



PART ONE

‘Hello, Walter’

(Vienna, 1938)

from Little, Brown Book Group





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1

Of course I'd seen him before. Many times. In the cafés, bars, restaurants, theatres, concert halls and beautiful shops of a small city like Vienna, everyone knew who was who, and everyone knew who might one day be more than that.

I lived at a fashionable address: 11 Kohlmarkt, next to Demels, the famous patisserie. One lunchtime, I rushed out of my front door, looked back to wave goodbye to a friend and bumped into Walter. For a moment, he held me close. Apologies. Laughter. He took my arm.

'We're going to have a glass of champagne, Trudi. This calls for a celebration.'

It was a command, and I obeyed.

I am sitting on a gilt chair looking at him across one of the small, marble-topped tables at Demels.

'You're making hats?' Walter asks. 'How's business? Surely a lady in your position should be in her salon, looking after her clients, not sitting in cafés having a good time.'

'Are you lecturing me? Is that what we came here for? I work very hard – I'm entitled to a break. Anyway, you seem well informed.'

'I've been watching you.'

'Sir?' The waitress hands him the menu. Walter takes out his spectacles. 'May I order for you, Trudi?'



I love the refined movements of his lips; his thick, shiny hair, greying at the temples; his olive skin. I have seen him glancing at me at the Café Rebhuhn. Once he left early, in a coat that was much too long. He looked pathetic. I think I began to love him then.

‘Tell me about yourself. Are you happy?’ he asks.

‘I’m all right. You?’

‘I’m lonely.’

‘You?’ I laugh. ‘Lots of girls are after you. You’re never alone.’

‘I didn’t say that I was alone. I said I was lonely.’

Our food arrives. Cold lobster, a huge green salad, champagne.

‘You are young to have a broken marriage,’ Walter says. ‘I saw you the other day with Pepi.’

‘Do you know him?’

‘Yes, and I like him a lot. Why do you want to divorce him?’

‘Ask me why I married him.’

‘Why did you marry him?’

‘I thought I was in love.’

2

Demels’ customers were the *beau monde* – famous, important, rich. It was the place to be seen, to stay *au courant*. We went for elevenses, delicate snacks and pastries with cream;



we went for absinthe, or a glass of champagne. We nibbled *Sachertorte* at any time of day – a chocolate cake so fine that it melts in your mouth. We went to Demels to watch the great and the good, and of course, we went to gossip.

Demels was a place of old-fashioned courtesy. Hands were kissed, heels respectfully clicked. Nobody was ever in a hurry. Sometimes I took customers there or met friends for coffee; at other times I just sat there alone, feeling privileged. I admired the wine-coloured carpets and window-seats where nests of little old ladies peeped out at passers-by. Most important! Because everybody knew everybody, and it was delicious to know who was walking with whom.

I am here again, with Walter. The blue silk-covered walls seem bluer, silkier. The richly draped brocade curtains seem more sumptuous. The pair of large antique blackamoors in their niches smile at me. Sparkling crystal chandeliers fairy-tale the room.

I wanted him. I was very young, and I had never wanted anything so much. He was a successful businessman. His apartment was elegant and comfortable; he had a beautiful motor car. I felt inadequate.

He said that he would ring the next day.

I waited by the window. Opposite was the building of the Vaterländische Front, Austria's nationalist party. It looked like any of the other large solid old buildings surrounding it. Anyone threatened by the Nazis felt it offered some protection. Not that the Vaterländische Front was on our side, exactly. But my enemy's enemy . . .

I wandered from room to room, thinking how lucky I was

to live in this beautiful building. It had four floors, each one divided into two apartments. The ground floor was occupied by Hiess, a large luxury store. I rented both the apartments on the first floor. The one overlooking Kohlmarkt I had chosen for my home; the one at the back was my business premises. I had a hat salon with adjoining work-rooms. Biedermeier furniture, silver-grey walls, curtains and carpets. Three large, Chinese-red, lacquer-framed mirrors. On the centre table stood a round, white-and-gilt cage housing two lovebirds. The room was bright with sunlight. I could hear thunder in the distance. But who cared?

What if he doesn't ring? Is it true he has a girlfriend? Doris shouldn't have mentioned it. I pushed the thought away, but now it is back again, threatening me.

