

FALL OF ANGELS



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*To a Cambridge friend—Heather—who joined me
in a snowy tramp around the city last Christmas morning,
snuffling out deposition spots for my unfortunate angels*



CHAPTER 1
CAMBRIDGE, DECEMBER 1923

“Hello? Detective Inspector Redfyre, Cambridge CID here.”

“There you are, Johnny!”

John Redfyre flinched. He eased the receiver an inch from his ear to take the edge off the hunting-field halloo of his favourite old relative and looked at his wristwatch. He smiled. Halfway between tea and the first gin, he might well have expected the caller to be Aunt Henrietta.

“I can’t deny it, Aunt Hetty. You find me here in my foxhole. Had I gone missing?”

His voice was warm, his tone light. Redfyre’s answer to any swords and lances coming in his direction was always to raise, not a shield, but two defiant fingers and skip away fast. He’d learned to greet Fate with a flirtatious smile, Adversity with a kick in the shins and his Aunt’s summons with a hearty riposte. Family circumstances had forged his resilience, he believed. As the youngest of four boys of a family fallen on hard times—and not only the youngest, but the handsomest—he’d endured a childhood to rival any Biblical tale of family disharmony. He could have told Joseph where he’d gone wrong. He could have given a few pointers to the Prodigal Son.

He accepted that he was never to lead the easy aristocratic life of his forebears owing to birth order and postwar austerity, but there was one aspect of a privileged situation he still

guiltily yearned for, and Hetty's call had triggered that yearning. On the occasions when she demanded his attention, he felt the need of a butler. Some suave old chap like his father's Simpson. A man who would purr blandly: "I'm so sorry, Madam. I regret the master is not at home. He is on his way to a Masonic meeting, I believe," whilst his master, in slippers and dressing gown, sat grinning shamelessly at him from his armchair.

Bloody telephone! Convenient for professional purposes, but he rather resented the social intrusion of the apparatus into his home. Anyone with access to one of these evil instruments could command his attention at a whim and the communication could not be avoided by crossing the road, affecting a sore throat or inventing an urgent engagement. Yes, here, indeed, was the Detective Inspector, caught in an unbuttoned state, glass of whisky in one hand, *Sporting Life* in the other at the end of a gruelling day—and no protective Simpson about the place to deny access. Not on a DI's salary.

Redfyre accepted the inevitable. He expressed his very real regard for his aunt and voiced his surprise that she should be troubling to speak to him by means of this inhuman device. A threepenny bus ride or a two-bob taxi fare and she could have been with him in person, pouring out her problems while he poured out a London gin and added a slug of Rose's Lime Juice. A bit of swift work with the ice pick and he could promise a tinkle of ice shards against the Waterford glass and . . . "There's still time," he added temptingly.

"Tinkling ice, eh? So there's one piece of modern equipment you don't disdain? Always a lure, of course, but, on this occasion, ice won't do the trick."

"Ah! Like me, Aunt Hetty, you've loosened your stays and settled into your evening?"

His aunt suppressed a gurgle, then gathered herself for the attack. "Now, I have to tell you that your despised telephone is

bringing you a delightful offer. Let's do diaries, darling. Ready? I'm looking at Friday evening. Are you free?"

"The day-after-tomorrow-Friday? That the one? Hmm . . ."

She'd caught him on the hop again. Pinned him to the page. There were several things he'd been planning in a vague way to do when his shift ended, involving a jar of ale and congenial conversation—possibly an Oscar Wilde play on the wireless—but none would survive a bald statement over the phone. He'd always found it a more fiendishly accurate revealer of the barefaced lie than the newfangled lie-detector machines he'd been experimenting with. Blood pressure pulses be damned! It was voice tremors they should be calibrating. However hard he stared, his Friday evening slot remained inconveniently blank.

"I'm free, Aunt," he admitted.

"Excellent! Then ink this in at once. I have tickets for a concert you will not want to miss. I find I can't use them—your uncle's gout again—so I'm leaving one for you at the ticket desk. Just up your street, you'll find. It's a Christmas concert in one of the college chapels, St. Barnabas. Welcoming in the festive season with a blast of traditional music. Mince pies and hot punch in the interval. No pink-faced choir boys—just two soloists. Organ and trumpet . . . Oh, you know, the usual gaggle of Germans—Haydn, Hummel, Bach of course and a bit of Orlando Gibbons batting for England perhaps . . . that sort of thing. Don't worry, you will absolutely *not* be called on to sing along," she added hastily. "It's an early start—six o'clock for two hours, so you'll still have time for something of an evening and an early night."

But Redfyre was suspicious by nature, especially of Aunt Hetty bearing gifts. He broke into her chatter. "Did you say you had *two* tickets? Are you expecting me to rustle up an organ-loving chum?" He added provokingly, "At such short notice?"

“That won’t be necessary, my dear. I’ve already allocated the other one to someone who jumped at the chance. Someone you may remember from your childhood. You’ll be sitting next to Earwig.”

“I’m sorry, Aunt, I didn’t quite make that out. Do you know, for a moment I thought you said ‘Earwig’! Ho, ho!” He shook the receiver and applied it to his other ear. “Ah! How do you spell that? E-A-D-W-I-G? Eadwig? Mmm . . . Close enough. An Anglo-Saxon acquaintance, would that be? A newly discovered Norwegian branch of the family?”

“No—English. The Strettons. Don’t pretend you don’t know them. You’ve met them all. Well-to-do family. They own much of the view to the south from the top of St. Mary’s tower, which allows them to indulge their artistic compulsions. Very arty-crafty, you’ll have noticed. He paints rather badly; she pots rather well. All their children were given Anglo-Saxon names: Aethelwulf, Aethelstan, Aelfhelm, Godric and Eadwig . . . Very fashionable twenty, thirty years ago. And now they’re all out in the world, of course.”

