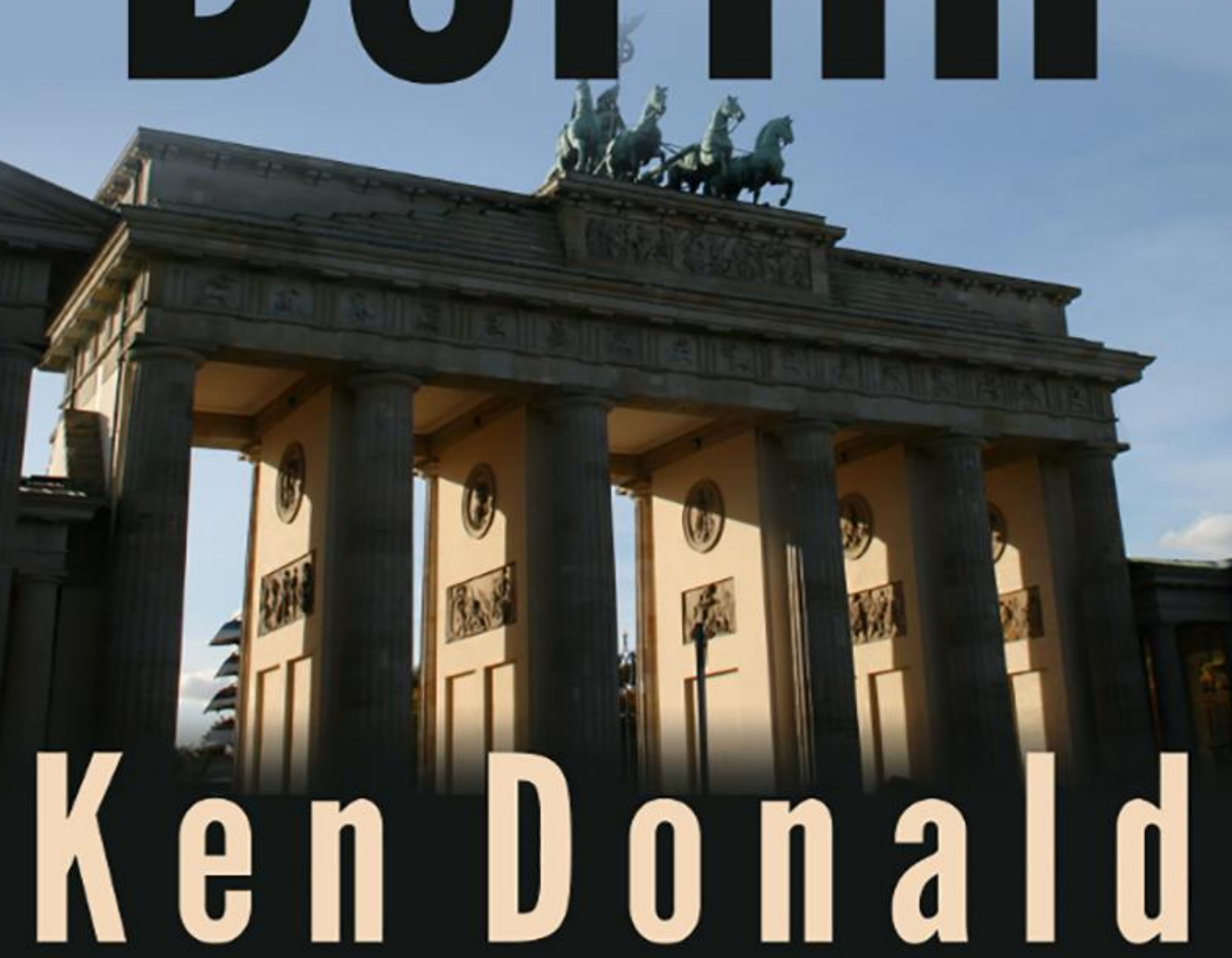


Our Reluctant Man In Berlin



Ken Donald

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From the Fletcher Memoirs (1948-9)

Ken Donald

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For Jane

Explanatory Note

My uncle was always regarded as the black sheep of the family but, as a young boy, I was enthralled by his stories of flying for the RAF all over the world and he seemed to take rather a shine to me. His name was Thomas Fletcher and he joined the RAF to train as a pilot, just as World War Two was ending.

When he died I discovered that he had left me his memoirs, and the story of his exciting life has been quite a revelation. Although we did not know it when he was alive, an 'unfortunate' incident early in his career led to him becoming a member of the British Secret Intelligence Service, commonly known by its military designation - MI6.

He worked as a Military Intelligence operative, albeit unwillingly, and played a dubious part in key historical events such as the Berlin airlift, the Korean War, the Hungarian uprising and the Cuban missile crisis, to name but a few.

What follows are Captain Fletcher's recollections from his days during the Berlin airlift of 1948-9, when he was also required to fly supplies to the British sector. I have edited and arranged my uncle's notes into a readable form and checked his memoirs against the historical record.

K.D.

A sage once remarked

A sage once remarked how vain it is to sit down and write when you have not stood up to live, and for a long time I have heeded his sound advice. However, as fate has seen fit to throw some of the most incredible events of the twentieth century my way, perhaps you will forgive me for putting my memories down on paper. Spoken words fly away; written words remain, as it were.

As luck would have it, Herr Hitler was good enough to kill himself in '45, with the result that *he* was worm food and *I* wouldn't have to fight for King and Country. Not that I'm any less patriotic than the next chap but, being something of a Bob Acres, I'm rather keen on surviving to see the dawn.

So with the fighting over I joined the RAF to be a transport pilot. Things went well at first and I enjoyed a brief spell in Japan as part of the army of occupation. When I wasn't delivering cargo from one end of the country to the other, I had time to cater to the needs of a ravishing secretary at our embassy in Tokyo. Unfortunately it wasn't to last and it was when I got back to Blighty that things really started to go tits up.

It must have been one of those Egyptian Days, and as I was coming in to land my undercarriage had the bad taste to give way, causing my plane to slide off the runway into a farmer's field.

He was as mad as hell, what with his vegetable patch being thrown to the four winds, and the red-faced buffoon cursed me something awful. Of all the bloody cheek. There I was, battered and bruised, and this yokel was more worried about his ruddy carrots.

So I told him to bugger off and get back to his daily chores - to wit, fornicating with his livestock. He looked as if he was going to have apoplexy and I thought it politic to take my leave. Adhering to the sound policy of an eye for an eye, I headed back to the mess for a well-earned eau de vie while I planned my revenge.

That night I waited until farmer Giles repaired to the Horse and Hounds- his usual haunt where he troubled everyone with his presence - and I went for a stroll to his beloved farm.

Unfortunately I accidentally spilt a few gallons of aviation fuel around his premises and, to top it all, I chose that moment to have a smoke. I suppose a complete disaster could have been averted if I hadn't rather carelessly discarded a cigarette on the aforementioned spillage, but what can you do?

The upshot was that by the time the fire crew arrived, the farmhouse was burning nicely. And I must say it was gratifying to see my friendly farmer enjoy a warm welcome home on such a cold night.

The only fly in the ointment was that I'd been spotted conducting my extra-curricular activities by an interfering quidnunc from the WAAF by the name of Sylvia, or Sally, or some other blasted name beginning with an 'S'.

You see, the vindictive piece of wool had been quietly biding her time, waiting to take revenge on the poor unsuspecting Captain Fletcher - and all because your correspondent had simply seen fit to share his amorous attentions between the spiteful shagbag and her sister.

Well, what did she expect? It would have been damn selfish to waste Fletcher's carnal artistry on just *one* woman. Anyway, she'd decided to settle accounts by reporting what she'd witnessed to the squadron leader - and given me conniptions into the bargain. My God, I thought, a court-martial would be the least of it - I could very well end up in Dartmoor for arson at this rate.

When I was hauled into Wing Commander Dobson's office, the sight of two dour civilians with peeler written all over them seemed to confirm my fears. Dobson's hard stare made me feel about as welcome as a vicar in a brothel, and he spoke in his usual high-handed manner.

"This is a singular business, Captain. I am struck dumb that a man in my command could be guilty of such a criminal act. For that is what it is, Captain - a crime! That is why your actions have been reported to the proper authorities."

I began to protest, but he cut me short and stood up to leave before giving me one final disapproving stare, leaving me to wonder what ever happened to the old-fashioned notion of comrades-in-arms.

I turned to look at my new friends from the constabulary and braced myself for more kind words to add to the joys of the day. They wore double-breasted suits and removed their hats, before they seated themselves at the desk to face me. One of the men had close-cropped fair hair, and he proceeded to light a foul-smelling cigarette before he broke into a smile.

"You don't remember me, Tom, do you?"

I took a moment to look into his dull grey eyes. He had a wide jaw with a cleft in his chin, topped with the flattened nose of a boxer or a rugby player - and suddenly it dawned on me.

"My God ... Biggins major. You were in the fifth form when I was at school with your brother, Biggins minor. Well, I never. So, you're a policeman now?"

"We're not policemen, Tom, we're with Military Intelligence."

My memories of Biggins as a bit of a Calandrino came flooding back, and I assumed he was using the word 'intelligence' in the broadest possible sense, but I deemed it advisable to be as pleasant as possible, considering the circumstances.

"What a turn up for the books. You're a spook, eh? Well, what brings you here?"

"*You* do, my dear chap. You'll find this rather difficult to believe, but we're not here because you've been caught playing with matches at this old duffer's farmhouse."

I said nothing and tried to force a smile. Mind you, it was easier said than done, because the stresses of the day appeared to have brought on a terrible bout of trapped wind.

"By a remarkable coincidence," he continued, "I had already suggested to my employer that you might be able to help us with a little problem we've been having."

It all sounded damned peculiar to me, but I bit my tongue and let him drone on.

"As a matter of fact I'd planned to contact you in a few days time, but as soon as we heard of your unscheduled bonfire party we had to move our timetable forward."

I continued to stare at him and clutched my stomach as I strove to hold fire.

“If you consent to meet with my superior and if you agree to his proposal, this arson nonsense is something we can clear up easily enough. I’m sure we can compensate this irate farmer for the loss of his little hovel.”

My ears pricked up at this. I was in a sticky mess to say the least, and if these chaps had the clout to put things right as easily as they made out, then I’d have been a fool to turn them down. My only worry was that all this sudden generosity probably came at a price, so I tried to keep my options open.

“Well, I’m not sure...” I began.

Biggins’ associate displayed a thin cruel smile and spoke for the first time.

“You’re hardly in a position to refuse. Because of this little stunt of yours, we’ve rather got you over a barrel.”

I decided it was time to test the water.

“What if I decline your kind offer?” I asked, and the man’s grin was wiped from his face.

“Then, Captain, you will be serving the next ten years at His Majesty’s Pleasure.”

It was then that all my attempts to hold my body in check came to nought, with rather devastating results.

Espionage in no job for a Boy Scout

Naturally I succumbed to the charms of Biggins and his genial companion, but whether or not our friendship would have ripened I had to wait and see. Before I knew it I was being whisked away in an official car to a Georgian edifice, set in rather impressive grounds a few miles outside London - evidently to call on some sort of Adelantado. I was led to a smoke-filled library by an impeccably dressed butler who formally announced my arrival.

“Captain Thomas Fletcher, Your Lordship.”

Seated in a high-backed leather armchair behind a large writing desk was a stocky, grey-haired man, who I judged to be in his sixties or thereabouts. He was smoking a large pipe, which explained the thick fog threatening to send me into a coughing fit. But when I looked at the butler rooted to the floor, I could see he was clearly immune to the complete lack of breathable oxygen. He stood there expressionless, while he dutifully waited to be dismissed.

“That will be all, Smith, thank you. Take a seat, Captain Fletcher.”

I did as instructed, but my new host ignored me and continued to read the papers lying on his desk. His Lordship was wearing an evening suit and black tie, which struck me as rather strange as it was still only late afternoon. As if he read my thoughts he looked up from his papers.

“Forgive my attire, Captain Fletcher, but I have a formal dinner this evening with the prime minister and Mr. Bevin, and they are expecting me to have briefed you before I arrive in town.”

His voice was clear and sharp and I immediately knew that this was a man to be wary of. His clipped manner exuded authority and, besides being as rich as Croesus, he was clearly someone who was used to getting what he wanted. I had already gathered all this from the first few moments of our acquaintance, but his casual reference to two of the most powerful men in the country only added to the feeling of unease in the pit of my stomach.

I was barely out of my teens and a suspected criminal to boot. What on earth was I doing mixing with the high and mighty? As if he had read my mind once again, he began to explain.

“Let me introduce myself. My name is Lord Haversham and I expect you are wondering what you are doing here, Captain, so I will endeavour to make things clear before I have to leave.”

His pipe had mercifully gone out and he tapped the contents into a metal ash tray. He stared at me with his pale blue eyes before he continued.

“Now the war is over you’d think that everything would be plain sailing as far as our international relations are concerned, but far from it. Germany, as you know, has been divided up between the victors to keep the Huns at bay, but the Russians aren’t to be trusted and this is causing HMG and her allies a huge headache.”

“I see,” I said, nodding, but inwardly I was becoming more confused by the second.

“Biggins tells me that your mother was of Russian extraction and you speak the language like a native.”

“I just kept up with it after she died – it seemed like the thing to do at the time.”

“He also informs me that you excelled in German at school. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir, but I expect I’m a little rusty now.”

“Nonsense, it’s like riding a bike - you never forget. Besides, you clearly immersed yourself in the subject, if what Biggins says is true,” said Haversham, giving me a knowing smile.

“I had a very good teacher.” I explained.

“Let us not play games, Captain. She was a lot more than that, was she not?”

I don’t know what shocked me more, the fact that he was so well informed or that he should bring up such a delicate matter without any preamble. I decided that it was no time for coyness, so I answered bluntly.

“Yes, she did teach me a few lessons that weren’t on the curriculum.”

“What happened?”

The question seemed to leave his lips on impulse.

“Well, the upshot was that she lost her teaching licence and I lost my virginity, but I can honestly say I’d never enjoyed schoolwork more.”

He gave a bark of a laugh and slapped the table.

“Ha! Espionage is no job for a Boy Scout. It requires a certain type of character. I hope I do not cause offence, dear chap, but we need men who can lie, cheat and deceive with the best of them. They must be men of resource. This unfortunate arson business is a case in point. We need someone who can get the job done and I believe you’re that man.”

“I’m extremely flattered, sir, but surely you must have any number of willing applicants for the kind of work you have in mind. So, if you’ll forgive me, sir, why me?”

Without answering he flicked a switch on the intercom beside his desk.

“Biggins, bring in the file.”

Biggins walked into the room carrying a red manila folder under his arm. He passed it to Haversham, and His Lordship pulled out a photograph and placed it on the desk for my inspection. It was of a damned handsome man in the RAF uniform of a captain. Biggins and Haversham looked at me expectantly, waiting for a reaction. For a moment I was at a loss, so I took another look at the eight by ten mug shot.

There was something about the man in the picture – and then it dawned on me. Even without the uniform he looked deuced like me. As I said in all modesty, he was a fine looking chap. He had dark hair, a strong chin, and piercing blue eyes. Yes, he was a ruggedly handsome Adonis, to be sure. As for his height and build, I couldn’t tell because the photograph was only of the head and shoulders. But if he was around six feet tall and had a muscular build, we could’ve easily been mistaken for twins at a distance.

“I take it you can see the resemblance?” asked Haversham when he saw my reaction.

“If you mean he looks a lot like me, I quite agree. But I’m afraid I’m still not sure what this is all about, sir.”

Haversham rose from his desk and walked up to the window to gaze out at the manicured lawn below. He spoke as he turned to face me.

“What I am about to tell you is top secret and must be kept under the rose, I’m afraid. I won’t insult you by asking you to sign the Official Secrets Act or anything like that, but if

you breathe a word of what I tell you, prison for arson will be the least of your problems. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," I replied, suddenly feeling uncomfortably warm in the stuffy room.

"As you know, the United States and Great Britain instigated the Manhattan Project to develop the atom bomb before the Nazis got their grubby little hands on one. We spent two billion dollars, used eighty-six thousand tons of silver, and employed twenty-four thousand skilled workers to drive the research and develop the project. What you will not be aware of is the fact that almost all of the technical information required to create the atom bomb has been leaked to the Soviets."

"My God," I exclaimed, unable to hide my disbelief.

The atom bomb had been our ace in the hole, so to speak, and if the Russians had somehow got hold of it, the world would have changed forever. Yet there was worse to come, as Haversham explained presently.

"We believe the Russians now have access to all of the technical information needed to create a fully functioning atom bomb. All they are lacking are sufficient quantities of the necessary raw materials - enriched uranium and the like."

"Who passed on the secrets?" I asked.

"There have been a variety of sources. Communist agents who infiltrated the project; misguided scientists who thought that both sides should have the bomb to create an even playing field; and others who were communist sympathisers before they joined the project."

"But aren't these people checked...I mean, don't they have top-security clearances?" I asked incredulously, wondering where all these Ahithopels had sprung from.

"People with top-security clearances are being hanged everyday," said Haversham cynically.

I could see I'd touched a raw nerve, so I decided to keep quiet and let him continue before he turned his anger on me.

"For many years we were totally unaware of the scale of the Soviet spy network. Then, a little over a year ago, we had a breakthrough when we deciphered the codes that Moscow uses to send messages via the telegraph system. The decoding project is called Venona. Clearly we don't want the Russians to know that we are eavesdropping on their secret messages so we have to tread carefully, but the problem still remains - what do we do about these leaks?"¹

Haversham left the question hanging in the air and started to refill his pipe before resuming his incredible tale.

"It is unfortunate, but I believe that within the year the Soviets will have in their possession an operational atom bomb."

"Jesus!"

I let out the curse in spite of myself, but then Haversham dropped another bombshell.

"Quite! But I am afraid that this unfortunate state of affairs isn't the worst of it. Some of our scientists have been working on the possibility of creating a hydrogen bomb, many times more powerful than the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Due to certain

practicalities, the creation of such a weapon is still some years away, but our scientists assure us that it is theoretically possible.”

“But that’s good, isn’t it? I mean, we’ll have the upper hand again, won’t we?”

“You are quite right, Captain, but for one thing. We have discovered that information is now being passed on to the Russians from our nuclear research facility.”

“My God, do we know who is leaking the information?” I asked, becoming curious in spite of myself.

“Officially, we do not, but I have my own suspicions. Unfortunately the powers-that-be have decided to ignore my warnings.”

For the first time there was a little colour in his cheeks and he cleared his throat before he went on to explain.

“A German-born physicist called Klaus Fuchs worked on the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos, when important scientific processes relating to the construction of the atom bomb were passed on to Moscow. My sources in the FBI have identified him as the author of that information.”²

“So you’ve arrested him?” I asked innocently, expecting they would’ve doled out some Jedwood Justice.

“In an ideal world that is exactly what we would do, but unfortunately my warnings have gone unheeded and he continues to work on the development of the British atom bomb.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Naturally I am trying to have him watched, but there is very little my people can do without official backing. Needless to say, Fuchs cannot pass on information personally without being discovered, so he is forced to use an intermediary. It is in this regard that we have had one piece of good luck. A Venona cable recently alerted us as to the identity of Fuchs’ go-between.”

Haversham leant forward and tapped the photograph on the desk.

“Is this the go-between?” I asked, being a little slow on the uptake.

“Yes, and it is an inspired choice by our Russian friends. He is a pilot stationed in our German zone who flies regular supplies to Berlin, where he can visit the eastern sector without hindrance. We don’t even have a border crossing there, for goodness sake - a perfect way for the Russians to pass on the information. Who would think of searching a military pilot?”

“So why don’t you arrest him?”

“We already have, Captain.”

“Well, that’s it – you’ve plugged the leak,” I said naively.

“Captain, you will soon realise that in this game we keep our cards close to our chest. If we stop this particular courier, the Soviets will simply find another.”

“So why did you arrest him?”

“We had to arrest him. If we hadn’t got him out of the way, how on earth would you be able to take his place?”

In my callow youth

With the wealth of experience I now have under my belt, I dare say I would have spotted Haversham's dastardly plan a mile off. But in my callow youth I hadn't seen it coming, and the revelation that I was going to be a pawn in some desperate cloak-and-dagger shenanigans was only just dawning on me. The stakes couldn't have been higher and it all sounded damn dangerous to me. Haversham's next words only served to fuel my fear.

"You can handle a sidearm, I take it?"

"We are trained to use a handgun in case we are shot down behind enemy lines, sir," I replied automatically.

"Good. You'll fly to our zone in Germany tonight. From there you will make your way to our sector in Berlin where you will meet Captain Hayworth's contact - a Fraulein Schoneberg. She will take you to her father, Otto Schoneberg - a member of the eastern sector police who also works for the Russians. However, from what we can gather, his daughter knows nothing about her father's collaboration with our Soviet friends - so try to be discreet, Fletcher. From then on you will have to play it by ear, but it is vital that you pass on the secret information as expected."

"But they will know that I'm an impostor, won't they?" I asked, confused.

"Fortunately they have never met Hayworth," he assured me.

"But forgive me, sir, why are we giving them what they want?"

"Oh, do keep up, Fletcher. You will be passing on *fake* plans designed by our experts to send the Russians on a useless line of research. It will set them back years."

"Sir..." I began to protest, but Haversham cut me short.

"Biggins will have all the details. I'm afraid I must get to my meeting with the PM. I'm sure I don't have to impress upon you how important this mission is, so don't disappoint us, old chap."

Haversham came around from his desk and I shook his hand in shocked silence before Biggins led me out of the room. I must have still been in a daze, because he was driving me back to my base and droning on before it properly registered.

"I've been instructed to brief you *in transitu*, so to speak. We have a new passport identifying you as Charles Hayworth, and your luggage has already been packed by our people back at the base. Your meeting with Otto Schoneberg is arranged for the day after tomorrow."

"You people have certainly taken a lot for granted. What if I'd said I wouldn't fall in with your little schemes?"

"We knew you had no choice - this was just a formality. Look on the bright side. You won't have to face the music because of that little prank of yours at the farmhouse and you'll be going on a nice trip to Berlin, all expenses paid. All you've got to do is pass the documents on to this Schoneberg chap and hop onto the next plane home - simple."

That was easy for him to say, sitting in his office in Whitehall while other people did his dirty work for him. I could've punched him in his smug face, but by then we'd arrived at my base.

“Ah, here we are. These are the bogus plans. Make sure you look after them, Fletcher,” he said, passing me a large brown envelope. “Good luck.”

As the car drove off and I was left standing there, I was in two minds whether or not to make a run for it there and then. But before I could act on the thought, two civilians were approaching with more wonderful news.

“Ah, Fletcher, there you are. Here are your papers and contact details. Your plane is waiting.”

Russia's playground

If I'd realised I was about to begin a career considerably more dangerous than my previous life in the cockpit, I might well have knocked on the doors of Dartmoor and begged them to let me in.

We are often prisoners of circumstance, after all, and sometimes there is nothing for it but to follow the flow of the river and hope there isn't a sudden drop waiting round the next bend. If I'd only known, there was an almighty waterfall ready to throw me hurtling down to the depths.

You see, hydrogen bombs and nuclear secrets aside, Haversham and his band of spooks had chosen to send me to the ravaged city of Berlin at one of its most crucial periods in history.

People talk about the Cuban missile crisis as the time when the world nearly went to war for a third time and risked destroying the human race in the process. But for my money the conflict that was brewing between East and West in Germany in '48 runs pretty close. In case you are unaware of the events leading up to the international crisis known as the Berlin airlift of 1948-49, I may as well take this opportunity to enlighten you.

If you look at a map of Germany from the period, you will see how the country was divided amongst the victors to stop any trouble raising its ugly head for a third time. From the summer of 1945, Germany was occupied by Britain, France, America and Russia, the four countries that had stopped the Nazis in their tracks – well, apart from the Frogs, of course.

So the country was conveniently split into four zones – one for each nation. The only problem was that Berlin fell into Russia's playground. At first this didn't appear to cause a problem because the Soviets, rather obligingly, agreed to allow Berlin to be divided into four sectors to be shared out amongst the Allies - thereby allowing everyone to have a slice of the cake, so to speak.

The German map was now all nicely coloured in and no doubt everything would have been fine, if the Russians hadn't started getting too big for their boots.

You see, there was one big problem. How would the western allies get to their sectors in Berlin through Soviet-occupied territory? Wiser heads suggested that we insist on having a wide corridor put in place, under the control of the British and the Americans, thereby giving us direct access to our sectors in Berlin. Of course those idiots down at the F.O. knew better and did no more than pencil in a few squiggly lines joining the West to Berlin by road and rail.

"Don't worry about it," insisted our Eton mob, *ex tempore*. "Our presence automatically gives us rights of access."

The only problem was that there was one person who had different ideas. Enter onto the stage, one-time bank robber and ruthless leader of one of the most powerful nations in the world, Joseph Stalin.

What amazes me is that anyone trusted Stalin and the Russians in the first place. The front line troops of the Red Army who took Berlin had been disciplined and orderly, but the

rabble that followed on simply raped their way through the city and smashed and grabbed anything of value they could get their hands on.

Many of the women suffered terrible injuries and were infected with syphilis, courtesy of the gentlemen of the Russian soldiery. Naturally the unlucky ladies of Berlin tried to get hold of penicillin, but the communists had already buggered off with the lot.

While our world leaders were bickering amongst themselves and getting nowhere, the German people were busy starving to death. Most of them were either very young, or very old, or women –all thanks to Hitler, who'd sacrificed a generation of young men trying to promote the Aryan race.

Homeless people travelled the streets with their worldly belongings in their 'Volkswagens' – that is to say, wooden carts made from planks and rusty wheels. Even when we tried to repair the war-torn city, the workers simply plunged to their deaths because a lack of food left them dropping like flies from their scaffolding.

When the Americans did eventually take control of their sector, they still couldn't stop the Russian troops raping and looting. Marshal Zhukov had another answer, of course.

"The criminals are Germans in stolen Red Army uniforms," he explained.

Eventually, if the Russians pulled out their guns when confronted by the police, the Americans intervened and shot them. The British Tommy chose to show restraint and simply beat the living crap out of them.

Things were far worse in the Russian sector where teachers, doctors, police officials and land-owners were all branded as Nazis and sent for 're-education'. Fortunately for the Russians, they had the ideal facilities nearby in the shape of the concentration camps, which the Nazis no longer had any use for.

So I wasn't exactly expecting a barrel of laughs on my little jaunt to Berlin. But at least you have now been briefed about events leading up to my involvement in the whole mess, and if you doubt a word of it –well, it's all on record and you can check for yourself, if you've a mind to.

Help a girl to start a fire

So there I was in April of '48 in the British zone of Germany, boarding a military train to Berlin without a clue as to what was waiting for me. At the outset things didn't bode well because when we arrived at the Russian checkpoint at Marienborn, we were forced to stop.

