

THE DIPLOMAT'S WIFE

Also by Michael Ridpath

Where The Shadows Lie

66° North

Meltwater

Sea Of Stone

The Wanderer

Amnesia

Launch Code

THE DIPLOMAT'S WIFE

Michael Ridpath



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PART 1

ENGLAND

Chapter 1

June 1979, Buckinghamshire, England

'Mean bastard!' Phil muttered as he reread the first page of what had over the last six months become his favourite book:

The thing is that the road takes you. You can't dictate to the road. If you do you might as well be in a train. Hitch-hiking is the art of wondering what will happen to you between your starting point and your destination and taking from everything that does happen everything that you can.

He pitched the already tatty paperback on to the floor next to his bed and stared down at the cover. The words *Hitch-Hiker's Guide to Europe* stood proud above an enticing red rucksack with bulges containing maps, a sleeping bag and clever survival tools, its fabric scattered with colourful stickers that were almost legible.

He glanced across the floor at his own brand-new rucksack, green, with a small Union Jack poorly sewn on to its centre.

This had been Phil's bedroom since the age of four. He was a bit of a hoarder, and a sucker for teenage nostalgia of lost childhood. He liked the random objects which traced his life dotted around the room: a Matchbox Ford Zephyr, a platoon of plastic Afrika Korps soldiers, an Airfix model of HMS *Victory*. Arsenal's Liam Brady crossed a football from one wall towards the stick figures of Lowry's satanic mills on the other. Phil's bookshelf traced a similar path, beginning with Enid Blyton,

Arthur Ransome and Biggles, moving through a row of war comics, on to Agatha Christie, Ian Fleming, John le Carré and Georges Simenon.

The bottom right-hand corner of the bookshelf was devoted to the eclectic gifts from his grandmother over the years: *Animal Farm*, *Homage to Catalonia*, *The Communist Manifesto*, *Atlas Shrugged*, *Njál's Saga* and *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, as well as his eighteenth-birthday present, a copy in French of Zola's *Germinal*, a bleak story of coal miners in northern France. He had read them all. That shelf was where the *Hitch-Hiker's Guide* lived. Grams had given it to him for Christmas when he had told her of his plans to spend the summer holiday between school and university Interrailing around Europe with his friend Mike.

Phil loved the book. It was subtitled *How to See Europe by the Skin of Your Teeth* and it was full of tips for ways to travel around the Continent on as little money as possible. Everything about the book excited him. Phil was always hungry, and the *Guide* was like the menu of the biggest buffet Phil had ever seen. He could gorge himself on so many of the marvels of Europe in just a month: the impressionist paintings in Paris one week, the canals of Venice another, the sands of a Greek island the week after that.

But the *Hitch-Hiker's Guide* also told of freedom. The freedom of the open road. The freedom from a plan. The freedom to wake up in the morning and not know where he would spend that night. The freedom to sleep on a beach, under a tree or in a hostel. The freedom to talk to other travellers from other countries, and to the random generous strangers who would give him lifts. The freedom to eat a meal of bread, cheese and wine on the banks of the Seine, or on the stone bench of a Roman amphitheatre.

The freedom to escape Wittingcombe, the village wedged into a fold of the Chiltern Hills in which he had spent the whole of his life.

Mike had shared Phil's enthusiasm; they had decided to ditch the Interrail idea and hitch-hike instead.

They were leaving the following Saturday, taking the train to Sevenoaks in Kent and then hitching to the Channel from there. They

had allowed themselves five weeks and three hundred pounds each, three hundred pounds that they had both saved toiling on a building site during the Christmas and Easter holidays.

Except now they weren't going. Or at least Phil wasn't going.

The mean bastard in question, Phil's dad, had seen to that.

'Phil! Grams is here!'

His mother's voice snaked up the stairs and through his closed bedroom door.

It was Sunday, and Phil's grandmother was dropping in for lunch before going on to London. She lived in Cornwall; Wittingcombe was on the way.

For a moment Phil considered staying in his room and sulking. But that wasn't his style. Plus he always wanted to see his grandmother.

Plus, he was hungry and the roast beef smelled really good.

'Coming!'

'So, when are you off on your adventure, Philip?'

'It looks like I'm not going,' said Phil as neutrally as possible. He was too proud to sound sulky or angry, even if that was exactly how he felt.

There were five of them around the gleaming dining table: Phil's parents, his grandmother and his sixteen-year-old sister, Mel.

'Oh. What have you done?'

Grams had realized immediately that Phil must have done something wrong. She was looking at him in that all-too-familiar way she had. Not exactly enquiring, more interrogating. She wanted to know the answer.

Grams always wanted to know the answer.

She was young for the grandmother of an eighteen-year-old – in her mid sixties, Phil believed. Nor did she really look like a granny: she was tall and long-limbed, and her thick short hair was still dark with only the odd strand of grey. Her voice was husky, clipped and old-fashioned, like something out of a black-and-white movie. She couldn't say her 'r's, a trait that had skipped a generation to her granddaughter, much to Mel's frustration. Grams's deep brown eyes, almost black, latched on

to you over her large, imperious nose, and once they had fixed on you, they wouldn't let go until you had answered her question.

'I crashed Dad's car last week.'

'Oh dear. Was it your fault?'

'The insurance company thinks so,' said Phil's father.

'What do you think?' asked Grams.

Phil had borrowed his father's Rover to drive a couple of mates from school on a mini pub crawl around the best village pubs in the area. Phil had only drunk one pint at the first pub, the Three Castles in Wittingcombe, and that was going to be his lot for the evening. They were celebrating the end of A-levels and Elvis Costello was 'Watching the Detectives' as loud as the car's tape deck would allow. Phil was turning right off a main road into a narrow lane to the second pub. The driver of a Marina had slowed and signalled for him to go ahead, but as he turned, a Bedford van sped out of nowhere and caught the rear of the Rover, spinning it off the road and into a wall. No one was hurt, Phil passed the inevitable breathalyser test, the van was scarcely damaged, but the Rover was a write-off.

