Sidcup
January, 2005

Sunday, 11.17 a.m.

She knows the cause of death without needing to be told.

The hand-delivered note from the solicitor is brief and unemotional, enclosing details of the funeral arrangements on Friday along with a copy of an obituary from the *Daily Telegraph*. The obituary describes Sir William Mitchell's early life in Sherborne, Dorset, where he contracted polio at the age of eight (she had not known that), made a miraculous recovery, and then proved himself particularly adept at Latin and ancient Greek at school. He went on to read Modern and Medieval Languages at Cambridge, was drafted into the Special Operations Executive during the war, and later rose to a high position in the Foreign Office, advising the British and Commonwealth governments on intelligence matters and gaining a number of honorary doctorates from various universities along the way. Apparently he was never happier than when walking in the Scottish hills with his wife, now deceased. She had not known that either.

What she had already known was this: that he would appear to die peacefully in his sleep.

She puts the article and letter on the table in front of her, her breath coming in short, sharp bursts. There is mud under her fingernails as well as on her apron, leaving smudged marks on the cream-coloured envelope. The three terracotta pots on the kitchen table are as she left them, each half-filled with patted-down soil around the geranium stem cuttings snipped from her neighbour's front garden that morning, but they seem somehow changed by the interruption, no longer delicate and victorious at having survived the English winter into January, but straggly and ill-gotten.

She thinks of the silver necklace William gave her sixty years ago, identical to the ones both he and Rupert wore: the engraved St Christopher's charm depicting the ragged saint carrying Jesus on his shoulders across a stormy sea. She had not known what the charm concealed, having mistaken its significance for something else. There was no sign of the needle tip infused with curare, a substance chosen for its untraceable qualities, which relaxes the muscles so effectively that the lungs stop moving almost instantaneously. Death by asphyxiation. So motionless that it passes for peaceful. She would not have accepted this gift from William if she had known what it was, but by the time she read the instructions, it was too late to give it back. He had arranged it that way. He wanted her to have the option too. Just in case.

Is this what has happened? Did they finally come for him, after all these years? If they did, it can only mean that there is some new evidence, something irrefutable, to have made him believe it was not worth trying to defend himself and his reputation. Better to die than to risk the possibility of his knighthood being stripped from him, of having to endure the public recriminations and shame such revelations would bring, along with the inevitable criminal trial. And why should he endure such humiliation? His wife is dead; he has no children. Nothing to stop him.

No son to protect, as she has.

The obituary is accompanied by a picture of William as a young man, his features clear and unblemished, just as he was the last time she saw him. His eyes are directed straight at the camera, a slight smile playing on his lips as if he knows something he shouldn't. She imagines that, to the rest of the world, the mistiness of the black-and-white image might appear glamorous and full of pathos, a picture of youth in a bygone age. But to Joan it is like looking at a ghost.

They come for her later that morning. Joan is watching from her bedroom window as a long black car turns into the quiet suburban street of pebble-dashed terraces where she has lived ever since moving back to England from Australia after her husband's death fifteen years earlier. The car is out of place in this part of south-east London. She observes the man and woman as they step out and glance about them, absorbing their surroundings. The woman is wearing high heels and a smart camel-coloured mackintosh, and the man is carrying a briefcase. They stand next to each other, conferring, facing across the road towards her house.

Goosebumps rise on her arms and neck. For some reason, she had always thought they would come for her at night. She did not imagine a day like this, cold and bright and perfectly still. She watches as they cross the road and push open her front gate. Perhaps she is being paranoid. They could be anyone. Social workers or meals-on-wheels salespeople. She has sent such people away before.

The knock is loud and staccato; official-sounding. 'Open up. Security Services.'

She steps back quickly, her heart stuttering as she lets the curtain fall in front of her. Too old to run. She wonders what they would do if she does not answer the door. Would they

break it down? Or just trust that she is not in, and come back again tomorrow? She could stay here until they've gone, and then she could . . . She stops. Could what? Where could she go for any length of time without arousing suspicion? And what would she say to her son about where she was?

Another knock, louder this time.

Joan clasps her hands across her stomach as the thought occurs to her that they might try to find her at her son's house if they do not find her here. Her neck feels hot at the prospect of one of Nick's boys answering the door, muddy-haired and careless in his football kit, calling out that some people have come about Granny. If Nick saw these two, in their smart clothes and black car, he would think they had come to inform him of his mother's death, and Joan feels a stab of guilt to imagine his shock at this news.

And then a greater, more terrible shock as he learns that no, this is not what they've come to tell him.

And which of those would be worse?

It is a tickling, stealthy creep of a thought, so bold and yet so soft as it insinuates itself in her mind, and she feels a cold spasm of fear run its sharp finger down her back. Yes, she can see why William might have thought it better to kill himself. She could do it right now, take the St Christopher's medal from her bedside drawer and push it open to reveal the needle tip, and then she could settle herself into bed one last time and she would never have to face them. It would be over, finished, and when they found her she would appear just as peaceful as William had, just as innocent. How easy it would be.

But easier for whom?

For one thing, the presence of curare in her bloodstream might now be traceable, even if it had not been sixty years ago, and would be revealed by an autopsy. Or it might not work, it might be too old, it might only half work. And, traceable

or not, they might still push ahead regardless with whatever investigations they had begun. Nick would be left to face the accusations alone, and quite suddenly Joan knows with absolute certainty that, in such circumstances, he would not rest until he had cleared his mother's name from whatever charge they brought against her. He is a barrister, and fiercely protective by nature. He would defend her with his last breath if he believed it was the right thing to do. It would all seem too far-fetched, too out of character, to square with the mother he has known all his life.

