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# Prologue

*4 May 1968*

The women crash together, a blur of twisted limbs and contorted faces. Eva opens her eyes to the lilac sky. There's blood in her mouth, on her knuckles, and her corduroy dress is ripped. She curls in, wheezing, one hand on her stomach, then straightens her glasses, cursing the crack in one lens. She watches the wheel of her bicycle spinning its slow, ticking orbit. A form comes into focus, a few metres away – an old woman on the ground, her mouth ajar, misaligned teeth poking from behind flaccid lips.

It all comes back. The last thing Eva had seen in the seconds before the collision was a pair of watery eyes, widened. Hands raised to a mouth. The white-haired woman had appeared out of nowhere, dashing through a gap between parked cars, barging into her.

Eva had been distracted as she'd cycled home along this residential backstreet in Vienna's leafy Hietzing district. She'd argued at lunchtime with the man she'd made a tentative life with. They'd met in a coffee shop near where she worked as an assistant at a store selling second-hand books in a tourist-crammed area of the Innere Stadt. But what should have been a moment for intimate revelation had become fraught with recrimination. Eva had run from the café and her lover had let her go. She'd been rehashing the day's argument, reliving the

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things she'd said, thinking about the things she should have disclosed. The next thing she remembered was the blurred flash of a figure running into her path.

She'd gripped the brakes, tried to swerve, but their momentum was unstoppable.

'Oh, no, are you hurt? Can you hear me?' Eva asks now, lowering herself to the woman's wounded frame. 'I'm so sorry! I didn't see you until it was too late,' she adds.

The woman doesn't move. Her silence is numbing.

Eva stares into the face of her victim, with its high cheekbones and sunken sockets. Blood oozes from the woman's forehead, vivid against pale hair. Her skin is cool to the touch, a sickly mauve, and a pungent smell, like old soil, radiates off her. Eva notices the ragged clothes and black-rimmed fingernails. A thin-soled shoe, lined with newspaper, has fallen off and the toe of the bared foot is ugly, its bunion oversized and ruby.

'I don't know what to do,' Eva whispers, rubbing her dark hair from her eyes, willing herself to concentrate. She searches for a passer-by, anyone who might help them. A light appears in the window of one of the grand apartment buildings overlooking the street, but nobody appears. She staggers over and presses the dozen brass buzzers.

'Call for an ambulance, please!' she says into the intercom, but hears only static.

The skies are darkening and threaten rain.

Eva returns to the woman and leans in, her heart pounding, listening for any signs of life. She shakes her, gentle but insistent. Silvery moths loosen from the seams of the woman's coat, startled by the light.

The bag the woman had been carrying is ripped, its contents scattered across the road. Eva searches for a clue to the woman's identity. There's a bundle of letters, tied in a ribbon, the ink faded, but nothing else by way of identification.

*Please, I beg of you, write to me, any response will do . . .* Eva deciphers the old-fashioned handwriting on almost translucent paper. *It's*

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*unbearable to have this rift between us. I need forgiveness. Eternally, your loving sister . . .*

‘Edith?’ Eva says, pocketing the letters, her eyes on the old woman once more.

It’s then that the muscles at the edge of the old woman’s lips flicker. Eva starts, encouraged by the movement. She grasps the old hands, which are rough like bark.

The woman’s eyelids flash open, revealing dilated pupils. A violent rasp comes from her mouth as she bares her gums. For an unspeakable moment, Eva believes this shrunken, injured stranger might be capable of sinking teeth into her flesh.

‘Get your filthy hands *off* me!’ the woman barks. ‘I’m not dead yet, you know! Even if you’ve damn well given it your best shot.’

Eva backs away as the victim struggles to her feet and brushes herself down, rubbing her elbow, then her lower back.

‘I was only trying to help,’ Eva tries, by way of apology.

‘You call this helping, do you?’ The old woman tests her frame like a bird before flight. She puts a hand to her head and winces as she sees the blood on her fingertips. ‘You didn’t see me, did you?’

‘You just appeared out of nowhere,’ Eva replies.

‘Oh, invisible, am I?’

‘But you ran into me!’

‘Fifty years I’ve been searching.’ The white-haired woman fixes her with a razor-sharp glare. ‘Since before you were even born!’ Her arthritic fingers move in a flourish. ‘And then you come along and knock me down, almost kill me, just as I lay eyes on her again.’

Eva feels as if they’re being watched and turns, but nobody’s there – only a tree with loose bark beside a poster for an art exhibition, pasted to a whitewashed wall.

‘You’ve no idea!’ the older woman continues. ‘No idea at all. All the sacrifices I’ve made, everything I’ve suffered, the heartbreak, every day, searching for a single glimpse of her. Then finally, here she is, after all this time. Look, goddamn it! There she is, exactly as she has always

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been.' Her breathing is ragged and a sob punctuates her words. 'I'm seventy-eight, with nothing to call my own. I've lost it all, ruined. If I were to lose her, too, on top of everything . . .'

'Please, let me help you. What is it that you've lost?' Eva asks, disorientated by the weft of the stranger's sentences, the peculiar desperation of her words.

Panic streaks across the old woman's face as she dips her fingers down the front of her blouse. She fumbles for a moment, then the fear fades as she pulls out a chain. On it is a gold band. She clasps it, her eyes closed, pressing it to her lips.

The rain begins. Crows, cawing from the roof of Schönbrunn Palace, rise and circle in flight.

'Edith?' Eva asks gently, touching the woman's arm.

The old woman's lip quivers. 'Whatever would you call me that for?'

'I saw your name on these letters.' Eva holds out the bundle and they are snatched away.

'You have no right to look at those!'

Eva is hurt and unsettled. She hears the unmistakable sound of an ambulance siren.

'With any luck, that's coming for you,' Eva says, to reassure the woman, and herself. 'Somebody must have called for help.' She looks up at the windows of the apartment building. 'They'll want to take you to the hospital, just to check you over,' she adds. 'You'll get all the help you need there.'

'*Genug! Nein!*' the old woman shouts, jumping back and trembling. 'I won't go! You can't make me!'

The blue light of the *rettungswagen* reflects off the cobblestones as it turns into the street. Eva hurries over to the vehicle, as a driver and his assistant step out of it.

