

Downed over Germany

Prequel
War Girl Series
Marion Kummerow

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This story is based on actual events. The main characters Q and Hilde have existed in real life under a different name. The author has tried to keep as close to real events as possible, but incidents, characters and timelines have been changed for dramatic purposes. Side characters may be composites, or entirely fictitious.

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Chapter 1

April 1943, Somewhere over Germany

Rattling and whirring filled the Mosquito fighter-bomber as it entered German airspace. Tom Westlake was on target to the city of Hamburg. He leaned back in his seat and enjoyed the absolute freedom of being above the clouds. Flying had been his dream since he was a small boy, and the one place where he always was in line with himself was in the cramped space of a cockpit.

The smell of kerosene. The constant hum of engines engulfing him. The pitch-black sky. The equally dark water beneath him. Tom squinted his eyes, trying to distinguish water from land. But the landscape beneath him lay in complete darkness. No doubt, the people of Germany had learnt to turn off the lights at night, afraid to provide a clear landing guide for bombs. But today he wouldn't deliver a deadly cargo. Tom had another – equally important – mission to fulfill.

Without the clues of vision, he had to rely completely on his instruments to find his way. During the last two years of service in the Royal Air Force, he'd become one with this aircraft, which he lovingly called "Harriet." There was nothing Tom couldn't do while he was in the pilot's seat. He glanced at the stars to confirm his dead reckoning was still on target. If he unloaded his cargo over an uninhabited area, the entire effort would go to waste.

Instead of deadly bombs, his Harriet was loaded to the top with leaflets – black propaganda to undermine the German morale and send the Gestapo on a wild goose chase after some nonexistent Resistance group.

He wiped the back of his hand across his forehead and then his fingers through his thick dark hair. The easy part of the flight was

over. He was in enemy territory. Adrenaline flooded his system and he sat up straighter, alert, and ready to react to whatever was thrown – or fired – his way. He flew alone, without the company of pathfinder aircraft or other fighters to protect his flanks. The Germans might not detect a single aircraft.

But they did. Out of the darkness anti-aircraft flak shot hard and fast against Harriet. The metallic sound of shells ricocheting off the metal structure sent chills down his spine. Mere moments later, a loud explosion and the smell of burning indicated that one of the shells had hit the fuel tank and possibly the engine. Incredible heat engulfed Tom.

Fire.

Harriet's nose tilted and she was spinning like mad.

This is it, fellow — bail out!

More adrenaline rushed through Tom's veins, and years of training took over his reflexes. Without giving it a conscious thought he went through the necessary movements and bailed out of his stricken aircraft at about 3000 feet.

The icy night air was a welcome soothing to his scorching skin. A sudden jerk indicated his parachute had opened and seconds later, he floated to the ground in slow motion. Harriet, though, crashed to the ground at full speed and exploded upon impact with the ground into a fire fountain.

Several minutes later, Tom landed on the ground, spraining his ankle. The pain from the burns on his wrists and neck, combined with the searing throb in his ankle, momentarily knocked him out. But he didn't have time to recover.

Tom had landed in the middle of Germany, somewhere near Hamburg. A British airman stranded behind the lines in enemy territory. Despite his decent understanding of the German language, his English accent rang true from the very depths of it – an insurmountable flaw to any disguise. His life depended on how fast, and how far, he could run.

Somehow he summoned the strength to crawl into a nearby thicket, where he struggled out of his parachute harness and flak suit and stashed them as best as he could. Then he soothed his burns with a tube of condensed milk from his Aids Box. He crammed his pockets with a few things from the kit: a bar of chocolate, Horlick's tablets and a dose of benzedrine.

Then he set off through the rural countryside.

Chapter 2

Tom made his way through the impenetrable darkness. German officials would soon find the wreck of what had been his ship and, with the lack of a dead body, start a search for him. Then it wouldn't take long until they discovered the discarded parachute and flak suit and knew he was on the run.

He looked down his British air-force uniform: navy-colored material, with the white winged Royal Air Force badge planted upon his breast. He had to shed his tattered military uniform for civilian clothes.

Tom walked westward, away from where he believed the city of Hamburg to be, for at least an hour. Rough fields and wet mud soaked his shoes, squelching with every slow and painful step he took. After almost an hour he distinguished a farmhouse against the horizon.

In complete silence except for the gentle whistle of the wind, Tom approached the farmhouse and hid behind a hedgerow. No sign of people. No lights. No sound. The inhabitants were probably fast asleep. His stomach clenched as he pondered his next actions.

Dire circumstances justified dire actions.

He took a deep breath and crawled out from under the hedgerow to climb over the fence. But his leg caught on the sharp wire and tore at the skin of his thigh. Tom couldn't stifle a moan of pain; he waited with bated breath. Apparently nobody had heard him, and he jumped down on the other side.

Just in that moment, a vicious dog barked in the house. *Dammit. I alerted the guard dog.* Tom froze in place, hoping the

barking would stop, but it became clear that the dog was raising the alarm.

Flight or fight? Tom reversed and climbed back over the fencing, but in his hurry the wire snagged him again and slowed him down. Seconds later, the farmhouse door slammed open and a sturdy man bolted towards Tom, pointing a shotgun at him.

Tom stared down the long barrel of the gun, fright seeping into his bones. His legs refused to move.

"Hey! You! Get off my property!" the man bellowed in German.

Tom's German was rusty, but even if he hadn't understood the words, he'd received the message loud and clear. He was about to back down the fence, when the farmer squinted his eyes and raked them down to the badge on Tom's uniform.

