

BERLIN CENTRE
MAX HERTZBERG



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BERLIN LICHTENBERG

My old pal Holger walked into my new office early on a Thursday morning.

“You’ve had a promotion,” I told him after counting the pips on his shoulder.

“Change of scenery, too,” he replied, twisting his head so he could join in with the counting. “Been transferred to Main Department II.”

Small talk exhausted, I told him to shut the door while I got the bottle and glasses out. He was my first visitor at Berlin Centre, and that called for a toast.

“You know that favour you owe me,” he asked once he’d emptied his glass.

I knew I owed him a favour, I just didn’t know which one he was referring to. But he was probably here to let me know, so I topped up his glass and settled back, ready to hear what Holger had to offer.

“Practically the first job across my desk,” he said, sipping his vodka. “I’ve been assigned to look after a walk-in, would you believe?”

“Congratulations,” I replied. I’d never had a *Selbstanbieter*, a member of a foreign security service walk up to me and offer their services as an informant.

“They sent me to pick him up from Beeskow. Let’s call him Subject Bruno, that’s what his file says after all. Bruno from Bonn. He’s visiting relatives over here and decides to make himself known to the local county office—they’re all in a swither and phone Berlin. Berlin phones me and tells me to go and get him.”

I took a sip of vodka. What Holger was saying sounded interesting, better than pushing the same piece of paper round my desk all day, which was what I'd been doing ever since I got here.

I topped up our glasses and waited for him to get to the point.

"So I drove out to Beeskow—you know the place?"

I knew it. I'd passed through on the motorcycle once or twice. One of those sandpit towns that lurk in the endless Prussian forests of Brandenburg.

"Picked him up, brought him back," continued Holger. "On the way, we got chatting, hit it off a bit. He was easy to talk to."

I could already tell I wasn't going to like where this was going.

"He's had a week of the treatment and now they're going through the transcripts, deciding what to do with him. While that's happening, he's to behave himself and sit tight.

"So, yesterday I took him to a *Datschek* in the woods. Nice joint, they're keeping him sweet: good food, more than enough beer and a couple of guards to split firewood and feed the stove when he's feeling cold. I reckon the plan is to make sure he arrives back in Bonn on time so they can play him back to the opposition. Of course, there's a hair in the soup." Holger paused to light a cigarette. I let him get on with it, I was enjoying story hour. "There's always a hair in the soup and this time it's the source himself. It seems our new friend Bruno from Bonn is getting bored." Holger paused to take another sip of vodka, watching me over the rim of his glass.

"You want me to feel sorry for him?"

"Wait, listen—this is the best bit: I had to take some paperwork down there this morning, had a bit of a chat with Bruno. He told me he's frustrated that the one good bit of intelligence he brought with him hasn't been acted upon."

"How's he know what we're doing with intelligence he

provided?" I snorted, this was obvious stuff, even to a walk-in *Westler*.

"Exactly. Normally he wouldn't know. Except this time he does because when I picked him up from Berlin, during a nice chat on the way to the *Datschek*—he told me about a mole in the Firm."

That made me sit up straight. Moles are bad news for everyone, and speaking personally, the last thing I needed was a deep probe tunnelling through the whole Ministry, I had too much smelly laundry that wasn't fit for the light of day.

"Wait, it gets even better." Holger held his glass out for another top-up. "One of the officers who interrogated him—Bruno from Bonn says the interrogator is the mole."

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BERLIN LICHTENBERG

It doesn't do to wander around Berlin Centre saying things like that.

The first thing I did was double check my office door was closed. The next thing I did was pull an army blanket out of the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet and put the telephone to bed, tucking it tight in the grey blanket.

"A mole? You sure he wasn't just causing trouble?" I asked.

"Always a possibility."

"You passed on the information?"

"Wrote the report, never got round to handing it in—you know what happens to messengers."

We looked at each other for a while, sipping our vodka. I wasn't enjoying the conversation and needed Holger out of my office. But he wanted something from me, and he wouldn't go until he'd asked. I gave him his line: "What do you want?"

"If I hand that report in—it's about members of my department and I've only just arrived. Doesn't do to make allegations like that, not without collateral."

"I'm not the one to—" I had my hands up in front of me, shaking my head.

But Holger wasn't in a listening mood. "Just have a wee poke around, see if there's anything to it. If it looks like Bruno's telling the truth then I'll hand in my report. Start my new posting with a bang—breaking something like this would set me on the right path."

"It'll also make you lots of enemies. Particularly if anyone finds out about it before you get that collateral you were just talking about."

“That’s why I’m asking for help.” Holger’s face was a picture of innocence.

“Listen, pal, I’ve only just got here myself. Haven’t even got my feet under the table yet. What you’re asking ... something like this, I’d have to take it to the section chief.”

“Be a good start for you. You run it, I’ll help out any way I can. That way we’ll both get some credit.”

Holger had a point, and I liked the way he said it. He could have got on his high horse, gone on about all he’s done for me over the years, how much I owe him. But he didn’t do that, he just offered me half the glory.

And all the risk.

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BERLIN LICHTENBERG

When my last posting ended, I'd decided I was ready for the quiet life. I'd put in for a transfer to Neubrandenburg district headquarters—nothing much happens up there, and there's nothing to do but watch the trees grow. No borders to the West, so no need to worry about escapees. It does touch Poland, and to be fair, the way the Poles have been behaving the last few years, that border might become a problem yet.

I packed my bags and sat on them, waiting for my transfer to the empty north, but it never came. Instead, they assigned me to ZAIG, the Ministry's Central Evaluation and Information Group, based at Berlin Centre in Lichtenberg.

On the first day, they gave me an office, complete with desk, typewriter and telephone, and told me to wait for further orders. Then they forgot all about me.

The first person to come near had been Holger, and he'd left again as soon as he'd told me what he wanted me to do. So I was back to me, myself and I in a poky office, gawping at a telephone wrapped in an army blanket.

I released the phone, folded and stowed the coarse, grey wool, all the while thinking about the time bomb Holger had brought.

If he was right about there being a mole in the Ministry then sooner or later the wolves would be unleashed, and they'd shred every secret from every body they came across, quick or dead. After the last two cases I'd worked, I couldn't afford that level of scrutiny—I didn't even know whether I was still in the frame for the death of my old Boss, Major Fröhlich. Nor did I know whether the disappearance of my wife had

gone unremarked, or whether they just hadn't got round to interrogating me yet.

I was still hoping nobody knew about my involvement in Operation Oskar and the disappearance of Major Blecher—but when it comes to the Firm, there's no telling. Wily bastards can watch you for years, perfecting their plans. Until they decide the time is right, you'll be none the wiser.

Perhaps Holger was right. Help him defuse the time bomb and we'd both get gold stars. And gold stars, when attached to shoulder boards, mean more salary and more privileges.

Holger's story interested me. I hadn't taken any notes, it was all in my head and I rattled through the little information he'd given me.

What it boiled down to was the word of a walk-in—someone prepared to betray his own country and his own colleagues. A discontented officer of the BKA, the West German Federal Crime Agency, tired of working on the rolling-up of the second generation of the Red Army Fraction. Even if his job involved assessing intelligence on the GDR's involvement in supporting the RAF, I couldn't see how he'd get hold of information about a mole in our department.

Source Bruno's story didn't ring true. His word wasn't good enough to justify releasing the wolves on Berlin Centre.