

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Mortal Mischief

Frank Tallis

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Author's Note

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About the Book

'God forgive me for what I have done. There is no such thing as forbidden knowledge. He will take me to hell - and there is no redemption.'

It is Vienna in 1902 and the imperial city is alive with art, philosophy, music and science. But a sinister presence is casting a shadow over this sumptuous backdrop. A beautiful medium has been found shot dead and Dr Max Liebermann, young disciple of Freud, is called upon to help his good friend Detective Inspector Rheinhardt investigate the mysterious circumstances that surround her death.

About the Author

Frank Tallis is a writer and clinical psychologist. In 1999 he received a Writer's Award from the Arts Council and in 2000 he won the New London Writers' Award. *Mortal Mischief* was shortlisted for the Ellis Peters Historical Dagger Award in 2005 and for the prestigious Quais du Polar award in France, 2007. *Vienna Blood* was published in 2006, *Fatal Lives* in 2007, *Darkness Rising* in 2008, and *Deadly Communion* in 2009, all to great acclaim. Titles in the Liebermann series have been translated into fourteen languages.

Also by Frank Tallis

Love Sick
Vienna Blood
Fatal Lies
Darkness Rising
Deadly Communion

Mortal Mischief

Frank Tallis



Volume One of the Liebermann Papers



arrow books

Part One

The God of Storms

1

It was the day of the great storm. I remember it well because my father - Mendel Liebermann - had suggested that we meet for coffee at The Imperial. I had a strong suspicion that something was on his mind . . .

A ROILING MASS of black cloud had risen from behind the Opera House like a volcanic eruption of sulphurous smoke and ash. Its dimensions suggested impending doom - an epic catastrophe on the scale of Pompeii. In the strange amber light, the surrounding buildings had become jaundiced. Perched on the rooftops, the decorative statuary - classical figures and triumphal eagles - seemed to have been carved from brimstone. A fork of lightning flowed down the mountain of cloud like a river of molten iron. The earth trembled and the air stirred, yet still there was no rain. The coming storm seemed to be saving itself - building its reserves of power in preparation for an apocalyptic deluge.

The tram bell sounded, rousing Liebermann from his reverie and dispersing a group of horse-drawn carriages on the lines.

As the tram rolled forwards, Liebermann wondered why his father had wanted to see him. It wasn't that such a meeting was unusual; they often met for coffee. Rather, it was something about the manner in which the invitation had been issued. Mendel's voice had been curiously strained - reedy and equivocal. Moreover, his nonchalance had been unconvincing, suggesting to Liebermann the concealment of an ulterior - or perhaps even unconscious - motive. But what might that be?

The tram slowed in the heavy traffic of the Karntner Ring and Liebermann jumped off before the vehicle had reached

its stop. He raised the collar of his astrakhan coat against the wind and hurried towards his destination.

Even though lunch had already been served, The Imperial was seething with activity. Waiters, with silver trays held high, were dodging each other between crowded tables, and the air was filled with animated conversation. At the back of the café, a pianist was playing a Chopin mazurka. Liebermann wiped the condensation off his spectacles with a handkerchief and hung his coat on the stand.

‘Good afternoon, Herr Doctor.’

Liebermann recognised the voice and without turning replied: ‘Good afternoon, Bruno. I trust you are well?’

‘I am, sir. Very well indeed.’

When Liebermann turned, the waiter continued: ‘If you’d like to come this way, sir. Your father is already here.’

Bruno beckoned, and guided Liebermann through the hectic room. They arrived at a table near the back, where Mendel was concealed behind the densely printed sheets of the *Weiner Zeitung*.

‘Herr Liebermann?’ said Bruno. Mendel folded his paper. He was a thickset man with a substantial beard and bushy eyebrows. His expression was somewhat severe – although softened by a liberal network of laughter lines. The waiter added: ‘Your son.’

‘Ahh, Maxim!’ said the old man. ‘There you are!’ He sounded a little irritated, as though he had been kept waiting.

After a moment’s hesitation, Liebermann replied: ‘But I’m early, father.’

Mendel consulted his pocket watch.

‘So you are. Well, sit down, sit down. Another *Pharisäer* for me and . . . Max?’ He invited his son to order.

‘A *Schwarzer*, please, Bruno.’

The waiter executed a modest bow and was gone.

‘So,’ said Mendel. ‘How are you, my boy?’

‘Very well, father.’