'There was an accident,' she explains to the two men. 'I'm not hurt, at least I don't think so.' She glances at her shoulder. 'But I cycled into her.' She gestures to the white-haired woman, who has hobbled over to the poster. 'I knocked her to the ground. She wasn't responding at first,

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she was out cold for a few minutes. I tried to help, but she's not the type to accept it. She seems confused.'

'You've done all you can. We'll see to her from here,' the driver replies.

The injured woman is pressing her hands against the exhibition poster. It depicts a young model, her cheeks flushed, an intense, uncertain look in her eyes.

'*Junge Dame*? Hello?' the man tries as he approaches. 'How are you feeling? We can see that you're hurt. Your head is bleeding. We need to take you to hospital. Let's get you out of this rain, shall we?'

'*Nein! Nein!*' the woman says fearfully, recoiling.

'This is for your own good, *meine Dame*.' He places a hand on her shoulder.

'Get off me! Don't you dare. You can't make me go back there.'

'Come now, let's not be like that. You must be in a lot of pain. We only want to help.'

'I've done without anyone's help for long enough,' she snaps.

The two men flank her, their shoulders above her head, their feet planted, mouths set.

'We'll take care of things from here,' they reassure Eva. 'If you're feeling well enough, you can go on home.'

They take the older woman by the arms and lead her towards the rear of the ambulance. They're gentle but firm. But she is ferocious. She fights and twists, kicks and squirms. Her eyes lock on to Eva's. 'You, girl! Help me!' she shrieks as she's forced through the vehicle's doors. 'Do something, please! I've nothing left! No one will help me! I didn't make it up.' She thrusts a fist in the direction of the poster. 'This proves it. I'm not mad! We existed. You can't—'

The doors slam and that haunting glare is gone.

Eva is ashamed that she feels relieved. She has enough to deal with, without all this. Still, her heart is racing and she can't shake a gnawing feeling of guilt. She tells herself she has helped this strange woman, but perhaps she has only succeeded in making things worse for her. Eva swallows and turns to the uncertain smile of the figure on the poster.

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The driver starts the engine. ‘Wait! Stop!’ Eva shouts. She runs over to the ambulance, banging a fist on the back.

But the vehicle is moving, the siren starting up as it speeds away. She has no name to go on.

Eva is exhausted, utterly spent, aware that the rain has soaked her to her bones. Her stomach aches in a new way. She considers her bicycle – another thing, along with her glasses, she can’t afford to repair. She will have to walk the broken frame home, a journey that’ll now be much longer than expected. She’ll find no words of reassurance there.

Then she sees it.

There, on the ground, between the cobbles, is a glint of gold. Eva bends to pick the object up. It’s a long, antique necklace. The clasp has been pulled apart but the chain is twisted around the scuffed metal of a round-edged band. It is still warm to the touch. Eva holds it up between her thumb and finger. Inscribed inside, in elegant cursive, are two initials: E & E.

Or is it E & A? The second letter isn’t clear. It looks as if it could have been scratched over, or reshaped, by the tip of something sharp.

The ring belongs to the old woman who ran into her. Eva only wants to forget her and get on with the rest of her life, as best she can, but she’s haunted by the rapture that had lit up the woman’s face as she held this item to her lips only moments before – and the terrified look in her eyes as she was locked away. Eva grips the band. The weight of it in her palm offers strange comfort. She knows how it feels to lose something, for a piece of you to be missing.

Eva accepts what she must do: somehow, soon, return the ring to its rightful owner.



Inside the ambulance, the old woman is strapped quickly and gracelessly on to a stretcher and secured in place. She aches with new-found knowledge. She was *there*, before her very eyes, after years of searching.

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There's a dull pain in her breast. And suddenly, a loud, insistent banging on the rear door of the ambulance. Above all the racket, that blasted plain-faced girl, the one who'd been dashing along on the bicycle, is demanding to know her name. But it's too late for such things. As they speed towards the hospital, the siren continues its unholy wail, promising to part the traffic, carrying her away from the only thing that matters.

What does *her* name matter now? I could be anyone in this world for all people care, she thinks. It has been decades since anyone wanted to know who she was. The last time a person spoke her name, the word was delivered as a bullet – an order, an insult, disgust stitched between its letters. Then it was forgotten entirely.

Did she ever really exist? Yes. She knows that now. And her life before . . .

As the stretcher is pulled from the ambulance, she can't help but hear a dreamy echo of her name's three lilting syllables, like champagne bubbles popping on her tongue.

She remembers it the way *he* said it. The thrill of it being whispered, the promise once carried within it, the desire she knows it provoked. The phantom sound touches a space that has long been numb: the part of her that holds the capacity for joy.

'Adele?' she remembers, in a wave of wonder, as a face peers down at her. '*A-dé-le*,' she repeats and her consciousness begins to drift, a smile across her bloodied, torn face. 'Why, yes, that's it. My name, if you must know, is Adele. Adele Harms. And don't you damn well ever forget it.'

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# ADELE



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*October 1912*

Adele, I swear, if we're late again, I will disown you,' Edith complains. She's red in the face, hot with the effort of trying to pull her sister from the gold chaise longue positioned by the window in the parlour of the Harms family's apartment. Adele makes herself heavy upon the velvet cushions. She knows her infuriating little sister won't leave without her.

'Don't rush me!' she says. 'You know how I hate to be rushed.' Adele shakes her sister off and stretches both arms above her head, wriggling her fingertips.

She is lingering in the hope of a final sighting of the man she has been watching from her vantage point all afternoon. She'd spotted him immediately as he walked down the street earlier in the day. Adele can't help but notice the comings and goings of the building opposite the one in which the sisters live with their parents, Hietzinger Hauptstrasse 114 – on the wide, tree-lined main street of Vienna's wealthy and aristocratic thirteenth district. She enjoys observing the signs of life behind the dozen windows which, on this last day of October, are covered with the lacy imprint of dead ivy. Mostly, she spies thickset men with elaborate facial hair, mothers, maids. This young man is a welcome novelty.

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He can be no older than Adele – in his early twenties, if she were to hazard a guess. And what's more, he has spent many hours moving his belongings into the building: cases, heavy furniture and a huge mirror that for the briefest second was angled in her direction and reflected back an image of herself, framed by the window.

