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# **DARK MERMAIDS**

Anne Lauppe-Dunbar

Submitted to Swansea University in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Swansea University  
2012

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## THESIS SUMMARY

Candidate's Surname / Family Name	Lauppe-Dunbar
Candidate's Forenames	Anne
Candidate for the Degree of	PhD
Full title of thesis	DARK MERMAIDS

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### Summary of Themes

Sporting success is defined by athletic prowess, mental stamina and the ability to win. The balance between winning by fair, or foul, means is an area of fierce debate. This thesis seeks to illuminate the workings of the former German Democratic Republic Doping Scam: (Theme 14.25); to shed light on the human tragedy of steroid engineering, and to explore, within a fictitious world, new ground in areas that have offered little in research.

*Dark Mermaids*, a novel, presents a narrative through contemporaneous documentation of the experiences of a fictitious former Olympic GDR swimmer and a tenacious young girl. In parallel, the novel considers the idea of selective memory, the paranoia of life under a dictatorship, and the notion of 'home' in a divided country. The accompanying essay further explores, through example, the themes of amnesia and exile, and the theory that the common exilic pathology of strain and estrangement of flight is never, in practice, over.

### Synopsis of Novel

1990. The Berlin Wall has fallen. Police officer Sophia Künstler slips through the backstreets of Berlin looking for sex in the arms of a cruel faced blue eyed stranger; the same boy she has found in clubs and dance halls over many years. Outside her apartment a cold and frightened girl waits with a letter. Dagmar, Sophia's mother, is dying. Sophia and her father must return to the former GDR, a place from which they had escaped.

As part of her job, Sophia is required to investigate claims of Stasi collaboration in her former home town's local police force. Suppressed memories gradually surface, and these impel her to revisit the GDR elite sports training ground, where death, or a new life, await.

DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed  ..... (candidate)

Date ..... 31.07.12 .....

STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s).

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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STATEMENT 2

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations. *n*

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## Translations by page number

11	<i>Pfennig</i>	Former German currency
11	U-Bahn	An intercity train line, similar to the London underground
11	<i>Schnapps</i>	Strong liquor made from fermented fruit
12	<i>Idioten</i>	Idiots
12	<i>Bratwurst</i>	A German pork sausage
12	<i>Sauerkraut</i>	Pickled cabbage
12	<i>Glühwein</i>	Mulled wine
12	<i>Entschuldigung</i>	Apology
18	<i>Salzbrötchen</i>	A white roll with salt crystals on the top
20	<i>Augen wie eine Prinzessin</i>	Eyes like a princess
20	<i>Ein Brötchen und einen Kaffee, bitte</i>	A bread roll and coffee please
20	Schmetterlingsplatz	Butterfly Square
21	<i>eine symbolische Wand</i>	A symbolic Wall
23	<i>Nicht wahr?</i>	Right?
23	<i>Na ja so geht es</i>	Oh well, that's life
27	<i>Sobotniks</i> <sup>1</sup>	From Lenin's 'great initiative'. Saturday Committees formed by People's Police to do gardening and house decoration
33	<i>Cervelat</i>	A cured sausage that can be sliced
34	<i>Lindenstrasse</i>	A weekly TV soap
35	<i>Wo ist sie?</i>	Where is she?
35	<i>Schadenfreude</i>	Finding happiness in someone else's misfortune

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<sup>1</sup> Nikolai (Vladimir) Lenin, 'The Great Initiative', Trans. by P. Lavin, Glasgow, Socialist Labour Press, p. 3 – 7. <<http://www.archive.org/stream/greatinitiativei00leni#page/6/mode/2up>> [accessed: 20 February 2012].

35	<i>Armes Kind</i>	Poor child
37	<i>Lügen haben kurze Beine</i>	Literal translation: Liars have short legs. Contextual translation: The truth will out
41	<i>Ossi</i>	East German
41	<i>ehrlich</i>	Honestly
46	<i>mein Schatz</i>	My dearest
47	<i>Schatzi</i>	Dearest
47	<i>Grinsen wie ein Honigkuchenpferd</i> <sup>2</sup>	Grinning like a Gingerbread horse. The equivalent would be: grinning like a Cheshire Cat
58	<i>Papierwölfe</i>	Paper shredders
65	Weisse Elster	The white Elster river flowing through Thuringia. The Black Elster flows from Lausitz into the Elbe. <i>Elster</i> translates as Magpie (hence black and white river)
72	<i>Das Wandern ist des Müllers Lust</i>	Hiking is a miller's delight. A German folk song
73	<i>Sei ruhig</i>	Be quiet
83	<i>wo bist du?</i>	Where are you?
86	Trabant	The most common vehicle in the former GDR
87	<i>Baumausreissen</i> <sup>3</sup>	The 'correct' spelling would be: <i>Bäume ausreissen</i> . Contextual translation: ripping out trees.
88	<i>Hörnchen</i>	Sweet milk and butter bread, shaped in a moon shape or sickle
88	<i>Käsekuchen</i>	Cheesecake
88	<i>Apfelstrudel</i>	Layered apple cake

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<sup>2</sup> Marions Kochbuch, *Honigkuchenpferd* (Gingerbread horse).

<<http://www.marions-kochbuch.de/rezept/3668.htm>> [accessed 03 April 2012].

<sup>3</sup> Steven Ungerleider, *Faust's Gold* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2001), p. 14.

94	<i>Raus</i>	Out
96	<i>Komme</i>	Come
96	<i>Die Muschelsucher</i>	<i>The Shell Seekers</i> , by Rosemund Pilcher
103	<i>das waere der Gipfel</i>	that would be the final straw
103	<i>Sich Verpissen</i> <sup>4</sup>	Literal translation: To wet yourself, hence, fuck off, piss off. Contextual translation: To abscond from normal duty and patrol areas known to troublemakers
107	<i>Wessis</i>	Westerners
111	<i>Thüringer Klöße</i>	Speciality potato dumplings with crisp buttered squares of toast in their centre
119	<i>Kleine Sophi</i>	Little Sophi
120	KaDeWe (Kaufhaus Des Westens)	West Berlin department store
121	<i>Nacht ohne Mond</i>	<i>The Moon-Spinners</i> , by Mary Stewart
131	<i>Erste Etage</i>	First floor
132	<i>Karlsbader Oblaten</i>	A round wafer delicacy
136	<i>Fünfzig Pfennig</i>	Fifty Pfennig
137	<i>Spätzle</i>	Pasta made from eggs, flour and water.
147	<i>Komm mal her</i>	Come here
152	1. FC Union Berlin	The (1991) newly united Berlin football Club
182	<i>Liebling</i>	Sweetheart

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<sup>4</sup> See: Andreas Glaeser, *Divided in Unity* (Chicago: Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 32, 217.

## Pronunciations

Diertha	e as in <u>end</u> . The th pronounced as t: Der ta
Hajo	a as in <u>art</u> . The j is pronounced as a y: Ha yo
Ka De We	Ka as in: <u>car</u> . The De as in <u>deh</u> . The We as in Veh: Car Deh Veh
Käthe	Kä as in <u>kay</u> . The th as t. The e at the end of the word is pronounced: tuh
Klöße	ö as in <u>better</u> . ß is pronounced as double s
Sei	s as in <u>zoo</u> : ei as in sigh

# **DARK MERMAIDS**

## CHAPTER ONE



~

Berlin 1990

Pulling on her leather coat Sophia wound through a gathering crowd, itching with the need to be touched. She crossed the road onto Jobenstrasse - where a music student played the violin, his raw fingers squeezing a lonely call from each string. The notes crystallised in the fog and icy air and she wondered at his dexterity: the cold making the rise and fall of Strauss (or was it Lehár?) sound muted. Dropping a few *Pfennig* into the violin case, she pulled her coat tighter and headed for the U-Bahn. Within the arch of a church doorway two drunks argued. One waved a half-empty bottle as the other turned, opened his flies and aimed a trickle of yellow piss against the darkened door. Sophia strode through the night, letting her heart race from tightly reined to unbridled. Felt her fingertips prickle with the desire to stroke soft skin.

Inside the train, the carriage filled with young people ready for a weekend of the city's particular magic. A group of men lurched from one compartment to another, fisting bottles and cans, growling out old songs about never ending forests and mountains. Sophia stared at the station signs and distant winding streets and thought about sex as the night sky hung fog-mantled over the city. They left Berlin Central, crossing the old border where the Wall had just recently stood and the group roared, toasting one another with mouthfuls of supermarket *Schnapps*. An old woman, in matching green coat and handbag, sank further into her corner. She opened the bag just a crack. There was a flash of white and an inquisitive pink nose nudged, before stained teeth chewed at the green leather rim. One of the drinkers prodded his mate and pointed. The pair closed in. Sophia tensed, but with a squeal of brakes the U-Bahn juddered to a halt at Friedrichstrasse. The woman zipped her bag shut as the drinker's mate grinned and spat. His phlegm landed, a gelid mound, between Sophia and the door. The woman carefully placed her feet onto the platform as the rest of the group began singing again.

Sophia followed, noting with a slight smile the woman's whispered "*Idioten*" to the rabbit in the bag.

The pavements were so full Sophia had to dodge into the street to avoid the swarm. Talking, shouting, touching and laughing. Eating *Bratwurst* with *Sauerkraut*, the city folk drank *Glühwein* from a forest of market stalls that had sprung up; even though it was only November. Why couldn't they be sensible? Stay at home and watch the news. They wanted, she supposed, to talk about their neighbours' new freedom and to laugh and stare. The market traders had responded in their usual way by hiking up prices to make a killing. It was all too easy to encourage the flood of eager visitors that poured in from East Germany to spend what little money they had. There they were: staring at the window displays, forming neat orderly queues at the entrance, until someone took pity on the poor bastards and told them to open the bloody door and go in. Every face was fixed in an expression of wonder, as if they'd stepped through the door into a Disney theme park full of brand new fridges and American jeans.

Tonight though, the crowds were welcome. Moving between them, Sophia kept her eyes firmly on the pavement, although, every now and then she checked the edge of the throng for green uniforms that could spell danger.

A large man trailing a wailing child collided with her and apologised profusely, his *Entschuldigung* pronounced with a throaty hum. What was that accent? She remembered the sound like a faint echo of an earlier time. Uneasy she sidestepped down the next alley, pausing to catch breath and pull her hair back, wrapping the blue-black scarf tightly round her face. Near Rosmarinstrasse, she stopped again and listened - stretching her neck to the sky: the distant boom of music was unmistakable. Heat tingled in her belly and between her legs. She shivered, then smiled. Yes. She could be anything she wanted, because no one knew. She'd left no trace; apart from notes hidden in the kitchen drawer, under the sharp knives - every late night visit, every address, the directions, times, and occasionally even names were there, carefully written in code, as she'd seen others write, so many years before. And of course, tonight's entry was an empty space, so even better, she could come back.

Over there was the entrance, but across the alleyway a bouncer was leaning against the doorpost watching her. She frowned and looked away, sure that when she'd read about the nightclub there'd been no mention of bouncers. The disappointment

made her feel sour and grey. This guy could be a problem: he would remember things, things she'd rather he forget – like her face. Her fingers burned with such longing that, almost moving against her will, she turned and, head down, dug out the entry fee. Inside the door, before she could pull away, her hand was stamped with a florescent pink star. She rounded the corner and squeezed past a couple straining up against the wall. Both were moaning, swapping saliva and skin. The tight fist inside her stomach uncurled, opened, making her groan as she made her way into the inky-black hall, signalling for a beer to avoid yelling through the purple music.

A swarm of bodies vibrated on the dance floor. Some in perfect rhythm, others touching: hand on shoulder, mouth to ear, leaning close to shout a word or two, weaving one way, swirling the other. Watching them she felt her body swell to the music, the beat strong enough to pulse through bone. Blood humming, heart thumping, she drank in the thunderous sound and checked the edge of the crowd for dealers: noting the moment when one figure joined another, how they drifted to the fringe, by the doorway, just far enough from the bright lights. The briefest of touches was accompanied by a nod, a hand moved to mouth, oh so casually slipping the discreet pill between lips, as the buyer swallowed his choice of drug with water or beer. The customer could slip away to rooms that offered pocket mirrors, a glass table where powder could be chopped into lines and inhaled through a note rolled up into a straw. She wasn't interested in white powder. Finding a clean surface in here would be impossible, and in any case, the chemical burn inside her nose (so near the brain) was off-putting: as was the numbing bite that slid into a deep passing nausea. She preferred to inject, but only if she saw the sealed needle in its plastic sanitised packaging. A cocaine fix was like magic: a buzzing, talking fizzy-tingle that had walls bulging, the wind whispering crazy secrets to a moon that swung heavy and metallic in the sky. No, tonight she'd buy the white dots that warmed her icy blood enough to dance and, more importantly, feel. She nodded once as they glanced over towards her, ecstasy was a good name.

The two she approached were whippet-thin and shark-eyed. Their knives glinted momentarily at the very edge of her sightline, sleight of the hand easily denied. Sophia glided nearer. The drug would make her skin loosen, peeling back her daytime exterior to reveal watery scales: wet and ready. She swapped money for one powdery circular fragment, bought a glass of cold vodka, placed the pill on her tongue, drank it back and



ordered another beer. Now the delicious wait, not long before the smoky room would seem milky and thick as a creamy orgasm. Music would blast through loosening bone, slack and easy under her hot wet skin.

Spotlights swung across the crowd, winking silver to green. She drank in the wildness of the night with more vodka and beer, until the floor became a sticky pool of sliding limbs, the night at its shuddering darkest. She danced, weaving her mind to the sound, moving like silk on water. Now she could see everything and nothing. There were no more boxed-in limitations. No more what she could, and what she could not do, just one long pounding wave of silver-green dancers moving closer.

From the seething edge of the crowd a slim-hipped stranger separated, his shadow thickening moment by moment until he became something defined and beautiful. A cruel mouth that smiled, blue eyes, hooded yet bold, these things parting him from the shoal and thrum of elastic movement. As they danced, Sophia wondered how he would taste and licked the downy fur on the back of his neck, slicked with sweat: bit down gently. He gasped, held her wrists and slid close, melting, before thrusting up hard against her. It was always so easy – this glide from loose to electric, nothing more than motion and sensation, the unrecorded break to exit from the crowd, walk, take a car (this time a taxi), to rapture and the effortless beat of skin on skin.

Later, deep in sleep, she dreamed of thick water above and below, muscles that strained; propelled her forward through clear bleached light that rippled and snaked across the pale blue tiles lining the bottom of the pool. As she raised her eyes above the surface, dark hair waxing back, chlorine in her eyes, she saw the edge and moaned: the noise inside her head swarming like wasps. Row after row of children paraded to clapping hands. She was swimming as if life depended on her speed. Turn now, turn. She shot under-and-through in a practised arch. Bite down now. No need for breath. Just for a moment wavering figures leaned over the pool edge. She gasped and swam deeper. Here it was silent apart from a distorted clicking and the distant splash of other swimmers. The water curdled, stringy. Terrified: she couldn't breathe, couldn't see through the reddening weave. Something wet bumped against her shoulder. What was that white substance? A delicate yet solid thing, riding through water: a child's limb?

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Panic: Sophia sat up. Flakes of white light darting from left to right made her feel sick and dizzy. She'd bitten her lip; the blood tasted like copper. Gagging, she slipped from

the bed and fumbled her way into a strange bathroom. In the dark she trickled water, but not so much as to make a noise. Cupped her hands and rinsed out her mouth. Her jaw, head, and shoulders were so tense they burned. Still dizzy, she sneaked back into the bedroom, dreading the possibility that she may have woken him. Thankfully the stranger with the cruel mouth, *that* mouth, was deep asleep. Sophia fingered her way around the silent room, registering each detail. The smell of newly washed curtains, the slimmest crack of light sneaking between the fabric to rest on a smart black desk and chair, and – halleluiaah, most of her clothes, strewn across a second chair by the window.

She fumbled around at the bottom of the bed to find her knickers and lingered on the memory of how smooth his skin had felt. He'd been young, so young, too bloody young – talking about banks: his lifeblood circulating numbers and money. At her age she should know better. Worse still, she wasn't sure she'd even liked him; a violent unsurprising lover who drove his body into hers with an intense, silent, furious focus. She'd drifted in a white-pill dream. Imagined herself floating dead as Diertha, while the unborn child of her dreams glided away.

Pulling on her coat, she glanced over to the bed with a ready excuse should he wake (people to see, things to do, *anything*). Crept to the door and carefully released the latch.

Outside in the empty, dimly lit corridor, she leaned against the wall, tasting blood again; decided against the lift. What if the wire it hung from snapped, just like that? At the end of the corridor, Sophia shoved open the fire-exit and limped down the stairs, counting three floors of grey cement lit by a dull flickering light. At last: out in the open. She spat into the gutter, inhaled the familiar smell of car fumes accompanied by the scent of fresh rain.

A cab was turning the corner into the next street. She whistled. The driver slowed, checking in his mirror to see if she was fit for his newly cleaned cab. Sophia threw back her shoulders and strode towards him, head high.

Home: she paused, listening before opening the main door. Nothing, only the low hum of traffic from across the other side of the park, mixing with the slow air of a Sunday morning: allowing her time. Climbing the stairs to the top floor, she unlocked the apartment; double locked it from inside. Her clothes were gluey with sweat, smoke, and – the milky-sweet smell of sex. She peeled them off, leaving the pile on the floor

and shivered her way to the bathroom, peering into the mirror, twisting to turn on the shower – opening her mouth wide to stare at a blistering row of tooth marks along the right side.

Bloody hell: yet another cock up. The purple circles under her eyes made her look like a vampire. Okay, one bruise on her neck. Minimal damage, she decided. Though god, it hurt like hell to pee.

Standing in the shower, eyes closed, face turned to the lovely stream of cleansing water, she calmed. Washed her hair, smelled the comforting normality of eucalyptus shampoo, and wished for safety. Lately her dreams had been filled with milky faces that melted before she could see who they were or what they wanted. Sometimes Diertha leaned over her bed, a heavy shadow, weighed down with reasons to kill her as she struggled to wake.

Enough. She'd throw away her flimsy dance clothes and the address book, right *now* - or at least the moment she was dry. That thought had come and gone many times. Now, as before, it vaporised in the steam.

In the kitchen she made strong coffee, adding hot milk and stirring in three spoons of sugar, drinking the toffee'd mixture as if it was nectar. Dawn broke over a November Berlin. No point thinking about half-witted dreams, or last night's pick-up. She wouldn't think about any of those – things – no, she wouldn't name them. She'd paint. Dragging the easel to the window, she angled it to face outward; squeezed green and blue oils onto the palette. The canvas, one moment a daunting blank screen, was the next, an open invitation. Layering blue on green, she made her sea roll and sway. No need to wait for the rocks and caves to tell their secrets. Every eddy and rush of the tide, each stone that ground to sand, even the starfish in the glinting rock pool was known. A distant whale rose in a daub of grey; in a dash of orange and white a clown fish darted to safety inside his own anemone-home. Time crept from early morning to a rain-soaked afternoon before she stopped, dipping brushes in white spirit. The rain, like Sophia's mood, had continued to fall throughout the day. Her mouth was healing fast so she rinsed with mouthwash, heated the last of the vegetable soup, and drank a cup of thick sweet hot chocolate, a leftover of childhood comforts. Finally, when she believed she might sleep, Sophia limped to bed, leaving the light shining in the sitting room. Wrapped tight, eyes closed; she prayed, *Please, oh please, just let me sleep.*

When the alarm began its annoying ring, Sophia turned it off and lay dozing in the warmth of the cosy bed, listening to the rain tap against the bedroom window. Wonderful. She'd slept well; something that always happened *after*. The side lamp threw an arch of gentle light across the bed and white rug. In her chest of drawers, contents were precisely organised. The top right drawer held white bras, folded chastely next to white pants and brown socks. The left drawer was filled with her other underwear: satin, Basque with ruched lace, ribbons and ties, black suspenders - stuff that just wouldn't fold - her secret life in black and purple.

In the closet, yellow police issue shirts hung next to brown trousers, keeping company with the solitary spare police jacket. Once her dance clothes were washed they would hang alone in the darkest corner of the closet, or she'd buy replacements.

Padding into the kitchen to fill the percolator with coffee, Sophia tripped over the pile of clothing from the day before. Disgusting. Pulling on plastic gloves, she dumped everything into a tightly sealed bag, showered, and dragged a brush through her hair until every strand was pulled into a neat, tight, bun. Make-up? She rarely wore any, was resigned to be whatever she was, although often she wasn't at all sure what that was. A pale face with blue-grey eyes gazed sternly from the mirror. Eyes that were nothing like her. Two skins, she decided, pulling on the uniform daffodil shirt. Two skins that chafed, occasionally moving as one when she was running or frightened or *that*. Well, the darkness and dancing were gone, washed away with a good night's sleep, safely recorded in the secret note book in the kitchen drawer - *and there it would bloody well stay*.

Her doorbell rang, demandingly shrill. Frau Weiner considered it her duty to alert everyone after the postman had been carefully monitored placing letters in each separate tray.

"There's a letter for you, Frau Künstler, hand-written!" she called. Sophia lifted her hand in a half wave before retreating and slamming the door. Already three letters made up a diminutive pile that sat unread on the kitchen table. Her address - 14 Tiergartenstrasse - written in a slanted, messy hand, a hand she knew only too well.

If she wasn't out the door by quarter to seven she'd be late. She gulped down some milky coffee, shrugged on her green jacket and hugged the fabric tight. The safety

of the uniform: *one of many*, not alone. The beige trousers were not flattering but they hid her slim features well, as did her cap with the insignia of Police Protection Squad perched on the front. As she did every morning, she threw a kiss to The Victory Column in Tiergarten Park and touched her medals that hung by the door. They clinked, a hollow sound against the wall – useless trinkets gathered from sport arenas in countries barely remembered: Columbia '75, Canada '76, places from a lifetime ago. Lifting the bag of washing, she ran downstairs, unlocked the mailbox and shoved the latest envelope to the back: out of sight out of mind. In the basement, she dumped the bag on top of her washing machine; turned and unlocked the door through to the garage. Sometimes she ran to work, loving the feel of hard concrete under her feet. Sadly, she was already late: so take the car. A broken bike, along with a mattress and chair, sat in the furthest corner of the garage, stinking of urine: a clear invitation for homeless drunkards. Right, that was it. The note she stuck on the residents' board wouldn't be so damn polite this time. Keeping the windows shut she drove out onto the street, along Kantstrasse; toward the Orangerie Pavilion, and finally, left into Charlottenburg police headquarters.

No room in the over-full car park. She reversed, drove furiously down towards Mollwitzstrasse, squeezing into a narrow space opposite the bakery. *Salzbrötchen?* The thought of the butter and salt roll made her mouth water. What the hell. She jogged across to the bakery – bought two, and was categorically, and officially, late again.

Monday briefing was well under way as she slipped behind her desk, ignoring Hajo's glare. There was another, sizable envelope on her desk. Her name written in capital letters across the front. Why couldn't Maria just leave her be? She listened with half an ear as Hajo, in a clean shirt and rumpled trousers, outlined their week's work while, under the desk like a schoolgirl, she broke her salted roll into chunks. He needed a haircut: thick dark curls nestled along the bottom of a strong neck. How delicious would it be to run her fingers through those curls? She lifted another section of roll to her mouth – Mmm. Better not be too obvious about chewing. She sat up when Hajo listed Grüner as her partner for desk duty. Ernst Grüner was an asshole. True to form, the guy grinned, lifted his middle finger, wiggling it while the others stood up, scraping their chairs back, glad to be out, glad to be going. Sophia caught Hajo's eye. She smiled straight at him, showing her teeth, her face bright and cranky. My god, he was grinning

back, his grey eyes seeing far too much. Lovely eyes: so strong, sure and steady. Her neck grew warm and she looked away. He straightened, broad shoulders stretching, leg muscle tightening under the uniform beige trousers, and dumped a pile of paperwork in front of her.

“Sophia,” he said. “Your parking fine receipts. Shouldn’t they have been done weeks ago?”

Sophia worked through the pile, imagining one hundred ways to kill Ernst. She imagined using him as a speed bump, reversing to make *quite* sure; leaving him in a very tight dark place; launching him into the path of a speeding car, or just shooting him. Neck sore, head beginning to throb, she tried (inconspicuously) to stretch to the right. Ernst’s eyes lit up, his mouth opened and Sophia deliberately turned her back. In the future she’d hand out parking fines only when she absolutely had to. Maria’s envelope emerged from under the pile of still-to-be-processed mail. She sighed, prodded it, thought about throwing the tiresome thing in the bin and bent the envelope in half. It was too thick to fit in her pocket so she shoved it back to the bottom of the pile.

## CHAPTER TWO



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Mia wriggled on the metal seat and thought about chilblains and *piles*. The shabby train station was freezing. She'd chosen a seat near the ticket office and pretended to fall asleep; but really, she was watching. Oma said she had the most amazing eyes, *Augen wie eine Prinzessin*, but she didn't feel like a princess now; just fed-up and hungry. The train was supposed to have arrived ages ago. There was a narrow kiosk selling hot drinks and rolls, but she was too frightened to go and buy anything. Someone might decide to be nosy and ask why she wasn't in school; and then what would happen? Even though it was none of their business, grown-ups always thought it was. She glared at the woman on the next bench who seemed to have moved nearer each time she looked. The woman edged back. Good. Mia wasn't going to cry, not here, not ever again, though it was pretty hard to stay calm. Oma had told her what to do once she got to Berlin. Be positive, she'd said.

With a deep breath, Mia picked up her backpack and stomped over to the kiosk window. Typical. The girl serving behind the counter didn't even look up as she asked for "*Ein Brötchen und ein Kaffee, bitte.*" She just waited while Mia sorted out the right money, before handing her a paper cup and roll. Mia warmed her hands against the hot liquid, holding the cup tight, before setting it down to take a bite of the roll. She'd chosen what she thought was bread topped with sugar-crystals, but the crystals tasted sour. She stopped. Licked the top. Yuck. Definitely salty. Took another cautious nibble and found the rest of it buttery and weirdly delicious.

Making the food last as long as possible, Mia peered carefully around Grünewald Station, to make quite sure that no one was watching her. She'd had to get off here, as the ticket collector said the train didn't go via Tiergarten Station, but headed off to Tegal Airport: she didn't want to go there. Across the street, the name of the square made her smile: Schmetterlingsplatz – a funny name. Oops. She pulled her mouth down and chewed. People didn't smile when they were on their own. Oma would have laughed out loud, embarrassing Mia by asking a complete stranger where the butterflies were.

~ 20 ~

The coffee had finally cooled enough to drink, but she ached to be home so much it hurt; like a bruise, except on the inside. She'd made up her mind weeks ago. Someone had to do something: and there was no one else but her. She'd told Oma, who'd looked relieved for the first time in ages. She'd been hugged and kissed so many times her face ended up hot and sticky - like a toffee apple. Oma had stuffed money into her pocket, money they didn't have and Mia had edged her grandmother away, just about to say that she didn't want the notes - when she realised Oma was shaking.

Just like that she'd grown up. Terrified, clear-headed, she'd smiled brightly like nothing was wrong. Taken a little extra time to lift her bag, so that when they said goodbye Oma would be strong again. Able to wave with an impatient hand as if to say go on, hurry up; I've got loads to do. So they could pretend that everything was all right.

Mia blinked and drank the last of the lukewarm coffee. Oma's instructions had been simple. Go first to one address, after that, the other. Either one or both people would help, of that she was certain, but she'd refused to say any more, remaining silent even when Mia insisted she should tell. It was so unfair. Oma was ill, really ill, and here she was miles away from home looking for two people who might help them, people she didn't even know and Oma had still treated her like a baby. She slouched over to the nearest bin, threw her cup away, and walked to the timetable display, running a finger along all the trains scheduled for Breden. Her watch said it was just after 11 am, so there was one due in just ten minutes, she could go home, look after Oma and write those selfish people a letter instead.

People were beginning to arrive, jostling each other for the best spot on the platform. Mia edged back and stood, bag ready, wondering what to do, as, three minutes later, the Berlin Central train arrived. She had to get on, or consider herself a coward. She found a seat as far away from the nosy woman as possible and stared out of the window. Humungous cranes teetered over dangerous black holes in the ground as men in white hats swarmed up metal frames. They looked like beetles (or ants) building loads of new homes. Oh – there was a bit of the Wall *again*. It had been part of her life since forever and now, finally, the idiotic thing had come down – she'd seen the party on TV. Oma said it had been *eine symbolische Wand* but that didn't make sense. What could be symbolic about a Wall? It was best not to listen when Oma started going on



about communism and what East Germany was *supposed* to have been like. They had enough boring stuff like that in school.

According to Oma everyone watched them. All her teachers, the shop assistants, their friends and neighbours, monitored their movements in case she and Oma did anything *unusual*, in case they packed up and left. Well, she just had. She'd walked to the local station and got on a train just like that, and look – Ta-Da. Nothing had happened. OK, she'd listened to one part of her grandmother's warning and hadn't told her best friend. Now she wished she had because Gerda would definitely have come with her. Mia had four stops before the place called Tiergarten. So far she'd counted one. At the third stop, she moved nearer the door. The nosy woman had left the train at Zoologischer Garten and the carriage was full of people who looked different: the posh kind with nice haircuts, wearing perfectly ironed clothes and holding expensive leather bags. They didn't stare, but checked their own reflections in the window. One old lady made a fuss about her makeup, using a miniature silver hand mirror. At Tiergarten, Mia dragged her worn bag across her shoulders and trudged out of the station looking for directions to the park.

It was still cold. Midday felt just as dark and gloomy and boring as the million evenings she sat at home waiting for something to happen: Gerda to ring (if she wasn't out with her *other* friends), anything to ease the boredom of Oma's awful choice of TV programmes.

Here, everyone hurried, no one just walked. She tried to work out exactly where she was standing. Because, if she knew where she was, she'd know where to go. The street was crammed with cars trying to squeeze into every available space – it wasn't safe. Any moment now they'd miss a turn, forget to slam on their brakes and crash. Mia's hands were clammy. Breathing too fast, she walked a few steps one way, turned, walked back - coming full circle. She was going to faint, scream, burst. Hang on, there it was. The golden angel statue, just to her left, not straight ahead as she'd been told it would be. Legs wobbling; wanting, very badly, to pee, she waited for the lights, hitched the bag securely over both shoulders and walked towards the statue.

The park was silent. Dead leaves lay slimy and rotten on the grass and the lakes were a dirty black. On the surface of the nearest, spirals of green algae belched and popped. This was more like home: always quiet, everything just rotting away. Hang on,

that was wrong. It had to be different here. There was all the building work she'd seen from the train, and, just to prove the point, over to her right a new red and yellow playground stood out from the dripping fog-laden trees. The sole occupant, a tiny child in a bright blue coat, was in the sandpit digging with a spoon sized brown shovel. As Mia walked nearer, she heard the child's mother plaintively try to convince the little girl that putting her hands in her mouth, eating sand, was going to give her tummy ache; far better to come home and have a hot chocolate and biscuit, *nicht wahr?*

Mia looked away. She wasn't lonely, she just didn't like being on her own. If Gerda were here they would have talked and laughed, running over to the swings to dare each other: go higher, higher, *higher* - until she'd go so high her heart would pretty much stop, because she'd imagine the swing going right over the bar. They'd forget all about finding people. Gerda would say: 'So what. Who cares?' and carry on swinging.

The people she was meant to find might not be where they were supposed to be. Oma had said they would be, but would they? Mia walked faster. It was all very well to worry, that was just the way things were, nothing they could do about it. Now she was beginning to sound like Oma. Mia automatically muttered the well-known words: "*Na ja, so geht es.*" "That's just the way it is." So annoying. Dumb words that made no sense – particularly now that sense was needed.

When she arrived in front of the golden statue, Mia leaned forward to read the plaque. It wasn't called 'Golden' or 'Angel' or even 'Statue'. What if she'd got the wrong one?

"Bloody hell!" Instinctively she looked around to check Oma wasn't listening. Swearing didn't help because there were probably hundreds of statues that looked exactly the same, all over the city, in every grubby park. Plus whoever had built this one had been really thick because from where she was standing she couldn't even see the top. The plaque said The Victory Column. What victory? She didn't know about any stupid victory. Her scribbled instructions said: golden statue in the centre of Tiergarten Park, cross the park to Tiergartenstrasse. Right then. That was way over there, on the other side. Mia ran, weaving her way past trees, over the slippery mossy ground towards the street. She stopped, breathing hard, the straps on the bag were pulling, and now she *really* needed to pee – but everything was okay because the sign on the corner read Tiergartenstrasse. Her heart jumped. Right. Fine. She'd definitely find the house now.

Mia walked all the way down the street on one side. She'd ring, or knock, and the door would open and everything would be just like she'd imagined it.

At the end of the road, she hadn't found Number Fourteen, so she turned and crossed the street to walk up the other side. She'd imagined that Oma's daughter (the lady she was supposed to find) would be tall, slim, pretty and very friendly. Oma was quite short, fat, and sort of whiskery and Mia was sure her daughter would look nothing like her. The lady would fling open the door and offer Mia hot chocolate and biscuits, like the little girl's *Mutti* in the park. And supper: cooking something new, something she'd never tried. Spaghetti Bolognese, or Curry. She was *starving*. After that, they'd phone Oma and say that everything was all right.

There was supposed to be a Number Fourteen. Right here. It was confusing because Number Sixteen stood next to an apartment block that had the numbers Six, Eight and Ten printed on metal signs. She walked up the path and put her finger next to the buzzer of Number Eight. She could ask. She could say she was lost. Though maybe they'd get cross, think she was lying or something. Her hand edged away. On the corner between Klingerhoferstrasse and Tiergarten stood a gaping old warehouse, there were lights in the second floor windows but it was a *warehouse* not a house.

It began to get dark, and tears started sliding down her face. She'd have to go home. Right now, before it got too dark to be safe. She turned, about to make her way back to the park, when the owner of Number Eight opened his window and glared at her across the front garden.

"What? Are you blind?" he said as Mia mumbled about being lost, not finding Number Fourteen. "Just open your eyes! It's on the corner. There." He pointed to the warehouse. "Clear as day: Numbers Eleven to Fourteen." He slammed the window shut. Beastly man. Oma was right, people were nosey, and rude, and they *did* watch though their curtains.

The warehouse on the corner had no door, just a garage grid. Mia walked round the side and saw a muddy pathway winding its way to the back of the building. She followed the path to a door where a line of names and numbers read like a magic spell: Eleven to Fourteen.

"I've found you," she whispered and pressed the buzzer. Nothing stirred. The light faded and the rain came. Mia sniffed. It was now or never. She scuttled round the

side to where some black bins had been lined up ready for collection. Tiptoed behind them and squatted to pee, praying no one would come.

Pulling up her trousers, doing up the zip on her coat, she slipped out from behind the bins just before she heard someone whistling. The whistling grew louder as a young man zoomed round the corner. He didn't even look at her: just plonked his finger on Number Eleven, leaned near to the door, and waited. He was wearing the exact same headphones she so wanted. A tinny whisper escaped as he moved his head to the beat. The door opened. A high pitched voice called out: "Hello?" from inside the building. There was a pause before the woman with the high voice said: "Oh no you don't! I've already told you we don't want any free magazines, take them somewhere else and don't you leave them outside to mess up the pathway like you did last week."

Mia ducked under the young man's arm and dodged into the hallway. There was a glimpse of a door opening on the left, the complaining voice repeating the same message, as she made her way quickly up the stairs. The young man replied that he had to eat and, just like everyone else, had to work doing whatever. Even delivering magazines whether people wanted them or not.

Apartment Fourteen was right at the top of the house. Mia knocked, waited, knocked again. Called quietly, "Frau Künstler!" When that didn't work, "Sophia!" even though the name felt strange to say out loud. She placed her ear right to the door and listened. Well, that explained it. No one was home. As the voices downstairs continued to rise she froze, waiting for the dreaded shout to come from below, the clatter of irritated feet coming up the stairs to throw her out. Doors opened, closed: silence again.

Mia pulled a jumper out the bag, took off her coat and spread it on the ground, dragged the jumper over her head. Ten past four. She'd eat the last chocolate from home really slowly. Someone would come soon, and if they didn't she would knock on the door of Number Eleven if, and only if, no one arrived.

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Sophia leaned her head against the steering wheel and wondered about changing her job. As usual the idea was no more than a fleeting whisper accompanied by instant breath-choking panic.

"Come on Sophi. Just keep to the straight and narrow," she muttered, opening the car door and peering down at the imagined chasm that would surely open if she

didn't hang on to the old rules. Rules were good; they kept her safe and moving forward.

The pile of useless furniture lay undisturbed in the corner of the garage, and Sophia hunted round in the car for a scrap of paper. Nothing except for the brown envelope she'd brought home. She tore a square from the back and wrote 'The rubbish in the garage must be moved IMMEDIATELY, signing with a very legible signature. Yes, such actions made her unpopular, yet they produced a strange twinge of intense pleasure streaked with regret because maybe, sometimes, she wanted to be liked.

She stuck the note on the communal board inside the hallway and glanced up. Perfect – today was the tenant's quarterly meeting so the note would be read, after an hour (maybe even more) droning on about pointless detail. One: Frau Weiner's disappearing washing powder. Two: the postman's attitude. Three: advertising leaflets, and Four: household rubbish. The culprit would blush and promise to sort it out, and quickly. Would someone mention her name? No. They'd drink coffee and eat biscuits whilst being gently propelled full circle back to the mystery of Frau Weiner's washing powder. Why, only last week Sophia had bought *two* boxes and placed one on Frau Weiner's washing machine.

She stripped to bra and knickers, dumping her work clothes in the machine to wash – before pulling on running trousers and top. Laced her shoes, unhooked the thinnest fleece and exited out the side door.

What a relief. Crossing the road to the park, the ridiculously tense day fell away as she took the time to breathe and notice that the evening light was amazing. Dark and soft, she thought, stretching her arms up and looking at the sky. At such moments it seemed that everything was possible. Something new and wonderful could magically just happen – like disappearing, stepping into a new skin, escaping to a world where no one knew you and you could, really, truly, become someone else. She laughed: that chance had come and gone. Breath rasping in the cold air, Sophia eased into a slow run. Time to dream about the things her make-believe friends would talk about. Interesting things, things she longed to explore; the idea behind painting blue on white, the black depth of the sea, the possibility of mermaids and the strangeness of time – why it sometimes stood still, the next moment rushing past out the back door. Her perfect imaginary friends would understand the smell of longing mixed with turpentine.

The evening light was dense and cloudy, thick enough to hide the golden angel perched on the Victory Column. Each time Sophia ran past she remembered Diertha: a muscled athlete, a rising star from a life before. Her roommate who had sunk to a watery grave, while Sophia lived. She raised her hand in a casual greeting, warning the demons away. Diertha wasn't here to haunt her. Besides, angels were just mermaids out of water, and the Victory angel was sad, frozen to be easy prey to the boom of aeroplanes and bird crap.

On the footpath towards Hansa, she pondered: left or right? Well that depended on how long she wanted to run. Choosing the longer route by the river Spree, she lengthened her stride, relaxing into a comfortable rhythm through the park. On her right, a shopping trolley blocked the entrance to an old bomb shelter. The stench of urine and beer leaked through the air: another filthy homeless shelter. One of her colleagues, hopefully not herself, would draw the short straw for the usual clean up and armed with gloves and antiseptic, peel away wet plastic and clothing encrusted with unspeakable muck. The residents would gripe, weep, and (more often than not) crap themselves as they were forced to leave. They might as well be dead. She could see no pleasure or purpose to days of lurking, half seen at street corners and outside off licences, wanting drink, wanting drugs, wanting money.

Warm, fingers tingling with the rush of blood, Sophia ran past Bellevue Castle and because she had to, she thought about *them* – hiding in their envelopes: five unopened letters. More were likely to arrive: Maria had always been a diligent and horribly stubborn friend. It was funny to forget someone so completely, only to remember years later her annoying habits.

Doubly annoying because it was Sophia's past and she had every right to forget.

"But you know me," she breathed, thinking about Hajo's unyielding arms, that mouth that occasionally smiled. Most times it just scowled. How would it feel to put her lips against his? Nothing like those other men whose only pleasure was their own. Hajo would embody stillness. He'd watch her, gently, patiently. How she wished he didn't know where she'd been born, or see right through her. Why, only last week he'd asked her what the word '*Sobtrieks*' meant.

She slowed to a jog to avoid slipping in a puddle. He'd got the name wrong. *Sobotniks* had been the name of committees formed by police housing associations.

Years ago her father had joined their local group so that they could have assistance getting their house re-painted and the garden dug. The groups weren't so different from the committee meeting taking place at her apartment block; although the tenants here in Berlin certainly wouldn't agree. She'd told Hajo she couldn't help him, turning away from the disappointment in his eyes. He'd *known* she was lying. The last thing she wanted was to be labelled as some kind of GDR know-it-all. Sophia pictured her medals hanging near her front door, bronze and gold mixing with her unease. She could pretend as well as anyone else, but knew only too well that there was so much more.

She was already on Klingerhoferstrasse. Just enough time to decide what to have for supper: meat and cheese, along with a very large glass of wine. The cellar hummed with busy machines that made the air warm and sticky. She fumbled with the set of keys from behind her machine and opened Frau Weiner's little washroom. Took a cup from the nearly full powder box and swiftly locked up, set her machine to wash, collected her mail and climbed the stairs to her apartment.

Something lumpy and awkward lay on the floor next to her door. No one delivered anything upstairs unless you paid. A flash of fear: had her father come to leave her something and fallen? But he never visited without phoning first. Plus he was in perfect health.

Cautiously, keeping the shape in sight, she rounded the last set of stairs to see the curved outline of a body curled up fast asleep beside a bag. Stepping over the lumpen shape, she reached for the bag but the shape moved. Sophia reacted automatically, jamming her knee into the child's side, shoving her against the floor.

Her mind registered *child* as the figure gasped and tried to move.

"No you don't." She eased back a little, allowing the girl - she was definitely a girl (pink and purple *fluffy* jumper) - to sit up. Young, no more than thirteen at a guess. Brown hair, deep blue-grey eyes and a pale face, her mouth opening wide to scream.

"I wouldn't scream if I were you." Sophia yanked the girl's arms up behind her tight as she searched the bag one handed. There'd be a knife or drugs - something sharp or dangerous.

"OW. Give it back." The girl tried to stand, making a wild grab for the bag. "You're *hurting*."

"How did you get in?"

Sophia decided: enough. Tired, fed up with the thought of yet another report to write if she questioned the girl, she backed away tossing the bag down the stairs.

“It’s called trespassing,” she snapped. “Get out before I change my mind and arrest you.”

The girl jumped, ran down the few steps, picked up her bag and reached slowly inside. Sophia’s fingers tingled. She’d got it wrong, could easily have missed a well hidden deadly-sharp knife. She moved quickly towards the door, keys out, ready to get in fast. Lock up. Call her colleagues, but the child was pulling out a tattered note. She held it out with a shaking hand.

“Please - I was waiting. I didn’t know what else to do.” The girl started to cry. “It’s a note from your mother.”



## CHAPTER THREE



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Everything in the apartment was wrong. The woman (who was supposed to be nice) read the note from Oma, frowned like she didn't believe a word of it, and picked up the phone.

"Don't you go touching anything," she said as Mia dumped her bag in the hallway. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. Mia tried to stop crying but her arms really hurt from being pulled. Her back hurt from being sat on. The woman's face turned red as whoever she was phoning wasn't there. Mia was told to sit and wait – like a *dog*. Still, she didn't say anything rude like: 'I don't like you.' If she had, Frau Künstler would have thrown her out – no doubt about it. Nasty people did things like that. It was dark outside and she wasn't allowed out after dark. Plus, even though she was hurt and tired *and* scared, she had to be here because Oma needed help.

She'd been given a drink, not hot chocolate but some kind of gross green tea.

"Go and clean yourself up." The woman pointed to the bathroom. Mia went in, locked the door, poured the gunky tea down the sink, and sat on the loo seat to cry. Crying made her stomach sore. Perhaps she could smash the cup? Smash everything? Wait. Oma always said there would be consequences. Mia took extra long. Washed and dried her face, neck and hands. Opened the cupboard, took out a bottle of pills, then another and emptied the contents of one bottle down the loo. Good, she wasn't crying anymore. Filling the empty bottle with the contents from another marked Stomach Settlers, she realised that she felt better, warm, powerful. Each time the pills were swopped she felt stronger and less afraid.

"Serves you right," she muttered and squeezed a brand new tube of antiseptic down the sink. Finally there was one half filled box of sleeping pills left. Better to leave those in the right box. She didn't want to kill her.

On the windowsill sat a basket full of seriously cool hair scrunchies. All kinds of colours: furry caterpillar black, gold, red, purple, and nearly twenty different blues – Mia's favourite colour. The one the colour of forget-me-not was best. She closed the cabinet door, and peered in the mirror. Her old hairgrip, a favourite from her last

birthday, was rusty and bent. Only two of the five glass stones remained stuck to the metal. Pulling her hair back so it stretched skin, she wrapped the scrunchie tightly round. Wow. Much older and loads thinner, except her eyes stared back, red-rimmed, like a bad tempered rat. Mia shoved the scrunchie in her pocket. It wasn't stealing. Sophia could have it back, no: THAT WOMAN could have it back, as soon as she said just one nice thing to her, just one.

Oma had promised Mia that both NASTY WOMAN and Petrus would help, not to worry, not to even *think* they wouldn't. It occurred to her that Petrus might be just as loathsome. She stuck her tongue out at her cloudy reflection: best not to feel frightened because she couldn't stay in here forever. Even though here was better than being out there with *Nasty*. Mia rinsed the sink and quietly slipped through the door, walking over to the window to peer out at the dark view over the city. Ugh, looking down made her feel queasy.

There was a walk-in kitchen opposite to a settee and armchair that faced a really big TV. On the left a narrow hallway led to the bathroom and probably Nasty Woman's bedroom. Her stomach ached. Definitely Nasty's fault: she shouldn't have twisted her arm and pulled her as if she was actually going to arrest her. If it hadn't been dark outside, or she hadn't been so scared, she'd definitely have left and found a phone. Was there one nearby? Mia couldn't recall, but she had seen Nasty's phone number before she made her sit like a dog. She could get Oma to ring. Oma would say something really snipey and sharp. She did both really well.

Edging nearer the window, Mia dared herself to look down.

The city was so busy. There were blurry bits of light that looked like bikes, or toy cars, going places - even though it was night-time. It made her feel unimportant and dizzy, a pinprick high above the roads and trains that could take her home. There was the park and, look, there was the Victory Column, or the golden statue. One of its lights was broken. The angel was looking at her. Half in shadow, half out, *staring* - like it wanted to get her. Mia recoiled: bumped into the corner of a broad frame which wobbled: *oh please don't fall*, clutched the corner and held on, peering sideways. Nasty Woman would come tearing in, any minute, eyes snapping, about to slice her into little pieces.

The painting was mostly just colours. They'd looked at stuff like that in class. Abstract art. Well, even she could paint better than this. Mia looked closer at the flashes of green in amongst the blue waves. Fishes! and – wow: there was a mermaid, *there*, just behind the ocean's rock cave. Nasty was on the phone again. This time speaking quietly, subdued, as though she'd given up. Or even better: she was being *told off*. Mia poked the hidden mermaid. Maybe she'd leave oily prints - and Nasty would notice, and be reminded, forever, how horrid she was. Mia edged closer.

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Putting the phone down, the click sounding disturbingly final, Sophia heard the girl prowling round the living room. She'd bloody well told her to sit and wait.

Petrus - seldom Father, never *Dad* - had listened to her questions: who was this girl? Why hadn't he told her? He met her questions with his usual silence. In the silence she'd burned to tell him how much she hated, hated, *hated* him. How everything started and ended with his refusal to speak the truth.

"Take a deep breath," she'd muttered as he waited her out: stay calm, visualise Petrus, sleet grey eyes, chiselled jaw, ridiculously long eyelashes, coat and all, disappearing into particles of dust, preferably inside a dustbin.

Still nothing but silence; the silence he used best for keeping secrets.

How could he not have told her? How could she not know about someone who was what – thirteen? The worst of it was that he definitely knew about the girl – she could hear his answer hiss down the telephone line, like a whispered confession. Not the confession so rashly imagined and longed for: the moment he'd tell her who she was, tell her he loved her, that her mother loved her.

"Mia?" Petrus had spoken in an unusually gentle voice. "Mia is here?"

There it was. One hundred per cent proof that he'd been expecting the girl. Sophia remembered his patient yearly longwinded explanation about how so many things were better unsaid, better forgotten. Swathes of history cut away, hidden under the carpet. But a child?

"Sophia, do try and be kind," he'd said down the phone - as if she weren't capable of such an emotion, as if she were an agent of destruction. "I'll be there as soon as I can be." Muscles cramping and a tightness in her chest, Sophia leaned down and

reached for her toes. Her back twinged but she kept stretching until the muscle gave and she could rest her hands on the floor.

“Um. Frau Künstler Are you OK?” Mia’s face blurred into view. Eyes met, topsy-turvy. The child’s gaze was resentful, but something else lurked behind the anger, something that resembled amusement. Sophia straightened, felt dizzy, and bit back a sharp reply. Be kind, he’d said, as if he might actually consider himself kind.

The girl slunk away and began inspecting her painting as though she had every right to look. Sophia slammed the hallway door so Mia jumped and moved away. Be kind? Perhaps polite, or maybe matter-of-fact, would do.

“I really like your weird mermaid,” Mia said.

Matter-of-fact would definitely do.

“Mia? That is your name isn’t it? Well Mia, I don’t like people looking.” Her hands were shaking? What on earth was she to do with the girl until Petrus arrived? Feed her? *Talk* to her? The only teenagers Sophia dealt with were high on glue, or so drunk they made no sense.

She fetched plates from the cupboard. Cut four slices of bread and put them on the table with cheese and *cervelat* from the fridge. Mia was certainly too young to drink wine, but there was only wine, or water. The girl munched through an entire pack of the cold sliced meat, stopping only when Sophia pulled a second packet from the fridge and raised an eyebrow.

“Yes please,” Mia said.

God, she needed a drink. Sophia filled her glass and drank. Unbelievable – there was only one piece of bread left. She cut one more and placed it, quite deliberately, on to her own plate before trickling a little wine into Mia’s glass. She wouldn’t like it; kids didn’t like the taste of sour wine. Mia sniffed and sampled half a mouthful.

