

EVEN MOUNTAINS CAN HARBOUR THEIR OWN SECRETS

THE
SILENCE
OF
STONE

ANDREA BUSFIELD

About the Author

Andrea Busfield was born in Warrington, England, and worked for UK national newspapers for 15 years before leaving for Afghanistan where she worked as a civilian editor for a NATO hearts-and-minds publication. Whilst in Kabul, she wrote her first novel, *Born Under a Million Shadows*, which was published in 2009 by Transworld and sold to 18 territories. Her second novel, *Aphrodite's War*, was published a year later, also by Transworld, and sold to five territories. She currently lives in Cyprus with five rescue dogs and a horse.

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Winter foggy morning on alpine meadow

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For Lorenz

Chapter One

For a long time Traudi couldn't move. For how long she couldn't say exactly because she was only a child and she kept falling asleep, but it was a long time, longer than she could ever remember – and she had always been good at remembering.

“Memory is a gift, Traudi, make sure you cherish it because in the end that's all that remains.”

This was the advice of her mama, issued a year earlier and not especially welcomed at the time. Eight years old and clutching a spelling test bearing a gold star, Traudi had been expecting sweets, and so she stared at the stick in her mother's hands, watching it stir clothes in a bathtub, waiting for an explanation. After a few moments, she turned her attention to Heini who was stood in the doorway holding onto their father's hunting rifle. She raised her palms in question and her brother raised his eyes to the heavens, confident in the knowledge that their mother wouldn't see. A mother's love for a son is blind, of course, but in this case their mama wasn't only blind to Heini, but also to Traudi, to the dog on the couch, to the dust dulling the lamplight and the birds gleefully crapping on their freshly-washed bed sheets. Their mother couldn't see. Her sight had abandoned her in early childhood never to return, and occasionally, whenever she thought she was alone, she could be heard crying for colours she could no longer recall.

“Mama, where are you? It’s me, Traudi.”

The plea left the child’s lips in little more than a whisper, and it brought no reply. The house was empty. The air stood still. And after a while, Traudi drifted back into sleep.

It was sometime later when Traudi woke again. A sluggish dawn crept over the mountains, casting the walls in a bluish grey light. Ice flowers spread their petals upon the glass of the windows. Everywhere was quiet. Even the rowdy river stood still; the open vein of the valley sealed and silenced by the kiss of another long winter.

In her bed, Traudi shivered and tugged at the blanket, bringing it closer to her chin. Deep in the valley there was no escape from the cold, not for the river, nor for the trees, nor for the hungry deer or the birds. Winter fell like a curse, making life harder than it had any right to be. Even the town suffered. An hour’s walk away, clear of the forest and further downhill, it gained little from the drop in elevation and the people trapped there would often stare in stunned envy across the lake – at the homes of their neighbours standing in the sunshine, shining like gold on the diamond white snow, whilst they, grey-faced and red-nosed, froze in the shadow of the Dachstein. Hallstatt was beautiful, it was a fact beyond dispute, but it was a town one had to be born to. With the mountain at its spine and the lake at its feet, the town was a flower pressed by giants. At its heart, towering houses were divided by narrow, cobbled lanes, their pastel shades only partially disguising the perpetual battle for light. During winter the days were so short it could send a man mad. Suffice to say then that had salt not been discovered in the rock that protected and imprisoned them it was highly unlikely that anyone would have thought to settle in such a remote, sun-shy corner of the

world. But salt had been discovered, and the mountains – cruel as they were – sustained Hallstatt’s fortunes.

“Man may live without gold, but not without salt,” or so believed Traudi’s father, who worked at the mine and was a frequent exponent of the company line. A solemn man with deep set eyes – possibly from a lifetime spent working underground – he effused the soft odour of tobacco and wet stone wherever he went. Though his words were few and his affection limited to gruff words and pinched cheeks, he was an honest man and strong with it, and as well as supplying the meat for the larder he also provided the salt.

“A family may live without kisses, but not without salt,” their mother once quipped and Traudi had laughed heartily, gamely repeating the phrase right up unto the day that their father left for work never to return. After that it didn’t seem appropriate.

It was a man from the mine who delivered the news. Arriving in the midst of a storm, he revealed in soft, serious tones, that his name was Herr Bittner. There had been an ‘accident’, he said, and when it became apparent that by ‘accident’ he meant ‘death’, their mother responded by grabbing her stomach and seeming to lose balance. Herr Bittner hurriedly pulled up a chair and urged her to sit before asking Heini to fetch a glass of water. Traudi stayed where she was, stood by the fire, watching the man’s leather coat drip rain onto the floorboards.