"British bastard!" The farmer spat a huge glob of saliva at Tom and cocked the gun, aiming at Tom's heart.

"Bitte nicht schiessen," Tom shouted. "Please don't shoot me."

In response the farmer gave a loud, hysterical, yet seemingly sarcastic laugh. "Not shoot you? A British? You are scum." He spat again. "You people have already taken my wife and two sons in this war. Don't you think I deserve some revenge?"

"I'm sorry. No – please, I am sorry." Tom begged for his life, holding his hands out in front of him. "We have all lost people we loved. You. Me. Everyone. Please don't shoot me." The image of his sweetheart lying in a puddle of blood flashed through his mind. After her death two years ago, he'd thrown himself into every dangerous mission, believing he had nothing to lose. He'd been wrong. He still had his life to lose.

The farmer glared at Tom, hatred and grief mixing in his dark eyes. Tom closed his eyes for a moment to send a hurried prayer to heaven. His opponent had all the right in the world to shoot him, the enemy. He might even receive a reward. If it were reversed, a German pilot downed in Britain would most certainly be shot on the spot.

Time slowed down to a crawl and Tom's entire life passed in front of his eyes as he watched the farmer squinting with one eye, his finger squeezing on the trigger. As the seconds stretched out into eternity, the tension snapped like a rubber band. Brakes squealed. Heavy footsteps shook the ground.

"Hände hoch!" a German voice said with authority.

Tom didn't dare to turn his head, but relief washed over him when the farmer lowered the gun to the ground and raised his hands in the air.

"Sie auch." That command obviously meant Tom. He obeyed and raised his hands. Then he slowly turned to face the man behind the voice. German police.

At the sight of Tom's badge gleaming in the moonlight, the faces of the two policemen lit up.

"Seems we made a great catch. He must be the pilot of the aircraft that crashed a few miles north," one policeman said to the other one, rubbing his hands with satisfaction.

"The chief will be pleased and we might even get special leave," answered the other one and addressed Tom: *"Ist Ihr Flieger abgestürzt?"* The policeman accompanied his question with the appropriate gesture: he scooted his stretched hand through the air and then dropped it fingertips first. "Boom!"

"Yes, sir." Tom nodded. At this point honesty was probably no more condemning than any lie. His uniform betrayed him.

"Well, well. A British pilot. You just made my day." Tom stared into the police officer's eyes, black as they were cast in shadow, and gave a curt nod. It was better not to let them know that he understood their language.

The police officer turned to his fellow, commanding him with sick delight to arrest Tom. Tom recognized the sadistic pleasure all too well, having seen many British soldiers boast of the German lives they had taken. War was an ugly affair. Just now he was on the receiving side.

Steel fists grabbed Tom and handcuffed him, and then they dragged him into the black and rusty police automobile.

Nobody spoke to him, as the officer started the motor and set the automobile in motion.

Chapter 3

Tom sat in the back of the vehicle handcuffed to the door handle as the police car drove through forlorn landscapes. The police officers spoke in rapid German amongst themselves, often laughing deep booming laughs at the delight of having captured a British airman – a rarity in this agricultural area.

He listened in on their conversation, but could only understand tiny bits. Soon enough the lull of the motor, the dwindling adrenaline in his blood, and exhaustion took their toll and he drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

In his dreams he and Harriet were still above the clouds, enjoying the absolute freedom and peace only flying could give him. He must have dozed close to half an hour, when the vehicle came to an abrupt stop. Tom was thrown against the seat in front of him and fire dazzled his wide-opened eyes. *I'm crashing – I have to bail out!*

Tom struggled to jump out of his ship when reality set in. The morning sun hung like a fireball on the horizon and cast a warm glow over the building in front of him. The police station. They'd reached their destination in what probably was the next, bigger town.

As the officers pulled him out of the vehicle, Tom couldn't help but notice the damage his bomber pilot colleagues had caused. No wonder people detested him.

He remained silent, as the officers pushed him inside and into a small holding cell adjacent to the only other room in the police station. Left there without any further explanation, he settled on the cot and put his face into his hands. His sprained ankle had swollen to almost double its normal size and burned like hell.

While he was waiting he could at least nurse his wounds. Lying down on the cot, he pushed up his foot against the wall and rolled down his socks to let the cool morning air soothe the ache.

Snippets of conversation wafted over. "His aircraft...prisoner of war...*Dulag Luft*..."

Tom sighed with relief. They wouldn't shoot him. They would treat him as a prisoner of war according to the Geneva Convention. And he would be sent to the *Dulag Luft*, a transit camp for aircrew. From the briefings back home he knew that a *Luftwaffe* camp was preferable to a *Wehrmacht* camp, as the *Luftwaffe* tended to treat their prisoners reasonably well.

At least that was the official version. Offhand rumors of torture and inhumane living conditions made the rounds between the fellows at the base.

It was way past noon when someone finally remembered Tom and slid a bowl of broth and a mug of water through the opening in the cell door. Tom devoured the food and fell back into a fitful sleep. Some hours later, the cell door opened and the policeman from last night appeared.

"Get up, we have a train to catch." The policeman shoved Tom outside and back into the police car. The vehicle bounced uncomfortably over the cobblestone pavement. Half an hour later it passed the outskirts of a big city. *Is this Hamburg?* They'd been driving westward, so probably not. Tom racked his brain for a major German city in the vicinity of his crash site, but came up empty-handed.

"Where are we going, please?" he asked the officer, but received no answer.