“Delicious.” She made a face and Sophia grinned, filling the glass to the top, watching as the child drank the lot in one gulp.

“Water?” Sophia enquired, not admitting to a sneaking sense of amusement and grudging respect.

Mia’s face had flushed from a pale grey to deep red. She wobbled with her plate to the sink, returning to the sofa to clutch her damn backpack, dig inside and pull out two wrinkled envelopes.

“What on earth do you want *me* to do with those?” If Sophia never saw another envelope in her life she’d be happy.

The girl didn’t reply; she leaned, deliberately slowly, to place the letters carefully side by side. Sophia’s name was written, in an old fashioned gothic slant on the first, Petrus’s on the second. That made a total of six letters – five from Maria, one from Dagmar. Six letters too many.

“Oma wrote them,” Mia said.

Was that a statement or an accusation? Should she feel relieved, grateful, *honoured*, that her mother had deigned to write to her after so many years? Did the writing of mail demand a reader? Sophia drank her wine, buttered the remaining slice of bread, and savoured the long uncomfortable pause.

“She is your *Mutti*.” Mia sounded unsure about Sophia even having a mother. Spawn of the devil perhaps? Oh for goodness sake. There was that tightness again, a burn inside Sophia’s heart, an irascible scorch from childhood, one that had no right to be there. She couldn’t care, absolutely wouldn’t care that Dagmar had adopted this girl. Replacing Sophia easily, as if there had been so little love, so it was the simplest thing to let go. In the silence, as the TV flickered out its Monday repeat of Sunday’s snail-paced soap ‘*Lindenstrasse*’, the realisation came too late. How utterly brainless. Why hadn’t she taken Mia straight to her father? But now, like an owlet, the child’s head had sunk to her chest. Asleep she looked too young to be anywhere other than tucked in bed with a cup of cocoa and teddy. Hard to imagine how she’d managed to walk to the train station, catch a train, *sneeze*, without anyone holding her hand. They’d wait. With that thought Sophia propelled the muttering girl to the spare bedroom.

“Hush Mia,” she said. “We’ll have to sort everything out in the morning.”

The child lay, half in, half out of the duvet, arms curled tightly around a pillow. She’d managed to take off her filthy shoes and socks. They lay scattered, a haphazard pattern of pink and red. Sophia leaned forward, about to place the glass on the bedside table, when the floor tilted: a peculiar sensation. The unfamiliar action of making certain this nuisance child was safe was upsetting the routine. This child was like her own old self, her young self, a child who had also lost her way and become frightened in the city. Seriously, that was nonsense thinking. Sophia hauled the duvet over Mia and shut the door. Wait a minute. What if the girl woke, was confused, and didn’t know

where she was? She'd call out, feel dread: so the door stayed half open. There was even less of a chance she'd wake Mia if she pressed the buzzer that opened the front door now, not later, when Petrus arrived.

Sophia waited, flattening her letter against the landing banister. Running a finger along the curve and line of her mother's writing, tracing the imprint – Dagmar's plea for help, someone to care for Mia. Her fingers copied the angle of the pen, the weight of Dagmar's hand on the paper - as if such actions might bring her mother's memory to life. Mother, she thought, *mother*. There was nothing. No memory or longing, just the smell of damp pinewood that reminded her of home when really, home was here. In this city, in this place she'd created as a fortress against the world. Wasn't it?

When Petrus arrived, she walked down to meet her impenetrable, beautiful, father. He was wearing his perfectly cut soft grey winter coat and holding his trusty umbrella. Handing it to her, he preceded her up the stairs, paused to turn, full lips turned down in their usual unconscious grimace. He'd had a severe haircut, the box-like finish making his ears stand out like two pink shells.

“Sophia. *Wo ist sie?*” Thick eyebrows rose to form an upside-down v, before he gazed back up the staircase. Perhaps the girl should be poised there, pale and wanting, waiting for rescue? Annoying how the touch of the wooden handle, still warm from his hand, could ignite a burn of rage.

“Hello Father. Mia's asleep.” Such dark pleasure, such *Schadenfreude*, as his shoulders drooped.

“Ah, but where?” They had reached the apartment door and Petrus handed her his coat. He looked ridiculously well, grey hair and tanned skin offset by a deep green pullover and pale blue shirt collar, too conscious of his own good looks altogether. She pointed to the spare room door but he hesitated. Was he afraid? Perhaps Mia was a dangerous reminder of the past? Sophia held her breath as he walked over to the bed, staring down at the sleeping child. A strand of dirty brown hair had fallen across the girl's nose, each time she breathed out it moved, gently flapping like a moth's wing. Petrus smoothed the errant hair back and leaned down to kiss the child's forehead, and, when he turned, there were tears in his eyes.

“*Armes Kind*,” he said, closing her door and making his way to the sitting room. Poor child? Spoiled brat was nearer the truth. Though why would she think that?

Perhaps it was the way in which he had leaned, so carefully, to kiss her; his tall frame bending down, the harsh edge of him softening just for this child but never for her.

Petrus took his time to sit down. He glanced at Sophia's painting, keenly noting, no doubt, how amateur her brush style remained. Even though he'd not planned this visit, Petrus would have brought a gift, something small, yet expensive, a token designed to make her feel grateful and, at the same time, unworthy. As he finally took a seat, flicking an imaginary speck of dust from lovingly pressed trousers, he took careful note of the two empty glasses of wine, the dirty plates; the curled up cheese rind.

"I thought to bring a little something," he said and placed a pocket sized gold box on the table. Lindt Pralines, her favourite. She decided to imagine they were for her, though a small voice told her otherwise, and thanked him politely, making no move to open it before they began the old game, now a well-worn track: each waiting for the other to speak first. She could tell, as he scanned the room, eyes resting on the letter that waited for him, that he was considering carefully what to say, weighing up the pros and cons. When he was ready to spin a half-truth, her father would lean forward, and, carefully manicured hands resting on knees, begin to weave his story. His version would wear well under questioning, but the tale would yield only a limited portion of the whole. He'd insist she be satisfied with breadcrumbs; grateful to be alive, grateful she had choices to make, grateful - to him.

Sophia leaned forward, a perfect imitation, hands on knees.

"Don't you lie," she blurted, knowing she hadn't offered him a drink, or anything to eat, and to him protocol was everything, rudeness the worst sin.

"Sophia? Really my dear, consider: whenever have I ever lied to you?" He leaned back, disapproval and the usual disappointment flitting, one shadow following the other, across his handsome face.

Always, she thought, looking through the apartment window where the city lights shimmered. Always and every day. Down there, in-between the light and darkness, a church bell tolled seven o'clock. A mother and child hurried along the pavement, the child's mittened hand tightly held.

"In any case," he continued, "you are old enough to make up your own mind."

And lie, just like you. Had she just said that out loud?

“Perhaps I can have something to a drink? Before you ask your list of interminable questions?” He glanced at the kitchen and the remaining half empty bottle of wine. “I do know how you will *insist* on having answers.” Sophia filled two glasses. My god, his hand was shaking.

“Sophia, I understand this may be hard,” he said. “But please, on this occasion, could you simply listen and try not to interrupt.”

*Why* was his hand shaking? Her debonair father had rarely shown any kind of nervousness or apprehension. She tried to relax her neck and shoulders, carefully leaning back. It would be of far more use to note what Petrus did not say.

“Mia, your cousin, is the only child of Dagmar’s sister.” He was talking slowly, as if she were thick, as if it would be all too easy for her to misunderstand, or, more likely, as if he were making it up on the spot. “There was an accident; I’m not sure exactly anymore what happened. Suffice to say your aunt died and Mia was taken to Dagmar. It was soon after you and I had left the GDR.”

What aunt? *Lügen haben kurze Beine*. Even though he was a liar, he didn’t have short legs. She may not have inherited his looks, but she’d got his long legs. Runner’s legs, swimmer’s legs; along with an athlete’s build. His hand, placing the glass on the table, had steadied and she almost laughed, partly in relief and partly because she was considering how many more ridiculous family connections could be magicked up, or annihilated, by a wave of his hand. One day he’d invent something so complicated she’d actually laugh out loud.

“Now we have clarified such matters,” he said, “the child will most certainly be more comfortable with me.”

The problem was, if her father took Mia now, she’d never know. Never find out what this girl, the first link to Dagmar in thirteen years, really wanted.

“She’s staying put.” What was happening? Sophia never disagreed with him. Father knew best. She did exactly what he said and was safer because of it.

“Sophia, don’t be ridiculous.” Petrus finished his wine and looked around the room as if he expected a child, hair brushed, shoes tied, jacket zipped, to simply arrive. “You know I only came to collect her. Don’t make a fuss; in any case the taxi is waiting.”



“Petrus, she’s asleep.” Sophia watched a strange expression, one similar to mild panic, appear momentarily on his face.

“Ah,” he said, “well perhaps you are right.”

Was he really going to leave her with the child? Why wasn’t he arguing, telling her no, demanding she wake Mia immediately? My god, he was leaving!

“Wait, just wait a minute.”

The front door closed. She could hear him making his way down the stairs. He’d left his damn umbrella. The gold inscription PK on the handle felt cold. This never happened. *Never*. He won arguments. Sophia did as she was told. She should run after him. Say something between I hate you and sorry. Ask him to tell her all those things that were too important to ask. Tell me, she’d say. Just tell me.

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Dressed in her warmest pyjamas, Sophia sat at the kitchen table and opened the first letter from Maria. Your mother is ill, she’d written. You really must come home. Well, Maria had never held back on what she thought was right. Her old friend went on to describe how she’d seen Dagmar. How ill she was. How, at such a time, a mother needed a daughter. Blah blah.

“Not a chance,” she muttered.

In the second letter, Maria wrote of life in Sophia’s hometown. It was as if she sensed resistance and sought to overcome it by reminding Sophia of all that had been before. The school was the same. She wasn’t married, had no children but wished she had. The third and fourth letters were short and to the point. If Sophia wasn’t going to come, who would help? What would become of the child? Sophia threw the lot in the bin. She was the last person her mother wanted to see. As for Mia? Her father would manage the child.

Blaming her reluctance to read the sizable envelope sent to the station on exhaustion, she made her way to bed.

The girl had wrapped herself in a duvet cocoon. Sophia listened to her breathing, heavy and regular, certain she wouldn’t wake until the morning. She found herself breathing with her, matching her rhythm. Her own childhood was remembered simply as deep water. A home filled with undercurrents. Over years, careful barbs had replaced

any words spoken with love. There'd been so little joy. If she thought too hard beyond those watery images, a fluey sensation rippled across her skin, her past life stalking her.

Petrus should have told a better lie. Dagmar had been an only child. Forever telling Sophia how lucky they were not to have to share anything, but Sophia had desperately wanted someone to shoulder her mother's consuming misery: someone, anyone, to take a portion of the load. Maria had done just that, she'd taken Sophia into her house when Dagmar's rage was too much to bear. The faint, soft memory of Maria's mother slipped and vanished as Mia turned over to sigh in her sleep.

Mia looked nothing like Dagmar. The mother Sophia remembered had been, at first, voluptuous and utterly female; a young woman with dark hair and deep blue eyes framed by thick lashes. Gentle and obedient, she'd vanished inside Petrus's shadow, losing her light, changing to a thickly set woman with hopeless eyes and a pursed mouth. Well, perhaps Mia's eyes were a little like Dagmar's... but with a slim athlete's body. They'd said the same to Sophia many years ago when measuring height, head, girth and arms, at school, as the rest of the class giggled.

Like everyone else, she'd shook when her turn came – no one wanted to have the biggest anything. Life changed that day. The sport's coach had chosen her to swim for 'Werner Seelenbinder', a residential placement organised by the youth sport's school of the GDR. When Sophia left, age thirteen, to stay at the training camp, Petrus followed. There'd been yet another woman, a new job. He'd always accepted opportunity as his due; never looking back, delighted to escape the turbulence of home.

Her hands were cold. She'd forgotten for a moment where she was. Better not to remember. Better to know those gaps were there for a reason, to protect and safeguard. Sophia made for her bed and curled up as her mind circled dark thoughts, strange waxy images of long shadows and zigzagging pool tiles. There was a smell of Wofasept cleaning liquid in the air, a well-remembered bleachy stench from the changing rooms at school and swim club. After checking every window and door, finally admitting there was no source for the smell, she lay, unable to sleep, remembering each new lie Petrus had told her. Why her mother never wrote, never came. Why she couldn't write to Maria. Why she had had to make up a past. Petrus had saved her. For her and for him, memory was a dangerous thing, so she censored the record. She let the jangled mess ebb

away – reassured that this, just like the rest, would wash clean, leaving her brittle but secure.

## CHAPTER FOUR



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Running through the dense silent forests of home, Sophia tried to escape her dream as it pursued her, biting into her sleeping mind, evading the apology for light that drifted through the gap in the curtains. She woke, sometime later, longing for her mother. Sat up, found her slippers, shoved feet inside warm fur. It was foolish to admit an archaic longing. Everything she needed was here – but the night’s dream whispered of a confined room that stank of chlorine.

Inside the room, a girl needed to cut her own skin. The fine slicing of metal against flesh released a line of pink bubbles. The girl’s body was strong, so strong she wasn’t able to control the heat that burned inside. Red dripped to the floor. No one was there to stop the whisper of the blade as it sliced through fresh skin. The child’s face seemed familiar, her eyes, nose, cheekbones mixed up portions of Maria, Diertha, Hilda and Käthe; people Sophia wanted to forget. The sense of them was so strong she’d felt as if she could swim through their minds. Taste their sour thoughts.

Uneasy, near tears (and she never cried), Sophia padded into the bathroom; turned the shower on. Wait a minute. The spare-room door was wide open and empty. Mia?

It was gratifying to be right. The girl was dishonest. No doubt she’d helped herself to money. Never mind that there was nothing of monetary value in the flat. The child was hardly going to walk out with a four-foot picture under one arm, was she? No, but Sophia was not going to be taken in by one slight East German-*Ossi*, appearing on her doorstep: bedraggled, confused, behaving as if she were still in the GDR. Those people could bleat about how they were family, *ehrlich*, they were, for as long as they liked. No matter. She wouldn’t care.

Nothing had been taken. In fact, her visitor had tidied up. The hand towel, folded but damp, lay on the shelf in front of the shower-room window. There was a scrubby battered hairgrip by the sink; that had (once upon a time) displayed a full set of fake diamonds. As a child Sophia had never wanted pretty things. A strand of Mia’s hair

remained, stuck in-between the two remaining diamonds and metal clasp. The hair was curly and pale – baby hair.

The medicine cabinet had been rearranged: sleeping pills on the top shelf, painkillers on the bottom. No pills had been taken - but Mia had somehow used up a whole tube of antiseptic; and Sophia's favourite hair scrunchie had gone. If she saw the girl again she'd tell her a thing or two about messing around with other people's stuff.

She'd need sweet strong coffee before she spoke to her father. He'd be livid, his voice controlled and quiet: Sophia should have woken, heard Mia, or preferably stayed up all night to make sure. Whatever, whichever: in some way she should have been better. In Petrus's eyes, being herself was enough to evoke criticism.

When he picked up, he said: "She took a taxi. Can you believe it! Rang from your phone using the list you keep there, and there she was, standing by the front door." He paused, adding rather inconsequently: "I am cooking breakfast. Pancakes! The child wanted pancakes."

Sophia put the phone down. Stared at the neatly folded umbrella – her hands frozen as her heart.

Slowly the hot shower eased the tension in her shoulders. The morning circled back to normal: just another day listening to the splash of water hitting the basin; trying hard not to think about anything other than work. Sophia washed her arms, feeling the narrow scaly ridges on both forearms. Her mind shifted from denial to uncertainty and a small voice, one recognised from many years ago, murmured: *Coward*.

Dressed in jeans and a black sweater, she tried not to wince before dialling the station and asking to speak to Hajo. Really, it would be better to put on her uniform right now. Stop being a complete idiot and go to work. He'd be exasperated, as he was every time she messed up, was late, didn't smile back at him when, really, that was all she wanted to do.

"Sophia? For god's sake, what now? I'm in the middle of the morning briefing." He paused. Sophia imagined his eyes searching the meeting room. "Why aren't you here?"

Halfway through her muddled explanation about who Mia might be, Hajo cut in, "Yes, Sophia - I heard. Take the rest of the week. See your family. Really, I do understand."

Thank goodness he wasn't going to make a fuss. She'd go and come back, return to work as if nothing had ever happened.

"Hang on. Just wait a minute. No, don't hang up. I'm going to get you to inspect Breden police station. One day's work. What? Yes, I'm sure you'll manage it. There'll be a folder in the post. No, not to your apartment, to your mother's address."

"Hajo, I don't know her address." God how embarrassing. Who didn't know their own mother's address? As for an inspection? What did he think *she* could do? And why would she want *four* days off? There was nothing in the whole world that would entice her back to East Germany. If the police in Breden had got themselves in a predicament, well, that was their problem – not hers.

"Sophia, you're a police officer – find the address," he answered. And she knew his eyes were rolling skyward in exasperation.

She could stay here. See the girl and leave the rest to her father. The whispered word *coward* seemed so very far away. Leave Petrus to the task he so obviously desired. Let him take the girl back, face Dagmar and whatever else there was to confront.

It was already nine in the morning. The streets were quiet for the fifteen-minute lull before the shoppers arrived. She drove across Schiffahrtskanal heading past the Universitätsmedizin into Wedding. Age sixteen, desperate to find a message from her mother, she'd systematically steamed open her father's mail; trying to find answers. Imagining the unimaginable but wanting so much to read that Dagmar missed her. Holding the seal to the steaming kettle, she'd become expert at knowing how near or how far to go: so her fingers didn't burn, or the contents warp. Just close enough to slowly loosen glue. She'd sweated, a sharp metallic odour, like an animal caught on barbed wire, and learned to re-seal each envelope perfectly. The only giveaway being that the paper didn't lie quite as flat as before. At first, finding nothing, she'd begun leafing through her father's treasured books on medical research. He might have hidden *those* letters, the ones she needed to read, inside particular books. She'd tried to find the key to unlock the desk drawer, and one day there it was - hidden inside a bowl filled with rancid potpourri. Barely pausing to breathe, she'd slotted the key into the miniscule lock, and the drawer had opened. Inside was a crisp pile of envelopes with her father's name clearly written – and each with a different address.

The first letter had been from Ilse: her mother's replacement, Petrus's *woman*. The letter didn't say that Ilse was coming to live with him (a thing of absolute permanent dread). No, the letter had been nothing more than a series of dates. Three dates every month, right up to last month's date. No explanation, no love and greetings, nothing. Confused, Sophia had put it back, run her hand under the pile and found two unfolded papers. The first had 'Ministry for State Security' stamped on the top right corner. She'd stared as the letters blurred, rubbed her eyes. Stasi? Why did he have papers from the Stasi? 'Top Secret, Personnel Information' papers, dated May 1973? Furthermore, why were her father and Ilse listed under the heading, 'Romeo Project'?

Ilse Hammerman had been working as an informer for the Stasi. In April '73, the year Sophia joined the swimming club and turned thirteen, Ilse had been told to approach a Dr. P. Künstler and get to know him. Intimately. Sophia had felt sick reading it. A honey sex trap? Well that was hardly necessary. Her father loved women and they, in turn, loved him. At the bottom of the drawer was a photo. Petrus naked. The back of his head straining back, his body bunched tight, bearing down into the girl's arched body. One hand-sized flushed breast visible. Ilse.

The front door had opened. Petrus had called out her name as she slammed the drawer shut, turned the key and dumped it in the potpourri with such speed she barely registered moving. Over time the horror of seeing that image and knowing that her father had been targeted faded to queasy embarrassment. He'd fallen for the trap and worse: he'd remained working for the Stasi and he'd stayed in a relationship with Ilse.

Now Sophia turned into Brüsselerstrasse. Her father's house was next door to a popular Kindergarten which had grown from a brave venture to a business bursting at the seams. Petrus helped out, a curious charitable pastime Sophia found hard to place. He visited the Kindergarten twice a year to talk about being a doctor and how each person, little or grown up, should be healthy. In addition to that he was happy to drop everything and give advice should a child become ill. Naturally the mothers adored him, sending gifts: cakes, biscuits and cards.

Parking anywhere on the street at eight in the morning, or midday, was impossible. After each day's drop-me-off-and-pick-me-up routine was over, the neighbourhood slowly unwound as noise levels dropped with each departing parent and child. Now the street was blissfully peaceful. The mini students were inside, doing

whatever they did when the weather was too cold for outdoor morning play. Lights shone out from the window, illuminating a group of children kitted out in plastic aprons; most clutched oversized paintbrushes that dripped pink, yellow and red. One little blonde girl stared at her yellow brush with such a focus that she caught Sophia's attention. The child waved the paintbrush slowly through the air, then shovelled it into her mouth.

Sophia shuddered and turned towards her father's front door. No one, she thought, not even a dreamed up whispery voice, was going to call her a coward.

Inside, the porch lingered the smell of burnt pancake. Petrus came to the door wearing a carefully tied, floral print apron, no doubt belonging to his current partner. His eyes widened when he saw her.

"Sophia? There was no need drive across town." He reluctantly opened the door to the hallway. "Aren't you supposed to be at work?"

Mia's jacket hung by his long coat, next to an assortment of fur and silk. Petrus's new lady, the latest in the string of hopefuls, was, rather obviously, attempting to move in. Sophia knew only too well that the minute clothes starting gathering, coats conveniently left until next time, the relationship was over.

Mia was chewing her way through a pile of oddly shaped pancakes drowning in treacle sauce. She looked up; face tight, eyes defiant. Her hair was tied back with the missing scrunchie but a number of wispy tendrils had escaped; they curled their way round her ears and pink neck, spoiling the intended statement. Sophia smiled. Mia stared back. I dare you, her eyes said; I dare you.

"Yummy." She waved her fork, with a chunk of massacred pancake circling, pulling Petrus's attention exactly where she wanted it. Clever girl. Sophia leaned against the door listening to the rise-and-fall of Mia's voice. Those grubby jeans and pink hand-knitted jumper were far too young for her, but the child was pretty in a coltish way: long legs and arms, that silly hair twirling around a thin, stern face.

Her father was entranced. As he did with each new lover, he danced to attention, showering Mia with offers of chocolate spread, orange juice, biscuits. When she seemed taken by the offer of strawberry Nesquick, he sidestepped to the cupboard, reaching with surgeon's hands, fingers long, as slim as a girl's, to place the tub on the counter. Sophia glanced at her own bitten fingernails; put her hands behind her back. Who came



to visit and drank strawberry milkshake? More to the point: how would she have reacted if he had focussed on her like that, just once, as she grew from child to woman?

Mia was a true professional. Shooting icy glances at Sophia whenever Petrus looked her way, she chattered enthusiastically about how long it had taken her to travel to Berlin. Petrus praised her heroic efforts and talked about Dagmar as if he'd seen her only days before, finding out what he needed without alarming the child. With his face arranged, his eyes gentle and observant, he constituted a careful study of how to be kind - and Mia began to relax. There was no hint of the steel Sophia knew so well. He'd always been preoccupied; obsessed with maintaining a reputation, a position that demanded astute social climbing: one step forward, two back, never repeating the same mistake. He'd juggled his affairs with women effortlessly. Until Ilse, when, for a time, things changed. However, even during that strange, almost perpetual absence, when Sophia swam, he'd paid attention, become the pop-up version of 'proud father', carefully noting the envious glances of the other men, the coquettish heavy-lidded gaze from the mothers as Sophia paddled towards his open arms. That was all before. She'd adapted. Become stronger. Able to survive.

Mia finished stuffing herself with pancakes, and there were no more questions to ask. In the silence Petrus cleared his throat and both turned, as if there were no way of avoiding it, to Sophia.

"I'll drive us there." The words fell out of her mouth. For god's sake - stuff them back in - pretend she'd never said something so inane. Mia, about to hand her plate to Petrus, mistimed. The plate fell to the floor with a loud clunk.

"I've been given a week's holiday." Her brain and mouth were obviously disconnected, but she fizzed with vindication: she'd broken their bloody tight-knit chatter. Petrus pretended he hadn't heard. He swept up the broken crockery before telling Mia she could phone Oma - leading the child away to the safety of his office. Was this what a wasp felt like before it stung its prey? She saw him touch Mia on the shoulder, leaning, as if, given the choice, he would have kissed her hair as he had the evening before.

"Everything will be alright, *mein Schatz*," he said.

His darling? God make the pain go away. Sophia wanted to kill him, anything to stop feeling such searing loss at his easy love for the orphan. She would have done

anything to have him care for her like that, just once, when she was a child. When she looked up he was watching, eyes pained, mouth curled; as if he'd eaten something that had left a repulsive aftertaste. He glanced around the room, ran a hand through his greying hair before he looked, reluctantly, back at her.

“My dear,” he said. “Aren't you a little old to cry?”

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Mia told Oma all about the early morning taxi drive across the city. The nervous wait outside; watching the car headlamps sweep by. She said nothing about meeting Sophia, or her terror that morning because at any *moment* Sophia might wake up and, like a man-eating bat, swoop down and snatch her. Oma didn't want to talk, so Mia described Petrus's house: how pretty it was, how it looked out onto an avenue of linden trees. She explained how she could hear some of the children playing a game of catch in the Kindergarten next door. Oma tried to laugh; a dry rasping that had neither of them fooled.

She wanted to say how *awful* Sophia was, that she was mean, with eyes that seemed to see right into Mia's head. When Sophia smiled it was like she had a big fat secret, something only she knew, and you would only ever want to know. She was skinny: Oma would say way too skinny, but privately Mia decided she wouldn't mind looking like that - rather than dumpy like Oma.

“Oma,” she said. “How d'you describe a grin that's hateful, you know - not just nasty? You said it to me once.”

“Who's being unkind to you *Schatzi*?”

“No one Oma. It's just something I heard on the train.”

“What a thing to ask! I don't remember.”

“Yes you do.” It was better to keep her talking, to try and hear if she was all right.

“You mean: *Grinsen wie ein Honigkuchenpferd*?”

Yes. Grinning like a Gingerbread horse! That was exactly how Sophia looked, except she didn't really look like a horse; which was a shame. Horses had fat lips and whiskers. Anyway Nasty Sophia didn't really know anything; she just pretended she did because she liked being mean. All police people were mean.

“Oma,” she said. “Promise you’ll rest. Don’t cook anything, okay? We’ll be there really soon, and we’ll bring our own supper. I love you,” and Oma was gone.

Maybe she could have a shower; her hair really needed washing. Better to wait until Petrus had sorted Sophia out. He looked kind but Mia had noticed the way his mouth tightened when he was irritated.

She worried about Oma, but the worry was so old it had become part of her skin, working its way deep inside her shoulder joints, behind her eyes, inside her stomach. Oma was sick. Not just sick until she got better, but sick enough she might not. When Mia was afraid about Oma dying, she thought straight ahead. One action came after the other. She edged the panic to a blue place she’d painted inside her head, a place where all terrors could go.

Good. Petrus and Sophia were in the kitchen talking in loud tight voices. He’d send Nasty back to do her work, and Mia and Petrus would travel to Breden by train. She’d buy a magazine and some chocolate. Better still, Petrus would buy them. There’d be no Sophia to spoil it. Petrus was a doctor; he could make Oma better, no need to worry any more.

Mia trailed her hands over the soft leather that made up the centre of his writing desk. Neat and tidy. The shelves around the room were filled with medical books. Mia could be a doctor; she checked Dagmar’s medicine every day and knew Oma was taking more painkillers than she should. She’d have to tell Petrus. Even with those extra medicines, it took Oma ages to get out of bed and downstairs. Last week she’d been stuck in bed all day without hot drink or food. That night Mia had cried, hiding the sound by running Oma a bath. Now every morning she brought her coffee and biscuits in bed. Oma’s favourites: the ones with thick coffee icing.

Behind Petrus’s desk was a picture of Sophia: young and smiling: her first day at work? It had to have been taken before she started arresting and beating up people, before she learned how to look so mean. Soon there would be pictures of Mia on that wall, pictures of her at school showing off her latest maths certificate.

One other photo looked familiar. A man in a dark green jumper held the hand of a girl who was showing her medal to the photographer: Sophia and her father. Mia couldn’t remember where she’d seen it, but was sure she had. Next to it was a picture of Petrus with his arm around someone else. A woman. Not Oma, not Sophia, a slim

blonde woman who looked at him sideways like she knew exactly what she was doing. Mia looked at the back. No date, no name.

The argument in the kitchen was over but Sophia hadn't gone. Mia put the picture back. She knew Petrus had left her grandmother. That didn't mean he was a bad person, did it? Nothing mattered as long as he came to help. Still, he didn't seem so nice any more.

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Sophia was drying dishes. The tea towel, rose pink with a recipe for dumpling stew, was old and faded; the list of ingredients barely visible. She placed one plate on top of the other as Petrus washed and pretended to consider her argument. He'd tell her she wasn't needed, send her home to return to work.

"Very well," he said.

Sophia stared at the towel. Grate two medium sized potatoes, mix together with flour and semolina. She hung it on the radiator - imagining Mia, ear to door, scowling when she realised they were all going.

Driving home, heart pounding, the car full of Petrus's suitcase, medicines, and *them*, she had just enough sense left to ask her father to write Dagmar's address on a scrap of paper. "I won't be long." She parked as near the garage as possible. She'd pack a bag and be back in ten minutes, tops. Jogging up the stairs gasping, "Bloody hell, bloody *hell*," at each step, she paused at the top to lean her head against the front door. Worst-case scenario, she'd be back by tomorrow, first thing. Forget the whole mess and move on. She threw the mail into her workbag, running clothes into an overnight suitcase.

She was put through to Hajo, who actually asked how she was, as if she'd been off sick. She had to repeat Dagmar's address three times. Did he want to annoy her? Could she, *dare* she think he actually liked talking to her? When she asked about travel expenses, or if Breden even had a hotel, he seemed confused. Sophia remained silent, rendered speechless at the prospect of sharing a home with her mother.

"Sophia?"

He was going to ask her why she couldn't, wouldn't stay with Dagmar.

"Whatever the situation is, Sophia, I know families can be complicated. You should be able to apply for some reimbursement if you stay in the hotel. Though I'm

still going to send the paperwork to your mother's address, OK? Ring me if you need anything.”

Ring him? Why would she need to ring him? Face burning with humiliation Sophia rang directory inquiries and, once they'd given her the number, called the hotel straight away, requesting a single room, adding the possibility of a second reservation for her father. Downstairs Frau Weiner was delighted to have a visitor. Less delighted when Sophia explained she wanted someone to cancel her milk order until the weekend. She'd stock up if she got back before, and, yes of course, empty her post tray. She sidestepped the inevitable: where was she going? Was there a phone number just in case? Crossed her fingers as she promised to make sure no more junk mail was delivered when she came back, and agreed to come to the next meeting if she wasn't busy.

In the cellar, she chose running shoes, folded her working clothes straight from the dryer to the suitcase. Stood quite still. It had happened. The thing to avoid at all cost, against all odds, was here.

## CHAPTER FIVE



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Mia had – for the last hour and twenty minutes – been regaling Petrus about her school and missing Gerda. Finally she paused, just long enough to make Sophia believe they might have a few moments of quiet.

“Gerda would have liked travelling across the border. We could’ve pretended it was still, you know, not allowed.” Mia made it sound like a great adventure, something not to be missed.

“You’ve only been away one night!” So, what to call her mother? Dagmar, *Mutti*, Mother? Bitch seemed highly appropriate; but in the circumstances a little harsh. What was she to do when she got to Breden? Sit by her dying mother and talk about why she hadn’t come with them? Why Dagmar had looked after this child, when she hadn’t cared for her own daughter?

The atmosphere in the car was chilly. Mia silent. Christ. Could the girl read her mind? Sense how much she didn’t want to see Dagmar? Sophia imagined Mia’s eyes burning holes in the back of her neck – cigarette burns. No. She hadn’t said a word about Mia’s bloody Oma, so she couldn’t know. Belatedly the realisation that she’d inadvertently suggested Gerda might not be missing Mia, sank in. After that it seemed like basic survival to shut up, tune out, and concentrate on driving.

She’d call her mother ‘Dagmar’, like someone she didn’t know and was politely indifferent to. The pain that had squeezed itself inside her heart, danced: one moment in her belly, the next her neck. Nerves? Fright? Probably both, and the growing certainty that she was driving into her own shadow, drifting nearer a darkness that had, so far, only managed to trap her in her dreams. Now that darkness fell softly across her waking life, compromising the light.

Petrus began a new conversation, steering comments away from anything that might prove upsetting. He talked about studying medicine and how much he’d enjoyed his time as a student. Sophia imagined him dark haired and handsome, taking his pick of the young girls as he worked his way through university into an early marriage. Dagmar had been beautiful. Sophia had seen pictures of her creamy-skinned mother, dark eyes,

and a steady smile standing, a peewee under the lee of her father's arm, waiting for life to begin. The day she met Petrus it had, no doubt, begun, although perhaps not quite as imagined.

Mia didn't manage to hold on to her caustic silence for long and followed Petrus's lecture with a detailed account of her science lessons. Petrus twisted round so he could see her and Sophia opened the window a crack, focussing on the road, remembering: forests, rain, water and misery.

The air from the road smelled of petrol and damp. Each car they passed left a trail of spit, an oiled ripple on the tarmac, a trace of its passage. Sophia's fingers tingled, a warning recognition that someone was aware of her imminent arrival. As they neared Potsdam, Petrus finally broached the subject of Dagmar's health. Mia's chatter stumbled and slowed. Dagmar, she said, was always tired, always in pain. She took too many painkillers; even when Mia told her she shouldn't. She wouldn't go to the doctor anymore; Mia having to collect her medicines from the pharmacist.

"She's really stubborn," Mia began to list all Dagmar's medication.

Sophia caught her father's eye and he gently shook his head, making some half-baked joke about doctors and prescriptions always sounding worse than they really were. Mia's face blurred out of focus: perilously close to tears. Indicating right, Sophia said it was high time they stopped for a coffee break.

The service station, newly built with a shiny silver-painted café, boasted fresh rolls and a good choice of drinks. Petrus took their orders and Sophia walked over to the shop to glance at the newspapers and to stretch her legs. Mia followed but paused to look at a wilting display of pink and white roses followed by a hideously overpriced checked table cloth. Should she stop her, or let Mia waste money? It was, after all, her money. Sophia was about to suggest they look in another shop, somewhere closer to Breden, somewhere less ridiculously priced; when she noticed the hairgrips. They were displayed near the counter: twin dragonflies decorated in silver, blue, and green. Beautiful. She paid, relieved to see the child frown - and stomp back to the table.

Eating cheesecake with some kind of pink jelly on top, Mia explained that she'd wanted to buy Oma a present, something pretty, but the flowers were droopy and the tablecloth boring.

“I’ll buy you flowers,” Petrus smiled. The nearest all-female table beamed and nudged one another. “I’m sure they have some fresh bunches if one asks nicely.”

Such a joy to see her father sandwiched between wanting to please the child, but not wanting to appear in Breden with flowers, and give the wrong message. Petrus, just like herself, would have to work out how to deal with Dagmar.

Sophia waited until he’d left before handing Mia the hair grips, wrapped in white paper. She shouldn’t have bought them. Mia might not like them, might not like receiving them from someone unpopular as herself: another moment of impulse and yet another really witless decision. The girl leaned forward and held them so gently, turning them round so the greens and blues glistened under the bright lights.

“They’re beautiful,” she said. “Blue’s like, my top favourite colour.” She fidgeted, reaching out, as if she wanted to shake Sophia’s hand or perhaps even hug her. Sophia leaned back and saw Petrus standing by the shop entrance, watching them, with a colossal bunch of pink roses in his hands, his eyes dark and questioning.

“Well, anything to stop you taking mine.” Sophia said, absurdly relieved when Mia laughed. One dragonfly sat in the girl’s dark hair, poised, as if it were just about to fly away.

They arrived at six. Mia squashed in between the two front seats as she directed Sophia through a maze of back alleys. The darkness was broken by the occasional yellowed streetlight that illuminated expanding circles of rotting tarmac. Sophia half expected to recognise the corners and alleyways but the landscape was unfamiliar. She smelt pine cones, petrol, wet wood and chlorine: the smell of home in a place she’d studiously forgotten. On either side of the street, old town houses sagged towards the ground. At the corner some newly built flats were already ballooning with damp. Dirt-streaked, they squatted, a sad monument to communist housing.

As Sophia parked the car, lights came on in all the neighbouring houses. My god, any minute now the welcome committee would come out with sharpened pitchforks. One door opened and, as if on cue, curtains twitched to one side, showing each neighbour’s dark profile. A short heavy set woman came out to stand, subsequently lean, on the doorframe. Mia scrambled from the car and ran toward Dagmar, hugging her. Dagmar’s arms encircled the child, her head lowered and she kissed her. Hot tears welled up in Sophia’s eyes. She blinked and took a deep breath.



“Oma,” Mia said. “They’re here.” She pointed dramatically to the car. Petrus was undoing his seatbelt, reluctantly leaning back to get the flowers, taking forever to find them, and straighten the paper wrapping. Sophia gritted her teeth, got out the car and slammed the door. The curtains twitched; a single yet united motion that had her on the brink of hysterical laughter.

“Sophia.” Petrus was waiting for her to open the boot, his soft blood red scarf a beacon in the dreary street. “Would you please carry these?” He pointed to his bag and Mia’s muddied backpack. Their eyes met as Sophia turned away. Let him carry his own stuff. Mia would come back and collect her bag. Mia was busy trying to get her grandmother inside. She answered Dagmar’s questions: have you eaten? are you well? have they looked after you? with gentle reassurance, her voice calm and sure; as if she had learnt some time ago how much love Oma needed.

Dagmar leaned against the door and looked across the front garden at Sophia, who froze - one hand on the gate.

“*Kind*,” she said.

Sophia remembered a gentle young woman from the distant past, before the advent of her silent unapproachable mother. Dagmar had aged. Her dark hair, gone to grey, had been cut short and left unkempt. Her skin was waxy and loose. Old skin. Sophia stared down the narrow path. Child? She wasn’t her mother’s child, had never been. If she looked up now, she’d die because this wasn’t her mother, this was someone else.

*Coward*, the shadow-voice whispered. Her mother’s hand was stroking Mia’s hair in a slow, gentle caress but she was watching Sophia. Mia. *Mia* was the child. The name had never been meant for her. Sick with archaic disappointment she remembered her mother’s emotional games from long ago and looked her in the eye.

“Dagmar,” she said, making her eyes say that she understood. Oh yes, she understood.

She recalled the dark sitting room, the window that looked out onto a scrap of garden, the last step on the stair that was shorter than the rest. The kitchen that smelled of yeast, cinnamon, and now something else she couldn’t name. Petrus, looking ridiculously young opposite Dagmar, waved the bunch of flowers around like a traffic warden. As if the action were bound to produce a result. Sophia, desperate for

something to do, found a vase while Mia talked at a hundred miles an hour. Who wanted what, she asked, rinsing cups, making coffee and fiddling around with a homemade cake. Her face was flushed, eyes glistening with more expected tears. Something caught deep in Sophia's stomach; a forgotten chord, unpractised and flat.

"Mia. Stop a minute. Why don't you take the cake into the sitting room?" she said. Mia threw her a red-faced grateful look. "And phone what's-her-name - Gerda? We'll be fine," she added as Mia blinked. "Go on."

The front door burst open and a frizzy-haired, stoutly built girl dashed in and grabbed Mia. The two danced, Gerda shrieking – what was Berlin like? Had she seen anyone famous? Did people in Berlin have loads of money? Why hadn't she *told* her? Eventually, after much giggling, Mia shoved her friend in front of her. Introducing Petrus and Sophia to her best, *best* friend.

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Even with the lights on the sitting room was overwhelmingly gloomy. Surely only someone very depressed could have chosen to decorate walls brown. It seemed, as the years passed, the furniture and the resident had grown darker.

Sophia spotted it as Mia and Gerda disappeared up the stairs, heads close together. Her childhood comforter, a much loved cream mohair rug with plaited edging, was folded over the back of the armchair. She leaned over, pulling, folding it into her hands, smelling fabric conditioner soap and childhood, as Dagmar's eyes found hers. Dagmar shuffled, with Petrus's help, to the settee where she sat, head back, breathing in, out, slow and deep, hands pulling at each other in her lap. Her mother had remembered; she'd washed the fraying comforter to welcome her daughter home.

To the side of the settee, a knitting basket was stuffed with pink, red, and green wool. The colour brought a much needed contrast to the room's monochrome decor. Sophia took the seat furthest away and watched her mother breathe. The heavy sound was dispersed by the girls' animated chatter that muffled its way down through the ceiling. Dagmar's eyes closed as the girls' voices rose and fell: the occasional short question, a shriek of laughter, followed by a pause. After what seemed only a minute they clattered back downstairs with rushed explanations: they were *just* going to Gerda's house, for a while, they'd be back soon - OK? Mia looked at Dagmar, at Sophia. Her mouth opened to ask again. Sophia nodded and she whirled out of the door.

Dagmar twisted her hands and whimpered. Her skin was grey, tinged with yellow. Barely conscious, she'd slumped forward.

"Dagmar?" Petrus leaned close. "Dagmar, listen to me. When did you take your pills?" Her muttered response didn't seem to reassure him. "Your pills?" he repeated, turning to Sophia. "Top drawer in the kitchen, above the kettle, quickly."

She left him speaking a language not dissimilar to Mia's: "Yes, all right, all right. Everything will be fine, don't worry."

Reaching into the cupboard above the kettle Sophia reached for the bottle of pills, and filled a glass with water. Alongside the cinnamon was the stench of death. It seeped in from the walls, a mix of rotting pear and vinegar.

"Sophia. Hold her." Petrus gestured where she should stand. No. Sophia shook her head. There wasn't enough air in the room. She was going to faint, the air was turning red; she could see it swirling round and round behind her eyes.

"Hold her head."

If she touched Dagmar, she might hurt, kill, squeeze her until there was no life left, or Dagmar might leach from her a pity she could not afford.

"Stop behaving like a child." Petrus's voice was somewhere far away. Dagmar would have to go to hospital, not tonight though, if Sophia would, for goodness' sake, just pull herself together, they could take away a little of that pain.

She moved closer. Her mother's eyes were closed. Her breath rasped, putrid. Sophia retched.

Petrus snapped, "Pull yourself together!" and she was holding her, easing her up gently; touching bones as delicate as a bird's, cradling her head so Dagmar could swallow the medication with water. Her mother's hair was soft and clean and smelt of eucalyptus.

Sophia felt her eyes burn. Tears leaked their way down her neck, soaking into her fleece, nevertheless she remained silent as Dagmar gulped down four pills. Lowering her mother's head, she walked out of the room, stumbling her way past the stairs into the bathroom.

"Fuck this."

Scooping cold water on her face, she dragged a towel from the rail, glaring into the mirror at red eyes and an expression that was a police officer's disapproving mask. If she held the towel over her mouth, she wasn't crying.

Petrus was standing by the window, one hand pulling back the curtain, watching the street as Dagmar's breath laboured in the darkness. A dark shape stretched out from the corner of the street, a thin ghostly profile against the mackerel-grey night. Sophia moved to her father's side just as the shadow melted away and Dagmar farted, rolling onto her side, grunting as she sank further into a medicated sleep. Sophia winced. As Petrus looked round she moved nearer, needing reassurance, a modest gesture of solidarity. He laid a hand on her shoulder for no more than a moment. Sophia glanced sideways to see an expression of terror on his face before he dropped his arm and moved away, crossing the room to close the curtains with a decisive sweep.

In the hallway, she searched for Gerda's home number; eventually finding the right one on a list stuck to the kitchen wall. Frau Rentsch (Elke) said she was delighted to have little (*little?*) Mia stay the night. Yes, of course, Mia could stay as long as she wanted; it was no trouble at all. Thank goodness someone had come, really, they had all wondered how Dagmar would care for the child if she herself was so ill.

Dagmar had not only baked cake, but supper. Petrus joined her in spooning the hot potato and sausage straight from the warm baking dish. Deliciously creamy, well flavoured food, a taste from another time and, even in the bleakness of the moment, Sophia felt vivid and alive. It was as if the house and town had been waiting, and now she was here all manner of things could happen.

When the phone rang, Petrus motioned her to stay. She couldn't hear the conversation. More than likely Mia, being awkward, asking to come home. Petrus was too soft where Mia was concerned, he'd probably agree, and the girl shouldn't see her grandmother so sick. Sophia moved to the door. Petrus's voice sounded tense and controlled. Not Mia. He wouldn't talk like that to her.

"No, nothing has changed," he said. "I'm simply here to help Dagmar, nothing more."

Who was he speaking to? She'd been right to never trust him. To not believe what he said was true, because it rarely was.

"I'll be staying," he said before climbing the stairs. "You go to the hotel."

Sophia dialled the number that would tell her who had just called, but the caller wasn't listed. Ilse? How would Ilse know Petrus was here, and why would she have Dagmar's phone number? Sophia saw her from a child's view: Dagmar's nemesis, a woman with lustrous blonde hair, so different from Dagmar's brown. Ilse had delicate hands, diminutive, like a child. She had worn glossy black shoes with ice-pick heels. Shoes Sophia had been jealous over, as of the attention Petrus showed her. Attention Ilse took for granted. "And who is this?" she'd asked; clearly displeased that Sophia even existed.

Outside the air tasted of burnt plastic, so different from the night fumes of Berlin. To Sophia the evening smelled of old pain: the suffering that had been preserved and ripened over years at the workings of the vaguely named 'Department of Technical Interception'. Anyone employed there went to great trouble to gather 'dissident' scent specimens for 'Department XX', the department where agents compiled a smells register. She knew exactly how the Stasi had done their collecting. A cotton wool pad pressed to the victim's groin. A sterile dust cloth placed on a car seat to collect the smell of whoever sat there. All interrogation chairs had been fitted with dust sheets, which, once removed after questioning, would be folded and the centre piece cut, lifted with tweezers, to be stored in a jar.

In January 1990, the Berlin police force had been deployed en masse to manage the crowds that stormed the headquarters of the Ministry for State Security or Stasi, as she preferred to think of them, in Berlin-Lichtenberg. That day Sophia had broken from the riot line, taken off her work jacket and slipped inside rooms filled with ripped paper. The *Papierwölfe*, the shredders, had done what they could with office shredding equipment. When the motors burned out, they'd started tearing reports by hand.

One room had been filled with jam-jars, each containing a scrap of pickled yellow cloth. Sophia had greeted the glass jars like old friends. Her training group's scent was here somewhere, tucked into a corner or on some anonymous shelf, preserved forever. There would be a fragment of Diertha's perfume, the cloying cheap spray she'd used; along with her sweat. Sophia had walked through Stasi headquarters shaking, furious yet excited, looking for the file that bore her own name, the jar with her scent. And there it was - alphabetically arranged - under the code name 'Dynamo One' given her when she was a swimmer with the 'Sport Club: Dynamo Berlin'. A tribute to how

fast she'd moved from a junior swimming club to training camp and the international league. In the chaos she'd easily slipped the jar into her coat pocket - hers to keep - and known not to look for her father's. She'd been certain that he, along with a select group of loyal colleagues, would organise a cleanup – every trace collected, spirited away before the authorities had time to act. As it was, it had taken until March for the Berlin's Citizens' Committee to take action and save what was left of the collection.

At home she'd smashed the jar, taking great satisfaction in grinding glass to powder and burning the square of cloth in the kitchen sink.

Now, pulling into Breden's only hotel car park, Sophia realised she wasn't thinking straight. If the caller had been Ilse, there were plenty ways she could have known Petrus was back. The same group that had cleared evidence from the Berlin Stasi headquarters would be doing the same here. Whether cleaning up people or files, they looked after their own. Just like those scent jars, Ilse's past could never be forgotten. If the Western authorities found out about the doctor's additional work as a Stasi informer, she'd never work in Germany again. Had she rung to tell Petrus to keep quiet? Could Ilse be found? Did she work in a surgery or hospital; would she be sitting at home now with her perfect husband and children who knew nothing? Should Sophia find her? Because she could if she chose to. She could hunt her down; make her life a misery of questions that might result in her ruin: a suitable end for a predatory woman who had destroyed her mother's life. No. That was wrong. The damage had been her father's doing. He was the one who had actively sought female companionship. Scheming or otherwise, the blame for Dagmar's heartbreak lay with him. Like Diertha's cheaply bought scent, Ilse's choice of perfume had sealed itself in Sophia's mind: a sharp, yet sweet echo of her father's desire. If she saw her father's lover, she was certain she would know her.

## CHAPTER SIX



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Far out at sea, two green-finned mermaids laughed, combed their black hair and gossiped - which was the brightest coral to wear? What was the best way of braiding seaweed?

“Shut up,” Sophia mumbled and tried to turn over. How could a bed be so uncomfortable? The fitted sheets were tight enough to make her feel like a tinned sardine. Just before dawn the mermaid faces darkened against the endless rise and fall of the ocean. One looked very much like Maria. They began to ask questions, questions that bothered her. Come on, the Maria mermaid mocked, open the envelope, read the letter, stop pretending. *Think*.

Petrus had known all along that Dagmar was ill and he hadn't told her. Why had he kept her mother's illness a secret? Mia's arrival had been the surprise; not Dagmar's cancer. He was a doctor and doctors were trained to heal, weren't they? Her father changed from a handsome distant man, to a dark and sinister shadow. A man with limitless, cruel patience - someone she didn't want to know. Someone who had done nothing to help her mother, until it was too late.

Thank god first light brought with it reassuringly human chatter. Through the slightly opened window the cooks and cleaners could be heard organising their morning: who was doing what, how many guests were staying in the hotel? There'd been a complaint about the lack of towels.

“What about this bloody bed?” The bedclothes gave just enough for her to turn on the side lamp as the question about who knew they were in Breden was answered. Obvious really. She'd used Dagmar's name in her reservation, because Künstler was also her name. Anyone who wanted to know, anyone who recognised that name, would know they were here.

It was still too early to ring the house. She'd call room service and ask for coffee, cream and lots of sugar. It was the very least they could do after providing her with such a bad night's sleep. Fortified, she'd open the final letter.

