

BLANK SHOT

Craig Faustus Buck

His face hit the pavement hard. He tried to recall what just happened, but his thoughts wouldn't sync. His head felt like he'd been whacked by the claw end of a hammer. Blood flowed into his field of vision, expanding on the ground before him. Must be his. Bad sign. He closed his eyes against a stab of afternoon sun reflecting off the crimson pool.

The relentless pounding in his head accelerated like the sound of a train starting up from a dead stop. The insides of his eyelids darkened. Something was blocking the sun. He opened his eyes to see polished black boots standing in his blood. Like Stasi boots. He was too weak to lift his eyes to see who wore them. He waited for his life to flash before him but all he saw were black boots in red blood. The world was running in slo-mo. If this was death, it was taking its fucking time.

Something new moved into his sightline. A small brindle mutt sniffed the boots. The dog seemed familiar. He realized she was his. He couldn't remember her name. He watched her wade through the ooze and start lapping up his lifeblood like she was in doggy heaven.

Next time he opened his eyes he was on his back with rows of lights rushing past. No. The lights were fixed. He was rushing. It dawned on him: he was alive.

He saw "Operationstrakt" painted over the swinging doors as his gurney crashed through them. Women in white caps grabbed his arm and slid a needle into a vein. He tried lifting his head but hit a brick wall of agony.

"Kannst du mich hören?" asked one of the nurses.

He understood she was asking if he could hear her but he didn't answer. He didn't want to move until the pain was under control. Not even his lips. He felt his eyes flag.

He woke up in a hospital room feeling a weight on his brow. Something shading his eyes. He inched his arm toward his head, trailing a tube attached to his hand. He felt a semi-hard surface cradling his head.

Another bed in the room was mostly hidden by a drape. He could see feet. Yellow toenails, cracked and furrowed. His roommate was old.

A man walked in, short and skinny, lab coat hanging open to reveal a navy bow tie and a blood smear on his white shirt.

"Ich bin Doktor Hermann." The doctor's baritone seemed deep for his size. "Wie heißen Sie?"

What should have been a slam-dunk question brought nothing to mind.

"I don't know my name."

"You speak English."

"I understood your German, but English seems easier." His words flowed slower than sap.

"You sound like an American."

The label fit like a pair of old jeans but he noted a sudden mistrust in the doctor's voice. He shrugged.

"At least you can speak," said Dr. Herrman. "That is a good sign. You are a lucky man."

"...don't feel so damn lucky."

"Do you know what year it is?"

He started to shake his head but movement hurt too much so he stopped.

"Nineteen-sixty," said the doctor. "You're in East Berlin."

"How the hell did I get here?"

"Most people from the Western Sectors take the U-Bahn."

"I meant...." He realized he didn't know what he meant.

"Sorry," said the doctor. "Bad joke. Do you know who shot you?"

"I got shot?"

"Yes."

"In the head." He tapped his bandage. None of this made sense to him.

"Do you remember where you live?"

A few bits and pieces came to mind. A narrow concrete-block row house. An iron gate. A black door. But that was it.

"Should be some ID in my wallet," he said.

"You had no wallet when they brought you."

"Where's my dog? She had a tag."

"Nobody mentioned a dog."

Shit. No papers, no memory, no mutt.

His head X-ray revealed that the gunman who tried to put a slug in his skull did a half-assed job, but the X-ray was useless as a prognosticator. Doktor Herrman had no clue when or if his memory would come back or whether he might suffer potentially lethal brain swelling, a threat that only a seizure would reveal.

He was wired to a monitor in case he launched into some kind of crisis but after a while he must have passed a stability benchmark because the nurse allowed a Volkspolizei cop to come in.

Just under six feet, translucent aquamarine eyes, the VoPo removed her grey felt pillbox hat with its metal emblem to reveal red glossy hair cropped short like a Kabarett singer from the Weimar years.

"I'm Leutnant Fleischer," she said. "The doktor told me you are American."

Her German accent was crisp, like her skirted semi-dress uniform.

"That's what he tells me, too."

He was glad she was just a People's Police instead of a Stasi interrogator, but he had no idea how he knew this was fortunate.

"What is your name?"

"I don't know."

Her lips curled into a knowing grin, making her look sexy even in her somber grey-green uniform with jade green necktie.

"Everyone knows his name," she said. "It won't help you to make me spend weeks leafing through fingerprint cards to find it."