'I simply don't understand how you're not ready,' Edith continues. 'The curtains go up in less than half an hour and you've barely moved an eyelid all afternoon.' Adele's sister scans the room for evidence. With pursed lips, she notices the unopened French novel abandoned on the floor, a silver tray laden with crumbs from a slice of that afternoon's freshly baked chocolate *guglhupf*, alongside an empty cup, its rim marked by the residue of coffee and frothed milk. She follows her sister's eyes to the street below. 'Oh, I see. You've lost yourself in other people's business again.'

Edith takes a step towards the window for a closer look. She places her fingers to the glass and her touch and breath leave visible blooms on the cool pane.

'Sssh, he's coming back again,' Adele says.

Below, the dark-haired man, slim and unkempt, is labouring under the weight of an easel that's taller than him. He's pale and seems hollowed out in places Adele cannot properly determine.

'My, my, that confirms it!' Edith turns abruptly and snaps her fingers in Adele's face. 'Off to the asylum, dear sister, for madness has overcome you. The only thing that dishevelled specimen has going for him, the only thing that could possibly have attracted your attention, is that his hair isn't thoroughly grey.'

Adele throws a fringed cushion that hits her sister square on the chest.

'A little excitement wouldn't kill you,' she counters.

'And who do you suppose *she* is,' Edith asks, raising her eyebrows and pointing to a young woman who has left the building by the same door to pick up a valise. 'His maid?'

The woman in question, who looks to Adele as if she could be a guttersnipe, here to sell her wares, pauses to loosen her fingers.

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‘Well, she *could* be his maid?’ Adele pouts, and narrows her eyes. ‘It’s impossible she’s his wife. His sister, perhaps?’

The woman below them is hardly a great beauty. Her clothes are unflattering and dull, with none of the tailoring the sisters take for granted. But the longer Adele has observed the waif, the more she must grudgingly admit that there is something appealing there: peachy skin, wide eyes, a tender, exaggerated mouth, and masses of thick burnt-red hair.

‘Come, now! We mustn’t dally any longer,’ Edith warns. ‘Papa will be furious. Young ladies must never operate below their station,’ she says in a low tone, mimicking their father’s repeated instructions. ‘And this, this shameless spying, is far below your station.’

‘One cannot forever embroider a handkerchief, you know,’ Adele sniffs. She pulls her long boots on to her feet and laces them up her calves as slowly as she can manage. She stands. Even without her shoes, she’s taller than her sister, and she enjoys the sensation of being able to look down at her. Adele instinctively checks her reflection in the mirror above the fireplace. All very satisfactory indeed, she decides, turning her face first to the left, then the right, smoothing her eyebrows with the tip of her little finger and tidying the silky auburn hair around her ears. The peaks of her upper lip are diabolical, she concludes, even if her teeth are somewhat misaligned – but not unappealingly so. She breathes out, smiles, then draws her furs around her, angles her feathered hat, and experiences a tingle of anticipation for the evening ahead.

‘How do I look?’ she demands of her sister.

‘Simply wonderful, as you well know. And me? What flaws can you find this time?’

Adele inspects her. Edith’s cheeks are round and rosy, as if she were a farmer’s daughter, and her hair is an unfortunate shade of dirty straw. Even dressed in her finest gown for the opera, she looks as if she’d be happier in a barn full of cattle. Adele has tried to encourage her sister to take more care of her appearance, but it has proved a fruitless endeavour.

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‘Exquisite, *as always*,’ she offers. ‘I’ve never thought otherwise. Why, if you weren’t my sister, I’d envy you. Luckily for me, the traits I admire in you I possess in abundance.’

Edith looks at her suspiciously, shaking her head.

Their old maid, Hanna, is waiting in the hallway and holds the apartment door open in anticipation of their departure. In starched apron and flat shoes, she bids the sisters a pleasant evening, succumbing to a modest curtsy, despite Mutti, ever the pedant for the appropriate way of behaving, not being there to appreciate the gesture.

‘See to it that you open the parlour window after we’ve gone,’ Adele commands. ‘We need fresh air in this dusty old space. Now, if you please.’

‘Yes, *gnä* Frau,’ Hanna replies, with another brief dip of the knee.

‘Goodnight, Hanna,’ Edith says as she leaves, giving the old woman a kiss on the cheek and clasping her hands warmly. ‘No need to work too hard on our account.’

Adele sighs loudly. Her sister has always been needlessly kind to the help.



Outside, the air is even more biting than Adele had expected. It will ruin her complexion, making her as ruddy as a country barmaid. But with a little luck – and before she loses her glow entirely – she might orchestrate an encounter with the man who has so fully captured her attention this afternoon. ‘Hurry, now, Edith, do come along!’ she encourages.

Adele deliberately steers her sister away from the spot where the carriage their parents have arranged is waiting to pick them up.

‘You’re leading us astray!’ Edith grumbles. ‘Mutti and Papa will be waiting for us.’ Still, she hooks her arm inside her sister’s, as is their habit, while they cross the street, stepping under a tall tree and

heading towards the building that the mysterious man will surely soon be leaving in order to collect the last of his belongings.

The streetlamps cast a pearly glow through the darkness. With the quality of an apparition, the stranger moves suddenly into their pool of light. Adele's step falters, her heel meeting the ground a moment out of time. She takes in the young man's heavy brows and high hairline, the artful curl of his thick, wild hair. He's tall, mesmerizing, almost demanding to be touched.

The trio walk towards each other, Adele pulling Edith to an even slower pace. She rushes to absorb every detail – the firmly pressed knot of his blue woollen tie, the delicate pinpoint detail on his shirt, the place where his neck rubs against his collar. His nostrils are quite large and there's a depression at the tip of his nose. She watches him cough in the cold air: observes the mechanics of his throat, the judder of muscle, the hard angles.

He's so close now that even in this shadowed light, Adele can see the velvet hairs of his earlobe and the clean line a razor has taken down his cheek, the skin matte on the lower half of his face. The man looks up – his eyebrows rising at the sight of them. Adele's eyes quickly meet his. A falling twist of shadow prevents her from distinguishing blue from hazel.

He's staring too, and her throat has tightened, her heart radiating blooms of heat. Her step, miraculously, does not falter this time.