The Russian guards wanted to board the train, but our wing commander argued with them for nearly an hour and they eventually gave up. But it looked as though we'd won the battle but lost the war, because in spite of the reluctance of the Russians to force themselves onto our carriages, they refused to let us continue any further.

As luck would have it, I'd found myself happily distracted by the magnificent charms of a pretty little thing who had been sitting opposite me from the moment we'd departed. She was a smashing-looking blonde piece in a WAAF's uniform, and she'd been prattling away non-stop like a mag throughout the journey.

I'd noticed her giving me admiring glances ever since we'd pulled away from the station, and it was slowly dawning on me that whatever my immediate predicament, I might as well make the best of a bad situation. I decided that my fair-haired admirer could well serve as a first-rate antidote to my feelings of dread.

"I've had enough of this," said my little blonde bombshell, and she asked me to help her climb off the train.

I followed, wondering what she was up to.

"We might as well get something to eat while we're waiting – I'm starving. How about helping a poor girl to start a fire?" she asked.

We had a warm campfire going in no time and I managed to liberate some crates of beer from one of the freight cars. When the alcohol finally took effect, my pert little blonde couldn't keep her hands off me. We chatted until daybreak and I found out that Penelope, or Penny as she liked to be called, was on her way to report for duty at Gatow, our airfield in the British sector of Berlin.

Anyway, the Russians were digging in their heels and it was clear we weren't going to be allowed to continue. On hearing the news that we had enough supplies for seven days, my heroine had a bright idea.

"Let's have another picnic!"

God knows how she kept that petite figure, but I doubt whether she can still fit into her WAAF uniform today, the little glutton. Happily I was soon to discover that food wasn't the only thing for which my little Penny had an insatiable appetite.

Wiser heads prevailed and that afternoon we were ordered back to the British zone. As luck would have it, my overseers from Military Intelligence hadn't been informed of my unscheduled return and I took the liberty of asking Penny if she would be willing to keep me company.

I thought I might have to wine and dine my blonde bit of fluff, but I couldn't have been more wrong. Before I knew what was happening, we were ensconced in a pleasant little guesthouse and celebrating our new deployment to Germany in fine style. As I lay in bed, all played out and smoking a cigarette, I smiled and voiced the one thought that came to mind.

“I must remember to thank Lord Haversham for setting me on the straight and narrow.”

* * *

I decided it would be bad form to hide away for more than one night and, after a pleasant au revoir from dear Penny, I finally rolled into HQ. Mind you, I soon wished I hadn't been so eager to please, because two American bigwigs had arrived and were making a damned nuisance of themselves.

“Who do these damn Russkies think they are? I'm gonna' send a God-damn convoy right up their God-damn autobahn,” exclaimed a wiry no-nonsense officer, as he puffed away on a long cigarette.

“Do you think that's wise, General? The president says he doesn't want to risk an armed confrontation with the Soviets,” countered the other.

“We can't just abandon Berlin ... hey, who the hell are you?”

I'd been so engrossed in the argument that I almost didn't realise the chain-smoker was actually addressing me.

“I do beg your pardon, sir. I'm supposed to be meeting someone here,” I explained, when I'd eventually gathered my composure.

“Hell, boy, this is a military base – do you have permission to be here?” asked the smoker, pouring himself what looked like a gallon of coffee into the largest tin mug I'd ever seen.

I was out of uniform and clearly the warmonger was worried that he might have inadvertently passed on state secrets to an outsider. He had a damn cheek, if you ask me, considering it was a British base.

“Actually, I'm in the RAF. I'm trying to get to Berlin but I haven't had much success.”

“This is exactly what I'm talking about, Albert. Even the limeys can't get to their own sector. What happened, boy?”

“I was making my way there by train when it was turned back by the Russians,” I explained, ignoring the slur on my ethnic origins.

“The bastards! Do you see what we're up against, General? I'd like to see them turn back a train full of armed guards.”

“The Russians could easily stop an armed convoy,” explained the other officer. “They could close the road for repair or destroy a bridge- then you'd be in a hell of a fix. What would your precious guards do, take on the whole Soviet Army?”

“There aren't any damn bridges on the autobahn,” countered the nicotine-addict.

Even I knew that was nonsense and he must have realised his gaffe because he corrected himself.

“Besides, my engineers have got equipment that'll take care of any damn bridges in no time.”³

Whether or not the argument was ever resolved I never found out, because I skulked off down the corridor and lunged through the first door I could find. I could still hear the bloodthirsty fool droning on as I closed the door behind me.

“I bet you’d like to show these damn commies what we’re made of, wouldn’t you, boy? We’ll show them what...hey, where the hell did he go?”

Eventually I discovered that I was to be flown into Berlin, which proved to be more difficult than it sounded. All we had to offer were a pathetic couple of Dakotas and an Anson. In the end someone must have pulled some strings because I was on the next plane destined for our sector. The pilot was an affable young captain named Duggan, and he was happy to chew the fat with a fellow aviator.

“They must want you pretty bad in Berlin,Captain - we don’t get many passengers heading *into* the capital.”

“What’s in the hold today?” I asked.

“Food mostly, but if they think we can supply enough to keep everyone alive in Berlin, they’re crazy.”

“Do you think we’ll be able to get our people out?” I asked, eager to make sure we had an escape plan.

“With what we’ve got now, who knows? They won’t be able to check in any luggage, that’s for sure.”

The more I thought about it, the more I wished I’d stayed safely tucked up in bed with Penny’s superb charms for company.

Sitting in the cockpit, I was eager to get my first look at the city which was to be my home for the next few days. As we approached Gatow airfield we followed a BEA Vickers Viking, and I spotted a Soviet Yak fighter performing aerobatics.

“My God, what’s that bloody idiot trying to do?” screamed Duggan in alarm.

Before anyone had time to answer, the fighter suddenly dived, passed underneath the passenger plane, and rose sharply. To our horror it smashed into the Viking’s right wing, ripping it completely off. Within seconds both planes crashed into the ground.

“Jesus, did you see that?” asked Duggan, I presumed rhetorically. “Nobody’s coming out of that alive – those poor bastards.”

“It looks as though our plane has come down in the Russian sector,” observed the co-pilot helpfully.

“Does that make a difference?” I asked.

I couldn’t help thinking that if the crew and passengers were dead,they wouldn’t be too bothered. He didn’t seem to get my point.

“It could cause problems for our investigators,” he opined.

As it turned out he was right. When we landed we were greeted by yet another angry general – this time of the British variety.

“Did you boys see what happened?” he asked, before we’d barely stepped out of the aircraft.

“The bloody Russian just flew into the poor bastards, sir,” said Duggan, no doubt deciding that the situation didn’t warrant a formal report.

“Good God! You men come along with me.”

And with that I found myself being dragged along to the Russian sector before I’d had time to catch my breath.

When we arrived at the scene of the crash, we found wreckage strewn everywhere, and the charred bodies of the crew and passengers were there for all to see. The general got out of our jeep to examine the destruction, but a Soviet guard stepped forward to stop him getting any closer.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” demanded the general, but the Russian just mumbled something under his breath.

“God damn it, my Russian’s not up to this. What’s the idiot saying?”

This was my cue, of course, and I offered my services. I’ve always found that it never does any harm to tender helpful assistance to the senior man.

“He says he’s under orders from General Sokolovsky not to let anyone touch the wreckage,” I translated.

“Doesn’t the moron realise I’m the British commandant?” asked the general, and since this was news to me I couldn’t help but show my surprise.

I dutifully translated, leaving out the less than diplomatic part. The guard just swore, insisting that he had his orders, and the general clearly understood what was said because he didn’t wait for the sanitised English version to leave my lips.

“Well, we’ll see about that. Explain to the nincompoop that we’re going to remove the bodies,” said the general as calmly as if he was just ordering breakfast.

I didn’t like the sound of that. Lugging the burnt remains of crash victims is not usually my first choice when it comes to whiling away an evening. Luckily the guard refused.

So we all clambered into the jeep and headed back to the British sector, but instead of returning to the airfield, the disgruntled general dragged us to where the Soviet Yak had come down. I was just beginning to wonder if he was expecting us to remove the *Russian’s* body instead, when the general shouted over to one of the soldiers at the scene.

“You there! Make sure no one comes anywhere near the wreckage – especially the bastard Russians.”⁴

Not the warmest of welcomes I’ve received when visiting a new part of the world, and the incident only served to unsettle my already frayed nerves. What’s more, plane crashes and investigations had no bearing on the most important issue at hand – namely, my immediate future.

Once the officials at Gatow had recovered from the shock of losing an aircraft, they remembered there was a recent arrival on government business in urgent need of a stiff brandy and a good cigar – neither of which was provided, I might add. Still, what do you expect from such poor hosts as the military?

But circumstances were about to improve - and suddenly Berlin wasn’t going to seem like such a bad place after all.

As gorgeous as they come

I was led to a spacious office and the sight that greeted me made me forget my problems. Rising from a chair to welcome me was one of the most beautiful women I have ever met in my life, and I've sampled a few. She was a proper little Neaera.

It wasn't simply the fact that she was as gorgeous as they come - it was her smile that banished any thoughts of wickedness from the world.

I guessed she was in her early twenties and she wore an extremely becoming grey outfit with a figure-hugging jacket, and an equally tight-fitting pencil skirt. The combination showed off her hourglass figure admirably. This was complemented by an elegant white blouse and a colourful scarf that contrasted wonderfully with her flawless complexion.

She had dark brown hair, which she had pinned up to add to her business-like appearance. One or two strands refused to remain where they had been carefully placed, but this only added to her feminine appeal. Most of these observations only became apparent after our initial meeting, however, because I'd been drawn in by her mesmerising brown eyes that lit up when she smiled.

Suddenly I became aware that I was staring open-mouthed at the apparition before me. Not wanting to spoil our first meeting by the sight of drool emanating from my lower lip, I shook myself out of my reverie. When she spoke, I'd never heard a German accent sound softer or more welcoming.

"Captain Hayworth? My name is Louise Schoneberg. I am glad you have finally made it to Berlin."

"If I'd known that *you* were here to greet me, I would've got here a hell of a lot quicker."

My German temptress laughed politely and offered a slender hand. I gave her paw a delicate kiss and she wrinkled her nose in a most attractive fashion.

"I hope I can make your stay here in my city a pleasant one. I have arranged some lodgings for you nearby. I'm afraid it is nothing special but accommodation is in short supply. I trust you will find it satisfactory."

Her eyes looked into mine expectantly and I'm convinced that even if she'd offered me a hole in the ground, I would've expressed my gratitude.

"I'm sure it will be fine, Louise," I said graciously.

It was quite touching to see her smile of relief as she led me from the office. After a few minutes we had left the airfield behind and were walking down a dimly lit street.

"I'm afraid you will have to mind your step - the electricity supply in Berlin is very unreliable."

Naively I asked if the problem had been caused by the wartime bombing.

"No, we had managed to get things back to normal, but most of the electricity comes from the Russian sector and they have cut us off. Coal is in short supply, now that most of the trucks coming into the city are turned back. Ah, here we are."

I'd heard how tough things were getting in the German capital, but when you actually saw the desperate situation for yourself it tended to hit home. As she led me into a shabby apartment building and we climbed the stairs to the second floor, my spirits weren't raised

any. But at least the walls were up and the windows were intact, which was more than could be said for many of the buildings lying in ruins, courtesy of allied bombing.

“It is fortunate that it is still early morning. The electricity is switched on from midnight until four o’clock. I have managed to get hold of some candles for when the power is off.”

“You have been very thoughtful, Louise. I’ve had to share a hut with a dozen sweaty airmen so, believe me, this is like staying at the Savoy.”

She gave me another one of those wonderful smiles and when I looked at the bed set against the far wall, she delivered her disappointing news.

“I live in a small house close by. This is the address,” she said, handing me a piece of paper with the location laid out in clear, neat handwriting. “I understand you need to see my father. He is a policeman in the eastern sector and he will be waiting for us at his headquarters early tomorrow morning. Is that convenient, Captain?”

“That is fine, Louise, but please call me Charles.”

She gave another nervous laugh and headed for the door. “Goodnight...Charles. I will see you in the morning.”

Once she had left, the apartment seemed incredibly empty. I sat on the hard, uncomfortable mattress and lit a cigarette, as I stared out of the window to gather my thoughts.

“I think I’m in love.”

The words had left my lips unannounced.

“Don’t be ridiculous, you bloody fool,” I told myself.

Suddenly I remembered how her full red lips seemed to pout whenever she asked a question.

“Then again...”

One lump or two?

When I left my new home the following morning the sun was shining, and in spite of the uncomfortable night I'd spent on the concrete slab Berliners called a mattress, my spirits soared. Perhaps it was the sound of the birds singing in the trees, or the sunlight glistening on the surface of the river - but more than likely it was the fact that very soon I was going to be in the company of Louise Schoneberg.

As I made my way, I spotted a British soldier from the Royal Norfolk Regiment walking on the other side of the street. He looked as thin as a rake and I thought back to my time in Japan. I'd witnessed the release of many of our chaps with the same gaunt look, after having spent years in prisoner-of-war camps on a starvation diet. He smiled and I gave him a friendly wave, but secretly I wondered how long the British sector could hold out against Russian threats if this was all we had to throw at them.⁵

I put my worrying thoughts aside and found the street indicated on the paper Louise had handed to me the previous night.

Every other house appeared to be missing a roof, but the terraced home indicated on the note seemed to be in one piece. There were some flowers in a pot by the door, sitting incongruously against the rubble littering the bomb-damaged plot beside it.

Louise answered the door wearing a fetching summer dress, tied at the waist with a belt. It had the effect of accentuating her voluptuous figure and causing my heart-rate to soar alarmingly.

"Good morning, Charles. Please come in."

She said the name so prettily, I wondered if Hayworth realised what he was missing while he was serving a life sentence for treason. She led me to a spartan drawing room and was as apologetic as on my arrival in Berlin.

"Charles, please forgive the lack of furniture - mine was confiscated when I left the eastern sector to be closer to my work. These damn Russians just like trying to make life difficult for us."

Louise's words seemed to confirm what I'd been told about her knowing nothing of her father's clandestine exploits. She could have been playing some sort of game, of course, so I resolved to keep a close eye on her - all part of my important assignment, naturally.

"I suppose it could be much worse," she admitted. "Some people have been arrested and hanged before they could even move to the western sector. My father says he is helping you with important business for the British government. I hope that when you get back to London you will tell your people how bad things are becoming here."

I said I would and I'd noticed her cheeks flush as she let her anger take hold. My God, I thought, she should be on the West End stage if it was all an act for my benefit. She seemed to regain her composure and started to apologise.

"Charles, what must you think of me? You've only just arrived and I'm doing nothing but complain. Will you forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive," I replied, trying not to let my eyes pop out as she leant forward to reveal her bouncers.

“One lump or two?”

“Eh?” I spluttered, gaping alarmingly.

“Isn’t that what you English say?” she asked, pointing at the teapot that I’d failed to notice. “I made some tea to make you feel at home.”

“Oh, I see...thank you,” I said, hoping she didn’t notice the beads of sweat on my forehead.

I took a sip of what tasted like watery cat’s pee and reluctantly swallowed.

“Mmm...lovely,” I whispered, trying not to breathe in too deeply, and I quickly changed the subject.

“What work do you do, Louise?”

“I’m a fashion designer - can’t you tell?” she asked, standing up and turning from side to side to show off her dress. “This is one of my creations. It is my dream to work for one of the top fashion houses in Europe.”

“You’re clearly very talented,” I said, hoping my flattery would go down well, but inwardly I was thinking that with *her* figure she would have looked good in a sack.

“I don’t wish to sound immodest, but I’ve always had an eye for well-designed clothes. Take your suit, for example. It fits you very well,” she said, eyeing me up and down appreciatively.”

“Thank you,” I replied, taking the tiniest sip of tea for appearance’s sake.

“It is just a pity that the lines are spoilt by that huge bulge.”

How I didn’t spit her witch’s brew all over the floorboards I’ll never know, and I take pride in the fact that I managed to gulp down the poisonous broth without choking.

“I beg your pardon?” I asked, shocked to the core.

“I am trained to look for anything untoward,” she continued calmly. “When you sat down a few moments ago, the jacket of your suit came apart and I couldn’t help noticing the butt of a revolver protruding from your belt.”

My head reeled with mixed emotions. On the one hand, I was embarrassed at the thought that she might have spotted my uninvited admiration of her curves, while on the other, I couldn’t help but be impressed by her powers of observation. I had completely forgotten about the sidearm Biggins had issued to me. I tried to think of a tactful explanation.

“It’s just standard procedure that military personnel are armed at all times.”

“I see,” she said, sounding unconvinced. “Oh dear, your tea has gone cold. Shall I get you another?”

“Christ, no...I mean, I think we’d better set off or we’ll be late meeting your father.”

“I suppose you’re right. He said he had to see Major Kutuzov first, but by the time we get to the police station he should be back in his office.

“Who’s Major Kutuzov?” I asked.

“He is the Russian liaison officer,” she explained, giving a shudder. “He is the vilest man I have ever met. Usually I wouldn’t desire that anyone should come to harm, and I don’t want you to think any less of me, but I wish he could die a long, agonising death.”

As we got up to leave, I couldn't help wondering at the strength of her feelings - while at the same time I was sure I had the answer to her prayers. So I muttered my suggestion when I was certain she was out of earshot.

“Why don't you just give him a pot of your tea?”

Those of you of a certain age

Those of you of a certain age will have grown up used to the idea of a Berlin scarred by its infamous wall – a visual reminder of the so-called ‘Iron Curtain’. While it stood, hardly a week seemed to go by without some desperate citizen from the eastern sector risking their life to get to the West. But in those early years, just after the war, things were very different and Berliners could come and go from one sector to another without being hindered. So it was with some relief that we simply walked to the police station in the Russian sector to meet Louise’s father.

We arrived at a large, imposing building set apart from the pavement by a number of stone steps. Otto Schoneberg greeted Louise warmly as we entered his office. His gaunt face was topped with short dark hair in the style of Adolf Hitler. Fortunately he sported a beard to accompany his moustache, so that was as far as the resemblance went. He spoke with a disconcerting lisp.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Captain,” he said, when Louise introduced me. “It’s always nice to meet a representative of our western allies - until they decide to desert us, that is.”

I took an instant dislike to Otto Schoneberg and marvelled at how such an odious individual could have sired someone as pretty and amiable as Louise.

“I assure you the Berliners are dear to our hearts, Inspector Schoneberg,” I said with more conviction than I felt.

He had a bloody nerve suggesting that we’d desert them at the first sign of trouble. Who did he think we were – Italians?

“Of course the West won’t desert us, father. Don’t make Charles feel uncomfortable,” said Louise, leaping to my defence.

Otto gave a look of disapproval, but whether it was in response to his daughter’s reproach or her familiar use of my first name, I wasn’t sure.

“Louise, would you mind excusing us? We’ll try not to keep you waiting for long,” said Otto.

She looked doubtful but gave a weak smile and left the room. I decided I just wanted to get the whole thing over with as quickly as possible, so I opened the batting.

“Let’s just cut the polite conversation, Schoneberg. Here are the plans,” I said, reaching under my shirt for the money-belt strapped around my waist.

“Not here – you can deliver the plans tomorrow night at the city’s next Assembly meeting,” he said, grabbing me by the arm.

“But why?”

“Major Kutuzov has asked to meet us there. He will be accompanied by a physicist who will be able to authenticate the plans.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. From Louise’s reaction to his name, I had no wish to make this Kutuzov’s acquaintance. As if that weren’t bad enough, I didn’t share Haversham’s confidence that the fake plans would fool the Russian scientists so easily. What if they realised they were bogus?

“Well, good luck to them - they don’t need me. Here, take the bloody things,” I said, grabbing the plans for a second time. But the confounded Otto stopped me again.

“That is not possible, I’m afraid. Major Kutuzov has insisted that you be there too.”

“Look, you can tell this Kutuzov to kiss my arse. My job was to deliver the plans to you and that’s what I’m doing,” I said, becoming more agitated.

“I will pass on your kind suggestion,” said the wag, “but nevertheless you must deliver the plans tomorrow. The major wants you on hand to answer any questions.”

“But I’m just the delivery boy. What I know about hydrogen bombs wouldn’t be worth a fart in a thunderstorm.”

“No doubt,” said the infuriating collection of bones, “but it has already been arranged. Good day, Captain.”

I left the office in a fitful state, cursing bomb-making physicists, spies and German traitors by turns. What was I going to do? My mind was in a whirl and I needed something to calm my thoughts. I marched across the courtyard of the police station and suddenly I could hear delicate footsteps in my wake. Louise was running to catch up with me and *there* was my salvation.

“I hope the meeting was useful,” she said, her chest heaving from her exertion. “What are we going to do now?”

I stood there, captivated by her rhythmic breathing, and my thoughts were drawn to clouds and silver linings.

A little drop of heaven

I'd heard stories from fellow airmen who'd survived the war, explaining how the constant threat of imminent death only served to heighten their desires and passions when they had come through danger unharmed. Food had never tasted better, they said. A cool beer in the warm sunshine felt like a little drop of heaven. Well, I'm here to tell you that after a spot of clandestine derring-do, the love of a beautiful German woman puts pumpernickel and kraut lager in the shade.

How do I describe the evening I spent with my gorgeous Fraulein? I could talk about the touch of her skin, sculpted *ad unguem*; the smell of her perfume; the heat of her breath; or even the complete feeling of pleasure that flooded through every core of my being. But it might sound trite and meaningless. I could wax lyrical about the touch of her lips on sensitive parts of my body, but it could well sound coarse and vulgar.

Yet none of this would come anywhere near to describing the feelings of absolute bliss that overwhelmed me on that wonderful spring night in post-war Berlin. I will simply say that I've repeatedly tried to look back on my introduction to Teutonic lovemaking in order to tease out one small moment or sensation that wasn't perfect, and I have always failed. She was my Alcina, all right.

But morning came all too soon, and the sensation of calm one feels after a night of hedonistic pleasure was shattered by the intrusion of consciousness and the frightening reality of my immediate future. Yet before I could break into a sweat worrying about traitorous Hitler look-alikes, Russian bullies and bombs that could throw humanity to the four winds, I sensed the gentle touch of Louise's tender fingers working their way up my thigh.

Oh, what the hell, I thought, grabbing welcome handfuls of Eve's puddings.

* * *

Unfortunately I was expected at the Assembly meeting and I thought I would have to cut our new-found union painfully short. But to my surprise Louise insisted on joining me, and I couldn't persuade her otherwise. So later that same afternoon we arrived together at the steps of the Stadhaus, where Otto was already waiting for us.

"I'm afraid we've chosen an awkward time to meet here," he said by way of an apology. "The members of the Assembly are gathering at four o'clock to impose the Soviet mark, but some of the members are not pleased and things could turn sour."

I wasn't surprised. The Russians were printing their currency as if it was confetti, with the inevitable result that it was quickly becoming worthless compared to the western Deutschmark. Before I had time to wonder why on earth Otto and this Kutuzov idiot had chosen such a place for our little transaction, we started to notice communist trade union members surrounding the main door and piling into the spectator's gallery.

As far as I could see, the east sector police were making no attempt to hold back the crowds or to help the Assembly members through the crush.

“Louise, there is no need for you to join us. Thank you for escorting the good Captain here, but I am sure he can find his own way back to the British sector,” said Otto.

She began to protest but he insisted, and he led me up the steps and through the angry crowd. I looked back to see Louise staring after us anxiously, and my feelings of dread returned. Eventually we made our way to a suite of offices at the rear of the building and when Otto shut the door behind us, the shouting became a muffled droning in the background.

Seated behind a desk was a lean man in his forties with thinning hair. He wore thick round spectacles and looked as nervous as a virgin on his wedding night. But I only gave him a passing glance because my eyes were immediately drawn to the towering figure behind him.

I stand a little over six feet tall, but the apparition before me was at least a head taller – and what a head it was. It was crowned with a shaven scalp and it was supported by a neck so thick, that to all intents and purposes it ceased to look like a neck at all. But it was his face that made all these other trivialities appear insignificant. It is the mirror of the soul, after all.

I can honestly say that it was one of the cruellest visages I have ever encountered in my life, and I’ve seen some beauties. The eyebrows were thick and dark, contrasting incongruously with his bald pate, and his mouth was turned down in such a way that I doubted if it had ever broken into a smile in living memory. Yet all these disconcerting features were nothing compared to the watery-grey eyes that stared back at you with such ill-concealed hatred, you instantly felt like prey waiting to be devoured by its predator.

“Major Kutuzov, Herr Koch, this is Captain Hayworth,” said Otto, and the thin man with the spectacles stood up to shake my hand.

Kutuzov, his uniform barely concealing the bulky frame of an Olympic wrestler, continued to stare at me silently while he smoked one of those awful Russian cigarettes that smell of cow dung.

“Do you have the plans?” asked the man at the desk, who I took to be the scientist.

I pulled a thick envelope from the inside pocket of my jacket and placed it on the table. The test tube jockey eagerly opened it and laid the technical drawing flat out in front of him. After several heart-stopping minutes Kutuzov finally spoke and his deep, coarse voice seemed to fill the room.

“Are they genuine?” he asked the scientist.

The poor man had the collywobbles so bad, he was dripping sweat all over the carefully drawn diagrams.

“I told you I would not be able to tell from a cursory inspection. If the British have replaced the genuine plans with fakes, they will have made sure that it is extremely difficult to spot the alterations. The changes will be subtle.”

When I finally got over the shock of realising that the documents weren’t going to be accepted with a polite thank you and have a good day, I thought it would be advisable to play the part of the disgruntled courier.

“Why on earth wouldn’t they be genuine? Fuchs gave them to me personally,” I exclaimed, trying to sound indignant.

“I doubt that very much,” said Kutuzov in the same guttural tones he’d treated us to before.

“What do you mean by that?” I cried, suddenly feeling a knot of fear in my stomach.

“What I mean is that I doubt if he gave the plans to *you*, because I was there when he put them into Hayworth’s hands.”

“What...” I began, but he ignored me and went on to put the final nail in my coffin.

“For the life of me, I can’t remember you being thereat all, Captain Fletcher.”

In flagrante delicto

In a long and illustrious career which has had more than its fair share of shocks and moments of pure terror, I still find it hard to think of one that comes close to the sensation of utter desperation that threatened to engulf me back then. No doubt my youth and lack of experience hadn't prepared me for such a rapid turnaround in my fortunes. One minute I was simply a messenger, eager to relieve myself of my fake scientific data, and the next I was a known spy caught *in flagrante delicto* behind enemy lines.

I was torn between trying to save my carcass by talking my way out of what appeared to be a hopeless situation, or the less than inviting prospect of shooting my way out. The matter was taken out of my hands when Kutuzov drew the pistol from his holster and pointed it squarely at my chest.

"Since you are clearly a spy working for British Intelligence, we will assume that these plans are worthless. However, all will be revealed when I take you back to headquarters and I have the pleasure of interrogating you personally."

