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The Air Raid Killer
Detective Inspector Max Heller's
first case
256 Pages

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Der Angstmann

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November 30, 1944

Heller struggled to extricate himself from the bucket. With five centimeters on most other men, he just barely fit in the sidecar to the Wehrmacht's standard-issue BMW combination motorcycle. No other vehicle had been available. Heller first stuck out his right leg, which had fallen completely asleep, and winced as his numb foot came to rest on the cobblestones. He stood and wiped his face of the icy drizzle that had built up during the trip, shaking his head in disapproval at the driver. Instead of pulling right into the courtyard, Strampe had parked the motorcycle outside the gate. He took that as a sign of contempt: the young SS officer could not stand Heller.

Now he found himself outside of the Dresden Rowing Club. He flipped up his collar and plunged his fists deep into the pockets of his long coat. He stood with raised shoulders, not knowing where to go. His leather peaked cap was missing, and his short-cropped, greying hair slowly beaded up with drizzle.

The Elbe River wasn't too far off but offered only a bleak, washed-out view on this late afternoon in November. There were a few trees along the shore, leafless and black from the damp. Upriver he could make out the barrels of anti-aircraft guns, which Heller knew were only dummies. The clouds hung low, effacing the slopes on the opposite shore under a veil of fog. It would be getting dark soon. Heller sniffled softly. In the distance, the fog looked like a dark-grey plaster wall, but a figure suddenly broke through and approached him.

"Detective Inspector?" the uniformed police officer asked as he rushed to raise his flattened right hand into the air. "Heil Hitler!"

Heller was suddenly forced to wriggle his hand from his pocket and listlessly return the gesture without making a sound.

The policeman took a step to the side and signaled with a bow that Heller should lead the way. "The old boathouse," the uniform explained.

It wasn't far, only about fifty meters, but Heller—by now soaked to the bones—was struggling with his tingling right foot. He took each step gingerly, sensing the impatience of the uniform behind him.

Once at the boathouse, Heller stopped to let the other man enter first.

But the policeman didn't move. "Go ahead, sir," he said. "Walk straight through. She's all the way in back, in the workshop."

Heller looked at the man dispassionately for a second before entering. The boathouse wasn't anything more than a shack connected to a large garage that housed the boats, along with the long rudders and other equipment. It smelled of brackish water, oil, and swarf.

"Through there!" the uniform exclaimed from the front door.

"If you had just gone first . . ." Heller said indignantly. Some light was streaming from the boathouse, but the bulbs inside were weak and dim. It was depressing, like everything at the moment.

"Is anyone still here?" Heller asked as he slowly walked in. "No photographer?"

"No one, Detective Inspector, but everything is as requested."

Heller nodded. And a lot had been requested.

“Was anyone at the discovery site? Did anyone touch the body?”

“No, Det—” the uniform began before walking into Heller, who came to a sudden stop.

The door to the workshop was open, and what Heller saw inside was not what he had expected.

“Who found her?” he asked hoarsely.

“Two boys. They’re across the courtyard, inside the clubhouse.”

“So no one came into the room?” Heller asked, pulling his eyes from the sight of the body and scanning the floor for evidence. Something must have been left behind in the mixture of dust and oil, he suspected. The blood had coagulated. The surface of the pool was cracked, like the mud in a dried-up puddle.

“I need light here, a lot of light, and the photographer.”

“We’ll need to darken the windows then.”

“See to it!”

The cop nodded curtly and vanished. Heller studied the woman, who had been bound by the wrists with heavy cord to the work bench in a seated position on the floor, her arms spread out like Jesus on the cross. Her blouse and camisole had been ripped open, as had her skirt. A piece of the same cord had also shackled her feet, and her lower torso was completely exposed. The panties and long stockings had been pulled down her ankles. Her head was hanging deep forward onto her chest, and Heller could see the nape of her neck. He wiped his face again.

The rain had since turned into a downpour. It started drumming on the tin roof and was soon gurgling through the gutters and downspouts outside. Heller knelt to see whether the woman had been gagged. He couldn’t tell; it was already too dark in the room, but he couldn’t touch the light switch. Her face was in the dark.

Heller finally heard engine noises. Then men’s voices. He stood up straight and stuck his hands into the pockets of his coat. Oldenbusch from forensics came in with a wooden tripod under his arm and a large brown suitcase in the opposite hand. Since no one followed him in, they could both dispense with the Hitler salute.

“Give it here, Werner,” Heller said, reaching for the suitcase, but Oldenbusch—thirty years old, stocky, and a bit doughy—shook his head.

“You do your thing, Max, and I’ll do mine,” he said between puffs and pants. “Gruesome scene—I already heard.”

Heller nodded. “Misery.”

“Everything is misery nowadays.”

Heller didn’t get into it. One avoided that type of conversation.

“Try to get a shot of every detail,” Heller said. “Even the pieces of clothing. But first search the floor for evidence; I thought I saw a footprint. I think there may be fingerprints on the work bench, and on the light switch as well. Someone else’s hair might be on the victim’s clothes. Where is that cord from? And I’m not sure, but isn’t that a sickle?” Heller pointed to a dark crescent sticking halfway out from under the work bench.

Oldenbusch rocked his head reassuringly. “All right, I know what to do. But first I need to come up with some floodlights. Flash bulbs are scarce. Everything is scarce. Klepp didn’t see why I should even come out here at first.”

“Why, if I may ask?” Heller asked, looking at the forensic technician suspiciously.

Oldenbusch only grunted, which for him seemed to say everything. And then he was already on his way outside again. Heller followed.

“I’m going to need a while. Do you know the new kid, Friedrich? They brought him in last week.” Heller didn’t know him. “I’ll talk to the boys. If you need me, I’ll be at the clubhouse.” Heller pointed with his chin toward the building on the other side of the courtyard.

