

## Chapter 1

Marguerite looked at her reflection in the mirror and despaired. Even with no make-up she was too flashy. Too French. She moved the cameo brooch higher on the neck of her white shirt to hide any hint of cleavage. The dark grey worsted skirt she had made from a Butterwick pattern looked suitably schoolmistressy, ending as it did just below the knee, its semi-flare gliding flat over her bottom, but her bosom betrayed her. She buttoned up the grey cardigan she had knitted in simple purl-plain from the pattern in *Woman's Own* to further lessen the impact of her troublesome bust. Better. It made for a pretty depressing image but one that was suitable for Miss Carter, English teacher in the Home Counties. The grammar school demanded not just academic excellence from its staff but a respectable example to be given to the girls.

The year before the Mistress of Girton had given her a lesson on dressing appropriately for the occasion. The occasion in question had been momentous. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of October 1948 Marguerite was one of the small posse of women to first receive the grudging recognition of their worthiness to become full members of the venerable University of Cambridge, rather than being excluded from societies, the library, the Union, grants

and scholarships. A few dons had hitherto allowed women students to slink into lectures, but pointedly still addressed the assembly as ‘gentlemen’. Now they were to receive proper degrees, alongside the Queen, deemed a more appropriate recipient of an honorary award than any of the women who had fought for years for that belated right.

Marguerite had concocted an outfit that would have pleased her French mother, based on the very latest Christian Dior trend. When she turned up in the Girton common room to fit her gown and mortarboard, she felt jubilantly happy in her scarlet skirt 8 inches from the floor, pushed out by a stiff buckram petticoat showing a flash of lace edging. The waspie waist corset that reduced her 21 inches to 20 enhanced the curvaceousness she had inherited from her mother. What with the matching black patent-leather wide belt and tottering high heels, the final effect, she knew, was ravishing.

The Mistress of the College was aghast.

‘What on earth are you wearing?’

‘The New Look for a new era. D’you like it?’

‘For a wedding, perhaps. But this is a solemn ceremony in the presence of Her Majesty and all the university and city dignitaries. An historic occasion.’

‘I know. That’s why I made an effort.’

‘Marguerite, we have fought long and hard for this privilege. Hitherto we have been reluctantly tolerated as long as we didn’t frighten the horses. We have had to convince the nervous nags of this establishment that we pose no threat, that we will not upend centuries of tradition and destroy their cosy world. Yet. By guile and subterfuge, we have convinced them we are harmless ladies. And I use that word advisedly. Now you come prancing in to take part in one of their beloved rituals looking like a latter-day Zuleika Dobson.’

‘Who is she?’

‘All the men in Oxford fell in love with her and committed suicide.’

‘Well, this is Cambridge.’

‘Yes, that is where she was heading at the end of the novel. They have been expecting her here ever since.’

‘Well, I’m sorry. But we’ve never done it before. There is no precedent for what we wear.’

‘Come with me.’

The Mistress took her to her rooms and gave her a black dress with a white collar and long sleeves.

‘You can keep the red nail varnish but wear these gloves when you kneel and take your certificate. You look disappointed.’

‘I am a bit. I wanted to say, “See – I got a First, you sad, old misogynist stick-in-the-muds. Look – I’m all woman and very, very clever.”’

The Mistress laughed then took her hands.

‘You know, Marguerite, the gown is the important thing. Wear it with pride. You deserve it. Your life so far has been exemplary. You had a good war—’

‘I always find that a strange choice of word – good.’

*She stands holding the small boy’s hand, watching the man shoot the girl in the flowery dress. Then he shows the boy how to hold the gun and helps him pull the trigger. ‘Good,’ he smiles, and pats the boy’s head. ‘That’s for your mother,’ he says, as he pokes the body with his boot to check that it is properly dead.*

‘I apologise. It is a ludicrous anachronism especially applied to this last nightmare, but you know what I mean. I know you don’t like it talked about, but a Croix de Guerre implies great courage. You have been an exceptional student. You know,

Marguerite, you could have done anything. The Foreign Office is opening up for women now, as long as you don't get married, and politics would have been a possibility. And obviously writing. Academic appointments will now be available to women here, but you have chosen to teach children. Why?

