

## Chapter 1

‘You’re *where?* Brandenburg Gate?’ Carla could barely get in a word for the torrent gushing from the other end of the line. ‘You’re on the film set again? You’ve got what? A rifle! Impossible!’ She refrained from flinging the receiver into its cradle. She checked her diary and the clock on the wall above her desk. Could she rescue Lulu from all this palaver and still get back in time to meet her new client? Not likely.

‘Please!’ Her aunt sounded unusually scared and pathetic. ‘You have to convince them, or else they’ll cart me off to the police station!’

Lulu was a good actress.

‘I beg you...’ she whispered. There were indeed harsh masculine voices in the background and even a police siren.

‘I’ll come as quick as I can,’ Carla promised. Of all the adventurous exploits that her aunt Lulu had been up to since the death of Carla’s father, this sounded like the craziest one by a long margin.

Should she take the S-Bahn or a taxi? Carla hesitated as she grabbed her lace summer gloves, a final present from her father. It would work out just fine, she told herself with a smile, that had always been Father’s motto. She missed him, not just because of the presents, which he always seemed to pull out of a hat. Her mother used to call him ‘the Raisin Bomber of Charlottenburg’, in a slightly jaded tone. But since his fatal car crash, there were no more raisins to be had – they had to watch every pfennig. Better take the S-Bahn then!

Carla checked to see if she had sufficient coins in her handbag, locked the door of the Nightingale Agency, ran up to the second floor and called out to her mother, ‘I’ll be right back!’ then rushed back downstairs.

As she made her way down Grolmanstraße through the summer heat towards Savigny Station, she congratulated herself for having had the foresight to wear her sensible shoes as well as the new faux-Chanel bouclé suit. It would almost certainly be a great help to look older and more earnest, if her crazy aunt had really got into trouble with the police.

Carla was breathless by the time she got onto the platform, but her reward was that the train drew in just then. Three rattling carriages with an oily smell.

The deadly combination of sweat, smoke and eau de cologne hit her like a wall once she was inside the carriage. She tried to take only shallow

breaths, but everything started swimming out of focus. She grabbed a strap just before the train set off.

She'd started having these dizzy spells since last year, right after the accident which killed her father but which she'd survived. Carla hated this fuzzy loss of focus, although the doctors kept saying there was no need to worry, that she was lucky she'd overcome her head injury so well. She considered herself anything but lucky.

She clung fast to her strap, until the dizziness subsided a little. Then she squeezed past a couple of men who didn't even look up from their newspapers, muttering her apologies as she sat down.

She closed her eyes in relief for a moment and touched the die on her lucky charm to collect herself. Not a good idea, it just made her feel worse. Better do some spotting, like in dancing. She opened her eyes to stare out of the window, but it was moving too fast.

Her eyes fell on the newspaper opposite, magnetically attracted to the large picture of Kennedy. Her heartbeat quickened, not because of JFK himself, but because he reminded her of Richard. Kennedy could have been his brother, they both had that tall, rangy look, a fine head of hair, as well as that unusual, electrifying glow. The slightest side glance from Richard turned her insides to liquid syrup. She dreamt of embracing him and breathing him in. After four semesters she'd finally worked up the courage to approach him. He'd looked at her and she'd gone up to him... but was then unable to do anything except stand there, not saying a single word. Carla looked down at her lace gloves. She should've dropped one of the gloves, he'd have picked it up and then... What would it have felt like, to ruffle his elegant quiff? Her fingertips started to tingle. His hair must be so silky, with a strong smell of brilliantine, moss and freshly-cut wood.

She sighed. She'd been studying law, but after Father's death, she and her mother were left without a pfennig, so she had to take on the Nightingale & Co. Agency to earn some money for the two of them.

She tried not to think of all that and focused instead on the headline below the Kennedy picture in the *Berliner Morgenpost*. It had to do with the press conference the other day, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of August, where he'd spoken about the Berlin problem. Kennedy was quoted word for word: 'There has been a tremendous passage from East to West which, of course, I know is a matter of concern to the Communists.' Surely every single person living in Berlin knew that. Carla squinted a little to see the next sentence: '...because this tremendous speed-up of people leaving the Communist system to come to the West and freedom, of course, is rather illuminating evidence of the

comparative values of the free life in an open society, and those in a closed society under a Communist system.’

