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How to Die

Thriller

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ABOUT THINGS

Forget the things born of desire

You'll never hold them close again

They spell it out each day and night

Thus they deal with souls like mine

See where you are, don't look for land

upon this sea you're bouncing on

light as cork but made of stone

They spell it out with fists to me

First comes the dying, then comes death

Yet sometimes it's the other way

So they believe and do not see

that I have long dwelt in this house

built from dreams of those who passed

With their final heartbeat door to door

A post office not far from here

for letters that are never written.

STOP MAKING SENSE

She'd always wanted to live forever, but never be immortal. Until that night, when she thought she was the woman around whom the earth revolved. Who danced across boiling seas and turned them to ice. Who could command any wind to spiral into a hurricane, or die away. All this seemed like nothing to her. Child's play for the queen of the world's breath.

But now there was fear.

They descended into thick cloud and it went dark, mid-sunrise. Then she saw Berlin. They had taken off around seven from Munich-Riem, where the armoured limousines had dropped them off right beside the *Mystère Falcon*. According to the registration it was owned by an international logistics firm – a front company. Police vehicles with flashing blue lights had escorted the plane on both sides until it was airborne, to safeguard against a possible terrorist attack by the Red Army Faction. Mere routine for the other three passengers, not worth a glance.

Nina was sitting in one of the thick leather seats at the back. At the front, the president of West Germany's foreign intelligence agency, the BND, was busy studying

files. Next to him sat Julius Boehnke, head of reconnaissance at the BND, engrossed in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

They were dropping fast. An amorphous lump of buildings appeared through the fog. Black lakes, parks resembling dung-coloured smears. Nina was sure she was already picking up the dank reek of brown coal that the city emitted. Nothing was more dreary than Berlin in November. And yet she had felt free here. Her dreams as untameable as the sea.

She'd assumed they would be landing at Berlin Tempelhof. But instead of veering off to the west they remained on course, no more than two hundred metres above ground now. There was the wall, like an open cut in the maw of a boxer who's hit the deck countless times but keeps on going. Their pilot provided them with a perfect view of the death strip. Border guards yanked up their binoculars, dogs strained at their leads. They passed over the River Spree, the Oberbaum bridge, the Landwehr canal. Then Kreuzberg district, her old stomping ground, followed by a panoramic view across the centre of East Berlin, with Gendarmenmarkt square and Linden boulevard. Prussia was a gaping grey.

Boehnke briefly turned his head and looked back at Nina. She saw the shadows in his face, eyes like searchlights after a sleepless night. Today was *the* day.

Boehnke hadn't believed it would arrive.

Nina had.

"A bit of sightseeing," said Simone Weller, who was sitting to her left. "The president loves the GDR's anti-fascist firewall, it motivates him," she added with a smirk, though more quietly. Her hair was the colour of teakwood after many summers in the sun. She had no make-up on apart from a touch of beeswax on her lips and she was thinner than a woman of her years should be. But she was one those people who

don't age because they were already fifty when they were thirty.

This was only the second time Weller had addressed her. The first had been an ugly affair. She was head of the SI department, which was responsible for security at the BND. Nina didn't know her real name, only this pseudonym. Just as for Weller she was *Elsa Opel*. They were all given a new identity on entering the service. Nobody knew the other's real name. Apart from the president and Boehnke of course. When she joined five and a half years ago, Nina's pseudonym had evidently been chosen by a film buff. But she'd liked Elsa Opel. The Elsa of *Marathon Man* was the kind of person Nina wanted to be at the time – inscrutable and dangerous. She had a complete set of documents with this alias, from driving licence through to passport. Elsa Opel was slightly younger, born end of May, not in February.

Only in her mind was she still Nina Winter.

The Brandenburg Gate slipped away below them. Junk shops and an empty viewing platform to the west of the wall; in the east the Pariser Platz, now just a parade ground. The Falcon tilted sharply over its left wing and headed west.

"We're landing in Gatow, the British airport. As if the KGB and Stasi didn't already know we're here," commented Weller.

