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The Good German

JOSEPH KANON

National Bestselling Author of *Los Alamos*

The Good German

JOSEPH KANON

PICADOR USA

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Good German takes place in Berlin in July and August of 1945. Any story set in the past runs the inevitable risk of error. This is particularly true of Berlin, whose map has been changed by history several times this past century, and certainly of the chaotic first few months of the Allied occupation, when events happened in such rapid succession that their chronology is often confused even in contemporary accounts, not to mention faulty memory. The alert reader, however, is entitled to know when deliberate liberties have been taken for narrative convenience. The Allies did indeed capture vast quantities of Nazi documents, but it was nearly a year before the Document Center in Wasserkäfersteig, described here, was fully operational. The Allied victory parade actually took place on September 7 and not, as here, three weeks earlier. Readers familiar with the period will know the American occupation authority as OMGUS (Office of Military Government, United States), but this designation was not official until October 1945, so an easier form, MG, is used here rather than the more unwieldy but correct USGCC (United States Group, Control Council). Any other errors, alas, are unintentional.

▪ BERLIN 1945 ▪

0 Miles 1 2
0 Kilometers 1 2

Olympic Stadium

Schloss
Charlottenburg

CHARLOTTENBURG

SAVIGNYPLATZ

KURFÜRSTENDAM

OLIVIERPLATZ

PAR
STRA

▪ POTSDAM ▪

0 Miles
0 Kilometers

Schloss
Cecilienhof

Neuer
Garten

Havel

Alten Markt

Havel

WILMERSDORF

GRUNEWALD

DAHLEM

To Potsdam

ARGENTURISCHE ALLEE

KRONENBURG
WALLER

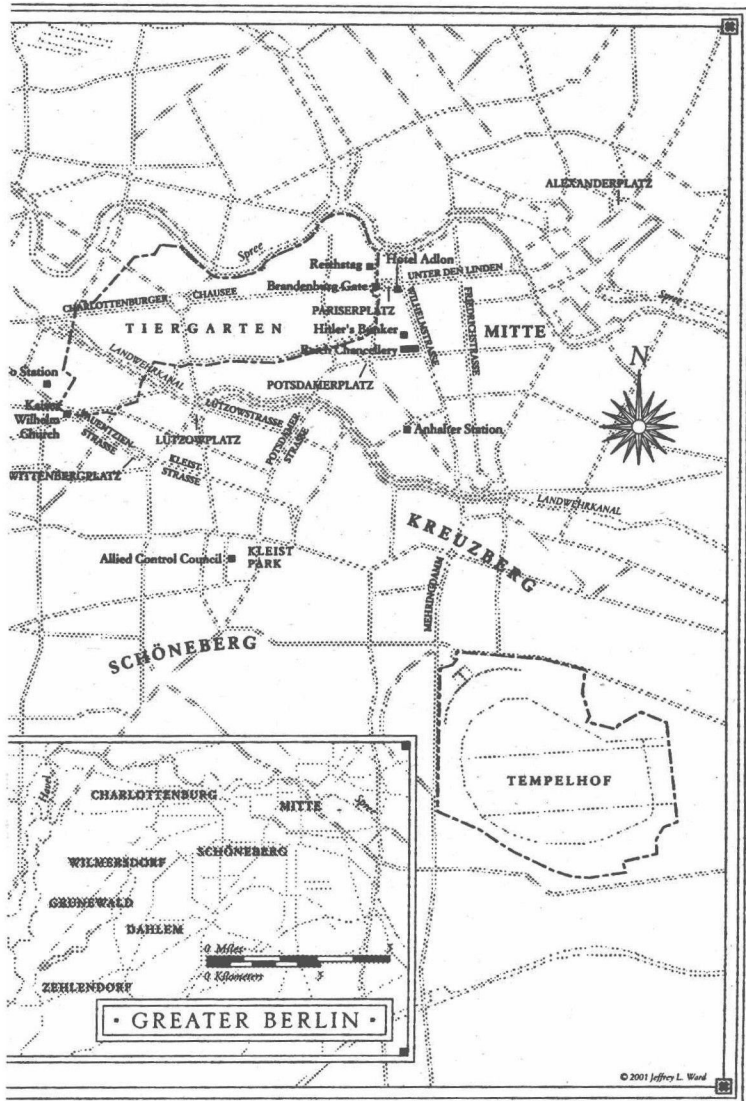
MG HQ

Kaiser Wilhelm Institute

Kommandantur



Potsdam



I

RUINS

CHAPTER 1

The war had made him famous. Not as famous as Murrow, the voice of London, and not as famous as Quent Reynolds, now the voice of the documentaries, but famous enough to get a promise from Collier's ("four pieces, if you can get there") and then the press pass to Berlin. In the end, it was Hal Reidy who'd made the difference, juggling the press slots like seating arrangements, UP next to Scripps-Howard, down the table from Hearst, who'd assigned too many people anyway.

"I can't get you out till Monday, though. They won't give us another plane, not with the conference on. Unless you've got some pull."

"Only you."

Hal grinned. "You're in worse shape than I thought. Say hello to Nanny Wendt for me, the prick." Their censor from the old days, before the war, when they'd both been with Columbia, a nervous little man, prim as a governess, who liked to run a pen through their copy just before they went on the air. "The Ministry of Propaganda *and* Public Enlightenment," Hal said, the way he always did. "I wonder what happened to him. Goebbels poisoned his own kids, I hear."