He recalled the woman in the Marina who had urged him on. He hadn't seen the van coming and perhaps he should have done. But wasn't it driving too fast?

'I don't know,' he said, honestly.

'Phil hasn't had much driving experience yet,' said his father. 'He only passed his test in February.'

'So it wasn't his fault?' Grams said.

'Oh, it was his fault all right.'

'And you won't let him go to Europe as a punishment, Caroline?' Grams directed the question at her daughter, Phil's mum.

'It's not that,' said Mum.

'We need him to pay for a new car,' said her husband.

'It's all my savings,' said Phil. 'I can't afford the trip now.'

'I see,' said Grams.

She popped a chunk of roast potato in her mouth and chewed it thoughtfully. Grams's inquisitions could be uncomfortable. Phil's mother, a small, slight figure a good five inches shorter than Grams,

had learned in the course of her forty-two years how to defy her own mother. Phil's father, an affable man with a sweep of fair hair, a strong chin and a pliant character, had more difficulty. But Phil knew that this was an issue on which he was prepared to stand his ground.

Phil's father wasn't usually a mean bastard. David Dewar was a kind, eminently reasonable, reliable husband and father. But he didn't like risk; he was a little afraid of life. He had been unhappy when Phil had decided to hitch-hike rather than take the train. He had been disappointed when Phil had turned down the chance to work in an insurance company in London over the summer. Dad saw this as a great opportunity for Phil to see what the insurance business – his world – was like, and to secure the all-important bottom rung on a sturdy career ladder. Phil thought, feared even, that he would end up spending most of the rest of his life in an office and he didn't want to start now.

The replacement for the Rover was going to cost £550, in addition to the insurance money, and the previous evening Dad had informed Phil that Phil would have to pay. Three hundred now and the remaining £250 when he had earned it over the summer.

Phil had argued; he had pleaded. He had almost burst into tears.

But Dad had loved his brown Rover. He believed, deeply and passionately, in financial accountability. Phil would have to pay.

Now Phil wouldn't have the money to go to Europe. Not only that, he would have to go back to the building site to earn the £250 he was short – if there was still a job for him.

Grams fixed her son-in-law with those interrogating eyes. 'Didn't you insure the car, David?'

'Of course I did, Emma,' said Dad. 'You have to; it's the law. But with Phil on the policy, the premiums were high, so I took a five-hundred-and-fifty-pound excess. It always makes sense to do that if you can afford it, you know.'

'If *you* can afford it?' said Grams. 'Not if Phil can afford it?'

'I'm the one paying the premium.'

'Yes, I see that. But apparently Phil is the one paying the excess. And he demonstrably cannot afford it.'

One-nil to Grams! Phil did his best not to chuckle into his Yorkshire pudding. A quick glance at his father's reddening face told him two things. Dad immediately understood his mother-in-law's point. And he hadn't thought of it himself. Which, as the insurance executive, he should have done.

A glimmer of hope flared. Maybe Dad would admit defeat? Maybe he would pay the excess? Maybe Phil was still going to Europe?

Dad bit back whatever he was going to say and took a sip from his small wine glass.

'Phil has to learn financial responsibility at some point, and eighteen is the right age.' Dad's voice was uncharacteristically firm. Phil realized he had been backed into a corner; there was no way out to save face apart from sticking to his guns. He glanced at his son. 'I'm sorry, Phil, that's just the way it is.'

'Caroline? What do you think?'

'I think David's absolutely right, Mother.' Mum was sticking by Dad, as she always would in any argument with Grams. Reluctantly, Phil acknowledged the score was now two-one to his father.

Grams seemed about to argue, but then she threw in the towel. 'I do hope I can come and see you when you get to Edinburgh?' she said.

'If I get to Edinburgh,' said Phil. 'I've got to get my grades first. But, yes, I'd love to see you.'

'Anything for free food,' said Mum in an attempt to lighten the mood. Phil couldn't bring himself to smile. In fact, he almost didn't ask for seconds, to make the point that he was very unhappy. But the beef was very good. And so were the roast potatoes.

The conversation flowed as the three adults coped well with the grumpy teenager, however justified his grumps. Mel kept her head down until Emma questioned her on a new musical form she had read about in *The Times*, something called '2 Tone ska'. Phil had barely heard of it, but Mel was an avid reader of the *New Musical Express*, and was able to fill her grandmother in, while Grams told Mel all about Jamaican ska in the 1960s.

Not for the first time, Phil found himself wondering how the hell

does she know that? He was sure his parents were asking themselves the same thing.

Phil was finishing his second helping of his mother's excellent Eve's pudding and custard when his grandmother took a sip of her wine.

'You know, David, I might have something for Philip.'

'Something?' said Dad.

'Yes. A job. A way for him to earn his two hundred and fifty pounds. Possibly a bit more.'

'Oh yes?' Dad was guarded. Phil was all ears.

'Of course, he might not want to do it.'

Dad looked pleased at this.

Grams glanced at Phil. 'For a while now, I have been thinking of driving around Europe myself. Visiting some of my old haunts from before the war. You know – Paris, Berlin, places Roland was posted.'

Roland was Phil's late grandfather, a former diplomat.

'I really thought this would be the summer to do it. In fact, I was intending to perhaps meet you and your friend and take you out to dinner in Paris or somewhere.'

Phil's father's brows knitted in a frown.

'I don't want to go by myself. And now it looks as if I will need a driver. So I wonder if you would oblige, Philip? I would pay for all your meals and accommodation, naturally. And perhaps three hundred pounds?'

'Why will you need a driver?' asked Mum.

'Philip isn't the only one in trouble, I'm afraid. I'm due for a visit to the magistrates' court on Tuesday. I was caught over the limit on the road to St Austell. Most embarrassing. We'll see, but I suspect I will lose my licence for a year. So I could do with a chauffeur. And the company.'

She smiled at Phil. It was an extraordinarily sweet, innocent smile, all the more affecting for its rarity.

'Mother!' Caroline looked shocked.

'I know. I won't do it again, I promise.'

'And you're planning to go in the Triumph?' Dad asked. 'Are you sure you are happy with Phil driving it?'