His mouth turned up at the edges into what I assumed he thought was a smile, but it only succeeded in making him look even more sinister - if such a thing were possible. He walked towards me and helped himself to my revolver without taking his eyes from mine, before pocketing it and indicating that I should make my way into the main assembly hall.

There was nothing for it but to do as I was told. So I opened the door and started to push through the crowd, while Kutuzov followed closely behind with his pistol pressed firmly in my back.

The meeting had only just begun, and I have a vague recollection of the Assembly members voting to maintain two currencies in the city. There was uproar in the gallery and when the members tried to leave, the mob outside started to turn nasty. The crowd charged into the main hallway and blocked the way.

"Move!" yelled Kutuzov, pushing me to a door at the back of the hall.

There was still a large mob outside the building and suddenly someone cried out. We both turned to see what all the commotion was about. One of the Assembly members was being screamed at by the mob as she made her way towards a car, and a group of men started to beat her. Kutuzov expressed his sympathy with another cruel smile and shoved me forward.

That was when the woman managed to escape from the clutches of the baying crowd and she ran towards me, appealing for help. Well, if a lady in distress is misguided enough to run to Captain Fletcher with a band of thugs in her wake, she'll be lucky if I point her to the nearest escape route while I stand back and call for the beaks.

But since there was nowhere to go and the east sector police were about as much use as tits on a boar, I decided an alternative plan of action was required.

"Here, Major, help this poor woman!" I yelled, spinning her round and throwing her into his arms.

It had the desired effect of blocking his view for the few vital seconds I was counting on. I threw myself to the ground and proceeded to make my way through the dense mob as fast

as my hands and knees would take me. I didn't stop until the crowd started to thin, and then I was up on my feet and running for all I was worth.⁶

Only after a good few minutes did I take the risk of stopping to see if Kutuzov was in pursuit. I soon wished I hadn't because the hulking brute was hot on my tail. So much for my theory that muscle-bound men in ill-fitting uniforms can't run, I thought.

He was gaining rapidly and I made for one of the bombed-out buildings in order to hide until he gave up looking for me. Once inside, I realised that the stairway was still intact and I raced up, only to find that most of the upper floorboards were missing and there was nowhere to run. I stood there, struggling to catch my breath, and I could hear the baritone voice ring out from below.

"Hey, Angliski, I know you're up there. Do not waste your time. Come down, you coward. No wonder there are no British graves in Berlin – you all stood aside while the Red Army was bleeding and now you want to run the city for free."

Well, of all the cheek. If he'd been three feet shorter and unarmed, I would've had half a mind to run down and give him a piece of my mind. As it was I looked around for a means of escape. Above my head a rafter protruded from the wall and I decided that if I could jump up and grab it, I could climb over the wall and make my way to the alleyway below.

So I gave it my best shot, but I missed and crashed to the floor. I barely had time to nurse my bruised knees, when the floor gave way with an ear-splitting crash and I found myself sprawled across a pile of rubble. It took a few moments before I registered the groans emanating from under the debris. It finally dawned on me that by a happy coincidence my fall had completely buried my charming pursuer.

I stood up and brushed the dust from my clothing, none too worse for wear, and that was when I spotted the hand reaching out from a gap in the wreckage.

"Help me, Angliski – I was only joking. I know you English have a sense of humour."

As I walked out of the house and clumsily stood on the outstretched hand, I heard a crack and a satisfying cry of pain. A smile came to my lips as I thought about the major's views on my country's national character, and I responded with my own opinion as I walked away.

"Do you know, I think he's right."

You frightened the life out of me

I returned to my luxurious apartment in the western sector to pick up my suitcase, before I headed for Gatow airfield to catch a flight back to the British zone.

“Were you going to leave without saying goodbye?”

Even though I immediately recognised the dulcet tones as belonging to Louise, I almost jumped out of my skin.

“Good God, Louise, you frightened the life out of me.”

“Why are you so nervous?” she asked as she walked towards me. “I thought you’d be calm and relaxed...after last night.”

She fluttered her eyelashes in the most fetching way and pulled me to her by grabbing handfuls of buttock. Not the style I’d been used to, having only experienced our demure English roses, but a way of going about things I could’ve grown accustomed to in a hurry.

“I’m not nervous. I just didn’t expect to see you again,” I said, feeling the warmth of her body pressed against mine.

“Do you mean to say one night was enough?” she asked, bringing her hand round to slide between us. “No, it wasn’t enough, was it?” said the little trollop teasingly.

“Oh, crikey...I’m sorry, Louise, but I’ve got to go,” I gasped, while I calculated how long it would take a fat Russian to extricate himself from a couple of tons of masonry.

“Have you got to leave right away?” she whispered, nibbling my ear.

“Yes, confound it,” I said, breaking into a sweat and trying to let common sense prevail for once.

“Oh, that’s a pity,” she purred, and with that she pulled the straps of her dress from her shoulders and let it fall to the floor, revealing all of her wonderful nakedness. “I’d hoped we could say goodbye properly.”

“Oh, God - I suppose they can do without me for an hour...or two.”

* * *

My reception back at Wunstorf in the western zone wasn’t quite so welcoming. Biggins had arrived in Germany and he was pacing up and down the floor of the wing commander’s office, barely able to conceal his frustration.

“So you don’t even know if this Kutuzov is dead or alive?” he asked, taking a break from his morning constitutional long enough to look me in the eye.

“I didn’t think it was advisable to stick around long enough to find out!” I yelled angrily.

Not a word of concern about the mortal danger I’d faced, you see – and all because of his ridiculous scheme.

“What about the plans?” he asked pathetically.

“I suppose it was rather careless of me, Biggins, but I forgot to carry a pickaxe so that I could dig up your worthless drawings from a mountain of bricks.”

“There’s no need for sarcasm, Fletcher,” he growled, giving me a stern look.

“Well, what do you expect? You send me into the Russian sector masquerading as this Charles fellow, assuring me that no one over there knows what he really looks like, and the first Russian I come across has met Hayworth personally and he knows who I am. I’m not surprised you’ve got spies leaking atomic secrets all over the shop if this is the way you run things. Why don’t you just mail all the blueprints directly to Stalin in Moscow and save everybody a lot of trouble?”

Biggins simply grimaced and I knew I’d touched a raw nerve.

“We were watching Kutuzov when he arrived in London, but we had no idea he’d actually met with Fuchs. He must have known he was being followed. That’s probably why he didn’t deliver the plans himself.”

“What’s all the fuss about, anyway? The plans I handed over are as phoney as a two bob note, aren’t they?”

Biggins didn’t answer, which I thought was mighty peculiar at the time, but I put it down to a bruised ego on his part. Eventually he gave a deep sigh and delivered his other bad news.

“It’s all academic, I suppose. As our American cousins say - the shit has really hit the fan. So I expect you’ll be needed for other duties.”

“What the hell are you talking about? What other duties?” I asked, thoroughly confused.

“Our sectors in Berlin have been completely cut off. The Russians are stopping anything or anyone attempting to get into the city by road, rail or canal - they’ve sealed it as tight as a drum.”

“Well, that’s just tough tits. I’ve delivered your pathetic plans, so I’d be much obliged if you’d arrange for me to get on the next flight back to England and I can forget all this nonsense ever happened.”

“Not possible, I’m afraid,” said the bloody know-all. “The only hope we have of getting enough supplies to the people of Berlin is by air, and that means flying around the clock. We need every pilot we can get.”

“Well, good luck. As soon as I get home I’ll send over a new batch right away.”

“Most of our pilots are still in training. We need experienced aviators right now.”

There was no arguing with him, so I had to console myself with the thought that the whole thing would blow over within a few weeks. Supplying all the citizens in our sector with everything they needed to stay alive just wasn’t possible, and that was that. Either the Russians would have a change of heart, or we’d simply have to concede defeat. This so-called blockade couldn’t go on for long, I thought, surely - which just goes to show how ignorant I was back then.

The Berlin airlift was about to begin.

A life of secret plans

A life of secret plans and murderous spies was to come back and haunt me soon enough. But if you'll forgive me, I'd like to give you a brief glimpse into the wondrous pleasures of an airman, delivering vital supplies to the capital during the blockade.

You see, the Russians had effectively cut off our sectors in Berlin. The only way for the western allies to get supplies to them was by air. The problem was that we didn't have the wherewithal to do it, and we'd only managed to scrounge up six Dakotas.

There were two and a half million people blockaded in the western sectors of Berlin who needed to import over ten thousand tons of supplies a day just to survive. Our motley bunch of aircraft just wouldn't be enough to do the job. A Dakota can only carry about two and a half tons. Even to deliver the bare minimum and to stop people dying in the streets from starvation would have required round trips all day long. Pilots can't fly twenty-four hours a day and neither can aircraft.

Under normal circumstances I wouldn't have given a monkey's for all these logistical problems. But instead of being a distant spectator to the plight of thousands of nameless Berliners, all I could picture in my mind's eye was my lovely Louise starving to death. Gad, I'm a sentimental fool, aren't I just?

Operation Plainfare, the plan to supply Berlin with basic supplies by air, was eventually given the go-ahead. I was to fly one of our precious Dakotas, and I had three other crew members for company. There was Jim, my co-pilot; John, our Welsh radio operator; and finally Pete, our navigator, who could find a dwarf's tea party in a sandstorm. Our first order was to rip out half of our safety equipment to make room for more freight, which didn't exactly inspire me with confidence. To top it all, the extra aircraft we'd been promised were delayed because some idle buggers in the dockyards had decided it was an ideal time to go on strike.⁷

My first flight to our sector in Berlin didn't bode well. It took place at night, and even before we took off we had problems. The loaders couldn't see what they were doing because the lighting was useless, and I swear we'd have been better off with a fistful of candles. Five Dakotas were left fighting over one fuel point and a starter trolley, and just to add to my misery one of my wheel chocks was missing. Even with the engines idling, the left wheel was in danger of inching forward so that we could've been going round in circles till doomsday.

Against all the odds we eventually got away and I made my delivery to Gatow airfield in Berlin. But any hopes I'd had of a rematch with the seductive Louise were quickly dashed. Less than twenty minutes after we'd landed, all of the cargo had been removed and it was time to return to our zone to do it all over again.

The only respite I had from flying during those first few weeks was when Biggins arranged for me to go to the American sector to see how they were coping. I was assigned a sergeant from their military police and he drove me round the city in his jeep. (The Yanks never walk anywhere).

“We’re losing patience with these damn Russkies,” he explained, as we turned a corner at an alarming rate. “Some of our guys were in their sector only last month, all official and above-board, and the Reds darned-well arrested them. They only let our guys go when General Clay told the commies he’d take ’em back by force if he had to. The general doesn’t take any crap.”

“So is it all water under the bridge now?” I asked.

“Hell, no – we’re gonna get our own back. The Russkies cut across our sector all the time and they drive like maniacs.”

They’re not the only ones, I thought, but I decided it was best not to say anything. It was then that the sergeant got excited and waved to his men in the jeep bringing up the rear.

“It looks like you’re in luck, Captain. You see that Soviet military car burning rubber? Watch this!”

And with that he radioed ahead for an armoured car to intercept the offending Russians.

We arrived at the road block just in time to see an irate Russian officer with enough ribbons and medals on his chest to open a shop. Another Soviet car suddenly appeared and four bodyguards jumped out, guns at the ready. The patrolman wasn’t fazed and he pulled his gun and thrust it right into the officer’s stomach. I daresay we’d have been there all day if an American officer hadn’t arrived to identify the man with the medals as Marshal Sokolovsky, the commandant of the Russian sector.⁸

A couple of days later General Clay paid Sokolovsky a visit to personally apologise, so the whole incident blew over. But I have described it in some detail to illustrate how dangerous the situation was at the time.

What if that patrolman had shot Sokolovsky? Wars have started over much less. After all, in their willingness to find their *casus belli*, it only took the assassination of some minor royal enjoying a ride out for our European leaders to start World War One.

Lust ruled the day

Once I was back in the British zone, I had to fly endless deliveries to Berlin for another two weeks before I was given a few days respite. Believe it or not, suddenly having time on my hands left me in a quandary. Common sense dictated that I head off to the local club to sample some of the handsome pieces of skirt from the WAAF's finest. On the other hand, I just couldn't get the thought of Louise and her irresistible curves out of my mind.

The problem was, how much did she know? The last time I'd seen her father I was being arrested by the charming Kutuzov for being an impostor, and in spite of Otto's assurances that she was completely in the dark as to what had been going on, I just wasn't so sure.

But why take the risk, I hear you ask? In the cold light of day, sitting in my armchair while I write these memoirs, I'd probably agree with you. But I was a young man, remember, with the blood of passion coursing through my veins. I was just too damn susceptible back then. Anyway, I ask you, what are we here for if not for that? Especially when you have the opportunity to share your brief time here with a beauty like Louise.

The laws of evolution leave us destined to try and reproduce when the occasion presents itself. I felt like a frenzied salmon, desperate to head upstream and fertilise his little batch of eggs. I was sure it was a terrible analogy. At least I hoped it was – the salmon dies immediately upon completing its reproductive task.

* * *

The upshot of my prevarications was that lust ruled the day, and I was hitching a ride on a Dakota to Gatow airfield so that I could happily take up where I'd left off with my gorgeous Fraulein. Just before nightfall I was knocking on the door of her home, nervously wondering how she would react to my unexpected visit.

I needn't have worried because her initial look of surprise gave way to smiles and whoops of delight. She wrapped her arms around me and kissed me so passionately on the lips that my head started to spin.

As I followed her into the house I had time to admire her physique once again, this time enhanced by a tight blouse that barely contained her incredible tremblers. I was pleased to note that her shapely legs were bare. You see, knowing that silk stockings were in short supply, I'd brought several pairs as a gift to mark our reunion. When I took them from my pocket her face lit up to such an alarming degree, you'd have thought I'd presented her with the crown jewels - and there was nothing for it but she must put a pair on straight away.

I took the opportunity to survey my surroundings. The room was dimly lit by two paraffin-lamps but, in spite of the lack of furniture, it was clean and brightly painted with a welcoming fire.

"I apologise about these useless lamps, Charles. The electricity will not be on for a few hours – if at all, the way things are going."

“Don’t apologise, Louise, I know what things have been like, believe me. In fact I may well have delivered that coal you’re burning right now.”

“You mean you’re one of the pilots bringing in our supplies?” she asked in surprise.

“Well, I’m just doing my bit.” I said, thinking it might be prudent not to mention how I’d tried my level best to worm my way out of the hazardous duty.

“My hero,” she said, giving me another delightful kiss.

“How are you doing for food? Your diet can’t be too bad because you certainly look amazing,” I said, thinking flattery is usually the best policy.

“Thank you, kind sir,” she said with a mock curtsy. “We get by, I suppose, although I haven’t eaten meat for days.”

“Oh, I see. Then I don’t suppose you’ll want this?” I asked, producing a large tin of ham from my bag.

“Is that what I think it is?” she gasped.

Not quite the same enthusiasm as for the stockings, I noticed, but for some reason I found it endearing. I do like my women to get their priorities in order.

“I will make a stew. Oh dear, I keep forgetting – we won’t be able to use the stove until midnight. Do you mind waiting, Charles?”

“Of course not.”

“But it’s only nine o’clock - what shall we do to pass the time in the dark until then?” she asked, treating me to a seductive smile.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

To wake the dead

I returned to Wunstorf to find the place was even more chaotic than when I'd left. There were men everywhere – mechanics, air-traffic controllers, electricians, drivers, and the usual lazy buggers who were about as much use as a pair of long johns on your wedding night. If you weren't bumping into some hapless moron who wasn't looking where he was going, you were tripping over piles of equipment strewn about the place.

To make matters worse, the weather was atrocious and supposedly we were still in the middle of summer. We had it all in those first few months – low cloud, driving rain, thunderstorms, and even snow. When the wind dropped, more often than not a dense fog would roll in. Normally we would have been grounded, but back then we were expected to fly in anything that was thrown at us.

On one particular flight I remember there was so much ice on my poor Dakota, I had to keep it on full power just to stay in the air. When I was finally able to get the de-icing equipment to work, I watched with growing alarm as huge lumps of ice cracked off the wings and thudded down the fuselage. But when I eventually came in to land at Gatow, a thaw had set in and there were men everywhere, soaked to the skin as they desperately tried to sweep sheets of water off the runway.

Water got into everything. If our Dakota was out of service, nine times out of ten it was because of an electrical fault caused by damp. The airfield became a quagmire and vehicles were always getting stuck in the mud. I had to resort to wearing a pair of wellington boots and one time they were so caked in ice, that in mid-flight my right foot froze to the rudder pedal. The way things were going, I thought, by week's end I would probably have to invest in a rubber dinghy just to get to the aircraft.

I don't think I've ever felt more tired than I did back then. Sometimes I'd be flying for twelve hours straight, and when you did manage to grab a few hours sleep, some clumsy oaf coming off duty would stagger in making enough noise to wake the dead.

It was then, when fatigue was threatening to send me into a coma, that I received the unpleasant news that Biggins had arrived at the airfield and wanted to see me. All those dreadful feelings of fear and anxiety I had experienced during my brief sojourn in the world of espionage came flooding back, and suddenly my weariness was forgotten.

* * *

"We've recently intercepted a coded message sent by Otto Schoneberg to his contact in London," said Biggins, getting straight to the point.

"I'm very pleased for you," I said, not wishing to get embroiled in his fun and games for a second time.

He ignored me and continued to brief me on the latest developments in the H-bomb saga.

"We don't know what to make of it, quite frankly. It warns the Russian operatives in London that Charles Hayworth's cover has been blown and that he was replaced by an impostor."

“So, what did you expect?”

“Exactly - that part of the message makes sense, but it’s what came next that’s baffling.”

“Biggins, I’ve just spent twelve hours in the cockpit flying sanitary towels to the good ladies of Berlin, so if you have a point to make, I suggest you get on with it before I fall asleep or die of boredom - whichever comes first.”

“The final part of the message says that the plans you passed on were genuine.”

Biggins sat back and folded his arms, pleased by the look of confusion written across my face.

“Look, I’m probably not fully conscious and I might be missing something, but wasn’t that the whole idea? The plans were supposed to be convincing, weren’t they? So well done – mission accomplished.”

“Very good, Fletcher, and you’re right except for one thing. The message refers to a technical breakthrough our scientists have recently made that wasn’t supposed to be in the bogus plans you gave to Kutuzov.”

If I hadn’t been confused at the start of Biggins’ latest revelation, I was now. I hadn’t a clue what it all meant. In spite of my tiredness I wanted some answers.

“Well, what do you make of it?”

“I think we have to face a terrible truth. The plans you passed onto Kutuzov were genuine.”

“But that’s ridiculous,” I protested. “Haversham gave them to you personally and you passed them straight on to me.”

“Correct, Captain. In which case, either I received the genuine plans in the first place or I switched them. But I’m here to tell you, Tom, I didn’t. Naturally I *would* say that, but I hope you can believe me, old chap.”

He looked me in the eyes to gauge my reaction.

“Look, Henry,” I said, since we’d switched to first name terms, “I’m new to all this skulduggery, remember? But if you didn’t switch the plans then...”

“Lord Haversham is the double agent,” said Biggins, finishing my thought for me.

“But the whole plan was his idea, wasn’t it?”

“That’s right, but then it all makes sense, don’t you see? He simply exchanged the bogus plans for the real ones and found someone to deliver them who was expendable. Then he tried to have you eliminated by letting the Russians in on the double-cross. You were supposed to just give the plans to Otto Schoneberg. I thought it was strange the way this Kutuzov suddenly crawled out of the woodwork.”

“My God, you mean Haversham just set me up. Why the fat b...”

“It is par for the course in this game, I’m afraid. What does the death of a young captain in the RAF matter compared to the slaughter of millions in a nuclear holocaust?”

“I’m still not convinced, Henry, but let’s just say for a moment that what you suspect is true – what are you going to do about it?”

“From the messages we’ve intercepted we know they haven’t forwarded the plans to their experts in Russia yet.”

“Why not?” I asked, unable to believe what I was hearing. “You’d think they’d want to get things up and running as quickly as possible.”

“From what we can gather from the messages we’ve intercepted, this Kutuzov’s neck is on the line. Stalin *personally* gave him the job of obtaining the plans for the hydrogen bomb. Kutuzov is no fool and he leaves nothing to chance. For all he knows, Haversham might have played him false. So before he heads back to Moscow he’s making sure he really *does* have the genuine article.”

“But he’s had the plans for weeks – he can’t keep stalling indefinitely.”

“That’s why he’s sending messages to his agents in London to try and get confirmation that everything’s kosher before he faces Stalin. Kutuzov will probably get the corroboration he’s looking for and head straight for the Kremlin – with our plans for making a hydrogen bomb in his hot little hands.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes,” I said.

“The thing is, old chap, they might be *your* shoes too,” he said cryptically, and a terrible feeling of foreboding started to form deep within my bowels.

His next words confirmed my worst fears.

“You see, when I started to suspect Lord Haversham,” he said, staring at the floor as if he was too embarrassed to look me in the eye, “I decided to seek out a higher authority, and I’ve been given orders to get the plans back at all costs before they leave Berlin.”

“Well, good luck with that,” I said, dreading what I knew was coming next.

“*We’ll* need it. I’m afraid the people at the top think that you are our best hope for getting those plans back.

“Well, you can tell this person ‘at the top’ to bugger off.”

“You’ll be flying to London within the hour to meet him, so you can tell him yourself.”

“What? Who the hell is he?”

“Oh, didn’t I say? It’s the prime minister.”

Number 10

So it was that just when I thought I'd seen the back of gun-toting Russian fiends and secret plans for putting together H-bomb kits, I suddenly found myself thrown into the lion's den once more. Yet what could I do? When the prime minister himself asks you to call, it would be rather bad form to make your excuses and politely tell him to bugger off. Besides, as an officer in the RAF, I supposed that technically I was in his employ. For the life of me I couldn't see a way out.

Less than six hours later Biggins and I were in Babylon and walking through the door of Number 10 in our Sunday best. As we climbed the stairs and passed the framed pictures of the former occupants, my bowels were threatening to rebel. We were escorted to an elegant room and when the secretary left there were just the three of us - Biggins, yours truly and the man himself, the Right Honourable Clement Attlee.

Attlee may not have been one of our most imposing leaders of the twentieth century, but for my money he was the sharpest pencil in the box. He was a modest man (Churchill rather cruelly claimed he had a lot to be modest about) and no one could have called him power-hungry. When Stalin met him he said afterwards: "He does not look like a greedy man." I suppose it was a complement, considering its source.

He'd always reminded me of a bank clerk, but then I remembered he'd fought in the First World War in Gallipoli, which proves what I've said before - never judge a book by its cover.

"Gentlemen, thank you for coming," said Attlee in his usual clipped manner.

After shaking our hands and asking us to be seated, he was all business, *ad rem*. I noticed an unfinished cigarette in the ash tray on his desk, but he was already filling his pipe.

"I am meeting you alone because we face a dire situation. As far as I can tell, we have Russian spies coming out of the woodwork and no one seems to know who to trust," he said, summing up the situation.

Everyone knew he'd shown our Rolls Royce jet engines to the Russians in '46, but he'd clearly changed his mind about our friends behind the Iron Curtain.

"I fear that as far as the atom bomb is concerned, the cat is already out of the bag, so to speak. However, now that research has begun on the creation of this new hydrogen bomb, I don't have to tell you that the stakes are infinitely higher."

"Yes, sir, we quite understand," said Biggins, toadying for all he was worth, but Attlee seemed to ignore him as he tapped his pen, apparently lost in thought.

Finally he broke the silence, and to my consternation his next question was addressed to me.

"Captain, I understand you kindly agreed to take the place of this courier - a Captain... Hayworth," he said, looking down at a sheet of paper sitting on the table in front of him. "I see you have also been fulfilling your obligations as an airman with the RAF, delivering much-needed supplies to our new friends in Berlin."

"Yes, sir. I was just doing my duty," I said modestly, and I noticed Biggins glance in my direction with a look of disbelief on his face.

“Be that as it may, I’m glad that you did. It might well be true that the Russians have got hold of our nuclear secrets through artifice, but rest assured the fault lies elsewhere, not with yourself.”

I was warming to the prime minister – excellent chap. But there was more.

“However, reading the report I have here in front of me, I see that you managed to better this Major Kutuzov and succeeded in escaping before you could be taken into custody. Excellent work,” said the old flatterer.

“You’re very kind, sir,” I replied, feeling quite elated at all this praise being heaped on my unworthy shoulders - until I remembered what it was all leading up to.

“As I see it,” said Attlee, returning to the point in hand, “we must get these plans back before this Kutuzov has them verified and delivers them to my opposite number in the Soviet Union. Now, what is it you propose, Mr. Biggins?”

Biggins sat up straight in his chair and cleared his throat before he began.

“Sir, you will see from the report that the original contact in Berlin was Herr Otto Schoneberg, a police officer in the Russian sector.”

“Yes, I have it here,” said Attlee impatiently, as he tapped the sheet of paper, “please go on.”

“Well, sir, Captain Fletcher initially made contact with him through his daughter, Louise Schoneberg.”

Biggins was starting to look uncomfortable and he reached up to his collar to loosen his tie, but thought better of it.

“Yes, I know all this, Mr. Biggins, but what is it that you propose?” asked the prime minister sharply.

“Captain Fletcher is still in contact with Fraulein Schoneberg, and my suggestion is that this could be our way to lure Major Kutuzov out into the open with the plans.”

Now it was Biggins’ turn to look embarrassed as I stared across in surprise. So he’d been keeping tabs on me, had he? Attlee’s next question broke in on my thoughts.

“Is this true, Captain? Have you still been...seeing this young lady?” he asked, no doubt trying to be tactful.

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, this is most peculiar, Captain. She is the daughter of a German agent working for the Russians. Weren’t you worried that you might compromise yourself?”

“Sir, I don’t believe she knows anything about her father’s clandestine activities. As far as she is concerned he is simply a police officer. Otto Schoneberg merely used her as an intermediary to facilitate our meeting.”

God, it sounded lame. But what could I say to the prime minister, for goodness sake? I could just imagine the reaction if I resorted to the truth: ‘Yes, sir, she might be a spy, but you should see her in the flesh - well worth the risk.’

“Let us hope your judgement is correct, Captain. I don’t know what your motives were for staying in touch with this young lady,” he said, glancing up at me over the top of his spectacles with a look that made me feel damned uncomfortable, “but thank God that you did.”

Attlee leant back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling as if he was searching for divine inspiration.

“As I see it, this is the only chance we have of stopping Kutuzov, albeit a slim one. I will leave the details to you gentlemen and I trust you will not divulge what has been discussed in this room with anyone.”

“Yes, sir,” we both said in unison.

“I know that this is a huge responsibility to be placing on such young shoulders, but I am afraid I have no alternative. If I cannot trust a man such as Lord Haversham, who I considered to be a personal friend until this latest revelation, what am I to do? The only comfort I can offer is that I will put any resources you require at your disposal. You have my authority to cut through any red tape. If there is any nonsense from anyone you have my permission to refer them to me directly.”