Everything outside this nucleus is hazy and hollow, everything except for him, this man, who is in perfect, precise focus. He sparks with the wild rebelliousness that Adele has been craving every second of the day for longer than she can remember.

She puts her fingers to her mouth, angling to present him with her best side, and holds his gaze. He's heading straight towards them but neither he nor Adele – arm still linked with a bristling Edith – will step aside to let the other pass. It's a small test, a teasing, trivial game.

Then, at the last possible moment, he veers away, putting his palm on the trunk of the tree and spinning around it. As he returns, he

brushes up against Adele's arm and she pulls away, her eyes wide, as if his touch has burned her.

The man turns back and smiles at them, entertained by the encounter. A bolt of victorious energy surges through Adele. She marvels at it, her head rushing. She can almost taste it.

This man is her future, she will make sure of it.

October 1912

Adele and Edith dash into the grand foyer of the Hofoper – the Vienna Court Opera – feathers and furs flapping, then stop in their tracks. The space is laden with marble, mosaics and Vienna’s fashionable *beau monde*. Adele runs a hand up the gleaming banister as they ascend to the upper echelons. She has an urge to spin on her heels and bow to an imagined crowd, accepting their rapturous applause. Instead, she steals glances at the other society women who have yet to take their seats. They wear silk dresses, pleated and draped, adorned with tulle and lace; their hats plumed with feathers and pearls, their gems refracting the light of the chandeliers.

Adele loosens her mink from her shoulders and manages to step ahead of Edith as they head towards the box where their parents are waiting, along with their close family friends, the Brons. As they enter, she can see Papa’s shoulders are hunched and he is pulling a hand along his beard, sharp eyes reading the time on his pocket watch.

‘It’s a record,’ he says, shaking his head. ‘You’ve arrived with a single second to spare.’

Adele leans in to him as she passes to take her seat.

‘I tried to hurry Edith,’ she whispers. ‘You know how she dallies.’

Mutti, preened to high heaven, the air around her scented with lilac,

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offers her daughters a withering look, a small tut escaping her lips. Edith takes their mother's hands and kisses her warmly, soothing her irritation at their late arrival. It is fortunate they are in a private box, not the stalls below, for Mutti has piled her silver hair into a towering nest, past which not even the tallest usher would be able to see tonight's performance. Herr and Frau Bron take the seats at the front, due to Frau Bron's weakening eyesight. Adele sees her holding a pair of opera glasses by the long stem, peering through them not at the orchestra or stage, but at the glittering audience below and around her. She turns to Mutti to crow at some point of indiscretion. The Brons' daughter, Emilia, smiles conspiratorially as Adele takes her place, the fabric of her dress rustling.

Then the lights dim, the audience falls silent, and the velvet curtains swing open.

Adele prepares herself, as always, to be awestruck. Without doubt, she'd attend the opera three hundred nights a year if she were left to arrange her own social calendar. The flamboyance of the musical performance, the poetry of the human voice, the elegance of choreographed movement, the extravagant costumes, all speak to her very core. She lives for this passionate world, and especially for Mozart, who ignites her soul with joy, tenderness, despair and indifference in a way that no other composer can; and for the work of Johann Strauss II, whose lightness of touch delights her. She soaks up the theatrical melodrama, the stories of intense longing, revenge and forbidden love – unlike poor, sensible Edith. Her little sister claims to love the opera, too, but seems to fear the excess of passion it brings. It's at times like this Adele most feels the difference of the three years between them.

During the interval, there's an opportunity to talk. Papa and his business partner, Herr Bron, share a rich history – they joined forces years ago when her father established a fine furniture shop in the Innere Stadt and needed an investor. Their daughter, Emilia, is only a few months older than Adele and a longstanding friendship developed between the two families. They take annual sojourns to the Austrian

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countryside together, share the cost of a box here at the Hofoper, as well as at the Burgtheater, and dine weekly in each other's homes.

Now the men talk of business, the fluctuations of the Wiener Börse, Emperor Franz Joseph's latest decree. Frau Bron talks to Mutti about an upcoming religious service at which the Emperor will be present, and suggests they attend also. 'Everyone who's anyone will be there,' she adds.

Both families are still adjusting to the news, announced at the start of the month, that Emilia is soon to be married. The revelation, somewhat ahead of the usual schedule of things, has unbalanced the dynamics of the friendship. Mutti in particular holds it against Adele. Her daughter's fault, earlier this year, was to break off her own engagement to Heinrich, a transgression which her mother cannot overlook, and which is made all the more unbearable now that Frau Bron is planning the wedding of the season.

'She's rubbing my nose in it,' Mutti frequently mutters.

Adele is not jealous of Emilia. She's prepared to wait, amid this pressure from her mother, for a man who sets her heart ablaze, rather than marry in a hurry just to get the job done – a tactic Emilia seems to have employed, with the wedding scheduled for the new year. Adele believes she has all the time in the world, so refuses to pay heed to her mother's warnings that she'll end up an old maid.

The relationship between Emilia and the man who is to become her husband has gained pace at such speed that the Harms family has yet to meet him. For Mutti, it makes the reality that much harder to swallow; she cannot legitimately point out this suitor's flaws until she has made his acquaintance, identified them all, and thrown in a few more for good measure. She suggests again that he must attend the next supper at the Harms residence.

'I've told you before, Josefa, he's terribly busy, he travels extensively for his apprenticeship,' Frau Bron replies. 'You'll meet him soon enough. He's a fine man in the making.'

'Alwin has a brother, you know?' Emilia nudges Adele. 'Albert is a

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very sweet young man, just slightly older than you. He has excellent prospects. We could be sisters-in-law!

‘Sweet?’ Adele retorts. ‘I don’t intend to marry until it’s for love rather than convenience,’ she says to her friend.

‘A suffragette are we now, Adele?’ Emilia teases.

‘Enough of that kind of talk,’ Mutti interrupts, one ear always listening.

‘I’m not sure I can be counted among the reform rabble just yet,’ Adele replies.

Emilia makes a polite movement with her shoulders. ‘You and Edith will both have your pick, I have no doubt. I’ve every expectation that all three of us will be married within the year.’

‘I’ll make sure of it,’ Mutti declares.

Edith whispers that marriage sounds like a thing best avoided, like the plague.

