

Witching Hour

“Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn and hell itself
breathes out Contagion to this world ...”

Hamlet: Act III, Scene 2

PROLOGUE 1

The Southern Front
Voroshilovgrad, Ukraine, 1942

Dusk was coming down, a late spring evening with night fast approaching, and the air mild on their faces. The pilot and navigator stood together with the other aviators at the side of the airfield without speaking. They looked on while the ground crew pulled back the camouflage netting from their aircraft. The armourers manhandled the clutches of bombs and attached them under the biplane's lower wings. The tanker lorry was huddling alongside, its hose locked onto the fuelling nozzle like an elephant's trunk. All around, other groups were busy at the same tasks. The regiment was preparing for action.

There was still just enough light to make out the dark green of the fuselage, the bold red stars with their white edging on the side and tailplane, the grey and black of the exposed radial engine and the brown of the single wooden propeller. Soon all these would merge into monochrome shades of grey.

The ground crews began hauling the bombers into place, lining them up at the side of the field, watched by the weapon technicians whose task was done. A dozen or so aircraft were now ready for taxiing onto the grass strip. The lead mechanics gestured, and the aviators began stepping forward.

This was the time of maximum nervousness. Once they were airborne all their attention would be directed to reaching the target area. They would have no room for personal anxieties.

First to mount the wing was the pilot who clambered towards the open front cockpit and climbed into the seat. The navigator followed, raising a leg over the leather-rimmed sill and dropping into place with a bump. Neither was encumbered by a parachute. At their operational altitude such luxuries were in any case impractical and would be nothing more than surplus weight. The plane's only armaments were a single rear-mounted ShKAS machine gun and six bombs, each weighing fifty or a hundred kilos. In holsters on their hips, pilot and navigator carried a Nagant revolver, intended only as a weapon of last resort if shot down. Based on past experience, no one could expect to survive that eventuality.

Now, the technicians withdrew, leaving only one mechanic standing by with the compressed air cylinder attached behind the biplane's lower wing. The pilot turned in the cockpit and made a circular motion in the air. The mechanic raised a hand and seconds later the starter motor whirred. Almost at once the engine clattered into life, its five cylinders popping and stammering on tickover as the oil warmed up, and a blast of air was thrown back from the propeller. Pilot and navigator fastened the straps of their leather helmets and pulled down their goggles. The pilot turned again and waved at the mechanic who replied with a perfunctory salute.

One by one the U-2 night bombers rolled forward onto the flare-path, gathered speed and took off. The last sight of them from the airfield was the occasional flame spitting from the exhausts. Moments later they merged almost silently into the black of the cloudless night.

Chapter 1

It began with a phone call one Saturday morning in early spring. Marnie Walker took it on her mobile, reaching into the back pocket of her jeans to fish it out. With the other hand she was holding the tiller of her narrowboat, *Sally Ann*. She took a deep breath of clean cold country air and pressed the green button. The tiny screen on the mobile showed the name: HEMINGWAY, Angela.

'Angela, hi. If you're phoning to try to convert me in time for Easter, you'll be disappointed.' Marnie hoped her friend could hear the smile in her voice. 'What can I do for you?'

'Where are you, Marnie?' The vicar of Marnie's home village of Knightly St John, sounded worried. 'Do I hear an engine? Are you on the boat?'

'Out for a tootle on *Sally*. Something the matter?'

'When will you be home? Are you far away?'

'We're up near Hanford, just out for the morning, back by lunchtime. Why, what's up?' A pause on the line. 'Angela?'

'I'm probably being hypersensitive, but ...'

'But what?'

'It's about the so-called Easter parade.'

'You're organising an Easter parade? I didn't think we did that in this –'

'Not me, Marnie. It's that far-right organisation ... fascists, you know ... New Force?'

'I'm not with you, Angela. Something's clearly bugging you, but where do I fit in?'

'You were involved the last time they tried to cause trouble, and frankly I couldn't think of anyone else I could turn to.' This time the pause was at Marnie's end of the line. 'Hello? Are you there, Marnie?'

'Listen, Angela. If you want to talk, why not join us for lunch?'

