
Opening Extract from...

Corpus

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RORY
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CORPUS

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For Naomi

BERLIN, AUGUST 1936

CHAPTER 1

The man was grey-haired, about fifty, and carried a black briefcase. He wore black trousers, a brown linen jacket, white shirt and striped tie but no hat. He might have been an office worker, except for the white socks and brown, open-toed sandals. *White socks and sandals.* In the middle of a working day, in the traffic-mad tumult of Potsdamer Platz, in the centre of Berlin. He was standing beside her at the edge of the pavement, waiting to cross.

Nancy Hereward turned her head and caught his eye. She stared at him hard and he looked away. She felt like laughing, but her mouth was dry and she had a terrible thirst. Surely, if he was following her, he wouldn't have made eye contact? Nor would he have dressed so distinctively. If you were tailing someone, you had to meld into the crowd, not stick out. A gap opened up between the trams, the buses, the cars and the horse-drawn carts, and he made a dash for the other side of the road by way of the clock tower island. Nancy waited.

Ahead of her, a policeman with white gloves was directing the onrush of vehicles. To her left, two young women in sunglasses were examining postcards at a newspaper kiosk. They wore flat slip-on shoes and short-sleeved, calf-length summer dresses, one polka-dot, the other floral, revealing healthy, tanned forearms. Through the fog of her brain, Nancy's first thought was that they must be tourists like her, but they seemed too confident for that, and their shoes were not designed for tramping across miles of an alien city. She caught the soft burr of their spoken German. Their easy sophistication marked them down as bourgeois Berliners, not provincials.

Nancy realised that she was doing the same to everyone she saw; assessing them, deciding who they were, what they might be concealing. Suddenly everyone looked like plainclothes officers. She had an urge to confront everyone in the crowd and demand of each of them, 'Are you

secret police? Are *you* secret police?' She pulled her sun hat down over her hair. Her hands were sweaty and her dress clung to her body. She clutched her slim shoulder-bag closer to her side and walked on.

It was late afternoon but the heat of the day had not yet relented. She and Lydia had taken the U-Bahn from the Reichssportfeld station at the Olympic Stadium in the west of the city and had spent two hours shopping and sightseeing in the broad avenues and boulevards around Friedrichstrasse and Unter den Linden. Now she had slipped away and was alone, the map of the streets she must walk down memorised.

The city was full of thousands of tourists, here for the Olympics and all the fun surrounding the games. *No one is following you.* She said the words under her breath. She gripped her hands into fists, then released, then gripped again. She took deep breaths to calm herself and increased her pace, trying to make herself look businesslike, less foreign. Less interesting.

God, she was a fool, a bloody novice. She had been told what to do, of course, how she must lose possible pursuers with backtracking, circling and stops. How to spot a tail. But that was theory; this was reality.

The man with the sandals had disappeared into the heaving mass of people. Perhaps he had been one of many; perhaps someone else was now on her case. Nancy had attempted to dress as anonymously as she could, in a shapeless green frock, with her hair braided and pinned up around the top of her head. In their shared hotel room, Lydia had looked at her oddly. 'I know what you're thinking,' Nancy had said. 'You think I look like a bloody little Waltraud.' Lydia had raised an eyebrow. A Waltraud was their private derisory name for the sort of Nazi girl who belonged to the BDM, wore dirndls and eschewed make-up and cigarettes. Was there anyone in the world less like the clean-living *jungmädel* ideal than Nancy Hereward? They had both fallen about laughing.

She headed south and westwards. On every corner and from every public building, the swastika banners fluttered in the warm breeze, black on a white circle in a sea of red. Every one of them seemed like a personal threat. Turning right into a side street, she stopped at a butcher's shop window and gazed at the cuts of meat and the endless varieties of sausage without really seeing them. She tensed as an old woman bustled up to her

elbow and put a letter in the red Reichspost box fixed to the wall at the side of the shop, then ambled away at snail's pace. No one was following. She carried on, walking further away from the main arteries of the city. At the end of the street she turned right then, quickly, went left. The area was residential now, a respectable mixture of smart tenement blocks, parks and churches, very different from the regimented grid of streets bordering Friedrichstrasse.

She knew that Lydia would be getting worried. Nancy had told her she would only be gone twenty minutes; she should wait for her at the Victoria with a coffee and cake and her book. 'I just want a little time on my own,' she had said. Lydia had shrugged, clearly puzzled, but seemed to accept it. This was going to take a lot longer than twenty minutes; Lydia would just have to wait.

She turned again into the road she had been seeking. Narrow and cobbled with a half-timbered tavern, which must have been old when Otto von Bismarck was young. She looked around once more. The street was almost deserted, save for a boy of about twelve. She stopped three houses to the left of the tavern, outside the front door of a three-storey building. Number six, one of the flats at the top of the house. She pressed the button twice, waited three seconds, then pressed again.

A dormer window opened twenty feet above her and a face peered out. '*Ja?*'

'*Guten tag, Onkel Arnold!*'

He hesitated no more than two seconds, then nodded. '*Einen moment, bitte.*'

Half a minute later, the front door opened.

'Come in,' he whispered. His English was heavily accented, but precise. He was a balding man in his mid-thirties and he was frightened.

Nancy stepped into the gloom of the hallway. On either side of her there were doors to apartments. In front of her was a staircase. 'Here?' she suggested.

'No, please, not here. Come upstairs.'