The two boys were sitting nicely at a table, but they hadn’t touched the tea in the cups before them. Both were wearing coats under which Heller could make out the collars of Hitler Youth uniforms. As he approached, both leaped to their feet and stuck their arms stiff into the air. “Heil Hitler!” they squawked at him in chorus.

How old can they be? Heller thought. Not even twelve. They had never known anything else. This time, he gave them a regulation salute in reply. With kids you needed to pay special attention; they were often the worst informers.

“Sit!” he ordered. “What were you doing in the boathouse?”

“Playing, Detective Inspector!” they said rapid-fire.

“Names!”

“Gustav Merker.”

“Alwin Trautman.”

“You broke in!”

“No, Detective! The door was open.”

Heller’s eyes wandered to the next table, where two simple wooden rifles lay.

“It’s Detective Inspector. Do your parents know where you are?”

They both shook their heads.

“Tell me what you did and saw. Leave nothing out. You first, Gustav.” Heller noticed movement outside, through the window. Klepp’s car had driven into the courtyard.

“We were playing. We often play here. We live over there on Gneisi— Gneisenau Straße. The door was open, just a crack, and we went inside because it was cold, and maybe a spy was in there. It wasn’t long at all, and then we saw the dead lady.” It didn’t seem to bother Gustav, but on saying his last three words, the other boy flinched.

“Did you two see anything? Was anyone running away? Did you hear screams?” The interrogation was routine; the woman had been dead for hours.

“No, no one was there.”

“Did you touch anything? The door, the light switch? The body?”

“No, Detector, nothing at all!” Gustav and Alwin earnestly shook their heads.

“How did you open the door then?”

“I pushed on it with the rifle!”

Heller nodded. “You both go directly home now, the shortest path. You’re not lying about your names, right? You know there’s a prison sentence for that.”

Both boys shook their heads vigorously.

“Good, then off!”

They both got up. But Alwin paused. “It wasn’t the bogeyman, was it?”

Heller looked up at him. “The bogeyman?”

“Mother says the bogeyman is going around.”

“The bogeyman? Who is that?”

“He catches little kids!” Alwin was serious, his chin quivering.

Heller stood up. “Go home. People are afraid of plenty of things; we don’t need to add a bogeyman on top of

it.”

“Will he follow us because we found the lady?”

Heller firmly grabbed the boy by the shoulder. “Go to your mother. If it was the bogeyman, then he has other things to worry about now than taking care of a couple of squirts like you.”

“Bogeyman,” Heller muttered to himself as he walked back across the courtyard to the discovery site. What was he supposed to do with that? It was wartime, and people were different than they are in peacetime. For example, who shackles a woman and beats her up so horrifically without even bothering to hide the crime? He could have thrown the body into the Elbe and hosed down the floor; that would have been the easiest thing. Heller had noticed a washbasin inside the boathouse with a hose attached to it.

Klepp met him right as Heller was about to enter the boathouse. The man was almost as tall as Heller but weighed significantly more and was a few years younger. SS Obersturmbannführer Rudolf Klepp had also recently been promoted to Heller’s superior. Klepp had never been a policeman; before starting his career in the SS, he had apprenticed as a butcher.

“Bloody mess!” he mumbled. Heller didn’t reply. People who sport skulls on their caps should be able to stand a sight like this, Heller thought.

“I’m heading back to HQ. Clean up here. There won’t be much to pick up.”

Heller didn’t say a word; he didn’t even blink. He felt the drizzle soaking his hair and the shoulders of his coat, running down the nape of his neck. To date he had worked only minimally with Klepp. They had pulled him out of Poland, from the Waffen SS. The new post with the Dresden Police was supposed to be his reward. People knew only rumors about Klepp in Poland. And rumors were something Heller never gave credence to, certainly not in wartime.

“I would like to have an autopsy done on the body,” Heller said.

Klepp waived him off. “Do what you must. I think you’ll have a final report tomorrow.” He leaned forward and rushed the few steps out to his car. His driver, who had been standing motionless in the rain the whole time, flung the door open for him.

“A final report?” Heller asked just as the driver slammed the door shut so Klepp couldn’t hear the question—or at least could pretend not to have heard it.

Heller watched the car drive off, and then he went back into the boathouse.

“Come in,” Oldenbusch said, seeming like he had been waiting. He pointed at something on the wall next to door. Heller walked in and looked to the side. A broom. “The perpetrator must have swept the floor. I couldn’t make out a single footprint.”

Heller studied the handle; light-colored dust had settled on its tip, fine lines of it sliding off. As he reached toward it, Oldenbusch cleared his throat.

“The broom still needs to be examined for fingerprints. The perpetrator forced his way through the steel door that leads out to the Elbe. He just pried the lock open. There was no sign of the tool he used to break in. Any evidence outside has already been washed away by the rain. Otherwise, the victim—no papers, nothing,” Oldenbusch continued without Heller having to ask. They had been working together for a long time.

“Nothing on her clothes. Aryan, no star. Klepp thinks—” Oldenbusch suddenly looked alarmed and peered around to make sure Klepp wasn’t in earshot anymore. “He says she’s Silesian, but I don’t think the clothes fit with that.”

Heller pointed at the dead woman’s foot. “Those are hospital socks.”

Oldenbusch pursed his lips. “From the Rudolf Hess Hospital?”

“It would be close by. Or the Deaconess Home.”

“The sickle is clean, by the way; the weapon must have been something else. At first glance, had to be a very sharp knife. I took a dozen photographs, and I’ll develop those today yet.”

“Klepp mentioned a final report?”

