

November 1930

A fug of tobacco smoke and damp clammy air hit her as she entered the café. She had come in from the rain and drops of water still -trembled like delicate dew on the fur coats of some of the women inside. A regiment of white-aproned waiters rushed around at tempo, serving the needs of the *Münchner* at leisure – coffee, cake and gossip.

He was at a table at the far end of the room, surrounded by the usual cohorts and toadies. There was a woman she had never seen before – a permed, platinum blonde with heavy make-up – an actress by the look of her. The blonde lit a cigarette, making a phallic performance out of it. Everyone knew that he preferred his women demure and wholesome, Bavarian preferably. All those dirndls and knee-socks, God help us.

The table was laden. *Bienenstich*, *Gugelhupf*, *Käsekuchen*. He was eating a slice of *Kirschtorte*. He loved his cakes. No wonder he looked so pasty, she was surprised he wasn't diabetic. The softly repellent body (she imagined pastry) beneath the clothes, never exposed to public view. Not a manly man. He smiled when he caught sight of her and half rose, saying, '*Guten Tag, gnädiges Fräulein*,' indicating the chair next to him. The bootlicker who was currently occupying it jumped up and moved away.

'*Unsere Englische Freundin*,' he said to the blonde, who blew cigarette smoke out slowly and examined her without any interest before -eventually saying, '*Guten Tag*.' A Berliner. She placed her handbag, heavy with its cargo, on the floor next to her chair and ordered *Schokolade*. He insisted that she try the *Pflaumen Streusel*.

'*Es regnet*,' she said by way of conversation. 'It's raining.'

'Yes, it's raining,' he said with a heavy accent. He laughed, pleased at his attempt.

Everyone else at the table laughed as well. '*Bravo*,' someone said. '*Sehr gutes Englisch*.'

He was in a good mood, tapping the back of his index finger against his lips with an amused smile as if he was listening to a tune in his head.

The *Streusel* was delicious.

'*Entschuldigung*,' she murmured, reaching down into her bag and delving for a handkerchief. Lace corners, monogrammed with her -initials, 'UBT' – a birthday present from Pammy. She dabbed politely at the *Streusel* flakes on her lips and then bent down again to put the handkerchief back in her bag and retrieve the weighty object nesting there. Her father's old service revolver from the Great War, a Webley Mark V.

A move rehearsed a hundred times. One shot. Swiftmess was all, yet there was a moment, a bubble suspended in time after she had drawn the gun and levelled it at his heart when everything seemed to stop.

'*Führer*,' she said, breaking the spell. '*Für Sie*.'

Around the table guns were jerked from holsters and pointed at her. One breath. One shot.

Ursula pulled the trigger.

Darkness fell.

Snow

11 February 1910

An icy rush of air, a freezing slipstream on the newly exposed skin. She is, with no warning, outside the inside and the familiar wet, tropical world has suddenly evaporated. Exposed to the elements. A prawn peeled, a nut shelled. No breath. All the world come down to this. One breath. Little lungs, like dragonfly wings failing to inflate in the foreign atmosphere. No wind in the strangled pipe. The buzzing of a thousand bees in the tiny curled pearl of an ear. Panic. The drowning girl, the falling bird.

'Dr Fellowes should have been here,' Sylvie moaned. 'Why isn't he here yet? Where is he?' Big dewdrop pearls of sweat on her skin, a horse nearing the end of a hard race. The bedroom fire stoked like a ship's furnace. The thick brocade curtains drawn tightly against the enemy, the night. The black bat.

'Yer man'll be stuck in the snow, I expect, ma'am. It's sure dreadful wild out there. The road will be closed.'

Sylvie and Bridget were alone in their ordeal. Alice, the parlour maid, was visiting her sick mother. And Hugh, of course, was chasing down Isobel, his wild goose of a sister, *à Paris*. Sylvie had no wish to involve Mrs Glover, snoring in her attic room like a truffling hog. Sylvie imagined she would conduct proceedings like a parade-ground sergeant-major. The baby was early. Sylvie was expecting it to be late like the others. The best-laid plans, and so on.

'Oh, ma'am,' Bridget cried suddenly, 'she's all blue, so she is.'

'A girl?'

'The cord's wrapped around her neck. Oh, Mary, Mother of God. She's been strangled, the poor wee thing.'

'Not breathing? Let me see her. We must do something. What can we do?'