A few minutes later the vehicle stopped with screeching brakes in front of a train station. Steel fists grabbed Tom, claspings far harder than necessary around his upper arm, and dragged him toward a waiting train. At least the policeman removed those damned metal clasps from Tom's wrists before handing him over to a waiting officer. Then he was shoved into a compartment

where already five men sat. Tom suppressed a smile as he recognized the RAF badge on the tattered uniforms of two of them.

“No speaking...or—” said the officer and waved his Walther PPK to emphasize his words.

Everyone nodded. Now wasn't the time to start a revolt. Although...Tom's brain worked overtime. “If you are captured, it's your duty to His Majesty to stay silent under all circumstances. The sensitive information of your mission can't get into the enemy's hands,” Tom's commanding officer had said, and then he'd added, “If I were you I would attempt everything to escape. Believe me.”

A shiver ran down Tom's spine. The Air Commodore knew what he was talking about. He'd been a POW in the Great War.

Without knowing where he was or exactly which route they were taking him on it was difficult to make a plan. Tom's stomach squeezed at the realization that his chances for escape would diminish greatly as soon as he arrived at the camp. Any attempt to escape must be made before that.

But when? And how?

Tom leaned back in his seat, as the train rattled into motion, the damaged remains of whatever city he'd been in, passing faster and faster. He glanced at the fellow airman sitting opposite him and quirked up the corner of his mouth into a half smile. From the almost invisible nod out the window, Tom understood the message: “We've done a helluva good job bombing that place.”

Tom itched to ask where they were, but a side-glance at the German officer grabbing onto his Walther PPK disabused him of that notion. After an endless train ride the sun went down and Tom still had no idea where he was headed.

The monotonous rattling changed and Tom sat up, alert, to look out the window. The trees that had been flowing by slowed to a crawl, until the train came to a halt. An announcement came over the tannoys.

The policeman sitting across from Tom crunched his nose. “Bloody Tommies!” Then he stared at the six prisoners with indecision in his eyes until he shouted, “*Raus! Schnell! Verstecken.*”

Tom translated the message to his confused-looking fellow prisoners, “Get out fast. We have to hide.” *It would be a cruel irony of fate to perish in friendly fire after surviving being shot down.*

Everyone rushed to hide beneath nearby trees and bushes. A squadron of war birds appeared in the sky. They were still high up, but the fear and panic their presence spread amongst the passengers was contagious. Even though Tom knew his comrades up there were headed for a different destination, a big city, the possibility of an emergency bomb release was always there. As was a shot-down aircraft or parts crashing to the ground. He swallowed and tried to focus his frightened mind.

Soon the train whistled and the passengers climbed inside to continue their journey. Tom’s ankle hurt like hell, and he hobbled behind the other prisoners. The train started moving the moment he’d put his foot on the first step. Holding onto the handrail for dear life, he struggled to get inside as the wheels rolled faster and faster.

He’d almost reached the safety of the platform when a thought flashed through his mind and he let go his grip on the rail. The last thing Tom saw was the perplexed face of the policeman, as he tried to grab Tom’s hand.

The cold air whipped hard against his face as he fell to the ground. Midair, Tom curled into a ball, bracing his head with his arms. His shoulders smacked first against the hard ground and the impact rippled through his body, causing searing pain and awful cracking noises. He rolled...and rolled...and rolled...from the sheer power of the train’s speed until he hit the bank.

For a short moment Tom wasn’t sure whether he was still alive or not. This jump had been a lot worse than the one from his aircraft.

The shrinking train disappeared in the distance, leaving dark plumes of smoke and silence behind. Tom needed a few minutes to control his ragged breathing and bring his pulse down to a normal speed. He wiggled his toes and fingers to check if all limbs were still working properly. Satisfied with the results he pushed himself up to sit.

“Ouch...” he groaned. His ankle hadn’t liked the bad treatment and neither had his left knee and elbow. But he was alive, apparently intact ... and free.

A huge grin spread from ear to ear, despite the pain. *I’m free. Time to make a plan.*

But first things first: he limped away from the train tracks and hid behind a few bushes. Then he fumbled the bar of chocolate from his pocket and bit tiny pieces, savoring them, while racking his brain for the best way to escape. He licked morsels of chocolate from his lips and stored the remaining half bar in his pocket for later.

Wandering aimlessly through Germany in his military uniform wouldn’t get him back home. Neither would his map, because he had no idea where he was. Stranded somewhere between Hamburg and Frankfurt. At least that’s where he supposed they’d been taking him. The *Dulag Luft* in Oberursel near Frankfurt. His best bet was to walk westward. Both the Netherlands and Belgium were known to be friendly to Allied soldiers and used secret escape lines to return downed airmen back to Britain.

Tom lay on his back, studying the stars. For once he was thankful for hours upon hours of boring theory in astronavigation. Who would have thought that the subject he most disliked during his piloting education might hold the key to his escape?

He found the Little Bear constellation without difficulties and grinned. Polaris was the last star in its handle. It shone clear and bright, indicating the cardinal direction North. *That’s why they call it North Star.*

With renewed spirits Tom climbed to his feet and began to walk west through the darkness. When he noticed a village in the distance, he fought his urge to walk around and instead headed straight for the few houses. Under the protection of the night he might be able to steal civilian clothes.

His stomach churned at the notion of theft. The disapproving face of his mother appeared in his mind. He shook it away. This was war. He wanted to survive.

As he came into the deserted village, he saw peeking out from a dustbin a piece of newspaper. Tom approached it and deciphered the title in the dim moonlight: *Münstersche Zeitung*. This gave him a good indication where he was. He stored the information in his brain and continued his prowl for clothes.