"What makes you think I've got a card?"

"It is written all over your torso. This is not the first time you have been shot. You have been stabbed, as well. If you are not in the Volkspolizei files, I am sure the Stasi has you somewhere."

The mention of the Stasi rattled him. He had no reply.

She ran her fingers over her ear like she was brushing back long hair. He wondered if she'd just recently cropped it. Maybe to look more like a man. Despite the Party line, he suspected women still struggled for equality in the People's Police.

"After all," she said, "it was the Stasi who brought you here. Any idea how or where they found you?"

"No. Didn't they say?"

She ignored the question. He assumed the elite Secret Police hadn't deigned to brief a lowly People's Police Lieutenant.

"You have a tattoo that reads 'Slade,'" she said. "Does that sound familiar?"

"No."

"You are sure?"

"Why would I lie?"

"Because you have something to hide."

"If I do, I don't know what it is."

She toyed nervously with the caliper and hammer insignia on her cap.

"Unless you are a homosexual with a tattoo of his lover's name, I am going to assume Slade is your own."

Her mention of a lover sparked a faint memory of the back seat of a car, a woman's tongue in his ear, her hand in his crotch. He couldn't picture her face but he vividly recalled his passion. He wasn't homosexual. On the other hand, it seemed odd that he'd have a tattoo of his own name. He supposed "Slade" could be a nickname. At any rate, it was something to latch onto.

"Where are your papers?"

"Whoever took my wallet has my papers."

He watched her ice-cold eyes study his face for signs of deception.

"What do you remember about the person who shot you?"

"Nothing."

Fleischer squeezed her brow as if tormented, as if the memory problem were hers, not his.

"I know you are lying," she said. "I know who you are."

"Maybe you could let me in on the secret."

"You are a biergarten brawler. A provoker of violence. And this wasn't the first time by the look of your scars. Hardly the marks of a paragon of Socialism."

Slade was surprised that she trotted out the word "paragon." She must have a daily-English-word calendar taped to her fridge.

"What's your point?" he asked.

"This memory loss. I find it a bit too convenient."

"Not for me."

Fleischer looked disappointed, as if she'd been expecting Slade to dissolve into tears and confess to something. Slade couldn't imagine what.

The lieutenant stomped her boot as if trying to get at an itch on the sole of her foot. The gesture prompted another fragment of memory.

"I remember boots," said Slade. "Black, glossy boots."

"And? Was he tall? Short? Fat? Thin?"

"I don't know."

"A man shot you and all you remember is the shine of his boots?"

Slade threw a glare so harsh Fleischer winced.

"I was kind of busy gushing blood."

Slade spent the night trying to sleep through flushing toilets, clattering bedpans and a groaning roommate. By morning he was ready to get the hell out of there. He tried sitting up. It seemed like a good idea while he was lying down but when he swiveled his legs off the bed, his opinion changed. As he waited for the room to stop swinging, a stout nurse walked in.

"Look who's sitting up." She spoke in a thick Bavarian accent that stirred a memory of an old woman. Why did this regional accent ring a bell? Was he remembering his mother?

The nurse steadied him as he cautiously stood. The room slowed to a gentle sway but he was still afraid to lift his foot, afraid he'd have trouble replacing it on the moving floor.

The Bavarian helped him shuffle into the bathroom with his IV stand. At six-one, Slade had to bend down to stare into the mirror. His hazel eyes looked familiar, if slightly dilated. The rest of his face looked like Black Forest roadkill. The rough pavement had not been kind.

Half his head was covered with a thick plaster bandage, augmented with surgical tape. It reeked of sulfa powder. He turned his head but the makeshift helmet hid any hair he might have. He thought he remembered it being black.

He lifted the sleeve of his worn cotton hospital gown to reveal "Slade" tattooed across his bicep in graceful blue cursive.

As the nurse helped him shuffle back to bed, Dr. Hermann walked in. "How's the patient?"

"You tell me."

Hermann pushed his wire-rimmed glasses up his nose, took Slade's chart from a pinewood pocket on the door and leafed through it.

"You should be well enough to go home in no time."

"If I can remember where it is."

An orderly wheeled Slade's wheelchair into a community room. A one-legged man sat deep in concentration, playing chess by himself. A young woman was slumped on a couch in a drug-stupor, her arms spotted like leopard skin from cigarette burns.

