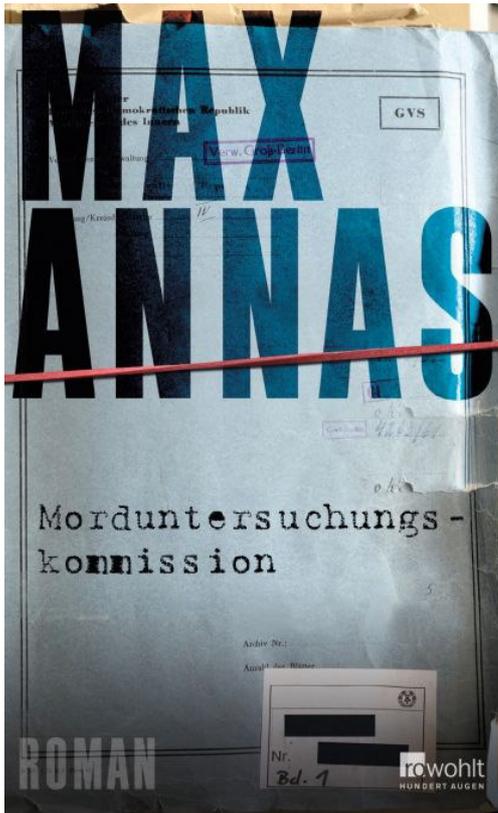


Max Annas MURDER INVESTIGATION COMMISSION



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Hundert Augen
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320 pages

A mutilated body is found next to train tracks near Jena. How did the young man from Mozambique die? First lieutenant Otto Castorp from the murder investigation commission in Gera looks for witnesses but is confronted with a wall of silence.

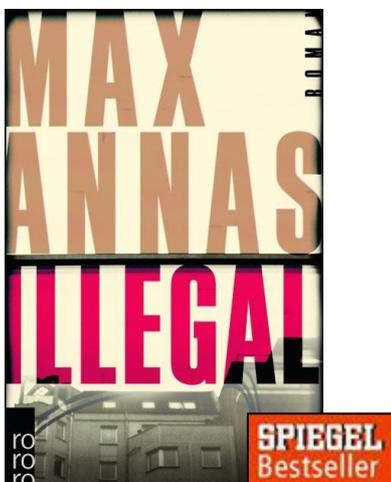
The evidence, however, points to racist motives for the killing. When it becomes clear that this line of inquiry can no longer be disregarded, the commission is ordered to drop the case: a racist murder is inconceivable in the German Democratic Republic. Otto Castorp begins his own covert search for the killer, under observation by the powers that be...

Based on a real case, Max Annas' novel is an urgent, deeply political thriller with a relevance that goes far beyond the 1980s and the former East Germany.

- Rights to *The Wall* have been sold to the USA (Catalyst Press) and to France (Belfond).
- Rights to *Illegal* have been sold to France (Belfond) and Japan (Sogensha).
- The author won the German Prize for Crime Fiction in 2017.

Max Annas was a journalist and worked for many years in South Africa on a research project studying South African jazz. He now lives in Berlin. He was awarded the German Crime Writing Prize for both his debut novel *The Farm* and his second book, *The Wall*.

Backlist:



Morduntersuchungskommission

by Max Annas

Sample translated by Rachel Hildebrandt Reynolds

1 | Sat., October 1, 1983

“And let me tell you...”

Otto turned his head, waiting for the end of the sentence, but Bodo just took one final drag on his unfiltered cigarette before calmly putting it out with his shoe. Bodo held the smoke in his mouth and simply shook his head. Otto could never understand how anyone could smoke something like that.

For the past few minutes, it had been quiet in the curve of the Ernst Abbe Sportfeld. Carl Zeiss was about to lose. As Hansa Rostock's Juri Schlünz started his free kick, Bodo dropped his eyes and slowly released the smoke. Otto glanced back at the field. A prolonged aah rippled across the curve as the ball was blocked.

“Anyway,” Bodo said, “there are just days like this. When you know nothing'll go right. Like just now when I saw it go in.”

Bodo didn't know what he was talking about, of course. He hadn't even been watching. How could he have seen the ball go in? But other than that, he was right. Carl Zeiss Jena had stormed the Rostock goal, and in the second half, they had come close to taking the lead.

There are just days like this, true enough. The attacks from their side were growing weaker. It had only been a few months since Jena had pounded Hansa, but that had been in the last Oberliga season.

Bodo held out the cigarette package, but Otto shook his head. He was thinking about calling it a day. Carl Zeiss wasn't going to dig themselves out of this, obviously. And he had a good parking space. Being a cop meant you could occasionally take advantage of small privileges. If he waited to leave the stadium with everyone else, it would take him so long to get away that he could just forget about his promise to Birgit to be home in time for supper. Carl Zeiss had already started another of those attacks that you could tell from the outset would result in absolutely nothing. The ball flew out of bounds.

At least one supper together with the kids on the weekends. They had agreed on that some time ago. Whenever it was possible. Whenever they were both off from work. Whenever nothing urgent came up. Whenever he didn't have to go out.

“Shit.” Bodo nudged him.

Schulz was running down the outside line toward their goal. He then passed the ball to center field.

Damn it. That guy had been wide open. What was his name?

And then the guy slipped past their goalie Grapenthin and made a clean shot. Just like that.

"I'm done," Otto said. Shouts from the curve.

"Huh?" Bodo hadn't heard him.

Otto pointed toward the parking lot. "I have to go," he yelled loudly enough for Bodo to catch on.

He jostled his way through the surrounding dumbfounded faces and drooping shoulders, and quickly reached the lot. Still some distance away, he caught sight of Konnie leaning against the Škoda he had parked right next to Otto's green Lada.

Konnie pointed at his watch. Hurry. Otto covered the last few meters to his car at a run.

"Follow me," he heard Konnie call. "Woman dead in a stairwell. And it wasn't a voluntary trip down the stairs."

"Did they call Birgit?" Otto called back as he unlocked the Lada.

Konnie gave him a thumbs up before climbing into the Škoda.

2

Otto followed Konnie to the autobahn. There wasn't much traffic on the highway. They passed several semis and two Trabants, all dutifully adhering to the traffic laws. The bridge over the Saale River was also practically empty. He wished he knew more about the case he was heading toward and wondered if the others were on their way, too. Or perhaps they were already there. That would just be pathetic. Although he was the only officer on the *Morduntersuchungskommission* who lived in Jena, he was going to be the last one on the scene. He wished he knew how long Konnie had been waiting for him.

