



Silver Wattle

'An absorbing story of hope and despair,
loyalty and love' *Woman's Day*

BELINDA ALEXANDRA

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

Silver Wattle

Belinda Alexandra

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DEDICATION

For Mauro

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ONE

We Czechs have a saying: ‘Do not let evil take you by surprise.’ I wish I had paid more attention to that warning. But then we also have a proverb: ‘After the battle, everyone is a general.’ It is easy to see what one may have done differently in hindsight.

When I remember Prague, I think of chestnut blossoms bursting out on the trees of Petrín Hill. I see shutters thrown open to blue skies and smell lilac wafting in on the breeze. I hear my sister, Klara, playing Chopin on the Petrof grand in our house at the foot of the Castle. My mother is there too, busy at her easel—blocking in the sky, roughing in a foreground, dabbing in the finer details of her latest painting. The book of verse falls from my lap while I listen to the music drift on the air as delicately as the lilac scent. Klara’s fingers glide over the keyboard. From the time she first sat at the piano, my younger sister confounded music teachers by playing complex pieces with a subtleness that belied her age. She has a certain touch, a way of caressing the music that is best described as ‘silky’.

My mother and I could listen to Klara play for hours on those mornings we spent together when my stepfather was away on business. And, being an indefatigable practiser, Klara readily obliged us. Even now, all these years later, when I think of her playing a sense of peace washes over me.

Later in the day, my mother, Klara and I would eat potato soup and fruit dumplings while Mother read the newspaper to us. We were interested in developments in our newly born state, Czechoslovakia. It had come into existence with the collapse of the Austro–Hungarian Empire at the end of the Great War, which had finished the previous year. But if Aunt Josephine arrived for a visit with her poodle, Fripp, the newspaper was put aside and the spirited spinster and her black-furred companion given our full attention.

‘Ah, look at you two girls,’ Aunt Josephine would say, addressing Klara and myself. ‘You grow more lovely each time I see you!’

Klara and I would exchange a smile. Aunt Josephine visited us three or four times a week and always said the same thing with an exclamation of surprise. ‘But what do you expect?’ she asked when we reminded her of this fact. ‘With such a glorious mother.’

Although Mother had been friends with my father’s sister for years, she was embarrassed by the compliment. Mother’s round face was not classically beautiful but her bowed smile and pink cheeks gave her a certain charm. She dressed superbly in shades of violet and, although she was close to forty, there was not a strand of grey in her blonde hair or a wrinkle on her creamy skin.

Some afternoons, Aunt Josephine arrived earlier than usual and in a state of excitement because she had received a letter from Uncle Ota. Mother would invite her into the drawing room with us, where we sat down on the gilded chairs like royal ladies on our thrones. Fripp would plonk himself at Aunt Josephine’s feet.

On one of these visits, Mother and the cook had made apple strudel that morning and Mother's maid, Marie, was called to serve the pastry along with a pot of tea. When the strudel was presented to Aunt Josephine, she lifted her palm to her cheek in horror. 'With my waist?' she cried, patting her belly, but accepted the plate Mother passed to her anyway. The smells of cinnamon and sultanas filled the air. The strudel was too tempting for anyone to resist.

Silence reigned while we ate the strudel, although Aunt Josephine kept glancing at her purse, impatient to share the contents of the latest letter. Frip, who was on a strict diet, lifted his nose in the air, but when he saw that none of the dessert was coming his way he rested his head on his front paws and fell asleep.

'Hmm,' said Klara, closing her eyes and relishing the strudel.

'You must include this recipe in the box-supper fundraiser,' Aunt Josephine told Mother.

At the start of each season, the women in our district baked their fanciest desserts and wrapped them in boxes covered with silk and decorated with ribbons, hearts and flowers. The boxes were auctioned off to the highest bidders and the money given to the church to help the poor.

Mother smiled and turned to me and Klara. 'I fell in love with your father that way. He always offered the most money for my Sunday babovka.'

It was a story that she had related to us a hundred times but we never tired of hearing it. I looked around the room. The house was every inch my mother with its velvet curtains, tapestry cushions and floral scrollwork, but the drawing room had touches of my father: the bronze stallion on the mantelpiece with its front hoof raised and its head thrown back; the acanthus leaf tea chest; the Turkish rug with its beasts of the forest motif.

'A man who has daughters has a family, and he who has sons has strangers,' Father used to say whenever someone expressed their sympathy that he had no male heirs. It was an unusual sentiment for a man who had been a captain in the army, but it was true that Father had loved Klara and myself as dearly as he would have loved male children. For a moment, I saw us all together again at the country house in Doksy on Machovo jezero. My father did not like to hunt and would take us riding through the woods in the early morning instead so that we could observe the deer and the otters. I smelt the damp of the mossy earth mixed with the summer air as clearly as if I were there.

