

CHAPTER ONE

May 17, 1933

Vienna, Austria

MY LIDS FLUTTERED OPEN, BUT THE FLOODLIGHTS BLINDED ME for a moment. Placing a discreet, steadying hand on my costar's arm, I willed a confident smile upon my lips while I waited for my vision to clear. The applause thundered, and I swayed in the cacophony of sound and light. The mask I'd firmly affixed to myself for the performance slipped away for a moment, and I was no longer nineteenth-century Bavarian Empress Elizabeth, but simply young Hedy Kiesler.

I couldn't allow the theatergoers of the famed Theater an der Wien to see me falter in my portrayal of the city's beloved empress. Not even in the curtain call. She had been the emblem of the once-glorious Habsburg Austria, an empire that ruled for nearly four hundred years, and the people had clung to her image in these humiliating days after the Great War.

Closing my eyes for a split second, I reached deep within myself, putting aside Hedy Kiesler with all her small worries and comparatively petty aspirations. I summoned my power and assumed the mantle of the empress once again, her necessary steeliness and her heavy responsibilities. Then I opened my eyes and stared out at my subjects.

The audience materialized before me. I realized that they weren't clapping from the comfort of their plush, red-velvet theater seats. They had leaped to their feet in a standing ovation, an honor my fellow

Viennese doled out sparingly. As the empress, this was my due, but as Hedy, I wondered whether this applause could truly be for me and not one of the other actors of *Sissy*. The actor who played Emperor Franz Josef to my Empress Elizabeth, Hans Jaray, was, after all, a legendary Theater an der Wien fixture. I waited for my costars to take their bows. While they awarded solid applause for the other actors, the theatergoers became wild when I took center stage for my bow. This was indeed *my* moment.

How I wished Papa could have watched my performance tonight. If Mama hadn't feigned illness in an obvious ploy to take attention away from my important evening, Papa could have seen my Theater an der Wien debut. I know he would have reveled in this reaction, and if he had witnessed this adulation firsthand, it might have washed away the stain of my risqué performance in the film *Ecstasy*. A portrayal I desperately wished I could forget.

The sound of clapping started to grow fainter, and a chord of disquiet descended upon the audience as a procession of theater ushers paraded down the center aisle, arms laden with flowers. This grandiose gesture, with its inappropriate, very public timing, unsettled the otherwise reserved Viennese. I could almost hear them wonder who would have dared disrupt opening night at the Theater an der Wien with this audacious display. Only the overzealousness of a parent could have excused it, but I knew my cautious parents would have never dared the gesture. Was it one of my fellow actors' families who'd made this misstep?

As the ushers proceeded closer to the stage, I saw that their arms brimmed not with ordinary flowers but with exquisite hothouse roses. Perhaps a dozen bouquets. How much would this abundance of rare red blooms cost? I wondered who could afford the decadence at a time like this.

The ushers mounted the stairs, and I understood that they'd been instructed to deliver these bouquets to their intended recipient in full view of the audience. Uncertain how to manage this breach of

decorum, I glanced at the other actors, who looked equally perplexed. The stage manager gesticulated to the ushers to halt this display, but they must have been well paid, because they ignored him and lined up in front of *me*.

One by one, they handed me the bouquets until my arms could no longer hold them all, at which time the ushers laid them at my feet. Up and down my spine, I felt the disapproving glances of my castmates. My stage career could rise or fall upon the whims of these venerable actors; they could dislodge me from this pinnacle with a few well-placed words and replace me with any one of the number of young actresses clamoring for this role. I felt compelled to refuse the bouquets, until a thought struck me.

The giver could be anyone. He could be a prominent member of one of the feuding government parties—either a conservative Christian Social Party member or a socialist Social Democrat. Or worse, my benefactor could sympathize with the National Socialist Party and long for the unification of Austria with Germany and its newly named chancellor, Adolf Hitler. The pendulum of power seemed to sway with each passing day, and no one could afford to take chances. Least of all me.

The audience had stopped clapping. In the uncomfortable silence, they settled back into their seats. All except one man. There, in the center of the third row, the most prized seat in the theater, stood a barrel-chested and square-jawed gentleman. Alone among all the patrons of the Theater an der Wien, he remained standing.

Staring at me.

CHAPTER TWO

May 17, 1933
Vienna, Austria

THE CURTAIN FELL. MY FELLOW ACTORS SHOT ME QUIZZICAL looks, and I gave them a shrug and a shake of my head that I hoped conveyed my confusion and disapproval of the gesture. As quickly as seemed appropriate amid the congratulations, I returned to my dressing room, shutting the door. Anger and worry surged through me at how these flowers distracted from my triumph, this role that would help me firmly put *Ecstasy* behind me. I needed to find out who'd done this to me—and whether it was meant as a compliment, however misguided, or something else.