A migraine waited, a spider in its lair, predicting when best to attack by the slow beat at the base of her skull. Great. Life couldn't get any better. There wasn't time to be ill; so another image would have to replace spiders and pain, a lighter picture. A cactus opening to the sun? That solitary flower she'd seen in miles of white sand during her one holiday: a painting trip to the Sahara. Might help: anything was worth a try. Even now the thought of white sand dunes warmed her. Memory though. Nothing else. Bringing any of that whiteness home, and onto a canvas, had proved impossible. The colours had changed from molten gold to cool water, and frustratingly, layer after layer of turquoise and green had appeared. She'd ended up painting her usual ocean with no hint of white sand.

She needed caffeine and gallons of water. Even better: a new brain. The young voice on the end of the receiver told her, yes, they were attending to her request. Although, didn't madam realise the time?

No one called her *madam*.

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Each sheet of paper (there were five) had the stamp 'Ministry for State Security' printed clearly on the top right corner. Stasi documentation. Why was Maria sending her information about Sophia's first swim school: 'Werner Seelenbinder', her father 'Dr. Künstler' alongside the codename: 'Romeo'?

She checked again knowing that 'Romeo Complex' was the name she'd found years ago, in her father's drawer. The code she'd assumed was the name for a honey trap. She remembered her trembling hands. That awful photo. The drawer closing as she struggled with the key. Her father calling. Anxiety so all-consuming it rendered her unable to ever look again.

The idea of Petrus having 'Romeo' as codename was bizarre. He may have *worked* at the adjoining 'Seelenbinder Sports Centre'. Okay, he'd been a sport's doctor while she was first training to swim. However, turning into an agent? Working for the Stasi? Calling himself '*Romeo*'?

Dr. Ilse Hammerman's name was also listed next to 'Seelenbinder'. Her initials followed by: 'Informer on Special Mission'. Ilse hadn't just been an informer, she'd been trained and paid to spy for the Stasi. She hadn't been in any way disconcerted to meet the young Sophia. Rather the meeting had been planned. Ilse would have kept tabs



on whoever Sophia talked to, her training partners at swim club, Maria and all her friends at school. Ilse would have known everything about Petrus and Dagmar's sham of a relationship. Dagmar's mood swings and her overwhelming depression. She'd have known when Sophia and Petrus left the GDR. And that didn't make sense. Ilse could have had them stopped and brought back. Why hadn't she?

Sophia's hands were shaking. Back inside that time of tribulation, she saw Ilse bending over her desk, hair falling like golden rain across her shoulder, writing her report; a meticulous noting of Sophia's, Dagmar's and Petrus's lives. Her delicate left hand shaping the letters in her spiky left-sloping script, listing the names of who had come to visit them and why. How many people would have suffered at the hands of that report?

Outside her window the town slept on. Sophia was fiercely glad to have escaped years ago. To have left the East Germans to their own complicated game of hide and seek. A twisted version that had no end and, she supposed, no clear beginning. It had begun so gradually. That first mirage of independence, after the war, so appealing: a socialist regime, one that looked after its own, with a father figure to guide them all. She glanced at the last, thankfully unknown name: 'Herr Schenke. Codename Wolf', and moved on.

'Research Programme 08 - State Planning Theme 14.25' brought with it a familiar panic, a sensation not felt in years. Come on, she told herself, stop being silly. That name was just another title for the 'GDR Sports Association'. An organisation wholly in the past, one of many items firmly cut from memory. The taste in her mouth was metallic, bitter. The heading: 'Training and use of supportive means in order to increase performance' drove her to dash and spit in the bathroom sink.

When Sophia wasn't winning each race, they'd given her pills. Vitamins, they'd said, to make her stronger, but everyone had known the pills were no ordinary vitamins.

The injections came later. Nail biting rushes of pure adrenaline and a sensation of unlimited power. She wondered, not for the first time, how the other athletes lived. Did they, like her, go dancing; need the rush of amphetamine, the heady mix of sex and wildness? Or had they managed to settle into absolute normality?

After the heading came the list of athletes' names. Fourth from the top was hers. The paper rustled in her hand. Her head hurt. She would put everything back. Reseal the envelope? Mark it, 'Addressee Unknown'. Post it. End of.

Bloody, *bloody* Maria. Interfering cow. Calling up from the sink of her memory poor muscle-bound Diertha, grunting her way through weight training, through each sexual encounter, laughing by the lake's edge, drinking, taunting Sophia until she joined in and took a swig on the bottle of beer, Schnapps, cheap wine: anything Diertha could get her hands on. Any memory of her former room-mate's cruelty had been distorted by her untimely death. So it was in deference to her that Sophia cautiously made herself pick up the second sheet.

'Ministry for State Security' had been abbreviated to: 'MfS'. 'File' was easily translated as 'Akte'. Okay, so this Stasi file contained details of a 'discussion' between Herr Schenke and Dr. Künstler.

Wolf and Romeo? She'd laugh if she wasn't so scared. Two middle aged men pretending they were something special.

Herr Schenke/Wolf, reported that the Stasi had two angles of persuasion with which to secure Romeo's medical services. One: the daughter was a potential GDR star swimmer. Two: photographic evidence of agent Ilse Hammerman and Dr. Künstler during intercourse. Eww. Her mind slid from the word 'intercourse' in the same sentence as 'father'; tried to focus on something, anything, else.

The Stasi had used Sophia's growing success to get at her father. It had been Ilse who had mattered so much that Petrus compromised his family to keep her. That knowledge hurt deeper than it should. He would have known that Ilse was more than a doctor. Informers had been relatively easy to sniff out, if you knew what to look for and, by then, he'd known exactly what to look for. Not by choice she had the photo in her mind: her naked father moving above the lithe and beautiful Ilse, her flushed breast appearing so fragile, when the woman was most certainly not.

"Well, *Romeo*," Sophia muttered. "Bet you didn't like it when Juliet left you."

The report stated that Dr. Künstler would begin work at 'Sport Club Dynamo One', Sophia's second training school. If the arrangements went to plan – he would take on additional duties at 'Sonnenberg'.

The hair of the back of her arms stood up. Not suited to water, in death Diertha had appeared lumpen on the surface of Sonnenberg Lake, a drowned mermaid, something other than human. Another image: the razorblade Sophia had kept so many years ago. Would it still be there? Waiting. In-between the seat fixing and wall of the changing room. The memory was no longer distant, but like yesterday. That blade, her true friend, tucked away, secret and safe as she swam; tightening her arm curve, learning how to manipulate hand flow. Now she imagined it rusting into the wooden seat. The metal would have marked the concrete wall, leaving a brown square stain. That stain: the only proof she had of being that girl.

Through the hotel window the sky was black, as if all the signs of daybreak had been imagined. If only she had a real friend, one she could confide in; ask for help, even advice, because right now she didn't know what to do. Phone Hajo? He *had* offered. Though rather than the support she so needed: someone who'd listen, hold her – tight: like he'd never let go, Hajo would demand details, details she couldn't give. Names, addresses, numbers and lists (preferably ticked); not a kaleidoscope of jangled-up knowing but not knowing.

She'd go running, even though it was still dark. Running was like being with a friend, the steady rhythm a settling thing. She'd think about the contents in the envelope, and why it had been sent to her. The names and drugs were only one part of 'Theme 14.25', the monster the GDR had created. Under each layer of code and subterfuge, an abomination hunkered.

Hajo would laugh at that idea, and she couldn't bear that. He'd say she was crazy, because there was no part of the beast that could be easily explained; no part of it that had ever been written to be legible.

Her migraine wasn't waiting any longer. It dug in its teeth, pain winding up her neck into her eyes. Let it come, do its damndest. Drinking the oversweet coffee in one gulp, she dressed. She was still going running.

Outside the air was cold and damp, promising yet another grey day. A perfect morning for curses, the ones kept for running on grim days like these. Curses that made her believe she wasn't as driven or as lonely as she was. In the desert: one moment there had been complete stillness, the next, raging storms. The forecast over Berlin was never

so dramatic. Clouds seemed to idle over the city, brown with pollution and dust. Eventually they would drift on to Potsdam, or further to Warsaw.

The previous evening she'd kept to main roads and circled the hotel, silently damning the place, her father, Mia, Dagmar, life in general, but really (honestly) feeling deliciously drunk on the wonderful quiet of the rural town. So today it made perfect sense to find and follow the Weisse Elster River.

Apart from the hotel staff and two drivers who gawked as they passed, there was no one about. Focussing on avoiding potholes, Sophia reached the river's edge. There, stretching out ahead was the footpath. She sighed. The tight air simply melted away. Running was better than having a friend because, rather than chatter, it offered solace.

Sophia ran, not analysing the pile of unquiet paperwork left on the bed, thinking instead about Mia. Were they related in some way? Mia certainly wasn't the child of a distant make-believe aunt. Whoever she was, they needed to find someone to look after her. Dagmar wasn't capable. Ought one to feel sadness, loss, something, *anything* – knowing that her mother was dying? There was only the thud of Sophia's feet against the ground, and a dry heat behind her eyes. The migraine was following. She'd have to take pills and soon.

Her father would find someone suitable to babysit Mia. Finding willing female assistance came naturally to him. He liked company as much as he craved adoration. Sophia had been farmed out to an ever-expanding list of female friends, every one of them kept wanting as he played them, showering them with gifts and (she shuddered) romantic gestures until they did whatever it was he asked. Even though Petrus never gave more than he was planning to, she'd put a lot of effort into making them suffer, even developed a knack for it: like father, like daughter.

Crossing the Elster via a narrow bridge - the thought blindsided her: Mia. Mia could be Petrus's daughter. She tripped, grabbed at the wooden railing. A *sister*? Sophia laughed, leaning on the rail to get her breath back. Dagmar and Petrus? No way. Not possible. She looks nothing like me, she thought, not at all, in no way.

The path on the far side of the bridge looked deliciously welcoming. Weeping birch grew on either side, tall and green, stretching up to where fir trees grew and thickened into a silent forest.

Ilse would never have carried Petrus's child. Nor would Dagmar have agreed to care for Mia if she was Ilse's daughter. Or would she? Dagmar had been brought up as a Lutheran. The idea of abortion, or adoption, would have thrown up uncomfortable questions.

The bridge was familiar. This spot by the river was a place from childhood, a well-known sloping hill and, of course, the slow muddy water. One overhanging, moss-laden weeping birch was leaning, about to fall (she remembered it standing). She stood, breathing in the past as the sky brightened, unfolding a pale blue layer that seemed, this early in the day, to be streaked with a mushroom grey.

Leaning further over the rail, peering into the darkness under the bridge, Sophia barely registered the impulse before climbing over and sliding down the embankment. A boxlike shape, with wooden slats and a drooping door, leaned precariously against one of the bridge supports. Sophia paused, thought back to Tiergarten Park. Why was she doomed to stumble on homeless piss-artists living inside makeshift cardboard boxes? Skirting the shelter, following the muddy path under the bridge to the furthest side, she clambered upward, feet slipping through sludge. This was the place, by the main birch root. Leaning forward stretching one hand round the base – there, perfectly intact, between the bark and the stone wall, was Jörg Schöller's informer's mail-drop – disguised to look like a wooden bird box.

She craned around to look inside, but the angle was wrong and her feet weren't steady. There might be a report. A note would be useful, just to prove that things were how she remembered. Carefully she inserted two fingers. The box was wet, slimy, and empty. Still, she'd known it was there.

Above her were the branches they'd climbed to watch Maria's much hated brother Jörg fumble in his pocket for a pack of cheap American cigarettes, payment for his vigilance. He'd check he was alone. Quick glance to the right and left, puff on his fag before strutting up and down in what he imagined was true Stasi style: thin chest out, knees high, chin jutting. Slicking back his overlong hair, Jörg would preen to an invisible mirror and finally stuff his latest report in the box as they, Sophia and Maria, shook with silent laughter high above him in the branches. Should his mother have caught him, there'd have been hell to pay.

A noise (a twig snapping?) made her slip and land awkwardly on one knee. The occupant of the cardboard box had woken. The fact that Sophia was alone wasn't a concern. She'd dealt with so many of the city's homeless, but somehow, because this was a place from her childhood, a well remembered playground, she felt unnerved, out of sorts as if she had no jurisdiction, no power to arrest or move the vagrant. The man swayed, slipped and reached for the wall of the bridge in an effort to stay upright, and began to laugh, a rich phlegm-infected rumble that had her wincing, looking sideways. Not a threat, just an unpleasantness, and one she routinely avoided.

"Thought there was something in there did you?" He coughed; made a big deal of clearing his throat before spitting deliberately near her foot. "Well, no one's left anything for months. So fuck off."

Sophia nodded. He was right, nothing here apart from filth and decay. She slid past and clambered back up the slope towards the bridge, pausing at the top to half-climb, half-haul her way back onto the path. Forget the damn woods, forget the run. Head back to the hotel, take pills and consider: stay, or get in the car and go home?

Twenty minutes later, as she shivered in the narrow bathroom waiting for the water to heat, the phone rang. She snatched a towel and dashed through to the bedroom, stubbing her toe on the leg of the bed. *Shit*. Hajo. How could he have known she needed him? Wait. He had no such idea. All he said was that Chief Inspector Martin Rathmann would meet her in the reception of Breden police station. Friday, nine a.m. Thank goodness she hadn't blurted anything out. She was to take an overview of the station and report directly back to him. Friday? She was supposed to stay until *Friday*?

"Are you alright?" Hajo asked. "Sophia, is there anything else you need to know?"

He'd be rubbing a hand through tired hair, leaving long stubble ridged like wiry question marks; burly shoulders would be leaning against the back of his chair as he chewed on a pencil. Tell him, don't tell him? The contents were back in their envelope. Out of sight, out of mind.

"Overview?" Sophia asked. "What do you mean by overview?"

"Well, you grew up with these people." Hajo yawned loudly into the receiver.

*These people?*

“You want me to spy on them?” She could only hope her disappointment and the irony of the request came across.

“What? Oh come on! Just ask Martin for whatever you need. There won’t be problem. He’s an old friend, from training college.”

There was a crackling sound. Damn, she’d sat on the envelope. The paper was warm and basin-shaped from the indentation of her bum. A corner of one sheet had ripped. It read ‘Ministry for State Sec’.

An old friend? Hajo was going to trust an old friend who’d grown up in this town? Her toe was bleeding. Her head hurt. Bloody Hajo. Why couldn’t he come to Breden and do his own arcane inspection? He and his ‘old friend’ could talk about old times together; they could put the world to rights. Martin could be asked to inform on his colleagues – she wouldn’t have to.

Maria was an old friend. Maria had sent this letter. It seemed like a very good idea to dump the papers on the floor and lie down. The shower was running. In a few moments the water would be hot enough to loosen knotted muscle. Could she *really* survive here until Friday?

## CHAPTER SEVEN



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Gerda was in one of her moods. As soon they got to school, she flounced across the car park and ran up the stairs to the main hallway to catch up with beaky-nose, yucky-mouthed Käthe. Tessa: who did everything Käthe told her to do, made a rude sign at Mia who trailed slowly behind. As they stood outside the classroom waiting to go in, Gerda deliberately turned away.

On their way to school, Gerda had said she was going to ignore her all day – because Mia had gone to Berlin without her. Mia had stared out of the window and imagined the hours turning into a day, a week, a whole term where she wouldn't have a best friend. Better to disappear quietly, without a fuss. Be totally unnoticeable. What made it worse was that they'd had so much fun last night. Hardly sleeping – just talking. Gerda's mum pausing outside the door every so often; meaning they had to shove their giggling red faces into the old smelly cushions.

Waiting by the classroom door, ignoring the treacherous heat building behind her eyes, she thought rather fiercely about Berlin and the things she'd *not* told Gerda. How she'd cried, instead of being brave. How the park had seemed spooky – although it had just been damp and dirty. She'd lied, saying that Sophia had been nice. Making up how she'd been invited into her apartment and asked a million questions about Oma, and her home town. It had sounded so much better that way.

It was maths, and maths was easy. The numbers fitted together into neat solutions with clear answers. Herr Stringer said she was a good student and, well, it was great to be good at *something*. Mia walked over to a desk as far away from Gerda and the others as she could and sat on her own, ignoring their thick headed whispers. Best to pretend today was just another day.

As the teacher began to talk, Gerda sidled away from Käthe to come back to sit by Mia. She whispered: “You missed the *worst* homework,” and dug her elbow into Mia's side. It really hurt. Mia shoved her back even harder, and just like that everything was all right and they were friends again.



Mia had woken really early, thinking, deciding that Oma was going to get better. Before Gerda starting chattering, she'd thought up a list. First, and most important, Petrus had to stay - he was a doctor and he could make sure that Oma had the right medicine. Second, because it made sense, Oma would get better. And third, when Oma was better, Petrus could go back to Berlin. Fourth, Sophia. The problem was it was difficult to decide whether she was Nasty Woman any more. Maybe not, because of the dragonfly brooch, and the thing that had happened in Oma's kitchen. It was like Sophia knew when Mia was feeling upset. Not only that, she knew what to do about it. Weird. None of that mattered because today she would find a place to talk to Petrus, alone.

The teacher told them to get out their books and turn to page twenty-one. Division? easy-peasy. Mia touched the dragonfly hairgrip. Gerda had hassled like crazy to borrow the second one but Mia had said *No Way*.

Oma had explained that Mia was family, although never really how or where she came from. If Mia asked her too often she just said 'how lucky they were because they had each other and that should be enough', and off she went into one of her long silences.

What about her birth certificate? How daft not to have thought of it before. She'd find it and she'd know.

Herr Stringer was collecting in last week's homework. He paused by Mia's desk, smiled and welcomed her back. They'd all missed her, he said. Yeah right, a likely story. Mia smiled politely, and bent down to fill out the answers in her book.

Gerda had actually *done* her homework. Mia waited until she'd handed it in with a dramatic flourish, Herr Stringer sighing as he took the messy scrap of paper.

"Gerda," she whispered. "Have you ever seen your own birth certificate?"

"No. Don't be stupid! Why?"

Before the Wall came down it was different; even Gerda did her work, and at the start of each day the class had to stand as their teacher marched in. He would call out: "For Peace and Socialism, are you prepared?"

They had to reply: "Yes, always prepared."

God, thinking about it now was so embarrassing. Mia was sure they were the only people in the world to have done such moronic things. Gerda had always made a face, screwing up her eyes, sucking in lips while Mia had kept her expression blank,

mouth tight. You got into real trouble if you made fun of stuff like that. She looked down at her book. Finished. Best to re-check though, just to make sure. Gerda chewed her lip: her exercise book was covered in inky blotches and streaks where she'd half-heartedly attempted to write (mostly the wrong) solutions.

There were new questions on the board. Nudging Gerda, Mia placed her book sideways. Gerda began to copy furiously as Mia slowly wrote out the new exercises. Gerda was only lazy because Elke, like so many mums, worried so much. She worried about *everything*. Was the weather too hot or too cold? Did Gerda's room need cleaning again? Should Gerda walk to school or catch the bus? She went on and on about school work, probably because it might be too much for Gerda to actually *do* some work. Imagine having her as a mother! Oma wasn't like that at all. She didn't freak out at the smallest thing, like not cleaning her room or eating in the sitting room. In fact, recently she'd not been bothered by anything other than trying to get up in the morning, or trying to cook supper.

The thought just sneaked in, uninvited, treacherous. What if Oma was really ill? What if she were going to die? There would be no one to look after Mia. No-one at all. They might give Oma the wrong medicine. Hook her up to the wrong machine. Give her an injection she didn't need, the injection they gave to old people that doctors couldn't be bothered to treat.

Her pencil had drawn dark squiggles across the page. Gerda stopped writing and stared. The stupid pencil gave a dry crack and snapped. The numbers on the page blurred - eight became zero, four dissolved, and from a long way off she heard Gerda say: "Herr Stringer. There's something wrong with Mia." The teacher was putting his hands on her shoulders, gently pulling her to her feet saying: "Perhaps you should go and see the nurse?"

Everyone stared. Mia heard Käthe giggle just as their teacher told her to be quiet, and the class to get on with their work.

The corridor was silent. Mia's shoes squeaked all the way to the girl's toilet. No way was she going to turn up at the nurse's room crying like they used to in primary school, even though the toilets were awful. They'd been built for little kids and hadn't changed even when the primary and secondary school was split into separate buildings. Mia could reach over the top of the doors. If you *had* to pee, you had to squat on the toy

seat and risk having someone haul themselves up and peer down at you, laughing, making gagging noises. Worst was if you had your period. If that happened, you could go to the nurse's room and ask to use theirs, but of course then everyone knew.

She leaned over the baby size sink and ran cold water over her hands, face and neck. It was no good, she just couldn't stop crying. Mia counted to ten, twenty, fifty. She thought of song lyrics, rhymes – anything. Whispered the words to '*Das Wandern ist des Müllers Lust*' twice, but that didn't help. In the end she sat on the floor with her head between her knees and sobbed. What to do? Phone Oma? Get Petrus to come and collect her from school? Phone Sophia? Sophia would come if she were asked. Somehow she just knew she would. It would be all right if she could just go home. Oma was probably already in the hospital. Petrus had said they were going straight away, so there really was no one.

Somewhere in the crying, the door opened. Gerda was holding her tight, saying everything would be all right. Mia hugged her back and tried to believe what she said as a new voice, clear and icy – *like Sophia's* – told her to stop being childish: nothing would ever be the same again.

"You really need to blow your nose." Gerda leaned away, peering in the mirror to check that no concealed spot was about to erupt, red and inflamed, in amongst her already pitted skin. She scowled. "Mia, you can stay with us you know."

Mia tried to smile. She'd give anything to go home and hide in her bed, in her own room and pretend that everything was quiet and safe. Gerda's room was jangly, a total mess of makeup, concealer, hairbrushes and face lotion, chucked all over the place as Gerda went from one fashion extreme to the other. Mia would rather die than tell Gerda she liked having stuff folded away – neat and tidy.

She opened the door but paused, looking back at Gerda busily squeezing a zit.

"I'm going to ask Nurse to call Sophia. She'll come and get me, I know she will. She'll take me to the hospital. D'you want to come?" Gerda would say no, no one wanted to sit for hours in a room that smelt of pee and disinfectant.

They went together to the nurse's office, Gerda obviously happy in the knowledge that she was missing the rest of maths. As they walked down the corridor, she began doing an incredibly daft imitation of Herr Stingy telling Käthe to be quiet.

“*Sei ruhig!*” she hissed, waving her arms, eyes bulging from her sockets, and Mia choked out a laugh.

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Sophia smiled her version of friendly at the young couple sitting by the main window that looked out to a narrow cobbled street. The hotel breakfast-room had been redecorated, leaving a faint tang of fresh paint. Perhaps as a way of showing new guests how much had changed since the Wall came down?

The couple greeted her with nods and smiles, continuing to eat as Sophia chose a table by a different window, as far away as possible without seeming rude.

She’d slept, sprawled on the top of the bed with the shower running. Now it was mid-morning and she’d only just managed to convince the hotel staff to let her in to the breakfast room by pointing out the two lovebirds were still eating. Through the window, just to the right, the street opened out into a rustic, pretty market place. Although there was no market today, the shops surrounding the square were busy. The couple whispered, leaning close. How *sweet*. The young man, apple cheeked with severely combed-back pale (almost white) hair, spread soft cheese onto a corner section of toast. He offered it to his love. The dark haired girl giggled. She tried to sneak it back towards him with: “Don’t be such a silly.”

Her milky skin and a sharp nose contrasted rather oddly with her soft brown eyes. The young man tried it again and they laughed, glancing sideways at Sophia, who pretended not to notice how young they were and how doltishly in love. They were just like children playing with a sparkly new toy. New toys were easily dented; they broke, or simply lost their dazzle. She helped herself to rolls, ham, and a miniscule bowl of what looked like strawberry jam and played her favourite game of pretend. The one in which she was a person who travelled the world. Someone who was, at this very moment, waiting for her husband to come down to breakfast: a model husband of course, one who never lost his sparkle. There would be a different life, a better one, full of friends, fun and laughter – perhaps even love. Hajo’s grey eyes, keen and searching, made her belly hot with a longing she didn’t want to explain.

A warning voice breathed in her ear: careful, don’t lose yourself like the time before. Keep to the straight and narrow. Stick to the rules. Rules are good; they keep you safe and moving forward.

What, she wondered, gazing out at the street, would it be like to rest her body against Hajo's backbone, to hold tight, be one part of two, a half that needed the other to be whole. Like a half of an orange, or a lemon without a skin? That was an oafish idea. It was far too easy to be hurt if you had no skin. She'd be a fruit with skin *and* thorns and, rather than thinking of love, she'd think about work and do what every other police officer would do: tell Hajo about the letter. Sooner or later he'd find out and, because he was a stickler for rules, she'd lose his trust and life wouldn't be worth living. He'd trusted her to be a capable officer, shown her how to take criticism and when not to snap as others laughed, or teased her. Somehow he had become a beacon. A point to which she turned, knowing that his was the right way.

She'd buy a logbook and note down dates and events as they'd occurred. Investigate the case just as the police would have done at home. Create a time-line. Link memories by writing them on to paper. Maria's letter would simply be part of the investigation.

The couple were leaving and, on cue, staff in white aprons began clearing the breakfast buffet, whisking trays and baskets through the double doors into the kitchen.

There had been nothing out of the ordinary during the weeks leading to the arrival of the first letter. Nothing. The momentum had begun with that first innocuous little white envelope. She'd been so naive, not looking at the handwriting, leaving it unopened, imagining (heart catapulting), that the letter came from her mother.

A slim young woman with a razor sharp blonde bob moved energetically across the dining room, heading over towards Sophia with a neatly folded note in her hand. Apologising for the disturbance, she explained there'd been a call from the secretary at Town School 13. Someone called Mia Künstler was in the school sickroom. She needed collecting. Was it possible that Frau Künstler could go?

With renewed purpose, Sophia crossed the square to the newsagent and bought a blue notebook and matching pen. Rules were wonderfully simple. As were lines with clear endings or full stops that held the endless shifting tide at bay; the tide that threatened to pull her down into chaos. It was a simple task to write a list of events. Later the list would help to work everything out. Now all she had to do was draw a firm line under the first heading: 'Maria's Bloody Letters', collect Mia and get on with her investigation.

Could there be anything simpler than the well-remembered bus route to school? She'd drive the car across town, turn right at the town hall, take the main road and turn left into the school car park, collect Mia from the sick room and head to the hospital.

Every turning that should take her to the school twisted through unknown backstreets into new housing estates where one block of flats followed another. As she crawled along a street, peering out of the window for anything that looked like a road sign, a heavy-set woman in a pale lavender housecoat leaned out of her window and shouted, "Clear off!" Sophia turned and parked directly beneath the window, leaned out and stared up at the house until the woman ducked inside and shut the window with a bang. Sophia laughed. Better to mock them. To be more as she really was. Fearless. Strong. She leaned back and closed her eyes, tracing her childhood route. Petrus, harassed, already late - telling her to hurry up; Dagmar, holding out a mid-morning break. Cake or biscuits?

The memory of a kiss? Her mother's lips whispering against her hair? That had never happened, had it?

Close the front gate. Turn right. Cross over the road. She began driving in the direction she imagined was correct. Recognised the turn and took the shortcut via Maria's house. No way was she going to look at the sweetshop, nor glance at her friend's home. She didn't need to trace that time before; there were no similarities now to the girl she'd been whose life revolved around swimming. Mermaids shed their skin only once to become human, didn't they?

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Stuck in a sea of concrete, with a flat roof that filled with water in the winter and smelt of dead things in the summer, Town School 13 was exactly as remembered. At the furthest side of the car park, silver birch trees grew. Her story trees: reaching up so much higher than before.

In her final summer at primary school, the teachers, too exhausted to conjure up adventurous themes, had told them to paint or draw one aspect of their school life. Sophia had covered the page with earthy brown before drawing grey and silver tree-roots stretching for miles under the school's concrete icing. The idea had developed, as they skipped and played, because the adults had seemed as distant as the moon. They'd talked in pairs or tight white clusters. She'd painted her people white because they were

quiet and frightened. To give them somewhere safe she'd drawn the grownups an underground world, sketching the groups a way to communicate by linking tree roots so that people, like the trees, could have silent, private conversations. The teacher hadn't liked it. She'd placed the picture on the homework table and, as everyone's work went on display, Sophia's disappeared. Eventually she'd spied her trees branching out from the classroom bin.

Sophia stretched, hands reaching up to the sky, spine snapping. "Bloody teachers."

In the entrance hall, the same low table and three apricot-coloured chairs sat on a circle of brown carpet, an island in an ocean of linoleum. On the table stood the ever-present flower display; each petal bristling. Woe betide any student who came too close. High on the facing wall hung portraits of past headmasters. Each moustached face gazed into space, looking important and serious. Maria had made rude faces at them. Sophia glanced round; screwed up her face and poked out her tongue.

The sharp featured receptionist didn't seem to need a name. She glanced at Sophia who had her hair tied back as usual, black boots done up tight, wishing belatedly that she'd worn her uniform.

"Mia Künstler," the woman said, inspecting her perfect manicure, "is on her way."

It was quiet, the kind of silence that descends only momentarily on a school. A hush that indicates all are doing what they're supposed to be doing. Mia had better hurry up. The thought of being in the building when the break bell rang was faintly terrifying.

Three full minutes crawled by, the clock-hand moving ominously nearer break-time. Right. Time to find Mia. She knew the way to the nurse's room; had been there often enough with bumps, bruises, and, occasionally, tears. Striding past the display boards, feet squeaking loudly, Sophia slowed and moved on with care, balancing on her toes. The displays were great, better than in her day when they'd had pictures of their leaders lining the corridor. Now a recent trip to Leipzig was presented as a story in photos. Outside St Nicholas Church, groups of children turned to the camera and stood, arms wrapped round each other, eyes searching for evidence (a chip in the wall perhaps from a bullet?) of the famous Monday demonstrations for freedom.

The last board glinted, caught her eye. A shimmering purple headline: 'Our Famous Students' listed the names of head girls and boys, was followed by the names and pictures of pupils who had gone on to do great things. Gudrun (*Gudi*) Neuberger had become a Professor of Biochemistry. Käthe Niedermann, Olympic discus thrower, crouched inside her ring, arms flexing, about to circle before hurling the disk. Sophia flinched, bit her bottom lip. Squeezed into tight Lycra, the GDR logo stretched across her chest, Käthe's muscled body made her look like a cartoon figure - a dancing hippo. Please no. For goodness' sake. Where had they found it? Stuck between photos of the two hundred metre runners, Padma and Miep, was a picture of Sophia and her father. Petrus was standing tall; as if the world were spinning on the axis of himself and the child. The girl held up a medal with ribbon. The medal glinted in the sun. She was smiling.

Sophia peeled the photo from the display. It came away with a sucking noise. The backing paper ripped as she tried to smooth it back into place. The folded picture fitted neatly into her trouser pocket.

Outside, the playground air was cool enough to calm hot skin. She gazed around: how everything had changed, but, at the same time, remained exactly the same.

The bell rang; a jarring drone. Children poured out of classrooms. Chattering and jostling, they raced to the canteen and further out into the playground. Sophia, arms by her sides, became an island in the tide. What if she moved sideways? A child's backpack dug into her back. Ouch. These weren't students, this was a rioting crowd. She couldn't bloody move, could hardly breathe, as ever more bodies careered from the building.

Four feet from her original spot, Sophia now faced a pale blue building with double doors. A teacher, wearing a dark jacket and contrasting green tie, emerged from one of the bungalows. To avoid being asked who she was, Sophia ducked inside the doors. This was the nurse's room, no question. Next to the toilets would be a door that opened to a waiting area and the sick bay.

The hallway was old and dry and *wrong*. A distant clicking from the other side of the double doors was followed by the smell of chlorine. The world tilted. The tingling sensation that had begun in her fingers now ran up both arms. She edged



sideways toward the second set of doors. Opened them and stared at blue and white tiles winking through a yawning expanse of white water.

She sat, head down, legs splayed on a moving floor, forcing breath in and out. Bright rippling water. The beefy red-veined face of her swimming coach. Hands clapping. Mother smiling. She was going to puke. Sophia crawled. Hunched over the toilet with its child-sized rim, she retched, listened: no sounds. No voices; just the click click of chlorine dripping into whiteness.

Sometime later, mouth rinsed, the tingling in her hands replaced by an almost welcome headache, she imagined the safe place, the place to hide, the room where everything was neat and tidy and made sense. Sophia tried to stand, but the world tipped sideways before tilting the opposite way as she edged along the wall, past the door, into the changing rooms. She counted: one, two, three, - stopping at the fourth cubicle to implore the world to stand still before she found the cramped seat, and fainted.

Child hands. Touching her. Someone was trying to suffocate her. At the same time those hands pulled her back from the comfortable nothingness. Sophia tried to swipe them away.

Mia's voice ballooned through the mist. "Stop being so dense and breathe into this," the Mia voice ordered, those delicate hands placing a paper bag around her mouth. Sophia breathed in a mouthful of breadcrumbs and spat.

"Bloody hell, get off." A crumb lodged itself in the back of her throat. She coughed. Someone was holding her hand. Mia. Sophia shook it away - only to have Mia grab it again.

Outside the cubicle the school nurse hovered and fussed: "Dear. I *am* the Nurse," she repeated, trying ineffectually to get the girl out of the way. Mia had somehow managed to get Sophia's trousers wet. The girl mopped the damp patch enthusiastically with a square towel. A pink flannel appeared. Mia placed it across Sophia's forehead; the cool of it was utter bliss.

"Mia. How long have I been here?"

"Ages. I was *waiting*, and some of my class found you. What were you doing?" Mia leaned closer, eye to eye. "Look. I'll let you sit here for a few minutes, but you're going to have to get up or they're going to carry you out in a stretcher." With that she vanished.

In that moment of stillness Sophia reached to the left, fingers inching down the crack that separated the bench from wall. Ah, there it was, rusting quietly in between the damp brickwork and cement.

The blade came away from its hiding place with little resistance, settling in her hand just as if it had finally come home.

## CHAPTER EIGHT



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Sonnenberg 1973

Glad to be alone, her body folded sideways on the narrow bench (feet high so no one would see them) Sophi relaxed into the smell of damp tiles, old urine and sweat. She let her head sink to her knees, waiting to make sure no one had noticed she'd stayed behind. The changing cubicle remained blissfully silent and warm, as if the narrow space was just for her. However, she was a child inside the body of a giant – and couldn't stretch out without either breaking through the door or reaching high over the cubicle wall.

The cleaners were mopping the pool sides with Wolfasept: a mixture of bleach and soap. Soon they'd move on to the men's changing room, leaving (as if by prior agreement) her private space until last.

As the overwhelming smell of bleach drifted in through the main door, Sophi raised her head, sniffing the familiar scent, the scent of the place that had become home. Soon she'd shower. As long as they were out *there*, she was alone with no surveillance, no one watching or listening – free and silent as the stars.

She flexed her broad shoulders round and back, pulling back bone, moving thick muscle, as much as the space allowed; placed her feet on the floor. Next to her sat a box of plasters. Innocently skin-coloured, they were her secret companions, accompanying her where no one else could. Sophi lifted the box. Shook it gently. Only three left; somehow she'd have to get more. Her fingers were thick and clumsy as she fumbled to take one out. A prickle of tension began at the base of her neck and she reminded herself: it's all right – you're made of saltwater and speed: a torpedo under the waves, inside the tide you can move through water. You're a dark mermaid.

The plaster slipped, floating towards the bench, falling through the gaps in the wood to the floor. In a flash, she seized it from the wet tiles just before the adhesive soaked up damp and became useless.

One of the cleaners had already moved to the men's changing room. Not long, she didn't have long. To her left, between the wall and the seat, was just enough space to keep and hide the blade. She wedged two fingers into the gap and the razor slid to her greedy fingers; ready to soothe, cut, let tension out.

There'd been another injection. The sting: needle-breaking flesh, heralding a wild roaring speed one hour later. Her trainer had smirked and preened, nodding to the others as she muscled through the water, making it clear she was a winner. The plans he had to ride on her success story were common knowledge. He'd been bragging about an even bigger car, a holiday abroad after the first International Swimming Federation Championship in Yugoslavia, and the whispered promise of a place in politics. Yes, he was happy letting her take more pills, working her even harder.

Sophi turned over her right arm, running fingers gently across the ridged scars that were healing; though not fast enough. She'd had sidelong glances from the other girls, and couldn't risk more attention.

The still damp swimming costume stuck to her back. It had become overstretched and worn with use, so she'd ask for another. Pulling down the straps Sophi looked at her breasts – pink perched jelly moulds with a thick brown raisin stuck on top. The muscle on her torso and arms took up so much room she could be anything between boy and girl. Her stomach was flat and toned, but a line of thick hair wormed down from her belly button; spreading a forest between her legs. She didn't look there. Maybe so much hair was normal - maybe. Other things happened there. Sometimes she swelled, grew hot, tingling so badly that she had to run, hide in the toilet and rub, tension rising, squeezing as she groaned. Heat bursting into her stomach and heart, making her cry out and moments later; weep.

She let others do that to her now: girls with clever fingers and tongues; wet and slippery, whispering or groaning. Boys and men that grunted and made crude promises as they prodded their *thing* hard up inside her.

Sophi was forgetting who she was.

Her period had started three months ago and she couldn't get used to the cramps that came with it, nor the strange object she was supposed to shove deep in there to hold her blood.

Thirteen years old and she thought she was going mad with wanting. She wanted to die, to live, run, dance, swim, never stop doing sex until she was loose and deliciously spent – and that never lasted.

Sophi traced a cut along her left breast, the thin slice releasing a trail of wet red bubbles. The bubbles popped across her skin, opening up a myriad of lilliputian streams that drifted towards her nipple. She sighed; this weave of metal on soft flesh was delicious, tension easing to a soft, gentle whisper.

Along with injections there were now even more pills. Pills that would stop her monthly bleed: their golden girl couldn't miss training, not for anything. Papa would know if they were going to make her ill. Papa was one of them so she knew it was all right. He said that *all* vitamins were drugs, some just stronger than others, although Sophi didn't like the injections that made hair grow on her face. Part of her whispered it was treacherous and wrong. Now whenever she went home she looked in his medical books and knew a little about what the special doctors and trainers were doing. Maybe Papa didn't know about the other things that happened, the secret things in the white room, underground, far away from the normal training centre.

Sophi slid her hand across the red cut, licked her finger, gently rubbing spit across the wound, cleaning away the blood. She cut another line just below and leaned back, eyes closed, swimming in a purple rapture.

Clumsy. Fast. She pulled the costume down to her thighs, drawing a finger through thick hair until it was inside her. The relief was instant, a long trembling shudder that had her gasping and crying out, hips dipping up and down as if the boy were there with her. She cried, tears dripping on her burning face. Bending down to pick up the wet costume, she wiped the last traces of blood from her breast and wrapped a towel round her, careful to not stain it.

The last cut was deeper than she realised. Sophi heard waves breaking on a stone beach, the grating pebbles heaving sand under foam. A hush as the white swill eddied and swung from left to right, milling, waiting for the next wave.

She woke slumped against the concrete wall, cold and pimpled, costume on the floor. There was someone tapping on the cubicle door, tentative but persistent. A woman's voice called "Are you all right?" In the distance came the echo of the same call, but this time it came from a voice used to being obeyed.

“Künstler, Sophia Künstler, *wo bist du?*”

She scrambled to her feet sick and shaking. “I’m right here, about to shower.”

Thank god. Her trainer slammed the outside door. He wouldn’t come in because the cleaning women were here. Sophi had a flash of his face above hers: red veins bulging. Lips tight. Eyes closed. Sweating. Panting.

She opened the door and stared into the eyes of the woman who stood, hand on her mop, about to knock again. Stare them down, she thought. Stare them down. The woman’s eyes slid to Sophi’s breasts and she swayed, put her hand over her mouth, eyes widening, backing away as the handle of the mop slapped against the floor.

Sophi closed the door and sat down again. It was all right. Everything was all right. She picked up the swimming costume and the nearly empty plaster box, placing the blade carefully back in its home; left the cubicle, walking calmly to the shower block. Eyes firmly on the ground as the woman mopped the floor. It suited them both to ignore what had happened. The code was simple: look after yourself, see *nothing*.

Calm, she dried and dressed. The plasters pulled a little as they held each cut together – healing. Now she was ready to face *him* with a plausible excuse.

The cleaning woman was crying. Sophi touched her shoulder, the crisp feel of dry cotton, comforting, unfamiliar, so far away from all she knew. She turned towards the dark music that evening was sure to bring.

## CHAPTER NINE



~

Over the years she'd tried hard to forget the man. His rapid, stale breath as he edged his tongue between her clenched teeth. He'd drive his penis inside her time and again so she bled. When she cried out he'd come: jerking, labouring. Grunts, wet gasps spilling from his open mouth, eyes closed, head back, his neck stretching up to the sky. She remembered the silver blade. The bite of that knife as it cut away hope, sliced away her childhood - leaving nothing but a machine that did her trainer's bidding. What, she wondered, absently picking up the ringing phone, could be so wrong about wanting a new life, clean of all that went before?

Hajo? The images collided. A blade. The man. Hajo. Sophia giggled. She never giggled. She held the phone at a distance, thankful that Hajo's voice was reduced to a tinny whine, and imagined diving into cool green water. There would be starfish and mermaids. She'd look for Diertha in-between the rocks and caves; find her and pull her to the surface. But there wasn't a way through the seaweed that thickened and putrefied.

Hajo was shouting, something about her being irresponsible, her behaviour unacceptable. Strange, he sounded more upset than truly irate. She'd withheld information - knowing that the information may have proved useful. If he'd only stop. She'd say of course she'd withheld information. It was, after all, hers to withhold. Why should he, of all people, need to know about her childhood desperation: the absolute need to cut flesh and let some of that tension ebb away? It was bad enough he now knew she had little love for her natural mother. This latest information would, almost certainly, paint her as an aberration in his eyes.

Now he was saying she'd compromised her position as an officer by not informing him about her involvement with the GDR sports association. The idiot didn't even pause, didn't think or consider that her homeland was the birthplace of whispers. Whispers heard through walls and keyholes, intimate knowledge that was collected and saved, to catch those who dared to run and run. Whispers, they had said, that would keep you safe - in a place where nowhere was safe.

He could officially warn, suspend. Fire her?

“Oh for god’s sake Hajo.”

A long silence. Perhaps he’d gone?

In the silence she realised. Yet again, she’d got it wrong. Silly slow-witted Sophia. Someone had told him about her letters. Hajo knew nothing about the razor blade.

“We had a call this morning, someone with information about your life in the GDR.”

She willed him to say: ‘Stasi connections and get it over with’.

“Believe it or not Sophia, I’m actually trying to help, so don’t go blabbing to anyone,” he said. “Do your inspection, OK? We’ll work out what to do when I see you.”

Blabbing? She formed her mouth to say something reassuringly irresponsible, even unacceptable, like *Screw you*, - but he’d hung up. Bastard! She stared at the phone, was this his weird way of saying he was concerned for her? as a true friend would be. She imagined Hajo’s mouth twitching into that knowing smile. In fact, she was convinced that he riled her on purpose at work, his sharp grey eyes lighting the minute she snapped. If they were in the station he’d walk away, just before throwing her a snarky comment that she’d have to swallow – because otherwise she’d call him a bastard, and he’d laugh like he’d won the battle. Still, the moody swing of his shoulders was a pleasure to watch, as was the way his hand always caught the door, just before it slammed shut.

It had to be Maria. Maria had contacted Hajo. She knew that Sophia was a police officer. She knew what Sophia had become. More importantly, she knew what Sophia had been. As she hadn’t responded to her letters, Maria had taken it on herself to call Hajo. Sophia pinched a layer of skin on her hand; it stayed ridged and dry like old leather.

Those dark nightmares had been dismissed as make-believe. The red faced man who stared from the edge of the pool, the one who had raped her, hadn’t been real. The smell of chlorine, so terrifying, had been explained as nonsense. Now, because of bloody Maria, she wasn’t sure. “Just won’t let it go, will you?” she murmured to her long ago friend.

Number one on the Hajo to do list was to ensure that there had been a complete removal of barbed wire from around the station. Barbed wire? Would a police station



need barbed wire? Two: the reception area had to be professional and welcoming. And three: police vehicles, Trabant P50 and P60, must be replaced with the latest Mercedes. Lovely, she'd have to traipse around looking at cars. Four: computers installed in April should be in full use with past service records updated.

That complicated everything. If new computers had been installed, a long trawl through old records and police logs would be needed, hours of painstaking work to find any sort of paper trail. Records that were too easily available would, almost certainly, be fictionalised - incriminating links carefully deleted or re-written to appear as innocuous codes. Thankfully Sophia knew how to read GDR acronyms. Her life had been recorded in code, each letter or number hiding the real name of the steroids that had made her invincible. The police had a habit of storing old paperwork for months, even years, before burning or shredding it. She'd have to find the storage place - you just had to know where to look. If Mr Rathmann really *was*, as Hajo imagined, straight as a die with no Stasi connections, he'd have no idea what records were worth saving. Far more likely that he wasn't, and had an interest in records (his included) being quietly burnt. He could start afresh; just as she had: changing from swimmer to police officer. Remembering only what was wanted, telling no one who she had been.

Sophia picked up her notebook. The name 'Maria' had been written five times across the front page, each instance circled by daisies. She drew a thick line through each annoying daisy, and turned the page to write 'Professional and welcoming'. The flowers remained visible though the thin paper. Come on, they whispered, *come back*. Her stomach felt bruised, being sick always did this. However, yesterday was yesterday and, despite longing for the safety of her apartment, she'd slept well.

In the drawer by the bed the ruinous blade waited. Picking it up, she gently ran a finger along the rusty pitted metal. Useless. The disintegrating alloy, just like the one at home, was singing the same strange song of pain and wild release, of deliciously silent places where no one ever found you. She rubbed her nail against the flat edge and sniffed. Unmistakable: miniscule particles of blood that had turned as dirty as brown rust.

Her past was slowly unravelling. As she tried to catch hold of it only portions emerged, bright and perfectly assembled: as a scene on the inside of a toy snowstorm shaker. No moment seemed to connect with the others so as to make sense - and she so

liked making sense. That was why it was vital that no one would ever know about the ancient secret relic. Or the new blade that sat, year in year out, in the bedside drawer in Berlin, a silver reminder that she was never ever going back to being a part of the machine that had moulded her from child to programmed athlete.

Yesterday, she'd left Mia's school as fast as was humanly possible. Not letting the nurse check her blood pressure or whatever it was she wanted to check. Mia's open mouth. The muttered, "Are you insane? You can't drive the car, you just *fainted*," had made absolutely no difference. No doctors or nurses, thank you. There had been quite enough of them *before*. Plus there were stronger medicines back in the hotel room, though amazingly any signs of the headache had gone.

The girl had been blessedly silent all the way to the hospital. They'd visited the pharmacy and gift shop to buy stomach settlers, a bottle of water and (reluctantly) a glossy knitting magazine for Dagmar. Mia had tried to convince Sophia to come to the ward. No, she'd catch her breath, drink water, and quietly ignore the fact that her mother was dying on the other side of the swinging doors.

She'd waited for Petrus and Mia as the late morning turned into midday, the corridor dark under the low hanging cloud. A nurse rushed round the corner with a pile of notes under her arm. The file on the bottom had tilted to show the words: 'Methylated Androgen'. Steroids.

A young girl, wild and feral, was pelting through the woods with a group of athletes whose feet streamed across the ground. Running until their lungs were about to burst. The young girl was *her*. The young Sophia climbed a tree, laughing as one or two joined her. Others mated – that was the only word for it, *mated* - by the tree roots, their gasps and groans making the others roar with laughter. The climbers leaped from the branches to rip young sapling trees from the ground with their bare hands. *Baumausrissen*, they'd called it. *Baumausrissen*. A test of who was the strongest.

Not prepared to sit and remember anymore she'd left the hospital. Surely Petrus and Mia could get a taxi? A brown file had been laid across the dip in the passenger seat inside her car. Dagmar's medical notes. Initially Sophia had thought that Petrus must have tried to find her and put the papers in the car – but he didn't have a key.

Now Sophia replaced the rusted blade in the bedside drawer and stared at her mother's file. There had to be something important in it, otherwise why go to all that trouble?

In July '75, the doctor had prescribed low-level painkillers; in November '76, antidepressants. Well, Christ, that was old news; Dagmar had always been on some kind of antidepressant. More appointments followed, closer together: February to May '77. The doctor's cautious notations described 'acute episodes of agitation' following 'necessary' interrogation. Stasi interrogation? Was this something Ilse had orchestrated after Sophia and Petrus left the GDR? Something to keep the Stasi focussed on a person other than herself? Had Dagmar been interrogated because Ilse laid the blame on her?

It was useless re-reading everything. The more she read, the angrier she became. Leaving the hotel she crossed the street to the bakery, slipped through the door and asked for two *Hörnchen*.

"The last two." A display of ready filled rolls was being laid out for lunch customers, alongside *Käsekuchen* and *Apfelstrudel*. The slim dark-haired baker tucked the shiny moon-shaped rolls into a paper bag with expert hands, then held them to her non-existent bosom like a forfeit, smile fixed firmly in place, readying, no doubt, for a long chat. Sophia paid and made a fast exit. Butter and sugar: simple perfection. She ate the first leaning against the shop wall, the second moments after. The trick was not to think about Maria, rather to concentrate on the cold air, petrol fumes and the bitter sweet scent of burnt coffee. Home: where the cobbled stone felt more solid than the concrete pavements in Berlin.

The shops were left behind as she strode through the old corn market and turned right to where Maria's house stood mid-terrace in a long line of grey. Each terrace was a mirror-image of front garden, neatly painted gate, and door. Behind the buildings, orderly vegetable gardens bordered onto a second terrace. The pattern continued all the way to the wooden summerhouses that would, at this time of year, be empty and cold, waiting for the warmer weather. The train track ran along the bottom of the Schöllers' house. Shame she wasn't wearing her trainers; it would have been so easy to turn tail and run past Maria's house, over the pedestrian crossing, up the pathway and away into the forest.

As children they'd raced from here to catch the bus. Maria winning (just that once) as Sophia's buckle snapped; the polished shoe sailing through the air in an almost perfect arc, to land smack bang in an oily puddle. The following moments of panic: Dagmar's anger, Petrus's disappointment, her panic. And lovely Maria bending over, choking with laughter as she fished the shoe out with an old stick.

