

CHAPTER 1

The ferryman lit a cigarette and waited. He would get into trouble, no doubt, but he didn't care. It was cold, it was late, and the fog that mingled with the sewage fumes, cloying to the shore of the little island, would kill him long before any Lucky Strike. Besides, it wasn't his health his employer was concerned about but rather that the red tip would alert the harbour patrol that something was amiss.

And something was amiss; the ferryman was certain of that. Even though he tried not to think where his illicit cargo ended up when he dropped it on the big island, after every trip, when he climbed into bed and placed his hands on his wife's pregnant belly, he feared that he knew. The child would kick against his hand. His wife would stir. And he would think of the jar in the kitchen cabinet that when full would pay for a ticket west. And then, reminded once again of why he was doing what he was doing, he would fall asleep.

He heard the crunch of gravel that signalled footfall at the top of the stone steps. And then, one at a time, his "cargo" made their way down to the jetty and he helped them into his boat, their faces pale and fearful in the swirling fog.

MONDAY, 1 APRIL 1921, LONDON

The sun rose over London. And for the first time in a week the pea soup fog – known to locals as the London Peculiar – cowed

in the face of its optimism. The sulphurous smog slinked its way back through the streets and alleys, past monuments and churches, over barrows and under motorcars until it slipped into the Thames like a wayward child returning to its mother. The face of Big Ben smiled over the City as the wheezing Londoners started their morning commute.

Poppy Denby got off the bus at the bottom of Fleet Street, intersecting with the stream of passengers emerging from Blackfriars Tube Station. A paper boy brandished a copy of *The Daily Globe* from his stand, declaring: "Thousands of miners stop work today – read all about it!" Poppy did not have to read all about it; she'd just seen it, first-hand. She shuddered to think what this was going to do to the country, but she didn't blame the miners one bit.

The misery she'd witnessed in the mines around Morpeth had not reached the capital and commuters went about their daily routine as if a state of emergency had not just been called and the whole country was not about to grind to a halt.

Poppy passed St Bride's Church along with black-robed solicitors and barristers heading up to the Temple Courts. As always, she gave a splash of colour to proceedings. Yes, there was bad news abroad; but there was always bad news. And despite what she'd just seen on her recent trip home, and fearing there was more to come, Poppy nonetheless felt a bubble of joy within her. It was spring and in its honour she wore a bright yellow daffodil in her lapel, offset, rather charmingly, by the sage green of her new suede coat.

She had purchased the coat at Harrods with her friend Delilah the previous day. Delilah, the daughter of a Maltese hotel magnate, had bought far more than a new coat, but Poppy had been pleased with her purchase. Oh, and of course the cloche hat she had bought to match. And the shoes... she felt a

little guilty about the shoes. They were far more than she could really afford on her reporter's salary – even with the clothing allowance she received for being arts and entertainment editor – but nonetheless, she'd given in to Delilah's "Oh darling, aren't they just the cat's whiskers!" After all, the whole purpose of the shopping expedition had been to cheer up her poor old chum, so Poppy just didn't have the heart to say no.

The green Cuban heels clicked on the Fleet Street pavement. "Morning Sarge!" she called out to the disabled war veteran, selling carved wooden crosses outside the Empire Tea Rooms. "Morning Miss Denby!" he called up from his folded-up blanket that cushioned his bandaged stumps. His furry friend, a bull-dog named Reginald, snuffled Poppy's hand as she reached down to give him a pat and toss some coins into his master's bowl. She would have stopped to chat with Sarge – no doubt he'd have some strong views on the miners' strike – but it was nearly half-past eight and Poppy wanted to get an early start.

"I'll see you later, Sarge!"

"You have a good day, Miss Denby!"

"I will!" She smiled and Sarge soaked in the sunshine.

