September 12th 1935

The girl with the gun crouched waiting. The dark shape hung over the belt of poplars, then banked, swooping out across the salt marsh. It was coming nearer.

She braced a knee against the wet wall of the trench. The monster pumped its black wings – ragged, impossible. Curls of samphire crunched beneath her elbow as she brought the gun to her cheek. The wind lifted old book smells off the mudflats. Kidney-shaped pools shone copper and gold.

She mouthed the old lesson like a spell, falling into Mr Garforth's quiet, steady rhythm.

To kill a bird, I must first ascertain its speed and trajectory. To do this, I follow it with the muzzle of the shotgun.

She tilted the barrels up and began tracking a spot a yard behind her target. She could hear the thing panting.

When I have ascertained its speed and trajectory, I bring the gun past smoothly.

Any longer and it would see her. Her index finger twitched over the two triggers, dithering between full and half choke. She held her breath and brought the gun up too fast – stopped, waited, let the muzzle fall back in behind her target. She counted to three, tried again. This time, she swung the gun in one clean movement.

If I miss the bird – if *I miss – I will miss it in front.*

She continued past what instinct told her was the sweet spot.

The gun kicked. A flock of brent geese took off in a rippling blast, their voices like starter motors. Dark bodies and white undertails confettied the air.

Delphine lowered the gun. She thumbed the locking lever and broke the barrel; the breech coughed a spent cartridge into the soft mud at her feet. She pressed her heel on the empty case until it sank. She reloaded.

The sky was red and empty. She hauled herself out of the trench.

On the edge of a small, crescent pool lay a smashed umbrella. As she got closer, it resolved into knuckled wings, cola-black fur, a sharp oval face like a weasel's. The creature was about three feet tall, its huge, shot-shredded wings veined and translucent like the membranes of a leaf. She prodded it with the shotgun. The clump of sedge at its cheek shivered.

She pressed the gun to its ribs and nudged it into the pool. Its huge wings settled across the surface. It floated; in the light of the setting sun, its fur blazed silver. She poked it in the belly; cloudy water puddled through the holes in its wings. The puddles began joining up and, bit by bit, the creature sank: its splayed ears, its closed eyes, the bright ring winking on its clenched finger.

Delphine gazed into the face of death and did not feel afraid. Maybe it was the after-effects of the tranquiliser; maybe it was the thought of her father, and the monsters waiting back at the Hall. The shotgun felt heavy and good.

She was going to kill them all.

Hidden amongst wind-hunched oaks was a cottage. Delphine rapped on the door with the curved iron tip of her crab hook.

'It's me.'

The sound of footsteps, a bolt being drawn. She waited, then pushed at the door.

The ceiling was low and sagged in the middle. Mr Garforth sat testing gin traps by lamplight.

'You're late,' he said. He was struggling to prise open a set of steel jaws. His fingers slipped; the trap cracked shut.

'There was a scout.'

Mr Garforth looked up. 'Were you spotted?'

'I killed him,' she said. 'It.'

He raised his wispy eyebrows. 'What range?'

'Sixty yards.' She caught his frown. 'Fifty. Forty. I hid the body.'

'Good girl.'

She set her gun down by the stove. 'What's for dinner?'

A spider was scuttling across the table. He slammed his palm on it, scooped it up and popped it into his mouth.

'You're not funny.'

He unfurled his fist, revealing the spider, unharmed. Delphine frowned to disguise a smile.

'In you get. While it's still warm.' He nodded at the tin bath by the open hearth. A change of clothes was drying on a chair. 'No sense rushing now. If we do this, we do it proper. I'll rustle up some grub.'

'And then?'

'And then it's time. If you still want to go.'

'I still want to go.'

'Well then.'

Delphine took two steps towards the bath, hesitated. Mr Garforth rolled his eyes. He shunted his chair round until he had his back to the fire.

Delphine lay in the bath with her head tipped back, listening to the water rumble and plop, and pretended she was being boiled alive. Her arms lolled over the sides, fingertips trailing on the cold tiles. Below the waterline, her ankles and buttocks throbbed.

'Excuse me.'

Mr Garforth walked to the fireplace, shielding his eyes. Delphine watched him unhook the cauldron lid and pull out a string bag full of steaming brains. He limped to the table and began slicing them into chunks. When he was done, he set a saucepan on the stove and heated a knob of butter. He added the brains, which sizzled and spat.

'Nearly ready.' He tapped an egg against the rim of the saucepan and cracked it one-handed into the mix, along with some parsley and a splash of milk.

Delphine got out of the bath. A scab on her knee hung open like a dead oyster, blood painting a zigzag down her shin. She put her finger in the blood then licked her finger. It tasted of money.

She took the towel and began with her hair, working outwards from the roots. Her skin prickled in the heat. Above the mantelpiece, a brace of rabbits hung from a nail. One looked like it was whispering a secret into the other's long ear. Beside the rabbits was a wooden cross, and beneath that, a carriage clock. The time was a quarter past seven.

She dried quickly. A salty, fatty aroma wafted from the stove and made her stomach belch. She pulled on her grey knickerbockers, her vest, her long blue woollen socks, then started brushing her smoky hair into some kind of shape. Her hands trembled. Each time the bristles snagged a knot, the tremor passed through damp strands to her scalp.

Mr Garforth set the table for dinner. He laid out knives and forks, a plate heaped with thick doorstops of brown toast, butter in a blue dish, salt and pepper, mugs of tea and, in the centre, the hot saucepan full of scrambled calf's brains. He slapped his hands together.

'Sit. Eat.'

Delphine pulled up a chair and buttered herself two slices of toast. Then she held her plate up while Mr Garforth spooned brains over the top. She waited until he was sitting. He picked up his fork.

'Aren't you going to say grace?' she said.

'Very well.' He bowed his head. Delphine went to close her eyes, but instead she watched him: the freckled nose against fingers pressed in prayer, the flaking, red skin on his scalp, the quiet motion of his lips.

'Dear Lord, we give thanks for the food you have provided for us. May it lend us strength.' The three creases on his forehead darkened. 'Give us help from trouble, for vain is the help of man. Through God we shall do valiantly: for He it is that shall tread down our enemies. Amen.'

He kept his head down, mouthed a silent addendum. His eyes opened.

'Go on, dig in before it gets cold.'

He was halfway through his second mouthful when he looked up at Delphine. Her cutlery lay either side of her plate.

'What's the matter?'

She wrinkled her nose. 'It looks like cauliflower.'

'Eat.'

Delphine sighed and began sawing at a corner of toast. Her belly felt tight and cold.

He said: 'We can't do this on an empty stomach.'

'Sorry.'

'There's still time to call it off.'

'No,' she said, then, setting her fists on the table: 'No. I'll kill whoever I have to.'

'Just stick to the plan.'

'I will.'

'Good.' He slurped his tea and reached for another slice of toast. She listened to the slop slop of his dentures as he ate.

'I know the answer to your riddle.'

'It's not a riddle.'

'Nothing,' she said. She watched his eyes for a reaction. 'The answer is: "nothing".'

Mr Garforth sucked his lips. He shook his head.

Delphine threw her hands up. 'Oh come on!'

Mr Garforth shrugged. 'Sorry.'

'Bugger.'

Mr Garforth gave her an odd look. She thought she saw the beginnings of a smile, then he coughed into his sleeve and it was gone.

'Help yourself to seconds,' he said. 'Who knows when we'll get the chance to sit like this again.'

'Not till the next world.'

'Eh?'

'Sorry.' Delphine felt her cheeks colour. 'It's what Daddy used to say. When something was very lovely. "Ah. Not till the next world, eh?"'