It is already six. I lift the receiver and put it down again. I pace my sitting-room, cursing my friend, cursing Kohlmarkt, cursing Demels. I thought that I was attracted to him, sexually and otherwise, but it is more than that. Much more.

Suddenly the telephone rings.

Next day I meet Walter in a small café, one of those lovely old-fashioned hideaways, a tiny, red-plushed place with lots of mirrors and no daylight. I wear a lilac chiffon dress; my hair is piled high.

Walter walks towards me. He smiles.

Tonight he will take me to dinner. I put on a white linen dress, white sandals, I carry an emerald green handbag. My red hair is held back by an emerald silk sash, tied at my neck. Its loose ends move in the wind.

Walter wears a dark grey bespoke flannel suit; handmade

white brogues with black toes; a white silk shirt; a tie. No doubt all of this came from Knize, his tailor. How handsome he is.

He drives me in his open-top car to have dinner at a little restaurant in the Vienna woods. We sit in a garden, under old chestnut trees. Red-and-white gingham tablecloths, candle-light, icy white wine in carafes. He orders a litre of Riesling. The wine is very potent, very dry; the food is exquisite. Two blond peasant boys in lederhosen play the zither. They sing songs of love, of eyes, mouths, girls. *If you don't like my blue, blue bed, all right, that's fine/There are other girls like you/They're pretty too.*

His hand holds mine under the table, reaches for my knee. Summer breeze. The smell of wood, of pines, moss, living and dying. I like his choice of wine and food, the way he makes the waiters dance around us. The way he handles the night and me and the car. In the twilight his eyes are purple velvet.

From time to time moonlight breaks through. Tree trunks are overgrown with moss. Fallen leaves and twigs crackle as we drive through the dark, pine-scented wood. The birds have gone to sleep. I feel calm, sheltered, his arm around my shoulders.

A deer leaps over the shrubs, sweeps past us, stops, pirouettes, then elegantly dances up a hill and disappears. Walter stops the car. Was it a vision? We look at each other and smile.

Suddenly there is light, as if someone with a long taper has lit an old-fashioned gas lamp. Glow-worms, yards of them

close together on moss, form an illuminated carpet. A few yards away, another carpet, and another.

‘It’s magic, Walter. I have to see it close.’

Worms, hundreds of them – fat little phosphorescent worms, motionless. Cold white lights.

‘Why are they here? What makes them lie like this?’

Walter takes my hands. Silent, unsmiling, we stand close to one another, filled with longing. He runs his fingers through my hair. He knows how to kiss. A breeze weaves through the branches of the old trees. Leaves shiver.

I stand undressed in my blue bedroom, full of warmth and the ecstasy of young love. That night was crammed with excitement, shreds of sleep. He visits my dreams. Kisses fly in all directions. I try to catch them with my green butterfly net.

The first time you came to No. 11, you were very shy. I wanted you to feel at home. I had straightened the rugs, again and again. They move if they lie on top of a fitted carpet, always in the same direction. I had polished the candlesticks. On the window-sill were the red roses you had sent me. I thought that it might look too obvious, and I put them on the table. I turned off the lights and opened the windows wide. It was a warm night. The gaslight of the street lamp turned your roses crimson.

You sat on the sofa, ill at ease, looking at me. I, in the armchair, far away, longed for you. We drank wine; I wasn’t used to it. I moved closer to you.

*



After you died, I kept your wardrobe locked, with all your clothes inside, all your lovely ties. The scent of you. I sat inside this wardrobe when I missed you so much.

3

More and more frightening news filtered across the German border. All Jewish money and property confiscated. Concentration camps. Torture. *I don't believe it*, I lied to myself.

In love with a city? Yes. I was in love with Vienna, where I was born. Its calm, its charm, its old houses, every corner of every street. Even in the early Thirties, when many Viennese were poor and unemployed, I found its magic irresistible. So did Walter.

One summer's day he came in his car to show me the sights of imperial Vienna. I didn't want to go. It was unbearably hot. But he stood there, so eager, his eyes shining. I put on my walking shoes and a cool cotton dress.

We made the rounds. Churches, monuments, palaces – Walter knew all their stories: the year they were built, by whom, how long it had taken to finish them, everything. I looked at his lovely happy face, saw how proud he was to share all this with me.

'And of course you know our Stephansdom,' he said, pointing at the cathedral. 'It marks the centre of the city. Do you know anything else about it?'

I didn't, and I was too hot to care. 'Tell me,' I said.