'And where has your mind wandered to, Adelka?' Aunt Josephine asked. I woke from my daydream to see that everyone had finished their dessert and was looking at me. Klara hid her smile behind her napkin. At nine years of age, Klara's features had already formed into the ones that would be with her all her life. The pointy chin and soft waves of golden-brown hair growing upwards from her forehead created the shape of a heart. It was a shape true to her character, because Klara was all heart, even under her sometimes cool exterior.

'Adelka is a great one for dreaming,' said Mother, smiling at me. 'She has a writer's imagination.'

Aunt Josephine clapped her hands. 'Ah, to be sixteen again.' I was expecting reminiscences about her youth, but instead she reached into her purse and pulled out the letter. 'Your uncle has written to us again,' she said, her eyes sparkling. 'It is a

most interesting letter.’

Klara and I leaned forward. Uncle Ota was Aunt Josephine’s and my father’s brother and an adventurer who had avoided going into his father’s sugar business by proposing he ‘travel for education’ before settling down.

Mother once explained it to me. ‘Your Uncle Ota started soberly enough with sojourns to Italy and France. But soon these trips extended to treks in Egypt and Palestine, from where he sent back pictures of himself in Arab dress and vivid descriptions of the temples of Karnak and Luxor. When his father called him home, Ota claimed that a fortune-teller had told him that if he ever stopped travelling he would die.’

Klara and I had grown up unaware of Uncle Ota’s whereabouts, until he began corresponding with us through Aunt Josephine after Father was killed in the war. Yet his letters were so enthralling, it was as if we had known him all our lives. His salutation was always ‘To my dear ladies’ and, although it was not clear if he intended the letters to be read by Mother as well as Aunt Josephine and ourselves, there seemed no harm in their being shared with everybody.

My stepfather called Uncle Ota a *povalech*, a useless loafer, but we paid him no attention. Klara and I were captivated by our uncle’s descriptions of his journeys up the Nile and the Ganges and his visits to civilisations that had never heard of words like ‘national revival’ and ‘independent state’.

To my dear ladies,

I am sorry for my tardiness in writing but I have been three weeks on the deck of a ship bound for Bombay, then a further week tied up with self-important customs officials...

‘India again?’ said Klara, tracing her finger along the map Aunt Josephine brought with her. ‘Perhaps he intends to travel overland to China this time?’

Aunt Josephine read Uncle Ota’s letter with great expression and Klara and I hung on every word about the devout of India who bathed in the holy rivers and the medicine men who healed simply by opening their palms.

The things I have seen here, one could not imagine...a five-legged cow wandering through the markets, a holy man making a pilgrimage on stilts, a ritual dance in which the worshippers throw coconuts into the air to crack them on their heads...

Mother’s reaction to the wonders Uncle Ota described was more reserved on these occasions. She nodded at every turn in the adventure, but all the while her face was blanched of colour as if she had received a shock. I could not imagine what it was about Uncle Ota’s letters that made Mother change so. The family photograph albums were full of pictures of my father and his older brother arm in arm, from their childhood until just after the time my father and mother married. Mother had adored Father who had in turn worshipped his brother. My father, according to Aunt Josephine, had been inconsolable when his own father disinherited Uncle Ota.

‘Do Uncle Ota’s letters bother you?’ I asked Mother when we were alone in the drawing room after Klara and Aunt Josephine had taken Fripp for a walk in the park.

Her face did not change but her eyes flashed with surprise. ‘No,’ she said, shaking her head. Her voice trailed off when she added, ‘Ota sounds very happy.’

When I remember Prague, I try not to think of my stepfather, Milosh. If I do, my stomach turns to knots and his voice booms in my head.

‘Marta, I want that useless maid sent away this afternoon!’

I see him in my memory, pale blond like an ice prince, stamping about the house and admonishing my mother because Marie had over-starched his collar and he could not button it.

‘I don’t know how your mother could have married him after Antonín,’ paní Milotova, the Russian music teacher who gave Klara piano lessons, confided to me one day after my mother and stepfather had returned from their honeymoon. ‘He doesn’t want Klara to play anything challenging, only decorative pieces. He broke a string on the piano just because I was teaching her Faure’s *Le Voyageur*.’

The question of why my mother would marry a man like my stepfather was on everyone’s lips. ‘He’s seven years younger than you and has no position,’ Aunt Josephine had warned Mother the day their engagement was announced. ‘He is after your money.’

‘My daughters need a father,’ Mother replied. ‘And he is cultured.’

Mother’s stubbornness on the issue was legendary; perhaps it was a kind of madness that came from the terrible grief she had suffered when the telegram arrived announcing Father’s death in the first year of the war. It was to Aunt Josephine’s credit that she remained Mother’s friend after her second marriage, although our aunt would never visit us when my stepfather was in town. Mother and Milosh married in 1917. All I remember of the day is being annoyed that Milosh’s mother said that because Milosh was fair like me, everyone would think I was his natural daughter. My father had been as dark as an Arab.