'Aha.' His shoulders relaxed, and his head fell into a steady nod. He smiled, and raised his mug. 'Well then. Till the next world.'

'Till the next world,' said Delphine, and gently touched her mug to his.

After they had eaten, Mr Garforth brewed more tea and they sat by the hearth to go over the plan one last time. He made her repeat things. The fire was white and tangerine. The heat made her cheeks glow. She could not concentrate. She had the oddest sensation that she was experiencing the cottage for the first time – that until that night she had never truly seen the pattern on its chipped brown floor tiles, nor smelt the sappy, mellow dampness beneath the woodsmoke. Her mouth was dry, and when she recited his instructions, the voice belonged to a calmer, tougher girl.

Presently, he peered at the clock on the mantelpiece. By flamelight, the loose, spotted skin around his neck looked like scales. He squinted.

'It says it's nearly eight,' said Delphine.

He curled his bottom lip. 'Oh.'

'It's time.'

Mr Garforth took the shotgun and wrapped it in a tea towel. She followed him into his workshop. He set the gun in a bench vice and began winding a handle. Wood shavings lay on the cement floor in stiff blond curls. The handle squeaked with each turn. Vice jaws bit into the towel. Mr Garforth pulled the towel back from the barrels like a barber-surgeon hiking up a patient's trouser leg. He picked up a hacksaw and rested the blade half an inch from the forestock.

'That's too much,' she said.

Mr Garforth started cutting. Steel fell in shining granules. He put a hand on the bench to steady himself. The left barrel dropped, clanging against the cement. The right barrel followed. Mr Garforth unwound the handle a little way. He picked up the shotgun, blew. The sawn barrels gleamed: a bull's snout.

'It's what you need,' he said.

They returned to the front room. She slipped a cloth bandolier diagonally over her shoulder like a sash. Mr Garforth handed her a carton of shells. While he sat wiping down the shotgun barrels with an oily rag, she took each shell from the carton, hefting the paper casing between thumb and forefinger, then slotted it into one of the

pouches across her chest, pressing down the flat brass head with her thumb until it was snug. Her crab hook tucked into a long slip pocket on the back.

Mr Garforth looked her up and down, gave a snort of approval. He held out her gun.

'Shall we?'

She took it, held it, testing the new lightness. She nodded.

Mr Garforth picked up the oil lamp. He led her into the backroom, ducking under the lintel with exaggerated caution. They squeezed between packing crates, box traps, poisons, a nested stack of spun aluminium washing-up bowls, three fishing rods and a split cricket bat held together with soiled bandages. Beneath a small window with thick, greasy panes, a brass ring was set into the floor. He hooked it with the end of his stick and, grunting, raised a trapdoor.

The shaft fell away into blackness. The route down was a column of rusted stemples – thick iron bars hammered into rock at two-foot intervals, acting as a ladder. There was a smell like rotting fish.

She turned from the darkness to the old man.

'Well,' she said, 'goodbye.'

'Wait.' Mr Garforth set the lamp down on a crate and left the room. She heard clattering, then he returned with a leather satchel.

'What's in there?'

'Insurance.'

He lifted the heavy brown flap. In the satchel were three condensed milk cans. She took one out. It was surprisingly heavy. From the middle of the lid protruded a five-inch fuse.

'Are these . . . jam tins?'

'Guncotton surrounded by bits of old horseshoe. Mr Wightman supplied those – you can thank him one day.'

'Jesus.'

'Hey.' He jabbed a forefinger at her nose. 'Do *not* use these except as a last resort. That fuse is about five and a half seconds. Call it five to be sure.' The finger hovered. The nail was chipped and yellow, underscored with a sickle of dirt. 'Don't be in the same room when this goes off.'

'I know. I'm not stupid.'

He flashed her another look she could not read.

She placed the grenade back in the satchel. Mr Garforth fastened the hasp, then helped her sling the strap over her shoulder.

'Look at you. All grown up.'

'Look at you. All old.'

Mr Garforth half-opened his arms. Delphine looked at him. He let them drop to his sides.

'Remember: nobody has to die.'

'No. We all do.'

He took a deep breath. His shadow was an ogre against the brickwork.

'You sound like a soldier.'

'Thank you.'

'It wasn't a compliment.' He smacked his lips. 'Enough. Let's get this over with.'

Delphine turned her back to the trapdoor and knelt, dangling a leg until her foot found the first rung. The air in the shaft was colder than she remembered; beneath thick socks, her calves stiffened with gooseflesh. She gave Mr Garforth a last nod. Her head felt weightless.

He narrowed his eyes. 'How long are the fuses?'

'Five and a half seconds. Five to be sure.'

The old gamekeeper nodded. She started her descent.

ACT ONE

December–June

To commence transit the student must fully immerse himself in the black ocean. The sensation is not unlike drowning while being burned alive: baptism and cremation. Remember to remove false teeth.

– *Transportation And Its Practice*, A. Prentice

NINE MONTHS EARLIER

CHAPTER 1

THE FIRE SERMON

December 1934

Condensation streamed down the window of the third-class carriage. Delphine pressed her nose to the glass. Outside, the fields and hedgerows were blinding with snow. Amber fires burned in the eyes of lonely cottages. Her fingers closed round the crisp brown paper parcel in her lap.

Ever since she had seen the set of fine hog brushes in the art shop window, she had known they were the answer. Laid out in a case of polished mahogany, they were elegant and very, very expensive, exactly the kind of grown-up present a sophisticated daughter would give to her artist father. The same night, she had begun saving.

For weeks, she had dropped pennies into the sock that she kept wedged between her mattress and bedsprings, forswearing liquorice, sherbet, lemon bonbons, regarding the tuck shop with the calm, famished humility of Jesus refusing to turn stones to bread. She even sold the brooch her late grandmother had given her – an oval of pink jasper depicting winged cherubs beside a woman playing the harp – to Eleanor Wethercroft for a shilling. A fortnight before the end of term, she tipped out the sock to find a miserable six shillings and thruppence. That night she had lain awake, devastated. The next morning, a letter arrived from Mother. It explained that, instead of getting picked up by car, Delphine was to buy a ticket and catch

the train home. With the letter was a postal order for a pound and twelve shillings.

The carriage was cramped and stuffy. On the seat opposite, a big crumpled man puffed at his cigar. He had the persecuted air of one who feels keenly the resentment of his fellow travellers, and resolves, by way of revenge, to justify it. The *Times* crossword lay folded on his knee. He alternated between jotting answers in pencil and breathing slow clouds of pungent yellow smoke. The young lady to his left tutted and sighed, a book* shuddering in her sheepskin-gloved hands.

Delphine pictured Daddy's delight when she stepped through the front door: his sleeves rolled up, his arms spread wide, ready for the crushing hug, the musk of oil paints and perspiration as he pressed her to his hard chest.

'Delphy! Oh, I've missed you. Oh, how I've *missed* you,' he would say, over and over in an ecstasy of love and repentance, and she would wriggle free and eye him with a sudden sternness, and he would look upon her and see, with a start, not the little girl sent tearfully away at the beginning of term, but a noble and self-possessed young adult.

Then she would climb the stairs two at a time, past the photograph of Grandnan and Grandpapa squinting baffled and austere in their thin gilt frame, across the landing to her bedroom. In a wicker basket on top of the toy chest waited Nelson, her teddy bear, and Hannibal, her stuffed elephant. During the long nights of her first term at St Eustace's, if she had pined for them at all, it was only because she knew that seeing them again would reinforce how she had outgrown their downy, threadbare comforts now that she was almost a grown-up, almost complete.

