

It was Paris in the spring: a city built for lovers in the season of romance. And of all the couples strolling arm-in-arm through the Tuileries Garden on that Good Friday afternoon in 1939, none were as transcendently in love as the tall, willowy girl and the man at her side, who looked down at her with a smile of disbelief at his own good fortune. There was still a cold edge to the early April breeze, and the girl snuggled a little closer to his broad shoulders and raised her eyes to his, knowing that he would not be able to resist the temptation to kiss her, and damn the looks of any disapproving passers-by.

Elsewhere the twin pursuits of female perfection and manly elegance might be dismissed as wasteful, trivial fripperies. In Paris, however, beauty has always been regarded as a moral imperative, and this man and woman were two magnificent specimens. She had a figure that would have had any of the couture houses in the Rue Cambon or the Avenue Montaigne vying for her services as a model, were they not already fighting for her custom as a client, and her face was equally striking. Framed by a head of thick, glossy black hair, her features gave some indication of her strength of character. Her jaw and cheekbones were clean-cut, her chin firm, her nose a decisive line rather than an upturned button. But her bones were so fine and her lips so invitingly full that they belied any suggestion of masculinity. And her huge blue eyes, as clear as the African skies under which she had been born, and fringed by thick, black lashes that barely had need for mascara, completed the picture of ravishing femininity.

He was a mate fit for such a paragon. To her delight, he was still a full head taller than her, even when she wore high heels. Any woman walking by would notice the dark blond notes in his casually swept back hair and the film-star glow of that loving smile. This being Paris, she would also have spotted that while his dress was casual—a pair of charcoal-gray flannel trousers and a tweed sports jacket, instead of a suit, and an open shirt

with a silk cravat tucked into the collar, instead of a tie—every garment was perfectly cut and his shoes were immaculately polished.

What the girl beside him appreciated, which other women could not, was that this man's gray eyes were windows into a soul that was more sensitive and thoughtful than a passing impression might suggest. She knew that while his forearms were strong and well-muscled, he had an artist's hands. His long, elegant fingers could draw anything on which his eyes might rest, or run along the length of her body, playing with every bit of her and bringing her pleasure that she could never have imagined possible, only for it to be exceeded by the ecstasy that the most thrilling, powerful part of him could bring.

Truly, Saffron Courtney and Gerhard von Meerbach seemed blessed by all the gods, for they were as rich and well connected as they were pleasing to the eye. It would have taken the steeliest heart to begrudge them their good fortune.

"Is it really only three months since we met?" Gerhard said. "I can't imagine life without you. How could I survive for twenty-seven years and have no idea you even existed? And then . . ."

"Then I landed at your feet," Saffron said and giggled. "Upside down, in a big heap, dressed as a man."

When two people are in love, few things on earth are as fascinating to them as their love itself. Gerhard and Saffron constantly found new ways to recount the tale of their first meeting, like children wanting to hear the same bedtime story every night.

Saffron had pretended to be a man, disguising her femininity with bulky clothes, determined to experience the exhilaration of the Cresta Run in St. Moritz, even though the course was exclusively men only. She had charged down the ice run, refusing to slow down, and eventually was flung off her sled at one of the bends, cartwheeling into the snow. Her dark glasses were thrown off, and it was her eyes that seared into Gerhard's soul.

"I know!" he said. "I took one look at you and . . . boom! I'd

been hit by a million volts, like a Frankenstein film, you know, when the doctor puts all the electricity through the monster. I'd never known anything like it. Truly, love at first sight. And I thought, how can it be? How can I feel like this about a man? And then as you walked away . . ."

"I gave that little wiggle. I know, I had to. I felt the same as you did and I simply had to let you know."

"And all because you were so brave . . . and so, so stubborn." Gerhard laughed. "So Saffron! You had to go down the Cresta Run, even though you knew only men were allowed."

Saffron grinned. "Of course! Why should you men have all the fun?"

Suddenly, Gerhard's mood seemed to darken, as if a cloud had crossed the sun. "Ah, poor Chessi. I still feel bad about her . . . That was supposed to be the night—"

"Ssshhh!" Saffron put a finger to his lips to silence him. Francesca von Schöndorf had been her dearest school friend. They were a pair, Chessi and Saffy: one a sweet, sensible German girl, the other a barely tamed child of Africa, newly arrived in England after being brought up in the Kenyan highlands. More than once, Saffron had gone to Germany to stay with the von Schöndorfs, watching the country change before her eyes as the Nazis recreated an entire nation in their twisted image.

At Christmas, when Saffron was on vacation from Oxford University, staying with relatives in Scotland, Chessi had written to her. The letter explained that she would be in St. Moritz for the New Year, hosting a chalet party at which she expected the man she loved would propose to her. Saffron had dashed across Europe as much because she wanted to be with her friend and share her joy as for the thrill of the Cresta Run. She had no idea that the love of her life would be waiting for her, still less that he would be the man Chessi expected to marry.