'I want to change the world.'

'Oh, is that all?'

'And where best to start than with the children? I hope I don't sound too highfalutin.'

'No, my dear' – she touched her face sadly – 'just young.'

'I have no pride in my life so far.'

'That's a shame. Well, perhaps you can wear your gown in tribute to all those women who won this for you.'

So she did. The ill-fitting black frock notwithstanding, tipping her mortarboard at a jaunty angle and brushing up the fur trim on her hood, as she stood outside the Senate House after the ceremony, she made a silent vow to emulate their commitment and thereby justify the pain that her desertion had caused Marcel.

So many debts to so many people.

Now, here she was, about to start the noble quest she had dreamt of and worked for and she was worrying about her hair, for heaven's sake. It was too red, too curly, altogether too unladylike. Her hat, a grey felt beret, would flatten it or she could tuck it inside, but she couldn't keep her hat on all day. Eventually, she settled for scragging it back into a tight pleat and sticking down any stray wisps with soap. That worked. She was desexed, neutered, unthreatening. The Mistress would approve.

Her legs were a problem. She toyed with the idea of the gossamer nylon stockings nestling in the drawer, wrapped in tissue paper, but worried that their dubious black-market source would be suspect. So, instead, she stained the offending

slim limbs with gravy browning and drew a pencil seam up the back, made slightly wiggly by her nervous hands. Sensible lace-up black shoes eliminated any risk of allure.

She allowed herself only one dash of chic. From the back of her underwear drawer she took a small Chanel box. Inside, wrapped in a piece of white silk, was a pair of black-leather gloves. The best ones, for special occasions. She caressed their softness as they lay in her hand and then held them against her cheek. Did she imagine a faint echo of Jean Patou Joy? One day, when she was about three years old, she had shuffled about the room, naked apart from her mother's high-heeled red shoes and these gloves. She flapped her hands in imitation of Maman's animated elegance. Maman laughed and clapped. 'Comme tu es belle, ma petite. Viens.' And she folded her in her arms. Soft, warm, fragrant.

Her hands were bigger now and had done terrible things, but Maman would understand and forgive. The fingers were too tight, so she took from the box the ivory stretchers with the silver A for Adrienne and gently eased them to allow her mother's gloves to grasp her hands. This was her special occasion. She suspected Maman would have preferred it to be a good marriage but her intellectual English father would surely have been proud of his Cambridge-educated teacher daughter.

When she pulled on her hat and belted her grey gabardine mac, the disguise was as effective as any she had used during the war. The small flat she had found herself was a ride away from the school with a pleasant walk to the bus stop. She made her way anonymously in the slight mist through Wilmington, nodding at the few people around so early in the morning. A road sweeper gathering autumn leaves doffed his cap at her and they exchanged 'Good morning's'. She took a short cut to the stop along a path through a copse of tangled trees and brambles

where the bosky smell tickled her nose. She sneezed, causing a woman walking her dog to say 'Bless you'. She wanted to say, 'Yes, I am blessed. This is the first day of the rest of my life,' but she was momentarily downcast by the sight of some huts behind a high barbed-wire fence, a former prisoner-of-war camp. What hell had awaited those men when they returned home?

The bus was crowded. A boy sprang to his feet and offered her a seat.

The bus conductor looked at her as he clipped her ticket.

'All right, duck?'

'Bit nervous. New job.'

'Where?'

'The grammar school.'

'Oh la-di-da. Tuppence to talk to you then.'

