

EXCERPT



THE GALLERY AT POTSDAMER PLATZ

The Gallery at Potsdamer Platz

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This book was originally published in German as *Die Galerie am Potsdamer Platz* in 2019 by HarperCollins Germany. The English version has been translated in 2024 by myself to reach a wider audience and share the story with more readers around the world.

It is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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FOR TED. FOREVER.

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PART 1

OCTOBER 1930–DECEMBER 1930

A declaration of war

October, 31 1930

Alice had imagined the villa on Potsdamer Straße to be larger and more magnificent. Perhaps it was the rain, which covered everything—the houses, the street, the trees, even the light—like a thin film and made it seem powerless.

Shivering, she glanced at the dimly lit windows and pulled up the collar of her coat. She had been freezing since arriving at Anhalter Bahnhof this morning. She had only stopped at the guesthouse on Motzstraße to drop off her suitcase. Then she had walked to Potsdamer Straße and saw Helena Waldmann leaving the villa. She ran towards her to see her face. It looked exactly like the photograph she had found in her mother's suitcase among unopened letters. Although the picture must have been taken 25 years ago, Alice had no trouble recognizing her. The years had been kind to her. Unlike her mother.

Alice had patiently observed where Helena shopped and whom she spoke to. But had that told her anything about the old woman? She knew now that her tailor was called Kutscher, that she ordered flowers from Bellmann and meat from the butcher. She could tell from the diligence of the shopkeepers that they were used to fulfilling her wishes immediately.

Alice had stood in line behind Helena at the newsstand and

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looked at her very straight back and her wavy silver-grey hair. She had smelled her perfume, a hint of lavender and jasmine, had heard her voice, a smoky alto, and when she had turned around, she had seen the color of her eyes. A glowing golden amber with an almost black iris. The color of her own eyes.

She quickly lowered her eyes, pushed past her, and asked the man behind the counter for Juno cigarettes. She had smoked one after the other and was now coughing. A sinking feeling spread through her stomach.

Alice looked up at the rows of closed windows. There was no more waiting. She flicked the cigarette butt into the gutter and stepped out into the street.

When she had crossed it, she opened her handbag, pulled out some decades-old letters, and pressed the bell. It was time, and the door opened before she could exhale.

Answers

October 1930

As the old woman's cold gaze locked with hers, Alice lost her self-control for a moment and took a step back. All her resolutions dissolved into a collection of conflicting impulses: turning on her heel and running seemed, for a moment, to be an option worth considering. Then her anger took over again and she held the pile of letters out to Helena.

"She died. On 26 October 1930, at seven in the morning."

Helena Waldmann looked at her suspiciously. Alice stepped closer to her. The old witch showed no emotion. She leaned forward and said in a low, hushed voice, "My name is Alice Waldmann. I am your granddaughter. The daughter of your daughter Anna."

Their eyes locked. When the old woman blinked, Alice straightened and looked over her grandmother's shoulder. She would not be turned away as easily as her mother.

"May I come in?" she asked, pushing past her without waiting for an answer. "What I have to say is difficult to discuss between doors."

Helena closed the front door slowly. Without looking at them, she took the letters that Alice handed her.

"Well?" asked Alice.

"Well, what ... Miss," Helena replied coldly.

"Well ..." Alice began, suddenly realizing that she hadn't given a single thought to what she wanted to achieve. The only thing she was sure of, and the only thing that had brought her to this point, was her anger. Anger at Helena for rejecting her own daughter, Alice's mother Anna. For loving a man who wasn't good enough for her mother.

"I ..." she began but was interrupted by the ringing of the doorbell. She flinched and glanced hastily at her grandmother. Hopefully, she hadn't noticed.

But she looked at her watch, unmoved. She seemed to hesitate for a moment. Then she grabbed Alice's arm with a surprisingly firm grip, opened the door to her right, and pushed her into the parlor behind. Alice tore herself away. But her grandmother gave her a look that made her freeze. She blinked and before she could protest, the door had slammed shut.

Stunned, Alice stared after her. What the hell, she thought angrily, and was about to rush to the door when she heard a soft click and scrape behind her. Startled, she spun around.