He looked at each of us in turn before delivering his final thoughts on the matter.

“The democratic countries of the world may not know it, but they will be relying on you two young men to secure their freedom.”

The prime minister rose from his chair and shook each of us warmly by the hand once again.

“It only remains for me to wish you good luck. Thank you, gentlemen.”

Slowly it dawned on us that it was time to leave and we shuffled awkwardly out of the room.

“What have you got us into, Henry?” I mumbled, as the secretary guided us down the stairs.

“I’m beginning to wonder,” he replied timidly.

“You know what this all means, don’t you?” I said, trying to look on the bright side and quash the rising panic in my throat.

Biggins looked across, waiting for me to answer my own question.

“After the chap with the spectacles up in that office, we’re the two most powerful men in the country.”

“Yes, I suppose we are,” said Biggins, and his whole body seemed to straighten up.

It’s funny, but when I look back on that strange and nerve-racking day, it’s not my meeting with one of the great leaders of the Free World I remember vividly. No, it was the sight of Biggins’ tired young face breaking into a smile and the spring in his step as we walked back to the car.

Let's snatch the bastard

Clement Attlee was as good as his word and Biggins was allocated a sizeable fund on which to draw when we returned to Germany that same night. I insisted we took full advantage of our new-found wealth, and I persuaded him to book us rooms at the best hotel in Hanover so that we could plan our strategy in comfort.

I have to say he didn't take much convincing. Being as tired and worn out as I was, I think he was looking forward to a comfortable bed and room service for a change. We breakfasted early and ordered a large pot of coffee to provide the fuel we'd need while we thrashed out the order of play.

"Louise Schoneberg - she's our ace in the pack," said Biggins, taking charge of the meeting. "Just how well do you know her?"

"In the biblical-sense, mainly," I replied, hoping to shock his sensitive soul - but not a bit of it.

"Excellent. That could work in our favour. You're a good-looking chap - perhaps she's smitten," he said, clearly intent on getting the job done and to hell with the moral niceties.

"I wouldn't count on it, Henry - certainly not enough to betray her old man," I said, trying to get him to face the reality of the situation.

"Ah, don't you see, she doesn't have to know what we're up to. You just need to persuade her to set up a meeting with her father. Kutuzov will hear about it and he'll take the bait, believe me."

The cheery bastard was enjoying himself. Never mind that your reluctant hero was going to have to put his head on the chopping block again. It was all just scrum down and let's score another try to this champion of the school rugby team.

"Am I the only one who has considered the bigger problem in all this?" I asked, thoroughly sick of Biggins' games.

"What's that?"

"Kutuzov knows I'm not a double agent. If he gets one whiff that I'm involved, we won't see him for dust."

"Not necessarily," insisted Biggins infuriatingly. "I've made a study of this Kutuzov - he detests being made a fool of and you escaped from his clutches."

"Okay, so he doesn't like being outdone. How does that help us?"

"I know him," said Biggins smugly. "If there's a chance he can get back at you before he leaves for Moscow, he'll take it."

I was struck dumb. There he was, supine on the bed as he blew smoke rings up at the ceiling, while he calmly discussed using my precious carcass as some sort of bait. Never mind that this Russian ogre wanted to use me for target practice. I quickly did my best to knock his preposterous scheme for six.

"All right, let's say for the sake of argument that our charming major will come running just to have another swipe at me - that doesn't mean he'll obligingly bring the blasted plans with him."

"No, that's right - you've got a point," he said, sounding rather pitiful.

I was tempted to let him stew in his own juice, but I realised that if I didn't think of something, he'd be coming up with all sorts of nonsense - and likely as not every idea would involve putting your correspondent into harm's way.

"Look, I think we're missing the point," I said. "As far as we are aware, Kutuzov is the only one who knows where the plans are. So if we get Kutuzov, we get the plans."

"If we can grab him, what makes you think he'll tell us where they are?"

"There are ways of making people talk," I said, trying not to spell it out.

"Here, I say...you don't mean torture, do you? We're British, for God's sake," Biggins cried, his voice having gone up an octave.

No doubt he was recalling my reputation as a bit of a fanfaron during our school days.

"A fat lot of good being British will do us if the Russians end up with hydrogen bombs all over the place. Look at the way they're throwing their weight around now- and that's when they haven't even got the A-bomb. Like Haversham said when you got me into this mess in the first place, we're not Boy Scouts. Of course, if you'd rather go back to the prime minister and tell him we weren't up to the job, be my guest."

He was sitting up now and I could see the cogs whirring around in his brain, as he wrestled with this new moral dilemma. On the one hand, as an ex-choir boy brought up in a family of good church-going Christians, I'm sure he had his doubts about God giving the use of torture his blessing. But on the other, he just couldn't contemplate failure when so much was at stake.

I watched as his troubled brow visibly smoothed over and his jaw set with a new-found determination. His next words betrayed his resolve.

"Let's snatch the bastard!"

Our best men

Knowing the sensible concern I have for my safety, you might be forgiven for wondering why your timid hero was coming up with ideas for putting himself in the firing line. The truth is I didn't have much of a choice in the matter. I'll freely admit that I'd seriously considered losing my way back to the airport in London and hiding out until the turn of the century, but what can you do when your prime minister says your country needs you? The thought of the humiliation I would have had to endure if I'd refused was too much to bear.

But once I'd resigned myself to volunteering my invaluable services, I consoled myself with the thought that I had the resources at my disposal to make my forthcoming adventure as risk-free as possible.

The plan was simple. Through Louise I would arrange another meeting with her father, and Kutuzov would no doubt turn up on the scene to do his worst. Naturally our hapless Russian major would be unaware of the reception committee we would have waiting for him.

"I want as many tough buggers as we can get hold of, armed to the teeth. We don't want Kutuzov getting away," I added, hoping I hadn't exposed my yellow streak.

"Don't worry. I've got a dozen of our best men on standby – ex-Paras and Marines. But remember we've got to take him alive."

That was easy for him to say when he wasn't the one in Kutuzov's sights, but what do you expect from these bloody backroom boys? To show willing I nodded eagerly and, since time was of the essence, it was decided I would fly to Berlin that night to see Louise.

At least that was one part of the whole mission for which I could muster some enthusiasm. Incredibly, events had proceeded at such a breakneck speed that I hadn't even given a thought to the impending rendezvous with my beautiful Fraulein, which wasn't like me at all.

So it was only as I knocked on the door of her home that I began to worry about how she would react to another surprise visit from her English admirer. I needn't have concerned myself because when the door opened, I was greeted with the same squeals of delight I'd been treated to at our previous reunion.

"Charles, I can't believe it's you!" she screamed, holding my face in both of her hands and treating me to another one of her delicious kisses.

I'm pleased to say that all formality was thrown out of the window and we were getting reacquainted in no time. In fact it was nearly three hours before I had the opportunity (or indeed the energy) to broach the subject of a meeting with her father.

For some reason, I found it perversely amusing to imagine what the prime minister would have thought if he'd known how I'd spent the last few hours while his country's security hung in the balance. Still, you've got to get your priorities right, haven't you?

Eventually I was able to pick my moment to tackle the subject.

"Louise, I was wondering if you could arrange for me to meet with your father again."

"What for?" she asked, innocently enough.

"Oh, it's just government business – nothing exciting."

“Charles, is that why you came to see me – just to arrange another meeting with my father?”

I laughed, partly out of relief that her concerns had nothing to do with what the meeting was about.

“No, of course not. If you don’t want to arrange it, I really don’t mind. I’m just happy being here.”

I was too, and if she’d refused I think I would’ve been relieved. Yet, as is so often the way in life, act as if you don’t care and people will usually accede to your requests, but look desperate and needy and they’ll slam the door in your face.

“I’m sorry, Charles, of course I’ll ask if he’ll meet with you. When do you want to see him?”

“I’m afraid it’s quite urgent, so I’d like to meet him at six o’clock tomorrow night...no, I mean tonight,” I said, noticing that it was already past midnight according to the clock by the bed.

“Will you meet him at the police station?” she asked.

“No. Ask him if he wouldn’t mind joining me at the Potsdamer Platz.”

The Potsdamer Platz

The Potsdamer Platz was situated in western Berlin, just over the border from the eastern sector. Biggins and I had chosen the square near to the Brandenburg Gate for two reasons. Firstly, it was generally a busy part of the city, which we hoped might suit our purposes. And secondly, not being too far from the Russian sector, we expected that Kutuzov would be more likely to emerge from his lair and show his ugly face.

You'd be forgiven for thinking that in a crowded square, when the city's people are making their weary way home from work or preparing for an evening out, it would be fairly easy for a dozen men to blend in - but you'd be dead wrong. Biggins' plain-clothes henchmen stood out like a sore thumb.

You have to remember that the blockade had been in full swing for a number of months by then, and it was beginning to show its effects on the local populace. The majority of Berliners looked drawn and listless, and there were none of the chubby, sausage-eating squareheads that eventually festooned the city's streets in the later years of prosperity.

The result of this dearth of well-nourished citizenry was that a trained eye would have been able to pick out our men as easily as they could tarts in a church congregation. It was almost comical to see our burly roughnecks in their ill-fitting suits, trying to look nonchalant. No doubt I would have seen the funny side if the stakes hadn't been so high - namely, my safety and wellbeing.

In that regard, I had insisted that Biggins acquire a government car with toughened glass, in which your hero sat scouring the rooftops like a man demented. The last thing I wanted was to end my days being picked off by a sniper's bullet.

With the thick windows firmly closed, I was starting to sweat profusely under the glare of the summer sunshine, so it was with some relief that I spied Otto Schoneberg approaching the car from across the square. I waved him over and he got in on the passenger side to take his seat beside me.

"What is this all about, Hayworth ... or Fletcher, or whatever your damn name is?" he asked angrily.

Aside from his warm greeting, I noticed he was looking decidedly nervous and he barely looked me in the eye, as he furtively glanced at the crowd filling the square. I was about to answer, when we both became aware of a commotion on the other side of the street.

Twenty or so east sector policemen had suddenly gathered in the platz, and the yells and cries of abuse from the crowd were becoming louder. Suddenly someone picked up a rock and threw it at the mass of uniforms and, before we knew what was happening, others were joining in and projectiles were being hurled from all directions. Many of the officers suffered severe cuts and were decorating the pavement with blood.⁹

Out of nowhere some British MPs arrived on the scene and forced the crowd back. By gum, I thought, this isn't going according to our scenario, and as if to confirm my growing conviction that everything was going to hell in a hand-basket, a car careered round the corner and rammed the front of our vehicle.

As a result of the collision, both of us were thrown from our seats towards the dashboard. Instinctively I'd brought my arms up to protect my face, but Schoneberg had been caught unawares and his head smashed into the windscreen. Blood was streaking from a nasty gash on his forehead and I heard him cry out in pain.

Everything had happened in a matter of seconds and the old cliché is quite true – under circumstances of extreme peril, time *does* slow down. If that wasn't the case, I doubt whether I would have had sufficient presence of mind to notice the two men from the offending vehicle calmly unstrap themselves from their seats and emerge, machine-guns at the ready, preparing to finish off the job they had started.

If you think 'bullet-proof' glass does exactly what it claims, I'm afraid you're sadly mistaken. No doubt the technology was only in its infancy all those years ago, but if you find yourself in a similar situation to me, I wouldn't recommend just sitting there and amusing yourself as you prepare to watch the bullets ricochet harmlessly off the glazing. I'm here to tell you, as sure as day, if I'd lingered I wouldn't be sitting writing these memoirs today.

Blind instinct had me diving for the footwell, and I looked up to see the relentless barrage of bullets completely destroy the 'bullet-proof' windscreen provided by the technical wizards in our intelligence department. Shards of glass sliced my hands as I attempted to protect my handsome visage, but I quickly realised that if I stayed where I was, the situation wasn't going to improve.

I reached up and searched for the ignition key. When I felt the cold metal in my hand I turned it and prayed that the engine was still in working order. I breathed a sigh of relief when the motor fired and, keeping my head down, I used my hands to operate the pedals, put the gear stick into reverse, and accelerated away.

Of course I had no way of knowing if a misguided pedestrian was about to have their day ruined, but if they were fool enough to still be lurking around with bullets flying in every direction ... well, they deserved whatever they got.

Unknown to me, the only thing impeding the car's rearward progress was a truck parked about ten feet away. Naturally what was left of my bullet-ridden vehicle promptly smashed into it, but because I was wedged against the front seat, my uncontrolled momentum was cushioned. It was just a shame that the same couldn't be said for the unlucky Otto, who was thrown around like a rag doll.

At least the gunfire appeared to have stopped, and I was about to extricate myself from my undignified arrangement on the floor, when who should appear at the shattered window but Kutuzov.

At his elbow was one of his gun-toting thugs, who proceeded to take aim at your helpless hero. To my astonishment, Kutuzov snatched the firearm from him.

"Nyet!" he cried, striking the assassin.

"I could have let these men kill you while I sat comfortably in my office, Captain Fletcher, but where would be the pleasure in that? I am very dedicated to my work and I always prefer a hands-on approach," he said, grinning as he took aim. "Where is your stupid English sense of humour now?"

I couldn't bear to look, so I squeezed my eyes shut and screamed. I heard the shot and was amazed at how painless death could be. I opened one eye to see what heaven, or more likely hell, actually looked like.

To my astonishment I was still in the car. But where Kutuzov had been standing only a few moments before, there was only blue sky. I clambered up to take a look outside, and there were four of our brave fellows manhandling my Russian executioner and his compatriot to the floor.

Mind you, Kutuzov wasn't making it easy for them and, as they tried to pin him to the roadside, he was making a hell of a din. I was just starting to enjoy myself when, to my horror, he broke free. But any fears I had that he would resume his murderous attack on my person soon vanished, when our Russian conqueror fled for his life.

It was then I noticed that the engine of the car was still running, so I quickly climbed into the driver's seat, put the car into gear, and headed straight for the fleeing Cossack.

No doubt anyone who has knocked down a pedestrian will tell you what a disturbing feeling it can be. But I'm here to inform you that deliberately sending nearly two tons of motorised machinery into the vulnerable flesh and bone of my Russian nemesis was a most pleasurable experience.

I didn't kill the bastard, more's the pity, because fortunately for the Soviet major we needed him alive. As he lay helpless in the middle of the road, my burly henchmen picked him up and carried him to a waiting truck where more of their colleagues gave them a helping hand. I wiped away the blood from the cuts on my hands and neck, but I was more or less intact. I climbed aboard and I made my way to the front of the truck, where Biggins was sitting next to the driver.

"We've got him. Let's go!" I yelled, slapping the rear of the cabin.

Biggins had insisted we bring a doctor, and he tended to the major's wounds as we drove away from the large crowd that had been drawn to all the commotion.

"Apart from this old injury to his arm, he's got a broken femur, a nasty head-wound, and it looks like a couple of ribs may be fractured, to judge by all the bruising."

"Still, never mind - accidents will happen," I commented sympathetically.

He gave me a disapproving look, but I didn't mind him – I was too elated at having come through another scrape with the MGB's best. There's nothing like facing mortal danger and surviving to put you in capital trim.

We soon arrived at the deserted warehouse Biggins had chosen for the next phase of our assignment, and I told our chaps to make sure the major was securely tied to the bed positioned in the far corner. I didn't want Kutuzov getting free from his restraints – broken limbs or not. The doctor wanted to set the Russian's leg, but Biggins and I shocked his professional soul by insisting he left the brute untreated.

"Wait in the next room. We'll call for you when we need you," ordered Biggins.

"This man needs medical assistance," insisted the doctor.

"I understand that, doctor, and we will call for you when we have finished with him," said Biggins firmly.

"But it is my duty..."

“It is your duty to follow orders, doctor. Now please do as I ask and wait outside.”

The doctor still looked angry, but he did as he was told and, when the others had left, we turned our attention to the prisoner, who appeared to be regaining consciousness.

“What do you think you are doing, you bastards? Let me go!” he screamed, spitting out the words with a hatred I’d seldom witnessed.

“Where are the plans that Captain Fletcher gave to you?” asked Biggins, wasting no time.

“I won’t tell you a thing. I demand you return me to the eastern sector.”

“Your leg looks nasty,” I whispered gently. “Yes, I think I can see the bone.”

“So, get me a doctor.”

“I tell you what, let’s not bother the doctor. I’m sure I can fix it myself.”

“What are you doing...?” he screamed.

Torture is a terrible thing

If you say to me that torture is a terrible thing, I'll agree with you wholeheartedly - I've been at the receiving end too often not to. However, I will say there is a time and a place for everything.

'You're just a sadist,' I hear the armchair moralists cry.

I'm sure they're right, and if I admitted I enjoyed my work and took some satisfaction in seeing the major suffer, they'd no doubt believe their accusation was justified. Be that as it may, I'll not be a hypocrite and say I regret I ever did it.

But I will say this. It's not something I went looking for. I hadn't asked to be sent on the bloody mission in the first place, and the innocent Major Kutuzov had tried to cancel me out, *twice*.

Then there are the men in power who send the youth of their country to get the job done, whatever the cost. No doubt if it was their own sorry carcass lying in the foxhole, with shells dropping down all around them, they might be tempted to look for another way of going about things. But there we were, with the fate of the world on our young shoulders.

"Don't disappoint us," we were told.

The upshot was that Biggins and I got the job done that day. Before we called in the doctor, Kutuzov had sung like a bird.

So we were armed with the information we had sought at great risk to life and limb – my life, Kutuzov's limb. There was only one little problem which I almost hesitate to mention, and that was the location of the plans. They were in a safe, in a guarded vault, deep beneath MGB headquarters in the eastern sector of Berlin – and we had to get them out.

That should be a piece of cake, I thought.

* * *

In the interest of strict truthfulness, I have to say that the whereabouts of the nuclear plans was not the only problem presenting itself.

Otto Schoneberg hadn't been as fortunate as my good self in our recent run-in with Kutuzov. He'd decided to shuffle off his mortal coil, and since I was the one who'd arranged the meeting where he met his fate, a less than charitable person might have suggested that his untimely death was my fault. That being the case, the thought of having to explain to Louise that her father was no longer in the land of the living filled me with dread.

Nevertheless I was relieved that my part in the whole mess was over, and I was looking forward to listening to Biggins worry himself into an early grave, as he tried to come up with a way of retrieving the elusive plans. Of course I should have known better.

"We can't go into the headquarters of the Russian secret police, guns blazing. What are we going to do?"

"What do you mean 'we'?" I asked.

"Don't forget, Captain, the PM gave both of us the task of retrieving those plans."

“Look, this is your problem - I didn’t ask to be here. Besides, what can I do? Even if you get in the building and past the guards, I’m no safe-cracker,” I said, desperate to scotch any idea of involving me in some sort of half-arsed robbery.

“We don’t have to break into the safe - Kutuzov has given us the combination.”

“If you think he’s told us the truth, you’re crazy,” I said, and a look of fury erupted on Biggins’ fat face.

“If you think he was lying, why the hell did you bother going through that whole charade?” he screamed, pointing to the bed recently vacated by the major.

“It seemed like a good idea at the time, but I doubt if it achieved anything.”

“I think you underestimate yourself, Captain. I was there when you tortured the poor bugger, remember. I think you may well have missed your calling – he was screaming out in bloody agony. You can’t tell me he was acting just for our benefit,” said Biggins, missing the point.

“No, I got his attention all right. But he was in so much pain he would have told us his *grandmother* had the plans if he thought it would stop.”

“Perhaps,” he said, smiling calmly.

Somehow I found Biggins’ change of mood more disconcerting than the rage he had exhibited moments earlier. I stood there transfixed as he went on.

“But I warn you against underestimating me. I let you have your fun to save some time. While we work out how to get the plans back, Kutuzov’s story will be checked.”

“How?” I asked, taken aback by Biggins’ new-found confidence.

“I didn’t ask the good doctor to come along just for his recuperative powers. We have used his services before, and his expertise in the use of certain types of truth serum is second to none. We will soon know if Kutuzov was telling the truth.”

Biggins couldn’t hide his satisfaction at my look of disbelief, and I was forced to listen as he signed and sealed my fate once again.

“I’m going back to the hotel to get something to eat. You’re going to join me, and while you stuff yourself at the government’s expense, we’ll get you fitted for the uniform of a senior officer in the Red Army. Then we’ll think of a way we can use your fluent Russian to get to that safe,” he said, like a Dr Pangloss incarnate.

He walked towards the large entrance at the end of the warehouse and I stood there watching the receding figure, totally dumbfounded. As he reached the door, he turned to issue one final friendly enquiry.

“Are you coming, Captain, or do I have to ask my men outside to come in and drag you to the hotel?”

Sorry, old chap

I've always instinctively rebelled against misplaced authority, but there was no talking to Biggins after our little tiff. I had to spend the evening listening to his latest scheme for retrieving the confounded plans and if I'd tried to wriggle my way out of it, likely as not he'd have lost his temper and thrown his toys out of the perambulator.

In the end he'd held the threat of prison over my head. So the following afternoon I found myself being driven to the eastern sector of Berlin, dressed as a major in the Russian Army. Since Biggins had no more mastery of the Russian language than a fifth-form dunce, it was decided that I would do the talking and he had to make do with the uniform of a captain.

He was seated next to me in the back of an authentic Soviet staff car, and one of his Marines acted as driver and bodyguard. Where Biggins had got hold of our transport I couldn't imagine, but I was too sick with a mixture of anger and fear to ask.

We pulled up in front of a gothic-looking building which served as MGB headquarters. How my shaking legs carried me up the stone steps, I'll never know, but the temptation to run down the street begging to be allowed into the nearest lunatic asylum was almost overwhelming.

The two guards at the heavy wooden doors saluted and we entered a large reception hall, where there was a sergeant seated behind a desk. He was filling out some sort of form that was requiring his full attention and he didn't even look up when we approached.

"Da?" he asked absent-mindedly.

I didn't answer and just stood there, waiting for him to look up from his urgent paperwork. Since his question had been welcomed by a wall of silence, he eventually tore himself away from his scribbling to see what the interruption was all about.

It was a pleasure to see his relaxed demeanour suddenly turn to shock when he finally realised he had the pleasure of addressing a major, who at that very moment was looking angrily down his nose at him.

"Major, I am sorry, I...I did not ..." he stammered, as he quickly stood to attention.

"Sergeant, I do not usually tolerate such slovenly behaviour in my men. However, since I am here on urgent business for Marshal Sokolovsky, I will let it pass. But I would appreciate it if you could expedite matters," I said, somehow keeping my voice steady.

"Certainly, Major, how can I be of help?"

I pulled out the papers that Biggins' backroom boys had been working on all night. They were official requisition forms for material stored in the safe. The downtrodden sergeant looked confused.

"But, sir, it does not specify which material is required. We have orders that certain documents must never leave the building."

"Do you think that Marshal Sokolovsky is not aware of that? He only requires personal papers he has stored here for safekeeping."

"I understand, Major, but I really should get confirmation before I allow you to..."

Here he reached for the telephone on his desk when I interrupted him.

“Sergeant,” I snapped, and he replaced the receiver. “I believe I told you it was a matter of some urgency.”

He seemed to hesitate and I worried that I had taken too heavy a hand. He stood up and retrieved a pistol from the desk drawer.

“Very well, Major, but I will have to insist that I accompany you,” he said, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“As you wish,” I replied.

We hadn’t counted on that, but there was nothing we could do but go along with his request.

“Your driver will have to remain here,” insisted the sergeant.

I didn’t like that. Our Marine was as tough as they come, and it had been comforting to have him at our back. Biggins and I had no choice but to follow the sergeant, as he led us down a flight of stairs to the basement. We came to a door, in front of which stood two guards armed with rifles.

“These officers have orders to retrieve certain papers from the safe. I will be accompanying them, but please follow standard procedure and lock the door behind me. You may open it again when I give you the order, understood?” ordered the sergeant, addressing the guards.

The men nodded, and Biggins and I gave each other worried glances. This was a fine mess. Even if we *did* get hold of the plans, we wouldn’t be able to get out of the building. Biggins’ ridiculous scheme had backfired already, and I found myself cursing the day I’d ever met him.

Once inside, the door was dutifully locked behind us and we found ourselves in an L-shaped room, with the safe tucked away in the far wall. The sergeant opened it and, in spite of our perilous predicament, Biggins and I couldn’t help but share a smile. After all our worries about Kutuzov giving us the wrong combination, we didn’t even need to use it - a welcome bit of fat if ever it was needed.

The sergeant removed a handful of documents and laid them out on an empty table.

“These are the only papers which may leave the building, Major. If it is with the remaining documents, then I am afraid Marshal Sokolovsky will have to come here in person.”

“Of course, Sergeant,” I replied, trying to sound nonchalant.

I looked through the offering and naturally our plans weren’t amongst them. The sergeant was bent over the table, perusing the papers with me, and while he wasn’t looking I gave a surreptitious shake of my head to let Biggins know we weren’t in luck. He nodded and unbuttoned his jacket. From the waistband of his trousers he pulled out a pistol with a silencer attached, and to my horror he pointed it squarely at the back of the sergeant’s head and pulled the trigger.

I stifled a scream and managed to catch the lifeless body of Biggins’ victim before it fell to the floor.

“For Christ’s sake, what are you doing?” I whispered through gritted teeth.

Since our fracas in the warehouse he'd been showing a different side, but now I was utterly convinced he was a candidate for the loony bin.

"Getting the job done," he said coldly.

"Have you lost your mind?" I cried. "How do we get out of here now?"

"We'll just have to play it by ear," he said.

While I watched open-mouthed, he rifled through the rest of the documents in the safe.

"Bingo!" he exclaimed as loudly as he dared.

To my amazement he'd actually found the plans and he passed them over, instructing me to put them safely in my inside pocket. I did as instructed, while he moved the body of the sergeant to the corner of the room, out of sight.

"Wait there. Only use your gun if you have to," he whispered, and he went to the door and rapped it with his knuckles.

There was the sound of a key turning in the lock, and before the guards had time to react to the fact that Biggins was there instead of their sergeant, he was leading them to the safe.

"Quickly, the sergeant has collapsed!" he yelled in Russian with an accent that belonged in the Home Counties.

The first soldier took the bait and put his rifle down before examining the body.

"He's been shot, what..."

The second guard was bringing his rifle round but before he could take aim, Biggins had shot him in the chest. He fell back against the far wall and slid to the floor, as Biggins turned to serve the soldier's comrade the same way. But the Russian was too quick and grabbed Biggins' wrist before he could swing the pistol round to fire.

Not wanting to bring the rest of the Russian Army down on us, I wrapped my arm around the guard's throat and squeezed for all I was worth. Slowly his grip on Biggins' arm loosened, but I kept a tight hold until I felt the guard's muscles relax and he fell to the floor.

"Go!" Biggins screamed, and we ran up the stairs to the reception hall.