Mr Bittner was clean-shaven, unlike the men of the valley, his eyes were hooded and weary, and when their mother had recovered enough to listen to what he had to say, he littered his apologies with talk of cables and shafts, of efforts frantic and sustained. Amidst her mother’s tears and her brother’s unvoiced shock, Traudi heard only one truth; that the mountain behind them, with its craggy stomach violated and empty, had

swallowed her father, like a toad feasting on flies.

The light was receding when Traudi next awoke. The stubborn grip of sleep had loosened its hold, releasing her slowly, allowing her to fly, and for a moment she felt happy – until she opened her eyes to find herself lying on the floor.

Confused, Traudi glanced at her hands. Tangled around her fingers was the silver necklace her mother had given her. In her palm lay the bone angel carved by her brother. Heini had rarely been generous – not with his gifts nor with his time – which is why she treasured the angel, despite it coming after the most terrible fight, when the children had yet to come to terms with the loss of their father, or their new roles within the home.

“I am the man of the house and you must do as I say!” Barely nine years old, Heini had erupted with all the red-faced fury of a drill sergeant having had his authority challenged. Grabbing Traudi by the hair he forced her to the floor.

“Wash it.”

“I will not.”

“Wash it.”

“I will not!”

“Wash it!”

“No! You can’t make me, Heini! You are not my father!” And with no words to counter the argument, nor the experience to diffuse it, Heini hit Traudi full in the face; the back of his hand propelled by months of unshed tears that burst from his gut to erupt in blood upon his sister’s split lip. For a moment, maybe more, neither of them moved, both too stunned to react to the violence. But then Traudi’s face crumpled, breaking the spell, and as she sobbed her brother fled the house, his cheeks burning with shame.

It was many hours later that Heini resurfaced. By then their mother had returned from Hallstatt, aided by the long stick that detected the obstacles her eyes no longer saw, and she had been nothing more than curious when she arrived home to find her only son absent. Her lack of concern was partly due to a belief that it was in the nature of boys to sometimes go missing, and largely due to the fact that she couldn't see the state of her daughter's bruised face. In the half-light, Heini entered the room as quietly as his boots would allow, but their mother, blind as she was, had the ears of a bat.

"Where have you been, Heini?"

"Nowhere." As he spoke he glanced at his sister on the couch. Caressing the dog's rump with one hand, Traudi used the other to point to the cut on her lip, her eyes livid and threatening.

"*Nowhere* is no answer, Heinrich. I want to know where you've been," their mother insisted.

"Hunting, Mama. I've been out hunting, that's all."

"And did you catch anything?"

"Only a cold."

"Then I assume you'll want the soup that's been waiting for you."

"I guess."

After their mother left her seat to tap her way to the kitchen, Heini took off his boots, ran his fingers through his thick, blond hair and carefully approached his sister. Head bowed, and with his cheeks coloured by something more painful than cold, he knelt by the couch. Before raising his face he brought his hands to rest on the shin of Traudi's leg.

"I'm sorry," he mouthed. "I really am very, very sorry."

And because Heini was her brother, and his blue eyes shone with all the tears he had been fighting since the death of their father, Traudi nodded. A few days later, he handed her the small

angel he had carved from the antler of a deer. Though the wings were unbalanced and the face teetered on the wrong side of ugly, Traudi declared the angel to be the most beautiful thing to have fallen out of heaven's blue skies.

"I'll wear it always," she promised, and her brother helped her attach the figure to the silver necklace her mother had given her the birthday before their father died.

Now lying in her bedroom, the light gone and her back all but nailed to the hard floor, Traudi squeezed the angel between her fingers. The bone was cold.

"Heini, where are you?"

Chapter Two

The men switched off their tracking devices, hung up their ropes, changed their boots, stored their skis and debated the merits of emptying their sodden rucksacks before agreeing, almost unanimously, that this was a job that would be better executed after beer.

As everyone prepared to leave, Leo took a moment to place cool palms over his eyes in an effort to ease the burning sensation caused by hours spent in the blistering cold. He didn't need a mirror to know the whites would be red as hell, making him look like an insomniac or a drunk, or a combination of both – something that wasn't too far from the truth these days.

“What about him?”

Leo looked up to see Günter pointing to where Reinhardt was sat at the end of the room, propped against the climbing wall, chin on chest, lips slack and moist, dribbling spittle and whisky.

“Bring him too.” Leo smiled. “I'm sure he could manage another drink.”