Three chimes announce that the interval is over and they return to their seats. Adele’s mind is full of the young man she saw earlier. The truth is, she does want to marry, to have a love story of her own.



The lights go up. The audience is revealed. They applaud those on stage, the exquisite performers, the orchestra and conductor, but mostly, they applaud themselves. For this is Vienna, and is it not they who are forging a path of progress and change into this new, promising, unblemished century? No other audience is more deserving.

‘That was splendid,’ Adele sighs. ‘But can we go home now? Please, Papa?’

Papa loosens his tie and clasps his hands. ‘You girls usually beg me to let you stay out just a little longer.’ He looks sideways at his eldest daughter, his lips twitching under the grey bristles of his moustache.

‘Oh, but we’re exhausted,’ Adele complains.

‘Some of us have had a lot of excitement for one day,’ Edith teases.

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Outside, a mist has fallen, a woven veil of spider silk that masks Vienna's magnificence. Papa hails a *fiaker* with a flick of his wrist and gives the bowler-hatted coachman their address in Hietzing. With any luck, they'll be home before midnight.

The horses' nostrils flare against the cold air. Edith rubs her hand down the neck of the one closest to her, whispering in its ear. She'll carry that rough animal smell with her all the way home to the bedroom they share, Adele thinks, watching her with disdain.

Mutti bustles her sculpted hair and voluptuous skirts into the carriage first, taking up almost all the space inside. Adele squeezes in beside her, followed by their father and Edith. During the journey, she endures her mother's prattling about the latest society gossip. This is precisely the petty existence Adele is desperate to escape. She may wish to be married, but she doesn't want some lawyer or banker for a husband, certainly not one of the specimens Mutti has been trying to force upon her.

The coachman pulls up in front of their elegant apartment block. Papa pays, counting out the *kronen* precisely. A few windows glow in the building opposite. Adele searches for movement and spots the dark silhouette of a man in one at the top, in the attic space, with its large bay window overlooking the street. Edith follows her sister's gaze and rolls her eyes.

'Destined for the asylum,' she whispers, loud enough for their parents to hear.

Adele kicks Edith's shins, holding a finger to her lips, as Mutti turns to the pair with a questioning look.



'What do you think of our mystery neighbour?' Adele says to her sister when they're alone.

She drapes her dress across the back of the chair, while Edith hangs hers, carefully.

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Pulling the blankets to her neck, Adele watches Edith at the dresser, her face reflected several times in the three-way mirror as she brushes her fair hair over and over.

Thick shadows fall across the walls.

‘He is rather handsome,’ Edith admits.

‘Aha!’ Adele kicks her feet beneath the coverlet. ‘So you’re not blind, after all?’

Edith turns a shade of beetroot. ‘I’m just making an observation, that’s all.’

Adele plumps her pillow. She pulls the shaft of an otherwise downy goose feather through the pillowcase, so it won’t bother her during the night. Her sister won’t have a single nice thing to say about their new neighbour now, after that little slip. Perhaps she shouldn’t say anything at all. Isn’t that what girls are taught? To be seen and not heard?

Adele turns and brings her fingertips to the wallpaper’s flowers while Edith slips into her bed, nightdress buttoned to her chin and hair neatly tucked away.

‘Don’t lose your mind over a man that Papa will never agree to,’ her sister adds.

‘Who said I’ve lost my mind? I’m simply intrigued.’

Edith snorts and turns off the lamp. ‘I know you better than that, dear sister. Remember Herr Färber.’



It hadn’t mattered that Herr Färber was the same age as the students’ fathers, that he was in no way handsome, with his bulbous ears and coarse hairy hands – or that he was married. Those things were overlooked. It had begun as a way to inject a little excitement, a little fun, into their otherwise endlessly dreary lives. Each Wednesday, the dozen or so older girls in his religious studies class would vie to outdo each other, passionately absorbing his tropes, elbowing one another to be the first to recite them, eager to impress.

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Adele, then aged seventeen, had worked steadily, but there was heat in her eyes. She quietly demanded his attention, and felt a tremble of power when he bestowed it upon her. Before long, the other girls came to believe that he paid her a fraction more consideration: it was an exaggeration, but one that she encouraged.

On the final day of term, Adele had stayed back as the others filed out of the room and sent withering looks her way. Edith, still needy, at only fourteen, had wanted to leave together.

‘Give me a minute or two,’ Adele had insisted.

Edith pulled a face. ‘You don’t have anything to prove,’ her little sister whispered as she edged beyond the door. Then Adele and her teacher were alone. She wiped the blackboard of its chalk and helped gather the books, stacking them together.

‘Thank you,’ Herr Färber said, straightening the pile so the spines aligned. ‘It has been a pleasure to teach you this year,’ he continued. ‘You’ve worked hard and applied yourself. I’ve seen much less of the daydreaming that characterized your attendance last year.’ He smiled.

‘I’ve learnt lessons that I’ll carry with me for a lifetime,’ Adele had replied. ‘Is there anything else I may need, do you believe, to help me on my way?’ She’d waited a few seconds, then moved her fingers on to his hand. She blinked. She had expected a jolt, but there was nothing at all.

Herr Färber had gently removed her hand, then walked her to the door.

Outside, Edith was waiting.

‘What happened?’ she asked, taking in her sister’s hot cheeks when she finally appeared.

‘Nothing. Nothing at all.’

It was the truth.

‘You’re lying.’

‘No,’ Adele replied, almost haughtily. ‘I am not.’

But Edith would not leave the question alone. ‘Something happened in there.’

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‘Fine. If you must know,’ Adele said, flustered, ‘Herr Färber’ – she hesitated – ‘kissed me.’ She tried to look nonchalant. ‘His bristles were quite unpleasant.’

Even Adele was surprised at how easily she had managed to rewrite her experience. The power she’d lost was restored and that burning sensation behind her ears lifted almost entirely. ‘But you must promise not to breathe a word. It’s our secret.’

‘But he’s married,’ Edith protested.

‘It was one small kiss,’ Adele replied, taken aback. ‘It’s not as if it’ll happen again.’

‘You shouldn’t have. You know it’s wrong.’

‘It wasn’t my fault he kissed me.’ Adele didn’t have to feign her indignation.

‘Don’t deny that this was your plan all along. You wanted this.’ Adele could feel Edith’s disapproval, and it shifted the balance. She couldn’t tell Edith the real truth: that she’d made a fool of herself.