Pulling out the envelope hidden amid the flowers of the largest bouquet, I reached for my nail scissors and slit it open. I pulled out a heavy cream card rimmed in gold. Holding it close to the lamp on my dressing table, I read:

To an unforgettable Sissy. Yours, Mr. Friedrich Mandl

Who was this Friedrich Mandl? The name sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it.

My dressing room door shuddered with an authoritative knock. "Miss Kiesler?" It was Mrs. Else Lubbig, veteran dresser to the star of every Theater an der Wien production for the past twenty years.

Even during the Great War and the despondent years following the Austrian loss, the gray-haired matron had assisted actors onto the stage for the performances that buoyed the Viennese spirits, like the character of Empress Elizabeth, who reminded the people of Austria's historical prowess and prompted them to imagine a promising future. The play, of course, didn't touch upon the later years of the empress, when the golden tether of the emperor's displeasure became a yoke around her neck, constricting her every movement. The Viennese people didn't want to think about that, and they were expert at denial.

"Please come in," I called out.

Without a single glance at the profusion of roses, Mrs. Lubbig began unlacing me from my sun-yellow gown. As I rubbed cream into my face to wipe away the heavy stage makeup and the last vestiges of my character, she brushed out my hair from the complicated chignon the director thought befitted Empress Elizabeth. Although Mrs. Lubbig was silent, I sensed that she was biding her time until she asked the question undoubtedly buzzing around the theater.

"Beautiful flowers, miss," Mrs. Lubbig commented finally after she complimented my performance.

"Yes," I answered, waiting for her true question.

"May I ask who they are from?" she asked after finishing my hair and turning to my corset.

I paused, weighing my response. I could lie and attribute the flowery gaffe to my parents, but this bit of gossip was currency with which she could trade, and if I shared the answer with her, she would owe me a favor. A favor from Mrs. Lubbig could be quite useful.

I smiled up at her, handing her the card. "A Mr. Friedrich Mandl."

She said nothing, but I heard a sharp intake of breath that spoke volumes. "Have you heard of him?" I asked.

"Yes, miss."

"Was he in the theater tonight?" I knew Mrs. Lubbig watched every

performance from the wings, always scanning her assigned actress so she could readily assist with a torn hem or a lopsided wig.

“Yes.”

“Was he the man who remained standing after the final applause?”

She sighed. “Yes, miss.”

“What do you know of him?”

“I wouldn’t like to say, miss. It isn’t my place.”

I hid my smile at Mrs. Lubbig’s false modesty. In many ways, with her treasure trove of secrets, she wielded more power than anyone else at the theater.

“You would be doing me a great service.”

She paused, patting her immaculately upswept hair, as if considering my supplication. “I’ve only heard gossip and rumor. Not all of it flattering.”

“Please, Mrs. Lubbig.”

I watched her in the mirror, seeing her finely lined face work as if she were sifting through the carefully kept dossier in her mind to decide upon the appropriate morsel of information.

“Well, Mr. Mandl has quite a reputation with women.”

“Along with every other man in Vienna,” I said with a chuckle. If that was all, I needn’t worry. Men, I could handle. Most anyway.

“It’s a bit more than the usual chicanery, miss. One particular romance led to the suicide of a young German actress, Eva May.”

“Oh my,” I whispered, although, given my own past history of breaking hearts and an attempted suicide on the part of a suitor when I rejected him, I could not judge too harshly. While terrible, this tidbit was not everything she knew. I sensed from her tone that she was still withholding something, that she had more to report. But Mrs. Lubbig was going to make me work for it. “If there’s more, I would be in your debt.”

She hesitated. “It’s the sort of information one feels cautious about sharing these days, miss.” In these uncertain times, knowledge was currency.

I took her by the hand and stared into her eyes. “This information is for me only, for my safety. I promise you that it will not be shared with anyone else.”

After a long pause, she said, “Mr. Mandl owns the *Hirtenberger Patronenfabrik*. His company manufactures munitions and other military weaponry, miss.”

“An unsavory business, I suppose. But someone must do that work,” I said. I couldn’t see why the industry must be the man.

“It isn’t so much the armaments he manufactures, but the people to whom he sells them.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, miss. They call him the Merchant of Death.”

CHAPTER THREE

May 26, 1933

Vienna, Austria

NINE DAYS AFTER MY STAGE DEBUT IN *SISSY*, A GIBBOUS MOON loomed over the Viennese sky, leaving dark-violet shadows in its wake. It emitted enough light to illuminate the city streets, so I decided to walk the remainder of the way home from the theater in the fashionable nineteenth district and hopped out of the cab, even though the hour was late. I longed for the quiet interlude, a pause between the post-performance theater madness and the parental inundation I had been getting at home after each performance.