'You're looking a bit thinner than usual.'

'Am I?'

'Yes. Drawn.'

'I hadn't noticed.'

'Are you eating properly?'

Liebermann laughed: 'Very well, as it happens. And how are you, father?'

Mendel grimaced.

'Achh! Good days and bad days, you know how it is. I'm seeing that specialist you recommended, Pintsch. And there is some improvement, I suppose. But my back isn't much better.'

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.'

Mendel dismissed his son's remark with a wave of his hand.

'Do you want something to eat?' Mendel pushed the menu across the table. 'You look like you need it. I think I'll have the *Topfenstrudel*.'

Liebermann studied the extensive cake-list: *Apfeltorte*, *Cremeschnitte*, *Truffeltorte*, *Apfelstrudel*. It ran on over several pages.

'Your mother sends her love,' said Mendel, 'and would like to know when she can expect to see you again.' His expression hovered somewhere between sympathy and reprimand.

'I'm sorry, father,' said Liebermann. 'I've been very busy. Too many patients . . . Tell mother I'll try to see her next week. Friday, perhaps?'

'Then you must come to dinner.'

'Yes,' said Liebermann, suddenly feeling that he had already committed himself more than he really wanted. 'Yes. Thank you.' He looked down at the menu again: *Dobostorte*, *Gugelhupf*, *Linzertorte*. The Chopin mazurka ended on a loud minor chord, and a ripple of applause passed through the café audience. Encouraged, the pianist played a glittering arpeggio figure on the upper keys, under which he

introduced the melody of a popular waltz. A group of people seated near the window began another round of appreciative clapping.

Bruno returned with the coffees and stood to attention with his pencil and notepad.

'The *Topfenstrudel*,' said Mendel.

'The *Rehrücken*, please,' said Liebermann.

Mendel stirred the cream into his *Pharisäer* - which came with a tot of rum - and immediately started to talk about the family textile business. This was not unusual. Indeed, it had become something of a tradition. Profits had risen, and Mendel was thinking of expanding the enterprise: another factory, or even a shop, perhaps. Now that the meddling bureaucrats had lifted the ban on department stores, he could see a future in retail - new opportunities. His old friend Blomberg had already opened a successful department store and had suggested that they might go into partnership. Throughout, Mendel's expression was eager and clearly mindful of his son's reactions.

Liebermann understood why his father kept him so well informed. Although he was proud of Liebermann's academic achievements, he still hoped that one day young Max would step into his shoes.

Mendel's voice slowed when he noticed his son's hand. The fingers seemed to be following the pianist's melody - treating the edge of the table like a keyboard.

'Are you listening?' said Mendel.

'Yes. Of course I'm listening,' Liebermann replied. He had become accustomed to such questioning and could no longer be caught out, as was once the case. 'You're thinking of going into business with Herr Blomberg.'

Liebermann assumed a characteristic position. His right hand - shaped like a gun - pressed against his cheek, the index finger resting gently against the right temple. It was a 'listening' position favoured by many psychiatrists.

'So - what do you think? A good idea?' asked Mendel.

‘Well, if the existing department store is profitable, that sounds reasonable enough.’

‘It’s a considerable investment.’

‘I’m sure it is.’

The old man stroked his beard. ‘You don’t seem to be very keen on the idea.’

‘Father, does it matter what I think?’

Mendel sighed.

‘No. I suppose not.’ His disappointment was palpable.

Liebermann looked away. He took no joy in disappointing his father and now felt guilty. The old man’s motives were entirely laudable and Liebermann was perfectly aware that his comfortable standard of living was sustained – at least in part – by Mendel’s exemplary management of the family business. Yet he couldn’t ever imagine himself running a factory or managing a department store. The idea was ludicrous.

As these thoughts were passing through his mind, Liebermann noticed the arrival of a gentleman in his middle years. On entering the café, the man removed his hat and surveyed the scene. His hair was combed to the side, creating a deep side parting, and his neatly trimmed moustache and beard were almost entirely grey. He received a warm welcome from the head waiter who helped him to take his coat off. He was immaculately dressed in pinstriped trousers, a wide-lapelled jacket and a ‘showy’ waistcoat. He must have made a quip, because the head waiter suddenly began laughing. The man seemed in no hurry to find a seat and stood by the door, listening intently to the waiter, who now appeared – Liebermann thought – to have started to tell a story.

Mendel saw that his son had become distracted.

‘Know him, do you?’