Oldenbusch looked at Heller sympathetically. “‘A random act,’ he informed me, committed by a ‘transient.’”

Heller looked at Oldenbusch for a few seconds. “Let’s have her taken to the coroner.”

Oldenbusch shook his head sadly. “They’re all on the front. Dr. Kassner got his marching orders last week.”

Heller snorted; evidently even essential employment didn’t count for deferments anymore. At some point they would be sending him to the front too.

“It can’t go on like this. Everything is totally going down the tubes.” Even as he was speaking, Heller regretted his emotional outburst and immediately composed himself again. “No transient who happens to be passing by will make an effort to cover his tracks so carefully. He must also have washed himself. One can’t commit a crime like this without getting himself dirty. Did he just run out of here in the same clothes?”

Oldenbusch frowned. “It would be easy enough to throw on a coat. He may also have cleaned up at the washbasin, if it was necessary. But there aren’t any prints.”

“I think he knew what he was doing. It was planned—the place, the crime. Even the finish.”

“But he just left the body!”

Heller sucked a breath of air through his teeth. That’s exactly what was giving him pause.

“You continue here; I’ll find out where we can take her!”

November 30, 1944, evening

Max Heller was fully drenched by the time he made it to the hospital. He took off his coat and hung it over the radiator in the secretary’s office, hoping it might dry out a bit. It had been tough rustling up a specialist. The hospital was overcrowded, and the staff was overworked. There were fresh outbreaks of fairly serious diseases at the moment; casualties from the fronts were arriving daily; malnourished refugees had to be supplied; lice infestations were going around. Heller had been sent into the doctor’s office to wait—for almost an hour. It had since gotten dark out. He pushed up the sleeve of his jacket and looked at his watch. The door opened at the same time.

Heller stood, but the doctor took regimented steps past him to his chair, gathered up the ends of his white coat, sat, and curtly gestured for Heller to return to his seat. Dr. Alfred Schorrer, as the sign read on his desk, leaned back. He was about Heller’s age, maybe a little older. He had a short military haircut. He sported a mustache cropped so short it was little more than a silver veil. His gray eyes were bright and intelligent as he looked at Heller.

“Unfortunately you were right in your suspicion,” he began. “This was in fact one of our nurses. Klara Bellmann. As far as I know, she hasn’t been at the hospital much longer than I have—three months. She works in the women’s clinic.” Dr. Schorrer rested his elbows on the armrests of his chair, tapping his fingertips together.

“I’m afraid this young woman endured a horrific ordeal before the Lord mercifully took her. None of her injuries appears to have been fatal. Her heart is intact. There is a stab wound to one lung, but this usually results only in blood filling the lobe in question. The effect is a very slow death by suffocation. We see this often enough on the front. Have you also fought on the front lines?”

Heller cleared his throat. “Yes, in the last war.”

Schorrer visibly perked up. “I was in that war too. Fifth Guard Grenadiers. And you?”

“Hundred-and-first Grenadiers,” Heller replied. He would not be saying another word about it.

Schorrer seemed to sense that and immediately returned to the topic. "Injuries to the abdominal wall are always associated with severe pain, as are the deep cuts into the arms and legs. She must have screamed, unless she quickly lost consciousness. We found threads from her torn blouse in her mouth. The perpetrator likely stuffed it down her throat. The cause of death was either from shock, or she bled out. The latter seems more likely to me." Schorrer tapped his fingertips twice.

Heller forced himself not to run his hand up and down the nape of his neck; he didn't want to come across as uncertain after the doctor's confident entry. But he did feel ill at ease. He shivered and rubbed his shoulders in his suit. He suspected he was going to have a bad night's sleep.

"Can it be determined if she was intoxicated with alcohol? Or in any other way numbed, knocked out, or paralyzed? Didn't she defend herself? She wouldn't have voluntarily walked into the boathouse."

Schorrer leaned forward just a bit to look at a form on his desk. "A blood sample was taken," he replied tersely. "Any other questions?"

"Do you run the hospital?" Heller asked. "I was told you're a pathologist."

"I am. But the order of the day requires extraordinary measures, which is why my responsibilities have expanded beyond my medical specialty." Schorrer opened his palms upward. "Now, Detective Inspector, there is a lot to be done."

Heller understood and got up. "Thank you for your assistance on short notice. May I come back for your advice if necessary?"

"Any time. I live here on the grounds. They cleared out two rooms for me in the nursing college dormitory."

Schorrer also stood. Facing each other to say good-bye, they hesitated for a moment.

"Heil Hitler," Heller said, raising his arm not quite all the way and instantly dropping it again.

Dr. Schorrer did the same, and for a moment they searched each other's eyes. Outside the doctor's office, Schorrer's secretary handed Heller his coat, which was now pleasantly warm. He thanked her and left.

The corridor smelled of supper—broth and bread. He hadn't eaten anything since his meager lunch of a few potatoes and salted turnips. The staff went about their work undisturbed, and Heller had to step out of the way once, then twice, then squeeze back against the wall as food carts and beds were pushed past him.

He walked past the elevator and instead took the stairs down.

"Say," he said to a nurse passing by on the main floor, "could you tell me where I can find the personnel department?"

"The administrative building back over that way," she said, pointing to a building across the yard. "But no one's there anymore."

"Thank you very much!"

"You're welcome." The nurse continued on her way and went up the stairs.

Then Heller had a sudden flash of panic and turned around. "Heil Hitler!" he called up the stairwell behind her.

The nurse paused and slowly turned around to look at him. She turned back and kept climbing the stairs without returning the greeting.

"What's up with you?" Karin asked, taking Heller's coat off. She slid it onto a hanger and took it into the kitchen, where she hung it next to the stove. Then she returned to the entry hall. Heller was already sitting on the small bench, laboriously pulling off his shoes. His wife looked at him disapprovingly. "Your cap?"