Each time my stepfather, a partner in a firm of interior decorators and plasterers, returned from one of his business trips, our easy meals of soup and dumplings gave way to a table covered with a white cloth, candlesticks and platters of roasted duck with sauerkraut, marinated beef and saddles of oozing venison, which Klara refused to eat.

‘If you don’t eat meat, Klara,’ my stepfather would say, pointing his finger at her, ‘not only will you fade away but you will cease to be Czech.’

Why Mother had thought that Klara and I needed the kind of culture that Milosh was capable of teaching us escaped me. While he played the violin and danced more elegantly than any other man in Prague, one got the impression that he had never shaken the stigma of belonging to a trade. It was clear from my mother’s pained expressions and silences one year into her new marriage that this truth had dawned on her. But there was nothing to be done now. Divorce was social suicide and she had spent a fortune on buying Milosh his partnership in the firm.

Klara was usually unmoved by our stepfather’s admonitions against her vegetarianism until his fierce blue eyes shifted to Mister Rudolf swimming in his tank on the sideboard. Milosh had threatened to dump Klara’s pet carp into the Vltava, where he would die of cold, and just his glance at the fish was sufficient to make Klara scoop a slice of beef onto her plate and nibble at it. Her face was always impassive,

but I knew that her stomach was retching. Milosh did not understand what it was about Mister Rudolf that stopped Klara from eating meat or fish, but he sensed the connection and found it a useful threat.

Czechs eat fish for Lent and our farmers have been breeding fat, thick-boned carp for centuries. Carp and potato salad are the traditional Christmas dishes, and it was with the intention of buying a juicy fish for Christmas that Mother, Klara and I set out, canvas bag in hand, one frosty December evening.

It was the first time Klara had accompanied Mother and me to the Christmas markets. She reached out one hand to Mother and one to me, and skipped along between us through the streets. When we reached the market, her eyes widened and she let go of us, running towards the brightly decorated huts. 'Look, Maminka. Look, Adelka!' she cried, pointing to the rows of wooden toys and straw and paper ornaments. The Christmas lights danced in her eyes like tiny flames.

After a sip of the hot spiced wine Mother bought from a vendor, Klara grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the nativity scene, where both of us patted the heads of the clay donkeys and sheep. Mother reminded us that we had to hurry because she had other things to prepare at home. The fishmongers were at the far end of the square. The cobblestones became slicker the closer we got to the stalls, and the air was especially chilly around the wooden vats where dozens of silvery carp swished together. Klara brought her face close to one, watching the fishes' mouths gaping for air. The enchantment on her face disappeared.

'Adelka, they are drowning,' she said.

'How do you want it?' a fishmonger asked an old woman, dipping a net into the vat and scooping up a fish. 'You'd be best to let it swim in the bathtub until Christmas Eve. It will be fresher that way.'

The woman pulled her shawl tighter around her head. 'I don't have a bathtub. Kill it for me, please.'

Mother always brought our Christmas carp home to swim in the bath as the fishmonger had suggested. I had never seen one killed. Somehow I had missed the connection between the live fish that came home with us and the fried one that appeared on a platter on Christmas Eve.

The fishmonger dropped the writhing fish onto a pair of scales and from there to a wooden block. It stared up at the man with a bulging eye, as if begging for mercy. The fishmonger held the fish and lifted the mallet. Klara clenched my hand so tightly that her fingernails pierced both of our gloves. I tried to stretch my free hand over her eyes but was too late. The fishmonger slammed the mallet down. The 'bang' sent a jar through me. He sliced off the fish's head and wrapped it with the body in a cloth which he handed to the woman.

After the woman left, my mother lifted her bag to the fishmonger. 'Ours will be going in the bathtub for a few...' She stopped short when she saw that the fishmonger was looking beyond her, not listening. She turned and saw Klara backing away, gazing from myself to Mother with tear-filled eyes. Her mouth moved as if she wanted to say something, but no sound came out. She reminded me of the fish we had just seen killed, writhing and wriggling away from me each time I tried to grab her hand.

'Klarinka, what's wrong?' my mother asked, rushing towards her but looking at me for an explanation.

‘The fish,’ I stuttered. ‘She saw him kill the fish.’