Liebermann turned.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Doctor Freud,’ said Mendel in a flat voice.

Liebermann was astonished that his father knew the man's identity.

'Yes, I do know him. And it's *Professor* Freud, actually.'

'Professor Freud, then,' said Mendel. 'But he hasn't been a professor for very long, has he?'

'A few months,' said Liebermann, raising his eyebrows. 'How did you know that?'

'He comes to the lodge.'

'What lodge?'

Mendel scowled.

'B'nai B'rith.'

'Oh yes, of course.'

'Although God knows why. I'm not sure what sort of a Jew he's supposed to be. He doesn't seem to believe in anything. And as for his ideas . . .' Mendel shook his head. 'He gave us a talk last year. Scandalous. How well do you know him?'

'Quite well . . . We meet occasionally to discuss his work.'

'What? You think there's something in it?'

'The book he wrote with Breuer on hysteria was excellent and *The Interpretation of Dreams* is . . . well, a masterpiece. Of course, I don't agree with everything he says. Even so, I've found his treatment suggestions very useful.'

'Then you must be in a minority.'

'Undoubtedly. But I am convinced that Professor Freud's system - a system that he calls psychoanalysis - will become more widely accepted.'

'Not in Vienna.'

'I don't know. One or two of my colleagues, other junior psychiatrists, are very interested in Professor Freud's ideas.'

Mendel's brow furrowed: 'Some of the things he said last year were obscene. I pity those in his care.'

'I would be the first to admit,' said Liebermann, 'that he has become somewhat preoccupied - of late - with the erotic life of his patients. However, his understanding of the human mind extends well beyond our animal instincts.'

The professor was still standing by the door with the head waiter. He suddenly burst out laughing and slapped his companion on the back. It was clear that the head waiter had just told him a joke.

'Dear God,' said Mendel under his breath, 'I hope he doesn't come this way.' Then he sighed with relief as Professor Freud was ushered to a table beyond their view. Mendel was about to say something else but stopped when Bruno arrived with the cakes.

'*Topfenstrudel* for Herr Liebermann and *Rehrücken* for Herr Doctor Liebermann. More coffee?' Bruno gestured towards Mendel's empty glass.

'Yes, why not? A *Mélange* and another *Schwarzer* for my son.'

Mendel looked enviously at his son's gateau, a large glazed chocolate sponge cake shaped like a saddle of deer, filled with apricot jam and studded with almonds. His own order was less arresting, being a simple pastry filled with sweet curd cheese.

Liebermann noticed his father's lingering gaze.

'You should have ordered one too.'

Mendel shook his head: 'Pintsch told me I must lose weight.'

'Well, you won't lose weight eating *Topfenstrudel*.'

Mendel shrugged and took a mouthful of pastry but stopped chewing when a loud thunderclap shook the building. 'It's going to be a bad one,' said Mendel, nodding towards the window. Outside, Vienna had succumbed to a preternatural twilight.

'Maxim,' Mendel continued, 'I wanted to see you today for a reason. A specific reason.'

At last, thought Liebermann. Finally, he was about to discover the true purpose of their meeting. Liebermann braced himself mentally, still unsure of what to expect.

'You probably think it's nothing to do with me,' Mendel added. 'But—' He stopped abruptly and pushed the severed

corner of his *Topfenstrudel* around the plate with his fork.

‘What is it, father?’

‘I was speaking to Herr Weiss the other day and . . .’ Again his sentence tailed off. ‘Maxim.’ This time he returned to his task with greater determination. ‘You and Clara seem to be getting along well enough and – understandably, I think – Herr Weiss is anxious to know of your intentions.’

‘My intentions?’

‘Yes,’ said Mendel, looking at his son. ‘Your intentions.’ He carried on eating his cake.

‘I see,’ said Liebermann, somewhat taken aback. Although he had considered many subjects that his father might wish to discuss, his relationship with Clara Weiss had not been one of them. Yet now the omission seemed obvious.

‘Well,’ replied Liebermann. ‘What can I say? I like Clara very much.’

Mendel wiped his mouth with a napkin and leaned forwards.

‘And?’

‘And . . .’ Liebermann looked into his father’s censorious eyes. ‘And . . . I suppose that my intention is, in the fullness of time to—’ (Now it was his turn to hesitate.)

‘Yes?’

‘To marry her. That is – if she’ll have me.’