Nina just nodded. The woman was a bitch. Nina had learnt that the hard way.

Weller lowered her voice again. "The gender ratio in this jet has never been as balanced as today. That's scandalous of course. After all, this is 1983. Have you ever wondered how many women there are in the service who don't type, translate or serve canapés? You can count them on one hand. And here you are, so young, so fast. Well, we both know what it costs."

"You don't have to serve canapés?" Nina asked.

Weller laughed quietly. "I like you."

"I'm usually funnier."

"It's understandable that you're nervous, Frau Opel. I'm picturing what it will be like for you when Kukura crosses the line today. I'm sure you're incredibly proud."

"Later perhaps. If everything goes smoothly."

"You don't trust the Russians?"

"I'm guessing you've never been there."

Weller lit up a cigarette. "Our first encounter was an unpleasant affair. Of course you understand, it's purely professional." She smoked like someone who hates it.

They were greeted by the stink of the sewage farms. Berlin's bone-chilling cold hit them full force. By the time Nina was sitting in the first of the three armoured limousines she already felt frozen to the core. Boehnke and the BND president got into the second car, the bodyguards of the personal security detachment brought up the rear. They drove through Spandau borough, then along the almost deserted Kaiserdamm boulevard. Nina felt a headache coming on; she wasn't used to the light refraction of the thick security glass. Next to her, Simone Weller pretended to be dozing. But her right index finger twitched nervously, tapping morse code on the upholstered seat.

K. U. K. U. R. A.

The hotel was on Budapester Strasse, near Tiergarten park. Nina's room was large enough to house her entire Munich apartment. The others had meetings at the Ministry of the Interior and with the Berlin police, Nina wouldn't be needed until the evening. And only for one single thing. She pulled on her sports gear, headed out to the park and ran the large loop twice without exerting herself. Behind the Soviet memorial a long-distance runner latched onto her, then dropped out, panting. She sprinted the last five hundred and showered at the hotel.

Nina took the underground towards Schlesisches Tor. The carriage was full of last night's rejects. Crashed out punks, women with sparkling lashes and heavy make-up. In their faces the emptiness of the morning after. Another night of wanting everything and getting nothing.

On Wiener Strasse, the Gärtnerei was open already, or still. It used to be her favourite watering hole after training in Görlitzer Park. Over at the Hard Rock tavern a handful of squatters were hanging out. They were high, but not because it was Sunday. They were always high. The blue-pink-orange-haired waitress sidled over to Nina's table; probably a perpetual student of sociology or the like, dreaming of a dissertation on *Cindy Lauper and the American trauma*. Nina ordered the house breakfast. Coffee, bread roll and a rock-hard boiled egg.

She caught sight of herself in the clouded wall mirror. Her brown curls had been flattened by the woolly cap, her face wore that wretched seriousness she couldn't get rid of. Her cheeks were too high, her mouth too small. She liked her eyes, but she wasn't pretty. Interesting perhaps. She occasionally persuaded herself of that. At one of the other tables, heroic tales were being proclaimed: "...the black bloc against an army of cops, ...got hold of some good dope at the Cheetah before, ...lifted every fucking cobble along Ku'damm."

She wondered why she'd come here. To say goodbye? To which life? This one here had ended long ago. Nor did she have a future up her sleeve.

"Want another coffee?"

Nina started so violently she knocked over the salt seller.

"No, bill please." Some doors you walked through for the last time without knowing it. But with this one she was certain.

Blue-lipped dealers hung around outside. Crows peered down from the roofs, the

sky was a spewed-out grey. Nina buried herself in her duffle coat and imagined what it would be like to tear Berlin down and re-erect it on the Côte d'Azure. At Kottbusser Tor she hailed a taxi and drove through this city that always brought the word *never* to her mind. Never enough. Never generous. Never effortless. Never what it once was.