On the far side of the room, Slade recognized Dr. Kohl, the psychiatrist who had done his mental evaluation after his interview with Leutnant Fleischer. The trim, silver-haired man wore a thick

wool suit and leaned against the windowsill, tapping his foot as if *The Flight of the Bumblebee* were playing in his head.

"Glad to see you again, Herr Slade," he said.

"That's Slade."

"As I said."

"Not Herr Slade. Just Slade. I don't know if it's a first name, last name, nickname or what."

Dr. Kohl smiled unconvincingly. "I see."

Slade thought psychiatry was a masturbatory joke but Dr. Hermann had insisted he see Dr. Kohl. Apparatchiks work in mysterious ways. Slade guessed he needed a shrink to sign off before Dr. Hermann could release him, so he decided to play it safe and keep a civil tongue.

"My job is to help you get to the root of your problems," said Dr. Kohl.

"I already know the root of my problems," said Slade. "I got shot in the fucking head."

The first words out of his mouth and his inner censor was already failing him. He wondered if impulse control had been a problem before the shooting or whether this was another symptom.

Dr. Kohl spent an hour grilling Slade about the shooting, about his identity and about his past. Slade remembered the dog, the black boots, the car sex and a few things from his childhood, but that was it. As Dr. Kohl took his leave, he told Slade an orderly would collect him shortly to take him back to his room.

While Slade waited, a stranger strolled in. He was tall, maybe six-five, with weathered skin and yellowish-gray coyote eyes. He had a gap between his stained front teeth where a toothpick would look right at home. He wore Levis, a sweat-stained cowboy hat and snakeskin shit-kicker boots. Slade suspected the man spent more time astride a barstool than a saddle and the phrase "dustbowl cowboy" popped into his mind, origin unknown. Another tidbit for Dr. Kohl, should Slade have to see him again.

"I been lookin' for you," said the man. Slade was encouraged that this man seemed to know him, but the cowboy didn't feel familiar. His dress marked him as a visitor from the Western sectors.

"Do I know you?" asked Slade.

"You sayin' you don't recollect?"

Slade pegged the twang to Tennessee. Apparently, he recognized regional accents in both German and English, but English felt like his native tongue. His thoughts were all in English and, as far as he could tell, so were his dreams.

"I don't remember much of anything," he said.

The cowboy absorbed this for a moment. "How 'bout a cup of java?"

Slade envisioned the orderly finding him gone. "Why not?" he said.

"Name's Rommy."

The elevator doors slid open and Rommy pushed the wheelchair straight in, leaving Slade facing the back. Cargo blankets covered the walls. It felt like a padded cell.

"Looks like they was expecting us," said Rommy. Slade heard the doors close to confine them and it struck him that the cowboy could very well be the man who shot him.

The cafeteria was fluorescent, cold and depressing. Soviet-style minimalism at its worst. Dented metal trays, scarred wooden tables, hard chairs and the smell of canned sauerkraut. Rommy parked Slade at a table as far as possible from the few other diners.

"Coffee comin' up, blond with sand," said Rommy, mimicking words Slade remembered himself saying. Rommy smirked as he swaggered off, leaving Slade to wonder how the cowboy knew how he ordered his coffee. What else did this stranger know about him?

When Rommy returned with two mugs, Slade asked, "How do you know me?"

"You and me used to be tight."

Slade couldn't imagine being friends with this man. There was nothing about him that Slade liked.

"Then who am I?" asked Slade.

Rommy grinned, revealing a gold-capped canine. "Not that tight. You call yourself Slade, what sounds about as real as a hooker's sob story, if you catch my grift, but I never heard no last name."

"Do you know where I live?"

"That, amigo, I do not the fuck know. We hung at the same saloon is all. Das Kocktail off Kurfuerstendamm."

Rommy licked a drip from the side of his mug.

"How did you find me?"

"A little birdie."

The next day was a whirlwind of tests. Doktor Hermann showed Slade his X-ray, explaining how the bullet had grazed above his right ear and drilled a trough through his skull just deep enough to skim the surface of his brain, searing a four-centimeter burn across his frontal lobe.

By the end of the day Slade was exhausted from all the **prodding**. There was nothing but propaganda on the radio so he amused himself by **poking** some Marxist excuse for red Jello to watch it jiggle.

Rommy walked in. "Remember me?"

"New memories aren't a problem," said Slade.

