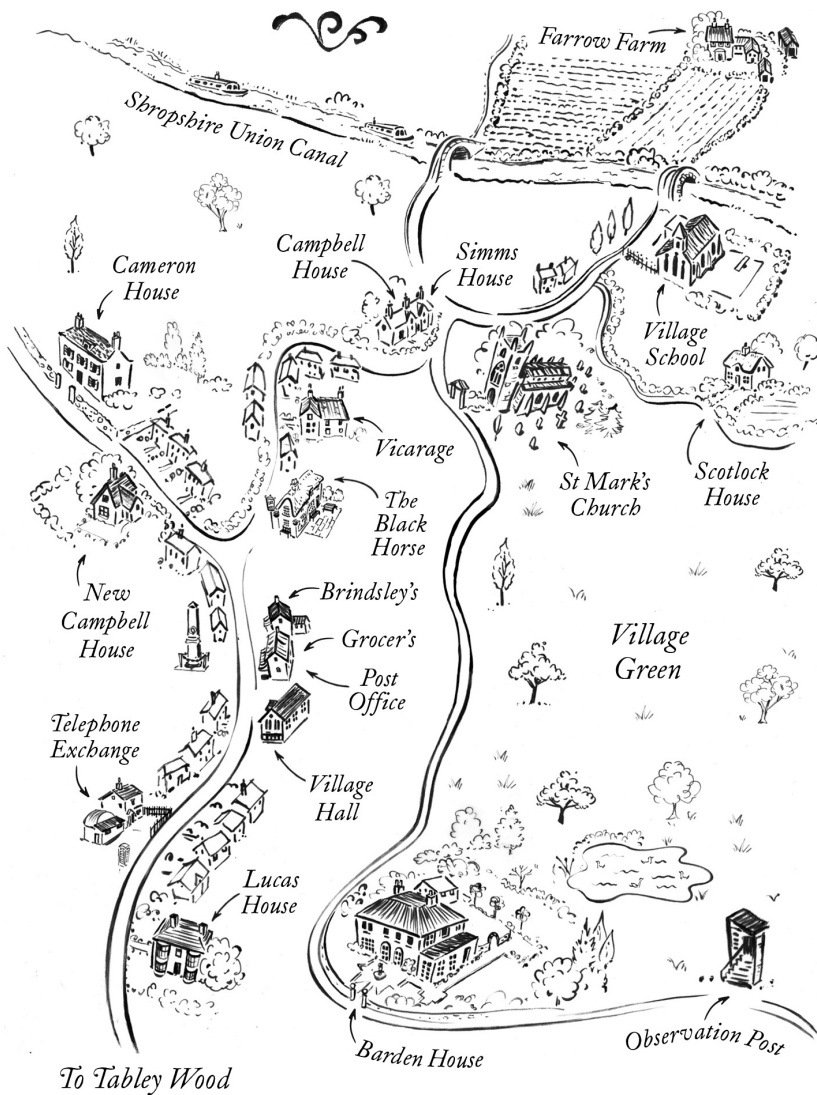


Keep the
**HOME FIRES
BURNING**

S. Block

ZAFFRE

GREAT PAXFORD



Prologue

PAT SIMMS STOOD BEFORE a scene of such outlandish devastation that she couldn't move. The harsh Cheshire wind drove icy drops of rain into her face and eyes at an acute angle, forcing Pat to wipe it away with her hands to get a clear sight of what lay before her. Having run from the village as fast as she could manage in her best dress and shoes, she was struggling for breath. For a few moments she believed that perhaps it was the lack of oxygen that caused her to hallucinate the vision in front of her.

A Spitfire was sticking out of a house in her village.

As she gasped for breath, Pat thought it so ridiculous it couldn't possibly be real. She *must* be imagining it – the tableau as a whole, but also its details. Smoke rising from the wreckage. The silhouette of a pilot in the cockpit, slouched against the closed canopy, splashed with red. The intact tail and broken wings. Even the smell of aviation fuel.

Is it possible to hallucinate a smell?

To prove she was imagining it all, Pat looked behind her to confirm there was no trace of where this phantom plane had

come from. She then reasoned that if the Spitfire had come from the sky there would *be* no trace. To her left she noticed the fresh damage to the church she had been sitting in just hours earlier. Then behind the church, Pat saw the shattered chimney stacks smashed from another rooftop, reduced to bricks and dust on the wet ground.

I can't be imagining all of this.

She was getting her breath back. This was real.

She turned back to the scene that had stopped her in her tracks. Only a sight as incongruous as this could have done that. Only something so utterly extraordinary would have overridden her mission to seek out her lover before it was too late.

Pat stared at the Spitfire and realised it had crushed the house it was embedded in. It looked like a huge bird lying in a brick nest. Pat looked around for someone to call out to, then recalled that the entire village was celebrating the wedding in the village hall, from where she'd just run.

And then Pat heard it.

From beneath the doomed Spitfire.

From beneath the fresh rubble.

A newborn baby's cry, struggling into the air through the gaps between the smashed, fuel-soaked masonry.

Plaintive, outraged, and despairing.

Calling out to its mother to save its life, wherever she might be.

PART ONE

Spitfire Down!

Chapter 1

Two weeks earlier

OVERLOOKED BY ITS fourteenth-century church at one end, and by Cholmondeley Castle at the other, attached to the outside world by a single thin road and the slender ribbon of the Shropshire Union canal, Great Paxford had quietly minded its own business at the intersection of three Cheshire hills for over six hundred years.