Behind him, Harald swore loudly. “I'm telling you now that if I get dragged away from my wife and bed again in order to find this drunk dog I'm holding you responsible, Leo Hirsch.”

“From what I've heard it's your wife who encourages the drunk dog to go missing in the first place,” Leo responded.

Ignoring the laughter of the other men, Harald threw his wet

socks into a rucksack. He then checked his watch, more out of habit than design.

“Come on, Harri, one little beer won’t keep you,” Leo urged.

“True, but what about the ten other ‘little beers’, eh?” Harald frowned and glanced at his watch again. Being three decades older than most of the team he felt the call of his bed more keenly than the other men, but resigned to his fate he quickly laced his boots and moved to the climbing wall where he proceeded to rifle through the pockets of their partly-comatose rescue.

“What are you looking for?” Leo asked.

“Money,” Harald muttered. “If the drunk dog’s coming with us he can sure as hell pay for his own beer.”

Berni’s bar was little more than a wooden shack clinging to the edge of the town. It was a sorry looking place mainly frequented by hunters, bachelors and men unable to cope with the modern fashion of having their women drink with them. Ancient deer heads lined the walls, their eyeless sockets boring into the souls of men whose ancestors had cut short their lives, and a wooden cudgel was strapped across the bar ready to be deployed in times of disorder, of which there were few. Only two beers were available, *Stiegl* and *Zipfer*, but there was a plentiful supply of schnapps, brewed locally and famous for their ferocity. Should someone ask for food they were advised to either drink more or leave. If they wanted music they were told to sing. In short, Berni’s Hut was a place bereft of charm, comfort, and more often than not, hospitality – which proved quite popular with the men of the mountain.

Despite the late hour drinkers were still spilling from the door into the ice cold air when the rescue team arrived. Squeezing through the entrance, Leo’s boots slipped on the floor, wet with

slush and wasted beer, and he was forced to quell a number of colourful protests by reminding everyone of the team's heroic status within the community as they ejected one sleeping drunk from a chair so they might settle their own sleeping drunk in his place.

"Is he having a beer?" Berni asked, coming to clear the glasses from the table.

"Why else would he be here?" responded Leo.

Berni threw him a look that was the default setting of most landlords in the region. "You found him up the mountain?"

Leo nodded.

"And how many times would that be now?"

"Three in four years."

Berni sucked his teeth in response. "Bus drivers," he mumbled. "No sense of direction." He wiped a wet towel over the table and went to fetch a glass of beer which Leo subsequently pressed into the grip of Reinhardt's unconsciously malleable fingers. He then bent to whisper into the older man's ear.

"Enjoy your drink, Reinhardt. The next time you do this we'll charge you for our time."

As if in response, Reinhardt lurched forwards, his body reacting to the new environment it found itself in, and Leo took the spasm as a sign of acceptance. Despite the grumbles of some of the team no one thought the man an intentional nuisance. Reinhardt merely had a weakness for strong drink and long walks. But on this occasion he had been lucky; the weather had been fierce and the team had found him within two hours of the call out, sleeping on the old pass to Gosau, sheltering behind a boulder on the Strenhang slope, the snow having only partially buried him. Had the team discovered him an hour later he might have lost his fingers, longer than that and they might have been

dragging his frozen corpse back down the valley.

Leo moved towards the bar and Günter promptly handed him a *Stiegl* before running a hand through the long curls of his hair, wet with sweat from the exertions of the mission and the sudden warmth of the bar.

“Busier than usual,” Günter shouted.

Leo nodded, raising the bottle as he did so to avoid contact with a Gamsbart goat beard protruding from the cap of a passing hunter. Almost immediately there followed a hefty blow to his left shin. A quick look at the floor revealed an unscheduled descent by a teenager. Leo nudged the youngster with the heel of his boot and into the path of being someone else’s problem. He then raised his bottle for a second time. “To the fear,” he saluted.

“To the fear,” Günter echoed with a laugh.

Every six years or so, the region suffered a spectacular winter. Blizzards blew in from the Atlantic to bury the landscape without mercy or respite. Overnight, ploughs became the only mode of transport and they worked around the clock whilst the country’s troops moved in, laying down their guns to take up shovels in an effort to preserve civil order along with the region’s homes, as roofs bowed under the weight of the snow. Roads were closed, electricity was lost and, inevitably, the snaking pass connecting Hallstatt to the rest of the world was buried by avalanches. As the lake had partially frozen the town was trapped – no one could get in, no one could leave – and as a consequence, a slow panic took a hold of the community, with the women fretting about food supplies and the men growing increasingly alarmed by the town’s dwindling beer stocks. This was ‘the fear’, and if Hallstatt was to eventually run dry the men wanted to know they had at least played their fair share in the disaster.