Rommy picked up a limp Spreewald pickle chip from Slade's dirty lunch tray. "You gonna eat that?" He stuck it in his mouth before Slade could answer. Slade waved his belated permission.

"I asked around Das Kocktail," said Rommy. "Nobody knows nothin'. You're a fuckin' mystery man."

"Somebody must know something."

Rommy flopped into the visitor's chair. "I'm takin' the Fifth 'til you're out of this slaughterhouse. You got VoPos nosin' around here like roaches in a sewer and with you bein' all doped up, who knows what you might say? It's a wonder the Stasi ain't come callin'."

"The Stasi brought me here."

"What?"

"That's what the doctors told me."

"I *wondered* how you ended up on the wrong side of the tracks."

Rommy foraged for another pickle and slipped it in his mouth.

"Fucking Stasi," Rommy said, still chewing. "That's all I need."

"Did I walk to Das Kocktail?" asked Slade. "Maybe I live nearby."

"You had a Volkswagen and a midget dog. That's all I know. You and me, we never got too personal. We was more like... associates."

He adjusted his hat. Slade saw it as a tell, like in poker, only he didn't know what it signified.

"So if we weren't that tight, why are you here?"

"I'm the only friend you got, seems to me. I may be rough-grained, but I ain't heartless."

"And I may have amnesia but I'm not stupid," said Slade. "You came here looking for me."

Slade tapped his protective helmet with his index finger. "You want something from me."

"Just tryin' to help a pal saddle up."

"Bullshit."

Rommy flashed another glint of gold tooth. "Tell you one thing, my friend. You didn't used to be such a doubtin' fuckin' Thomas."

Slade found physical therapy more punishing than healing.

"You lack stamina," said Dr. Hermann. "Your physical therapist cannot find any problems that she can trace to your injuries, so I am guessing it is the cigarettes."

"I smoke?"

"If you don't remember, this would be a good time to stop."

"What about releasing my photo to the papers?" asked Slade. "Someone is bound to recognize me."

Slade tapped his helmet. This was getting to be a nervous habit, like tonguing a loose tooth.

"Leutnant Fleischer does not want the gunman to know you are alive. He might try to correct his bad aim before she catches him."

Slade grunted, seeing the obvious logic but lamenting the result.

"Dr. Kohl thinks you are ready to go home," continued Dr. Hermann.

"What do you think?"

"Physically you're progressing well, assuming you don't get infected. We have no medical reason to keep you here more than another day or two. But I am concerned that you still suffer amnesia with no place to go and no money that we know of. If you stay here, the expense will be on your head."

"What's left of it," said Slade.

Dr. Hermann smiled. "Perhaps the Volkspolizist can arrange a place for you to go."

The thought of being locked in an East German jail or, even worse, a workhouse with the "asocials," gave Slade the shivers.

"I have a friend in the West," he said. "Maybe he'll put me up."

"You will need permission from the lieutenant to leave East Berlin. You are the only one who can identify your attempted murderer."

"But I can't."

"That may just be a matter of time."

"You will not leave," said Leutnant Fleischer. "Your case is not closed."

"Everyone knows Krushchev won't seal off East Berlin," said Slade. "At least not while Eisenhower's still President. If you need me, I'll jump on the U-Bahn and be here in ten minutes, not counting the hour it takes your border guards to check papers."

"Danke, Herr Slade. You are too considerate." Her sarcasm was as close as she'd come to a joke since he'd met her. "And if you do not come? I cannot very well cross the border and drag you back."

"Do you really think you have more interest than I do in finding out who I am and who shot me?"

She considered. "I will check with the Stasi."

This jolted Slade's nerves. He wished he knew why.

"Leutnant Fleischer approved your release to the care of your friend," Dr. Hermann said the following morning. "She gave no explanation. I made it no secret that we were short on beds but somehow I do not think that was a deciding factor."

The four blocks from the hospital to the U-Bahn station seemed endless. Slade felt dizzy on the station stairs and Rommy had to hold him up as they descended to the bleak platform. But once they were on the train, Slade felt better. The car was almost full but silent as they rumbled under the city toward the border.

When the loudspeaker announced they were now entering the American Sector, a wave of relief washed through the passengers. The tension yielded to animated talk and laughter.

The train stopped for a border check. An American soldier came through to spot check papers. The G.I. frowned at the DDR stamp on Slade's hospital discharge and asked him to name last year's American League champions. Slade couldn't remember his own name, but he knew the White Sox won

the pennant for the first time since the Black Sox scandal in 1919. And he knew they went on to lose to the Dodgers in the first World Series ever played on the West Coast. He marveled at the detail he recalled and wondered if this was a sign of improvement.