Mendel relaxed back in his chair. He was clearly relieved and a broad smile lifted his grave features.

‘Of course she’ll marry you. Why shouldn’t she?’

‘Sometimes we seem to be . . . well, just good friends.’ In all areas of life, Liebermann was entirely confident of his powers of perception; however, where Clara was concerned, he was never entirely sure if her affectionate gestures were tokens of love or merely of flirtation. Desire had blunted his clinical acumen. ‘It isn’t always clear what—’

‘You have nothing to worry about,’ Mendel interrupted, inclining his hand in a courtly gesture. ‘Believe me.’ He

leaned forward again, and squeezed his son's arm: 'Nothing to worry about at all. Now eat your *Rehrücken!*'

But Liebermann had no desire to eat. Clara had obviously told her father that she would accept a proposal of marriage. He had *nothing to worry about*. Liebermann thought of her delicate features: her expressive eyes, small nose, and rose-petal lips – her straight back and slender waist. She was going to be his wife. She was going to be *his* Clara.

'I won't tell your mother,' continued Mendel. 'I'll leave that to you. She'll be delighted, of course. Delighted. As you know, she's very fond of Clara. In fact, she was saying only the other day how pretty Clara's become. And they're a good family, the Weisses. Good people. Jacob and I go back many, many years. We went to the same school, you know, in Leopoldstadt. And his father helped my father – that's your grandfather – into the trade. They shared a market stall together.'

Liebermann had been told this more times than he cared to remember. Even so, he knew that his father took immense pleasure in reiterating family history, and simulated interest as well as he could. Mendel warmed to his theme, and continued to expound upon the several other links that existed between the Weiss and Liebermann families. The *Rehrücken* helped Liebermann to survive the repetition. Eventually, when Mendel had exhausted the topic, he attracted Bruno's attention and ordered more coffee and cigars.

'You know, Maxim,' said Mendel, 'with marriage comes much responsibility.'

'Of course.'

'You have to think about the future.'

'Clearly.'

'Now tell me, will you really be able to provide for a young family on that salary of yours?'

Liebermann smiled at his father. It was extraordinary how Mendel never missed an opportunity.

‘Yes,’ Liebermann replied patiently. ‘In due course, I think I will.’

Mendel shrugged.

‘We’ll see . . .’

The old man managed to sustain his stern expression for a few seconds longer before allowing himself a burst of laughter. Again, he reached over the table, and patted his son on the shoulder.

‘Congratulations, my boy.’

The gesture was curiously affecting, and Liebermann recognised that – in spite of their differences – the relationship they shared was predicated on love. His throat felt tight and his eyes prickled. The bustle of the café faded as the two men stared at each other, suspended in a rare and vivid moment of mutual understanding.

‘Excuse me,’ said Mendel, rising precipitately and setting off towards the cloakroom. But the old man had been too slow. Liebermann had already observed a tear in his eye.

Liebermann watched his father disappear into the bustling Ringstrasse crowd. A gust of wind reminded him that – unlike Mendel – he was not carrying an umbrella. Fortunately, a cab was waiting just outside The Imperial. There was another rumble of thunder – the growl of a discontented minor god. It made the cab horse toss its head, jangle its bridle, and stroke the cobbles with a nervous hoof.

‘Easy now,’ called out the driver – his voice barely audible above the rattling of the carriages. Across the road a loose café awning snapped like a sail.

Liebermann looked up at the livid millstone sky. Ragged tatters of cloud blew above the pediment of The Imperial like the petticoats of a ravished angel. The air smelled strange – an odd, metallic smell.

Liebermann raised his hand to catch the cab driver's attention but was distracted by a familiar voice.

'Max!'

Turning, he caught sight of a sturdy man approaching. His coat was undone and flapping around his body as he walked into the wind - a precautionary hand kept his hat from flying off his head. Liebermann immediately recognised his good friend Inspector Oskar Rheinhardt, and smiled broadly.

'Oskar!'

The two men shook hands.

'Max, you will think this a dreadful impertinence, I know,' said Rheinhardt, pausing to recover his breath. 'But would you mind awfully if I took your cab?'

The Inspector possessed a face that suggested weariness. The skin under his eyes sagged into discoloured catenated pouches. Yet he had grown a miraculously trim moustache, the turned-up extremities of which tapered to form two sharp points.

'An incident?' asked Liebermann.

'Indeed,' said Rheinhardt, puffing. 'A matter of some urgency, in fact.'