Even as she turned to walk away, the lights in the hall came on and someone opened the door. This woman was a stranger. Maria had twisted into someone else: someone with a thick waist, a puffy face and skin the colour of an old tea bag. She wore a baggy blue faded sweater and cord trousers. The hem on the right leg had frayed. Worse, she'd cut her formerly amazing black hair dead short. Now all that remained were blunt ends of grey and white. Unbelievable. Aged twelve, Sophia had decided that when she grew older and stopped swimming, she would dye her own wispy middle-length hair jet-black: just like Maria's.

Staring: thirteen years of waiting stretched out between them.

Maria finally shrugged and began to turn, as if she were about to go inside. She paused, took a pack of cigarettes and lighter from her back pocket. Lit the tip, inhaled, and deliberately blew a long stream of smoke into Sophia's face. They'd promised each other they'd never smoke, *never*.

"Sophi, all grown up," she said. "Or is it Sophia?"

There was still time to walk away. Hand back the letter and Dagmar's file to this grotesque version of Maria and not look back, not once. She took a step back and saw something dark in her friend's eyes. Apprehension? Anger?

"Maria." She said, ignoring the twist of sympathy in her belly. "What on earth have you done to your hair?"

Maria wouldn't be scared of her, would she? The possibility was frankly ridiculous; she'd always been so much stronger. So able to joke or laugh about the things Sophia feared. Any moment now Maria's mother, Frau Schöller, would be there, dressed in her blue painter's smock, Short black hair that curled - no matter how she tried to make it straight. A sharp nose and wide mouth. She'd have a smudge of red or blue paint on her face. Kind, she'd given more love to Dagmar's daughter than her natural mother ever gave, and now she'd greet Sophia like a long lost friend - like her own. Sophia's heart was racing; her eyes brimmed; she'd talk to this second mother

about how her oil colours wouldn't lighten, how, when she tried to paint in gold, only blue arrived. She ached to hug Frau Schöller, even though normally she flinched from touching people, and Maria would be told to invite dear Sophi in and to stop looking like she wanted to kill her.

The narrow hall was, as always, lined with pictures: a silver wolf howled at a blood red moon. Sophia leaned closer: the delicate layering of oil was amazing. There were grey clouds and pale specks of rain, bright against the distant black and yellow glow that suggested thunder. Something was wrong. The wolf was staring with merciless eyes. Frau Schöller really should be there by now. Asking how she was, taking her hand, her arm, holding her, making her welcome – but there was only Maria standing in a kitchen surrounded by white walls stained with circles of brown mould. Worse: she was reaching, with the casualness of a long-time smoker, to light another bloody cigarette.

“Where's your mother, Maria? Has she moved away?” Sophia watched the smoke drift slowly towards the ceiling. She'd have to open a window or she'd start feeling sick again.

“She's been dead for years.”

Maria flicked ash into an old coffee cup. The damp in the room shifted, closing in.

“For god's sake Maria, why would you say such a thing?” Sophia pulled out a chair, sat down heavily and felt dizzy all over again, the world spinning uncontrollably as she tried to understand.

“Well, because it's true.”

Could she grieve more for this mother than her own? Eyes shut tight; Sophia pretended everything was as it should be. Never mind what happened here, she would forget it all and continue just as she had before. When she opened her eyes Maria was watching, her dark eyes troubled, holding out a boxlike square wrapped in worn tissue-paper.

“Mutti wanted you to have this before you disappeared over the border, without telling me.” She laughed, a sound like sandpaper on wood. “Some best friend you were.”

Sophia lifted one corner. The tissue paper crumbled. A silverfish darted out to weave round her wrist and she squealed.

Maria laughed, and - just like that - thirteen years melted away, leaving them flushed and awkward, glances meeting only to slide away. This was a dangerous weakness. A long-ago friendship, filled with joy, turned to grief. The connection would be better broken. Or else it might reform into something new and difficult to control. Sophia turned the gift the right way up. The painting was perfect; the differences were only there when you really looked. Frau Schöller's artistic style, her flair, was in her confident brush-stroke and a use of colour Sophia could only dream of.

A blue mermaid swam with a shoal of angelfish: a guardian in the deep water. The seaweed drifted and spun, and look - just there, around the black outline of a rock, was a second mermaid hiding. Sophia was crying, dripping onto the picture. She'd ruin it if she didn't stop.

"Come on Sophi. Look, I'm sorry. I should have told you in one of the letters, but it didn't seem right, plus you never answered." Maria placed a mug of black tea on the kitchen table. She sat close by, as if she wanted to reach out to her old friend. "You do remember how ill you were? Your father wouldn't say what was wrong."

There'd been yet another abortion. Pain, red and deep inside her stomach. A wet bruising that wouldn't ease. Sophia remembered sinking; disappearing inside the bruise. Being bundled, shaking with cold, into the back seat of Petrus's car. The endless drive through pine trees where the moonlight had drawn wolfish shadow-shapes across the top of the car. Sophia had woken at home. Maria had been holding her hand, telling her nonsense about school, while Frau Schöller painted a picture to make her well again. Frau Schöller who had called Sophia and Maria her dark mermaids and had loved them for who they were.

"So what happened?" she asked. Maria was holding her hand. Her skin felt like rough leather, yet Sophia held on. She'd been painting this exact image for years, re-working the blue sea and that bloody mermaid who waited patiently behind her cold grey jagged stone. Trying to get back to somewhere where someone loved her.

"What happened? You're the police officer." Maria let her hand go. "You should know?"

Know what? Frau Schölller had painted the darkness that had begun to creep into their lives. Her realistic depictions of the town had included shadows that edged out from behind doorways, eyes that watched from behind darkened windows. All that time Sophia had watched and learned how to mix oils - how to layer colour on to colour. How to paint what she saw, what she imagined and what she knew. She'd pretended so hard that Maria's mother was really hers, and listened to the truth that Frau Schölller spoke. A truth that was often uncomfortable and dangerous. Frau Schölller had warned her about trusting the doctors at training camp; suggested that the vitamins were something more. She'd been gentle when Sophia cried; telling her that Dagmar did love her, it was only that her mother's heart had been broken. It would mend, she'd said, one day it would mend. Sophia had been comforted, grateful to the world for giving her this one person.

Maria was explaining how their mother had sold pictures. With care: never too many to risk being noticed by the government. Making money for individual gain would be viewed as capitalistic and was therefore, a jail offence. Jörg wanted to study to be journalist, Maria as a nurse. Because Frau Schölller had been an artist, her children were expected to train for manual work, complying with communist policy: complete change of class and profession.

"Jörg was furious" Maria avoided looking at Sophia. "He thought because he was working for them, he'd be treated differently."

Jörg. Sophia thought. The creepy little shit with his scribbled reports that had earned him points and cigarettes. This was his fault, his failing.

The government had commissioned Frau Schölller to paint portraits of the great GDR leaders, Ulbricht and Honecker. They'd loved her pastoral scenes: mountains covered in cowslips, cathedrals and lakes, forests under a muted light. Her work, Maria said, was on display in the town hall, the museum and library. She'd been told to keep to herself what they called her silly nonsense: the dark shadows that crept under doors, the mermaid pictures Sophia loved.

It would have been early when the Stasi came. No one awake to hear the first knock on the door - or the second with more force than needed. Maria and Jörg panicking, Frau Schölller trying to calm everyone down, trying to explain, to protect her children from the officers who turned the house upside down. She would have been

terrified when they took her to the waiting van. Even so, Maria said, Jörg had been certain it was all a mistake. Someone had given the officers the wrong name, the wrong address, anything but this. Initially there had been hope – plans for her imminent release, promises made. Every hope vanished when the Stasi told them they knew how many of her paintings had been bought by Westerners.

“Your father tried to help,” Maria said. “He collected enough money to buy her passage to the West, but she died before they got the paperwork. Our food parcels weren’t getting through so she had almost nothing to eat, and she became ill.”

Sophia stroked the corner of her painting. She’d been wrong about Maria. Imagined her as happier than herself. Someone who had all the things Sophia had lost. Perhaps she could make amends, help in some small way. The wooden picture frame had begun to flake; she’d varnish it as soon as she got home. Make it perfect and whole again.

Walking back to the hotel, Maria’s words circled. All she’d wanted to do, she insisted, was to help her old friend. She’d looked Sophia up in the phone directory. It had been easy she said, just as easy as it was to write and send the letters and documents. As for Dagmar’s medical file, well she was a nurse, and the car hadn’t been locked. Wasn’t that what friends were for?

Sophia’s Berlin address was ex-directory. Information about doping athletes, ‘Sonnenberg’ and the ‘Romeo Project’, were classified documents, not easy to come by unless you worked in those places. Something wasn’t right. Sending a letter to an old friend was one thing, sending classified information another. Maria was asking for help in the only way she knew. She’d given something to Sophia and would ask something in return.



## CHAPTER TEN



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Petrus was speaking in his too-cheerful grown-up voice; the one he'd used when Oma tried to refuse to get in the car. Everything was 'all right,' he said, so straightaway Mia knew it wasn't. He'd collected her from school and they'd come straight to the hospital. They'd been here for hours. Oma had fallen asleep in the metal bed with a plastic under-sheet that burped each time she moved. There were tubes coming out of her arm but, worst of all, Oma looked and smelled like a *dead* person.

*Dead.* If she didn't stop thinking about it Right Now, she'd start crying and wake Oma. Better to think about yesterday and Sophia, bad-tempered, pig-headed Sophia, who had got lost in the school while Mia waited by the car in the parking area like a complete lemon. Her friends had been just about to come out for break. Gerda would've seen her and thought she was lying about going to the hospital.

She'd had to go back to the medical room and wait - all over again. It had to have been *her* class that went into the changing rooms to get ready for games. Someone (thank god not Gerda or Käthe) found Sophia and rang the nurse. Mia had run to see what was happening. Everyone had stared because it was a perfect excuse not to go out to games. They couldn't get changed, could they? Mia explained that the fainting woman was Frau Künstler, and the teacher had given her a funny look - as if he knew who she was. He snapped at the class to stop gawping and get a move on. "*Raus!* Out to the sports field!" he'd said, even though everyone complained about going out in their school clothes. He'd glared at her, like it was *her* fault Sophia had been sat there puking.

The puke was gross. The cleaners had mopped it up so Mia saw no reason why they couldn't go, but Nurse spoiled everything. She said they couldn't move the patient. They had to call an *ambulance* because, according to school rules, only fully trained staff should carry her. Being transported on a stretcher might not be a problem for Sophia: *she* could just disappear. Walk away like she'd done years ago, leaving Oma to survive on her own. Mia had to face everyone the next morning.

Sophia had got better fast, it was like she couldn't bear to be weak: fainting one moment, forcing herself to get up and walk the next. The problem was - she hadn't been better at all. She'd sat in the car, sweaty and pale, not looking at her shaking hands. Mia realised that Nurse had been right, so she'd stared straight ahead and kept her mouth shut tight. If Sophia could pretend she was fine, well, Mia could pretend even better. She'd been pretending *normal* for as long as she could remember.

When they finally got to the hospital, Sophia hadn't said a thing about being sick or fainting. She'd bought a magazine because Mia asked her to and turned around and left. Just like that. So now the school puking thing was their secret.

Mia had lots of secrets. Her newest one, the one she'd made last night, was that there was no way, no way, she could live with Gerda. Everyone thought that was the answer but it wasn't. She'd have to share her room. Put up with Gerda's mental moods and pretend to agree with her: because if she didn't she'd be told to leave, and that was worse than anything. Mia knew what it felt like when you weren't wanted. She'd learned how to navigate through grey days when no one called and Oma held a silent vigil in the sitting room. Not even answering when Mia asked about supper, TV or going out. It seemed, at those times, that Gerda wasn't there either. Not ever. She'd be out with her new friends, leaving no message and Mia's heart would beat way too fast. The world would stretch to an edgeless panicky grey nothing. The scary grey feeling would stick like glue and burrow the hurt inside, bruising her with a longing for something: something she didn't know, because she didn't know what belonging felt like. The feeling could be kept under control as long as she kept talking, reading, or watching TV. During those in-between times when she was tired, alone and quiet, the greyness would come. Gradually it had settled deep inside her heart. Hardening layer by layer - until the outside was as tough as a walnut shell.

Oma was number one at secrets. She was really stubborn and never talked about Sophia or Petrus. If Mia asked about them, she just went silent for hours, *days*. She'd refused to get in touch with anyone, and now it was too late. Petrus was nodding at whatever the doctor was saying. They were too far away for Mia to hear, so she walked to the nearby window. Petrus glanced over and smiled his 'nothing to worry about' smile, and Mia knew Oma was never going to come out of hospital. The thought squeezed at her tummy as she stared fiercely towards the car park. No crying. Not now.

Not ever, because she had a bigger secret than any of them. She was going to find out what had happened to her mother. Not the pretend mother Dagmar tried to fob her off with. The real one. Even if she found that her real mother didn't want her – it wouldn't matter. She had to know because before now, even with those long silences and the grey feelings, she'd had Oma and Oma'd had her. She would convince Petrus to take her to Berlin. He had to be made to feel like it was the only thing he could do. She wouldn't disturb him. She'd go to school every single day, taking the bus so as to not need a lift. She'd cook, clean and work hard at staying out of the way and keeping quiet. Once he had got used to her being there, she'd make him tell her who her real mother was – because he knew, she was certain of that.

Everything was normal outside. People hurried from one building to the next. Cars parked; others drove away with people who had families waiting for them at home. Mia had no one. Petrus might feel responsible, but he didn't actually care. Sophia wasn't coming because she didn't care about any of them; only about herself. It just wasn't fair. Wiping her eyes with her sleeve, Mia turned away from the window.

“*Komme, Schatz,*” Petrus said, his best smiley, pretendy face fixed like a mask. “I have ordered a taxi.”

On the way home she decided that she was now the best secret-keeper because she knew about Petrus and the blonde woman, the shared (fainting-puking) secret with Sophia. *Plus* her secret plan. All that knowing definitely made her a better secret-keeper than Oma, which was good news. Now she had to think like a detective. Every bit of information would help to make people tell her about her mother.

At home Petrus turned the heating up so high the house creaked and popped. He made hot chocolate. In a croaky voice she whispered, “Thank you,” and took her drink upstairs. Petrus would think she was going to her own room, but she wasn't.

Oma's bedroom didn't smell of her normal favourite biscuity perfume; it smelled of being ill. What to do first? Pack a clean nightdress? Find Oma's favourite book? That was easy - it was there on the bedside cabinet *Die Muschelsucher* by a lady called Rosamund Pilcher, with its pretty cover of blue shells. She'd take it to the hospital and read a whole chapter out loud. There was a clean nightdress in the drawer, and some massive old-people's knickers. Mia made a new promise to never get old and never ever wear knickers like that.

The greyness was coming, reaching out its soft fingers.

She *had* to make plans, plans were better than doing nothing; they were the only way to avoid other people arranging your life for you. She opened the desk drawer; searching through receipts and old half-empty medicine boxes. The plastic container for false teeth made her feel queasy. If Petrus came up now, he'd tell her off. She could say she was packing clothes for Oma. That was true. She could also tell him to mind his own damn business because Oma was hers, not his. He'd left her alone with nothing, nothing to help her stay happy and nothing to help her stay well.

Head leaning on the bedclothes, the stench of panic seeping through the mattress and blankets, Mia knew there was no point planning. She was lucky to be offered a place with Gerda, a roof over her head. How could she even *think* of going to live somewhere else when no-one wanted her? Petrus would leave right now if she ever *ever* said anything bad to him about being selfish, cruel and not caring for Oma when he should have.

There were sounds from the kitchen: Petrus cooking supper, Petrus trying to look after her. She had to calm down because it could be a lot worse - like having supper at Gerda's house with a long inquisition about Sophia, the changing rooms and that disgusting sick.

"Come on Mia," she muttered. "Get a grip."

Her school reports and baby photos were in the bottom drawer. Mia in nappies, in braces, oh dear: at camp – worse, in the bath. It was seriously cringe-worthy to see Oma had kept every story she'd written about the pets she'd wanted. A hamster, a rabbit, that kitten she'd seen at Käthe's house. Whatever the animal, the answer was always N.O. No. No pets. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever. Help. There was that doltish picture of her make-believe puppy called Pip.

At the very bottom, underneath all the baby stuff, she found a faded envelope dated February 17th, 1977. Inside were three more photos of a baby wrapped in a towel. The baby looked like an ugly, peevish worm. Yuck. Nothing else. No mention of a name or hospital.

She waited for Petrus to walk in and disapprove of her sneaking into other people's rooms. When he did it would all be over. Any chance of going to Berlin

broken before it even started. From the racket he was making, he seemed to be happy: clanking pans, banging cupboards open and closed as he rooted round the kitchen.

There had to be a birth certificate with her name on it. It was a legal document so you didn't exist without having one. Mia pinched the skin on her arm until it bruised. There, that was proof she existed. Proof she wasn't just a ghost or something. Wait a minute. Sophia would have access to records. The police could do what they wanted, they could look at anything. Even better, the police were taught how to find things other people tried to keep hidden. Sophia might be willing to help if she believed that by finding Mia's mother, neither she nor Petrus would have to look after her. Sophia wasn't daft though. She'd know that a mother who hadn't contacted her daughter in thirteen years was unlikely to want her now. Mia would have to be really careful how she asked, if she asked.

The closet, where Oma kept her clothes and shoes, was the last place to look. The scent, lavender and dust, was achingly familiar, Mia's stomach tightened and tears welled. She brushed them aside. Now was not the time to cry. It was dark in there, but she could make out the shapes of shoes, an umbrella, a vase (furry with dust) and something that looked like an old shoe box. Picking up the box, she emptied the contents onto the bed. Photographs of girls in swimsuits poured over the dark blue bedspread and slid over the edge onto the floor.

Petrus called, "Supper Mia! Ten minutes!"

The girls were wearing GDR swimsuits. Mia had her own black costume shoved at the bottom of her swimming bag. They could wear what they liked until they joined a sports group; after that they had to wear costumes with a logo. She picked up a group photo: young athletes in tracksuits with patterned waves interlacing pale blue and white, spelling DDR.

The girls grinned at her. A medal dangled from each neck. Written on the back of the photo was: Sophia Montreal Olympics1976. Sophia had been a swimmer. Mia knew that, but a famous one? One print had fallen between the wall and the bedpost. Mia dug her fingers round it and pulled. Sophia. Happy and confident, standing next to her father and holding out her latest amongst a pile of medals. Mia turned the box upside down, just to make sure there was nothing else, and there wasn't, apart from a mouldy old swimming cap that had stuck to the cardboard. When she pulled at the cap

circular areas of the plastic stuck to her fingers, plastic that had wrinkled and congealed like old skin.

She should've worked this out ages ago. The same picture was on the display board in the school corridor. No one actually looked at them. The pictures were just there like boring old desks and blackboards. That's why her teacher had looked funny when Sophia fainted. He'd known Mia was related to someone who had been truly famous, someone who had escaped.

If she'd realised Petrus was on the phone she would have waited, sitting on the top step to listen. He looked so out of place in her home, tall and smartly dressed. The last time a man had visited was months ago. He'd been a doctor as well.

Petrus left another message for Sophia. He spoke slowly, as if he were afraid that whatever he said she'd misunderstand. Perhaps Mia ought to call Gerda. In fact if she didn't ring there'd be another day of silence, another day of being ignored. She knew that Gerda would ask why Mia wasn't coming over now, followed by the dreaded question: when was Mia going to move in?

"No one told me Sophia was an Olympic swimmer," she blurted as Petrus put the phone down. Right. Now or never. *Ask* him. "And Oma's going to die, isn't she?"

Petrus flinched. He'd rolled up his sleeves to do the cooking, and had Oma's old flower print apron tied very tight around his waist. The apron was too big. It wrapped round him twice, the ties doubled into an elaborate bow at the front - right across a faded tulip print. His eyes said 'yes' but his face was carefully arranged to be safe and comforting. He was going to say, 'Oma will be fine'. He was going to reassure her, lie, pretend, anything to make her feel better, and she was glad, because even though Mia knew all the bad things in the world she didn't want to hear them.

But he didn't.

He spoke the words. The ones she didn't dare think. Oma was going to die. Not today, not perhaps for a little while, but it was only a matter of time. The staff and doctor at the hospital were making her comfortable, taking away the worst pain so that she could manage better. She could even come home - as long as Petrus stayed, and he would (he *promised*) as long as they needed him. Mia cried until her head felt empty and wrung out. She wanted to ask why he had come only now - when it was all too late.

Oma had said Petrus was cruel. She'd called him a liar. A *Judas*. When he left her she said she'd been glad, really glad – but mostly Oma acted like one of those old black and white movie stars, the ones who stared out the window, just waiting for someone to come and make everything better. When Mia grew up, she wasn't going to spend one second bothering to look out the window for someone who wasn't there.

“What about me?” There. She'd said it. Now he'd say she'd be better off staying here, with the people she knew like Gerda and her mother.

Instead he said she was to make up her own mind. She could come back with him to Berlin, if she wanted, and go to a new school; when the time was right.

“I want to. Come with you I mean,” she said. Before he could say no and change his mind, say he'd already made arrangements, arrangements that couldn't be changed. Grownups were like that; they offered something and, just like that, took it away. Petrus smiled and kissed the top of her head. It made her cry again, a weak tired sobbing, because Oma kissed her just the same.

Dinner was awful: soggy potatoes and thick cream cheese. The cheese stuck to the top of her mouth as she chewed and tried to swallow. Despite that, she ate it all. Petrus might start going on about her eating properly, like Oma, and she didn't want him to think her a nuisance. When he offered her more, she said no, shaking her head to emphasise the point, and told him about Sophia's picture being on the school display board. Instead of looking pleased, like a normal father would, he turned away to gaze out the window. There was nothing to look at out there, just a dingy street light that lit up a portion of their garden and the pavement.

“She has something called traumatic amnesia,” he said. “She doesn't remember, and it's better that way.”

Yeah right. Sophia was *pretending*, deciding that she didn't want to remember - just like she hadn't wanted to remember her own mother. Sophia wasn't *Nasty* anymore, in fact Mia had to admit she was beginning to admire her. Like someone she might look up to, someone strong – though actually she wasn't really that strong. Strong people didn't faint or puke.

Even though it felt like a betrayal to Oma, Petrus made her feel safe by being quiet and careful, as if she were a delicate piece of china, something important that could break.

She cleared the table and washed up, to show him how useful she could be. When she'd finished and went along to the sitting room, Petrus stood up, like she was a visitor in her own house. Mia felt cross all over again, but she didn't say anything. He poured her a glass of wine that tasted of old sunshine and ripe pears and made her throat tingle. He'd changed into brown trousers and a grey jumper that looked expensive. Maybe *she'd* get some new clothes when she went to Berlin?

Later, in bed, woozy from the wine, she whispered her love across the town to the hospital bed, "I love you Oma. I love you." Fell asleep to dream of mouldy changing rooms, Oma shouting at Petrus. The nurses' sneaky looks that said they all knew exactly what was happening. Sophia fainting?

Mia sat up so fast she felt dizzy. Sophia hadn't been lost. She'd gone back to the swimming pool where she trained. That was why she'd fainted - her memory was coming back. She knew stuff. No. Wait. She didn't actually know. She just *knew*, like getting a plate from the cupboard *before* you remembered it was there. Weird. Something really bad had happened to Sophia. Something Mia needed to know.

This time she fell asleep busily planning just how to find out more, and glad, so glad she was wrapped in her own duvet in her own bed, safe at least for tonight.





## CHAPTER ELEVEN



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The morning couldn't get any worse. Petrus had upset everything by ringing to say that he'd arranged to meet with the consultant first thing that morning. The problem was that Mia was insisting she accompany him to the hospital.

"Out of the question," he'd said. "Certainly not the place for a child."

When Sophia arrived, Mia had grudgingly opened the door, before she sloped into the kitchen.

"It's all *your* fault I can't go to school," she'd muttered, in an undertone perfectly loud enough for Sophia to hear. Still in her pyjamas, the girl had returned to folding Oma's clean laundry into a neat pile on the kitchen table.

"What about her clothes?" she'd said, scowling when Sophia told her to go upstairs and get dressed: Right Now. However, instead of doing what she'd been told to do, Mia had crumpled against the table and wept. What had Sophia been supposed to do? Petrus had disappeared and all she'd heard was broken sobbing. She'd reached out a tentative hand and patted the girl's shoulder. Surely that would do? Mia had sobbed even louder. The girl was going to make herself sick. The thought had barely registered before Mia had somehow managed to turn and burrow her face against Sophia's stomach. Her arms had wrapped themselves tightly around her like a baby octopus, squeezing. Sophia's uniform would be spoiled. She'd felt the telltale wetness of snot and tears seep through the fabric. Any chance of Herr Rathmann's respect was spoiled before she even opened her mouth – and there'd been no time to change.

Her right hand had taken on a life of its own, stroking Mia's hair. Sophia had noted, vaguely, how soft and clean it was. Her left arm had automatically pulled the child's slim frame closer and, if she hadn't snapped to, in the next minute she would have laid her head against Mia's head.

She'd backed away as Mia hiccupped, apologised and insisted on wiping Sophia's shirt with a somewhat grubby cloth from the sink. In-between more tears and sidelong apologies, Mia had dressed, found her school bag and they'd reached an agreement. At twelve Sophia would be at the school to take her to the hospital.

First, Sophia had to rat on people she'd grown up with. People she'd recognise from school days, people who wore the same uniform. And, *das waere der Gipfel*, on Monday Hajo would still, no doubt, exclude her from his team and send her off to work in the records department. Could she transform again? No. If there wasn't a choice? The 'amalgamation of East and West forces' threatened to end so many people's careers; why not hers? That July there'd been yet another update. Dreading it - eyes closed, muttering a prayer for the phone to ring with an urgent call: a traffic incident, theft, *anything*. She'd snapped to when Hajo placed his warm hand on her shoulder, winced as the old projector threw its black and white horror stories across the wall. Images of the People's Police shooting at a runaway, the figure falling, legs twisted, trying to rise before he was shot again. A close up of an informer's drop point: a bird box, just like the one she'd found. The enlarged report: he did this, she did that; saying absolutely nothing of consequence. There was so much more that she knew of: desperate mothers and children who had run through the forest and now lay side by side with rotting trees, undetectable in the earth.

"That," Hajo had pointed to a slide that showed uniformed officers shopping in the middle of the day, "is what we have to deal with." He seemed to enjoy talking about the People's Police scare tactics: *Sich Verpissen*, a practice that meant leaving a designated patrol area to cruise around known trouble zones, making it damn clear who was in charge. He'd been particularly happy when every police officer in the room had clamoured to tell him that that *never* happened on their patrol.

'Stasi Informer' had become a label for anyone whose work records showed anything out of the norm, and, well, not a lot of what happened in the GDR could be described as normal. The new centralised police committee first encouraged the East police force to work with the West. When that proved unsuccessful, they simply combined both forces under the leadership of the West. Any East German officer with a link to the Stasi lost their job, and nearly every officer in the GDR had had some contact with them. Eventually realising the extent of Stasi contact, the committee decided that only officers who could prove *marginal* links should be kept. Those officers had to retrain and be redeployed to the records and archive department.

Surely Hajo had the aptitude to know that the GDR was a spider's web, each link splitting to form myriad points of contact. Points that would be seeded and primed,

utilised just when the victim thought he'd been lucky enough to slip through the net. If you wanted a good job, you had to join a committee. Every committee was politically linked, every political link led to the Stasi. If you needed help, payment in kind resulted in your becoming an informer. If you tried to escape, anyone left behind was in danger.

Thirteen years ago, they had left Dagmar unprotected to answer to the Stasi.

That blame lay awkwardly in Sophia's belly. Had her mother really chosen to stay? Or had she simply faded so much into the background that neither Sophia nor Petrus saw her as capable of living anywhere other than Breden? As a child, when Sophia laughed, she'd laughed with Maria. When she cried, it had been in Frau Schöller's arms. Dagmar had always been back at the house, growing bitter, fading to nothing more than a shadow as Petrus became more vibrant with each day. Yet Sophia heard her mother's words as if it were still yesterday. It was true - Dagmar had chosen to stay.

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Sophia stared towards the end of the street where Police Precinct 66 loomed: a mountain of grey wrapped in fog. Thick glass windows glinted from the walled expanse and electric, rather than, barbed wire, encircled three quarters of the station. Professional and welcoming? Not by a long shot.

It was nine o'clock and, in the morning light, the list of do's and don'ts looked faintly ridiculous. Martin Rathmann would show only what he wanted her to see. If she were to have any chance of finding anything, Sophia would need to be convincingly naive, polite and agreeable. She practised a smile in the car mirror, remembering Thursday. Was it really only yesterday? She'd had an hour of sheer joy: running through the trees in the hush of autumn twilight, her feet falling on a soft bed of needles.

Police cars were parked behind the building with a precision that defied normal. No mud, no chaos, no last minute swearing before attempting to find some other miniscule space. Why was the reception window and buzzer fixed so stupidly low? A person had to lean down to press the button. Ah, of course. Sophia realised even as she moved – you became vulnerable when you had to bend down.

The buzzer made no sound. Was it broken? Did they *really* have soundproofed walls? Eventually a disembodied voice asked for 'Name and the purpose of visit?' Sophia politely explained that she was here by appointment. Three long minutes later

the door clicked open. The woman behind the desk didn't even glance up. Dipping a dainty brush into a bottle of nail varnish, she continued to apply orange gloss to her left index nail.

Inside were two barred windows. One looked out onto the car park, the other onto the road. Nice to know they'd be safe under a sustained attack. Sophia took out her notebook and began to sketch a map of exit points, just in case. The silence was unnerving, not even a creak or door slam. The woman began painting her right hand. For want of anything better to do, Sophia drew the secretary sitting in the centre of the precinct as an electric generator, wires coming from her ears, eyes and fingernails. Her face took on exaggerated, froglike features: a bulbous nose, protruding eyes with outsized spherical glasses and a permanent frown. The woman's coiffed hair became matted. One coil took on a life of its own, growing a second head and forked tongue. Sophia snorted and looked up. Her muse was glaring.

It was too quiet. Things were happening on the other side of that door. Things Sophia needed to hear. If she really had to sit here another ten minutes she'd explode, strangle Froggy-face and break the bloody door down. Instead she imagined a hall filled with people and music loud enough to make walls bulge. She'd be in the centre of the crowd, moving high as a kite on speed, eyes scanning the crowd for her blue-eyed stranger. Skin, stomach and groin hot with desire. Over the years it had become so easy to find him. The city offering up a seemingly endless supply of slim-hipped, cruel mouthed strangers, each one with the potential to make her forget the police officer she'd become.

Mia had blue eyes and a sulky mouth. Dressed in her favourite hand-knitted jumper, the girl resembled a bad tempered bumble bee. Petrus had had the nerve to try and insist that Sophia take the child to Berlin. "It would be best to keep her away from the hospital," he'd said, as if somehow Mia had become her responsibility. Yes, there was Dagmar's file: the interrogations, medication, her mother's imminent death. However, was it really necessary, or wise, to take Mia away now?

The door opened and the secretary smiled at a trim, tired-looking man with a thin face and carefully backcombed brown hair. He returned the secretary's smile, revealing a row of uneven teeth. She'd expected a bull-like imitation of Hajo, imagining

that his friends would all be door-slamming versions of him, not this quiet man in a badly fitting police jacket.

“Officer Künstler?” Rathmann squeezed her hand as if he imagined it might leap up and slap him, letting go as quickly as he decently could. As they walked through the building, he apologised for keeping her waiting. They were short staffed, he murmured. Most of the officers were re-training or had (he shrugged, refusing to meet her eyes) been dismissed. The Commander General, a man named Günther Schenke, had just been asked to resign after the discovery of documents linking him to the Stasi. Schenke? She’d read that name on the papers from Maria: Herr Schenke, code name Wolf.

“I’ve been given the job of managing the station until a suitable replacement can be found.” He looked embarrassed, even more so when she asked him to explain why electric wire surrounded the building.

“Ah, well you see, no one has the right qualifications to remove it.” He blushed as if somehow the fence was his personal failing, and she felt like a bully. They were walking down a long grey silent corridor. Through the window facing the car park two officers moved jauntily from police vehicle to building. One looked familiar – if he’d just turn, or pause? But Martin had opened a door and was waiting for her to proceed into his office.

“Here we are. The furniture is from the Commander’s time,” he said, placing his jacket on the back of a chair, casting a dubious look around the sumptuous, beautifully furnished room that was his office. Perhaps he hoped the decor would fade into something more suitable: a plastic table and threadbare carpet?

“I hope I’m right in imagining coffee break would be the best time for you to meet the officers? We swap shifts at ten, so I’ve asked that everyone attend,” he said. “Shall I give you a tour of the rest of the building beforehand?”

If she said ‘boo’ loudly, Sophia imagined he’d fall over, so she’d try and be nice – she hated bullies.

Her job was simple: identify familiar faces. Recognise people who had, in her time, maintained some connection with the Stasi. She would report them to Hajo. She was to feel no sense of responsibility. No niggling doubt that she was, or had been, one of them. No. There was no chance that anyone would perceive her a version of her father: working to a time where things were done differently, the truth hidden. The

question came, unbidden, uninvited, and quite as if she'd spoken it aloud – just like you've been hiding from yourself?

Six new computers sat in the police writing-up room, glowing like a display in an art gallery. The old, now defunct monitors were piled up along the far wall. Frustratingly, every wire had been cut.

“Please make yourself at home in here,” Martin waved vaguely at the room. “The records Hajo requested will be brought in when you've met the officers.”

Hajo had requested *all* records, not a select few. Sophia corrected him, smiling. Maybe he wasn't the frightened little mouse? Could he honestly think her that dense? It would be simple to get an employee master list from Berlin and check personnel against the files they gave her here. Hajo hadn't sent *that* list, and she hadn't thought to ask. It would be far too easy for Herr Rathmann to leave one or two of the files in the drawer, files that were best forgotten.

The tour lasted twenty minutes. Sophia noting the rooms where records were kept, the places she'd want access to. They climbed the back stairs to emerge very near where they had begun. Muffled voices seeped out from the room at the end of the corridor. Rathmann opened the door but Sophia didn't at first notice the officers who sprawled on chairs, eating, talking, some staring – clearly hostile. All she saw was Maria's brother. Jörg's hair was falling (absurdly long) across his face. That narrow jutting chin and those girly eyelashes, his sharp features blurring as he deliberately turned and slid out of Sophia's line of vision. Odious little Jörg. Stasi informer. Working for the police. Now she knew. Maria was trying to buy her silence with information.

“Listen please. This is Police Sergeant Künstler.” Martin began his introduction, his gaze attempting to quell the sullen murmur, the overloud clunking of mugs. “From Berlin,” he continued a little louder. “At the express order of Detective Inspector Ewalder. She'll be reading through all your files.”

“You'd think the fucking *Wessis* could put their minds to proper police work, not snoop on their own kind.”

Who'd said that? Wait. No point in reacting. Just try and spot him and keep calm, keep smiling. A squat muscle-bound man with a dark buzz cut appeared at her

side. He introduced himself as Officer Gerd Neuman and asked: did she want coffee with sugar and milk, just sugar, or none – and what about a biscuit?

*There* he was. It wasn't Jörg who had spoken so rudely but another guy, chewing on a sandwich, watching her through vicious blue eyes. Smiling an insidious, all too familiar smile.

“Sophia Künstler!” Neuman said. “You're our Olympic swimmer. I saw you on the TV!”

Ignoring him, Sophia turned and scoured the room. Where was Jörg? The boy who'd scared her half to death as he watched her room at night. Standing under the bedroom window, on the corner where the road branched to the left. She'd told no one about his silent stalking - though certainly her father had known. Jörg with his Stasi connections could have caused trouble and she, golden future mapped, hadn't wanted to take any risks. Besides, she'd loved Maria too much to break their friendship. Now, just like before, Jörg had vanished.

As if on some pre-arranged signal, the officers scraped back their chairs and walked out slamming the door behind them.

“Officer Künstler?” Gerd, who'd stayed put, was joined by a tall angular policeman who introduced himself as Officer Lutz. They glanced at one another, at the floor. “Uh, we're really sorry about their behaviour. What with Officer Schenke leaving so suddenly, and the West taking over. It's not been easy.”

She followed the pair out into the morning light. A distant plane burrowed through the thick air, casting a white trail. If only she were flying somewhere, anywhere. The Bahamas, Jamaica perhaps? Somewhere where there was warm sand and salty water, a place where no one knew her.

“This model has a table and chairs.” Lutz made a beeline for the shiny new van, enthusiastically polishing an imaginary mark from the bonnet. “We're able to question suspects without having to bring them to the station.”

Over on the other side of the car park, two officers were heading out on patrol. The first, slim, built like an athlete, was the man who'd spoken so rudely. He had the most extraordinary blue eyes. She knew him, was so sure of it that when he turned away she sighed. His partner, Jörg, glared at her. Sophia held his stare. Bastard. Did he really

think he could scare her? The minute she reported him he'd lose his job; receive no payout, no pension – nothing. And she'd make damn sure he knew it had been her.

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Jörg's records were squeaky clean. All those years of spying washed away - and worse, no easy way of locating the originals today. Well, let him imagine he'd got away with it for the time being.

Martin Rathmann's documentation seemed in order. At first glance his computer records looked solid. However, when she read the paper files Sophia saw years of service that were, at best, sketchy and incomplete. Rathmann had been working in Breden for ten years. In her book that automatically made him suspect. She found her proof in-between the duties rota. Three years of service on the protocol stretch: Schönefeld to Niederschönhausen Castle, home to the head of council. Martin had worked as 'officer on special assignment'. That meant working with the Stasi. Hajo wasn't going to like it one bit.

There was no trace of Günther Schenke, the man who had only recently been the boss. Undaunted, she prowled through the files. Making notes, comparing each paper record with the computer transcription. Noting the differences, copying out information that had been carefully re-worded, or left out, she made a list of the officers she thought she knew. Clicked on the name Eberhard Borneman, and stared.

My god. Ebbe. It was Ebbe. The man with those piercing eyes was the boy Diertha had brought with her on that pale moonlit night.

He'd walked lightly in contrast to Diertha, who lumbered her way along the path between the apple trees, both of them keeping to the side of the bungalow so that they would remain hidden in the shadow. She remembered they had been laughing together over some private joke.

Ebbe was here. The boy Diertha had taunted her over when Sophia admitted liking him better than all the others. Although, for once, Sophia hadn't cared what Diertha thought. Ebbe. Her beautiful, cruel boy, the boy she looked for in the crowd, in the dance halls. Ebbe was found.



## CHAPTER TWELVE



~

Mia waited outside the school, kicking the wall as if she wanted an argument. Looking everywhere but over by the trees where Gerda made a great show of nudging her podgy dark-haired companion.

“Why are you always so late, Sophia?” The girl hugged her backpack and scowled revealing perfectly lined sharp teeth.

“Your friends want a lift?”

“No.” Mia began biting her nails. The two other girls made an exaggerated show of giggling: hands covering mouths doubling over in fake mirth. The one who wasn’t Gerda pretended to faint: arms spiralling, hand to chest, leaning backwards about to fall. Gerda held onto her and they collapsed onto the ground shrieking.

Sophia wanted to knock their heads together.

“You have to deal with things,” she said. “Whether you want to or not.”

“Deal with what”? Mia’s voice squeaked. “Not having any friends?”

For goodness sake: was Sophia really the only one who saw how things were, that Mia’s life was going to change and she’d just have to adapt. And yet she felt an echo of Mia’s pain as if it were her own.

“You’re going to have to deal with your Oma - my mother - Dagmar - being ill.” The word ‘dying’ lingered on her tongue. “As for those two ninnies.” Sophia climbed out of the car and stood up straight in her uniform, smiling in vindication when the girls fell silent, turned tail and ran. “If they can’t be your friends now, they never really were.”

Beneath them the birch tree roots she’d drawn as a child were growing, shifting in the earth. The places Sophia had imagined as secret and safe nudged at her, suggesting she should have said something kinder, found a phrase that might actually help the girl.

“Can we just go please?”

Lord. Ten to one Mia was going to cry again. Sophia didn’t think she could cope with more tears. Perhaps ignoring the child might minimise the risk. She drove,

concentrating on how best to present her findings to Hajo. Martin was his friend. However, every scrap of evidence would almost certainly disappear from the precinct if Hajo didn't do something fast. She pointedly ignored the little voice that whispered: just walk away. Maria would be grateful, Jörg would still have his job - no one would know any different and the world would continue to turn as it had always done.

Mia was unclipping the buckle on her school bag for the third time. Well she wasn't crying. Perhaps she was angry: being angry was so much better than being sad.

"I want to come with you tomorrow, to Berlin." Mia stared fiercely ahead as they came to the hospital entrance. "Petrus said I could if I asked."

Blindsided. Petrus had planned the request so well. Even she wouldn't be that cruel to a child. Mia waited, eyes averted while Sophia silently promised to make Petrus pay.

"So," Mia asked, "can I?"

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It was lunch time and, wedged in between a hairdresser and vegetable shop, the provincial café was serving *Thüringer Klöße*, a long forgotten favourite of potato dumplings with meat, cauliflower and a creamy cheese sauce. Delicious. Utter perfection. The dumplings gave up their secret at the last moment: three crispy squares of buttered toast.

Sophia had phoned Hajo from the public phone in the hospital, her short message making it clear that any further action was up to him. She'd left out telling him that, even without proof, there was no way she was letting Jörg just walk away and carry on being a police man. Stomach full, bill paid, she gazed across at the hospital entrance, duty lying heavy as lunch. Did she really have to wait and offer Mia and Petrus a lift - when there were so many more important things to do? Ah. Right on time. There was Petrus, emerging from a side door near the hospital kitchens. He walked quickly across the car park and paused by the bus stop. Where was he going? She stood up, about to wave or call.

He was following someone. The gait was unmistakable. He waited too long to cross the road, glanced over at the newspaper shop, stared at the window display as if the advertisements were captivating. While all the time he was watching his chosen prey in the glass reflection.

Ilse Hammerman was still undeniably beautiful and as recognisable as a long absent member of the family. A ghost of a memory floated into Sophia's mind: her father arriving home late, car lights picking out the profile of the driver. Her lovely young face turning to him for a kiss, Dagmar waiting inside the house, hidden in the shadows of the unlit sitting room.

Certain she wouldn't be seen; Sophia slipped out of the café and leaned against the wall, humiliated by the thrill of excitement and terror that ran from her toes to her fingers. A child again, snooping on her father.

Dressed in a beige trouser suit and a white over jacket with deep blue edging, Ilse captured the image of a successful doctor. Her bright blonde hair had been cut to a perfect bob that sashayed as she hurried through the car park, past the shops, crossing the road and making her way towards a new housing estate.

Sophia's father followed at a distance, his daughter trailing behind.

It wasn't easy to admit that like everyone, Dagmar had wanted nothing more than to be loved. She had been vital at one time, and beautiful; given that all Petrus's women were beautiful in some way. Sophia tried to remember a mother unbound from illness and saw her, as if from afar, gazing at Petrus with a fierce expression of love. Her mother's dark brown hair, formerly so abundant, had been carefully brushed back to show off two stud earrings in a deep blue stone. The blue matched her eyes. Perhaps the image came from an old photo? Or perhaps it was childish memory from a time before? A time when Petrus had loved her mother and when her mother had wanted her.

Petrus turned a corner and Sophia hurried to catch up. She didn't want to lose this chance of seeing whether love or hate remained between them. Somehow during Petrus's quest for status and adoration, Dagmar had begun to fade. A flower with no water, she'd lived most of her life comparing herself with the women Petrus wanted. The belated realisation that Dagmar had blamed herself for not being good enough, made Sophia even more determined to see what her father was up to. It would serve him right to be treated as he'd treated Dagmar, although, in her mother's place, Sophia would have found many ways to make Ilse's life difficult.

Just as Sophia reached the corner Ilse stopped, as if a string had been pulled tight, and turned around. Damn. Ducking behind the wall, Sophia couldn't hear a thing; all she could do was crane her neck and peer.

Oh god. Petrus had taken hold of her. Instead of avoiding him away as she should, Ilse clung to him, her head brushing his shoulder, raising her face, kissing him. Sophia looked away. Obscene. Stomach tight, hands clenched. She imagined walking up to them, killing them both by just looking at them, her childhood hatred grown into something absolute and authoritative.

Why was Ilse weeping? Petrus guided her away from the possibility of prying eyes to the relative seclusion of a dark alleyway that ran opposite to where Sophia waited, squashed up against the damp wall. Their heads were inclined. They were talking. Touching the way lovers do when they've been apart for too long and their meetings have been kept a precious secret. They held one another in a tight yet furtive embrace. She read their need for reassurance as a stability that would never materialise, but was forever hoped for. Petrus began kissing Ilse's ear and neck as if he were starving. Sophia looked away, she felt dizzy, seasick. As if the land had become an unsteady place.

When she looked back, Ilse, playing the weepy-eyed tragedy queen, was walking away down the road one hand trailing as if she longed to stay. She turned right and Sophia followed, taking savage pleasure from the knowledge that her father must now have seen her.

Ilse made her way along a narrow driveway and put her key in the lock to open the front door. A miniature blonde child hurtled past, followed closely by a stocky red-faced boy squeezed into pale khaki shorts. Both were yelling. The boy held a fat black plastic spider in his hand which seemed magically to transform into an aeroplane flying through the air to land on his sister's head - provoking the girl to shriek. Ilse's daughter was a miniature image of her mother. Almost white hair stuck to an indignant face with a snub nose, grey eyes and mouth that was stretched to its widest, maximizing the impact of her scream. Ilse caught both children in her arms. Turning them, she plucked the offending spider from her son's hand and propelled the pair towards the doorway.

"The tickets arrived, the tickets arrived!" The girl threw a furious look at her brother and stuck out her tongue, keeping a tight grip on her mother's hand.

"And a letter from our new school." The boy was not going to be outdone; reaching behind his mother he pinched his sister on her bottom. In between the girl's furious wail Ilse turned back to scold the boy, and saw Sophia watching.

She seemed to quail; all the light in her face went out. Her eyes darted left, right, as both children hauled at her arms.

Sophia felt Ilse's shock even as her own heart raced. What could be said to this woman who had floated so bright and unchanging in her mind for years? Nothing at all? Everything?

Ilse lifted her daughter and placed her in the arms of a slender sandy haired man who'd appeared at the door.

"Finally," he said. "The car's packed. I've been trying to get them to eat lunch."

Were these children Petrus's? Her half brother and half sister?

Petrus and Ilse had been meeting for years. Those dates: the ones she'd found in her father's drawer all those years ago, were reminders of their meetings. The two of them had travelled across the complex, dangerous barrier between East and West to continue a strange, twisted version of a love story. Dagmar must have known. The Stasi must also have known: there was no sanctuary from their surveillance. Sophia wondered, momentarily, if Ilse's husband knew and, like Dagmar, did nothing. It hurt that her mother had accepted a husband who came to see his mistress, but never herself. Petrus would have seen glimpses of Mia growing from child to teenager. Worse, he had watched Dagmar's health steadily decline and had done absolutely nothing. How contemptible her father was, with his easy deceit and smooth lies, his concentration on no-one but himself.

Ilse was leaving. Getting out before the medical profession caught on, before her file was discovered, before she lost her job. They would be going to New Zealand or China, far away from the prying eyes of West Germany.

The door shut, but Sophia stayed where she was, staring at the house. Ilse needed to know that she wasn't a scared child any longer. In fact she was the person to intimidate Ilse. The little girl's blotchy face appeared, peeping over the back of an armchair in the sitting room window, staring straight into Sophia's eyes. The child stuck her tongue out: a lollipopped pink flag between reddened cheeks.

Ilse burst into the picture, scooping up the child, closing both curtains in two sharp sweeping motions.

Go on, Sophia thought. Take your children and run. If I see any of you again, I'll break you. Those thoughts calmed her as she made her way back to the car, where Petrus was waiting.

"Ilse has to start again," he said, waiting for Sophia to unlock the passenger door. "A terrible punishment for doing only what she was told to do."

Sophia had placed the picture of the mermaid on the back seat, a talisman, a source of protection against all the lies that seemed to be layered one on top of the other, to create a complex illusion. She could feel how the picture held traces of warmth. Perhaps those traces were like the truth, a reality that Frau Schöller had tried to show her: the truth that a person *can* become something better than the devastation all around. She traced a finger along the ridged wooden frame.

"Sophia? Listen to me. Ilse helped us to get out."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Look – you need to know this. You were dying. They refused to move you to a place where they could treat you."

"When was this?" Did he really expect her to believe more lies?

"I'll explain, really I will. First, you need to know she saved your life, and now, I beg you, let her go."

He was pleading for this woman but he'd done nothing to save Dagmar. Sophia touched the mermaid. It felt brittle, bumpy. Paint had been applied in one thick stroke as a way to show how the tide would sway the mermaid's hair first one way, then the other. She'd have to give it back to Maria, return what wasn't hers. Make it clear that she would accept no form of bribery. No payment to keep Jörg's secrets safe.

"You must listen." Petrus had taken off his long coat. He folded it with care, climbed into the passenger seat and placed the coat across his knees. "I always knew Ilse was working with the Stasi but I also knew that they wouldn't ever be interested in me."

He was digging himself out from any blame. Making it seem as if Ilse were the injured party and he the unwitting victim who had been tricked into spying, writing informer reports and doping unsuspecting young athletes. Sophia longed for Mia to appear. To come out from the hospital entrance and put a timely end to the conversation.

“There was something they wanted,” he said. “Something very important.”

“Well, actually, what I’d like to know is - if those children are yours. Perhaps I ought to go and say hi to my dear little brother and sister?”

“Sophia.” Her father paused. She tried to read the pause. “Don’t be absurd.” His voice was gentle, the voice of a tiger purring before it pounced. “Listen to me. The Stasi didn’t want me. They wanted you.”

It was because of Sophia that he’d been approached to work for ‘Theme 14.25’. Initially he’d been horrified when athletes came to him with strange injuries, torn muscles that wouldn’t mend because their bones were unable to support such massive growth. Doctors were told to fix the injuries quickly, to find new pills to heal damaged tissue. Later his duties grew to include testing and distributing medication from Kreischa, the main hospital and treatment centre for any sports injury. Steroid drugs had been packaged to look like vitamin tablets. Some even came disguised as chocolate with their own design on the wrapping. She remembered the sticky overly sweet chocolate with a nauseous aftertaste.