Redfyre groaned. “Now I’m beginning to recall the faces that go with the names. Out in the world, you say? Surprised to hear that! I’d have expected behind bars. And the place, their country seat—Melford wasn’t it? Just south of Cambridge? We used to be sent over to play with them there when we were little.”

“That’s right. You were quite a favourite with Clarissa, I recall. She preferred your quiet, sunny nature to the rumbustious indiscipline of her own brood. And who wouldn’t? Though perhaps it was ill-judged of Clarissa to say so to her own children. You spent many hours in her studio learning to handle clay.”

Uncomfortable memories, long suppressed, were beginning to surface. Once, they would have stung; now they merely

irritated Redfyre. “Aunt, it was safer to be in the studio with a kindly adult than to be outside in the grounds with a pack of hooligans on the loose. For the Stretton boys, ‘Go out and play’ meant ‘Go out and fight.’ I hated our visits. It was a social experiment that was thankfully cut short and abandoned. Big, blond bullies! I believe I had a particular disagreement with one of them.”

“You broke his nose, darling. With your little fist. That was Wulfie—Aethelwulf. But don’t concern yourself—it’s been broken on several occasions since by others who shared your sentiments.”

Redfyre grunted. “I ask myself what’s wrong with ‘Alfred’ or ‘Hilda,’ if you’re such a sucker for the Saxons? Why put modern man to the trouble of wrestling with uncouth syllables?”

Hetty snorted in agreement. “Know what you mean! It’s like trying to eat a piece of overdone toast. Much noise and effort expended for little gratification. Eadwig, you’ll find, is the most agreeable of the bunch, in character and pronunciation. I’m informed that ‘ead’ means ‘wealth’ and ‘wig’ means ‘war.’ Make what you will of that.”

REDFYRE HAD SETTLED into his front row seat directly below the high organ loft—ease of access for gouty gents was always a feature of his aunt’s arrangements—and scanned the program a good ten minutes before the music was due to start. He looked about him with satisfaction.

The college chapel was en fête tonight. Candles had been lit in profusion, and the air was charged with the invigorating scent of green boughs: pine and holly and ivy with, somewhere in the background, an ancient blend of incense and dark wood. Chapel officials in splendid vestments were swirling about, busily doing nothing productive and avoiding catching the eye of members of the public, punctuating this seemingly

choreographed performance with an occasional genuflection to the altar. One of them disappeared behind the hangings masking the door to the organ loft and climbed the staircase up to the gallery where the performance was to take place. He appeared moments later, stage left, ostentatiously tweaking at the heavy brocade curtains, which were already perfectly draped. This was an actor manqué, Redfyre decided, impressed by the young man's good looks and his tongue-in-cheek gestures. The man even slapped a glove at imaginary dust on the gleaming wooden rail that edged the small gallery. Being at knee height, the contraption didn't impress Redfyre much as a safety feature, should some soloist, carelessly overconfident or swept up in a transport of delight, manage to lose his balance. With his trained eye and concern for public safety, Redfyre was amused to watch as the young flunky actually put a right hand on it and indulged in a bit of arm wrestling. The mahogany handrail shrugged off the attack on its integrity. So no one would be ending the evening with a headlong plunge into the lap of the law in the front row, at least.

Entertained by the performance the warm-up team was putting on, Redfyre sighed contentedly. With four Christmases in and out of the trenches of Flanders being a very recent memory, he was in heaven. He enjoyed the ceremony and respected the traditions. He offered up a silent prayer of thanks for his survival and wondered whether Eadwig Stretton had come out of it unscathed. Men of Redfyre's age (and he had calculated that this youngest of the Stretton brood was most likely a year or two younger than himself) had grown accustomed to greeting old acquaintances warily, affecting a cheery oblivion to twisted features, missing limbs and wrecked minds. With the Stretton reputation for pugnacity, Redfyre prepared himself to meet one who had led from the front and suffered the consequences. The surprise, for him, was that one

of their number would have found the offer of a classical music concert ticket alluring. Or that his aunt would have considered a Stretton a likely recipient. He'd have thought those boys would have risen to nothing more demanding than a medley of Gilbert and Sullivan tunes belted out by a Royal Navy band.

Redfyre instantly scolded himself for his snobbery and his baseless pre-judgement. His aunt knew what she was doing. Always. And she had been right in his case, certainly—he knew and loved every item on the program. Though the organ was his favourite instrument, this pairing with the trumpet caused him some concern. Would a solitary piece of brass be up to the job of accompanying the magnificent medieval forest of pipes lodged up in the loft above the heads of the congregation?

He opened his program to check the credentials of the bold trumpeter and read with surprise and some disquiet the name of the soloist.

Good Lord! Was it possible? Could the audience be aware?

He looked about him, seeing the usual shining anticipation of a well-to-do Cambridge gathering. They were smiling and chattering in low voices. They must all have read the name, yet no objector had stamped out in protest, tearing up his ticket, wondering out loud what the world was coming to. The inspector's antennae constantly twitched in response to the slightest threat to public order, and he knew better than most with what speed an altercation could break out, even in this civilised town. It was, after all, full of men and women who liked the sound of their own voices and knew how to use them to good—or mischievous—effect. Debating, protesting, lampooning, even the occasional hanging-in-effigy from lampposts were skills they enjoyed and practiced, and on this occasion, someone had provided them with an irresistible target for protest.