'Then please be my guest.'

'Thank you, my friend. I am much indebted.'

Rheinhardt opened the door of the cab and as he climbed up, called out to the driver: 'The market square - Leopoldstadt.' The driver responded by touching his forelock with a gloved finger. Before closing the cab door, Rheinhardt addressed Liebermann again: 'Oh, and by the way, the Hugo Wolf songs are coming along nicely.'

'Until Saturday, then?'

'Until Saturday.'

With that, Rheinhardt pulled the door shut and the cab edged out into the noisy traffic.

A sheet of white lightning transformed the Ringstrasse into a glaring monochrome vision. Moments later a great

ripping sound opened the heavens, and the first heavy drops of rain detonated on the paving stones.

Liebermann looked around for another cab - knowing already that the attempt would be futile. He sighed, good-naturedly cursed Rheinhardt, and stomped towards the nearest tram stop.

2

RHEINHARDT PRESSED HIS shoulder against the locked door and pushed. It didn't budge.

A blast of wind rattled the windows and unholy-sounding voices wailed in the chimney flues. A shutter was banging – again and again – like an impatient revenant demanding entry, and all around was the inescapable sound of rain: a relentless artillery. Teeming, drenching, torrential. Drumming on the roof, splashing from the gutters and gurgling out of drains. The deluge had finally come.

Rheinhardt sighed, turned, and looked directly at the young woman sitting in the dingy hallway. She was slight, wore an apron over a plain dress, and was very nervous. Her fingers fidgeted on her lap, a mannerism that reminded him of his daughter Mitzi. The young woman stood up as Rheinhardt approached.

'Please,' said Rheinhardt, 'stay seated if you wish.'

She shook her head. 'Thank you very much, sir, but I think I'd rather stand.' Her voice shook a little.

'I'd like to ask you a few questions, if I may?'

She mouthed the words 'Yes, Sir' – but no sound escaped.

Having determined the girl's name – Rosa Sucher – Rheinhardt asked: 'What time did you arrive today?'

'My usual time, sir. Nine o' clock.'

'And is Fräulein Löwenstein usually up by then?'

'Usually, but not always. As you can see – the bedroom door is open.' Rheinhardt responded politely by looking across the hallway. The corner of a drab counterpane was just visible. 'The bed had not been slept in, so I—' She broke off, her face suddenly flushing with embarrassment.

‘Naturally you assumed that your mistress had not spent the night at home.’

‘Yes. That’s right, sir.’

‘And what did you do then?’

‘Well, sir, I got on with my duties . . . but I found that I couldn’t get into the sitting room. The door had been locked – and I didn’t know what to do. So I carried on cleaning, thinking my mistress would eventually return . . . but she didn’t. And today is Thursday. My mistress always sends me to the shops on Thursdays, to get things. Things for her guests. Pastries, flowers—’

‘Guests?’

‘Yes, sir. Fräulein Löwenstein is a famous medium.’ The young woman said this with some pride. ‘She has a meeting here, every Thursday at eight.’

Rheinhardt felt obliged to look impressed.

‘Famous, you say?’

‘Yes. Very famous. She was once consulted by a Russian prince who travelled all the way from St Petersburg.’

The downpour intensified and the unfastened shutter banged with even greater violence. Rosa Sucher looked towards the sitting-room door.

‘Please, do go on,’ said Rheinhardt.

‘I waited until the afternoon – and still my mistress hadn’t come home. I began to worry . . . finally I went to Café Zilbergeld.’

‘On Haidgasse?’

‘Yes. I know Herr Zilbergeld, I worked for him last summer. I told him that my mistress had not returned, and he asked me if this had ever happened before? I told him that it hadn’t, and he said that I should call the police. So I ran around the corner, to the police station on Grosse Sperlgasse.’

The young woman pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve and blew her nose. She was clearly about to start crying.

‘Thank you, Rosa,’ said Rheinhardt. ‘You have been very helpful.’

The young woman curtsied and sat down, steadying herself by touching a small rosewood table.

Rheinhardt walked up the hallway, peering into the various rooms. The apartment was not very large: a bedroom, a drawing room, a bathroom and a kitchen – which also housed the closet. The maid watched him: a large man in a dark blue coat, apparently deep in thought. He paused, and twisted the right horn of his moustache into an even sharper point. Returning to the locked door, he crouched and looked through the keyhole.