"I forgot it at the office." The right shoe jerked off his heel, and Heller grimaced.

"Oh, you and your hat! A cold is the last thing we need you to get!"

Heller said nothing. He didn't like it when she was that way, but she was right, and he was annoyed with

himself. He didn't mention he was shivering a little.

"So, what's wrong?" Karin asked, sitting beside him.

"A woman was murdered. Not far from here, just a fifteen-minute walk. A terrible crime. Really gruesome. Someone . . . cut her open . . ."

"A robbery?"

"No, Karin. It wasn't about a robbery. It was the crime of a madman."

"Can you do anything?"

Heller snorted softly. "No people, no gasoline, no flashlight bulbs, no time. Klepp thinks it was some kind of transient passing by."

"Oh Klepp, that ridiculous man!"

Heller rested his free hand on her forearm and softly squeezed. She shouldn't speak so loudly when they were in the hallway.

"But it's true," Karin whispered defiantly.

"What is there to eat?"

"Potatoes and turnips." Karin got up, and Heller followed her to the kitchen. "I waited in line for four hours at Kiebels because people were saying they had lard. But it was long gone by the time I got to the front of the line."

"Anything else?" Heller asked almost casually.

"Nothing," Karin answered without looking at him.

That was good and bad at the same time. It meant that no Hero's Letter had arrived notifying her that one of her boys had fallen for Führer, Folk, and Fatherland. But it also meant there was no mail from the front. There hadn't been for months. Her own letters had been returned, all stamped RETURN TO SENDER—WAIT FOR FURTHER NEWS.

They sat at the dining table without any words, the only noise the soft rattling of spoons on plates. The radio was silent. Heller actually enjoyed listening to classical music, too, Händel and Vivaldi, but he couldn't stand listening to the feeble-minded blather between the musical pieces. The same lines over and over again.

Karin finished up first; she had served much less food onto her own plate. She set the spoon down deliberately to keep it from making any noise. "Mrs. Lehmann said they're advancing again in Russia."

Heller ate his last bite and tipped his plate to spoon up the last bit of broth. Then he set his spoon down, also very quietly. "Bull is all people talk about anymore. If they were advancing in Russia, they would have made loud announcements of it ages ago." He stood to move into the living room. To read the newspaper, which now consisted of only a couple small, translucent sheets of paper nearly half-filled with obituaries. Karin would wash up and join him in a few minutes, when they would sit by candlelight waiting to hear if the air raid sirens would go off that evening. Only after they were sure the British were staying away would they head to bed. But in the doorway to the living room, Heller turned around to face the dining room again. "Has Mrs. Lehmann heard anything about the bogeyman?"

Karin was clearing the dishes. She thought for a moment and shook her head. "The bogeyman? No."

Heller was annoyed at himself for mentioning it at all. Just as he had been annoyed at himself for calling after the nurse with a much-too-loud "Heil Hiter!"

HEROIC FIGHT, Heller read. "Heroic fighting" was everywhere—including the phrase itself. No news in the paper was worth reading; everyone knew—everyone would have to know—what the news was worth. And yet people craved to read it, looking for any tiny clue about what was really going on. There had been "heroic fighting" back in Heller's war, too. They had lain heroically in mud; they had heroically cowered as grenades went off all around them, their faces pressed heroically into the muck.

“What does that mean, ‘the bogeyman?’” Karin asked.

Heller jumped. He hadn’t heard Karin come in.

“Oh, the woman today. Two boys found her, and one of them was quite shaken. He asked me if it had been the bogeyman. That’s all I know, Karin.”

Karin moved the candle from the dining room to the coffee table, turned off the ceiling light, sat on the sofa, and wrapped a blanket around her legs.

“You say he cut her open . . . ?” She hesitated. “Who does something like that?”

Heller looked at her pensively. “I don’t know. But it wasn’t a normal murder. No robbery. It’s something else. I can feel it.”

“But Max,” Karin whispered, her face so far from the candlelight it was hard to make out, “hold back if that’s how that Klepp wants it.”

“It’s a murder, and I have to do my job!”

“Max, it wouldn’t be the first time you did more than necessary!”

“I’ve always done only what was necessary.”

“But right now—”

“Right now especially is not the time to toss the rules overboard and lose all sense of decency.”

“Don’t interrupt me, Max. I’m just worried. Not that you’ll be the only decent person in the end among all the crazy people.”

“What are you trying to say? Should I also play crazy?”

Karin shook her head indignantly. “Don’t play dumb. You know what I mean!”

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Heller opened his mouth wide. Small pebbles and dust trickled down on him. He tasted dust and blood, and what he initially took for ringing in his ears was actually the screaming of women and children. But that was drowned out by the roar of the next bombs. This was the moment Heller—who had already been in a war and whom no god could console—stopped wanting to live. He thought of Karin. It hurt not to be with her. He would have held her in his arms, comforted her, thanked her for all their years. He had wanted to die with her instead of here among complete strangers.

But there wasn’t room even for thoughts like that anymore. What ensued robbed him of all feeling, his sense of time and space. Deafening bombs exploded by the second, leaving no time to breathe, no time to think. Explosions rocked the cellar, tossed people like dolls back and forth. Heller’s ears filled with garish wailing, his blood stopped flowing.

The blasts and shaking found no end. Another impact very close by made every other sound around him vanish. The only thing he could still hear was a shrill whistling. Now, he thought. Now. Death would finally catch what eluded it in the trenches.

How long it went on, Heller didn’t know. Maybe he had been knocked out, maybe he was out of his mind. He thought he could perceive people in the distance, coughing, crying, and moaning. This couldn’t be—it just wasn’t possible. No one was still alive here. Not even Heller.