A dog! But what a dog! She had never seen such a big dog before! The huge grey animal had risen from its blanket in front of the fireplace to greet her with a cautious wag of its tail. Alice took a deep breath and held out her hand to let him smell her. His cold, damp nose dug into her palm. "You're a good one," she murmured and began to scratch him behind his ears, which he acknowledged with an enthusiastic wag of his tail. She swallowed the lump in her throat as her fingers ran through the dog's rough fur. "Can you tell me what I was thinking coming here?" she whispered to the dog. "The old witch broke my mother's heart." She got down on her knees in front of him. He panted and put his head on her shoulder. "She can't just get away with that, can she? Can't she? I want to hear from her what happened. I want ..." She hesitated, moved away from the dog, and took his huge head between her hands. "I want her to admit her guilt." The animal tried to lick her face and she laughed softly, pulling gently on its ears. "You're right. We don't give up that easily, do we?" She patted him on the shoulder and stood up, not a second too soon, as

the door opened and Helena walked back into the room. Without glancing at Alice, she walked over to the dog, grabbed his collar, and led him out. For a brief moment, Alice could make out the tall figure of a man in a leather jacket, then the door closed again. She heard the soft scratching and shuffling of the dog's paws on the tiles, a few muttered words, and the front door slammed dully into the lock.

Alice glanced around the elegant room. There was a small table set for three by the window. Helena was obviously expecting company. She crossed the room in a few steps, put down her purse, and sat down. A pot of hot tea stood between the fine china plates. She took a deep breath and tucked her dark curls behind her ears, which had already fallen out of her carefully pinned hair. Helena Waldmann shouldn't think she could dismiss her like that. No, madam, she couldn't get rid of her that easily. Determined, she reached for the teapot and poured steaming, fragrant tea into the cups.

When the door opened, she looked up. "Milk? Sugar?" she asked, seemingly unmoved, holding up the milk jug.

Helena hesitated for a moment, then sat down opposite her.

Alice shrugged and took a sip.

"Where were we?" she asked after putting down her cup. "Oh, right, I was going to tell you why I'm here."

Helena frowned as Alice quietly stirred her cup with a clink. The sound hovered over their heads like an icy blue dissonance. She felt her grandmother's cold gaze on her. She should just look, Alice thought. If she thought she could intimidate her, well, she was wrong.

Helena looked at her watch again.

"It's late and I don't have an infinite amount of time. So, if you have something important to tell me, do it now. And then leave my house."

Alice stared at her. "You want to know what I want?" With a clink, she set the cup on its saucer, opened her purse, took out her mother's photograph, and placed it next to Helena's cup. "I'll tell you. I want to know what happened. Why you broke your daughter's heart. Why you can't forgive."

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The old woman took a quick look, blinked, and turned her face away. "I don't remember addressing you informally!"

Alice felt heat rise to her face. "Don't think you can get away with not answering my questions."

The old woman looked at her coldly. "I think you'd better leave before I call a constable."

Alice got to her feet. "I will get answers from you. I won't make it as easy for you as my mother did." She opened the door and glared at the old woman. "You're not getting rid of me." Then she left.

Alice runs I

November 1930

Alice knew she was in trouble. Ten minutes earlier, she had stormed out of the house in a rage and almost ran into a couple about to turn into the villa's front garden. Startled, she jumped back and pushed past them. When she glanced back, she saw the woman pulling her husband's arm while he stared, mouth agape. It must have been the visitors Helena had set the table for. Let them stare! She had turned away and wandered through the streets without a thought to how she would find her way back to her guesthouse. Now, as evening traffic rushed past and oncoming headlights blinded her, she realized she had no idea where she was or how to get back.

It was good that she had taken the city map offered at the inn. With its help, it shouldn't be too difficult ... Alice stopped abruptly. She had left her bag at Helena's! She groaned. It wasn't just the map that was in the bag. The key to the guesthouse and her wallet were there too. She clenched her fists. Damn, she'd screwed up again! A passerby brushed past her, turned angrily, and shook his head. She glared at him. When another man almost ran into her, she exhaled sharply, stepped aside, and looked around.

She stopped short. There was a man with a huge dog on the side of the road. Wasn't that the dog that had been picked

up from Helena's? Alice approached the man reluctantly. He was wearing a worn leather jacket that didn't seem to fit in with this middle-class neighborhood. Either his arms were too long or the sleeves were too short because his wrists were sticking out of the cuffs. When Alice saw that he wasn't even wearing a hat, she shivered.