The driver took the Kurfürstendamm route. Not a single cobble stone was left on the pavements. Shop owners stood about outside, lamenting the gaping window caverns. Another feast day for the front-line city's glaziers guild. On Clay Allee, the US Headquarters Command loomed large. Just around the corner was the old Wehrmacht Villa, now home to the *B.O.B.*, the CIA's *Berlin Operations Base*. Nina should have been feeling sick with tiredness after the night she'd had, but it was as though she was on coke. Without thinking, she had positioned herself in a spot on the backseat that gave her a clear line of vision into the cracked rearview mirror.

They were travelling along Argentinische Allee when she noticed the BMW.

It maintained a hundred-metre distance, but in the sparse Sunday morning traffic it was as inconspicuous as a nun on a nudist beach.

"Take the next left into Onkel-Tom Strasse," Nina instructed.

"And then?"

"Along Sven Hedin Strasse to Mexikoplatz."

"Well, it's your bucks."

The BMW didn't follow them.

Stasi reconnaissance? Never. The Stasi's Directorate for Reconnaissance didn't use BMWs, nor did the KGB.

On Potsdamer Chaussee it reappeared.

CIA? Unlikely. They had so many people in Berlin, they would have used more than one car.

BND intelligence scouts.

The sleek car must belong to one of the observation units under Simone Weller's control.

And without her orders, no surveillance.

Did they know about Zarizyno?

Impossible. I'd be long gone if they did.

The Talking Heads were on the radio, *Stop Making Sense*.

"Feel free to turn it up," she said to the driver.

When they reached the shores of Grosser Wannsee, the BMW turned off towards the underground station and disappeared. There was no other traffic on the avenue, which in summer was often gridlocked with tourist buses. They passed a stretch of bleak woodland. Half-heartedly hidden police vehicles lurked in the turn-off to Nikolskoe and the driveway to Glienicke hunting lodge. A little further along, the cab driver pulled over at the rotunda.

"Final stop. Shall I wait?"

"I might be a while."

"Nothing else happening anyway."

As she got out, she searched the avenue for signs of the BMW. Nothing. She turned round and stood in front of the world's most securely guarded bridge.

You are leaving the American Sector.

A patrol hut stood to one side. Two young, fresh-faced West Berlin border policemen eyed Nina. The bridge barrier was down, beyond it a garish GDR emblem hung prominently from the centre brace between the bridge's rear steel pylons. Below it, an iron fence ran across the entire roadway. The far end of the bridge was hidden from view due to the slight arch, but the flat roofs of border buildings could be made

out to the left and right. It was so quiet that Nina could hear the red flag on Potsdam Arcade flapping from across the river. She descended the steps to the lakeside path and sat down on a lonely bench. She was freezing. The wind whirled ice crystals into her face and snatched her breath away before it could form a cloud. It smelt of snow, but none was falling yet. Men with binoculars stood on the opposite bank. They weren't border guards. Probably Stasi or KGB. She used to come here regularly during her Berlin years – when she went for a walk with her mother or when she wanted to get away from the concrete jungle. She noticed for the first time that the eastern and western sections of the bridge were painted differently. Dark green on this side, lime green on the other. Ice floes bobbed about on the lake. So early in the year. They were of the same non-colour as the border patrol boats and the sky. Swans floated among them, heads tucked into their feathers, seemingly lifeless.

Agent exchanges usually took place on the transit motorway, in the no-man's-land between Hesse and Thuringia. But the CIA had pushed for Glienicke Bridge because the area was easy to secure and the Allies could freely scout out the eastern approach via their Potsdam military liaison missions. Nina heard barking, twigs breaking. Men with dogs emerged from the woodland.

Without their radios they could have passed for civilians. They patrolled the shore, moving away.

Today would be the second time this bridge was the stage for an agent spectacle. U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers, who was shot down over Russia, and Rudolf Ivanovich Abel were the first, on 10 February 1962, at 08.50 a.m.. Nina had read everything the BND had on it. Even the weather conditions had been noted in the file: two degrees, thick cloud cover, drizzle and sleet.

It was a very unequal trade. *One of them was a master spy, the other just a skilled*

worker, Rudolf Abel's defence lawyer Donovan later said. In around ten hours, another two men would pass each other on the bridge. And once again they had absolutely nothing in common, except that they were both Russian.