“Have you heard from Lisa?” Leo shouted to Günter.

Adopting a pained expression his friend confirmed that he had. “Three dresses and counting.”

Leo winced in mock sympathy. “Let’s hope the road opens before she discovers handbags and shoes.”

“She’ll have a job,” Günter laughed, “I’ve informed the bank that my credit card’s been stolen.”

Leo raised an eyebrow, expressing both surprise and admiration for his friend’s unswerving devotion to his wallet. He also thought him insane. Leo had once dated Lisa, a few years before Günter took the brave decision to marry her, and he was almost certain she would batter him when she returned home. Of course, Hallstatt men were always at their bravest, or most foolhardy, when a wall of snow stood between them and their women. Two days ago Günter’s wife had driven to Bad Ischl, the summer haunt of the old Kaiser, now popular with tourists and the region’s more fashion conscious housewives. Unfortunately, an hour after her departure the mountain shook the weight from its shoulders to bury the road back under twelve metres of rock, snow, forest and whatever else was in its path. Mobilised by experience, the authorities had reacted quickly to the emergency by closing the only other route into the town, fearing a landslide on the road from Obertraun. Lisa had no way back in and though Bad Ischl was barely 20 kilometres away it could have been the other side of the world right now.

“She’ll kill you,” Leo predicted.

“I know,” Günter admitted.

At the far end of the room a group of teenage boys broke into a rousing, if murderous, rendition of a Wolfgang Ambros song. After glancing warily over his shoulder, Günter leaned closer to Leo. His face was sober, his eyes a little less so.

“In all seriousness, Leopold, it’s in times like these, when the

fear comes around and you're cut off from all that you know, that you come to appreciate the opportunities life puts in your way."

"Fair enough, Lisa's a good woman," Leo responded with a nod, only recognising the error a second later.

"I was talking about the peace and the quiet, *du Flasche!*" Günter snorted, poking his friend in the chest to add pain to the insult.

Permitting a weary smile to cross his lips, Leo drained his bottle and lit a cigarette. In his defence he hadn't been sleeping well, not that this was any excuse – it was commonly acknowledged that mountain men only got emotional about their dogs. But things had changed for him recently, life had become complicated and he'd had a lot more to think about. Though he was doing his utmost to resist it his mind kept dragging him home – to rooms standing lightless and empty, and to a suitcase packed and waiting by the door. He glanced at the bottle in his hand.

"Ready for another small beer?" he asked.

By 4am, the hut, and the few diehards left in it, found space to breathe again as 'the fear' lost its hold in the face of mass insobriety. Leo lit the last cigarette in his packet and wondered whether this might be his signal to leave. Before the idea took hold he ordered one 'final little beer' for himself and Harald who had volunteered to keep him company after Günter declared that having a double bed to himself won over any loyalty to Leo.

"What about the bus driver?" Berni asked.

Leo looked over to where Reinhardt sat. By now his chin had slipped from his chest and his head was resting on the table, close to the hand cradling the glass given to him some three hours earlier. The sight was nothing short of pathetic and, as Harald noted, it was an appalling waste of good beer.

"I think Reinhardt will forego this round," Leo announced.

“I wasn’t asking what he was drinking,” the landlord responded flatly. “I want you to tell me that you’re taking him with you when you leave.”

“Leave?” Harald interjected, almost dropping the cigar from his lips.

Leo draped an arm around the older man’s shoulder, partly for balance, but also to demonstrate some form of affection. Harri was in the sixth decade of his life and for all of his complaints, punctiliousness and age, he could still match any of the men on the team; mountain for mountain, beer for beer. He was the type of man, in fact, that Leo imagined he might one day become – a thought that both pleased and disturbed him.

Leo looked over to Reinhardt. “Don’t fret,” he assured Berni. “We wouldn’t dream of leaving Reinhardt behind, after all we might need his bus to take us to the next bar once you’ve run out of beer.”

“The day I run out of beer, friend, is the day I stop breathing.”

Harald cast an eye over the debris around them, taking in the empty bottles and marinated flesh. “In that case, you might be due a check-up, Berni.”

Before the landlord could reply the sound of glass smashing stole everyone’s attention. At the table where they’d left him, Reinhardt had finally come round. Surprising them all, he had moved from his seat and was now on the floor, both arms raised above his head, as though expecting a heavy blow to render him unconscious again. A second later, he started to scream.