'I suppose ...'

'Good. We'll be back by about twelve-thirty. Meet us at the farmhouse. Okay?'

Marnie checked her watch. She was calculating journey time when she was joined on the stern deck by a thin girl with ultra-short pale blonde hair and sharp urchin-like features. This was Marnie's close friend and work assistant, Anne Price.

'Who was that?' Anne asked. 'Did I hear you talking to someone?'

'Angela, on the phone.'

'Is she hoping to save our immortal souls?'

'I think she gave up years ago, Anne.'

'So just the usual juicy gossip from the fleshpots of downtown Knightly St John, then.' Anne noticed Marnie's expression. 'Have I said the wrong thing?'

'No. it's just that Angela seems troubled. Something's bothering her.'

'Did she say what it was?'

Before Marnie could answer, a third person came up the steps from the cabin. He was tall and slim with dark hair slightly greying at the temples. Professor Ralph Lombard, a distinguished economist from Oxford, was Marnie's lover. They had been living together for the past three years. Until the previous winter they had slept aboard Ralph's boat, *Thyrsis*, and used Marnie's boat, *Sally Ann*, for eating and short trips, known as *tootles*. Ralph suspected that he was the only academic in the country who used a narrowboat as a fully-equipped floating study.

Ralph continued his research and writing on *Thyrsis*, but he and Marnie had recently moved into the house on Marnie's canalside property. Separated from the Grand Union Canal by a spinney some fifty yards deep, the cluster of buildings at Glebe Farm comprised the main house, a terrace of three cottages and various small stone barns. One of the latter had been converted by Marnie to create an office base which she shared with Anne, and from which she ran her interior design business.

'Am I interrupting?' Ralph asked.

'I was just telling Anne I had a call from Angela. She's fretting about something.'

'Really?'

'It's something to do with an Easter parade, she said.'

'What, here?' Ralph said. 'Thought they were just in the States.'

'I've asked her to join us for lunch to tell us about it.'

'She wants us to get involved in a church thing?' Ralph pulled a face. 'Surely she knows we're –'

'Not a church thing, Ralph. It's being organised by New Force.'

'The neo-Nazis?' Ralph's expression combined puzzlement with anxiety.

'Why would they have an Easter parade?' Anne asked. 'It seems an odd thing for them to do.'

'Why do they do anything?' Marnie said. 'Their aim is to cause disruption and havoc wherever they can.'

'I wonder what Angela might have in mind,' Ralph mused.

'We'll find out over lunch.' Marnie glanced at her watch. 'Thinking of which, we'd better turn round if we're to be back in time.'

Ralph peered ahead and pointed. 'The canal widens between those clumps of trees. We can wind there.' He pronounced the verb like the wind that blows.

Marnie slowed the boat and threw the tiller hard over to swing the bows towards the gap. She pushed the heavy gear lever into reverse and pressed down on the throttle, straightening the tiller as the water bubbled on either side of the stern. *Sally Ann* eased gradually to a halt with her bows just clear of the bank. Almost imperceptibly the boat began to back away from the shore. Marnie waited until the boat had crossed the canal and the stern button was within a yard of the opposite bank. In one fluid movement she eased the throttle and pulled the lever into forward gear. She pushed the tiller hard over to the right and accelerated. *Sally Ann* swung easily round to face the way they had come and built up smoothly to her impressive cruising speed of some three miles per hour.

'Nicely done, skipper,' said Ralph.

'Thank you, kind sir.'

'Anyone fancy a coffee?' Anne asked.

There was unanimous assent, and Anne went below to the galley leaving Marnie and Ralph on deck. Marnie handed the tiller to Ralph and stepped forward to sit on the wooden lid of the gas bottle container.

She bit her lip. 'Angela sounded really worried on the phone.'

'Hardly surprising,' Ralph said. 'We had riots on the streets last time they were here. Had you heard anything about them?'

'Nothing, but then I don't have Angela's community connections. She picks up a lot from her committee work.'

From inside the cabin they heard the kettle whistling. It was cut off to be replaced by the clinking of crockery. Moments later Anne came up the steps bearing a tray. Marnie stood up, took it from her and set it down on the container lid.