One a hero, the other a beast.

Nina studied the border fortifications on the headland across the river. A close-meshed electric fence rose up behind the embankment, three metres or more. Beyond it lay the mined death strip, then the hinterland wall. She could see the Stasi training centre. When Abel was exchanged for Powers, the KGB had used the villa as a look-out post. No doubt snipers would be positioned there this evening.

A man sat down beside her. His chubby cheeks below the Russian fur cap were snow-white and smooth. His pale blue eyes bordered on grey, his cheerful bulbous nose was runny. With a stick-on beard and a bit of rouge and he'd have made the perfect department store Santa.

"Are you from Berlin?" he asked. His German was excellent, apart from the American accent.

"No, I'm visiting."

Nina wished Santa had chosen a different bench. At least he'd left some space between them.

"It's the arse-end of the world, as they say," he commented. "But it gets pretty busy early in the morning and in the evening, when the cars of our military liaison missions commute between Berlin and the sector. Uncle Joe had a weak moment at the Potsdam Conference and signed an agreement that they could pass unchecked."

So that's your BMW, thought Nina.

"Are you sure you're just visiting?" he asked.

"Are you sure you're not sitting on the wrong bench?"

Santa smiled. "Elsa Opel has a certain ring to it. *Marathon Man*, I assume. You must have struck home like a cruise missile when you arrived at the BND five years ago. Otherwise you wouldn't have become Rem Kukura's contact person in such a short time. Kukura is a Pink Star, the best agent the BND ever had. What's it like to see him being exchanged for Yegor Belyakov, a man lined up for the lethal injection in California? Does it feel like triumph or failure?"

"This conversation is over," Nina replied and stood up.

"What conversation?" he barked at her. "You'd do well to be a little more grateful. After all, I'm the one who also saved Kukura from certain execution."

"What do you want?"

"We're handing over Belyakov. In return, the BND have promised that we can milk Kukura. If he knows even half as much about the Soviet spy network in the US as is claimed, I'll invite you for dinner at Munich's best restaurant. But who can guarantee that Kukura will talk? You?"

Nina didn't reply.

"Thought so. I just want to be sure we haven't bought a lame horse."

Crows circled above her as though she was carrion.

He looked at her. "What's Zarizyno like in summer? I was only ever there in winter."

The ground dropped away from below her. Then she was back on the bench again, heard Santa say: "Our Moscow station knows what you did there two years ago. It's amusing that they still think of you so highly at the BND. They seem to view you through rose-tinted glasses."

A thousand responses came to her mind. None of them was any good.

"The fact that this little family get-together of four intelligence agencies is taking

place today is down to one person – you. You covered up the real reason why Kukura was unmasked and arrested. To be honest, I would have done the same in your shoes. But what if it comes out? You know the answer as well as I do."

She felt as though she was standing stark naked in the cold in front of Santa.

"If Kukura refuses to cooperate with us, I want every damned report of yours from your time in Moscow. Plus the ones you kept back. I'm sure there's plenty more you're not telling the BND."

"That would amount to treason," she gasped.

"As you probably know, there are steel spikes in that water, put there to impale swimmers. Just goes to show – you can be so close, and still get caught out."

When he got up and walked away, Nina wanted to follow him and break his neck. She was consumed with hatred the whole journey back, every second, even in the hotel lobby. The ping of an elevator door cut through her thoughts. She could hear laughter coming from the bar. A group of men, tales of heroic deeds, making deals, pulling off tricks. Kukura had told her how as a KGB agent he'd once visited New York's Harvard Club. *I sat on a bright red leather sofa dressed in my cheap suit. The plaster busts of Roman Consuls stared down at me. Golden ashtrays, golden lamps, monogrammed hand towels in the toilets. I listened to their loud-mouthed talk about stock market investments and the women they'd managed to get laid, and I thought – anyone living here voluntarily must believe in nothing but money and sex.*

Nina took the lift up to the tenth floor. In her room she stared at the velour carpet, a brown-orange labyrinth of colour. She sat down on the bed, opened the lock on her attaché briefcase and took the file out of the hidden compartment.