She had never bought Daddy a Christmas gift before. Up until now, he had been the magical provider and she, the dutiful receiving daughter. While a gaggle of aunts – on Mother's side – insisted on

* Delphine saw the title, *Murder On The Orient Express*, and realised she had read it in a brief fit of grown-upness two months before. She had powered through three whole chapters before skipping to the end (the novel's primary focus, she had discovered, was not murder, but talking).

bestowing twee, cloche-hatted dolls and Shirley Temple frocks, Daddy always came up trumps with a train set, or a junior woodworking kit, or Meccano, often barrelling in late but bearing a jolly, Christmassy smell, spilling over with festive joie de vivre.

Last year, however, he had not come home at all. Some time after six, Mother had risen from the settee, walked into the dining room and closed the door. Delphine had waited, blowing on the embers of the fire. Two hours later Mother left the kitchen, walking unsteadily, and went to bed.

Delphine realised now that future Christmases were her responsibility. She was a grown-up, and if she wanted magic, she would have to weave it herself.

'Tickets, please.'

The voice loomed close to her ear. She opened her eyes. 'May I see your ticket please, miss?' The conductor's breath was hot and peaty.

Delphine wiped condensation from her cheek and made a show of rummaging in one coat pocket, then the other. The conductor folded his arms. His eyes were grey lozenges converging on a steep, regal nose.

She stood, took off her duffel coat and turned it inside out.

'I'm sorry, I . . . it must . . . '

She clambered onto her seat and groped at the luggage rack, wobbling as the train went over a set of points. Her fingertips brushed the suitcase; she made several half-hearted grasps before the conductor stepped forward and helped her get it down.

She sat. Her thumbs fumbled with the catches; the lid sprung open.

'It's got to be here.' Delphine smeared a palm across her eye, trying to make herself cry – the credibility of her entire performance hinged on it. 'My mother bought it me. I had it. It was *here*.'

She glanced at the conductor. He glowered over flaring nostrils, nasal hair rippling as he exhaled. She rubbed her eyes again.

'I'll need to see it please, miss.'

She stared at the inside of her suitcase, cheeks prickling with heat.

She needed tears. Her eye caught a label inside the lid where Daddy had written her name and address, beginning:

Delphine G. Venner

The Pastures

Something in his familiar, flamboyant penmanship did the trick – her vision blurred. She felt a warm teardrop slide down to her top lip, where it clung. She began burrowing through clumsily folded underthings and small, scrunched packages, pausing to sniff, dab at her eye with a sock.

'Come on, miss – I've a whole train to get through.'

'Ah now leave off the poor girl,' said the big man with the cigar. 'She's going as fast as she can.'

'I'm just doing my job, sir.'

'Well, can't you do it with a bit more chivalry? Look – she's distraught.'

Delphine pushed her face into her hands and heaved out two of her best wretched sobs.

'Every passenger must have a ticket, sir.'

'And she's *told* you her mother bought one.'

'Tickets must be presented for inspection, sir.'

Delphine spread her fingers and peered through the gaps. The cigar-smoking gentleman had set down his newspaper and was puffing fractiously, bathing his head in a little cloud.

'Can't you let her off?'

'I can't change the rules for no one, sir.'

'Don't you "sir" me!'

The conductor took a deep breath and pushed out his lower lip.

The cigar-smoker looked to his carriage-mates for support. The other passengers became pointedly transfixed by a loose thread on a cuff, the view out the window and a novel, respectively.

'Right, fine. How much?'

'I'm sorry, sir?'

'How much?'

'For what, sir?'

'For a ticket, for a bloody ticket, that's what, sir.' He plugged the cigar stub into the corner of his mouth and took out his wallet. 'I

am going to pay her fare, and when I get home I am going to commence a letter-writing campaign the pettiness of which you can't imagine. I warn you, I am a very lonely, very bitter bachelor with vast acres of time at his disposal.'

The conductor's eyelid twitched. Sensing a breach in his hitherto bombproof comportment, Delphine flourished a spotted handkerchief and blew her nose.

'That won't be necessary, sir.' The conductor nodded at Delphine's luggage. 'I spotted a ticket amongst the young lady's effects. Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.' And, tweaking the peak of his cap, he left.

The cigar-smoker exhaled through straight white teeth.

'Thank you, sir,' said Delphine.

'Oh, don't you start now.' He reached the end of his cigar, pulled a face and deposited the stub in his jacket pocket. 'What are you looking at? Didn't your mother teach you it's rude to stare? Go on, tidy up that clutter. Stop making a spectacle of yourself.' He unfolded his newspaper with a bang and began to read.

Delphine stuffed her things back into the suitcase, humming quietly to herself.

At the next stop, everybody but the grumpy cigar-smoker disembarked. She realised the low, throaty growl coming from behind the wall of newsprint was snoring. As the train gathered speed, she stretched her legs along the seat and took out a bag of pear drops. She sucked one then held it to the light, where it shone like an opal. Lulled by the rumble of the train, she closed her eyes and fell into a contented doze.

Delphine woke with a start, gripped by the conviction she had missed her stop. The carriage was empty. She swung her feet to the floor and turned to the window. Her groggy face gaped back at her. Beyond the glass, the night was rook-black. Her damp hair stuck to her cheek in strands. She shivered.

Pulling on her duffel coat, she got to her feet and walked around the carriage. It was deathly quiet, aside from a steady *ca-chuck ca-chuck*. Her chest tightened. The train was heading back to the rail yard.

She imagined spending the night on the cold carriage floor, Mother doubled over in tears on a deserted platform, policemen searching the tracks by electric torchlight, digging in snowbanks, the whisper of pencil lead on notebooks, her fellow passengers brought in for questioning, the finger of blame swinging sure as a compass needle towards the large man with the cigar – *well, he was still with her when I left* – the conductor recounting with relish the man's sudden, unprovoked aggression, his wild gesticulations and fiery eyes – *like a fiend he was, sir, like a man possessed* – the newspapers tattooed with lurid headlines: CIGAR-SMOKING CHILD-SNATCHER STILL AT LARGE, and Daddy, ashen, wracked with torment (at this she felt a pang of guilt), before a knock at the front door, and in she would glide to bellows of relief, to tears and a hug as tight and strong as plate armour.

The train began to slow. Delphine looked out the window and saw houses, and a little way ahead, the lights of a station. She yanked her suitcase off the luggage rack and waited at the door as the train shuddered to a stop.

When she stepped onto the platform the full chill of the evening struck her. She set down her case and spent a few moments fastening the toggles on her coat, the engine snorting and steaming behind her. The guard blew his whistle and the train started its long trudge out of the station. A breeze ghosted the nape of her neck. The last carriage filed past and she was alone.

When Delphine turned around, a woman in a cream coat with big black buttons stood farther down the platform. She was soaked in lamplight, her face flat shadow, the crown of her head blazing gold. All around her was ice.

'Delphine? What on earth are you doing there?' She began striding up the platform. Delphine braced for impact. 'Delphine? I've been waiting for you outside first-class. Why are you down here?'

'They said first-class was full.'

'Full? *Full*? On a little branch-line stopper like this?' Her mother drew back and puffed as if recoiling from a hot stove. 'The thing was half empty!'

Delphine hung her head.

'Of all the . . . ' Mother cast about the station, heels scraping the icy platform. 'Where's the stationmaster? I shan't stand for this. I'll wring his – '

'Please, Mother.'

'No.' Mother tugged Delphine's chin sharply upwards and fixed her with keen hazel eyes. 'You paid for a first-class ticket, you should have got a first-class seat. We're not leaving until I receive a refund and a frank and thorough apology.'