'Maryland cookies?' she observed.

'Inspired by Ralph's mention of the US of A,' Anne explained. 'The coffee's filtering. Won't be a minute.'

'The filtering no doubt inspired by Donovan?' Marnie suggested.

Anne nodded. 'Not just inspired. It's his *Melitta* filter and his *Jakobs Filterkaffee* in fact.'

Donovan was Anne's boyfriend, a student of media and communications at Brunel University in London. He was of part German, part Anglo-Irish descent, and a regular visitor to Glebe Farm. The rest of the time he lived in the house in west London that he had inherited from his parents. They had been killed in a coach accident while on holiday in South Africa when Donovan was ten years old. He had survived the accident and been brought up by relatives of his mother's family in Germany. It was his custom to bring back a range of goodies from Göttingen when he returned from his frequent visits to his continental home. His German family had suffered greatly at the hands of the Nazis, and he detested all far-right organisations.

'I wonder what Donovan will think of New Force being in the area again,' Ralph said.

Anne paused at the top of the steps. 'No prizes for guessing. I'll fetch the coffee pot.'

When Anne reappeared, she found the boat had slowed almost to a standstill. Marnie had walked along the gunwale towards the bows to check that no traffic was coming their way through a narrow bridge hole. She signalled all clear and stepped nimbly back to the stern deck where Anne was pouring coffee.

'This is good stuff,' Marnie said appreciatively after her first sip.

Ralph murmured agreement, and the three of them stood together in silence while the coffee steamed before their eyes, and the gently rolling Northamptonshire countryside slipped by. As usual, Anne gripped her mug in both hands. Marnie always thought it made her look vulnerable like a waif, a lost child, a refugee. It was strange to think that Anne would soon be twenty. An outstanding student at art school, she had one more term before completing her foundation year. If all went well, she was hoping to transfer to Oxford in the autumn.

Marnie looked at her watch. 'It'll have to be omelettes for lunch, and we've got the first of the new crop of Jersey Royals. I can steam those and serve them with butter and chopped parsley. Should we offer Angela wine, Ralph?'

'Sure. If it's good enough for Elizabeth David ...'

'I don't get that reference,' Anne said, peering over the top of her mug.

'*An Omelette and a Glass of Wine*,' Marnie explained. 'Famous cookery book by Elizabeth David. You'd enjoy it; it's a good read. In fact, I'm sure you'd like all her books. They're classics.'

Anne smiled. This was the kind of conversation she loved, full of promise, opening up new horizons. Just then, her focus shifted. The smile faded. They were approaching another bridge, now close to home. It came into view over Marnie's shoulder and conveyed a message that made her shudder.

Marnie and Ralph noticed the sudden change in Anne's expression and turned to look ahead of the boat. On the side of the bridge was painted a sign filled with hatred and menace. Dripping, where the paint still fresh had run, was a large red swastika.

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'What the hell's going on, Angela?' Marnie asked.

She and Ralph were sitting opposite Anne and the Reverend Angela Hemingway over lunch at the kitchen table in the farmhouse. Ralph poured wine while they waited for Angela's reply. Typically, she was wearing a clerical grey dress, complete with dog collar. Some people had described her as having a 'horsey face', but she had an attractive and infectious smile that lit up her features. It was not in evidence that lunchtime.

'I think it's fair to say we're facing a major problem.'

'We?' said Ralph.

Angela made a face. 'As luck would have it, it's my turn to chair the inter-faith committee. The bishop thinks the job should be shared around when it's the turn of the Anglicans.'

'And it's you rather than the archdeacon?' Marnie said.

'Yes, well ... I think the bishop takes the view that the archdeacon needs to be ... how can I put it?'

'Assassinated?' Marnie suggested.

Angela chuckled. 'I was thinking more along the lines of *reined in*, but your idea has definite merits, Marnie. Oh dear, did I say that out loud?'

'Okay, so tell us about this major problem.'

Angela took a deep breath. 'It could well be as serious as the situation we faced three years ago at the time of the European election.'