Mister Rudolf, the carp we brought home from the markets, swam in our bathtub for the next three nights. Mother had promised to keep him as a pet, secretly hoping Klara would turn her attention to something else. But Klara watched over the fish vigilantly, regarding anybody who went to the bathroom to wash their hands or sponge their face as a potential murderer. When we wanted to take a bath, we had to do it quickly, because Mister Rudolf needed to be moved to a bucket, and he would often flip himself out and onto the floor. Finally, in exasperation, my mother bought a tank for Mister Rudolf and served another, less fortunate fish from the markets for Christmas dinner. But Klara was not fooled that the cooked fish had suffered less than the one she had seen killed at the markets. Mother and I realised then that Klara was seeing us differently, and that we would have to win back her trust. After that, my mother indulged Klara’s whim to never touch meat or fish and instead fed her nuts, dates, figs, grapes, raisins and mushrooms as substitutes. As for Mister Rudolf, carp were supposed to die a while after being removed from their pond, but he thrived in his tank.

While our stepfather took exception to Klara’s eating habits, he used our mealtimes to improve my education. The impromptu lessons made me so nervous I could not swallow my food.

‘Adela, what is that allows a ship to stay afloat?’ Milosh asked me one day. He always used my formal name, never the diminutive, Adelka, as the rest of my family did.

I stared at the plate of beef soup and liver dumplings that were our meal that day, unable to think of the answer. He had explained it to me the previous summer when we were walking alongside the Vltava River. I knew it had something to do with the boat pushing water out of the way and some ancient Greek who had discovered the principle of displacement. But beyond that I could not explain it exactly, and a precise answer was the only kind my stepfather would accept.

Sweat gathered under the arches of my feet.

Milosh closed his eyes and repeated his question so slowly that my face burned with shame. It was unfair of him to say that science was for men and then teach it to us in dribs and drabs. Klara still attended a school for young ladies three days a week, but Mother was mainly responsible for our education. She encouraged us to pursue our natural strengths. That was music for Klara and literature for me. I had read everything from the Czech poets to Chekov’s plays, and Uncle Ota’s letters were an education in themselves. If my stepfather had asked me about the geography I had learned from Uncle Ota’s travels, I could have answered him. But he was not interested in other countries and their cultures.

‘So you don’t know? Then I suggest you look it up and give me an answer tomorrow,’ he sighed, before turning to Klara. ‘And you, young lady, what is the difference between a butterfly and a moth?’

Klara thought for a moment before answering. ‘Moths fly by night and rest during the day. Butterflies love sunshine. A butterfly rests with its wings closed but a moth sleeps with them spread open.’

Klara was in her element. She had an eye for the wonders of nature: the fall of light on a landscape, the rustle of wind through the trees. She loved to watch living creatures and could spend an afternoon studying an army of ants or an evening listening out for nightingales. But Milosh was interested in facts, not poetry.

‘Anything else?’ he asked.

‘Moths are not as colourful as butterflies and have a fatter shape.’

Milosh gave a satisfied laugh and returned his attention to his food. I glanced at Mother. Her face was expressionless, but I saw the glint of tears in her eyes.

Mother’s hand on my shoulder stirred me from sleep later that night. ‘Adelka,’ she whispered. I struggled to open my eyes and focus on her standing next to the bed in her dressing gown and holding a lamp near her face.

‘What is it?’ I asked, glancing at Klara who was sleeping beside me. ‘Is anybody sick?’

Mother put her finger to her lips and shook her head. She moved towards the door and then turned, indicating that I should follow her. The house was silent except for the creaks of the floorboards under our feet and the occasional groan of its ancient walls. It had been in our family for nearly a century and had been left to Mother by her parents. My father had owned a family home too, where Aunt Josephine now lived, but had resided in Mother’s house for, while it was not the grandest in Prague, it was one of the most beautiful. The exterior walls were pale blue with white portals and dormers decorated with carved birds and flowers. The house resembled a jasperware vase, and its rear courtyard was a secret garden of ivy-covered fountains and benches. Once you had lived in the ‘blue house on the corner of the square’, you were spoiled to live anywhere else.

I followed Mother down the hall and wondered if we would meet any of the family ghosts on our journey. There was Great-grandfather Francis who coughed before dashing from one room to another and then disappearing; and Great-aunt Vera who appeared whenever a change was made to the house. She either slammed doors in disapproval or left petals on the doorstep to demonstrate her pleasure. The ghost of Aunt Emilie, who I saw every few years, was the most intriguing. Her face was young and tranquil and there was no inkling in it that her life had ended tragically. One Christmas, I came across Emilie when I thought I had heard Klara singing carols in the music room. I opened the door to find a woman by the piano. She vanished in an instant but I recognised her as Emilie from the picture in the locket Mother wore around her neck, which also contained a snippet of Father’s hair. Mother, who was not able to see the ghosts, was happy when I told her that I had discovered her younger sister in the house. She was comforted that Emilie seemed to have found the peace that had eluded her in life.

We climbed the stairs that led to the attic. Mother opened the door and put the lamp on a table.

‘Here, sit,’ Mother told me, indicating a chair covered with a sheet. She switched on the attic light.

