1

Just a few miles beyond Innsbruck, the train suddenly comes to a juddering halt. My book, a volume of fairytales, slips from my lap to the floor. The man sitting opposite picks it up. He's middle-aged, balding, wearing a jacket of mud-coloured flannel. As he gives the book back to me, the damp skin of his hand brushes mine, and I wonder if this is intentional. I feel my face flaring red.

'Thank you,' I say, in German.

His eyes are on my face; he has a hard, greedy look. I've noticed this already – the way men on the Continent stare at you. Hungrily – as though you're a special, shiny present, something intended just for them, that they can't wait to unwrap.

'You are English, fräulein?' he asks me.

Not, I hope, because of my accent, which I pride myself on, but because I'm reading an English book. Maybe, too, because of something about my appearance – my skin that flushes too readily, my fair unruly hair. The way I'm dressed as well, perhaps – the Tana Lawn blouse and pleated skirt; the sensible lace-up shoes, because my mother says you should always wear comfortable shoes for travelling.

'Yes, I am,' I say.

'Are you travelling far?'

'I'm going to Vienna.'

I roll the word around my mouth like a secret caramel, relishing its sweetness.

'You have been there before?'

'No. Never.'

'Vienna is a wonderful city,' he says.

'Yes. Everyone says that.'

'But – if you don't mind me saying, fräulein – you look very young to be travelling on your own . . .'

'I'm seventeen,' I tell him, a little defiantly.

He looks at the book in my hand.

'You like fairytales?' he says.

'Yes, I love them.' Then I worry this sounds too naive. 'The thing is, there's a little boy who I'll be teaching English to. He's only four. I was looking for a story I could maybe read to him.'

All at once I feel myself blushing again: I've said too much.

'Well, the little boy is most fortunate in his teacher, fräulein,' says the man.

I shrug slightly. I don't know how to respond.

The only other person in our compartment is a rather plump middle-aged woman. She has a matronly air – loden skirt, lisle stockings – and she has sensibly brought a picnic in a biscuit tin, little packets of food wrapped up in greaseproof paper – bratwurst, brown bread, some rather bland-looking cheese. She seems unperturbed by the sudden stop; she chews on stolidly through her picnic. But when the guard passes in the corridor, she gets to her feet and slides open the half-glazed door.

'Would you mind telling us what's going on?' she asks him.

She's brisk. She expects to be listened to. I wonder if she's a schoolteacher.

The guard frowns, a shadow moving over his face.

'Some idiot went and jumped in front of the train,' he tells her.

A thrill of horror goes through me; and then a wash of sadness,

grief for this stranger who died – and who met his death in such a terrible way.

I don't think the matronly woman feels this. She has a no-nonsense pinch to her mouth.

'Will we be stuck here for long?' she asks him, rather crossly.

'They have to clear the line,' the guard tells her.

I don't want to think about this – about what they have to clear.

She gives an extravagant sigh and takes her seat again.

The man in the brown flannel jacket leans towards me. 'So, fräulein, are you going to study in Vienna?'

'Yes, I am,' I tell him. 'I'm going to study piano. At the Academy of Music and the Performing Arts.'

I love saying these words: they're like a poem to me.

'You are obviously very talented,' says the man, with too much enthusiasm. I feel there's something salacious lurking under his words.

I get up, murmuring that I'll try to discover what's happening. It's just a pretext really, a way to end the conversation, because the man makes me uncomfortable. I step into the corridor and look out of the window. But the track curves round – I can't see to the front of the train.

Instead, I stare out at the view – the vast granite mountains, with streaks of glittery snow at their peaks; the steep, slanting forests on their lower slopes; a few scattered villages. Above, the dazzling autumn sky, its depth on depth of colour; and far off in all that clarity, a bird of prey soaring, silver touching its wings. The corridor stinks of sweat and cigarette smoke, and I daringly open the window a little. The freshest air floats in, smelling of sappy grasses, the delicate pollens of wild flowers, the resins of the pine forests; hinting at the chill blue scent of distant snows. I breathe it in, the scent of the future; I relish all of it – the smell of the air, the brightness, the soaring bird, the perfect day. On the calendar on the wall of my bedroom in Brockenhurst, Hampshire, this date is ringed in red crayon. *8 September 1937*. The day my life really begins.