"Excuse me?" she called out.

He didn't hear her.

"Hello? Excuse me," she tried again.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw her. She raised her hand and he turned to face her.

Alice looked into a narrow face with high cheekbones. Auburn hair, badly shaved. A wide mouth with thin lips and deep-set blue-green eyes.

She cleared her throat and pointed at the huge animal at his side. "Did you pick up the dog earlier? At Waldmann's?" She held out her hand to him and the dog immediately began to wag its tail and pant in a friendly manner.

The stranger nodded. "Aye. Right. Gentle. The dog, that is. That's his name ..." he added. The hint of an English accent, almost imperceptible, lay beneath his words.

Smiling, she looked at the still wagging dog and scratched him behind the ears. "Pleased to meet you, Gentle!" She held out her hand to the man. "Alice. Waldmann. Well, that's my name."

Amused, he raised an eyebrow and grasped her hand with a smile. His hand was dry and rough, with a pleasantly firm handshake. There was nothing she hated more than damp, boneless sweaty hands.

"John Stevens," he replied.

"Could you tell me how to get from here to Motzstraße on foot?"

"I could." He looked at her and tilted his head. "But you'd better take the bus."

Did he think she couldn't find her way? She raised her chin challengingly. "I'll walk," she replied firmly. "If you just tell me how to get there."

He narrowed his eyes, then shrugged, pointed to a road off

to the left, and began to give directions.

Alice watched as his hands pointed this way and that. They were large but slender, with long, delicate fingers. No ring. When she broke her gaze, she realized she had lost track. She cleared her throat.

"All right. I think you're right," she interrupted him. "I think ... it would be ... too far ... on foot. Maybe you could tell me where the nearest bus stop is?"

"I have to go in the same direction. I can walk with you if you like."

She nodded. "That would be very kind. Thank you."

His legs were long, his strides wide, but not hurried. Alice was amazed to see that they matched their speed without any further effort, almost of their own accord. Most people walked too slowly for her, and walks often ended with her companion complaining about her pace, or Alice feeling she had to creep along.

On any other day, Alice would have enjoyed the walk. She would have looked around expectantly in this torn, scarred city. She would have soaked up everything: the beggars, the pale women huddled in dark doorways. War invalids, cripples, hungry children. Just a few meters away, the lively, pleasure-seeking throng of passers-by. The dressed-up couples entering brightly lit cafés, through whose wide windows you could see heavily made-up women smoking and pomaded men casting bold glances around. But tonight was different. All the life around her fascinated her but was overshadowed by her anger at Helena Waldmann—and herself. She shook herself slightly. No, she didn't want to think about it anymore tonight. There would be plenty of time for that tomorrow.

She didn't want to spoil what could be her last evening in this city. She would have a little chat with the man next to her, get on the bus, go to the guesthouse, pick up her handbag in the morning, and then decide whether she should return to Vienna.

She glanced briefly at her companion. How could anyone walk around in this cold in such a thin jacket? She pulled her coat tighter around her. "Aren't you cold?" she asked.

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He shook his head. "No. I just need a scarf. Because of the wind. That's hard."

"Where are you from in England?"

"England?"

"Well," she hesitated. "John Stevens is not a German name."

He nodded. "And yet I'm half German."

She looked at him in astonishment.

"My mother was German. My father was Irish."

"That's why you speak German so well!"

"If you fall asleep every night with Grimm's fairy tales, you should be able to at some point, right?"

"And what are you doing here?" she asked and would have liked to bite her tongue at the same moment. Of course, the war. How stupid of her.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"What does your family say? Don't you miss them?"

"My parents died."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." She stood still, embarrassed.

He nodded briefly, then looked around. "See, there's the bus stop. From here, it's just a stone's throw to Motzstraße."

"I think I have another favor to ask you." Alice cleared her throat, feeling embarrassed. "It's awkward, but could you lend me some money?" She looked down, her cheeks flushing. When she heard a soft laugh, she looked up.

"Miss Alice Waldmann, you are welcome," he said, shaking his head. He reached into his trouser pocket, dug out some coins, and held them out to her in his open palm. "You're very welcome."