But then he could feel again, noticing concrete under his stomach, the taste of metal and mineral dust in his mouth. He coughed, spat, tried to push himself up. His head felt infinitely heavy, he could hardly lift it from the floor. Something was running into his face from his ears. He touched the back of his head and found a warm sticky spot—of blood.

A beam from a flashlight finally stabbed through the darkness. Heller blinked and saw nothing but white fog. Dust that didn't want to settle, blurred movements in it, like people floating in soapy water. He had a terrible thirst. Someone grabbed him, roughly rolled him to his back. The beam of light blinded him for a second, leaving him only half able to see. He struggled to turn back onto his stomach and support himself on all fours but hit his head hard on something. Reaching through the darkness his hand touched a concrete block. He pulled himself up, took a step, and felt something soft under his foot. Sand was crunching between his teeth. "Sorry," he said, although he couldn't hear his own voice.

All he could sense was rushing in his ears, touches to his body, vague hand motions through the dim twilight of the flashlight. Then he could make out a roaring that began to resolve into words. Suddenly someone was shaking him. The powerful motion tipped him backward against a wall.

"Help!" he finally heard. "We need to get out!" He pushed himself up from the wall, covering himself as he followed the shadowy figure who cowered and darted through the dusty air. He felt his way along the wall with his fingertips.

"Over there!" someone yelled.

"The door's jammed!" said another.

Heller tried to take hold and help pull it open, but he couldn't find a handle, there was nowhere to get a grip on it, the men were already giving up.

". . . dig ourselves out," Heller could make out as ringing filled his head again.

Dig ourselves out? he thought. Impossible.

"Someone will come," said one person reassuringly.

"Who, you moron?" another cursed. "Can't you hear?"

It was totally quiet for a moment. Beneath the ringing in his ears, Heller could make out the sound of a massive wave, a rumbling. He knew the sound. Fire. At that moment he noticed heat radiating in from the door.

"Is there no lever? An iron bar?" he asked. He could hardly hear himself speak, but he seemed to have gained everyone's ear. The men fanned out.

"Here. Over here . . . ," one called. "Come on!"

Heller followed the yell as the beam from the flashlight darted through the room, finally settling on the concrete block he had pulled himself up on. Beside and half underneath it lay the air raid warden. The light didn't rest on him but flashed up to the spot in the ceiling where the block had fallen out. One of the men was already climbing up reaching with his bare hand into the hole, but he jerked back quickly and ran for cover as an avalanche of rocks, rubble, and wood fell through.

Another cloud of dust surged, enveloping them all. Heller pulled the lapel of his coat over his mouth and nose but still ended up breathing dust. He could feel it catching in his hair, coating his skin, blocking his nostrils. His throat was raw—hacking and spitting didn't help. The thirst was suddenly overpowering.

"We need to get up there!" someone ordered. "On the double!" The coughing in the cellar spread.

You could die this way, too, Heller thought. Suffocating in dust. The women and children started gathering, stumbling, groping, stunned as though blind. Everyone wanted out! They wouldn't last long. No one was screaming anymore. Everyone was pressing and pushing in silent panic. White faces reaching toward the hole in the ceiling, pale figures with dust on their hair and shoulders, even the little boy dressed up to play Cowboys and Indians.

Heller tried not to think of water—cold water, clear water. He bent down, picked up the child, handed him to the man who had climbed atop the concrete block. The man took the boy and pushed him up and through the hole.

“Next! Where is Egon?”

Heller helped, lifted another child, and another who was much too heavy for him. His back hurt. He couldn't lift the women. A second man silently stepped up, lifting and pushing, lending a hand without any false modesty. Once they were all up and through, the man inspected the space once with the flashlight.

Heller waited.

“Everyone's out!” the man yelled. “Is Alfred up there? Hannah?” he called up, getting a yes in reply.

Now it was Heller's turn. He climbed onto the block only with difficulty. He had to kneel, and he got dizzy as he looked up into the hole. The back of his neck hurt more than his back. A rock must have hit him there.

“Go now!” said the man beside him. “Once you're past, you have to help me out.” Then he stooped to give Heller a leg up. He stepped onto the man's hands and felt his body sail into the air. He spread out his arms looking for something grab hold of. Someone pulled him up by the collar. He was welcomed by heat. Once he was through the hole, his lifters carelessly left him standing to the side. He staggered and crashed into the rubble. And now they pulled the last man out of the hole.

“Köhler?” someone asked once he was up too.

“Dead,” he replied curtly, and a woman shrieked.

“Where do we go now?”

“To the Elbe!” The first people out had already started climbing over the rubble that had once been their building but was now piled around them in towers several meters high.

Heller studied the people like an outsider. He wasn't one of them, they weren't taking him with them, and he didn't have to do what they said. But before he realized it would have been smarter to go with them, he was already alone. Alone in a world wholly foreign to him. This was no longer his city, no longer his neighborhood, no longer the street he had been running down earlier. It didn't even seem like his planet anymore.

It was a hell of heat and thunder, garish light, and dark shadows where sinister demons lay in wait to devour the people. A rolling rumble like a never-ending thunderstorm, howling and sucking at the lapel of his coat, his hair, a hurricane of heat that wanted to set him ablaze as well. A wave of fire raced through the canyons of rubble, its fingers spiraling wildly up into the sky. Heller tried to shield his face, the glowing heat desiccating his skin, singeing his hair, trying to eat his eyes. This is complete madness, he thought. There is no way out here. No up and down. No over and across. No escape. It was hell.