Over the following week, Adele had expected that Edith’s stance would soften, that they’d laugh about it together. But a few days later, after a wearisome hour of piano practice, Papa had barged in and grabbed Adele’s arm.

‘Come with me,’ he snapped. He prided himself on being a man of logic, of reason, and rarely raised his voice. ‘Is it true?’ His features were altered, his lips pulled back. ‘Don’t make this worse for yourself,’ he continued. ‘Your teacher has been summoned. Tell the truth so there’s no confusion when I see him. I don’t want to accuse an upstanding man of doing a thing such as this, if . . .’ He stopped. ‘If you lie to me now, Adele, you’ll regret it.’

‘It’s not true, whatever Edith has said.’ Adele twisted away. ‘She always wants you to think the worst of me.’

Her father weighed her words, then released his grip as the bell rang.

‘This will be him. We’ll get to the truth, whatever that may be.’

Herr Färber, with sickening solemnity, tapping his fingers in a steady

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sequence on the dining table, had denied all knowledge of anything improper.

The walls seemed to shrink in upon Adele.

‘Categorically untrue.’ His whiskers jostled above his lip as he presented his side of events with distinction. ‘The girls were caught in a period of extreme silliness, I’m afraid, and Adele’s behaviour was the most extreme. She simply got carried away. I cannot say why she acted as she did, but I can say with certainty that I did nothing to encourage her. I assure you, there was nothing resembling a kiss.’

‘I didn’t lie, I didn’t.’ Adele had cried real tears. ‘He kissed me, you have to believe me. Why does nobody ever believe me? I didn’t make it up.’

Papa had shot her a withering look. ‘We’ve heard enough from you, young lady. It’s about time you took on board, once and for all, the notion that actions have consequences. Lies ruin lives.’

Adele continued to cry – and her anguish lasted for weeks.

After everything, she could no longer remember what was real and what wasn’t.

### 3

*Winter 1912–13*

Adele Harms is a busy young woman. She and her sister Edith have barely a minute to spare – each hour of the day is filled, often months in advance, with an array of classes, cabarets, recitals and receptions. From an early age, the girls have engaged in all the pursuits deemed suitable for women of their standing. They study English, French, Greek and Latin and both continue to advance each week, with lessons in conversation and literature. Adele also enjoys classical history, learning about the myths and mishaps of the past, but her true passion lies in music. She receives twice-weekly tutorials in piano, and plays with flair. She adores Mozart, Mahler, and Maria Theresia von Paradis. Adele and Edith are also fine dancers.

Edith's other pastimes are more sedate: she spends hours on embroidery, card playing or craft. Adele has never been able to master the bullion knot and her ruby roses unravel.

Aside from the formalities of education and musical pursuits, their mother curates a packed social calendar. She's an attendee of every salon and society event on the Viennese circuit – galas, gallery shows and grand openings – and her daughters are brought along, to be seen in the right places by the right people. The sisters are popular among their peers, young women who inhabit the same sphere, and the only

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reason they don't rely more heavily on these friendships is that they have each other. Their loyalty to one another always comes first.

'What's the point of all this education?' their father sometimes quips. 'Men don't appreciate overly intelligent wives.' He chuckles, and his wife and daughters shake their heads. Papa, for all his teasing, is proud of his girls. Adele knows he values his family, and is grateful for the security he can pull around them all, with his wealth and experience. Her mother, Josefa, is a decade younger than Johann – they didn't meet until an advanced stage in their lives. After a whirlwind romance, Adele's parents had married within months, days before Mutti turned thirty-five. Adele had arrived promptly, nine months later. Johann was forty-five and a first-time father. Edith was born three years later.

Papa's work always keeps him busy. He collects fine furniture, buys at favourable prices, dabbles in a little repair – mostly of the gentle wear-and-tear variety – and sells the items on for a tidy profit to the noble patrons of the city. Adele loves spending time in his shop, among the curiosities. Now, at sixty-seven years old, Johann Harms has not yet retired and has no plans to do so – he's as engaged and energetic as ever.

The income, over the years, has allowed the Harmses to enjoy a modest upper-middle-class lifestyle. It's a delicate balance, of course, and Johann jokes that his family's tastes don't get any cheaper, but Adele knows that Papa also has his investments, pots tucked away here and there. Adele has every certainty they'll fare well in the coming years, and she imagines the ease of her existence unfurling into the future like ribbons of silk.



Plans for Emilia's wedding continue apace and Mutti becomes frigid with annoyance every time she glances at Adele. The situation comes to a head when a heavy envelope arrives, inviting the Harms family to

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the wedding of Heinrich – the man to whom Adele was previously engaged.

Since her girlhood, Adele had admired Heinrich from afar. She'd been the one, at the age of twenty, to push for an introduction and Mutti had been only too happy to oblige. They'd courted for close to eighteen months, Adele enjoying the tickle of anticipation as she stoked his hopes and desires. On Boxing Day 1911, Heinrich had proposed with an emerald and Adele had agreed, with her mother's explicit encouragement, to accept his hand in marriage. The New Year edition of Vienna's most esteemed newspaper had reported their engagement. But, as fantasy moved closer to reality, the sheen came off. Adele found herself looking at her husband-to-be and noticed that he was twenty-six, already balding, soft around the edges. Yes, he came from a good family, yes, his prospects were unimpeachable, but his shoulders were hunched from years of his father slapping him on the back, proud of what a fine, upstanding fellow he'd produced. Heinrich's obliging nature often left Adele wanting to scratch him. Frankly, he was insipid, and by the end of January, she could no longer tolerate a shred of him. So she broke off the engagement. Heinrich had taken the news with equanimity; it was Mutti who threw a priceless vase at her head.

Within three months, he began courting Lina, the parish mouse. And now they are getting married.

'Don't pity me!' Adele rebukes Edith when she offers condolences. 'I don't envy that woman, with her ever-expanding stomach.'

But Adele feels a hard sentiment gnawing inside, a desire to prove her true worth.



Adele increasingly spends her spare moments watching for her mysterious neighbour. She can't stop scanning the street for a glimpse of him, losing herself more and more in dreams of a chance encounter.