Why on earth was Kennedy using all those indirect allusions, instead of simply stating that the Allies would do their best to preserve freedom in the West?

Father thought JFK was nothing more than an idle talker. ‘A politician who won’t wear a hat so as not to damage his quiff has no respect for anyone,’ was his opinion after a couple of glasses of Berliner Luft peppermint liqueur. Father must be turning in his grave knowing that the hatless Kennedy had been sworn in as the American President in January.

The S-Bahn stopped with a squeal of wheels. The doors opened, letting in more of the sticky-hot summer air, but at least the seat opposite was now free. Three more stops and then she’d have to change at Friedrichstraße. Heavens, the timing was tight! What on earth was Lulu thinking, carrying an air rifle close to the border with the Eastern sector?

A small, plump woman with a hat decorated with oversized flowers sat down opposite her. She took out a roll of sour gumdrops and popped one in her mouth. Carla couldn’t look away: the woman and the hat reminded her of her aunt.

The woman noticed Carla staring at her and offered her a gumdrop with a twinkle in her eyes. That was exactly what Lulu would have done, although she might have embellished things with a dramatic ‘I always have some on me for any kissing scenes in the film. Did you know that Walter Giller is the best kisser of them all?’

Carla shook her head. ‘Thanks anyway,’ she said and smiled in as friendly a manner as she could. It really wasn’t nice to stare at somebody and then turn down their sweets. This was all because of the film *Emil and the Detectives* – after seeing that, she had nightmares and never accepted anything from strangers ever again.

‘Please yourself!’ the woman shrugged indifferently, put away her gums and took out a *Constanze* magazine from her enormous handbag. She took off her gloves, licked two fingers and started leafing through the magazine, as if she were at home on the sofa. Carla observed her greedily devouring a richly illustrated article about Farah Diba and the Shah of Persia. That was exactly the kind of thing Mother would read too – she adored royal beauties.

Oh no! She blushed as she realised she’d forgotten to buy Mother’s favourite magazine. Naturally, her mother had not uttered a single word about this omission, and she never would. She was so proud of the fact that she never complained. She preferred to suffer in silence.

When Carla finally arrived at the Brandenburg Gate, she could already hear the screech of the autograph hunters long before she even set eyes on them. 'Horst, Horst, Horst!' Great, so the film set must be close by. She walked hurriedly towards the barriers designed to keep the fans away from the actual filming.

Scores of young women were waiting with their autograph books for the stars of the film *One, Two, Three*. Carla could understand all too well why Lulu was so keen to get a part in this Billy Wilder comedy. The main stars were James Cagney, Liselotte Pulver and of course the one whom all the girls had come to see: Horst Buchholz.

It broke Lulu's heart when, after two casting calls, they opted instead for the Austrian actress Rose Renee Roth, who in one fell swoop became Lulu's arch-nemesis. Since shooting started, Lulu kept hanging around the film set, hoping against all hope to secure a role.

But what on earth was she planning to do with the air rifle? Shoot her arch-rival? Could you even kill someone with that? Probably not. Then what? Shoot the hat off a border guard to get her name in the papers? Yes, that sounded more like her.

Just behind the film set there was the crossing to the Soviet zone, which was teeming with even more border guards than usual. Ulbricht must have been worried that comrades might be tempted to flee to the West – after all, the film was about one of the most seductive drugs of American capitalism: Coca Cola.

As Carla approached the set, she noticed lots of shrivelled balloons lying on the street, which reminded her of a complicated but well-remunerated case she'd solved with her father. They had to secure used condoms for evidence. They'd been able to solve the case, but the memory of it made her hair stand on end. She shook her head to get rid of the unwelcome images and tried to search for Lulu instead.

She was good at observing details, on the streets, inside buildings, she could recall everything in great detail even hours later. More than that, she could even picture things she'd not actually seen in a particular place but that should have been there, or things that had happened there. Carla found this somewhat disconcerting, but her father was far more pragmatic about it and explained it was the collective unconscious. It was neither strange nor magical, it was simply a useful skill and he encouraged her to develop it further, particularly when he noticed that it helped them move an investigation forward.