‘It was built in 1147; completely destroyed in 1258 by a fire – it was so hot it melted the bells. Incredibly, in 1290, it happened again. That same year, the complete rebuilding began.’

I was tired, longing for a cold drink, and remembered a café in a side street. Almost in front of the door stood a horse, staring stoically ahead. I have always been afraid of horses and I pulled Walter away.

He walked in front of me, towards the car. I looked at the perfect shape of his head. The thought that he was mine made me feel unbearably happy.

The magnificent State Opera House, Vienna’s pride. Walking up marble stairs, across inlaid marble floors. Waltzes by Lanner and Strauss. The whisper of silk crinolines still lingers. The ceilings, painted by artists of centuries past, are lit up by rows of crystal chandeliers which spark off tiny lights. Millions and millions of them. Like diamonds. Like a fairy-tale. Every evening at the Opera is a glittering, unforgettable occasion. Especially just before midnight on New Year’s Eve, when the bells of St Stephan start to ring out.

Walter showed me the nineteenth-century parliament building. ‘Lit from inside, it looks like Brussels lace,’ he said. We looked at the Karlskirche, with its domed copper roof that has turned green – the oldest baroque building in Austria. The Votivkirche, its soaring spires rising into the dark sky. We went to the fairground. Finally we sat down in a garden restaurant, ate Vienna sausages, drank iced lager. Then through fields and woods stretching down to the





Danube. Flowering trees, the old-fashioned amusement park and the famous Ferris wheel. The Danube – never blue, but a lovely, old, busy, dirty-grey river, cutting Vienna in two.

His arm around my shoulders, Walter asks, 'Have you ever taken a cruise down the Danube to Wachau?'

'No.'

'Let's go together. You will see the loveliest river valley in Europe. Imagine – old castles perched on craggy rocks. Gilded baroque churches dotted across the green banks. It's fabulous in spring, when the trees are in bloom. I know you will love it.'

We were young, and the world was ours. Viennese music and all the people who loved it so much were ours. In the morning they sing; upstairs, downstairs, on the bus, in the metro, humming in the streets. Up on the fourth floor a window-cleaner whistles the Radetzky March.

The Austrians love wine, women and song. I remember the white wines. Easy to drink, they flow too easily down your throat. Fruity, dry wines, delicious with chicken fried in breadcrumbs.

We walked some more, until I could go no further. My face red and hot, my hair in a state, my feet sore, I cried.

'I've had enough, Walter. I need to sit down.'

He apologized, pinched my cheek and took me to a tavern in a cellar next to the cathedral. It was cool there. The food was good, the wine chilled.

Walter loved small, intimate bars. There were many of them all over Vienna. He took me to his favourite.





How many girls had he taken there before? Beautiful girls.

He calls for me, looking handsome in his navy blue mohair suit and white shirt. I have been to the hairdresser. I try to look my best.

The bar is enchanting. Dark red velvet curtains, bright red linen tablecloth. Candlelight reflected by mirrored walls. The pianist plays romantic music. We dance very close to one another. In the dim light my eyes meet the veiled eyes of the man dancing next to me. The pianist's gaze burns through my clothes.

Walter notices. He falls silent. We never go there again.

4

I waited for Walter in his flat. Until I take the receiver off the hook, the telephone rings constantly. Girls. There would be little notes when we got into his car outside his building: *I still live at No. 7, Susie. I waited, Lilli. Chéri, encore? Hughette.* The telephone number of a young lady called Carolle.

No wonder, my darling, no wonder they were after you. No wonder. Your eyes, the blue of African violets, dark hair, greying at the temples. Your slightly olive skin, smooth all over your body. Your sweetness, kindness, decency. You *did* flirt, trade on your good looks, but not like a rogue. Good-naturedly, for fun. Of course I was jealous. You grinned at girls, a twinkle in your eye.



There was a photograph of a beautiful woman in the drawer of your desk.

'Who is she, Walter?'

'A past love.'

That was all you said. I wanted to ask: *How long ago? What colour is her hair? Her eyes? Her complexion? Is she tall, slim, with beautiful legs? Beautiful hands? Is she a threat to me?* But I didn't.

I am civil to him, but I don't like him, Walter's so-called friend. Poldi interferes. He wants Walter to marry an heiress, a young woman living in the same building. Poldi is clever. Rumanian. He is a short-legged, broad-shouldered little man, head three sizes too large, glittering black eyes. He is over-dressed. Poldi means trouble.