Exhausted by some social event or another, a shopping trip to the

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boutiques of Vienna's finest district, or fresh from a piano recital, her fingers tingling from overexertion, Adele settles herself on the chaise longue – a book plucked from the shelves as a ruse – to watch the door of the building opposite. She requests that Hanna serve refreshments here from now on. In the late afternoons, Adele brushes crumbs of pistachio from her dress as she continues her vigil. She sucks icing from her fingers, cursing the other men who pass by.

Where is he? What is he doing? With whom? The taste of marzipan lingers.

Adele might be rewarded once or twice a week. The man flashes with a seductive energy as he moves, a cigarette or paintbrush tucked behind his ear. He's often late, dashing so fast he barely has time to close the door behind him. Sometimes he's with a friend, a well-dressed man who enters the building empty-handed and leaves with a neat parcel or two under his arm, wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. More often than not, the man is accompanied by that red-haired guttersnipe, whom Adele has never seen smile. Occasionally, she sees the woman entering the building by herself, opening the front door with a key she slips back into her pocket. The woman must surely be his maid, Adele decides – hired help and nothing more.

She puts out feelers on the Viennese gossip circuit, and salacious rumours make their way back to her ears. And, to her chagrin, also to the ears of her parents.

'Did you know we're living opposite an *artist*!' Mutti exclaims.

'They say he's a disciple of Gustav Klimt,' Papa adds, tugging on his beard.

'That doesn't make it any better,' she reprimands him.

Adele tries to quell her excitement; the man is an *enfant terrible*, defying convention, ripping up the rulebook. There's a frisson of scandal, that much she can glean, although the details are withheld from a woman of her position. Instead of repelling her, as it should, this reputation only deepens her desire. She knew he would be the kind of man who'd shuck off tradition, embrace the future.

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Her senses heightened by this knowledge, Adele continues to watch. The man seems to have no routine – he'll be gone for days at a time, then he'll be back, not leaving his position near the window in his front room. Adele assumes he must be working. A stream of pretty girls comes and goes and Adele is racked with envy. If only she could orchestrate a meeting.

She has no doubt that when he finally meets the formidable Adele Harms, the attraction will be mutual and all other women will be forgotten. Even in the darkness, Adele can conjure his features clearly. She imagines pushing a hand through his hair, nestling her lips against his jaw. He runs a thumb across her neck. Fine, so perhaps she is losing her mind, as Edith so often remarks. But what can Adele do? She is feeling, has felt for some time, an emotion that she cannot put into words, certainly not in a way that her simple-minded sister would comprehend – but here it is, an uneasy fluttering in her chest. It's an intense impatience, as if something were meant to happen, were on the brink of taking place, but day after day, the revolution she desires fails to materialize. Does everyone not harbour this overwhelming urge for action, momentum, change? Do they not pray for something to come along and alter the path of their life?

*Spring 1913*

The day has finally arrived. Adele and Edith stand on the precipice of the grandest evening in Vienna's carnival season, *Fasching*. The spring society ball draws archdukes and princes in pristine medal-lioned tuxedos, princesses and grandes dames draped in silks and dripping with diamonds and sapphires. Masks conceal the identity of Vienna's powerful elite – from politicians to royalty, foreign diplomats to distinguished artists, musicians to actors. Couples waltz in the grand hall, heels turning on the polished parquet, crystal and gold glinting from the chandeliers above. Adele and Edith have attended every year since they came of age and this year will be no exception. Emilia would usually be in attendance, too, but she is enjoying her honeymoon in the countryside.

Tonight, Adele is the one to be ready ahead of the carriage that will take them to Vienna's Innere Stadt, to the sprawling Hofburg Palace, travelling along the Ringstrasse – a magnificent boulevard in the city centre – passing the opera house and the pair of imposing court museums, with the lights of the neo-Gothic town hall glittering just beyond. The sisters have spent the entire day preparing themselves, bathing in water scented with rose petals, rubbing lotion into their skin, as if they were the reincarnations of the Empress Elisabeth herself. Their hair

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was set the previous evening and both have had elaborate ballgowns made – Edith’s in the finest pale-green silk, with oozing underskirts laden with lace. Adele’s is silver brocade with a midnight-blue velvet bodice; it pulls in at the waist, showing off her height and slender frame. The dresses were purchased from Vienna’s most exclusive boutique, the designs straight from famous Parisian couturiers. The sisters have attended several fittings over the past months and the fabric is cut to perfection, nipping in at all the right places, drawing the eye.

Adele places her mask upon her face, covering her eyes, and dances over to Edith.

‘You’d never know it was me, would you?’ she asks, spinning.

‘I’d know that neck anywhere,’ Edith replies.

‘But I could be anyone, for a short while, at least.’

‘I don’t believe you have a preference for anonymity.’

‘I like to be known,’ Adele agrees, removing the mask.

‘You like to be *seen*,’ Edith says.

‘I do wish to be noticed,’ Adele admits. ‘But a little mystery can be a good thing, can’t it? After all, don’t all mysteries demand to be unravelled?’



As the sisters step into the Kleiner Redoutensaal ballroom, Adele looks around at the enormous chandeliers and candelabra, the glittering crystal and precious porcelain. A band on the upper balcony strikes up the ‘Fledermaus Quadrille’ by Johann Strauss. The sisters know that the dancing will linger long into the night, peaking at midnight with a waltz led by a distinguished *tanzmeister*. The women will curtsy, the men bow, and for that witching hour, the thousand partygoers will be transformed into a mass of elaborate motion. The last revellers can often be found rubbing sore feet at four in the morning, but the Harms sisters will not be permitted to stay out so late. Adele looks around and imagines the faces of all the men behind their masks – it’s a disorientating procession, and

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she feels dizzy for a moment. She can't help but hold on to the hope that her neighbour might be one of them, although she can't imagine he'd feel at home in a place such as this. He's the opposite of men like Heinrich, men who represent order and sobriety, who shape themselves within the bounds of convention and grow dull with respectability. Even though she hasn't yet met the man across the street, to Adele he represents passion, freedom, independent thought – a different life altogether. He's the antithesis of the stuffy men who vie to entrap Adele in a life of sewing and society, precisely the kind of dreary existence led by her mother.

'May I?' A man with medals pinned to the chest of his dinner jacket approaches.