Nothing came into the village that wasn't seen by most of its inhabitants. Nothing of note took place that wasn't heard by most as it happened, or told to the rest within the hour. Privacy within such a small, rural community was almost impossible. Gossip and secrets were commodities, exchanged and bartered day and night, the transactions part of the tight social fabric.

Though the Great War had left deep scars on individual minds and families of Great Paxford, in subsequent years its citizens had fallen into the understandable habit of taking one another for granted. Prior to the declaration of a second world war just twenty-one years after the first, there would always be tomorrow to drop round for a chinwag, resolve a dispute, or do



a good turn. But from 11.15 a.m. on 3 September 1939, anyone owed an apology for something, or who might benefit from a favour or a rebuke, could be killed by a bomb in the night. Every book read, every meal enjoyed, every cup of tea either drunk in haste or lingered over with a friend, every walk in the countryside, every moment of lovemaking, every breath and heartbeat might be your last. Every German bomb and bullet had someone's name on it. War made life more fragile, and each lived moment more intense.

Before war's outbreak, the regulars at the Black Horse barely registered the voices of their wives, sisters and daughters singing 'Jerusalem' at the start of yet another monthly meeting of the village's Women's Institute. At 7 p.m. on the first Thursday of every month, their voices rose as one from Great Paxford's small village hall, to the general indifference of the men a hundred yards up the road in the pub. But since the onset of war, on those Thursday evenings, the men had started to wander out onto the road with their pints, and stand in the soft moonlight to listen to their women sing with a distinct edge of defiance about their newly endangered green and pleasant land.

The meeting on this Thursday evening in October 1940 was particularly important. Outside the village hall, crows in the trees that surrounded Great Paxford were settling for the night under a cloudless sky. Inside the hall, members of the WI sat back into their seats after the last notes of 'Jerusalem' signalled the start of the evening proper. The women sat shoulder to shoulder in silence, facing the executive committee on the raised platform before them. The hall was charged with nervous excitement, for tonight was to see the return of their





elected Chair, Frances Barden, to lead the branch for the first time since her husband had been killed in a rather horrific car accident just five months earlier. Joyce Cameron, the previous Chair, had been asked to helm the branch while Frances had stepped down to grieve, and sort out her husband's considerable and complicated affairs.

Joyce was a small, well-dressed, intelligent woman with a natty taste in expensive hats that invariably sported a pheasant's feather. Her face was soft and round, her skin smooth and pale, untroubled by the elements. Her expression could switch from benign to venomous in an instant. After moving to Great Paxford from Oxford with her solicitor husband some years earlier, Joyce had led a comfortable life of relative leisure, busying herself on local committees and organisations. While her husband became a local magistrate, and joined the local Rotary and golf clubs, Joyce had immersed herself in the WI, had become a governor of the local school, and involved herself in several small local charitable organisations that gave assistance to the rural poor. In each organisation, Joyce earned a reputation as an effective scourge, frequently asking questions no one else dared ask, often bullying others to get her way.

'Thank you, ladies. Settle down, please.' Joyce's voice was clipped and authoritative. When she asked for quiet she got it.

Joyce's beady eyes looked over the members, gauging the mood in the hall. She wondered if it hadn't been a mistake to have held back from trying to take over as Chair on a permanent basis, while Frances had been mourning for her husband. Joyce's younger self wouldn't have hesitated. Joyce had always been one-tenth demagogue – probably two-tenths, perhaps





three. She instinctively knew which levers to pull to get her way on most issues. Where others may have hesitated, Joyce never lacked the steel to drive home an advantageous hand. She not only had the stomach for Machiavellian wrangling, she possessed the liver and kidneys too. Her younger self would have seized back control within a month, ‘in the best interests of the branch’.

But Joyce was no longer that woman. Having left the village with husband Douglas ten months earlier for a safer environment along the north-west coast at Heysham near Morecambe, ‘beyond the interest of the Luftwaffe’, as Douglas had put it, Joyce had reappeared in the village just a month and a half later. It hadn’t taken Great Paxfordians long to notice the change in her. It was as if the time away had been an ordeal that had knocked her sideways. Indeed, the month away had been the most difficult of Joyce’s life. During that period, she’d finally admitted that her marriage had been sterile for many years. Moving to Heysham had been Douglas’s decision, and Joyce’s loathing of life on the coast came upon her almost immediately. If it wasn’t the wind it was the rain. If it wasn’t the rain it was the salt on the air, or the lack of people like her, or the smell of fish everywhere, or the impenetrable grey sea stretching beyond the horizon, intensifying Joyce’s sense that her life had become becalmed, and deepening her conviction that she no longer wanted to be Douglas’s consort, wheeled out at social events to help him drum up business for his legal practice. If she didn’t act decisively she felt this existence would claim her sanity. So she’d packed her suitcase and returned to Great Paxford, alone.





‘Douglas,’ she told those who asked, with a tone of fatigue in her voice, ‘has long-standing ambitions to become a Conservative member of parliament, and is remaining in the north-west to pursue that. I wish him every success, but for myself . . . I want to see out the war among my *friends*, at *home*, in *Great Paxford*.’

Joyce concluded her potted explanation with a tired smile that said: *That is all I shall say on the matter.*

While Alison Scotlock considered Joyce’s explanation characteristically grandiose, her fellow WI members weren’t so certain about the change. Sarah Collingborne, the vicar’s wife, was more charitable, believing the swiftly returned Joyce did *appear* to be less self-confident, less spiky, more subdued, even a little vulnerable.