The sidewalks contained only a few passersby, a gray-haired couple ambling home after a late dinner, a whistling young man, and I felt safe enough. The route home grew increasingly affluent and well-heeled the closer I got to my parents' home in the neighborhood of Döbling, so I knew the streets would be safe. But none of this would have appeased my parents' concerns if they knew I was walking alone. They were very protective of their only child.

Pushing aside thoughts of Mama and Papa, I allowed myself to smile over the review published in *Die Presse* this week. The glowing words about my portrayal of Empress Elizabeth had led to a run on ticket sales, and the theater had been standing room only the past three evenings. My status in the theater ranks had grown, with audible compliments from our usually critical director. The accolades felt good

after the scandal of my nudity in *Ecstasy*—a decision that had seemed acceptable and in keeping with the artistic sensibility of the film until the public, my parents among them, reacted with shock—and I knew that the return to the theater after my foray into film had been the right decision. It was like coming home.

Acting had been a ward against childhood loneliness, a way to fill my quiet existence with people beyond the ever-present nanny and tutor but the ever-absent Mama and Papa. It started as the simple creation of characters and stories for my many dolls on an impromptu stage created under the huge desk in Papa's study, but then, unexpectedly, role-playing became much, much more. When I went to school—and suddenly became introduced to a wide, dizzying array of people—acting became my way of moving through the world, a sort of currency upon which I could draw whenever I needed. I could become whatever those around me secretly longed for, and I, in turn, got whatever I wanted from them. It wasn't until I stepped on my first stage, however, that I comprehended the breadth of my gift. I could bury myself and assume the mask of an entirely different person, one crafted by a director or a writer. I could turn my gaze on the audience and wield my capacity to influence them.

The only darkness cast over all this light from *Sissy* was the nightly delivery of roses. The color had changed, but the volume did not. I had received fuchsia, pale pink, ivory, bloodred, even a rare, delicate violet, but always exactly twelve dozen. It was obscene. But at least the method of delivery had changed. No longer did the ushers bestow my roses on stage with a grand flourish; now, they discreetly placed them in my dressing room during the show's final act.

The mysterious Mr. Mandl. I thought I had seen him amid the theatergoers in the coveted third-row seat on several occasions, but I wasn't certain. He had made no effort to communicate with me after the letter accompanying the first roses, until tonight. A gold-rimmed card tucked between vibrant yellow blooms—precisely like the color of my gown—contained the handwritten words:

Dear Miss Kiesler, I would very much like the honor of taking you to dinner at the restaurant at the Hotel Imperial after the performance. If this is amenable to you, please send word to my chauffeur who will be waiting at the stage door until midnight. Yours, Mr. Friedrich Mandl

While my parents would despair if I even considered meeting a strange man unaccompanied—particularly at a hotel restaurant, even if it was the landmark establishment created by architect Josef Hoffmann—the knowledge I'd gathered about Mr. Mandl ensured that I would not cross that breach. Cautious inquiries had yielded more information about my mysterious benefactor. The few friends I had in the insular theater world had heard he was driven by profit, not the morality of those to whom he sold his weaponry. But the most salient nugget came unprompted from the purveyor of secrets, Mrs. Lubbig, who whispered that Mr. Mandl was favored by the crop of right-wing autocrats that were springing up all over Europe. This report troubled me most of all, as Austria was struggling to maintain its independence while geographically surrounded by land-hungry dictatorships.

But while I didn't dare dine with him at the Hotel Imperial, I couldn't continue my practice of ignoring him entirely. By all accounts, Mr. Mandl was a politically connected man, and the current situation required that all Viennese act cautiously. Still, I didn't know how to properly manage his attention, as all my past dalliances had been with malleable young men close to my own age. Until I could formulate a plan, I enlisted Mrs. Lubbig's help to distract Mr. Mandl's chauffeur so I could sidestep the stage door and exit out the front.

My heels tapped in a staccato rhythm as I continued my progress to *Peter-Jordan-Strasse*. I ticked off the familiar homes of our neighbors as I neared what my parents referred to as our "cottage," a misnomer that all Döbling residents used to describe their houses. The name was meant as an homage to the English architectural style of the

neighborhood's large airy homes, built around enclosed family gardens, but it belied their substantial size.

A few houses away from my parents' home, the light seemed to diminish. I glanced up to see if clouds were obscuring the moon, but it continued to shine brightly. I had never noticed the phenomenon before, but then I almost never walked alone into our neighborhood at night. I wondered if the darkness could be explained by the proximity of *Peter-Jordan-Strasse* to the dense Vienna Woods, the *Wienerwald*, where Papa and I liked to take our Sunday walks.

There was not a twinkle of electric light on the block save for my parents' home. Pitch-black windows with the occasional hint of dwindling candlelight stared back at me from the houses bordering that of my parents, and I suddenly remembered the reason for the increased darkness. Many of the inhabitants of our Döbling enclave honored the tradition of refraining from electrical use beginning at sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday, even though their religious habits didn't incline towards the orthodoxy that mandated such a practice. I'd forgotten, because it was a practice my parents had never observed.