Grams's sleek green TR6 was visible through the dining-room window, a fine-looking two-seater convertible that Phil had long admired.

'That was my intention. Don't worry, David, I will make sure it's insured properly. But what do you think, Philip? I know it will be frightfully dull for you, carting an old woman around. Nothing like hitch-hiking with your friend.'

Phil grinned. 'I think that would be great, Grams. Thank you so much!'

Dad's frown deepened. 'I'm not sure that's such a good idea, Emma.'

'Oh come now, David. Philip's eighteen. He owes money. He needs a job. He's found a job. There's nothing more financially responsible than that.'

Dad glanced at Mum. The score was now three-two to Grams. Dad let the final whistle blow. 'Your grandmother is right, Phil. It's your choice.'

'When do we leave?' Phil asked.

'Next weekend all right for you?'

Chapter 2

Phil sauntered the couple of hundred yards through the village to the Three Castles. It was a lovely summer's evening. The rooks were settling themselves in the trees behind the vicarage; the narrow village street was quiet as the inhabitants watched *Coronation Street* or *Crossroads*, or, as in his parents' case, tucked into the first of the evening's gin and tonics.

Wittingcombe snoozed gently in its valley, bathed in soft evening sunlight. Ancient timbers supported the crooked bricks of the cottages that lined the road, as red, yellow and pink roses crept up the walls towards roofs that buckled and bowed. The Three Castles stood at the far end of the village, as it had done for centuries, at the point where the village high street became a country lane lined with high hedges and tangles of Queen Anne's lace.

Phil ordered himself a pint of Brakspear at the bar, and settled at his favourite table between the dartboard and the jukebox. Although school hadn't technically broken up yet, now exams were over the pupils didn't have to show up, so Phil had been surprised and a little flattered when his French teacher, Mr Parsons, had rung him to suggest they meet for a drink.

He had no idea why.

Phil sipped his pint. He was grateful for his grandmother's offer, but he was still angry with his dad that he had had to abandon his hitch-hiking plans. It wasn't as if travelling around Europe with Grams was going to be that great anyway. One of the things he had been looking forward to was chatting up girls with Mike around the bars of Europe. They probably wouldn't have had much success, but it would have been fun trying. Hard to do that with your grandmother.

Especially if your grandmother was a little weird. And it was hard to escape the fact that Phil's grandmother was more than a little weird.

He wished he had hesitated just for a moment at that turning to double-check the road when the woman had beckoned him to go forward. She looked like one of his friends' mums – he had just done what she had told him without questioning it. What an idiot!

'Hello, Phil.'

Phil recognized the voice of his French teacher and scrambled to his feet. Mr Parsons was a prematurely wizened sixty-year-old with a clipped, very English accent and a deep love of French literature, which over the previous two years he had managed to pass on to Phil and the rest of his A-level class. There was not much Phil wouldn't do for Mr Parsons.

Standing just behind him was a man a little older than the French master, bald with fluffs of grey hair sticking out above his large ears. Phil would have pegged him as another teacher, except he didn't recognize him, and he was wearing a suit. Apart from the headmaster, teachers at Phil's school stuck to old sports jackets and rumpled trousers. 'Hello, sir.'

'Sadly, Phil, I am no longer "sir" to you. And not even really "Mr Parsons". Call me Eustace.'

Naturally, Mr Parsons' pupils had gleefully been calling him 'Eustace' behind his back ever since they had discovered that was his first name, but Phil felt honoured to be permitted to call him that to his face.

'This is Charles Swann,' said Mr Parsons. 'Phil Dewar, one of my pupils. *Former* pupils. Going to Edinburgh in September.'

'Provided I get the grades.'

'As I said, going to Edinburgh in September.' Mr Parsons grinned with confidence. 'What will you have, Charles?'

'Oh, a pint of bitter, please.'

'Can I get you another, Phil?'

'Thank you, sir. I mean, Eustace. A pint of Brakspear's.'

The bald man sat down opposite Phil and pulled out a packet of cigarettes, offered Phil one, which he declined, and lit up. 'Nice pub,' he said, taking a puff. 'Your local?'

'My house is on the other side of the village. Do you live around here? I haven't seen you about.'

'Oh no. I live in Surrey. Woking.'

'Are you a teacher too?'

Swann grinned. 'Sometimes I wish I was. No, a civil servant.' He leaned back in his chair, examining Phil. 'Eustace tells me your exams are all finished now. Have you got any plans for the summer?'

'I was supposed to be spending a month hitch-hiking around Europe, but it looks like that's fallen through. I crashed my father's car last week, and now I can't afford to go.'

'My commiserations,' said Swann. 'I had a bad smash when I was your age. Lucky to get out alive. All my fault.'

'I suppose this one was mine,' said Phil.

Mr Parsons reappeared, clasping two pints. 'Here you are, Phil. I have to go, I'm afraid. I'll leave you here with Charles.'

Phil accepted the pint and put it down next to his existing glass. He looked at his teacher in confusion.

'Charles will explain. This is the first time I've met him. But he is a very good friend of a very good friend of mine. He is who he says he is.' Mr Parsons looked straight into Phil's eyes as he spoke.

'All right,' said Phil, confusion morphing into interest. 'Thanks for the pint.'

He turned to Swann, who was still watching him carefully as he smoked his cigarette. The man's gaze was shrewd, with a hint of steel. Definitely not a schoolteacher. 'What are you planning to do instead?' Swann asked. 'Now you can't go hitch-hiking.'

'My grandmother has offered to take me around Europe. I'm supposed to drive her. Technically it's a job, but actually she bailed me out.'

'That's decent of her,' said Swann.

'She's a decent woman,' said Phil. 'A little odd sometimes, but she has always been good to me.' He sipped the smaller of his two pints. 'What do you want? You said you worked for the civil service?'

'I do. I'm semi-retired now.'

'Which department?'

'I couldn't say.' Swann looked at Phil levelly.

Phil had read enough spy novels to know what Mr Swann was saying. A thought occurred to him. 'Is that Swann as in *À la recherche du temps perdu*?'