The soldier welcomed him to West Berlin.

The faded couch had more stains than a butcher's smock and smelled even worse.

"She ain't much, but she's all I got," said Rommy.

The ragged brown davenport was a good ten inches shorter than Slade but he said it was fine.

Rommy grabbed two beers from a dented Frigidaire and tossed a can to Slade.

"Your tab is now open," he said. "When you're making some scratch you'll pay it all back, including that there Schlitz." He opened his can, then tossed the churchkey to Slade.

Slade sat on the couch and felt it sag along with his spirits. How did he wind up in the clutches of a man who lived in the Shangri-la of beer and chose to drink Schlitz from the PX?

The walls of the small, one-bedroom apartment were darkened by years of smoke and poor ventilation, making the place feel doubly claustrophobic. The only window was blacked out and barred like a prison cell. The bolt on the front door was keyed both outside and in. If there were a fire, Slade would be fried.

But at least he had a place to live.

"What else can you tell me?" he asked.

Rommy sat down on an old wooden chair that creaked in protest.

"Das Kocktail is what you might call my office," said Rommy. "You and me, we'd meet at DK, have some beers. Sometimes I'd need a runner, you'd need some cash, we'd work somethin' out."

"What kind of runner?"

"Morphine, sometimes a little Moroccan kif."

"I'm a dealer?"

"You're a fucking patriot. I know an East German Army Major, happens to be addicted to morphine. This Ossie sends me a drop box location; you deliver the dope and bring back classified documents; I sell 'em to the CIA for a pretty pfennig and we've both served our country."

Something about trading drugs to a Communist for secrets didn't seem right to Slade, yet it felt somehow familiar.

"I reckon whoever tried to kill you was trying to move in on my action," said Rommy. "It's bad for business to let that kinda shit slide. That's why I sprang you out of that pinko klinik in the Soviet Sector. Somewhere in that head of yours, you know who shot you. And when you remember that asshole's name, I guaranfucking I'll make him pay for what he done to you."

"Hey, Rommy." The woman's voice startled Slade. He turned to see her in the doorway to the hall, banding her long, honey hair into a ponytail. Standing about five-three, she wore only a white slip, short enough to give him an eyeful of the garter clips that gripped her nylons near the tops of her thighs, but she didn't seem self-conscious.

"Is this our new roommate?" she asked.

"Fuckin' A," said Rommy.

She could stand to lose fifteen pounds but Slade still found her riveting. Was it her sexy lingerie? Or was she triggering a memory?

"Have we met?" he asked.

She broke into a smoky laugh. "Just barely, darlin'. I've seen you at DK a few times, but we've never been properly introduced." She spoke with a gentle drawl.

"Charlene, this here's Slade," said Rommy.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," said Charlene.

Rommy's coyote eyes turned on Slade. "She ticklin' your memory? You look like you seen a ghost."

Slade shook his head.

"I'll go find you a towel," said Charlene. "And don't you be leaving the toilet seat standing at attention."

She turned and walked down the hall. Slade couldn't keep his eyes off those thighs.

"You follow through on that sweet ass," said Rommy, "and I'll put another hole in your head."

Slade wondered if he had put the first one there.

Slade slept like a drunken dog, but in the morning his back felt like he'd been hauling bricks all night. Charlene insisted they go to Cafe Kranzler on the Ku-damm for coffee and strudel with lots of whipped cream.

When they got back to the apartment, Rommy retrieved a battered leather briefcase and headed back out. Slade saw a bulge beneath his jacket. Armed and concealing, he thought. Yet again, Slade wondered if Rommy had shot him, but the notion seemed absurd. If Rommy had, or planned to shoot him again, why invite the attention of the VoPos by taking Slade into his home?

Charlene went to change out of the sundress she'd worn to breakfast. When she came back she was wearing a pair of Rommy's boxer shorts and one of his flannel shirts. The top three of six buttons were undone.

"He's off on his rounds," she said. "He'll be gone most of the day." She looked at a dirty ashtray on the wooden crate they used as a coffee table and added, "That man is such a pig." She leaned over to retrieve the ashtray and her shirt drooped open. Slade stared at her breasts.