The laughter in the bus was good-natured. Several people wished her good luck. Marguerite looked around at her fellow passengers as the bus rattled along. There were men in overalls, worn housewives with stropby babies and string bags for shopping, two men in smart suits with bowler hats on their laps, a group of children quietly giggling over a comic, making the most of the last day of the holidays, jam jars and nets on sticks ready for tiddler fishing, three nurses, and a couple of men in RAF uniform. It occurred to her that one of the few benefits of war was the enforced breaking down of class barriers. These people had been evacuated, served in factories or the services, and had lived with and worked alongside those they would normally only have encountered superficially. She herself was destined for an upper-class leisured life until the German invasion of France had derailed that course. She could barely remember the rigid convent school, the piano and dance classes, the trips to the Comédie-Française and the Opéra.

Enthused by the good wishes, she alighted at Dartford Heath.

The landscape was just recovering from its use for Army manoeuvres. The tank tracks were grassing over and the sand-filled sacks for bayonet practice, hanging from gallow-like structures, were being used as swings. The mist had lifted now to show a blue sky devoid of swollen barrage balloons. Gone too were the big iron cylinders lining the road in readiness for making a smokescreen. On a patch of waste ground were abandoned three small concrete pyramids, fortunately never called upon to test their effectiveness in stopping an invading army in its tracks.

As she walked along past neglected semi-detached pebble-dashed houses she saw that the gaps made by bombs had been tidied up, the remaining rubble providing a good playground. The blasted walls revealed the wallpapers so carefully chosen from sample books, now flapping in the slight breeze. In one house a staircase remained, leading to a void which had been a bedroom where there had been love and respite. Possibly the owners had sheltered from the bombing in the cupboard beneath, in which case they may have survived, while their world was destroyed around them. Shattered lives everywhere, but now the mending process was underway and she was eager to be part of it. There, in front of her, was the arena for her impending challenge.

## Chapter 2

**D**artford County Grammar School for Girls had been built in 1912 in a not-quite-Gothic style. There were stone walls and a modest tower in the middle, but there was a regularity about the edifice that undermined the gesture towards the medieval. It was nevertheless imposing and suggested a seriousness of purpose. Marguerite was suddenly scared to death – she with the nerves of steel. There was a double-fronted main door, and as she approached along a path, through the garden which had seen better days, she realised she was holding her breath, and had to stand for a moment gulping in air to calm herself.

On the door was an iron knob which she assumed was a bell. She tried twisting it and pressing it to no avail. Panicking, she pulled it and it sprang back making a loud clanging noise. She forced a polite smile in anticipation as the heavy door creaked open. The smile froze when a huge woman was revealed.

‘You should have gone round the side. We don’t use this door. Miss Fryer, Headmistress.’ The woman proffered a large hand.

Miss Fryer must have been 6ft 2 in her bare feet which no one, it was fair to assume, had ever caught a glimpse of. They were firmly encased in thick lisle stockings and lace-up Cuban-heeled shoes, presumably handmade, because no shop would

ever stock that size. She could have bought a man's shoe, but the slight heel indicated she had womanly aspirations, or just enjoyed towering over people. It was certainly effective. Marguerite was reduced to babbling an apology as she bent her neck to look up at the face above her.

The headmistress had a surprisingly small head, with pepper-and-salt hair held back by a tight bun. Her head did not seem to match the extraordinary body. This was large, very large, but solid rather than fat. It was difficult to detect any shape, encased as it was in a peculiar costume with a jacket, tailored to betray no trace of gender, reaching below her hips, where it paired a matching skirt that stretched, featureless, to her lower calf. Marguerite was profoundly relieved that she was not standing in front of this monument in her New Look frou-frou. The monument now smiled down at her.

'You weren't to know. Come to my study. We'll have what will need to be a quick chat. Rather a busy day, I'm afraid.'

The study was wood-panelled with two walls lined with books. A bay window gave a panoramic view of the playground and playing field beyond. Miss Fryer seated herself behind a large mahogany desk and indicated for Marguerite to sit on a wooden chair placed in front.