Joyce looked down at the rows of women seated in front of her. Great Paxford’s village hall wasn’t large, but it always looked bigger than it was on WI nights, when it was full of local women. On those evenings, the old, whitewashed wooden walls and cobwebbed, gabled ceiling could barely contain their energy. Joyce could see the excitement in the women’s eyes, and knew it wasn’t for her. With a smile of resignation, she swallowed her inclination to speak, and turned to Frances. With a subtle nod of concession, Joyce ceded the chair of the branch committee back to the elected Chair and sat down behind the trestle table.

Frances was a dignified, educated, elegantly dressed woman in her early fifties, known to the women of Great Paxford as a woman of integrity and passion, given to acts of extreme kindness, but also extremely short on patience – a quality her sister





Sarah described as ‘my sister’s Achilles heel’. Frances tried to hide her uncharacteristic nerves with a broad, confident smile as she stood to address the women in front of her.

‘Before anything else, I should like to thank Mrs Cameron for helming the branch so competently in my absence.’

Frances turned to Joyce and began to applaud her. Immediately, the membership followed suit. Given that she had been a competent but never an exciting branch Chair, the applause for Joyce was appreciative but not what anyone might call *enthusiastic* – managing to express a level of gratitude one might offer someone who turned down the heat on a pan before its contents boiled over. Joyce nevertheless accepted the expression of thanks with a graceful nod of the head. She was about to take advantage of the moment to say a few words, but as soon as she opened her mouth to speak, the applause abruptly stopped, and the moment immediately passed. Joyce closed her mouth and turned, with the others, to Frances.

Frances cleared her throat and took a deep breath. Every face beamed at her, bathing her in goodwill. It was entirely in character that Frances had prepared for this moment by drafting many possible speeches in recent days. She had abandoned them all on Sarah’s advice to ‘just speak from the heart’. Frances looked along the ranks of friendly faces, eager to hear from her after months away. She felt pleased to be back, yet carried an anxiety that with everything she had gone through in the aftermath of Peter’s death she might have lost her capacity to lead. *I’m not the woman I was. Do I remain the woman the branch needs me to be?*

‘It is so wonderful to be back. To see you all. To hear that hymn sung from the bottom of your hearts once again. With each day of war that passes, it grows in poignancy.’





She saw the women nod in solemn agreement. Frances clasped her hands in front of her, pressing the palms into one another, urging herself on.

‘So much has changed since I last looked at you from this platform. I’ve lost my husband . . .’

She stopped for a moment. Every heart in the hall skipped a beat as the women wondered if Frances was yet ready to come back to them. Frances took a deep breath.

‘I have taken in a child evacuee. While you . . . you are all so different too, in so many ways . . .’

Pat Simms, the WI’s efficient, watchful and diligent Branch Secretary, sat on the platform behind Frances and reflected on what was different about herself since Frances last addressed them. *Nearly everything*, she concluded. *Because of Marek*. Pat smiled to herself as she recalled making love with the Czech soldier in her bed at home. She remembered the calm, reassuring look in Marek’s eyes as they made love, the feel of his soft hands electrifying her skin. Though they were last together over two weeks ago, the intensity of the memory left Pat feeling it could have been that afternoon. She felt not one drop of remorse about the affair she was having.

Where her husband Bob had used Pat for his own satisfaction over the course of their thirteen-year marriage, Marek had been a tender and generous lover.

Where Bob existed in a state of perpetual anger and discontent, Marek had always been calm and effortlessly at ease with himself.

Where Bob’s words towards Pat were patronising, dismissive, and stripped of affection, Marek’s were always warm and elevating.





Where Bob was occasionally brutal towards Pat, Marek – well, when she had looked at his face in the concealing long grass outside the village, Pat had never felt more protected or more valued.

‘I love you,’ she had said tentatively for the first time, not knowing how he might respond. He had looked at her directly, his gaze only intensifying. Early in their relationship Pat had realised Marek never wasted words, or said anything he didn’t mean.

‘And I you,’ Marek had replied, his English beautifully correct. It sent a pulse of relief and reassurance and love coursing through her. Before she could speak again Marek kissed her.

From then on, whenever Marek told Pat he loved her, she’d smile and reply, ‘And I you’ in his accent. Until Marek had come into her life Pat had long forgotten what it was to properly kiss and be kissed, to hold and be properly held. Marek told Pat that he and his men would soon be mobilised, though they had no fixed date. For security reasons, it would come at short notice.

Though they knew Marek’s time in the region was going to be limited, his imminent departure had crept up on them. Pat couldn’t bear to think of life without Marek.

Life without him means life only with Bob. I can’t bear the thought of it. How can I go back to that now?

The prospect left Pat feeling sick, even at the WI, among friends. Determined not to think about it, Pat focused her attention on Frances.

‘The war has bitten into each of us,’ Frances continued. ‘Whether we win or lose, the changes we will experience individually, as families, as a community, are likely to be irreversible.’





The women looked at Frances intently. For this moment in this hall in this village, she was their leader every bit as much as Churchill was the country's, and her words tonight struck a chord every bit as much as his when he addressed the nation.

Frances's mind went suddenly blank. Her mouth became dry as her confidence drained away.