No sign of either Lulu or any policemen anywhere. She'd have been easy to spot with her extravagant hat in this sea of young autograph seekers in their capris or petticoats. There were guards in uniform every fifty metres. The artistes' entrance had no less than three guards in front of it.

You couldn't make out much beyond the barriers, other than the Brandenburg Gate. Some tracks had been laid and a mounted camera was being pushed backward and forward slowly by two young men, until someone with a megaphone yelled 'Cut!' which made the camera trolley and a few extras come to a standstill.

Not a trace of Lulu. As she turned to check in the other direction, a wonderful aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafted towards her. She could do with a coffee now, but she couldn't figure out where the smell was coming from, nor where Lulu could possibly be. Had she somehow strayed beyond the barriers? She'd said on the phone that the police had arrested her, but there was no sign of police anywhere, just the private security on set and the border guards at the Brandenburg Gate, who looked grey and frozen like tin soldiers.

'Horst! There he is, Horst!' cried one of the autograph hunters, pointing somewhere beyond the barriers, running towards it and trying to climb over. The others followed, shrieking. Carla shielded her eyes with her hand and watched them.

Indeed, it was Horst Buchholz heading towards one of two stalls, which Carla had not hitherto spotted. Liselotte Pulver was standing in front of one of them, taking a cup from a woman in a white apron. There was a snack stall right next to the coffee stall, and she became aware of the appetising aroma of grilled sausages and chips. Carla's stomach started to rumble. Her cheese sandwich was still at the office, and she wouldn't have much time to eat when she got back.

Where was this aunt of hers?

She claimed she'd be carted away by the police if Carla didn't come to back her up in the great fib she'd told them. But there were no police around. Or did she mean the border guards? That would make sense, because surely it was a grave error to wander so close to the border with an air rifle. What if Lulu had been taken to Hohenschönhausen Prison, because she'd been rude to them?

Goodness, the smell of those sausages! She couldn't help but look at the food stalls, where Liselotte Pulver was being escorted by a man. She was nodding and laughing her famous big laugh, which reminded Carla of the time she'd queued for hours to get tickets for Father for the premiere of A

*Glass of Water* at Zoo Palace Cinema. But then the accident happened and when she found the tickets months later in her drawer, she burst into tears. They'd never do anything together again. Instead, she had to look after Mother and grab hold of his crazy sister as soon as possible and head back home. She couldn't risk having the new client turn up to find the door locked. After all, there were many rival detective agencies in Berlin.

Carla walked up to one of the guards standing at the cordoned-off entrance to the film set. She was confident that, dressed as she was in her sober little suit, she did not resemble any of the autograph hunters.

'Excuse me, have you seen any police officers around here?' she asked. He shook his head and pointed at one of his colleagues who was standing closer to the Brandenburg Gate. She went up to him and asked again.

'Whaddaya want with them?' This guard was obviously bored and looked forward to a bit of disruption to his routine. He tapped his burly chest, grinning; his chest looked particularly fine in the dark blue uniform. 'Ain't I ace enough for ya?'

'No, no, none as ace as you!' Carla wasn't even lying, for the man was very attractive, his eyes full of mischief. 'But they've got something you don't have!'

'Impossible!' He scrutinised her more closely and raised an approving eyebrow.

'Yes, they pulled in my grandma,' she said. Most people loved their grandmothers; aunts were decidedly less popular.

'A wee little thing, covered in jewels and armed to the teeth with a hat and a gun?'

Carla nodded, stunned.

'Nah, sorry!' The guard laughed out loud. He must be teasing her. How else would he have known to mention the hat and, above all, the gun?

'I'll be in trouble if I don't bring Grandma back soon...' Carla wished she could squeeze out a few tears, but the only actress in the family was Lulu. Maybe she'd be more successful with a little tip.

'All right then, don't wanna spoil your day. It's all good.' He pointed towards the food stall. 'They took...' he hesitated a moment, '*Grandma* over there and are now having a fine ole time.'