Redfyre was struck by an awful thought—an unworthy one. Bloody old Aunt Hetty! Eyes, ears and trouble-making tongue

of Cambridge society that she was, could she have got wind of an undercover plot to disrupt proceedings? The Cambridge police had dealt with several outbreaks of civic disorder in the last few months. Heads had been cracked, blood spilled, holding cells overcrowded and the reputation of the Force called into question most eloquently in the newspapers. It was clear to Redfyre that, after years of quiet, an ugly altercation was bubbling up. Town versus Gown, Worker versus Employee, Male versus Female and Everyone versus Undergraduates—all were on the menu. Small provocations could blaze up into violent scuffles within minutes, and regardless of whichever factions had lined up to do battle, the one certain outcome was that the police would find themselves in the middle of it, the unwilling magnet of ire from both sides and the condemnation of the press.

He could well imagine Hetty, over a pre-dinner sherry, grandly reassuring some college bigwig: “Don’t worry, Master, I’m sure your fears are groundless, but just in case, may I offer to put my nephew into a strategic position on the night? In mufti, of course—we wouldn’t want to frighten the horses with the sight of a uniform . . . No, I’m sure the Detective Inspector will be delighted.”

He got to his feet, ostensibly using the last few minutes to stretch his legs. He swept the rows behind him with the mild, enquiring eye of a gentleman looking for acquaintances amongst the audience. He was even lucky enough to spot a chap he’d been at school with and gave him a swift, cheery salute. He did not, however, salute or even signal recognition of the sharp features and supercilious smile of a neatly suited representative of the *Cambridge Oracle* seated six rows behind him. Not their music critic, he noted, but their chief crime reporter. Apart from that discordant note, he was pleased to see no sign of flags or placards. No visible weaponry, apart from the hatpins still favoured by the older women.

He was being overcautious. This was a chapel, after all—a consecrated building. Behaviour would be nothing less than respectful. Nevertheless, Redfyre found his eyes flicking over the exits and counting the number of college officials on duty. It was when he found himself calculating the defensive possibilities of the organ loft as a last bastion—*Stand by to retreat on the loft!*—that he acknowledged he was being ridiculous. He forgave himself and grinned. Just let 'em try!

“Never take sides, my boy!” had been the constant advice of his boss, Superintendent MacFarlane. But he had no doubt as to where his loyalties would lie if things turned nasty. Anyone attempting to cause distress to a musician would run into Redfyre’s sword arm. The arm would be flourishing a warrant card rather than a weapon, but it would be effective.

Two minutes to go and still the seat next to his was empty. Evidently, another of Hetty’s victims had rebelled against her press-gang tactics at the last minute. He speculated briefly once again on Hetty’s odd choice of companion for the evening. Had she planned to supply him with a strapping great bully to act as his lieutenant? It was possible . . . and inconvenient. Redfyre preferred to work alone. He was relieved that the seat remained unclaimed. He could enjoy the performance without the need for dutiful conversation with someone he knew he ought to remember—someone whose last memory of *him* could well be a black eye or worse. Redfyre had uncomfortable flashes of memory of a scene where, small, scared and deserted by his brothers, he’d been trapped with his back to the orchard wall by a pack of blond tormentors. His hosts, in full cry, had pelted him with windfall apples as hard as pebbles until, blinded in one eye but roaring defiance, he’d stormed forward with fists and feet flying, with much damage done to both sides before he’d been rescued by the chance appearance of the garden boy.

Jonas. Redfyre still remembered his name. Would never

forget it. Jonas had put his stalwart frame firmly between the adversaries and threatened, with remarkable aplomb for his fifteen years, to tell Grandpa Stretton that Master Wulfie and his pack had attacked a guest and messed up the apple orchard. He didn't need to tell them that that was a beating offense. Nor did he need to mention that Grandpa Stretton would always take the word of the gardening staff before that of tale-tellers. They'd tested that out, to their discomfort, before. The gang ran off, shrieking blood-curdling threats, in search of other amusements. Young Jonas had turned to the injured boy and told him with surprising tenderness in his rough country voice, "Here, take this hanky. Go to the kitchen and ask Gertie to take a look at that eye. Never let 'em see you cry, lad! They'll tear you to bits, them little old scallywags. You were doing the right thing. The only thing." That was the first male kindness Redfyre had encountered, and he could still recall the reassuring firmness of the rough hand that grasped his, hauled him to his feet and dusted him down.

He could never be certain, but he'd always counted that as the moment when his picture of himself changed. Perhaps it happened to all eight-year-old boys? But after the rescue, he determined he would no longer be the smallest and weakest. He would be the one who helped up the fallen and encouraged the despairing, he'd decided sentimentally. "Bless you, Jonas," he murmured, half in thought, half in prayer, "but you passed on a burden I've never quite been able to put down. And here I am, still hefting it."

At the last permissible moment, there was a scampering down the aisle, and a sides-man, face frozen in disapproval, ushered Eadwig the Unknown into the aisle-side seat next to Redfyre.

Cold fingers reached out and grasped his hand in a firm handshake. "John Redfyre? Earwig. How d'ye do? Must be

twenty years, eh? Talk in the interval. I think the players are about to make an appearance.”

Redfyre stared, speechless for a moment with astonishment. “But . . . but you’re a girl!” he heard himself burble.

The slender, fair-haired creature, silk- and fur-clad and scented lightly with Mitsouko, batted mascaraed lashes at him. “You noticed at once!” She smiled a smile wicked with lip rouge and twisted with sarcasm. “Hetty warned me you were a detective. What were you expecting?”

The inspector rallied. “The clue’s in the name. Some evidence of wealth and war—an arms dealer, perhaps? A flint-eyed gent, lighting his *Romeo e Julieta* with a rolled-up fiver?”

Earwig laughed. Her laughter frothed and gurgled like champagne being poured by a generous hand.

Redfyre was charmed, but someone hissed “Shhh!” in reprimand from behind.

Earwig turned her head and quelled the hiss with a har-rumph: “I say! Do settle down, gentlemen!”