"Whoops," she said without embarrassment. Slade felt a twinge in his crotch even as he thought about the gun in Rommy's belt. Charlene disappeared into the kitchen to dump the ashtray.

When she returned, she'd buttoned a fourth button and put on a short black skirt making her somewhat less likely to breach public decency laws.

"Let's get out of this dump," she said.

Charlene kick-started her German Army-surplus reconnaissance motorcycle. It was loud. She told Slade her father wired her the money for the DKW bike on her twenty-fifth birthday. Slade hopped on behind her and they rode to the Wannsee Lakes to take a walk.

The sky was clear, the water unruffled. They strolled across the bridge between the two lakes and when a chill breeze arose she took his arm and huddled close. He liked the feel of her.

She led him along a path by the Kleiner Wannsee, through the yews, to some steps down to a small neglected incline bordered on three sides by a short wrought-iron fence. He kneeled with her before two headstones.

"Ever hear of Heinrich von Kleist?" she asked.

He shook his head as he read the name on the larger stone.

"Nineteenth century poet," she said. "His lover was dying so he brought her here and shot her, then shot himself so they could spend eternity together by this lake. Do you think that's romantic?"

"I'm not a big fan of people getting shot."

She looked at him for a moment, trying to parse his meaning, then picked a small flower and placed it before the headstone of the poet's lover.

"I think it's romantic," she said.

She led him back to the path and they walked along the lake. Her silence felt ominous, like a storm cloud about to burst. When she finally spoke it was almost in a whisper.

"I lied to you," she said. "We have met."

"We have?"

She stopped and turned to face him. He heard the S-Bahn train pass not far away.

"We've more than met."

Her green eyes seemed to peer right into his broken skull, as if searching for his memories of her.

"Tell me," he said.

"One night the Landespolizei came through DK and took Rommy in for questioning on some trumped-up drug charge. We started talking and you introduced me to a good many shots of rye and we wound up in your car, scorching the backseat."

"I think I have a vague memory," he said.

"That's because we did it more than once. Your little dog used to go nuts. I couldn't take you back to Rommy's and you said your landlord didn't allow guests, so your car became our secret love nest. It was getting a lot deeper than just sex. We were falling hard."

"Sounds like something I wish I remembered better."

"Maybe I can help you." She clasped her hands behind his neck. A nanny pushing a pram down the path tsk-tsked as Charlene stood on tiptoe and kissed him. He felt transfixed. Was this déjà vu? Or was it just lust? Her soft tongue parted his lips, leaving no doubt it was both.

Rommy was waiting when they got back. "Where the fuck you been?"

"I took Slade to von Kleist's grave," said Charlene. "Do you expect us to stay cooped up in this luxury palace all day?"

"I expect you to do what I fuckin' tell you to do."

"Who the hell do you think you are, giving orders like the high and mighty King of Sheeba? If I want to take him to the lake, I'll take him to the damn lake!"

"The man has an open hole in his skull, Charlene. What the hell you doin' putting him on the back of a bike with a fuckin' diaper for a hat?"

"He's a grown man, Rommy! He can make his own decisions!"

"It's okay, Charlene," said Slade trying to smother her fuse.

"No it's not!" she said. "He thinks I'm just some goddamned piece of ass!"

"You're whatever I fuckin' tell you to be," said Rommy.

She slapped him. A red handprint bloomed on his cheek. His expression hardened.

"I oughta rip your goddamned hand off."

"Hey," said Slade. "Let's all just calm..."

"Shut up," said Rommy.

"Or what, big man," said Charlene. "You going to pull out your shiny steel dick and shoot him all over again?"

Rommy backhanded her fast and hard, sending her tumbling across the coffee table. Slade jumped up to intervene but Rommy raised a semi-automatic pistol.

"Don't you fuckin' move," he said.

Slade froze. He recognized the standard-issue Soviet Makarov and wondered if that meant he'd been in the Army.

Charlene was drooling blood. "I swear to God I'll cut your dick off in your sleep."

"Don't you make me hit you again, you won't be gettin' up," said Rommy.

"Is it true?" said Slade. "Did you shoot me?"

Rommy smirked. "If I wanted you dead that's what you'd be. Don't you go believing nothin' that lying bitch has to say."

"You wouldn't know the truth if it kicked you in the balls," she said, starting to push herself up. Rommy shoved her back down with a snakeskin boot.

"Why would she lie about that?" said Slade.