Konnie turned into the newly developed area of Winzerla. A couple of uniformed officers were standing in front of a six-story building, staring at the curious bystanders and apartment residents who had gathered at a suitable distance. They called these kinds of buildings five-plus-ones, a word trick that enabled their builders to save on the construction of elevators.

He recognized the beige Wartburg sitting at the main entrance: their squad car. The others had already made it here from Gera. Konnie and he were the last ones. Otto parked his Lada several meters away on a green stripe. Before slamming his car door, he stared for a moment at the building. He had been somewhere around here with Birgit and the kids. Who had they visited? One of his wife's co-workers. He remembered the apartment. Nicer than theirs. Better light, larger kitchen. But they hadn't been in their place in Lobeda all that long. And they had only gotten that one by skipping to the top of a lengthy waiting list. Another perk of being a cop. There was no point in hoping for something better for a while yet.

Rolf was sitting on the second-floor landing. Beige windbreaker, horn-rims perched on the tip of his nose, legs apart, hands on his knees. He was puffing on a cigarette as ash floated down on the steps. When he caught sight of Otto and Konnie, he took a drag and inhaled without taking the cigarette out of

his mouth. He didn't say hello. Rolf never did. His hair was parted with painful precision as always. It only got messy when he beat the shit out of someone.

Otto hesitated briefly, searching for some small verbal jibe, but Konnie pushed him from behind.

It was lying between the second and third floors. A blanket was draped over the body. Not a slender woman, that was obvious. A pair of glasses on the floor, uncovered. One of its lenses was cracked. A few blood splatters could be seen on the wall under the window. On the upper set of stairs, an officer Otto didn't know was standing watch over the corpse.

Ilja, a young cop Otto had worked with previously, was waiting by the apartment door. He nodded at Otto respectfully. The name Radunek was pasted over the doorbell. Otto could hear Günter's and Heinz's voices from inside the apartment.

"What a total disaster." Günter's bass.

"You can say that again." Heinz's bell-like tenor in response.

"If what the neighbor lady says is true..."

The two of them turned as Otto and Konnie entered the kitchen. Günter's towering figure in a shabby blue suit. Slightly stooped as if he were about to pass through a doorway, scratches on his cheeks from careless shaving. His hands were jammed as deeply as possible in his pockets, and exactly ten hairs had been carefully combed across the crown of his bald head. Otto had lost count of how many times he had come close to telling him how shitty that looked.

Heinz was pacing, which was what he frequently did in enclosed spaces. Otto guessed he had grown accustomed to doing this during interrogations. It made them all nervous, not just the suspects. He was the senior policeman in their group and their commanding officer, which you wouldn't have known by looking at him. In his baggy black suit, you never would have guessed he was 55 or that he was a habitual drinker. They all knew better. Over the past year, a small paunch had developed over his belt. He sucked in his stomach when he noticed Otto's glance.

"How nice that we can always rely on Comrade Castorp to show up on the scene once all the work's been done." Heinz gestured toward the living room door behind the newcomers. "Especially when it's right in the middle of Jena. We're already done securing and surveying the crime scene." He pointed at their colleague. "Günter's already started his inspection."

Otto studied the kitchen table on which a bowl of salad and another holding potatoes were sitting. The second set of utensils on the table were untouched. He wondered why there was no meat in sight.

"It was the husband." Konnie leaned down to get a closer look at a potato that was lying next to one of the chairs. "He saw the roast was missing, and lost it." He straightened up and looked at the others. No one laughed.

"A neighbor from upstairs saw it happen." Günter gazed at Heinz.

"Yes," Heinz continued. "She was coming down from up there and saw Radunek push his wife down the stairs."

"Down the stairs?" Konnie asked. "How did they get from the table to out there?"

“Down the stairs.” Heinz raised his eyebrows for a second. “And we’re here because now she’s dead.”

Otto tried to imagine the scene, but was having difficulty.

“And he did it on purpose?” he asked

“With both hands.” Günter held his hands up in front of him, as if he were mimicking Radunek. “If the wife didn’t see it coming, then she would’ve landed on her head. And that’s exactly what it looks like.”

Heinz was standing at the window. “They’re here to get her,” he said.

“Where’s Mrs. Radunek’s husband now?” Otto asked.

He glanced back at the second set of utensils. The knife was set meticulously perpendicular to the edge of the table, the fork not quite.

“Vanished with his Wartburg, a ‘72.” Heinz was following something that was happening outside. “Over the past year, he was pulled over twice for drunk driving.”

“Received warnings,” Günter added.

“Where are the kids?” Konnie asked from the kitchen door. “There are three beds.”

“We’re looking for them now,” Heinz said.

“I’m much more interested in where Radunek is,” Otto said.

“The neighbor lady, Mrs. Vogel,” Heinz pointed upward, “saw him drive off. Alone. Without the kids.”

“And did Radunek know Mrs. Vogel saw him?” Konnie asked.

“He just left,” Günter said. “Sounds funny, I know. She says he’s a regular at Feldeck Bar.”

“That’s in downtown Jena.” Konnie shook his head. “He must’ve been able to get a beer around here, though.”

“We need to split up,” Heinz said. “The two of you go to Feldeck and take a look around. We’ll question the people here in the building. And look for the kids first. Rolf’s already on it.”

“Sure,” Otto said. He had already seen how hard Rolf was searching for the children.

3

“I’ll follow you.” Otto said as he descended the stairs behind Konnie. “I don’t want to leave my car here.”

Across Jena, then a little out toward Zwätzen. The streets were empty. It was almost evening. The daylight would only last for another hour or so, and everyone was either back home or visiting someone or sitting in a bar, like Erich Radunek likely was. And Birgit would soon be making supper for herself and the kids. Recently, it seemed like he was almost always being sent out with Konnie, which was fine with Otto. He sometimes couldn’t help thinking that something must be wrong with Rolf - his violent outbursts which he usually managed to hide. Heinz and Günter were often off on their own. They

were the most senior officers, and Heinz was the captain of the *Morduntersuchungskommission*. Günter had been a crime scene tech since forever.

When it got crazy, they were sometimes out and about in differing constellations. But when did it ever get really crazy? Not much happened around here. This was the Gera district after all, not Berlin.

Konnie parked on a narrow street behind a Wartburg that was straddling the sidewalk. One tire up, one on the street. There were fresh scratches on one fender. Must be the one. Konnie was standing in front of the car, holding a piece of paper and studying the plate number.

“It’s our man,” he said as Otto got out of the Lada.

Otto knew Feldeck. He had gotten plastered here a few times himself. One of those places you could still get something when everywhere else was closed. Along with the usual clientele. At least, later in the evening.