“Save me! For the love of God, someone save me!”

“Jesus!” Harald shouted back. “How many times does this fool want saving in one night?”

Leo laughed. He then ran his fingers through his short, dark hair before vigorously slapping his cheeks. Being the leader of

the rescue team, and one of the few men left standing, he felt a certain sense of responsibility towards their charge so, after finishing his cigarette he went to calm the situation, taking his beer with him.

Crouching by Reinhardt's side, Leo took hold of the man's upraised arms, forcing them into a less defensive angle. "Take it easy, Reinhardt. You don't need saving. You're in Berni's."

"Berni's?"

"Yes, you're safe. Christine raised the alarm, we brought you from the mountain and in a minute we'll take you home."

"You'll take me home?"

"Yes," Leo confirmed. "We'll take you home."

Reinhardt slowly raised his head, pausing briefly to wince at the light. He looked around and though it took him a while to focus, when his eyes finally settled on Leo they were unexpectedly clear. More than that, they looked scared.

"I'm not mad, Leopold."

"No one said you were mad, Reinhardt."

"That's because I've not said anything yet."

Reinhardt dropped his face into his hands and Leo patted the man's shoulder, shamed by a belated sense of guilt. He should have taken Reinhardt home to his wife, or at least forced some coffee down his neck. There was also a pang of regret at having left it to the control room to inform Christine that her husband had been found safe and unharmed. Leo recognised he was an asshole at times and it was a realisation that gave him no joy.

"I'm sorry, Reinhardt. We shouldn't have brought you here," he admitted. But if Reinhardt heard he made no effort to show it. Instead he raised his head to stare into Leo's eyes, as though searching for a sign, and when he spoke his voice was hoarse with emotion.

“I saw things, Leo.”

“You saw what things, Reinhardt?”

“Unspeakable things.”

“Is that so...”

“Yes, really.”

Leo took a deep breath and counted to three. “OK, Reinhardt. Where did you see these unspeakable things?”

“Up there!” Reinhardt jerked his head backwards, indicating the mountain before grabbing hold of Leo’s jacket, pulling him closer. Though his hands trembled his grip was surprisingly strong and Leo had to prise the fingers from his arm, all the while keeping his voice calm, as though talking to a child.

“Easy, Reinhardt. Don’t worry yourself. Just tell me what you think you saw.”

“I’m not *thinking* I saw anything. *I saw* what I saw,” the older man insisted, and to Leo’s astonishment large tears welled in Reinhardt’s eyes. “And I saw them all Leopold, as true as I see you crouched here; all of the men, all of the women, even the poor, tatty-clothed children. It’s the truth, I swear it is, and it was dreadful, pure dreadful; their tiny hands, their screams, the grief... Believe what you like, but God help me Leo, I’m telling you that I walked with the dead this night.”

Chapter Three

Traudi was six years old when her father died, her brother was eight. Their father's death was nothing short of a tragedy, everyone said so, and when he was laid to rest it seemed that the whole of Hallstatt came out to watch as six pallbearers wearing miners' helmets lowered his coffin into the ground. In the driving rain, words were spoken, but no tears were shed – it wasn't that kind of town – and a band played sombre tunes until everyone returned home. As the crowd dispersed, Herr Bittner shook their mother's hand and financial help was promised, and subsequently given, through the widows' fund. But in real terms, in all the small things that get taken for granted before a tragedy strikes, the family was on its own, and the burden of death had little to do with managing, it was about learning to live – with fewer plates on the table, no cough in the night, and an empty chair by the fire.

Since that most terrible of days three winters had blown through the valley and – given their mother's disability and Traudi's still tender years – only Heini managed to retain a clear vision of the man who had once played such an integral part in their lives. In short, the boy had worshipped his father whereas the women of the house had merely loved him.

Therefore, when the family's grief was still raw, there was nothing anyone could do and there was nothing anyone could say

that would bring comfort or reason to the pain the boy suffered. Heini was devastated. His father had been the one to teach him to ski, the one with whom he had gone hunting, the one who had given him his first knife. Tied through blood and a shared sense of solitude, the two of them had spent countless happy hours sat in easy silence, deep within the forest, watching the sun rise, waiting for the sun to set. But it was his father, and not the sun, that Heini's world revolved around. And though he had never been a playful boy he had still been a child – unthinking at times, occasionally demanding, yet firm in the belief that all would be well once his father returned home. Now there was a hole in their lives where security once sat. And though no one expected it, Heini had become the man of the house because he understood there was no other choice.

“Poor Heini.”