Carla looked where he was pointing, but all she could see was Horst Buchholz raising his bottle of beer with James Cagney.

'Behind the food stall are the cheap seats for the crew,' he explained.

'And how do I get in there?'

'Got a smoke by any chance?'

Of course she had. First rule of detecting: always have some cigarettes on you. Carla opened her bag and took out a pack of Lucky Strikes.

'It's all yours!'

'Look at that, will ya!' He pocketed the cigarettes, waved and called to his colleague, 'Off for a quick break.'

Then he pushed the barriers to one side and politely gestured to Carla that she should go through. She was pleased that she'd be spared the death stares of all the female autograph hunters.

The closer she got to the film set, the more alluring the smell of coffee and fries. There were people bustling around between the cardboard backdrops, tables full of tools and clothes trolleys. On their left, a workman was connecting a sidecar to a black motorbike bespattered with mud. The guard sighed.

'Would love to have one of those!'

'A dirty motorbike?'

'Nah, got one already. I meant the sidecar, so I could cruise through Berlin with pretty girls and their grandmas!' He looked at her admiringly. Was he always so ready to turn on the charm?

A couple of steps further, two women were blowing up balloons with a hand-held pump. When the balloons reached their full size, Carla saw what was written on them and had to laugh. The first lot said *Ruski go home*, the other *Ami go home*.

'Be swell if they both got the hell outta Berlin!' the guard commented with a broad grin. They ducked behind a plywood model of a tall building and finally reached the back of the food stall.

And there she was! Carla was struck dumb at the scene unfolding before her eyes.

Aunt Lulu was sitting at a table, giggling with two uniformed policemen. One of them must have told an incredibly funny joke, because they were all bent over with laughter. One of the men was smacking the table with his hand as he laughed, making the now-empty currywurst containers jump, while the gun leaning on the table right next to Lulu rattled.

Carla didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. Aunt Lulu had once again managed to rescue herself.

It was late. Too late, she could tell without even looking at her watch. She'd have to get a taxi to be back in time. And even so, she'd need to have the traffic lights all going her way.

Before Carla could say anything to Lulu, the guard stepped forward and picked up the pellet gun. The two policemen instantly snapped to attention and Lulu's eyes bulged when she finally noticed Carla.

'Careful!' said one of the policemen, the table-thumper.

'Just a pre-war Diana 25,' said the guard, holding the gun in shooting position and pointing it skywards, 'I know it. A harmless toy.'

'Depends,' said the other policeman, getting up and standing to attention. 'If one of these things hits you...'

*Straight in your heart would be nice*, thought Carla, looking daggers at her aunt, who was making gestures of appeasement.

'Child! How nice to see you here *at last!*'

Carla took a deep breath and started counting backwards from 777, so as not to lose her composure. Seven was her lucky number and she really could do with some luck right now.

'Just imagine,' continued Lulu unabashedly, 'While I was waiting for you – for so long – I managed to sort things out with these nice gentlemen. Sit down, my child, and Trudi will make you a nice portion of fries.'

What was she on about and who on earth was Trudi? Aunt Lulu always assumed people knew whom she was talking about. Lilo, Billy, and now this Trudi person.

'I don't have time for that, unfortunately,' said Carla, trying to ignore the rumbling in her stomach. 'As I told you on the phone, I have an appointment.'

'But, child, your father would hate to see you all skin and bones! And Trudi...'

'So that's poor, poor Grandma?' said the guard, shaking his head.

'I see you've got it all in hand!' said Carla, turning round and rushing towards the barriers. That was it, done, over!

'Wait a minute!' called Lulu after her, 'I can explain.'



*But I don't want to hear it*, thought Carla, speeding up. She bumped into something soft. A man had suddenly appeared out of nowhere and they collided. His peaked cap flew through the air and landed on the floor.

'Watch out, will you?' she said.

Then she looked up. Oh, no, it couldn't be... it was Billy Wilder. Lulu had shown her hundreds of pictures of him and of his films. His glasses hung lopsided, and it was all her fault.