Mia finally appeared and made her way towards them, but Petrus still wouldn’t stop. Words poured from his mouth, a torrential confession. It was as if he believed he’d never find the impetus to speak in this way again.

His job had been to check that the correct amounts were given to the trainers. To monitor any athlete who responded in an adverse way. He’d treated her. Making her so strong she could swim faster than anyone else. She’d become a mermaid, a creature more used to water than to land, unlike land-logged Diertha who had sunk beneath the water lilies and pondweed, to lie with the rocks and silt at the bottom of the lake.

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Jörg was sitting at the kitchen table, scowling into a frothing glass of beer.

“He’s written his letter of resignation.” Maria glared at him. “Go on. Show her.”

Jörg tossed the sheet of paper across the table. This was a silly game. One Sophia had no wish to play. Jörg had no intention of resigning while his sister had information to sell. In response Sophia placed the mermaid picture on the table.

“I don’t take payments Maria,” she said, thinking of Mia meticulously packing her bag for a trip to Berlin, Petrus longing to be the one flying to a faraway country.

Maria put her hand in front of her mouth. A pantomime of shock. “You thought,” she pointed at the picture, “*That?* No, no. I can give you something better, information that should have been burnt years ago. Things about you.” She waited, greedy and calculating, for Sophia to ask what she needed to do in order to secure this secret paperwork. Maria had changed into a woman who was unrecognisable, someone Sophia no longer knew.

“Have you never wondered about your father? What he was doing all those years in Kreischa? Why your mother looked after Mia?”

What else was there to know? She knew what Petrus was. Mia was seen as part of the family. Well. Fair enough. Mia would be cared for by Petrus.

“Sophi, listen to me. I have records all the way back from when you were training at Dynamo and Sonnenberg. Records that show they gave you drugs. Proof.” Maria smiled, triumphant in this, her moment of glory.

Why, faced with such calculation, did she still long for Maria to turn back into the girl she’d once been? Sophia looked away. “Little Jörg, haven’t you grown up yet? Hiding behind your sister’s skirts now, are you?”

Good. There it was. The fury she’d seen at the station. Jörg’s narrow face tightening as he rose to do what he’d itched to do the moment he saw her.

“Watch your temper,” Maria hissed. “Don’t you go making things worse than you already have.”

She signalled that Sophia should follow her. An age old journey up the stairs, one they’d done so often: running, shrieking, giggling their way into what was now a tidy but grey space. As they climbed, a tangible sadness echoed between them, such bitter loss at the friendship they had once shared.

“You’ve been busy.” My god, she really needed to phone Hajo. Right now. This room was stuffed full of paperwork. A treasure trove: secret files that the West German authorities would move mountains to get their hands on.

“Sophi? Look here, look at this.” In Maria’s palm lay a bracelet – *that* bracelet - made from cotton thread and beads. Blue and white fabric daisies had been attached to the chain at regular intervals.

“We made a promise, a promise you can’t forget because you have the other half.”



She dropped the friendship bracelet into her hand and held tight before Sophia could object. A promise made that couldn't be broken. Sophia's cold hand was trapped inside Maria's warm clasp. The plaited fabric was too short to circle her grown up wrist. She wasn't going to tell Maria that its partner lived in her police jacket pocket: protection against bad luck. Sophia had imagined Maria accompanying her through thick and thin, the old Maria, not this strange bitter woman, perhaps almost as brittle as herself, who stood near her, pleading for her understanding and help.

Maria wasn't looking at her. "I understand – I do understand – that after this we'll not be friends. You can have all the paperwork. Take it with you. I'll never ask anything more, but please help Jörg to keep his job. If he loses it we lose this house and we don't have money to buy another. If you won't do this for me, do it for *Mutti*? She loved you as much as she loved me."

Outside in the biting air, Sophia hoped her side of the promise would hold true. She'd asked that Maria keep the room with the documentation intact, untouched as from today. Jörg, incandescent with rage, had been made to write an honest declaration that included every detail of his work for the Stasi, the reason for his mother's imprisonment, her eventual death and the family's subsequent living situation. He wouldn't continue to work as an active investigations officer. However, if the files Maria had collected were valuable, Hajo might be persuaded to agree that something could be salvaged, as a gesture, not payment in kind.

In her hand, contrite, she held the bracelet. It reminded her, as the picture had, of the possibility of something good coming from so much that was wrong. Perhaps, just this once, she'd done the right thing.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



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Late, long past visiting hours, Sophia walked silently across the dark car park. Through the side entrance and along corridors where strip lighting flickered and droned, finally turning into the ward where her mother lay in her bed babbling, half crazy in a yellow morphine haze. Having spent the entire evening inside an endless circle of blame and sadness, Sophia picked at her guilt, a scab which never healed, her heart refusing to let the problem go. How could they have left Dagmar with no family to protect her, no way to earn money? No way to be safe?

“*Mutti?*” Her mother’s arm felt like unbaked dough, damp, slightly warm and sticky. Dagmar sobbed and called out: “Mia?”

“No *Mutti*. It’s me, Sophia.”

“Sophia,” she said, “*Kleine Sophi. Wo bist du?*”

“I’m here, Mama, right here.”

Dagmar called out for her again. Her voice throaty, filled with unassuageable pain. She had something to tell Sophia. A secret, something important she should have confided a long time ago. Where was her daughter?

“Sophi!” She pulled at the needle in her arm until it tore.

“Mama, stay still,” Sophia pleaded as Dagmar fought crying, shouting: she wasn’t going, she wasn’t leaving her child.

What child? *What* child? Someone had to help because rather than calming Dagmar, Sophia seemed to have made the situation worse. In desperation she pulled the emergency cord and slipped outside the ward. She couldn’t leave but waited heart in mouth, until she heard her mother calm once more with the help of gentle murmured reassurances from the nurse.

At the hotel she spent the remainder of the night reading through papers. Hajo had left a message saying she should report to him that morning. An unusual, unsettling demand: Hajo never worked on weekends. Sophia made ever more detailed notes about the station’s personnel records and, of course, Jörg. It mattered that her report was foolproof. Hajo had a talent for spotting dodgy pieces of information and now, the

further they travelled from Breden, the more ridiculous her story sounded. Jörg, a former Stasi informer being considered a viable candidate for re-training because he'd had no choice but to inform? Hajo would simply laugh.

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"Sisters of Mercy," Mia sang, tapping her feet on the car floor in time to the music on the radio. "Yeah. Mmm," she hummed the happy carefree hum: "Oh tie a red red red ribbon," and craned forward - trying to make out what the DJ was saying about the group's appearance at the Heidelberg stadium. Turning up the volume she shot a glance at Sophia; who tried her best to ignore her.

"I'd better tell you what I've written on my shopping list." Mia held up the sheet of paper. "You did promise you'd take me to KaDeWe tomorrow."

"I did?" Sophia glanced over at Mia who grinned.

"They have a whole floor for perfume, makeup, and *loads* of hair stuff," Mia continued. "I want jeans with buckles and poppers and a belt. Maybe I could get nail varnish? Or eyeliner and mascara. Jeans," she said the word like a prayer, "Levi jeans *and* pyjamas. D'you think I can get both?"

Sophia leaned forward and turned the radio off. In-between the wailings of pop stars she'd heard Dagmar's scream. Mia immediately fell silent. Her fingers nervously opened and shut her purse and, heart sinking, Sophia realised she'd broken the child's moment of ease. Brought her back to the grim reality of having to tag along unwanted - trying to forget what she'd left behind.

"I'll put it back on after the services." Sophia indicated right. "They might have a magazine in the shop. You know, one that will tell you about that concert."

The shop sold aspirin, long-life milk and bread. Perhaps they should get a takeaway that evening and make do with toast for breakfast? Mia might not like takeaway food; perhaps she'd never tried an Indian, or Chinese? Somehow, at every step, Sophia said or did the wrong thing. The girl had dressed with care in a patterned mustard skirt with a dark blue sweatshirt. Both dragonfly grips were in her hair, each strategically positioned as if one wanted to fly to the right, the other to the left. Seated at a table, happily engrossed in a magazine called '*Popcorn*', she barely glanced at Sophia and mumbled something about a seriously cool singer calling herself '*Madonna*'.

Age thirteen, Sophia had read training manuals: how to get the best stroke in water; how to breathe, how to flow with water – how to *become* water.

She remembered there had been a modest library at training camp, a quiet, dry room with formica shelving, high windows and chairs. She'd read a book called '*Nacht Ohne Mond*' by Mary Stewart and been swept away to a place of dust and heat. An island called Crete where a young woman found herself tangled up in a web of lies and deceit. The woman had fallen in love, and in that baking heat, her lover had saved her. Sophia took a bite of her sandwich and remembered that she'd returned the book and left the quiet room with a keen, hopeless longing for the possibility of that kind of love.

*Stern*, her favourite magazine, had their usual breakthrough headliner plastered over the front cover. This week's story was: '*Der Skandal der DDR*'. Was there no escape? She'd take the magazine back and get a refund. Or, to avoid that inevitable fuss, leave it unread on the table. *Come on*, the headline dared her: *Open the page*. In any case, sooner rather than later, the whole world would know about her and the others; whether they wanted to be known or not.

Mia had chosen a chocolate croissant. Between mouthfuls of pastry she mouthed song lyrics from Madonna's 'gossip-songs-and-hot-news page'. Her simple joy touched Sophia. A happiness that excised a little of the shadow that pursued her.

*Stern*'s report focussed on Raoul Schiemann, a sports coach from the GDR. Schiemann (code name 'Meschke') was abdicating responsibility; happily placing blame on the 'Sports Medicine Service' for giving him specific orders to hand out anabolic steroids. He explained in detail that the pink and blue pills had been the standard steroid, 'STS 646', and went further to explain that the drugs were passed to the athletes by way of a handshake.

How grotesquely absurd it all sounded: children who knew no better dutifully parading to the vitamin table. They'd pause to drink a glass of some harmless concoction before moving on to shake the trainer's hand and accept the pill that lay in it, casually transferring the steroid to their mouths as they rounded the corner into the changing room. Diertha was in the report, a whole page just about her. She would have loved that, the fame and the satisfaction of getting back at the people who conspired to make her a monster. Quarrelsome, too large inside her own skin, she'd had such violent

flashes of temper that her friends had learned to stay clear. Stern reported the case of drowning as a suicide.

Suicide? In Sophia's mind her roommate's death being labelled as suicide was another instance of the way the doctors and trainers had refused to take blame.

"Do you like Indian food?" Sophia turned the magazine upside down (out of sight, out of mind) and laughed at Mia's delighted surprise.

As they joined the motorway, Mia leaned back in the passenger seat to sing along to 'Like a Virgin' and, as they passed another line of slow traffic, Sophia was only slightly mortified to realise that she was humming along.

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Lord. There was Hajo waiting, a tower of papers on his desk, his tension palpable when he spotted Mia trailing behind. He'd have to watch his mouth, be polite and not shout. A good sign. Sophia held herself tight. Hajo, solid, grouchy and tired: everything she wanted and knew she could never have.

"I won't be long, *Schatzi*," Sophia said, pulling out the chair at her desk for Mia who shot a glance at Hajo and blushed crimson when he smiled and raised a hand - before she buried her nose back in the magazine.

"Sophia."

Hajo was wearing old jeans. His long legs disappeared under the desk. The black jumper suited him, as did the wet, rumpled, newly cut, lemon scented, hair. Her pangs of relief at being with him made her skin tingle.

"Who's the young lady?"

"Mia, my cousin. You know? The girl who turned up on my doorstep."

Sophia wondered if he saw what she imagined: a member of his team trailing a rumpled young girl, both trying to appear nonchalant and sophisticated, both failing miserably. Or just an investigation he'd rather not investigate, but had to? Whatever Sophia had done, he'd tell her what he thought: whether it was good enough, or not. That was how he was. She didn't mind; had the measure of him; something faintly ironic in his manner made it possible to see round his stiff correctness, a trait dissimilar to her father's secretive rigidity. She was old enough to have inappropriate thoughts about Hajo's damp lemon scented hair, so, rumpled or not, she was certainly able to manage an investigation, and take Hajo's criticism.

“Did you manage to contact your friend, I mean Mr Rathmann?” she asked, feeling a twinge of sympathy at the headline on the very top of his ‘to do’ pile which read: ‘Unification Procedures’.

“Well, yes, I did.” He pulled a copy of the Stern magazine from under the pile. “But, you know, this was more interesting. What do you make of it?”

She should tell him what she knew, say it all and try to explain. Salvage what she could. Her mouth wouldn’t form the right words about how she’d spent a lifetime inside the GDR sports machine - only to be spat out; a broken version of what she could have been.

“Ah,” was all she could say as the scent of him wafted nearer.

“Look, there’s more.” He handed her a sheet of paper. Eric Röther, it said. Her swim coach. The man who made her kneel on all fours, close her eyes, stay silent as he worked on his own fast, furious pleasure. She could still smell him; a vile mix of vinegar and beer.

He’d *raped* her. There was no air left to breathe. Hajo’s hands were heavy on her shoulders, as if he were holding her steady.

“Sophia? My dear, what is it?”

My dear? What was he saying? Mia had heard him: in fact the child was moving towards them looking frightened and strangely out of focus.

Next to Röther was the name: Sonnenberg, the place of memory. The elbow shaped lake so beautiful at dusk: silver grey ripples turning to the distant shore. Apple and cherry trees. The big house. Long nights during which nightingales sang.

“Your auntie’s OK” Sophia could hear Hajo’s voice echo, as if across a vast space.

“She doesn’t look okay to me!”

“No, well Mia, it is Mia isn’t it? Good. Can you get Sophia some water from the kitchen, just across the corridor?”

Her skin was warm and prickly; it felt as if it belonged to someone else. Hajo had knelt in front of her, taken hold of her hand. She couldn’t look, just prayed he wouldn’t let go. Her father had taken her from Sonnenberg, through a never ending maze of white-walled corridors that were painted with streaks of blood. If Hajo let her

go she'd end up stuck inside that terrifying place, forever. She leaned across the desk and, with her spare hand, turned the paper slowly upside-down blurring the sharp detail.

Hajo released her hand - she was certain he took longer than necessary - and took the cup of water from Mia.

"Well thank you. I'm very pleased to meet you, Mia," he said, making her giggle. "It's a good thing you're here, your aunty nearly fainted!"

"She keeps doing that."

Hajo looked surprised. He turned to Sophia, about to quiz her, no doubt, about her repeated weakness. "Hmm. Well she looks alright to me now. I'll tell you what Mia, our new duty officer will show you round the headquarters while I make sure your aunty is OK. The prison cells for Berlin's most notorious criminals might interest you?" He grinned as Mia raised her eyes to the ceiling. Sophia felt her heart jump: the girl's face was a mirror image of how she felt.

"I'm, like, thirteen." Nevertheless Mia blushed furiously when she saw the good-looking young officer. She followed him out of the office without so much as a backward glance.

"That was kind." Sophia moved carefully to the spare chair. "It really was. Thank you."

"You're not really going to faint?" He looked so utterly relieved when she shook her head Sophia almost laughed, before remembering they were going to have to talk about the now face-down paper.

"Sophia, exactly how were you involved in all of this?"

"I know those places, Sonnenberg and Kriescha." She stumbled to explain the lake and the apple trees, finding nothing but blurred images that would have little or no relevance. Could she really tell him about swimming, running, late nights and sex?

"Hajo, I just don't remember," she said. Her head was pounding, willing her to move on and not linger on fossil-memories embedded in the watery part of her brain.

"You do realise, given this added complication, I should suspend you?" He spoke gently, ruefully. Probing, not condemning.

"I was an athlete, Hajo, not a Stasi informer."

Sophia refused to meet a stare that might be full of hostility and not a little contempt. To fill the silence, she told him about Breden and Precinct 66: the atmosphere

of mistrust, the barbed wire, narrow windows and unhelpful staff. Computer files that were more about creating grey areas than about specifics. She tried to emphasise how Hajo needed to move fast and get his hands on original police records to have any chance of finding out what was missing. They had to compare the old and new. Find stretches of unexplained time, those police duties carried out in locations that had political relevance. Such information was vital.

“But Martin will have done that, won’t he?” Could Hajo really not know how so many were turned, made to do things they would never normally do?

“Martin worked on the protocol stretch. Schönefeld to Niederschönhausen Castle.”

“And? Sophia what do you mean?”

“The section of road manned by the People’s Police. You know. The area that was organised and run by the Stasi.”

She handed him the report, sad that he’d lost a friend, yet knowing that because of his error of judgement, now was the expedient time to tell him about Jörg – to give him the letter and report she’d so carefully worded. However, even before she’d had her say, Hajo was talking over her explanation. Any officer like Jörg who’d been directly implicated, he said, had to be struck off.

“And Rathmann? What about him? At least read the notes I’ve given you, and don’t pretend that room full of paperwork Maria has collected is worthless, Hajo, because it isn’t.”

Mia was crossing over the back yard to the door that led down into the cells. She jiggled and held up her right hand as if she were in class, thought better of it and lowered her arm before glancing coyly up at the officer’s handsome profile. When Sophia looked back, Hajo had read the letter.

“You’ll have to go back, Sophia,” he said.

“What? We agreed. I took a holiday: I never agreed to *work* there.”

“Sorry, my dear, but I’m not asking for your agreement.”

“No, Hajo, not again! I’m only going back to take Mia home.”

On the floor, by the corner of her chair, was a hardened lump of chewing gum, its owner’s tooth marks clearly visible in the twisted dirty white rubber. Hajo was waiting, giving her a moment to think: to make a sensible decision; the decision she



knew she had to make. She peeled the gum from the floor with a piece of tissue and tossed it in the bin. There was a time when she could have done anything: run for miles, leaving everything so far behind she'd never had to look back. Swim deep underwater - like Diertha, whose tears would have mixed with the lake. Now Sophia was half that person, a half that was forever missing something essential, something so fugitive that although now she was running towards it, she had hardly any idea what it was.

It was already past midday. She could hear the squeak of shoes on the floor as the handful of duty officers walked purposefully around the building. Sophia had worked Saturdays and Sundays so many times, avoiding the empty weekend and gliding straight into Monday. If she wanted to carry on working as a police officer, she couldn't refuse Hajo's request.

"Yes, all right, Hajo, I'll handle the investigation. Fine." She stood up, phrasing it as a concession and, exacting payment in kind, pointed to the letter from Jörg. "But I want them to be shown some leniency and I need you there this coming Friday, to clean up the mess."

When she first graduated as a police officer, she'd not known how to handle her fellow officers and tripped up when talking about setting up a surveillance job: the placing of recorders in houses was not allowed, whereas she'd assumed they were a normal procedure. Following that mistake, she'd tended to retreat into a more passive role, filling her time with work and running - dancing only when the world became too narrow a place.

"And remember, you can't notify anyone until I arrive at the station on Monday. That's understood, isn't it?"

Hajo grinned and momentarily placed his arm around her shoulders, squeezing, before handing her a set of keys and a file. He seemed to be enjoying the novelty of taking orders from below. "The codes for the security system are in the file." He turned to Mia who was waiting by the door, eyes widening at the sight of the bunch of keys and the vast envelope. "Mia, would you do something for me? Would you remind your aunty to book me a hotel room? She's going to pretend to forget, just to annoy me."

Mia nodded, her eyes sliding sideways to monitor Sophia's level of annoyance.

The flat was cold and clammy. Turning the heating on full, Sophia ordered the takeaway and walked the short distance to collect it. Five minutes alone. The name

Günther Schenke circled in her mind. Someone she'd known, someone she should watch out for; even though he was no longer a police commander. His name, along with the name Eric Röther, was enough to shake her with horror, without knowing what it was she feared.

Back home, Mia was waiting, a bright blue towel twisted around her newly washed hair. She glanced at the phone in the hallway, back at Sophia.

“Go on, Mia,” Sophia said. “Ring the hospital. The number’s just there by the phone. Take as long as you like.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



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Hajo was watching her, his sharp grey eyes laughing. Moving so close: as if he might kiss her. She sighed and turned her mouth to his and the beetroot, pock-marked face of Eric Röther stared back. Sophia gasped and squirmed away as her swimming trainer ran his tongue across his lips. Waking, she began to cry out, before remembering that Mia was in the flat.

As a young girl, she'd tried so hard to hide in the crowd that walked to and from the training pool. To avoid him when possible. That wasn't often. Mia was as young and as vulnerable as she had once been. What if something happened to her while she was in Berlin? Sophia would be guilty of the same lack of care she'd been afforded.

Eric Röther had liked the idea of young, easy prey. Unlike the other athletes, whose parents phoned every day and came to visit at the weekend, Petrus saw his daughter infrequently. When he did, it was to only hear how successful she'd been, not to listen to her frightened, confused confession. She'd tried to tell him. Stumbled to find the words to describe how she was being touched in places she shouldn't be. He'd frowned, made a note or two about her medication and suggested that she stay clear of trouble. Looking more like a twelve-year-old than thirteen, Sophia had no breasts, no regular periods. She'd been naive; imagining herself special as Eric positioned her on the bed, and fucked her. The first time left her bleeding, terrified and silent, hiding in their shared bathroom until Diertha persuaded her to open the door. It was the only occasion she recalled Diertha being kind. She'd given her painkillers and told her to use Vaseline next time, or better, KY Jelly. When Sophia asked what that was, Diertha had laughed, warning her she'd better grow up fast, get used to using whatever she could, because Eric wasn't going to stop any time soon.

Now she felt tainted by all of them. Eric, Ebbe, all of the boys and girls who had touched her, kneading her breasts like infants blindly seeking out milk, mewling and tugging. They had become a part of who she was, how she saw herself, why she did what she did.

But Hajo?

Sophia tiptoed to the spare room, eased open the door and prayed: please let her be asleep. Under the covers, curled up like a snail, the child was oblivious to the world. Only one nail-bitten hand was visible, clutching an over-washed white bear with pink button eyes. Mia's shoes, socks and clothes, were neatly placed under and on a chair.

Sophia estimated two hours before the day had to officially begin, KaDeWe only opened at eleven on some Sundays, this being one. She dug out a clean pair of running trousers, and was pulling on a t-shirt and jacket before she realised Mia couldn't be left asleep and alone in the apartment for a whole hour. In what seemed a lifetime ago, Sophia would have happily and roughly shaken the girl awake. Not now. She showered, scrubbing away uneasy thoughts of sex until her skin tingled. Better than nothing. Halfway to feeling relaxed. A glance in the mirror confirmed that her hair needed a cut. Apart from dark circles under her eyes, Sophia looked the same, but she *felt* different. Lighter, easier, more like herself: the girl she'd once known.

Where was her face lotion? The bathroom cabinet had been utterly rearranged. Everything, apart from the sleeping pills, were in the wrong bottles. And there, sitting on the top shelf like two bloody exclamation marks, were the dragonfly hair-clips. The girl must have swopped everything! Why? When? Whatever the reason she decided to seize this peaceful hour for painting. It was always a relief to be absorbed in colour, painting an imagined world from smudges and lines.

In the quiet, a mermaid took shape, the darker shade of blue and grey morphing into a lithe body with a green fin. This one was playful - about to shoot to the surface, jump and dive down to where the eels hid. And there, just to the left, a shark emerged behind what looked like a shipwreck.

"I like that bit."

Sophia turned to see Mia pointing to the shipwreck. As the child came nearer, Sophia smelt traces of sleep and petrol, as if yesterday's journey still clung to her.

"What on earth have you done with my medicines, Mia?" Sophia added steel grey to the underside of the shark, as Mia bumped into the trestle table that held palette and brushes. "Watch out." She balanced the table with one hand, Mia with the other.

"I'm sorry, really *really* sorry. You were horrible and I was cross and I mixed the medicines and poured them into the wrong bottles." She paused. "I was going to buy you new ones today so you wouldn't notice."

“Well, I have noticed, haven’t I?”

“Yes.” Mia looked out the window across to the statue. “I know.”

She didn’t *sound* sorry. However, rather than wanting to tell the child that she’d done wrong, Sophia wanted to laugh. If she’d possessed half the anger and strength Mia had when she was a girl, she might have questioned the people who were supposed to be caring for her.

A flash outside the window. The golden angel emerged as the weak sun broke through the cloud and found the power to reach her.

“She’s just, like, amazing,” Mia said. ‘Sorry about messing up your stuff. I can’t say I didn’t mean to ’cos I did. Well, I did mean it then. Not now. Not anymore.’

‘Well, OK. But you might like to put it all back?’

When they finally made their way downstairs, Frau Weiner was waiting: hair shaped into a neat bun, dressed in her best tan jacket and skirt as it was Sunday, and Sunday meant church. How nice, she said, for Sophia to have such a pretty niece, someone to take care of her, keep her company when she grew older.

“I,” she added, sniffing through a rather angular nose, “have no one.”

She insisted they follow her into her neat apartment where she made a fuss of tucking foil-wrapped Lindt chocolates into Mia’s willing hands whilst listing the sender of each letter, placing them, one by one, in Sophia’s palm.

“Telephone bill. Gas. Pay slip. You are shopping today, *nicht wahr?*” She looked up expectantly.

Mia glanced at Sophia, her mouth opened to answer but Sophia shook her head in warning. Once Frau Weiner got talking, they’d never get away.

It was raining outside, the steady deluge that usually settled in for days. Sophia stuffed the post inside her bag as they crossed the Landwehrkanal and walked the short stretch to Lützowstrasse. The market was already in full swing. Mia stopped by a collection of wrist watches, and the stall owner’s eyes lit up with Deutschmark signs. It was only Sophia’s intervention that stopped Mia handing over an extensive chunk of her pocket money. After that the girl stuck close by as they headed for the bakery stall.

They ate hot sweet *Hörnchen*, watching the crowds dodge past vendors who, despite the soaking conditions, were as upbeat as ever. Calling to passersby, selling kitchen utensils, handbags, *Bratwurst* with brown mustard, purple and red tulips

brought in from Dutch greenhouses, sour-sweet gherkins, chocolates, seasonal vegetables – all at unbeatable prices, according to them.

When the clock above the Wittenbergplatz U-Bahn said ten to eleven, Sophia pointed out where they were going and, zigzagging past the stalls, they joined the queue waiting for the doors of KaDeWe to open. At precisely eleven, the metal security gates began to roll up, clanking like a giant roasting spit. The front row took a nervous step back as the metal grid wound its way out of sight, revealing two heavy glass doors that were opened by footmen in smart red and green felt livery.

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Mia hugged Sophia's arm tight as they were pulled through the doors, crushed between loads of chattering people. Tourists huddled together by a towering information board. Mia could tell they were American because of the way they spoke - a kind of nasally sound. Plus she'd seen an American cowboy film at Gerda's house, one they weren't supposed to be watching, with guns and horses and women dressed in long skirts. The group wore pressed beige trousers with sneaker shoes and big, comfy looking coats. One man tried to read the words on the board. He said *Erste Etage* like he had lollipops in his mouth. As Mia watched, a lady wearing high heels and carrying a clipboard came over and began to tick off people's names and, at the same time, translate. The group clapped and laughed.

The shop was amazing. Everything was wrapped in white and silver tissue. No. Not just everything, everyone. All the shop assistants were dressed up to look like *angels* in white sarong dresses with wings made out of paper feathers. They beckoned to shoppers to come and try out the latest Dior perfume. Mia had some sprayed on her wrist. Mmm. It smelt expensive. Stars turned and twinkled, dangling from fine, almost see-through, string. The stars flashed, turning from silver to green. Manikins had been placed on podiums, dressed in nothing but jewels so you could see their breasts! Mia looked away. Far over on the other side, were counters piled high with tons of lipstick and make-up.

She felt dizzy, a good, delicious, excited-dizzy, better than Christmas, better than her birthday, better than anything she could remember. Sophia was edging her towards the stairs.

“I don’t like lifts,” she said, which was brainless because lifts were great. They took you up or down with no effort.

On the third floor: jeans! All kinds. Flared and drainpipe. Straight jeans in different colours: grey and black and light blue. Mia wanted dark blue Levi flares so much her mouth felt dry like sandpaper; even though she had cleaned her teeth properly that morning. The dark blue Levis were soft and *furry*. She wasn’t going to even bother looking at anything else yet; just take these off the rack and try them on. Sophia was saying something about meeting up in forty minutes and Mia nodded: good idea. Whenever she went shopping with Oma they had to hurry, and she couldn’t bear to hurry now. Instead of one, she selected ten pairs of jeans and made her way across to the shop assistant. She’d try these on first and after that get some more.

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Sophia found her usual choice of white underwear, no lace, no trim. She selected and paid for four pairs of knickers before making her way up to the delicatessen floor. She’d decided to buy *Karlsburger Oblaten* because these biscuits had been her mother’s favourite. Now the idea seemed a foolish gesture, not one she wanted to analyse. Dagmar might no longer like them, or she’d take them and mumble a token thank you before looking away, her eyes making it clear how little the gift meant to her. From the moment Petrus had his first affair, every gift had produced the same response. No matter what Sophia had brought, nothing had been enough. So was this wafer-thin circular biscuit worth the effort? What would be lost? she asked herself. A new thought for her, and one she’d never been generous enough to afford. Picking up two packets, she made her way back down to the third floor. The child could easily get lost, or spend too much before she really knew what she wanted, or what fitted.

“But I want to try them *all*.” Mia’s voice reached Sophia from where she stood at the bottom of the stairs.

“Three. You are allowed three.” The sales assistant turned to Sophia for help. “The young lady won’t let me measure her. How can she choose if she doesn’t have the right measurement?”

Sophia laughed a strange joyous bark that had Mia glaring at her, before joining in – giggling as she was propelled into the changing rooms once more.

It wasn't long before the assistant and Mia returned. Following that it was only a matter of sorting through the mountain of jeans, to find that only four pairs were the right size.

Two pairs of pyjamas had been placed on the sales counter, fluffy, girly nightwear with a yellow and pink heart design - more suitable for a child of seven than for a teenager. Sophia took them back, selecting instead pyjamas in rose pink, finished with white ribbing and lace. Feminine, yet young. The kind of nightwear she would have chosen for her own childhood self. She paid and turned to see a slim and lovely girl dancing towards her, looking sideways at her bum, checking that the trousers really did fit and were not deceiving her.

“We're not going home yet, are we?”

Sophia had formulated an answer, something along the lines of ‘You've already spent your money’, but Mia's eyes were blue and pleading, and really, what harm could another hour do?

“Makeup or underwear?” She asked and the girl threw her arms around Sophia and squeezed.

They arrived home laden with clothing. Mia held her hands up to the light and spread her fingers. “Cool,” she said, gazing at her red hot nails. “It should also be on my toenails, to match. The lady did say.”

The hour had turned into three. Mia bought three bras, a feat involving yet more measuring, accompanied by furious blushing. They'd tried on hats, sunglasses, scarves and finally sprayed themselves with so many perfumes Sophia had the beginnings of a poisonous headache from the cocktail of sickly pineapple and tart lemon.

In the hallway the phone was blinking. Sophia called to Mia to wait until she'd found her an old newspaper on which to put the varnish *and* her feet; before she lifted the receiver.

Petrus's voice, tinny and thin, spoke so quietly Sophia could hear the silences between words. Dagmar had died at lunchtime. Sophia should ring him. They were to come home when they could.

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Mia was crying. The sound trickled around the otherwise hushed room. She sat on the settee, shopping strewn at her feet, her face turning from Sophia's. Her mouth opening



to let out a wail that had, as yet, refused to arrive and lodged in her throat, a portent of the grief that was to come

Sophia felt nothing. No sadness, no loss, no guilt. At the same moment her heart yearned for some portion of time in which to remedy the years of loss that had settled between mother and daughter. Dagmar had not told her the secret she'd professed to have kept. Sophia had wanted, in that lonely moment at the hospital; to tell Dagmar that somehow she did care. That she was trying to understand how her mother had given all she had left to Mia, leaving nothing for her.

The girl's face had turned from pink to red. She'd pressed her fingers hard against her cheek. Now three white lines stood out, a sharp contrast against the blotchy skin. Mia hiccupped and coughed as Sophia, at a loss to what else to do, poured the barest portion of Schnapps into a glass.

"Come on now - don't argue," she said and Mia downed the glass in one gulp. Looking up horrified, the girl veered towards the bathroom, hands over mouth, to throw up. Finally she sat waxen faced on the toilet seat as Sophia rinsed a flannel under hot water. She placed a cautious hand on Mia's cheek, brushing her hair from her neck. Mia's skin was soft and smooth like a baby's; under it the child's pulse raced, distraught. The unfamiliar rush of emotion was so unsettling that Sophia removed her hand.

"I want to go home," Mia's mouth was set in a determined line.

"Not today though. Tomorrow. First thing."

"No. Now!" Mia leaned forward and stared at her nails before clenching her hands into fists. "You hated her, didn't you? That's why you can't be bothered to go now. You're glad she's dead and, well, I *could* hate you. You're mean and selfish and you should've cared for Oma because she cared about you."

Sophia wanted to say how Mia knew nothing about it. The girl couldn't have known what Dagmar had been like all those years ago. Mia would never know how Sophia had been told not to contact her mother when she'd wanted her so badly. How she'd needed a mother when she was ill and in pain.

"Mia, listen to me. I do care." She explained that there really were things she had to do before they left. Pack her uniform, organise all the paperwork needed for her work in Breden. Clean the apartment. She'd simply have to let the child hate her until

they returned home, there was time enough for grieving and the worst of it – the building a new life. She didn't say it out loud but the words were there in the silence: Dagmar wouldn't know now, one way or the other.

When Mia had calmed, Sophia left the door slightly open and jogged downstairs to the cellar. In the washing machine were the left over dry clean clothes from a lifetime ago. The black leggings and gossamer top looked hopelessly out of keeping from where she stood now, knee deep in conflicting emotions. Her worry for the child. Rage that Dagmar had died and an odd tremulous annoyance that Mia thought she could dictate when they would leave. Lifting the lacy underwear from the pile, she hardly knew whether to laugh or cry.

Plodding slowly back upstairs, Sophia wondered how Petrus felt. She imagined him as a young man, gradually forming from soft clay into the person he now was. The first shaping completed by the GDR: moulding him into a tool for their use. The second casting had been of his own making. In West Germany he'd become a silent spectator, a father whose job it was to keep his daughter from remembering or contacting anyone from Breden. He'd had to minimise the possibility that either of them would be considered a threat to the GDR.

Mia had gone.

In the time it took Sophia to collect the washing, she'd packed her rucksack and let herself out the front door. Sophia ran to the window. All she could see were four couples hurrying along in various directions under colourful umbrellas.

Nothing had gone from her wallet but the drawer full of change and selected notes for parking and bus fares was nearly empty. Mia had taken the money to buy a ticket home.

Sophia drove, baffled by a heart-wrenching worry. Where was the girl? How could she have gone without any explanation? She could be hurt, lost, frightened. A child sized figure was walking along the pavement. Sophia accelerated and pulled up onto the curb to see a stranger's face: dark eyes and charcoal black hair, nothing like Mia. The woman turned, stared, and hurried away as Sophia drove around Tiergarten Park and parked back outside the apartment. Mia wouldn't go to the main train station. If she wanted to go home, she'd travel by the same route as the one that brought her here.

Frau Weiner was peering out the window waving. Nosy old cow, always wanting to know everyone's business. Sophia ignored her. Frau Weiner rapped on her window, opened it wider and leaned out.

"Hello? Frau Künstler? You're looking for your niece?" she called. "You just missed her. She just left. Ten minutes maybe, walking that way." She pointed across the park. Sophia muttered thank you, adding a sincere silent apology.

Tiergarten Station was full of tourists milling around looking at timetables and gazing up each time the loudspeakers issued any new information. Mia wasn't by the ticket office or in the waiting room. In the toilets under the station, a woman in a housecoat glared and shouted for Sophia to pay her *Fünfzig Pfennig* entrance fee. Sophia muttered "Police," but Mia wasn't there and, even with the payment, the attendant couldn't summon the memory of a young girl in the last fifteen minutes.

The child wanted to go home, and going home without Sophia meant taking a train scheduled to pass through Breden. Any train would do, as long as it stopped there, and there weren't that many today: the most likely left in two minutes from platform four.

Mia was there. Sitting on the last bench: as far back from the crowd as she could be. Head down and hunched up, a lost little person counting out her change. Sophia wanted to shake her until her teeth rattled; instead, because Mia's face was wet with fresh tears, she walked quietly over to her and tried to find words that would ease the child's pain.

"There now, *Schatzi*, come on now. I'll phone my father," she said. "And tell him we'll be there by nightfall."

"Will you?"

"Yes, I will. Come on, you can phone him with me. I'm sorry."

They arrived in Breden at dusk. This time it was Petrus waiting at the door; a slim dark figure, silhouetted by the light in the hallway.

"Sophia, I don't want to go in." Mia curled up tight in the front seat and stared out into the night air. "If I go in, it'll be real, won't it?"

"Be brave. I'll be right behind you."

Mia nodded, and Sophia felt a rush of overwhelming pride when the girl stepped from the car, straightened her shoulders and walked towards the door.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



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The hotel restaurant had been re-designed: tables placed together to form three long rows. Oversized glass vases adorned the room, filled with the same purple and blood red tulips Sophia had seen at the market. Thank god: two single tables remained, one in each far corner. A chalk menu placed by the door advertised *Spätzle*, soft pasta with pork wrapped in brown buttered breadcrumbs. A local delicacy: one that made Sophia's mouth water. She'd managed to book the last available room in the unusually busy hotel. Each second Sunday in the month, a tour bus unloaded its passengers for one night, en route from Prague to Berlin. Despite this, the busy, business-like atmosphere in the lobby was a relief after the tense emotion in Dagmar's house. The room came with a double bed. Nothing could be better than the delightful prospect of climbing under those covers, forgetting about her dwindling family, curling up to lose herself in sleep. Which to do? sleep? run? or face the dreary task of unpacking?

Clad in trainers, leggings and a fleece, she paused. The reports and official files Hajo had given her needed to be kept somewhere safe. Under the mattress? Obvious, though it would just have to do. If someone wanted them, well, they wouldn't have to look hard. The car had already been used as a drop point for her mother's medical file and utilising the hotel safe was akin to putting an ad in the paper. Dagmar's house would have been the better option, but to have to face Mia again? No. Absolutely not.

Sophia ran. Slowly at first, warming her muscles, breathing deep, deciding on a route that wouldn't take her anywhere near the lurking dangers of Maria's, or Dagmar's house. The river footpath was as good a place as any, but this time she'd cross at the Blaue Brücke; the larger bridge near to the town centre. It was six in the evening, and already dark – although the occasional streetlamp gave out just enough light to avoid tripping. As her eyes became accustomed to the gloom she sprinted, slowed, sprinted again as her mind roamed and settled: excavating each portion of the day, inspecting each dilemma with the same care an archaeologist might use to interpret each find.

Mia had been utterly lost, unable to believe that Dagmar wasn't a short drive away, recovering in hospital. Sophia had seen the same expression when arresting a guy

who thought he'd got away with it, acting as if the whole episode were a bad dream. When Mia came to accept that her Oma was no longer there, the nightmare wouldn't go. On the contrary her grief would wait for the shock to pass before working its way deep inside the child's mind, forming part of the person she would one day become. Don't be like me, Mia, she thought in surprise: don't live to rigid rules that are all I have to keep me safe.

When had those rules become too tight? They chafed, making her heart lurch from indifference to acute sensation.

All day the girl had stayed tightly glued to Sophia, as if she were her shadow. Perhaps she'd believed Sophia's presence would keep the monsters at bay? Whatever the reason, Petrus had watched their strange dance that late afternoon, lips tightening; his eyes coldly distant, not liking what he saw. He didn't approve of the closeness weaving its delicate thread between girl and woman.

Sophia had explained to Petrus that she had to stay in Breden, predicting his anger. Such a decision, he'd said, was pure foolishness. Her job would be at risk. All her hard work would be tainted if she had any contact with police officers from the town. The news that Martin Rathmann was to lose his job had turned him pale. The more she'd explained, the more agitated he became, until he descended to pleading with her to pack up and go home now; leave him to sort out the house, the funeral, everything. They could only hope to resume their lives in Berlin if she did what she was advised.

Was he frightened? Surely not. He'd simply assumed, as he always did, that she would do whatever he told her to do. Because of that assumption, childish perhaps, Sophia hadn't told him about the article in *Stern* magazine. How it was only a matter of time before his name would appear in the papers. He'd be asked to explain exactly how he'd been involved in the doping plan. His work with 'Theme 14.25', the past he'd kept secret, would be revealed. She trifled with the idea of cooling the burn of self justification, but, hell: let him get what he deserved. Let him be finally pulled back into the mess he'd played such a part in creating.

The rhythmic thud of her feet soothed. There was nothing here to harm her. Life could be just as it had been: simple, predictable, the demands of a job, her painting and running, enough to sustain her. She began to mull over the dilemma of mixing blue and

green to get a perfect turquoise. Frau Schölller would have known. She would have said: just try it and see. It wouldn't have mattered to her if the first attempt was awash with mistakes, a mess of dirty green. She'd have laughed, called Maria to come and see, kissed them both and been proud of Sophia for simply trying something new.

Mia's face slid into focus: mouth wide, eyes grief-stricken. A terrified child, as I was once, she thought with a deep qualm and shoved the image away, sprinting through the back streets, past the butcher's and the grocery shop's dark window.

Back in the hotel a slim woman, hair pulled into a tightly braided grey bun, leaned over the admissions desk and hailed her. No one had known if, or when, Sophia was due to return, she explained. That was why the note delivered that morning had been put with all the general messages and not noticed until now. In her room, closing the door firmly behind her, Sophia sighed and opened Maria's note, to read: 'Records are being destroyed in the police station. If you want anything, go this afternoon'.

They were already too late.

She tried to get through to Hajo, first at work, then at home. Where was he? In the end Sophia left a short message on his answer phone to say she was going to the station now, rather than in the morning. Swapping her damp t-shirt for a sweatshirt and a warm fleece jacket, she jogged back down the stairs, keys plus door codes in her pocket, and drove through the evening light to the police station. Of course, the letter had to be true. In all the time Sophia had known Maria, she'd never known her to lie; rather, her friend had been exasperatingly honest. Well, people did change. If this was a trap, Sophia was stepping into it, with no back up other than a message left on Hajo's answer phone.

Before climbing out of the car, she clicked off the interior reading light: better safe than sorry. It would be just her luck if someone saw her. She had the keys to the station and could go in without alerting anyone. As a senior officer, she had every right to wander in as and when she chose; it was just that no one knew that yet.

The neighbouring houses were clearly visible, their towering walls monumentally dark. Faint light profiled the alleyway. Now, from where she stood, Sophia could see both the public entrance and the car port. The sky, which had been brooding all afternoon, promised sleet, maybe even snow. Parked up, the squad cars rested like slumbering beetles, their carapaces glimmering under the orange security

lighting. Sophia made her way to the reception door, peered at the paper in her hand and punched the sequence into the key pad. Thank god, the first key fitted and she slipped through into the reception area. Nothing stirred. There should have been a twenty-four hour operator at the call desk, plus two duty officers. Still, it was a rural station, perhaps the out-of-office number would be switched through to the police rest room.

The door through to the offices, so firmly closed only two days before, stood wide open. The incinerator would be out the back, in an area not far from the carport. Passing silently by the door to the computer room, Sophia shivered. This was dangerous turf. She was stepping on forbidden ground, ground that had remained secret and untouched for years. Whosoever foolishly stepped in the way of the Stasi, the People's Police, or anyone involved in 'Theme 14.25' would, in the past, have been silenced. Perhaps, now she thought of it, it would have been wiser to have brought her gun.

The rain finally arrived, thudding on to the roof top. Burning anything on such a wet night would be madness. A phone rang. She could hear the voices of two officers in the rest room grumbling.

"Who," one asked, "have they thumped this time?"

"Each other. Same as last week."

The second voice initiated a heated discussion on whose turn it was to attend the disturbance. Sophia ran back to the reception area. A moment later, the headlights of the squad car flared, beaming through the pane as she flattened herself against the wall, listening for the sound of the security gates to roll back. The car pulled away. The building fell silent. Any relief at the departure gave way to dread. One officer would be as dangerous as two.

There was no need to worry. The stubby, pastry-faced officer was happily ensconced watching a portable TV, his feet comfortably resting on the table, arms linked behind a thick neck. Thank goodness, not Ebbe. His presence would have made the situation even more risky. If it had been Jörg? The prospect wasn't worth thinking about.

At the far end of the corridor a beam of light shone through the gap between carpet and door. Someone had been in there. Better still, they'd left the door open. Maria was telling the truth. Sophia waited. No sound. No movement.

The room was filled with paper. Towers of old reports teetered: a line of unsteady pensioners waiting to cross the road. Files were haphazardly stacked on grey metal cabinets that lined the sides of two walls. On the table in the middle of the room more papers were scattered, half in, half out of loose, metal edged containers. Three of the nine cabinets yawned open as if they were simply too tired to close. Their innards, a mix of metal edged files and brown cardboard, were exposed. The filing had been alphabetically arranged. The cabinet labelled 'P-S' was empty, everything gone. Günther Schenke and Jörg Schöllner's reports had been incinerated. Their past lives ceased to exist. They thought they could still be anything they chose to be: except, of course, for Sophia, who knew there was more. The drawer labelled 'H-K' hadn't been opened. She expected to find nothing more than a mention of her name, details of her rank prior to her visit on Friday. So what were her father's records doing mixed in with police records under the (now well known) code 'Romeo Project'?

'October 1973', it read. Ilse Hammerman had been working for the Stasi. Operation 'Romeo' had been successful, Hammerman instructing her contact to deliver monthly doses of anabolic steroids to the Sonnenberg training facility.

Every time new information came to light Petrus was there, his name woven deep into the fabric of the doping system. Each time she learned more about his sordid involvement, she was plagued by the same mortifying burn of regret, love, and concern. You were a drugs courier, she thought. You, my father: a medical man who handed out poison to athletes.

The question remained as to why such information was here. Her father wouldn't have been involved with the police. "Please not," she prayed as she opened the second file.

Her records were inside.

Not who she was now, but who she had been: the State's creature. S. Künstler, international swimmer, daughter of P. Künstler. Competing for Sport Club Dynamo, supervised by the trainer code-named 'Technik'.

Her daily medication: 5 mg of steroids per day for a 12 day cycle, and nothing three days prior to competition. Trainer: Eric Röther.

She remembered a room painted white. *That* room with the examination bed. Pumping her full of drugs that made her strong at the same time as they made her crave



sex. Outside there had been air and birdsong. Inside she'd gradually changed from girl into a monster, thick hair springing between her legs. Wire brush hair, too long to be normal. Her voice had dropped to a growl; her legs muscled into tree trunks as her body grew engorged and ugly. Sophia remembered the wild power. The fury that made her want more than life could give. More than sex could offer. A fierce longing for something greater than the strength she'd had: to be able to swim forever.

The file only listed two of her four remembered, enforced, abortions. The first in '75, the second in '77 when there had been complications. Petrus had requested permission to withdraw his daughter from the training programme.

Not granted.

She'd been obtuse. Not seen what was staring her in the face. The data clearly showed that Günther Schenke, the chief inspector who'd been forced to resign, knew Petrus. They must have worked together: Günther protecting her father; Petrus (most likely) treating the inmates in the police cells, keeping quiet about their injuries. Arranging death certificates for those men and woman who had died from frenzied beatings, or starvation – as Frau Schöller had.

*Christ*, it had been Günther on the phone that first night, not Ilse.

Sharp terrifying pain. A solid weight fractured against her head. A door opened and shut. An icy breeze touched sore skin. Blackness.

Sophia woke to grey light edging in through a cracked window. Everything was wrong. Who'd broken into the apartment and broken the windows? No water, no painkillers? Someone had moved them from where she kept them, always within easy reach. The bed felt hard. Every part of her was raw and aching.

*Stupid Sophia*. She wasn't in a bed. She was curled up on the floor. When she moved, the room slid around like oil on water. Was this dying? Her head was sticky. *Blood?* Please, she prayed, let someone come. But then she was slipping away to a calm place, a place where nothing mattered, a place where she could rest and float under the sea.

Left for dead. She could lie on the whispering sea bed and remember Diertha.

Sophia eased her legs out straight. *Die?* Not bloody likely. Not at the hand of a fellow officer. The roaring in her ears was like the sea. *Concentrate*. The wall was just there, she could feel it with the sole of her foot. Right hand wedged against the floor she

pushed until her back felt its cold firm comforting strength. Hajo would be furious if she died in an anonymous storage room, unable to protect herself as she'd been taught.

There was a length of thick wire by her left hand. The wire trailed all the way up to the top of the cabinet. Sophia moved her head and fainted. When she woke, the wavering outline of a telephone mocked her. *Come on*. She pulled. The phone rattled. If that bloody thing fell on her head, she'd be finished.

She pulled harder. *Fuck*. The phone hit her neck with a wet thud followed by a whine as the receiver disconnected. Her hands were shaking and turning a strange greeny blue. The number? what was the bloody number? She couldn't remember.

God, she wanted her mother. "*Mutti*," she sobbed, hating the weak, salty, useless emotion, closing her eyes. She cried for Dagmar who had let her go. Dagmar who hadn't kept her safe when she needed keeping, her mother who had given everything to a child called Mia.

A fierce little voice broke through her weeping, telling her to stop being so dumb. "Come on," the child voice insisted. "Wake up. Stop being so *pathetic*. Of course you remember! Open your eyes and dial."

Sophia remembered. She dialled her mother's number, waiting for what seemed like a lifetime before Petrus answered, and could only whimper when he asked with growing anger and anxiety: who was there?

"Papa," she whispered in a voice that sounded more like a child's than her own, "help me," before the darkness came like a warm thick blanket and took her away.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



~

Mia thought she heard Petrus call. She'd been crying again and, desperate for anything that might stop the grey feeling, she started down the stairs.

Petrus was talking to someone, quietly, urgently.

Something in his voice wasn't right. His strange whispery tone, like the one she used in class to tell Gerda the answers to stuff, made her certain he didn't want anyone to hear. It wasn't late, only around eight, so he couldn't think she was asleep. Mia didn't want to snoop. She hated it when people snooped, but she *had* to hear what he was saying.

"Sophia won't know?" He seemed reassured by the answer because he said, "Good. That will be the end of it," and replaced the phone.