As soon as he had closed the door to his flat, she removed her hat and tossed it on the table. Then she opened her bag and took out a brown envelope. She thrust it at him. 'It's all in there.'

He slid the papers out and studied them, then gave her a strained smile. It would take a great deal more than this delivery of forged papers to wash away the stresses of his life. 'Thank you, miss. Truly, I don't know how to thank you or repay you. You have risked a great deal for me.'

'Not for you, for the cause.'

'I thank you all the same. Can I make you a cup of tea? Or coffee perhaps? It is ersatz, I'm afraid.'

'No, I must go.' She hesitated. She was shaking. 'Do you have a lavatory?'

'Yes, it is shared. Across the landing.'

No, not here. It would be too risky. She had to get to safety. She tried to control her shakes. 'Forget it. I have to leave now.'

'I think if you were really my niece you would stay a little while, don't you? Having walked all this way?'

'No one saw me coming.'

'My landlord would have seen and heard you ringing the bell and calling out my name. He sees everything.'

'I'll stay ten minutes.' Nancy took a grip of herself. 'I am thirsty. Perhaps you have something a little stronger than tea?'

'Peach schnapps. It is the only alcohol I have, I'm afraid.'

She made a face. 'Better than nothing.'

They sat together in the man's sweltering, badly furnished sitting room, the ceiling sloping acutely beneath the eaves. The open window let in only warm, dirty air. Arnold Lindberg was a physics professor from Göttingen, but in this house he was Arnold Schmidt, unemployed librarian. She could smell the sweat of his fear. His pate was glistening and there were beads of perspiration on his brow and on his upper lip. He lit a cigarette and she could see that his fingers were trembling. As an afterthought, he thrust the packet towards her, but she shook her head. 'A glass of water,' she said. The sugary-sweet peach schnapps stood on the table in front of her, untouched. Perhaps she could wash it down.

He went to the basin and filled a glass. She drank it quickly, then asked for another.

'So tell me, miss, what do you think of the new Germany?'

'You mean the National Socialists?'

'Who else?' He gave a hollow laugh. 'But please, do not name them.'

Don't say the devil's name for fear that he might think you are calling him. 'I loathe them,' she said. 'That's why I'm here.' At last, she threw back the schnapps. It was not as sweet as she had feared. Not what she really wanted or needed, of course, but that would have to wait.

'I pray you never learn what it is like to live here like this,' he said. He began talking of his fugitive life as both a Jew and a communist, spurned by the university where he had been both student and professor. 'The *Deutsche Physik* make it impossible. They take our jobs for the crime of our race. In the twenties I worked with the great names – Einstein, Bohr. I counted them as friends, you know. Leo Szilard, too. Such a funny man. So many others – hundreds of us swept away by men without brains. Lise Meitner is still here, still working because she is Austrian. I want only to be with my friends and colleagues again and to continue my studies and teaching. Leo has said he will find me work and accommodation, if only I can get to England.' He shook his head. 'But a warrant is out for my arrest. All ports and railway stations have been alerted to stop me leaving. My crime? Insulting Himmler, the bastard. I will not embarrass you by telling you what I said, for I confess it was obscene.'

She already knew what he had said. Something about Himmler being promoted to Reichsführer in return for sucking Hitler's cock. One of Arnold's students had denounced him.

Nancy stood up. 'I have to go,' she said.

'Yes, of course. I have kept you too long – but it is safer, you see.'

'I hope the papers are what you want.'

He nodded. 'Thank you again. Thank you.'

She picked up her hat and went to the door, pulling it open. She looked down the empty staircase. She was about to go when she turned round. He was standing there, clasping the envelope she had brought him. He looked pathetic. 'Good luck,' she said. *You'll need it.*

She took a more direct route back, across the Tiergarten towards the Brandenburg Gate. She looked at her wristwatch and saw that she had already been well over an hour. Beneath her frumpy green dress, her body was as slippery as a wet eel.

'I was about to send out a search party for you,' Lydia said when Nancy, sweating and hot, finally came round the corner and slumped down on

the seat opposite her at the Victoria café. 'You're soaked! You look as though you've been running.'

Nancy was frantic now, upturning her bag on the table. From the debris, her scrabbling fingers clutched at a silver syringe.

Lydia's mouth fell open. 'Not *here*, Nancy! For pity's sake, not here in front of all these people!'

Nancy ignored her and with a shaking hand thrust the tip of the needle into a small vial and filled the syringe. Lydia looked round anxiously; Nancy stretched her left arm out on the white tablecloth. A thin vein bulged from the white flesh on the inside of her elbow. The needle slipped in, a speck of blood seeped out. She pushed in the plunger of the syringe and let out a low moan.

Neither woman saw the boy looking in through the café window.

ENGLAND,
MONDAY NOVEMBER 30, 1936

CHAPTER 2

He drove the little MG two-seater into a large village in south Cambridgeshire. He was hungry and thirsty and the local inn looked inviting, the sort of place he would have visited on a summer's afternoon in the old days. Rural English. Wholesome food and strange beer.

His assessment was accurate. The Old Byre was a traditional coaching inn with rooms, good food, a log fire and a selection of half a dozen ales and beers. He ordered a steak and kidney pie with potatoes and peas and a pint of bitter. He ate the food hungrily, but he barely drank.

'Is there something wrong with your beer, sir?'

'It's fine.'

'The keg's new on today. Can I get you something else?'

The waitress was a woman in her late thirties with loose curls, a figure that hadn't succumbed to gravity, and a wanton eye. There was a warmth to her, enhanced by the glow of woodfire in a broad open hearth. She was flirting with him.