Marnie glanced across at Anne, whose expression registered alarm. They all remembered the riots provoked by extreme right-wing organisations which had led to the shooting dead of a charismatic hard-line candidate. Donovan had been a prime suspect at the time. Some local police officers still wondered about his involvement.

Ralph frowned. 'You've presumably arrived at that conclusion from reports you've received in your committee?'

Angela shook her head. 'No. It's much more than that, Ralph. I've seen examples on the streets. And there are other indicators.'

Marnie said, 'So you're convinced it's New Force that's stoking up trouble?'

'Undoubtedly. Their NF symbol has been sprayed on walls in the town, and they seem to be especially targeting immigrant communities.'

'That's no surprise. What is it, Afro-Caribbean and Asian, like last time?'

Angela looked thoughtful. 'Actually, they seem to be more interested in eastern and central Europe.'

'Do we have many of those in this area?' Ralph asked.

'I think the main grouping would be Polish people.'

'What about the Jewish community?' Marnie asked.

'They're relatively small in numbers in this county, but I know their reps on the inter-faith committee are getting worried.'

'Frankly, they're not the only ones,' said Marnie.

Angela raised an eyebrow. 'How d'you mean?'

'The bridge just by our moorings is now decorated with a swastika.'

Angela's eyes widened. 'No ...' Her voice was little more than a whisper.

'It wasn't there when we set off for our tootle this morning, but it was there when we got back.'

'Oh my dear lord ...'

'Quite. Tell me, Angela, did you know something like this was going to happen? Is that why you rang me?'

'No, not at all. I never imagined anything would penetrate down here.'

'Why, then?'

'I felt in need of support. You were so helpful when we had the last trouble, you were the first one I thought of ... all of you really. You were a godsend.'

'But what is it you think I could do ... we could do?'

'Would you consider being co-opted onto the inter-faith committee, Marnie? We'd really appreciate your insights.'

Marnie smiled. 'Do you have a membership category for agnostics?'

'I mean it. Really. Our next meeting is on Monday afternoon. Of course I realise it's short notice, and you probably have meetings already in your diary ...'

Marnie glanced at Anne and raised an enquiring eyebrow. Anne gave the slightest shake of her head.

'No, I think I'm free then. It's just ... I'm not sure an inter-faith committee is quite my thing.'

Angela looked crestfallen. 'I wouldn't expect you to become a permanent member, Marnie. It would just be while we try to cope with this Easter parade business.'

'What is all that about?' Ralph asked. He reached forward to top up their wine glasses. Angela put a hand over hers and declined.

'We've had word from a reliable source that New Force and their ilk are planning some sort of mass demo over Easter.'

'How reliable?' said Ralph.

Angela hesitated before replying. 'I'm not sure I'm supposed to ... oh, what does it matter? I know I can rely on your complete confidentiality.' She took a breath. 'The police have someone working undercover. They've so to say infiltrated New Force. That's how we know about their plans.'

'Which I suppose means you must be very careful how you treat the information,' said Ralph.

'Absolutely.' She turned her gaze on Marnie. 'Will you join us ... please?'

Marnie shrugged. 'I'm an interior designer, not a ... special agent, but if I can give you a modicum of moral support, then okay. Count me in. I just hope your reliable source has exaggerated the problem.'

'Frankly, Marnie, so do I, but I don't think that's very likely.'

They finished the meal with no more talk of fascists, riots or persecution. Anne made coffee, and they opted to drink it in the kitchen, warmed by the dark blue Aga cooker that was Marnie's pride and joy. Anne was topping up their mugs when Angela's mobile began warbling. She stood and went out to the hall. When she returned minutes later, her face was ashen-grey. She looked close to tears. Marnie stood up and put an arm round Angela's shoulders.

'What is it?' she said. 'Tell me.'

Almost too choked to speak, Angela said slowly. 'That was the police community liaison officer. The reliable source was right. Things are serious, *deadly* serious. Someone's been killed, an old lady.'

'An immigrant?' Marnie said.

Angela nodded, her expression desolate. 'Polish.'

'And it's definitely a hate crime?'

'It seems there's no doubt about it ... not the slightest.'