In the reflection of the glass, she observes the man and woman walk back down the path and stand on the pavement to look up at the windows of the house before turning away. She draws back further. She can hardly believe it is happening. Not now. Not after all these years. There is the click of one car door opening and slamming shut, and then the other one. They are getting back into the car, either to wait for her there or to drive to Nick's house. She does not know which.

This is not how it was supposed to end. A sudden memory of herself as a young woman comes to her with a jolt; a bright Technicolor image of a life which, from this distance, she cannot really believe was ever hers. It seems so removed from the quiet way she lives now, where the only things filling her week are watercolour classes on Tuesday afternoons and ballroom dancing on Thursdays, punctuated by regular visits from Nick and his family. A calm and contented existence, but not exactly the extraordinary life she had once imagined for herself. But still, this is her life. Her only life. And she has not kept silent for so many years just to have it swept away from her now when she is so close to the end.

She takes a deep breath and walks briskly across the room, no longer caring if she is visible from the street. She must sort this out now, alone. She cannot allow Nick to find out like

this. The afternoon sun falls in a white blossom of light through the window above the narrow staircase as she hurriedly descends the stairs to the front door. She unhooks the silver chain and tugs the door across the part of the mat which has a tendency to catch on the underside of the wood, blinking as her eyes adjust to the glare of daylight, and then she steps out onto the doorstep, her heart pounding in her chest. She sees the woman turn around as the car begins to pull away, and for a brief second their eyes meet.

'Wait,' she calls out.

They take her to a large building in a narrow street not far from Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament, a forty-minute drive from Joan's house. They do not speak, except to check she is comfortable and to ask again if she would like to call a legal representative. She tells them that she is quite comfortable, and that no, she does not wish to have a lawyer present. She doesn't need one. They haven't arrested her, have they?

'Not technically, but . . .'

'There, see. I don't need one.'

'This is a matter of state security. I would really advise . . .' The woman hesitates. 'Your son is a barrister, I believe, Mrs Stanley. Would you like us to contact him?'

'No,' Joan says, and her voice is sharp. 'I don't want him disturbed.' A pause. 'I haven't done anything wrong.'

They sit in silence for the rest of the journey, Joan's hands clasped tightly together as if in prayer. But she is not praying. She is thinking. She is making sure she remembers everything so that she cannot be taken by surprise.

When they arrive, her seatbelt is unbuckled for her. She follows the woman, Ms Hart, out of the car, while the man, Mr Adams, walks behind them up the steps to a small wooden

door set into a carved stone frame. He does not say anything but reaches forward and holds his pass up against a small black box. The door clicks, and he pushes it open.

Ms Hart leads the way along a narrow corridor. She propels Joan into a square room with a table and three chairs and takes the briefcase from Mr Adams. He does not follow them in but waits outside, and then shuts the door behind them. There are microphones set up on the table and a camera attached to the ceiling in the far corner of the room. A glass window reflects Joan's gaze back at her and she looks away quickly, although not before observing the faint shadow of Mr Adams' presence behind the screen. Ms Hart sits down on one side of the table and gestures that Joan should do the same.

'You're quite certain you don't want a lawyer?'

Joan nods.

'Right.' Ms Hart extracts two files from the briefcase. She places them on the table and pushes the slimmer one across to Joan. 'Let's start with this.'

Joan sits back. She will not touch the file. 'I haven't done anything wrong.'

'Mrs Stanley,' Ms Hart continues, 'I would advise you to cooperate. We have enough evidence to convict. It will only be possible for the Home Secretary to show clemency towards you if there is some sort of confession or an admission of guilt. Information.' She pauses. 'Otherwise you will make it impossible for us to be lenient.'

Joan says nothing. Her arms are folded.

Ms Hart looks down at the shiny floor of the interviewing room, adjusting the position of her briefcase with the immaculate point of her shoe. 'You're being accused of twenty-seven breaches of the Official Secrets Act, which is effectively treason. I'm sure you're aware that this is not a light charge. If you force

us to take it to trial, it will carry a maximum sentence of fourteen years.'

Silence. Joan counts the years in her head, each one causing a painful tightening across her chest. She does not move.

Ms Hart glances at the shadow of Mr Adams behind the screen. 'It will be of benefit to you if anything you wish to say in your defence has been recorded before your name is released to the House of Commons on Friday.' She pauses. 'I should tell you now that you'll be expected to make a statement in response.'

Friday. The day of William's funeral. She would not have gone anyway. She steels herself so that when she speaks her voice is quiet and firm. 'I still don't know what you're talking about.'

Ms Hart slips a photograph out of the side pocket of her briefcase and places it on the table between them. Joan glances at it and then looks away again. She recognises it, of course. It is the photograph from the obituary.

Ms Hart places her palms flat on the table and leans forward. 'You knew Sir William Mitchell at Cambridge, I believe. You were undergraduates there at around the same time.'

Joan looks blankly at Ms Hart, neither confirming nor denying.

'We're just trying to build up a picture at this initial stage,' Ms Hart continues. 'Place everything in context.'

'A picture of what?'

'As I'm sure you're aware, Sir William died rather suddenly last week. There was an investigation and several questions remain unanswered as a result.'

Joan frowns, wondering how exactly she might be linked to William. 'I don't know how you think I can help you. I didn't know him all that well.'

Ms Hart raises an eyebrow. 'The case against Sir William is

incidental to the case against you, Mrs Stanley. It's your choice. Either we sit in silence until you cooperate, or we can just get on with it.' She waits. 'Let's start with university.'

Joan does not move. Her eyes flick to the screen and then to the locked door behind Ms Hart. It will not end here – she will not let it – but she can see that a degree of cooperation might be worthwhile, and could even buy her a little time to decide how much they know. They must have some evidence for William to have done what he did.