TOP SECRET

13 November 1983

Location: Berlin/Wannsee. Truss-beam bridge on four pillars. One transit opening for ships and two side openings. Support span of transit opening: 73 m, of side openings: 36 m each. Horizontal clearance through main opening: 60 m, through the two side openings: 21 and 16 m respectively. Border runs through the centre of the bridge; northwards curve direction Krughorn, southwards sharp left bend towards the hunting lodge.

People: Rem Kukura. KGB, First Main Directorate, Service I. Most recent abode: unknown.

Yegor Belyakov. Soviet Consulate San Francisco. Father: Konstantin Belyakov, member of the politburo of the CPSU's Central Committee.

J.B. most recent abode: Folsom State Prison, California.

Parties involved: BND, CIA, KGB.

Assistance: Potsdam US military liaison mission, Bundeskriminalamt, Wachpolizei, Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, Volkspolizei.

Security east: snipers, border patrol boats, Spetsnaz.

Security west: 4 snipers (US Army), Grenzschutzgruppe 9.

Exchange: 22:00 h.

Identification Kukura: Elsa Opel. BND, Dep. 3, Division 32F.

End of intelligence.

She read it again.

Again and again.

Everything was correct. But nothing made sense any more.

She went to the window. Only now did she notice the snow. It fell so thickly that she could barely make out the nearby Brandenburg Gate. It wasn't even half one yet,

but the sun was already shedding its last rays.

NINOTCHKA

They drove in the same formation as in the morning. The city was white. Gritting salt scrunched under the solid rubber tyres of the three-and-a-half-ton armoured vehicle. On the motorway snowflakes raced towards the headlights like projectiles. Before they'd left, Boehnke had informed them that Yegor Belyakov had landed at Tempelhof and was on his way to the bridge.

And Rem Kukura was here too.

A scout from the US military mission had reported that a convoy of vehicles had left the Eberswalde-Finow Soviet airport, forty kilometres to the north, at half past seven. Across the bridge, on the Potsdam side, all residents in the border area had been placed under curfew until midnight. GDR Volkspolizei patrolled the villa district, and the approach road had been sealed off by the Stasi. For the past hour, three black Saabs had been parked a hundred metres behind the eastern border buildings.

That's how close we are. Just a few more steps.

As if we'd ever been far from each other.

The avenue was deserted, and was closed to all traffic from Wannsee town hall. They passed two checkpoints, then they arrived at the bridge. Nina saw officers of the Federal Police security force, their double-action revolvers poking out from open jackets. Beside them stood masked men of the border protection unit. There were medics and an ambulance, uniformed police with submachine guns. The sniper on the guard hut was barely visible under his white ghillie suit.

The bridge was cloaked in darkness. White boat lights danced on the lake amid the whirling snowflakes. This was it, the stage for the biggest show the Cold War had to offer.

They went over to Richard Wolf, head of counter-espionage at West Germany's Federal Police Department. Some of his people were with him. He was chatting to the US ambassador and a man unknown to Nina, who turned out to be the Under Secretary at the Department of State and had the handshake of a weightlifter.

She nodded at Wolf as if they only knew each other fleetingly. His black eyes were inquisitive as always, narrowed to slits as though he was looking straight into the sun.

"I was just asking Herr Wolf why the Federal Police is in charge of counter-espionage, when you also have the BND," the ambassador informed them.

"The BND can spy, but they can't investigate and they certainly can't carry out arrests," Wolf replied. "It's no different to your CIA and the FBI."

"But we have the prettier secretaries," Boehnke retorted and slapped Wolf on the shoulder.

Weller laughed along with the men. Nina felt embarrassed for her.

She saw Belyakov climb out of a VW transporter in handcuffs. A policeman hissed at him: "If you try to run, we'll fire." Belyakov grinned. He had a face like a bad dream. Nina knew men like him, men with fathers like his. In Moscow they hung around in the bar of the National, fat dollar wads on the table, even though they got everything for free. If their Stolichnaya wasn't topped up fast enough they'd push the waitress' head into the dishwater, jeering, or did worse to her. At midnight they were chauffeured to the Dome cinema, where the latest Hollywood hits were screened just for them, and their Malinas and Natashas giggled when they reached under their short skirts. American newspapers referred to Belyakov as *Jeg the Ripper*.