"To stir the fuckin' pot like she always does. I'd be a rich man, I had a nickel bag for every damn bar fight she's lit off. She just loves to watch me bleed."

That night Slade tossed for hours, kept awake by the din of his own thoughts. He wondered if there were really women out there who'd pit men against each other for the sport of it. He wondered if it was a common practice. He supposed he once knew more about women, but now he was at a loss, unable to summon memories of the ones he'd known.

He shot awake at the clack of the front door bolt being thrown. He was surprised that he'd fallen asleep.

Rommy flung open the door to flood the room with the light of the morning gloom. "No more fuckin' daytrips, Charlene!"

Briefcase in hand, Rommy stepped outside, kicking the door shut behind him. A moment later, Charlene came into the room, tying her robe.

"Asshole," she said, sitting on the crate, her pink robe draped over her knees just inches from Slade's face. She ran her fingertips gently down his cheek. "How are you feeling this morning, Sugar?"

Her brief touch made him hunger for more.

"Do you know what really happened to me?" he asked.

"Some of it," she said. "The night before you got shot, you and me were out making honey in your car. Alex came out to dump some trash, heard your dog barking, caught us at it."

"Alex?"

"Bartender at DK. You gave him fifty Deutschmarks to keep his mouth shut. But I'm sure he told Rommy anyways because, when Rommy came home the next day, he had blood all over his shirt."

Slade flashed on his own blood pooling. "Does he have some black boots?"

"He's got a lot of boots."

She led him into the bedroom. It stank of cigarettes and spilt whisky. The bed was unmade, the sheets stained by years of night sweats and drunken sex. Two small closets faced each other across the room. His and hers. Hers was closed; his open, the floor a cramped jumble of dirty clothes and three pair of boots, none of them black.

"Maybe they got stained by your blood," she said. "He would have tossed them; he's not stupid."

Slade stared at the boots. "Why would Rommy risk taking me in if he was worried enough to destroy evidence? And why would he leave me alone with you if he was jealous enough to shoot me?"

Slade's mind felt like a hamster on a wheel.

"You need to give your brain a rest," she said.

He turned to find her lying on the bed, robe splayed wide like angel wings, transforming the sullied sheets into a field of dreams. A recollection almost arrived but never quite made it.

"Come to me, Sugar," she said. She grabbed his belt and pulled him closer. "Make up for lost time." She unzipped his pants and threaded her fingers through his fly. He was hers.

They lay slick and spent in the dark, fetid room. He felt at peace for the first time since he woke up in the hospital. Charlene blew a perfect smoke ring then gave him a deep kiss that tasted of Pall Mall. He didn't mind.

He wanted to clean the sheets before Rommy returned but she assured him Rommy would never notice as long as they were dry. She used her hair dryer to speed up the process.

Later, they walked to Cafe Einstein.

"Coffee," he ordered. "Blond with sand." The waitress was mystified.

"Cream and sugar, Fräulein," said Charlene.

They sat side-by-side watching an ant drag a crystal of sugar across the counter.

"We talked a lot about running away," she said. "Get out of Berlin. Just you and me."

"We could still do it," he said.

"He'd find us. That night we got caught I told him I was going to leave him. I'm sure that's why he shot you. That's why he'll do it again." She leaned over and whispered in his ear, the warmth of her breath spreading through him. "He keeps his spare gun in his nightstand."

Slade was watching Charlene slice chicken for schnitzel when Rommy came home.

"I'm starvin'," he said.

Charlene stabbed a piece of raw chicken and held it out to him.

He gave her the finger. "Gimme a goddamned beer."

Charlene pulled two beers from the fridge and smacked them onto the dining nook table for Rommy and Slade.

"Another on your tab," said Rommy, puncturing his with a church key. Beer sprayed on his shirt. He paid no attention. "About time you earned your keep. Think you can drive?"

"He's not ready for runs," said Charlene, leaning against the counter.

"The man can speak for his own self."

"I can drive," said Slade.

"See?" said Rommy.

"Bullshit," she said. "He's just acting big, strutting around defending his *manliness* like you all do, leaving what little common sense you might have in your tracks."

"Who went and appointed you Dear Abby?" said Rommy.

"I'm entitled to my opinion."

"The hell you are. The man's gotta earn his keep, so shut your fuckin' yap or I'll shut it for you."

"Leave her alone," said Slade.