There were still several civilians and armed soldiers milling about, so we slowed to a fast walk and made our way to the main doors. I was glad to see that our loyal Marine was still waiting and the three of us headed out of the building. Thankfully the guards just stood smartly to attention as we passed by and headed for the car.

"Stop them!"

We looked back to see the guard from the basement clutching his neck. On impulse we ran to the car and the guards at the door opened fire. I saw Biggins grab his arm and stumble before he fell and rolled to the bottom of the steps. He managed to pull himself up onto one knee and returned fire, killing one of the guards. Three more armed Russians emerged from the building and they were drawing their weapons, ready to finish us off.

"Go!" screamed Biggins, as he tried to give us covering fire.

The Marine hesitated, while I headed for the car as quick as a flash. It was then that I remembered he had the ignition keys and I yelled for him to hurry up. But the bloody fool had taken his revolver from its holster and turned to fire back. I'll say this for him, he must have been a crack shot. He'd downed one of the Russians before he'd reached the car and he was in and starting the engine in one swift motion.

I'd slipped across to the passenger seat, but instead of heading out of there hell for leather, the reckless fool pulled the car up next to Biggins and beckoned him over, while another fusillade of bullets headed our way. As a reward for his heroic deed he stopped a bullet with his head, and his body slumped forward onto the steering wheel.

Somehow I managed to push him back and stretched my legs across to operate the pedals. I hit the clutch, slammed the stick into gear, and pressed the accelerator to the floor. The car's tyres screeched as I tried to steer with one hand and hold the Marine's lifeless body back with the other. I waited for another hail of bullets to smash into the rear of the car as I sped away, but when I looked back, the guards were chasing Biggins in the opposite direction.

Two of the Russians had nearly caught up to him, so I couldn't have turned round to help even if I'd wanted to – at least that's what I told myself. I had only one thought – to get as far away from there as possible. I managed to manoeuvre the car round a corner and I leant across to the driver's door.

"Sorry, old chap," I said, as I unceremoniously shoved the dead Marine onto the kerb.

Once in the driver's seat I headed for our sector, praying that the Russians hadn't had enough time to send someone after me. Instinctively I'd headed for the British sector and I was starting to regret my decision. You see, the French and American sectors both shared an extensive boundary line with the Russians, but there were relatively few places to cross over into our sector. If the Soviets were going to try and stop me, I'd unwittingly made it easier for them.

My fears seemed to be realised as I approached the main road that ran alongside the Brandenburg Gate. An East German police car was parked just inside the eastern sector and two officers stepped out into the road and signalled for me to stop.

"Excuse me, Major, but are you all right?" one of them asked, looking at my car.

After all the excitement it took me a moment to realise what he was talking about, and then I remembered that the car was full of bullet holes.

"I am fine, thank you. Oh, I see what you mean," I said innocently, pretending I'd only just realised what they were looking at. "This damage happened days ago. It's becoming so hard to get our cars repaired, what with all the shortages – you know how it is."

The officer looked unconvinced and then he noticed the blood stains on the dashboard. His face hardened and he took a step back.

"Would you mind getting out of the car for a moment, Major?" he asked.

"Look..." I began, but then all three of us turned to see who was calling out as she ran towards us.

"Vladimir!" cried the vision, as the wind ripped about her light summer dress, threatening to reveal her shapely figure. "You're not still driving around in this old thing, are you? You promised you'd get a new car before you came to visit me again. It's so embarrassing."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," I said, taking my cue. "I'll pick up a new one next time."

I turned to the police officers to see how they were reacting to this new turn of events, only to find them with their mouths open and their tongues dragging on the floor. She got in the car and gave me a wonderful kiss on the mouth.

“Goodbye,” she said sweetly, waving to the policemen as we pulled away, and I looked in the mirror to see them standing in the middle of the road waving back.

I was safe, thanks to the fortuitous intervention and womanly charms of my angel of mercy – Fraulein Louise Schoneberg.

Irresistible eyes

“How on earth did you find me?” I asked, as we drove to her home in the British sector.

“Since you weren’t coming to see me and nobody at the airfield knew where you were, I decided to try and look for you. I knew your business always seemed to be taking you to the Russian sector, so I’ve spent each day at the main crossing point hoping to find you and today, finally, I’ve been lucky.”

I could feel her looking at me as I coaxed the ailing car through the streets of the city.

“Weren’t you going to tell me about my father? He was killed at that meeting I arranged for you, wasn’t he?”

“Yes,” was all I seemed to be able to say.

“How did he die?” she asked, staring straight ahead.

“Kutuzov killed him.”

“I knew it – that bastard!” she screamed.

In spite of the display of emotion, somehow I found her outpouring of grief a trifle unconvincing. I couldn’t help thinking that she wasn’t even sporting a water-gall.

Once back at her house I saw her safely inside and began to make my apologies.

“I’m sorry I’ve got to go, Louise. I have some important business that can’t wait.”

“More important than me?” she asked, looking up at me with those irresistible eyes.

“Believe me, if I could I...”

Her lips were on mine, and before I could collect my thoughts sufficiently to formulate a coherent ending to my protestations, we were tearing at each other’s clothes and heading for the bedroom, leaving a trail of discarded linen in our wake.

As we breathlessly made our way up the stairs, a part of my mind was idly wondering about the top secret plans for creating the most dangerous weapon in the world, sitting in my pocket.

Oh well, I thought, first things first.

* * *

After the evening’s proceedings reached their glorious conclusion, Louise left to make some of her ghastly tea. God help me, I thought, if the Russians don’t get me, my Fraulein’s horrid brew will finish me off. Prophetic words, if I’d only known.

I took the papers from the pocket of my jacket, and while I placed them in the drawer of the bedside table for safe-keeping, I stole a quick glance at the open door, thinking I had seen some movement out of the corner of my eye. But no one was there, so I pushed the drawer shut and got back into bed to wait for Louise to return with her appalling night cap.

She passed me her poisoned chalice and, as she climbed into bed, I surreptitiously poured the evil concoction through a gap in the floorboards. To hell with the mess, I thought, I wasn’t drinking the fowl brew for a pension. I made a satisfied gasp.

“God, I needed that. I didn’t realise how thirsty I was.”

“There’s more if you want it,” she offered.

“No, don’t go to any trouble,” I quickly interjected, and we snuggled up to fall into a sound sleep.

At least that was the pretence. I could sense her watching me closely for signs of the onset of slumber, and I did one of the best performances of my life – to wit, deep rhythmic breathing to give the impression I was in the land of nod.

Louise gently extricated herself from her lover’s grasp and I heard the drawer of the bedside table open. I could hear her quietly retrieving her clothes and I risked opening one eye in the darkness. I was just in time to see her slip the papers into her bag and head for the door.

When she was gone, I quickly walked to the window to see if the car and driver I had noticed earlier were still waiting outside. They were, and I watched through a gap in the curtains as my treacherous Fraulein put two hands up to her face to mimic her sleeping lover in his drug-induced coma. Then she slipped into the passenger seat of the car before it drove away.

I dressed as fast as I could and recovered the secret plans from under the mattress where I had placed them while Louise had been out of the room. Well, I thought, I’d best be off before she realises she went to all that trouble for a bunch of requisition forms.

It's not a bloody game

My suspicion that Louise might be something of a female Cagliostro had been aroused for a number of reasons. For one thing, her timely appearance at the Brandenburg Gate had been just too much of a coincidence. Somehow she must have known about our attempt to recover the elusive plans. And for another, her reaction to Schoneberg's death had been far from convincing and I had begun to doubt that she and the unfortunate Otto were in any way related.

There was also the fact that my initial meeting with her had been arranged by Haversham, which suggested she was in on the whole thing. He could well have had his suspicions about what Biggins and I had been up to and sent Louise, with her wonderful assets, to play us false.

She had used her womanly wile to retrieve the plans on behalf of her Russian masters and she would have succeeded, if it hadn't been for the brilliant foresight of your gallant hero.

All these thoughts of self-congratulation were going through my mind as I hitched a ride back to my welcoming hotel in the western zone. As I entered the foyer and retrieved the key to my room, I had some vague notion of trying to get a call through to Attlee, with all the difficulties that would entail, and I was just starting to curse the early demise of Biggins, when who should be standing in my room but the ghostly apparition himself.

"My God, you're alive," I exclaimed, nearly jumping out of my skin.

"No thanks to you..." he began, but he quickly stopped himself. "No, that's unfair of me. You did the right thing. You had the plans and they're the important thing."

No mention of my wellbeing, you see. These bloody spies – I could have been quite insulted if I'd thought about it.

"You do still have them, don't you?" he asked, concern rising in his voice. "It's just that I was expecting you here hours ago."

"Yes, I've still got them," I said, putting them in his warm wet hands and glad to be rid of the confounded things.

"Where have you been anyway?" he asked.

"Louise Schoneberg made an unexpected appearance and she did her level best to get our precious secrets away from me."

"I knew it," he cried triumphantly. "I thought there was more to her than met the eye."

He was looking at me accusingly before he continued.

"Of course some people can't see past a beautiful face."

"It's very easy to be certain after the fact, Biggins. If you were so worried about her, why did you agree to use her in the first place?"

"We had no choice. Haversham recruited her, remember, which rather bears out what I suspected about him all along."

Oh, he was suddenly very sure of himself, was our Biggins – the smug bastard.

"How did you get away?" I asked, not really caring.

"I just kept running and managed to slip into a side street while I waited for all the commotion to die down. The wound wasn't serious and when I got back to our sector, one of the company quacks patched it up before I came here looking for you. What happened to Wilkins?" he asked, and at first I didn't know who he was talking about.

"Oh, the Marine? I'm afraid he copped it – good man, though," I said, thinking it sounded the right thing to say.

I needn't have worried because Biggins just shrugged it off and picked up the phone to arrange for the plans to be sent to London in the diplomatic bag. So much for the gratitude of the poor man's country, I thought. When Biggins had finished his call I tried to bring things to a satisfying conclusion.

"I suppose now that the plans are safely back in our possession and Kutuzov is nicely tucked away, you won't be requiring my services any more. So, if you wouldn't mind arranging a flight for me back to England, I'd be much obliged."

"We had to let Kutuzov go."

At first I thought I hadn't heard correctly, but when his words finally sank in, I nearly had apoplexy.

"Let him go – what the hell for?"

"Arresting someone for spying is one thing, but abducting a senior Russian officer and torturing him is quite another. The Soviet authorities have been kicking up one hell of a stink, and we couldn't risk an international incident. Things in Berlin are tense enough without adding fuel to the flames."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"But he was trying to kill me!" I bawled.

"And you got your own back – it's just tit-for-tat in this game, I'm afraid."

"It's not a bloody game when people's lives are at stake. Try telling Wilkins' widow all about your bloody games."

"He wasn't married," he replied, as if that answered everything. "Anyway, he knew what the risks were."

"And so do I. That's why I want out."

"I'm not letting you leave Germany until I get the all-clear from the PM personally. We've got the plans back, but we still haven't got enough to prove Haversham was behind it all."

"That's your problem. I've done my part."

"You're remaining here until all the loose ends are tied up - and that's final."

There was clearly no arguing with him, so I resigned myself to a longer stay in the Fatherland.

"Have it your way," I said, "but you and the bloody PM can stump up the funds for my stay here. If you've finished with the telephone, I'll order a nice spot of lunch."

"You're jolly well not staying here, Fletcher," said Biggins haughtily.

"Why the hell not?"

"It might have escaped your notice, but you are an officer in His Majesty's Royal Air Force and there's still a shortage of pilots in the British zone."

He walked over to the wardrobe, removed my uniform, and threw it on the bed.
“Welcome back to the Berlin airlift, Captain Fletcher.”

I'd been betrayed

I arrived back at Wunstorf with my mind reeling. Since I'd last delivered groceries to the citizens of Berlin, it had been one blasted thing after another. I'd been summoned to London to receive personal orders from the Prime Minister of Great Britain; I'd broken into the headquarters of the Russian secret police; and, as if that weren't enough, I'd been betrayed by my beautiful Fraulein, who turned out to be a double agent.

I was in a rotten mood and it wasn't improved by all the talk going on around the airfield. From the senior men down, all I heard was talk of another bloody war. Berlin's stocks had dropped dangerously low and coal had all but run out. The situation was desperate.

The only good piece of news was that I managed to get my old crew back without too much trouble. They were heartily sick of their new captain and welcomed me back with open arms.

"I don't think my arse could've taken many more of his landings," said John, our radio operator, summing up his evaluation of my predecessor's flying skills in his usual Rabelaisian style.

It was also around this time that we transferred from Wunstorf to a new base at Fassberg, north-east of Hamburg. It was an old Luftwaffe training camp, of all things.

Now that it was the middle of summer the weather had improved, of course, but it brought its own problems. Where, only a few short months before, we'd been struggling through the mud, we now had a new enemy – dust. It blew up from the airfield through the grass and it got into your eyes, your nose, your throat, your clothing – in fact, it got into any orifice where it could find a home.

I was getting heartily sick of flying all the hours God sent because of the damn Soviets, and one night I deemed it was time to give them a dose of their own medicine. So when I'd dropped off my supplies and faced a dreary night-flight back to base, I resolved to liven it up with a visit to the Russian barracks situated just outside our air-corridor. I dropped down to two hundred feet, waited until I was directly overhead, and then slammed the throttles open to wake the lazy buggers up and remind them that some of us were still working the night shift.

So the dull routine went on and we managed to stay alive, in spite of a few accidents. As they say, any landing you can walk away from is a good landing. Unfortunately the Yanks weren't so lucky and were having a tough time of it. In that month of July we heard that three Americans had been killed when their C-47 smashed into a hill near Wiesbaden. Another crashed on its approach to Tempelhof, causing the deaths of two more American airmen doing their bit to beat the Soviet blockade.

"I'm sending you over to the American sector for a couple of days, Fletcher, to help our allies out while they wait for their new replacements," said the commanding officer out of the blue.

I was too tired to argue and I found myself packing my bags once again. In hindsight, I should have pleaded my case for staying with my loyal crew and my precious Dakota. If I'd

only known, a certain communist was waiting in the wings, hammer poised, while he sharpened his sickle.

* * *

My new American crew took a few days to get used to their 'limey' captain acting as a warming-pan, but when they realised I liked boozing with the boys as much as they did, I soon became part of the team.

Their version of the Dakota had all the latest direction-finders, but if I'd had to make a choice between radio compasses and Pete, my navigator, you'd have heard the clatter of electrical equipment being thrown out of the cockpit every time. I knew one American crew that ended up fifty miles off course because their gizmos sent them the wrong way. Well, that's what you get for relying on scientific wizardry when some idiot on board is wearing hobnailed boots and sending all the circuitry haywire.

It was the co-pilot, Joe Sanders, who I really hit it off with, and we were like Damon and Pythias in no time at all. We explored all the local haunts together and regularly staggered back to Tempelhof in the early hours of the morning.

As luck would have it, I was something of a novelty to the pretty young women of the American zone, who'd grown used to the Yanks trying to get them into bed for the price of a pair of nylons. That, together with the fact that I spoke German like a native, meant that we had our pick of the pretty Frauleins.

Of course there wasn't one of them to touch my treacherous Louise, but it was a relief to be back in the saddle without the prospect of having my throat slit every time I got between the sheets. And plenty of sheets there were.

You see, if my time in Germany in 1948 taught me anything, it was that life is damned fragile and if you don't sample the best bits while you've got the chance, you've nobody to blame but yourself.

Mind you, we pressed the point a little too far one night when we spent the evening with two cracking nurses from the base and drank until the early hours. I woke to find my Florence Nightingale's jugs thrust in my face, which is a much better way to start the day than having a sergeant major shouting in your ear any day.

Our problem was that we were still rather intoxicated and when we climbed aboard our aircraft a few hours later, we both struggled to bring the gauges into focus. Flying was dangerous enough back then without having to leave your seat to throw up every five minutes. So from that moment on I always had a self-imposed curfew, during which I desisted from frequenting the local bars and drinking the devil's brew – like some sort of blasted Rechabite.

It was in the middle of one of our many drinking bouts that I happened to say something that prompted Joe to suggest an excursion into town - and it nearly frightened the life out of me into the bargain.

"You know, Joe, I sometimes wonder why we bother risking our lives flying back and forth to Berlin. You chaps have just lost five good men, for goodness sake. I mean, do these

folks in Berlin really care?" I asked, slurring my words as I took another sip of American beer.

"I tell you what. Seeing as we ain't flying tomorrow, I'll show you something to prove you're dead wrong," he said, pointing at me and spilling his beer all over my lap.

"Maybe," I said, smiling at the blonde barmaid I'd caught looking in my direction. She started to walk over towards me.

"I'll see if I've still got the energy in the morning."

The Sweet Bomber

Morning came and once Joe had explained that we weren't going far from the airfield, he persuaded me to face the world and join his little excursion. As we walked, he began to talk about two of the airmen who had lost their lives delivering vital supplies to the people of Berlin.

"Both of them were fathers, you know. What can you say to those little kids when they ask why their daddy isn't coming home?"

I had no answer, so I asked him where we were going.

"To the scene of the accident," he replied, as if that explained everything.

It was a short way from the airfield and I was astonished to find crowds of people dutifully taking turns to view a makeshift monument. When we finally got to see it for ourselves, Joe read out the inscription.

"Two American officers became victims of the Berlin blockade here. You gave your lives for us. The Berliners of the western sectors will never forget you. Once we were enemies and yet you gave your lives for us."

There were fresh flowers lying next to the plaque and I have to say that words deserted me. The two men had died trying to save the Berliners from starvation and the people of the city were truly grateful. Joe broke in on my thoughts.

"War is a strange thing, isn't it? One minute Americans are *bombing* the people of Berlin and the next, they're risking their lives to *save* them."

"It's a crazy world, that's for sure," I replied, unable to think of anything else to say.

We walked on, leaving others to pay their respects, and headed to the church where the funerals were to take place. As we turned the last corner and reached the large square where the church stood, we realised that we would not be able to get inside.

Our way through was blocked by thousands of grateful German people standing in utter silence.

* * *

We walked on and spotted a group of children watching the American planes take off and land. Others were sitting on the ground playing 'airlifts' with paper models, using pieces of rubble as imaginary runways.

"That reminds me," cried Joe suddenly, "I think we might be in time and there's something I want you to see."

Before I had the chance to ask what he meant, he was running to a spot near the end of the runway where another large group of children were gathered. They were all looking up at the sky expectantly.

"What are they waiting for?" I asked.

"The Sweet Bomber," said Joe.

"What did you say? The..."

Before I could finish my question another plane took off and, as it flew overhead, dozens of little parachutes dropped out of the sky. The children surged forward to grab the cargo.

“What’s going on?” I asked, still confused.

“It’s called ‘Operation Little Vittles’,” replied Joe. “The parachutes are handkerchiefs and the pilot is dropping candy and gum for the children. Isn’t it a great idea? The pilot felt sorry for the kids and he arranged for them to wait at this spot. Of course once he’d started, the children kept coming back and he couldn’t just leave them disappointed. So now he does the drop nearly every night.”¹⁰

It was then, when I turned away from the heart-warming sight, that I received one of the greatest shocks of my life. For there, standing before us, was the female Judas herself – Louise Schoneberg.

I was just recovering from the fact that she’d turned up like a bad penny, when she terrified my mortal soul with her next revelation.

“There is someone waiting over there who would like to see you,” she said, and I turned to look where she was pointing.

Sitting in a car was Major Kutuzov of the Russian secret police. Somehow I fought the temptation to run away, and I was just looking for a suitable riposte, when Joe interrupted my thoughts.

“Tom, where in the hell have you been hiding this little honey? It’s a pleasure to meet you, ma’am. My name is Joe.”

He took off his cap and held out his hand like the Southern gentleman he was.

“Pleased to meet you, Joe,” she said, and presented him with that beautiful smile I never tired of. “It’s nice to meet a real gentleman. They’re so hard to find these days. Isn’t that right, Charles...no, it’s Tom, isn’t it?”

Joe was looking confused and I thought I’d better warn him before he fell for her charms.

“Be careful with this one, Joe. She’s an acquired taste, only to be contemplated if you like a knife placed firmly in your back.”

He gave me a strange look and I was disappointed to see that my little snipe had been wasted. She was still all lightness and life, blast her.

“Oh, don’t listen to him, Joe. He’s just sore because I broke up with him. You see, I prefer American airmen.”

She treated my friend from across the pond to a wanton look that had him drooling into his hat.

“Tell Kutuzov that if he wants to kill me he’s out of luck. I’m not going anywhere near him,” I said, trying to look as if I wasn’t scared witless.

Her next words shocked me more than any threat could ever have done.

“He doesn’t want to kill you, Captain. He’s come here to ask you for a favour.”

When an enemy appears friendly, watch out!

I know at times I've been as naïve as the best of them, but even I couldn't swallow such a preposterous idea. Here was a ruthless, sadistic brutewho I'd tortured half to death, and he wanted to ask *me* for a favour? I would have been less surprised if I'd seen a bishop in a brothel, sampling the establishment's wares- which I have, as it happens.

"Tell the major he must be crazy. I wouldn't trust him with the tuck shop," I said, trying to inject a little humour to lighten my mood.

"I don't know what that means, Tom, but I am sure it is very funny in your country," said the cheeky mare. "If he wanted to kill you, believe me he could have done it before now. He merely wants to talk to you. That is why he sent me to invite you over. He knows you would have run off or shot him as soon as you saw him."

"He's no fool that one, is he?"

"Say, Tom, are you in some sort of trouble? What's this damn Russian want with you, anyhow?" asked Joe.

"It's okay, Joe, I'll only be a minute. I suppose I'd better go and see what he wants. But will you do something for me?"

"You name it, pal - as long as I get to spend a little time with this beautiful lady," he said enthusiastically.

"It's up to you, Joe, but you'll soon tire of her," I said, trying to get a rise out of her again and failing miserably.

That's the trouble with these absolute stunners - they bloody well know they are.

"I'd be happy to keep you company, Joe," said our little siren. "It'll be nice to have a little stimulating conversation for a change."

"You see those MPs over there, Joe?" I asked, ignoring the floosie. "If the Russian tries anything, I'd be obliged if you'd bring the cavalry along with you and get them to shoot him dead."

"Consider it done," he replied as I walked away.

Somehow I didn't feel reassured, because he turned his back on me and began trying to work his magic on the willing Louise – the little flirt.

When I reached the car I stood well back, and I was ready to run if Kutuzov as much as blinked the wrong way.

"Thank you for seeing me," he said.

His conciliatory tone was most disconcerting and at odds with his appearance. *When an enemy appears friendly, watch out!*

"What do you want, Kutuzov?" I asked, desperate to get the whole thing over with as quickly as possible.

"I have something I want to discuss with you, but first I need you to relax. With that in mind, I am going to reach into my jacket and pull out my gun very slowly. I will pass it to you and I will then be totally unarmed, whereas you will have my loaded pistol. I will do this to prove I wish you no harm and then we can talk. Agreed?"

“Just make it *very* slow,” I said, and I stepped back so that I was at an awkward angle if he tried to turn in his seat to shoot.

When he’d passed me the gun, I checked that it was loaded and looked into the car to see if I could spot any other concealed weapons. With some satisfaction I noticed that he was sporting a walking stick. I got into the rear seat and aimed the gun at the back of his head.

“You are a very cautious and resourceful man, Captain. That is why you have managed to slip from my grasp more than once. I must congratulate you.”

“That’s quite enough of the flattery, Major. Why don’t you get to the point?”

I found my hand was shaking and I had to hand it to Kutuzov – there he was with a sworn enemy pointing a loaded gun at the back of his loaf, and he hadn’t even broken into a sweat.

“As you wish,” he began, as genial as could be. “There is only one man in this world that I fear and that is the glorious leader of my beloved country, comrade Joseph Stalin. He entrusted me with a vital mission of enormous importance to the security of the Soviet Union. Through the English traitor, Haversham, I contrived to obtain the plans for the British hydrogen bomb. As you know, I had them in my hands until you and your compatriots managed to steal them away from us.”

“Sorry we had to spoil things for you,” I said, trying to hide my shock at his revelation that Haversham was indeed the double agent. That was if he wasn’t trying to play me false. He ignored my attempt at humour before continuing.

“Haversham learnt that he was under suspicion and he was worried that the plans might have been switched back. So he insisted on waiting for confirmation that they were genuine. If he hadn’t, then they would have been in Moscow by now and I would be the hero of the hour. Alas, it was not to be.”

“Still, water under the bridge, eh?” I said, trying to needle him.

“Unfortunately I cannot be so philosophical. When Stalin realises I have failed, I will probably spend the rest of my life in Siberia, if I am lucky. If not – shwit!” And he made a cutting gesture across his neck.

“If you’re trying to make me feel sorry for you, Kutuzov, it’s not working.”

“That is not my intention, Captain. If I may continue?” he asked.

“Go on,” I said, deciding I had to hear him out.

“Fortunately the loss of the plans from my headquarters has not been reported to my superiors. I am not the only one who fears the result of failure, you see. So, for the moment, Stalin does not know that we have been unsuccessful in our bid to obtain the precious documents. In the meantime, Lord Haversham has come up with a scheme that will hopefully save our skins.”

I’d had enough by then, but I couldn’t help but be intrigued. Besides, if I’d just walked off I’d have been left in the dark and I might have been in danger. I reasoned that if I stayed to hear what he had to say, at the very least I’d know what I was up against. So I let him continue.

“Bevin’s private secretary, Frank Roberts, has been granted an audience with Stalin in Moscow in two weeks time to try and sort out our little differences over who should control

Berlin. Also attending, at his own insistence, will be Lord Haversham – purely in an advisory capacity, of course.”¹¹

“How the hell did he get the go-ahead for that?”

“How could your government refuse? He is a senior member of your security services with relevant knowledge that has a bearing on the negotiations, and although he may well be under suspicion, he has not been formally charged.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked, and his answer soon had my hand shaking all over again.

“Haversham will be requiring the services of an assistant. That assistant will be you.”

I couldn’t hide my shock at this latest revelation.

“Me, go to Moscow? You must be mad.”

“No, it has all been arranged, and rest assured you will be informed in due course. However, what your government will not know is that you and Lord Haversham will also be granted an audience with the Soviet leader.”

“I’m going to meet with Stalin? But...but...” I stammered, and in the mirror I could see Kutuzov smile at my distress.

“The pretext for the meeting is quite simple. The chairman will be enquiring as to the progress of the airlift in order to get an opinion from a man on the ground - or should I say, a man in the air?” he said, clearly enjoying himself.

“Let’s say, just for the sake of argument, I believe you’re terrified of what Stalin might do. That doesn’t explain why Haversham has arranged this meeting. By letting me know he’s involved, I’ll be able to tell the folks back home that he’s a traitor and they’ll hang him. I expect he’ll find it a little difficult to meet with Stalin if he’s six feet under.”

“If you tell your people about our plans, we will implicate you in the whole business. You can rest assured that we have the means to make it appear that you are involved and you will join Haversham at the end of a rope.”