'Trudi, Walter asked me to talk to you.' My heart misses a beat. 'Mira tried to commit suicide.'

Mira? Who is Mira? The girl in the photograph in Walter's desk?

'Who's Mira?' I ask. He watches me, savours my shock. I am strong. I will deny him that pleasure. The yellow walls of my sitting-room are turning around. The patterns of the blue Chinese carpet explode. I remain cool.

'She is a divorcée,' he explains, 'and for the last two years, on and off, Walter was having an affair with her. Until he met you.'

'Why has Walter never told me about her?'

'Obvious, isn't it? He didn't want to upset you. He tried several times to break it off with her, but she wouldn't let him go.'

‘And now? What is going to happen? Is he going back to her? Why has he sent you? Why doesn’t he tell me himself?’

‘She is dead.’

Good.

No. I mustn’t think that. It’s terrible.

But it *is* good. Now she can’t take him away from me.

Or can she? Will her death come between us?

Finally I realise Poldi is still talking. ‘Did you hear me, Trudi? She’s dead.’

When I heard the full story from Walter, I was angry at first. Very angry. And then sorry. But what a trick.

Mira lived with her widowed mother on the fourth floor of one of those big old buildings in the centre of Vienna. It was Easter Monday. After lunch her mother went to visit her sister. Mira was going out too, and asked her mother to make sure she was home by seven at the latest, telling her it was important because she was expecting a telephone call and might not be able to get back in time for it herself.

But Mother *was* late. She came home and found Mira on the bed, unconscious, a letter next to her. A few sleeping tablets on the pillow, the empty bottle on the floor. She rushed out to get help and accidentally locked her keys inside the flat. Easter Monday. No locksmiths. Eventually, the fire brigade arrived. Their ladders didn’t reach the fourth floor. They had to use a battering-ram on the heavy front door. Mira was still alive. Four hours later she died in hospital. Poor, beautiful Mira, whom I never knew. Her plan didn’t come off.



Walter holds me tight. Should I cry?

It took a lot of tact, patience and love to re-establish the equilibrium that had existed between us before the tragedy.

5

I have influenza. Walter sits on the edge of my bed, holding my hand. He is not afraid to catch my cold. I am hot. I shiver.

Red roses. Lots of them. Walter is generous, he always gives me red roses. Their colour matches my Bokhara rug, contrasts well with the blue walls, painted to look like moiré silk. The roses stand in a tall crystal vase. I like to see the long stems in clear water.

Mother arrives unexpectedly. I know she likes him, and why not? He is kind, tactful, modest, well behaved. Mother adores beautiful people. She sits on a chair at my little desk, still glamorous, very chic. Her famous dimpled smile appears. It is only used for special people.

Walter looks at me. We exchange smiles. They get on well, Mother and Walter. I am happy, but hot. Their voices are faint.

'Trudi,' Walter's voice brings me back. 'May I come tomorrow?' Good God, what a question!

I nod and fall asleep. Mother is still there when I wake up. She smiles at me.

'Has he gone?' I ask.





‘Yes, darling,’ she says. ‘Don’t worry. He will be back. You know, Trudi, when I saw those eyes, I knew.’

‘Knew what, Mother?’ We laugh. ‘Would you like a drink? Coffee?’

‘No, thank you. I don’t want anything. You rest. I’ll stay. Later on, I’ll make you a hot drink.’

I close my eyes. I remember my parents and me walking alongside a cornfield. I was a little girl. It was a summer’s day; I could almost hear the air vibrate with heat. Brushed by a sudden breeze, the ripe fruit inside the heads of corn rattled softly, like maracas. At the end of the field stood a huge oak tree, still clad in its leaves. The grass underneath was losing its green. I ran backwards and forwards, picking cornflowers for my mother. Poppies, daisies, and a few stems of golden corn.

She smiled when I gave them to her. I loved her. A love that lasted all my life. Suddenly I realized how beautiful she was. Soft face, warm hair, shaded gold; large eyes, the colour and sparkle of well-cut sapphires. I saw that people smiled at her; I was envious and tried to copy her. I tried, like her, to walk with a slight sway of my hips. I didn’t succeed and was upset. No one looked at me.

Mother was aware of the glances from passers-by and occasionally turned her head to look at Father, with a big grin and a twinkle in her eye. Arm in arm, they laughed together, talked together, walked together. No one looked at me.