'It is, actually. Eustace thought you would appreciate it.'

Phil couldn't help grinning. Mr Parsons had overreached himself with inflicting Proust as an off-syllabus novel on his class the previous autumn term.

'So Swann is not your real name?'

'Obviously not,' said Swann. 'But it will do us for now.'

'OK.' Phil sipped his pint. His heart started beating faster. He was going to study languages at university and he had fantasized about how one day he would be approached by the secret service in exactly this way. Was it happening already? Phil knew that Mr Parsons liked him, respected him even. Would MI5 or MI6 or whomever Swann was with want him to learn Russian? Phil had always fancied the idea of learning Russian.

He decided to take the initiative. He had no idea whether he would agree to be a spy, but he knew he wanted to be asked. 'Are you recruiting me?'

'No,' Swann replied, with a smile revealing chaotic yellow teeth. 'Or not exactly. There is something that we would like you to do for your government. For your country. But before we talk about that, I want your word that you won't discuss what I am about to say with anyone. Not your family. Not your friends. Certainly not your grandmother.' The grin had gone.

Phil didn't want to keep this a secret. In particular, he wanted to tell his mates from school all about Mr Parsons' friend. But if he didn't promise he would never find out what 'this' was. Mr Parsons had trusted him.

'All right,' he said. 'I won't tell anyone.' And he meant it. He would keep his word and justify Mr Parsons' trust.

'Good man,' said Swann. 'This is what I would like you to do, if you are willing . . .'

Chapter 3

The train pulled into St Austell. Phil closed his hefty volume of *War and Peace*, which he had long planned to take with him on his European trip, since it was a book big enough to last him five weeks: 130 pages done, 1,270 to go. He grabbed his bulging green rucksack and dropped down on to the platform. He had one five-pound note in his pocket, borrowed from his mother, to pay for the taxi to Mevagissey, the fishing village near which Grams lived.

He emerged from the station entrance to find his grandmother, and her TR6, waiting for him.

'Stick your bag in the boot and hop in,' she said. She took the passenger seat, and Phil sat at the wheel. The boot was already two-thirds full of luggage.

'I thought I was supposed to go to your house. How did you get the car here?'

'I drove.'

'The magistrate let you off?'

Grams smiled. '*You* didn't really believe that? Your parents, maybe, but not you, surely?'

Phil grinned. 'So you weren't caught drinking and driving?'

'Of course not! I would never do such a thing. Now, let's get going.'

'All right. Where to? Dover?'

'Not quite yet. We're going to start in Devon. Chaddington Hall.'

Phil loved driving the TR6. They sped across Bodmin Moor with the roof down. It was a cool day for June with small white clouds chasing the

car eastwards, scattering quick black shadows across the green moor. Phil usually drove his mother's dull, underpowered Renault 5 with the weird gearstick, and occasionally his father's big, heavy, slightly scary Rover. The TR6 beat both of them hands down, and along the straight bits of the A30 he was able to push above eighty without any complaint from his passenger.

Stupidly, Phil had forgotten to bring any of his tapes. Grams slotted in one of her own, some opera, and although Phil flinched at the first screech, he enjoyed the way the music swelled around them as they barrelled across the moor.

'Do you really need me to drive, or were you just being generous?' he asked.

'Oh, no. I'd much rather you drove. I've lost my confidence, recently. And I'm very glad you agreed to come.'

'Really?'

'Yes, really. I have a feeling I will need a fit young man with me.'

'To do what, exactly?'

'To deal with the unexpected.'

'Are we expecting the unexpected?' Phil asked with half a smile.

'Yes, I rather think we are.'

Phil slowed behind a line of cars following a caravan. 'Where are we going? You said you were posted to Paris and Berlin?'

'That's right. Or rather Roland was.'

Phil remembered his grandfather well: he had died five years before, when Phil was thirteen. Phil had liked the old man. The family had visited his grandparents a few times in Mevagissey, and Grandpa usually took Phil out fishing around the local coves in a little motor-boat. They never caught much, but it had been fun.

'Will we be going anywhere else?'

'Possibly. Probably. I don't know yet.'

'This all sounds very mysterious.'

'Oh, it is,' said Grams. She was silent for a moment. 'One of the reasons I asked you to accompany me is that I want to tell you a story. My story. The story of what I did before the war. I mentioned I've

been thinking of revisiting my life then. But I also want to share it, so someone knows about it when I'm gone.'

'But you're not going anywhere, Grams,' said Phil. 'I don't know how old you are, but you can't be much more than sixty.' Phil tactfully lopped a couple of years off his best guess.

'Sixty-four,' said Grams. 'And you never know. Roland was only seventy-two when he died.'

That still seemed to give Grams another eight years at least. She looked pretty healthy to Phil. Not even really an old lady.

'Why me?' said Phil. 'Why not Mum?'

Grams smiled. 'My story would be difficult for your mother. It might be difficult for you. But I think you are the right person to hear it. I'm sure you are.'

Phil wasn't completely convinced by that explanation, but his curiosity was aroused, as his grandmother had no doubt intended.

'All right. We start at Chaddington Hall? That's where you grew up, right?'

'That's right.'

'And your father was a lord?'

Phil's parents had discussed Chaddington Hall once or twice, but when he had pressed his mother for details of her grandparents, she had been evasive, to the point that Phil had almost doubted their existence. The idea that his family could have had any lordly ancestors seemed faintly ridiculous to him; his mother behaved in a resolutely middle-class fashion. But Grams? There was a touch of the aristocrat to her. And she had become a 'lady' herself when Grandpa had been knighted for his services to diplomatic cocktail parties or whatever. Dad's father, who still lived with his wife in a nice village outside Glasgow, had been in insurance.

'He was Lord Chaddington,' Grams said.

'Is there a Lord Chaddington now?'

'No. I did have a brother. Hugh. But he died, so there was no heir to the title.'

Phil hadn't heard anything about a Hugh. He would have been Phil's great-uncle. Why had his mother never mentioned an uncle? There was

a Great Aunt Sarah in Australia, presumably Grams's sister, but Phil had only met her once, and couldn't remember that very clearly.