'I've got to stay awake. I still have a long drive ahead of me. Perhaps a coffee?'

'We don't do coffee, sir.'

'Not even in the landlord's own accommodation?'

'I could ask him.'

'That would be kind of you.' He flashed his best Hollywood smile. 'Black, no sugar, please.'

A few minutes later she reappeared with a cup of coffee. As he took it, she said, 'Beg pardon, sir, might I ask if you are travelling far this evening?'

Had she blushed as she spoke? No, far too brazen for that. It was merely the heat of the fire that brought colour to her cheeks. 'A little way yet,' he said. 'Thank you for the coffee. I am sure it will do me very well.'

'Have you really got to drive on, sir? They say there'll be a fog. It's very late and we have some comfortable rooms to rent. Not many travellers at this time of year, you see. I'm sure if I had a word with the landlord, he'd do you a favourable rate.'

She had touched his hand, deliberately, as she handed him the cup. His initial suspicion was correct. If he stayed, she would come to his room. One of that lost generation blighted by the war, perhaps she took her pleasures where she could among the travelling salesmen who stayed here. On another night he might well have obliged, but he could not stay, and anyway he did not want to leave too large a footprint. As the shutters came down, he paid the bill, took his leave of her, and drove on into the night.

He depressed the throttle. The car was low to the ground, had power and held the road well. The drive was not quick, however, not in late November. These country roads were small, unlit and mostly unmarked. Too many ruts and potholes, some deep. Roads from another century. England had not awoken from the self-satisfied torpor of its Victorian age.

Half an hour later, on a deserted stretch, a mile outside another typical English hamlet – pub, church, green, war memorial and duck pond – he turned left on to a small farm track, where he killed the car lights and switched off the engine. A stranger would never have found this place, even with an Ordnance Survey map, but he knew it well. He lit the last of his Swiss-made Parisiennes, then got out of the car and stretched his legs. The night air was chilly but not cold, and stank of fox. A low mist clung to the ground between the hedgerows. A quarter of a mile away, across a field, he could see a single upstairs light in an uncurtained window of a remote manor house. As he watched, the light was switched off and the house plunged into darkness.

He climbed back into the car, covered himself with his greatcoat and settled down to wait, staring into the darkness. The only light was the glowing red tip of his cigarette. From now on, he'd smoke Players Navy Cut. Apart from the soft, slow sigh of his breathing as he sucked in the smoke, the only sound was the distant hoot of an owl. A little while later, he opened the car door, pushed the cigarette butt into the soil and

covered it with a layer of earth. He slumped back into the driving seat, closed his eyes and fell asleep.

On waking, he was uncertain at first how long he had been out. He reached to his left and dragged a small leather case from the footwell onto the passenger seat and flicked it open. He clicked on the electric torch which lay on top of a couple of shirts, then pulled out a flask of water, drank deeply and gasped before pouring some of it into his cupped hand and splashing his face. He looked at his watch. It was twelve thirty.

Pulling aside the shirts, he found his tools: a handgun, two lengths of mountaineer's rope, a large paintbrush, a long and curved hunting knife, its blade honed so sharp he could have shaved with it. He climbed out of the car again, without his greatcoat, and tucked the blade and gun into his belt, coiling the ropes around his chest bandolier-style. He switched on his electric torch. He was ready.

The house was easy. He had anticipated breaking a window, but a side door was unlocked and so he was able to enter in silence. He removed his English brogues and left them by the back door, then padded deeper into the house. In the pantry, he found a galvanised bucket and mop. He removed the mop and took the bucket.

He went through to the drawing room. Years ago, he had spent pleasant evenings here on exeat from college, drinking fine wine and Cognac with Cecil and Penny Langley and their rather staid friends, plus, of course, their beautiful daughter, Margot, who was in love with him. He recalled the old upright piano against the wall closest to the garden window. Penny had loved to play Chopin to entertain her guests, blissfully unaware of how badly she performed and how out-of-tune the instrument was kept. Now it had been replaced by a Bechstein grand, which held pride of place in the middle of the room. Such a magnificent piano was wasted here.

Slowly, he examined the familiar space, playing the torchlight across the furniture and walls, into all the crannies of the curtained room. One corner of a wall was given over to sports photographs from another age; pictures of a young man in climbing gear with peaks soaring behind

him, pictures of young men with cricket bats and balls. Some of the sports pictures were draped with faded caps, won by Cecil who had played for county and varsity in the days of his youth. The torch beam alighted on a side table holding silver-framed photographs. At the forefront, in pride of place, was the Führer, his signature scraped in black ink in a downward sloping arc along the bottom of the photograph. Behind it were various other well-known faces: Mosley, Ribbentrop, the Marquess of Londonderry. The King's picture was directly behind Hitler's. The man smiled thinly. So the German corporal took precedence over the British monarch. The world turned upside down.

Another table held family photographs. Aunts, uncles, mothers, fathers, distant cousins, but most of all Margot, the beloved daughter: Margot on the beach in Devon with friends, Margot tanned and glowing with tennis racquet on the lawn, Margot riding side-saddle with high hat and hunting jacket at the Easter meet, Margot in the Alps with her father, Margot in her wedding gown being kissed by her bridegroom in front of the lychgate of a small country church. And then there was another picture, from Cambridge. Four of them, outside the arched college entrance in Trumpington Street: a young man in college gown, standing between Margot and Nancy Hereward, with Lydia Morris at the side. They had their arms about each other, four friends and lovers. His eyes stayed on Margot a moment. Someone had once said she was like a Newmarket filly. Jittery. Likely to snap a leg. Poor Margot.