A periscope had been positioned in the centre of the carriageway. The policeman let Nina look through the infrared eyepiece. In twentyfold magnification, she watched officers on the Potsdam side take photos and smoke. Messengers darted back and forth, saluting.

Both sides together, there must have been close to two-hundred people involved in the exchange. All of this just for two men, of which one was honourable and the other deserved the death sentence.

"The officers are Soviets," she heard the policeman say.

Weller came over. "They're wearing badges of the 35th Guards Air Assault Brigade Cottbus, but they probably belong to the KGB's 3rd Main Directorate."

There was movement. Two GDR transporters drove onto the bridge and parked sideways a short distance behind the border marking, leaving only a narrow passageway. Nina's hands were soaking wet. She stepped back from the periscope.

"You have fifteen minutes, the Russians are always bang on time." Weller lit up a cigarette and held the pack out to Nina.

She shook her head.

"Yes, you want to."

Weller gave her a light. Nina sucked on the first cigarette of her life as if she was a chain smoker. The falling snow was so fine now, it was more like fog.

"No doubt you've gone through this a thousand times in your mind," said Weller. "You walk onto the bridge with Belyakov and keep going until you reach the line. You can't miss it, they've cleared the snow away especially. Once you've definitely identified Kukura, you give us the sign. The Soviets will do the same with Belyakov; they just want to make sure we don't palm them off with a doppelgänger. The two start

walking at the same time. Kukura joins you and you coolly stroll back over here with him. At midnight we'll celebrate in the Kempinski."

Weller's calm manner soothed Nina. She had heard that voice being used to very different effect. But as a woman, Weller would never have climbed to her current position without laughing about a sexist joke or two.

Without being so tough I was shaking with fear during the interrogations.

Nina suddenly felt as though she'd been kicked in the face. Santa had turned up. He climbed out of his BMW and moodily went round greeting people.

"I know you'd prefer to have one of our men accompany you," Nina heard Weller say. "But those were the Soviets' terms, one person on each side. And you're the only one who can identify Kukura."

"Who's that over there?" Nina asked her.

"Carter McGhee, chief of the CIA's Berlin Station. Come, I'll introduce you."

Weller already had her by the arm.

Nina briefly considered confiding in Boehnke. But Boehnke was the BND. In his eyes, what she had done in Moscow, in Zarizyno, wouldn't warrant a single word of consolation, no drink in his office, no chat about the artistry of a life that had been just 9 mm away from death. She might just as well jump from Glienicke bridge.

"Ah, so that's the famous Elsa Opel," commented McGhee without removing the fag from the corner of his mouth. "What crazy weather. The last time I felt this damned cold was in Zarizyno." He was having a wail of a time.

Nina fervently hoped that Kukura could give McGhee what he wanted. It was the old Nina that held that hope, the Nina that was still as naive as on the day she left her parent's house aged nineteen. But the Nina that had travelled to Moscow and had learned to balance on a spider's thread knew that this was impossible. That the single

reason why Kukura was about to walk across that line was because she had lied to all the world. The police, the BND, the CIA.

And herself.

The moment of truth had been so far away that she'd convinced herself it would never come. If he were beside her now, Kukura would say with a sad smile: *Oh Ninotchka, you know that it's better to die once than to permanently expect death.*

