

## Chapter 1

Announcing its progress with an occasional cantankerous groan and long-suffering screech tramcar 47 trundled north and west towards the drab grey suburbs. Most of the passengers had boarded in the town's cobblestone square, the ancient guild houses now, in 1992, three years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, splendidly restored and bedecked with fluttering medieval flags, prancing golden bears, and sharp-tusked silver boars. Shortly the line curved past the park with its great grass-covered mounds of bricks and rubble, a half-hidden testimony to the gritty determined trummelfrauen, who, when the Reich reaped the whirlwind, had scraped and delved and burrowed to save what they could from the blasted, pulverised, buildings. To most, their grinding exhausting labour, day after day, week after week, provided a grim, numbing, diversion from the sporadic chaotic days when rumours of an arriving train would percolate the dusty dangerous worksites and lead them, lemming-like, to the grotesque twisted shell of the town's railway station.

Miraculously, most of the rumours materialised, and eventually a steaming, hissing, spider-engine would chuffle slowly into the station pulling a motley chain of railway rolling stock and a miscellaneous assortment of miserable, defeated, humanity. From the creaking squealing carriages, the flat-cars and box-cars, a dozen pallid lousy survivors would stumble down, dazed and shocked, wondering if this ugly serrated wilderness was really the magnificent old town they had left only two years before. A few of the women would weep with joy and relief as they claimed their half-lost men and the rest would turn again to their relentless therapeutic scavenging which gave them a purpose until the next raising and smashing of fading hopes and dreams.

Slowly the rubble was sifted and chaos gave way to order. The agony of shattered lives and scattered families receded and the town was built again as an egalitarian bourgeoisie-free worker's paradise with healthcare, and education, and jobs for all. Most of the time most of the people accepted the sporting triumphs, the boundary fences, and the control of the party. It would be a full generation before their socialist idyll would be swept aside by the irresistible forces of the free-market.

Leaving the park the articulated single-decker grumbled across the straight flat road that arrowed its way east to the distant, fume-belching chemical works

now shivering in the freezing blast of the economics of re-unification. Soon the line veered left again up a long shallow gradient past the functional grey apartment blocks towards the Magdeburgstrasse stop.

Sitting next to the window on the hard wooden-slatted seat Uli reflected briefly on her success with the class four gymnastic team. There really were some promising kids, if only she could coach them for a little longer. However Frau Tannenbaum had made it clear that her position was strictly temporary so she would just do the very best she could in the few more weeks she would be with them. As the tramcar grated and juddered to a halt a gaggle of elderly hausfrauen, a few proudly sporting their tottering pensioner husbands, descended unsteadily to the road before Uli could dart out and pass their meandering shuffling paths. She ran across to the now disreputable graffiti-streaked entrance door of apartment block 67. Just outside, a battered old yellow Trabant with a pronounced list to the left patiently awaited Doktor Huber's return. Uli passed quickly through the dingy entrance hall. As usual the lift's sliding doors were decorated with a rakish "Out of Order" sign. She almost welcomed the excuse to use the stairs rather than the small dirty unreliable metal box that called itself a lift but she did wonder how her mother managed the five storey climb laden with shopping and all her other burdensome cares. As for father, well, she hesitated to think when he would next travel down the lift or the gloomy ill-lit stairs.

As she climbed Uli reflected that it seemed only a short time ago that her parents had moved from the pleasant country area near the Czech border to be nearer the source of her father's treatment, treatment that had certainly delayed the inevitable, but now the top half of his hour-glass was nearly empty and would not be turned again. In a way it was a blessing that the re-organisation of the physical instruction unit and the chance of teacher training had enabled her to be with her parents during the last few difficult months.

Uli rapidly ascended the five flights of stairs and made her way along the dim bare corridor past a pram and a couple of old bicycles to her parents' front door. She inserted her key and with a pull and a shove the door creaked open then banged shut behind her as she stood for a moment in the sombre claustrophobic entrance hall. She slipped out of her coat, hung it with her bag on the peg at the back of the door, and walked tentatively towards the living room of the cramped constricted flat she shared with her parents. As she entered the room Doktor Huber backed out of her father's bedroom and carefully closed the door behind him. He spoke in a hushed confiding tone.