But love is ruthless and will not be denied.

"You and Chessi weren't meant to be together," Saffron said. "If you were, you would not have met me, and even if you had

met me, you'd have picked me up, dusted me down and gone on your way. And I wouldn't have given you a second thought."

"And then, when we met again, at the party that night . . . ?"

"Then we would have taken a second to recognize one another, and laughed about what had happened, and you would have told Chessi the story and she would have laughed too. None of us would have taken it the slightest bit seriously, because it wouldn't have been serious. You would have been made for Chessi. But you weren't, you were made for me. And . . . Oh!"

Saffron squealed as a gust of wind blew her hat from her head, and the two of them ran down the Grande Allée, laughing like children as they chased after the tumbling confection of black felt and sunny silk flowers.

The happiness stayed with them for the rest of the afternoon. They stopped in front of the Eiffel Tower to have their picture taken by one of the photographers who plied their trade there.

"Where would monsieur wish me to send the finished print?" the snapper asked.

"We're staying at the Ritz."

The man looked at this gilded couple and smiled. "But of course."

They dined at La Tour d'Argent and looked out at the lights of the riverboats on the Seine as they ate the pressed duck for which the restaurant was famous. As was the custom, the proprietor, Monsieur Téraïl, presented them with numbered postcards as certificates of their meal.

Afterward, pleasantly drowsy from the champagne cocktail that had preceded her meal and the bottle of 1921 Cheval Blanc that had accompanied the duck, Saffron had rested her head against Gerhard and teased him affectionately.

"I want to go sleep," she mumbled. "I'm too tired for hanky-panky."

Gerhard nodded, frowning with exaggerated thoughtfulness. "Hmm, I think that's wise. You've had a long day. You should get some rest. You won't mind if I put you to bed and go out on

the town, will you? I hear the dancing girls at the Folies Bergère are particularly pretty this year.”

“Beast!” She pouted and slapped him lazily.

They went back to their suite, paying no attention to its elegant cream, beige and gold decorations. They dashed without a second glance past the high glass doors, through which a balcony looked across the Ritz’s magnificent garden to the city beyond. There would be time enough in the morning to snuggle on one of the silk-upholstered sofas, or enjoy the view.

Saffron kicked off her shoes, yanked her dress over her head and threw it to the ground without the slightest concern for its delicate chiffon fabric. She unhooked her bra and stepped out of her French knickers, laughing as she gave them one last flick with her toes and sent them flying toward Gerhard, a missile of white satin. She kept her stockings on, knowing how her man loved the contrast of color and feel.

She threw herself onto the bed and then arranged herself artfully, sitting with her back resting on the pillows propped up against the headboard, brazen and unashamed as she turned her eyes toward Gerhard. He was unbuttoning his shirt with maddening deliberation, one button at a time, gradually revealing his chest, lightly furred with golden hair. Then she could see the ridges of muscle on his stomach. Gerhard looked at her, enjoying her gaze. He paused, his eyes examining every inch of her, and she felt the heat rising within her, the melting beginning.

His smile broadened. He knew what he was doing to her. But she could see as he undid his belt and opened the top button of his trousers that she was having an equally potent effect on him. He took his trousers off.

*Good boy*, Saffron thought as she saw that his socks had already been removed.

And then he was on her, and in her, and she felt completed by him, as though they were two halves of one single organism. Her moans turned to screams and she gave herself over, body and soul, to the man she loved, as he gave himself to her.

Later, when they were sated and Saffron was lying in his arms, idly running her fingers through the hair on his chest, Gerhard said, "This will be the last time we can be together, my darling . . . before the storm breaks."

Saffron felt an icy shock. She wrapped her arms around him, as if she could force him to stay with her. "Don't say that."

"The Führer won't stop at Austria and Czechoslovakia. There's all the old Prussian land that was given to Poland. He wants it back. He'll use Danzig as the excuse, you wait and see."

"Let him have it then. What difference does it make to us?"

Gerhard shrugged. "None . . . except that Chamberlain and Daladier have promised the Poles that Britain and France will respect their borders."

"Won't that stop Hitler going in?"

"Why would he stop? He's got away with it so many times before. The British and French have always backed down. He'll assume they'll do it again."

"What about the Russians? They won't like the German border getting any closer to the Soviet Union."

"I don't know . . . But I can tell you this: my dear brother Konrad is strutting round telling anyone who'll listen that the whole world is about to tremble. 'They're going to get the Reich's iron fist in their faces' is how he likes to put it. Then he tells me to go and get my flying suit, because I'm going to need it."

"Will he fight too, if it happens?"

"Konrad? No, not him. He'll be back in Berlin, nice and safe, with his head tucked up General Heydrich's arse, same as usual."

