

PROLOGUE

It is just after nine o'clock in the evening. A woman stands on a pavement in Hampstead outside the Magdala pub, where Easter revellers raise their glasses, oblivious to what is taking place just a few feet away. Between the pub and a parked motor-car, face down on the footway, lies a man – David is his name. Darkness has fallen, but the combination of street lighting and the yellow glow from the Magdala's windows allow the woman to see the grey worsted wool of his suit, on which bloody circles are expanding. She trains the gun in her trembling hand on his back. The man makes an attempt to prop himself up on one elbow, but any prospect of escape is ebbing away.

The parked motor-car is a grey-green Standard Vanguard. His – although, as the woman told the policemen who attended a disturbance in the early hours of Easter Sunday, it's as good as hers. After all, hasn't she lived with David these past two years? And it can't be vandalism if it's your own property. Why did she push in the windows? Because he didn't pick her up as he'd promised, that's why (one more broken promise in a trail of broken promises). She remembers the waiting. How at first she worried – he'd been drinking before he drove off, and this is a man who thinks nothing of speed. Speed is his business. It's in his blood. But worry turned to anger, and anger to hatred. What she doesn't remember – not quite – is what brought them both to this place. Today. Everything has happened in a cold cold frenzy.

They are not alone, she sees. Here is David's friend Clive. She always rather liked Clive. Sensed he liked her too. And here, standing beside Hanshaw's news-stand, are two boys. Men, she supposes. Fighting age, but no more than eighteen. They look down at David, sprawled at their feet, one arm outstretched towards them, beseeching. Then, slack-jawed, they turn their faces towards her, as if she's a mirage: blonde, petite, horn-rimmed spectacles, a grey two-piece, stilettos. The last person they'd expect to be brandishing a firearm.

Clive doesn't know where to put himself. "Look what you've done, Ruth."

How can she reply when there is so much blood? She had no idea there would be so much; that it would seep between the slabs of the pavement and drip from the kerb into the gutter, and David is gasping for air that will not come.

And then, no more gasping. It's over. They are looking at her, the boys and Clive. Waiting to see what she will do. Ruth raises her arm, presses the barrel of the gun to her temple. This, she realises, was always her intention. She feels ready to die. Wants an end to it. Her finger squeezes the trigger, but some internal force pulls her hand away and the shot ricochets off the pub wall. Now there is no escape. Even if there were somewhere to run to, it wouldn't be an option she'd take. Ruth has never run away from problems. No, she always ran straight towards them. "Go and call the police," she says quietly.

Part One
August 1949

CHAPTER ONE

Caroline

What the hell does she think she's playing at? Seventeen, alone in a strange city and accepting an invitation from a man she's only just met. Finbar Weir. Well-dressed and judging by the size of the order he placed at the bar, with cash to burn. Right now, that's what Caroline's looking for. The term Sugar Daddy suggests something sickly sweet, an expectation. She prefers Ration Book. Stamps not just for meat and cooking oil, but for introductions. A means to earn enough to put a roof over her head and have money left over to send home. *Take a good look at this place. That's what you're here for.* An apartment is too fancy a description for the living room, kitchenette and bedroom she can sense behind the door to her right. It's all so shabby, a clutter of things that make no attempt to match each other. *You'll need to tone down your expectations, girl.* Unlike at home (home in Suffolk, that is), there's a tower of shillings to feed the gas meter, teetering as if someone's just brushed past. There's a gramophone player with a stack of 78s. A decanter on a tray, held aloft by a statue of a young Negro. Did it come with the rooms, or is it the kind of thing a man like Finbar Weir finds amusing?

Caught frowning at his Negro, Caroline colours from the neck upwards. *Quick, say something.* "It's ten to nine. Can you warm up the wireless?"

"Warm up the wireless? Will you listen to yourself?" All the same, he goes to switch on the radio set.

"It's something my da used to say." Though she's betrayed her age, something liberating strikes Caroline. Here, it's possible to mention her father. In her new London life she can parrot his favourite expressions without worrying that one of the younger ones will demand, 'When's Da coming home?' Without fear that her ma's eyes will glaze over. She forces a tense smile, says, "At 'ome, everything always stopped at ten to nine."