It was Friday morning and she had to put the finishing touches to her copy for the Saturday morning edition. Poppy prepared herself to ascend the six marble steps into the offices of *The Daily Globe*. In the nine months since she'd been employed on the London tabloid the thrill of those six steps had not worn thin. She noticed a smudge on the brass straps around one of the marble globes that flanked them and took out a handkerchief to wipe it clean. She was proud of her newspaper and even more proud of the articles she had contributed to it – not least the two huge exposés that had set her up as one of the best up-and-coming investigative journalists on Fleet Street. But those sorts of stories were exhausting, and she was grateful that she'd had

a few months of "ordinary" events to cover: gallery openings, book reviews, film premieres, and celebrity interviews. It was a giddy world and she loved it.

She took in a lungful of spring air – hoping not to inhale too much pollution – and walked into the foyer.

Her heels clicked across the black and white marble floor on her way to the lift. *En route* her eye caught a new statuette in a marble alcove, carefully positioned to enhance the Art Deco theme of the atrium. The concentric geometric frames gave the illusion of depth, and the mirrored back of the alcove reflected multiple versions of the brass Isis. *It was Isis wasn't it?* Poppy leaned forward to look.

"Rollo brought it in this morning. A gift from Miss Reece-Lansdale, apparently." The explanation came from the direction of the reception desk.

"Morning, Mavis! You're back! Did you have a good holiday?"

"Morning, Poppy! I did, thank you. Mr Bradshaw and I took in the sea air in Brighton. How was your Easter break?"

Poppy took a surreptitious look at the black lacquer clock hands, embedded directly on the white wall. Should she give Mavis the long story or the précis? Her Easter break, spent with her parents up north in Morpeth, had been... *interesting*. She'd spent most of the time helping them with a soup kitchen for the families of miners at Ashington Colliery – struggling to make ends meet on the pittance they were paid. It was in stark contrast to the high society life she was now living and had reminded her to count her blessings.

It was the first time she'd been home since arriving in London the previous summer, and her parents were itching to hear all about her new job... and the new man in her life. But this did not go as well as she'd hoped. Poppy had been

prepared for their concerns about the dangers she'd recently faced in her two big stories, but she had not been prepared for their objections to Daniel. She sighed inwardly... *The précis, definitely the précis.*

"It was lovely to be home, Mavis. Nothing like home-cooked food, eh?"

Mavis looked at her shrewdly. "Well, isn't that lovely. You'll have to fill me in on it all over a nice cup of tea."

"I will!" declared Poppy, heading for the lift. "But I need to finish a story by deadline or Rollo will have my guts for garters!"

Mavis laughed. "Best you do that, Poppy. He's not in the best of moods..."

"Thanks for the warning," Poppy offered as she opened the concertina gate and pressed the button for the fourth floor.

It had taken a while for Poppy to get used to her editor's mercurial moods, but she'd learned to stay out of his way as much as possible when he was in one of them and only offered sympathy if he asked for it. She'd also learned not to approach him before he'd had at least his second cup of coffee – which he should be having about now. Rollo was always the first to arrive and the last to leave the office and Poppy respected his work ethic immensely. But his problem was that he played as hard as he worked, and he often came into the office without having been home. Poppy suspected that Rollo's foul moods were usually preceded by a night at his club. And her suspicions were usually correct.

As the lift stopped on the fourth floor she was met by a tearful Vicky Thompson, the office assistant. "Oh, Miss Denby, I don't know what's happened," she blurted out, "but it's the worst I've ever seen him!" Vicky shook her head, sniffed back her tears, and stepped into the lift. "If anyone wants to know where I am, I'll be helping Mr Molanov in the morgue."

Poppy nodded in sympathy and watched as the young woman pressed the button for the third floor archive, known in journalese as "the morgue".

It was heart-warming to see how well Vicky and the Russian archivist got on. Ivan was now training her to be his assistant – much to Rollo's chagrin. But the archivist didn't care. "Tell that Yankee he can get a doggy body anywhere."

"Dog's body," Poppy had gently corrected.