THE YOUNG ORGANIST entered the chapel from a door on the right. Clearly easy with an appearance before even an experienced audience, he came forward and acknowledged the welcome he was given with a wide smile, a bow and a flick of luxuriant, over-long chestnut hair. A splendid figure, Redfyre thought, and he twitched an eyebrow at Earwig, inviting her to share his appreciation.

“Goodness! He’s pulling out all the stops tonight!” she chuckled under cover of the applause and dug him in the ribs to underline her joke. “That gown! What is it? Cream damask lined with cherry satin? Remind me to ask the name of his tailor.”

“It’s his festal gown. Only paraded on certain days of the year, and this isn’t one of them. Dr. Coote must have been

granted special dispensation to wear it for Advent in the name of entertainment. Good—it certainly cheers up the troops!”

Coote raised his head and gathered the attention of the distant back row, sweeping up and reflecting the warm anticipation of the crowd, before introducing himself. Redfyre checked his program: Christopher Coote, Doctor of Music. A talent from his early years, apparently. College choir boy and organist who was beginning to make a name for himself on the international circuit. Redfyre noted that he made no mention of his growing fame in his introduction, and yet he managed somehow to bring it to mind by referring, with some fervour, to his frequent appearances in this, his own college. He implied that, however strong the attractions of the venerable organs of Paris, Amsterdam and Vienna—all yearning for his touch, apparently—his Christmas would be incomplete without an interlude on his home instrument. His audience was charmed and oddly flattered.

And Christopher was delighted to be sharing the platform this year, he confided, with an astonishingly able musician, a rising star with whom he'd had the privilege of scoring pieces of Handel, Bach and Mozart for their two instruments. Rarely heard playing together, the organ and trumpet gave forth an inspiring sound. They were to experience an evening of spine-tingling harmonies, surprising interpretations of well-loved themes, but above all, music very much in tune with the season. His voice took on a jovial medieval throatiness as he promised them “a right merrie noyse.”

Coote moved back to the door, opened it with a flourish and, at last, brought the soloist before the audience. He stood back, the better to assess their reaction.

All had read the program, all had been prepared to see on stage that extreme rarity: a female trumpeter.

A species as rare as the black-tailed godwit in these parts.

No verifiable sightings ever made in the east of England. It was rumoured that they existed, but no one Redfyre knew had actually clapped eyes on a living, breathing specimen. People had sisters whose best friend's cousin swore that she'd seen one at the Wigmore Hall—or was it the Albert Hall?—before the War. On reading her name, Redfyre had tried, but not managed, to censor the ribald old men's club piece of guidance on choice of instrument for musical daughters: "Remember, now! You are to have no truck with any instrument you have to put in your mouth or between your thighs, Amelia!" And, strangely, the world had complied, as Redfyre knew of no female cellists, either.

What had the audience expected? A doughty, middle-aged dame, freethinking and determined to outdo her male counterparts? Yes! She'd be clad in rusty black taffeta down to her sturdy ankles, and her gaze would be as steely as her instrument. Undoubtedly a suffragist, Redfyre had surmised. And yet, the name had not rung a bell with him when he'd called to mind his gallery of female firebrands about Cambridge. Not a name he would have forgotten: Juno Proudfoot. Now, that was a name that announced a lady who would put up with no nonsense. Reassuringly classical. Yes, a Cambridge audience would be very ready to give the lady a sympathetic hearing. She was probably the daughter or wife of one of the assembled dignitaries.

No one had expected a Florentine angel straight from the walls of the Uffizi to step shyly on stage. The beauty and grace of the young woman who now, holding her instrument by her side, stood bowing and smiling, drew first a stunned silence, then a vigorous clapping. Hair the colour of silver gilt coiled about her head in a style that would have had Fra Angelico running for his paints; pale blue eyes glinting with mischief in the candle light; her dress a slip of white silk in the Greek style,

which clung in a daring way to the contours of her lithe figure. The girl was very definitely not wearing a corset.

“So that’s Juno!” Earwig commented under cover of the thunderous applause. “Scheming Queen of Olympus, huh? Looks more like an apprentice Aphrodite to me!” To make herself heard, she leaned close to Redfyre, her lips brushing his ear, her fringe tangling with his eyelashes. His head was beginning to spin. Angels to right of him, angels to left. He was caught in a heavenly pincer movement.

“Lord!” Earwig made a second assault on his ear. “What an elf! She doesn’t look strong enough to blow out the candles on her birthday cake!”

“I’ll say! Let alone survive two hours competing with a pneumatically powered pipe organ,” Redfyre agreed politely. “Recently re-voiced,” he added, reading from his program notes. “Will she have the puff?”

“You must avert your eyes, Inspector, if a Hummel crescendo proves too demanding. I’m not sure that wisp of silk that passes for a bodice can cope with the lung expansion, in addition to accommodating a not-inconsequential bosom,” she hissed under cover of the over-lengthy applause.

Redfyre was stunned by the boldness of the remark—he’d have thought it rather salty coming from one of his male friends—but he’d learned how to respond to Anglo-Saxon challenge. Go on the attack at once. Fists, apples, deception—use whatever came to hand. He reached for an overconfident statement, not to say a blatant lie. “Lovely gown! A Captain Molyneux confection, if I’m not mistaken? Stout English seams by stout English seamstresses. The good captain will not let her down. Or out,” he said repressively.

THE PROGRAM GOT underway with the Handel trumpet concerto, a choice of opener designed to reassure by

its familiarity that all was well. Here was a confident player able to take her place on any concert platform. Juno's unspoken message to the audience was, *You've all heard this before. You know how it should sound. Now listen again!*

An astonishing performance. The thunderous applause that followed brought a flush to her cheek and a smile to her lips. Redfyre was glad she would never overhear the remark (kindly meant) from the gentleman sitting behind him to his wife: "Great Heavens, Edna! Shut your eyes and you'd never know it wasn't a man playing!" Juno was emboldened to approach the rail, the better to take in both sides of the audience to make her own introduction to the next item on the program.

