

The Lover Prologue

SATURDAY 19TH OCTOBER 1940

Soho, London

The alley was pitch dark. The two men, hats and overcoats wreathed in a post-pub fug of cigarettes and beer, lurched along the broken pavement, leaning on each other for support.

‘I said to her,’ slurred George, ‘I said, “You want to stop thinking of what you’ll look like blown to pieces, that’s what you want to do.” I said, “You go down to the shelter if you want. I’m not getting out of bed for bleeding Hitler.” I said to her, “You’ve got too much imagination, that’s your trouble.”’

Bob belched. ‘Shouldn’t have had that last.’

‘There’s no talking to her,’ said the other. ‘Ever since they copped it three doors down, she’s been that bad with her nerves...’

‘They’re bastards, that’s what they are... Do you know something?’

‘No, what?’

‘I can’t see a bloody thing.’

‘Nor me.’

They stood together, swaying and peering hopelessly into the black void.

‘Got a torch?’ asked Bob.

‘Can’t get the batteries. Shop’s had nothing for two weeks and there’s sod-all chance elsewhere.’

‘Oh, well...’ Bob stepped forward. ‘Long as we don’t walk into a wall.’

‘No bloody walls left, after the last few nights. I heard a good one yesterday, did I tell you? There’s three blokes, all in the pub, they’ve had a few-’

‘-Like us-’

‘Well, they make this... pledge... when they get home, each man, whatever his wife tells him, he’s got to do it. The one that doesn’t, he’s got to buy the drinks. So off they go, and the next day, they meet up. The first man says, “Well, I did it.” He says, “I’ve got home, and I’m a bit... you know... so I piss in the sink, and the wife says, “That’s right, piss all over the place.” So I do – the table, the chairs, the curtains, the rugs-’

‘Steady!’ George’s foot slipped, and he cannoned into Bob, who grabbed his arm.

‘Whoa! Sorry, mate. Bit slithery round here.’

‘It’s you, you daft berk, you’ve had a skinful.’

‘No, it’s the ground. Something down here, slippery... So then the next man says, “I did it, too – I’ve got home, and I’m the same, so I go to light a cigarette and I drop the match on the rug. And my wife, she says, ‘That’s right, burn the bloody house down.’ So I do. The whole lot, up in smoke.” Then the third man, he’s a bit quiet, so they say, “Well, what about you?” And the third man, he says, “Well, I’ve gone home, and the wife’s in bed, and I fancy a bit of the other, so I put my hand between her legs, and she says, ‘Cut it out, Sid...’”

‘Cut it out! Cut it out... Steady the Buffs, for Christ’s sake, or we’ll both go over.’

‘It’s a good one, though. Blimey, this pavement...’

‘Just a bit of rubbish. One of the shops.’

‘Aren’t any shops. Not down here.’

‘Yes there are... aren’t there?’ They halted again. The darkness was impenetrable, like a barrier. ‘Christ, where are we?’

‘We’re bleeding lost is where we are.’

‘Amazing...’ Bob sighed. ‘We could be anywhere. Anywhere at all.’

‘Well, we’ve made a balls of this, all right. I’ll be the one who cops it tonight, I’m telling you. I promised Edna I’d be home before the next lot.’

‘You got a match?’

‘What?’

‘A match. There *is* something down here, an’ all... Ta.’ There was a scraping sound, followed by a brief flare of light.

‘Watch it! You nearly had my eye out with that. What’s down there?’

‘Dunno. Butcher round here, is there?’

‘Not this way, there isn’t.’

‘Well, somebody’s been and dropped their supper. Liver, by the looks of it.’ Bob staggered backwards as his companion bumped against him and slid down onto the pavement. There was a wet, slapping noise. ‘Sounds like my dog licking its bits... You all right?’

‘Christ, it’s... Oh, *Christ*... My hand, my hand in it, Jesus, oh, Jesus...’

‘What are you talking about, your hand?’ said the other, impatiently. ‘You’ve come a cropper on a sandbag, that’s all.’

‘Sandbags... don’t... wear... nylons... God, I’m going to-‘

‘Here, not on my shoes, your bastard! You finished, are you?’ Bob bent down and felt for his companion in the darkness, gagging at the stink of vomited ale. His fingertips brushed over something viscous and then felt thick material – wet, soaking – a coat pooled out over the grimy stones. His hand travelled along its length and he felt the bony lump of a hip, the slope of a thigh – chilly, doughy skin – and then the top of a stocking. ‘Sorry, love. Thought you was a sandbag. It’s just my pal, he’s-‘

Footsteps. The man turned and saw a dim pool of torchlight moving towards them, dark shoes and uniform trousers behind it.

‘You the warden?’

‘Yes. What’s going on?’

‘You tell us, mate. Woman here fallen down. My pal tripped over her.’ He took a couple of steps towards the light and said in a low voice, ‘I think she must have had a few herself.’

The warden sniffed. ‘Dear oh dear. Let’s get some light on the subject.’ Watching the little beam from the warden’s torch skipping over the stones, Bob had a sudden image of his children playing hopscotch in the road, of grubby knees, flashes of knicker and bunched, bouncing hair, extinguished in a gasp as the light caught the edge of a puddle of dark fluid, thick and shining. The warden stopped. ‘Blimey!’

‘That’s blood, that is.’

‘Blimey,’ repeated the warden. ‘Blimey O’Reilly.’ His torch played across the pavement, and stopped. In the centre of the pool of light lay a bloodstained metal claw. ‘Tin-opener,’ he said, flatly.

The men kept silent as the torch beam moved again, this time catching the hem of a blue coat with a pinkish tangle of bulging, glistening flesh that seemed to be slithering out from beneath it.

Bob clutched the warden’s arm. ‘What’s that?’

‘I don’t know.’

The light fell on the woman’s open palm, and beside it, a little piece of blue cloth, folded over like an envelope.

The warden drew in his breath. ‘My God...’

‘What is it, mate? What you seen?’

‘Never you mind,’ said the warden, sharply. ‘Just stay back.’

The beam followed the greyish-pink flesh of a leg to a knee, streaked with blood and dirt, a nylon stocking rucked round an ankle, a high-heeled shoe lying on its side, and then traced its way across the blue coat to reveal a bloody mass of dark, clotted hair and a scarf, and then, incongruously, a fringe of shining, chestnut-brown curls, and the clean, pale edge of a profile, the skin white and lustrous in the torchlight, the eyes closed and the expression almost passionate.

Greta Garbo, thought Bob, suddenly, before his eyes followed the beam down to- ‘Oh, Jesus *Christ*.’ He took a step back. ‘Her neck – her throat – he’s cut her throat – he’s carved her up... with a *tin-opener*...’ He staggered over to the opposite wall and sat down, his head in his hands.

George shuffled towards him on all fours and collapsed across his shins. He blurted, ‘It’s him again, isn’t it? He really cut it out this time, didn’t he?’ then raised his head and vomited again.

The warden ignored them both. He turned off his torch and, standing quite upright beside the body, he took off his helmet and clasped it against his chest. ‘No,’ he whispered into the darkness, ‘It can’t be...’