Turning away, he set to work. He put down the torch on a side table and removed all the equipment he had brought: the ropes from his shoulder and the weapons from his belt. He laid them on the floor, then undressed, leaving his clothes in a neat pile on a wing chair. With the residual heat from a coal fire, the room was warm enough, even naked. He slung the ropes over his bare shoulder and picked up the weapons, the pistol in his left hand, the knife and torch in his right. He would come back for the bucket and brush.

The building was a large manor house from the seventeenth century. It had been refurbished and carpeted throughout. And yet still the boards creaked as, barefoot and naked, he climbed the stairway to the first floor. He paused on the landing. There were five doors. He wondered whether they had a maid. They had always had someone from the village, but

perhaps that had changed. He would deal with that matter later, if necessary. From behind the door at the back of the house, he heard breathing – light, comfortable snoring. Slowly, he turned the handle and pushed the door open an inch at a time.

It was a perfect bedroom, well-proportioned and airy, with a high ceiling dominated by a long supporting beam.

His tread was soft. Standing at the foot of the bed, he directed the torchlight at the two sleepers. Cecil was on the left, Penny on the right. Cecil was lying on his side, head beneath a pillow, grunting in his sleep; Penny was on her back, her head on the pillows, her lips parted.

He put the torch on a chest of drawers and approached her. Looking down into her placid face with its yellow teeth just showing, he recalled how pleased she had been when Margot brought him home. She had wanted to know all about him and his family. Her husband had seemed less enamoured. Cautious, distant, unwelcoming. What had gone wrong? It was the picnic by the river, of course. He smiled. The long summer had ended then and they had gone their separate ways, Margot to marry her decent young farmer or whatever he was.

Whether it was his breathing that awoke Penny Langley or some sixth sense was unclear, but her eyes opened and met his. He saw the horror, saw her try to recoil. His face was no more than a foot from hers. Almost instantly, the horror turned to recognition and relief.

'My dear,' she whispered. 'What are you doing here?'

'Sshh.'

'It's so late. You should have teleph–'

She said no more. His blade sliced deep into her throat, releasing a rush of blood. Her dying hands came from under the bedclothes and thrashed the air in uncomprehending frenzy.

From the other side of the bed, Cecil Langley, still asleep, elbowed his wife and pulled the blankets away from her as he snuggled further down. The killer leant over the dying woman's body, his arms and chest slippery with her blood, and put the muzzle of his pistol to the sleeping man's temple.

'Wake up, Mr Langley.'

Afterwards, he went to the bathroom and was pleased to discover a new and efficient hot water system. For a full minute, he gazed at himself in

the mirror. The blood was all over him – face, arms, legs, torso. Arminius the warrior, knee-deep in Roman gore at Teutoburg. His eyes were ice blue, atavistic beacons. His hair as pale as the sands of Friesland.

He ran a bath and sank into it, rinsing the blood from his hair under the tap and scrubbing every part of his body, then climbed out and dried himself on a large white towel. After pulling the plug, he wandered the upstairs rooms, listening, looking. Satisfied, he returned to the drawing room where he dressed quickly. Finally, he used the butt of his pistol to shatter the glass fronting the picture frames of Hitler, Mosley, Ribbentrop, Londonderry, the new King. He pulled out the photographs and tore them to shreds, scattering the little pieces in a snowstorm around the room. He took all the pictures of Cecil Langley and hammered the glass into tiny shards.

The first part of his work was done. At the side door, he was loosening the lace on one of his brogues, but then put it back down and returned to the drawing room. From the picture table, he took the photograph of the young man and the three young women outside the college gate, slid it from its silver frame and placed it in his pocket.

TUESDAY DECEMBER 1, 1936

CHAPTER 3

It was eleven in the morning, but Nancy Hereward was still half asleep. The telephone was ringing. Why would anyone be calling her? She wasn't expecting any calls. She wished she had never had it installed.

She crawled from bed and made her way downstairs. Her throat was parched. She hadn't even had a cup of tea yet. Her eyes fell on the silver syringe, but she turned away. The telephone was on a low table by the front door. She picked up the receiver.

'Hello. Nancy Hereward speaking.'

'Nancy. It's Margot.'

'*Margot?*' A voice from years ago. An urgent voice. The last person she would expect to call. 'Margot, where are you?'

'Can you get a message to Mummy for me? Please. I tried calling her, but—'

The line went dead.

Nancy held the receiver tightly to her ear. 'Hello, Margot? I can't hear you, Margot. Is that really you?' Why on earth would Margot Langley be calling her? Where had she got her number? And why had she hung up? Nancy put the receiver down. She should call Lydia. She'd know what to do. Not yet, though; she couldn't face the day quite yet. She felt shaky. Anyone would. Her eyes alighted once more on the glittering needle.

The gyp put his head round the door of Thomas Wilde's room. 'Good evening, professor.'

'Good evening, Bobby.'

'Two young gentlemen are here to see you. They say you agreed to hold their supervision before Hall.'

'Ah – Maxwell and Felsted. Send them in. Oh, and Bobby, some tea if you will. Perhaps rustle up a few biscuits. And you know what for me.'

Bobby grinned. 'I think I might have a bottle of Scotch secreted about my room, sir.'