It was the Sabbath in Döbling, a Jewish neighborhood in a Catholic land.

CHAPTER FOUR

May 26, 1933

Vienna, Austria

THE MOMENT I CROSSED THE THRESHOLD, I WAS ASSAULTED WITH the scent. I didn't need to see the roses to know that the entire house was bursting with them. Why on earth had Mr. Mandl sent them here as well?

The desultory chords of Bach sounded out from the Bechstein grand piano in the parlor. As the door clicked shut behind me, the music stopped, and my mother called out, "Hedy? Is that you?"

As I handed my coat to Inge, our housemaid, I called back, "Who else would it be at this hour, Mama?"

Papa came out of the parlor to greet me. With an intricately carved wooden pipe dangling from the corner of his mouth, he asked, "How is our Empress Elizabeth? Did you 'own the stage' as *Die Presse* proclaimed?"

I smiled up at my tall Papa, handsome even with gray at his temples and wrinkles around his blue eyes. Even at this late hour, after eleven o'clock, he was immaculately dressed, in a pressed charcoal suit with a striped burgundy tie. He was ever the reliable, successful manager of one of Vienna's most prominent banks, the *Creditanstalt-Bankverein*.

He took me by the hand, and for a moment, I was reminded of my childhood weekend afternoons when he would patiently answer all my questions about the world and its workings. No query was off-limits,

whether historical or scientific, about literature or politics, and I gobbled up my time with him, the only with his undivided attention. On one favorite sunlit afternoon, he'd spent a full hour describing the nature of photosynthesis in response to my childlike ruminations on what plants ate; his patience in answering my relentless questions about the natural world and the physical sciences never faltered. But those hours were few, as Mama and work and social obligations demanded nearly every other piece of him. And without him, I faced long hours of rote schoolwork with teachers or homework and routines with my nanny and, to a lesser extent, Mama, who paid attention to me only when I sat before a piano and she berated my skills. Even though I adored music, I now only played the piano when Mama wasn't at home.

Leading me into the parlor, he settled me into one of the four brocade chairs that surrounded the fireplace, which was lit for the cool, spring evening. As we waited for Mama to join us, Papa asked, "Are you hungry, my little princess? We could have Inge prepare a plate for you. You still look too skinny after that bout of pneumonia."

"No, but thank you, Papa. I ate before the performance."

I glanced around the room, family portraits crowding the walls already busy with their striped wallpaper, and saw that someone—my mother, most likely—had arranged the dozen bouquets of pale-pink roses artfully around the room. But for a single raised eyebrow, Papa remained silent on the subject of the flowers. We both knew that Mama would dole out the questions.

Mama entered the room and busied herself with pouring a glass of schnapps. Without speaking a word or meeting my eye, she conveyed her disappointment in me.

The room grew quiet while we waited for Mama to speak.

"It seems you have an admirer, Hedy," Mama said after a long draw on her schnapps.

"Yes, Mama."

"What could you have possibly done to encourage such a display?"

Her tone held its usual judgment. The finishing school she'd insisted upon had failed to polish me into the marriageable young *hausfrau*-in-training for which she'd hoped. When I'd pursued a profession she deemed "crass," even though the theater was held in high esteem among the Viennese, she had decided that, very likely, all my behavior followed suit. And sometimes, I admit, I obliged her with whatever young man I was currently allowing to court me. I'd occasionally let certain suitors—whether the aristocratic Ritter Franz von Hochstetten or the upstart actor and *Ecstasy* costar Aribert Mog—touch me in all the ways that Mama imagined, in my own private rebellion against her. Why not, I asked myself. She thought I was engaging in the salacious behavior anyway. And I liked learning that the power I had over men mirrored the power I had over the audience—to keep them in my thrall.

"Nothing, Mama. I have never even met the man."

"Why would a man give you all these roses if you've given him nothing in return? If you don't even know him? Has this man seen your reprehensible *Ecstasy* perhaps and figured you for a loose woman?"

Papa interjected rather sharply, "Enough. Perhaps it was the gift of her performance, Trude." Mama's given name was Gertrude, and Papa only called Mama by her nickname when he was trying to soften her.

After smoothing an errant black hair back into her perfect coif, Mama rose. Looking much taller than her tiny five feet, she strode over to her desk where the bouquet bearing the card sat. She reached for her silver letter opener and sliced open the familiar cream envelope.

Holding the gilt-edged card close to the lamplight, she read aloud:

To Mr. and Mrs. Kiesler, I have been fortunate enough to watch your daughter play Empress Elizabeth four times in the past week, and I congratulate you on her talent. I wish to introduce myself to you in person in order to request your permission to call upon your daughter. If that is acceptable

to you, I will come to your home this Sunday evening at six o'clock, the only evening when the theater is dark. Yours truly, Friedrich Mandl.