'It's fine. I didn't mind. I – '

'Shh! That's quite enough. Honestly Delphine, why didn't you say something? You really must learn to assert yourself.'

Delphine picked up her suitcase and followed Mother in a forced march down the platform to the stationmaster's office, which was closed. Mother rapped on the glass.

'Hello? Hello?'

'Mother, it's closed.' Delphine's fingers ached with cold. Her mittens were deep in her suitcase.

'Your problem is you give up too easily.' Mother switched from her knuckles to the heel of her fist.

'Please, let's just go. I said it's fine.'

'Don't be obstinate.' Mother dealt the door three crashing blows. 'Hello? Ah, it's no use. There's no one there.' She turned and sighed. 'Well? Are you coming? Philip is waiting with the engine running. It'll never restart in this weather so unless you intend to walk home . . . '

Delphine hurried towards the exit.

'Delphine! Don't run!'

Delphine sat next to Mother in the back of the car, listening to the motor strain as it climbed the gears. Road poured through the headlamps, pocked and bright between tall, dark hedgerows. Snow had fallen lightly; every so often the wheels slithered in a patch of slush.

'When we get in you're not to bother your father.'

Delphine bit back her disappointment.

'Yes, Mother.' She glanced out the passenger window. 'I'll say goodnight to him then go straight to bed.'

'What did I just tell you?' Mother grabbed Delphine's wrist. 'Delphine. Look at me. You are not to bother your father, is that clear?'

'You're hurting me.'

'Is that clear?'

Delphine was breathing heavily. 'But I only want to say goodnight.'

'He's been working very hard and he is very, very tired. Dr Eliot,' she flashed a glance at the back of Philip's head, lowered her voice, 'Dr Eliot said he needs rest. You can speak to him tomorrow.'

'He'll be happy to see me.'

Mother closed her eyes and exhaled. 'Of course he will. Look, you can speak to him first thing. Let's you and I keep to the sitting room tonight. I'll have Julia make cocoa and you can tell me what you've been up to at school.'

'I'll just poke my head round the door of his studio.'

'The matter is closed.'

'But – '

'Delphine! If you say another word I'll have Philip turn this car around and you can spend Christmas at your Aunt Lily's.'

Delphine bunched her fists and glared into her lap. She knew Mother might make good on the threat if pushed. Over the past year, Mother had made it clear she did not want Delphine around the house. It would be just like her to seize upon one small outburst as justification for keeping Daddy to herself.

Philip swung the car round a sharp bend. Delphine had to grip the seat to stop her head settling on Mother's shoulder. She leant her hot brow against the cool glass as the car descended towards the village, and home.

When Philip pulled up in the drive the night was tangy with woodsmoke. He opened the door and Delphine's mother stepped out, tugging her coat about her with a flourish.

'What sort of idiot has a bonfire in this weather?' she said.

Delphine thought that this was the *perfect* weather for a bonfire. She followed a few paces behind as Mother walked up the garden path, paused, sniffed the air, then continued up the steps. The little

Pan fountain had frozen over. The lawn was powdered glass. Delphine exhaled, lips spilling mist.

Philip killed the engine. In the quiet that followed, Delphine thought she heard a noise like hail, or the slow winding of a winch. Mother pounded the door knocker.

'Philip, would you come and let us in please?'

Philip whipped off his driving gloves and tugged a bunch of keys from his pocket. Mother stepped aside as he stooped for the lock.

'I can't imagine where Julia's got to,' she said, worrying at her coat cuff. 'She can't have gone home. I gave her clear instructions to wait till we had returned. Philip? What's wrong? She hasn't drawn the bolt, has she?'

'Just a bit stiff with the cold,' he said. He grunted, twisting the handle. The door gave. 'There.' He waited on the doorstep while Mother and Delphine stepped inside.

As soon as Delphine crossed the threshold she knew something was wrong. It took her a moment to realise the hatstand was missing. And the little table Mother liked to set flowers on. And the hall mirror.

Mother looked around with a slight rolling of the shoulders. Hanging thickly in the air was a smell like motor oil and toast.

Mother said: 'Where is he?'

A bang came from the landing. Daddy appeared at the top of the stairs, dragging the longcase clock that Mother's late Uncle Shipton had brought back from Denmark.* He was barefoot and stripped to the waist. His back was covered in red marks.

'Gideon,' said Mother, her voice strangely measured, 'what are you doing?'

Daddy went on dragging the clock down the stairs. As he drew

* Great Uncle Shipton had claimed he got the clock after agreeing to referee a swimming contest between four sailors – usually a Dutchman, a Swede, a Norwegian and a Finn. The race was to run from Aalborghus Castle, across the Limfjord, and back again. The first man to touch the castle wall would win an antique clock. On the morning of the contest, Shipton and a crowd of spectators watched the sailors plunge into the freezing waters. Four heads bobbed as they crossed the narrow channel. Presently, there were three. Then two. Then one. Then none. Some time after midday, the organiser turned to Shipton and asked if he wanted to declare it a draw. Shipton agreed, and received the clock in recognition of his good sportsmanship.

closer, Delphine could hear him muttering to himself.

'Gideon,' said Mother. 'Where's Julia?'

Daddy grumbled something incomprehensible.

'Giddy? Where's Julia?'

'I said I sent her home.' It sounded like Daddy was breathing through gritted teeth. He pulled the clock down another step and the door on the front fell open.

'Please let's sit down, dear. It's terribly late to be rearranging things. Where's the hatstand?'

He muttered into his fist.

'What?'

'It's hooks.'

He widened his stance. With each fall, the clock jangled queasily.

'Hooks? Giddy, darling, what on earth are you talking about? Where's the hatstand?'

'It's too heavy. It's all hooks.' He spat as he spoke. 'I can't . . . I can't . . . '

Mother came to the edge of the stairs. 'What's heavy? I don't understand. Where have all our things gone?' She reached for his elbow.

'Don't touch me!' Daddy lunged over the bannister and swung at her with a wild backhand. Mother stepped back in a practised reflex, turning her face so his knuckles only grazed her cheek. Uncle Shipton's clock rattled down the last few stairs and hit the floor with a crunch of bust workings. Daddy clutched for her throat but she dodged and his fingers closed round the collar of her cream coat. She twisted out of it and lifted her forearm just in time to shield her head as he used the coat to lash at her.

Daddy lost interest. He bundled up the coat and strode down the last few stairs. As he stepped over the clock, Delphine tried to catch his gaze. His eyes were like chips of glass.

'Daddy?' She would snap him out of it. She stretched a smile across her face, took a breath and stepped towards him. 'Daddy, I'm home for Christm – '

'Delphine! No!' Mother threw up an arm.

Daddy rounded on her.

'It's killing me! It's killing me!' He drilled at his temple with two fingers, gasping. 'Man's not supposed to live like this! It goes! It goes! It all goes in!'

Mother slammed against the wall, withering. Delphine looked to Philip, who stood dumbly in the doorway. Philip blinked, took a step forward.

'Mr Venner, I . . . '

Daddy shut his eyes. He ran a hand through his slick silvered hair, whispering.

'It's almost gone now,' he murmured. He stepped over Mother as he had stepped over the clock, carrying her coat down the corridor to the kitchen. When he opened the door Delphine heard the hail noise again, but louder; the oily smell grew stronger. Mother was on her feet, scrambling after Daddy, pleading, shrieking operatically. She grabbed at his back; he bore her like a rucksack as he walked out of sight.

Delphine felt a cold weight in her belly. She walked to the stairs. Her legs felt gluey and she had to grip the bannister. Philip was saying something but it was far away and muffled. The picture of Grandnan and Grandpapa was gone, leaving a dark rectangle of wallpaper. She staggered towards her room. The door was open. Perhaps she had made a mistake. Perhaps everything would be fine.