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The depression that had arrived with Angela Hemingway settled on Glebe Farm for the rest of the day. After supper Marnie tried to absorb herself in a novel, but found she was reading the same paragraph over and over again. Dolly, their sturdy black cat, had curled up beside Marnie on a sofa in the sitting room. Marnie stroked her head absent-mindedly while a soft purring sound filled the room.

Ralph had lit a fire in the wood-burner, but even its comforting warmth failed to cheer them. From the armchair where he was reading an article in *Time* magazine, he looked across at Marnie.

'Dolly's going to end up bald if you carry on like that,' he observed.

'Mm?' Marnie looked up. 'You could be right. Still, she doesn't seem to mind.'

Ralph scanned the room. 'What's become of Anne? I didn't see her go out.'

'Probably just popped to the loo.'

Ralph said, 'I expect you're right.'

But she wasn't.

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Anne had opted for an early night to put the gloom of the day behind her. She had nipped out and taken her mobile across the courtyard to the office barn to phone Donovan.

'So, how's it going?' she said.

'Hi, Anne. What time is it?'

'You're bored with my conversation already?'

He laughed. 'Not quite. I've been slogging on all day, trying to finish this essay ... lost track of time.'

'And?'

'Nearly there.'

'Listen, there's something I have to tell you.'

'You sound serious, so I'll refrain from making a jokey reply.'

'Good decision.'

Anne described Angela's anxiety about trouble from the far right. She told him about the so-called *Easter parade*, their shock at finding a swastika daubed on the bridge close to home and the murder of the old lady.

'She was Polish, you said, Anne? And you think that's significant?'

'That's the feeling up here. There's a lot of hatred being stirred up towards immigrants at the moment.'

'She wasn't mugged or anything?'

'She was killed in her own home.'

Donovan considered this. 'Presumably she could've disturbed a burglar.'

'That occurred to me, too,' Anne said. 'But that's not how the police see it.'

'How d'you know that?'

'Angela had a call from them.'

'What's it got to do with Angela?'

'She's on some community committee. There's a police rep on it. They told Angela about the murder.'

'They must have a reason for being so sure it's a hate crime.'

'I s'pose so.'

'Look, Anne, I've got this essay to –'

'Oh, I know. Sorry to interrupt. I just wanted to talk to you. We're all a bit down in the dumps this evening.'

'I was going to say I'll come up to be with you.'

'But the essay –'

'Don't worry about that. I'm in the conclusions section. Give me half an hour to finish it and I'll get on the road.'

'But it'll be so late.'

'That's okay.'

Anne checked the office clock. 'Half an hour plus travel time ...'

'It's fine, Anne. I'll get it done and be on my way up.'

'Then I'll expect you at midnight.'

'I like the sound of that. See you soon!'

Anne went back to the farmhouse and told Marnie and Ralph that Donovan would be coming. Pleased as they were to hear that, they could neither prevent themselves from thinking that it was all reminiscent of the long hot summer of violence and disruption that had first brought Donovan into their lives.

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At home in west London, Donovan sat thinking. His life seemed to be haunted by the spectre of fascism. His German grandparents and their children, including his own mother, had only just managed to escape the clutches of Heinrich Himmler by the skin of their teeth. A German great-uncle, a photojournalist, had been 'disappeared' by the Nazis in 1938 while writing a magazine article on the SS involvement in the invasion of the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia.

Donovan had worked solidly all day to complete his university assignment. After speaking with Anne he had to make a supreme effort to refocus his thoughts on the essay. He took a deep breath, summoned up all his mental energy and buckled down to it. Twenty minutes later he typed the last sentence, reread the conclusions and switched off his laptop.

He stuffed a few essentials into an overnight bag and threw it onto the back seat of his elderly but lovingly maintained VW Beetle. A thought struck him. He dashed back into the garage, took down a box from a high shelf and stowed it in the car. Fastening the seat belt, he started the engine. The last thing he needed at that hour was a fifty mile drive up the motorway. But it had its compensations. What had Anne said?

I'll expect you at midnight.

He smiled inwardly at the thought as he put the car in gear.