'You never fail me.'

'Your comfort is my pleasure, as always.'

Professor Thomas Wilde was tall and angular, with high cheekbones and hair that was a little too long for some of the stuffier fellows of this most ancient and venerable of Cambridge colleges. He had spent much of his life in England, but he was American by birth and nationality and even in winter his skin had a summery hue. He had an outdoor face, uncommonly healthy among the morbid pallor of his academic colleagues. His voice was a hybrid that seemed to have washed up from the broad Atlantic; not quite American, not quite English.

He turned towards his old oak desk, remarkably uncluttered save for a typewriter and a two-inch thick pile of foolscap paper, the first three hundred pages of a biography of Sir Robert Cecil, the Elizabethan and Jacobean statesman, successor to Sir Francis Walsingham as the Queen's spymaster. He pushed the manuscript towards the back of the desk.

Though some might have thought his college rooms a little Spartan, Wilde enjoyed working here. He barely noticed the walls, stained yellow from the cigarette smoke of his predecessor, or the cracking and peeling paintwork. Apart from the desk, he had a calf-hide sofa where he read and dozed, two armchairs and a window with a pleasant view over the scuffed lawns, the tall chimneys, the dormers, the mullions and the wintry grey walls of the old court. They were airy, academic rooms, used only for work, not living. There was, too, a smaller room, cell-like and cold, with a narrow bed where he had been known to sleep when he simply couldn't be bothered to trudge home to his modest late-Georgian house in one of the older quarters of Cambridge near Jesus Lane.

The only other sign of domesticity in his rooms was a painting, an oil by Winslow Homer, left to him in his father's will. Occasionally, Wilde would stop and gaze at it, at the young barefoot boy with a straw hat, standing in a meadow, staring away into the distance. The picture seemed filled with yearning, a longing for something lost or not yet found. Wilde imagined his father to have been that strong American boy.

The warmth of the rooms, such as it was, came from a coal fire, which was stoked and refuelled throughout the day by the ever-cheerful Bobby, whose domain was across the stairs, no more than four feet from Wilde's outer door. The gyp room had all the necessary supplies to keep those fellows and students assigned to Bobby warm and watered. Endless supplies of bread for toasting, tea, milk, sugar, butter, jam, coal for the grate, whisky, bottled beer, brandy, cigarettes, tobacco and matches. Bobby was a squat man, whose ever-present smile was marred only by the lack of several front teeth. He had once been apprenticed to a Newmarket trainer and had hopes of becoming a professional jockey, but a bad fall had left him with a limp, a mashed jaw, and had done for his dreams.

Wilde couldn't think of his rooms as homely; he had spent too long enjoying the comforts of North America for that. But he assumed his pupils found them welcoming enough, for they didn't avoid his supervisions. The smoke of the coal, the uneven heat, the soot and grime on the walls; it might have been a railway station waiting room, save for the Homer painting. Well, he wouldn't stay here tonight. All he had to attend to was this supervision and then the irritation of a meeting in the Combination Room. Then home.

Maxwell and Felsted appeared in the doorway.

'Come in, come in.'

'Thank you, sir.' In unison.

'Foggy outside, sir,' Maxwell said.

'Well, Bobby will bring us a warming pot of tea to take the chill from your bones.'

He sat the young men together on the sofa and turned his own desk chair to a ninety-degree angle from the desk so that he could face them. At his elbow was a fountain pen, an ink bottle and a blotting pad.

'Did you hear about the Crystal Palace, sir?' Maxwell said. 'It burnt down last night.'

'Yes, I did hear of that. A great shame.'

'The communists,' Felsted announced. 'After all, they set fire to the Reichstag . . .'

'Oh, nonsense!' Maxwell retorted. 'The Blackshirts did it, sir. Mosley and his filthy gang.'

Wilde raised his hand, but not his voice. 'Enough.' He liked these young men. They were not the best history students he had ever taught, but a long way from the worst. Very raw, with the sheen of school still not washed away. Wilde wanted his undergraduates to take the long view of history, but Roger Maxwell and Eugene Felsted's black and white views on the politics of the twentieth century were intruding on their understanding of the sixteenth. They needed to learn to speak in measured tones and, more importantly, to think.

'The BBC suggests it was started accidentally,' Wilde said quietly. 'I confess I have no idea. But I would also suggest that you two have no idea, either.'

'But, sir—'

'No, don't speak. Not yet. For a moment, simply listen. You might learn something.'

Maxwell and Felsted had the glowing skin, soft hands and well-fed faces of the privileged. Their hair was slicked back with Brilliantine and they were dressed almost identically in flannel shirts, old school ties, Fair Isle sweaters and bags, topped off by their college gowns.

'You must learn not to rush to judgement. None of us here in this room has any evidence regarding the Crystal Palace fire, so how can you possibly reach a verdict? All you have are your prejudices, which are worthless. It is the same with history.'

Bobby knocked on the door and entered with a tray holding a pot of tea, three cups and a plate of biscuits. He deposited it by the fire. 'I'll be back with the Scotch in just a moment, sir.'

'Don't worry. I'll come and collect it before I go.'

'Thank you, sir.'

When he had gone Wilde turned to Felsted. 'Your turn to be mother, I believe. Now then, we were talking about evidence and prejudice. How would it be if a jury, instead of listening to evidence, convicted someone of murder or theft – or arson for that matter – simply because they didn't like his politics?'

'But a Dutch communist was convicted of the Reichstag fire, so there's a precedent, isn't there?'