'I did go,' she says at last. 'In 1937.'

Ms Hart nods. 'And what did you read for your degree?'

Joan's vision is suddenly concentrated on Ms Hart's hands, and it takes her a few seconds to realise what is unusual about them. They are suntanned. Suntanned in January, and the thought prompts an unexpected thud of homesickness for Australia. For the first time since her return to England, Joan wishes she had not come back. She should have known it was not safe. She shouldn't have allowed Nick to persuade her.

'Certificate,' she says at last.

'Sorry?'

'Women got certificates, not degrees. Back then.' Another pause. 'I read Natural Sciences.'

'But you specialised in Physics, I believe.'

'Did I?'

'Yes.'

Joan glances at Ms Hart and then looks away again.

'Right.' A pause. 'And why did you want to go? It can't have been a very normal thing to do back then.'

Joan exhales slowly, aware that everything she says must be absolutely consistent. No, it wasn't normal, but the only other options seemed to be getting married, teaching or learning to type and she didn't want to do any of those. She closes her

eyes and forces her mind back to the year she first left home, wanting to be absolutely certain of the memory before she speaks, and as she does, she finds that she can still remember the feeling of that year with absolute clarity; the breathless sensation brought on by the knowledge that if she didn't go somewhere and do something then her lungs might actually burst out of her chest. It feels odd to remember it now: such a long-forgotten feeling. She had never felt a sensation quite like it before and she has never felt it since, but, now that she thinks about it, she remembers observing that same static energy fizzing out of her own son when he turned eighteen. Not old but no longer young either. An impressionable age, her mother called it.

In the autumn of 1937, Joan leaves home to attend Newnham College, Cambridge. She is eighteen years old and impatient to leave. There is no particular reason for this impatience other than an underlying sense of life happening elsewhere, far removed from the ivy-covered lodge of the girls' public school near St Albans where she has lived all her life. The school is a hearty establishment with special emphasis placed on organised games, which (according to the school's prospectus) will encourage the girls to develop a love of justice, alongside the ability to make prompt decisions and to recognise defeat with good cheer, and Joan is obliged to spend several hours every week charging around the school field dressed in a pinafore and wielding a wooden stick in pursuit of these lofty ideals.

As the headmaster's daughters, Joan and her younger sister are not ordinary pupils – they do not have beds in the dormitory or parts in the school play or tuck boxes arriving through the post – and while her parents insist that this set-up is a

privilege, to Joan it seems to be no more than a form of constant surveillance and, in her opinion, is bound to give them both asthma. She knows she should be more grateful, being reminded often enough of how lucky she is that her generation has not been sent off to the trenches, and that she is not obliged to run away from home in order to become a nurse in the Great War as her mother did when she was sixteen but, at the same time, she also feels there is something enticing about that youthful display of self-sufficiency, which only serves to make her feel more restless.

There is a whole world out there that is barely recognisable from the safe, padded vantage point of St Albans. She knows this because she has seen it in her father's limp, in the newsreels at the cinema showing the Welsh collieries and deserted shipyards of the North; in newspapers and books and films; in the pictures of small children in doorways with grubby knees and no shoes. She glimpsed it when the Great Hunger March passed through St Albans a few years previously, a straggling procession of men and women so dirty that their skin seemed to have turned a deep, charcoal grey. Joan remembers how one of the marchers stopped outside the lodge as he left town in the morning, leaning against the garden fence and bent double in a fit of coughing.

'What's the matter with him?' Joan had asked her father. 'Shouldn't we call the doctor?'

Her father shook his head. 'That's coal dust,' he said. 'Nothing you can do about silicosis. Cuts into the lungs and kills the tissue. And he's walking to London with all the rest of them because he wants his job back.'

'Why doesn't he just get a different one?'

Her father had not answered this question immediately. He watched as the man drank the glass of water that Lally had taken out to him, and then struggled to catch up with the rest

of the marchers. He turned away from her and limped out of the room, muttering, 'Why indeed?'

He answered this question the following day, interrupting the chaplain just before the recitation of the school prayer in a way that only a headmaster can. He waved a newspaper aloft as he declared to the school that it was a criminal sort of government that refused to acknowledge the reality of life in what they called the 'Special Areas' of Britain. It was either a failure of imagination or wilful blindness, but either way it was a betrayal. He instructed each child and teacher in the school to close their eyes and picture life in the ship-building towns where no ships were being built, to think of the boarded-up shops, the Means Test man declaring that a family's only rug must be sold before any relief could be granted. Imagine the destitution. And then imagine it in winter.

He quoted Ramsay MacDonald, leader of the coalition who was supposed to save the country from economic despair. 'Has anyone,' Ramsay MacDonald was reported to have asked in the House of Commons in response to the marchers' request for an audience, 'who comes to London, either on foot or in first-class carriages, the constitutional right to demand to see me, to take up my time, whether I like it or not?'

The question was rhetorical and its impact was lost on many of the younger schoolgirls, but Joan's father let the words hang in the scuffling silence before folding the newspaper in disgust. 'Our prime minister may not know it, but we have a duty,' he said, frowning at a noise coming from a group of girls in the Upper Fifth, 'to make this poor and hungry world a better place for everyone in it. To be responsible.'

Another pause, longer than the first, so that when her father spoke again his voice boomed into the beamed ceiling of the school hall.

'From each' – she remembers his exact words – 'according to his ability.'