The attic was crowded with furniture of generations past that could no longer fit in the main rooms: a beechwood armoire with brass-banded doors; cherrywood

bedheads; a refectory table with lyre-shaped legs. A corner of the room was cordoned off like a chamber in a museum. That place was devoted to my father's favourite pieces for which Milosh had found no use in his rooms. They were arranged exactly as my father had positioned them in his study. I cast my eye over the walnut desk and matching bookcases, the gilt bronze inkstand, and the tall-case clock with the hands stopped at twenty minutes past eleven, the time we had received the telegram informing us of Father's death.

Mother slipped a key from her pocket and opened a mahogany chest with a bear carved on it. I caught a glimpse of Father's sword, Bible and officer's helmet. Mother lifted a black case from the chest and placed it on the desk.

'I was going to give this to you when you came into your inheritance, but I can't see any reason to wait.'

She opened the case and produced a box Brownie camera and passed it to me. I recognised it was the camera Father had bought before he left for Sarajevo. It was a simple design with a rotary shutter and a meniscus lens. My father had never been anything more than an amateur photographer. Yet, I felt his spirit as soon as I touched it. I was taken back to those rides in the countryside around Doksy. I remembered the way Father regarded me with his gentle eyes when he helped me to mount my horse. I was sure that no other human being would ever love me as much.

'Thank you,' I said, looking up at Mother. One glance at the hopeful expression on her face and I understood the meaning of the gift. She was trying to compensate me for having married a tyrant in place of the angel who had been my father.

'Your mother is one of those women who can't not be married,' Aunt Josephine told me the following day when I arrived at her house to show her the camera and to take pictures of her and Friip. 'She was lucky with my brother, but her second marriage... what a mistake!'

It was not the first time Aunt Josephine had lectured me on the subject of marriage. The women in my family did not always make good choices.

'Men can be so charming before marriage and so terrible afterwards,' Aunt Josephine continued, positioning herself on the sofa with Friip sitting beside her. 'My own father had an atrocious temper and used to order my poor mother around so much that I am certain it was he who sent her to an early grave.'

If Mother had known that Aunt Josephine lectured me against marriage her hair would have turned white. For Mother, marriage was a woman's highest achievement. Not so with Aunt Josephine. Since the time I was old enough to visit her on my own, my aunt had plied me with articles from newspapers and magazines about women who had established themselves in occupations that had been previously forbidden to them: women physicians, astronomers, chemists, journalists and mountain climbers.

'No, give me the free life,' said Aunt Josephine, holding her straight nose in the air and lifting her chin as I depressed the shutter on the camera. 'It might be simple but it's mine.'

I walked the cobblestoned streets home and thought about Aunt Josephine. She lived more humbly than we did. Her house had been left to her by my father, but in order to keep it in good repair she lived on one floor and rented out the others. She had

one maid, a stern but loyal German woman called Hilda. Aunt Josephine was always in good temper but the economies in her 'simple' life were obvious: daisies instead of roses in the vases; sponge cake instead of babovka; cotton instead of silk handkerchiefs. Could I be happy without the financial security a man gave? Then I thought about Mother, and the drain Milosh was on her fortune as well as her happiness, and wondered if Aunt Josephine might be right.

Before returning to the house I walked around Petrín Hill. Mother could not have given me a better gift than the camera. I had always seen the world in images but had been frustrated by my lack of ability to draw or paint. Suddenly I had a means of expression. I took pictures of trees, of couples sitting on benches, of elegant dogs with their equally elegant mistresses. One Afghan hound stopped on the path in front of me and held his chin in the air.

'I think he is posing,' I told his mistress. 'Do you mind if I take a photograph?'

'There is no opportunity Prince would miss for some attention,' she laughed.

I loved dogs. As a child, I asked my parents every Christmas why we could not have one of our own.

My mother's mouth would set in a firm line. 'You know why,' she always replied, turning away from me while my father attempted to distract my wilful demands with promises of birds and goldfish. It was only when I was older that I was made to understand why my mother refused to own a dog. It was a front to save her family's reputation, for Aunt Emilie was supposed to have died of madness brought on by a case of rabies after she was bitten by a stray dog.

Because Mother knew many wealthy people and Milosh's clients were rich, we often attended parties in grand homes. One of these was the villa of paní Provazníková, on one of the most exclusive avenues in the fashionable suburb of Bubenech. When Klara and I followed Mother and Milosh up the marble staircase, past rows of manservants and maids dressed in black, we knew we were in no ordinary house. French doors opened into a reception hall complete with Greek columns. For her first party of the season, paní Provazníková, the heiress to a coal fortune, had converted the hall into an indoor garden. Trellises of vines hung from the ceiling; a weeping willow drooped over an artificial pond with live ducks bobbing on it; and a path bordered by pots of golden azaleas led the way to paní Provazníková. The hostess sat on a floral throne surrounded by admirers perched on stools while a string quartet played Haydn in the background.