Mr. Mandl was forcing my hand.

To my great surprise, my parents fell silent. I thought my mother would scoff at the invitation as bold and inappropriate or chide me for some invented offense surrounding Mr. Mandl's attention. And I assumed my father—mild-mannered in all matters excepting me—would rail against the supplication by a man unconnected to us by family or friends. Yet the favorite mantelpiece clock, a gift from Mama's parents on their wedding, ticked loudly for nearly a minute, and still they said nothing.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Papa sighed, something he'd done with more frequency in recent months. "We must tread carefully, Hedy."

"Why?"

Mama drained her glass and asked me, "Do you know anything about this Mr. Mandl?"

"A little. When he started sending roses to my dressing room, I asked around the theater. It seems that he owns a munitions business."

"He sent you flowers before?" Papa sounded alarmed.

"Yes," I answered quietly. "Every night since *Sissy* opened."

They shot each other an inscrutable glance. Papa answered for them both. "I will respond to Mr. Mandl. We will have him here for a cocktail on Sunday at six o'clock, and Hedy, you will dine with him afterward."

I was shocked. While my mother was eager for me to conform and marry a nice Döbling boy, and I guessed my father felt the same though he never said so, they had never overtly meddled in my personal life before. Not even when I refused to give up my career to accept the marriage proposal of the son of one of Germany's most distinguished families, the Hochstetten fellow. And they'd certainly never insisted

that I go on a date with a particular boy. Why now? “Do I have any choice in this matter?”

“I am sorry, Hedy, but you must. This is not a man we can risk offending,” Papa said with a sad expression.

Even though I’d guessed that I’d eventually have to meet Mr. Mandl, I wanted to resist. But the pained look on my father’s face stopped me. Something, someone was forcing his hand. “Why, Papa?”

“You were born after the Great War, Hedy. You don’t understand how politics can be a force of destruction.” He shook his head and sighed again.

But he did not elaborate. When did Papa start withholding information from me and thinking that I was unable to understand complicated matters? He had always told me that I was capable of anything, and I had believed him. His assurances had prompted my confidence to pursue acting.

I tried to keep the anger and disappointment from my voice. “Just because I’ve chosen acting doesn’t mean that I can’t comprehend issues unrelated to the theater, Papa. You of all people should know that.”

I was irritated at Papa’s patronizing tone, unusual after years of treating me as an intellectual equal. How many Sunday nights had we spent discussing the newspaper by the fire after a family supper? Since I’d been a relatively young girl, he’d reviewed with me every detail of the headlines until he felt certain that I understood the nuances of the national and international political scene, not to mention the economic developments. All the while, Mama would sip her schnapps and shake her head in disapproval, muttering “a waste of good time” under her breath. Why would Papa think I’d changed simply because the theater now occupied my nights instead of fireside conversations?

He gave me a weak smile and said, “I suppose that’s true, my little princess. So you must know that, only two months ago in March, Chancellor Dollfuss took advantage of an irregularity in parliamentary voting procedures to seize the Austrian government and dissolve Parliament.”

“Of course, Papa. It was all over the newspapers. I don’t just read the theater section. And I saw the barbed wire around the Parliament building.”

“Then you must understand that this move turned Austria, like Germany, Italy, and Spain, into a dictatorship. Theoretically, we are still a country with a democratic constitution and two parties—Dollfuss’s conservative Christian Social Party, which appeals to rural and upper-class folk for different reasons, and the opposing Social Democrat Party. But the reality is different; Chancellor Dollfuss is in charge and working to consolidate total power. Rumors abound that he’s going to ban the *Schutzbund*, the military arm of the Social Democratic Party.”

My stomach churned at Papa categorizing Austria with its fascists neighbors and lumping its leaders in the same category as Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Francisco Franco. “I don’t know if I ever saw it written quite so plainly, Papa.” I knew Austria was surrounded by fascist dictators, but I’d thought our country had remained largely free of such rulers. For now, anyway.

“You might not read the word ‘dictator’ in the newspapers, but indeed, that is what Chancellor Dollfuss has become, with the *Heimwehr*, which, as you know, is a paramilitary organization, effectively serving as his personal army, since the treaty ending the Great War limits Austria’s ability to amass troops. The ostensible head of the *Heimwehr* is Ernst Rüdiger von Starhemberg, but behind Starhemberg is his close friend and business colleague, Mr. Friedrich Mandl. Mr. Mandl supplies all the military needs for the *Heimwehr* and, by all accounts, is involved in strategy as well.”

I had thought Papa was meandering in this political lecture, but now I comprehended. He was leading me to Mr. Mandl, and the power this mysterious man exerted was becoming clear. “I understand, Papa.