To Joan's disappointment, her abilities seem to be limited to hockey and schoolwork. At first, she was unsure how either of these could be put to practical use in the way her father envisaged, but she suspected that one might be of more use than the other. Her science teacher, Miss Abbott, was the first to suggest she might try for university, and it was on her instigation that Joan applied to read Natural Sciences for the honours certificate at Cambridge; the flat, weather-beaten town where Miss Abbot had once spent her happiest years before the Great War marched in and snatched away the life she had planned.

Joan is excited about going, although it is less the qualification that interests her than the prospect of going somewhere, anywhere. And it is also the prospect of learning things that she would never have the chance of knowing if she didn't go, of attending lectures in the mornings, reading books all afternoon, and spending evenings at the cinema watching Mary Brian and Norma Shearer being whisked away on horseback by Gary Cooper, then copying their hairdos later in case the same thing should ever happen to her.

Of course, she knows that in Cambridge she is unlikely to come across Gary Cooper. There will only be real men, men whose teeth do not glint in the moonlight and who ride bicycles instead of horses but still, endless, bountiful men. Boys, some of them, but even they will be a welcome break from the rippling sea of girls at school. Joan did not mention this to her father or Miss Abbott during the coaching sessions for the interview ('And why do you wish to pursue your academic study at the University of Cambridge?') but now it simmers under the surface of her enthusiasm. She knows that it is a privilege to be going and she is constantly reminded of this

fact by both her father and the college scholarship fund but, frankly, she would have gone anywhere.

Joan's father is delighted to see her go. He tells her that it will be a wonderful thing to be educated in the religion of reason. These are his words, not hers, although she knows what he means. They understand each other, Joan and her father, sharing a quiet sort of complicity that is not chatty enough for her mother or Lally. Other people tell Joan how much her younger sister resembles her, that they could be twins if not for the five-year age difference, and while Lally flushes with pleasure at this, Joan considers it to be eye-rollingly stupid, although she has to hide this sentiment from Lally. Her sister's temperament is sweet and wide-eyed, and whereas Joan cannot remember there ever having been a time when she was happy to go shopping for dress material with her mother or make daisy chains in the garden, Lally seems happy to do it. It is only her father who does not see this resemblance and grunts his disagreement when anyone else alludes to it. He is complicit in Joan's plans to escape, and Joan loves him for this more than for anything else.

In contrast, Joan's mother is decidedly ungrateful about the whole enterprise. It is clear that she would like to march into that school and have a strong word with Miss Abbott for condemning Joan to eternal spinsterhood by educating her beyond all prospects of future happiness. It is made clear that she does not intend to let the same thing happen to Lally, oh-ho no. Her second daughter will be kept well away from Miss Abbott.

When Joan suggests that going to university is no worse than running away to become a nurse, her mother shakes her head and insists that the two things are quite different. 'They were unprecedented times, Joanie. You can't imagine it. You can't imagine the sound they made, all those boys being delivered

at the hospital door, crying out for their mothers as we unloaded them from carts and wagons and ambulances until they filled the corridors. Such a terrible, terrible time.'

Joan has heard this speech before and knows better than to say what she really thinks, which is that yes, it does sound terrible, but all times are unprecedented. Surely her times are unprecedented, too. But she also knows that her mother will not actually be able to stop her, and so while some of the other girls from her class will be enrolling in secretarial college in the autumn and others will be getting married and moving into their own homes, Joan is the only one who is going to university.

Before she goes, there is the University Trousseau to arrange; it is a compromise, a tactical diversion, to allow her mother this slant on events. A list of items Joan will need is drawn up between them, and Joan is dispatched to the local department store to obtain great swathes of material so that she can be suitably upholstered before leaving. There must be some sort of tweed ensemble, a navy suit, a knitted outfit for lectures, a pair of chic trousers (chic is her mother's word, indefinable for both of them), three blouses, two belts, two bags (one pretty, one practical), a mackintosh, a simple woollen dress and one smart dance dress. Her mother insists that she should also have a fur coat and she will not be budged on this. It is a huge extravagance, there is no question of buying one: one must be found.

'You've got to look the part, Joanie,' her mother tells her, surrounded by pins and cottons and materials cut into unlikely shapes on the living-room rug, although neither of them knows what the part should look like. They know only that they do not know, which is not quite enough.

No mention is made of purchasing the set texts or the

equipment required for science practicals or any of the other things that Joan feels might actually come in handy for the course. University, it seems, is mostly a question of textiles.

During those first few days of living alone in Cambridge, Joan finds that she is amazingly, gloriously happy just to be alive. She loves her new home with its red-bricked Queen Anne architecture, its beautifully manicured lawns and sports field and tennis courts. Physically, she equates this excitement to the feeling in her stomach when she cycles very fast over the hump bridge at the back of Clare College, that sudden rush of giddiness in her stomach, and then the exhilaration of speeding downhill.

She attends lectures in the mornings, leaving her bicycle propped against the railings of the science faculty on Pembroke Street, and then sliding into the back row of the lecture theatre with her satchel under her arm. The days of chaperones are over, but the lecturers still largely ignore the female presence, addressing the audience as 'gentlemen'. They tend to stand directly in front of whatever they have written, mumbling 'square this' and 'subtract that', and then wiping the board down to move on to the next calculation before anyone has had time to work out what they are supposed to be doing but Joan remains undeterred. She regards each lecture as a small dot of knowledge which will one day join to another dot, and then another and another, until she will finally understand at least some of the figures chalked up in minute smudges on the blackboard, and she is hopeful that this will come about before the summer examinations.