Finally he passed a small house with an attached shed whose door hung ajar. Tom snuck in holding his breath and waited until his eyes had accustomed to the darkness inside. He found a pile of laundry, which would suit his needs just fine.

Tom rummaged the laundry and found a jumper and pair of trousers approximately his size. Then his sight fell on a thick grey coat that hung by the door. The humid chill of the night seeping into his bones, he stole that one, too, and left the village in total silence.

His heart pounding in his throat, he limped away until he reached the edge of a wood, before he dared to look back. Nothing but all-engulfing silence and the rattling of...what?...trains...in the distance. He flopped to the ground, exchanged his telltale uniform for the stolen garments and wrapped himself in the thick coat. Then he dug a hole in the soft brown soil and buried his uniform – after cutting the liner and retrieving a piece of silk the size of a handkerchief.

The hammering bolts of pain in his ankle and knee clouded his alertness, and he decided to curl up under a large tree to get a thimbleful of sleep. Now that he looked like everyone else he could risk traveling by day. It might even be more inconspicuous should

he be seen. Despite wearing the thick coat, he shivered in the cold spring night, until he fell into a disturbed sleep.

Chapter 4

Tom suffered nightmares where he ran through forests with trees as thick as buildings. He fled in a constant sprint ahead of invisible pursuers until he awoke drenched in cold sweat with the dawn.

He couldn't say whether his clothes were damp from the dew that covered him and the ground around him, or from his sweat. Rays of sunshine reached across the sky, leaving spots on warmth on his exposed skin.

Tom followed the soft sounds of rushing water and found a brook, where he settled to wash hands and face. Then he drank the water until his grumbling stomach was full, but not satiated. He pondered eating the rest of his chocolate bar, but decided to reserve it for later.

In plain daylight he unfolded the piece of cloth cut from his uniform. It was an elaborate silk map of Germany, invented by the eccentric genius Clayton Hutton. The MI9 distributed several of those maps to all aircrew as an aid to assist escapees and evaders behind enemy lines. The soft material flattened under his fingers without a noise.

It took him a great deal of searching to locate the city of Münster along the intricate lines and numbers that showed all of Germany, because the detailing on it was minute. His finger traced a line from his assumed location to the border of the Netherlands.

His heart jumped as he calculated the distance. Less than fifty miles. Under normal conditions he could walk that in two days. With his ankle, but using the Bensedrine, maybe three to four days. It would be a cruel and awful journey. Hunger and thirst were his biggest problems, apart from the fact that he could get caught at any time.

Using the sun as his guide, Tom began to walk west hoping to pass by some of the locations on his map to indicate he was on track. Walking proved more strenuous than he'd anticipated. After only a few miles, Tom gritted his teeth harder with every step he took. His ankle was killing him.

The unusually warm April sun burnt down on him mercilessly the moment he left the protection of the woods behind and trudged through open fields. His tongue clung to his upper gums and his throat was as dry as the dust he inhaled. The limping increased, and he had to admit he'd never be able to persist fifty miles in his current condition.

A change of plan was in order. So far he'd walked cross-country, steering away from inhabited areas in an attempt to avoid crossing paths with police or suspicious civilians. But he might be able to catch a ride with a friendly soul, if he walked alongside a road.

Pain and dehydration stole his senses, and he set one foot in front of the other like a zombie, until he reached the summit of a small hill. There he collapsed to his knees. Tom panted hard, willing the pain in his leg to go away. It didn't work.

Unable to stand up, he used his last resort. A tablet of Benzedrine. Swallowing that thing down his dry throat without the help of a gulp of water was easier said than done. The acrid taste left a disgusting aftertaste in his mouth, and he pulled a wry face.

Tom relaxed for a few minutes and then tried to stand again. He stared at his hands, which pushed hard into the ground, until his legs obeyed and pushed him up. If he were to survive his journey he had to turn towards the population and find a village well to quench his thirst.

His head spun with a million worries attacking him, but Tom pushed them aside and concentrate on one single task: Walk.

A church spire in the far distance was his target. He didn't hear or see anything despite the hissing in his ears and the earth in front of his next step. One. Two ... Four hundred twenty-seven...

“Stop!”

Four hundred twenty-eight.

“Stop!” A commanding voice bellowed.

Tom raised his eyes from the ground, but didn’t see anyone. He continued trudging forward until he heard the voice again.

“Hands up and turn around, or I’ll shoot.”

This couldn’t be real, could it? His imagination was playing tricks on him. But Tom decided not to tempt his luck; he’d do as the voice asked. Then his jaw dropped.

Two policemen with German shepherd dogs at their heels stood in front of him, one of them pointing his Walther PPK at Tom’s chest. A slight shiver ran down his spine. *This is the second time I’ve been held at gunpoint in the last twenty-four hours. Hope this doesn’t become a habit.*

“*Papiere,*” the officer in his impeccable uniform said, demanding to see Tom’s papers. The German shepherd at his side growled and moved his ears to reinforce his master’s words – and to show that any attempt to escape was futile.

Not that Tom had even considered the idea of running. *Crawling away,* he corrected himself.

“I’m sorry, officer, I have been mugged and my papers were stolen,” Tom answered, trying an honest smile.

The police officer furrowed his brows. He’d probably heard that excuse a thousand times from people who wanted to go unrecognized. His gun still pointing at Tom, he nodded to his colleague. “*Durchsuch’ ihn.*”

Tom’s German was good enough to understand that they wanted to search him. There was nothing he could do – not staring into the gun muzzle and with the dog’s growl in his ear. He kept still, his hands held up. His only reaction when the second officer pulled out the silk map from one of his pockets was to blink, although he wanted to scream. The map was his only hope of salvation.