Traudi ran her fingers across the collection of knives that her brother kept on a small table by his bed. There were six in total; all of them sheathed, lying side-by-side, evenly spaced and arranged in order of size. In front of a cupboard stood four pairs of boots, all of them polished and facing the wall. On a desk she found pencils, collected in a jar, casting spiky shadows across sheets of loose paper stacked in piles according to their colour. Not a thing was out of place, not a book, not a knife, not even a sock. It was a bedroom rigid with discipline. And knowing she shouldn't be there, Traudi closed the door before moving downstairs.

In the hallway, at the bottom of the staircase, a little to the left of the front door, was the toilet. The door was open and – as it should be if the toilet door stands open – no one was inside. There had been times in the past when the door had stayed shut with her brother behind the lock doing God only knows

what, but according to her mother this wasn't a topic for decent conversation.

"Everyone needs their privacy," she had said.

"You make it sound like he's up to something disgusting."

"It's a toilet," her mother retorted, and she had raised her hand to signal the end of the discussion.

Moving to the kitchen, Traudi found a fresh loaf of bread on the stove, covered by a muslin cloth. On the shelf, by the window, was a leg of ham. Tearing at the bread, Traudi thought of her brother, knowing he would have slapped her fingers for not using a knife.

"Not here though, are you?" she said aloud, albeit to no one but herself.

Wandering to the front room the floorboards creaked beneath Traudi's feet as the house responded to the pressure and the cold wind rising up from the cellar. It was the strains of weight and weather that her mother believed helped wooden houses to speak, whereas concrete was 'cold and unfeeling'.

"Never live inside bricks," she advised, "they don't care about you and they tell you nothing."

Naturally, Heini had scoffed at the very idea of talking houses and he had informed their mother she was living behind the moon. But Traudi understood that their mother heard more without eyes and so she found herself listening, picking out sounds as the wood reacted to the wind, searching for clues. But for all of its groans, its sudden creaks and cracks, the house told her nothing she didn't already know.

She was alone.

At the door leading to the sitting room, the earthy smell of the river caught Traudi by surprise, reminding her once again of their father, striding through the house in his dark overalls, wafting

tobacco and wet stone. With all of her heart, Traudi wished she could recall his face, but in the years he had been gone the sharp lines had melted into a blur. All that remained was a memory of heavy boots on the landing, a shape cutting wood, and a back disappearing down the pathway never to return. Occasionally, Traudi forced herself to focus, concentrating hard to recapture the look of his eyes or the fleeting warmth of his smile, but his features always shifted, drifting into someone else – sometimes it was her grandfather, sometimes the butcher, on one occasion it was Herr Mayer who lived in the woods with his dog and fat pigs. Nothing worked. Despite her wishes and strongest prayers, Traudi's father was gone, he'd never be coming back, and her picture of him grew ever more indistinct with each passing year. As a consequence, and though it pained her to admit it, Heini had become the one person, other than her mother, that Traudi looked up to, the one she admired. Her brother was the twine that held their family together and now, with him nowhere to be found – not in his room, not in the kitchen, not even in the toilet doing the unspeakable – it made her uneasy, until she noticed the fireplace.

Little more than a dusty glow on the iron grate, the fire was moments from dying, but it could only mean one thing; that her brother was near or, at least, not so very far away. It was Heini's job to light the fire. It was his first task of the day whereas Traudi had to wash up. Naturally, this was a chore she abhorred, not only because the grease slipped under her nails and the water wrinkled her skin, but also because of the sheer banality of the task; it was a job that anyone could do, even the blind, and yet it was her cross to bear simply for the sin of being the youngest and of being a girl. Traudi hated it. She positively longed for the responsibility of tending the fire, but her mama wouldn't hear

of it and she remained as adamant as Heini that this should be his role and his role alone, and the only time that Traudi found herself released from the hell of the kitchen sink was when she was sick, which she was. Yes, she was. She remembered that now. There was a hot bowl of soup and a cool pillow for her head followed by a long and difficult sleep in which she caught glimpses of her mother – sitting at her side, standing at the window, sometimes curled into a ball on the floor.

Unconsciously, Traudi raised her fingers to her forehead, finding her flesh cold and damp. Toads were cold and damp. The mountain was a man-eating toad. And it was clear that little girls should have nothing in common with either of those things. She was clearly unwell and as such she had every right to expect her family to be there – to bring soup and cool pillows and stories of fairies and angels – and because no one appeared to be present, and because she was left with no other choice but to cope on her own, Traudi began to itch with a familiar rebellion.