“I’m not certain that you do. There is more, Hedy. I’m sure that you read in the newspapers that this Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany in January.”

“Yes,” I said as my mother rose for a second schnapps. Typically, she only drank one, sipping it slowly throughout the evening.

“Are you also familiar with the anti-Semitic policies Hitler has been adopting in Germany?”

I hadn’t really paid much attention to the articles on this topic, as I didn’t really think it applied to us. But I didn’t want to admit ignorance to Papa, so I said, “Yes.”

“Then you know that as soon as the Nazis came to power, they began a formal boycott of Jewish businesses and banned all non-Aryans from the legal profession and civil service. German Jewish citizens have not only been subject to violent attacks, but they’ve been stripped of their citizenship rights. Rights that Austrian Jews have counted upon since the 1840s.”

“I’ve read about that,” I said, although in truth, I skimmed those stories.

“Well, then maybe you’ve also read the articles about the Austrian Nazis who long for a unification of our country with Germany, and whatever people’s political views about Dollfuss, everyone’s primary fear is that this Chancellor Hitler will stage a coup to take over Austria. Nothing has been said publicly, but I’ve heard rumors that Chancellor Dollfuss met with Italian leader Mussolini last month and that Mussolini has agreed to aid Austria in protecting our country should there be a German invasion.”

“I suppose that’s good news, although I’m not sure Austria should be beholden to Italy,” I offered. “I mean, Mussolini is a dictator too, and we might just end up with Mussolini instead of Hitler.”

Papa interrupted me. “That’s true, Hedy, but Mussolini doesn’t advocate the same strident anti-Semitic policies as Hitler.”

“I see,” I said, although I couldn’t see why Papa was so concerned. Such policies wouldn’t really affect us. “But what does that have to do with Mr. Mandl?”

“Mr. Mandl has a long-standing relationship with Mussolini; he

supplied him with weaponry for years. The rumor is that *he* arranged the meeting between Dollfuss and Mussolini.”

My head spun as I began to see the thread stitching Mandl into this nefarious tapestry. This was the man pursuing me?

“This Mr. Mandl is the man behind Chancellor Dollfuss’s throne. *But* he may also be the man behind Austria’s continued independence.”

CHAPTER FIVE

May 28, 1933

Vienna, Austria

ICE CLINKED ON CRYSTAL, AND LIQUID POURED ON ICE. FORCED laughter and the hum of small talk drifted up the steep mahogany staircase. A conversational lull transpired, rectified by the dulcet tones of Beethoven played by my mother's expert hands. My parents were attempting to manage Friedrich Mandl.

We had decided that I would wait upstairs until Papa summoned me. That way, my parents could engage in the charade of assessing Mr. Mandl to see if he was worthy of calling upon their only child, even though we all knew that this was a ruse, that Papa's permission had been granted the moment Mr. Mandl signed his name on the letter to my parents.

My palms were sweaty, an unfamiliar experience for me. My nerves had never been an issue in the past, not with men anyway. I might feel a flutter in the second before the curtains lifted onstage or in the long minutes before the director called out "take one," but never in the context of dating. Boys did not intimidate me; I'd always had the upper hand in past relationships, committing and severing ties with ease. I treated them as subjects upon whom I could practice my chameleon skills, the building blocks of my acting career.

I rose from my perch on the chaise longue and stood before my full-length mirror for the hundredth time. Mama and I had debated the

appropriate attire to navigate this encounter. Nothing too suggestive, or he might receive the wrong impression of me; nothing too childlike, or he might take offense that we weren't taking him seriously. We had settled on an emerald-green crepe dress with squared shoulders and a high neckline, with a skirt that hit well below my knee.

Pacing my room, I strained to hear the conversation downstairs. Snippets became audible periodically, but nothing I could place in context. A loud burst of laughter sounded out, and then Papa called upstairs, "Hedy, please come downstairs if you are ready."

After a final glance in the mirror, I headed down the staircase, my heels making an unseemly clatter. Papa waited in the doorframe to the parlor for me, his face carefully assembled in a mask of pleasantness. It belied that worry that I knew lurked beneath.

Taking Papa by the elbow, I crossed the threshold into the parlor. Mama sat on the sofa facing Mr. Mandl, a cautious expression on her face. Of my caller, I could see only the back of his carefully combed head.

"Mr. Mandl, may I introduce my daughter, Miss Hedwig Kiesler. I believe you're familiar with her, although you have never formally met." Papa gently propelled me forward.

Together, Mama and Mr. Mandl rose, and he turned toward me. From the ugly rumors about politics and women, I expected to find him repulsive. In fact, I'd braced myself for it. After he made a formal bow to me, our eyes met, and I found him unexpectedly attractive. Not in the physical sense exactly, although he was handsome in a polished way with his impeccable navy Savile Row suit and gleaming cufflinks, but in the power and confidence that exuded from him. Unlike all my past suitors, he was a man, not a boy.