What am I doing? What nonsense am I talking? Who am I to lecture these women? My loss was an accident. It could have happened at any time. It had nothing to do with the war. I sound like a fraud, I'm sure of it. They can sense I'm making this up as I go along. How could they not?

Frances looked at the front two rows of friendly faces looking expectantly at her, and tried to draw strength from them to continue.

Sarah looked at Frances and nodded encouragingly. Frances could almost hear Sarah's voice saying: *You can do this. Keep going. Joyce isn't what the branch needs now. The branch needs you, Frances, and you need the branch . . .*

Next to Sarah was Steph Farrow, who had come straight from her farm, and had offered so much no-nonsense fortitude to the Institute since her hesitant first meeting nearly a year ago. She now looked up at Frances, willing her to continue.

You're why I joined. Joyce has been . . . all right. But if you hadn't come back I'd probably've left. You made the WI somewhere I feel I belong. And not just me . . .

And then there was Teresa Fenchurch, soon to marry the wing commander from the RAF station at Tabley Wood. A strikingly handsome woman in her late twenties, with brown hair and brown eyes that were constantly alive to everything around her,





she smiled encouragingly at Frances, as she might to a child in her classroom who had been doing very well giving a presentation, but who had suddenly lost their nerve.

Frances gathered herself to continue, but caught sight of Alison Scotlock, hidden away towards the rear of the hall. Frances almost wished Alison hadn't come to the meeting, their friendship had recently ruptured over the dramatic and ignoble closure of Frances's factory. An intensely private individual with fair hair and startlingly blue eyes, Alison was a match for anyone behind closed doors, but in public she always avoided confrontation where possible.

Not wishing to be distracted by Alison, Frances continued, 'Our village has been the victim of two stray bombs since the start of the war, with no loss of life. Though by God we've come close! One might argue that thus far, Great Paxford has got off lucky.'

Frances paused to allow the suggestion to sink in. The women were nodding in agreement. She could push on with her theme of the branch's evolution to meet the changing demands war placed on them.

'Be under no illusion, ladies. That luck could run out at any time.'

The women now looked at Frances with an intensity she hadn't seen before. They waited to hear what solutions she might offer to the current situation.

'Over the past few months our nation has come closer to invasion than at any time for centuries. But for our stupendously courageous pilots we would almost certainly be living under German occupation, and this meeting would not be taking place. Great Paxford is well and truly *in* this war now. We





see this every day in menfolk who are absent. In rationing. In the blackout. In turning every garden into a vegetable patch. In the way we take gas masks everywhere as a matter of course. The way we regard taking shelter during air raids as a nuisance as much as a necessity. *Our* resolve as individuals and as members of the Women's Institute is being – *and will be* – tested like never before. Many of you remember the Great War. It was a terrible time, wasn't it?

Many in the hall nodded in silence or looked down at their shoes, remembering loved ones lost, recalling the particular horrors of war that none present believed they would see repeated in their lifetimes.

'A terrible, terrible time. In that conflict, the fighting was "over there". Not now. What has become abundantly clear *this time* is that our village and every village, town and city of England is being dragged onto Hitler's battlefield. That is why I am calling on you this evening to look into yourselves and ask what more can you do. So that we may pool our resources like never before, and become far, far greater than the sum of our parts.'

Frances looked at the women's faces and suddenly felt entirely at ease. She felt her old confidence and strength grow from their belief in her. Words were flowing easily. She instinctively knew how to pace her speech. How to pitch each word without seeming to strain for effect. Her breathing was calm and relaxed. This is what she did better than anyone in Great Paxford. It was for this quality that these women had almost unanimously voted for her: *leadership*.

'Some of you might be asking, what can I do when our own army, navy and air force are doing all they can and only just





holding the line? Well, when I look around this hall, I see that – *as always* – we can do *rather a lot*.’

The women smiled. Where Joyce used to focus on *not* overstretching themselves, consolidation, and playing it safe, Frances spoke of going beyond expectations and testing limitations.

‘Ladies, my dear, dear friends, if ever there was a time for *not* playing safe, it is now.’

Her voice grew in warmth and confidence with every sentence. She raised herself an inch taller and lifted her chin as she continued.

Miriam Brindsley, approaching the ninth month of pregnancy, had felt her unborn child kick during the early parts of Frances’s address. Whenever she felt a kick Miriam wondered if it was in response to something going on outside. A voice or sound causing a physical spasm of fear, or delight. As Frances developed the theme of her speech, Miriam had little choice but to wonder about the timing of bringing new life into the world.

Who would do it intentionally? We’ve been extraordinarily lucky with David. Almost lost him to the war, but for the grace of God. But who can say what kind of world will be left for this one to live in if Hitler tries again to invade, and succeeds? Doesn’t bear thinking about. But . . . how can I not?

She wondered if she was mixing her anxiety about the war with her anxiety about unexpectedly becoming a mother again, seventeen years after her first. She rested her palms protectively over her bump and refocused on Frances on the platform. She remembered Frances had recently taken in a young relative of Peter’s, and took some strength from the deed.

If Frances can become a mother of sorts in her fifties, why not me again in my late thirties?





So effective was Frances's speech that even Erica Campbell was focused on what she was saying. Erica had only come out reluctantly, after her husband, Will, had suffered a racking coughing fit during supper that left him gasping for breath. Despite that, he had insisted she come for an evening of respite from his 'killjoy' – her husband's nickname for the mass of cancer he envisaged skulking in the humid chambers of his lungs.