"He can have as many bodies as he likes! Mees Thompson is going to work for me."

There was no denying that Ivan needed an assistant, particularly now that he had a child at home and no longer spent his after-hours working, trying to keep his loneliness at bay. The bubble of joy rose again in Poppy's chest as she thought of the day Ivan had been reunited with his young daughter – and the role she had played in making it happen.

Yes, Poppy was in an optimistic mood and it would take a lot more than a grumpy editor, a country in industrial turmoil, and disapproving parents to quench it. She pushed open the newsroom door and stepped into a haze of pipe smoke and coffee fumes. On her way to her desk she greeted three other journalists pounding away on their Remington typewriters, trying to meet deadline. Among them was the political editor, Ike Garfield, who had written the lead article on the miners' strike. He looked as if he hadn't slept a wink – and if she wasn't mistaken, he was wearing the same shirt, braces, and bow-tie as he had the day before. "Morning Ike. I hope you didn't spend the night here."

The West Indian man raised a tired eyebrow and grunted. *Oh dear*, thought Poppy, then put down her satchel at her desk and went to make them both a cup of tea. But as she opened the door to the small kitchenette she didn't see the diminutive frame

of her editor coming out, carrying a hot brew. They cannoned into each other, splashing hot liquid over them both.

“Jake, Mary, and Jehoshaphat!” bellowed Rollo and released a string of New York expletives that would make a dock worker blush.

Poppy was tempted to swear herself when she saw the coffee stains on her new coat and shoes, but she refrained.

Rollo turned on her, his moon-shaped face ablaze. “What the —?”

Poppy put up her hand: “An accident, Rollo. It was an accident. We’re equally to blame.”

Rollo opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. He scrunched up his eyes and took in a sharp breath, held it, and exhaled slowly. “Sorry, Miz Denby. Are you all right?”

Poppy’s mouth was tight, braced for the fight she thought had been about to come. But it hadn’t. Her face softened into a wry smile. “Nothing that won’t come out in the wash.” Then she took a dish cloth from the sink and mopped up the spilled coffee on the floor. Rollo stood over her, his short legs planted on either side of the brown pool. She thought for a moment he was going to offer to help, but instead he said: “I’ll see you at the ed meeting at twelve. Can you make sure all the troops are there? I’ve got an important announcement to make.”

Poppy looked up at her editor. The blood was slowly retreating from his face and his eyes... *Golly, are those tears welling?* But before she could examine him further he took what was left of his coffee and left the room.

Poppy finished cleaning the floor, then examined the damage to her shoes and coat. Suede stained so easily; she did the best she could but soon decided a visit to the dry cleaners would be needed. She sighed, removed the dripping daffodil from her lapel, and threw it in the bin.

CHAPTER 2

Poppy tapped her way through the morning on her Remington typewriter, organizing her thoughts about the play she had seen the previous evening – a controversial new show called *A Bill of Divorcement* – into a well-considered, balanced review. It was an “issue” play about a man returning to his family home after spending some years in a mental asylum only to discover that his wife had divorced him. Under the existing law, something like that could never happen, as women did not have the same rights as men to initiate divorce. But as Poppy and the playwright Miss Clemence Dane both knew, there was a bill working its way through Parliament that would give women the same rights as men to sue for divorce.

If the bill was passed, her aunt’s dear friend Grace Wilson – currently serving time in Holloway prison for perverting the course of justice – might finally be able to divorce the husband who had been refusing to initiate divorce proceedings for the past seven years.

Poppy wasn’t sure how she felt about it. Raised in a Christian home, she believed that marriage should be for life. But having met Grace’s estranged husband she doubted they would ever be happy together. And then there were the women she knew who suffered physical and emotional abuse from their husbands. Should they be compelled to stay married? And, in the case of the play, the wife who thought her husband might never return from an asylum. But what about the husband? It wasn’t the poor man’s fault that he’d become ill. And did he really deserve to