He took the lead. "It is a true honor, Miss Kiesler. I am an admirer of your work, as I think you know."

Heat spread across my cheeks, another rarity for me. "Thank you for the flowers. They were beautiful and"—I searched for the right word—"generous."

“A paltry reflection of my enjoyment of your work.” Smooth words slid out of his mouth like liquid.

An uneasy silence settled upon the room. Usually Mama, ever socially astute, had the right response at the ready, but Mr. Mandl seemed to have unsettled everyone. Papa came to the rescue. “Mr. Mandl has been sharing his love of the arts with us.”

“Yes.” He turned to me and said, “I learned that your mother was a concert pianist before she married. I confess that I implored her to play, even when she protested that she no longer performed outside the family. Her rendering of Beethoven was masterful.”

It was Mama’s turn to blush. “Thank you, Mr. Mandl.”

The fact that Mama played for Mr. Mandl told me more about my parents’ fear than Papa’s earlier monologue about Mr. Mandl’s political and military maneuverings ever could. When she gave up her career twenty years ago to marry Papa, she had sworn that she would never play for anyone again, save family. And my stubborn mother had adhered to that vow, until tonight.

“I’m guessing you taught your daughter to play beautifully as well,” he said.

“Well...” Mama hesitated.

I knew Mama couldn’t bear to compliment my playing. She demanded perfection, and all my efforts displeased her, as much as my looks. As if she believed that I chose my beauty on purpose, exclusively to defy her.

“Have you seen any of the other new plays that opened this month, Mr. Mandl?” I turned the attention away from my visibly apprehensive mother to the broader conversational topic. I didn’t want Mama to fill the silence with nervous chatter unflattering to me.

He fixed his brown eyes on mine. “In truth, Miss Kiesler, your performance in *Sissy* spoiled me for any other actor or actress. I keep returning to the Theater an der Wien.”

His intensity made me uncomfortable, and I longed to avert my

eyes. But I sensed that he didn't want demureness from me but strength. So I met his gaze, while I said the words etiquette demanded. "You flatter me unduly, Mr. Mandl."

"I mean every compliment, and you deserve every rose."

Mama returned to herself and blurted out a phrase she had repeated over and over since my childhood. I'd heard it every time someone called me pretty or complimented my piano or acting skills and every extra moment Papa spent explaining to me the inner workings of a car engine or a porcelain factory. "You'll spoil the girl, Mr. Mandl."

The phrase was not the affectionate admonition it seemed on the surface. It reflected her feelings that I didn't deserve spoiling, that I had already been given too much, that I was—at my core—unworthy.

Could this stranger decode the criticism hidden behind my mother's words?

If Mr. Mandl sensed her true meaning, he didn't react. Instead, without averting his eyes from mine, he said, "It would be my pleasure to spoil her, Mrs. Kiesler." Turning back to Papa, he asked, "Do I have your permission to take your daughter for dinner?"

After a discreet, apologetic glance at me, he said, "Yes, Mr. Mandl, you do."

CHAPTER SIX

May 28, 1933

Vienna, Austria

THE MOMENT WE STEPPED OUT OF MR. MANDL'S CHAUFFEURED limousine into the lobby of Hotel Imperial, the staff flocked to his side. Even the notoriously persnickety maître d' of the hotel's legendary restaurant raced to Mr. Mandl, offering his services. On the few, special occasions I'd dined at the restaurant with my parents—for birthdays and a school graduation—we'd practically begged for attention and waited nearly an hour to place our orders. The establishment, known for its fine cuisine and the haughtiness of its staff, felt like it was a different place on Mr. Mandl's arm. But I tried to hide my amazement, to play the part of the worldly actress.

Whispers trailed behind us, and we were led to a table placed in the enviable center of the wood-paneled room. I'd always thought of Papa as a successful man, and he was, but only now did I understand true power. Funny how it could be conveyed by the service at a restaurant and the stares of other diners.

Roses of every imaginable color decorated the table, brightening the otherwise luxurious but monochromatic room. None of the other tables had flowers, only bronze candlesticks topped with gleaming white candles, and Mr. Mandl must have specially ordered them for this occasion. Clearly, he'd had no real concern that my parents would withhold permission for our date.

As I settled into the striped upholstered chair pulled out for me by Mr. Mandl, who eschewed the attempts by the *maître d'* to seat me, I felt dowdy in the dress Mama and I had selected. In the mirror, it appeared simple but appropriately modest. But here, wives and girlfriends alike wore the latest *couture*, which mostly consisted of flimsy slips of expensive fabric stitched together by crystal strings. I looked positively unlike in comparison.

He asked me a few pointed questions about the types of food I enjoyed and the wine I preferred and then asked, "Do you mind if I order for you? I eat here frequently and have a reasonable sense of their best dishes. I would hate for you to be disappointed."