"No. Magda," Jake said. "The *gnädige frau*. In chocolates."

"Yeah, sweets to the sweet. Nice people." He handed Jake the traveling orders. "Have a good time."

"You should come too. It's a historic occasion."

"So's this," Hal said, pointing to another set of orders. "Two more weeks and I'm home. Berlin. Christ. I couldn't wait to get out. And you want to go back?"

Jake shrugged. "It's the last big story of the war."

"Sitting around a table, divvying up the pot."

"No. What happens when it's over."

"What happens is, you go home."

"Not yet."

Hal glanced up. "You think she's still there," he said flatly.

Jake put the orders in his pocket, not answering.

"It's been a while, you know. Things happen."

Jake nodded. "She'll be there. Thanks for this. I owe you one."

"More than one," Hal said, letting it go. "Just write pretty. And don't miss the plane."

But the plane was hours late getting into Frankfurt, then hours on the ground unloading and turning around, so it was midafternoon before they took off. The C-47 was a drafty military transport fitted out with benches along the sides, and the passengers, a spillover of journalists who, like Jake, hadn't made the earlier flights, had to shout over the engines. After a while Jake gave up and sat back with his eyes closed, feeling queasy as the plane bumped its way east. There had been drinks while they waited, and Brian Stanley, the *Daily Express* man who had somehow attached himself to the American group, was already eloquently drunk, with most of the others not far behind. Belser from Gannett, and Cowley, who'd kept tabs on the SHAEF press office from a bar stool at the Scribe, and Gimbel, who had traveled with Jake following Patton into Germany. They had all been at war forever, in their khakis with the round correspondent patch, even Liz Yeager, the photographer, wearing a heavy pistol on her hip, cowgirl style.

He'd known all of them one way or another, their faces

like pins in his own war map. London, where he'd finally left Columbia in '42 because he wanted to see the fighting war. North Africa, where he saw it and caught a piece of shrapnel. Cairo, where he recovered and drank the nights away with Brian Stanley. Sicily, missing Palermo but managing, improbably, to get on with Patton, so that later, after France, he joined him again for the race east. Across Hesse and Thuringia, everything accelerated, the stop-and-go days of fitful waiting over, finally a war of clear, running adrenaline. Weimar. Then, finally, up to Nordhausen, and Camp Dora, where everything stopped. Two days of staring, not even able to talk. He wrote down numbers—two hundred a day—and then stopped that too. A newsreel camera filmed the stacks of bodies, jutting bones and floppy genitals. The living, with their striped rags and shaved heads, had no sex.