At long last, with a clank and a judder, the train gets going again. We pass a knot of people gathered at the side of the track – men in uniform, policemen, who have an urgent, serious look. There's something scattered on the ground, like bits of soiled, reddened cloth, that I don't want to look at too closely.

I stay out in the corridor for a while. I draw the clean air deep into my lungs, and think about the poor person who died in front of the train. I can't understand it. Why would anyone do such a thing? Why would anyone put an end to their life, when the world is so full of joy?

2

My name is Stella Virginia Whittaker, and I can't remember a time when I didn't want to be a pianist.

My mother tried to discourage me; she'd been a good pianist herself when she was younger, and she said the piano was a very hard taskmaster. If you didn't practise for just one day, your fingers would stiffen, your technique started to go. But I wanted this so desperately – to make this magic with my hands. I pleaded, begged, entreated – till in the end, when I was seven, she organised lessons for me.

I was a conscientious pupil; I worked hard. At school I was shy and awkward, the sort of child that people didn't really notice at all, and growing shyer as I grew older. At grammar school always blushing, always convinced I'd said the wrong thing; and gangly, all elbows and knees, too angular and clumsy. I was bullied by the bold girls – the girls who were sleek and sporty, who had loud confident voices and boyfriends, who didn't like books. I was picked on, called names; sometimes dragged off to the shrubbery behind the bicycle sheds, where I'd be held down and stung with stinging nettles.

All the time I worked at the piano. Whenever I sat at the

keyboard I'd feel happiness descend on me, like a cloak of some enchanted fabric, wrapping me closely around.

I was chosen to play a piece in Assembly at school. I played the Beethoven Sonata in C minor, the 'Sonata Pathétique' – terrified and shaky at first, then forgetting everything but the music. I remember the utter quiet in the school hall when I played. In those moments, I knew I had found a voice, that through the piano I could say astonishing things, that when I played, people listened.

After that morning, the bullying faded away.

My teacher, Mrs Slater, encouraged me, took me to concerts. When I was fourteen, she took me to hear Dame Myra Hess play at the Mayflower Theatre in Southampton. I remember how I stared at her – this unremarkable-looking woman alone on the concert platform, bending over the keyboard like a supplicant – and in that whole vast hall, not a whisper, a murmur, a breath. She played my kind of music – Chopin, Liszt, and her celebrated adaptation of Bach's 'Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring', the sound of the music filling the hall like fine wine filling a glass. A phrase of music can sometimes seem like the answer to everything: to have the whole world contained within it. At the end of each piece, there was a brief time of hush before the applause, a little collective sigh, a moment of recognition – of holding onto the music for just a moment more. Not wanting to break the spell of it.

I wanted that. I wanted to be her; I wanted that kind of power. More than anything; more than life.

Mrs Slater had herself been taught by a legendary piano tutor, Dr Zaslavsky of the Academy in Vienna. She'd often talked about Dr Zaslavsky: he came from a famously musical Jewish family, and had emigrated from Odessa, she said. On one of his visits to England, she arranged for me to play for him.

When I arrived at Mrs Slater's, shaking slightly with nerves, he was waiting in her music room. A small hunched man, quite old, with a drift of white hair, his body crooked as a thorn tree; Mrs Slater had said he suffered from arthritis, and I could see how

deformed his hands were, how he couldn't play any more. It was startling to see, in his worn, wizened face, the eyes of a much younger man – black as sloes, and fierce with life.

I played 'April' by John Ireland, and a Chopin Etude. I was utterly unaware of myself once I started to play, just feeling the flow of the music, in spite of everything that hung on this. He listened in absolute silence. At the end he said nothing but, 'Thank you, Fräulein Whittaker.' I left, dejected. I was sure I hadn't been good enough.