You can imagine what I made of this wonderful piece of news. If he wasn’t careful, Kutuzov was going to find the rear seats of his new automobile decorated with an unplanned bowel movement, courtesy of your English hero. Unfortunately he had more to say.

“You and His Lordship are both expendable and Haversham is not to be trusted. Somehow the British have had access to many of our secrets and we are sure he knows how this has been done, but he has refused to tell us unless he is paid an exorbitant amount of money. If he is not careful, his greed will be the death of him.”

So he hadn’t told the Russians about Venona, our code-breaking operation. Perhaps Kutuzov was on the level after all.

“I still don’t understand why you and Haversham want me there at all?” I asked, feeling desperation take hold.

“Ah, now we get to the crux of the matter.”

Put the flags out, I thought. If you’ve ever had the misfortune to have someone bore you to death, just thank your lucky stars you didn’t have a loaded weapon in your hand. You can take it from me, the temptation to pull the trigger is almost overwhelming.

“Haversham has ‘leaked’ one important nugget of information, however, but he has been careful to disguise the fact that he is the source,” said Kutuzov, clearly trying to keep me in suspense.

“What information?” I asked.

“Oh, just that a certain young Captain Fletcher is privy to his country’s nuclear secrets.”

“What the hell? But that’s a bloody lie,” I protested.

“That is hardly the point,” said Kutuzov smugly. “His Lordship has always been a disseminator of misinformation.”

“But why ... what does he hope to achieve?” I asked, desperate to know what was going on.

“He wishes Stalin to believe it,” he said cryptically.

“Stalin won’t buy that, I’m just a junior officer.”

“Haversham learned of your meeting with the prime minister and you can be sure that Stalin will know of it too. That is enough to sow a seed of doubt in the chairman’s mind. The leader of my country may be an admirable man in many ways, but he is also paranoid.”

“So, what difference does it make if Stalin believes it?” I cried in exasperation.

“Here we come to the most ambitious part of the plan. At your meeting with Stalin you must come across as a naïve young officer in awe of our leader – not an inordinately challenging task, I suspect.”

Of all the bloody cheek, but I let it pass, desperate for him to get to the point.

“You will let it slip that your country is having problems with their attempt to construct a hydrogen bomb. You will intimate that the recent breakthrough which has been a rumour within the scientific community has come to a dead end. Haversham will feign anger at your unintended indiscretion - he is supposed to be your superior, after all. God willing, Stalin will be convinced by your revelation.”

I’d never heard anything so ridiculous and said so.

“Perhaps,” was all he said.

“Let’s say he *is* somehow fooled by all this double-talk - what will it change?”

“We hope he will believe that any plans regarding advances in the creation of the bomb will be worthless. As a consequence, he will relieve Haversham and I of our mission – a mission we have already failed.”

“You’re stark raving mad. It’ll never work.” I said.

“You may well be right, but what is a man to do when he is backed into a corner?”

“What makes you think I’m the same as Haversham? I might not want to betray my country.”

I would have betrayed my nearest and dearest if a gun was pointed at my head, but he didn’t need to know that.

“You will be betraying nothing. It is all a lie, is it not?”

“I’m sure this has all been very educational, Kutuzov, but let me ask you one more question before I blow your head off for wasting my time. Why, for the love of God, should I help you? I’d just be guaranteeing the survival of a man who has tried to kill me.”

“Haversham and I have drawn up a document, laying out the scheme I have just explained to you. You may place it in the care of any organisation of your choice with instructions to forward it to Stalin in the event that anything happens to you. This will guarantee your safety.”

Well, of all the crazy ideas I’d ever heard, this beats Banagher, I thought.

“You’ll forgive me, Kutuzov, if your so-called guarantees don’t inspire me with confidence.”

“You must consider the alternative.”

“What alternative?” I asked, ready to leave him alone to his diabolical scheming.

“You could just refuse me.”

“At last you’re making sense,” I said, relieved that the pathetic conversation was coming to an end.

For the first time since I’d joined him in the car, he turned to face me, ignoring the gun pointed straight at his face. The evil stare that I had seen in my worst nightmares returned as he uttered his next words.

“However, if you decline I will be backed into a corner. I will have nothing to lose and I might as well take my own life.”

“And?” I prompted, dreading what was coming next.

“And, Captain Fletcher, I would take *your* life right along with it.”

* * *

I’m ashamed to say that, as I sat there mulling over my options, I agreed to go along with the hare-brained scheme. Why didn’t you kill him when you had the chance, I hear you ask? Aye well, it’s not as easy as it sounds. From a technical standpoint all I had to do was squeeze the trigger, but there would have been the aftermath to contend with - and I don’t just mean having to clean Kutuzov’s brains from the dashboard.

Would my betters have supported their loyal servant if he’d got caught and sparked an international crisis? Or, knowing the oafs in Whitehall, would they have washed their hands of the whole affair? Also, lest we forget, I happened to be a guest in the American sector at the time and God knows what the Yanks would have done - tried me for murder, most likely. In fact there were a dozen MPs not more than fifty yards away to get the ball rolling.

And of course there were the Russians. What would their reaction have been if I’d killed one of their own? If there’s one thing a born coward like me doesn’t want to contend with, it’s the prospect of having to look over his shoulder every five minutes while he waits for an assassin’s bullet. I’d have been old and grey before I was thirty.

So what was I to do if killing him was out of the question? If I refused, one look at his ugly dial told me he meant what he said. I would’ve been dead inside the week. I weighed up all these things in an instant, as I sat there feeling the cold metal of the pistol in my hand. It’s amazing how the prospect of imminent death can focus the mind wonderfully.

If nothing else, I decided that agreeing with the idiot’s plan would buy me some time and give me a breathing space in which to think things through. So I took the pathetic letter

supposedly implicating Kutuzov and Haversham in their foolhardy scheme, and removed myself from the major's odious presence, toute suite.

No thought for my shattered nerves

Fortunately I didn't have time to dwell on my forthcoming adventure in Moscow, because the Russians had the bad taste to maintain the blockade. With no thought for my shattered nerves, I was called back to the British zone two days later.

The lack of sleep was the worst of it and it took its toll soon enough. When I brought the Dakota in to land on my first flight back to Gatow, I was fast asleep before the loader had even reached the doors.

On the second flight I nodded off in mid-air, and it was only the sound of the plane losing height that jolted me awake. I was supping bucket-loads of coffee in an effort to stay awake, but it only succeeded in giving me the shakes. I was too tired to eat properly and besides, our rations in the British zone were no better than those we'd received during the war. The Americans had vitamin tablets, of course, while we had to make do with tea and a bun at the Malcolm Club.

As the days wore on, I was just starting to convince myself that Kutuzov had been full of hot air, when Biggins turned up to tell me that Haversham had arranged for me to join him in Moscow.

"You'll have to catch up on your sleep on the flight, I'm afraid," he said. "Frank Roberts has been called to a meeting in the Kremlin to try and find a way out of the whole mess caused by the blockade. Lord Haversham is tagging along to advise him on matters of security and His Lordship has said he wants you with him."

I feigned shock and alarm at this 'unexpected' news, and pretended I wanted no part of it. I decided it was simpler not to let Biggins know about my meeting with Kutuzov. God knows what sort of skulduggery he would have come up with. Knowing him as I did, I was sure he would insist that I attend the meeting anyway. No doubt he hoped I would glean some precious nugget of information which he could take back to his department and earn extra brownie points. He didn't disappoint.

"I don't know what Haversham's up to, Fletcher, but I'm afraid you'll have to play along for the moment."

"Attlee's letting him go?" I asked, surprised that Haversham had actually got away with it.

"He didn't really have much choice – not without causing an incident and arousing Haversham's suspicion. Everything will be explained on the flight. You're to fly to Moscow in an hour's time. I suggest you go and pack."

In spite of my foreknowledge, the suddenness of it all still struck me senseless. One minute I'd been worrying about getting enough sleep before I took my Dakota to Berlin for the umpteenth time, and the next I was going on a delicate diplomatic mission with His Lordship and a minister's secretary. My poor, tired brain just couldn't take it all in. But what could I do?

So I caught my flight as instructed, while I let the embassy lackey wax lyrical on the finer points of diplomatic etiquette and I fell asleep into blissful oblivion.

It was late afternoon by the time we landed in Moscow, and I was driven to the British embassy to meet Haversham. A couple of aides were scurrying about, trying to look busy, and when they left he leaned forward and spoke to me in a hushed voice.

“Did Kutuzov explain what to do?” he asked, and I noticed His Lordship was displaying none of the composure he’d exhibited at our last meeting.

“Yes he did, and I think it’s one of the most idiotic ideas I’ve ever heard of,” I said, laying my cards on the table.

“No, you’re wrong, Fletcher. I think we can pull it off.”

“You realise I’m only going along with this because your Russian friend has threatened to implicate me.”

“Yes, I thought that might give you an incentive,” he said with a knowing smile.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of yourself, Haversham. Don’t think for a moment I’d be here if I thought I was helping the Russians. As it is, the whole thing’s just a waste of time.”

I knew he didn’t believe me and he sneered as he looked down his nose at me.

A summons arrived for Roberts and the American ambassador to see Stalin and Molotov at nine o’clock that evening. Apparently Stalin only began work in the late afternoon and he would carry on into the early hours, eating vast meals and forcing drink on his guests. He’d catch them at an unguarded moment and ask them their opinions – in vino veritas, no doubt.

When we arrived at the Kremlin, Bedell Smith and Roberts left to see Stalin and Molotov while we waited patiently in a large imposing hall, sitting on chairs arranged against the wall.

It was several hours before the delegation emerged, looking fairly satisfied and making positive noises, and I was just starting to feel relief at not having been called upon to pay the leader of the Soviet Union a visit, when an impeccably dressed major walked up to our party and singled us out.

“Lord Haversham and Captain Fletcher, the chairman was wondering if you would be able to give him a few moments of your time.”

“Certainly,” Haversham replied.

I rose to my feet with the alarming discovery that my knees were shaking, and it took a brief moment to steady myself.

The major escorted us to a lift and we went up to the second floor. When the doors opened, we were confronted with a long, red-carpeted corridor, along which stood several guards in immaculate uniforms and highly polished boots which seemed to sparkle.

With my legs threatening to give way, we walked past the guards until we came to a set of high double doors clad in dark-green padded leather. They were opened by two guards at the far end of the corridor before they followed us into another set of reception rooms. The major rapped his knuckles against a heavy wooden door and opened it.

“Lord Haversham of the British Foreign Office and Captain Fletcher of the Royal Air Force of Great Britain, sir,” he announced.

We were directed to enter and found ourselves in a long, plain room with bare walls, save for two hideous portraits of Russian generals. Stalin rose from his desk, dressed in the uniform of a Red Army marshal.

Naturally I'd seen pictures of the Soviet leader, but nothing prepared me for the sight of the small man, whose tunic seemed to hang across his large stomach, exaggerating his long arms. He had a pale complexion, although his cheeks were bright red and his pockmarked forehead was topped with thinning hair. His famous moustache was streaked and partially hidden by a large Dunhill pipe resting between his lips.

I was expecting Stalin to be a huge, powerful-looking figure, but I soon realised that his public image was probably largely due to the expertise of Soviet photographers, rather than a true reflection of the man himself. At Yalta, of course, the three leaders had been sitting for their portraits in deference to the fact that Roosevelt was in a wheelchair. I later learned that in public Stalin was always careful to be surrounded by men of diminutive stature.

In spite of his size, I sensed his physical strength as he walked towards us, arm outstretched, and he smiled to reveal an alarming set of discoloured teeth so sharp, they wouldn't have looked out of place in the mouth of a man-eating tiger. He shook our hands firmly and I looked into the watery-yellow eyes of an amiable peasant father-figure.

"It was good of you to agree to see me."

"Not at all, sir, it is a signal honour," said Haversham, while I wondered if I'd lost the power of speech.

"Please, sit down. Can I offer either of you a glass of vodka?" he asked, ringing a bell.

"Yes, thank you," I replied, glad of anything to help calm my nerves.

An aide walked in and stood to attention.

"A glass of vodka for our guest," ordered the Soviet leader.

While the aide left to get my drink, I took the opportunity to look around me. A man in a colonel's uniform was busy writing at a desk while, in the corner, a tough-looking customer in civilian clothes simply returned my gaze when I glanced in his direction.

The aide returned with my drink and, grateful for the distraction, I accepted the glass that was offered with a polite thank you. The man nodded and then addressed Stalin.

"Foreign Minister Molotov has asked whether he might speak with you before he leaves, sir."

The change in Stalin's demeanour was alarming. He appeared to straighten in his chair and the yellow eyes that had looked so friendly only moments earlier, now displayed a cold anger that I had never witnessed before.

"Tell Comrade Molotov that if he wishes to see me, I suggest he cultivates a little patience!"

The sudden transformation was frightening, and it did nothing to help my shattered nerves. If I had been in any doubt that I was in the presence of one of the most ruthless men the world had ever seen, I wasn't now. As the aide shuffled off to pass on the good news to Molotov, Stalin turned to face Haversham and sighed.

“Ah, these are trying times and I sometimes find myself so busy with important affairs of state that I forget my agenda for the day. Forgive me, Lord Haversham, but could you remind me in what capacity you join us today?”

The question caught the traitorous aristocrat off-guard. Stalin knew full well that His Lordship worked for British Intelligence, but Haversham could hardly admit to it then and there.

“I am simply here as an adviser to the Foreign Office, in the event that there are any questions of a logistical nature.”

“I see,” said Stalin, scratching his nose thoughtfully. “Fortunately all such matters have already been addressed in my meeting with the American ambassador, so I need take no more of your time. Thank you, Lord Haversham.”

Fear was etched on every line of Haversham’s face. That was his plan wrecked before we’d even had time to warm our seats.

“But...” he began, and Stalin simply turned his watery eyes on him. The colonel stopped writing to look up and I could hear the bodyguard twitching behind me. Haversham tried to regain his composure as he stood up to leave.

“Thank you, sir. Come along, Captain,” he said, putting his hand on my shoulder.

I made to get up but Stalin was speaking again.

“If you don’t mind, Captain, I would like to have a few words with you. It is not every day that I get to talk with an officer in the RAF.”

Haversham left the room and I would have given a king’s ransom to join him. What was Stalin up to? All I could do was wait to see what he had in store for me. So, with my heart threatening to hammer its way out of my chest, I sat back and tried to look as relaxed as possible. Mind you, the beads of sweat on my forehead more than likely gave me away. If I’d been expecting social chitchat, I was very much mistaken.

“Do you know, Captain, that everyone in the Soviet Union is terrified of me?” he asked, I assumed rhetorically. “For example, if I make a speech to the Party members, they treat me to a standing ovation and I receive thunderous applause.”

“Quite deservedly, I’m sure,” I said, toadying. He gave me a thin smile but his eyes bore into me and I wished I hadn’t interrupted. I quickly resolved to stay quiet unless I was asked a question directly. Eventually, to my great relief, he continued.

“Nobody in the Party dares to be the first to stop applauding and retake his seat. It would continue until they started collapsing from exhaustion, and therefore I have arranged for a bell to be rung to indicate that their appreciation can cease. I hope that illustrates my point?”

“Yes, sir,” I said quickly.

There was a pause and although I’d resolved to keep quiet, the temptation to break the silence was almost palpable. But I resisted and let him continue with his heart-warming anecdotes.

“There is a man in this very building whose meddlesome wife I have had killed to get her out of the way, and yet the spineless bureaucrat serves me still.”

I smiled like a blithering simpleton, unsure what to say, and I took a healthy swig of my drink.

“Tell me, did you enjoy burning the farmhouse down?”

The shock of what I heard caused the vodka to go down the wrong way, resulting in an embarrassing coughing fit which seemed to take an eternity to subside. I was sure I could see the colonel smirk as he continued to scratch away with his pen. I finally gathered my wits sufficiently to see Stalin enjoying my obvious discomfort.

“I am sorry, are you unwell? Can I offer you a glass of water? No? Forgive me if my knowledge of your personal life has surprised you, but I’m afraid any matters to which your intelligence services are privy do not stay secret for long. Indeed, their security is so poor, they might as well advertise their activities in the public press.”

If I’d been nervous before, I was a quivering wreck now, but I prayed that my uneasiness didn’t show. Stalin’s next words dashed my hopes.

“Please, do not distress yourself – we have all been reckless in our youth. Did you know, for instance, that before I became an influential member of the Communist Party, I was considered a criminal by the establishment?”

“No, sir, I’m sure it was a misunderstanding...”

Stalin ignored me and carried on regardless.

“These bureaucrats with their papers and their fine words think they shape policy but they are fools. It takes men of action and vision to change the world. We do not follow rules created by other men – we make our own and crush anyone who stands in our way.”

Stalin was in full flow now and didn’t seem to even be aware of my presence, which suited me just fine.

“I cannot say such things to these ambassadors and diplomats with their delicate temperaments, but I can speak freely with a man like you. We know the true nature of men behind the empty rhetoric.”

My own delicate nature threatened to empty my bowels without formal instructions, but somehow I kept my bodily functions in check.

“Tell me, truthfully now, as an officer serving in Germany who is airlifting supplies to the people of Berlin everyday – can you beat our blockade?”

The change of tack and the abruptness of the question put me on the spot and left me unsure how to answer – which was exactly what the devil must have intended. God knows how he would’ve taken it if I’d said: “Yes, we can beat the blockade, piece of cake.” But if I told him we couldn’t, it might have given him the confidence to strengthen his position.

Either way I could well have been influencing international matters of immense importance, and the feeling of responsibility made me feel weak inside. Looking at Stalin’s keen and intelligent eyes fixed on mine, I decided that honesty was probably the best policy.

“Well, I don’t know, sir. We’re doing our best, naturally, but it’s going to be tough with winter approaching.”

He sat back and gave a satisfied laugh, much to my relief.

“Ha, as I suspected. Yes, we ignore Mother Nature at our peril - as an enemy of mine learned to his great cost.”

Even in my disturbed condition I realised he was referring to Hitler, whose designs on the Soviet Union had come to a sticky end when his army faced the merciless cold of a Russian winter.

“Thank you for your candour, Captain. It has helped me in my decision and you have put my mind at rest. Now that I understand how desperate the situation is for the western sectors, we simply have to wait for the German winter to take hold and the people of Berlin can either yield or starve – it is their choice.”

He’d said the words, condemning millions of people to malnourishment and possible death, with all the passion of a man reading a bus timetable.

“This has been very useful, Captain. I have enjoyed our little chat, but please don’t let me keep you any longer.”

Relieved that no mention had been made of nuclear bombs or secret plans, I rose from my chair and turned to leave.

“Give my regards to Mr. Attlee, won’t you,” said Stalin, stopping me in my tracks.

“Sir?” I asked, clenching my fists in an effort to stop my hands shaking.

“I understand you have met him personally. It must be a great honour to be singled out by your prime minister in such a way. I would not presume to ask the nature of your discussion, but I am sure it must have concerned a matter of great importance.”

“Yes, sir,” was all I could manage to say.

“I trust that whatever commission he entrusted to you, it was met with some success.”

By now I was feeling so uncomfortable I just wanted to get out of the airless room.

“Yes, sir, it was,” I replied.

“May I offer you my congratulations, Captain?”

“Thank you, sir.”

“How unfortunate it is, however, that one’s success often results in someone else’s failure. Would you say that is a truism, Captain?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied, and Stalin nodded thoughtfully.

“Good day, Captain.”

Stalin watched as I walked to the door and I left the room to be escorted by the waiting guards. As I made my way down the long corridor, confused and weary as I was, I couldn’t help feeling that somehow I had just condemned Kutuzov to death.

All I could do was offer a fervent prayer that when it came to committing the unforgivable sin of failure, Stalin believed in swift justice.

Have you lost your marbles?

On the journey back to the embassy Lord Haversham was eager to know all about my meeting with Stalin. I tried to reassure him that the Soviet leader had only been interested in the day-to-day work of air crew delivering supplies to the western sectors, but I'm sure he suspected there was more to it than that.

As luck would have it, he had to return to London that night and I was free to enjoy the luxurious hospitality of the embassy until I caught my flight to Germany the following morning. I virtually collapsed unconscious on my bed and I didn't rouse until I was woken by a member of staff just after daybreak.

Once I was back in Germany my nervous disposition wasn't helped any by the news coming out of Berlin. Raids in the western sectors by east sector police and Russian troops had become a regular occurrence. There just weren't enough police officers in our neck of the woods and even if they did intervene, there were rumours that they were being snatched by the Russians.

Of course it wasn't long before Biggins turned up again, but for once he brought good news.

"I just thought you'd like to know that your friend Kutuzov is back in Moscow."

"You're kidding," I said, not daring to believe it was true.

"One of my men actually saw him boarding the plane."

I couldn't believe it. All of a sudden it was as if the clouds had parted and a huge burden had been lifted from my shoulders.

"Good God, Henry, that's bloody marvellous," I cried, unable to wipe the smile off my face.

"It appears the major's had to skulk off with his tail between his legs. It didn't have anything to do with your meeting in Moscow, did it?"

"Have you lost your marbles?" I replied, and I quickly tried to change the subject.

"Henry, I'm going to buy you a bloody drink," I said, leading him to the nearest bar.

I'd barely had a couple of beers before the room started spinning. It must have had something to do with all the release of tension after weeks of worry. I believe that if the fattest whore in Berlin had walked in just then, asking if I fancied a go, I would've been slapping her rump and sending her in the back to wait for starter's orders.

In my life I've often found that it's at moments like that, when you've convinced yourself that you're safe and sound, it pays to be wary because you're at your most susceptible. Sitting there with Biggins, knocking back one drink after another, was a case in point. If I'd been myself, I dare say I would have listened to the advice he was about to give me.

"Kutuzov might have flown the coop, but can you guess who has been stepping out onto the stage again and asking to see you?" he asked mysteriously.

"Who?"

"Louise Schoneberg."

I felt my heart flutter at the mention of her name and I couldn't hide my curiosity.

"What on earth does she want?" I asked, trying to sound uninterested.

“She swears she just wants to see you. Now that Kutuzov’s out of the way, she said she wanted to bury the hatchet and let bygones be bygones.”

“She said *that*, did she? Well, there’s a turn up for the books.”

I looked thoughtful and Biggins interrupted my reverie.

“Here, you’re not thinking of seeing her again, are you? She was working for the Soviets, remember, and for all we know she still is,” he warned.

“No, I’m not that daft,” I insisted, knocking back the rest of my beer and ordering another.

Biggins insisted that he’d get the next round and, while he was blowing the cobwebs from his wallet, I began to daydream about Louise’s pouting lips, her mesmerising brown eyes, her firm breasts, her shapely buttocks...

“Here, I say, Biggins. Did she mention how I might contact her?”

As long as there is a breath in us

The mayor of Berlin, Ernst Reuter, had arranged for a demonstration to take place that evening in front of the Reichstag. It was an incredible sight, as we looked across at the thirty *thousand* people crowded together.

“You see, Tom, the citizens of Berlin are standing firm – we will never give in. We have survived the Nazis and we will survive this bullying by the communists – with your help and men like you,” said Louise defiantly.

“Hold on,” I said sceptically, “you’ve been working for the communists, unless you’ve forgotten.”

“Only on my own terms,” she contended. “I didn’t go looking to be a spy. I simply agreed to help when Haversham’s men spotted my talents.”

I bet they did, I thought, but she had more to tell.

“When His Lordship explained that I could earn a great deal of money working as a double agent, I thought why not? I was nineteen years old without a mark to my name and I had known nothing but war and hardship.”

“Yes, but now you’re acting the part of a patriotic German – you can’t have it both ways.”

“Why not? You do,” she insisted. “You only serve your country when you are forced to, or when you believe there is no danger. You would sell your soul to save your own life. For you, it is self-preservation that is your motivation. For me, it is the chance to make a better life for myself.”

She’d seen through me, all right, but I wasn’t about to let her have the satisfaction of thinking she had all the answers, so I tried to burst her bubble.

“Wanting to survive to see the sunset is one thing, but letting the Russians get hold of a bomb that could kill millions of your own people is quite another,” I said accusingly.

“It is only a game, Tom, you should know that. The Russians will get the bomb eventually, with or without my help. If these little boys want to play their games then let them. And if I make enough money along the way to set up my own fashion house in Paris, where is the harm in that?”

There was clearly no arguing with her so I changed the subject.

“So why did you want to see me again? Aren’t I just one of those ‘boys’ playing at being a spy?”

“No, I don’t think you are. I think you wish all these crazy people would leave you alone so you can just take what life has to offer and enjoy it.”

“Well, you’re right about one thing – I do like to enjoy what is on offer. Did you have anything particular in mind?”

She held my face and gave me a long, lingering kiss.

“Perhaps,” she whispered.

Reuter’s voice began to ring out *ad populum* from the loud speakers that had been erected around the Reichstag.

“We Berliners have said *no* to communism and we will fight it with all our might as long as there is a breath in us.”

Cheers rang out from the crowd before he continued.

“The freedom-loving people of Berlin will build a dam against which the Red tide will break in vain. The struggle for Berlin is a struggle for the freedom of the world!”

“No mention of our attempts to bring in food to the city, I notice,” I said, feeling a little neglected.

“The people of Berlin still believe the West will give in to the Russians. The winter is coming and they know you are powerless against the blockade,” Louise explained.

“We’ll see,” I said, trying to sound confident. “In fact, I have to catch a flight back to the western zone tomorrow night to carry on delivering supplies to these people who think we’ve given up on them.”

“Ah, you poor thing,” she said mockingly. “No one in Berlin shows their gratitude to the brave British airman.”

“Well, it would be nice if *someone* was willing to show their appreciation,” I said, grinning.

She took me by the hand and we made our way to her home, as she offered to make amends for the oversight of her fellow Germans.

“Let’s see what we can do about that.”

I awoke to the lovely sight

I awoke to the lovely sight of Louise sitting at a mirror, brushing her long silky hair and wearing a nightie so small it would have barely made a serviceable handkerchief. I was just contemplating how to orchestrate its removal, when there was a loud knocking at the door from downstairs.

“Would you be a dear?” asked the partially clad Louise, sweeping her hand down her body to indicate she was not in a position to be receiving guests.

So not for the first time, I was dressing hastily to vacate a lady’s bedroom. I answered the door, only to be greeted by Biggins’ grinning face.

“I thought I might find you here,” he said with smug satisfaction.

“What the hell do you want?” I asked.

“And a very good morning to you,” he said with infuriating cheerfulness for such an early hour.

“Forgive me, Henry, but every time I see you I always seem to end up in the soup,” I complained, leading him to the drawing room.

“I’m mortified, Tom, I really am. Those days are all behind us now. Anyway, aren’t you going to offer a chap a drink? I’m parched. I had to take an early flight to get here in time to catch you.”

This begged the question as to why he felt the need to ‘catch’ me at all, but I left it alone for the moment.

“I’ll make you a cup of tea before Louise comes down to offer you one. As much as I resent your intrusion, I’d hate for you to return to the western zone in a box.”