Saffron couldn't help but laugh, but then she stopped herself. "There's nothing funny about it, is there?" A moment of silence fell and then she said, "I know it's selfish of me, with the whole world about to go up in flames, but all I can think of is: what's going to become of us?"

"I am putting a system in place with Izzy, a way for us to get

letters to each other. It will be complicated and take forever for our messages to get through. But they will, I promise.”

“Will that be safe for him?”

“He says he’ll be fine. He spent the last war on the front line; how could he possibly be in any danger spending this one in Switzerland?”

“They could get to him there, though, couldn’t they . . . if they found out?”

Saffron felt Gerhard’s head nodding as he said, “*Ja*, they could. But Izzy doesn’t care. He says it’s his repayment for me getting him out of Germany.”

Isidore Solomons had been a hero in the First World War, awarded the Blue Max, Germany’s highest award for valor. He’d returned home to Munich and taken over from his father as the von Meerbach family lawyer and their most trusted adviser.

But Solomons was a Jew and Konrad von Meerbach was a fanatical Nazi, whose passion for Adolf Hitler and all his works far outweighed any considerations of loyalty, or decency. He relieved Solomons of his duties, without notice or compensation.

Gerhard, however, was cut from a different cloth to his brother. Ashamed of the way that such a loyal retainer and friend had been treated, he had persuaded Konrad to give him five thousand Reichsmarks from the family trust by claiming that he wanted to buy a Mercedes sports car. Instead, he had given the money to Isidore Solomons, and, in so doing, enabled an entire family to escape to safety in Switzerland.

Within a day of first meeting Gerhard, Saffron had traveled with him to Zurich to meet Solomons. She heard the story from the lawyer’s mouth, saw the respect that the local Jewish community had for Gerhard, and she discovered the price that Konrad, disgusted by his “Jew-lover” brother, had made him pay for the crime of possessing a conscience. Saffron understood then that here was someone who knew the difference between right and wrong, and who was willing to act on that

knowledge, whatever the consequences. It made her certain in her heart and mind alike: she had chosen the right man to love.

"I like Izzy," she said. "It's so good of him to do this for us."

"Believe me, he likes you too. He keeps telling me that it's his moral duty to keep us together: 'You will never find another woman to match her if I don't.'"

"Well, that's true. You won't."

"And will you ever find another man to match me?"

"No . . . never. I swear. I'll always be yours."

They made love again . . . and again for the rest of the Easter weekend. On Sunday evening, Saffron saw Gerhard off at the Gare de l'Est, where he boarded the overnight express to Berlin. She managed not to cry until the train had left the station. But then the floodgates opened as the awful truth became impossible to wish away any longer.

Her love for Gerhard von Meerbach had only just begun. But she might never see him again. She might yearn for a time when they could be with one another and build a life together in peace. She might tell herself that their love would survive and their dreams would come true, and try with all her heart to believe it. But then another voice inside her asked: *What chance is there of that?*

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In less than five months, in the early hours of Friday, September 1, 1939, Hitler unleashed the forces of Nazi Germany against Poland.

Two days later, Great Britain declared war on Germany. And slaughter, suffering and horror exploded across the world.



**A**nother April in another country, on an early spring evening in 1942. Saffron Courtney was wearing baggy black serge overalls that hid her figure. In the heel of one of her hard leather boots was concealed a small fighting knife and the button of the map pocket on her left leg was a disguised suicide pill. She leaned over the railway track and pressed the three-pound block of explosives into the hollow between the base and top rail. The block, comprised of six eight-ounce cartridges of Nobel 808, was as malleable as putty, so that Saffron could squeeze it snugly up against the metal. The night air was filled with the strong smell of almonds, the odor emanating from the nitroglycerine-based explosives. She pushed in a length of detonating cord, onto which a one-ounce guncotton primer had been inserted. Once she was satisfied with its placement, she took a roll of three-quarter-inch adhesive khaki tape from her knapsack, tore a strip off with her teeth and wound it over the plastic explosive and around the track. She then tore a second strip and repeated the procedure so that there were now two strips, roughly three fingers' widths apart, holding the bomb she was making in position.

She sat back on her haunches and looked up and down the track. Then she glanced at each side of the deep cutting. It was almost nine o'clock at night, but in the north fringe of a Nazi empire that extended from the depths of the Sahara Desert to beyond the Arctic Circle, there was still enough light to see without a torch. Saffron satisfied herself that she was not being observed. For a couple of seconds she took in the peaceful, limpid beauty of a northern evening sky, its soft blue streaked with clouds in oyster colors of gray, pearl and palest pink. She breathed in air laced with the soft scent of the gorse, whose brave yellow flowers were blooming through the last patches of winter snow, and the salt and seaweed tang of the sea.

The next item out of her knapsack was a metal button that was a little under two inches in diameter. It was attached to a