A shifting, aquatic glow lit the space. The room felt bigger than she remembered. Her bed was gone. There were splinters on the floor. Her books were gone. Her model castle was gone. In the carpet were four dents left by the legs of the toy chest. There was no basket. There was no Hannibal. There was no Nelson.

She stumbled to the window. The fields around the village were blue and still. Down in the back garden was a huge bonfire. She saw the outlines of mattress springs, picture frames, a bike wheel. All around, the snow had melted and where the grass had not been scorched away it shone a lustrous bottle green. Smoke formed a solid, curling pillar. Daddy slung Mother's cream coat into the flames, where it shrivelled. He dropped to his knees and gripped his head, shuddering.

No. He was laughing.

Delphine turned away, dazed and sickened. Her body felt light as a seedpod. She walked out of her room and down the stairs and picked up her suitcase. She walked out of the house to the car, opened the back door and climbed inside. She took out the brushes in their brown paper parcel. She lay down on the back seat and hugged them to her chest.

CHAPTER 2

O QUEEN OF AIR AND DARKNESS

March 1935

Nothing lifted Delphine's mood, not even the monster. Brawny shanks, conch ears, wings like a ripped corset, lips drawn in an endless howl – everything she wanted in a Hell fiend, except life. In its granite throat was a robin's nest. As the car rolled through the wrought-iron gates of Alderberen Hall, the little bird watched from behind a row of lichen-freckled fangs.

Delphine scraped an index finger round her nostril then wiped it on the seam of the leather seat. She sat hunched, her jaw tight. Mother had made her wear a bonnet with a bright green ribbon; she could feel it balanced on her head, conspicuous as antlers.

Beyond the car, the estate spread dew-soaked, teeming. Tall Scots pines twisted out of a flat expanse. In the glassy morning light, she could almost believe she was on the savannah. Chickweed strafed the thickening grass in great creamy splashes. The road swung through a blackthorn thicket spattered with white blooms. They entered the woods.

Through Philip's open window she smelt the sour sweat of nettles. Ferns lashed at the running board. A branch clattered against the windscreen. She caught a flash of dark red behind a rotten log. When she looked again, it was gone.

The woods thinned. Beeches lined the road, their branches hacked

back to ugly stumps. Bracken gave way to grass. The driveway began a gentle curving descent.

She saw a boating lake with a little hill beside it. On top of the hill sat a dome of black brick rather like an igloo. Huge shadows rolled across the lawns. All at once she was looking at Alderberen Hall – vast, brilliant – sunlight blazing off the golden stonework of its east and west wings.

A fawn lifted its head at the rumble of the motor. It bounded away, beech trees chopping its movement into a zoetrope flicker. Delphine lined up a shot with her imaginary hunting rifle, picturing a second, invisible head in front of the first, aiming for the eyeball, holding her breath. Pinching.

'Pow,' she whispered. The fawn kept running, oblivious.

Mother shook a pill into her palm from a brown glass bottle. She put her hand over her mouth, as if receiving bad news.

Ahead, Alderberen Hall fattened, gaining detail. Heavy mullioned windows were set in walls of faded golden stone. Six classical columns stood over the entrance. The Hall was symmetrical, its east and west wings reaching forward like the paws of the Sphinx.

Philip switched off the engine and let the car coast the final few yards. Wheels crackled on gravel and stopped. Delphine got out. She waited, hands clasped over her tummy.

Mother took Philip aside. She stood close and spoke quietly. Delphine realised she was being excluded and edged closer, indignant.

'We'll send for you when we need you,' Mother was saying. 'Philip, I . . . the family appreciates your loyalty and discretion over these past few months.'

'Of course, Mrs Venner – '

She took his hand in both of hers. 'I know we can trust you.' When she let go, he glanced down.

'Oh, I . . . ' He took a sharp breath. '*Thank you*, Mrs Venner.'

'Take your aunt on a daytrip somewhere nice. Borrow the car, if you like.'

'Yes, Mrs Venner. Thank you, Mrs Venner.' Philip seemed unable to lift his head. His cheeks were pink. 'Uh . . . uh, so . . . '

'What is it?'

He kneaded his hands, his voice tailing off. 'I was just . . . I mean, so I know . . . to be ready, like . . . for, uh . . . Will . . . *when* will you be wanting me to pick up, uh . . . Mr Venner?'

Mother turned away.

'We will send for you when we need you.'

'Yes, Mrs Venner.' He began backing towards the car.

'Philip? Our cases, please.'

'Oh, sorry, Mrs Venner.'

As he unlocked the boot, Delphine wandered along the front of the house. Between the blocky east and west wings ran a long façade of smutted mustard-yellow brickwork. Up close, its palatial grandeur congealed into the grubby functionality of a sanatorium. A row of black-barred windows filled most of the – she fancied fatal – drop between the two storeys. Ivy clung to the brick in sickly clusters, too brittle to climb down.

'Delphine!' Mother's voice was sing-song but her eyes flashed with warning. 'Let's not keep our hosts waiting, dear.'

A maid stood in the doorway, one elbow propped against the frame. She was young and slight with white-gold hair. Mother turned to wave off Philip. The maid eyed the two suitcases out on the gravel. She trudged over and grasped the handles.

'Where's the rest?'

Mother's smile tightened. 'We have all our luggage.'

'I see.' The maid straightened up, baring her teeth. She was stronger than she looked. 'This way, please.'

Mother turned to Delphine and mouthed 'Come *on!*' before following the maid through the double doors.

Delphine hung back, scraping surly arcs in the gravel. When *was* Daddy going to come? Why hadn't they waited till he was ready? It was horrible how Mother wouldn't let her see him. Delphine spat into the white dust. Mother was a beast.

Above the entrance, stout columns rose towards an architrave crusted in bird mess. As she craned her neck to follow them, she felt a surge of vertigo. She turned away.

'Delphine!' Her name echoed from the corridor.

Lawns spread ripe and unbounded. The distant treeline hung like an unresolved chord. She could run.

'Delphine!'

Then she saw him.

A figure was crossing the lawn – an old man with white side-whiskers and high, knotty shoulders. She couldn't understand how she had missed him. His jacket was clay green against the sun-blanched green of the grass, the blood-dark green of the woods. In his right hand swung a shotgun; in his left, mole carcasses on a string.

He stopped. The dead moles swayed and came to rest, nuzzling his filthy boots. He coughed into splayed fingers, examined them distastefully. The hand dropped away; he glanced about with a sudden wary vigour.

Delphine held her breath. The man looked towards the Hall.

She stepped backwards across the threshold.

'Lord Alderberen is in bed, owing to his dyspepsia,' the maid was saying, her little voice resonating as the corridor opened out around her. 'Wait here in the Great Hall and I'll see who's about.'

'Oh.' Mother stood in the middle of a chequered marble floor, like the last piece in a chess game. 'Are you sure he's well enough to be receiving guests?'

'Oh yes, ma'am.' The maid shot a wistful look towards the domed ceiling. 'It comes and goes. Always seems to flare up when he's got visitors. He's a martyr to his dyspepsia.'

'Can't they do anything for it?'

'You'd have to ask Dr Lansley about that,' the maid called, retreating through a side door with their cases. 'He knows everything that goes on here.'

A slam boomed through the Great Hall.

Mildly buoyed by Mother's irritation, Delphine looked around at portraits of dull ancestors, the grand staircase and the crimson carpet that flowed like lava from the landing above. At the top of the stairs was a painting of a wan young lady with sad eyes and buttery hair. Above the painting, an alabaster frieze showed bulls trampling a

phalanx of spear-wielding hoplites on giant ostriches. Electric lights glared in brass fittings. The whole place smelt of polish and hospitals.