Her room at Newnham is on the ground floor of Peile Hall, a relatively new block with modern bathrooms and kitchenettes and a view out over the immaculate gardens. It is as large as the drawing room at home, with a small truckle bed pushed

up against one wall and a thick-cushioned sofa against the other, leaving a huge expanse of carpet in the middle where she can practise handstands without the remotest possibility of breaking anything. The kitchenette has a single gas ring upon which she has not yet attempted to cook, preferring to skip breakfast in favour of an apple on the way to lectures, followed by a packed lunch of crusty bread with cheese or boiled ham, and then dinner in Hall, a large, light room with beautiful, corniced ceilings and long, communal tables. Although there is no one she immediately takes to in those first few days, she is not lonely. Everyone is astonishingly friendly, and these dinners are enjoyable, rumbustious affairs. She is not used to this after the cliques and hierarchies of school, and she puts it down to the fact that here, in Cambridge, everyone is a bit of a swot, and so for once there is nothing unusual about her.

On her third night, Joan is awoken by a smart rap on the window, followed by a scrabbling noise on the window ledge outside, as if a very large cat is trying to get into her room. She leans out of bed and pinches the bottom corner of the curtain between her finger and thumb and pulls it back. Her hockey stick is propped up against the wall, and there is something comforting about its proximity. She clears her throat, ready to scream if necessary, and peers out.

Two scarlet high-heeled shoes are standing on her windowsill.

She pulls the curtain a little further back and looks upwards. A girl is half-standing, half-crouching in the shoes, resplendent in a black silk dress and a white scarf, and when she sees the curtain lift she smiles and puts a finger to her lips. She crouches down so that her face is almost level with Joan's.

'Hurry up and let me in,' she mouths through the glass.

Joan hesitates for a moment, and then slides out of bed to

undo the catch, and the girl steps through the window frame and into Joan's room. 'My room's on the third floor,' the girl announces, by way of explanation, removing her shoes one at a time before jumping down from the windowsill. 'Darned curfew,' she mutters, massaging her toes where her shoes have been chafing. 'Sorry for getting you up. The laundry window was closed.'

Joan rubs her eyes. 'Don't mention it.'

The girl glances around the room, taking in the heavy green curtains and the sofa with its collection of ill-matched cushions. Her hair and eyes are dark, her cheeks smooth and dusted, and her lips bear a bright slash of red lipstick. Joan is suddenly conscious of how she must look, standing barefoot in her nightie with small strips of muslin tied into her hair. She steps back towards her bed, supposing that this might encourage the girl to go, but the girl does not seem to be in any rush.

'Are you a first year too?'

Joan is surprised by the implication in the question that this girl is also a new arrival. She seems so self-assured, so certain of the rules, that it is hard to believe she hasn't been here for years. 'Yes.'

'English Literature?'

Joan shakes her head. 'Natural Sciences.'

'Ah. I was fooled by your cushion covers.' She pauses. 'I'm reading Languages. More modern than medieval. I say, I don't suppose you've got a dressing gown I could borrow? I don't want to get caught walking around like this. Better to pretend we've been up all night drinking cocoa or something like the rest of them.'

Joan nods and turns away, not wanting to let on that this was, in fact, how she had spent the latter part of her evening before going to bed, that she was one of *them*. She goes to the wardrobe and takes out her dressing gown.

'Is that a mink coat?' the girl asks from behind Joan's shoulder, her voice suddenly curious.

'Hmm, yes, I think so.' Joan gives a small shrug, self-conscious at having such a thing in her wardrobe, procured on indefinite loan from a second cousin who no longer had any use for it, but Joan cannot imagine that she will ever be bold enough to wear it. 'It's a bit hideous, isn't it?'

'Well, it's rather *fin de siècle*,' says the girl with a sideways smile, stepping towards the wardrobe. She reaches out her hand and strokes the coat, and then slips it off its hanger, tilts her head to inspect it, and flings it around her shoulders. 'Although at least it's not Arctic fox. They're everywhere at the moment.'

'Except the Arctic regions.'

The girl gives a short, surprised laugh. She turns around and glances at her back in the mirror. And then she lifts her arms and twirls, so that her silk dress clings to her chest and the mink coat spins out like a flapper outfit: miraculously transformed, made glamorous in a way that Joan has never imagined. So that is how you wear it, Joan thinks. Not draped or buttoned or belted. Just flung.

'I don't think it's hideous,' the girl says. 'It's different.'

Joan smiles. She expects that it is different because it was made so long ago that its cut is no longer recognisable. But there is something rich about it as it spins and flares, something luxuriant and soft which she can't help but admire as the girl discards it on Joan's bed. She must remember to thank her mother properly for finding it in her next letter. 'I suppose it's not so bad,' Joan concedes. 'I'm just not used to it yet.'

'I'll bring your dressing gown back tomorrow,' the girl says, tiptoeing to the door and turning the handle. She peers out to check that the corridor is empty, and then looks back to nod towards the pair of scarlet stilettos lying discarded in the

middle of Joan's room. 'And I'll pick up my shoes then too, if that's all right? They don't make very convincing slippers.'

'Of course.' Joan waits for the girl to close the door behind her. She picks up the fur coat and goes to hang it in her wardrobe, and then she glances at the girl's shoes, so bold against her beige rug. How could anyone walk in those, let alone climb onto a windowsill? Still considering this, she slides her feet into the steep cavities of bright red leather, a close fit but not uncomfortable. She catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror, and for a moment she pauses, no longer sleepy but giddy and precarious, before coming to her senses and taking them off, placing them next to her well-worn, low-heeled brogues, and getting back into bed.

Sunday, 2.39 p.m.

Ms Hart takes a photograph from the file and places it on the table next to the photograph of William. 'Do you recognise this?'