He could see nothing. It had obviously been locked from the inside, suggesting that the room was still occupied. The occupant, however, had not moved, nor spoken a word since Rosa Sucher’s arrival in the morning.

Rheinhardt could hear his assistant, Hausmann, and the constable from the Grosse Sperlgasse police station running up the stairs. Within seconds they appeared at the end of the hallway.

‘Well?’ Rheinhardt asked, slowly straightening up. He was a stout man, and pressed the palms of his hands down on his thighs to gain extra lift.

The two men marched towards him, leaving a trail of wet footprints in their wake.

‘All the shutters are bolted,’ said Hausman, ‘except for one. It’s difficult to see the window in the rain . . . but I think it’s closed. The sitting room is completely inaccessible from outside.’

‘Even with a ladder?’

‘Well, a very long ladder would do it, sir.’

The two young men came to an abrupt halt in front of Rheinhardt. Even though they were thoroughly soaked, their expressions suggested a kind of canine enthusiasm – the controlled agitation of a retriever as a stick is about to be

thrown. Beyond them, the pathetic figure of Rosa Sucher sat biting her nails.

‘Constable,’ said Rheinhardt, ‘would you escort Fräulein Sucher downstairs?’

‘Downstairs, sir?’

‘Yes, to the foyer. I’ll follow shortly.’

‘Very good, sir,’ said the constable, turning swiftly on his heels.

Rheinhardt clapped a restraining hand on the officer’s shoulder before he could spring forward. ‘Gently now,’ said Rheinhardt close to his ear. ‘The young woman is upset.’

Rheinhardt released his grip, allowing the constable to approach Rosa Sucher. He did so with the exaggerated slowness of an undertaker. Rheinhardt rolled his eyes at the ceiling, and turned to face Haussmann.

‘I don’t think we should waste any more time. It’s a strong old door but we should be able to do it.’ Haussmann removed his sopping cap and twisted it in his hands. Rainwater dripped to the floor, creating a small puddle between his feet. When he had finished wringing the cap he placed it back on his head.

‘You’ll catch a cold,’ said Rheinhardt. Haussmann looked at his superior, unsure how to react. ‘Why don’t you take it off?’

Haussmann obediently removed his cap and stuffed it into his coat pocket.

They positioned themselves on the opposite side of the hallway.

‘Ready?’ asked Rheinhardt.

‘Yes, sir.’

Running towards the door, they threw their shoulders against it. There was a dull thud, and the sound of air being forced from their lungs. Haussmann stepped back, grimaced, and rubbed his shoulder.

‘That hurt.’

'You'll live,' said Rheinhardt. At the end of the hallway, the constable was holding the front door open for Rosa Sucher. For a brief moment she looked back before hurrying out, ducking beneath the policeman's arm.

'Now, let's try again,' said Rheinhardt.

They returned to their former positions and repeated the procedure. This time, however, when their shoulders made contact, the frame split and the door burst open with a loud *crack*. The two men struggled to keep their balance as they fell forward into the room beyond.

It took a few seconds for Rheinhardt's eyes to adjust. The curtains were drawn and the light was poor. Even so, the unpleasant smell was enough to confirm his worst fears.

'God in heaven . . .' The timbre of Hausmann's voice suggested a combination of reverence and horror.

The room was large, with a high bas-relief ceiling of garlands and floating cherubs; however, Rheinhardt's attention was drawn to a massive circular table, around which ten sturdy chairs were evenly spaced. In the middle of the table stood a gaudy silver candelabra. The candles had burned down, and long wax icicles hung from excessively elaborate arms.

Gradually more shapes began to emerge from the gloom, one of which was a chaise longue located on the other side of the room. The couch was not empty but was occupied by a shadowy form that swiftly resolved itself into a reclining female figure.

'Hausman,' said Rheinhardt. 'The curtains, please.'

His assistant did not respond but stood very still, staring.

Rheinhardt raised his voice: 'Hausman?'

'Sir?'

'The curtains, please,' he repeated.

'Yes, sir.'

Hausman walked around the table, keeping his gaze fixed on the body. He pulled one of the curtains aside, which filled the room with a weak light. As he reached for the second

curtain Rheinhardt called out: 'No, that's enough.' It seemed improper, or disrespectful, to expose the body further.

Rheinhardt advanced, stepping carefully across the threadbare Persian rug, and stopped next to the chaise longue.