'Is there? Does that mean because one man with a white beard is known to be a diamond thief, then all diamond thefts are committed

by men with white beards? I hope you'll agree that's absurd, because if you don't then I rather think you might be wasting your time at Cambridge. History, I'm afraid, is bedevilled by prejudice. Take the case of Mary Queen of Scots. Was she a saintly figure murdered by the Protestant state and her wicked cousin Elizabeth? Or was she a murdering, scheming witch guilty of every sin known to man or woman? Maxwell, what do you think?'

'I think she was a murdering, scheming witch, sir.'

'Felsted?'

'The same.'

'And which Church were you two gentlemen brought up in?'

'Church of England.' The two undergraduates spoke in unison.

'That does not surprise me in the least. But I can tell you this, there are young men and women of your age brought up in the Roman Catholic Church who would say precisely the opposite. So which version is true? To discover that, we must look at the evidence.'

'But the evidence was presented in court – and she was found guilty.'

'Then why don't the Catholics believe it? I tell you why, because they believe the trial was politically motivated. They believe she was framed. Maybe they have a point. That's for the historians to discover.'

'How then can we tell what is true, sir?' Felsted demanded as he poured the tea.

'By thinking,' Wilde said. 'And by challenging the books you read. By getting dusty in archives. By listening to the evidence of archaeologists and palaeontologists. By using your eyes and ears and brains. And most of all by doubting everything I tell you until you have proved it for yourself.'

The two young men exchanged glances, discomfited. Teachers did not like to be doubted. That wasn't the way the world worked. They would never have dared question their teachers at school.

'Argue with me!' Wilde insisted. 'Make me prove my points, demand evidence, get as near the truth as you can. Re-examine everything you have ever been told and make your own mind up on the evidence you can find. And if there is not enough evidence, then keep an open mind. Become a detective – because if you don't, you'll never become a historian.'

Wilde hoped the talk had done the trick. He used it with all undergraduates and it usually worked, even though it undermined the very foundation of everything they had understood up until then. He looked at the two young men sitting uncertainly on his sofa and felt sorry for them. They needed reassuring. He sipped his tea, then opened his desk drawer and took out an object wrapped in a fragment of cloth. From the cloth he removed a piece of tar-blackened wood, about six inches by three. Without a word he handed it to Maxwell. The young man frowned at it, turned it this way and that, a puzzled look on his face.

'Give it to Felsted.'

Felsted looked equally bemused.

'Well, what do you think it is?'

'A bit of driftwood?' Felsted suggested.

'Not bad. Maxwell?'

'Looks like a chip off a railway sleeper to me.'

'No. Well, I'll tell you.' He took the wood back from Felsted. 'This old hunk of wood is perhaps the most thoughtful present I have ever received. It was given to me two years ago by one of my first undergraduates here at Cambridge. It's a piece of the *Golden Hind*, the ship in which Sir Francis Drake sailed around the world, and the cloth in which it is kept is a scrap of sailcloth from the same vessel.'

'How can you tell, sir?'

'Because it had been in his family for three hundred and fifty years. When the *Golden Hind* returned home, it was brought up on to dry land at Deptford, and became a huge tourist attraction. Unfortunately, everyone wanted to take home a souvenir – and they cut pieces off the hull, the sails and the rigging until the ship fell apart. This is one of those pieces. The rest are probably all lost or forgotten in attics and cellars. Gentlemen, you have just held a piece of history in your hands. That piece of wood was part of only the second ship to circumnavigate the globe.'

'Shouldn't it be in the British Museum, professor?'

Wilde wrapped the wood in the sailcloth and put it back in the drawer. 'I don't know, Maxwell, but perhaps you're right. My feeling at the moment, however, is that it serves more purpose here in this room. I think of it as

a time machine, which can transport scholars like yourselves back to the sixteenth century. Anyway, that's where you are now, so let's start talking about that other Sir Francis – Walsingham.'

The hour passed quickly. Maxwell and Felsted were more attentive than they had been in weeks past and they desisted from their usual pastime of baiting each other about politics. At the end of the supervision, Wilde set them a task for the Christmas vacation: 'Like Hitler and Stalin, Walsingham used torture as a tool of statecraft. I won't ask you whose side he would have been on today, because I think I know what your answers would be. But I *will* ask you whether his use of torture helped his cause or hindered it. Remember what he said to Lord Burghley: *without the use of torture, I know we shall not prevail.* Well, we know with the benefit of hindsight that he did prevail – but was that thanks to the use of torture, or despite it? I want your answers, clearly argued, at the beginning of the Lent term. And put a bit of effort in.'

The two young men got to their feet and struggled into their coats. On their way out, Felsted popped his head back round the door. 'That piece of wood, sir,' he said. 'I suppose we've only got your word for its provenance, haven't we?'

Wilde could not suppress a smile and a light chuckle. At last, they were beginning to think. He gathered his papers together and switched off the desk lamp. The truth was he had no proof that the wood had come from the *Golden Hind*, and nor did he care; he liked the story. Not for the first time, it had had an effect on students whose minds were elsewhere. 'There's hope for you yet, Felsted,' he said.

On his way out Wilde looked in on Bobby. 'That Scotch? Just leave the bottle on my desk, if you would.'

'Yes, sir. Oh, and professor, don't forget that tip I gave you.'

'Winter Blood?'

'Ten to one if you get on early.'

Wilde laughed. 'You know I'm not a gambling man, Bobby.'