'Don't wander off again.' Even with her voice lowered, Mother's rebuke rang off the walls. 'Come here. And don't look at me like that. You're still in disgrace.'

Delphine began walking to Mother across the chessboard tiles. She stopped. In the light from the tall portico windows, Mother looked angular and old. She had lost a lot of weight. Her head looked like muslin stretched over a pine-cone.

'Come here *now*.'

Delphine lifted her right foot. She held it over the boundary between one square and the next. She looked at Mother.

'Please, Delphine.'

Delphine did not move.

'Now!' The word resounded emptily, a thunderclap.

Delphine thought of Mother crumpled on the floor, of how Daddy had stepped over her, and felt a sickly, creeping scorn. She withdrew her foot like a knife. Mother blinked. Delphine turned away.

Her chest was pounding. She stared at the oak-panelled wall and waited for the tide to come crashing back in. Seconds passed. The expected slap to the back of the head did not come. Mother was not going to correct her.

Fear gave way to a numb, terrifying freedom.

'Mrs Venner?'

Delphine turned and saw him: a tall man in hunting tweeds, around Daddy's age, with oily black hair and a narrow moustache. He began descending the stairs, smoothing a gloved hand along the polished bannister. His slicked-back hair, receding at the temples, gave the impression he was moving at speed.

Mother's jaw worked dumbly. At last, she nodded.

The man stopped two steps from the bottom. He held out his palm. A wire ran from his ear to a large battery hanging from his belt. Plugged into the top of the battery was a microphone the size of a digestive biscuit. Mother crossed the floor and placed her hand in his. The man bowed.

'Dr Lansley, Lord Alderberen's personal physician,' he said, almost shouting. 'Pleased to make your acquaintance.'

Mother smiled. Delphine folded her arms.

'Very nice to meet you,' said Mother.

Dr Lansley kept hold of her palm. Her wedding ring caught the light and sparked.

'I hear the Earl is unwell,' Mother said.

'What?'

'The maid said his dyspepsia – '

'Yes, yes. Alice gets overexcited, silly thing.' Dr Lansley placed two fingers in the small of Mother's back and began guiding her away from the stairs. 'Nothing to worry about – some boiled milk and a good night's sleep and he'll be quite restored, I'm sure. Now, would you care to take the guided tour?'

'That's very kind of you, Doctor, ah – '

'Please, call me Titus.'

'We've only just arrived. Delphine needs to unpack her things. She has private study to be getting on with.' She turned to Delphine. 'Don't you, dear?'

Delphine scowled.

Dr Lansley faced Delphine, as if noticing her for the first time. His head had a slight rightward kink, weighed down by the deaf aid, but he was not old – his eyes were ravenous, alert, and beneath his slick dark hair his posture shivered with the concentrated tension of a mousetrap. He looked her up and down.

'Hello,' he said.

'Hello,' said Delphine.

He held her gaze a moment longer, then turned back to Mother.

'Well, we've got a lot to get through but since we're on the subject of families I suppose this is as good a place to start as any.' He took Mother's hand and led her across the Great Hall, their footsteps sarcastic applause. Delphine watched them go. Mother shot a look over her shoulder. 'Now this fellow is Sir Robert Stokeham – good chum of Pitt the Elder, apparently.'

Dr Lansley stopped before a gilt-framed portrait the size of a billboard, lit on either side by electric lamps. As he continued talking,

Delphine edged towards a doorway. 'Look how they've composed the scene around him: the matchlock, the faithful gundogs, the quill and documents lying oh-so-conveniently in the background. You can just imagine, can't you? "Yes, do come in, I'm just cleaning my hunting rifle and – oh look, what's this on the desk? A frightfully important letter from King George the Third? How scatterbrained I am!"'

The Doctor's whinnying laughter faded as she entered a long corridor lined with south-facing windows. She walked in and out of the light, enjoying the cool lakes of darkness.

Why had Daddy insisted they come to this stuffy old place? Surely, if he wanted to get better, the best place for him was home. She stopped beside a door, tried the handle. It was locked.

Pinned to a corkboard beside the door was a typewritten timetable:

S.P.I.M. ACTIVITIES

Monday:

9 a.m. – morning orientation

10 a.m. – breakfast

11 a.m. – true work (M) / hidden steps (F)

12 a.m. – luncheon

1 p.m. – archery

2 p.m. – true work (M) / hidden steps (F)

4 p.m. – wakefulness drills

5 p.m. – dinner

6 p.m. – private study time

9 p.m. – discussion

11 p.m. – supper

There were similar lists for Tuesday to Friday, with minor variations: 'surgery' on a Wednesday afternoon, 'fencing' instead of 'archery' on Tuesday and Thursday, and a 6 a.m. slot on Friday called 'dawnbath'.

Delphine followed the corridor until it opened onto a spacious music room. Her sandals slapped against worn, waxed boards. Sunlight from four windows converged on a dusty harpsichord. On a stand above the harpsichord's double keyboard sat some hand-

written sheet music: *The Shadowed Way – Sequence 15*. The corner of the page was initialled: *I.P.*

Mother had forced Delphine to take piano lessons. Just thinking about the *tak-tak-tak* of the metronome made her throat tighten. She rested an index finger on middle C. The key colours were reversed: the majors ebony, the sharps and flats ivory. The key sank; a nasal, spidery twang died beneath the lid.

She entered a wider, longer corridor. As far as she could tell, she was in the west wing, heading north. On her left were tall windows, on her right, white statues of men in laurel wreaths and togas, pottery fragments, a bull's head in alabaster. She came to some double doors. She listened at the keyhole. Nothing. She tried the door knob. The door opened.

The room was thick with the sweet, rank stench of dead flowers. Huge drapes smothered the windows. As her eyes adjusted she saw a billiard table, a leather sofa and a globe the colour of autumn. She could taste the dust in the air. She approached the fireplace. A deep rug swallowed her footsteps.

She wondered if Mother had missed her yet, if she was pacing the hallways, calling. Delphine looked at the oil painting over the fireplace: a Venetian plague doctor in leather overcoat, wide-brimmed hat and white beakmask, gazing down upon a sea of corpses. She did not know much about art,* but something in the mask's dark sockets made the hairs at the top of her spine rise.

On the mantelpiece sat a glazed earthenware jug. It was shaped like a puffy, leering face, the eyes rolled back, the skull hanging wretchedly open. Beside it, bracketed to the wall, was a gun.

Delphine walked over for a closer look. It was a duelling pistol – a flintlock, with a rounded walnut grip, a cleaning rod slotted

* Daddy's latest work was a triptych entitled *Trial Of The Profligate*. The three panes showed, respectively, a manacled angel taunted by centurions, a club-footed beggar woman admiring her (male) reflection in a full-length mirror, and an empty bird cage. Though, at first, Daddy's canvases, with their thick, childish lines and botched perspectives, had left Delphine baffled, guilt had hardened into a keen aesthetic eye, and she now recognised them as masterpieces. He stored his works at the studio in London where he painted and often slept. They had been some of the only family possessions to escape the fire.

under the barrel. Duelling pistols usually came in pairs, and she glanced round for another, but it seemed to be the only one. The manufacturer's name was incised on the iron plate beneath the hammer: *Dellapeste.*

In her belly, she felt the flint fall, the flash of black powder, the musket ball thudding into the heart of her arch foe. She lined up candidates and shot each in turn: Mrs Leddington (through the left bosom), Eleanor Wethercroft (headshot). Then, though she was not sure why, she shot Dr Lansley (kneecap, making him bow) before reloading and shooting him again (headshot, point-blank).