Konnie opened the door. It was gloomy inside, as dark as it soon would be outdoors. Otto and Konnie didn’t move as the door swung shut behind them.

Not much going on inside. There never was much action here until after ten. The bar was deserted. Solitary people were scattered around the tables. Otto saw a couple, barely forty, sitting with a wine bottle between them. They were wrapped up in each other and didn’t even notice that they were being watched. A gaunt alcoholic was staring at two glasses of beer, one half-full and one empty.

A thickset man stood up from the table sitting closest to the restrooms. He was wearing a checkered shirt and oversized jeans. He gripped the table tightly, then straightened up and wove his way unsteadily toward them. The fringe of hair that circled his faintly shining, bald head was matted and uncombed. The man looked older than his thirty-nine years, and in this light, you could see that his flabby face was covered in a two-day beard. One side of his shirt hung below his waistband. When he reached them, he crossed his wrists and held them out.

“I did it,” he said. “I confess everything.”

Otto pulled out his handcuffs and snapped them in place. “For that, you’ve earned one of our lovely rooms in Gera.”

Meanwhile, Konnie mumbled: “Come with us. We need your assistance to clarify a case.”

Justice was always served in the end.

Before they climbed into the car, Radunek said: “I should’ve done it earlier.” He belched and looked like he was about to vomit.

Konnie waited a moment, and then gave him a light cuff on the back of the head as he shoved him into the back seat of the Škoda.

Otto slid in next to Radunek. He was going to have to leave the Lada where it was for now.

As Konnie started the car, the man repeated: “I should’ve done it earlier.”

"He refuses to say anything else." Otto was standing in the hallway of the police presidium in Gera, his back against the wall.

He rubbed his eyes. The corridor was almost pitch dark, a cone of light stretching into the darkness through an open door at the back of the passage.

Heinz and Günter glanced at each other.

"Nothing else?" Günter gestured at the door behind them. All they could hear from the other side was Konnie's voice.

"Nope." Otto raised his arms and stretched his shoulders. "In the car yesterday, he said / *should've done it earlier* a few times, but that was it. Not another peep. Nothing all day today, either. He spent most of the time staring at the floor."

"Alright. Where are we at this point? His premeditation. He took the children to their aunt's..." Heinz's intonation was almost flat.

"It all fits," Otto said. "And the neighbor witnessed him do it. We don't really need his confession."

"True." Günter looked at Heinz. "But we've only just gotten started on him."

"What does Radunek actually do at VEB Schott & Comrades?" Otto asked.

"He's a union leader." Günter smoothed his strands of hair. "A very honorable comrade."

Heinz's hand was already on the doorknob, but he glanced back quickly. "Let's go in. I want to see him."

Konnie was sitting on the desk, Radunek on the chair with the short legs. He was still in the clothes he'd been wearing in the bar.

Radunek looked at the three men who had just stepped into the room. First Otto, then Günter. His eyes came to rest on Heinz, who stuck his hands in his pockets. Heinz closed his eyes for a second, then began pacing up and down the room.

"We will resume this tomorrow. Consider very carefully what you want to say, Mr. Radunek. Okay?" He stared hard at the man in the chair, who didn't react. "Because one thing is clear. You have to talk. And at some point, you will. Everyone who lands in here does eventually. You can count on that."

Günter held open the door to the dining area at the Heinrichsbrücke restaurant as the others filed in one after the other. A few solitary guests were seated at various tables with almost empty glasses sitting beside them. They didn't expect new ones. They knew they would no longer be served. It was after ten already.

The table in the back corner at the window was already set, as was always the case this time of night. Utensils and plates, glasses for beer, wine and schnapps. Dimitar appeared at their table as Rolf took his usual place in the corner against the wall. Heinz and Günter squeezed in beside him, as Otto and Konnie sat across the table. The usual arrangement.

“No food today,” Heinz said. He was the last one at the table to light up.

“It’s no surprise this case is so open and shut,” Rolf said, his eyes fixed on the bar. “When you see how beaten they look after something like that... Like this Radunek. It’s simply not in people’s nature. Well... at least not when you live in a just society.”

“What do you mean?” Konnie glanced over his shoulder as he spoke. “Dimitar should go ahead and bring out the good stuff.”

“Ah...” Rolf pointed at Dimitar, who was heading their way with a tray. “Here he comes. Actually, what I meant to say is that sometimes we’re more trustees than anything else.”

Otto shook his head. “Trustees?” Where was Rolf going with this?

“Yes. Look, in a society like ours...” Rolf broke off as Dimitar set the tray down on the table. Two bottles of cabernet, eight bottles of Jena pils, one uncorked bottle of Wiltener Goldkrone - all of which would soon be empty.

Rolf continued as he poured his beer into a glass. “So. A society like ours is completely different than, say, America’s. I went to the movies a few months ago, and obviously, it was an American film.” He paused for a moment. “I can’t remember the title, but it was clear from the way the story went that everyone was only interested in personal gain. There’s a point when you can no longer control a situation like that. Everyone against everyone else. That’s what happens in late-bourgeois societies. On the other hand, we...”

Otto stopped listening. He must have seen that film, too, since he caught all the American films that came over. There wasn’t much else worth seeing. But he wasn’t exactly sure which film Rolf meant. He had watched *Missing* not all that long ago. The theater had been sold out that night. And the movie had shown very clearly what capitalism did to people. He finished his schnapps and then took a sip of wine.

“They don’t respect any boundaries whatsoever,” Otto heard Rolf say. “In America, that is. Of course, I mean anywhere in the West. And here it is totally different. You can really see that socialism is the only right way.”

Günter nodded. Heinz, as well. Konnie looked away.

Heinz caught Otto’s eyes. He didn’t break his gaze until Konnie began to speak.

“That’s why you can’t make any comparisons,” Konnie said. “When a society functions differently, then crime over there has to function differently, too. Right?” He looked around the table, waiting for agreement.

“Yes...” Günter said, sounding bored. “Over there, crime exists because they send individuals out into the world to compete against each other. You can see where that leads by simply reading a history

book. Under F for fascism. What we do is so vastly different, no comparison. Our political sensibility shapes everything we do, as far back as we can remember. That's what you meant," he looked at Rolf, "right?"

Rolf topped off his beer and shook his head. "That wasn't what I meant. I just wanted to say that Radunek has simply veered off course. And that he knows that as well. Something like this really only happens when all the bad stuff hits you at once. Think about it," he glanced across at Otto and Konnie, "he was fully aware that he'd screwed up big time. He didn't really try to escape, did he? On the one hand, he knew that he wouldn't have a chance. We'd catch him, of course. Where could he go? Besides that, he just wanted to drink after what he'd done."

