

THE CABBIE OF BERLIN

by

DAMOND FUDGE

They say that Berlin hasn't changed much over the years. That might be true on the east side of Checkpoint Charlie, but Darrow had seen plenty of advancement just in the few short years he had been here. Many of the cars were of the current Western make and models, or at least within the 1980's. Modern rock and pop music could be heard spilling from bars, clubs and record stores as he walked the city. More often than not the TV's he saw were controlled with remotes rather than dials.

One of those televisions, over the bar in the café behind him, was broadcasting the latest speech from his own president. Darrow hadn't voted for him either time. It wasn't for any political reason, though. He just never voted. After that first time, when he turned eighteen, the process lost all of its mystery. Whenever the topic came up in conversation he had a standby glib remark about not thinking an actor could run the country. It would usually elicit laughs and the

topic would change. West Germans didn't like to linger too long on political conversations. Living this close to the Eastern Bloc on a daily basis had desensitized them to the subject.

The waitress set his sandwich down in front of him, breaking his trance. He realized that he had spent this entire time mindlessly staring at the dog lying dead in the gutter across the street. It had apparently been hit by a car when it was almost to safety. Its body was crushed from halfway down its ribcage to its tail, everything so twisted and mangled, with bones protruding, that it wouldn't have resembled an animal had it not been for the blood-matted fur. Darrow had found himself mesmerized by the sad, empty eyes that looked straight at him as if asking, "Why me?"

As he took a bite of his lunch, he glanced up and down the strasse. He tried to keep away from routine, since that was the best way to get yourself killed in this business. The only consistent behavior he indulged in was meeting contacts in the patio area of a café. The traffic noise might not drown out every word from potential eavesdroppers, but any little bit definitely helped. He had just taken a second bite of sandwich when Angus Finch sat down next to him, tossing a book onto the table.

"You really fucked this one up."

"I'm fine, Angus. And how are you?" Darrow replied. He pointed toward the rapidly approaching waitress. "I went with the turkey, but I hear the soup is fantastic."

Before the waitress spoke a single syllable, Finch said, "Kaffee. Schwarz."

"Not even a bitte, Angus?" Darrow quipped, as she walked away. "Manners."

“I’m a little short of them, these days. It might have something to do with one of my operatives.”

“It wasn’t my fault.”

“It never is.”

“It’s the truth this time. A rarity, I know.” He took another bite of sandwich, but the flavor had gone from it.

The waitress brought Finch’s coffee. He smiled at her as genuinely as he could manage. “Danke.” She smiled back and left them alone. Finch turned to Darrow and asked, “Better?”

Darrow shrugged. “I’m still certain she spit in it. Or worse.” The drink was halfway to Finch’s mouth. He stopped, looked down into it and then set the cup back on its saucer.

“So,” Finch coyly began. “The microfilm?”

“It’s safe.”

“Where is it?” A lot less coy that time, Darrow noticed.

“Safe.” Darrow took a sip from his beer. As he was setting it back down on the table, Finch slid the book he brought closer to the spy. “What’s this?” Darrow asked.

“Your way out of Germany.”

“Funny. I didn’t know I had any such plans.”

“You do now. You’re done here.”

Darrow’s ears got hot. “I can salvage this. Nothing is unfixable.”

“This is. They now know who you are.”

“It couldn’t have been that big of a secret.”

“No, but the few people who knew only had suspicions. Thanks to those two witnesses and, apparently, some security video, what was once a small rumor is now a full-fledged fact.”

Shit, Darrow thought as he picked up the book. He flipped it open and found, stuck within its pages, a photograph of a man. It looked like a copy of an official workplace photo, maybe taken for one of those clip-on ID cards. His ears got hotter and his heart even sank a little. Without looking up he asked, “Is this a joke?”

“You have, at most, twelve hours to get out of the country. Not enough time for even our best cobblers to create new papers for you.”

Darrow hardly ever noticed the gun under his left arm anymore, but it suddenly felt five times heavier. He flipped the photograph over without removing it from the book. He was familiar enough with the address scrawled on the back that he only needed a glance. “Who is he?” he asked his handler, covering his reaction.

“Works freelance as a cabbie. No one will miss him right away. And, of course, his resemblance to you is uncanny. Get in, get his papers, get out. Simple.”

“Hmph. Simple.” Darrow closed the book and took a large swig of his beer.

“You have your choice of travel methods. There’ll be a ticket in his name waiting at the airport, train station and bus station.”

Darrow slipped the book into his jacket pocket. “Tell me, do you have one of these guys for everyone?”

Finch nodded and said, “Pretty much.”

Darrow raised an eyebrow. “Even for you?”

“I’m sure they do. Yeah.”

Darrow raised his glass in a sarcastic toast and said, “God bless America.” He finished off the drink in one long gulp.