Despite that, Erica hadn't wanted to come. They had lived with his diagnosis for over a year, and he had entered a period of reprieve following radiation treatment in Manchester. He wanted her to have as normal a life as possible under the circumstances. So, despite his coughing fit at supper, Erica had reluctantly left the house, leaving Will in the care of their youngest daughter, Laura.

None understood Frances's talk of war and sacrifice better than Erica. Her eldest daughter, Kate, had lost her husband just a month after their wedding, while Laura had become embroiled with a married RAF officer some months after that, enduring public disgrace when his wife had petitioned for divorce. Together with Will's illness, going to battle on so many fronts had left Erica feeling that she was enduring twice as much war as everyone else. Yet she felt energised by Frances's speech, leaning forward to catch each word.

Don't imagine yourself so special, Erica. Fate hasn't singled you out.

'While I've been away from public life these past few months, I've nevertheless given great thought to how our WI might proceed in the days ahead. To begin with, we can do our very best to prepare ourselves as a social organisation to help others in our village who may find themselves in sudden need. I thought





we might do that by establishing an emergency committee that is able to mobilise swiftly to tackle immediate crises that befall the unfortunate. I am also aware that many of us have struggled with the WI's pacifist philosophy – especially those with men-folk fighting, or preparing to fight.'

Frances knew this was a difficult subject to raise. So many women in the branch wanted to cleave to the WI's constitutional pacifism at all costs, while others felt it was foolish, if not ideologically myopic, during wartime. But effective leadership meant not backing away from impassioned debate.

'I have often found myself asking, "How can helping on the home front not *also* be helping our boys on the front line – and consequently, the war effort?" Anything we may do to help our chaps feel better, warmer, more comforted is likely to help them endure the privations of battle – which can only make them more effective soldiers. Of course, whatever we tell ourselves, the reality is that working to keep the home front intact and helping the war effort go hand in hand, even if we and the wider organisation wouldn't wish it to. We knit gloves for our mariners and submariners. Socks and balaclavas for our soldiers. We send food parcels and write letters to the "friendless soldiers" who have no one else to write to them, keeping up their morale. And for what purpose? So they will fight more effectively for *our* survival. *Of course* providing these small comforts for our boys is helping the war effort. And yet we are told we may raise money for ambulances at home for those injured by war, but not for tanks or planes to help bring hostilities to an end sooner rather than later. It is this aspect of the WI's pacifism that feels confusing. What seems morally





crystal clear in peacetime seems terribly muddled during war. This is what war does. It muddies everything. It will continue to challenge our moral compass the longer it continues. Just as the country cannot become complacent about the prospect of a renewed attempt at a German invasion, we women of the Women's Institute cannot be complacent about easily giving up long-held beliefs simply because it would be expedient to do so. Wrestling with our consciences is not a sign of weakness. On the contrary, it is a sign that we live in extraordinarily difficult times. To easily succumb to that which simply makes us feel better is the weak path to take. While I'm Chair that is a path this WI will never go down. Instead we will focus on doing all we can to keep life in Great Paxford constant while our men are away at war. We will do whatever's necessary to maintain the home front, whether it be preserving fruit or fundraising for ambulances.'



The women broke into a rousing round of applause. This was precisely what they wanted from Frances. They might not all agree with her, but they also knew she wouldn't ever try to bully them into agreeing with whatever her own view might be.

Frances waited for them to fall quiet and began to outline suggestions for campaigns and activities she'd been thinking about during her absence. With every suggestion the women's smiles grew broader and their eyes shone brighter. They began to feel newly empowered, and started to envisage what they might do in the days to come.

Frances could feel her heart beat faster. Ideas for organising and mobilising the WI in the following weeks flowed from her, and the members were quick to respond with suggestions





and amendments of their own. The institute had trundled along under Joyce's caretaker leadership in a solid but underwhelming manner, and most had forgotten how it felt to be inspired. Frances, too, had forgotten the exhilaration she felt when she saw the galvanising effect her words had on other women – hands shooting up to offer points, women turning to their neighbours to quickly debate an issue. As she'd struggled to bear the weight of Peter's death and all its ramifications, there had been moments when she believed she might never again leave her house. But here she was, standing before the WI, leading from the front.

Joyce could feel the excitement ripple through the hall. With a little sadness she recognised that this was something she had never managed to elicit, and wondered if Frances was simply more suited to being Chair than she was.

Or is it just that she is the right woman for the current time? She certainly has an impressive capacity for coming up with all sorts of initiatives, and that's what's needed, most definitely. I entirely concede that. But when the war ends all these programmes and drives might feel exhausting, and Frances too aggressive. In normal times she never stood against me for the Chair, perhaps recognising I was the right woman for then. And might be again. But however you look at it, she does seem to be the right woman for now. I would be terribly daunted by what she is proposing. She seems to come alive with it. And is able to bring the members alive too. An invaluable quality. I shall certainly do my best to support her in whatever way I can.

When Frances came to the end of her address, Joyce was first to her feet to trigger a standing ovation. The old Joyce



would have viewed Frances with envy as the hall resounded with thrilled and thunderous applause. But now she clapped harder than anyone. When Frances turned to Joyce to mouth, ‘Was that all right?’ Joyce smiled and mouthed back, ‘Bravo, Mrs Barden. Bravo . . .’ And wholeheartedly meant it.

Cometh the hour, cometh the women . . .