The police officer stared hard at him and spat on the ground, "*Vermaledeiter Engländer.*"

They had raised their brows at his accent, but the map had betrayed his nationality. The first officer gave him a once-over, eyeing Tom's clothing, and then spoke to his colleague. "He must be a spy, wearing German clothes. Let's make ourselves some friends and take him to the Gestapo. They'll be delighted."

Tom sighed. It mattered little whether he was an English spy or an escaped prisoner of war. He was a dead man walking either way.

Chapter 5

Tom had lost count of time and place. He had no idea whether days or weeks had passed since he'd arrived at the Gestapo headquarters in Berlin. Back home on the base they'd warned the men about this place from hell. And every awful rumor had been true.

The impressive stone building was beautiful. Ironically beautiful. It had once been an art museum and featured intricate detailing along the roofline and huge staring windows. But prisoners never saw the light of the day. They were kept in the mold-infested cellars, taken upstairs only for the dreaded interrogations – into rooms with blacked-out windows and thick, metal doors.

Nevertheless, cries of agony could be heard when passing those doors. It sent icy chills down Tom's spine. He fully expected to suffer the same fate as those poor souls. But nothing happened. He sat in his tiny cell for minutes, hours or days. The only indication of passing time was the thump of his heartbeat running through his body.

He paced the room, back and forth. Counted his steps. Repeated his cover story in his head. The monotony and tension tore at his sanity, until at one point he found himself desperately longing for the interrogation, despite the prospect of torture, as he wanted to get it over with.

It was only then that it occurred to him that this *was* part of the torture. The waiting time was supposed to push him to the breaking point, so when they came for him it would be so much harder to remain strong.

Tom stopped the pacing. He could not give away his secret mission to distribute black propaganda and to lead the Gestapo on a wild goose chase. With any luck the leaflets carried in his aircraft had burnt to ashes and they'd never find out, if he didn't talk. His silence was vital, not only for himself, but for King and country.

In hindsight it would have been preferable to be a POW at the *Dulag Luft* than to fall into the Gestapo's hands. At least the *Luftwaffe* was known to adhere to the Geneva Convention most of the time.

Eventually, Tom was taken to an interrogation room. The room was empty save for a table and two chairs. The window was covered with a thick blackout curtain and a sole light bulb hung from the ceiling. It was an eerie atmosphere and Tom, who usually didn't believe in ghosts, had the feeling that the tormented souls of perished prisoners wafted through the room. He took a deep breath to fight the urge to flee.

The door opened and a senior Gestapo officer, who introduced himself as Kriminalkommissar Becker, entered the room.

"Sit," Becker commanded and sat down in the chair across the table from Tom. Becker had classic facial features and dark blond hair – a handsome man. But his grey eyes showed the warmth of an iceberg when he scrutinized Tom as if he were some kind of insect. The cold stare made two things very clear. For one, Tom was not going to be treated with any sympathy, and two, the Gestapo officer was prepared to spend however long it took to drill the information out of the prisoner.

"Name?"

"Tom Westlake," Tom answered truthfully. All soldiers and airmen had been instructed not to elaborate on any question unless asked. Too much talking and it became easy for a trained interrogator to listen between the lines and find out the information one was trying to hide.

The officer proceeded to ask simple questions such as date of birth and nationality before he leaned back in his chair with a sarcastic smile. "Profession?"

"Pilot." Tom opted to tell the truth, for the sole reason that he hadn't been able to come up with a believable cover story. If the Gestapo believed he was just another downed airman, they might even let him go.

The burly man furrowed his brows. "A pilot? How convenient. Where's your uniform?"

In a rapid succession of questions and answers Tom recounted the happenings from the moment he'd bailed out of Harriet until the moment he'd been caught by the two policemen with the German shepherd. Albeit he left out his first capture and subsequent escape, and the nature of his mission – should they believe he was an ordinary bomber pilot.

"Why did you carry a map of Germany?" The officer hit his fist onto the metal table and Tom jumped in his seat. Becker smiled with delight.

Tom wasn't easily scared, but the past days had taken a toll on him. He had survived a plane crash, stared twice into a gun muzzle, escaped the police, stolen clothes, slept and eaten the bare minimum to subsist, and awaited upcoming torture. No wonder his nerves were strung tight.

The topic of the map was tricky. The Germans weren't supposed to know that all aircrew was equipped with them to facilitate an escape. "It was in the coat I stole."

"Lies," Becker shouted. "They way I see it, you are a bloody English spy." In a sudden fit of rage the Kriminalkommissar stood, and threw his chair at Tom.

Tom dodged the flying object, running straight into Becker's fist. The metallic taste of blood filled his mouth and a small trickle of red ran down the German's hand.

Becker wiped his hand on his black uniform and said in a calm, even friendly voice, "I don't like people who are lying to me."

Tom nodded with a dry throat. "I'm not a spy. I'm a British pilot."

"You are not a spy, you say?" Becker said, "Very well." Then he waved at the second officer lingering in the back of the room, who left momentarily, only to return with a thick rope in his hands.

"Perhaps I can persuade you to tell me the truth," Becker said with a sadistic smile on his lips.

Tom's gut clenched as Becker nodded and the other Gestapo officer used the rope and tied him to the chair. The heavy rope cut deep into his abdomen, making breathing difficult.

The officer wrapped bandages around his own wrists and fists, allowing Tom to see the events unfurl. Tom doubted the bandages would have any actual effect other than to fill him with angst anticipating the approaching blows. This they did. Very effective.