"At 'ome?"

His mockery ramps up her nerves. This must be what it feels like to be a boy whose voice is breaking; one moment BBC news reporter, the next lapsing into the language of childhood. Determined not to let on, Caroline raises a baton-like finger. "Haym. At ire hice," she enunciates in the King's English.

"That's more like it. We'll make a Londoner of you yet."

"We'd warm up the radio set in time for the news." *Slow down, you're blabbering.* Caroline crosses one leg over the other. She's in the early stages of turning herself into someone new, someone sophisticated. Not by choice – not exactly. Da's disappearance has forced her hand.

Caroline thought Ma was being kind, sending her on her way when she did. That she'd sensed what went on that evening when the bailiffs arrived and Ma pushed her towards the back door, hissing, "Fetch your Uncle Anthony." When Caroline did as she was told, her uncle cornered her, asking what she would do for him, and he was breath and hands and mouth. But sending her on her way was no kindness. When Ma gave her a last packed lunch, she held her close and said, "We're all counting on yer." This, from the same woman who used to ruffle Caroline's hair and call her 'my little worryguts'. *We're all counting on yer.* With those words, her skin prickled, and she sensed that Ma *had* known. The war might be over but sacrifices weren't just expected. They were demanded.

This thought lurks behind every decision Caroline must make. Why she's here, in the rooms of a man she's only just met. A ridiculous situation to have put herself in, 'specially when you think what the newspaper hawkers have been hollering; after everything she's read. *A gallstone, the size of a grape, led to the discovery of human bone, dentures, a lipstick container.* Not everything, it turns out, dissolves in sulphuric acid.

She doesn't hold her newly acquired responsibility against the younger ones. Plenty of times she's benefited from being the oldest child. Besides, London was always Caroline's dream.

She arrived, eyes gleaming, expecting to *find* herself, as if she'd pictured a second self who'd been playing hide-and-seek. It's not as if she'd believed in all that 'streets paved with gold' nonsense. She wasn't that daft. Even so, the reality hit her the way it hits you when you discover you're the punchline of a joke. There was no welcome committee as she stepped down from the bus outside Park Lane. Doors didn't open for her. Here, Caroline is no one. Here, she's on her own.

"Lord knows why anyone would think you'd need ten minutes to warm up the valves," Finbar is saying. "Ten seconds is long enough."

"I don't know the first thing about valves. This was musical chairs without the music."

He laughs, his forehead creasing into a frown.

She'd put him at thirty. Now she thinks, *Maybe thirty-five*. "We'd all scrum for a place on the sofa. Then, at the sound of the first bong..." Caroline uncrosses her legs, sits up straight, stares ahead, and mouths the words: *'The Silent Minute.'* It was the prime minister's idea: the entire nation bowing their heads during Big Ben's chimes to pray for the men on the battlefields.

Finbar is up on his feet. "Hey! Where d'you think you're off to?" Her hand reaches after him. Why, she has no idea – she's spent the past quarter of an hour fretting about what to do if he catches hold of her waist and pulls her towards him.

"All the way to my coat pocket, to fetch my cigarettes. *If that's alright with you.*"

Grudgingly, she watches him go. *He has you pegged as some country bumpkin*. As he turns, she flashes the smile that is expected.

Finbar bends from the waist, an impression of a bow, and opens his pack of Craven A. The cigarettes form a line of skyscrapers. "Will you have one?"

No point worrying whether nice girls smoke. Caroline forfeited that label the moment she stepped through the door. "How long until the news?"

He appears amused by her hesitation. "Seven minutes."

Seven minutes. "Go on then."

A single shake of the pack and Finbar shunts two cigarettes upwards. He presses his lips around the ends of these and, head to one side, flicks the wheel of his lighter.

Caroline's nerves leap as high as the flame. "Mind out," she warns. "You'll have your eyebrows off."