'Oh,' Joan whispers. It is the picture from her undergraduate laboratory pass while she was at Cambridge. She has not seen it for years, and yet it is so familiar to her that it is almost like glancing in a mirror; a tea-coloured and misty mirror, yes, but a mirror all the same. Her face in the photograph is powdered and rouged, and her eyes have a distant look about them, silvery-grey in the black-and-white spectrum. There will have been lipstick on her lips to make them so dark and defined, and they are parted slightly in a smile. How different she looks there from how she looks now. So young and innocent and, well, pretty. She has not used that word to describe herself for years. 'Of course I recognise it.'

'This is the photograph that will accompany the press statement on Friday.'

Joan looks up at her. 'But why will the press want a photograph of me?'

Ms Hart crosses her arms. 'I think you know, don't you, Mrs Stanley?'

Joan shakes her head, careful to maintain her expression of confusion. She can see the appeal of this photograph to any members of the press who might be interested in the story, if they know as much as William evidently thought they did. A lump rises in her throat, and for the first time, Ms Hart's eyes seem to show a brief flicker of sympathy.

'Where did you get it?' she whispers.

'I'm afraid I can't tell you.'

'Why not?'

'It's classified.' There is a pause. Ms Hart is sitting with her arms crossed. 'What I can tell you depends on how much you tell me.'

'I've got nothing to tell.'

'Now, that's not true, is it?'

Joan feels her heart flutter inside her but she will not drop her gaze. Her voice is louder now. 'I don't know what you think I've done.'

Ms Hart looks down at her notes. She turns back a page, circles something, and then speaks. 'You've said your father was a socialist—'

'I didn't say that,' Joan interrupts.

'You implied it.'

Joan shrugs. She is annoyed with herself for having said something that could be twisted in an attempt to implicate her father in . . . in what? She doesn't know. All she knows is that she must select her words carefully around this woman. 'But I didn't say it.'

'Well? What was he?'

Joan frowns, considering Ms Hart's question. She wants to

be sure of representing her father's beliefs correctly, given that he was always very particular about such things. 'He would never have used that word to describe himself. He just believed there was more the government could have done to help people. Politically and socially. My father put a lot of store by institutions. It was in his nature. Public school, university, army officer, headmaster. He thought the government, as an institution, was letting people down.'

'So he wasn't a member of any political organisation?'

'No.'

'And your mother?'

In spite of herself, Joan raises an eyebrow. 'Most definitely not.'

'So you wouldn't say that you were encouraged to take an interest in politics by anyone in particular?'

Joan looks at her and wonders when it changed. When was it decided that taking an interest in politics was something subversive? As she remembers, it was quite normal to be concerned by such things when she was young. Society meant something in those days. It was not like it is now, when the news is filled with nothing but gossip about people who have never done or achieved anything, who don't seem to know the first thing about grammar or the etymology of the word *celebrity*, who appear doll-like and too colourful and yet somehow the same. What sort of society glamorises these people? She knows what her husband would have said: that the rot set in with Mrs Thatcher, and perhaps it did, but she also knows that it happened on the Left too, after all that fuss with the unions in the seventies. There was nothing for anyone to believe in any more, and the realisation of this saddens her, not just for itself but because she recognises it as an old person's thought. Redundant and unnecessary. She shakes her head.

'Please speak up for the recorder,' Ms Hart says, her voice firm and unwavering.

'Nobody encouraged me. Nobody in particular.'

Ms Hart looks at her as if she was expecting a different answer. Her gaze is unblinking. She waits a little longer. 'Fine,' she says at last. 'I believe you were about to tell me about your friendship with Sonya Galich, as she then was. If we're going to be chronological about it, that is.'

Joan shivers. She looks down at her feet, trying to weigh up how much she can tell them against how much they already know.

As promised, the girl comes to Joan's room the following morning to return the dressing gown. Joan is in the middle of writing an essay on diffraction techniques in the study of atomic particles and does not hear her approaching. When she looks up, she sees the girl leaning against the doorframe, dressed in a blue trouser suit and wool-covered slippers. Her hair is wound up and knotted in a chocolate brown scarf in a manner that Joan imagines her mother would dismiss as 'washerwoman style' but which, on this girl, makes her look as if she has just stepped off a filmset. She produces a thin silver box and flips it open. The silver glints and sparkles in her hand. 'Cigarette?'

Joan smokes occasionally but only in company and never yet in her room. It makes her feel self-conscious in a mildly pleasurable way. She likes the obligatory pout which the act of inhaling requires, the narrowed eyes, the wisps of smoke. It amuses her to think how furious her mother would be if she could see her now, smoking before lunch on a weekday – *Who do you think you are? Some sort of femme fatale?* – but her mother cannot see her, so she shrugs her assent, and the girl takes this as an invitation to come in. She hands a cigarette to Joan, and Joan places it between her lips in what she imagines to be the manner of a femme fatale. The girl strikes a match

to light her cigarette, and then holds it out for Joan to do the same. Joan leans forwards, closing her eyes and inhaling gently until the cigarette catches.

There is a brief silence but it is not uncomfortable. The girl glances around the room, amused to see her shoes filed neatly by the door. 'Thanks for last night. Sorry if I startled you.'

Joan grins. 'You did rather.' She goes into the small kitchen to find an ashtray, rummaging through the cupboards above the gas ring and eventually locating the ceramic bowl she once made in a pottery class at school. She taps ash into it as she walks back into the room and places it between them on the desk. 'Where had you been anyway? Anywhere good?'

'I was with my cousin and some of his friends.'

'Is he a student here too?'

'He's at Jesus College. Doing a PhD.'

Joan waits for her to elaborate but she doesn't. Instead, she leans over the desk to read Joan's half-finished essay, her hand resting on her hip as her eyes skim the page, and to Joan's surprise, she realises that she is glad it was her window this girl chose to climb through last night. She likes her self-confidence, her ease. Joan catches sight of the invitation propped up on her bookshelf. 'Are you going to the sherry party this evening?' she asks.