Becker asked the questions and at every answer he didn't like – all of them – the other officer slammed his fists against Tom's ribs, shoulders, jaw, and nose. How long this continued, Tom had no idea. Confined by the rope he was unable to dodge the punches. Blood and spit flew out of his mouth with every smack – a fine, red spray. The cracking sound of breaking bone overwhelmed him, and he toppled over with his chair.

Kriminalkommissar Becker continued his interrogation with Tom lying sideways on the floor. At some point Tom's senses faded and he welcomed the grace of passing out. But the painless blackout didn't last long. He struggled to breathe against the gush of water coming down on his face. Puffing and blowing, he came to, for a moment missing the black silence on the other side.

He kept responding to Becker's questions with the same answers. "I'm not a spy. I'm a British pilot. My name is Tom Westlake. My rank is..." He resisted the temptation to tell the Gestapo about his secret mission. Whether he talked or not wouldn't make a difference. Becker might even intensify the torture to find out more. "My name is Tom Westlake. I'm a British pilot. My rank is..."

A knock on the door interrupted the interrogation, and Tom was thankful for the reprieve. Another Gestapo officer entered the room, clicking his heels and slamming his hand into the air. "Heil Hitler!"

Becker responded likewise, although with the grim face of someone not being pleased with an interruption.

"I apologize for the inconvenience, Herr Kriminalkommissar," the other officer said with a subtle bow of his head. "We received reports of a POW who escaped during transport to Dulag Luft."

"Talk," Becker commanded.

Tom breathed with renewed hope. If they believed he was a simple airman, they might stop torturing him.

"Sir, this subject," he pointed at Tom, "fits the description. We believe he was shot down fifty miles northwest of Hamburg about a week ago."

Becker squinted his eyes at his subordinate, then at Tom and back to the subordinate. "Continue," he nodded.

"The remains of his plane were scrutinized and we found something very interesting," the officer said.

Tom's heart thundered against his throat. That was bad. Real bad.

"Don't protract the story. Give me a summary of the facts," Becker commanded.

"Yes, sir, of course. The downed plane was a Mosquito fighter-bomber and although it was heavily damaged, we salvaged a container with leaflets. Anti-German propaganda." The officer held out a half-destroyed leaflet to Becker.

Becker's head turned beet-red while he studied the leaflet. It read *Kraft durch Freude* – Strength through Joy -- and showed Hitler and other high-ranking Nazi officials admiring the table-top model of a new Volkswagen in 1939. The picture beneath showed an actual Volkswagen as a wreck in the African desert, two mutilated, dead German soldiers lying in the sand beside the vehicle.

“You...” Becker turned towards Tom and gritted his teeth, “...you miserable piece of scum. You’ll be punished for defamation of the Wehrmacht!”

So much for letting them believe he was a simple airman. Tom swallowed hard, trying not to show his mortal fear on the mangled remains of his face.

Hours later, Tom was shoved into a cell crowded with other unfortunate souls. His legs gave out and he fell face first onto the cold and musty floor. This cell would become his home for the next several weeks, but fortunately Kriminalkommissar Becker had decided there was no need for further interrogations. They’d found his plane and the leaflets.

Time faded into a grey mush in this hellhole deep below the surface. The only indication that a world outside the bars existed was a tiny window opening into a light well. It let just enough light inside to cast the cell and its inhabitants into a constant twilight.

Eventually, Tom's case was called to court. *Wehrmachtzersetzung* – ridicule and defamation of the Wehrmacht – was his charge.

Tom sat in court apathetic, waiting for what was to come. He didn’t hold his breath, nor did he hold out any hopes. The outcome was clear for someone accused of dropping black propaganda over Germany to demoralize the civilian populace. Capital punishment.

When the judge announced the verdict, Tom didn’t react. He had felt dead for weeks already.

Chapter 6

After the verdict Tom wasn't returned to Gestapo headquarters. He observed it with hidden relief, because wherever they took him, no place on earth – or in hell – could be worse than Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse.

“Where are you taking me?” He asked several times, but nobody would answer.

Only when he entered through the heavy metal front door of the red brick-and-mortar building, the guard who filled several lists with Tom's name and crossed it out on other lists said, “Welcome to Plötzensee.”

Plötzensee? The name didn't make Tom any wiser. He knew that *See* was the German word for lake.

He was put into a cell with only two other prisoners. The nine-by-twelve-foot space held a chair, a table, a closet, and a three-storey bunk bed, completely equipped with a mattress and a rough woolen blanket. Compared to the Gestapo cellar, this was luxury.

“Hallo.” His new companions nodded in a friendly fashion and the older one pointed his thumb up. “*Deins.*”

Tom followed the direction. Apparently the bed just a few inches under the ceiling was reserved for him.

“Thank you. I'm Tom, by the way.” He tried a smile, but the man only repeated the thumbs up. Tom tried again in German, “*Danke. Ich heiÙe Tom.*”

Another nod. Another thumbs up. Then a chuckle from the other man and rapid conversation in some language Tom didn't understand. Finally the younger man pointed at himself and said, “Stanislaw.” Then he pointed to the other man, “Dmitri.”

That's just my luck. Stuck in death row with two inmates who don't speak a word of English or even German. He climbed up the rickety ladder and crawled into his bunk. The ceiling was barely high enough to roll over, but he wasn't even able to raise his head. *Get used to the feeling of being inside a coffin.*

The inmates of Plötzensee prison were a diverse mixture of political prisoners, about half of them German. The majority of the remaining were various Eastern European nationalities, with only a few Brits like himself sprinkled into the mix. The conditions were a lot better than he'd expected – definitely not gruesome like they were in some of the POW camps.