Earwig appeared disconcerted by this manoeuvre. She had begun to mumble a warning between her teeth. Leaning closer, Redfyre made out, "No, Juno darling! Not too close . . . Oh, do watch it!" Then, to Redfyre, a hasty, "So sorry, John! I have vertigo—rather disabling vertigo. It's so bad, I can't even bear to see others approach a drop."

"Then close your eyes," he advised, clapping heartily. "I'll tell you when to open them."

The angel's speaking voice did not disappoint. He'd anticipated the deep yet penetrating tone, bearing in mind her extraordinary lung capacity but the voice was also warm and intelligent. She spoke at an easy pace, giving just the right amount of information to what she assumed to be a knowledgeable audience. Having promised a piece of everyone's favourite Haydn concerto to follow, she paused and ran a quizzical eye over the rows. As though they had somehow earned her trust, she took a step even closer to the edge. (Earwig shuddered.) Head tilted slightly in a conspiratorial attitude, she spoke again, delivering an apparently unplanned confidence.

"Forgive me. I should have checked that the acoustics are all that one would wish . . ."

A concert audience was not accustomed to being consulted on such matters, but they responded at once. Smiles and grunts of approval broke out. A few soldierly thumbs were raised in reassurance. One daring and public-spirited chap even got to his feet and chirruped his assessment: Here, in the back row, apparently, the sound was well balanced and crystal-clear. Though perhaps he could use this opportunity to tell Cootie he was coming on a little heavy with the left foot?

Juno took this in the spirit in which it was offered—with amusement and an ironic bow. Redfyre was beginning to think that this musical sprite had all the aplomb of a Marie Lloyd facing a rowdy music hall audience. And they were readily seduced, caught by the casual intimacy of the exchange and warmed by the spirit of Yuletide. She held them in the palm of her hand, John reckoned. He was delighted when she decided to prolong the moment by giving an impromptu introduction to her instrument. She held it aloft and told them briefly how the shape had evolved and why it had started life as the voice of war. She conceded that, as a woman trumpeter, she was certainly a rarity, but she was not the first; she had been preceded by about three thousand years by the warrior women of the ancient world, the Amazons. There was a particularly lively depiction of one such giving a good blast on a very recognizable instrument on a black figure vase in the Fitzwilliam Museum, if they cared to go along and have a look.

“And up here, on high in this magnificent loft,” she confided, “I’m taken back to an earlier time, a time when this heroic little instrument had its part to play in every citizen’s life. To the very beginning of the trumpet’s transformation from clarion of war into the supple and sophisticated concert performer we’re hearing this evening. I’m taken back in particular to the watch towers of Medieval Europe. Mounted above the city gates in their wooden eyries, the watchmen would sound

the trumpet at dusk and dawn to announce the opening and closing of the gates. And sometimes, more urgently, to warn of danger.” She asked, like a kindly school mistress: “I wonder if anyone has heard the ‘Hejnal Mariacki’ played from the watch tower of Krakow?”

An excited young man in the third row was so carried away as to put up his hand. This was instantly hauled down with an admonishing cluck by his mother, seated next to him.

“Oh, good! Then you’ll recognise this,” Juno said, involving the lad and melting away his embarrassment at being caught showing a schoolboy’s eagerness. “It’s the warning a trumpeter of Krakow gave in the thirteenth century when he caught sight of a Mongol horde riding fast towards the city.” She put the trumpet to her lips and there blared out a rousing five-note anthem, which she repeated. When she reached the tenth note, to everyone’s alarm, it soared out of control and was abruptly cut off, sending an almost human shriek reverberating around the beamed ceiling.

The audience was aghast. They looked up anxiously, fearing she had played a wrong note. Had she got her tongue stuck? Trapped a finger?

Juno staggered for a moment, took an uncertain step closer to the edge of the platform, wobbled, then regained her balance. As her eyes lifted to follow the wounded note into the ether she slowly lowered the trumpet and with her left hand clutched at her throat.

With perfect timing, a second before Redfyre and other alert ex-military men on their feet and poised to storm the organ loft could dash forward, she straightened up, put out a quieting hand and spoke to them again. “At this point, the sentry was shot in the throat by a Mongol archer,” she explained. “Or so the story goes. An unduly harsh judgement, you might say, on a poor chap bravely doing his duty! And the townsfolk agreed,

since the death note, in all its discord, has been played at dawn and dusk down the centuries to this day. And we remember that watchman.”

A general release from suspense flooded through the audience at her sly humour and, under cover of the laughter and movement, Redfyre took hold of the small but strong hand that had clamped itself in terror onto his left arm and forgotten to let go. He detached it gently, patted it reassuringly and returned it to her lap.

“But the story of the trumpet bounds on,” Juno pursued her theme, “particularly in the war-loving lands of the north. The mayor of one of these tough little towns noted down in the civic annals the very beginnings of the war trumpet’s elevation to musical instrument. He was there on the spot!” she said, consumed with wonder and enthusiasm, further enmeshing her listeners. “This clerkly figure heard it and recognised the significance of what he was hearing. *‘When our watchmen,’* he wrote, *‘in the festive season play a sacred tune from the tower, the citizens gather to listen. We are very moved and imagine we can hear the angels singing.’* The mouthpiece of war and alarm had so sweetened and softened it was thought to be a voice from heaven.”