Later that day, Mrs Slater called at our house, pink and vivid with excitement. 'He *loved* your playing, Stella. He *loved* it. He said you have the potential to be extremely expressive . . .' Warmth rushed through me when I heard that. 'But he feels there is something held back – that there is a kind of fear in you.' Immediately, the sense of falling inside me, all hope gone. 'He says there is no darkness in your playing. That you have to know your own darkness . . .' She looked briefly apologetic, at the very un-English flamboyance of the phrase. 'He would like you to learn to reveal more of yourself in your playing. He says you play like a talented child, not a woman.' Of course he would think that, I thought: I am just a child, really. There's so little I know of life, so little I have seen. I felt ashamed of my childishness.

And then the words that glitter still in my mind: 'He would like to help you to become the pianist you could be. He would like to take you on as his pupil, at the Academy in Vienna . . .'

My mother was worried, of course, about the international situation: Germany re-arming; the terrible civil war in Spain. And I suspected she felt I was rather young to live so far from home. But she knew this was a unique opportunity; she urgently wanted me to go. There was some money from a legacy from a great-aunt: enough for tuition and daily expenses, but not enough for my rent. So where could I stay? She talked to relatives, and to people from the congregation at church; no one had any Austrian contacts.

'Stella,' she said one morning. There were lilac smudges of

sleeplessness under her eyes. 'I don't think we can do this – I can't work out a way. I'm so sorry, darling.'

But I couldn't bear it – to come so close to this thing I so yearned for, then have it snatched away from me.

'There must be something else you could try. There *must* be. *Please*.'

There were a couple of days when she seemed to hesitate, to draw back. I'd find her sitting at the kitchen table, taking her glasses off and rubbing her fingers over her face, a nervous gesture she'd developed in the years since the death of my father. As though steeling herself to do a thing she was somehow reluctant to do.

I came on her writing a letter. She looked up at me, little frown-lines sketching a faint fleur-de-lis between her brows.

'I'm writing to Rainer and Marthe Krause – some people I knew long ago. They live in Vienna,' she told me.

The names were vaguely familiar. I remembered that when I was younger, the Krauses had always sent a card at Christmas, sometimes a picture of Vienna. Perhaps some vast Baroque palace, painted the sweet, dense colour of marzipan. My mother had told me the old Imperial buildings were all painted this exact yellow. But she must have lost touch with the Krauses: no cards had come for several years.

'Oh! That's wonderful!'

'Remember – I'm not promising anything, darling,' she said, carefully.

But I was so sure it would happen.

'How did you meet them – Rainer and Marthe?' I asked her.

There was a little pause – just for a heartbeat. She took off her glasses, and moved her hand over her face.

'It was at a house party, the year after the Great War. It was not long after I got engaged to your father,' she said.

'Was the house party at Gillingham Manor?' I asked.

She nodded.

I knew this was a big house in Somerset where she'd sometimes

stayed; she and the daughter of the family had been best friends at school. There's a photo from that time I once found hidden in her bureau. She was standing in a rose garden, her hair blowing over her face. She looked so pretty in the photograph. I'd asked why she'd never framed it, and she'd made a vague gesture and turned a little away. 'It was all so very long ago, Stella,' she'd said.

From that moment, I bent my whole will on Rainer and Marthe Krause – these unknown people who held the gold thread of my future life in their hands.

Marthe wrote back straightaway; my mother showed me the letter. I still sensed a kind of hesitation in her, not the triumph I felt – perhaps she didn't like asking for favours. And yes, they would have me to live with them; I could help look after Lukas, their little boy, who was four, and teach him English. As it happened, they'd had a woman from London living in to help with Lukas, but sadly she'd had to leave them. So this was terribly fortunate – my mother's letter had come at just the right time. This was an arrangement that could work to everyone's benefit . . .

I said a fervent prayer of thanks – that my life was all playing out as it was meant to do, the shiny path of my future spooling out before me.

So that is where I am headed, to the Krause apartment on Maria-Treu-Gasse, Josefstadt, Vienna. And, thinking of this, it's as though my life in Brockenhurst – my mother, our home, with its safety and small comforts, and the woods, the quiet streams, the heathland glazed with summer flowers – all these things are receding behind me, muted, in shades of sepia; while the train hurries me on to my future, neon-lit, glittery-bright.