Chapter 2

SMALL AND STILL, forty-two but looking eight years older, Pat Simms sat at the table in the smart, floral-print dress made for her by the village seamstress. Pat had pinned up her hair in her customary style for an occasion, and had even applied a little make-up. She looked around the small kitchen where she spent most of her waking hours. The drab walls and floor were spotless, as were the shelves and cupboards. The criss-cross blast tape on the small window above the chipped sink was so neat that it seemed to Pat to be mildly decorative. In this rare moment in which her husband was neither hammering away at his typewriter nor demanding she make him tea or a sandwich while he worked, Pat felt calm. Every plate, bowl, knife, fork, spoon, pan, utensil and cloth lay where Pat had meticulously cleaned and placed them. They had to be. After thirteen years of marriage Bob still carried out spot checks, and would happily make Pat's life miserable if he found anything he could construe as 'below an acceptable standard'.

Knowing there was nothing for Bob to find fault with, Pat relaxed into the moment, the soft scent of her perfume making her think of her lover, Marek, who never forgot to comment



how much he liked it when they met in secret. The Czech army captain had knocked into Pat as she'd made her way home from a shift at the telephone exchange. He'd been breaking up a brawl between two of his men and some locals outside Great Paxford's pub. Pat had fallen, and Marek – Captain Novotny, as he'd introduced himself – was so apologetic that Pat had to ask him to stop. At the time, she hadn't much noticed him. Owing to Bob's temper, Pat had learned how to absorb and digest physical pain that resulted from violence, and get on with things. Moments after being knocked to the ground, she had got back on her feet and walked stiffly home.

It was only when Marek had knocked on the door with wild flowers and a further apology that Pat had really taken his measure. He was tall, like Bob. Slightly more thickset. His features were not unlike Bob's, but less pointed, his forehead less furrowed, the corners of his eyes more generously scored with laughter lines, his expression open, and curious. Where Bob's eyes were furious black holes from which no lightness escaped, Marek's were pale blue, like two drops of recently thawed ice. They observed Pat with wry interest. He smiled as he watched her find a vase, and seemed in no hurry to leave once his flowers were in water. Marek had no idea how panicked Pat was that someone might see a strange man at her front door with a bouquet of flowers, however modest.

Are you thinking about me as much as I'm thinking about you, my love? When can I see you next? I have to see you. This silence is killing me.

Pat remembered being attracted to Marek from that first meeting. She had walked him back to the Czech camp at





Cholmondeley Castle, showing him a short cut. They talked easily, and by the time they arrived at the camp gate Marek asked if he could see Pat again. She had every reason to say no, but somehow said yes. And as she'd bidden him goodbye Pat had held out her hand for Marek to shake, and he'd gently kissed it. Pat had walked home wondering if she had imagined what had just happened. She'd sat at the kitchen table for the rest of the evening thinking it over, pausing on details, trying to work out if she had dreamt the whole thing. But she could smell Marek's cologne on her hand and she knew their meeting had been real.

Their relationship had quickly blossomed after their first walk. Though they'd had to conduct their affair with an even greater degree of secrecy in the weeks following Bob's return from reporting on the Battle of Dunkirk, knowing Marek was just five miles up the road made life with Bob bearable. Just. They left regular, secret notes for one another in the village churchyard, in which they arranged to meet in remote areas of the surrounding countryside, away from village eyes alert for any 'dirt' that could be converted into gossip or scandal. Secrecy, subterfuge and an intense passion for one another became the hallmarks of their association. Pat had felt like a spy operating behind enemy lines. One slip and disaster would result, destroying her reputation. The pressure was constant, but worth every moment.

'Pat?'

Despite leaning on the walking stick he'd been given by the hospital, Bob stood tall and striking in the dark suit he wore for special occasions – marriages, like Teresa's today, but also funerals, meetings with his London publisher, or with the



editor of the local paper for whom Bob grudgingly reported on local events that he lauded in print and mocked in private. Bob considered the parochial work of a rural reporter beneath a man of his talent, and there was some truth to that. But since he had failed to follow up on the modest success of his first novel they'd needed every penny he could earn even to afford their small house on the outskirts of Great Paxford, which was all but tacked onto the Campbells' much larger house and surgery. Furnishings and decor were kept to a functional minimum, according to Bob's taste, which meant no pictures, ornaments or the memorable knick-knacks most people accumulate through life. Pat was allowed one small mirror in the bedroom. When it became cracked during an argument three years ago, Bob refused to replace it. The only books allowed on the few shelves that lined the dark walls were Bob's. Any books Pat read were collected every second Tuesday of the month from the mobile library, read by her, and then exchanged a month later.

Bob stood in the doorway staring at Pat, who clearly hadn't heard him. His hair lay Brylcreemed against his scalp, drawing attention to his gaunt, bony face. He'd trimmed the moustache he'd brought back from Dunkirk into a precise line across his upper lip. Pat thought it made him resemble an older, less striking version of the author George Orwell, who she had once met before her marriage to Bob, when she was a trainee editor at a London publishing house.

'Pat!'

The sharpness in his voice cut through Pat's reverie, and she turned in the chair to face him.



‘Sorry, Bob. I was thinking about the wedding.’

Pat had long since learned to dissemble and keep her inner life secret from her husband, and her affair with Marek had forced her to draw on all her powers of duplicity and self-control.

Bob held out his tie. ‘I can’t do this.’