'So who owns Chaddington Hall now?'

'It's a prep school. My sister and I sold it in 1967. Most of the proceeds went in death duties. I telephoned and they are expecting us. It will be the first time I have been back since my father died. And it's the place where my story starts.'

Soon after they crossed the River Tamar from Cornwall into Devon, they turned off the A30, and followed a number of ever-smaller roads that twisted and turned through little valleys and wooded lanes where the trees met overhead. Grams did the navigating without the aid of a map, which was fortunate, because Phil had completely lost his sense of direction. They emerged from a wood and over an uncharacteristically low hedge he caught sight of a broad bare hillside about five miles away.

'Dartmoor,' said Grams.

'Are we going up there?'

'Not quite.'

They meandered closer to the hills, until they passed a small sign announcing Chaddington. The village was tiny, just a few cottages, a couple of farms and a squat stone church with a squat stone tower. Trees encroached from all sides.

'Let's go the back way,' Grams said. 'Turn left here.'

She indicated a tiny lane opposite the church.

'There's more of a back way than this?' said Phil, but he did as she suggested. He wasn't sure why: even though they were heading towards the moor, it was impossible to see much above the high banks and hedges. The lane twisted and turned, passed a farm, and then straightened up for a hundred yards or so. Phil braked as the lane lurched over a small rise, and plunged into a hollow surrounded by trees, where it turned sharply to the right. Grams seemed to shiver and looked over her shoulder at the curve. Phil felt a flash of irritation: he had braked in plenty of time.

They emerged from the trees and soon came upon a slightly bigger road and a pair of grey gateposts, guarded by a tiny lodge. A large blue painted sign proclaimed: 'Chaddington Hall School' and underneath it: 'Preparatory School for Boys 7–13 Years'.

Phil turned in, and guided the TR6 along a driveway running through a sports field split up into a number of cricket pitches. Boys of different sizes were playing – it was a Saturday afternoon in summer, after all.

'This used to be the park,' said Grams. 'It makes sense they would turn it into playing fields.'

Chaddington Hall appeared ahead of them at the end of the long drive: a rambling house surrounded by lush vegetation. Plants climbed to left and right of the front door up towards the roof, and a thick, ancient tree stood on a circle of lawn to one side, its long branches stretching out towards them. The house appeared kindly rather than imposing, ancient grey brickwork wrinkling the facade.

'That's a chestnut,' Grams said. 'We used to love climbing it. I bet the schoolboys still do.'

'I bet it's out of bounds,' said Phil. 'That's what schools do: ban the stuff that's fun.'

He drew up next to a line of cars and a couple of minibuses parked on a tarmac apron to one side of the drive.

'I'm pleased to see they haven't messed the house up,' Grams said. 'At least on the outside.'

'If they've turned it into a school, it's bound to look different on the inside,' Phil warned.

'I know.'

As they walked up to the entrance, a small boy in grey shirt and shorts charged past, then stopped and pushed open the heavy door for them. They entered a square black-and-white-tiled hall, an imposing wooden staircase rising opposite. To their left, an open door marked 'School Office' revealed a large desk, behind which sat a middle-aged woman in a tweed skirt. She rose and approached them.

'Lady Meeke? I'm Mrs Woodfield, the school secretary. We spoke on the telephone.'

Grams shook her hand and introduced Phil.

'Would you like a tour? I'm sure the place has changed a lot since you lived here, but I hope some of it will bring back memories.'

'Thank you, I'd love one.'

And so Mrs Woodfield showed them around the house, or rather the school. Phil had never been in a boarding school before, and he felt sorry for the kids who were shut away there for weeks on end, especially the smaller ones. But he had to admit the place had a friendly feel to it – this was no Dotheboys Hall. It did smell of small boys: strains of socks, body odour, school food, old books, ink and carbolic twisted through the corridors, dormitories and classrooms.

It wasn't a large school, but Phil was amazed at how dozens of children could eat, sleep and work in a home that had been built for just one family. His grandmother's family. They passed through the dormitories upstairs.

'This was my room,' said Grams. Phil could see how it might once have been a delightful bedroom, looking out over a lawn sloping gently down to a stream, with Dartmoor rising behind it. Now four small single beds and two bunk beds took up almost the entire floor space.

They passed through other dormitories that had belonged to Hugh and Sarah, although they weren't permitted to see Lord and Lady Chaddington's bedroom, which was now part of the headmaster's quarters.

Downstairs, the dining room was still a dining room, but narrow tables and benches had replaced the Chippendale table and chairs, and most of the other rooms had been turned into classrooms, as had the stables outside. Scrappy notices and solemn wood-and-gold honours boards proclaiming scholarships to minor public schools adorned the corridor walls, along with a random selection of prints: county maps, local churches, Indian hunting scenes. The classroom art was more educational: posters of an internal combustion engine and Roman legionaries marching along a straight road.

Finally they came to the school library.

This was a magnificent hexagonal room of bookshelves reaching two storeys high, a wrought-iron gallery giving access the higher shelves. A hexagonal skylight let in the June sunshine.

'I'm so pleased you kept this!' said Grams, her eyes shining. 'Oh, this was my favourite room in the house, Philip! My grandfather built it in the last century. And stocked it. There were wonderful books here.' She cast her eyes along the shelves. 'They've all gone, now.'

Mrs Woodfield sniffed. 'We're very proud of our library.'

'Oh, of course!' said Grams. 'Every school should have a library.' She glanced along a row of history textbooks. 'It's wonderful that children learn to love books here. It's just . . . it's different.'

'The grounds will have changed too,' said Mrs Woodfield. 'Although I suspect what we now call the headmaster's garden will be pretty much the same as it was. You are welcome to wander around outside, if you wish.'

And so they did. The stable yard had been turned into a playground, a pair of wonky football posts defied the summer term on the lawn, classrooms had been built in the walled garden, but a square of grass survived, lined on one side with a border of flowers of different shapes and sizes and on the other with an arbour bearing a massive green plant.

'Ah, they've kept the wisteria!' said Grams. 'A couple of weeks ago this whole thing would have been purple.'