The wind rustled in the trees. Leaves fluttered.

I adored my dark-haired, dark-eyed father. He came from a long line of jewellers. He was a specialist in copying and





restoring antique jewellery. He had taste, style and the beautiful, long, slim hands of an artist. He walked with a beautifully straight back until the end of his days.

He could do no wrong in my eyes. I always took his part, even against my mother. Yet when I had an argument with her, he would stab me in the back, staunchly on her side. But no matter how many times it happened, I felt no bitterness. My loyalty to him never failed. They were lovebirds – but lovebirds can't live without each other. If one of them dies, the other dies too. Not so in their case. Life had decided differently.


I recovered from the fever. Walter and my mother became friends. She adored him.



6

February 1938: Walter, some friends and I walked across Graben. A young, shabbily dressed man shouted at us. He cursed us, baring his teeth. We took no notice and walked on. He smelt of drink. He shouted after us, 'Jews! Dirty Jews!' and raised his fist. Walter swivelled around, jumped at him like a tiger. The man ran.

A small bomb exploded in a telephone kiosk. It caused hardly any damage, but it worried me. Austrians are not normally aggressive. Was it wise to go to Paris now? To produce a new collection? Walter advised me not to change my plans. Everyone persuaded me to go.



At the beginning of March 1938, I flew to Paris to do my buying for the coming season. There, the main topic of conversation was the trouble in Austria.

I sat in a bistro, having coffee and croissants for breakfast. I saw the headline in the previous day's *Paris-Soir*: DR KURT SCHUSCHNIGG LOSES HIS FIGHT. I bought a newspaper. The Germans were ready to march into Austria, just waiting for Hitler's command.

Alone, scared, I ran back to my hotel and started to telephone. My friends and business contacts confirmed the terrifying news.

'No, no, madame,' said the young lady at the block-makers. Her black eyes opened wide in shock. '*Ne revenez pas à Vienne, madame! Jamais! C'est impossible. C'est très, très dangereux. Restez ici, madame, chez nous.*'

My buying agent, Monsieur Roubach, an elderly, kind man, spoke English. He had never forgiven the Germans for emptying his precious wine-cellar.

'Oh no, madame,' he said. 'Never can you go back to Vienna. Never!' He sliced his hand across his throat. 'Grrr!' he said, and his head began to tremble. 'You will stay with us! Yes? Madame Roubach *et mes enfants*, they will have honour.'

Madame Paulette and her *Directrice* were my friends. 'Out of the question,' Paulette said authoritatively, putting her manicured hand under my chin. 'We wouldn't let you go.' Her normally business-like voice was warm. 'So young,' said the *Directrice*. Her watery blue eyes were sad.

Early next morning, I booked a car and Monsieur

Roubach for the next two days. I told him to arrange appointments back-to-back, during lunchtime and after hours. I visited every leading house, bought all the materials I needed and met with all my fashion contacts to hear what they were thinking.

Then I telephoned my friend Marie-Louise, a model at Patou. I knew that she was having an affair with a minister in the French government. She might know something about Hitler and Austria.

In the late afternoon of 9 March, I waited for her outside the Café de la Paix. I sat on a small metal chair at a round metal table, a little stove next to it, as with every Paris café when the weather is not yet warm.

Marie-Louise strode across the rue de la Paix. Her understated elegance was dramatic. A tight-fitting grey tweed suit moulded her sleek, sexy body. A sable scarf protected her from the slight chill. We embraced, happy to see each other. We ordered coffee and aperitifs. As always, Café de la Paix was busy, people coming and going, shouting at one another in different languages.

'Trudi,' she said, 'you must stay in Paris. You can't go back to Vienna. Whatever happens.'

So she knows, I thought.

'There is no choice. I want you alive. Stay with me. Don't worry about money.'

'How can I stay here?' I asked. 'Walter and my parents are in Vienna. If they are in trouble, I want to be with them.'

'Trudi, darling. We'll think of something. Maybe Pierre will know what to do.' Her smile would have cheered the



saddest person. It didn't cheer me. I envied her fresh, rosy complexion. Her security. Large emerald and diamond earrings matched her green eyes.