It took him forever to stand up. He brushed the dust off his clothes and out of pure habit groped to check for his pistol. As though he had all the time in the world. It was in his coat pocket. He was alive, but the world around him was gone. He felt oddly empty, paralyzed, thoughts frozen. But he couldn't stay here alone with only the dead air raid warden under where he stood, so he started climbing the mountain of rubble. He had to climb two meters, three meters, or more, before he could peer over the ridge.

Fire blazed everywhere he could see. Isolated figures hurried aimlessly through the inferno, stumbling, falling, and struggling up like spooked animals crossing each other's paths, merging and immediately diverging again. The flames caught one, he rolled, writhed, and died like a hay-filled scarecrow in the fire. Others were swept to the ground by the firestorm's winds and sucked up by a vortex of fire. Endless mountains of rubble piled up, bathed in thrashing orange glares; individual explosions absurdly akin to bursting soap bubbles; breaking wood and stone below him. A single wall of a building that had withstood the bombing collapsed not a hundred meters before him, apparently without a sound. The cloud of dust was instantly sucked high by the boiling-hot air, mixing into the reddish-brown clouds of fire in the sky. There was no sign a street had been there before. Above him, the constant roar of planes, as though the devil himself were whistling a tune.

Heller tasted ash and blood. His tongue was instantly scorched if he even slightly opened his mouth. He could still see only through the slits of his fingers in front of his eyes. He threw his coat over his head and slowly walked forward. He pulled himself up and over the remains of building but then slid back into a void, landing painfully on his ribs. Then he changed directions—a fallen chimney promised more support, more progress. Heller managed to crawl twenty meters along on top of it, but the mountain of debris ended sharply at a bomb crater. He pushed his legs over the side of the chimney, trying to gain his footing, but something gave away beneath his toes. The whole slope of rubble started to slide in. Heller let go, the winds pushing him to the bottom. Glowing hot chunks of brick and rock trickled into his collar and sleeve. He screamed but stayed put, lying prone on the smoldering rim of the crater. He clung fiercely to the demolished pipes jutting from the earth and pulled himself up, using them as steps to make it back to street level. At one point as he ran, he got tangled in burning curtains blasted by the explosion from their windows and now fluttering around like glowing birds. Once again he fell, freeing himself by kicking at the fabric and rolling to the side. His hands touched cobblestones, but he jerked them back because the pavement was unbearably hot and glittering with millions of shards of glass.

A woman rushed past him, blindly kicking him in the ankle. She caught her fall and hurried on in panic, pulling a child by the hand behind her. Heller cried out and raised his hand. But she didn't notice him. Only the child turned as they kept running. For a moment, Heller's and the girl's eyes locked.

It brought Heller back to his senses. Where should I go? he thought. The Elbe was a good idea. There should be protection enough in its wide, grassy floodplain. But where was the river?

Where the woman was running to with the child? There was no way through; the street was torn apart. It might be possible to walk around the crater, but there was also fire all around it. Heller could hardly stand up because the intense winds kept pushing him down, trying to rip the coat from his body. The only headway was on his knees. The cobblestones were so hot that he had to protect his hands with the sleeve of his coat. Flames blazed meters into the street and toward him from the few still-standing buildings, fanned by the winds. Heller watched street lamps turn soft as butter and tip over. He had lost all sense of direction. Was this Holbeinstraße, or had they climbed out on the other side of the building? Were those trees burning over there? Where had they stood? Suddenly he saw a figure crawling out of a pile of rubble toward him. After a few meters she got to her feet and staggered in short, unsteady steps toward him.

"Where are we?" Heller wanted to ask, but the firestorm's winds blew the words from his mouth. "Are you—" he began again but fell silent. The woman was in a long winter coat under which she had only a nightgown on. She looked through him with expressionless eyes, the hair on her head singed off, even her eyebrows were gone. Her coat was smoking. Her eyes and mouth wide open, she tried to get past him. Where was she going? Behind them there was only fire and rubble.

"No, wait!" Heller yelled, trying to touch her shoulder. The woman rasped hoarsely, turned to face him, and then tipped backward stiffly. Heller went onto his knees to help her up, but she was dead. Then he recognized her. He had just helped her out of the cellar.

Heller turned away. A wave of nausea and fear overwhelmed him. This is not how he wanted to die. He didn't want to die at all.

Then he noticed a manhole cover. Maybe he could hide inside there, he thought. He crawled toward it, pushed a chunk of wall off of it, put his fingers into the holes and pulled. Then he shrieked. Boiling air hissed out of the sewer and burned his fingers.

The pain was what snapped him to. Now he knew with every fiber of his body what was happening, he could feel the winds pushing and pulling on him, the flames looking and looking for more food, his hair curling, the

hot air shrinking his lungs, his eyes drying up, and the oxygen running out. All around him, more and more half-standing walls were caving in, pouring debris and glass into the street. The hills piling up were insurmountable. But where had the woman with the child disappeared to? Following her seemed his only chance. Now he crawled close to the ground, his coat over his head, although the heat from the pavement was almost unbearable. With a sudden inspiration, he searched for the pistol in his coat to toss it away. It was so hot blisters instantly formed as it flew from his hand. When he dared to peek his head out of the coat, his hair immediately started to catch fire. He patted his head down with his hands and pulled the coat back over. He kept thinking maybe he should have kept the weapon, then he might have been able to put an end to his misery, if needed.

But then he saw a cellar door down on his right. He pulled himself together, ducked and ran toward it, avoiding the fire lapping out of the windows in the building's main floor, fell blindly down the stairs, landed hard, and found himself in front of the open cellar door. He crawled inside, gasping for breath, but everything he inhaled was scorching hot gas. He heard a high-pitched whistling, shrill like a boiling teakettle. Heller then felt the sharp draft and didn't ponder long before groping ahead into the darkness of this cellar. He crawled with the draft toward the whistling and found a way through the wall into the cellar of the next building. He stood, staggered forward blindly with outstretched arms, found another opening, and fell over something soft, lifeless.