Nerves damaged in an artillery blast on the French coast now made fiddly tasks difficult. Pat crossed to him. Avoiding eye contact, she patiently threaded the tie through Bob’s starched collar, her fingers working delicately, careful not to yank either end of the tie or pull its knot too tight. As she worked she felt Bob’s breath on her face – a bitter blend of stale tobacco and coffee that made her gag.

Bob watched Pat intently, twisting his mouth into a thin smile of appreciation. ‘You smell nice,’ he said.

Pat didn’t look at him. She was always more unsettled by Bob when he tried to be pleasant.

‘I found an old bottle of something at the back of my dressing table. Nearly empty.’ And then, wondering if this was what he meant, ‘You don’t think I’ve used too much?’

‘I like it when you make an effort,’ he said. ‘Should do it more often.’

Why would I want to do that? The very last thing I want is you pawing at me.

Pat couldn’t recall the last time she’d enjoyed Bob’s touch, and had long since come to dread a compliment as it was usually an overture to mechanical sex in which she parted her legs and locked her eyes onto a point on the bedroom ceiling until Bob had finished his mercifully brief thrusting below. After finishing, Bob would lie on top of Pat for a few moments,





regaining his breath. He'd then roll off without looking at her and go downstairs to wash himself, as if he couldn't bear to carry any trace of her any longer than he had to. He never asked if she enjoyed sex. Either Bob no longer noticed or no longer cared that his wife had received no pleasure from it for years.

With Marek it was the opposite. The first time they'd had sex almost two months ago in the bedroom upstairs, Pat had immediately understood they were truly making *love*, with and *for* one another. Marek's tenderness had unlocked Pat both physically and emotionally. She'd willingly offered herself to him that first time, and every time since. Because their moments together were so precious to her, Pat went to inordinate lengths to protect them. If Bob were to find out about their affair, the consequences would be catastrophic. Pat knew what he was capable of. Flashes of violence, certainly. But worse than kicks and punches, Bob had a grip on her self-confidence that he could tighten and tighten until Pat felt increasingly insignificant, incapable and, finally, utterly imprisoned within his will.

Pat finished tying Bob's tie and took a step back to look at her husband, hoping Marek was at that precise moment writing a new message to leave under the piece of old slate on top of the oldest headstone in the churchyard. She knew Marek and his men were preparing for mobilisation within the next two weeks, and was desperate to discuss their future.

I'll check before the wedding service. No – better to look immediately after the wedding, before everyone leaves the church, while Bob is limping out. I'll make an excuse and look then.





She could feel her heart race as she tried to will her longing into reality. The possibility of finding a note made her head swirl with excitement.

Pat suddenly became aware of Bob's voice.

'... they can think what they like. But when my novel's published, this shitty little village is going to sit up and take notice. You'll see.'

Bob had been talking for a while and she'd missed his opening salvo. Pat chose a reliable retort.

'No more than you deserve,' she said. He nodded agreement.

Bob seldom required an authentic response from her these days, especially about his new book – a fictionalised account of his experience following the British Expeditionary Force out of France. Pat had read the first draft and found it hard going. Not because it wasn't a page-turner, or reasonably well written – Bob's craftsmanship meant it was both. But because its journalist-hero was clearly Bob's heroic version of himself, which Pat had found revoltingly dishonest.

'I don't know why I'm expected to come to this bloody wedding. She's your friend, not mine.'

'It's expected.'

'Problem with this village all over. Everyone does what's expected. No one does anything out of the ordinary.'

'That's what makes it such a nice place to live, Bob.'

'Only if you lack any imagination.'

She glanced at the small clock on the wall.

I'd prefer it if you didn't come. It would certainly make looking for a letter from Marek easier. In fact, I'd be happy if we never left the house together again.





‘Anyway. You look very smart, Bob,’ she said blankly, trying not to antagonise him further. ‘We should be on our way . . .’

Pat carefully pushed past him into the hall to collect her coat.

Bob looked at her and a flicker of a smile played across his mouth before it disappeared. He took a deep breath, and then another. Keeping his emotions in check. Biding his time. He looked at his watch. Not long now . . .



Chapter 3

WALKING UP THE hill towards the church, the trim, elegantly dressed woman in her mid-fifties tried to curb her natural disposition towards briskness and kept to the pace of the smartly dressed eight-year-old boy at her side. The strong wind buffeted them both as they passed by the hedgerow. His hand was like a small ball of warm putty in hers.

To a stranger they looked like any other mother and son, yet just a few months earlier Frances Barden had been entirely unaware of little Noah's existence. As the product of a ten-year, secret relationship between her husband, Peter, and his company accountant, Helen, Noah's existence had been kept from Frances. When her husband and his lover had been killed in a car accident just outside the village, events had spiralled from that moment to this at a speed that left Frances gasping.

She looked down at the boy.

How is it I've ended up playing mother to their child and not to my own? Have I taken you in to help you, Noah, or myself? Are the feelings I'm experiencing 'maternal' or 'pity'?



After putting Noah to bed and reading him a story, Frances spent most evenings in the drawing room with a glass of whisky, trying to make sense of everything that had happened in the last eight months. Peter often told her she thought too much, a criticism that irritated her immensely. Is it ever possible to think *too much*? Would he have accused a man of the same?

Noah looked up at Frances. His dark eyes were the colour and shape of Peter's. They often fooled her into believing she might hear Peter's voice when he spoke. But it was always the voice of a small boy.

'What plane does he fly?'