Rommy turned in mock astonishment. "Since when is my bitch any of your goddamned business?"

"I don't like to see girls pushed around."

Rommy rose so fast his chair flew over.

"Who gives a shit what you like, you fuckin' freak. I'll treat you any way I goddamned want to!"

To emphasize his point, he sucker-punched Charlene. Blood sprayed from her nose tracing her path across the room before she smashed into the wall.

Rommy turned back at the loud click of his spare gun being cocked. Slade aimed at Rommy's glittering canine. Everyone froze.

"You touch her again I'll kill you," said Slade. Then, to Charlene, "You okay?"

"Almost." She spat out a tooth and dragged herself up to lean against a cabinet.

"I don't know what the hell she told you," said Rommy, "but she's playing you."

Slade eyed the revolver. "This the thirty-eight you shot me with?"

"I wasn't even here the day you was shot. I was in Munich scorin' morphine at the Army..."

He lurched forward. Slade fired, realizing too late that Rommy was falling not lunging. The slug missed but Rommy still dropped like deadweight. The chef's knife in his back must have pierced his heart. Charlene's hand glistened with Rommy's blood as she stared wide-eyed at her handiwork.

Slade stood immobile, the sound of his shot having blasted shards of memory through his mind like multicolored shrapnel. Yellow flash. Powder blue sky. Crimson pool. Black boots. Brindle dog.

Charlene was trembling so hard she couldn't stand. She crumpled to the floor, wrapped her arms around her shoulders and proceeded to rock back and forth.

"What do we do?" she asked.

Slade knelt to check Rommy's pulse but they both knew he was dead.

"Call the VoPos," he said.

"Are you crazy?"

"If we don't, there's no chance they'll believe us. Either way, they'll be here soon. Someone must have heard that shot."

"What are we going to say?"

"It was self-defense. He beat you. I grabbed the gun to make him stop. When I missed, you stabbed him. And that's all we remember. It happened so fast."

"You make it sound so easy. But you're not the one who killed him, are you."

He eyed the revolver.

"Go get a towel," he said.

She left the room.

Charlene returned with a towel.

"Put it over his head," said Slade. "So we don't have to look at him."

She didn't seem happy about approaching the body but she did as he asked. Slade headed down the hall toward the bedroom. He was in Charlene's closet when she came in. He held up a pair of black patent leather boots.

"I remember my little dog standing next to these boots. They were no bigger than she was. Too small for Rommy. But not for you."

Charlene blanched and ran out. He followed her into the kitchen. She raised the revolver.

"I really did love you," she said.

"But you shot me anyway."

"I was afraid I'd go down as an accessory to Rommy."

"What do you mean?"

"That night behind DK, while you were paying Alex off, I had to fix my smeared lipstick before going back inside. I dropped the tube on the floor of your car. While I was fishing around for it, I found your Polizei ID pin under the seat."

It took him a moment to fathom her meaning. The answer seemed absurd.

"I'm a cop?"

"Slade," her eyes locked on his, "you're Stasi."

His stomach pitched at the thought of belonging to the Secret Police.

"That's why they took you to East Berlin for treatment," she said. "Your comrades found you first."

"If I'm Stasi, they'd have my fingerprints on file."

"I'm sure they do. But they'd never blow your cover to a lowly VoPo."

"But I'm an American."

"So were the Rosenbergs."

It felt wrong. If he was a Stasi agent, he'd know it, wouldn't he? On the other hand, if the Stasi was trying to identify an East German Army officer who was trading state secrets for drugs, it would make sense to start with the traitor's drug connection, which would explain Slade's relationship with a scumbag like Rommy.

"I was in love with you," said Charlene, "while you were lying to my face." Twin tears striped her cheeks.

She cocked the revolver. The sound triggered his memory of being shot. And of loving the woman who shot him.

"I remember loving you," he said.

"You remember because we had something rare. We still do. I know you felt it this morning when we made love."

He nodded. She lowered the gun.

"I felt it, too," she said, reaching out to touch his cheek. "We can start over. Run away to Paris, the States, anywhere. We could be so good together."

He kissed her, tasting salty tears on her lips. "I do still love you," he said, "but I'll never trust you."

"Then it's goodbye." She raised the gun and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

He opened his hand and, one by one, let the bullets fall to the floor.

"Aufmachen! Polizei!" The police pounded on the door.

Her eyes begged for mercy.

He said, "I'd be a fool to give you another shot."

END