"Exactly." Günter raised his beer glass. "To the case. To its speedy resolution."

Otto lifted his wine glass, as did Konnie. Rolf topped off his beer again.

Heinz's fingers were wrapped around the stem of his wine glass, which was filled to the brim with schnapps.

"If only it were that simple," he said. "Cheers, men. Good work."

6

Birgit was standing in the kitchen when Otto got home. She was putting away the dishes, but stopped to dry her hands on her apron.

"Mike's sleeping in the living room," she said, holding a finger to her lips. "He had a bad cough. At least this way the others can get their rest."

"Do you think they'll catch what he has? Can you go to work tomorrow?" Otto kissed Birgit's cheek.

"We'll have to see. Did you close the case from yesterday?"

Otto leaned against the kitchen door jamb. "More or less. Just the formalities are left. But..." He gazed hungrily at the table on which his plate and the supper leftovers were sitting. "It feels strange to be standing there at a total loss. You know you're missing something, but you can't help wondering why a man would push his wife down the stairs? And you know what?"

Birgit waited.

"They also had three kids. That alone should've meant this didn't happen. He couldn't have done this. I mean, what did he think would happen? Mommy's dead, and Daddy's in jail.

"How old are they?"

"Older than ours. Eight, eleven and fourteen."

"Our kids might still know them from somewhere. Winzerla isn't all that far. Come one. Let's go to bed." She pointed at Mike sleeping on the couch. "I'm so tired."

Hand in hand, they went into their bedroom and got undressed. Birgit was already rolled up under the covers by the time Otto stepped out of his briefs.

“They live in one of the brand new buildings,” he said. “They really are much nicer, but I don’t want to gripe. We’re happy here. Did your sister get that apartment she was so excited about?”

All he heard was Birgit’s quiet breathing. She was already asleep. In a few minutes, she would start making a muted, high-pitched tone, a delicate pheeep sound. He had heard it so many times before.

As his head hit the pillow, he once again saw Mrs. Radunek in his mind. *Think about something else*, he told himself. So he thought about Marion. If everything went as planned, he would meet her tomorrow. Just briefly. But he was still looking forward to it. He imagined her, the way she pulled things off the shelves in the book shop. From way up high. He felt himself relax at the mere thought of her.

[...]

As soon as Otto left Kahla behind him, he saw the three other cars parked along the shoulder of an extended curve. Rolf's and Konnie's vehicles were parked off either side of the MUK Wartburg. His colleagues were nowhere in sight, though.

The railroad tracks that connected Jena to Rudolstadt ran parallel to the road. After verifying that no train was approaching from either direction, he crossed them and saw his colleagues gathered in a semi-circle on the sloping meadow. They couldn't have beaten him here by much, otherwise they would have already started on their work. They were utterly silent as he joined them.

The comrades were staring at a row of trees and shrubs that lined the bank of the Saale. The river wasn't very wide at this point, as it flowed languidly on. Between the men and the trees was overgrown meadowland. And in the shade of the trees, a corpse. Otto could make out jeans and dark clogs. A red shirt stuck out from under a light-blue jacket.

The body was all contorted, lying on its stomach with its limbs twisted about. One arm was pinned underneath the body, while the other pointed at the river. The hand was dark with blood.

Just like the head. Someone had beaten it to a pulp. Otto looked more closely. Actually, the head didn't really exist anymore. More of a stump than anything else. It wasn't just that someone had given a beating. Nothing but total frenzy could have done this. Everything was bloody and dark. He looked at the others. Konnie off by himself on the opposite side of the group. Next Heinz, then Rolf and Günter. Otto had placed himself at the edge of them.

It was Rolf who broke the silence. He coughed and then took a deep breath. "Brown coal," he said.

Heinz glanced up, disapproval written across his face.

Rolf wasn't blind. "That's what my oldest says," he added, as he cocked his head a little to the side.

Otto looked harder. What was peering out from the jacket collar was bloody, but he had only noticed the blood, not the dark color of the corpse's skin. It was the neck of a black man. Now that he knew what he was seeing, he could distinguish skin from blood.

"One of the Africans," Heinz said.

"The Cubans are also black." Konnie's commentary.

"Algerians are African, too." That was Günter.

I'm the only one who hasn't added anything, thought Otto. But if there was nothing to say, there was simply nothing to say. The man lying on the ground in front of them was dead, whether African or not. They would have to find out who was responsible for this. That was just the way it was. However, they had never started an investigation in silence like this.

Heinz slowly spun around. "The scene is..." he said, breaking off when his gaze reached the tracks. "Damn it, he wasn't beaten to death out here. Let's go take a look at the other side of the tracks. Or do you think this is also the primary crime scene?"

"There..." Konnie pointed to some flattened grass in front of them. "Something happened there, whatever it was. But the grass is already straightening back up."

They were standing in the middle of what might have been a five-meter-wide strip of grass. The tracks and road behind them, the trees, shrubs and Saale in front of them. There were clear signs of activity between their location and the body's.

"Who called it in?" Otto asked.

"A woman..." Rolf pulled a piece of paper out of his jacket pocket. "A Mrs. Semmler. She was traveling from Saalfeld to Kahla to pick up some preserves from her daughter. That's what she said. And she saw something lying out here from her train window. That's what she also said. She then called the authorities from her daughter's shop. Our colleagues verified the report and notified us."

"Then what we're seeing here are traces from the other cops, right?" Otto glanced around the circle.

No answer was itself an answer.

"If he was run over by the train," Rolf said, "it'll be a case for the transport police anyway."

"Until we know that, we're in charge." Heinz didn't look at Rolf as he replied. "We'll see from there."

"Where are they anyway? The uniforms?" Otto asked. "Couldn't they cordone off the area?"

"A traffic accident near by." Heinz pointed back toward the road. "They had to go. Konnie and Otto, you'll have to do it. Günter, start on the crime scene. Rolf, we'll stay here with Günter and look around."

Konnie beat Otto to the tracks and waited for a train to pass that was heading toward Rudolstadt. As they reached the road, a patrol car pulled up next to them. Otto spoke to the driver who got out: "Don't let anyone through. Until further notice, this is our crime scene. It should be easy to rope off. The area on the other side of the tracks isn't usually accessible, is it?"

"No. Only a few fishermen go down there. Or kids. But..." The officer looked at his watch. "They're all in school." He broke off for a moment. "No, that's not right. They're out on vacation."

"Good," Otto said as he crossed back over the tracks.