Delphine reached for the gun. Her elbow nudged the jug. Its face turned away and, as she grasped for it, the whole thing pirouetted off the edge of the mantelpiece, struck the hearth and broke apart with a chime.

She looked at the brown chunks. Amongst them was a key.

Tingles spread from the nape of her neck down her spine and up to her scalp. She stooped and picked up the key. The head was club-shaped. She glanced around for a locked cupboard or chest. A lacquered Chinese cabinet stood behind the billiard table. She tried the key, but it was too big. She was wondering whether to return and try the locked doors in the corridors, when she heard footsteps.

They were heading north, coming up through the statue gallery. She recognised the loud, reedy voice.

'These two are Minerva and, uh, Bacchus,' Dr Lansley was saying, 'which reminds me, your throat must be dry as a, ah yes. We'll take cocktails in the orangery shortly. The light this time of day – ah!'

'I'm not sure I – '

'Now at the end of the west gallery is the smoking room . . . '

Delphine scurried to the ashy hearth and began sweeping the shards of broken jug into her bonnet. The footsteps drew nearer. As she reached for the last thick sliver, she noticed a slit in the patterned wallpaper. It ran from the floor to just above head height, forming a rectangular outline. She walked up to it and pressed. It gave slightly. She pressed harder. It was a door.

And it was locked.

She ran a hand down the pink embossed fleur-de-lis wallpaper. Her fingertip snagged a keyhole. Mother and Dr Lansley were at the double doors.

'The Society holds a symposium on the last Saturday of every month. You mustn't feel obliged to attend.' The door knob began to twist. Delphine slotted the key into the hole and tried it. It would not turn. Of course it wouldn't. 'Please understand – I admire Lord Alderberen's forbearance immensely. *Immensely*. But we live in a country full of those willing to take advantage of a generous nature.' The doors started to open.

'He's been very kind to us, yes,' said Mother.

The door stopped. 'Oh, I . . . I didn't mean to imply . . . Not *you*, of course.'

Delphine jerked the key the other way. A tumbler clucked and a hinged section of wall swung out.

Dr Lansley stepped into the smoking room, facing Mother. 'I'm talking about a lot of the . . . *creative* types who've arrived since Lord Alderberen opened his home to the Society.'

'Yes. Gideon and I were honoured that Mr Propp thought to invite us.'

'Gideon?'

Clutching her bonnet full of broken earthenware, Delphine stepped through the doorway.

'My husband.'

'Ah.'

She plucked the key from the lock then tugged the lip of the door. She pulled her hand clear just in time. The door shut with a click.

'What was that?' said Mother.

Delphine stood in the darkness, her back to the wall. The air was warm and thick with dust.

'I said "Oh, I see",' said Lansley. 'And is . . . your husband coming to stay also?'

'I thought I heard a noise.'

Delphine held her breath.

'Oh, you will do. Alice, I expect, or Mrs Hagstrom, our housekeeper. We get by on a skeleton staff – Lord Alderberen is rather

. . . particular when it comes to domestics. Now, this also serves as the card room. What's your game? Bridge? Oh Hell? No, don't tell me – let me guess.'

Her eyes began to adjust. A faint thread of light picked out the door frame. To her right was a narrow passage. It continued for the length of the wall, curving round the fireplace, fading to black.

The tingle spread down the back of her neck again, stronger. She felt like a ghost. She set down her bonnet, closed her fist around the cold brass key.

Behind the chimney breast, the passage waspnecked. Delphine exhaled and squeezed through. Mother and Dr Lansley's conversation faded with the last of the light.

The passage smelt of dry rot and the acrid smack of rat urine. Rough beams scraped her shoulders; something yanked at her cardigan and she gasped. When she reached into the darkness behind her, her hand closed round a three-inch splinter, talon-sharp. She took a step back, unsnagged the loop of wool, continued.

A pipe near her head gurgled and clanged. She tore through a sheet of cobwebs, finding a dead-end. She felt the wall. Wooden rungs like pick-axe handles poked out at two-foot intervals. They formed a ladder leading up. Delphine lifted her head and strained her eyes at the flat and fathomless black.

'Pow,' she said. The word rang slightly, as if there was an opening. 'Pow!' she said, louder. The way it echoed suggested a hollow space above. She tucked the key into her sock, gripped the first rung and began to climb.

The going was easy, with a wall to lean back on if she got tired. She climbed one-handed, keeping the other over her head, flinching with each rung, convinced she was about to dash her brains out against the ceiling.

The ceiling never arrived. Soon, she could hear she had emerged into a second enclosed space. Gripping the ladder, she leaned out, dangling a toe in the air. Her stomach clenched, but her chest surged with warmth. She imagined stepping into a void, falling, breaking her neck, her mangled body lying undiscovered for decades. 'The Venner Vanishing' would become one of the world's great unsolved

mysteries – competing theories would abound: kidnapped and sold into slavery in Yemen to settle the Earl's gambling debts; dragged by vengeful spectres into one of the Hall's many ghastly paintings, where she can still be seen, selling matches in a Spanish marketplace; slain by the infamous 'cursed jug' of the Stokehams, which also disappeared on that fateful, terrible day. Then, in the year 2000, a citizen of some queer, barely human future would poke around the ruins of this ancient house, whirring and puttering with his electronic devices. A needle on his chromium instrument panel would swing towards the wall. He would locate the hidden doorway, spring the lock with a special magnetic ray, and there, crumpled in the dusty cavity, the bones of a little girl.

She felt pleasantly giddy. Her sweaty palm slipped from the rung and she fell.

She hit the floor and stumbled forward, grabbing at the walls. She pulled herself upright. From farther up the passage, she thought she heard scuttling – in her shock, she nearly stepped backwards into the hole. Her legs shook and her brow pounded with heat. She had fallen all of two inches. She was alive. And she could hear voices.

She followed the noise along the new passageway, which felt smaller and stuffier. She could not make out words, just muffled rhythms and inflections. A question. A rapid follow-up question from the same person. A short answer. A loud retort. Somebody was very angry.

The passage turned ninety degrees to the left. Either her eyes were adjusting, or it was getting lighter. She wiggled her fingers in front of her face and saw movement.

Another dead end. The voices were close. She could almost hear the words. To her left, dark red light leaked from behind a wooden slat. She prodded the slat. It moved. She poked it again. It slid easily between two runners. She pushed it all the way to the right; light streamed through a hole the size of a shilling. She stood on tiptoes and looked through.

She was peering into a windowless box room. In a bed lay a very old lady.

An electric nightlight threw tortoiseshell shadows across the walls. The old lady was almost completely bald, save for a fine white cowlick that trailed across the pillow. Her eyes were closed. Blue veins forked across her scalp.

Delphine felt a cold thrill. She was looking at a corpse.

The corpse inhaled – a sudden, hungry action with one, two, three catches, like the snagging of ratchet teeth.

Delphine slapped the slat back into place, her heart thudding. She could still hear the rhythms of an argument. Squinting against the gloom, she found a second slat on the opposite wall. She drew it back and pressed her eye to the hole. Nothing. She inserted a finger. Something rough. She tapped gently: wood, hollow. The back of a wardrobe, perhaps.

She felt cheated. Wardrobes and old ladies were dull, dull, dull – they were practically the same thing, if you went by smell. What was the point in building a secret passage if all it led to was furniture and death? She was about to retreat in disgust when she noticed a glow at shin-level.

Delphine lay on her side and nudged open a third slat. She saw the backs of two blue-stockinged feet in low-heeled slippers. The right slipper tapped the carpet.