'There he is,' she said, turning to welcome Milosh. 'There is the genius who made all this happen.'

In her pink gown and dainty slippers and with ostrich feathers in her hair, paní Provazníková was a fairy princess. Her dark hair was streaked with silver but her face was young and, despite the frivolity of her outfit, her eyes had an intelligent gleam.

'The house is a masterpiece,' agreed one of paní Provazníková's companions. A woman sitting next to him squinted at us and produced such a tight-lipped smile that I cringed. 'Marta, it is nice to see you,' she said to Mother. 'It has been a long time. And you brought your children.'

Mother introduced the woman as paní Doubková, a friend of hers from finishing

school.

‘Such lovely girls,’ said paní Doubkova, her eyes narrowing on us like a hawk. ‘One blonde, one dark.’

Klara flinched and I wondered if paní Doubkova’s high-pitched voice was grating on her sensitive ears. In the house next to ours lived an old man who liked to whistle whenever he watered the flowers in his window box. But there was no tune to his serenade, which sounded about as musical as a squeaking wheel, and Klara would cup her ears and wince in pain whenever she heard him. Then I realised that she was staring at the glass eyes of the fox stole paní Doubkova wore around her neck. The animal’s feet hung limply at the woman’s stodgy throat, its once wild claws manicured into tiny points.

If paní Doubkova noticed my sister’s disgust, she did not show it. She patted Klara on the head and introduced her husband, who was named Vaclav Doubek. When he stood up to greet us, he stooped so badly he must have measured half his true size.

‘Why don’t the children get something to eat?’ suggested an old lady sitting near paní Doubkova. She had the kindly eyes and apple cheeks of a storybook grandmother. That was the only kind of grandmother I knew, because my maternal one had died before I was born and my only recollection of my paternal grandmother was the whiskers on her chin, which prickled me whenever she kissed me.

I returned the woman’s smile, not minding that she had referred to me as a child although I was nearly seventeen. I took Klara’s hand and led her to a table spread with cheeses, breads, apple pastries, chocolates and marzipan sweets shaped into crowns. We returned with our plates to sit beside Mother. Milosh was gone. I surveyed the room and found him talking to an elegant woman in a brocade dress. She glanced in our direction before turning away. Her gaze fell on us for only a second but it sent a shiver down my spine.

‘She’s pretty, isn’t she?’ whispered paní Doubkova. ‘She is paní Benova, widow of the army officer, the late Major Beno. Her family used to be one of the wealthiest in Prague, but her father gambled their fortune away. I’ve heard she is on the lookout for a better situation.’

‘She is a talented pianist,’ added pan Doubek.

‘Klara plays the piano beautifully,’ my mother said. ‘She is exceptional for her age.’ There was a sense of strain in her voice. It mirrored the anxiety creeping up on me that I could not explain.

‘Is that so?’ asked the old lady, who was called paní Koutska. ‘I do so love music and children and these days have neither in my home. Perhaps, paní Provazníková, you could introduce me to paní Benova and I can ask her and Klara to play at a soiree for me one day?’

I turned to look again at Milosh and paní Benova. The young woman was beautiful, with raven-black hair, a long neck and a tiny pout for a mouth. She was like a swan. But it was my stepfather who most caught my attention. Gone was the stern look on his face. He lowered his eyes and whispered something that made paní Benova laugh. Then he laughed too, his eyes sparkling with gaiety. That must have been Mother’s first impression of Milosh, I thought. For I was convinced that she would not have chosen such a humourless man to be our stepfather had she known what he was really like.

The invitation to attend paní Koutska's soiree came a few weeks later. Klara was finishing up her lesson with paní Milotova. They had been working on Beethoven's last keyboard work, the Six Bagatelles, Opus 126. It was a mature work for Klara to be studying but she played it with deep feeling. I listened from the dining room where I was helping Marie lay out the table for lunch. Paní Milotova was a friend of my mother's and she stayed to eat with us each Wednesday after Klara's lesson. When we were seated at the table, Mother handed her paní Koutska's invitation.

'Do you think it is too soon for Klara to perform for an audience?' she asked. 'Will it take away her enjoyment of playing?'

Paní Milotova, who Mother called Lída but who we addressed formally because she was a teacher, studied the invitation. 'Klarinka is a natural performer,' she said. 'She will shine even brighter with an audience.'

Mother turned away. Paní Milotova frowned then a look of understanding crossed her face and she blushed. 'You could certainly use that as an excuse if you didn't wish to attend. But I would go, if I were you. I would hold my head up and be proud of my daughter. You are the one who nurtured her talent.'

I looked from Mother to paní Milotova. Some understanding had passed between them but I was not sure what it meant. My stomach turned. I had the premonition that something was about to happen but I had no idea what.