Günter was busy with the body. Leaning over it, he lifted the outstretched arm by the jacket sleeve. He then looked over at them, searching for Heinz. His expression was a mixture of disgust and bewilderment. But he couldn't locate Heinz, who had just gotten into the Wartburg to use the radio. He was probably arranging for the body to be picked up later. Otto wondered what the autopsy would find.

Otto studied the corpse from the distance of several meters, as Günter searched through the clothing on his knees. He had already spread out a metal ring with various keys and a few coins on a cloth. Slowly, he turned over the body. Otto was revolted by the frenzy he now saw. He had encountered all kinds of death. Very early in his time with the MUK, that had been right after he finished his criminology degree, they had found an older man dead under an IFA W 50 in Triptis. He was caught underneath the rear axle of the truck, and the body had looked horrible. A double tire had driven over his head, and very little remained that his relatives would want to remember. It turned out that this was not a murder, and the local police department handled the case. However, the image of what remained of that head had haunted Otto's nightmares for months.

They were over. The nightmares. Long over. He had seen a lot during his past few years with the MUK.

But the dead black man here... Something was off. How could anyone have enough energy to deliver such a beating? Who could even do something like this to another living creature? He was not as close as Günter was, but from where Otto was standing, he could see that the head had been the target of extreme violence, which had not ended with the actual death. Someone had kept going and going and going. As a classification category, the concept of frenzy did not suffice to cover what he saw. And if the dead man had been run over by the train, then the body would look completely different and would not be located so far away from the tracks. Otto examined the grass between the tracks and the crime scene. The local cops had already trampled on too many potential clues when they had come out here to confirm the woman's report.

"Hey," he heard Konnie call. Otto turned around and saw his colleague leaning over the tracks a short distance away. He straightened up and took a few steps to the side to allow a train to pass, heading toward Jena. "Come here," he called and motioned.

Otto reluctantly set off to join him. This was something they needed to pursue. Somebody might have seen something. Where had the people who had left the body come from? Not from the river. So, from the other side of the tracks. How many people would it take to lift a full-grown man from a car and carry him across the tracks? And what about a body in such a battered condition as this?

Out of the corner of his eye, Otto caught sight of a gray wagtail perched on a limb stretching over the meadow. He thought he had heard its clear ssissitt song a little earlier. There had been an increasing number of them around here over the past few years. He looked closer. It was a female with a yellow breast and white flanks. The bird took off again, cutting a swift arc across the Saale. Every small insect that skittered around out here this time of year would become her victim.

"Look at this," Konnie said when Otto reached him. He was pointing at a large splatter of blood that had fallen onto the gravel right next to the tracks. His finger shifted direction. There were also spots on the grass that might have been blood. Otto bent closer.

“Shit!” he said. “We have to cordone this area off as well.” As he said this, his eyes fell on more dark red farther down the tracks. “Wait,” he said.

He took several more steps, then a few more. Leaned down. He was already almost fifty meters away from the crime scene. Of course. They had transported the body along the tracks.

20

“The dead man...” Günter was talking, but the train that was just driving past the window drowned him out. He took a drag on his cigarette and stared at the floor.

Konnie stood up and shut the window. They had been allowed to use a room in the *Volkspolizei* station in Kahla for the afternoon. Heinz was sitting at the desk. Günter was standing a short distance behind him, a photo of Erich Honecker hanging right above his head. Otto was leaning against a corner, one arm propped against a waist-high filing cabinet. Konnie and Rolf were sitting behind a second desk. Rolf got up and slammed the door that connected their room with another one containing two additional workstations. Only one of them was occupied.

“Anyway,” Günter continued. “The body is on its way to Gera. The autopsy will take place today. The...” He glanced out the window. “Let me just say... What they did to his head...”

“What did they do to the head?” Otto asked.

“In my opinion, it wasn’t just done with blunt force.” Günter looked at the floor, obviously searching for words. “Regardless of which weapon was used, beating the head over and over again with it wouldn’t have been able to batter it to that extent. What I mean to say is this: The head wasn’t just beaten. There were also other forces at play. Part of the skull is simply gone.”

Heinz turned around, waiting for more.

None of the others said anything, either.

Heinz opened his hands to indicate that Günter should keep going.

“I don’t know,” he said. “It looks like there was some kind of violence from the top down that exerted pressure on the skull. But it’s more than that. I don’t want to say anything else at this point, not until we know more.”

“So, as if someone used an object and swung it down on the head?” Rolf glanced around as he spoke, searching for support.

“Yes,” Günter said slowly. “Kind of. But different, too. We’ll know more after the autopsy.”

This wasn’t like Günter at all. Otto was surprised. Their group normally worked in a climate of openness. If anyone had a thought or an idea, then everything was freely discussed.

“What else do we have?” Heinz took over for Günter and looked at the other three men.

“The main thing we don’t have is a name,” Otto said, waiting on an objection that did not come. No papers had been found on the body. “Is there any clue at all as to who the man might be?”

"Definitely an African." Rolf.

"We already got that," Heinz said. "Or a Cuban."

"But how can we identify him?" Günter.

"We haven't gotten any missing persons' reports," Heinz said.

"At least, not in Jena."

"And what if he isn't from Jena?" Otto asked.

"We'll ask at the dormitories," Günter said.

"That'll just upset the people there," Rolf said. "The word will get around. We won't look good just going around and knocking to ask if anyone's missing."

"And do you have any idea how long that would take?" Otto shook his head. "Considering how many of these dormitories there are in our district. And if we want to be thorough, then we also have to ask in the factories. And if there aren't any missing persons' reports in Jena, then he could come from practically anywhere."

"Maybe we should begin with the blood trail first." Heinz paused until he was certain that everyone had heard his suggestion. "Good," he continued. "Otto, Konnie, you've already started on that. Go take a look at the area around the crime scene. Make a wide sweep. We want to know where the body was brought from. Günter, go back to Gera and wait on the autopsy findings. Rolf, let's go ask around in Kahla and the general vicinity."

21

The sky darkened as Otto parked his car behind the police Wartburg. It smelled like rain again.

"How long do you have to stay here?" he asked the officer who was standing at the side of the road and gazing across the tracks.

"Till six," the young man said. "PM. My replacement should be here by then."

Otto and Konnie stepped across the tracks and studied the crime scene. Konnie's shoulders tightened as he stared at the spot of meadow where the body had been found.

"Yes, that's where Günter worked his magic," Otto said. "And," he pointed toward Kahla, "the body couldn't have come from that way. So back to the blood trail."