Adele looks the man up and down, represses a smile, then offers him her gloved hand. The musicians coax notes from their instruments, producing a powerful, persuasive sound, and Adele and her partner spin off on to the dance floor.

As she dances, Adele watches her sister over the man's shoulder. Edith steps away to the edge of the ballroom, where a waiter hands her a glass of something sparkling, segments of fruit visible in the long flute. Her sister smiles at nobody in particular, looking aloof but guileless. Edith loses all her awkwardness when she dances and can waltz as well as anyone in the room, with her impeccable posture and innate sense of timing, but the elegance she radiates on the dance floor is rarely seen, as she is rarely asked.

The rousing score draws to a close, and the orchestra rest their instruments for a moment, before they launch into the next piece. In the pause, Adele's dance partner takes hold of her arm and walks her to the balcony, which overlooks gardens, immaculately tended.

The light has mostly faded from the sky; pinks and purples remain, and the stars are becoming visible through the veil of darkness. The man leans on the balustrade, taking in Adele, his eyes roving along the contours of her figure.

Adele keeps her eyes on the topiary, determined not to give him the satisfaction of her attention. He touches her elbow. She ignores him.

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He becomes more insistent. She turns to him, her eyes on his, a challenge shining through the cut of her mask.

‘Remove it,’ he says, touching the side of her face.

‘Why?’

‘I want the pleasure of seeing you.’

A waiter walks past, a silver tray balanced on his hand. The man takes two flutes and passes one to Adele.

She takes a long, slow sip, then removes her mask, looking the man directly in the eye. He whistles softly.

They converse for a while, Adele dancing the delicate line between withhold and reveal. Other revellers drift over to the balcony to admire the view, but soon they are alone again.

Adele hears the band start playing Edith’s favourite waltz.

‘Excuse me,’ she says. ‘My sister will be looking for me.’

‘But you’re not excused,’ he teases, stretching out a hand to stroke her bare arm.

Adele turns to leave but now he holds her back and won’t let go.

‘You’re hurting me,’ she says angrily, pulling away. He has ripped a small seam on her dress.

Suddenly Edith is by her side. ‘Get your hands off her,’ she warns.

The man laughs, his arrogance flaring. ‘Don’t delude yourself. There are plenty more like you here.’

He struts away and the sisters retreat, Edith pulling Adele through the main ballroom and out into the garden on the other side. They sit on a bench, their backs to the palace.

‘I don’t suppose you want to share this?’ Adele asks, her hand trembling slightly. She produces a long, thin cigarette from her clutch bag.

‘Where did that come from?’ Edith asks.

‘What you don’t know can’t hurt you,’ Adele laughs. She takes out a box of matches, and draws the matchstick across the strike paper. With a flick of the wrist, it sparks to life and dances in the darkness between them. Adele smiles, triumphant, and inhales. ‘Let me be a bad influence,’ she says, passing the ebony cigarette holder to Edith, kicking off

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her shoes as she does so, and feeling the coolness of the ground through her stockings.

Edith puts the cigarette to her lips, attempts to breathe in a little smoke, then splutters and passes it back. She smiles at her sister, resting her head on Adele's shoulder.

'I'll leave all the risqué pursuits to you from now on,' she says.

'Thank you for stepping in earlier,' Adele says. 'My heroine,' she laughs, hugging Edith to her, and kissing her little sister's cheek. 'What on earth would become of me without you?'

*Autumn 1913*

In the second week of September, Mutti receives an invitation to the opening of a new exhibition at a gallery in Hietzing, and the girls' presence is required. Adele feigns protest at first, in her usual way, but she also can't ignore the possibility that her artist might frequent such a place, so prepares herself accordingly.

The gallery is well lit, the doors open to the street, letting in the last of a late-summer breeze. A dozen young men, seemingly attendees of Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts, congregate around a table laden with flutes of sparkling wine. Adele circles them, trying to distinguish if her artist is among them. They disperse to view the framed paintings and Adele follows, staring at the artworks without enthusiasm.

In the adjoining gallery room, Edith appears to be talking to a man who has his back to Adele. But she'd know that silhouette anywhere! Her sister is engaged in conversation with the artist. Edith keeps looking away, as if begging to be rescued.

'I can't get over the beauty of the art,' Adele says, approaching. 'Doesn't it move you, Edith?' She steps in close to her sister. 'Oh, I'm terribly sorry to interrupt,' she adds, as if she has only just noticed the artist. This is as close as she has ever been to the object of her desire. The room seems to palpitate with his presence. The bones of his

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knuckles are so prominent they show up whitened through his skin. There's ink on his shirt, by the pocket, and his teeth are tobacco-stained. It is clear he has smoked a cigarette recently; Adele inhales a long drag of its residue, leaning in closer.

'I should introduce myself. I'm your neighbour,' he says, bowing.

This is the first time Adele has heard him speak.

'Neighbour? Are you new to the area? I've not seen you around,' Adele fibs.

'Well, I've certainly spotted you.'

Edith stands, prim and proper, by her side.

'You have?' Adele says.

'You're the girls in the window. I can see into your apartment from my attic. The angle between us is perfectly aligned. But don't be concerned!' he laughs. 'I can only see into the front room, so there's little to incriminate you.'

'Such comments could get you into trouble,' Adele says, feeling emboldened.

'Oh, they already have.' The artist smiles, but she notices his expression tighten. 'Do you have a name? I can't refer to you as the "sisters across the street" for the rest of my life,' he says, turning playful again.

'My name? Why, yes, if you must know, it's Adele. Adele Harms,' she says with all the confidence in the world, holding her hand in his direction. 'I hope you won't forget it.' Edith fidgets next to her. 'Oh, yes, and this is Edith.' She rolls her eyes a little at him.

'The Harms sisters,' the artist muses, taking Adele's fingers and squeezing them, pressing his thumb into the back of her ring finger. She has the urge to let him waltz her round the gallery; how she manages to remain standing on her own two feet is a mystery. 'How delightful,' he continues. 'It's a pleasure to meet you. Finally.'

'And do you have a name?' Adele asks.

'I certainly do. One that follows me everywhere I go. I simply can't get away from it, and believe me, I've tried. Egon Schiele.' He drops her hand to perform an elaborately deep bow. Adele feels his phantom

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