He gave me a strange look but decided to ignore my cryptic comment and got to the point.

“There *is* one small favour you could do for me before you fly back to the western zone, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“What’s that?” I asked, deciding to hear him out.

No doubt I must have been in a good mood after the previous night’s entertainment.

“The Assembly is meeting again this afternoon and we’ve arranged for you to attend. The struggle between the communists and the democratic parties is reaching acrisis point,” he explained. “If the Russians are gaining a stranglehold on the city, we want to be the first to know.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Henry, why send me? Can’t you find someone else, or am I the only person working for British Intelligence in Berlin?”

“You’re the only one on hand,” he insisted.

“Well, *you’re* here now, Henry, why don’t you go?”

“You know what my German’s like, I’d end up being none the wiser,” he said modestly. “Anyway, you don’t have to worry. There will be western sector police there to keep you company. In fact I’ve arranged for one of them to meet up with you.”

“Do you know, Henry, if I were a cynical man, I’d think you told me about Louise’s sudden yearning for a reunion just to get me here in the first place.”

“Now you’re getting paranoid.”

“For the life of me, I can’t think why.”

* * *

So only a few hours later on that September morning, Louise and I found ourselves being jostled by a dense crowd outside the Stadthaus, as demonstrators arrived in long processions or crammed together in broken-down trucks. I soon became aware that the mob was noticeably tougher and rowdier than the one I’d seen at the previous meeting, when I’d managed to escape from Kutuzov’s demented clutches.

We followed the rest of the Assembly members into the building, but it wasn’t long before we heard someone shouting outside and the mob rushed forward, smashing the glass doors to the Assembly hall. I looked around to see how the east sector police were earning their pay, and I was shocked by the sight of a helpful man from the Berlin constabulary obligingly pulling the door off its hinges.

Several journalists seated in the public gallery were dragged from their seats and beaten up, and I was cursing Biggins and our so-called intelligence department for throwing me into the fray again.¹²

An Assembly member tried to restore calm by speaking to the crowd using the loudspeaker system, only to have the microphone snatched from his grasp and the cable ripped out of its socket. I was about to lead Louise to the rear of the building, when a tall man in a dark suit and tie approached us.

“You must be Captain Fletcher. Herr Biggins gave me your description but I was about to despair of ever finding you. My name is Inspector Schmitt,” said the skeletal figure with a high-pitched voice.

“We were about to leave,” I said, cursing our bad luck at having been spotted.

“You may be wise. Some of the senior Assembly members asked for plain-clothes police from the western sector to come and give them protection. There are forty or fifty of us here, but what can we do against a mob such as this?” he asked, pointing to the hall where the noise was growing louder. “You and the young lady had better follow me.”

We headed along a corridor, just as several east sector policemen burst through to arrest every western officer they recognised. One of Schmitt’s men opened a door and we rushed through, only to find that we were in an office with no way out. As night came we saw that a tight police cordon had been placed around the building and we were effectively trapped.

It was five o’clock in the morning before we were finally told that we would be allowed to leave. Schmitt and the other western policemen were loaded onto one lorry and Louise and I were directed to another, which we shared with a handful of Germans and a couple of American journalists. We looked across at one another in silence and collectively breathed a sigh of relief, thinking the worst was over.

Any thoughts of an early celebration were soon dashed, however, when an armed Russian jeep suddenly shot ahead and swerved across the road, bringing the two trucks to a

halt. I peered out from behind the canopy and I was greeted by the sight of a large number of east sector police, arranged in an arc.

“I’ve heard that the communists are throwing anyone they consider a threat into Sachsenhausen, the old Nazi concentration camp,” said one of our fellow passengers, no doubt trying to cheer us up.¹³

Two of the armed police joined us and the truck pulled away. When it stopped, we were ordered to step out onto the road. As we looked around to get our bearings, I recognised the gothic building looming above the steps.

It was the headquarters of the Russian secret police and there, standing in the doorway to greet us, was Major Kutuzov.

Every woman for herself

I was off and running down the street like the favourite at Newmarket before our German guards knew what was happening. As far as I was concerned, it was every man for himself - and every woman for *herself*, for that matter.

There's a time and place for the heroic white knight to stand in defence of his helpless maiden and, having convinced myself that Kutuzov wouldn't bother harming my lovely Fraulein, I'd decided to leave without making my excuses. Besides, I'd forgotten my suit of armour.

As it turned out I needn't have worried because there, forging ahead of me by leaps and bounds, was the fleeing Jezebel herself, evidently set on breaking the women's Olympic record for the one hundred metre dash. Clearly she'd abandoned her obligatory stilettos and opted to run barefoot.

The guards had finally woken up and they were firing at us, but we managed to make it round the corner out of harm's way. We found ourselves running along a road with a low wall separating us from the banks of the river, which was in full flow as a result of the inordinate amount of rain that had fallen over the past few weeks.

We couldn't maintain our pace for much longer and I was just looking for a suitable place to take refuge, when a jeep swerved round the corner, climbed the pavement and headed straight for us. I barely had time to see Kutuzov's ugly face behind the wheel, before Louise and I scrambled up onto the wall to stop ourselves from being run over.

We looked over the other side to discover that it was a sheer drop to the river below. Desperately we both turned back to see Kutozov standing, pistol in hand, barely concealing the look of triumph on his face.

"Auf Wiedersein, Captain Fletcher," he growled, pointing his gun straight at my head.

"No!" screamed Louise, and Kutuzov turned to face her.

"Shut up, you traitor," he bellowed, shooting her in the chest.

I had time to see a red patch of blood soak through her blouse just above her left breast before she was thrown back, landing with an almighty splash into the water below. I stole a quick glance, only to see her lifeless body being carried away by the powerful current. I spun round to face my executioner.

"Oh, you cad!" I screamed. "Why, I've a good mind to..."

My words were cut off as I lost my footing and I found myself hurtling arse over tit into the swirling water below.

Two things saved me. Firstly, the usually icy waters were none too cold, it being early autumn, and secondly, the water was sufficiently deep to arrest my downward plunge before I struck the river bottom.

Fortunately I had the presence of mind not to follow my instincts and head straight to the surface in search of lungfuls of air. It was as well that I did, because I could hear the thudding sound of bullets hitting the water all around me.

Thankfully the current soon delivered me away from the deadly hailstorm and I noticed I was being taken along the same winding course that the unfortunate Louise had followed moments before.

Eventually I was washed up onto the far bank, and I desperately looked up and down the river in the hope of seeing my wounded heroine. There she was, not more than a few yards downstream, and I scrambled towards her through the mud.

She was lying face up, staring at the sky, and with mounting relief I saw her chest heave as she gasped for breath.

“Try to keep still!” I yelled, competing with the roar of the water.

“You came to save me, Tom. You do care, don’t you?” she gasped.

“Stay still, won’t you,” I grumbled, taking off my shirt and placing it under her blouse to try and stop the bleeding.

The silly girl thought I’d dived into the water to save her life. Well, if that was what she chose to believe, who was I to disillusion her?

A crowd had gathered on the street above us, and someone must have called for help because an ambulance arrived. Louise was soon being helped onto a stretcher and whisked away to a hospital in the western sector. I joined her and she insisted I held her hand all the way, until she was taken away by a team of doctors.

I wasted no time in telephoning Biggins and, after humble apologies for the mess he’d landed us in, he turned up at the hospital.

“Who did this?” he asked, once the doctor had assured us that Louise would survive.

“Well, it’s funny you should ask, Henry, because if I hadn’t had your word that he was on his way to Siberia, I could’ve sworn that our would-be assassin was none other than Major Kutuzov.

“That’s impossible,” insisted Biggins, “he definitely got on the plane for Moscow.”

“Well, he turned right round and got off again while your halfwit of a man wasn’t looking, or he caught the next flight back. The point is, he’s still here in Berlin and he’s out to get me.”

“Quite. Well, at least it’s turned out all right in the end. It looks as though Louise will survive the ordeal and you appear none the worse for wear. Anyway, I expect you’ll just be happy to get back to your life as a delivery boy.”

“You can’t be serious. You mean you expect me to keep flying to Berlin?”

“Why shouldn’t I?” he asked pathetically.

“Well, Kutuzov’s still got his sights on me, for one thing. He and his thugs could be waiting for me the next time I land in Gatow.”

“I doubt it,” he said, trying to reassure me. “The way things are in Berlin for the Russians right now, he’ll have other things on his mind.”

“But ...”

“Besides,” he went on, “we’ve tightened up security at Gatow – just don’t leave the plane. Get the cargo off sharpish and head straight back. That’s what you’ve been doing anyway, isn’t it?”

“I can’t argue anymore, Biggins. Just get me back to Fassberg where I can be reunited with that instrument of torture the RAF call a bed – that is if I’m allowed *one* night off.

“Of course,” said Biggins generously.

“I’m just going to check in on Louise and then you can drive me back to the airfield.”

He tried to follow me into Louise’s ward, but I let the door slam behind me. It was gratifying to hear the howl of pain as it smashed into his smug, fat face.

Try dipping those in your tea

In spite of the rhetoric and the gratitude of the citizens of Berlin for the pilots delivering their daily bread, the hourly grind of flying was becoming a thankless task. It was a matter of *persta atque obdura*. Those of us who'd been there from the beginning had flown back and forth to the city for months, and we were still only supplying barely half of what had once been brought in by land and water. Stocks were falling and winter was on its way.

In fact winter had decided to make an early appearance. September in Berlin was the coldest it had been for thirty years, and when we flew at higher levels you could even see snow on the mountains. I knew it wouldn't be long before we had the white stuff everywhere, as well as ice and fog, with the result that hundreds of thousands of Berliners would suffer from malnutrition, as we struggled to make our deliveries.

Then there was the cold – the raw, biting cold that can kill the weak in hours. Most homes in Berlin were bomb-damaged and as leaky as a sieve, so the wind howled through, taking any warmth with it. To make matters worse, the amount of coal we were delivering was pitiful.

The food we brought in wasn't up to much either. The dehydrated potato tasted like cardboard, the dried pea soup took half a day to cook, and you needed about a ton of the tomato soup powder to make anything that didn't taste like bilge water.

The Berliners were usually grateful for whatever they got, but one day I remember sitting on a large sack of biscuits by mistake, leaving nothing but a bag of crumbs.

"Try dipping those in your tea," I quipped to a local, as he took possession of a crushed packet of Marie's finest.

He just scowled at me, which just goes to show that most of our German friends had no sense of humour whatsoever.

I remember one atrocious day when there were sheets of rain and cloud down to about two hundred feet. My radar had stopped working and I was following an American C-54 which was trying to land. It overshot the runway and landed in a ditch before catching fire. The crew managed to get out safely but another plane landed minutes afterwards and had to brake so hard to avoid the blaze, that its tyres blew out and blocked the runway.

"Bugger this," I said to the crew, which is a well-known airman's term for: "Let us divert to another suitable runway."

Unfortunately there wasn't one, and the airfields were so busy that we weren't allowed to overshoot, come around and have another go. I was damned if I was going all the way back to base, so I put down on a new runway that was in the process of being built, much to the annoyance of the workmen. One of the navvies shouted across when we alighted from the plane.

"Here, mate, we haven't finished building this runway yet," he complained.

"Well, you'd better get a move on then, hadn't you, you lazy bugger." I said, and I walked away while he questioned my parentage.

What were the Russians doing all this time to assist us in improving our safety record, I hear you ask? Oh, helpful things like staging mock air battles over Berlin and conducting hours of anti-aircraft practice in our air-corridors.

But what could you do in your unarmed transport plane when a Russian fighter flies alongside, pretending to attack you? I just followed standard procedure. I smiled across, gave a cheery wave, then pulled my trousers down and showed him my arse.

Gradually things did start to improve and new aircraft arrived all the time. I was happy to stick with my trusty Dakota, but it meant we had to move to Lubeck, another old Luftwaffe station. I didn't mind because the German accommodation was a sight more comfortable than ours. I still have a pleasant memory of sitting outside my quarters, set on a hillside, watching red squirrels play in the late autumn sunshine.

I was just getting used to my new home when my old friend Biggins turned up like an unwelcome dose of the clap.

"I don't care what the Russians are up to, Biggins. They can drop an atom bomb on Buckingham Palace for all I care, you can count me out," I said, determined to stop him before he started, and that was when he blurted out his latest shocker.

"Kutuzov's grabbed Louise and he says he'll kill her if we don't return the plans."

What could go wrong?

I'll freely admit that he'd given me a nasty shock when he'd imparted this latest piece of cheery news, but his next proposition had me breaking into a cold sweat.

"Look, I know what Louise means to you, but we can't risk the nuclear plans, I'm afraid, it's just not possible. But don't worry, Tom, we'll think of some way to get her out."

It was how he had used the word 'we', with such gay abandon, that had my heart beating like a tom-tom. Don't get me wrong - Louise was a lovely girl, once you put aside the fact that she'd been a double agent in the employ of the Russians, but the thought of strolling into the eastern sector and risking my neck in some half-arsed rescue mission was a completely different kettle of fish.

The problem was that Biggins appeared to be so game, and it put me in rather an awkward spot. He assumed I'd be as eager as a teenage boy in a brothel to play the part of Sir Galahad. I half hoped he'd be at a loss as to what to do, but he had it all planned out, blast him.

"The exchange is to take place at the Brandenburg Gate, where the two sectors meet. As soon as we see that Louise is safe, we'll strike," said the bloodthirsty fool.

"Hold on," I protested, determined to put a halt to the proceedings before things got out of hand, "I thought you said we can't risk the confounded plans."

"That's true, but we don't need them. All you have to do is show Kutuzov an envelope stuffed with paper and demand to see Louise alive before you hand anything over," explained the buffoon.

"And what will *you* be doing while Kutuzov's busy snatching the fake plans and blowing my brains all over the Brandenburg Gate?" I asked, unable to believe what I was hearing.

"Don't worry," he assured me, "you'll have some of my best men with you. I doubt very much if he'll start a gun battle in such a public place."

"Would these be the same 'best men' who nearly let Kutuzov get away the last time we tried to snatch him?"

"This is different - we know where he'll be. Besides, you'll have a trump card to play," he said with a smug smile on his blasted face.

"What's that?" I asked, completely uninspired by Biggins' bravado.

"I didn't always work for British Intelligence, you know. During the war I was a sniper working behind enemy lines. I'll conceal myself so well that even you won't be able to see me and as soon as we know Louise is safe, bang! Kutuzov won't know what's hit him," he explained, his arms outstretched as if he was holding an imaginary rifle.

"And I suppose his men will just let me grab Louise and walk off into the sunset," I protested, far from impressed by his supposed marksmanship.

"Look, there are no guarantees in this game. Anybody would think you don't care what happens to her," he objected.

Suddenly I found myself on the defensive and searching for reasons to explain my reluctance.

“Of course I care, but this plan is likely to get her killed, what with bullets flying around all over the shop.”

“I won’t miss, Tom, and you can take that to the bank,” he announced, brimming with confidence. “All you’ll have to do is grab hold of Louise and run like the clappers while our men cover your rear. Surely you can see it’s our only hope. I mean, what’s the alternative?”

In truth, I couldn’t see one. Of course I was still shaking at the thought of placing my precious carcass into harm’s way, and the temptation to suggest that we just leave the careless baggage to look out for herself quickly passed when I realised it wouldn’t do. I’d have looked like a right uncaring bastard, which no doubt I was - but one has to keep up appearances.

“No, of course you’re right, Henry,” I said insincerely. “When does the exchange take place?”

“The day after tomorrow,” he said eagerly, as if he couldn’t wait, God help him.

“Just make sure you shoot straight and that these men of yours know what they’re doing,” I insisted.

“You worry too much, Tom. What could go wrong?”

So help me, I think he meant it.

* * *

Knowing Biggins and his intelligence mob as I did, I was convinced all manner of things could go tits up if I didn’t do something to take matters into my own hands. Even while Biggins had been going through his brainless scheme, I was already trying to formulate my own backup plan.

It was all I could do to hold my frayed nerves together, and for once I was glad to be still doing my usual delivery-run. At least it kept me from imagining all the horrors Kutuzov would inflict on me if Biggins’ plan failed.

Even so, I still found myself getting more irritable by the second and looking for mischief into the bargain. My search didn’t last long. When we landed at the new French airfield at Tegel the following day, I nearly crashed into a pair of transmitter masts sitting right in the flightpath and I decided I’d had enough. So as soon as the Dakota ground to a halt, I sought out the French commandant.

“What are you going to do about those blasted masts, sir?” I asked mischievously.

“I made a request to Radio Berlin’s director that they be removed, but he refused,” he explained.

“Well, I’m surprised you took that as an answer, sir. We’ve always admired the French because they never take any nonsense,” I said, trying to goad him in my best style - and it worked, God bless him.

“You’re right, Captain,” he announced, before turning to some of his men.

“Get plenty of explosives and pack them tightly around those masts,” he ordered.

They did as they were told and we all sat on the grass to watch. Ten minutes later we were treated to a wonderful firework display and the masts collapsed like so much scrap metal.

The Russian commandant, Kotikov, happened to be visiting that day and he went crazy.

“How could you do such a thing?” he cried.

“With dynamite,” replied the general calmly.¹⁴

Once the fun and games were over, the crew wanted to know what was bothering me.

“Hey, Tom, you’re a bit of a live wire this morning, aren’t you?” asked my co-pilot, as observant as ever.

“I’m just trying to pass the time of day – you know how it is,” I explained.

“There’s more to it than that. Come on, Tom, what’s got you all riled up?”

So I explained to the crew all about Louise’s kidnapping and Biggins’ proposed rescue attempt and how I needed help. They were all for mucking in, of course – anything to break the monotony.

As luck would have it, I was blessed with inspiration on the flight back to Gatow when we delivered a consignment of smoked fish. I’d forgotten to switch the heaters off and the smell was so bad that when we landed, the loaders had to hold their noses.

“Why don’t you drop this lot on the Russians, Captain? They’ll soon bugger off back to Moscow then,” suggested one of them helpfully, and I looked at him thoughtfully.

After a few minutes I knew what my plan would be.

I do believe we're going to crash

We were becoming so desperate to get supplies to Berlin that I often found the Dakota overloaded. Taking off was sometimes hit and miss and if one of my engines had given up the ghost at the wrong moment, they'd have been pulling what was left of us from the wreckage. Mind you, how the loaders managed to get the cargo on board day after day was beyond me. Half of them looked dangerously underfed and more often than not they were soaked to the skin, working in the driving rain.

So that night, at Lubeck, I personally supervised the loading of nearly three tons of coal, packed in the flimsiest sacks we could find, and I made sure the loaders did their best with the tie-down equipment to keep the cargo from sliding everywhere. The last thing I wanted was Jim being joined in the cockpit by a few hundred shovelfuls of slag.

Biggins and I flew to Berlin and we made our way to the Brandenburg Gate, where we were met by half a dozen of his men, their sidearms barely concealed beneath their jackets. Biggins picked out a likely spot where he would be able to hide and still have a view of the square. The men were briefed and we all retired for a well-earned rest, while I lay in a frightful sweat, wondering what the next day would bring.

I must have dropped off eventually because I had terrible visions of the ground coming up to meet me as my Dakota plunged helplessly earthwards. I turned, only to be greeted by Biggins' concerned face.

"Oh, dear me," he was saying calmly, as if he was on a Sunday stroll, "I do believe we're going to crash and burn to death."

"Help me!" I was screaming, pulling back on the stick for all I was worth.

"Here, allow me," roared a booming voice, and I looked across to see Kutuzov sitting in the co-pilot's seat, smashing all the controls and gauges as he laughed demonically.

"Oh, thank God you're here, Louise," I cried, as she entered the cockpit.

"Come on, lover boy," she squealed, as she climbed onto my lap and blocked my view out of the windshield.

"Get off me, you daft trollop!" I cried, as I desperately pushed her away.

It was then that I awoke in a cold sweat, punching the bed linen for all I was worth and gasping for breath. Light was streaming through the window of the hotel room and it took me several minutes to regain my composure so that I could face the rigours of the day.

* * *

I was reminded of a showdown in a terrible Western, as seven of us slowly walked towards Kutuzov waiting on the other side of the square. I had my revolver, but shooting and hitting anything was an entirely different matter, what with my hands shaking so much you'd have thought I was suffering from delirium tremens. Biggins had squirreled himself away in his little hidey-hole and there was nothing to do but make the exchange.

I was surprised to see that Kutuzov was alone, but for some reason I didn't find the discovery comforting.

"I've brought the plans, Kutuzov. Now where is Louise?" I asked, wanting to get the whole thing over with as quickly as possible.

"You must think I'm stupid, Captain Fletcher. You wouldn't hand over the plans for the life of one woman."

"Well, if that's true, why the hell did you arrange this whole charade?" I asked incredulously, and I was comforted by the fact the Biggins' men looked ready to pounce on the Russian if I gave them the word.

"Do you think I care about some useless pieces of paper which my beloved leader will get hold of eventually anyway? It's you I want," he said, taking a step back.

"Well, good luck with..." I started to say, but before I could finish the sentence there were dozens of east sector police swarming in on us from all directions.

Where the hell they'd been hiding I couldn't imagine, but one look at them, armed to the teeth with rifles and machine-guns, let you know that resistance was useless. My bodyguards obviously realised it too and they reluctantly raised their hands in surrender.

I looked across to where Biggins was hiding, hoping that at least *he* would be able to get a shot at the ugly Russian bugger, only to see him being led meekly by two more of Kutuzov's henchmen.

So much for British Intelligence coming to the rescue, I thought. When Kutuzov noticed the direction of my gaze, he couldn't help but give a triumphant smile.

"It was obvious that you would try and kill me. You British really are very arrogant to believe you can outsmart us so easily," he said, pointing his pistol at my stomach and deftly relieving me of mine.

The policemen did the same with Biggins' men, and we were led away towards the eastern sector. Incredibly Louise was there, guarded by two of Kutuzov's men, and he explained when he saw my look of confusion.

"I brought her as an insurance policy in case things did not go according to plan. Be assured, I leave nothing to chance," he said smugly.

It was then that the low hum I had been listening for suddenly became a huge roar and the Dakota hove into view, barely clearing the roof tops. While everyone looked up to see what was causing the deafening noise, I took the opportunity to reach into my pocket and pull out the goggles and surgeon's mask I'd been carrying.

I donned them within seconds, and I was just in time to see the coal sacks being launched from the hatch of the Dakota. John and Peter had kicked them out of the plane, as we'd planned, and the torn bags smashed into the ground right on target, a few feet from where we were standing. As predicted, the worthless sacks disintegrated on impact and mountains of black coal dust exploded into the air, covering everything in sight.

Everyone in the square was soon coughing and spluttering, unable to catch their breath, and I could see people desperately trying to wipe the dust from their eyes. But even with my goggles on it was touch and go, and I could barely see a few yards in front of me. To top it all, my mask didn't seem to be up to the job, and I found myself struggling for breath like everybody else.

But I'd had one important advantage. I'd known what was coming and I'd been careful to mark out exactly where Louise was being kept prisoner before the sky turned black. She and her guards were kneeling on the ground, threatening to cough up their innards, and I helped Louise to her feet before the Dakota had disappeared from view. She was gasping for air like the rest of us, and I had to carry her to the western sector and safety.

As luck would have it, a car was parked nearby, while the driver looked on in astonishment at the spectacle of the unexpected black snowstorm. His look of wonder turned to alarm when two apparitions suddenly appeared and pulled open the rear doors, demanding to be taken to Gatow. Clearly too afraid to refuse, he pulled away, and before long I had Louise safely tucked away on the Dakota, which the crew had flown back to the airfield after their covert bombing mission.

Peter had thought to bring copious amounts of water, and the crew eagerly washed the dust from Louise while I got myself cleaned up.

"Thanks, chaps," I said gratefully. "Believe me, you saved the day."

"No problem, Captain. I haven't had so much fun since I pelted that admiral with flour back in Kent," said our radio operator, remembering one of the few stories he'd failed to share with the rest of the crew.

Eventually Louise came to her senses, and when my German angel realised she was safe, she wrapped her arms around me and gave me a wonderful mouth-watering kiss. Suddenly she noticed the awkward smiles of the crew.

"These are the gents who saved your life," I said magnanimously.

"Well, I'd better thank them all properly," she said, and before I knew what was happening she was treating them to their own kisses as a reward.

Jim was grinning from ear to ear when he received Louise's token of gratitude. Then he turned to me to say his piece.

"Hey, Tom, you haven't got any more Frauleins tucked away who need rescuing, have you?"

Once you've seen one lad in Lederhosen

Our unscheduled delivery of coal had caused more disruption than we'd realised. Everyone in the square had been so incapacitated by the dust that by the time they'd recovered, the British military police had arrived in force, and Kutuzov and his henchmen were obliged to skulk off to their own sector. Biggins and his men eventually recovered their composure, if not their dignity, and in the meantime I'd arranged for Louise to stay at a hotel near to Lubeck under an assumed name. I reasoned that she would be safer there and, more importantly, on hand for the close attention of one Captain Fletcher.

After I'd rescued her from the jaws of death, she was pining for me like a little Freyja, and she even begged me to take her on one of my flights to Berlin. I told her it was a preposterous idea and she sulked, thinking I'd give way.

As it turned out I *did* relent eventually, but it was for purely selfish reasons. You see, I was notified that the following week I was to pick up a group of sick children who were destined to go to homes in Frankfurt in the American zone. The last thing I wanted was to baby-sit a planeload of sprogs from one end of Germany to the other, so I suggested to Louise that she came along and the besotted little minx was all for it.

It was just as well that she'd agreed because she replaced the nurse who'd been hoping to come along for the ride - and I wouldn't have wished the fat battleaxe on my worst enemy. Besides, the weight restriction would have meant that I'd have had to leave half of the little mites back in Berlin to compensate for the extra payload.

Even without a crew, it was still touch and go trying to make it into the air, but I just put it down to the fact that we'd packed the little terrors into the hold like sardines.

When we were finally in the air and I looked back to see how my pretty Mata Hari was doing, I was amused to find her trying to remember all of the children's names. They were supposed to be labelled, like our little evacuees back home, but half of them had torn their name tags off. Louise was having a hell of a time telling them apart. Mind you, she had my sympathy. As far as I'm concerned, once you've seen one little blond lad in lederhosen you've seen them all.

One bright spark actually spoke passable English and he was screaming to be allowed into the cockpit to play with the controls.

"What does this do?" asked the toddler with the English degree, as he pointed to the landing light switch. But then he decided to thank me for rescuing him from starvation by vomiting all over my trouser leg.

"I want to go to the toilet," he demanded, and when I yelled to Louise to get the little devil out of the cockpit before he shat himself, the rest of the kindergarten decided they wanted to go too.

I couldn't help grinning at the thought of my glamour-puss, dressed to the nines in the latest number from her collection, escorting one piddle-soaked child after another to the makeshift toilet at the rear of the plane.

"Tom, can you come back here?" she asked, clearly not able to cope.