'It's very pretty,' said Phil. His enthusiasm for gardens lagged way behind his grandmother's, but even he could appreciate the beauty of the setting.

They walked over to the arbour. 'Let's sit here for a bit,' she said as they approached one of those benches engraved with the name of a past pupil which adorn all schools. They looked out over to the moor rising not more than a couple of miles away. They could hear the rustle of a brook at the bottom of the garden, and in the distance the squeals and cheers of small boys playing cricket.

'Are you sorry you came?' Phil asked.

'No,' said Grams. 'Well, partly. But I wanted to see it. I *needed* to see it.' She sighed. 'I loved it here. At least when I was a child. I'm not

sure I came back here at all after about 1939. Until Sarah and I had to sell it.'

'Why was that?'

'You'll find out,' Grams said. She turned to her grandson. 'I think I need to begin my story, don't you?'

'Yes, I do.'

'We'll begin here, the weekend Hugh died.'

Chapter 4

February 1934, Chaddington Hall, Devon

I WAS NINETEEN, and I was waiting to get married. To whom, I had no idea.

The project had started the year before, my first season. My mother and I had decamped to our London house in Hill Street in Mayfair. Several weeks were given over to Mama visiting the mothers of other debutantes and both of us trying on a series of dresses, before the gruelling schedule of ball after ball began. Although I was her raw material, my mother was strangely confident. My elder sister Sarah's season had been a triumph; she had nabbed Tubby Partington-Smythe, a skinny cavalry officer who was the son of a marquess and a genial, considerate young man who had fallen instantly and heavily in love with her. They were now married – happily married. Although my mother considered me not nearly as good a catch as Sarah, she felt I had nice eyes, and her dressmaker could make something of my full figure. Although unfashionable, quite a few men liked a full figure, apparently.

And I was clever, she said. A much smaller number of men would like that.

The whole thing was the disaster I had expected it to be. The balls involved dance cards, which were carried around by the debs. The dance cards were filled in with the names of young men. Or not.

In my case not.

My mother soon got fed up with sitting out dances with me, and I ended up with a girl called Edwina, the daughter of an ambassador to a Balkan country who had seen the world and was interested in it. Her figure was 'full' top to toe, and she had unfortunate buck teeth, so she and I spent a lot of time together on the edges of the balls, much to Mama's annoyance. The one good thing was that eventually I got to go to Buckingham Palace to see the king. That was fun.

But now I was stuck in Chaddington Hall, with nothing but the library and Tallow, my beautiful grey mare, to amuse me.

And my brother Hugh, whenever he put in an appearance.

Luncheon was over and I was sitting in the small drawing room, reading my book, waiting for him to arrive from London. The small drawing room had a good view of the drive. Hugh was arriving 'some time after luncheon', and I was excited.

Sure enough, his dark blue Riley sped up the drive. I rushed out to meet him, overtaking Jecks, the butler, on the way.

Hugh waved and hopped out of the car, before giving me a hug. He was short for a man, about my height, with thick dark hair, blue eyes and a wide, wide smile that he now bestowed on me. He was desperately good-looking, according to the debs and their mothers, so Mama had come under pressure to procure him for a number of the balls last summer. He had liked Edwina too.

'*Ciamar a bha an turas agad?*' I said.

'What?'

'*Ciamar a bha an turas agad?*' I repeated.

'Ah!' Hugh gave me a wide grin. '*Bha turas math agam,*' he replied. 'I'm sorry, I didn't recognize your Gaelic pronunciation.'

'I was just guessing,' I said. 'It's difficult when you only have a textbook to go from.'

'Not bad, then,' said Hugh. 'I'm impressed.'

I grinned. Hugh had written to me that he had started learning Scots Gaelic for the fun of it, and I had wanted to surprise him. 'I

got Hatchards to send me MacLaren's *Gaelic Self-Taught*. It's fiendishly difficult, isn't it?'

'It is,' said Hugh. 'Which makes it more fun, don't you think?'

Unlike Hugh, I had never been to school. My parents had employed a succession of tutors and governesses. I had learned French and German from them. Hugh had taught me Latin and Greek, or at least got me started, and with Hugh's help I had had a bash at Italian. We both loved languages and were good at them, but Gaelic was a cut above the rest, even Greek.

Mama came down to greet her son, but Papa remained snoozing in his business room. Jecks took Hugh's suitcase up to his bedroom, and Hugh glanced at the sky.

'After that drive, I'd love to get some fresh air before it gets dark. Do you want to come with me, Ems?'

'Rather!' I said. Twenty minutes later we were crossing the brook at the bottom of the garden and heading across the fields towards the moor. It was a cloudy damp February day, and the top half of Dartmoor merged into the grey. The going was muddy, especially by the gates where the red South Devon cows had churned up the red south Devon soil. Hugh headed for a gully scored into the flank of the moor, from which a stream tumbled down to join the brook that ran by the Hall. It was a walk we had both done many times.

'Have you read *Down and Out in Paris and London*?' I asked. 'George Orwell. I've almost finished it. It's really very good.'

'I've heard good things about it.'

'Did you know that tramps are called tramps because they have to spend all day tramping from one parish to another? They are not allowed to spend more than one night in a parish. It's beastly!'

'I think I did know that,' said Hugh. 'And it does sound beastly.'

'Mind you, Paris is just as bad. The restaurants there are like the Black Hole of Calcutta, at least for the kitchen staff. I'm not sure I could bear to eat a meal there. Do you know this man Orwell?'

‘I haven’t met him,’ Hugh said. ‘I think Orwell isn’t his real name. It’s Blythe or Blair or something. And I believe he went to Eton.’

‘Really? I find that disappointing.’

Our father had attended Eton and loathed it. Which is why he had sent Hugh to a public school in Wiltshire instead. I had imagined George Orwell as a crusading man of the people – certainly not someone who could have touched his relatives for the odd fiver if he was in real trouble.

‘How is the cramming going?’

‘All right, I think.’ Hugh was cramming for the Foreign Office exam, which involved spending most of his days at an establishment near the British Museum, brushing up on his languages and learning economics and history.