"Ah, Fraulein Hartzberg, I'm afraid the news is not good. Things have deteriorated faster than I thought they would. It may only be a matter of weeks.

I'll do all I can to make him comfortable. I'll call back on Friday.” With that Doktor Huber made his way to the drab entrance hall, along the dark familiar landing, down the five flights of stairs, through the profanity-streaked door to the tattered, ticky-tacky trabbie that would take him, noisily oil-belching, on his next errand of mercy. Uli had always thought well of Doktor Huber, a decent sincere caring, increasingly overwhelmed man who shouldered the burdens of his patients as best he possibly could. She hoped that under the new regime his lot would be an easier one.

Uli turned and, with not a little trepidation, made her way into the small hushed bedroom where her father had spent most of the summer. The bright blue eyes in the grey creased stubble-chinned face lit up as his daughter entered the room. Knowing well what the doctor would have told her he tried to lighten the mood.

“Cheer up, Uli. These medics often get it wrong.” They both knew that this time there was little doubt but Uli smiled, inwardly thanking him for his brave light-hearted approach. They looked fondly at one another for a quiet, knowing moment. He continued in his cheerful, almost optimistic tone.

“Mutti and I were speaking. You and she should be thinking about a holiday, somewhere in the sun. Maybe the Old Officers home could take me in for a couple of weeks.”

His brightly said words were well-meant but Uli knew that however much her mother needed a holiday, and she too for that matter, there would be sadder, more tearful business to transact before they could think of anything as superficial and inconsequential. Uli's mother, looking worn and off-colour, stood up from the small wooden chair by the window where she had been trying to gather her thoughts after the doctor's visit. She embraced her daughter then tactfully changed the subject.

“How did school go today? You must be careful not to drive the kids too hard you know.” Uli almost laughed. Enthusiastic she was, dedicated she was, but she would never push a pupil beyond the point of enjoyment, the point where extra drive and effort was quickly dissipated by fatigue and resentment.

“Oh, Mutti. School was fine. I really do enjoy working with the kids. It makes such a change from trying to squeeze a few more laps out of some fat old border guards!” She looked towards her father who winked back and remembered the happier days when the young PT instructress would cajole, bully, threaten, and motivate the reluctant, grunting, sweating, members of his battalion until they were fit, or fit to drop. But now he had something else on his mind, something he wanted to share only with Uli, so he spoke quietly and asked Mutti if she could give him a few minutes alone with his daughter. Mutti nodded and silently

made her way through the apartment to the tiny cupboard-like kitchen where she would start preparing their simple evening meal. Working on the well-established principle that even the walls had ears, the old man beckoned Uli to come close and sit at his bedside. With difficulty he sat up and leaned forward a little, so that he could direct his hoarse strained whisper towards his daughter's attentive ear.

“Look, Uli, Willi Braun—you remember Willi Braun? Well, Willi owes me a bit of a favour.” The old man paused, gathering his breath for the rest of the tale. Uli vaguely recollected a Willi Braun who had been talked about in hushed tones and who, very occasionally, had visited their home. On his most recent visit, a few months ago, Willi had spent a full hour ensconced with her father before emerging, sharing coffee with her and her mother, and then graciously excusing himself before disappearing into the late summer evening. She wondered what possible favour the mysterious Willi might owe her beloved father. By now Papa had gathered his composure and was ready to explain.

“Before these damned Wessis took over Willi's lot built some apartments in Canarife as a rendezvous for their Wessi contacts. In return for placing the contract Willi, err, em, managed to obtain a holiday house at the other end of the island. He really did know his old Spanish customs. Not even the STASI knew about it. He says that the place was pretty well complete when the Berlin Wall came down. Unfortunately for Willi, the husband of one of his star turns found out that he was getting a bit more than information and made an allegation, completely unfounded may I say, that Willi was working for the Russians on the side. Now Willi's back for—” The old man scratched his two day old bristle as he searched for the word that would adequately describe Willi's fate. “For ‘debriefing’ conversations. They've confiscated his passport so now he can't go back. He'll give you the keys and the deeds to the property as soon as he can. But watch him, he's a randy old goat.” With that the old man sat back on his pillow; the effort of conveying the news of Willi's abandoned villa had taken its toll on his failing lungs and now he coughed violently and gasped for breath. Uli, who had started to think of more and more questions about the elusive Willi, what he did on Canarife, and the state and ownership of the villa, immediately refocused her attention towards her ailing father.