Darrow climbed the apartment stairs quickly but silently. He had mastered being light on his feet in these situations. As old and creaky as German apartments could be, there was no need alerting the other tenants to his presence, thus risking any unnecessary prying eyes. Especially in a city like Berlin where information was currency.

He lightly rapped on the door to 5A, using the agreed upon knocking sequence. Even so, he still noticed a shadow fall over the peephole before the locks were undone. The door opened a crack and the nervous face of Emil Keller appeared in the space. His eyes darted around, looking at every inch of the hallway that wasn’t Darrow.

“What happened to next month?” Keller asked.

“Timetable moved up drastically. Not my doing.”

Keller now focused on Darrow, looking him up and down for an uncomfortably long moment. He finally stepped aside and let Darrow pass into his apartment.

Darrow stood in the middle of the living room, taking in the simplicity of the furnishings, while Keller relocked the door. “What happened?” Keller asked as he locked the final deadbolt.

“I’m apparently burned. Gotta get out as soon as I can.”

“I understand. Give me a minute, then.”

Keller entered his bedroom. Darrow could hear some scraping sounds as something heavy was moved. While he waited, he turned his back on the bedroom door and withdrew his revolver from the shoulder holster. He reached in his jacket pocket and removed his suppressor. He had just finished screwing it in place when Keller returned.

“Here is...”

Darrow spun around and his weapon coughed once, interrupting the German. The red blossom that appeared on the left side of Keller’s chest brought an expression of surprise to his face, a look that partially disappeared as the second bullet destroyed the left side of his head. The microfilm case dropped from his outstretched hand and bounced twice before rolling under the coffee table. Soon afterward, the dead body crumpled to the floor.

Darrow unscrewed the suppressor and re-holstered his gun, pocketing the metal tube. He crouched down so he could see under the table. The microfilm had stopped against the far leg and he had to reach for it, rolling it closer with his fingertips before he could get a good grip around it.

He stood and entered the bedroom. He found Keller’s passport on the first try: Top dresser drawer under his socks. How stereotypical. Darrow had honestly hoped for it to be more of a challenge. He flipped it open to check the photo. He stared at it, even cocking his head to get

a different perspective. There was a mirror attached to the top of the dresser. He held the passport up in front of him so he could compare the picture to his reflection. He'd never thought about it over the months Keller was his inside man, but even Darrow had to admit there was a resemblance. *Fucking CIA*, he thought as he popped the tiny booklet into his inside jacket pocket.

When he returned to the living room, Darrow knelt on the floor next to Keller's body. He rolled him over just enough so he could retrieve his wallet. He slid the driver's license from its little window sleeve and returned the wallet to Keller's pants pocket. He took one last look around the apartment before turning off the lights and exiting.

Darrow spent three hours the next day huddled in a stall of the train station's men's room. He had gone straight to his own apartment after Keller's. As he approached his building, he noticed the car out front containing what was, more than likely, a pair of KGB agents. None too subtle of them, which was just fine with Darrow. He used his contingency entrance through the building next door and was able to get into his apartment, grab his pre-packed getaway bag and slip out without incident.

Using one of his oldest aliases – he had already burned the rest, both figuratively and literally - he checked into one of the finest hotels near the station. In his experience, the staff at a high-end hotel, who regularly cater to rich patrons who wish for anonymity and tip well for this extreme privacy, are less likely to report anyone to the authorities than someone at an out-of-the-way fleabag. Besides, it might be the last time he could indulge in such luxury.

He checked out early the next morning, about five hours before his train was scheduled to leave. He picked up his ticket and then spent the next half hour casing the station to see if it was being watched. Not yet, but it wouldn't be long before they arrived. He noted several out of the way nooks and blended into the shadows of one until he saw them. Dark dispositions in equally dark clothing. KGB agents were so confident in the fear their presence caused to the general populace that they rarely hid who they were, which just made them easy to spot.

He watched the Russians as they made a preliminary sweep of the entire station, including his planned final destination of the men's room. As he watched them, Darrow couldn't help wondering if they were the same duo from in front of his apartment or a new shift? One of them got close to approaching his hiding spot, so Darrow ducked out behind a passing family and slid easily into another nook. Once the two agents settled into their seats, perfectly angled to see anyone entering the station, Darrow crossed the waiting area using the various clumps of people as cover.

He reached the bathroom and settled into one of the middle stalls. Every half hour he changed into a different pair of pants, socks and shoes. He had three pairs of each, and he varied the combinations each time. He figured that his two puppy dogs would periodically recheck the men's room, but unless they just popped their heads in the door for a quick glance, he heard nothing to indicate that they came back anytime during his water closet self-imprisonment. When he heard the final announcement for his train, he melted into the crowd and traversed the platform with ease until he was aboard and comfortably seated.