Inspecting the wicker basket standing to the right of the fire, Traudi grabbed two logs and a handful of kindling, reasoning that she had to tend the fire if she wasn't to freeze to death. Having watched her brother a thousand times or more she deftly copied the way he arranged the twigs on the fading embers, waiting for them to catch fire before adding a log. Once she was satisfied the flames would take hold, Traudi moved to the couch. As she lay down, her hand reached for the dog, only to remember he had died in the spring.

After their father's accident, which was really his death, there was a concern within the valley that a blind woman with two young children might not be able to cope without a man. It was a concern shared by their grandfather who spent many months

sat in his lonely old house in Hallstatt dreaming up ways to convince his daughter to bring her two children to live with him. For *Opa* it was a concern that grew ever more pressing as that first winter approached, shortening the day until it turned the ground white.

“It seems that we can’t be trusted on our own,” their mother one day declared, her sightless eyes looking between Traudi and her brother rather than at them.

“So we’re moving?” Traudi asked.

“If that’s what you want. And that’s what I’m asking you: do you want to live in our house, in the place you were born, or do you want to move in with your *Opa*?”

“Will you be coming too?”

“If that’s what you want.”

Pondering the question for longer than was possibly decent, Traudi enjoyed the brief weight of responsibility her answer might carry. On the one hand she loved *Opa*. Furthermore, Hallstatt had a sweetshop, the existence of which occupied much of her thoughts in the valley. But on the other hand she loved being out of the town. She loved their house. She loved her room. She loved the deer in the forest and the angry springtime river that screamed at the mountain after its winter confinement, obliterating all other sound. There was no possible way she could choose between the two worlds, and so she had looked for the answer in the blue eyes of her brother who appeared to be blessed with fewer conflicting interests.

“This is our house,” Heini had responded, speaking so firmly it left no room for doubt that this was the answer Traudi ought to give.

Their mother had smiled in response, reinforcing her daughter’s suspicions. “And what do you say, Traudi?”

For a second Traudi had paused, imagining *Opa's* smiling face and the taste of sugar on her lips, before bowing to pressure and echoing her brother's sentiments.

"Good, then this is where we'll stay," their mother agreed. And that's what they did – they carried on living in the valley instead of giving up and jumping into the grave of their father.

With the matter settled, a simple routine quickly developed that cemented the family's decision and worked to silence the worry mongers around them. Every morning, with or without the sun's help, Heini rose from his bed to chop the wood that would feed the fire that would keep their mother alive whilst they were at school. When he returned home he chopped the wood to feed the fire that would keep them all warm until bedtime. Of course, this wasn't the only chore of the day, there were many more, and they were shared between the children amid varying levels of protest whilst their mother did as much as she was able. In the evenings, sat in the glow of Heini's fire, Traudi would read from the Bible, cross-legged at her mother's feet, while her brother cleaned his gun or sharpened his knives pretending not to listen. Their mother loved the Bible because it kept her 'connected with the wonder of God', and she insisted that Traudi read to them each night because she said it set them apart from the Catholics who kept 'their book in their church' and 'followed the Beast of Revelation'. As there were a lot of Catholics living in Hallstatt Traudi often wondered whether this was the real reason her mother didn't want to move to the town – for fear that the Catholics' Beast of Revelation might get loose and pounce on her sweet Protestant bones. It might also explain why so many people went missing.

Of course, there were days when the family had no choice but to go into Hallstatt – Beast of Revelation or no Beast of

Revelation – and their mother usually reserved this ordeal for Saturdays when they would leave the valley to spend her widow’s allowance on flour, cheese, barley and beans, poultry and ham. On the way home they would stop by *Opa’s* house to swap news and eat stew and always, without fail, *Opa* would try to foist money into his daughter’s hands as they left. Because she was ‘prickly’, according to *Opa*, their mother habitually refused the help offered which is why Heini always stepped forward to silently take the notes instead. Sometime in the evening he would then slip the money into their mother’s purse. It was a charade that everyone accepted and liked to ignore, but Traudi found it annoying because she was given no role in the subterfuge. *Opa* certainly didn’t have any such scruples when it came to her washing his dishes.