On the second day, at one of the slave labor camps, a skeleton took his hand and kissed it, then held on to it, an obscene gratitude, gibbering something in Slavic—Polish? Russian?—and Jake froze, trying not to smell, feeling his hand buckle under the weight of the fierce grip. "I'm not a soldier," he said, wanting to run but unable to take his hand away, ashamed, caught now too. The story they'd all missed, the hand you couldn't shake off.

"Old home week for you, boyo, isn't it?" Brian said, cupping his hands to be heard.

"You've been before?" Liz said, curious.

"Lived here. One of Ed's boys, darling, didn't you know?" Brian said. "Till the jerries chucked him out. Of course, they chucked everybody out. Had to, really. Considering."

"So you speak German?" Liz said. "Thank god somebody does."

"Berliner *deutsch*," Brian answered for him, a tease.

"I don't care what kind of *deutsch* it is," she said, "as long as it's *deutsch*." She patted Jake's knees. "You stick with me, Jackson," she said, like Phil Harris on the radio. Then, "What was it like?"

Well, what was it like? A vise slowly closing. In the beginning, the parties and the hot days on the lakes and the fascina-

tion of events. He had come to cover the Olympics in '36 and his mother knew somebody who knew the Dodds, so there were embassy cocktails and a special seat in their box at the stadium. Goebbels' big party on the Pfaueninsel, the trees decked out in thousands of lights shaped like butterflies, officers swagging along the footpaths, drunk on champagne and importance, throwing up in the bushes. The Dodds were appalled. He stayed. The Nazis supplied the headlines, and even a stringer could live on the rumors, watching the war come day by day. By the time he signed on with Columbia, the vise had shut, rumors now just little gasps for air. The city contracted around him, so that at the end it was a closed circle: the Foreign Press Club in Potsdamerplatz, up the gloomy Wilhelmstrasse to the ministry for the twice-daily briefings, on up to the Adlon, where Columbia kept a room for Shirer and they gathered at the raised bar, comparing notes and watching the SS lounging around the fountain below, their shiny boots on the rim while the bronze frog statues spouted jets of water toward the skylight. Then out the East-West Axis to the broadcasting station on Adolf Hitler Platz and the endless wrangling with Nanny Wendt, then a taxi home to the tapped telephone and the watchful eye of Herr Lechter, the *blockleiter* who lived in the apartment down the hall, snapped up from some hapless Jews. No air. But that had been at the end.

"It was like Chicago," he said. Blunt and gritty and full of itself, a new city trying to be old. Clumsy Wilhelmine palaces that always looked like banks, but also jokes with an edge and the smell of spilled beer. Sharp midwestern air.

"Chicago? It won't look like Chicago now." This, surprisingly, from the bulky civilian in a business suit, introduced at the airport as a congressman from upstate New York.

"No, indeed," Brian said, mischievous. "All banged about now. Still, what isn't? Whole bloody country's one big bomb site. Do you mind my asking? I've never known. What does one call a congressman? I mean, are you The Honorable?"

"Technically. That's what it says on the envelopes, anyway. But we just use Congressman—or Mister."

"Mister. Very democratic."

"Yes, it is," the congressman said, humorless.

"You with the conference or have you just come for a look-in?" Brian said, playing with him.

"I'm not attending the conference, no."

"Just come to see the raj, then."

"Meaning?"

"Oh, no offense. It's very like, though, wouldn't you say? Military Government. Pukkah sahibs, really."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Well, neither do I, half the time," Brian said pleasantly. "Just a little conceit of mine. Never mind. Here, have a drink," he said, taking another, his forehead sweaty.