The tracks branched off from the Saale close to where they had observed the last blood splatter earlier that day. They marched on for a short distance without finding any more clues. The landscape opened up on their side of the tracks, and they saw a small village.

"What's that place called?" Konnie asked, jerking his chin toward the first few houses that were less than a hundred meters from them, mostly covered by trees.

"Großeutersdorf."

"Shitty name."

"Yeah." Otto glanced across the tracks. "Maybe we should look around over there. The other side of the tracks, the other side of the road. There's the rest of the village."

He strode across the tracks, and Konnie followed him with a sigh. "What would a black man be up to over there? Don't they all live in the city?"

Otto had wondered about that, too. First of all, they had their own dormitories. Secondly, they had their own reasons not to be seen all over the place. Even if it was before their time, all the blacks knew about what had happened in Merseburg in 1979. They had all heard about what had happened there to two Cubans. Certain things just got around somehow.

Konnie stared at the ground. Road shoulder, gravel, soft dirt, roots. He shook his head. "I think they took him out of a car."

"There where the last drops of blood were?"

"And then over the tracks to where they left him."

"But why would they have hauled him over those fifty meters or so?"

"No idea. You?"

"Nope."

"The others won't be happy if we don't come back with something."

"We'll just have to live with it. It happens sometimes."

When Konnie dropped him off at the precinct in Kahla, Otto saw that the others had already left. Günter must have been driven back to Gera by one of the local officers to start his work there. And the MUK Wartburg was no longer parked close to the entrance to the precinct. Heinz and Rolf were also off somewhere. He lit a cigarette as Konnie drove off with a wave out the window of his Škoda.

He slowly smoked his cigarette and then started his car. On the country road, he signaled to turn north, toward Jena and the autobahn. He let a Trabant coming from Rudolstadt turn first, then a Barkas van heading away from Jena. And then he followed the Barkas.

The first raindrop splashed against the windshield. He did not have much time if he wanted to check along the train tracks. And if it really started to rain, it would all be pointless anyway.

Another drop. And then another. He passed the Barkas, drove through Großbeutersdorf without dropping his speed, and saw that the tracks and the road forked off. In Orlamünde, they converged again, and Otto hit his brakes as he reached a turnout.

He parked the Lada and jumped out. It had begun to drizzle.

With long strides, he ran to the tracks and glanced in both directions. He jogged along the tracks heading southward until he was out of breath and stopped. After wiping sweat and rain from his forehead, he ran back to the car.

The tires squealed as he accelerated sharply. Unlike the Saale with its numerous little curves, the road on the other side of the tracks snaked gently through the valley. Otto was driving far above the speed limit by the time he reached Zeutsch. To his left, he caught sight of a road that ran over the tracks and the river. When he reached a curve in the highway, he hit the brakes and gazed into his rearview

mirror. The road was open, and he turned around. He then drove back to the turn and stopped the car on the bridge right above the tracks.

He left the engine running as he gazed over the railing. Behind him, the platform and rural highway ran parallel to each other. In front, the tracks and the river, lined by trees. The rain grew stronger.

Decide.

Along the highway.

Or along the river.

Otto slid down the embankment and walked between the trackbed and the river toward the south. He could feel the dampness already accumulating on the grass under his feet. As he walked, he stared at the edge of the trackbed. Picked up his pace, as the rain began to fall steadily.

When he was once again out-of-breath, he paused, hands on his knees. It had been worth a try. He inhaled, gazed down the tracks, and then turned around.

It took several seconds and a few steps for him to process what had bothered him the moment he had spun around to return.

He turned back around and started to run faster again. And stopped the moment he noticed a red shimmer on the ground. He leaned down and watched as the blood seeped away in the afternoon rain.

He pulled a clean handkerchief out of his jacket, spread it over the red spot, and pressed it firmly into the ground. He then folded it neatly and returned it to his jacket pocket. Maybe they would be able to confirm if this blood belonged to the same blood type as that of the dead man.

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“... and if I could find that ten kilometers away, then we have to rethink everything.”

Otto was the last one to return to Gera. He was standing in Heinz’s office doorway and had just ended his account. And also whatever discussion had likely been going in a different direction prior to that. He pulled the handkerchief out of his pocket.

“I brought it with me.” He held it up so that everyone could see it.

“Then...” Heinz inhaled deeply. “Then...”

“Of course, it’ll take a few days until we have the comparison.” Rolf glanced around the group as he spoke. “Maybe it was just an animal.”

“Then... we’ll actually have to rethink it all.” Heinz had rediscovered his voice.

“We’ll definitely have to do that.” Otto refolded the handkerchief and set it on the desk right in front of Günter. “And if it happens to be animal blood,” he looked at Rolf, “explain to me how it managed to schlep itself all those kilometers along the train tracks. Across roads and through cities and towns.”

"Yeah, but they wouldn't have dragged him all that way along the rail line. The body, that is." Günter picked up the handkerchief. "Maybe it's blood from different...", he broke off to think, "... different creatures. Human here, animal there. Maybe all these clues along the tracks have absolutely nothing to do with our victim."

"True. Couldn't these all come from different sources?" Heinz asked.

"But," Otto said, "how long will it take until we know if this blood is a match for the dead man's? We'll have to wait those few days."

When nobody said anything, he continued: "Or did one of you find any clues around the crime scene?"

Again, no one said anything.

"Good." Heinz raised his hands as he took a pull on the cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. "When we discovered the blood on the tracks, it stood to reason that it had something to do with our case. Let's say... People, at least two, carried the body over the tracks and left it close to the river, since we assume that the man didn't die where we found him. They deposited him there. We can assume they carried him over those fifty meters across the meadow before dropping him where we found him. Although any other spot would have been just as good as that one, as far as I can see. So, the blood you found near the tracks seems to be a clue related to our case. And...", Heinz pointed at Günter, "there's also the injuries on the body."

"He was run over. By something. Anything could've happened." Rolf addressed Heinz directly without including the others.

"Yes, but his hands and injuries don't corroborate that. Someone hit by a train looks quite different." Heinz glanced around their group. "His hands look like they've been through a combine." He lit a new cigarette, then stared at Otto. "Close the door."

He took a deep drag as he pulled a bottle of Goldkrone out of his upper drawer. After he unscrewed the lid, he took a few seconds to enjoy the scent of it without removing the cigarette from his mouth. Then, with two fingers, he gripped the bottle and raised it to his lips. He took a drink, closed the bottle again, and ran his tongue along the inside of his left cheek.

"Toothache," he said, pausing to consider his next words. "If we take the blood trail along the tracks seriously - close to the crime scene as well as further on... and it could be that there were more splatters that the rain washed away... if we take them seriously, then how do we explain them? It feels as if this has something to do with the trains."