I returned to my hotel. After a little rest, a bath and a change of clothes, I went out again. I wanted to walk through Paris by myself. To see its people, its shops. Feel its freedom. *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité.*

7

It was twilight. I walked towards la place de la Concorde. Hundreds and hundreds of black lamp-posts surrounded it. Octangular glass shapes. Old-fashioned, romantic. They shimmered, sparkled; they took me into another world. It was impossible to imagine that, once, the guillotine had stood here. On the left, the green gardens of the Louvre. On the right, the flowering gardens of the Champs-Élysées. I found a quiet corner to stop and take it all in, maybe for the last time.

I walked up the Champs-Élysées, past majestic buildings and beautiful shop windows. Café after café, people sitting outside, eating, drinking, enjoying themselves. An endless stream. The comparison with what was happening to people at home was unbearable.

I arrived at Le Rond Point.

A young couple, hand in hand, were mesmerised by the four fountains. They seemed to have forgotten their baby girl





in the pram. Black eyes, black curls, white coat with pearl buttons. She was fascinated by the twinkling drops of water and glittering lights. I tickled her under her chin. She closed her soft baby fist around my finger and cooed. Her tiny presence changed my mood. Maybe it won't be as bad as everybody thinks, I thought. Please, God, help us.

I was tired and hungry. Fouquets, the fashionable place to go, was close by. At the next table was a young American couple who looked as though they were on their honeymoon. People spoke Spanish, Italian, German.

'*Mademoiselle?*' asked the waiter. I ordered *omelette aux champignons*, a salad. Melon.

'*Et pour boire, mademoiselle?*'

'*Du bière froide.*'

I ate some bread and excellent unsalted butter. My omelette arrived. Deliciously hot, beautifully presented.

I walked on, past la place d'Etoile to l'Arc de Triomphe. Majestic. Dignified. I missed Walter's explanations.

Early next morning Marie-Louise told me that her friend the minister would do everything in his power to get permission for Walter and my parents to come to France. She urged me again not to go back to Austria. To bring my family to Paris.

I telephoned Walter. My eyes filled with tears when I heard his voice.

'Trudi, darling.'

'Walter, speak up. I can't hear you. Hello! Hello! Walter? Hello! Hello – hello!' The line went dead. I dialled again.



‘We were interrupted,’ he said. ‘Tell me how you are.’

‘Walter, you *must* come to Paris. At once.’

‘Why? What’s happened?’

‘Please come. Come as you are. No time to pack.’ My hands were shaking. Tears ran down my cheeks. ‘Walter, please. Listen to me. I’ve seen the papers. The French papers. Schuschnigg has lost. You’re in danger—’

‘Nonsense,’ he said. His voice was calm.

‘The Germans are preparing to march into Austria! It’s *certain*.’

‘Don’t be so pessimistic! Do your buying as usual, and come home. Come home to me.’

‘For God’s sake, listen to me!’

Walter did not answer.

To go back to Vienna now would be a great gamble, yet I knew Walter would never survive on his own. He was no fighter.

I boarded the night plane to Vienna. I looked through the window of my plane. Down there was Paris – drama, fashion, elegance.

Goodbye, Paris, I whispered. Goodbye, Lautrec. Goodbye fashion shows, wonderful food, avenues and boulevards, beautiful churches, picturesque houses with wooden shutters, organ grinders, spring breezes, the reflection of ancient walls in the Seine. Goodbye.

I arrived in Vienna early in the morning of 11 March 1938. Walter met me at the airport. I felt his arms around me. His lips on mine. It was good to see him. Good not to be alone.



8

I went back to work. I loved my work-room, its atmosphere, my girls. There was Betty, with the face of a truck driver and the soul of an angel; she never had much to say, but was always ready to help. Little Dolli: big, dark-blue eyes, always laughing, luscious and plump; she ate horse-meat steak on Sundays as a treat. Anne-Marie, the girl with the best figure in the room, had never seen herself naked; as a devout Catholic, she believed to do so would be a sin, and took her bath wearing a nightdress.

I can still see my work-room. Starting under the window and stretching almost the full length of the room stood a wooden table seating twelve milliners. Every girl had a box of pins, a cushion with needles, a pair of scissors and several thimbles. On the floor beside each chair was a cardboard box holding necessities for the work in hand. Spools of cotton in every colour were slid on to a metal rod on legs which ran the whole length of the table. It was fixed at one end and locked at the other. That way, spools couldn't disappear. We had wig stands in various sizes. They were used to shape the hats. Against the wall was a table with gas rings, large and small irons, and a steam kettle.

