

27th November 1944

*The images stay with me. They won't let me go. It was three days ago now that they murdered my brother. But I can still see it before my eyes, every second.*

*Tom and Flint didn't want me to go. They were afraid something might happen to me. Thought the Gestapo would recognize me and nab me. But I didn't listen to them. I had to go. In the end, they gave in and came too, to make sure I didn't do anything stupid at least.*

*It was in Hüttenstrasse. Where they've been executing people for a month or two now. Outside Ehrenfeld station.*

*By the time we arrived, the square was already full. Gawpers everywhere, drawn in by the posters. Dull faces, greedy for sensation. We mixed in with them. Right outside the station, there was the gallows. Two long cross-beams, resting on a frame. The bottom one for their feet, the nooses thrown over the top one.*

*I saw Mum further forwards. Two women were holding her up. I badly wanted to run over to her, but Tom and Flint held me back. There were Gestapo spies everywhere. Standing there, looking inconspicuous. Listening out for anyone saying the wrong things. Lurking in wait for people like us, who're on the wanted lists. We kept our heads down and pulled our hoods over our faces.*

*After a few minutes, the SS marched up. When I saw them with their machine guns, all my hopes crumbled. I'd been secretly playing with the idea of rescuing my brother. But it was no good. The only weapons I had were an old knife and one of our basic Molotov cocktails.*

*Mum turned around, as if she was searching for me. She looked scared and desperate. Helpless. Kind of against my will, I shoved my hand in my pocket and gripped the knife. Maybe I should go, I thought. Now—before it's too late.*

*But then the lorry arrived with the prisoners. They were sitting in the back, which was uncovered, their hands tied behind them. Horst was there too. He was wearing his SS uniform, but the badges he used to be so proud of had been ripped off. They dragged him and the others to the gallows. He kept his head down and climbed onto the beam. One of the SS men put the noose round his neck while he just stared blankly into space.*

*Right away, one of the Gestapo men read out the death warrant. I couldn't take it in. Just stared at Horst. My brother! Who'd always been so strong. The one I admired. Now the noose was round his neck. But at the moment I looked at him, he suddenly raised his head. Like he was trying to find me.*

*I let go of the knife and grabbed the Moli. What if I light it and lob it so it goes off among all the SS? I thought. Maybe they'd panic? Maybe I could rescue Horst in the mayhem and then we could...*

*But before I had time to do anything, Tom was there. He must've been watching me. Probably guessed what I was planning. He grabbed my hand and held on tight.*

*I crumpled and shut my eyes. He was right. I knew it, but I didn't want it to be true. We stood there like that for a couple of seconds, then a murmur went round the crowd. I didn't need to look to know why: the SS had started the executions. One by one, the nooses would be jerked tight, the prisoners would lose their balance on the beam and kick the air, fighting with death. Same hideous show every time.*

*When I opened my eyes again, Horst was still standing there, but the man next to him was just being pulled up in the air, so he'd be next. I couldn't bear it and tried to get away from Tom. But Flint appeared on the other side of me. He grabbed me, put his hand over my mouth and nodded to Tom. Then they dragged me away.*

*Over the people's heads, I saw my brother being yanked up in the air. And I heard Mum cry out. I reared up, wanted to shake Tom and Flint off. But they held me tight, trying to pull me away before anyone noticed us.*

*At some point, I stopped fighting. Horst was dead because he saved us. It was like part of me had died up there.*

It all began when I wouldn't let somebody go. Would he have stayed of his own accord? Probably not. He was too shy for that.

It was two months ago. I was standing at my grandfather's grave not long after he died. The sky was bleak and grey; everywhere, the last leaves were falling from the trees. I stood there, missing him, the way I still miss him. I often went to see him—before. If there was something I couldn't deal with. He was so relaxed. Nothing fazed him. No matter what was on my mind, if I discussed it with him, I felt after a while as though it was small and unimportant and didn't actually matter at all.

It was gradually getting dark; I was about to go. Then I noticed this old man, a short distance away, by one of the other graves. There was nothing special about him. But I'd been there the week before, and the week before that, and every time, I'd seen him in exactly that spot. I looked more closely at him and could see that his lips were moving, as if he were talking to someone—but there was nobody around. There was only the gravestone by his feet.

And I noticed something else. He kept looking over at me. He wasn't paying any attention to anybody else.

Whenever he raised his head, he looked at me, and nobody else. I didn't know what to make of it. It was a bit creepy.

After a while, he turned and walked away. As I watched him, I suddenly had a feeling that I should ask him about the way he was acting. I'm not normally like that, but that day I felt an urge and before it faded, I'd run after him. It was quite a way to the grave he'd been standing by, but he walked very slowly, with small steps, cautiously feeling his way, so he hadn't got far when I reached it.

"Excuse me!" I called after him.

He stopped and turned around.

"Excuse me," I said again. "Do we know each other, by any chance?"

He looked uncertainly at me. "No. I-I don't think so."

"It's just that—you kept looking over at me. So, I thought, maybe we'd met but I just didn't recognize you."

"Oh!" He seemed embarrassed. "You noticed that, then?"

"Well, I don't know about noticed, I just kind of wondered."

He came hesitantly closer. "Yes, you're right, I was looking at you. I was wondering why a young person like you keeps coming here. It's the third time I've seen you now. You should be—I don't know—playing football or something."

So that was it; he'd just been curious. Or was there more to it? When I looked at him, I couldn't shake off the feeling

that he had only told me half the truth. He looked away and turned around, as if to leave... but then he didn't. An embarrassing silence was building up. To stop it going on too long, I pointed at the grave we were standing next to.

"Is that—a relative of yours?"

"Yes," he said. "My brother. Today is the sixty-seventh anniversary of his death."

I took a closer look at the gravestone. "Horst Gerlach", it read. And beneath it: "18.2.1925–24.11.1944". Then I realized. Today was the 24th of November!

"Was he killed in the war?" I asked.

"No. He was murdered."

It sounded strange, the way he said that. I wondered whether everyone who died in war was somehow "murdered"—at least in some way or other.


"It's a long story," he said when I didn't reply. "But it might interest you. *You especially!*"

I was only listening with half an ear. Standing by his brother's gravestone were three red memorial candles, which were all lit, and lying next to them were flowers. White flowers.

"If you'd like to hear it, I'll tell you," he continued. "What do you think? You could come to my place."

I hesitated. We didn't know each other. Why was he inviting me to his place? I must have looked pretty astonished, because he cringed.

"No," he said hastily. "No, that was stupid of me. Please, forget I said it, OK?"



The next moment, he turned and walked away. I hadn't meant that to happen. I raised my hand and wanted to call out to him—but by then that sudden feeling, the one that had made me run after him, had disappeared. Instead I just watched until he was out of sight, and then I walked away too.

On my way home, there was one thing I couldn't get out of my mind. He'd stressed it so emphatically. What had he meant—this story might interest *me especially*?