"Hello?" Heller said, standing again, reaching forward. After another dozen openings, he recognized a glimmer of light ahead of him. He estimated he had made it several hundred meters, maybe a whole block. Out of breath, he reached the exit. There was nothing but black bundles there. Looking more closely, he realized they were bodies. They looked like they were sleeping, the skin on their faces like parchment. He would need to climb over them to get out. There was no other way—he had to get out. No matter how much he breathed, he couldn't get enough oxygen. He desperately flung himself forward and crawled over the dead.

Finally outside, he found himself standing at a main intersection. The fire hadn't had enough fuel here, but a squall of hot wind instantly pushed him to the ground nonetheless. Heller crawled into the lee of an ad kiosk, whose glued-on posters were smoldering and singeing away without catching fire. He had no idea where he was. Nothing around him seemed familiar. The kiosk pillar was cracking and crunching from the heat, as though it were about to explode. Heller crawled away from it. But where should he go now?

Somehow he had to get an overview, he thought, an idea where the life-saving Elbe could be. To the right in front of him, a building had collapsed to its foundations. The beams of the roof were sticking out every which way between bricks and remains of walls. Heller began to climb up it on all fours. Several times loose stones gave way beneath him, rolling down and pulling him back. He stuck close to a fragment of a wall and balanced several meters across a beam, and then continued on all fours. He slowly made progress this way, past smashed furniture, scraps of curtains, a single ski. He tried to support himself on a solid-seeming board only to have it give way under his weight. Another piece of a wall collapsed, crashing into the hole and pulling everything in its way with it. Heller threw himself to the other side, looking for a handhold of some kind, finding it on a ripped water pipe thrust steeply into the air. Suddenly there was another kind of sound. Heller rolled to the side, crawled toward a small gap in the rubble. He lowered his head and listened.

It's some people screaming, he thought.

"I—" He had to clear his throat. I'll get help, he had wanted to say. "Hang in there!" he yelled instead, as loud as he could, but all that came out was raspy croaking.

"Help!" someone yelled in terrified panic. "Help us please!"

Heller couldn't help them. The people must be buried down there under ten meters of tons and tons of

rubble. It was impossible to do anything for them. He had to help himself. He needed to get higher, to the peak of this mountain of ruins, to orient himself.

“Hang in there, help is coming!” he yelled again. Then he climbed on, reaching ahead to test beams and walls. At some point after what felt like an eternity, he arrived at the top and looked around. In utter terror, he saw the whole world on fire.

Heller turned his face upward and stared for a few seconds into the bluish-red sky before daring to take in the city again. He couldn't believe what lay before him. As far as the eye could see, the entire city was ablaze. Around him there were only craters and mountains of debris and fires. Black clouds of smoke rose into the sky only to be sucked back down by the intense winds from the heat. And overhead planes still hummed past, illuminating shells still shot skyward, and bombs still exploded in bright flashes, while the roars from their detonations pulsed down and around everything. He closed his eyes in a desperate attempt to keep the immense horror away from himself. His chest burned hot, pitiful sobs came out of his throat. Suddenly he pulled up the sleeve to his jacket and looked at the time with tears in his eyes.

Ten minutes, he thought and laughed hysterically. Ten minutes had been all it took to transform a quiet night during a winter of war into an inferno. Ten minutes before, he was following a murderer through the streets, and now the street didn't even exist anymore. There was nothing more around him. The world was a burning heap of rubble.

Karin! Heller thought with a start. For the love of God, how had Karin have fared?

As though electrified his eyes darted all around him. Over in the distance after a squall ripped through the black smoke, he made out a church tower. That could be Trinity Church. So directly behind him . . . Heller turned around so fast he lost his footing. He tipped forward and landed hard, but it didn't matter. His neighborhood, Gruna, his house, had to be somewhere in that firestorm, not three kilometers from here.

“Karin! Oh, God, Karin!”

Obsessed with the thought that Karin needed his help—and worse yet that she might think him dead—he rushed back down the mountain of rubble. To his right he recognized a wide street, the pavement was ripped up, the cobblestones churned up, and a few cars that had been parked at the curb were glowing white. Trees were broken like matchsticks and now criss-crossed the street. Heller recognized streetcar rails ripped up and bent like wire. He might be able to find his way using those. He just needed to get to that side of the street somehow. He aimlessly climbed left then right, found something that looked like a rope, and grabbed for it. Startled, he jerked his hand back realizing it was a torn power line. But then he reached out again, it was unlikely there was still any power. He pulled on it vigorously a couple of times, but as soon as he tried to let himself down on the cable, the rubble it was hanging from gave way, and he fell into the abyss. He struck several things on his way down, finally coming to a rest, stunned.

Then rapid footsteps approached. Someone was tugging wildly on Heller. With difficulty he tried opening his eyes. Everything was buzzing, every part of him was hurting.

“Stand up! Please stand up!” A boy about twelve years old wearing an unbuttoned Wehrmacht coat and a Hitler Youth uniform was shaking him. His face was smudged with tears and soot, a much-too-big steel helmet hanging low over his face. “My mama!” he yelled.

Heller let the boy help him up, and he shook his head, dazed. “Come!”

The boy kept pulling at him. “I need to get to my mama!”

“She'll be OK!” Heller said, feeling like a pathetic liar. “I need to . . . we need to get to the Elbe. We'll be safer in the wet grass there.” He took the boy by the hand. He grasped tight, his hand crawling up into Heller's jacket sleeve.