"I have a great story for you, Frau Opel. You'll like it," said McGhee. "A couple of years ago, a defector told us that he'd been stationed at the KGB office of the Soviet mission in Mexico City together with Kukura. An American contacted them and asked for a meeting. Kukura went. It was in some kind of tavern. The man was there with a loaded pistol on the table in front of him. He said he'd lived in Russia for a while. First in a hotel in Moscow, then he was given work in Minsk, in a combine that produced radios. He said he'd met the niece of a KGB officer and married her. She was allowed to emigrate and they came to the US. Since his return he'd been living in Texas with his wife and their daughter, but he needed to get out. He said the FBI had him under round-the-clock surveillance. He feared for his life and wanted to go back to the Soviet Union, but his visa application had been turned down. Kukura walked out on the weirdo, that's what we were told." McGhee trod on his cigarette. "The weirdo was Lee Harvey Oswald and the meeting took place in September 1963, two months before he blew out John F. Kennedy's brain in Dallas and spread it all over Jackie's pink Chanel outfit. I reckon your man did us a favour. Without him that bloody liberal Harvard wuss would have remained President and carried on sucking up to the Russkis. "

Nobody said a word.

Nina noticed that the American ambassador had gone white as a sheet, but he didn't dare speak up. There was nothing more she needed to know about McGhee.

"Well, stories, who knows whether they're true," McGhee continued. "I know people who swear that Rem Kukura doesn't even exist, that he's just a phantom invented by the KGB." He looked at Nina. "You're the only one who really knows. Enlighten us, what kind of a man is he?"

You can destroy me, but you can't humiliate me.

"Most importantly, he isn't the kind of revolting prick who finds it amusing that a young woman and mother of two had to witness her husband's murder."

Nina had never seen eyes like McGhee's.

Just then, the bridge was flooded with bright light from both sides. It was as though it had been carved out of a block of black granite. The rest of the world was a vast void.

Nina took in every tiny detail, as if she was watching a film. Belyakov was brought over to her. They removed his handcuffs; grinning, he rubbed his wrists and cracked his knuckles. Weller nodded at Nina, her face full of regret that Nina had thrown her career out the window just like that. The barrier shot up. Nina placed one foot in front of the other, knowing she would never forget a single step. She walked with Belyakov towards the vehicles parked across the bridge. They were Barkas box vans, the type often used by the Stasi for prisoner transport. One of them was dull grey, the other beige with a scratch on the passenger side door and not enough air in the right-hand front tyre. Nina's movements were stiff and awkward, Belyakov strutted along close beside her. There still didn't seem to be anyone else on the bridge. The searchlights were directed straight at her, forcing her to squint. Nina glanced at Belyakov. His jugular was throbbing gleefully. In his mind he was already sitting in the bar at the National, with Malina-Natasha draped across him. The snow up to the middle of the bridge was untouched and as white as the skin of a Geisha.

Two more steps.

One.

They reached the border line.

It had been swept clear.

A man appeared between the Barkas, about fifteen metres from where Nina stood. A Siberian, judging by his high cheekbones. "Your godfather Alexander Romanovich sends his regards," he said in Russian. His voice was oddly high-pitched.

"My godfather is called Denis Maximovich," Belyakov replied.

The Russian smiled and disappeared.

Then came back.

Rem.

His black hair was shaved almost down to the skin. His cheeks were so hollow his eyes looked like those of an alien. He'd lost a lot of weight. But his smile reminded her of the day in Gorky Park when he called her Ninotchka for the first time. She knew that for the past two years, he had firmly believed she would save him. And here she was.

Nina turned round and stared into the wall of light on the western side. She raised her right hand. Rem and Belyakov started walking. All the buttons on Rem's coat had been cut off and one of his shoelaces was hanging loose. Nina felt as though she was spinning in circles, faster and faster. The two men drew level, passed each other without a glance.

Five more metres, then she would clasp Rem in her arms.

He stumbled. For a moment she thought he'd bent down to tie his laces. But he doubled over forward, then was wrenched back. Their eyes met. Rem reached his hand out to her. One of his temples was painted red by an invisible hand. Nina ran towards

him. An iron fist battered her left arm. Her fingers were suddenly cold as ice, despite the thick leather gloves.

A scream came from somewhere. Was that her? Nina fell to her knees. More shots. Bullets whirled up the snow around her, carving wondrously beautiful ornaments into the blanket of white. The Russian dragged the lifeless Belyakov behind the vehicles. A piercingly hot cord tightened around Nina's neck. She belly-crawled to Rem, wanted to throw herself over him and protect him with her body.