Aunt Josephine appeared on our doorstep with Frip soon after paní Milotova had left.

'I have a letter from Ota,' she said, holding up a thick envelope. It was not opened, and when Aunt Josephine saw that I had noticed she explained, 'The moment I touched it, I knew it was something important. So I came straight here.'

Mother showed Aunt Josephine into the drawing room and gave Frip a bowl of water. The maid brought tea as usual. The day was warm and the curtains were closed to keep out the heat. The drawing room was stuffy and I was sure I felt the presence of a spirit somewhere near me but had no idea to whom it belonged.

While Aunt Josephine was always excited to receive a letter from Uncle Ota, she seemed more so than ever today. Her face was flushed and she had not taken as much care as usual with her toilette. She smoothed down a lock of hair that had sprung loose from her chignon and pushed her hat straight before she commenced reading the letter.

To my dear ladies,

So many extraordinary things have happened since I last wrote to you. Not the least is that I have married. Now, my dear ladies, I know that this is not something you were expecting to hear from me and that you are wondering to what kind of woman I have decided to devote my life. Well, let me tell you that her name is Ranjana, which means 'delightful' and sums her up perfectly...

'Ranjana? An Indian?' said Mother, patting her neck with a handkerchief.

Klara and I leaned forward, eager to hear more. I had a picture of a marvellous princess bedecked in gold bangles and an ochre-coloured sari. We were used to Uncle Ota's eccentricities and viewed his marriage as another of his adventures. We begged Aunt Josephine to continue to read the letter to us. And after a few moments of disbelieving head shaking, she obliged.

As you will recall from my last letter, I was heading towards Delhi from Bombay. I stopped in a village not far from Jaipur to visit a British officer and his family who I had met on a previous trip to the region. While I was there, the officer was informed that a young woman in a nearby village was intending to commit sati. You may have heard of this custom? A widow immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Hindus believe that a woman who dies this way is virtuous and will go directly to heaven and redeem all her forefathers' sins in the process. The practice was outlawed by the British government last century and is condemned by enlightened Indian leaders.

The officer asked if I would like to accompany him and some soldiers from his regiment. When we arrived in the village we learned that the woman and her kindred had already left with the husband's body and were heading towards the cremation ground. We followed them there and viewed the party from the cover of some nearby hills. I have seen many temples dedicated to sati 'goddesses' and have always sought not to interfere in anyone else's beliefs. The life of a widow in India is a hard one. On the death of her husband, she loses all status in the household and her head is shaved. Her touch, her voice and her appearance are considered abhorrent. But what we witnessed on the field below us was an abomination.

The widow was no more than twenty-one. She had been tied to a horse and was being led along by a man in a red robe. Instead of her holding the symbols of a sati—a mirror and a lemon—in each hand, they had been strung around her neck. Her head was lolling as if she had been drugged. Walking in front of her were a group of women singing and chanting. The officer told the soldiers with him to be ready for trouble because the girl was surrounded on all sides by youths carrying swords. They had got whiff of intervention and were ready to prevent it.

We watched the party until they reached the spot where they intended to set the pyre alight. My stomach turned when the woman was dragged from the horse and thrown upon the platform alongside her husband's corpse. In her weakened state she put up the fiercest struggle she could but her pathetic cries for help were unheeded by the women who simply chanted louder. The officer told me to stay some distance behind his men, then he commanded the soldiers down the hill between some rocks. I watched in horror as the youths covered the woman with sticks then doused her with oil. But before they could light the pyre, the officer and his men were upon them. A fight ensued in which several of the youths were shot and one soldier had his arm wounded. While the men were having it out, I noticed one of the youths sneak away and light a torch. I ran down the hill and intercepted him before he reached the pyre. I had to deliver several blows to his stomach before I could force him to the ground and put the fire out. I pulled the sticks off the girl; curiously none of the women tried to stop me. When I reached the widow, I found her fitting and frothing at the mouth. I lifted my canteen to her lips, convinced that she had been poisoned and was done for anyway. But after a few moments the convulsions ceased and she looked up at me with the richest coffee-coloured eyes I have ever seen.

The rest I leave to your imagination, only to tell you that after that fateful

meeting of eyes we travelled to Calcutta and from there to Ceylon, where we were married yesterday amongst bougainvillea, hibiscus and gardenias in what must have been the original Garden of Eden.

My dear ladies, I am sure that this letter has you astonished but I hope that you will share with me in my own happy bewilderment. I am a man who does not change his habits easily, therefore, while my decision may have been quick, do not think it was unconsidered. Ranjana is an unusual young woman. She was betrothed at ten years of age to her husband, who was then sixty. Although the marriage was arranged, he was a wealthy businessman who did not want an ignorant wife. Ranjana often accompanied him on his trips to Jaipur, where he traded with the British Raj, and she was educated by governesses in English, French and German. She assures me that her husband would never have agreed to her committing sati and that the whole idea was dreamed up by her in-laws because her husband had made provision for her in his will, a practice unheard of in India. She is quite a linguist and her Czech is coming along nicely—much better than my attempts at Marwari and Hindi, which leave her in fits of laughter. Anyway, with Ranjana a widow and me a Czech, we cannot stay in this region for long and must find a new place soon. We are thinking of going to the fifth continent, Australia...