'I'm so sorry,' she said and wished she were four metres behind the Brandenburg Gate. She bent to pick up the cap, desperately wracking her brains for more English vocabulary, but drawing an absolute blank. 'So, so sorry,' she said as she handed him the cap.

'Isn't the saying "More haste, less speed"?' he said in German with a slightly rattling voice. He took the cap, slapped it against his thighs a couple of times and put it back on his head.

Of course, he was from Vienna and Berlin. 'You're right. I should have looked where I was going.'

'According to Lubitsch, whom I admire greatly, even the most dignified person makes a fool of himself at least twice a day,' the Hollywood director continued, adjusting his glasses back and forth until he was satisfied. 'This was merely the first time today!'

'Please accept my apologies.'

Billy Wilder winked at her. 'Take it easy, you know that nobody's perfect!' Then he headed off to the coffee stall.

A heavy hand grabbed Carla's shoulder. She was ready for anything by now. Getting arrested, thrown out, sued. She superstitiously touched the lucky die on her necklace.

'I'll take you out this way, there's a taxi stand here.'

To her relief, it was the guard who'd helped her before. 'Seems like you're in a hurry.'

'Thank you, that's kind of you.'

He handed her the rifle. 'I confiscated that, just in case.'

Carla stared at the rifle, then at the guard and then, over his shoulder, at Billy Wilder helping himself to a coffee. Had she really just experienced all of that? Now she'd have to rush through the city with a gun to complement her fake Chanel suit. She'd almost certainly be too late for the meeting even if she shot her way through the crowds.

The guard must have realised that she was about to keel over, because he smiled encouragingly.

‘By the way, my name’s Bruno,’ he said as he shyly handed her a note, ‘Here’s the phone number from the place where I sub-let. Just in case you feel like havin’ a coffee some time.’

‘A taxi to start with, perhaps?’ said Carla, stuffing the note in her handbag.

‘No taxi required,’ said Aunt Lulu, all out of breath. She still had the two policemen in her wake.

That was all she needed! How had her aunt moved so fast, when she hated any form of sport other than dancing? At least she hadn’t witnessed the collision with Billy Wilder, otherwise she’d have tried to make a lifelong friend of the film director.

Lulu dramatically handed Carla a portion of chips, as if she were presenting her with the Oscar for best film rather than a greasy paper bag. ‘For you!’ she said.

‘I’ve got my hands full.’ Carla waved her handbag and the rifle. ‘Besides, I don’t have the time.’

‘I’ve solved the problem. These charming gentlemen will drive us to Charlottenburg. I’ve explained to them how important it is for you to get to your meeting with the mayor’s spokesman in time.’

All three men looked respectfully at Carla. She tried to keep an earnest face and cleared her throat. What had Lulu just invented?

‘Thank you,’ she said at last, unable to bear Bruno’s amazed glance. ‘This shows a great spirit of citizenship on your part, I’m sure the mayor will appreciate it.’ No need to be too honest, she was sure there would be no police escort for a meeting with her actual client.

Soon after, Carla was sitting next to Lulu on the back seat of the black police Volkswagen Beetle, eating her chips to the accompaniment of the howling siren.

‘Can you please explain what you were doing with an air rifle on set?’ Carla whispered, looking anxiously at the two policemen. ‘And what about the call? There was no one arresting you, obviously!’

Aunt Lulu handed her an embroidered handkerchief. ‘You’re going to get your suit dirty. Not much of a loss, though, this horrible colour would insult even blind people. I wouldn’t use it even as a coat for my little Fritzi to go walkies.’

Carla bit her tongue and instead took the last three chips out of the newspaper. She could read the titles clearly through the grease, and now she understood where Lulu had got her idea about the mayor's spokesperson.

*Adenauer warns that Willy Brandt is sowing panic. It bodes ill for peace if the Mayor of Berlin claims that its inhabitants are afraid that the Iron Curtain will be cemented there.*

Carla crumpled up the newspaper, leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes. Her aunt's soft hand squeezed hers. 'Well, child, we got out of that alive. Tomorrow I'll pay my debt by taking you out to lunch at Café Kranzler and tell you all about it. My treat, of course.'

As always, Carla was unable to say no to that.