But he was no longer there.

Magicked away.

She realised she had turned round and was lying with her head facing west. When she rolled over and saw Rem he was lying on his back. His arms moved feebly as if he was trying to make a snow angel.

Somehow she got to her feet. Under her, the carriageway bounced like a trampoline. There was a loud whistle in her ears that was driving her crazy. The bridge turned upside down. Steel struts merged with tarmac and snow to form a three-dimensional painting by Baselitz. There was no up and no down, no near or far. This is what it must feel like in outer space, weightless. Then gravity hammered her back down to the ground. She suddenly weighed a ton. Thick smoke everywhere. The taste of blood. Nina clumsily took a step without knowing where she was going.

A quake struck, so violent it went through her every bone. She became light again, was floating and only regained consciousness when she hit the water.

The cold was like a thousand-volt electric shock. Her heavy coat was pulling her down. She fought against it, arms and legs flailing wildly. She hadn't seen the plunge coming, hadn't held her breath, she was running out of oxygen.

She pictured herself in the last round of the ten-thousand metre race, far ahead the

leader, about to break into a sprint in the bend. Nina was hopelessly wedged in behind the chasing pack, but she elbowed her way into a tiny gap, quickly cut to the outside and saw the contorted faces of the others, their vacant eyes. Her lungs no longer filled with air, only with pain, but she caught up, metre by metre. Soon she could hear the panting of the leading woman, her limp, ragged breath, and she knew that she would pass the finish line with a narrow lead.

Nina stared up to the water's surface. It was as bright up there as if the sun itself was diving into the lake. Something black hurtled towards her, trailing a comet's tail of light. The comet scraped across her left arm, which had been virtually numb before. Now an incendiary bomb exploded inside it, every cell a wound.

Then she was at the top.

The entire West Berlin section of the bridge had vanished, the other half protruded into empty space. Around her the water was burning; the heat was so intense, sweat was pouring down Nina's face. Her muscles had turned to melting ice. Cosmic dust filled the air, a meteorite shower of green, yellow and pink fire was raining down from an Arctic sky. Far ahead, she saw a shape in the bouncing flames.

A body. It was moving. It went under, then reappeared, fighting for survival like her.

There was a time when breathing seemed unbelievably difficult to me. But I've got so used to it now, I would miss it.

That's what Rem had said to her in Moscow. On the day of madness.

She swam over to him, her progress was agonisingly slow. A loud groaning noise sounded from above her. She looked up. The Potsdam part of the bridge was tilting downwards, the steel girders could no longer support the free-floating weight. With horror she saw that the two Barkas had started to slide, they were skidding towards the

void right above her.

Then they tipped.

She made inept attempts at crawl, her hands smacking the water helplessly. One of the hefty vehicles hit the water close by, missing her by a hair's breadth. A giant wave heaved her up, for a heart stopping moment she was suspended in mid-air, suffused with the joy of not having been crushed to a pulp.

Then the panic machine fired up.

A great force was yanking her down into the depths at furious speed, as if she was attached to an elevator cable. An eternity passed before she understood what was happening. The hood of her duffle coat was tangled round one of the Barka's side mirrors.

The vehicle hit the bottom. Desperately, she tried to get hold of the hood. *I need to get the coat off!* She couldn't find the loops and buttons. Then she realised. *The gloves! I'm still wearing the gloves!*

What wretched agony, getting the sodden, water-logged leather off without any feeling in her fingers.

She did it.

Nina kicked her way to the surface, spewed out water and held on to a thin shoal.

Where was Rem?

She yelled out his name, kept yelling until all that came out was a whimper, the whine of a dying animal.

The shoal she was clinging to broke apart. Her brain ordered swimming movements, but her arms and legs had long melted away. Her entire body dissolved as she slid into the depths forever. The last thing she saw was Rem's cold hands as she took them into hers in Donskoy Cemetery. She heard herself say: *I'll see you in*

Zarizyno. Everything will be OK, I promise. Then she ran into the endless darkness, in her heart a hole so large the entire world had disappeared into it.