After a few pleasantries about the weather and her journey, Miss Fryer said, 'I see from your records you served in the FANY during the war. I see also that you were awarded a medal. So I suspect that nursing was a cover for something a tad more dangerous.'

Marguerite hesitated, then said, 'I was in the SOE.'

'Ah, Special Operations Executive. Bit of a mad lot. We at Bletchley called you the Baker Street Irregulars.'

*The sun is shining in Baker Street. Inside Colonel Buckmaster's office the curtains are drawn. The colonel, a tall man, surprisingly in casual*

*sports jacket and flannels, rises to greet her. 'Ah, Carter. My minions are impressed with you. You stood up to their grilling. I do not have to tell you of the dangers you face if you join the Firm, your parents' deaths are evidence enough. We will send you for training but you will be on your own. From this moment on you can confide in no one. Everything you do is to be kept secret. You will be living a lie.'*

'You worked at the code-breaking centre, Headmistress?'

'Yes.'

'Miss Fryer, forgive me, but I'd rather—'

'Miss Carter, there is no need to expand on what you did. Four years after the war is too soon to disclose all our goings-on. Not easy to sum up anyway. It is difficult, isn't it, to break the habit of secrecy? None of the staff know what I did during the war and there is no reason why they should know about your role either.'

'Thank you, I'd prefer that.'

'Understood. But in your new job as a teacher at this school it will be an advantage that you'll have experienced the horrors of war. You will understand your pupils better. They too have suffered. Ripped from their families, labelled and pushed on a train to be billeted with strangers, some of whom were cruel to them, physically and mentally. They have been bombed and machine-gunned, underfed and deprived of all the usual joys of childhood. Now they are having to adjust to men they scarcely know coming back from heaven knows what nightmares and taking over their homes. I see it as our major task to bring the order and discipline of education into their disrupted lives.'

'I will do my best, Headmistress.'

Miss Fryer came round the desk and shook Marguerite's hand.

'Thank you, and welcome. Now, come and meet the rest of the staff. They are in the tower.'

‘Oh, what have they done?’

The raised eyebrow told her the joke was an old one, so, eschewing frivolity, Marguerite settled for silence as she followed the headmistress’s purposeful stride along a classroom corridor. The smell of floor polish and the head’s faint Parma violet perfume was pleasant as she went up a flight of stairs, through a small wooden door that led to a spiral staircase, and then another door, behind which she could hear chatter and laughter.

Miss Fryer tapped at the door and, giving an alarming wink to Marguerite, waited a moment for the noise to subside. After the faux pas of the tower joke Marguerite was too frightened to react. A wink back would surely be misplaced, so she smiled wanly.

‘Good morning, ladies and gentleman.’ Everyone leapt to their feet, apart from the one man in the room, who rose slowly, with a reluctance bordering on impertinence.

‘Forgive the interruption. Here is our new recruit, Miss Carter. I know you will make her welcome. Will you please do the honours, Miss White? I must be elsewhere. Do please sit down, Mr Stansfield, don’t mind me. Save your obviously waning strength for the term ahead.’

The staff room was a perfect square, as befits a tower, but that was the only regular thing about it. Compared with the impeccable order of the teaching area she had passed through, it was chaotic. There were battered armchairs over which, after the headmistress’s exit, various women draped themselves; some had books, one knitted, another had a copy of *The Times*.

Miss White, Maths, a cheerful woman with Eton cropped iron-grey hair, introduced her to the teachers in the room, pointing out that others were round and about preparing for the start of term tomorrow, when all hell would break loose. Two

middle-aged women were marking a pile of books on a small table, throwing the completed ones onto the floor. One, Miss Lewin, History, had brown hair plaited and twisted into ear-phones either side of her face, the other, Miss Haynes, Domestic Science, had blonde hair but her plaits were looped over the top of her head. Other than that they had few identifying features.

Miss Lewin lifted her reading glasses to squint at Marguerite.

‘Oh God, you’re young.’

‘I’m twenty-four.’