“Our house is gone, and everyone is lying still and not moving anymore at all!” the boy screamed frantically.

“I know, son, but we still need to go. Come now!” Heller pulled the boy behind him, like the mother before with the little girl.

“Why are they doing this?”

“Over there!” Heller pointed ahead merely to distract the boy. But the boy had already seen what he should never have seen, wailing as he tried to walk clear around the charred remains of what had once been human beings. There were so many here, and Heller had no time to dodge them all. He leaped over them with long steps, holding the boy tightly by the hand.

“Why are they doing this? Those pigs!” the boy roared, choking as though he would vomit. “What did we do to them?”

Heller stood and shook the boy until his eyes finally turned from the corpses and looked him in the face. “Be quiet, and run with me!” he ordered him. “After all, does a German soldier cry the way you are right now when facing the enemy?”

What a stupid argument, he thought to himself, but it still brought the boy back to reason. He swallowed hard, gasped for air, and tried to suppress his sobs that were making his entire body shake. Heller knew only too well how German soldiers lay howling and trembling in the trenches, and it disgusted him he had now lied to the boy twice. But the boy needed to come with him, he could not leave him behind. There was no way to know whether more bombers would come, mindlessly dropping their loads into the night over the areas where they saw fires burning. Without a word, Heller started running again, and the boy followed.

They reached another square. Suddenly a time fuse bomb exploded there. Trees fell over, glowing rocks flew around them. Shards of bricks rained down on them. Heller looked for cover.

“Do you know where we are?” he asked the boy.

“Fürstenstraße!” the boy said, gasping and panting. Fürstenstraße, Heller thought. Impossible. All these ruins, ridiculous remnants of human habitation. Grand Garden Park, he suddenly thought. The animals in the zoo—the poor animals.

“Please listen,” the boy pleaded. “My mama is in the hospital! She is a nurse.” He tried to pull free, but Heller held him tight.

“What’s your name, son?”

“Bernhard Stölzel.”

“Bernhard, we need to—” he fell silent. What else can a person do? he thought. I want to find Karin; he wants to find his mother.

“Please! Please! Please let me go.”

He let the boy loose, who immediately ran off. Heller was alone again. A hundred newspapers from a destroyed news kiosk were swirling through the hot air, catching on fire in the heat, the thin branches of the trees glowing and crackling. A small group of people who had evidently materialized out of nowhere silently ran past him. They had thrown blankets over their heads. No one paid any attention to him. Everyone was alone their misery. An old man pulled a hand cart down the street. The only thing left of the hat on his head was the brim. His entire back was bare; the clothes had been consumed by fire. If he were fully conscious, he would have to be screaming in pain. He doggedly pulled and tugged every time the little wheels got stuck in rubble. It made no sense. What he was pulling on his cart, crunched in the middle like a bean, had been hopelessly lost. He would make more progress without it. His only chance at surviving would be to leave the cart.

He would also probably make more progress alone, Heller knew. But he immediately wiped the thought from his mind. He would continue running toward the Elbe, to the Gruna neighborhood. No matter where he looked, there was only fire and destruction. But he had no choice.

Max Heller ran off, he was still alive, and he had to find Karin.

Heller struggled through neighborhoods—Blasewitz to Striesen—and had to take huge detours. What otherwise had been a short walk, now took him more than an hour. Everywhere people were crawling from cellars into the streets. Some just stood there, staring bewildered into the inferno. Others responded pragmatically by starting to dig in the destroyed buildings for survivors. Some uniformed policemen were giving orders, the first dead were being carried into the street, while others tried to save their belongings by hauling chests of drawers and dishes or laundry into the street. Heller rushed on, faster and faster the closer he came to Gruna. He forgot the pain in his ankle, ignored the burning in his throat. The pressure in his chest grew tighter, his stomach turned to stone. He tried not to think about what he had seen. He tried not to imagine what could have happened to Karin. But in his mind he kept picturing her suffocating and burning to death, always crying out his name.

But once he crossed Bergmannstraße and approached Schandauer Straße, his steps slowed until he came to a stop. He let out only a gravelly moan. Everything that had once been his neighborhood was razed to the ground. Only the outer walls of a few buildings were still standing, like the backdrop to a stage play. The firestorm was raging hundreds of meters high, the wood of the roof trusses was glowing red, bursts of sparks sprayed out like volcanic eruptions. A street car sat in the intersection nearly unscathed, but there was no longer any track it might have driven on.

A few people hobbled toward him. No one cried, no one screamed. Apart from the muffled thunder of bombs—which was slowly sounding farther off—and the roar of the fires, there was only an eerie quiet. Even the sirens were silent. Heller lost all strength in both knees at once. He had to sit. Two Red Cross aides rushed past but didn't take notice of him. As he sat on a section of curb ripped a half meter out of the ground, everything inside him suddenly turned grey, all noise was far away. His eyes clouded as though trying to shield him, protect him from too much misery and hopelessness. He felt nothing anymore. His own stench rose into his nose, the burnt leather of his shoes, the scorched wool, the singed-off hair. Blood, flesh, dust, fear, death.

“Max?”

It almost sounded shy. Disbelieving. Heller looked up. Karin stood in front of him. She was wearing her slippers, a long grey skirt, and a half-burnt knit cardigan. Her hair was grey as dust, her face black from soot, and one eye was swollen shut. He slowly rose.

“Max?” she asked again as though she couldn't believe it. Heller nodded silently, taking her hand and stroking the back of it with his thumb. Then he touched her face, gently ran his fingers over her hair. “Max, I had to—I can't—” she began, but fell silent. Because there weren't words enough to describe what had happened.

Heller pulled her to him, and Karin pressed her face into the crook of his neck.

And that's how they stood.