It could have been a relatively comfortable place to wait out the end of the war, if it weren't for the red piece of cloth dangling from his cell door – a constant reminder that the inmates awaited death by guillotine.

A simple look at that dreaded cloth sent icy chills into his bones that not even the hot and unforgiving August sun shining through his window could dispel. Maybe the worst part was the uncertainty. Every morning he perked up his ears for the steps of the executioners stopping in front of his cell. They always came in the morning, and the inmate taken was replaced by another one that same evening. Tom had no idea how they chose whose turn it was or when it would be his time.

One of the invaluable perquisites in Plötzensee was the vast library. All prisoners were allowed to read as many books as they wanted in great German literature by Schiller, Goethe or Mörike. Tom had read one or two of those plays back in school, which helped him now to understand the German version.

He'd taken the decision to learn as much German as possible whilst he was in prison. It was a means to keep him occupied and converse with his fellow prisoners and, in the unlikely event of an escape, it would prove invaluable in survival.

When he returned to the library for a new book, he found the Catholic priest *Pfarrer* Bernau in a heated discussion with two

inmates he'd seen during leisure time, but never talked with. Scientists. Wilhelm Quedlin and Werner Kraus if he remembered right. They stopped their conversation the moment Tom entered the library room and eyed him suspiciously.

"What brings you here, my son?" *Pfarrer* Bernau asked him.

"I wanted to return a book and borrow another one," he answered.

"Come, sit with me for a moment," the priest urged him and gestured to a chair opposite him. The other two bid their good-byes and left the room.

Tom felt the scrutinizing gaze of the priest on his person and shuddered. He'd evaded talking to him since his arrival at Plötzensee two weeks ago. The other prisoners had a high opinion of the prison, but for Tom it felt so...definite. If he sought spiritual support it would be as if he'd accepted his death penalty. But he hadn't.

I won't give up ever. As long as I'm breathing there's still a chance to survive this.

"I know you are here to offer spiritual guidance but I feel I should warn you, I am not a particularly religious man," Tom said as he sat down on the chair.

"God loves everyone. And I'm here to help regardless of your faith, nationality or political conviction." The priest had a kind face with warm brown eyes, but it was lined with age and the stresses of life during war.

"Father, I'm not sure you can help me. I'm damned either way." Tom noticed the confusion on the priest's face and added, "I am on death row."

"Most of the poor souls in here are, and you're right, I can't do anything about this. But what I can do is offer consolation and a sympathetic ear. Even the strongest men need to lean on someone else at times. I'm here for you should the need arise."

Tears toweled up in Tom's eyes. He hadn't had the luxury of being weak since the day he'd left England many months back in

his aircraft. Whether he liked it or not, he craved a compassionate soul, someone to share his misery with, even if only for a few minutes.

Pfarrer Bernau didn't speak, but he stood and walked around to put his hands on Tom's shoulders. Warmth and comfort seeped into the Briton's bones.

"I'm afraid, of course." Tom spoke, slowly at first, but then the words tumbled out of him, "I'm twenty-five, I don't want to die! The worst is sitting here, waiting. Always waiting. I should fight, but waiting to be killed? I fear for my family in England. They do not know what has come of me, and my mother must be worried to death. It tears my heart apart to think of her grief."

"There may be ways to send them a message if you wish."

Tom's eyes widened. German prisoners were allowed one letter a month to their family, but he hadn't been offered such a privilege. He thought for a moment before he answered, "Thank you. But I'm not sure they would be better off knowing where I am now and what awaits me..."

"Knowing is always better than uncertainty," the priest answered and returned to his seat.

"I'm not saying goodbye. I'm not done yet," Tom blurted out.

The priest smiled at him. "I see your spirit hasn't been broken. Remember this, my son: it is not weakness to lean on someone else. It may give you the strength needed to continue."

Another prisoner entered the library and Tom got up to leave. A wave of gratitude warmed his body and he returned to his cell with renewed hope. *All is not yet lost.*

Chapter 7

Several days later, Tom was fast asleep in his cot when the shrill noise of air raid sirens woke him. He'd experienced the Blitz in London, but what his RAF colleagues did to Berlin had no comparison. Night after night the German populace hunkered down in air raid shelters, waiting for the all-clear signal and another day to live.

Prisoners, though, had to stay in their cells. Tom had soon learnt to imitate the resignation to God's will his two Czech cellmates displayed, who simply stretched out on their bunk beds with closed eyes until it was over.

But today was different. The impacts were louder – nearer. Then the first shell hit the prison building. The crash was so loud it physically shook the building, the floor no longer a floor but as unstable as the ocean. Tom jumped up from his cot and slammed his head smack dab against the ceiling. For a few moments, black stars circled in front of his eyes, but the next moment another impact shook the building and his military training took over.

Within seconds, Tom lay flat on the floor and rolled beneath the bed, covering himself with the blanket. Plaster and concrete drizzled from the ceiling like gentle rain. Tom coughed as dust thickened the air, and he put his handkerchief to his nose and mouth. The hours passed and the attack intensified. Tom lay still beneath the bed, where his two fellow prisoners had joined him, and tried to calculate the amount of aircraft and ammunition needed to cause that kind of damage.

It was by far the biggest air raid he'd experienced, both up in the skies and down on the earth. As the next shell exploded with a deafening noise, Tom gritted his teeth and shook his fist. It would

be a cruel twist of fate if he were to perish by the hand of one of his colleagues.