The end of what? He had to be doing something bad if he was whispering on the phone. Maybe *he'd* killed Oma? Stopped giving her the right medication? Put something in that drip that had been inside her arm, something that made her die? Maybe he'd done it so he could be with his girlfriend. The one Oma talked about, the one who lived on the new estate by the hospital.

Oma had been right to not trust him. He wasn't the person Mia thought he was. He was a doctor and knew about medicines, medicines that could kill people instead of making them well. He could be a part of the thing that frightened her and everyone else who lived in East Germany. Even though it was all supposed to be over with the Wall and everything, it wasn't. The police, the Stasi, *those* people, could still hurt you for no reason at all.

Before the Wall came down those people would arrive in the early morning, acting normal, as if there was nothing wrong. They'd take you from your home because your sister or brother or niece or even your *friend* had tried to escape to the West.

Sitting down, Mia put her head between her knees. Please don't let Petrus come up the stairs, she prayed; remembering how frightened she'd been, knowing Sophia was a police officer. She'd been scared to go inside the police station in Berlin, expecting

everyone to be mean. Sophia was kind, Hajo funny. And the dark haired young officer? Well, just thinking about it made her feel squirmy inside.

Sophia wasn't part of the badness. In fact Sophia made Mia feel safe, as if she would do a great deal to help her, if Mia asked. In the police station, she had wanted to interrupt, to tell the pair of them that everyone knew Officer Rathmann had been working with the Stasi. It was as if Hajo was being thick, or he, like Mia, just didn't want to see what was right under his nose. If Petrus had hurt Oma, I was to blame, she thought. I left to go shopping when really I should have stayed at home and looked after her.

In her room the lovely new clothes lay neatly folded on the bed. A reminder of how false she was. How she should have been here. Not there, in KaDeWe, buying clothes. Trying on jeans and messing about with nail varnish as Oma died. Mia took the scissors out from the top drawer and pulled the soft Levis onto her lap. She stretched them lengthwise along the bed covers and cut through the right leg, then the left. Even though she was sobbing, each snip made her feel easier, lighter, less heavy with guilt. The burning in her stomach slowly lessened as Mia took out the pretty pyjamas and cut them to ribbons. So what if Gerda had been jealous about her second trip to Berlin? She hated oafish Gerda nearly as much as she hated herself. Oma was gone, her best friend was gone. Everything she knew was gone.

The grey feeling of loneliness and guilt stretched out its fingers and whispered how useless she was, how selfish, how unwanted. Even her friends at school hadn't called to see if she was OK, because no one cared enough to bother.

Mia shoved her favourite hand-knitted jumper and coat into her bag. She needed Sophia. She'd find her and tell her about Petrus talking on the phone. She'd warn her, and by warning her she'd be doing something good.

Petrus was in the kitchen pouring a drink. She heard the clink of the bottle against the glass and the sound of the cupboard closing. The TV was blaring so he wouldn't hear as she crept down the stairs, heart in mouth; with a ready excuse should he see her. He was watching a news programme about a sports doctor who'd talked to the papers, earning himself a load of money.

Sophia had been an athlete; just like the one that reporter was talking about. The sports doctor said that many athletes didn't want to remember the experiences they'd

had to endure. If I said I couldn't remember what happened yesterday or the day before that, she thought, Sophia would tell me to shut up and stop being an idiot. The thought was comforting, it helped her to move quietly across the kitchen, unlock the back door and slip outside. Even though he might be a bad person, she locked it so that Petrus would be safe. It was better that way: if he did try the door he'd not realise that she'd gone.

It was *freezing*. Just around the corner she put on her coat, zipping the hood right up. Last summer, she'd met up with Gerda in the evenings; they'd wanted to escape Gerda's annoying mother and Oma's loud TV. Gerda had decided to hang out with a group of older kids, kids Mia didn't like. They dressed in black and had chains around their necks and studs in their ears, mouths, even tongues. One of them boasted he had a piercing with a ring on his *willy*, gross as well as moronic. They also liked drinking. Gerda had thrown up because she hadn't drunk anything ever, but pretended she had. The group hadn't stayed to help as she vomited everywhere; they'd walked away laughing.

Now she realised that it had served Gerda right. She and Käthe had laughed as they pretended to faint. Worse, Sophia had seen them. Gerda wasn't a friend any more. Sophia had been right all along. If your friends didn't help you when you needed them, they weren't your friends in the first place. So was that why Sophia didn't seem to have any friends herself?

The quickest route to the hotel was along this road. Cross at the junction and head into town. It wasn't that far, about forty minutes. Mia walked fast, keeping away from dark alleys, walking right in the middle of road in areas where the streetlights were broken. The rain, drizzle when she'd left, was now a steady sleety downpour. She tried to pull the hood of her coat even tighter, tugging at the straps, tying them in a bow - when she heard footsteps.

A woman, not Petrus, came round the corner, hurrying along under a voluminous blue umbrella. She stopped, glanced up and opened her mouth to speak. Mia forced herself to turn, walk away and not glance back. This wouldn't happen in Berlin. People would just mind their own business. The alleyway she'd taken led in the right direction. The cobbled path was pitch black apart from one light right at the other

end and that made Mia even more frightened. God, how brainless can you get? But the woman might have followed her to insist she go home.

Something ran through the darkness towards her, the rat-thing's feet scrabbling on the stones. Shrieking, Mia stumbled backward into the wall and bashed her shoulder. The rat-thing growled and bumped its runty furred body against her leg. She stayed quite still. Any moment it would bite.

A slice of bright yellow light fell across the path as a door directly opposite to her opened and a thickly set bald man wearing nothing but a vest and pants leaned out. He had a tattoo that went all round his neck

“Fipps,” he called “Fippsi! *Komm mal her.*”

Mia tried to make herself invisible as the little sausage dog barked and jumped around her feet, before it scuttled towards the door, nails clipping on the cobbled stone.

“Daft dog.” The man slammed the door shut.

Mia ran. Down the alley, across the street, round the corner onto Hinter Der Maur Strasse. She stopped under the archway that opened out into a square, directly opposite the hotel. Gasping for air, she looked behind. No one there. No one following. Dashing across the square, she climbed the few steps up to the hotel.

Mia had rehearsed a story that would get the lady at reception to phone through to Sophia's room, even though the visitor was wet and dirty. No one was there. Round the back of the desk were all the hooks with keys for the rooms. Sophia's key was right there. Number Seventeen, just as she'd said before she left Oma's house. That meant Sophia wasn't in her room - or perhaps the hotel had two keys? Mia couldn't go back to Petrus, so it really wasn't stealing. She'd unhooked the key just as the receptionist's heels clicked in the distance. By the time voices drew nearer, talking about night shift rotas, Mia was already at the top of the first floor stair, hurrying along a carpeted hallway.

Room Seventeen was at the very end of the corridor. She knocked. Waited. Knocked a little louder and stuck her ear against the door. No sound, not even the drip of water running, which would have meant Sophia was in the shower. There were, however, voices behind her and rapid footsteps coming along the corridor. Mia shoved her key in the lock. Opened the door and closed it silently behind her.

Oh god. It was dark. If Sophia was asleep, she'd have her gun next to the bed.

Mia stood absolutely still. Nothing happened. No scream. No breathing noise. Nothing. She felt around the wall by the door for the light switch. Closed her eyes and braced herself for Sophia's yell of fury. Not a sound. Outside, a car pulled into the car park. It reversed, stopped. The car door opened and shut. Mia opened her eyes and tiptoed to the window. Even though she wished hard that it was Sophia, it wasn't.

Shaking with cold and disappointment, she wondered what to do. Sophia's shirts were hung in the cupboard along with her police jacket. Her suitcase was half unpacked, which was weird because Sophia was seriously tidy. In the silence Mia crept into the bathroom, taking great care not to get the carpet wet or dirty. Taking off her wet socks and shoes, she turned on the hot tap and kept her hands under the running water until they were warm; filled the sink and awkwardly washed one foot, followed by the other.

It was after nine. She'd wait until twelve. If Sophia wasn't back? Well that wouldn't happen. Sophia didn't know anyone other than Petrus, so whoever she'd gone to see would be going to bed before midnight. Old people didn't stay up all night like her and Gerda, except her and Gerda wouldn't talk anymore. Not ever again. Gerda would have to do her own homework; muddle through class on her own. Chat all night to Käthe if she wanted; because Mia would never speak to her again.

It was good to be annoyed. Sophia would be angry. In fact she'd be in a foul temper when she found Mia was in her room uninvited. She'd probably shout and tell her off for going outside on her own in the dark. She wouldn't ring Petrus. Mia knew that, just as she knew Sophia would listen to what Mia told her, and she wouldn't say how silly or how childish it all sounded.

Anyway, Sophia was probably at the police station, working her way through piles of boring paperwork. Doing what she always did, being a police officer. Mia sat down and waited. She pulled the blanket from the bed so as to wrap a bit of it round her. The corner of a brown envelope stuck out between the mattress and bed frame. The envelope Sophia had taken from Hajo. Sophia wouldn't want her to open it. But what if Sophia was in danger and Petrus had been talking to someone he shouldn't have? Mia was the only one who knew both things. Anyway what could be worse than what she'd already done?

Mia read the list of weird sounding names. Pages of what looked like codes. Luckily Sophia had put all her thoughts onto one page, so all the rest of the paperwork went back in the envelope and she concentrated on that page.

‘Theme 14.25’? She had no idea what that was but everyone knew that SC Dynamo was where the best swimmers went. Either there or to Seelenbinder School. Sophia would have gone to one of them when she was a girl.

Eric is ‘Technik’. Schiemann is ‘Meschke’? OK. Those were code names. Mia read them again and felt scared. If Sophia was looking for people who used code names, bad things would happen. Bad things were already happening: Petrus’s name was next to police chief Günther Schenke’s name, halfway down the page, next to codenames ‘Romeo’ and ‘Wolf’.

Mia pulled the bedclothes loose, put the paper and envelope back under the mattress, curled up as tight as she could and she shut her eyes.

“Sophia, please come,” she whispered. “Come quickly.”

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Sophia was deep inside the sea, floating under shoaling creatures. Scales glinted once, twice, as the sun hit the water. The shoal vanished and once more the silver weave of the ocean held her in its arms. She didn’t know where she was, hardly cared. This place, unsettled, silent, safe, was the only home she knew.

Predators were circling closer. Her arms were ice cold. She pulled against tight muscle, water and terror. Concentrated on each stroke, aligning her head the way he’d told her to; moving her hands with the water, *being* water, never separating one element from the other. He’d said, ‘You are liquid, so move like liquid’. Her muscles were burning, heat thawing ice. She felt stronger. A child made of water, powerful, never tiring. A being that could swim forever. So why was she frightened of the glittering white water? A dark shape squatted, leaning out over the water. Darkness moved over the pool, stretching out, long and thin. A finger. Pointing straight to her.

Sophia screamed. She pulled at the needle that was inserted inside her arm and tried to strike the nurse who was standing by her bed.

“Oh no, you don’t.” The woman’s thick brown glasses magnified her eyes. What was she doing in hospital? Sophia moved her head. Christ that hurt. Fighting nausea, she made out the shape of curtains and a heart monitor by her side.



“Petrus?”

“Your father is just outside, Frau Künstler.”

When she moved, the shadow beside the pool reared up and formed into a thick set man with sullen eyes. She knew him. She knew him enough to be frightened. However, as her mind cleared, she realised this man was nothing like Eric.

“Frau Künstler, stop pulling at your arm.” The nurse turned to the gaunt doctor who stood watching and making tut-tutting sounds. He checked her pulse, and told her to stay still.

“You’re lucky your father got to you as soon as he did.”

Who? My father? The strangeness of this double-knowledge: the twin faces of her father. Sophia tried to focus his doubleness: a father who both attacked his child and came to her aid.

There he was. Petrus. Standing by her side. But which one was he?

White faced, he took her hand, checking to make sure she was all right. She tried to tell him about the dark man, the water and the mermaids.

“Sleep,” he said. And she was at once relieved and obedient.

\*\*\*

Mia burrowed deeper under the covers. It was way too early for Oma to be banging on the door, and she was so tired.

“Go *away*,” she mumbled when the knocking came again.

“Mia? Are you in there?”

Mia scrambled out of the bed and stared at the door. There were people talking on the other side. Someone inserted a key in the lock and tried to turn it. Thank god she’d left her key in there. Oh no! Sophia was on the other side. Sophia couldn’t get in her own room so she’d gone to get Petrus and they were both here. Mia shrank back against the cushions. Sophia would kill her. Oma was dead and Sophia was going to kill her for taking her room and locking it from the inside. She’d never listen to her now. The room seemed tight, walls squishing in so she couldn’t breathe.

They knocked again. A new voice came through the door. Hajo! Hajo was there. Mia sat bolt upright and unlocked the door straight away. The hotel receptionist barrelled through first, thrusting her out the way, followed by two police officers and

Petrus. He stared at her, hugged her, peering into the room behind her as if he were willing someone else to be there.

“Where’s Sophia?” Mia asked. She could see his hands were shaking and that made her scared. “I want her. What’s happened?”

The officers were now looking through Sophia’s things. That wasn’t right. Sophia wouldn’t like that. Mia told them to stop. They didn’t have a warrant. She was an underage female and no female officer was present as far as she could see. She had a right to ask them to leave. Hajo’s eyes widened, but she thought he smiled.

“It’s alright Mia,” he said. “They’re trying to help.”

The policemen came back out into the hallway and began talking with him in low tones while Petrus told her that Sophia had gone to the police station and had been attacked.

“No, don’t worry. She’s all right,” he said when Mia began to cry. Sophia had managed to phone him. Sophia was a survivor, he said. He’d traced the number and then he’d gone to get her.

Mia remembered the phone call she’d heard. Petrus must have made that call before Sophia was hurt. He’d arranged it!

No, that wasn’t right. All he’d said was that Sophia wouldn’t know. Maybe all that meant was Sophia shouldn’t know who had hurt her. Mia was so scared that when she asked Petrus to wait outside so she could get dressed, her voice came out as a frightened squeak. Pulling the envelope from under the mattress; she stuffed it in her bag. Took off her jumper and shoved it on top of the envelope so as to hide it, before pulling on one of Sophia’s sweatshirts. The top smelt of Sophia, who wouldn’t let anyone mess her about. Mia would be like her.

People had secrets, secrets that sometimes made them do things that they would never normally do. But hurting your own daughter? Her skin felt prickly just thinking about it. She’d go and see Sophia straight away, tell her to be careful and not trust her father.

Hajo was waiting in the corridor. He looked at Mia as if he could see what was going on inside her head, as if he knew that she had his papers inside her bag. “You’ve forgotten your shoes,” he said.

Mia blushed, heat spreading from her neck to the top of her head as she returned to the bathroom to get them. When she came out again: shoes tied, hair pulled back, Hajo smiled. His two officers and Petrus went inside the room as Hajo asked her questions. *Loads* of questions. When had she arrived? Why had she run from her house? Didn't she realise it was dangerous? Had she seen Sophia?

Mia didn't know what to admit. It was scary not knowing who was who anymore. She needed someone who understood, someone who would take care of her. Someone she trusted completely. Mia pinched her nose hard and concentrated on Hajo's shoes. They were shiny black ankle boots, very clean and expensive, just like her lovely clothes that were now snipped into little bits and ruined. Tears leaked down her cheeks, and her nose ran. She dug in her pocket for a hanky and came up with nothing.

"There, there." Hajo patted her absentmindedly on the shoulder and handed her a clean white hanky with a '1. FC Union Berlin' football team logo embroidered on one corner.

"So, tell me again Mia, why did you leave your house?" Hajo asked again, like they did in films and cop shows. Trying to see if she lied the first time, then couldn't remember the lie.

"I wanted to see Sophia, and I thought Dr Künstler would say no, that's all." Mia blew her nose and felt sorry for Hajo. He couldn't help but look at his spoiled hanky. Through the door she could see the police unpacking Sophia's suitcase. They were searching through every single item, even her socks.

"I really need to see Sophia." Mia slipped past Hajo, pelting along the corridor and down the stairs before he could say no or stop her. Everyone she passed stared and the receptionist called out: was she alright? Even though it was pretty obvious she wasn't. In the fresh cold air, Mia made a promise, whispering it fiercely so that it would have more chance of coming true. First she'd see Sophia, give her the papers, and after that she'd ask her to come with her to see Oma. No matter how terrifying that would be, she had to say goodbye.

She could smell her own panic. Like almonds or vinegar, it made her lightheaded. When Hajo and Petrus ran out to find her, she said someone had to take her to the hospital. Hajo nodded and one of the officers opened the door of the smaller of

the two police cars. Petrus got in the back seat and waited for her to follow. Patted the seat. She didn't want him to come, but there was nothing she could do.

Instead of looking at Petrus, Mia hugged the backpack to her chest. She could feel how much he wanted to talk to her, because he kept peering over and starting to say things, before stopping. She kept her head turned away and thought about what she'd tell Sophia. When they arrived at the hospital, instead of going to the ward, Petrus pointed to the café by the shop.

"Breakfast?" he asked, trying to smile.

Mia couldn't run away again so she sat down. There were lots of people around making it safe, plus she was starving. The croissant tasted so good she asked for another and ate that before drinking a glass of orange juice.

"You heard. Didn't you? You overheard?" Petrus spoke quietly.

She jumped, spilling some of her drink on the table. "What?"

What if he *was* dangerous, what if he could arrange to hurt her, like he did Sophia, what should she do?

"You heard me talking on the phone. Last night." Petrus sounded sad. Mia had to be ready. She would throw the cup at him and run away screaming: whatever it took.

"Mia, I should tell you," he said. "I was speaking to the man who attacked Sophia, but I had no idea Sophia had gone to the station. No idea whatsoever. We agreed that he should remove old records. Records that were of no use to anyone, and could only do more damage than good."

"But Sophia got hurt," she said. "She got hurt because you told that man to go there."

"Mia, it's so much more complicated than you realise. Hajo Seppelt knows. I phoned him as soon as Sophia was safe."

Hajo wouldn't let something like that just go. He would come here and make sure that Petrus and the man on the phone were punished. Petrus didn't look like someone who would hurt anyone, he looked sad and old and very tired. Just like Oma had when she'd been trying to pretend that she wasn't ill. Everything was changing and Mia wanted the changes to stop.

“Let’s go and see if Sophia can have a visitor,” she said, using the same voice she’d used when Oma was unable to make even simple decisions. Petrus smiled, like he knew what she was doing and stood up.

“What a good idea, my dear,” he said.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



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Mia straightened the bedspread before plucking the hand-delivered card from the nearby cabinet and placing it centre stage on the windowsill. It was pretty: a profusion of cowslips against a bright blue sky,

“Dr Werner’s not happy, Sophia,” she said. ‘Apparently you need more medicine.’

“Really?”

“So Dr Werner says. Petrus says it’s already a day since you sustained your injuries and you are most certainly strong enough to recover.” Mia rendered a near perfect impression of Sophia’s father. Each word carefully enunciated. Thick eyelashes narrowed so only a mere glint of blue remained. “They’re in the kitchen arguing. No, sorry, having a *professional disagreement*.”

She gave the bedspread a last tug. Sophia heard her tread warily down the stairs, stop midway. No doubt craning her ears to hear further details.

Sophia was off the case, finished before she’d even started. Worse, the bash on her head had jostled memories so that moments of her past kept popping up as a series of images that elbowed for position. Some arrived in colour, others remained monochrome. There was a dark bungalow hidden by apple and cherry trees. Near a wooden jetty, pale-blue boats wobbled on a lake surrounded by birch trees and the occasional towering oak. A narrow path wound its way to a conservatory and a stately house – where, via the open glass doors, she could see ornate tables, art deco lamps and a second door that led into the dining room where chandeliers hung.

Worst was a memory of injections that prickled and burned through her arms and legs and the tidal wave of energy that roared through her so she believed herself nothing without it. She’d run for miles. The birch trees at the water’s edge opening into soft mossy woods that turned into a thick fir-tree forest. Such a vast silence. Her breath and footfall the only sound. The intense deep green of the trees, the smell of wood and pine, the soft floor layered in cones equalled unequivocal bliss.

Under water, in a cramped yet fathomless pool, wearing a purpose built diving mask with black goggles that stretched over both nose and mouth, she'd pitted her strength against a wave machine, learning to control her breath as she conquered her panic.

Some proof of that time remained in the papers Mia had saved. Now safely in Hajo's hands, they were the high point of the girl's night of adventure.

"Putting stuff under your mattress was *really* dumb," she'd said at the hospital, as if Sophia's misjudgement ruled out her own stupidity in walking across the town alone at night to voice her misgivings about Petrus.

Mia had lost someone utterly dear to her, but she hadn't pulled back or built a wall around her heart to avoid any further distress. For reasons beyond Sophia's comprehension, she'd managed to burrow herself a safe place inside Sophia's heart and decided to trust her. Added to that, she spoke gently to Petrus. As if he was the one who was hurting, not Mia - a child who had lost her mother. For Sophia no such conviction existed. Petrus had phoned Günther to warn him. In her bewildered mind, one idea spoke loud and clear. Her father had given Günther permission to stop her even if that meant assaulting her. Against her better judgement, she agreed to be cared for at Dagmar's house. Telling herself that it was a good way to keep an eye on Petrus and Mia.

Now she slept, dreaming of mosquitoes biting her skin so a hundred pinpricks dotted her arms and legs. In her dream each sting was inflicted not by an insect but by a question. Whatever remained concealed behind the horror of needles and pain was waiting to be found. However, the more that memory was encouraged to emerge, the further back it crouched until she was unsure it had ever existed. Yet when she woke the image that remained was of a child's pearly hand, doll-sized, curled and resting. Plus the certainty that she would go back to the house and lake: whatever was eluding her now was there. Finding it might enable Sophia to grow back into the person she'd hoped existed before, someone whole, someone strong and naturally unafraid. A woman who never thought to look over her shoulder. The house wasn't far. In fact, the route seemed as clear in her mind as a line drawn by pen.

When she woke, Hajo was sitting by the bed, scribbling in a notebook. The back of his hair was sticking up as if to confirm he'd slept badly and not bothered to use a comb.

"That fucking man thought he'd destroyed all the records." He ran his fingers through the stubble and Sophia's hands ached to reach out and do the same.

"What? He didn't burn all of them?"

"It looks that way, thank goodness. I'm staying a few days, okay, to sort out the mess." He reached over and patted her hand. "My dear Sophia, I'm so sorry."

"What? What on earth?"

Why was he sorry? Ah, of course. He'd come to the hospital and kissed her, hadn't he? Believing she was asleep. Not on the cheek: both were bruised, sporting a livid range of purple and orange, the right more so than the left. He'd kissed her on her lips. Even now, the imprint of his mouth remained warm against hers. He'd tasted of old tobacco and the musky scent of aftershave. Then, as now, she'd wanted to grasp hold of him and keep the heat between them.

"Sorry for what, Hajo?"

"Neglect, I suppose, really. Putting you in danger." He kissed her chastely this time - on the forehead, the only uninjured portion of her face.

"Does it *still* hurt?" Mia peered round the door and glanced suspiciously from Sophia, to Hajo. When they both turned to face her, she came in and placed a bowl of soup on the table by the bed. "D'you want some, Hajo?" she asked him.

"Hmm, what kind is it?"

"Broccoli and potato. I made it myself. Petrus can't cook and he's waiting for you downstairs."

"Well, in that case, I'd love to try some."

Sophia knew Mia wanted to ask a question, but each time an opportunity was there for the taking, the child backed away as if the answer were too important. If Sophia misunderstood, or said the wrong thing, the child would be troubled or hurt because she'd interfered in something Mia needed to do alone.

"Mia - I'll come to the funeral with you. If you'll let me," she said and watched as first relief, followed by fresh upset, appeared on Mia's face.



“How did you know what I was going to ask?” The child sat on the bed trying valiantly not to cry and Sophia felt the pull in her heart that had become as familiar as seeing Mia each day. Any guilt that Dagmar had died without her was tinged with an honest regret that there had been no moment of opportunity. No time when they might have shared an understanding for this child who, even now, stood between them: a beacon of light in such a dark, unhappy place.

“Well, she was my mother.”

“I just didn’t think you’d want to go.” Mia stared mutinously at the bedspread and plucked at a strand of blue cotton, working it loose from the floral pattern.

Unable to explain the complexity of her feelings, Sophia asked, “How’s Gerda?”

“OK.”

“Are you friends again?” She’d have given anything for her own mother to have asked the same and yet this habitual regret occurred to her less as a grievance than as a piece of information that would help her speak to Mia and her needs.

“You said that proper friends were there when you needed them.”

*Goodness.* The child had taken her advice to heart. Taken it in and believed her. So it was part astonishment that made her pick up the bowl of soup and say, “Well, she does seem to be trying to help now.”

“Maybe.”

“Where are all your friends, Sophia?”

“I wasn’t great at – all that.” She had the grace to add, shame-facedly, “I’m working on it.”

Mia crept to the door as Sophia put the bowl to one side and closed her eyes. Petrus knew what lurked behind the big house, the lake and that bungalow that made her heart race. He’d countered any attempt at looking back, yet now her life was unravelling. Why, only that morning when Maria delivered her get-well card, apologising for Sophia’s injury quite as if she were somehow responsible for the attack, Sophia had been crazy enough to invite her old friend to visit her in Berlin. The idea had, at first, appeared as exciting as hidden chocolate. Here was a friend who knew her well enough not to be put off by sharp words and an antisocial need for solitude. As soon as she’d opened her mouth, she’d been plagued by doubt. Maria might want to stay. A stranger sleeping in her apartment wasn’t welcome. Although Maria wasn’t a

stranger: she was a friend. Sophia mentally chastised herself. This harmless old school mate had a brother who'd been an informer, a policeman working for the Stasi. What on earth had she been thinking?

When she woke, much later, it was evening and she knew she'd have to go to the house and lake, or her nerve would fail and she'd never know whether the nightmares were a real thing, or simply a childhood fantasy. Setting the alarm for six am, she climbed awkwardly out of bed, every part of her body conspiring to make even the window seem a long way away.

Snow light as icing sugar drifted down from a dark sky, settling on the steely ground. Eventually, when she made it out onto the landing, the TV murmured in the background and Mia's voice rose and fell as she chatted on the phone to Gerda.

Now that she was alone, there was no time to be squeamish. Sophia made her way to the bathroom and co-ordinated her movements in the mirror to gently peel back the dressing and reveal a livid scar with blackened stitching that ran from ear to crown.

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In the morning, when the alarm rang, the pain in her head was so corrosive she considered taking more pills and falling back to sleep, but the muffled drone from under her pillow insisted that it was time to wake. It hurt to stand, let alone bend down and pull on jeans, socks and finally, a fleece jumper. With six pills in her back pocket (god, let that be enough), Sophia tiptoed out to the hallway and down the stairs, stepping wide to avoid squeaky stair eight. How many times had she slipped out as a young girl to run through the town into fields and up to the forest? Thank goodness the original wildness was in her now, a strong pulse keeping the weakness away, giving her the strength and determination to move forward.

The kitchen was dark. Only the wooden cupboards and old gas cooker could be seen in the orange glow of a streetlamp. There were no keys on the table but her shoes sat clean and polished by the kitchen door next to Mia's. Creeping along the hallway, Sophia hit her shoulder against the banister and mewled in pain. In the dim light, the outline of a coat rack promised a jacket, and in its pockets, hopefully, her car keys. She had to sit down to get her shoes on. When she glanced up Mia was standing at the bottom of the stairs, fully dressed in coat, boots and hat, clutching her backpack.

“I... I’m coming with you.”

They both heard Petrus cough, mutter and turn in his bed. Sophia put a finger to her lips and silently opened the door. Mia nodded and they slipped out into the dark where the shock of icy air made Sophia stagger. Each tender stitch was being stroked with an inquisitive icy finger.

“Put this on.” Mia pulled at her arm and handed her the striped woolly hat, but she couldn’t raise her arms high enough.

“Come on now. Bend down.” The child stretched the hat gently across her head and the worst of the nausea seemed to pass. Sophia almost turned back. Nothing was worth such pain – but Mia had pulled on the handle of the car door until the driver’s side opened, before scrambling over to the passenger seat.

“Come on,” she said.

Sophia eased gingerly onto the arctic seat. Using no headlights, she drove at a snail’s pace around the corner, and stopped to glare at her companion.

“You were sneaking off home, weren’t you?” Mia pulled a flask from her bag and poured hot chocolate into the cup. “And you *promised*.”

“And how did you know?”

“Easy. You set the alarm.” Holding out the cup, Mia waited until Sophia drank.

Water had begun to puddle on the dashboard as ice melted on the inside of the windscreen. Outside, the yellow street lights began their dying flicker.

“Mia, I’m going to Sonnenberg,” Sophia said. “To where I trained to be an athlete.”

“Oh.” The girl seemed to collect herself, as if the idea that Sophia might be going anywhere other than home were actually rather a good thing. She continued to admonish her: “Well, you know that’s crazy, don’t you, Sophia? You shouldn’t even be out of bed.”

The problem was, if she sent the child back, as any adult should, this final window of chance would disappear.

As Sophia drove, part of her floated weightless above the car, watching it beetle through one sleeping village after another. Most of the houses were dark. One or two had a thin line of white smoke curling from the chimney, or a faint night light shining in the hallway: a beacon in the pre-dawn grey. They crossed the train line and veered right

through Fürstenwalde, driving over the line for a second time at Hangelsberg, a hamlet on the forest's edge which offered little more than a shop and train platform.

Mia looked increasingly nervous as the trees thickened into a never-ending line of dirty green pines; an endless plantation that was too tall to harvest and too wide to imagine any edge. Sophia knew. She'd added the sum up many times. There were eighteen kilometres of trees, sentries and danger. Breathing fast, she remembered that behind the big house, in the meltingly damp bungalow, was Ebbe, her lovely cruel boy with his wet mouth and gentle probing hands. A second man waited, half hidden, submerged behind Diertha, poor greedy Diertha who exercised her mastery of power with sex.

They were all there, waiting.

Mia shrieked and grabbed the steering wheel as the car veered from the road. Thickly covered branches groaned against metal, catching the wing mirror, ripping it with a snap; before they were back on the road, tyres slipping on the tarmac.

"OK, we're fine, we're fine." Sophia stopped the car and opened her window to breathe. Outside, the air smelt of ice and pine cones. Inside the car smelled of fresh panic.

"You're not hurt?"

Mia shook her head and made an attempt to hide her tears by rummaging about in her bag. Sophia gave her arm a gentle squeeze. "Look, my dear. Isn't that amazing?" She pointed to where the shadowy outline of an owl could be seen swooping through the trees. He dipped, silver feathered, beautiful against the miles of green and grey.

The final stretch was driven with particular care. Soon enough they'd see the narrow rooms with miles of steel grey wire that ran to and from monitors: many eyes would scrutinise their every move, make notes on performance, speed, strength and condition.

Finally, around the corner came the familiar straggle of houses. Sophia pointed to the phone box, the nursery, the block of apartments for cooks and cleaners. Further on, near the training centre, she ignored the ghostly whispered warning: 'Turn around and run.' Drove on past the entrance barrier and deserted sentry box, following the left wall that ran all the way to the big house.

Every dwelling remained dark. However, she knew that in each sleepy bedroom, one warm body would slip from the bed, compelled to tiptoe to the curtain and note the car, the registration and time as they drove by. Everyone who lived here owed their livelihood to the Sonnenberg Training Centre. They would have been watching from the moment her headlights were seen in the distance.

So let them think she *had* gone. Sophia carried on past the big house, turning off the car lights before veering left and rolling behind the towering wall as far across the grass as the car would go, until they were nearly on the lakeside verge.

“Best you stay here, Mia.” Sophia looked around, half expecting her old companions to emerge from the shadows as she took out two pills and swallowed them dry.

Mia was out the car before she’d finished speaking.

“I’ll come back. I promise. Look, if I’m not here in twenty minutes, go to the phone box in the village and phone Hajo.” Would this child never do as she was told?

“No way.” Mia moved closer. “I’m not staying on my own.”

Nothing stirred. The air, thick with a damp frost, hung heavy over the lake. In the distance water rippled under the weak moonlight. On the far side were the outlines of bungalows, and nearer them, to the left, the solid rising bulk of the main house. There was the jetty, exactly as remembered, stretching across the lake as if it were forever trying to reach the far side. The bobbing boats were nothing more than smudges of black against the dark water.

“Besides,” Mia continued, “you can’t even stand up! Look at you.”

True, Sophia’s arms were unbearably heavy and the ground kept weaving from grass to stone. Come on, she reminded herself: training at six, followed by breakfast. From seven to eight: school studies followed by laps and underwater breathing. If she could do all that, surely she could just remember how to breathe.

“I’ll be fine. Stop fretting. Honestly.” Sophia reached for Mia’s hand. Such warmth and strength derived from a simple gesture.

Many years ago, the house had been a holiday residence for Honecker, who had visited during the summer months. She’d occasionally imagined him, a broad-shouldered fatherly figure, striding leisurely along the lake shore, sitting in the winter garden with coffee or beer, entertaining friends and associates.

“Well if you’re coming, watch your step.” Sophia led the way across the grass to the back of the house, down a narrow pathway that would take them to the cooks’ entrance.

“Ow.” A wet branch sprang back, catching Mia’s face. A brown residue trailed across her nose and cheek. “Yuck.” She stumbled, swiping at the wetness with the back of her hand.

“Sshh.” Sophia fumbled with the gate. Morning light hadn’t reached the narrow corridor that hugged the back of the house, but the darkness suited their purpose. This was the only way to bypass all main doors. Diertha and she had sneaked in through the window enough times to steal vodka and wine, to remember it as only yesterday. Now the window with the broken latch had been replaced by a door.

“It’s scary out here.” Mia gripped her hand as Sophia tried to think of something reassuring to say. The lake re-emerged into partial view, waxy-blue, smooth in the grey light. Snow had encircled it and now, from where she stood, she could see that the jetty sagged, its centre completely submerged. She could lie. Say it was all a big adventure? Yet didn’t Mia deserve the truth, just as Sophia had deserved it?

“We need to get inside.” Sophia leaned against the rotting wood, too dizzy to do more than stain both arms with green mould.

“I’ll do it.” Mia gently edged her to one side and launched herself at the mouldy frame. It squelched and leaked water. She thrust again and this time the door gave way and they stumbled through the gap into pitch black.

“We could go to jail for this. Couldn’t we?” The child sounded terrified and, at the same time, absurdly delighted.

“We could. But we’re not going to.”

The kitchen was icy cold. Mia fumbled in her bag to produce a torch which threw a thin beam of light along the floor. The door to the left opened out to a private bar and restaurant: if they went that way they’d be at the bottom of the stairs. The offices were upstairs: best to start looking there. Sophia could hear her child-self calling. Telling her that whatever she was looking for was somewhere close. The disused kitchen was stacked high with tables and chairs, leaving only a narrow space to move in-between. Of course. She hadn’t been thinking straight. Everything would be done in order of priority. Firstly the workers would clear away the most incriminating

files, burning all evidence of wrong doing in the mammoth incinerator. Ultimately they'd clear the house, and finally the training facility.

From outside came a distant thud. A gate being opened?

"The torch!" Darkness. Sophia waited. What kind of fool would bring a child into such danger? No. Everything was all right. There was only silence. They crept up the stairs into a sizable room with windows that let in faint light. Nothing here, apart from five empty metal cabinets. The floorboards creaked as they tiptoed out and Sophia signalled Mia to edge her feet to either side of the landing. In the second room papers had been stuffed into boxes, ready for the incinerator. Sophia picked a sheet from the box nearest to her as downstairs a door opened. Mia would have screamed if Sophia hadn't dropped the paper and clamped her hand tightly over her mouth.

She pointed and they crept into the gap behind the door.

"You saw what? lights?" A man's voice came from the hallway.

"From my bathroom window." The woman's voice had the timbre of a perpetual whine.

"This time you're sure?" He sounded irritated.

"Well - not completely, no. But we were *told* to look."

"So we'll look."

The voices faded. The pair seemed to be tramping to the back of the house, toward the conservatory. Grasping Mia's hand, Sophia pulled her out from behind the door, down the stairs and through the front door. They ran over the lawn, past the closed barrier, ducking behind the sentry box as the woman came round the back of the house.

"You go upstairs." She hurried towards them, important in a long dark coat that ballooned as she moved. "I'll phone him."

The man came into view. He was cavernous and dark. When he turned, Sophia saw a bulbous nose and prominent moustache.

Mia pulled her arm and they were walking silent and fast toward trees. Cherry and apple trees? Sophia stopped. She'd come home. The smell of apple blossom was everywhere. The air ripe with the drone of bees, honey and sex.

A man bent over her, another was waiting.

He was jamming himself hard inside her; she could feel him, there, right inside her belly. Sweat dripped, drop by drop, on to her still body.

“What are you doing? Move.” Mia dragged Sophia along the pathway towards the first bungalow with its front door facing the lake. Moss and algae grew along the roof and walls, making the building seem part of the wild landscape. The door opened with a wet shudder. Inside (as Sophia knew there would be) were two doors - one on either side of the box shaped hallway.

She turned left. Forgot to breathe. Diertha was lying naked on the bed, a young man moved over her, another lay beside her.

“*Komm mal her*, Sophi,” Diertha said, and Sophia stepped through the door back into her nightmare. There were two beds, one on the right wall - one on the left. The fawn carpet held a brown stain that had been half-heartedly concealed by a formica table. The window facing the apple and cherry trees remained slightly open.

Mia crossed over to the cherry tree window.

“Phew, they’ve gone.” The child was seeing a simple picture: a romantic old forgotten orchard, a damp room. Nothing more than a place to be between sleep and waking. Sophia saw the place that had formed her, a space that had, at one time, been home.

And here again was Diertha, opening the bathroom door, dancing, pink skinned from the shower. Muscular and powerful, moving in time to the pop music, playing on her cheap transportable radio.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Sonnenberg 1976

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Moonlight touched the base of the door that opened to a hallway and out into the dark. In the adjoining room, a sigh turned to a gasp, followed by a sharp slap. The rhythm began again, to shouts of encouragement and clamorous laughter. It was, she realized, the trainer's turn to perform. Sophi's skin was on fire. She'd considered a dip in the nearby lake. No time for that. She showered, lathered on body lotion, pinched Diertha's nail varnish and painted each nail with a hideous coat of pink. The varnish felt thick and heavy as if her fingers were webbed.

Next door, the man and girl reached climax; the bed heaved: one-two-three-four, against the wall.

A flake of paint dislodged from the ceiling and floated down to the carpet. Sophi didn't know any of them. The two girls had arrived that afternoon, grunted their way through training and refused to talk to anyone. The boys' voices were just as unfamiliar. Sophi slipped off her dressing gown as the second pair yelled. A gasp, silence, and applause before the sound of running water and the door opening and slamming shut as the boys returned to their dormitory.

Square to the mirror, she twisted first right and left. Her stomach was flat and muscled, but her arms hulked on either side like cumbersome strangers.

Even though she spent half her life in water, her hair was long, glossy and dark. It was the one thing that remained feminine.

I look like a man, Sophi decided, staring at her upper lip that hinted at a three o'clock shadow. Down *there* thick hair was already re-growing, strong and waxy, and she'd already shaved that day. Running her hand through the wiry growth, she wished to god they'd hurry, wished they'd never come, wished she had some other way to appease the itching inside. I'm a giant mermaid she thought, imagining the lake closing over her, leading her down into the murky pond water.

Outside the window she heard the warning shriek of a nightingale as Diertha's throaty laugh was followed by a giggle: someone pinching her then squeezing. Four of

them? The training session had run late and that meant they were high on steroids. Pulse racing, Sophi recited her weekly rule: never miss training, never ever miss training. Eric, her coach, a squat man with dry skin that flushed whenever he became annoyed, had laughed when, as a novice, she'd been foolish enough to ask him about the nightly orgies.

“You girls can't get enough can you? Sex is good. Play hard but work even harder.” Now he squeezed tight against her whenever he had the chance and, more often than not, he came with the rest; after the late training session – keeping an eye on her, he said, as he fucked her, his eyes the colour of dirty water, mouth panting to reveal a stained tongue and brown teeth.

They burst in through the door, jostling, laughing and stripping. Diertha caressed her first choice of mate and pulled him towards the second narrow bed.

“She'll do whatever you want,” she said, waving the others toward Sophi.

The three remaining boys stood watching the two moving on the bed. They giggled, looked sideways at one another. Two began to masturbate. The third turned to Sophi and lurched toward her as she lay down, legs spread. He propped himself above her, shut his eyes and brutally entered her. No doubt thinking of Diertha's coy teasing, her come-on laughter and explicit suggestion as he drove into Sophi again and again.

She lost herself in the sensation of movement, such bliss. Her body felt as if it were made for sex, skin and sensation, a push of life, a glorious wave of relief, and finally the silky explosion, groaning, gasping.

The next stood to take his turn, hollering out with an untimely ejaculation. At the sniggers of the third boy, the guy flinched, blushed crimson, slunk away.

Strong hands turned her over and opened her wide to bruise and caress.

Another joined another as the door opened and more athletes arrived.

Beds were hastily created on the floor, sheets and blankets protecting skin as the seething, jerky, fluid motion escalated.

Sophi opened her eyes. She could see the moonlight bend its light across moving naked flesh. Beauty, ugliness, what was the difference?

She sensed him standing, waiting in the shadows, and knew he would be patient, his hand moving in practised rhythm. So she closed her eyes and lost herself once more.

They were leaving, some in pairs, some alone. The sound began to die, shouts turning to murmurs and laughter. Without warning he was next to her, pulling her close, rougher than all the others, hurting, making her bleed and cry out in pain and pleasure. Finally there was only cool air on her skin, and from out in the birch trees came the final keening of birdsong.

Sophi woke with a start. Ebbe was sleeping beside her. They were punished if they didn't report for training by six am, well rested, ready for work. Bad things would happen if they missed any class, not only to them but to their families. Food tokens might not arrive, the car might be taken away, travel permits to competitions abroad refused, and Papa so wanted to come to Montreal for the Olympics. Worse still: your parents could be taken to Stasi headquarters for questioning.

Each and every time, the boy looked younger than she remembered.

Dark hair, full lips and a determined chin. He held her even whilst asleep and she wondered for a moment why. He awoke and, with a seal-like turn, entered her. Kissing her into silence. They moved together before they lay spent and silent. Sophi stared into his grey blue eyes, the set of his mouth and cheekbones seeming to express a cruel side to him. He grinned, the smile not quite reaching his eyes, kissed her mouth and slid out of the bed in one long flowing movement, pulling on his trousers and standing over her, strong and beautiful.

Sophi's legs shook as she stood under a hot jet of water in the shower room. There was blood between them and, right at that moment, she vowed: I'm not going to do this again. Ever.

She'd find another room today, or as soon as possible. Another room-mate if she had to. She was only here for one more week, now even that felt too long. The last time, after three weeks of almost nightly orgies, she'd stopped bleeding altogether and had to have an operation. The translucent foetus removed before it grew. The weary doctor hadn't bothered to look up as he motioned a nurse to give the injection.

It wouldn't hurt, he'd said. It had hurt. A bruising pain in her belly, an ache behind her eyes, and Sophi hadn't cried. They were training for the games and, if she won a medal, she'd be eligible for a room of her own.

The hallway leading to the pool was silent; only the distant rasp of a scrubbing brush came from the pool area.

In the fourth cubicle, Sophi locked the door and checked every centimetre of space. Nothing had been moved or painted over. For there were ways of knowing when or where a bug had been placed: newly painted walls, pictures that had been cleaned or re-hung. All was well. This cubicle was the same as yesterday: safe and wonderfully quiet. Her skin began to itch. Changing into the uniform swimsuit, she checked her legs and navel for new hair growth and saw her thighs were dotted with pinpricked circles. The last time that had happened she'd been given antibiotics but with the medicine her swimming time slowed. No way was that going to happen again.

Outside there was the usual patter as the other swimmers arrived. She'd learned how to judge distance at Sonnenberg. To know when someone was close enough to hear or when she was being listened to. The main doors opened and closed and from the far side of the pool Eric Röther shouted, 'Come on Künstler, hurry up.'

Her groin tightened remembering last night's sex, counting how many times. I'm fifteen, she thought sliding her left hand between the seat and the wall, I'm fifteen. There it was. Her very own secret: the metal ridge of a new razor blade. As long as she could keep it safe everything else would be OK. As if he'd heard her, Eric began yelling at the swimmers to change from their warm up to fast and slow laps.

"You're late." He pointed to the nearest lane that had been kept clear for Sophi. She could smell his stale breath; recall his hands pinching her breasts, poking, squeezing until he'd done what he wanted. His daughters were the same age as Sophi. Creamy fleshed, dimpled babies, she'd seen them sitting with their mother applauding as his team came first.

The water was deliciously cool. The white and blue of the swimming pool tiles magnified an underwater world, bringing her thoughts sharply into focus. If only she could talk to Ebbe as a normal girlfriend might. Maria had a boyfriend. She'd be doing the things normal kids did: walking around the town in a group, talking, laughing about things that were only funny to them. No one in this place could ever do things like that. With every vitamin, each injection or medication the athletes took, they slipped further away from the edge of normal.

After six lengths she paused and waited for the day's instruction - bursting to take on a challenge. That moment, the burning power in her muscles, the knowledge

that she could fly through water and never really tire, made training worth every moment of pain.

After the hour's work, she was thinking about breakfast and dreading the excruciating hour of exercise theory. No need to join the queue for the vitamins they all knew to be steroids. No pills today, or for the next three weeks. That afternoon she'd be in one of the hidden underground rooms, sitting in the submarine-like Barochamber, breathing in oxygen reduced air. Following that would be a series of painful steroid injections and training in the wave pool with the hated mask over her face and a tube that fed in air.

A side-glance at Eric had her missing Maria again. Her old friend would have made such fun of his fist of a face. Someone had upset the training schedule. Maybe she hadn't swum fast enough? Frightened, Sophi knew Eric could do terrible things. Her days could be turned into one long cycle of injections and 'exercise' alone with him.

In its hiding place the blade whispered a promise of escape. She dug her shaking hand between the seat and the wall, pinched the blunt end between her finger and thumb, running the blade lightly across her arm careful not to cut skin. They were swimming again straight after the theory class, and people were beginning to notice the scars on her arms and her breasts.

In the adjoining cubicle, pretty snub-nosed Heike chatted away about the theatre trip that had been arranged. She waited so they could walk to the canteen together and talk about the latest method of hand roll to create smooth water flow.

"It's impossible," Heike held her hands out, turning them first one way then the other.

"Like this?" Sophi slowly cupped and tilted her hands as gracefully as she could, but out of water the movement looked clumsy and wrong. Heike laughed.

"How's your roommate?" she asked as Sophi looked away. Older athletes were primed to check on the younger ones. Reporting everything to the officials and getting rewarded for information with special favours: extra travel permits, or even a single room. Heike didn't even know who Diertha was. She'd never asked anything like that before, only complaining, like they all did, about the gruelling schedule and the nearly impossible new swimming styles they were supposed to perfect.

"Everything's fine."

Sophi turned left towards the sentry gate, slipping into the cramped reception office. Barely ten minutes left to make her weekly phone call. When *Mutti* answered, Sophi asked for Papa and her heart sank when she heard him saying that he was late, in a hurry to leave. Reciting the list of clothing down the phone, she longed to whisper, 'Save me', and tell him what happened every night but she knew Papa well enough to be realistic, so she ended the call weeping silently into the arm of her sweatshirt.

After breakfast Eric was already ticking the last name on his list when Sophi astonished herself by stopping and asking him outright for a different room.

"Diertha stays up so late," she said. "I need extra rest if I'm going to win." She amended her words to: "I will win," when he looked annoyed.

"Better than all the others now are you?"

"No Eric, I just need to sleep."

Right there, at that moment, she nearly blurted out how she knew where his wife lived; she even had the phone number. If she did that she might as well cut her wrists properly. Eric would hardly miss her. There were new girls waiting to swim for him, girls that could be better than her, each one eager to give him whatever he wanted.

"Diertha Bernstock will be leaving soon enough," he said. "You'll have the room to yourself once she's gone."

Paying scant attention to the theory lesson, her mind already imagining that promise of stillness, of sleep wrapped in clean white sheets, of winning the Olympics and escaping this place of nightmares into a world of colour.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



~

She was lying on a filthy carpet. Everything was the same, yet utterly changed because Diertha and Mia didn't fit together. Diertha came from a lifetime ago, and Mia? The girl was shining a torch in her eyes and whispering something about going home, but she *was* home and any minute now, the alarm would sound and she'd have to get ready for the morning's lap training.

"Sophia!"

Mia's face loomed close, her blue eyes wide with fright.

"Wake up. Now!"

There were no sheets on the bed, no curtains covering the windows, nothing to explain why she was so afraid.

"You've got to get up!"

Mia pulled at her hands until Sophia gingerly stood up. Where was she? Ebbe had seemed so real; even now she could feel his slim body against hers with his particular musky scent, the gentle dip between his collarbone and neck, such a contrast to the cruelty of his face. This room should vanish like a bad dream. She ought to be in Breden, tucked up in bed, safe. Though, of course this was real. Everything stayed the same: a dirty carpet, the two rusty metal-framed beds, that hideous formica table with the one wobbly leg.

In the bathroom, cupping her hands under a stream of cold water that would help her to swallow the last two pills, Sophia fought the dizziness, anxious not to faint again. She stared into the mould-flecked mirror. For years she'd searched for Ebbe's blue gaze in every nightclub, in every dark place, but really, all that time her true self had been here waiting. There was a muzzy outline of the child watching her. Mia. Why was Mia here? How could she have brought this carefully loved girl to such a dangerous place? No doubt, like every child, Mia was unaware how much such devotion would have cost her grandmother. Sophia knew. Love had never come easily to Dagmar, yet once it found root, it was the strongest of bonds. Dagmar had let Sophia go, knowing her daughter would be safer on the other side of the Wall. Better without her. Sophia had

hated her for deserting her to the prison of Petrus's care. So why was it that only now she understood just how much her mother must have loved her?

"We have to go," Mia peered out the window, "before you collapse *again*."

"Mia, I promise I won't."

She'd look after this child. Make certain she returned to safety and watch over her, like a guardian, or an older sister, a well meant gesture of accord toward Dagmar. You could pledge yourself in love to a person after her death, in a real, honest-to-god way: she saw that now.