‘Are you confident? For the exam?’

‘As confident as I can be,’ said Hugh. ‘But it’s frightfully competitive. Last year they only took the top seven out of eighty-two applicants.’

‘Well, I’m sure you’ll pass,’ I said. And I was. Top seven was easy for Hugh.

‘What are your plans?’ Hugh asked.

‘I have no plans. I’m waiting for a big fat husband to come down the chimney.’

‘Is Mama making you do the season again this summer?’

If a deb failed to snare a husband in her first season, the rule was she could have another go the following year. ‘She’s trying. But not as hard as I would have expected. I think she may have given up.’

‘Good. It really isn’t your thing, is it?’

‘They’re all chumps, Hugh. Every single one of them.’

Hugh laughed.

We crossed a stile into open moorland, and the path pointed steeply uphill, along the edge of the brook. We were both panting. The gully stretched up into the mist.

I felt outrageously happy, being with my brother, alone, up on the moor we both knew so well. I started to sing: *'Oh, 'tis my delight on a dirty night, to bomb the bourgeoisie!'*

It was a song Hugh had taught me when I was fifteen. He laughed and joined in as we climbed.

'I think we should stop here,' he said at last, panting.

So we paused and turned to look back at Chaddington Hall in its wooded valley, two plumes of smoke twisting up in the still, damp air, the parish church squatting a short distance from it.

Hugh took a deep breath. 'I do miss this. Especially after London.'

I glanced at my brother. 'I do have a plan. But I'll need your help.'

'Oh yes?' Hugh grinned at me, as if expecting an idea that was a little odd.

He got one.

'I'd like to visit the Soviet Union.'

'What! Mama and Papa would never let you.'

'But you went last year.' Hugh had gone for three weeks with two old friends from school and Cambridge.

'Yes. And they didn't like that much either.'

'Well, if they let you, why shouldn't they let me? And don't say it's because I am a girl.'

'Because you are a girl.'

'I told you not to say that!'

'I know you did, but it's true.'

'It may be true, but it's wrong.'

'It may be wrong – it *is* wrong – but where are you going to get the money from if they don't give it to you?'

'I've been saving up. And . . .'

'Yes?' Hugh looked at me suspiciously.

'And maybe you could lend me some? When my fat husband comes down the chimney I can pay you back.'

Hugh didn't say yes. But then he didn't say no either. 'You can't go by yourself.'

‘Well, that’s the other thing you can help me with. Could you put me in touch with people? Women, preferably. You must know heaps of people who’d like to go.’

Hugh set off down the hillside. ‘I’ll lend you the money – no, I’ll *give* you the money, as long as you promise not to tell Papa where it came from. Or anyone else for that matter.’

‘Oh, you are a darling!’

‘And I can give you the names of a couple of people to write to. But you must keep my name out of it. You see . . .’

‘What?’ I asked. I didn’t like the sound of Hugh’s voice. ‘What is it, Hugh?’

‘I know you are not going to like this, Ems, but I’ve changed my mind about a few things. Political things.’

‘Yes?’

‘You see, as I’ve got a bit older, I’ve come to realize that some of my thoughts on politics were a little naive. Fine in theory – admirable in theory – but not practical in the real world.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘I’m still a socialist. I believe in helping the poor. It’s just I’m no longer sure that communism is the right way to do it.’

‘But . . . Hugh! What about all the stuff we’ve talked about for the last couple of years? The books you’ve made me read! I read the whole of *Capital*, for heaven’s sake! You’re not saying that’s naive?’

‘I suppose I am a bit.’

‘Well, what about Russia? You came back saying the Soviets have really got the answer. Everyone is equal. The farms are modernizing. The Five Year Plan is bringing prosperity. You saw it with your own eyes!’

‘We saw a lot of starving people in Russia. And they lock a lot of people up. Dick came away with a different opinion; I think he may be right.’ Dick was one of the two old school friends who had travelled with Hugh.

‘Those were all kulaks, you said!’

‘Maybe. But, as Dick says, kulaks are people too.’ Kulaks were

rich Russian peasants whom Stalin had accused of profiteering off poor Russian peasants. 'Warnes of Tumphill Farm is a kulak. Why should he starve?'

We trudged down the hill in silence, as I tried to make sense of it. Tumphill Farm was one of the most successful farms on the estate, and Mr Warnes was generally admired for his expertise. I liked Mr Warnes; everyone did.

And if that's what the Soviets did to the kulaks, think what they had done to the landowners. Like us.

But that wasn't the point! I had to recognize I was being brain-washed by my class when I should be worrying about the people, the masses.

'Is it because you are applying for the Foreign Office?' I asked. 'You don't want them to think you are a communist?'

'That may be part of it,' Hugh said. 'I knew you would be upset. You don't have to change *your* mind.'

'Why? Because it's all right if *I* am naive?'

'No. Because it's all right if you make up your own mind. It might even be a good thing.'

That last comment stung me, and I spent the whole time until dinner stewing. It stung because it was true. I was and always had been totally dependent on Hugh for my education, and hence for my opinions. So I agreed with him. Probably always. Which, as he said, was probably not a good thing.

But what choice did I have? My parents had refused to allow me to go to school. Although he never came right out and said it, my father seemed to think that money spent on educating girls was money wasted. My mother seemed to think it was positively harmful, especially for me. She was suspicious of my reading, of my love of learning new languages, of the awkward questions I had been asking people since the age of five. She lived in fear of me becoming a 'bluestocking', one of those females to be pitied

who went to university, scared off eligible men and reached premature old maidenhood at thirty. Sarah was my mother's model of what a young woman should be: witty, charming, well dressed, an excellent horsewoman, capable of conversing with anyone, but unburdened with too much education. Sarah had made a fine marriage.

Why couldn't I be more like Sarah?

I often wondered that myself. I loved my sister, and I agreed with my mother that she was a great catch for the lucky Lord Tubby. But I was different. Hugh understood that.