Many men would have taken charge of the ordering without even asking permission, and I appreciated the courtesy. Still, I knew I shouldn't just dutifully acquiesce; his strength demanded strength in return. "I usually like to order for myself, but in this instance, that would be fine."

My caveat surprised and pleased him, as I'd sensed it would. He laughed, a rich, melodic sound, as he signaled for the waiter to return to the table. After he ordered oysters and champagne for us to begin, followed by *chateaubriand*, he initiated a conversation about the theater world. He was quite familiar with Vienna's established directors, writers, and actors and solicitous of my opinions about the staging and casting of recently opened plays. The knowledgeable exchange was rare for me—most men knew little, or cared little, about the theater world—as was his active encouragement of my own thoughts. I found him refreshing and unexpected.

We grew quiet over the oysters, until he asked, "I suppose you have heard a lot about me?"

The blunt question startled me. I'd been enjoying his company and had momentarily forgotten about the unpleasantness of his reputation. Unsure about the safest response, I settled on honesty; his own bluntness seemed to deserve its match. "Yes, I have."

"I'm guessing you've heard nothing good."

A knot formed in my stomach. My parents and I had hoped the evening would pass without any foray into his character. “Not *all* of it bad,” I answered with a smile. I hoped to inject a note of levity into this unsettling exchange and perhaps divert it back to our former topic.

He placed his fork down on his plate and carefully wiped the corners of his mouth with his linen napkin before speaking. “Miss Kiesler, I will not insult your obvious intellect by claiming that the rumors you’ve heard are *all* lies. It’s true that I’ve dated several women and that I’ve been married once before. It’s also true that, in my line of work, I must occasionally deal with political figures and movements that others find unsavory. All I ask is that you allow me the opportunity to demonstrate that I am different from the men with whom I do business and that I am more respectful than the number of women to whom I’ve been linked would suggest. I am not my reputation.”

Although I knew I should feel otherwise, that I should guard myself against this man, his words moved me. I understood him. I too had been trying to restore the harm to my honor wreaked by *Ecstasy*. Immediately after its release, the movie’s nudity and depiction of sexual intercourse—in which the director poked me with a pin to achieve an orgasmic expression on my face—led to the movie’s banning in several countries and censorship in others, which cast a shadow upon my name. Although, of course, the scandal only increased people’s desire to actually see the elusive movie. Didn’t this man deserve the same chance at redemption that I myself sought?

Before I could answer, he spoke again. “You seem hesitant, Miss Kiesler, and I would be surprised—maybe even a little disappointed—if you weren’t. I have no interest in playing games, so I ask that you please allow me to make my feelings and my intentions plain.”

I nodded my assent, even though his request made the knot in my stomach tighten.

“I am not a particularly religious man, Miss Kiesler. Nor am I especially romantic.”

Without thinking, I raised my eyebrow and glanced at the roses.

“Well, not usually,” he said with a smile. His face quickly became serious again. “But when I saw you on the stage, there was a moment when I felt a surge of recognition, as if I knew you. Not as if we had met in the normal manner—at a social occasion or through acquaintances—but as though I’d always known you. It happened just before your curtain call; for a few seconds, you were no longer Empress Elizabeth but yourself. And I felt that I knew you.”

He continued to speak, but I didn’t hear him. I was too astounded by his statement and deep in my own thoughts.

“It has been a singular experience for me, and I feel strangely connected to you—” He stopped talking suddenly and shook his head. “If my business colleagues could hear me talking to you in this way, they’d consider my words the ravings of a demented fan. As you must.”

I could have allowed him to flounder. I could have stayed silent and watched as this man who was reported to hold the fate of Austria in his hand falter. His behavior could have provided the excuse for me to refuse future encounters. But I felt a peculiar link to him. “No, I could not possibly think of you in that way.”

“If you mean that, would you consider seeing me again?”

I had been pursued by boys before, and even though I was only nineteen, I was no innocent. There had been many admirers: Wolf Albach-Retty, Count Blücher von Wahlstatt, even a young Russian academic whose long, unpronounceable last name had faded from memory, among others. Some had held my attention briefly, and others I had entertained for slightly longer periods. A few I’d allowed access to my body, while most I’d held at bay. But none of them had afforded me the respect of this frankness. Instead, they’d engaged in the intricate courting dance so typical of most men but so insulting to my intelligence, so predictable. Notwithstanding their titles or money or degrees, none had seemed my equal, so I stayed with them only briefly. But Friedrich Mandl was different.

I paused, allowing him to think I was mulling over his request. He didn't bother to hide his anticipation, and I delayed my response as long as possible, enjoying his apprehension and the sway I held over this very powerful man.

I took a long sip of my champagne, carefully licking my lips before I spoke. Then, finally, I said, "Yes, Mr. Mandl. I would consider seeing you again."