The congressman ignored him, turning instead to the young soldier wedged next to him, a last-minute arrival, no duffel, maybe a courier. He was wearing a pair of high riding boots, his hands gripping the bench like reins, face white under a sprinkling of freckles.

"First time in Berlin?" the congressman said.

The soldier nodded, holding his seat even tighter as the plane bounced.

"Got a name, son?" Making conversation.

"Lieutenant Tully," he said, then gulped, covering his mouth.

"You all right?" Liz said to him.

The soldier took off his hat. His red hair was damp.

"Here, just in case," she said, handing him a paper bag.

"How much longer?" he said, almost a moan, holding the bag to his chest with one hand.

The congressman looked at him and involuntarily moved his leg in the tight space, out of harm's way, turning his body slightly so that he was forced to face Brian again.

"You're from New York, you said?"

"Utica, New York."

"Utica," Brian said, making a show of trying to place it. "Breweries, yes?" Jake smiled. In fact, Brian knew the States well. "Fair number of Germans there, if I'm not mistaken."

The congressman looked at him in distaste. "My district is one hundred percent American."

But Brian was bored now. "I daresay," he said, looking away.

"How did you get on this plane anyway? I understood it was for American press."

"Well, there's Allied feeling for you," Brian said to Jake.

The plane dropped slightly, not much more than a dip in a road, but evidently enough for the soldier, who groaned.

"I'm going to be sick," he said, barely opening the bag in time.

"Careful," the congressman said, trapped.

"Just get it out," Liz said to the soldier, a big-sister voice. "That's it. You'll be all right."

"Sorry," he said, half choking, clearly embarrassed, looking suddenly no older than a teenager.

Liz turned away from the boy. "Did you ever meet Hitler?" she asked Jake, the question bringing the others with her, as if she were drawing a privacy curtain in place for the soldier.

"Meet, no. Saw, yes," Jake said. "Lots of times."

"Up close, I mean."

"Once," he said.

A sultry early evening, coming up from the Press Club, the street almost in shadow, but the new Chancellery still catching the last of the light. Prussian *moderne*, the broad steps leading down to the waiting car. Just an aide and two guards, curiously unprotected. On his way to the Sportpalast, probably, for another harangue against the devious Poles. He stopped for a second near the bottom stairs, looking down the empty street at Jake. I could reach into my pocket now, Jake had thought. One shot, put an end to all of it, that easy. Why hadn't anyone done it? Then, as if the thought had carried like a scent, Hitler raised his head and sniffed, anxious as prey, and looked back at Jake. One shot. He held the look for a second, assessing, then smiled, just a twitch of the mustache, lifted his hand in a languid *heil* of dismissal, and headed toward the car. Gloating. There was no gun, and he had things to do.

"They say the eyes were hypnotic," Liz said.

"I don't know. I never got that close," Jake said, shutting his own, making the rest of the plane go away.

Not long now. He'd go to Pariserstrasse first. He saw the door, the heavy sandstone caryatids holding up the balcony over the entrance. What would she say? Four years. But maybe she'd moved. No, she'd be there. A few more hours. A drink at the café down the street in Olivaerplatz, catching up, years of stories. Unless they stayed in.

"Pleasant dreams?" Liz said, and he realized he was smiling, already there. Berlin. Not long now.

"We're coming in," Brian said, his face at the little window. "God. Come have a look."

Jake opened his eyes and jumped up, a kid. They crowded around the window, the congressman at their side.

"My god," Brian said again, almost in a hush, silenced by the view. "Bloody Carthage."