She left a pause, knowing well that she had just transported every man and woman in the audience back through the centuries to a chilly central European Christmas, witnessing the birth of a new and sublime music. Then, involving them all in a confidence: “They’re up there tonight, you know—the angels!” Like the rest of the listeners, Redfyre couldn’t resist glancing up into the soaring oak beams, but caught no more than the impish eye of a carved Green Man keeping watch on proceedings from his niche. He could have sworn the old Pagan mischief-maker was trying to convey a grudging admiration for a fellow agitator.

Confident that they had shared her vision, she held out an invitation impossible to resist. “And here I am in my tower, halfway to Heaven—let’s see if I can lure them down to make music with us.” Returning to her performance spot, she raised her trumpet and added whimsically over her shoulder, “So, will any Mongolian music critics in the audience kindly leave now?”

“Tell me,” Redfyre breathed into an ear that tilted readily towards him, “Exactly where did your friend acquire her stagecraft? The Royal Academy of Music, Regent’s Park, or the Royal Palace of Varieties, Clapham?”

CHAPTER 2

The first half of the concert passed swiftly, ending with rousing applause from a happy audience. Redfyre noted but did not comment on Earwig's sigh, which seemed to him to be one of relief rather than pleasure. Had he communicated his own inexplicable tension to this stranger, or had she arrived trailing clouds of concern with her?

Remembering his manners, he turned to her and asked if he might accompany her into the winter-garden anteroom where rum punch and hot mince pies (just as promised by his aunt) were being served.

Earwig looked at her wristwatch. "We have half an hour," she commented. "So, yes, thank you. Easier, I think, to catch up on twenty years over a stiff drink, though I suppose a policeman, even off-duty, will feel obliged to settle for a lemonade. It's longer than the usual interval to allow the soloist time to catch her breath and change her costume, I expect."

"I thought it was extended for purposes of gossip. So much to say! Now, *I* was quite swept away in admiration. But some will consider we have just witnessed a scandalous performance," he murmured to test her out.

She glared at him. "I challenge you to spot a single empty seat when we return for the second half! No one looks in the least likely to stomp off hissing into the chilly night."

They settled, knee to knee on little gilt chairs, eyes taking

each other's measure over a steaming glass of murkily purple liquid. Earwig tried it first, grimaced and took a second, more enthusiastic sip. Redfyre decided that, seen full-face, she was even more enchanting than in profile. Her short, thick hair had been Marcel-waved by an expert hand, but he was pleased to note that it was escaping the restraints of the Amami setting lotion and bouncing back into a natural exuberance to rival a feather duster. The flaxen hair he remembered had darkened to the deep gold of a newly minted George the Fifth penny. Her eyes were not the blue he had expected, but the more nuanced greenish-brown of a cat he'd been fond of. He remembered that a brown gaze signified purring affection; a green glare warned of imminent and painful retribution for some fancied slight.

"This is rather good," she pronounced. "Brandy base, not rum, I'd say. Red wine. They've managed to get their hands on some tangerines. It's well spiced—cinnamon, ginger—nice and fruity."

Redfyre recognised this for the inconsequential, nervous chatter of a stranger and was reassured. He decided to break the ice himself. "I'm puzzled! Did they keep you locked up in the nursery the day my brothers and I came to visit? On the occasion of the apple fight. I don't remember seeing you in the Stretton front line."

She nodded. "Oh, I was there all right. The smallest. I looked just like my brothers though, same haircut . . . green cord trousers and fisherman's sweater." Her grin was enchanting, full of mischief and nostalgia. "I think we kept an entire Irish fishing village busy knitting jumpers for us for years. I wore my brothers' hand-me-downs, and being the youngest, I was always the scruffiest, so people thought I must be a boy, too. My name gave no clue. I'm not sure my parents were even certain who I was. In any case, they only knew how to bring up boys—not

very well, at that—and knowing nothing different, I just accepted it.”

“But you kicked over the traces rather emphatically, somewhere along the line? I like the change! Though now I’m filled with guilt that perhaps, in all innocence, I may have aimed a windfall, or even worse, a fist, at that female nose.”

The grin widened. “Heavens, no! I had more sense than to line up with the gang. I watched in a cowardly way from behind a tree, and when it dawned on me that Wulfie seriously meant to kill you, I ran off, grabbed the garden boy and asked him to come and stop the fight.”

“Jonas did indeed save me from a battering,” Redfyre said. “I add you to my list of guardian angels. Thank you! But tell me—Wulfie? Older than me by four or five years, I’d guess. Did he have a good war? Such an enterprising and belligerent character. He must have put heart and soul into whatever part he played.” Disconcerted by an uncomfortable silence, he added with a lighthearted grimace, “You’re about to tell me he’s now a major-general?”

“He’s a thug, you’re right. Martial to the core. And he . . . um, yes, you could say he had a good war. Much decorated. Reached the rank of lieutenant-colonel.” She looked thoughtfully at her punch, took another fortifying gulp and added, defiantly, “Though fighting for the other side.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Rifles regiment, Hetty tells me you served with? Sniping? You could well have had Wulfie in the sights of your Enfield! Weren’t you on the Marne? The Race to the Sea? Well, Wulfie was there too. Trying to stop you getting there. In a Saxon cavalry regiment, harrying British troops. The Tenth Magdeburg Hussars, raised in Saxony.”

Redfyre was lost for words, finally murmuring: “So, Oberstleutnant Stretton was a dreaded Uhlan? Lancers regiment.

Polish originally. Yes, we encountered some of those south of Rheims.” His eyes clouded at disturbing memories. “The finest of horsemen. The most fearless. The most savage. Armed with sabers, pistols and lances. Ten foot long steel lances flying a pennant below the tip. Though those medieval weapons were swiftly jettisoned. They didn’t survive contact with an equally determined French cavalry fighting hand to hand in the narrow lanes of their own native land.” He’d reduced her to an embarrassed silence and spoke again more lightly, “Well, well! I can’t imagine how Wulfie came to be recruited to the Kaiser’s cause in Saxony. Magdeburg, you say? Isn’t that way over to the east in Prussia, seat of Otto the Great, Holy Roman Emperor and all that?”