Hugh was my window on the world of ideas. He brought them back with him from school or university, smuggled them into the house and unpacked them to show to me. Poetry – Kipling at first, then Hardy and Swinburne, and now Brooke, Eliot, Yeats and Pound. Literature – Dickens, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Hugo, Zola; and then Bloomsbury: Woolf, Forster, Strachey – some of whom Hugh had actually met. He brought me languages, economics, history, even physics.

It wasn't just Hugh, it was also my grandfather, whom I barely remembered, but who had stocked our wonderful library with many of the tools I needed to follow where Hugh led.

In Hugh's second year at Cambridge, he had become interested in socialism and then communism. So I had read Marx and Engels, articles by Lenin, and *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* by George Bernard Shaw. I read about the General Strike, the breakdown of capitalism in 1929, the Hunger Marchers from Jarrow, the rise of Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany. I shared my brother's anger at all this. I wanted to do something about it – but stuck in Devon I didn't know what I could do, apart from read and learn.

And now he tried to tell me it was all naivety.

I felt betrayed. I felt angry. I felt used.

It wasn't just that. I felt that a bond between me and my brother had snapped. Until that moment, he and I were two

young twentieth-century right-thinking rebels together in a nineteenth-century household of obsolete aristocrats. Now there was just me.

I felt abandoned.

I slunk off to the library until it was time to change for dinner. I was late to the drawing room to welcome our guests, Sir Ivor and Lady Growcott, who lived about ten miles away, and Roland Meeke, a diplomat who had taken a cottage on the estate for a couple of weeks to go hunting. The purpose of the dinner was ostensibly to introduce Mr Meeke to the Growcotts, but was of course really to introduce him to Hugh. The scheme had been cooked up by Mama, who had urged Mr Meeke to come down to Devon, tempting him with the use of one of our hunters, in the hope of helping her son become a diplomat.

The Growcotts, affable gentry pushing sixty, I had known since childhood, but I had never met Mr Meeke before. The first thing I noticed was how dark he was: black hair, black eyebrows, deep brown eyes, even his skin was an unseasonable shade of brown. He was about the same height as Hugh, but whereas my brother was broad of shoulder and face, Mr Meeke was slim: narrow face, thin fingers, delicate gestures.

And charm. Oodles of effortless charm.

It was quite difficult to charm me in those days, and Mr Meeke didn't seem to try. We were seated next to each other at dinner. I was curious about a diplomat's life, a curiosity springing from those hours of conversation with my friend Edwina, and Mr Meeke did not disappoint. He came from a diplomatic family; like Edwina his father had been an ambassador – he'd served in Vienna and Brazil. Mr Meeke's first posting had been to Prague and, after a couple of years in Whitehall, he was about to head off to the embassy in Paris. He had a couple of weeks' leave before he went, and he wanted to get in some foxhunting.

Before I knew it, I had agreed to ride around the estate with him the next morning.

‘Do you think the Schutzbund will succeed against Dollfuss?’ I asked him.

Mr Meeke blinked at the sudden change of subject, a small smile flickering beneath his narrow moustache.

‘I think the socialists are falling into a trap,’ he replied. ‘Dollfuss is provoking them so that he can come down hard on them. It will give him an excuse to lock up their leaders and ban the socialist parties.’

‘Do you approve of Dollfuss?’

‘No. But I don’t approve of the Schutzbund either.’ We spent several minutes discussing the details of Austrian politics, before Lady Growcott ‘rescued’ him. I am sure that’s what she thought she was doing, although it seemed to me that Mr Meeke was interested in my opinions, even if they were gleaned from no more than a careful daily reading of *The Times*. But perhaps he was just being charming.

‘Did you see Bettinson, Hugh?’ Papa asked his son.

‘Yes, I did, as a matter of fact,’ Hugh replied. ‘He gave me luncheon at the Carlton last week.’

Sir Patrick Bettinson was an MP for a constituency in the north of the county.

‘And?’

‘He’s offered me a post as his secretary until the FO exam results. And I think he’ll keep me on if I need to retake.’

‘Good man, Bettinson,’ said Sir Ivor. ‘You can learn a lot from a fellow like that, Hugh.’

‘That’s what I thought,’ said Hugh.

‘You didn’t take the job?’ I asked. I sounded more horrified than I meant to, but less horrified than I felt.

Hugh looked at me uncomfortably. ‘Yes. I did.’

‘Excellent!’ said Papa. ‘Ivor’s right. You can learn a lot from Bettinson. Do you know Sir Patrick, Mr Meeke?’

‘But Sir Patrick is a Conservative!’ I interrupted, before Mr Meeke had a chance to answer.

‘And the Conservatives are in power,’ said Mama, glaring at me. ‘Or the National Government is, which is pretty much the same thing.’

‘Hugh!’ I beseeched my brother. ‘I know you told me you had changed your mind about politics, but you said you were still a socialist. Bettinson’s a dinosaur. He should be extinct! You can’t possibly work for him.’

Hugh’s expression of discomfort turned to pain. ‘If I am going to represent my country abroad, I am going to have to represent the government, whatever their political persuasion. Working for Sir Patrick will help that.’

Something inside me snapped. I profoundly disagreed with Hugh, but it wasn’t that which ignited my anger, or not just that. It wasn’t even that Hugh had betrayed me, although by now I believed he had. It was that my brother had shown himself to be a weaker man than I had always believed him to be. He was a hypocrite, a moral coward. The most important person to me in the world had let me down, and I didn’t like it one bit.

He was leaving me all alone.

‘You are going to throw over all your beliefs, Hugh, just like that?’ I was shouting now. ‘What about me, Hugh? What about me?’

‘What *about* you?’ said Mama sharply. ‘This has nothing to do with you. Behave yourself!’

‘All right then, Hugh. What about you?’

Everyone stared at me. Including Hugh. The others were staring in incredulity, but Hugh understood, and I could see he was ashamed.

I wanted to scream at him. A voice at the back of my head started to yell, and I wanted to open my mouth to let the sound out. My eyes stung; I could feel the tears coming.

I couldn’t bear the humiliation of crying at my brother’s betrayal of me.

‘I’m sorry, please excuse me,’ I said, pushing my chair back and rushing from the room.