They left the bungalow. Slipping quietly out of the door and along the pathway by the lake, Sophia veered left where a wider track wound through the trees, past a newly built overly-varnished log cabin with a veranda that faced out to a jetty at the lakeside.

"This isn't the way back." Mia studied her; the child's thin face was serious, inscrutable.

"I know *Schatzi*, come on. This way." Sophia continued along the path through the trees.

On the far side of the road that ran the length of the sport's complex, another red and white barrier marked: No Entry. Behind the barrier, bricks and sand had been piled next to boxes the size and shape of fridges. Each box was wrapped in weathered cellophane. A short distance to the right of the pole, fir trees covered a man-made hill with the contours of a burial mound. At its summit a white turret with deeply set windows protruded. Beyond that, as far as the eye could see, fir trees stretched into a forest that ran all the way to the main road, crossing it to begin again.

"We're not going up there are we?" Mia pointed.

"The lookout point? No, don't worry."

Not far from here the trees served as a perfect camouflage for the oval running track. At its furthest point a cross-country path vanished into the woods. In that other life Sophia had taken to following it all the way to the village, train station and that longed-for escape. Yet every time, at the very last point, she'd turned and headed back.

"What were they looking for?" Mia snared Sophia's hand and held on.



“Russians mostly.” She pointed out the area behind the turret that had been designed to appear as a loading bay. There was room for a lorry to turn and back-up against a broad storeroom door.

“What did the Russians want to look at?”

“The underground facility.” Keep up your chattering, Mia, she thought. If the child fell silent, Sophia worried she’d not find the strength to move. She’d be glued right here, in this very spot, until they came and found her.

“Are we going underground?”

“I am. You stay here where it’s light.”

“No!”

“If someone came, you could get help.”

“I’m coming with you and that’s that. What would happen to you if you fainted again?”

Once, sometimes twice a week, helicopters had circled overhead. ‘Bloody nosey Russians’, their trainers had muttered, looking up at the ceiling, closing doors and moving their schedules late into the night after the helicopters had pulsed away.

The entrance to the labyrinth looked just like any door to the back of a store. Sophia knew the column of windows played tricks with reality: the window-line remained horizontal whilst the passageway sloped steeply down to a hallway where stairs led your further into the ground. There was, she noted, the added option of a miniature, yet modern, lift.

They took the stairs, Sophia taking the torch from Mia to shine a circle of light on damp walls and icy steps. Somewhere in the darkness below, water dripped, a steady trickle whose lonely sound was reminiscent of her life in water. Now, even though they were walking into danger, Sophia began to feel vital and alive. Here at last were the answers she needed. Eleven months ago the athletes would have been told to leave. Was she too late? The underground rooms may have been destroyed. If that were the case, would the staircase not have gone, she reasoned, conscious of falling back on her years of police experience to mitigate the sense of danger. The government had spent a fortune on wave pools, bikes, treadmills, surveillance cameras, treatment rooms and, of course, the Barochamber. They’d want to get all the equipment out first. Either way, if

they were caught, she and Mia could be killed down here. If they were, they would be entombed, buried forever, and no one would ever know.

“Come on – if we’re going?” The girl prodded her forward.

I’ll look after her, Sophia promised her mother. I won’t let her get hurt. She sensed that Diertha and all the fallen athletes were with her, floating in the musty air; all those young men and women who hadn’t had a chance to escape.

“You were always such an *idiot*.”

True to form Diertha’s voice mocked, no doubt enjoying the spectacle of Sophia tripping on the stairs, swearing as she bumped into Mia. The hallway was dark and narrow, the smell of damp overwhelming. Mia’s torch picked out mushrooming orange algae at the top and bottom edges of the wall. At the end of the corridor, on their left, a narrow room had been split by a dirty mustard curtain. To their right a thick white metal panel lined the far wall. Each section was covered with buttons, gauges and dials. Tracing her hand along the wall, Sophia found the light switch. Overhead the strip-lights flickered on one by one, throwing shadows across the floor.

“Yuck, that’s weird.” Mia stayed very close.

“They’re just pressure controls.” Though yuck and weird were a far more accurate description for the switches that controlled the Barochamber pressure. Crammed just below the ceiling, the 25 cm square monitor screens were there to display the athletes’ heart rate as they cycled or ran on the treadmill. Each reading scrutinized in order to improve performance.

“Ha! Brain dead Sophi’s looking in the wrong place.” Diertha giggled as all the ghosts turned their faces towards the mustard curtain. Was whatever lay behind that drapery better seen alone?

“Is this what we’re looking for?” Mia picked up a flag inscribed with ‘*DTSB der DDR*.’ “What does DTSB mean?”

“German Gymnastics and Sports Federation.” Sophia leaned over to get a better look at the various triangular gold, green, yellow, red and blue flags pinned to the wall. On the floor a poster soaked up damp. She could just make out the features of ‘Swimmer Number Twenty-Five’, a pretty blonde girl who regularly appeared on a West German sports channel, a GDR star who’d swapped her swimsuit for a television microphone.

“Come on, nothing here.” With the flags and posters came the uncomfortable reminder of how much she’d wanted to be the very best.

“Everything smells of mushrooms or dead things.” Mia dropped the flag and followed her into the rest room with its black faux leather sofas arranged in a circular design. From here doors led off into different treatment areas. The Barochamber hatch was the same cream colour, but there were more gauges, monitors and bolts surrounding the mean opening that led inside. Through a second portal on the far side, was a larger recovery area with soft chairs. Sophia’s nerves shimmered with panic. Enclosed inside the cramped room, the heavy sound of the bolt closing had made her believe each time that no one would ever open it. They were below twenty three feet of earth. Above them worms and beetles slid through the wet ground. There could be a landslide, a burst pipe, poisonous gas.

“Can I go in there? It looks like a prison cell.”

“Yes, okay. Sit inside if you want.” The girl climbed in as Sophia explained that, if the Barochamber were working, it would decrease oxygen and encourage Mia’s body to make more blood cells.

“But why?”

How could she but not warm to this irrepressible child? “To help you work even harder in the gym.”

Mia shook her head. “That’s so pointless,” she said, climbing out to follow Sophia through the double doors into the gym. “Didn’t you hate it?”

“Sometimes I loved it.”

Now Mia sat astride one of the fifteen training bikes neatly lined up along the left wall. Each bright blue metal frame supported a crossbar and handles. On the crossbar a yellow box with black wires linked the bike to sockets built into the wall. Metal screeched as the girl pedalled furiously, eyes glued to see whether the gauge moved.

“Mia, Stop!” The noise was unbearable. If someone had come in after them, they’d now know exactly where to look.

“Sorry.” Mia grinned and jogged across the dimly lit room to the first of the five running machines. Each treadmill was enclosed by three foot ply-board frames. Sheets of white plastic had been stapled over the cheap wood: above this peculiar design only

Mia's head and shoulders appeared as she bobbed up and down inside the oblong box. Even stranger was the heavy television set that had been fixed to the front bar so the athlete could watch TV while exercising. The girl was laughing, moving on the spot in an exaggerated slow motion run, but Sophia didn't see Mia, she saw Ebbe, beautiful Ebbe, pitting his strength against the machine as a throng of athletes urged him on.

"Bugger off and leave me alone," Sophia muttered.

"Sophia! Who are you talking to?" Mia's face mirrored the white plastic. "Have those people found us. Is it my fault?"

Some athletes had escaped to the West; others had simply disappeared. Alive or dead, none had been like Diertha: boiling up from the deep lake, engorged, putrid.

"There's no one here so why were you talking, Sophia?" The child had followed her out from the gym; now she collapsed rather dramatically on one of the black settees. "Can we leave now, please?"

"Just as soon as I finish looking. Stay put, I'll be back in a minute."

Mia dug out a bar of chocolate and wriggled. The sofa produced a squawky fart that had her laughing again. "*Gross*," she said, and wriggled again.

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The chocolate tasted better here than it did at home, probably because, although she didn't want to admit it, Mia was frightened. What might happen if Sophia fell over or if someone bad came? Either way, she would be the one to have to go and get help. I'm only a child; she thought and took another bite of her chocolate. The people who'd been snooping didn't seem like people she could ask for help, to put it mildly. Most likely they'd kill her and bury her body next to Sophia's – in an unnamed grave. Petrus would never know where they were, or where they'd gone. The knowledge that Gerda would miss her brought a delicious thrill of comfort. Good. Gerda deserved to miss her.

Oma was dead. Mia curled up in a tight ball. Oma was dead and lying somewhere on her own, cold and grey and lonely; no one watching over her like they should. Mia had got it wrong again. She should be there making sure Oma wasn't alone, but really she couldn't bear it. Mia wanted to remember her as she was when she was well. They'd had fun together. Oma teaching her how to make dumplings so they puffed up, tasting delicious. They'd played cards through the dark evenings in the winter. Not needing anyone else.

Mia sat up and scanned the damp room. The carpet was a bright red. A plastic lime-green bin sat empty on the floor. She put the chocolate wrapper in it. Ah. Better not. Sophia wouldn't want them to leave anything down here as proof. Down here. The words were terrifying. She couldn't hear Sophia anywhere. Maybe she'd gone? Maybe she'd brought Mia here on purpose? To leave her and run back to Berlin without her? No. That made absolutely no sense. It was Mia who'd insisted on coming along. Sophia had wanted to visit this place alone. That was the truth so Mia forced herself to calm down. She curled up again and shut her eyes, thinking hard about being safe in her own lovely room with nothing to worry about apart from what she'd have for breakfast.

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Sophia knew that whoever had been in the big house would have rung their boss. Soon they'd spot the car and come looking, and when that happened, she wanted to be long gone. She drew back the clammy curtain and stepped into the nightmare room with its everyday medical equipment: a chair and examination bed, desk with a heart monitor, and the less usual: a strap-on electro pulse-belt, a tube of nasal spray able to raise testosterone 237 % in fifteen minutes - virtually undetectable.

Opening the bottom drawer labelled '1976-77'; she felt again that first thrill of being chosen, the dizzy shock of potential and limitless possibility. Her world had expanded from the simple East German town to encompass places she'd never dreamed of: Russia, Columbia, Canada.

None of that magic remained. Her training had begun age three, when her father taught her to swim. Twice a week, they'd visited the local pool together. At first she'd only managed doggy paddle, head just above water level, loving every moment of Petrus's undivided attention. When she was seven, the school had been host to sports coaches who chose whichever youngsters showed talent. She'd been picked to swim for Dynamo Berlin. Could her father have known she would be chosen? Was it crazy to imagine that her future had been prearranged even from that young age?

"Read it." Diertha whispered, startling Sophia so the papers spilled onto the table. The first medical report surmised that due to the abnormal size and shape of Diertha's clitoris, an immediate reduction of medication had to be agreed.

The second half of the page listed internal testes and chronic liver damage along with five abortions; resulting in severe internal scarring.

Poor helpless Diertha readying herself for another night out: pink nails, bleached hair, feet oozing from overly tight yellow stilettos. Sophia recalled how none of the elaborate costumes had ever managed to disguise her roommate's unnaturally muscled body, the shadow of a beard, or her low, hateful voice.

"They just threw me away." Diertha laughed as the chorus of athletes murmured their agreement. During their last year at Sonnenberg, Diertha had ballooned from a muscular girl into a giant, hair springing up so thick on her legs and navel that clumps congealed around the shower plug when she shaved each morning. One night, late into competitive training, Diertha hadn't come back.

Even now Sophia could recall the taste of that first wonderful night of sleep. Each morning had felt clearer than the last.

The air smelling sweeter, her sleep disturbed only by Ebbe. In the hope that Diertha might never return, Sophia had scrubbed all traces of her roommate's phlegm from the sink, pulled handfuls of pubic hair from the shower plug and folded Diertha's clothing into the bottom drawer of their shared cupboard. Diertha's razor, shampoo, towels, and toiletries were unceremoniously shoved into the corner of the bathroom window ledge.

Every time footsteps came near the bungalow, she'd panicked. Dreading the moment her roommate would roll through the door and turn on Sophia because she'd touched her stuff, and you never ever touched Diertha's stuff. Not ever. After four nights of waiting, Sophia stood taller and breathed easier. Eric had said that people like Diertha didn't stay. Sophia thought she must have returned home. Diertha's mother, a bulky nervous blonde woman who'd flirted with Eric, had come looking. Her daughter was gifted, she said, a true athlete. Why wouldn't they tell her where Diertha was? Why were they saying she wasn't good enough to stay?

The next morning, drinking in the scent of dew-soaked grass and conifers, Sophia had walked to the lake and along the jetty to watch the sun come up. She'd been happy, cocooned in a warm glow that came from escaping the constant threat of her roommate and Eric. At the end of the platform she'd sat gazing across the elbow-shaped lake toward the rising sun: a pale distant glow that drew misty circles on the water and sent the mosquitoes into a zigzagging frenzy. A lazy carp bobbed to the surface, blowing a circle of bubbles before flipping its brown and yellow-finned body out of the

water and diving. To Sophia's left the thick pelt of green pondweed smelled over-ripe, and she'd leaned over to get a better look.

Even now she could smell that putrefying flesh and see her younger self, hands pressed over nose and mouth, staring at Diertha's bulging tapioca eyes as her bloated body floated, half submerged, in the dark water.

## CHAPTER TWENTY



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Diertha was wailing, a thin, harrowing whine that sounded nothing like a bully, rather a heart-broken child. Time to call Mia and leave.

Sophia stuffed the papers inside her jacket pocket. A page, slipping out, drifted to the floor. She bent to retrieve it muttering, “For god’s sake shut up,” to her old roommate. Promising she’d make sure her death was investigated if, and only if, Diertha would go away.

“Read it.” It was only by virtue of Diertha’s voice being so utterly broken that she did as she was asked: Sophia Künstler. Seven months into pregnancy. Foetus presents as fully developed. Patient suffering internal bleeding.

The report (it had to be a lie) was written in her father’s neat hand.

Sophia had been thirteen years old the first time they told her she would have an abortion. She’d been ill whilst taking the pill she thought made her safe. The metal hook inside her belly had snagged: wet flesh, soft skin – a fisherman hooking fish. Pain, deep like no other, had transported her to a place where the world was red and aching. Following the first operation there had been more such mistakes and, after each mistake, orders to terminate the pregnancy.

Sophia laid a hand on her stomach. Perhaps there was an imprint of each baby’s short life hidden inside her womb? She remembered her dream where the child’s delicate, bloodied limb had bobbed through clear water. The later dream of an infant’s curled hand, pink as the inside of a seashell, but *seven months?*

Dagmar couldn’t have known about any of them. Her mother’s Baptist beliefs would never have tolerated so ungodly an act. Yet something tugged at Sophia’s memory. A younger version of her mother watching with all too knowing eyes as her daughter left for training camp. She’d placed a note in Sophia’s hand with the telephone number of her minister, a well-meant gesture sure to make her daughter snap.

‘You don’t have to go,’ Dagmar had said when there was absolutely nothing to stay for.



A girl of sixteen would have known if she'd carried a child for seven months, wouldn't she? Sophia prayed: let there be nothing more as she read that the baby had been delivered by Petrus Künstler and Ilse Hammerman. No? Her heart twisted with reluctance to believe. Were they the doctors that had carried out the majority of abortions for the Sports Association?

Her father's meticulous notes reported that the premature infant, a girl, had been placed with Dagmar. Why? So she could bury it? Nurse it?

The notes were lying. No baby had *ever* been born. No child would have survived the steroid doses she'd been given and actually live, would it?

Sophia had no memory of returning home to her mother. Petrus had taken her across the border to West Germany where in a starched white-walled surgery a doctor had spoken kindly as the pain and memory faded.

Now she could sense people were coming. She had to leave. Take the girl. Get out. Hurry *hurry* before the workers arrived.

A mad idea flew through the air, settled, and she knew.

Mia.

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The child lay coiled up on the seat, fast asleep. As if seeing her for the first time Sophia acknowledged that this combination of herself and Ebbe had mixed the best, not the worst of them.

"Wake up, Mia." She didn't dare touch her. "We need to get out."

"Why. What's happened?" Mia scrambled blearily to her feet.

"Noises." Someone was coming down the stairs. Sophia turned and headed towards the door nearest to them, certain, or rather praying that it was a rear exit.

"That's the wrong way again!"

"Never mind." She heard the girl's sharp intake of breath, her own anxiety rising to match as they ran through a side door, along the cramped passageway, out into a cavernous, dark, green-tiled room.

"I'm really scared."

"I'll look after you *lieblich*." She put her hand out to turn on the lights, the other arm pulling the girl close.

Mia's skin touched hers, soft, so utterly familiar now. Had her mother held Mia just so, spooned up against her side, one arm protecting her from the world and all its evil?

The pool should be at the far end, the double-doors beyond leading out to the shot put grounds where there'd be some safety before the long walk back to the car. She'd phone Hajo and tell him about Mia and they'd be safe.

This room was as remembered but the pool, once a clear oblong of water, had been divided into five narrow lanes. Fitted to the two midsections were lines of black plastic canoe seats. Half submerged in filthy water, red and green oars jutted like a child's collection of seesaws. The exit on the far side was locked. Reaching high above the frame, Sophia found the key, a little rusty, lying exactly where it should.

Something hit the water. They both heard it. Mia yelped, grabbed tight to Sophia's coat.

"Mia, keep quiet." Everything would be so much easier if she weren't so dizzy. Again she switched on the lights and, through the door they saw a constricted yet deep pool nestling by a lean-to office. On the tiles near the water a mask and tube had been left on the ground. White from lack of use, the drying rubber was detailed with winding patterns. Sophia knew the tube connected to the mask's side to feed in oxygen; the tidal flow in the pool could be increased to make swimming against it almost impossible.

There, to the side of the lean-to, was the exit to the shot put ground. She pointed, and moved towards the lean-to, as the lights went out and Mia screamed.

"Shh. Do you have the torch?" There were no voices, no footsteps – nothing other than a growing apprehension that was making her hands shake. "Mia. No. *Don't* touch the switches."

It was already too late. With a screech the wave machine started and a pungent smell rose up from the pool as stale water and chlorine churned.

"Sorry, *sorry*." Mia backed out of the office, torch light waving across the squalid cream walls as a huge shadow loomed and stretched towards them.

A fist hit the centre of Sophia's back. She thrust Mia toward the wall. Gripped the zip of a stranger's jacket with the other and held on tight. They waltzed by the poolside in slow motion, a two-step nearer and nearer the churning water. The man looked down into her eyes and laughed.

“Little Sophi and little Mia!” Ebbe sneered. “Ah! Sweet!”

“Ebbe?” Sophia stepped back and sideways, slowly, with glacial calm, closer and closer to the edge of the pool. Ebbe wasn’t here by chance. The woman with the shrill voice had called him so he could come and stop them.

“You should have stayed away, Sophi dear. I wouldn’t have hurt the child.”

Sophia stared into those piercing eyes that had followed her all her life. The warmth they had shared as children had never been love, rather a spoiled version of physical need – nothing more. She hurled herself sideways, forcing him to fall with her into the churning icy water.

Mia’s shape took flight, running towards the door.

Ebbe grabbed her shoulders and forced her under the water. Sophia closed her eyes and saw herself holding her mother’s hand the day she’d joined the swimming club - her dreams nothing more than a child’s desire to please. There was Mia curled up on the floor outside her apartment door, frightened and cold. Sophia reared up, seized a chunk of Ebbe’s hair and pulled. He hit her, catching her head so everything went black – but she held on spitting out blood and filth, dragging him with her under the water.

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Mia ran. She flew through the door and found herself outside. Dawn had arrived so she could see all around her. The ground was flat and scuffed, with the soles of many feet. The shot put arena. Sophia had said there was one nearby: signalling the way out.

Where to go? She needed help *now* or Sophia would die and there would be two dead people. Mia pelted towards the trees. Sophia was drowning. Nothing. Just trees and darkness. She turned full circle, staring. Even those bad people would do. She’d make them come and help. There had to be something she could do. Terror rose hot in her throat and Mia screamed. Her voice echoed across the deserted pitch. Silence. She screamed again and began running back. If no one else came, that left only her.

A shape appeared, growing bigger as he ran towards her. Hajo. Mia held her hands out like a prayer. Her knees shook but she wasn’t crying. Not now.

“Sophia,” she said, and pointed to the door.

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“You were trying to *kill* him.”

Sophia squeezed the child’s hand and made an effort to open her eyes. She’d wanted to see Ebbe plead before he died.

Why was Hajo standing there with a blanket? He leaned down so close heat radiated from him to her. His eyes were dark and furious. Hajo wrapped the blanket tightly round her so the coarse material rasped against her skin. Bloody hell, someone had taken all her clothes. Mortified she opened her mouth to tell Hajo to put them back on.

“It’s OK. They left your underwear on.” Above her Mia’s chin wobbled as she spoke. Her tears dripped on Sophia’s face. In the distance came the sounds of people shouting. Someone finally turned the tide machine off and, when they did, the stillness echoed.

“I’m going to carry you, my love. Hold tight if you can.”

Hajo strained to lift her head from Mia’s lap. Sophia hung on, her frozen arms draped round his shoulders, resting her sore head against the warmth of his neck. He carried her out the door to his car, where he eased her into the back seat.

“Hajo, my coat, where’s my coat? Can you look in my coat pocket?” Her words were slurred like baby talk.

“Sophia, don’t talk. My dear – you’re safe, Mia’s safe.”

“She wants you to look in her coat pocket.” Mia spoke as if Hajo were an incredibly stupid child. She edged in and took Sophia’s hands, rubbing them between hers.

“Ow! Mia *stop*. Bloody hell that hurts.”

“Well you shouldn’t have jumped into a freezing cold swimming pool.”

Through the window, she could see Hajo walking away. He had to see the papers; they’d be wet but hopefully legible. There was Ebbe, staring, hating her as she now hated him; being escorted to a second car by his colleagues.

Who had told Hajo that she was in danger? Her father – or Jörg?

“Petrus phoned Hajo as soon as he realised we’d gone. He’ll be here in a minute.” The girl was fiddling with the heating controls and Sophia wondered if she’d asked the question out loud or if Mia could read her mind. “What were you *really* doing, Sophia?” The child asked. “He wouldn’t really have hurt you, would he?”

“Yes he would.” The warmer the car became the more the inner chill seemed to intensify. Rain was washing down the windscreen. If she didn’t speak now she’d shut down piece by piece, eventually talking herself out of doing the bravest and most honest thing she’d ever done.

“Mia?”

“What?”

Dagmar had chosen silence when the baby had arrived; creating a fairytale story to suit the gossips and informers who loved to pass on anything anomalous. Her mother’s anger towards Petrus had developed hand in hand with nurturing the child.

“I found something out and I need you to know.”

“Before you went mad and tried to kill a *police* officer?”

There was her father hurrying towards the car, gauntly beautiful as ever in his soft grey coat, red scarf wrapped around a regal if proud neck. Now she could see that he was nothing more than a trick of the light, an adaptation to it rather, a chameleon who conformed to his surroundings. Dr Petrus Künstler, a functionary of the state. Her father who’d supplied drugs to athletes; a physician who’d injected death.

He paused when Hajo called his name, irritation turning to apprehension when Hajo held out the sodden papers Petrus believed to have been destroyed.

Sophia’s father turned and stared directly at his daughter, mouth slightly open, as if he were struggling to invent and foist on her a new lie, one in which he took on yet another persona. Only this time Petrus’s face appeared oddly naked. He’d shrunk; the mask was stripped away. He seemed to cringe with dread, the same dread that had kept her bound to him for so many years. Finally there was nowhere left for her father to hide.

“Mia,” Sophia said simply. “I’m your mother.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE



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Boring blue and green - the canvas showed the usual cold, fed-up mermaid, busy plucking defenceless anemones from rocks as she searched for the perfect shell to clip her hair back. Something the mer-person could show off to her friends - if she had any. Mia doubted anyone quite so grumpy and vain would bother having friends. More likely she'd just have an admirers' club, a bit like horrible Käthe, now safely far away in Breden.

Sophia had finally started to pack away the oils and white spirit, when she started laughing.

“Look.”

There it was, just inside the right hand corner of the canvas, staring out at them with fierce blue eyes. A pocket-sized child mermaid with a shimmering green tail.

“It's you,” she said and put her arm around Mia, pulling the girl into her warmth.

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Sophia and *Mutti* were two different things. One was strong, unbending as steel. The other - soft and confused, as if the actual person hadn't arrived yet.

First of all everything began with 'N.O.' No new jeans. No amazing new hats from the shop next door to KaDeWe, and definitely no more make up. Sophia would get a faraway look on her face. As if she was hearing someone talking. Someone who was saying: “No you can't” even more than she was - and she'd change her mind, which was really good. Mia had bought the most amazing pair of cashmere gloves in orange and black stripes. They came all the way up to her elbow.

The dragonfly grips were stashed in her new jewellery box, kept for the most special of occasions. The bluest dragonfly was called Mia, the greenest Sophia. As they were the very first present her *Mutti* had given her, they were doubly important. Mia had decided she would give them to her own daughter, if she had one. If it ever happened that someone looked at her like Hajo looked at Sophia. As if he wanted to eat

her up. The thought made her skin fizz in an exciting way, like she was waiting for good things that really were going to happen.

They'd been sitting outside the school in the car having the same conversation they'd had a million times: how Mia *had* to go to school, how she'd met everyone in the class, even made friends with a girl called Britta, so there were no more excuses. Things were different, better, because she had the chance to start again, perhaps not so different because, for the first time, Sophia was beginning to sound like Dagmar: frustrated and trying not to show it.

"Go on," she said. "Britta's waiting."

They were *all* waiting, but that wasn't the point. The point was that Mia's tummy hurt. It was all very well that Sophia was going drop her off. Sophia would just go back home and paint or whatever.

Hajo might visit. Sophia had said he was a friend, but honestly she didn't have many friends apart from Maria who'd come to visit after Christmas. She'd brought with her a box of biscuits that tasted so much of home that Mia had slipped away to her room to cry. When Sophia found her, she hadn't made a fuss or said anything about behaving like a baby. She'd asked Mia to come and join them for a glass of wine. They'd sat talking together for ages about Berlin, Breden, and how things were so different now. For the first time Mia had felt like she belonged. As if they really wanted her there and weren't just pretending. So it was nice to know that Sophia had at least one friend. Hajo, Mia knew, was a whole lot more.

It was a good job she was wearing her new gloves today. Britta and her friends were dressed in really cool stuff. Patterned leggings - she only had her jeans. They had ear muffs and hats with bobbles and string, and every single one of them had little wires leading to their ears. Headphones! Sophia would have to buy her a personal stereo for her birthday. She'd written 'personal stereo' first on a Christmas list that had never been completed, because everything had been different and she'd felt like a little girl that really needed to grow up.

The tummy ache was getting worse. Mia worried that Sophia would go and do things on her own. Things Mia wouldn't know about. She might talk to Petrus and tell him she'd never forgive him. Sophia said Petrus was a criminal, and that he would have to go to court, and Mia knew that, she also knew that he was just a lonely old man.

She'd phoned him every day since they came home to make sure he was all right, he was her grandfather after all. Most of all she was scared that Sophia might go back to work and discover even worse secrets that needed looking into. She'd drive away. Forget all about Mia waiting, just like that first time, outside her door.

The playground was full of giggling primary school children who were dashing round and round playing kiss chase; the girls enjoying kissing more than the boys, who scowled and faked being disgusted, wiping their mouths on the backs of their coat sleeves. Over by the wall that separated primary from the middle school were Britta and the kids Mia was supposed to hang out with. They were another reason for her tummy ache.

She wasn't popular. Had never belonged to the cool group; the clique that was full of pretty girls like Britta with her tangled blonde hair and purple ankle boots. Mia had tried hard enough to keep Gerda – and now Gerda was in Breden and Mia was here.

The group were talking and laughing. One boy put his arm around Britta, pulling her close. Britta looked up, saw Mia and waved so energetically that her hair flew around in the cold air. Mia wished the ground would open up and swallow her before the group had time to peel away from the wall, traipse across the playground and form a tight circle around the car.

"Hey, Mia." Britta leaned in the window; her hands were wrapped in fluffy pink mittens. "It's so cool you're finally, like, here."

There was nothing else for it: she had to get out the car. As she grasped her bag Mia ached for Dagmar and all the usual greyness of Before: the toast and sweet hot chocolate she'd had to make before school, getting up extra early so she could bring Oma coffee with biscuits. Knowing that she and Oma were together against the world had meant she'd known who she was and where she was. She'd been able to tell good from bad. All that changed when Sophia arrived. Petrus had spent most of his life as a doctor. Not helping people but doing terrible things. He'd taken babies out of girl's stomachs, girls the same age as Mia, girls who had been athletes. Sophia had been there for such an operation but Petrus had saved her - and he'd saved Mia. Plus he'd made pancakes and been kind when she'd run from Sophia's house when Sophia had been so mean. How was she supposed to be friends with girls like Britta when she knew so many awful things?



“Go on, *mein Schatz*,” Sophia leaned over and tucked a stray hair behind Mia’s ear. Outside in air that was freezing cold, Britta linked her arm through Mia’s and said her gloves were amazing. Where had she got them? How much did they cost? The group stroked the cashmere and murmured their agreement, turning as one to flow up the steps into school. Mia looked back. It was OK: Sophia was still there waiting until she went into the school.

The morning went so quickly. One minute she was in a maths class helping Britta through algebra. The next it was break and they were all talking and talking. She swapped beige nail varnish for pale lilac with a dark eyed girl called Tanya who was going out with Christian, the most gorgeous boy in the group. They made arrangements to meet near KaDeWe that afternoon, while heated discussion took place on who would wear what and whose parents could give them a lift, Mia longed for the simplicity of her room and the quiet that descended on the house whenever Sophia painted. Every half hour or so, paintbrush in hand, Sophia would ask if Mia wanted a glass of juice or a biscuit. Sometimes Mia would sit on her bed, waiting in her room, just so that she could hear Sophia’s voice when she called.

At lunch time they poured out the school gates to parked cars and buses and there, in the distance, was Sophia, looking fierce: running along the pavement dressed in black leggings and a black fleece top.

“Wow,” said Britta as the group turned and stared.

Sophia’s police eyes moved across the group to settle on Mia and - just like that - Mia knew Sophia was never going to forget her. It’s us against the world, she thought. You and me. You and me.

## **Reflective Essay**

# Reshaping the Fugitive Mind through Story: *Dark Mermaids*

## 1 Introduction: Memory and Home

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of November 1947, my mother escaped from the German Democratic Republic. It was her third attempt. Unknown to Christiane Hansen-Arnold, that night the Russians celebrated a historical landmark: the storming of the Winter Palace. At 4 am, as she walked past comatose Russian soldiers, she said she felt that ‘a wiser being worked into my half-conscious mind, telling me I was doing the right thing’.<sup>5</sup> Born in late 1926, my mother was twelve in 1939 when the Second World War began. She experienced totalitarian rule as delivered by Hitler. Then she lived through the chaos of Soviet dictatorship reinforced by the Red Army, and was nineteen when, in April 1946, the SED,<sup>6</sup> The Socialist Unity Party, was formed from a forced merger between the KPD, German Communist Party, and the SPD, Social Democratic Party of Germany. My mother knew nothing about one criminal doctrine that Erich Honecker, SED Party Executive in 1946 and Sec responsible for Sport,<sup>7</sup> was to help realise. Discovery of this crime would warrant additional media focus amidst the mass worldwide coverage (in November 1989) of the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>8</sup> The media called it ‘The GDR Doping Scandal’. Doping wasn’t a new idea. During Hitler’s time, the distribution of anabolic steroids was normal practice so as to render soldiers fearless in war. However, under Honecker’s rule, the GDR developed and honed its knowledge of Hitler’s strategic doping to create a master plan, a plan to make their athletes unbeatable in sport.

The discovery of doping in the GDR was not widely reported in the United Kingdom, even less so the unlikely connection between Hitler’s doping of his troops and Honecker’s doping of athletes. Steven Ungerleider, the author of *Faust’s Gold*, has written that ‘Hitler issued vast quantities of steroids to the SS and the Wehrmacht’.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Conversation, Christiane Hansen-Arnold, 12 November 2011.

<sup>6</sup> *Die Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands: Die Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands; Die Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*. See: John O. Koehler, *Stasi: The Untold Story of the East German Secret Police* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1999), pp. XIII, XII, XIII.

<sup>7</sup> Steven Ungerleider, *Faust’s Gold* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2001), p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> See: David Childs, *Fall of the GDR* (Essex: Pearson Education, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> S. Ungerleider (Thomas Dunne Books, 2001), p. 45.

During the April 1998 trial: ‘State Court Of Berlin In the Name Of The People’,<sup>10</sup> ‘The charges of Criminal Case 28 Js 39/97 were Wilful Bodily Harm inflicted by six defendants [doctors and sports coaches from the GDR] on children.’<sup>11</sup> Dr. Michael Lehner, the lead attorney for the athletes, drew the case against Dr. Lothar Kipke ‘the medical mastermind behind the doping [plan]’<sup>12</sup> and member of FINA: Fédération Internationale de Natation [International Swimming Federation]<sup>13</sup> to a close in a shocking manner. “Dr. Kipke, you are the Joseph Mengele of the GRD doping system,” he shouted at the stunned doctor... “You are the perversion of the art of curing people.”<sup>14</sup>

Whilst these comments were widely criticised in the German press, a point had been made. The gruesome experiments carried out by Nazi doctors may have seemed utterly incomparable with the doping of athletes, yet the pathology behind such experimentation was not dissimilar. Dr. Barbara Cole suggests that German historians liken ‘the abuses under Hitler to those under Honecker’.<sup>15</sup> Cole goes further to explain that, ‘This is known as a *Diktaturvergleich*, or dictatorship comparison.’<sup>16</sup> Just as Hitler doped his soldiers to make them fearless while his Nazi doctors attempted to create a master race, the GDR continued such experimental engineering by building an intricate and systematic plan that was realised in the doping of athletes, thus manufacturing a master race in the arena of sport as a means of promoting the GDR. While in many countries the practice of doping remains, it is generally focused on the athlete’s individualistic purpose to be faster, bigger, stronger, and ultimately – to win. In contrast, the GDR held their athletes’ superhuman achievements as a shining example of what their country could achieve within a communist manifesto. My story, *Dark Mermaids*, draws heavily on the history of the communist regime in the GDR and the subsequent, systematic, doping of athletes. The narrative proper begins in November

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<sup>10</sup> The University of Texas at Austin, Center for American History, The Ungerleider Archives, box 4C469, folder 25. 36 237, *R. Gläser and Dr. D.M.W Binus’ Court Case* (original German with English translation).

<sup>11</sup> S. Ungerleider (Thomas Dunne Books, 2001), p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> International Swimming Federation, Home Page.

< <http://www.fina.org/H2O/> > [accessed February 2012].

<sup>14</sup> S. Ungerleider, (Thomas Dunne Books, 2001), p. 83.

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Cole, ‘*The East German Sport Machine Image and Reality: A Dissertation in History*’, Texas Technology University Libraries.

< <http://thinktech.lib.ttu.edu/ttu-ir/handle/2346/21865> > [accessed February 2012], p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

1990, yet much of the tale draws on historical occurrences between 1939 and 1990. I am conscious of writing it as my refugee mother's daughter: a child of the GDR who fled west carrying personal knowledge of a country in which secrets and lies were endemic.

Whilst the two principal characters of my novel, Sophia, a thirty-year old former athlete, and Mia, a thirteen-year old girl, are carefully shaped as products of the GDR, my priority has been to avoid cliché. Sophia and Mia are conceived as the portraits of idiosyncratic individuals, who (as in life we all too often realise) cannot be relied upon to respond, or act predictably, or to remember reliably. Memory is infinitely variable. When an intense experience is remembered, memory of the event can manifest itself in a variety of ways. For example, my mother remembered the colour of an existential guide, or angel, as 'creamy white'.<sup>17</sup> She recalls, in detail, the walk from East to West as a strange, silent, terrifying passage across no-man's land ending in the tented coffee area in which the Red Cross served soup and, of course, coffee, as her welcome into West Germany. The thought that finally she could begin to follow her true calling – her '*Rote Faden*'<sup>18</sup> ('red thread', a figure for 'destiny') – sustained her. Whilst being interviewed, my mother gave contradicting versions of her escape. I taped each session, something learned during my visits to Germany as a way of lessening the slippage between what was said, in an often fast, dialectal German, and what was understood. During our first session my mother had forgotten about the Russian soldiers who came onto the train platform during the first leg of her journey. In the second interview she remembered them vividly: harbingers of panic and instant flight for many people waiting at the station. She forgot about the hours of waiting, hidden under the staircase beneath the station master's room; and then recalled that she had pushed her backpack under the staircase. During the final session, Christiane corrected herself again. She had crawled under the staircase *before* pulling her backpack in behind her. In this final moment of recall she hinted at hours spent watching Russian soldiers play cards as she served them with drink and food.

Likewise, Sophia remembers only a portion of what was. Her dreams are often disturbing, 'The water curdled, stringy. Terrified: she couldn't breathe, couldn't see

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<sup>17</sup> Conversation, Christiane Hansen-Arnold, 12 November 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

through the reddening weave.<sup>19</sup> She dreams in unhappy fragmentation, recalling moments as distant and upsetting as a recurring nightmare. I wrote these sequences partly from my own on-going experience of nightmares, yet primarily as a means of allowing Sophia access to buried truth and with that, the chance to discover her past. Memory, it would seem, is a tricky beast. The Germany I know, a Germany composed mainly of an older generation from the East, likes to forget portions of its past. This notion of selective memory and amnesia is intricately woven into *Dark Mermaids*. Roediger, McDermott and Goff claim that:

If we think of our memories as (to pick but one typical example) books in a library, the metaphor is useful for representing distinctions about encoding (original purchase of book), storage (placing in the library), decay (its falling apart and becoming unreadable with age), and the critical role of retrieval process (the book being hard to find due to being misshelved).<sup>20</sup>

My mother, like my principal character Sophia, has a number of misshelved books within her bank of memory. Whilst every mind may resemble a library of memory, the notion that some books are labelled whilst others are lost or misplaced suited my purpose in creating Sophia; the main protagonist and medium through which the doping experience is told.

The narrative arc of the story follows Sophia's physical and emotional journey through memory and landscape until she returns to a place that is both physical and emotionally her *Heimatland*, her mother country. My use of the word 'mother country' or 'motherland' is deliberate. Hitler's Germany was named *Vaterland*, translated as 'Fatherland', whilst the GDR named their homeland: '*Sozialisches Vaterland*'<sup>21</sup> ('Socialist Fatherland'). I sought to find a literal translation; however, no exact equivalent portrayed Sophia's process of identification, so I covered the German term with the emotionally more appropriate English near-equivalent that I felt might serve better to conjure up the idea, or emotion, of homeland.

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<sup>19</sup> *Dark Mermaids*, p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> Henry L. Roediger, III, Kathleen B. McDermott, Lynn M. Goff in 'Recovery of true and false memories: paradoxical effects of repeated testing.' *Recovered Memories and False Memories*, ed. by Martin A. Conway (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 143.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Boa, Rachel Palfreyman, *Heimat: A German Dream: Regional Loyalties and National Identity in German Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 132.

When the story begins, Sophia is a 30-year old displaced athlete who, with her father Petrus, a former GDR sports doctor, escaped to West Germany in 1977. The border escape from East to West followed the pattern, not only of my mother's flight, but that of many other refugees. There were however, differences. In 1977, the GDR was an established functioning state. When my mother escaped the state was still in its infancy, with plans in the process of being carefully drawn. When she left the GDR she went first to Scotland, then South Africa and finally to the United Kingdom, grateful for the refuge these countries offered. By choice, she was a stranger to her *Heimatland*, finally making the United Kingdom her adopted home, choosing never to renew her link to the land of her birth. Christiane Hansen-Arnold is both German and not German, her childhood home no more than a memory of pre-War Germany. When Sophia escaped, she had survived all that the GDR had to offer her. Living as a refugee in West Berlin, unable to adapt, she is, like Emine Sevgi Özdamer's protagonist in the tale, *Career of Char – Memories of Germany*, 'a witness of the solitude of the German high rise dwellers'.<sup>22</sup> As she goes through her daily routine she 'listens to the sounds of loneliness'<sup>23</sup> and is able to inhabit only a rigidly fugitive state of mind. My phrase, 'rigidly fugitive' is an oxymoron. I think it bears witness to a common exilic pathology of strain and estrangement (including self-estrangement): flight is never in practice over. No longer a part of GDR sporting history, Sophia is incapable of integrating into the Western way of life. Compartmentalised and afraid (at the start of the novel) to move forward, Sophia is also afraid to look back. She inhabits a place that is forever in-between, a place that defies historical or geographical change. Even though the start of the novel establishes that the Wall has been dismantled, psychologically Sophia is unable to register this. Andreas Glaeser suggests that there are many ways in which walls can be manifest:

The nature of the puzzle of unification is perhaps best captured by juxtaposing the enormous mood swing in both mass media coverage and popular sentiment between early winter 1989, right after the fall of the

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<sup>22</sup> Isolde Neubert, 'Searching for Intercultural Communication: Emine Sevgi Özdamer – A Turkish Writer in Germany', in *Post War Women's Writing in German*, ed. by Chris Weedon (Oxford: Berghahn Press, 1997), p. 165.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 165.

Berlin Wall, and summer 1991, just a few months into actual re-unification, when talk emerged about the “walls in the heads of people.”<sup>24</sup>

To add to Sophia’s dissociative, ‘walled in’ mind I wrote her as a police officer, someone who represents power, but has no power of her own. I wanted her to need the uniform as a way of hiding: ‘She gulped down some milky coffee, shrugged on her green jacket and hugged the fabric tight. The safety of the uniform: *one of many*, not alone’ (p17-18). Seeking some acceptance in uniformity, she aspires to fit into a world without familiar or familial reassuring features. Comfortable in police uniform, Sophia also represents Glaeser’s idea that ‘There the clock ticks differently’,<sup>25</sup> an expression used by East Germans to explain the differences between East and West thinking. She is not only a product of the East, but her fugitive mindset is a product of totalitarianism itself. Sophia has ‘walls in her head’. Walls that have been carefully built by the communist state in which she was born and which she represented as an athlete.

In order to explore the idea of an East German athlete working as a West German officer, I wrote Sophia as someone who imbibes many of the East German People’s Police traits. For example, the ‘People’s Police officers had to travel from home to work and vice versa wearing their uniforms’.<sup>26</sup> Sophia does the same – wearing her uniform as a disguise, a way of reassuring herself that everything is as it should be. This state of denial becomes second nature to someone who is emotionally frozen. Another example of an East German officer’s work day is shown by the fact that Sophia is often late for work: ‘*Salzbrötchen?* The thought of the butter and salt roll made her mouth water. What the hell. She jogged across to the bakery – bought two, and was categorically, and officially, late again’ (p18). This contradictory, defiant yet subservient characteristic is much discussed by Glaeser. He writes, ‘the people’s police system, despite its militaristic character, did allow slack sometimes where slack is not so easily tolerated in the Berlin Police... They [People’s Police] all of a sudden disappeared during the middle of the day... it turned out they had gone shopping’.<sup>27</sup> The reason for the People’s

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<sup>24</sup> Andreas Glaeser, *Divided in Unity* (Chicago: Chicago Press, 2000), p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 143.

See: *Jeder Schweigt Von Etwas Anderem: Last To Know*, dir. Marc Bauder, Dörte Franke, Bauderfilm, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> A. Glaeser (Chicago Press, 2000), p. 83.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 201.



Police's uncharacteristic laxity was nothing to do with subversive defiance but was a response to the survival imperative. Commodity supplies in the GDR being limited, an officer who needed food or toiletries could not wait until the end of a shift, for by then all the goods would be gone. If you wanted to eat, have soap to wash, or have a haircut, you had to stand in a line and wait. The People's Police had, in fact, a strict adherence to orders; and with this rigid structure came a limited ability to think independently. The People's Police was 'organised much more than the Berlin Police according to the notion of military discipline.'<sup>28</sup> Sophia has this mindset and will follow a directive exactly as it is given, and see the job through to the end.

When Sophia's self-imposed isolation becomes too heavy a burden, she reaches out in the only way she knows and re-enacts moments of her past. Schacter, Norman and Koutsaal state, 'that children who had been abused or otherwise traumatized often "acted out" memories of the abuse even when they could not (or would not) explicitly recount the traumatic event or events.'<sup>29</sup> In Sophia's case, she resorts to taking drugs and picking up young men in an attempt to recreate the closeness and intensity she experienced during the sexual orgies so rampant in the GDR athletic training camps. Ungerleider writes, 'Early in the programme, female athletes as young as fourteen embarked on sexual rampages in the sports centres, which their trainers, coaches and physicians ignored as long as the girls performed well in the pool or on the track.'<sup>30</sup> In this context Sophia has to reach beyond what is 'normal' in order to connect with any kind of deep emotion. At the start of the novel, Sophia behaves true to form. Intent on breaking out of her 'walled in' mindset she visits a nightclub and dances:

Now she could see everything and nothing. There were no more boxed-in limitations. No more what she could, and what she could not do, just one long pounding wave of silver-green dancers moving closer (p14).

Schacter, Norman and Koutstaal go further, suggesting that 'children with dissociative disorders exhibit severe behavioural problems'.<sup>31</sup> Even though adult, Sophia could be defined as having behavioural problems. She is unable to form

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<sup>28</sup> A. Glaeser (Chicago Press, 2000), p. 200.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel L. Schacter, Kenneth A. Norman, Wilma Koutsaal, 'Implicit memory and the symptoms of forgotten abuse', ed. by M. A. Conway (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 86.

<sup>30</sup> S. Ungerleider (Thomas Dunne Books, 2001), p. 46.

<sup>31</sup> Daniel L. Schacter, Kenneth A. Norman, Wilma Koutsaal, ed. by M. A. Conway (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 71.

friendships, even the most trivial. Furthermore, at the start of the novel, she is unable to operate within the normal structures of a social situation and refuses to attend even a residents' meeting, thinking negatively, 'Would someone mention her name? No.' (p26). Instead of trying to actively make her life better, she elects to daydream of: 'the things her make-believe friends would talk about. Interesting things, things she longed to explore; the idea behind painting blue on white' (p26).

My intention was to piece together this emotionally dysfunctional character as a person warped by a fragmented, delusional, hard-edged GDR state. In addition, I wanted to write a story about a person for whom emancipation seemed an unlikely scenario. In attempting this, I surprised myself, realising that in Sophia lay scarcely acknowledged aspects of me, relegated for many years to the hinterland of my mind. She is a blurred reflection of the person that I once was and still occasionally see when I look in a mirror. A girl who looks on in confusion at a world she cannot hope to comprehend, someone who once turned to drugs and sex as an escape; rather than as a way in to feeling emotion. Nevertheless, once the echo was discerned, I used my knowledge to flesh out the dissociative sensations Sophia experiences when taking drugs, and I recognised, somewhat ruefully, how a portion of the writer can be deposited, unpremeditatedly, piece by piece, in any one novel. Sophia's life in Berlin is rigid and reclusive; her persona is written as so unwelcoming, that when her liberator arrives, Sophia experiences no gleam of recognition. For one thing, she believes herself irredeemable and is therefore in no position to respond to a catalyst as unlikely as the thirteen-year old Mia.

Mia is everything Sophia is not. Representing the painful truth of what Sophia missed in her childhood, Mia is, by the same pen-stroke, Sophia's familiar, her lost self, the person she could have been if things had been different. Mia has been loved and cherished by Sophia's mother, Dagmar, a communist loyalist who, when Sophia was chosen to train as an athlete seventeen years earlier, handed her daughter to the state to be initially 'cared' for in the sports training centre Werner-Seelenbinder-Halle, named after the executed Berlin Nazi resistance fighter, Werner Seelenbinder. Secondly, Sophia was enrolled into the SV (*Sportvereinigung*) Dynamo, Sports Organisation Dynamo, East Berlin, and finally she trained at Sonnenberg, a fictional training centre

based on the actual sport centre, Kienbaum Sportzentrum, Kienbaum Sports Centre.<sup>32</sup> I visited Kienbaum in 2008. Surprised that, after being rebuffed by every former GDR athlete I managed to contact, the sports centre responded positively to my request, I booked a flight, two nights' accommodation at the centre and a tour of the old and modern facilities by their manager Klaus Peter Novack, a former GDR children's sport coach. The visit became the bedrock for my writing about Sophia's time as an abandoned young girl, training to become a world class athlete. The bungalow I slept in was one of two remaining accommodations from the GDR era. Finally, I was able to imagine my character as a real person. I could trace her steps: walking to breakfast past the cherry and apple blossom. I watched the dawn break over the lake, just as Sophia did that fateful morning when she discovered Diertha's body. I learned intimate detail that I later transposed into the novel. For example, the village of Hangelsberg was created around Kienbaum, not the other way round. Everyone who lived in the hamlet worked at the sports complex; therefore all Kienbaum's neighbours were loyal to the management.

Frau Elke Krüpf Ganz, a secretary since 1975, told me that when the Wall fell in November 1989, the centre was systematically cleared of incriminating paperwork. "*Damals wurde viel verbrannt*" ('Everything was burnt') she said, sighing as she produced a small cardboard box from under her desk. Inside the box were pictures of a Cuban athletics team, another of little girls practising ballet, a shot-put athlete frozen in time as she twirled round, about to throw. The final image was the centre's manager handing out gifts to loyal workers. Everyone was smiling. The unpaid staff drifted back in the New Year of 1990. They began to clean and service the deserted buildings until, in June 1991, the German government realised the potential of the sports complex. Now Kienbaum is a modern centre for sporting excellence, a training ground for many athletes who are readying themselves to compete in the 2012 London Olympics. During the period of my novel, the villagers' loyalty to their sports centre was shown by how they would watch over the centre even if no one was there. The workers would inform the management if they perceived any kind of threat. For the sake of anonymity, I renamed Kienbaum as Sonnenberg, and wrote:

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<sup>32</sup> Kienbaum Sportzentrum, Grünheide, Berlin, Germany, 2012.

Every dwelling remained dark. However, she knew that in each sleepy bedroom, one warm body would slip from the bed, compelled to tiptoe to the curtain and note the car, the registration and time as they drove by. Everyone who lived here owed their livelihood to the Sonnenberg Training Centre. They would have been watching from the moment her headlights were seen in the distance (p162).