'Oh, Mrs Todd, ma'am, she's gone. Dead before she had a chance to live. I'm awful, awful sorry. She'll be a little cherub in heaven now, for sure. Oh, I wish Mr Todd was here. I'm awful sorry. Shall I wake Mrs Glover?'

The little heart. A helpless little heart beating wildly. Stopped -suddenly like a bird dropped from the sky. A single shot. Darkness fell.

Snow

11 February 1910

'For God's sake, girl, stop running around like a headless chicken and fetch some hot water and towels. Do you know nothing? Were you raised in a field?'

'Sorry, sir.' Bridget dipped an apologetic curtsy as if Dr Fellowes were minor royalty.

'A girl, Dr Fellowes? May I see her?'

'Yes, Mrs Todd, a bonny, bouncing baby girl.' Sylvie thought Dr Fellowes might be over-egging the pudding with his alliteration. He was not one for bonhomie at the best of times. The health of his patients, particularly their exits and entrances, seemed designed to annoy him.

'She would have died from the cord around her neck. I arrived at Fox Corner in the nick of time. Literally.' Dr Fellowes held up his -surgical scissors for Sylvie's admiration. They were small and neat and their sharp points curved upwards at the end. 'Snip, snip,' he said. Sylvie made a mental note, a small, vague one, given her exhaustion and the circumstances of it, to buy just such a pair of scissors, in case of similar emergency. (Unlikely, it was true.) Or a knife, a good sharp knife to be carried on one's person at all times, like the robber-girl in *The Snow Queen*.

'You were lucky I got here in time,' Dr Fellowes said. 'Before the snow closed the roads. I called for Mrs Haddock, the midwife, but I believe she is stuck somewhere outside Chalfont St Peter.'

'Mrs *Haddock*?' Sylvie said and frowned. Bridget laughed out loud and then quickly mumbled, 'Sorry, sorry, sir.' Sylvie supposed that she and Bridget were both on the edge of hysteria. Hardly surprising.

'Bog Irish,' Dr Fellowes muttered.

'Bridget's only a scullery maid, a child herself. I am very grateful to her. It all happened so quickly.' Sylvie thought how much she wanted to be alone, how she was never alone.

'You must stay until morning, I suppose, doctor,' she said reluctantly.

'Well, yes, I suppose I must,' Dr Fellowes said, equally reluctantly.

Sylvie sighed and suggested that he help himself to a glass of brandy in the kitchen. And perhaps some ham and pickles. 'Bridget will see to you.' She wanted rid of him. He had delivered all three (three!) of her children and she did not like him one bit. Only a husband should see what he saw. Pawing and poking with his instruments in her most -delicate and secretive places. (But would she rather have a midwife called Mrs Haddock deliver her child?) Doctors for women should all be women themselves. Little chance of that.

Dr Fellowes lingered, humming and hawing, overseeing the washing and wrapping of the new arrival by a hot-faced Bridget. Bridget was the eldest of seven so she knew how to swaddle an infant. She was fourteen years old, ten years younger than Sylvie. When Sylvie was fourteen she was still in short skirts, in love with her pony, Tiffin. Had no idea where babies came from, even on her wedding night she remained -baffled. Her mother,

Lottie, had hinted but had fallen shy of anatomical exactitude. Conjugal relations between man and wife seemed, mysteriously, to involve larks soaring at daybreak. Lottie was a reserved woman. Some might have said narcoleptic. Her husband, Sylvie's father, Llewellyn Beresford, was a famous society artist but not at all Bohemian. No nudity or louche behaviour in his household. He had painted Queen Alexandra, when she was still a princess. Said she was very pleasant.

They lived in a good house in Mayfair, while Tiffin was stabled in a mews near Hyde Park. In darker moments, Sylvie was wont to cheer herself up by imagining that she was back there in the sunny past, -sitting neatly in her side-saddle on Tiffin's broad little back, trotting along Rotten Row on a clean spring morning, the blossom bright on the trees.

'How about some hot tea and a nice bit of buttered toast, Mrs Todd?' Bridget said.

'That would be lovely, Bridget.'

The baby, bandaged like a Pharaonic mummy, was finally passed to Sylvie. Softly, she stroked the peachy cheek and said, 'Hello, little one,' and Dr Fellowes turned away so as not to be a witness to such syrupy demonstrations of affection. He would have all children brought up in a new Sparta if it were up to him.

'Well, perhaps a little cold collation wouldn't go amiss,' he said. 'Is there, by chance, any of Mrs Glover's excellent piccalilli?'