

Chapter 1

Otto Hartmann raised a lazy arm. The aeroplane was so low, undercarriage already down for landing, he felt he could touch it as it flew over him. For a moment it blocked the sun, its engines filled his ears. He waggled his fingers at its silver belly and then the sun was back on his face. He sighed and closed his eyes, opened them again and looked up into the deep blue sky.

Imagine being up there, lifting your plane higher and higher above Berlin. He'd always thought he had a good name for a pilot because if you wrote it "OttO" it looked like a pair of flying goggles. It was the same backwards as well. Otto used to tell everyone that. Now he was older, it didn't seem so important.

A second plane interrupted the sunshine. Otto stood up, shielded his eyes with a dirty hand, and stared over the

piles of rubble towards where the planes were coming from. Another was heading his way and he could see the glint of a fourth behind it, a little higher in the sky. Beyond that, higher still, the sun was preparing for its own end-of-the-day landing.

This was unusual, there was normally only one flight into Tempelhof at this time. The Americans didn't like to fly late over Russian territory, which made perfect sense to Otto; everyone knew Russians were best avoided after dark.

Something was going on. He leapt onto the highest point of the rubble mountain, his favoured lookout over the runway. Down by the fence he could see a cluster of children opposite a parked line of planes. They were American C54s, Skymasters. Otto knew all the planes, could pick them in the sky, the silhouette of a transport plane, a fighter, a bomber, Russian, American, British.

Planes had filled the skies over Berlin for as long as he could remember. It was bombers to begin with. They left vapour trails high in the sky and vapourised lives and buildings far beneath them.

It was different now. Three vast American bombers were lined up on the far side of the runway. These days they were supposed to threaten the Russians, not Berliners. Some

people thought another war was on the way. Otto was too busy to think about that.

He saw two pilots from the Skymasters sauntering towards the children. They appeared tall, one with his cap angled towards his left eye, the other's pushed back to expose a large forehead; dark glasses covered their eyes, broad smiles beneath. Each wore a leather flying jacket, arms decorated with colourful unit badges, one unzipped, flapping comfortably with the pilot's progress, the other zipped up to the fur collar. There was nothing Otto wanted more in the world than one of those flying jackets.

He took off down his mountain, leaping from boulder to boulder, then slithering and sliding across the looser rubble, hoping the string wound around his right shoe to keep it together wouldn't break.

Once on the flat he ran to the fence and pushed his way through the children, ignoring the protests. At the front, close to the wire, he found Ilse and Karl.

"Wondered how long before you got here," said Karl, grinning at Otto.

"Hey! Mister!" yelled Ilse, her fingers as always curved around the straps of the rucksack that went everywhere with her.

"Hey yourself missy!" The taller pilot flashed a grin at

them, revealing the whitest teeth Otto had ever seen. He had a pencil-thin moustache and looked like he'd stepped off a movie set.

"Want some candy?" The other joined him, shorter, squarer but also with teeth from a different world.

"Sure thing, mister," said Otto. He was learning English, copying accents he heard on the streets and occasionally, when he'd money in his pocket after a smart bit of business, from the movies. Afterwards he'd lie on his mattress in the cellar and consider the movie. Imagine living in that world.

Otto stood as tall as he could. Everyone said he was tall for his age. He was skinny but then so was every Berliner, man, woman and child. The other children pushed close behind him.

"Howdy!" he said loudly.

The pilots laughed. "Why, howdy yourself, little buddy!" Otto pulled his shoulders back, stood on tiptoes and deepened his voice. "What's going on – why so many planes so late?"

The pencil-moustache pilot handed two thin, shiny rectangles through the fence. Karl took one, Ilse the other. Karl leant on his crutches to free his hands to unwrap it.

"You spying on us for the Russkies, pirate boy?"

"What is it?" Karl spoke in German. Pencil-moustache

looked puzzled. The squat one ignored Karl, staring at Otto, the smile still on his face as he waited for an answer.

“Well, boy? You a Russkie spy?”

“Er, nein, ich, I mean I... nein, no, sir, I’m not, I like, um, flying, I mean planes – I like planes, I want one day to be a pilot. Like you...”

The pilot snorted and turned to Karl. “It’s gum,” he said.

“Here,” said Otto, took the stick of gum from Karl, broke it in two, gave one half back to Karl and put the other into one of the many eager hands thrust towards him. “Chew it,” he said to Karl.

“It’s mint,” said pencil-moustache. Karl’s face lit up as he began to chew. Ilse divided her piece and looked at her half suspiciously.

“What is mint, please?” said Otto, desperate to keep up a conversation with the pilots. Close up their leather jackets seemed just perfect. He wanted to touch them. Instead, he sniffed the wrapper. “Ahhh,” he said. He couldn’t help it because he’d never smelt anything like it. He passed on the wrapper. “Here, smell it, it’s...”

“Guess you kids never had gum before.”

Otto translated. They shook their heads. “Would you like some more, some candy maybe?” Otto spoke quietly while the Americans beamed at them. The other children

nodded, struck dumb, scared if they said something they'd awake from this most perfect of dreams.

“Well, let's see what we can do, eh Charlie?”

The squat one, Charlie it seemed, winked at Otto. “Sure thing, Gail. Cat got your tongue, Russkie boy?”

Otto concentrated hard. “Say, Charlie, give me a go on your sunglasses, my eyes ain't so good in this sunshine.”

The pilots roared with laughter and the children joined in, even though they'd no idea what they were laughing at.

“You're a proper one ain't cha, kid!”

“I'm Otto and I can help with what you want.”

“Swell, then you won't be needing our candy then – come on, Gail, we should be getting back...”

“Oh! Nein, wait – sirs, sorry, don't go, I mean if there's anything you want from Berlin, a souvenir or, or... something, I can get it for you. We need candy very much, very, very much.”

“Just kidding, kid.” The pilot reached through the wire and ruffled Otto's hair, then looked at his hand suspiciously and wiped it on his trousers. “Next time we fly in, tomorrow probably, you look for us – that beautiful bird there, 712, that's mine – Gail's in 714. Wave to us and we'll drop candy.”

There was a gasp from the children when Otto translated,

sliding the words out the side of his mouth so he could keep eye contact with Charlie.

“But how will we know it’s you? From the ground we might not see your numbers.”

“You think of everything, kid...”

“We’ll waggle our wings,” said Gail, smacking his hands together to applaud his own idea. “You wave and we’ll waggle back.” He put his arms out as if he were a child pretending to be an aeroplane and waggled. “Just like that!”

Just like that every child in front of him did the same, even Karl, who remembered just in time he’d only one leg and grabbed his crutches.

“So long, wagglers.”

The pilots strolled along the fence. The children taxied on the other side, arms outstretched, ready for take-off, led by Otto. He dropped his arms and turned to the fence. “Wait – but why are you here? You never told us...”

“Because we’re the cavalry come to rescue you.”

“I do not understand.”

The rest of the children were further along the wire, arms still outstretched, heads full of what tomorrow might bring.

“You’re surrounded – Berlin’s surrounded. The Russkies have cut you off. The only way in – or out – is this way.”

Gail pointed. Otto looked up as another plane thundered in to land. “We’re going to build you an air bridge, Cyclops.”

“A bridge of planes,” said Otto.

“That’s it – a bridge of Skymasters.”

Otto lifted his right arm and saluted the American way, hand angled above the right eyebrow. The pilots gave one last flash of whiter-than-white teeth and touched their caps in return, and as they did, Otto Hartmann felt 12 feet tall.