'The tutors' sherry party?' The girl gives a small burst of laughter, and Joan feels faintly embarrassed for having mentioned it. The girl stubs out her cigarette and then turns to look at Joan. 'Only if I can wear your fur coat.'

Her name is Sonya, an exotic, unusual name, which is fitting for a girl who does not walk through life but sails, who floats in and out of rooms without ever seeming to trip or falter. She makes perfectly ordinary people into an audience, even when they don't want to be. They think they are taking part but they

aren't. Not really. Not like Sonya. She doesn't have the humble opinion of her own importance that besieges most girls of her age. She seems to know that she is different and doesn't mind it. Even her clothes are different, but not in the same way as Joan's. Joan's are too new, too homemade to look right. When Joan observes herself in the mirror, she looks as if she is dressed in someone else's clothes which don't quite fit. The hemlines are all too long, the waists too slack. It is an uncomfortable thought and she wishes she did not have it, but no matter how much she tells herself that she is grateful for all the effort her mother put into her University Trousseau, the tugging and pinning and late-night stitching, she cannot seem to wriggle out the thought.

Sonya, in contrast, wears what she likes; black silk dresses in the evenings and, in the daytime, all-in-one trouser suits and odd, mustard-coloured dresses with no shape, no darts or nips or tucks, which on anybody else would look like old sacking tied up with a too-thin belt, but which on Sonya somehow manage to look stylish. Not chic exactly, but deliberate. And then high heels, headscarf, bright red lips. It is almost a statement of anti-fashion, a shrug of contempt towards garters and girdles and primness in the days before dresses were supposed to make statements. Almost anti-fashion, but not quite. Because soon they will all want to look like her.

Sonya comes back to Joan's room that evening while Joan is getting ready for the party and proposes a swap: mascara for mink. Joan protests that she does not want anything in return. Sonya can just borrow the coat. There's no need for bartering. Mascara is unlikely to be the sort of thing she can pull off anyway so she'd rather not wear it.

Sonya waves her objections aside, wafting her back into the room. 'It doesn't need to be pulled off. If you put it on properly, then nobody will know you're wearing it. They'll just be

dazzled by how big your eyes suddenly appear. Come here and sit down.' She shows Joan how to apply it, dabbing the cake of black dye with a droplet of water and then brushing the mixture upwards along her eyelashes with a small brush. 'There! What do you think?'

Joan looks at herself in the mirror and has to admit that the transformation is quite amazing. She has used Brilliantine on her eyelashes before but it has never had this effect. Now her eyelashes flick upwards and curl, and if she lowers them and looks slightly upwards as Sonya instructs, they give an involuntary flutter. So this is how it's done, she thinks with delight.

'What did I tell you? You look like Greta Garbo in *Anna Karenina*.' Sonya grins at her, and then turns to Joan's wardrobe to extract the fur coat, her side of the bargain, flinging it dramatically over her shoulders and spinning into the centre of the room.

'You have to be careful with it,' Joan says. 'I'd get into so much trouble if I lost it.'

Sonya laughs. She extracts a headscarf from her bag – crimson with small white flowers – and ties it around her hair. 'Of course I'll be careful. Now get a move on, Garbo. We're going to be late.'

Their shoes clip on the cobbles and the mink coat flutters behind them as they cross the river by The Anchor. There are wolf-whistles from the pub doorway as they run along Silver Street and onto King's Parade, half-mocking but also amused. Joan is not used to so much attention, noting with surprise that just as much of it is directed at her; a reflected radiance. She wonders if this is how it feels to be Sonya. Always looked at, always admired.

The sherry party is held in an old building in the centre of town, a square, wood-panelled room decorated with books and candles, and Joan and Sonya's arrival goes largely unheralded

by the huddle of academics talking in the middle of the room. Sonya goes to hang up the fur coat in the cloakroom, and instructs Joan to procure her a drink. Waiting staff in black uniforms with pressed white collars carry silver trays of tiny glasses in which sherry shines and sparkles.

'Dry or medium?' A waiter is standing in front of her.

'Oh.' Joan glances at the tray of glasses and then looks back at the waiter. 'I don't know.'

The waiter's expression is stern, but when he sees her confusion he grins and the skin crinkles around his eyes. He leans towards her. 'New here, are you?'

Joan nods.

'Take the dry. Medium is sweeter, but if you say you like dry sherry it sounds as if you know what you're talking about.' He glances across at the huddle of academics and then turns the tray towards her. 'And that's what seems to matter most around here. It's the one on your left.'

Joan smiles gratefully, and selects two glasses from the tray, one for herself and one for Sonya. 'Thank you.'

She sees Sonya come in and waves to attract her attention, and she observes a glance pass between Sonya and the waiter. The waiter bows in acknowledgement, a small movement but a definite indication that he recognises her, and then he turns away to greet the next entrants to the party.

'How do you know him?' Joan asks once he is out of earshot.

Sonya takes a sip of sherry. 'Who, Peter? I met him last night. My cousin knows him from when the waiters went on strike last year. He did some leaflets for them.'

'Why were they striking?'

'Just the usual. Wages, overtime, holiday.'

They are interrupted by one of the tutors, a tall woman with long, grey hair who is intent on persuading Joan to take her zoology course. She has recently had an article accepted

by the *Journal of Animal Ecology*, outlining her research on host-finding parasitic insects, and she is intent on relaying the more intricate aspects of this paper to someone, but Joan is too polite to slip away with Sonya once it has become clear that the paper is not a short one. She sees Sonya joining a group of girls from their year with whom Joan had dinner on the first night. She remembers their conversation quite well: horses, boarding school lacrosse games, sailing regattas in the Solent. Their expressions are strained with interest as Sonya speaks, and she sees Sonya laugh politely in return, but she also notices that there is something distant about the way Sonya talks to them, as if she does not quite know how to interact with them. After a few more excruciating minutes of parasite-based conversation, Joan excuses herself from the tutor and slips across the room to join Sonya.