Jake looked down at the ground, his stomach suddenly dropping, all his excitement draining away like blood. Why hadn't anyone told him? He had seen bombed cities before—on the ground in London, ripped-up terrace houses and streets of glass, then Cologne and Frankfurt from the air, with their deep craters and damaged churches—but nothing on this scale. Carthage, a destruction out of the ancient world. Below them there seemed to be no movement. Shells of houses, empty as ransacked tombs, miles and miles of them, whole pulverized stretches where there were not even walls. They had come in from the west, over the lakes, so he knew it must be Lichterfelde, then Steglitz, the approach to Tempelhof, but landmarks had disappeared under shifting dunes of rubble. As they dropped lower, scattered buildings took shape, smashed but there, a few chimneys sticking up, even a steeple. Some kind of life must still be going on. A beige cloud hung over everything—not smoke, a thick haze of soot and plaster dust, as if the houses could not quite bring themselves to leave. But Berlin was gone. The Big Three were coming to divide up ruins.

"Well, they got what they deserved," the congressman said

suddenly, a jarring American voice. Jake looked at him. A politician at a wake. "Didn't they?" he said, a little defiantly.

Brian turned slowly from the window, his eyes filled with scorn. "Boyo, we all get what we deserve. In the end."

Tempelhof was a mess around the edges, but the field had been cleared and the terminal itself was still there. After the tomb city they'd seen from the air, the airport seemed dizzy with life, swarming with uniformed ground crews and greeters. A young lieutenant, full of hair and chewing gum, was waiting at the foot of the stairs, picking out faces as they disembarked. The sick soldier had staggered down first, running off, Jake guessed, for the men's room.

"Geismar?" The lieutenant stuck out his hand. "Ron Erlich, press office. I've got you and Miss Yeager. She on board?"

Jake nodded. "With these," he said, indicating the cases he'd been lugging off the plane. "Want to give me a hand?"

"What's she got in there, her trousseau?"

"Equipment," Liz said behind him. "You going to make cracks or give the man a hand?"

Ron took in the uniform, with its unexpected curves, and smiled. "Yes, sir," he said, giving a mock salute, then picked up the cases in one easy movement, impressing a date. "This way." He led them toward the building. "Colonel Howley sends his regards," he said to Liz. "Says he remembers you from his days in the ad business."

Liz grinned. "Don't worry. I'll take his picture."

Ron grinned back. "You remember him too, I guess."

"Vividly. Hey, careful with that. Lenses."

They went up the gate stairs behind the congressman, who seemed to have acquired an entourage, and into the waiting hall, the same tawny marble walls and soaring space as before, when flying had been a romance. People had come to the restaurant here, just to watch the planes. Jake hurried to keep up. Ron moved the way he talked, breezing a path through the gangs of waiting servicemen.

"You missed the president," he said. "Went into town af-

ter lunch. Had the whole Second Armored lined up on the Avus. Quite a picture. Sorry your plane was so late, that's probably it for town shots."

"Wasn't he at the conference?" Liz said.

"Hasn't started yet. Uncle Joe's late. They say he has a cold."

"A cold?" Jake said.

"Hard to imagine, isn't it? Truman's pissed, I hear." He glanced at Jake. "That's off the record, by the way."

"What's on?"

"Not much. I've got some handouts for you, but you'll probably throw them away. Everybody else does. There's nothing to say till they sit down, anyway. We have a briefing schedule set up at the press camp."

"Which is where?"

"Down the road from MG headquarters. Argentinischeallee," he said, rolling it out, a joke name.

"Out in Dahlem?" Jake said, placing it.

"Everything's out in Dahlem."

"Why not somewhere nearer the center?"

Ron looked at him. "There is no center."

They were climbing the big flight of stairs to the main entrance doors.

"As I say, the camp's right by MG headquarters, so that's easy. Your billet too. We found a nice place for you," he said to Liz, almost courtly. "Photo schedule's different, but at least you'll get out there. Potsdam, I mean."

"But not press?" Jake said.

Ron shook his head. "They want a closed session. No press. I'm telling you this now so I don't have to hear you squawk later, like the rest of them. I don't make the rules, so if you want to complain, go right over my head, I don't care. We'll do the best we can at the camp. Everything you need. You can send from there, but your stuff goes through me, you might as well know."

Jake looked at him, forced to smile. A new Nanny Wendt, this time with gum and get-up-and-go.