'If I may s – '

'No, you may not. Please, just shut up.'

Both voices were male. Her view was framed by the legs and underside of a leather club chair. The springs creaked as the occupant shifted his weight. She could see the manufacturer's label and a dropped matchbook behind one of the legs. On the far side of the room, grey pinstripe trousers terminated in a pair of black patent-leather shoes. The shoes plodded in and out of sight, pacing the floor.

The man in the chair sighed – a pained, faintly bovine sound that ended in a rattle.

'Christ's sweet tree. The whole thing's a bloody mess.' His diction was crisp and deep.

The black shoes stopped at the opposite end of the room. They pivoted to face the chair.

'War comes.' The second male voice was slow and purring. Her forearms prickled. She could not place the accent – to her ear, the owner of the black shoes sounded vaguely Russian.

'You are willing it to come,' said the man in the chair.

'It is inevitable.'

'No!' The slippers stamped in unison and Delphine flinched. 'War is never inevitable! That is an excuse, and you, you of *all* people . . . God! They were willing to talk.'

'Talk?' said the black shoes. 'Of course. Negotiate? No.'

Delphine's head was swimming.

'What are we going to do?' said the man in the chair. 'Ivan? I said what are we going to do? We can't fight an entire people. When they find out what you've done we're finished.'

'So you *do* think they plan invasion?'

'I do *now*, yes! Of course I do *now*. You've given her the perfect *casus belli*. They'll have no choice.'

The patent-leather shoes covered the distance to the chair in three strides. Delphine almost cried out – for a mad instant, she thought they would crash through the wall. She bit her lip.

The foreigner's voice was hushed, urgent: 'This. This is your flaw. Innocence. You think family will save you. You think justice will save you. No. Justice is shield of glass. We must have wisdom.'

The slippered feet splayed. She heard the man in the chair take three grating breaths.

'But how can I go on if I trust no one?'

Creases appeared in the foreigner's polished toecaps as his heels rose from the floor. The club chair creaked with extra weight.

'My dear friend.' He spoke in a whisper, but impossibly loud, as if his lips were at her ear. She felt chill and limp; all she wanted to do was surrender. 'You may trust me.'

He stayed on his toes a moment longer, then sank. He began walking away.

'What about Lansley?' said the man in the chair. 'He's going to have kittens.'

'We must not tell him.'

The man in the chair laughed. 'Oh no, I quite agree. *We're* not

going to tell him anything. *You're* going to explain to the Doctor exactly what *you've* done and how you propose to keep our heads from rotting on the bloody tips of ten-foot pikes.'

The shoes stopped, side-on. 'We continue visits. We say nothing.'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing. We behave normal, we smile so nicely. If they mention child, we offer to help with search.'

'And when they find out we've got the girl right here, under our bloody roof?'

Delphine felt a horrible electric thrill.

'They must not.'

'You're riding a tiger,' said the man in the chair. 'Easy to start, damned hard to stop. The longer we wait, the worse it is. No, look, you'll just have to go cap in hand and tell them you made a mistake. You were mad. You were drunk – your youthful body couldn't handle the nectar. You're terribly, terribly sorry. Here she is, and no harm done.'

One black shoe tapped the floor. 'It is too late.'

'It's not too late if you act now.'

'I will not give them child.'

'It's not your choice to make!'

'And yet,' said the foreigner, 'I choose.'

'I'll take her. I'll choose for you. What do you think of that?'

'No. I do not think you will.'

'But we have so much to teach each other. You *heard* the things they said. They still respect England. They respect us. We can stop this war before it starts.'

'Lazarus. They are monsters.'

The chair creaked. 'Was my father a monster?'

Silence. Delphine blinked. It was as if time in the room had stopped.

'Your father is dead,' said the foreigner. 'God rest his soul.'

Delphine heard a rustling above the chair, the sound of a match being struck. Seconds later, she smelt the soft aroma of pipesmoke. The blue stockings slid out of the slippers.

'What about the new Britannia? What about everything the

Society was created to achieve? Is that just all . . . what? We just give it up, do we?'

'No. We give up nothing. We go on as planned. They do not suspect us.'

The man in the chair grunted. 'Let me send the child away, then.'

'No. I must keep her in my sight.'

'Why? We could . . . ah!' The pipe clattered on the carpet and bounced underneath the chair, spilling tobacco. Delphine gripped the slat, ready to close it. Springs groaned; the man above grunted; four pale fingertips appeared, grasping impotently. 'Oh, hang it all.' The fingers withdrew. 'Look at me. I can't pick something up when it falls at my feet. It might as well be in China.' He took a breath, and Delphine heard the catch in his throat. 'When we're out there, I feel like anything is possible. I feel hope. But each time we return home I sink deeper into decrepitude. The journey's too much. This body is dying. I can't afford the luxury of brinkmanship.'

The patent-leather shoes stepped into view, close and huge. Before Delphine had time to pull away, pinstripe-trousered knees were touching the carpet and a big tanned hand was reaching for her. Behind thumb and forefinger appeared a face: white moustache, plump cheeks and huge grey eyes.

She was paralysed.

The hand swallowed the pipe and withdrew like a sea monster. The man stood.

'No,' he said. 'Luxury you cannot afford is cowardice.'

Delphine snapped the slat shut, stumbled to her feet and began hurrying back along the passageway. The walls amplified her breathing till the very house seemed to be gasping for oxygen. The blackness was total. Something round and smooth brushed her calf – she choked down a yell. She groped at the void ahead until her fingers found the top rung.

She had to get out. She had to find Mother.

Midday sun flowed through the orangery's domed glass ceiling, trapping everything in a net of shadows. Mother and Dr Lansley were

sitting on black lacquered chairs, sipping dark green cocktails. A bronze cherub had its bow aimed at Lansley's temple. About its shoulders, a climbing plant hung leathery and dead.

Delphine marched up to the little wicker table.

'I need to talk to you.'

Dark bars split Mother's face into segments. She looked Delphine from crown to toe.

'You're filthy.'

Delphine glanced down. Her blouse and skirt were caked with dust. Thick clumps clung like fur. She began slapping it off.

Mother wrinkled her nose. 'Oh. Don't do that here.' She flapped a hand. 'Whatever happened? Did you fall?'

'I need to talk to you.'

Dr Lansley grasped the thin stem of his glass between gloved thumb and forefinger. He lifted the drink to his lips, tinting his keen features a queasy, corpse-bloat green. He sipped. His jaw muscles tightened.

'*Mother*.'

'Yes, yes, yes.' She sat back in her chair. 'Well. Go on, then.'

'I mean in private.'

'In that case, you'll have to exercise a little patience. Perhaps if you ask the Doctor politely he'll have the maid show you to your room. I'll come and speak with you when the three of us are done.'

'This is a matter of – wait, what?'

Mother placed her glass on the table with the confident finality of a grandmaster capturing a rook with a pawn.

'You heard me perfectly well.' She flashed Dr Lansley a smile. 'I'll talk when the three of us have finished. Mr Propp has been telling me about his dances.'

A shadow at the window turned. Delphine jolted the table with her thigh, sloshing green liquid into the wickerwork.

Mr Propp was a short, tanned, round man. A silk robe parted about his paunch like theatre curtains, fob watch glinting in the pocket of his waistcoat. Delphine's gaze followed grey pinstripes down to polished black patent-leather shoes. He took a few steps

forward, walking with a rocking motion, until his bald head came into the light. He smiled, lifting the tips of a vanilla-white walrus moustache.

'Hello,' he said, in a purring, vaguely Russian accent.

And there were the eyes: huge, grey, unreadable.