“It’s on the River Elbe. A straight run down the river to the Baltic Sea. Next stop: Denmark and then England.”

“Ah. Not so distant if you think like a Viking,” he commented.

“Exactly. Wulfie . . . we . . . have . . . er, had cousins there. In Magdeburg. He spent every summer before the war there. He got on well with them. So well *he* signed up when *they* signed up, um . . .”

“In the spirit of the ‘pals regiments,” Redfyre supplied, attempting to cover his intense dislike of the entire Stretton clan. “Well, bully for Wulfie!”

“But our other brother, Aethelstan, chose to return home before hostilities broke out. He joined the Cambridgeshire Regiment,” she added. Her tone, low and awkward, told him she’d picked up his sarcasm at once. She knew that her words did not go anywhere towards absolving her eldest brother of the supreme crime of treason.

“Wulfie had the good sense to stay over there in Germany when it was all over, I hope,” Redfyre said coldly.

“Of course. He’d have been hanged, drawn and quartered or

suffered whatever punishment they dole out in these enlightened times if he'd returned."

"I believe it's back against a wall of the Tower, facing a firing squad."

"Yes. Well, as you can imagine, Father went quite mad. A lot of: 'Never darken our doors again!' Went on for years. Wulfie didn't lose touch though. Pa refused to open his letters, but he didn't forbid me from reading them and passing on the gist. But in the family, we don't talk about it. I'd be obliged if you could keep Wulfie's indiscretion to yourself."

"Indiscretion! I'd have said: infamy, treachery, utter disgrace," Redfyre thought, but aloud, he said stiffly: "Of course. But I do wonder why you decided to confide in *me*? We've never been chums."

Earwig nodded. The conversation was clearly going exactly where she had planned that it should. He noted that her response was instant. "There *is* a hidden motive in seeing you this evening, as you seem to have guessed. I wanted to ask your advice. I was going to get around to it by a circuitous route, but those sharp eyes of yours tell me you're a step ahead and perhaps I should be prepared for that."

Redfyre was not an easy subject for flattery, and he didn't warn her that he was two steps ahead of where she assumed him to be. He listened, sporting an encouraging smile.

"Attacking you in the orchard was the first misjudgement of Wulfie's life. He'd never been defeated or thwarted before in any of his enterprises, and there'd been lots before you squared up to him. He thought himself invincible. It was a silly little incident, but he never forgot it, and he's a man like no other to bear a grudge. He made us children all swear a blood oath that we'd have revenge."

"Blood oath?" Redfyre asked in disbelief. He was unable to keep the distaste from his voice. "Bit of an overreaction, surely?"

“You don’t know the half of it! We each had to prick our thumb until it bled, suck some out and spit it onto the corpse of a crow while saying your name and uttering a black oath.”

“Ouch! Don’t, please, repeat the dire phrase. You may strike me dead before I’ve finished this delicious brew.” Redfyre saw that she was relieved that he was taking this for the nonsense it was.

“Still, that’s Wulfie. Loves drama. He could have written the script for the *Götterdämmerung*! But I speak too harshly of him. Black sheep that he is, he does have redeeming features.” She countered Redfyre’s sardonic expression. “No—he does have a sense of humour. And his troubles in the war have given him a certain maturity. Like a good wine, it sometimes takes a few years in bottle at the right temperature before the true character comes out.”

Redfyre had already seen where this story was leading and thought it was high time to cut it short. “I see. Tell me, when is he expected back in England?”

She gasped. Rather too dramatically, he felt. “Ah—yes. At any moment. My father, whose heir is still Wulfie, is . . . dying. At least, he’s announced that he’s dying. It’s Wulfie’s intention to return, rebuild bridges and make sure of his inheritance.”

“Why didn’t your father change his will if he was so displeased with his oldest son? He has several in reserve to choose from, I understand.”

“He’s never mentioned it. I’ve no idea what the terms are, nor has anyone I’ve spoken to. But daddy’s lawyer has been about the place quite often recently. Nearly as frequent a visitor as the doctor. Getting things in order, you’d say. So there you are. Trouble ahead! I thought I should give you fair warning, since you’re very much a local figure—and a policeman. That really is something Wulfie would despise. As you’ve guessed,

he's on his way back home from Germany. You could well run into each other. I'm probably being unnecessarily cautious about this, but, well, it's the least I could do! I can't guarantee there'll be a Jonas on hand at the next encounter."

"What a load of piffle!" was Redfyre's judgement, but he censored it and replied pleasantly. "No need to fret, Miss Stretton, I'm sure. Your brother and I are both grown up, and we've both learned to survive. I've worn the bullseye on my back many times and lived to tell the tale! I'm sure Aethelwulf won't want to draw the attention of the law down onto himself, bearing in mind the personal circumstances you've revealed to me. He'll keep his head well below the parapet. So unless you ask me to tea again, our paths will never cross. We move in different circles socially, so the worst that can occur is that we will encounter each other by chance one dark night down by the river in Laundress Lane and only one of us will make it out to the Anchor for a restorative pint."

"Laundress Lane? Sinister little alleyway! Wulfie wouldn't be caught dead or alive down there. Not his style at all. No, you're more likely to meet by appointment on Jesus Green, at dawn—your choice of weapon, a doctor and two seconds standing about, biting their nails."

Catching a genuine agitation disguised by frivolity, he gave her a warm smile and told her, "All will be well, Miss Stretton. But feel free to contact me again. I'll give you my card, should anything else be troubling you."