The woman was in her late twenties and very pretty. Long blonde tresses fell in ringlets to her slim shoulders. Her dress was of blue silk - its neckline tested the limits of decency - and a double string of pearls rested on an ample alabaster bosom. She might have looked asleep had it not been for the dark stain that had spread from her décolletage and the coagulated blood that had crusted around the jagged hole over her ruined heart.

There was something odd - almost affected - about her posture, like that of an artist's model. One arm lay by her side, while the other was placed neatly behind her head.

'Sir?'

Hausman was pointing at something.

On the table was a sheet of writing paper. Rheinhardt walked over and examined the note. It was written in a florid hand: *God forgive me for what I have done. There is such a thing as forbidden knowledge. He will take me to hell - and there is no hope of redemption.*

It appeared that the writer had been jolted, just as the final word was finished. A line of ink traced an arc that left the page just above the bottom right-hand corner. On closer inspection, Rheinhardt also noted that the writer had made a mistake in the final sentence. A word that she'd obviously decided against had been crossed out - before the *me* in *He will take me to hell*.

'Suicide,' said Hausmann.

Rheinhardt said nothing in response. Hausmann shrugged and walked around the table to the chaise longue. 'She's very beautiful.'

'Indeed,' said Rheinhardt. 'Strikingly so.'

'Fräulein Löwenstein?'

‘Very probably. I suppose we should get Rosa Sucher back up here to identify the body. Though she was so upset – perhaps that’s not such a good idea.’

‘It might save us some legwork, sir.’

‘True. But being a good policeman isn’t only about making expedient decisions, Haussman.’ His assistant looked slightly hurt, forcing Rheinhardt to amend his reprimand with a conciliatory smile. ‘Besides,’ Rheinhardt added, ‘Fräulein Löwenstein was expecting some guests tonight – perhaps there will be a gentleman among the company who may be willing to assist us.’

Although the room had at first appeared rather grand, closer inspection soon revealed that this was an illusion. The paintwork was chipped, the floorboards scuffed, and a brown stain under one of the windows suggested damp. At one end of the room was an austere marble fireplace, above which an ornate Venetian-style mirror had been hung. Rheinhardt suspected that it was a copy. Recesses on either side of the fireplace contained shelves on which an array of items had been placed: a cheap porcelain figure of a shepherdess, an empty bowl, two vases, and a ceramic hand (displaying the chief lines of the palm). The other end of the room was occupied by a large embroidered screen. The total effect of the room was somewhat depressing, moth-eaten and shabby.

‘We’re going to need a floor plan for the file – can you do that, Haussmann?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And an inventory of items?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Rheinhardt continued to scan the room.

The rain lashed against the windows, running in streams down the casement. Outside, the shutter continued to bang against the wall. Rheinhardt unlocked the offending window, opened it, and peered out. A blast of cold air scoured his face and the curtains billowed inwards. The road had

become a river in spate – a rushing, tumbling flood. Peering over the ledge, the Inspector looked downwards. It was a sheer drop.

Rheinhardt fixed the loose shutter and closed the window. He wiped the rain from his face with a handkerchief and examined his reflection, making some minor adjustments to his moustache. His satisfied exhalation fogged the glass.

‘Sir?’

The young man’s voice was slightly edgy – uncertain. The room trembled as the celestial cannonade continued.

‘Yes?’

‘You’d better take a look at this.’

Behind the screen was a large lacquered box, decorated with Japanese figures. Rheinhardt tried to lift the lid but discovered that it was locked.

‘Shall we force it open?’

‘That won’t be necessary. You can ask Rosa Sucher where her mistress kept the key.’

‘Shall I do that now, sir?’

‘No. Not yet, Haussmann. Let’s just think a little, eh?’

Haussmann nodded, and assumed what he hoped the Inspector would recognise as a contemplative expression.

Rheinhardt’s attention was drawn again to the body. Slowly, he advanced towards the sofa and knelt to inspect the wound. As he did so, he accidentally brushed against the woman’s delicate but unyielding fingers. Her frozen touch made him shudder. He instinctively wanted to apologise but managed to stop himself. Rheinhardt used the damp handkerchief to cover his mouth and nose. Close up, the smell of stale urine and the beginnings of decomposition became deeply unpleasant. There was a double flash of lightning, and the crystals of dried blood around the wound glowed like garnets.

‘Impossible.’ He whispered the word almost unconsciously.

‘I’m sorry, sir?’

The thunder roared like a captive giant.