'Thank God you're here,' Sonya whispers, handing her another sherry which she has managed to appropriate from a passing tray. 'Drink this and let's get out of here. There must be something more exciting going on in this town.'

Joan hesitates. 'Let's stay a little longer. I don't want to appear rude.'

Sonya looks at her with barely concealed irritation, but then she shrugs and gives a small half smile. 'All right. One more hour, then we absolutely have to leave.'

They stay until the end, as by the time the hour is up Sonya has found an appreciative audience of language students who are amazed at how well she speaks German, and she is blithe in her acceptance of their compliments. Joan, however, is cornered by a girl she has never met before: Margaret, a Classics undergraduate, who confides in her at great length about a secret engagement with a young man who works on her family's farm, and when she finally escapes from Margaret, there is someone else wanting to tell her about a

fascinating piece of research she is conducting on the contact between Reindeer Tungus and Russian Cossacks in north-west Manchuria. Joan tries to appear interested but it is a struggle, and she loses count of the number of tiny glasses of dry sherry she is obliged to drink. When Sonya comes over to claim her, she is relieved to have an excuse to leave.

They walk home arm in arm, both of them giddy from too much alcohol, and giggling at the memory of how the other girls had responded to Sonya's recitations of German poetry. Sonya does an impression of one of the girls. 'Which boarding school did you say you attended in Surrey?'

Joan laughs, even though she is curious to know the answer to this too. Sonya has no trace of a foreign accent, just a lingering drawl that sounds more American than European, but Joan is pretty certain she is not English.

Almost as if Sonya can read her thoughts, she says suddenly: 'I was only there for two years.'

'At boarding school?'

She nods. 'It was in Farnham, in Surrey.' A pause. 'But I was born in Russia.'

There is a silence as Joan absorbs this fact. There is something about the tone of Sonya's voice that makes it clear this is a carefully guarded piece of information. 'Are your parents here in England too?' Joan asks.

Sonya does not look at her, and it takes a few seconds for Joan to work out that this was a tactless question. 'My father was killed a few years after the Revolution. A small uprising. It's okay,' she adds quickly, shaking her head to forestall any sympathy Joan might attempt to offer. 'I never even met him.' She stops. 'And my mother died of pneumonia when I was eight.'

Joan feels suddenly very young. She reaches out and squeezes Sonya's arm. 'I'm so sorry.'

'It's all right. I don't remember very much about her either. I went to live with my uncle and cousin in Leipzig after that.' She grins. 'That's where I learnt to speak German.'

'The cousin you saw last night?'

'Yes. Leo. He sent for me to come here when Uncle Boris moved to Switzerland.' She pauses. 'We're Jewish, you see.'

'Oh,' Joan says again. 'It must have been terrible for you.'

'I don't know. Surrey's not that bad.' She glances at Joan, a sly, sideways glance. 'Besides, I had Leo so I wasn't exactly on my own.'

Joan feels a stab of pity for her, even though she knows better than to voice it out loud. How different it sounds from her own childhood, so easy in comparison, born in the aftermath of a war she would never have to know. Yes, she knows all the stories: that her father served in France as an officer in the trenches, that her mother was a nurse, that they met in the field hospital in the Somme near where her father's left leg is now buried. It is supposed to be a happy story, this account of her parents' first meeting, a tale of hope and salvation. She can picture her mother administering the anaesthetic as the doctor cut into the shattered, shrapnel-flecked flesh of her father's leg, gangrenous and useless, a straight incision this time, revealing the smooth whiteness of his bone, thick as an elephant's tusk. Ah yes, a happy story; Joan's father lying in a hospital trolley as he waited for his wooden leg to be fitted, an old man at the age of twenty-two, with just enough gumption left to reach up and take his nurse's hand and ask her to marry him.

'My mother taught me to play the piano,' Sonya says, breaking in on Joan's thoughts. 'She used to chalk the keys onto the kitchen table and we'd play along to the gramophone. That's my clearest memory of her. She could play anything – Chopin, Shostakovich, Beethoven.' She pauses. 'Or so she said. She sold the piano when I was a baby so I never actually heard her play.'

Joan imagines Sonya's mother: tall, elegant, perhaps a little thinner than Sonya, but other than that, exactly the same. She watches as Sonya places her handbag unsteadily on the cobbles in front of her, and then runs her fingers through her hair, as if this action might restore her sense of composure. She flicks her hair, shaping it into a loose ponytail, and then twists it, piling it up on her head and pinning it expertly into place with a pencil extracted from her pocket. How does she do that? Surely it will not hold. But it does. The dim glow of a nearby street lamp glances off the pile of dark hair, bringing out an array of colours: hints of rust, chocolate, gold. Her skin is splashed with tiny freckles, fading now that the summer is past, but still creamy and healthy-looking. Yes, Joan thinks, Sonya's mother would have been beautiful too.

'What are you doing tomorrow evening?' Sonya asks suddenly as they turn in through the college gates.

'I thought I might go to the fundraiser for the new building.'

Sonya laughs. 'Really? Don't tell me you've been enticed by the raffle.'

'Just the cake sale. Aren't you going?'

'No, and you shouldn't either. I'm going to see some films at the Town Hall with my cousin.' She pauses and looks at Joan, and her expression is scrutinising but also curious. 'Why don't you come along? I think you'll like them.'