During my tour of the training facility I was shown through the underground rooms that had been guarded by sentries from a man-made turret and a second sentry point. Klaus Novack explained how Russian helicopters would circle over the area in a repeated attempt to see what they were hiding. Underground a myriad of rooms catered for special training. The sports doctors called this 'special training' 'UM' (*Unterstützende Mitte*, translated as 'Supporting Means') or doping. The entrance to the labyrinth was designed as a clever and convincing illusion. A nondescript loading bay had been built next to a door that appeared to open into a passageway leading to the rear of the bay. However: 'Sophia knew the column of windows played tricks with reality: the window-line remained horizontal whilst the passageway sloped steeply down to a hallway' (p174). The walls of the underground rooms were built around reinforced steel, making the cost of demolition too expensive, a fact Klaus Novack, the centre manager, was unhappy about. His vision was focussed on bringing Kienbaum into the modern era.

As I descended the narrow stairway into the labyrinth, I imagined that an athletic spectre might have been trapped underground. In writing Sophia's similar descent, I re-imagined that sense of a 'haunting' and wrote Sophia sensing 'that Diertha and all the fallen athletes were with her, floating in the musty air; all those young men and women who hadn't had a chance to escape' (p175). The rooms were damp and cold and terrifyingly functional, a place of dark creation where athletes were metamorphosed into something unnatural. A barochamber was built between the gym and restroom. This sealed unit created conditions of high altitude, making athletes' blood able to carry more oxygen. There were testing rooms where doctors administered anabolic steroids by injection. Standing in this underground Frankenstein-esque laboratory, I realised that the story's denouement had to happen within these walls. Sophia had to come back and face her past. Her *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (struggle to come to terms with her

past)<sup>33</sup> must become a totally consuming need to face what had happened, because only in doing so would she change.

The fact that Sophia's mother left her alone in this forest of fairy tale horror results in any love between Dagmar and Sophia being buried so deeply as to be invisible. Yet the shadow of this difficult love follows both mother and daughter through the story. Mia is a natural foil to Sophia's abandoned exclusivity. She exudes warmth, enthusiasm and naivety, bubbling with optimism in those moments when Sophia can be only pessimistic. Mia's ability to break through Sophia's negativity brings some much needed brightness to an otherwise dark narrative. Furthermore, when Mia arrives in Berlin uninvited, her first-hand view of the city allowed me the opportunity to sketch out a stranger's take on the two worlds during the process of amalgamation.

Humungous cranes teetered over dangerous black holes in the ground as men in white hats swarmed up metal frames. They looked like beetles (or ants) building loads of new homes. Oh – there was a bit of the Wall *again*. It had been part of her life since forever and now, finally, the idiotic thing had come down (p21).

The narrative of *Dark Mermaids* begins, not during the process of East-West amalgamation but in its aftermath. I chose this historical moment because I wanted the landscape to be familiar to modern readers; yet at the same time utterly unfamiliar. Many areas of Berlin were reduced to piles of rubble, marred by left-over portions of the Wall. On the West side modern architectural designs stared across the pile of stone at the grey or green of communist bloc housing. Streets in the area around Hohenschönhausen, a notorious area in former Eastern Berlin, had not appeared on a western map since 1951.<sup>34</sup> Just as a map of Berlin was re-drawn, Sophia and Mia's 'psychological' map needed to be redrawn through the unravelling of an emotional and geographical narrative. Their 'psychological maps' had to mirror external change of place: Germany being separated, then joined. Additionally, this map had to reflect the change of who they were becoming on the inside. As the narrative develops, Mia and Sophia, East and West Germany, join. Eventually, the two protagonists mirror the

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.goethe.de/ges/pok/dos/dos/ern/vgp/en2267663.htm> [accessed June 2012].

<sup>34</sup> Berlin Hohenschönhausen Memorial, Berlin, 2012.

[http://en.stiftung-hsh.de/document.php?cat\\_id=CAT\\_233&special=0](http://en.stiftung-hsh.de/document.php?cat_id=CAT_233&special=0) [accessed April 2012].

newly united land they live in. Furthermore, the woman and child take up residence together in this altered landscape. With that realisation I deduced that the theme of reclaiming one's *Heimatland*, originally depicted as peripheral (I had imagined the theme being one of discovery) would become central to both storylines. The notion of *Heimatland* became more than location; it began to represent the psychological ideology of what home might represent: a place where one felt safe, comfortable and at ease with the surrounding landscape both external and internal, a place where one truly belonged. Such a place did not need to be only represented by a location but by a person. For example, I would (somewhat ruefully) have to admit that, to me, my husband represents 'home'. From the chaos that was my childhood, my homeless adolescence and harsh years of single parenting, he has created a place where the earth feels stable under my feet. A home where all manner of frightening things can be put to rest; a place that Milton talks about when he says: '*Patria est, ubicunque est bene* (One's native land is wherever it is well with one).'<sup>35</sup>

Sophia's narrative within *Dark Mermaids* is comprised of three settings. The first is in West Berlin where we meet Sophia living as a fugitive, her mind 'walled in', incapable of change. To this location – but not to the initial state of mind – she will eventually circle back. The second is in the East, in a fictionalised town named Breden which I based on aspects of Gera, and Greiz Thüringen: my mother's childhood home. This second location includes Sonnenberg; a fictionalised sports training centre based on Kienbaum,<sup>36</sup> a training centre just outside former East Berlin. The third setting is located within the twin worlds of the West Berlin police force and the former GDR police force, which, at the time of the novel, had seen all their powers of autonomous administration stripped away;

Berlin police were indeed quite worried about the possibility that former secret police employees might be hidden as "moles" in the People's Police by sympathetic police leaders. The West Berlin Police therefore, made efforts to influence the personnel policy of the People's Police, actually demanding a complete stop to all new hiring and transfers.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> John Milton, *Letter to Peter*. Heimbach, 15 August 1666, *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, gen. ed. by D.M. Wolfe (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), Vol. 8, p. 4. See: Stevie Davies, *Milton* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 120.

<sup>36</sup> Kienbaum Sportzentrum <<http://www.kienbaum-sport.de>> [accessed January 2012].

<sup>37</sup> A. Glaeser (Chicago Press, 2000), p. 131.

This ‘takeover’ gave me the perfect opportunity to marry Sophia’s professional Western police expertise with her childhood knowledge of East Germany. In order to do this I wrote a situation in which Sophia would feel compelled to go back to her homeland, firstly because she sees her father’s adoration for the child and is inexplicably jealous: “‘I’ve been given a week’s holiday.” Her brain and mouth were obviously disconnected, but she fizzed with vindication: she’d broken their bloody tight-knit chatter’ (p46). Secondly, I wrote it this way because Mia is pleading for help as Dagmar, Sophia’s mother, is dying. In addition to these I added a work directive. Sophia would be ordered to oversee the ‘takeover’ of the local police station in Breden by her immediate boss, Hajo. She tries to refuse. ‘If the police in Breden had got themselves in a predicament, well, that was their problem – not hers’ (p43). However, Hajo is her boss, and a man she trusts, someone with whom she eventually considers having a meaningful relationship.

In Breden, not only is Sophia doubly displaced – a fugitive returned – but she is forced into a dilemma: were she to recognise former IMs, (*Inoffizielle Mitarbeiterinnen*, Unofficial Stasi Informers),<sup>38</sup> she would have to report them, and in doing so would be responsible for their job loss because ‘Berlin, and the federal government started to check every single eastern public servant for Stasi connections’.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, once inside the police station in Breden, she would be in a position to discover papers that would eventually lead her back to the point where her story truly began – the Sonnenberg training centre. In plotting such circumstantial clue-finding moments I had to take care not to manufacture the ‘finding’ but to write from the point of view of the individual character, using a closely focalised free indirect technique. The driving force of Sophia’s fierce nature impels each situation to occur naturally, as if she herself were acting spontaneously. Her choices and reactions must camouflage all authorial manipulation of plot and narrative. Intimate familiarity, I have found, is a great secret of credible narration: when I wrote about Sophia’s childhood home town, I based the fictionalised Breden on Gera and Greiz, towns I knew well. I needed to know, for example, how the cobbles felt under Sophia’s feet so I too could think, ‘Home: where

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<sup>38</sup> See: *Das Leben der Anderen: The Lives of Others*, dir. Florian Henckel Von Donnersmarck, Wiedmann & Berg, 2006.

<sup>39</sup> A. Glaeser (Chicago Press, 2000), p. 271.

the cobbled stone felt more solid than the concrete pavements in Berlin' (p88). The town had to be situated deep within the boundaries of the former GDR, a place far enough from Berlin that its occupants would live together as a tightly formed, introverted community, remote enough to mirror the testimony of Christiane Knacke-Sommer, a former GDR swimmer whose experience was of a community with little outside influence.

A prosecutor patiently led Christiane through the early years of her childhood in a small Saxon town near Dresden, then shifted to the months when she was first installed in the 'swim club' dormitory and began her training regime.<sup>40</sup>

Growing up, as Christiane did, in a small isolated town, Sophia is found to have a talent for swimming. Any chance for her family to move up the ladder is grasped by Petrus, Sophia's father, who stops at nothing to hold on tight to such a rare opportunity, even if it means his daughter becomes part of the doping machine. Olympic swimmer Rica Reinisch described growing up in a similar situation: 'I think my parents knew what was going on, but they were caught in a tough position, with my success and the prestige bestowed on our family.'<sup>41</sup> Reading the historical and factual material in Ungerleider's book, I determined on building a realistic picture of Sophia as a girl who had no avenue other than to accept her 'luck' in being chosen to train as a swimmer. Whilst creating her back story, I strove to keep the information about doping and the training of athletes as close to the truth as possible, without breaching the confidentiality of athletes still living in Germany. Therefore, in addition to the novel being a narrative quest for home, *Dark Mermaids* is an attempt to re-create the world of the doped GDR athlete, to show how it was, and to ask how such athletes can ever live a normal life, once the drugs, the guidance, and the rigorous timetable of training have gone. Much of the background information on the GDR came from reading books such as Michael Simmons' *The Unloved County*, where the author states: 'In 1988 I wrote in my notebook about Leipzig (the country's second biggest city): Five- and six-storey blocks, black, pock-marked and visibly crumbling; should have been demolished or

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<sup>40</sup> S. Ungerleider (Thomas Dunne Books, 2001), p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p. 101.



vigorously refurbished years ago.’<sup>42</sup> Another text was Anna Funder’s *Stasiland*<sup>43</sup> wherein Funder visits the ‘Runde Ecke [round corner]’<sup>44</sup> museum, and reads the display for the Stasi agents’ practice of observation: ‘Signals For Observation. 1. Watch Out! Subject is coming – touch nose with hand or handkerchief’.<sup>45</sup> Funder writes of seeing ‘One glass [cabinet] contained nothing but empty jars... Frau Hollitzer explained to me that the jars in front of us were “smell samples”, as a way to find criminals.’<sup>46</sup> My writing incorporated the ‘visibly crumbling’ buildings of the GDR: ‘At the corner some newly built flats were already ballooning with damp’ (p53), as well as the use of a smells register: ‘One room had been filled with jam-jars, each containing a scrap of pickled yellow cloth. Sophia had greeted the glass jars like old friends’ (p58).

My research into the doping programme was geographically far-reaching. It included contacting The University of Texas at Austin<sup>47</sup> to request photocopied reports that Steven Ungerleider amassed and archived there during his research and writing of *Faust’s Gold*, a book which, as I have shown, has had a significant impact on my own writing. Photocopied reports from the Ungerleider Archives in Austin contained not only portions of Brigitte Berendonk’s book: *Doping Dokumente: Von der Forschung zum Betrug* (Doping, From Research to Deceit)<sup>48</sup> but also court proceedings from the 2005 ‘State Court of Berlin vs. Rolf Glaeser and Dr. Binus.’<sup>49</sup> These reports were detailed in their testimony as to how:

State Plan Topics occupied a unique position within the research establishment of the former GDR, because the Ministry for Science and Technology served as coordinator, and supervised the progress of the individual projects. In that capacity it was authorized to require from other

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Simmons, *The Unloved Country* (London: Sphere Books, 1989), p. 118.

See: Nicholas Shakespeare, *Snowleg* (London, Vintage, 2005), Peter Schneider, *Eduard’s Home-Coming*, trans. by John Brownjohn (Canada: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd, 2000), P. Schneider, *The Wall Jumper* (London: Penguin, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> Anna Funder, *Stasiland: Stories From Behind the Berlin Wall* (London: Granta Books, 2003).

<sup>44</sup> Bürgerkomitee Leipzig e.V. Museum in der "Runden Ecke", Leipzig.

<<http://www.runde-ecke-leipzig.de/index.php?id=76&L=1>> [accessed February 2012].

<sup>45</sup> A. Funder (London: Granta Books, 2003), p. 7.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 7 – 8.

<sup>47</sup> The University of Texas at Austin, The Ungerleider Archives.

<<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/utpsm/00001/psm-00001.html>> [accessed February 2012].

<sup>48</sup> Brigitte Berendonk, *Doping: From Research to Deceit*, trans. by Gisela Ulich (Hamburg: Rowohlt Paper book, 1992), Center for American History, The Ungerleider Archives, fourth series.

<sup>49</sup> Center for American History, The Ungerleider Archives, State Court of Berlin, box 4C469, folder 25. 36 237, pp. 3 – 88.

ministers that support be made to projects for capacity allocations, devices, chemicals as required for the research activities.<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, it was conceivable that any child of the state with a talent for sports would be required to join a sports club and become part of a research project that ultimately led to the taking of anabolic steroids. Sophia was part of that world. As a young child she is taught by her remote, often absent and always difficult father to swim. She loves those short moments where his attention is focused on her. His motives – whether the desire simply to be with his daughter, or to train her for selection – are never made explicit. ‘Recruitment began when girls were approximately eleven years of age,’ states Ungerleider,<sup>51</sup> so naturally Sophia is chosen to swim for the ‘Sport Club SC Dynamo Berlin,’<sup>52</sup> and grows up within the world of the athlete, her life arranged into neat cycles of training, eating, resting and training:

Their training day typically began with in-water training, followed by classroom training, and then another in-water training period or workout-room activity. After lunch, another classroom training session followed, then back to the pool.<sup>53</sup>

She is not given the opportunity to grow independently, to imagine how her first kiss might feel, to try out all the normal adolescent fumbblings which a normal relationship might include. Diane Williams, ‘a sprinter, with an achievement of 100 metres in 10.86 seconds ... the third in the world competition in 1983’,<sup>54</sup> states: ‘The steroids changed my sexual behaviour. Often I behaved like a nymphomaniac’.<sup>55</sup> Williams goes on to testify:

“Chuck [Chuck Debus, the coach who in the meantime has been banned from continuing his work] gave me a white plastic bottle without any inscription... he advises me to take two pills daily for the next six to eight weeks... After another eight weeks of taking the pills, I noticed serious side effects. In March 1983, I did not menstruate ... I had male appearances.... My clitoris grew to an embarrassing size.” The witness at this point broke down in tears.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The Ungerleider Archives, State Court of Berlin, box 4C469, folder 25. 36 237, p. 33.

<sup>51</sup> S. Ungerleider (Thomas Dunne Books, 2001), p. 60.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p. 61.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p. 61.

<sup>54</sup> B. Berendonk. *Doping: From Research to Deceit*, The Ungerleider Archives, Fourth Series, p. 49

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p. 49.

<sup>56</sup> B. Berendonk. *Doping: From Research to Deceit*, The Ungerleider Archives, Fourth Series, p. 49.

In writing between two extremes – idealised teenage romanticism and the explicit, abusive sexual practice Sophia takes part in – I wanted Sophia to reflect on how different her best friend’s life was:

Maria had a boyfriend. She’d be doing the things normal kids did: walking around the town in a group, talking, laughing about things that were only funny to them. No one in this place could ever do things like that. With every vitamin, each injection or medication the athletes took, they slipped further away from the edge of normal (p169).

I wanted her to be painfully conscious of what she is part of and utterly unable to escape Sonnenberg Training Centre, where the notion of concealment was woven into the fabric of every athlete’s life. No one was free to speak, every phone call was listened to and ‘Older athletes were primed to check on the younger ones, reporting everything to the office’.<sup>57</sup>

Sophia’s only escape comes through her training and through self-harm. She cuts herself in order to exert some small control over the world in which she lives, a place where she is party to abuse at the hands of complicit adults that included her own parents. In 2004, *The New York Times* reported there were many such athletes: in fact:

As many as 10,000 East German athletes were involved in a state-sponsored attempt to build a country of 16 million into a sports power rivalling the United States and the Soviet Union... 500 to 2,000 former East German athletes are believed to be experiencing significant health problems associated with steroids.<sup>58</sup>

The historical-political landscape inhabited by *Dark Mermaids* is littered with the tools of concealment. The mendacity of the GDR police state infiltrated every aspect of life. It is startling to read that: ‘between 1950 and 1989, a total of 274,000 persons served in the Stasi... the *inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* [IM, or Unofficial Informers]’ were ‘[by] 1995, 174,000 strong’. This amounted to ‘2.5 percent of the total population between the ages of 18 and 60.’<sup>59</sup> IMs were voluntary spies who would report back to

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<sup>57</sup> B. Berendonk. *Doping: From Research to Deceit*, The Ungerleider Archives, Fourth Series, p. 187.

<sup>58</sup> Jere Longman, *The New York Times*, 26 January 2004.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/26/sports/othersports/26STER.html?pagewanted=all>> [accessed February 2012], p.2.

<sup>59</sup> J O. Koehler (Oxford: Westview Press, 1999), p. 8.

the People's Police or Stasi on conversations they had with their neighbours, their suspicion about anyone who might be planning to escape or who was selling, or making money, or any action deemed unlawful within the strict guidelines of the Communist State. For example, my aunt's old school friend lost her father, Richard Grosse, due to the simple fact that he owned a factory and was, therefore, a capitalist.

Both of the factory's owners, Willi and Richard Grosse, were arrested by German police in the presence of NKWD [Soviet Secret Service] soldiers and brought to the then district court of Greiz... Richard Grosse died in the NKWD camp of Sachsenhausen.<sup>60</sup>

Just as Maria describes how she and her brother Jörg try and send food parcels to their mother who is imprisoned for selling her paintings, Thea, my aunt's best friend, tried to save her father – visiting him, writing petitions, collecting funds to buy his freedom. My aunt said that in the end her friend's heart broke whilst watching her father die of starvation and cold. Thea never left Greiz; her villa is an imposing building on the hill above the town. She stayed even though her husband begged her to leave with him. In the end, her husband, a doctor, made a deal with the SED (*Die Sozialistische Einheitspartei*, East German Socialist Unity Party) that his daughters would be allowed to train: one as a dentist, the other as a doctor. Under the communist regime the doctor's children were required to work the land. The idea behind this political manifesto: to provide a platform for social and economic change within the established class structure. The house remained open to all People's Police, Stasi and SED members. A day book or diary was kept in which the family had to record each visitor and purpose of visit. They were watched constantly and at any moment an important visitor of the SED could demand the best room in the house, for however long he or she wanted to stay. Thea's husband died young, broken after years of dodging between the Stasi and his professional code of practice. Thea passed away in 2007.

There are many such stories that feed Sophia's sour thoughts as she watches GDR video footage given to the West German police: 'There was so much more that she knew of: desperate mothers and children who had run through the forest and now lay

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<sup>60</sup> W. Schatzberg, *Deutsches Schicksal* (Books on Demand GmbH), pp. 120 – 125.

side by side with rotting trees, undetectable in the earth'(p103). For example, the story of an eighteen-year old girl named Ruth Edith Matthes:

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1945 Ruth Matthes... [was] walking along Bahnhofstraße in the small town of Triptis in East Thuringia when a Red Army military jeep suddenly pulled up alongside... The front seat passenger asked the unsuspecting Ruth a question in broken German. When she stepped a little closer to answer him, two uniformed soldiers grabbed her.'<sup>61</sup>

The arrest had been ordered by the SBZ, (*Die Sowjetische Besatzungszone*, Soviet Military Administration Zone), from information given by an IM. Ruth, they stated, had not only been an active member of the BDM (*Bund Deutsche Mädel*, The Band of German Maidens, a branch of 'Hitler Youth'), but in fact she had been reported to be a '*Jungmädelführerin*',<sup>62</sup> a BDM leader. According to her family Ruth had been nothing of the sort, yet she was taken in for questioning on the say so of her employee who:

[f]or food, a good breakfast, a bottle of Schnapps or for other such benefits ...betrayed... [his] fellow Germans and even as in the case here, their own employee, who never once belonged to the circle of BDM leaders.<sup>63</sup>

She was never released: 'the rehabilitation document notes that Ruth Matthes died in prison from typhoid fever on 27/12/1945'.<sup>64</sup> Her resting place is still unknown.

Code names and acronyms in abundant use confused the researcher. For example, the acronym 'NKWD' used above to describe the Stasi soldiers who arrested Willi and Richard Grosse is listed as 'NKVD' in Koehler's book on the Stasi. Both 'NKVD' and 'NKWD' refer to the Russian, '*Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennikh del* (Russian People's Office for Internal Affairs)'.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, Koehler states that, 'During WWII, the counterespionage functions of the NKVD were delegated to the newly formed NKGB, '*Narodnyi komissariat gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti*: the Soviet People's Commissariat of State Security',<sup>66</sup> which after the war was put under the aegis of the MGB: '*Ministerstvo gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti*, Ministry for State Security (Stasi)'.<sup>67</sup> I

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<sup>61</sup> W. Schatzberg (Books on Demand GmBh), p. 196.

<sup>62</sup> W. Schatzberg (Books on Demand GmBh), p. 196.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, p. 196.

<sup>64</sup> W. Schatzberg (Books on Demand GmBh), p. 199.

<sup>65</sup> J. Koehler (Oxford: Westview Press, 1999), p. XII.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p. XII.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, p. XII.

created two lists of acronyms, one for the political hierarchy and one for the athletes and the doping scam. This helped in bringing a modicum of logic to the chaos. The fact that ‘During its heyday... the East German Doping machine was virtually unassailable’ only served to highlight the fact that in creating such a vast and complex state secret, the Communist Party was pathologising misfit elites: athletes, police, the medical profession and bureaucrats. These minorities are only the more grotesque examples of the pathology of the DDR’s citizens as a whole. Anne Faust, author of *Gulag*, suggests, ‘To put it bluntly former communists have a clear interest in concealing the past: it tarnishes them, undermines them, hurts their claims to be carrying out “reforms.”’<sup>68</sup> To conceal anything takes some effort. To conceal a doping plan that had ‘230.000 members in 1974’<sup>69</sup> is an industrial-scale exercise in arcane social engineering.

The act of concealment necessarily divides those who know from those who don’t. Furthermore, concealment enacts a form of power. I chose to represent the GDR mentality of oppression through Sophia’s father, Petrus Künstler, and a fictional sketch of the General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party, Erich Honecker. Honecker and Künstler are siphons, sucking what they need from each situation with little regard for human life. As a young man, Honecker joined the German Communist Party against Hitler. Arrested in 1935, he was freed at the end of the war and moved steadily up the ranks in GDR politics. A member of the ‘Central Committee of the SED’,<sup>70</sup> he oversaw the building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961, became General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party in 1971, and was the owner of Kienbaum’s stately villa, prior to its transformation into a sport centre. I depict Honecker as ‘a broad-shouldered, fatherly figure, striding leisurely along the lake shore, sitting in the winter garden with coffee or beer, entertaining friends and associates’ (p162), a man who Sophia sees as ‘a normal father figure’, someone not dissimilar to her own costive and authoritarian father who, in their new life in the West, keeps her isolated from her past with a web of half-truths and lies:

When he was ready to spin a half-truth, her father would lean forward, and, carefully manicured hands resting on knees, begin to weave his story. His

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<sup>68</sup> Anna Applebaum. *Gulag: A History* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 509.

<sup>69</sup> D. Childs, *From Schumacher to Brandt: the story of socialism, 1945 to 1965* (New York: Pagamon Press, 1966), p. 89.

<sup>70</sup> S. Ungerleider (Thomas Dunne Books, 2001), p.49.

version would wear well under questioning, but the tale would yield only a limited portion of the whole (p36).

Petrus Künstler represents the warped and twisted truth of the old GDR system. He conceals his former complicity as firmly as he holds on to his daughter's fragmented memory, keeping secrets from her as a means of patriarchal control. 'Age sixteen, desperate to find a message from her mother, she'd systematically steamed open her father's mail; trying to find answers' (p43). Petrus continues to have contact with his GDR colleagues and associates. He remains in covert contact with his former lover, Dr. Ilse Hammerman, and automatically contacts Günther Schenke, the Chief of Police to warn him that Sophia is about to access files in the Breden police station, thus endangering his daughter:

They must have worked together: Günther protecting her father; Petrus (most likely) treating the inmates in the police cells, keeping quiet about their injuries. Arranging death certificates for those men and woman who had died from frenzied beatings, or starvation – as Frau Schöller had. Christ, it had been Günther on the phone that first night, not Ilse. Sharp terrifying pain. A solid weight fractured against her head. A door opened and shut. An icy breeze touched sore skin. Blackness (p142).

In spite of Petrus's deviant and self-serving mentality, I wanted to offer him, as I did Sophia, the possibility of some measure of redemption through his relationship with Mia, and tried to write in a shift from a pathological liar to someone able to see the truth and accept it. However, Petrus remained stubbornly true to form. Unable to change, at the end of the novel he had to be forced out of his concealment to be faced with the truth and to stand in the light, 'He paused when Hajo called his name, irritation turning to apprehension when Hajo held out the sodden papers Petrus believed to have been destroyed' (p186).

His *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* or, in Petrus's case, acknowledgement of a sordid and well-hidden past, is written as a reflection on the crisis of the defunct GDR, when all the nasty little secrets it had kept crawled out into the light as a series of painful embarrassments laid bare for all to see. His abiding loyalty to those left behind the Wall has left him with nothing and he is exposed to questions not only about his involvement in the doping of athletes, but also the abortions carried out by him and Ilse Hammerman. Ungerleider writes, 'It cannot be easy, I think, to tell of the horrors of

their [the athletes'] bodily functions, of the changes in their sexual feelings, of being asked by a coach to abort their babies.<sup>71</sup> On reading this passage I imagined the former, now middle-aged, athletes standing humiliated, in front of a courtroom of men and women. Some fellow athletes would be sympathetic, others furious at the revelation of these intimate secrets. I wanted to explore more penetratingly: to understand (firstly) how the young athletes, at the mercy of the steroid rush, felt impelled to take part in orgiastic sexual intercourse. Secondly how, under the tyranny of medication, the young girls fell pregnant only to be told they were expected to abort the child. I had to read between the lines of newspaper reports and factual writing as there was no clear explanation or explicit testament from which I could draw absolute conclusions. Once again, I drew on my own experiences as a young girl far away from home, embroiled in a world of drugs and living a very different life from the one I live now. I wrote of sex being part beauty/part horror:

Strong hands turned her over and opened her wide to bruise and caress.  
Another joined another as the door opened and more athletes arrived.  
Beds were hastily created on the floor, sheets and blankets protecting skin  
as the seething, jerky, fluid motion escalated.  
Sophi opened her eyes. She could see the moonlight bend its light across  
moving naked flesh. Beauty, ugliness, what was the difference? (p167).

I imagined the orgy as something akin to Hieronymus Bosch's *Last Judgement*.<sup>72</sup> But fiction is a shot-silk medium: something unexpected and pure came into being at the heart of obscenity, a detail that, although initially undesired and inconspicuous, would have reverberations throughout the story. So it was a pregnancy and the horror of a forced, or rather a kind of statutory, abortion that I placed as a kernel of truth at the centre of the novel. Sophia's termination is too late and the child is brought out alive:

"Read it." It was only by virtue of Diertha's voice being so utterly broken that she did as she was asked: Sophia Künstler. Seven months into pregnancy. Foetus presents as fully developed. Patient suffering internal bleeding (p181).

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<sup>71</sup> S. Ungerleider (Thomas Dunne Books, 2001), p. 11.

<sup>72</sup> Hieronymus Bosch, *The Complete Paintings*, ed. by Walter Bosing (Köln: Taschen GmbH, 2011), pp. 42 – 43.



It is only through this life-changing discovery that Sophia is finally delivered from trauma: her stubborn predisposition to surviving as half the person she could be is shattered when she realises that the baby was delivered alive. Added to this epiphanic moment is the (hitherto unknown) fact that the child is none other than Mia.

### 3 Emotional Transformation

Throughout the novel Sophia and Mia are searching for themselves. They tunnel into the story from different points looking for somewhere to belong. Ultimately, Mia is looking for her mother – and in a sense so is Sophia, whose mother-loss darkens every horizon and cannot be remedied. Sophia is looking for a way out of her past, yet essentially both of them are searching for their Heimatland, their true home – a place where they can begin to grow into the people they long to be. Even though Mia is less of a fragmented character than Sophia (she has had a home and someone in that home who loves her), she knows that something is missing. The lack of background information her grandmother, Dagmar, gives her is similar to the limited, and often incorrect, information Petrus relays to Sophia. Therefore, both Sophia and Mia have to work their way through limited information that is lacking in both coherence and logic. In asking difficult questions about where she came from, Mia makes herself vulnerable to fears that manifest themselves as ‘The grey feeling of loneliness and guilt stretched out its fingers and whispered how useless she was, how selfish, how unwanted’ (p145). She turns to Sophia for elucidation of the incomplete explanations she has been given, thinking that, as a police officer, Sophia has the necessary investigative skills and access to files.

Oma had explained that Mia was family, although never really how or where she came from. If Mia asked her too often she just said, ‘how lucky they were because they had each other and that should be enough’, and off she went into one of her long silences (p70).

The fact that both protagonists are searching for answers serves the genre of the novel well. In writing a ‘historical novel/thriller’ I worked hard to create suspense through placing vital information, like a trail of breadcrumbs, so the reader would follow the characters’ search to find the next clue. Similarly to Nesser’s thriller, *Borkmann’s Point*,<sup>73</sup> I intended that the final piece of the puzzle only be solved (by Sophia) at the very end of the novel. Often I had only a vague idea what would come next and gave Sophia permission to go whatever way she chose. For example, I had originally shown her finding information linked to her past life in Sonnenberg training

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<sup>73</sup> See: Håken Nesser, *Borkmann’s Point* (London: MacMillan, 2006), Henning Mankell, *Sidetracked* (London: Vintage Random House, 2002), Gwen Hunter, *Shadow Valley* (Canada: Mira Books, 2005), John le Carre, *A Small Town in Germany* (London: Pan Books, 1969).

centre, not at Breden police station, where in the event she finds something quite different and unexpected: the much hated brother of her old best friend Maria: 'All she saw was Maria's brother. Jörg's hair was falling (absurdly long) across his face' (p107). This insider knowledge that Sophia possesses, yet does not remember, is carefully placed in the novel as an intimation to the reader of the historical cultural context of post-Communist East Germany. For example, Sophia knows that 'there, perfectly intact, between the bark and the stone wall, was Jörg Schöller's informer's mail-drop – disguised to look like a wooden bird box' (p66). This was a way of informing the reader of intimate, arcane detail, about the world of informing and commonplace, quotidian espionage in the GDR. I wanted Sophia's familiarity with small details such as the example above, to be matter of fact. Yet, at the same time as knowing so much, Sophia remembers almost nothing until she sees it. For example, she is confused and disturbed when she can't fully remember a simple thing like the way to her old school:

Could there be anything simpler than the well-remembered bus route to school? She'd drive the car across town, turn right at the town hall, take the main road and turn left into the school car park, collect Mia from the sick room and head to the hospital.

Every turning that should take her to the school twisted through unknown backstreets into new housing estates where one block of flats followed another (p75).

The irrefutable fact that the outside world is in constant flux chafes against Sophia's desire for stability and an inflexible, safe life.

One of the themes exploring this notion of change and stability in the novel is the parallel narrative of Sophia and Mia's friendships; most notably the friendship between Sophia and her childhood best-friend, Maria, and Sophia's love of Maria's mother, Frau Schöller. The theme is further explored through Mia's friendship with Gerda and Gerda's mother, Elke Rentsch, who suggests that Mia live with them after Dagmar's death. Maria and Sophia's friendship is the remnant of an old GDR loyalty. Forged through difficult times, it represents all that is unchanging. When Sophia goes to see Maria she is reminded of the past by realising that, in visiting her old friend, she has rekindled an old pattern of bartering with information: 'Maria was asking for help in the only way she knew. She'd given something to Sophia and would ask something in return' (p93). Sophia nevertheless does hold true to their childhood promise of loyalty and protects Maria's brother, Jörg, from unemployment when Hajo is made aware of

Jörg's past as an IM. However, this act of loyalty has as much to do with Maria's mother, Frau Schölller, as it has to do with Maria. Frau Schölller is the one adult who saw Sophia for what she was. Not as an athlete or a ticket to greater things, but a child who wanted to be loved. Frau Schölller's presence in the hinterland of the novel is fleeting, yet profound. Through her, Sophia has been able to experience what it feels like to be loved for who you are, not what you represent: 'Frau Schölller who had called Sophia and Maria her dark mermaids and had loved them for who they were' (p91). Maria's mother is a painter and, in teaching Sophia to paint, she instils in the young girl a lifelong love of painting. At the start of the novel the only picture Sophia can paint is an ocean with rocks and mermaids which represent the tireless athlete she once was. However hard she tries to alter the image, adding land or even trying to paint an arid desert, her painting reverts back to the obsessive original. When she is given a gift from the now dead Frau Schölller, the past catches up with her:

A blue mermaid swam with a shoal of angelfish: a guardian in the deep water. The seaweed drifted and spun, and look - just there, around the black outline of a rock, was a second mermaid hiding. Sophia was crying, dripping onto the picture. She'd ruin it if she didn't stop (p91).

The theme of friendship and loyalty is further developed when Maria tenders Sophia her half of a friendship bracelet as a way to emphasise the importance of their connection. Maria and Sophia's friendship remains a constant thing. Forged in steel in difficult times, it is different to the friendship that Mia experiences with her 'best-friend', Gerda. Their friendship is modern and malleable, only kept when useful. The two school friends have no shared experiences that will hold them together. Mia longs for something more. She, like Sophia, searches for a meaningful, fulfilling relationship – a version of the bond they eventually find in each other. In fact Sophia establishes her first real connection to Mia by buying her; 'the hairgrips. They were displayed near the counter: twin dragonflies decorated in silver, blue, and green. Beautiful,' (p52), and in doing so she plays out the small acts of kindness witnessed at the hands both of Maria and her mother.

Throughout the narrative I wove in the presence of an athlete named Diertha. Diertha is a choric motif, a universal yet ambivalent portrayal of the reciprocity of cruelty and suffering,

Each time Sophia ran past she remembered Diertha: a muscled athlete, a rising star from a life before. Her roommate who had sunk to a watery grave, while Sophia lived. She raised her hand in a casual greeting, warning the demons away. Diertha wasn't here to haunt her. Besides, angels were just mermaids out of water (p27).

Diertha is to me like a modest version of the choir in Mahler's Symphony Number 2 in C Minor: the 'Resurrection'. The choir waits silently as the symphony's narrative builds and changes, moving energy around the recesses of the music hall. The episodic movements within the symphony relate (in my mind) to *Dark Mermaid's* narrative, whilst Diertha lurks submerged, a constant presence waiting to surface and be heard. Her character adds layer upon layer to what is already known. Diertha, a shot-put athlete, is based on two seemingly unlinked sportspeople. The first, a generic example I have seen on television, practises in an arena Mia describes in these terms: 'The ground was flat and scuffed, with the soles of many feet. The shot-put arena' (p184). Curiously, I sometimes dream of these muscular men and women, circling, silently in the dirt, letting out a guttural yell as the shot-put flies through the air. Those lonely hours of rehearsal for the one big throw that may, or may not, make their name. The second is Katharina Bullin, a former volleyball player whose film: *Und ich dachte ich wär' die Größte (And I thought I was the greatest)*,<sup>74</sup> I went to see in Berlin in December 2007. It was Katharina's way of moving that captivated the audience. Her androgynous features, her need to be physically engaged at all times, no matter what it cost her in pain and suffering, were remarkable. Katharina's need to stay close to her home roots, living in what she still calls 'East Berlin', her unfriendly and closed demeanour towards me, an outsider in the after-film gathering, all worked towards the writing of a unsympathetic, unlikeable, character whose demise is brutal. Diertha represents the devastation 'Theme 14.25' wreaked on its community. When Mahler's choir finally does stand and sing, that is the moment, for me, in which Diertha finally arrives. Her message is simply 'her bloated body' (p180) surfacing from her watery grave.

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<sup>74</sup> K. Bullin: *Und ich dachte ich wär' die Größte (And I thought I was the greatest)*, dir. Marcus Welch, Documentary Film, 2006. See: *Staatsgeheimnis Kinderdoping*, ARD-Sportschau – extra – RBB-Sendung vom 25.09.1997.

There are a number of voices that sang within the context of my initial steps towards research and the writing of *Dark Mermaids*. In 2002 I happened upon a novel in my local library: Stevie Davies's *The Element of Water*,<sup>75</sup> one of the very first books I would read on the subject matter of Germany, a book that threw light, not only on the place but on the idea of identity, truth, and where one might belong. I was surprised when Stevie Davies's name appeared (during my search to study for an MA in Creative Writing) as a tutor at Swansea University and I applied in order to study as one of her students. For my MA dissertation I researched my mother's family in the former GDR. It was whilst doing this research that I stumbled upon the somewhat incongruously named: 'Komplex 08, (Complex 08, Research Program 08)',<sup>76</sup> that I later decoded as: *Staatsplanthema 14.25* (State Theme 14.25).<sup>77</sup> This initial find led me on an often wild goose chase, searching for some small detail that, at the time, seemed vital. In hindsight, many were not. I began by my investigation online, looking for anything I could find under 'Komplex 08', 'Staatsplanthema 14.25', the GDR, and similar word associations. Slowly information emerged. A great deal of it was written in German. Conversation is my strong point, not the written word. Not to be outdone, I enrolled on a GCSE German evening course. This helped, not only with my reading, but also with my sentence structure - a useful skill, as I was required to write letters and queries in German. I enrolled the help of a friend, Susan Spiransa, a translator from German to English and vice versa. Initially Susan acted to confirm or correct my reading of a German document. Later she helped search for specific links on 'The Smells Register', finding the exact dates when, in 1990, the demonstrators took possession of the 'Headquarters for State Security' in Berlin. I wrote letters to former GDR athletes, finding their addresses through hours of painstaking search on the German equivalent of Yellow Pages. None answered. I came upon a report written by Werner Franke and Brigitte Berendonk.<sup>78</sup> I wrote to Brigitte and had a response with new addresses for past Olympic swimmer, and (inevitably) Brigitte's refusal to meet. Each new branch of

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<sup>75</sup> Stevie Davies, *The Element of Water* (London: The Women's Press, 2001).

<sup>76</sup> Craig Lord, Drug claim could be a bitter pill, *Times Online*, 02 March 2005.

<<http://www.ergogenics.org/ddroids2.html>> [accessed April 2012].

<sup>77</sup> Matt McGrath, Sport's Greatest Cover Up, BBC World Service.

<[http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/science/2009/08/090805\\_discovery\\_sports\\_cover\\_up\\_one.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/science/2009/08/090805_discovery_sports_cover_up_one.shtml)> [accessed February 2012].

<sup>78</sup> <http://www.clinchem.org/content/43/7/1262.full.pdf+html> > [accessed June 2012]

investigation opened an alternate avenue. With diligence I looked into each and every one, amassing piles of printed matter. Searching archives, and Google/de, under the title ‘film making and the GDR’ led to my finding and contacting Marcus Welsch. We arranged to meet in Berlin to view his film. I found Kienbaum Sports centre in a similar way – following a vague reference to GDR training camps. Concrete detail, and the ability to link events, came from Ungerleider’s book: *Faust’s Gold*. I accessed archival transcripts from The University of Austin Texas,<sup>79</sup> requesting what I *thought* I needed, often having to rethink the order as documents would arrive in partial sequence, chunks of vital information left in Texas. Some decisions were hard to make. I couldn’t finance travel to Texas and Germany. I opted for three trips to Germany, a decision I have never had cause to regret. In Berlin I traced the run Sophia would make through Tiergarten Park. In Kienbaum I felt her presence, perhaps as a manifestation of my longing to meet her, or simply my ongoing desire to further connect to my German heritage.

My mother talks about connections as a central part of her ‘*Rote Faden*’: her destiny. While her childhood home is a distant memory of extreme wealth and privilege, it is the people she connected with who led her away from this easy wealth to ever greater adventures. Just as I was to read the novel *The Element of Water*, my mother listened to her *Tante* (aunt) Ali (Annalisa), delightfully nicknamed: *Möndschen Radischen* (Little Moon Radish), talking about the art of biodynamic gardening, and how she was planning to build a new farm near the Black Forest. Tante Ali’s plans were brought forward dramatically. In a similar situation to the one in which Richard and Willi Grosse were arrested, Tante Ali’s husband was seized by the Russians in 1945. In the chaos, he somehow managed to escape. Only hours later, the couple and their children fled the GDR. In the same year the female residents in Greiz were given a choice: either to be transported to Russia or Siberia to work, or find work on the land in the local neighborhood. There were no schools operating, little food and, in the most part, total chaos as the Russians took over. My mother opted to work on a farm in the nearby district of Untergrochlitz. Here she met with Friedle Gögler, a fellow gardener. Firm friends, they would sit together under the apple trees and talk. On one such occasion Friedle began to speak about the idea of biodynamic gardening, re-incarnation

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<sup>79</sup> <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/utpsm/00001/psm-00001.html>> [accessed June 2012]

and the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner. Just as I had known (when I saw the words 'Komplex 08') that I would write about the underbelly of the GDR doping system, my mother knew (at that moment) that she had to find out more about the ideas behind Anthroposophy.<sup>80</sup>

On the 9<sup>th</sup> November 1947 when my mother walked across no-man's land, she was heading for Tante Ali's new farm in the Black Forest: Hagenauer Hof. Here she trained for two years. It was after a conference in Stuttgart by Karl König, a high profile member of the anthroposophical movement that she decided to leave Germany and go to the Camphill Community<sup>81</sup> in Aberdeen, Scotland. This idea was utterly impractical as her papers, passport and birth certificates, had been confiscated in the GDR. Therefore, there was little hope of ever leaving. In one of those extraordinary moments that characterised that time, Tante Ali bribed the local magistrate in Hagenauer Hof with freshly churned butter and meat from the farm. One month later, pass in hand, my mother took a boat, then a train to London then Aberdeen. A few years later, she travelled to South Africa where she met my father and married. My mother's 'Rote Faden' remains strong even today.

Perhaps (retrospectively) it is less than surprising that the theme of *Dark Mermaids* was of home, when home looms so large within mine and my mother's life. The true haven that she strove so hard to find was one of a united spirituality. The home I found was not one of location, but rather of human safety. The place I created for Sophia and Mia was one of hope and endless possibility, perhaps a subconscious perspective on my own hopes and dreams. It is with this collective notion of *Heimatland* in mind that I like to imagine Sophia and Mia getting ready for their day.

Mia will be late, insisting on some hair grip or other, perhaps some impossible shade of nail varnish.

Sophia: frustrated and initially cross, will laugh as finally they make their way down the stairs and out into the morning.

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<sup>80</sup> Rudolf Steiner Web.

<<http://www.rudolfsteinerweb.com/>> [accessed February 2012].

<sup>81</sup> Camphill Around the World.

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-----Box 4Jc112 Folder 12 12. On Several Problems with the Effect of Anabolic Substances Report from the Colloquium: Androgen and Synthetic Steroids in the Process of Athletic Performance Development.

-----Box 4Jc112 Folder 20 28. Endurance Training and Menstruation Hormones (Part I) Report from the Colloquium Results 1981.

-----Box 4Jc334 Folder 2 200. Criminal Court Case, Regional Court Berlin (Landgericht Berlin), Indictment Script vs. E. Müller, Dr. L. Kipke, W. Richter and J. Tannenberger Prosecutors case against above defendants involved in "doping in swimming".

-----Box 4Jc334 Folder 3 201a. Criminal Court Case, Regional Court Berlin (Landgericht Berlin), Verdict for E. Müller, W. Richter and J. Tannenberger Verdicts and sentences for E. Müller, W. Richter and J. Tannenberger in the "doping in swimming" case.

-----Box 4Jc334 Folder 4 201b. Criminal Court Case, Regional Court Berlin (Landgericht Berlin), Verdict for Dr. L. Kipke Guilty verdict and sentence for Dr. L. Kipke in the "doping in swimming" case.

-----Box 4Jc116 Folder 1 112a. Reports from IM file "Rolf," (Dr. Lothar Kipke, Chief Physician of the National Swimming Association of the GDR), Volume II/4 Official Ministry of State Security IM file.

-----Box 4C469 Folder 25 234a. Criminal Court Case, Regional Court Berlin (Landgericht Berlin), Verdict in the criminal case of Müller, Kipke, Richter, Tannenberger [Fragment] Fragment of German court case of Müller, Kipke, Richter, Tannenberger [English and German].

-----Box 4C469 Folder 59 324. Doping: From Research to Deceit. Fragments of translation of Beredonk's book [English] with notes by Dr. Ungerleider and copies of relevant German court cases [Fragments].

-----Box 4C46937 Folder 36 237. R. Gläser and Dr. D. M.W. Binus' Court Case, English translation of R. Gläser and Dr. D. M. W. Binus' court case [English].

-----Box 4Ad128 Legal documentation (photocopies): Coaches and functionaries: Questionings (protocols) by criminal police, prosecutor or judge and verdicts.

-----Box 4C316 Court material:

Unnamed Athlete #13 v. USA Track and Field and United States Olympic Committee:

1. Complaint and demand for jury trial, February 2, 2004.
2. Plaintiff's notice of motion and motion for a temporary restraining order and an order to show cause why a preliminary injunction should not issue, February 4, 2004.
3. [Proposed] temporary restraining order and order to show cause why a preliminary injunction should not issue, 2004.
4. Plaintiff's memorandum in support of motion for a temporary restraining order and an order to show cause why a preliminary injunction should not issue, February 4, 2004.
5. Declaration of Athlete #13 in support of his motion for a temporary restraining order and an order to show cause why a preliminary injunction should not issue, February 4, 2004.
6. Declaration of Julie A. North in support of plaintiff's memorandum in support of motion for a temporary restraining order and order to show cause why a preliminary injunction should not issue, February 4, 2004.
7. "Investigation report regarding the detection of 19-nandrosterone in the urine of numerous ATP players between August 2002 and May 2003," by Robert R. Young.
8. and 9. Declaration of Julie M. Davis in support of plaintiff's motion for temporary restraining order and an order to show cause why an injunction should not issue, February 4, 2004.

10. Declaration of Craig A. Masback, February 13, 2004.
  11. United States Olympic Committee's opposition to plaintiff's motion to file case under seal and to proceed anonymously, February 25, 2004.
  12. Reply memorandum in support of plaintiff's motion to file case under seal, February 26, 2004.
  13. Jerome Young v. USA Track and Field and United States Olympic Committee [decision of judge to life seal], February 27, 2004.
- Articles and correspondence: (Were all these in the Archives?)
14. David Ulich to Janice Silvernail, re: Jerome Young v. USA Track and Field and United States Olympic Committee, March 18, 2004.
  15. "Blowing the Whistle on Drugs," by Mark Starr, *Newsweek*, November 3, 2003.
  16. "East German Steroids' Toll: 'They Killed Heidi'," by Jere Longman, *New York Times*, January 26, 2004.
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  22. "Teaching Athletes to Say No," by Elizabeth Corcoran, *Forbes* [online], February 12, 2004.
  23. "Adu's Brain Trusting Getting His Mind Set," by Jason La Canfora, *Washington Post*, February 12, 2004.

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## Glossary

<i>MfS</i>	<i>Das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit</i>	Ministry for State Security (Stasi)
<i>AS</i>	<i>Anabolikum</i>	Anabolic Steroids
	<i>Das Staatsplanthema 14.25</i>	State Plan 14.25
	<i>Komplex 08</i>	Research Program 08
<i>SMD</i>	<i>Sportmedizinischer Dienst</i>	Sports Medicine Service
<i>UM</i>	<i>Unterstützende Mittel</i>	Supporting Measures (doping)
<i>IM</i>	<i>Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter</i>	Informer
<i>IME</i>	<i>IM für besonderen Einsatz</i>	Informer on Special Mission
	<i>Linie 26: Technische Abhörmaßnahme</i>	Department 26: Technical Interception and Acoustic Monitoring
	<i>Linie XX: Staatsapparat, Kirche, Kultur, Opposition</i>	Department XX: State, Church, Culture, Opposition. Department for Compiling the Smells Register
	<i>ZDKL: Zentrales Doping – Kontroll – Labor (Kreischa)<sup>82</sup></i>	Kreischa Central Laboratory of Doping Testing and Control
	<i>SV Dynamo: Sportvereinigung Dynamo</i>	Sports Body Founded in March 1953 for the security agencies, divided into fifteen regional units
	<i>SC Dynamo: Berlin Hohenschönhausen</i>	Sports Club, Berlin

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<sup>82</sup> Werner W. Franke, Brigitte Berendonk, 'Hormonal doping and androgenization of athletes: a secret program of the German Democratic Republic government', *Clinical Chemistry*, vol. 43, no. 7 1262-1279, July 1997.

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*BStU: Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der  
ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* Federal Commissioner for the  
Records of the State Security  
Security of the former German  
Democratic Republic

*Werner-Seelenbinder-Halle* Indoor arena located in the  
Prenzlauer Berg District of Berlin,  
Germany

*Für Frieden und Sozialismus seid bereit – Immer bereit* For peace and socialism be  
prepared – always prepared:  
Ernst Thälmann Pioneer  
Organisation similar to Guides or  
Scouts

Romeo Project A honey trap mobilized by the Stasi  
using an agent to contact and  
become intimate with the target.  
Once successful, the target would  
be coerced to take on work set out  
by the Stasi

*Der Berliner Bürgerkomitee* Berlin Committee of Citizens  
January 1990 saw the closure of the  
MfS (Stasi). The Central Round  
Table (*Der Zentrale Runde Tisch*)  
decided that a memorial place and  
research centre should be  
established in the former House  
No. 1 in the Stasi-Headquarters

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