The continuous explosions shook and battered the time-worn brick and mortar building although its walls were as thick as an arm was long. A colossal explosion sounded and then the noise stilled. Silence penetrated his ears except for the heavy breathing of his cellmates.

He smelled smoke and peeked out from under the bed to see light behind the cell door in the otherwise complete darkness.

“Fire!” he cried out and for once his Czech cellmates understood his words. Judging by the speed with which they crawled out from under the bed they were soldiers like he was.

Tom glanced at the metal cell door, which hung lopsided on one hinge, giving a glimpse at the rampaging fire in the hallway behind. He swallowed hard and looked at the massive yet emaciated frames of Stanislaw and Dmitri. No doubt, they’d been strong men in a previous life.

“We need to force the door open,” he shouted and ran forward to slam his body against the door. The two men immediately noticed what he was doing and crashed against the door in unison. With the combined effort of the three of them, they forced it open and stepped into the hallway. The fire rampaged to their right, so they took the left.

Tom rushed through heat and smoke, more and more prisoners joining him in the hallway as they escaped their cells through cracked-open doors. More shells hit the building, the ensuing noise drowning out the spine-chilling cries of agony from prisoners still locked in their cells begging to be rescued from burning alive.

There was nothing he could do for them.

Tom stumbled and one of the Czechs dragged him back to his feet, following the crowd into the courtyard. Here they were safe from the fire, but not from the shelling his RAF colleagues dropped on the city of Berlin. Glowing fires lit the sky. *The fellows will have a good view at the target*, Tom thought and shuddered as

it dawned on him that he was part of the target. It was no joke to be on the receiving end.

For all he knew this would continue until dawn. He ducked against the outer wall of the courtyard and took stock of his limbs. His ankle was fine, but his thigh throbbed. He ran his hand over it and felt...wetness. In the dim glare of the burning fires he noticed blood on his hand. *Well, isn't that just perfect!*

He pulled down his prison uniform trousers to scrutinize the wound. An ugly cut, but apparently nothing life-threatening. The bleeding slowed down to a trickle. His heart thundering in his throat, he leaned against the courtyard wall, waiting for the attack to end.

A deafening explosion shook the entire foundation of the prison building, sending bricks tumbling down the wall. Tom quickly pulled up his trousers again and edged further away from the burning building, until he noticed a pile of rubble in the far corner of the courtyard.

He decided to examine it with the rising dawn and made his way to the corner, oblivious to anyone and anything around him. When he reached the spot he couldn't believe his eyes: behind the pile of rubble was a hole in the wall. Tom climbed across the rubble, moving rocks away with his bare hands, and then squeezed into the crack in the wall. For once he was thankful for the meager prison rations.

But his luck ended about midway through the thick wall. The hole widened into a tiny cavern, but the way out was blocked by more rubble on the other side of the wall. Tom groaned and dug. Every now and then he paused to catch his breath, until he heard the all-clear siren.

Uggh! Now the guards would return and herd the prisoners back into the cells. Then they'd check their many lists – these Germans loved lists – and cross out names on one list to put them on another one. And soon enough they'd know he was missing.

Tom dug faster.

The sun rose and sent its merciless August heat down over Berlin. Through the cracks in the rubble overhead, bright sunlight stabbed at Tom's body. The adrenaline was slowly wearing off and his injured thigh started throbbing again. He could not imagine how he had managed to run, nay, sprint from the cell just the night before. Even if he made it out on the other side, he wouldn't be able to escape in plain daylight.

It was hopeless.

Nonetheless he continued digging.

Chapter 8

Tom tenderly ran his fingers over his leg. The cloth was sticky with congealed blood and the merest brush of his fingertip dragged curses of pain from his lips. His mind clouded continually with fits of dizziness.

The sound of angry voices caught his ear, and he immediately stopped digging and ducked deep into his cavern, trying to become one with the wall surrounding him.

“Four men are missing. We need to find them before nightfall, or the authorities have to be informed – and you all know what that means,” the voice of one of the senior guards barked, and then he assigned each of the other guards an area to search.

Tom froze in place, barely daring to breath. Three others had escaped too? He could only wish them luck, but this wasn't good. The more prisoners were missing, the greater effort would be put into the search.

The guards dispersed and Tom heard voices echoing from all corners of the courtyard. He hoped, no, prayed to God, that they wouldn't find him in his hideout. Minutes later he heard soft footsteps approaching and stopped breathing altogether. He willed his body to merge with the stone and become invisible to the human eye.

His eyes stared in shock towards the opening into the prison courtyard, where moments later a head with long blonde hair appeared. *A woman! I could knock her out and run for my life.* Of course that thought was entirely ridiculous and he quashed it the same moment.

A flashlight glared into his eyes. The woman gave a surprised gasp and lowered the flashlight. In that moment Tom knew his third attempt to escape was over.

Nevertheless, he held her gaze. She stilled and a charge of electricity passed between them. He knew she'd felt it too, because her beautiful blue eyes softened, before she blinked the emotion away.

"Please. All I want is to live," Tom begged.

The beautiful woman swallowed hard and an inexplicable sadness swept over her face. Then she gave a barely visible nod and backed out of the hole in the wall.

"I can't see anyone. The hole's a dead end; they must have escaped somewhere else," she yelled back at her colleagues.

Tom's heart rate needed several minutes to return to a normal pace. He'd been given a new lease on life.

Thank you for taking the time to read DOWNED OVER GERMANY. You'll meet Tom again in the full-length novel WAR GIRL Ursula, due to be published in June 2017.

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