"He wasn't hanging off the side of the train." Rolf.

"Nor was he dragged along." Günter. "That's not what it looks like."

"Could he have gotten off somewhere?" Konnie asked. "And then the door closed and..."

Otto shook his head. "Isn't that the wrong side? Then the blood trail wouldn't be on the outer side of the railbed."

"None of it makes any sense," Heinz said.

“What should we do?” Otto asked.

“What do you suggest?”

“If the rest of you ask questions around Kahla,” Otto said, “then Konnie and I could walk the tracks.”

“No, that’s too much attention for me. People would ask questions about why two of us are wandering along the tracks. I don’t want that kind of attention. We couldn’t keep things quiet. You would have to go hunting all by yourself.” Heinz gazed at his desk. “We still don’t have any missing persons’ reports.”

“Perhaps we should systematically search for a missing person,” Otto said.

“Absolutely not.” Heinz stood up, and started pacing back and forth behind his desk. “We aren’t going to traipse around all the dormitories in the area asking about any blacks who spent the night somewhere else. That would ruffle too many feathers. Just imagine what they’d say - that we were out looking for some African whose name we didn’t even know. No,” he said. “No, no, no.” He hesitated and resumed more quietly. “Sooner or later we’ll hear if one of the contract workers has disappeared. We’ll just hope it doesn’t take too long.”

23

Otto drove off right after this discussion, and was glad to be alone with his thoughts. He turned off his windshield wipers. The rain had stopped. During every murder case, meeting with the others in his group to exchange ideas and theories was the center of the investigation process. It usually ended up that the members of the group assumed the roles that they had developed over time. Or that they had been allocated. Sometimes he was unsure which was more true.

Rolf was the one who would argue against any good suggestion, even if it was obvious that it should be followed up on. One time, when they were all together, someone had labeled this with a foreign word. It had probably been Günter. Otto had forgotten what he said. Even if it sometimes seemed destructive, what Rolf argued often had a solid rationale behind it. Are we sure that we’re doing the right thing?

Günter was the one who brought everything together, always with an eye on Heinz. On the one hand, this was useful since there were moments in which someone had to do this work. On the other hand, his statements often sounded hollow and opportunistic. Nonetheless, Günter’s contributions were helpful because they corralled everyone into line, into an investigative line.

Then there was Konnie, who always operated with a degree of detachment which he thought appropriate. I’m the youngest in the room, his gaze and body language said. At the same time, his perceptive qualities were good. Otto was glad Konnie was there. It meant he was no longer the youngest in the MUK.

And lastly Heinz. As the captain and squad leader, he was the highest ranked member of their group and the most experienced investigator. He often gave the impression that he wanted to prevent his people from deviating from a line that he did not always clearly define. If anyone presented an idea that threatened to fracture the communal spirit of the group, he would react very critically and often dismissively. And yet he would sometimes find a solution that would enable someone to separate themselves from the group and follow their own instinct. This was why Otto was now underway on his own. He was once again driving past the spot in Kahla where they had found the body.

Because ultimately they all had the same goal. When it came to a capital crime, all forces had to be mobilized to find the culprit. Which was why Heinz tolerated a dissenting opinion in the interest of achieving this goal.

What happened before the rest of the MUK team set off was standard procedure. A secretary, most likely Frau Heitmann as usual, would be asked to keep track of everything while the MUK members were out in the field. This was a difficult task and often a time-consuming one. Frau Heitmann had to be reachable at all times in order to pass along the messages that the individual members of the group transmitted through her by phone. Otto knew that Frau Heitmann did not enjoy this work at all. He had learned this by accident. A conversation between two women in the stairwell who had no idea that he was standing half a floor above them, smoking a cigarette and staring out the window. He happened to hear Frau Heitmann complain that she could hardly make it to the restroom when she was managing things for a MUK case. She simply had to be permanently available. And only the MUK's Wartburg had a radio. All other communications were made via telephone.

After arranging that, a room would be made available for their use in the Jena police presidium. The distance between the two cities was not much more than forty kilometers, but it made sense to have this space for the necessary meetings, several of which might occur on the same day depending on the situation. Thus, having quarters close to the crime scene was advisable, especially considering Gera was over fifty kilometers away from the meadow in question. Besides that, it was possible that in Jena, two or three other detectives might be assigned to them for the duration of the investigation. He had just driven through Zeutsch and kept going. The tracks and river were now a few hundred meters away from him. All the way through Uhlstädt, back close to the tracks, then through Etzelbach and Kirchhasel toward Rudolstadt, where he parked the car at the train station. He watched as people left the building. A train pulled out for Jena. Otto had to admit that he had no idea what he was actually looking for.

Walking more of the trackbed might not be the most logical next step, but he did not know where he should start. Any other traces of blood were bound to be gone. The rain would have thoroughly washed them away by now.

Otto tried to remember what they had found on the body. A keyring containing both a door key and a bike key.

Also, a perforated ticket for some event. From a roll. He could have gotten that anywhere. A receipt from a Kaufhalle. That, too, could have come from anywhere in the country. A West German penny in his pants pocket, but no wallet. They had taken that off of him. Just like his ID papers.

Nothing, Otto thought. At least, nothing that could help him.

A bus came to a stop in the station courtyard. The driver opened his window and lit a cigarette. He inhaled and held the smoke in his lungs for a remarkably long time. He then blew out the smoke in a thin stream. A train pulled up, from Jena. It took a while, but then about thirty teenagers marched sedately out of the station and vanished into the bus, which left soon afterward. The driver tossed his half-smoked cigarette out the window, still burning. Otto watched the bus as it drove toward the center of town. He lit a cigarette as well. The only thing he had was the bloodstain he had saved from the rain. If it matched the African's blood, then they would have something. Then the dead man must have boarded the train in Rudolstadt or before. Otto turned around and drove back. He would take a look at a few sections of track.

[...]

Otto was still tired. He should have used the Sunday to rest, but he always enjoyed being with the kids. And he spent more time with them than most of his colleagues. Birgit had looked puzzled when the children had told her about the game on the train platform. She probably had her own thoughts on the matter.

When he reached the parking lot of the Jena presidium, he saw that the others were already there. He trudged up to the second floor, where the meeting room was located. Heinz was the only one missing.

Otto looked at the clock. It was already a few minutes past eight. "I'm sorry," he said.

The mood was different than it had been at the end of last week, when they had listened to Günter's disturbing reconstruction of Macamo's murder. They all looked exhausted now, despite having had a day off. They hadn't made any progress, and they knew they were facing a long week of interrogations at the end of which they might not be any closer to the truth.