There were straw braids in pastel shades and straw braids in bright colours. Velvets and silks; flowers, feathers and ribbons. Order sheets, pieces of veiling and other fabric were





randomly pinned to the wall. Hats were everywhere: large hats, small hats, sports hats and sophisticated turbans for evening. The place was almost a replica of the Paris work-room where I spent two months learning French hat design and techniques. Its *directrice* was a chic, slim woman with shrewd, penetrating eyes.

‘Mademoiselle,’ she said, ‘you like to learn from the *modiste Parisienne*? Well, mademoiselle, never, never do you forget. The hat must be designed with the luxury, with the wit and with the craftsmanship. Always it must be charming and amusing.’

It was 1935. The poor were getting poorer; the rich, richer. As always, fashion catered for the rich. And French fashion was a dictatorship. Hats became smaller and smaller. More charming. More amusing. This was the time when a feather and a sequin was a hat.

My work-room glittered. It was alive. It took possession of me, made me forget the world outside. Everyone was busy, everyone was happy, chatting and laughing. The whole place reeked of fashion.

But this time, as I entered my beloved work-room, I felt immediately that something had changed. The girls greeted me with politeness, but without the usual bright smiles and hellos. The usual questions were missing – *How was Paris, madame? What are the new hats like? Again small toques? Or do we have brims for a change? Did you have fun?* They were reserved – only slightly, but it was impossible to overlook. I pretended not to notice, thinking that I understood the reason for it. But I was wrong. They had not





been influenced – yet – by Hitler’s propaganda. For the moment, they were afraid for me, and embarrassed. They didn’t know how to behave. They didn’t want to hurt my feelings.

‘Madame, may I speak to you?’ my forelady asked.

‘Of course, Stefanie.’

‘In private?’

Her voice was a tone higher than usual. She was tiny, ash-blonde, with dark eyes.

‘Come on, Steffi.’ I put my arm around her shoulders. ‘Let’s go to my room, it’s cosy there. Come, sit down. Tell me what the matter is.’

‘I don’t know, madame. It’s hard to explain. I can’t understand it myself. While you were away, in those few days, everything changed.’

Her eyes were bright with tears. ‘You shouldn’t have come back! You shouldn’t! I hoped you wouldn’t. You were safe in Paris. Don’t you know, any moment now, German troops will march into Austria!’

‘How do you know?’

‘My brother is a member of the Communist Party, and they are well informed. I worry about him just as much as I worry about you.’

‘I read the papers in Paris. Believe me, the world knows far more about our troubles than we do.’

‘So why did you come back? *Why?*’

‘Steffi, you love your husband. I couldn’t possibly abandon Walter. You understand.’

She started to cry. ‘It’s not so much what has actually



happened. It's what is *going* to happen. Hitler isn't even here, but suddenly everyone is a Nazi. They've all been members of the Party for a long time. They don't hide their swastika pins any more – they wear them openly. Proudly.'

'Steffi, don't worry so much. Not everybody is bad. I am sure there are plenty of people like you.'

She looked at me anxiously. While I was away, Chancellor Schuschnigg had called a referendum on Austria retaining her autonomy. He wanted to see the people's loyalty. All day long, youngsters paraded up and down the Kartnerstrasse. On the left side of the street, the Socialists were shouting, '*Heil Schuschnigg!*' On the right, the Nazis screamed, '*Heil Hitler!*'

'And who do you think I saw on the Nazi side, wearing a swastika pin and shouting?'

'Who?'

'Our two little learners, our two little nobodies – Pauline and Anna.'

That really shook me. It hurt. I flew back to the work-room and started shouting at the two girls – hard, angry words, in front of everyone. Then I walked away, wishing I could undo what I had done.

A few days later, there was a knock at my door. In those days, a knock at the door could mean the beginning of the end.

'Come in,' I said.

A huge bunch of flowers appeared first – with two pairs of eyes peeping through. Pauline and Anna. Only fifteen, Pauline



was like a young deer – slim, with long, delicate legs, dark, calm eyes. Anna was a country bumpkin.

‘Frau Trudi,’ Pauline whispered. ‘We have come to tell you not to worry. We are members of the Nazi Party, and we have told our friends in our group how nice and kind you are. They promised to protect you. Nothing bad will happen to you.’

from Little, Brown Book Group