“Oh, Papa, that sounds bad. Can I get you anything?” The old man wheezed and panted as he gradually regained his equilibrium.

“No thanks, Uli, just give me a minute. I'll be fine.” They both knew that fine was the last thing he would be, but after a short, gasping pause he was able to continue. He spoke more loudly now, not caring whether any nebulous eavesdroppers were at their posts.

“Oh, I heard that Walter Schmidt has made another big purchase. Yes, now he’s branching out into bird food.” Uli blinked. It had been seven, no eight, years since she had last seen Walter and she felt once again, for a sharp bitter moment, the heartache of his departure. The old man battled on, determined to reflect on Walter’s sudden change of career.

“It’s a pity about Walter but, well, I suppose he had the chance to go west, and he grabbed it with both hands. He couldn’t tell anyone he was going, of course. I know that you adored him, my precious little girl, but back then he was one of our best young officers. Now he’s the epitome of a bloated West German capitalist.” It had never ceased to amaze Uli how well informed her father was about Walter’s rapid rise through the ranks of the burgeoning West German entrepreneurs. She wondered what skills, or inclination, had started him off as a pet food salesman, then a distributor, then a manufacturer, until his dog biscuits and cat food sustained doggies and moggies the length and breadth of Europe. She didn’t like to admit the strength of her feelings for Walter but always listened avidly when her father disseminated his snippets of news. She still remembered the day when her father’s account of Walter’s Wessi bride, and her supposedly Nazi parents, had so stunned her that she hadn’t heard anything else that afternoon.

Now she daydreamed again and drifted back through the years to the time at PT college where she learned to run and jump and master the skills of gymnastics and was trialled for the Democratic Republic’s Olympic swimming team. Seeing what had become of her fellow-swimmers, who were only a fraction of a second faster, she was glad she had not progressed to the Olympic squad and its performance-enhancing dietary supplements. Then Walter had appeared, handsome, fit too, and the pair had courted through the long summer days, shared the walks in the enchanted forest, the hot lazy afternoons by the river, and the slow strolls home in the cool evening air. They became lovers but she had often wondered whether her slim trim athletic figure would be feminine enough to keep Walter hers. She remembered in a moment of nagging self-doubt, when they were in bed for the third time, asking him anxiously whether he thought her breasts were too small.

He had been caught completely off-guard and had spluttered, blinked and coughed and said, “No, darling, not at all. I had not even thought about it. I thought it was only men that were concerned about their vital statistics.” Then he had put her at her ease and they had lain nose to nose as he whispered softly the words she had ached to hear. He had traced his fingers gently over her lovely face and round her sparkling blue eyes and pretty little nose, her soft sweet lips, her elegant neck, and all the way over her lithe golden body to her slender ankles

and feet of a ballet dancer. She had relaxed and absorbed every marvellous word and melted into him and he had praised her wonderful suppleness, her welcoming, tilting, hips that moved deliciously and complemented his entry and slow rhythmic movements. They had come gloriously together and that night she had rested in his arms and slept as well as she had ever slept before, two bodies as one, forever. She thought then that there would be no one else but Walter, no one who would make her the total woman, loved, encouraged, adored, cherished, and comforted. She reflected poignantly that this was what had made the stunning, searing shock of his defection so utterly devastating.

Eventually life had gone on and for a while she had leaned on her parents; then her training assignment had provided a diversionary interest. Soon she was aware of the quickening political change but it had come too late for her to meet and win Walter again, to become the couple and the family she had dreamed of. Slowly her heart had mended and she had recovered and become resigned to losing him. She had attempted a few superficial friendships with other men but had never felt anything like her adoration for Walter. Now she had daydreamed enough. She refocused on the present and its problems.

“Don’t worry about me Papa, I’ll be all right.” She paused; the conversation had been strain enough for both of them.

“I’ll go and help Mutti get things ready for the meal.” Uli was always happy to assist her mother in any way she could. It helped her keep her mind off all the other worrying thoughts that darted incessantly in and out of her troubled, unsettled mind.