“In case you haven’t noticed, I’m rather busy flying the plane,” I replied, having no wish to assist in the toilet debacle.

“I’m afraid there’s a bit of an emergency,” she insisted.

I sighed and, having no autopilot worth a damn, I trimmed the Dakota for straight and level flight as best I could, and left the cockpit to see whatall the fuss was about.

“Good God, Louise, can’t you cope with a few...”

I didn’t manage to finish my sentence because the extra weight I’d detected on take-off had suddenly revealed itself. Towering over our incontinent brood was the beast himself – Major Kutuzov.

Missing his mother's milk

"I can see you are at a loss for words, Captain Fletcher. No doubt you are overcome with emotion at having the unexpected pleasure of my company," he said, chuckling at his own witticism.

But his booming voice only succeeded in causing half of the little cherubs to burst into tears, which I was in danger of doing myself, once I'd got over the shock that the ugly brute was actually standing there.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Kutuzov, but what the hell are you doing here?" I asked, trying to hide my absolute horror at seeing him again.

"Ah, I can see that polite conversation is not to be forthcoming. In that case I will get straight to the point. It appears you did not keep your side of the bargain when you met with the glorious leader of my country."

Louise tore her gaze away from our intruder and looked at me with ill-concealed surprise. I hadn't told her about my meeting with Stalin and clearly she was quite taken aback. Still, a chap has to have some secrets, doesn't he? It all adds to the mystery surrounding the gentleman spy, don't you know.

"I'm afraid I didn't have much choice, Kutuzov," I pleaded, suddenly aware of the gun pointed at my chest.

"You'll forgive me if I don't believe you. However, the damage is done and it appears I am now expendable. I have therefore been forced to make...other arrangements."

"Are you going to kill us, Kutuzov?" I asked, deciding that my nerves wouldn't be able to stand the suspense for much longer.

"Really, Captain, you have a very low opinion of me and a rather high opinion of yourself. I did not go to all this trouble merely to kill you. I could have done that a hundred times over with ease, believe me."

I tried not to let my sense of relief show. Naturally I still trusted him less than my local bank manager, but at least it was easier to put on a brave face with this welcome news.

"So what is it that you want? I've got to get back to the controls before we crash into something."

"Please, go ahead," said Kutuzov, pointing towards the cockpit with his gun.

I took my seat while he loomed over me, and I was just starting to feel relieved that we weren't in danger of ploughing into the ground, when he explained his demands.

"Captain, I wish you to alter course for Zurich."

"Zurich –you mean in Switzerland?" I cried, unable to hide my disbelief.

"That is where it was located the last time I looked at a map," said Kutuzov, who was a humorist in his own way.

"But that's nearly twice as far as Frankfurt. We'll barely have enough fuel."

"Nevertheless, that is where we are going. Change course now." And he stuck his pistol against the back of my neck as an incentive.

There was nothing for it but to do as I was told, and I tried to find out what he had in store for us.

“At the risk of making polite conversation, why exactly are we going to Switzerland?” I asked.

“I have decided to take a sabbatical. Fortunately I have been able to procure enough funds to live comfortably for several years. All that I needed was a way out of Berlin, and when I happened to discover that it was *you* flying to Frankfurt ... well, let us just say it was an opportunity too good to miss. This way, I can leave my troubles behind without laying a trail for my colleagues to follow.”

He sat down in the co-pilot’s seat with a self-satisfied grin on his face, keeping his gun firmly aimed in my direction. It all made sense, sort of, but it didn’t take a genius to work out that once Louise and I had outlived our usefulness, he’d have no choice but to kill us both. His next words showed that he must have read my mind.

“I know what you are thinking. What is to stop me from killing you when I no longer need your services? However, you have nothing to fear. When we land in Zurich, the last thing I want is to draw attention to myself. I doubt whether the Swiss authorities would take too kindly to someone entering the country if their first act was to commit murder. Besides, you and Fraulein May hardly pose a threat to my safety.”

“Fraulein May?” I asked, wondering if I’d missed something.

“Ah, no doubt you have not been apprised of Fraulein Schoneberg’s real name. Surely you realised she was not Otto Schoneberg’s daughter. After all, how could such an ugly pighave fathered a daughter so beautiful,” opined Kutuzov, which was rather like the pot calling the kettle black as far as I was concerned, but I let it go while he continued to reassure me.

“As I was saying, even if you were foolish enough to tell the Russian security police about my escape, I very much doubt if they would believe you. They know full well that you work for the Secret Intelligence Service and they would be more likely to assume that you were feeding them with misinformation. That sort of thing is your stock in trade, after all.”

I couldn’t fault the logic but I still didn’t trust him. Nevertheless, it gave me one small crumb of hope that we’d all survive the lunatic’s scheme. So I concentrated on the job in hand and tried to lean the fuel as best I could in the hope that we’d make it to Zurich with more than just vapour in the tanks.

The trouble was that I hadn’t made up our fuel problem just to dissuade the evil major from going through with his escape – it really *was* touch and go whether or not we’d even make it to the Swiss border, let alone Zurich. I made the mistake of telling Kutuzov, and he got out of his seat to join Louise and the children in the hold.

“As I see it, we have a weight problem,” he said.

His calm voice was menacing enough to get a coward like me wanting to join the toilet-run with the rest of the little orphans. I looked back to see him stoop down and pick up two of the older children by the scruff of the neck. My God, I thought, even an evil blighter like Kutuzov couldn’t contemplate such a thing, but I was dead wrong.

“These two will do to start with,” he said, ignoring the youngsters’ screams.

“No!” yelled Louise. And she rushed forward, trying to snatch the children from him.

She pounded his chest with her fists, but for all the good it did she might as well have been hitting a brick wall. Kutuzov dropped the children as if they were unwanted baggage and his right hand went around her throat.

Without thinking I was out of my seat, charging back to face the mayhem. While he was occupied with the process of strangulating my heroic Fraulein, I went to give him a swift kick in his wedding tackle. Unfortunately he turned at the last minute and I missed, catching him on his leg. He let out a yelp and instinctively let go of Louise's slender neck, but somehow he caught hold of her blouse. As he brought his fist round to smash me in the face, he succeeded in ripping it and pulling her brassiere halfway down her body into the bargain.

The youngster who'd landed on the cargo floor soon forgot about his bruised bottom, as he stared at Louise's magnificent breasts. He reached out, yearning to latch onto one of them - no doubt missing his mother's milk. I, for one, would happily have joined him, if I hadn't had more pressing things on my mind.

Fortunately the young lad and I weren't the only ones overcome by the sight of all the delightful meat and Kutuzov stood there, staring open-mouthed. I took the opportunity to make the most of the unexpected diversion and picked up one of the crowbars the loaders used to open their crates of goodies. I smashed it as hard as I could into the major's stomach.

I heard a satisfying moan of pain and I was poised, ready to knee him in the face when he doubled over in agony. So imagine my disappointment when I found my victim still upright and rubbing his abdomen as if he had nothing more than a bellyache. He pulled his pistol from its holster and stood back.

"Enough!" he roared, and he grabbed the side of the hold as the plane lurched. "Get back to the controls, Captain Fletcher."

"Look, Kutuzov, I'll get you to bloody Switzerland - just don't throw any children out of the aeroplane."

"Don't worry, the Fraulein will be the first to go if it becomes necessary," he said, pointing to Louise as she did her best to recover her modesty.

Fortunately we'd left Berlin early in the morning and it was still daylight as we approached the Swiss border. I was just admiring the view of the Alps in the distance, when Kutuzov appeared from the rear of the plane to make an announcement.

"This is where I leave you," he said, pointing his gun at me, and I couldn't help but notice he was wearing a parachute and clutching a large sack.

"What are you talking about? We've still got some way to go before we get to Zurich," I explained, being a little slow on the uptake.

"Zurich will be a little too busy for my purposes. Besides, you didn't really think I'd let you both live, did you?"

I slammed the throttles forward and pulled back as hard as I could on the stick, sending Kutuzov flying arse-backwards towards the rear of the plane. He fired a shot before dropping his pistol, but the bullet only succeeded in putting a hole in the co-pilot's seat.

I was up and diving for the gun before Kutuzov had time to regain his balance, but it slid away from my grasp and ended up amongst the children. One of the engines spluttered and I

realised that my sudden aerobatics must have used up what was left of the fuel. In my defence, the fuel gauges on my old Dakota were about as much use as a pair of swimming trunks in the Sahara.

Kutuzov pulled the handle of the rear door and there was a whoosh of air as it filled the cabin. He shouted above the roar of the wind ripping through the plane.

“It seems that you have done my job for me, Captain Fletcher!” he yelled, as he heard the remaining engines cough and die. “Happy landings!”

He jumped into the void and I didn’t wait to wish him a bon voyage, but ran to the cockpit and retook my seat. I could feel the plane falling as it went into a stall and I knew that our only hope was to try and build up some speed. So I pushed the stick forward and gradually the shuddering stopped as the airspeed indicator started to climb. Although we’d dropped a few hundred feet, we still had enough altitude for me to pick a likely looking landing site.

Fortunately northern Switzerland isn’t quite as festooned with the towering peaks of which the south boasts, and I spotted a large valley with no unwelcome obstacles to block our landing. Once I knew we could reach it, I put in full flaps and dropped the gear to slow us down as much as I dared. The plane began to stall as the ground came up to meet us, but it was mercifully flat and the Dakota eventually rolled to a stop.

As the plane creaked and shuddered for one final time, Louise checked on our crying passengers and I gave a huge sigh as all the tension drained from my body.

“They’re all in one piece,” she assured me, “which is more than can be said for Kutuzov.”

“What on earth do you mean?” I asked, wondering what she was getting at.

“I don’t expect the parachute will have been much good to him without these,” she said, and she opened her hand to reveal two pieces of shiny metal.

I stared and finally recognised them for what they were – the handles to the ripcords of the parachute.

“What...I mean, how did you know?”

“While he was explaining his plan, I had a look to see where he’d been hiding and I spotted the parachute, together with his sack of cash,” explained my amazing double agent.

“Why, you sneaky devil. Still, it serves him right. It’s just a pity he won’t be able to spend all that money.”

She took her elegant bag from her shoulder and opened it to reveal that it was filled to the brim with American dollars.

“No, but we will!”

I could stay here forever

As luck would have it we'd landed near a little village north of Winterthur, and when the locals came out to see who'd decided to land a plane in the middle of their pretty valley, they couldn't do enough for us. I suppose it didn't hurt that we had a plane full of crying infants in tow. There's nothing like the sound of bawling toddlers to get the maternal instincts of the womenfolk in full flow.

The mayor of the town contacted the authorities in Germany to let them know what had happened, and as nothing could be done until the morning, he arranged for the youngsters to be taken in by the eager families who had offered them a bed for the night. He even gave Louise and I the use of his lodge in the hills.

It was a splendid little place. The mayor said he only used it in the winter, but once we'd lit the big pile of logs in the huge stone fireplace, it soon began to feel like home. I managed to find some furs which I spread out in front of the hearth and, as I poured another glass of wine from the bottle I'd located in the cellar, I sat back to admire Louise's naked body glistening in the firelight.

"I think I could stay here forever," she said, reaching across for the glass that I offered her and rewarding me with a handsome view of her bouncers.

"Well, we can afford to now," I said, pointing to her bag of money.

"What would Mr. Biggins have to say about that?" she asked, rather spoiling the moment.

I pulled one of the furs around us so that our naked bodies were wonderfully cocooned.

"He'll have to find us first."

Biggins did find us, of course, and he was all efficiency as he arranged for us to get back to Germany the following day. He'd contacted our man in Zurich, who'd arranged for two buses to take us all to the airport just outside the city. From the tears of parting I witnessed as Louise and I rounded up our German orphans, it looked like they would have been more than happy to make their new homes at the foot of the Swiss mountains, but like the rest of us they were forced to join the real world.

The Americans had obligingly sent over one of their large C-54s to take us back to Frankfurt, and once we'd dropped off our human cargo we were flown to Berlin. Now that Kutuzov was out of the way, Louise decided she wanted to go home and I was a little put out, to say the least. She seemed a little preoccupied, but I noticed that throughout our journey she never once let her precious bag out of her sight.

So the waifs were finally delivered to their new homes and all that changed was that a certain major in the Russian secret police was no longer around to trouble the world. Unfortunately the RAF was missing one valuable Dakota. But they managed to repair it and have it back in service in no time, thanks to the magnificent landing of their top pilot.

Not that I got any thanks for my unwilling part in the whole business. If you try to look through the records to find evidence of a British Dakota suddenly going missing in the middle of the airlift, you'll be out of luck. It's amazing what can be hushed up when you count the prime minister among your acquaintances.

So before I knew it, I was plunged back into the world of constant noise, as aircraft made their incessant round of deliveries to the good people of Berlin. The residents assured us the sound was a comfort. The throb of the engines meant they had food and fuel to survive and we hadn't forsaken them.

I can't say I minded being back in the fray too much. For one thing it was a blessed relief not to have to look over my shoulder every five minutes, waiting for the sadistic major to exact his revenge. And for another, when I was given time off I still had access to the most beautiful woman in Berlin - or Germany, come to that. Unfortunately such opportunities were few and far between.

You see, the people of Berlin were in such a sorry state that they were converting their tiny gardens into little vegetable plots and they were even bartering away their personal belongings for food. When they weren't huddling around burning twigs with their neighbours, they were on street corners gathering around loudspeakers, desperate to hear any news that the blockade might end.

Permanent barriers began to appear, and the Soviets shot at anyone who tried to leave their sector. It was beginning to look like I still had months of miserable and dangerous winter flying ahead of me, with scant sign that the blockade would ever end. That was the moment, when everything seemed so hopeless, that the miracle arrived.

Watching the squirrels play

I'll not weary you with talk of weather patterns and blasted isobars, but simply say that Mother Nature decided to give the poor people of Berlin and their heroic aviators a much-needed respite.

Everyone expected the winter of 1948 to be the same as any other. Bitter easterly winds from Russia and Poland, ice and snow – all of these hazards and more should have been thrown at us. By rights, frosts should have been tearing up the runways; engines ought to have been icing up; and vehicles left with no choice but to skid around all over the place.

The meteorological miracle was that none of this came to pass and the bone-numbing cold never arrived. Of course there were occasional days of biting winds and hard frosts, but never for a sustained period of time. We had fog, but thanks to the latest technology and Pete, my navigator, I could take off in all but the very worst conditions.

Yet perhaps the most amazing thing of all was how we managed to get by with the little fuel reserves that we had. Just a few degrees colder and the sharp frosts would have caused the wheels of the aircraft to bind onto the ground, forcing us to burn precious Kerosene to release them. If it hadn't been for the miracle that spared us, there is no doubt our meagre stash of fuel would have run dry and the people of Berlin would have starved.

To give you some idea of how exceptional that winter truly was, only the year before there had been *hundreds of hours* of severe frost. But in January '49 no bad frost *at all* was recorded. Also there was the added bonus that we didn't have to deliver as much coal to keep the people of Berlin warm. The skies were clear and our airfields operated with the same amount of traffic as they'd done in the summer.

Mind you, if you think all this wonderful weather meant that our job of supplying Berlin was just a walk in the park, you'd be dead wrong. We still had fatal crashes and there were at least five that I know of.

I had the misfortune to witness one accident when we lost a Dakota in a large explosion. The next day a communist-sponsored newspaper claimed that the deaths of the children among the passengers were the result of 'politically inspired murder' committed by those responsible for the airlift. Of all the nerve.¹⁵

Good men died trying to supply Berlin's citizens. I put it down to lack of training and exhaustion. I know for certain that I was making mistakes I wouldn't have if I'd had enough sleep. More than once I almost landed without putting the wheels down when the alarm failed to sound.

But as so often happens when you feel you're fighting against the odds and there appears to be no hope of an end in sight, if you put your head down and just get on with it, little by little things improve - and suddenly everything doesn't look so hopeless after all. That was how it appeared to me as I was sitting, watching the squirrels play and smoking my cigarette between flights. It was Valentine's Day, I remember, and we'd heard that the allies were going to go all out to supply everything Berlin needed – indefinitely, if that's what it took.

What a transformation from eight months before when it had all started. Back then we had thought we could only last a few weeks and we would have to give up when winter

arrived. We'd simply been trying to stave off disaster while we tried to reach an agreement with the Russians. Now we felt we could go on until the Soviet Union raised its siege on *our* terms.

It was no longer a question of how long we could hold out, but *when* would the Russians give in? They'd had their chance to take Berlin in the winter when food was scarce and our airlift was on the verge of collapse, but now we had seven or eight months of good flying weather to look forward to and we could build up our reserves. Berlin had survived.

Eventually the Russians saw sense and gave orders for the lifting of all restrictions. The lights came on all over the city and crowds gathered at Helmstedt, the crossing-point from the British zone to the start of the Berlin autobahn. Fences and buildings were painted, verges trimmed, and flags fluttered in the breeze. At midnight the military police opened their iron gate for the first cars and trucks to move through, and a train full of supplies set off for Berlin.¹⁶

In Paris an agreement was reached that the blockade would be lifted permanently. I'd like to be able to tell you that our struggle culminated in a great battle where we defeated the communist foe, but I'm afraid that real life often isn't like that. For me and the other western aircrew it was hard to realise that we had won a great victory at all, and that Europe would be changed forever. We just kept concentrating on our jobs until it was all over.

Give me a kiss

I was looking forward to a well-earned rest and the chance to recuperate in the loving arms of Fraulein Louise. What with my flying duties, I'd been living the life of Saint Kevin and I was getting uncommon hungry for her.

For the second time it looked as though Biggins was coming up trumps, which should have set the alarm bells ringing if I'd had any sense.

"Some of the bigwigs at the talks in Paris need flying back to Berlin," he explained, but it meant nothing to me.

"Well, good luck to them," I replied, not really caring.

"We're sending over a DC-3 tomorrow but we need another pilot," he went on.

"Oh," I said, not realising what he was trying to say.

Exasperated, Biggins continued to spring his surprise.

"Tom, you're that pilot, and you can take a certain someone with you who has always longed to go to Paris," he said, spelling it out for me, and finally the penny dropped.

"Good God, Henry, do you mean it?" I cried.

"It's all arranged. You'll only get a couple of days there, but..."

"You beauty, Biggins. Here, give me a kiss!"

* * *

Before I tell you of Biggins' unwelcome news that sealed my fate for the next two years, you may well be wondering what became of the charming and beautiful Louise.

Well, she finally got the fashion house she'd always wanted, and I leave it to you to fathom where she found the necessary capital. I'll just say that I never got so much as a whiff of the contents of her bag. That's not to say that she didn't make a small fortune herself as a successful model, and you may well have seen her yourself on the covers of the more up-market glossies.

She was known by a different name by then, having married a rich and work-shy Italian count who probably had dealings with the mafia – they usually do. I've only seen her once since our adventures in Berlin, when I was dragged to a fashion show a few years back. I decided to keep in the background, and as I watched her fussing over her grandchildren, I couldn't help thinking she was still a damned handsome piece.

Naturally I'd missed my chance when she realised I wasn't for tying down to a life of domestic bliss. I might have saved myself a lot of heartache if I'd taken her up on her offer, but I can console myself with the thought that the wealthy fashion designer and delectable model was mine once.

I have a delightful memory of her beautiful face in the firelight of the lodge near Winterthur, looking at me adoringly after we'd finished the proceedings - and it always brings a smile to my face. Anyway, I still think of that fashion house in Paris as partly owned by an old, retired RAF pilot.

But enough of idle reminiscing and let me bring you back to that fateful day when Biggins dropped his confounded bombshell. We were boarding the plane bound for Paris and Louise was as excited as a drunk who'd been given the keys to the brewery.

Biggins was there to see us off and, as he said his goodbyes, he held the door to the plane, ready to close it.

"How can I ever thank you, Henry? I've always dreamed of going to Paris," said Louise, and she kissed him on the lips.

"That'll do," he replied, and I was amused to see him going red in the face with embarrassment.

"Well, I'll see you in a couple of days," I said, reaching for the door.

"That'll be fine. When you get back we'll be heading over to London for our meeting with the PM."

It was the first I'd heard of any blasted reunion at Number 10, and I felt my heart skip a beat.

"He wants to thank you personally," explained Biggins reassuringly, and I began to relax, cursing my own wariness. But there was more to come.

"Oh, and he has got *one* little problem he was hoping you might help him with."

"What problem?" I asked, suddenly finding the hairs on the back of my neck bristling.

"Oh, nothing really – just a little spot of bother in Korea."

And with that he slammed the door shut.

"Korea?" I cried to no one in particular.

[This is where the first packet of papers from my uncle's memoirs ends. The next instalment describes his exploits in the Korean War. After succumbing to the alluring charms of his beautiful South Korean contact, he finds himself caught up in the conflict, fighting with British and American forces. The communists were prevented from gaining total victory, in spite of my uncle's reluctant participation in the war.]

Notes

1. Venona, the decoding project named by Fletcher, remained an official secret until it was declassified in 1995. The British government did not want to reveal that they had cracked the Russian code, so any evidence brought to light by Venona could not be used in court, but it could trigger investigations and surveillance of suspects. Venona blew the cover of several spies.

(Haynes, Earl & Harvey, *Venona – Decoding Soviet Espionage in America*).

2. Klaus Fuchs is considered by many to be the most important atomic spy in history. He was a physicist on the Manhattan Project and a leading scientist at Britain's nuclear facility by 1949. A Venona decryption revealed that important scientific processes relating to the construction of the atom bomb had been sent from the United States to Moscow and FBI agents identified Klaus Fuchs as the source. In 1949 Fuchs finally confessed to passing on information relating to the creation of an atom bomb to the Soviet Union. He was tried and sentenced to fourteen years in prison. After serving nine years he was released. He resumed his work as a scientist in East Germany and died in 1988.

(Moss, *Klaus Fuchs: The Man Who Stole the Atom Bomb*).

3. The encounter Fletcher describes must have been with General Clay, the American Deputy Military Governor, and General Albert Wedemeyer, who was visiting Europe from America. Apparently Clay was more than willing to take a tough stance against the Russians, as Fletcher claims. When Russian guards attempted to board American trains, Clay threatened to put armed guards on them. He also wanted to form an Anglo-American convoy, arm it, and force a way through the checkpoint at Marienborn and up the autobahn to Berlin. Eventually he suggested that the allies bring a whole division to the crossing-point. General Bradley turned down the idea. It was Wedemeyer who first concluded that it would be possible to supply all of Berlin's needs by air.

(Avi Schlaim, *The United States and the Berlin Blockade 1948-49: A Study in Crisis Decision-Making*. Jeremy Isaacs & Taylor Downing, *Cold War*).

4. The officer who took Fletcher to both of the accident sites must have been the British commandant, General E O Herbert. He placed a guard on the Yak with the excuse of "stopping German looting", but the real reason was to make sure that the Russians could not tamper with the undercarriage and give the impression that the Yak had been innocently preparing to land.

(The Times, 6th & 7th April 1948).

5. Apparently the western authorities were concerned that there might be violent mass demonstrations on May Day. General Herbert planned "extensive precautions with troops at very short call but tidied away out of view." Men of the Royal Norfolk Regiment were dispatched to the Reichstag and it must have been one of their number that Fletcher met on

the streets of Berlin that day. The regiment was captured after the fall of Singapore so might well not have been fighting fit, as Fletcher seems to suggest. However, they fortunately spent a quiet day on duty because the demonstration was peaceful.

(British Military Government Document, 30th April 1948: FO1030/60 – Herbert to Robertson).

6. The woman who Fletcher witnessed being attacked may have been Jeanette Wolff, a representative of the Social Democratic Party. It was not until nightfall that the Speaker of the Assembly and a handful of other members could slip out.

(Foreign Office document, 1948 – based on an account by Suhr).

7. The Douglas C-47 was called a Dakota by the RAF from the acronym ‘DACoTA’ - Douglas Aircraft Company Transport Aircraft. It differed from the civilian DC-3 in that it was fitted with a cargo door and had a strengthened floor. C-47s were used to fly ‘the hump’ from India into China and it played a major role in the Berlin airlift. Crew: 4, Capacity: 28 troops, Payload: 6,000 lb, Length: 63ft 9in, Wingspan: 95ft 6in, Height: 17ft.

(Donald, *The Complete Encyclopaedia of World Aircraft*).

8. This incident took place on 26th June. Although General Clay apologised to Marshal Sokolovsky, their friendship ended.

(Lucius D Clay, *Decision in Germany*).

9. Although Fletcher refers to the stoning of the East German police by the crowd in the Potsdamer Platz, he does not mention the fact that the police opened fire, killing one person and wounding several others. However, as his life was in danger at the time, he may be forgiven for not hearing or seeing the gunfire.

(Daily Telegraph and The Times, 1948).

10. Gail Halvorsen, a pilot from Utah, left his base at Tempelhof and met some children who he felt sorry for. He told them to wait that evening at the end of the runway and look up to see what happened. He and his crew dropped candy attached to parachutes, but they soon realised that the children would be waiting every night. By October, Halvorsen had a staff of six to deal with supplies and thank you letters. Halvorsen became known as the “Sweet Bomber” or “Schokoladen Flieger”, and once the German Youth Activities group started mass-producing parachutes, ‘Operation Little Vittles’ was dropping 6,000 consignments of goodies a day. Although Fletcher does not specify the date when he witnessed the dropping of sweets, he appears to suggest it took place in the summer. If so he is mistaken, because the first ‘drop’ did not take place until the autumn.

(Stars and Stripes, October 1948).

11. General Walter Bedell Smith, the American ambassador, and Frank Roberts, Bevin’s Principal Private Secretary, were summoned to see Stalin and Molotov in Stalin’s office in

the Kremlin on 2nd August 1948. Frank Roberts attended because the British ambassador, Sir Maurice Peterson, was in London for treatment after a heart attack.
(Details from Bedell Smith to the Secretary of State, 3rd August 1948).

12. The second Assembly meeting which Fletcher refers to took place on 6th September 1948. At noon the demonstrators rushed forward and there were a number of beatings.
(Details from the Military Governor to the Foreign Office. The Times, 7th September 1948).

13. Everyone in the two trucks that Fletcher refers to was arrested. At least two of the men spent a month in Russian jails before coming to trial. They subsequently spent six month terms in Sachsenhausen.
(Statements of Gerhard Lickert and Ernst Welk, dispatch No. 391 from Berlin).

14. The French officer who ordered the demolition of the two radio transmitters was the French commandant, General Ganeval.
(The Times -17th,18th,20thDecember 1948).

15. The claim was made by a newspaper called the *Berliner Zeitung*.
(Details from The Tempelhof Papers: A Report on 'Operation Plainfare': review of Berlin press, 26th January 1949).

16. On 10th May, 1949, the Russians published orders for the lifting of their restrictions in two days time. The lights came on in Berlin on the 11th May. At 1.23 a.m. a British military train set off from Helmstedt station bound for Berlin.
(Berlin to London, 11th May 1949: FO 371 76551).



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