'This is easy money, Mr Wilde, trust me.'

'Very well. Put me down for five shillings.' He dug into his pocket and handed over two florins and a shilling.

'I'll do half a crown each way. That way you'll make a profit even if it comes second or third.'

'I thought you said it was certain to win.'

'Horses are only human, professor. Things can always go wrong.'

Outside, in the old court, the smoke of the town had gathered and was swirling in a mist, closing down light and sound. The paving underfoot was wet. A group of undergraduates hurried past him. In the grey, foggy light their billowing black gowns made them look like bats. A little electric light spilled from the college windows and lit the way through into the new court. With its high golden stonework, its arches and spires, a little over a hundred years old, it was designed to impress. Wilde preferred the more modest contours and ingrained history of the older court; the beating heart of the college.

The sherry, a fragrant oloroso, was ready in its decanter. A dozen or more glasses, polished to a shine, were laid out at one end of the long oak table that dominated the Combination Room. This was where the fellows met to socialise or to discuss important college matters.

It was a stately room, with a high ceiling on which the college arms were emblazoned in bas relief. The walls were encased in fine panelling that had been fitted in the days of Bloody Mary. It was said that one of the panels concealed a tunnel that led down to the landing stage at the river, near the King's mill, for a swift escape. No one was quite sure whether it had been a getaway for Protestant fellows during Mary's days or Catholics in Elizabeth's long reign.

Horace Dill grinned as he slouched across the room, smoke belching from his cigar like the funnel of a liner. 'Well, well, it's the brilliant and devilishly handsome Tom Wilde! To what do we owe this pleasure?'

'Why, Horace, I wanted to imbibe your wit and choke to death on your cigar smoke.'

'Come on, Tom. A team of six horses wouldn't normally be able to drag you here to take sherry with us lesser mortals.'

'Well, if you must know, Sawyer's asked me to meet him. And I can assure you there is no pleasure involved.'

'What on earth does he want?'

'It's a mystery to me.'

'Sherry?'

'No, thank you, Horace.'

Dill took a sip from his own glass. 'Sawyer is a filthy runt and you can tell him so from me.'

'I suspect he already knows your opinion. Anyway, he's just come in. Off you go, Horace. Go and annoy someone else.'

Dill laughed. 'Up your scabby middle-class arse, Tom.'

'Up yours, too, Horace.'

'You know why I like you, Wilde? Because no one else does. On which thought, I'll leave you to the Nazi's tender mercies.'

As Dill edged away, Sawyer appeared in front of Wilde.

'Ah, Professor Wilde, a rare appearance. Good of you to come. Have you got a glass? Can I pour you one?'

'No, thank you, Dr Sawyer.'

'No? Well, bottoms up anyway.' Sawyer held up his own glass and sipped, then nodded appreciatively. 'Glad something good still comes out of Spain.'

'You wanted to speak to me.'

'Indeed. Indeed. The bursar thought you should be brought on board. Wanted your support. Asked me to have a word with you.'

'And why couldn't he have had a word himself?'

Sawyer smiled. He was a distinguished-looking man with a hint of steely grey in his sideburns. He had a rowing blue from Oxford, had played tennis in the early rounds at Wimbledon, won races at Cowes week, was known as a fair boxer, and had been mentioned in dispatches for a daring action in Mesopotamia in the last year of the war. His subject was German literature and it was said he was a man destined for great things. Wilde had always felt there was something missing in him. A soul perhaps.

'He was called away to London. I believe his father's ill. Asked me to carry on without him. So here we are.'

Wilde waited. He did not spend more time than necessary in the Combination Room. The sherry, the cigars, the port and the undrinkable coffee were all bad enough, but it was the college politics, the tittle-tattle and whispers that he most disliked.

Duncan Sawyer, of course, was already proving himself a master in the art of college politics. Like Wilde, he was a man in his late thirties. He had been elected a fellow two years ago, not long after Wilde's own arrival, and was already thought to be in line for the position of senior tutor when the incumbent moved on in the summer. Sawyer had been a favourite of the old master, Sir Norman Hereward; their politics, both in and out of college, were perfectly aligned. They were both good friends of Sir Oswald Mosley and Lord Londonderry. But even though Hereward had retired, very little had changed for Sawyer; anyone who imagined the old man's absence would harm the younger man's prospects had been wide of the mark. Sawyer was thriving and set for great things. Perhaps a safe seat in the Commons and, if his pal Mosley continued on his upward trajectory, possibly a Cabinet post, and maybe eventually the mastership of the college itself. No hint of doubt or scandal ever threatened the charmed life of Duncan Sawyer.

'Will you be joining us at High Table?' Sawyer asked.

'No, not this evening.'

'And yet you are required to do so three times a week. Once would be a start.'

'Well, there we are.'

Wilde was well aware that some of the other fellows were put out that he avoided dining in Hall. '*Not clubbable*,' was one phrase he had overheard. '*Not quite one of us.*' Or the more straightforward *'bloody Yank.*' He was indifferent.

Sawyer put down his glass and took a cigarette from his case. He didn't bother to offer it to Wilde.

'Do you know Peter Slievedonard, Wilde?'

'Lord Slievedonard? I know of him. I read the papers. But we haven't met.'

'Well, you'll be aware that he is exceedingly wealthy. Did you also know that he has a home not far from Cambridge?'

'I imagine he has homes all over the world.'