He looked at her steadily, wondering if this was the moment she would come clean and tell him the real reason for this contrived meeting with an officer of the Cambridge CID, but she merely smiled, her cat's eyes narrowing briefly before she accepted a mince pie from the plate he held out. All in good time. He guessed that her real problem, the one that had provoked Hetty's strange ticket distribution, remained undisclosed,

was still worrying her and, in some way he had not yet fathomed, involved *him*.

THE SECOND HALF of the concert took on a party mood from the first moment of Juno's reappearance on the platform. She had changed into a shiny, dark-red ankle-length gown, low cut, and the white slopes of her upper bosom were covered with an unashamedly extravagant piece of costume jewellery: a cascade of rubies in a gold setting. On her head, in place of a formal tiara, she'd jokingly placed a wreath of dark holly enlivened by bright red berries. The Angel of Purity had changed into the Spirit of Christmas, and the audience responded to the change with warm applause. The program for this part of the evening had taken on a seasonal flavour as well, and one riotous and well-known anthem followed another. Aunt Hetty's assurance that Redfyre wouldn't be called upon to sing proved ill-founded, as after the first piece—a jolly "In Dulci Jubilo," it was clear that Juno could not rein in the audience's enthusiasm a moment longer. With perfect judgement, she invited them to join in with the words of "Deck the Halls."

Redfyre looked at Earwig and grinned in delight. He plunged in, offering up his warm baritone unselfconsciously, years of school choir training buoying him up. Earwig sang squeakily, hitting one note in three, he estimated. She knew all the words, but was not having the happy time that the rest of the congregation was enjoying. Carried away by the jaunty tune, the punch-fired, unbuttoned humour of the crowd and not least by the joyous trumpeting, Redfyre seized the hand next to him and boldly gave it a squeeze. She smiled nervously in acknowledgement, but delicately detached it and struggled to catch up with the chorus.

At the end of the piece he leaned to her and murmured, "I

think I must have died and gone to heaven! I don't think I want this banquet of the senses to end."

Earwig frowned and looked at her watch again. "Do you suppose they'll keep her up there playing lots of encores?" she asked, her voice thick with concern.

"No! It's hardly the Alhambra. It's a Cambridge crowd. Well-mannered and aware of how exhausting playing the trumpet is. They won't insist."

The close of the program was, like the rest of it, well managed by both audience and players. There were polite but enthusiastic cries for more, and these were dealt with by a smiling Christopher Coote, who stepped forward to explain that Miss Proudfoot had borne the long program with exemplary stamina, but there was a limit to even her prowess and lung power. Nevertheless, he knew (he turned to Juno for a nod of acknowledgement) that she would not be able to tear herself from such a wonderfully responsive audience without leaving them with one last bonbon. Were there any suggestions?

As skilled as Juno at handling the crowd, he skated over all the well-known tunes proposed from below until he heard the one he was waiting for. "Hark, The Herald Angels Sing,' did someone say? Excellent suggestion! That's it. First and last verses."

FIVE JOYOUS MINUTES later, that was that. The musicians waved a final goodbye to their noisily appreciative audience and remained up in their tower, pottering about packing up their instruments. Wasting time, Redfyre guessed, until the crowd had put on its gloves and scarves and moved out, calling to friends, giving and accepting invitations for nightcaps and a little last hot savoury on toast. "Welsh rarebit do you, Wilfred? A little oxtail soup? Cook's waiting up. Join me in a snifter? You'd be very welcome," Redfyre overheard behind him,

and would at that moment have gladly swapped places with Wilfred, whoever he was. Two by two, they began to shuffle out, still humming the ancient tunes and pausing in the archway to run appreciative eyes over the medieval fairytale setting the frost-spangled courtyard offered them. Following the pale gold puffballs of light from the line of Victorian lamps leading to the great gate, they began the tramp back to the hearths they'd left carefully banked and guarded to provide a warm welcome home.

So, Aunt Henrietta! What on earth had been the point of this unexpected evening? He could only infer: matchmaking. Another failed effort to fix him up with a suitable girl. Fearing worse, his suspicious nature had unnecessarily put him through two hours of increasing tension and, while he'd much enjoyed Juno Proudfoot's performance, he now found himself with a prickly stranger on his hands. On his arm, rather. He extended the arm with automatic good manners to escort her from the chapel. To a taxi? Had Daddy sent the car for her? That would be the ideal end to the evening, releasing him to wave goodbye and nip into the Blue Boar for a pint on the way home. The singing had given him quite a thirst. He was deciding between Greene King and Guinness as they began to move forward at the pace of the crowd around them when his pleasant state of anticipation was shattered by a piercing dread.

The evening was not yet over, and these last few moments when crowds were milling about in an uncontrolled way with all the exits wide open could be exploited.

Redfyre would never rightly know what instinct, what subliminal sound had triggered his reaction. He dropped Earwig's arm and pushed his way towards the staircase to the organ loft. The door was closed, the brocade hangings in place over it. Fools! The two players would at any moment now be attempting to come down those high, narrow stairs in pitch blackness.

Some attendant should have eased forward, cleared the exit and brought in a light as soon as it was evident they had reached the end of the performance. He tore back the drapery and seized the handle to the door.

The thud and the scream from the stairs rang out as he threw the door open and stood in alarm, trying to penetrate the darkness and make sense of the series of bumps and jagged cries cascading towards him. He rushed at the staircase, blindly reaching out his hands to break the momentum of whatever alarming avalanche was about to engulf him. To his horror, before he could climb a step, he was knocked backward, his outstretched arms filled with the slippery, satin-clad form and flopping rag-doll limbs of Juno Proudfoot, falling headfirst, bloodied and senseless, to the ground.