Within moments, the train was gathering speed on its way out of Berlin. They hadn't even made it to the city limits when Darrow noticed his little Russian buddies making their way up the

aisle two cars away. He stood and casually made his way toward the back of his car, trying not to attract any undue attention while knowing too well that he was probably going to be spotted. He stepped into the area between the cars. The door to the outside was locked, yet was successfully picked a mere ten seconds later. He opened the door, then moved to the other side of the small space and waited.

The open door had its desired effect. As the first Russian exited the train car, his attention instantly went to the sound of rushing air. Darrow grabbed the man from behind and shoved him into his partner, knocking the other agent back and onto the floor. Using the momentum from this, Darrow flung the first agent toward the opening. He could hear the man's fingernails scraping the metal walls as he tried to prevent the inevitable, before finally stepping backward out into the beautiful, sunny day.

A bullet ricocheted off the wall next to Darrow, just missing his head. He rushed through the door into the next car, racing past startled passengers. His pursuer had just entered the car as Darrow exited the other end. The next car was baggage. A few crates and boxes were stacked just inside the door. Beyond them, racks upon racks of cases, both suit and brief, lined the sides. He made his way halfway down the car, slid into the tight space between two racks, drew his gun and waited.

The remaining KGB agent quickly peeked through window on the door, then ducked back out of sight. He made the same movement a second time, just to verify he saw Darrow. He threw the door open and waited for a moment in case the American fired his gun right away. When nothing came, he dove into the car and rolled, coming up behind some of the crates and narrowly avoiding Darrow's first shot at him.

The Russian popped up from behind his cover and fired. Sparks erupted from the front of a mustard-yellow suitcase nearby. It popped open, spraying toothpaste and cologne all over the bright red suitcase sitting innocently next to it. Darrow flinched but remained calm. He did nothing the next three times the Commie took a shot, just studied him and the situation.

After the third shot, one that pulled so wide it struck the back wall, Darrow brought up his gun. He took careful aim, stabilizing the weapon on the luggage rack, and waited. Just as the top of the Russian's head appeared over the crates, he squeezed the trigger. The bullet caught the upper right area of the agent's forehead, but it was enough. His head snapped back from the force and disappeared from view. Darrow lowered his gun and carefully approached the body.

He could hear a rhythmic tapping as he neared the crates. His bullet must have taken out a part of the Russian's brain that was crucial, but not enough of it to kill. The body was twitching in a strange death dance, its eyes wide open as if completely surprised by this turn of events. An odd gurgling noise began to emanate from the slack mouth. It was something he had never seen in all of his years, and was too much to endure any longer. He shot the poor man in the chest, effectively stopping the grotesque display.

Darrow holstered his gun. He stepped out into the space between cars and picked his second lock of the day. He returned to the luggage car, bent over and hefted the body up to its feet, careful not to get any blood on him. He walked it over to the door and unceremoniously chucked it out into the passing forest. His next task was cleaning up. He took a shirt from the wounded suitcase and used it to clean up what spatters of blood and brain there were. He cleaned the toiletries from the red suitcase and, using some tape he found on a utility shelf in the back of the car, secured the yellow one. Darrow tossed the shirt out the door on his way back to his seat.

The American secret agent stood in front of the Customs Agent at the border between East and West. While the man rummaged through his bag, Darrow calmly snacked on a large piece of apple strudel. The Customs Agent constantly glanced up at Darrow the entire time. It was times like this that his hours spent working to lose his American accent when he spoke German paid off the most.

"It appears you packed in a hurry, Herr Keller," the agent inquired.

"I did. I got the call from my aunt late last night."

"About your...uncle? Is that correct?"

"Yes. They do not expect him to live to see tomorrow. In fact he might be dead by the time I get there."

"And this is in Frankfurt?"

"Yes."

The Customs Agent picked up the passport from the table and examined it for what seemed like the thousandth time. "If it was so urgent, why did you not fly?"

"I drive a cab for a living. I can't afford a plane ticket." He held up the mostly-eaten strudel. "That is why I am eating now. I do not know when I will get a chance again, and this little piece of strudel was all I could afford."

The German studied Darrow through the suspicious eyes specifically bred this side of the Curtain. He flipped through the passport as if it contained the page count and hidden depths of

your average Dostoyevsky novel. He finally handed the passport to Darrow and waved his hand toward the exit. "Proceed," he instructed.

Darrow collected his bag and did as he was told. As he passed through the door, he could hear someone complaining to another Customs Agent about the damage to his suitcase. On the other side of the border, the spy took one last bite of strudel before removing the plastic film canister hidden within its flaky folds. He tossed the remaining pastry into a trash can and proceeded to the station bar to order the most expensive glass of whiskey he could.

The End