"You're a funny girl." As he attends to each cigarette in turn, Caroline puts out a hand, two fingers forming Churchill's famous victory sign in reverse. She and her school friends perfected this pose using sweet cigarettes. But Finbar places a Craven A between her lips. She feels the casual graze of his fingertips – *Vampire Horror, Modern Day Dracula*. John Haigh thought he'd invented the perfect murder. Believed he couldn't be convicted unless the bodies were found. Can this man, this man with Brylcreemed hair who takes a seat next to her, be trusted?

But Finbar does not pounce. "What's so important about tonight's news?" he asks. "I thought you'd be keen to go out."

Out would be good. The streets, a pub, anywhere but here. Caroline shrugs, hoping a display of nonchalance will disguise her panic. This man could be anyone. She shouldn't have come.

"Don't tell me you're another one." His knee nudges hers.

She blows a steady plume of smoke. (She has remembered not to inhale. *It will make you dizzy.*) "Another what?"

"You've been following the exploits of the Acid Bath Murderer. You know Pierrepoint hanged him two days ago!"

"Not soon enough," Caroline blurts. There, she's said it. She's glad Haigh is dead, glad there's one less killer walking the streets of London.

Again, Finbar gives her that bemused half-smile of his. "What more do you want?"

“Six murders he was guilty of. Six stories he spun, all of them believable.” *‘Gone into hiding to avoid military service.’ ‘Didn’t he tell you? He bought a one-way ticket to America.’ ‘Come quickly. Your husband’s been taken ill.’*

From the back of Finbar’s throat comes the sound of grudging agreement. “True. But you can only hang a man once.”

Caroline looks at Finbar, really looks, trying to see through his polished exterior, thinking all the while of what have become familiar photographs of Haigh. There’s one where he looks like Hitler. A candid shot taken as he was hustled up the steps of the Old Bailey. With narrowed eyes and his mouth slightly open, Haigh has the shifty look of a second-hand car salesman. Caroline is confident she would have known that man was trouble. But there’s a third photograph, where Haigh’s index finger is resting to the right of his mouth. The film star shot. It’s the thought of how easily she might have been taken in by this version of Haigh that has frayed Caroline’s nerves. Why her stomach seizes when she hears footsteps behind her as she hurries from the bus stop to the YWCA, bracing herself for an attack. She knows hardly anyone in London. Who would report *her* missing? And when news eventually got back to Suffolk, would Ma fall for a story that Caroline has set sail to America to start a new life?

She puts it to Finbar: “Haigh said there were nine victims. Don’t you want to know if he made a last-minute confession?”

Finbar sucks smoke through his teeth; shakes his head. “He’s the type to leave everyone guessing. That way, he wins.”

Something stubborn in Caroline can’t accept this. Three mothers, three fathers, three wives, all of them permanently in the dark.

Finbar, who has been keeping one eye on his wristwatch, announces, “Nine o’clock!” But where Big Ben’s first chime should ring out in E, there is silence.

She turns to him. “Where are the bongs?”

“The announcer must have been early.” They both inhale, cigarette paper and tobacco crackling. “No,” he says gravely. “No bongs.”

Caroline thinks out loud: “Is the King dead?”

“There would be radio silence. Perhaps the prime minister –”

Not even the Luftwaffe managed to silence Big Ben. A chill crawls up the skin of Caroline’s arms. “Perhaps we’re at war.”

“We can’t be. There would have been an announcement.”

“But if the prime minister’s dead –”

“Shut up and listen!”

It’s so like one of Da’s outbursts that Caroline obeys (head down, stay well out of the way). The thud from her veins punctuates the silence before the news reporter’s voice slices through the tension. *‘My apologies to you all for the unusual start to tonight’s programme. Big Ben is running four minutes slow. Swarms of starlings are sitting on the minute hand, holding it back.’*

One of Caroline’s hands flies to her chest.

“Would you believe it?” Finbar’s tone suggests he’s heard everything now. As Caroline jumps to her feet, he says, “What’s this? Lost interest in the news?”

“If the world isn’t ending, I think I’d like to go out. If you don’t mind.” *Out, up the basement steps, into the street.*

“In that case,” Finbar sits his fedora squarely on his head, “We mustn’t keep the lady waiting!”

A reprieve. She feels peculiarly grateful to him for that.