‘Well, I say,’ said Aunt Josephine. ‘He is full of surprises!’

I was startled to hear a sob. Klara, Aunt Josephine and I turned and saw that Mother had risen from her chair and was standing by the fireplace.

‘Good gracious, what is it?’ said Aunt Josephine, rushing to Mother’s side.

Klara and I both stood, not sure of what to do. I thought of calling Marie to bring Mother a glass of water but I stopped myself. This was a sight she should not see.

‘I’m fine,’ said Mother, wiping at her wet cheeks. But she was anything but fine. She was trembling and there was a desolate look in her eyes. Aunt Josephine led her back to the sofa and sat down with her. Klara poured Mother another cup of tea. Mother had made a scene and she would have to give us an explanation for it.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said, dabbing at her tears with her handkerchief. ‘You see, I knew Ota when he was young and he said that he would never marry. His news came as shock because it took me back to the days when I first met your father. That was twenty years ago. It’s a jolt when things change suddenly and you realise that you are no longer young. That so much has already passed and you can never go back and live those days again.’

Aunt Josephine patted Mother’s hand sympathetically but her mouth twitched and she did not seem convinced by Mother’s explanation. I thought back to Milosh unashamedly flirting with paní Benova at paní Provazníková’s party, and the mysterious conversation between Mother and paní Milotova earlier in the day. Could these be the true reasons for Mother’s reaction?

I was even more puzzled that night when I passed Mother’s room and heard her weeping. Not gentle tears of sentimentality but choking sobs of unbridled grief. I was tempted to knock on her door and try to comfort her, but something told me not to disturb her, to let her anguish run its course.

When I climbed into bed beside the already sleeping Klara, I found it difficult to

drift into dreams. It seemed to me that Mother was grieving as bitterly over Uncle Ota's marriage as she had over Father's death.

TWO

Mother accepted the invitation to paní Koutska's musical evening, and Klara and paní Milotova worked on some pieces by Mozart, Beethoven and Chopin. They chose six sonatas and preludes, so that Klara could adapt what to play based on the mood of the gathering.

When the evening came around, I was amazed at how at ease Klara was about the prospect of playing for her first audience. She hummed her repertoire while she went about bathing and dressing as if she did not have a care in the world. Paní Milotova had been right in describing Klara as a natural performer. Mother had bestowed upon Klara and me beautiful porcelain dolls when we were growing up, but our favourites were the ones we made ourselves by painting faces on wooden spoons. We gave our divas coiffures made from wool and costumed them in pieces of lace and tulle. We created mini puppet shows together to showcase the dolls—Klara composed the songs while I penned the dialogue and storyline. But when the time came to perform for Mother and her friends, my tongue always managed to lodge itself in my throat and Klara would be left to carry the extravaganza on her own. My only consolation was that afterwards Mother would praise the story. 'You may not be a performer but you created some wonderful scenarios,' she was always quick to comfort me.

The evening of the soiree, Milosh, who had been in Brno for business, arrived home just after seven. He stood at the bottom of the stairs, glaring at his watch and yelling at us to hurry. My heart sank. Milosh was always impatient with us, but that night was especially so. I hurried down the stairs, tripping on the rug in my haste to avoid his wrath. But Klara remained unruffled. She glided down the staircase with the grace of a princess.

'You had better not act so proudly at the party, young lady,' Milosh muttered, 'or it will be your last.'

Mother emerged from the drawing room looking splendid in a lilac dress with silver beads over the bodice and hem. The scent of lily of the valley, her favourite perfume, wafted around her. She glanced at Milosh and I wondered if she had heard him, but she said nothing and turned to Klara and myself. Her face broke into a smile. 'You will be the most beautiful girls in the room.'

Mother always lavished praise on us, but from the way Milosh skulked to the car, I wondered if the comment had been made with a more pointed purpose on this occasion.

Paní Koutska's apartment was everything a grandmother's home should be, down to the Tiffany lamps, tulip-patterned wallpaper and upholstered chairs. The piano was in the drawing room, and when we arrived there were already guests drinking tea and eating honey cake. Paní Benova, in a claret gown with an overdress of iridescent sequins, was talking to a man with white hair and peaked eyebrows. I recognised him as Leosh Janachek, the composer of *Jenufa*. I had heard he was in Prague that month to attend a concert. Paní Koutska had barely a chance to greet us before paní Benova