'Indeed. Indeed. One in Berkshire, a villa on the Riviera, a place in Knightsbridge and an estate in the Hamptons. Oh, and an estate near Bayreuth, I believe. The point is, he has strong connections with the college and wishes to endow us with a generous benefaction, in the form of

a scholarship. To be precise, a history scholarship, which is where you come in. In addition, there will be a handsome sum set aside for us to spend as we choose. It is a most wonderful offer, I'm sure you'll agree.'

'You're not a fool, Sawyer. The man's a Nazi – or at the very least a Nazi sympathiser.'

Sawyer maintained his smile. He was perhaps a shade under six feet, with a pugilist's powerful physique. A middleweight, Wilde reckoned. It would be an interesting match. A love of boxing was, perhaps, the only thing they had in common.

'I rather feared you would say that, but hear me out. Peter's son was here studying history under the supervision of your predecessor. He had just finished Part I, with a first, when he enlisted. He died on the Somme. Lord Slievedonard wishes to endow a scholarship named in his honour.'

'That is admirable, Sawyer, but Slievedonard's politics do not sit well with the traditions of this great institution. The college would be permanently tainted by such an association. Do your own political leanings blind you to such considerations?'

Sawyer sighed and ran a large hand across his elegantly curling hair. 'You are being tiresome, Wilde. The British Union of Fascists, which Slievedonard supports as do I, is a perfectly legitimate political party. It's not as if he's a damned Commie like Horace Dill and his chums. This is not about politics, but the good of the college, a fine opportunity for scholars, both now and in the years to come. We cannot allow personal prejudices to get the better of us to the detriment of the college. Such opportunities are few and far between.'

'Good evening to you, Sawyer.'

Sawyer's mask of politeness slipped. 'We don't need your permission for this, you know, Wilde. It's simply that the bursar and the master were anxious that there be a consensus among the fellows. As a history don, they were particularly keen to secure your support.'

'Well, they and you don't have it.'

'As you wish. But you *will* be overruled, Wilde. You will be the anvil to my hammer.'

'Oh, for pity's sake, don't quote bloody Goethe at me.'

'You're a bad lot, Wilde.' Sawyer gave full reign to his vitriol. 'Remind me – what exactly did you do in the war? Run back to America and hide? And don't go telling me it's because you're American, because I know damned well your mother is Irish and I know, too, that you were at school here. What happened to those boys you were at school with?'

The room was almost full. They had raised their voices. They were making a scene, the ultimate Combination Room transgression. On the far side of the room, fat Horace Dill was watching them with evident pleasure. He grinned broadly at Wilde, gave him an exaggerated wink through his thick bottled spectacles and blew out a cloud of smoke. So Wilde had one friend to stand against Sawyer. The question was: did he really want or need the allegiance of a man like Horace Dill?

Fifty miles away, in another fine old room, three men were meeting over a decanter of brandy. They were in the long room of one of London's premier gentlemen's clubs. A fire blazed in the wide hearth, but they had chosen to seat themselves in the quietest corner, by one of the tall, curtained windows looking out over Pall Mall. They were important men in the life of the nation, a general attached to the War Office, a landowner with thirty thousand acres in the West Country and a senior civil servant in the Foreign Office. None of them was ambitious for himself. None of them had need of more money or property.

Their families had been close for generations and they had known and liked each other since early childhood. They had been at prep school together, then Eton – same house – and Cambridge, where they had all won blues and Firsts. All had served in Flanders in the same regiment. It was only after the war that their paths had diverged into different careers. And yet they met often, both in London and at shoots and meets. When one was invited to a house party, the others tended to be there, too.

Their trust in each other was absolute; their views on Great Britain and its place in the world almost identical, though none of them considered themselves British exactly. They were English. Old English. And their loyalty was simple and inviolable. First came King, then country, then each other.

It was the first of these loyalties that had brought them together this evening: the threat to the King from the prime minister and those in the Cabinet who were trying to force him to abdicate if he refused to give up Mrs Wallis Simpson, the love of his life.

'So we are agreed?' the landowner said. 'I call Cambridge?'

The Foreign Office man nodded slowly. 'Baldwin is implacable. He's not even lukewarm to the idea of a morganatic marriage and believes the King must go. I was with him yesterday and he really means to proceed with this madness, which means we have no option. We have all sworn an oath of allegiance to Edward and an oath is an oath. But time is not on our side.'

'This morganatic idea?' the general said. 'Surely it would be acceptable if she became Duchess of Cornwall but not queen.'

'Baldwin says he's consulting the Dominions on the matter, but it'll be a fix.'

The landowner shook his head. 'Our friends in Munich are certain that Baldwin is about to force an abdication. It's a bloody palace coup! Baldwin should be shot for treason. We must protect the King. He is our only hope for peace.' He paused, then, 'Sophie called. She has been talking to Munich and is at our disposal.'

'And Munich will play its part?' the general asked, stroking his moustache. 'Because Nordsee can't do this alone. And we three cannot be implicated.'

'The Germans already have it under way. Edward is their best hope of avoiding war. They want to work with us, not against us. Edward is like-minded, of course, as is von Ribbentrop and, indeed, the Führer himself. All we have to do is ensure Nordsee is in place, and wait. The Reds will be blamed, of course.'

'Germany should have talked to us first.'

'Things don't work that way in Berlin and Munich these days.'

'I'll call Cambridge,' the landowner repeated. 'I'll keep in touch with Sophie.'

'Of course.'

The general raised his forefinger to summon the steward. 'I think we need more brandy,' he said.