"Heinz'll be here in a minute," Günter said.

"What's going on?" Otto asked. He felt a little uneasy.

Rolf held up his pointer finger - his sign for the hierarchy in which they were bound. There was a top and a bottom. They were at the bottom. And Heinz reported to superiors in Gera.

"Do you know anything?" Otto asked, walking over to Günter instead of taking a seat.

Günter opened his hands to indicate that he knew nothing.

Which meant he knew something.

"Wait?" Otto asked.

"Wait," Günter said.

"We have to wrap up the initial questioning of these people by the middle of the week." Konnie stretched. "Of course, we'll have to verify what they tell us, but we also need to start checking out other leads. Do any of you think we're on the right track in terms of the brawl?"

Nobody answered.

"Maybe some of us should take a closer look at the victim's immediate environment and acquaintances," Konnie added.

Otto walked over to the window. Not far from where he was standing, a giant flock of starlings was flying in a constantly shifting formation. He could have watched them for hours. Perhaps they were already heading to their winter habitat. They had probably come from Scandinavia and had chosen the German Democratic Republic as their temporary home for a few weeks. Stuff like that happened. And now they were flying on.

"The railway line," Otto said. "I think we'll find the key there. Who did Macamo meet?"

"Maybe someone from the bar," Rolf said.

"Yeah, maybe," Otto said. Not because he believed Rolf was right, but because he wanted them to focus on the railway line.

Heinz's Wartburg pulled into one of the parking spots below. He stepped out of the car and lit a cigarette. He then looked up and caught sight of Otto. He held his gaze for a second before lowering his eyes. He took a second drag on the cigarette before dropping it on the ground and stepping on it. Otto took a seat.

Less than a minute later, Heinz walked into the room. He quickly scanned the faces of his men and sat down in the free chair at the head of the table. He lit another cigarette. Held the smoke in his mouth for a moment, blew it out, and inhaled.

"The case is over for us," he said.

"Which case?" Otto asked. Were they working on anything besides Macamo's?

"The Mozambican."

"We're supposed drop it?" Konnie asked. "Why?"

Heinz took another puff on his cigarette and exhaled the smoke. "Our work has come to an end."

"Who's taking over?" Otto knew exactly who would be taking over the case. The special MfS commission in Gera responsible for murder cases. Whenever anything began to smell of politics, the comrades stepped in.

Heinz shook his head. "Nobody's taking over."

"Has someone confessed?" Otto asked.

"You know as well as I do that hasn't happened."

"Then, what?"

"We've been taken off the case."

"And no one's taking over."

Heinz stared hard at Otto. "After discussing everything with our comrades from the MfS, I have decided that this case will no longer be pursued."

Heinz had decided nothing. At best, he had been informed about what had already been decided. Otto crossed his arms on the table and rested his head on them.

"Comrades, you must see the political dimension," Heinz continued.

Otto closed his eyes. He didn't want to see anything more.

"We have decided that we can't allow this reach the international arena. Think about it. How would that look? A young man from a fellow socialist state comes over here to learn something useful. You all know the people of Mozambique have just gotten through a horrible struggle against colonialism. Victoriously, I should add. Because of the reactionary powers in South Africa's Apartheid state, they are now caught in a civil war that threatens to extinguish all life in that young country."

"What does that have to do with Macamo's murder?" Otto asked without lifting his head.

“Don’t be so naive.” That was Rolf’s voice. “We were all raised to be politically conscious. Us especially. And I know you’re not unaware there isn’t a single aspect of our work that isn’t politically defined.”

“Shit...” Otto raised his head, straightening out his back. “How long ago was it that we sat here and listened to Günter reconstruct the murder for us? Even if only half of what he said was true, we have work to do. That’s why we’re here. It’s our social responsibility.”

When no one replied, Otto added: “Right?”

“Comrade Castorp,” Heinz said. “You need to quiet down and get yourself under control. What I’m conveying here are orders. You aren’t being asked whether or not you agree with what I just told you. Is that clear?”

“So we’re just going to let the murder slip through? As what? As a... as a trivial offence?”

“The investigation ends now.” Heinz hadn’t raised his voice the entire time, nor did he now. “This is a totally normal procedure. You’ve received orders like this before and followed them.”

“But all of you were there, you saw it. You can’t just let it slide. What happens to our social responsibility then?”

“Give it a break.” Otto gazed in astonishment at Radtke, who was pointing at him. “We’re not in one of those crime films like they show in the West. We do things our own way.”

“Our own way, huh?” Otto got to his feet. “And what happens to the people who murdered Macamo?”

“Sit back down, Castorp.” Heinz’s voice was now a tad louder. “I’m telling you what we’re going to do.”

“Sit down!” Rolf shouted. “Right now!”

Palms raised in front of him, Otto took his seat.

“Do I have your undivided attention, everyone?” Heinz waited until Otto took a deep breath and released it. Then another one. And another.

“Good,” Heinz said. “We’ve seen all the Mozambican’s injuries. In the end, nobody can be certain that it wasn’t a terrible accident.”

“What?” Now it was Otto’s turn to shout. “An accident? Are you...”

“Shut the fuck up!” Rolf interrupted. “You’re going to get us all in trouble. You’ve always been on the unreliable side. I knew it would eventually become a problem. And then it would be a problem for all of us.”

Heinz let him finish talking, a deliberate decision on his part. “Comrade Castorp,” Heinz now cut in, “you’ve heard all there is to say. We have to send the poor boy home now, to Africa. It must have been an accident. We have already contacted the Mozambican Embassy. The body will be delivered to them in a casket, which will be difficult to open. And we have already informed them that it would be a good idea to leave it shut. Think about it... How could we possibly explain to them that one of their boys met his end here like this? And what about the family? Which is why we’ve decided to tell them that Mr. Macamo was

in a terrible workplace accident. And that his body is so mangled that they really shouldn't view it. That is logical and also considerate of the family's feelings. We now know that his mother is still alive. She lives in the village he came from."

"And what will happen to the murderers?" Otto asked. He had managed to bring his voice back down to its normal volume.

"You have to understand," Heinz said, "there are no murderers. Sometimes a murder investigation reaches a dead end. We were in one of those dead ends, and then determined that there hadn't even been a murder. Remember your upbringing, Comrade Castorp. You learned that truth back then, that and more. Comrades..." Heinz paused for a few seconds. "We have worked so hard over the past few weeks that I want you to go home and relax. We'll meet up again Wednesday morning in Gera."

Otto closed his eyes again, and listened as the others stood up and left the room.