Frances knew Noah was talking about Teresa's fiancé. Noah had been obsessed by the prospect of seeing a real wing commander ever since she told him he would accompany her to the wedding.

'I'm not sure. Hurricanes, I think.'

His eyes widened, the name instantly exciting him, as it now excited all English boys his age.

'Don't hold me to that, Noah. I may have that wrong. Aeroplanes aren't my strong suit.'

'Has he shot down any Germans?' He looked at her intently. Frances sensed where this was going. 'I really couldn't say.'

'But has he killed people?'

During the Great War, Frances had seen that most boys had a weakness for picturebook glory, which no one seemed to discourage. Stupidly, in her opinion.

'I'm sure Wing Commander Lucas would be only too happy to discuss how many Germans he's killed with an eight-year-old





boy who *really* shouldn't be thinking about such awful things. Though perhaps *not* on the day he's getting married.'

Noah looked a little disappointed, but accepted the point.

Frances started to think about her own wedding day, then stopped when she remembered Helen – her husband's mistress – had been a guest.

She always struck me as a clever woman, but unambitious. Whereas I couldn't stop pushing at everything. Was Helen his respite from me? Stop this . . . Peter had betrayed her terribly. There was no justification for it. *No justification. But should I not look for some explanation?*

The road got steeper and a silence grew between her and Noah. Frances could see the tall trees surrounding the church at the top of the hill hurling their branches around in the wind, as crows rode the turbulence. Outside the church, congregants gathered in their finest, holding down hats and skirts.

Frances couldn't think how to break the silence.

Peter would point out something amusing or interesting along the way. Or make a silly joke that would leave Noah in stitches.

Frances smiled at the memory of Peter readily making a fool of himself to elicit uncontrolled giggling from children.

Having learned the full extent of his betrayal, Frances had determined to never think well of Peter again. Yet she found trying to sustain a form of hatred towards him utterly exhausting. It had threatened to drive her mad.

Thank God for Sarah.

Frances could see her sister standing outside the church up ahead with two other women.

Thank God for you, my darling sister. You saved my life.





In the terrible weeks after Peter's funeral, Sarah had pressed the argument that rather than loving Helen *instead of* Frances, Peter had loved Helen *in addition to* Frances. Then, even the idea of sharing Peter's affections with another woman had torn Frances apart. Yet the more she considered the proposition, the more Frances wanted it to be true. Over many months, as the pain of Peter's violent death had settled into grief, Frances had slowly absorbed Sarah's reasoning. The alternative was to believe Peter had spent every moment with Frances wishing she were Helen. That would have been too much to bear. Besides, it didn't match what she felt to be true: that she and Peter loved one another. Their life was, as he'd told her one evening after returning from a concert in Liverpool, 'an utter blast'. Frances used to make him laugh until he cried.

You can't do that to someone who'd rather you didn't exist.

Peter had betrayed her in an extraordinary fashion, but one could argue that the inordinate lengths he went to in order to conceal his double life were an expression of his desire to protect Frances; which was, in turn, an illustration of his love for her.

As they drew nearer to the church Frances glanced down at the top of Noah's head.

'None of what happened is his fault,' Sarah had said.

How could it be? I've lost my husband but he's lost his mother and father – in many ways he's bearing up better than I am.

By the time Noah's grandparents – Helen's parents – had come to beg Frances to shelter Noah from the Luftwaffe's bombardment of Liverpool, her anger had given way to an intense curiosity to see what of Peter the child might possess.





Beyond that, he wasn't her responsibility, and it made little difference when she was told that Peter would have wanted Noah brought to a place of safety. Frances had felt no sense of duty towards the boy, and resented the emotional blackmail she believed Noah's grandfather was trying to exert. And yet there was something about the way Noah had looked at her through the window of the taxi when he'd arrived at the house. She'd seen the same expression on her own face in the bathroom mirror in the weeks following Peter's death. A loss of confidence around the eyes. A fearfulness about the future.

In that moment, Frances realised Noah was a fellow traveller in loss, grief and sheer bewilderment. Before the boy had got out of the taxi, Frances had resolved to take him in. Leading Noah into the house, she'd recalled a remark Sarah had once made in response to the child of one of her husband's recently deceased parishioners, sent to live with a relative they'd never met before.

'Children just need love,' Sarah had said. 'It doesn't always matter from whom.'

Frances watched Noah look around as they approached the church; everything seemed to interest him, just as it had Peter. His questions were pointed, not general, just like Peter's. He listened to the answers and remembered them, and expressed affection at unexpected moments, taking Frances's hand to stroke, or kissing her cheek, just like Peter.

Noah is Peter's son. I am Peter's wife. Noah is therefore my . . . ? What are we to one another? I wonder.

Frances squeezed his little hand with a pulse of affection, prompting Noah to look up and smile at her.



‘Remind me, Noah. Have you ever been to a wedding before?’

‘No. Never been asked to one,’ he said, in all seriousness.

Frances laughed. She waved at her sister, who Frances could now see was standing with Erica Campbell and Joyce Cameron outside the church. They smiled and waved back.

‘I think you’ll enjoy it immensely.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s where people are at their *most* happy. Not just the man and woman getting married. *Everyone* . . .’

‘Were you at *your* most happy at your wedding?’

Frances glanced at the darkening autumn clouds overhead.

‘Absolutely.’ The thought of it raised a lump in her throat.

‘We should hurry, Noah. Before the rain starts . . .’

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