Depending on the weather, they would usually leave *Opa’s* before the sun started its weary descent. More often than not, it was rarely an easy walk home, not with all the provisions that had to be carried, and the road only remained a road for as long as there were houses to line it; out of sight of the town, the asphalt degenerated into a broken track that ran parallel with the river, climbing gradually steeper as it rose to meet the skirts of the mountain. It was a hard walk, and tough on their legs, and Traudi would constantly glance upwards – expecting the ancient stones of the Dachstein to fall and bury them, so oppressive was the shadow it cast upon their path. But it was also a fear that added to the magic of the valley; that kept it alive in a way the town could never hope to be. There was mystery and colour – from the hard white of winter to the lush green of spring, to the blue skies of summer and the golden hues of autumn – no matter the time of year or the mood of the mountain there was always something to feel, or a noise

to fear, or a marvel to wonder at and see. Unless, of course, you were blind.

“It’s something you adjust to,” their mother admitted when Traudi asked how it must be to never see a flower or a bumblebee or even a tree for that matter.

“I’d hate it. It must be awful,” she declared.

“Well, yes and no,” her mother replied. “But I’m more able in other ways. For instance, I hear more than I used to, like the call of the birds or the talk of the house. My sense of smell has also changed and I feel more than before. When I open the window I can tell when a storm is coming or when it might rain – long before you tell me there are cows lying in the fields. Even so, and though I don’t mind being blind as I know there are people far worse off than me, I’d give anything, anything at all, if the Lord would give me back my eyes, if only for a few minutes, so I might one day see your faces.”

“In that case I pray the Lord spares you,” Heini shouted, walking ten steps ahead of them, like a scout searching for danger. “Traudi’s uglier than a pig dog with ticks!”

“You’re the pig dog!” Traudi screamed back in reply.

“You are.”

“No, you are!”

“No, you are!”

And their mother had sighed, just as Traudi now sighed as she woke to find dusk falling and the fire once again gasping its last.

Hauling her body from the couch, feeling groggy and fed up, she added more twigs. When the flames took hold she threw on another log.

“Mama?” she asked, though she knew no answer would come.

“Heini, are you here?”

With another sigh Traudi reached for the angel hanging once

again at her neck. Offering a brief prayer to God, she asked Him to bring back her family as soon as He was able, or to at least give her a clue as to where they had gone. Then, prompted by the hunger unsettling her stomach, she headed for the kitchen.

Standing on her toes, Traudi reached for the ham on the shelf by the window. Though she knew it was wrong, and she even glanced around to check no one was watching, she took a bite from the leg. As she chewed she hummed to herself and grinned, feeling like the most glorious heathen and imagining Heini's outraged face should he come walking through the door to see the wanton savagery his absence had caused. After licking the salt from her lips, Traudi moved to the larder, searching for milk. In the gloom her fingers fumbled over a number of jars holding pickles and jams before coming to rest on a bottle. Before she could pull it from the shelf a sharp crack thundered through the valley, causing Traudi's heart to thump under her tunic.

She couldn't be certain, but it had sounded like gunshot.

Fierce snowstorms have battered Upper Austria, paralysing the region in the grip of an early and unforgiving winter.

Nine-year-old Traudi wakes up to find she's alone in the house. Cut off from the nearby hamlet of Hallstatt, she senses something is wrong. Then, when daylight fades and she catches sight of blood stains on the snow, she realises she may not be as alone as she had previously thought.

As Traudi prays for her family's return, the local mountain rescue team receive an emergency call. Leo Hirsch, the group's leader, is battling a loss of his own and finds the mission a welcome distraction, little knowing that this rescue will turn out to be like nothing he has encountered before.

From the critically acclaimed author of *Born Under a Million Shadows* and *Aphrodite's War*, this haunting thriller charts the frozen rivers of the mountains as they deliver up the mysteries of the past.

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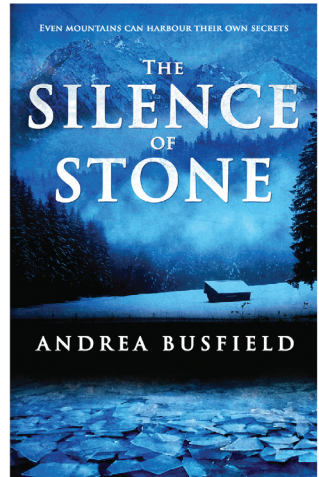
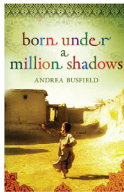
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ANDREA BUSFIELD was born in Warrington, England, and worked for UK national newspapers for 15 years before leaving for Afghanistan where she worked as a civilian editor for a NATO hearts-and-minds publication. Whilst in Kabul, she wrote her first novel, *Born Under a Million Shadows*, which was published in 2009 by Transworld and sold to 18 territories. Her second novel, *Aphrodite's War*, was published a year later, also by Transworld, and sold to five territories. She currently lives in Cyprus with five rescue dogs and a horse.

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