‘Exactly. Promise me you won’t be earnest. I’m exhausted already and term hasn’t even started.’

Miss Haynes, the other plaited one, rapped her hand with her marking pencil.

‘Shut up, you old drear. What kind of welcome is that?’

She stood and shook hands with Marguerite.

‘We are catching up with last term’s exam marking. We give them the results tomorrow, poor things. Should have done them in the hols, but Miss Lewin and I went camping in France and tried to forget that we were teachers for a bit. I believe you’re French, aren’t you?’

Marguerite stiffened.

‘Half French. My father was English. I left France when I was a child.’

‘Oh I see. That accounts for your excellent English.’

‘My accent is not perfect, I’m afraid.’

‘Nonsense. It’s hardly noticeable. It’s charming. We were in the Vaucluse. Do you know it?’

A silence.

‘Yes.’

‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

*The sky is azure, the distant mountains sepia, the ravine clad in a palette of manifold greens, the verge is ablaze with red poppies, pink valerian, purple orchids, yellow gorse, chaste white daisies. On the road are strewn body parts and pools of crimson blood.*

‘But one is aware that there are scars. It is hard for us to imagine what it is like to be occupied.’

‘Yes.’

Miss Lewin snorted.

‘The Vaucluse was Vichy France. I should think they had a pretty cushy time, thank you very much.’

Miss Haynes hit her quite hard with the pencil.

‘Will you shut up.’

Miss White tugged Marguerite towards a handsome woman, sitting on a hard-backed wooden chair and intent on a complicated-looking petit point picture on a wooden frame.

Miss Yates, Latin, gave a cursory nod of greeting.

‘Sorry. Can’t look up. Tricky bit.’

In the corner, an unkempt, wispy-haired woman, Miss Tudor-Craig, Music, was sitting legs akimbo, humming and chuckling to herself as she beat time with her hands.

When she felt Marguerite’s eyes upon her she said, ‘Want to join the choir, whoever you are?’

‘Oh, well, my voice is not good, I’m afraid.’

‘Nonsense. Do this. Doh ray me fah soh lah te doh.’

Marguerite tentatively did as she was bidden.

‘Perfect. A soprano. Tuesday after school in the hall.’

Miss White squeezed her arm and pulled a face just as a youngish woman with lively blue eyes and a fresh complexion rushed into the staff room.

‘Oh good. Marguerite, meet Mrs Conway, Hygiene.’

‘You’re married?’

Mrs Conway laughed.

‘Yes, it’s allowed. Marriage for teachers has been legal for five years now, you know. I don’t think Miss Fryer really approves but she thought it better to have a married woman teaching reproduction.’

‘Too late for me,’ shouted Miss Trevelyan, Geography, who looked about sixty. ‘No one’ll have me now. Too late to procreate, so I make do with other people’s children.’

‘I’d have you any day,’ the man piped up.

‘You! Lawksamercy.’ Miss Trevelyan raised her hands in mock horror. ‘I don’t want any reds under my bed.’

‘Who said I’d be *under* it?’

Mr Stansfield, Sport, was obviously cock of the roost. Sprawled on the sofa, reading, his tie loose and shirt unbuttoned, he was handsome and knew it.

He stared at her with mocking blue eyes and ran a hand through his unruly hair as he said, ‘You’re far too young and pretty to join us sad sacks. Don’t look so scared. We don’t bite. Well, on rare occasions, some of us have been known to have a bit of a nibble.’

‘Shut up, Tony,’ said Miss Haynes. ‘You’ll frighten her off and we badly need some fresh young blood.’

He licked his lips.

‘Mmm, delicious.’

Marguerite had no idea how to respond so she opted yet again for a wan smile.

Miss White offered her a cup of tea and put a battered kettle on the gas ring.

‘What did you think of Miss Fryer?’

‘She looks a little odd. She’s a giant, isn’t she?’

Miss Yates rose to her feet, revealing that she too was over six foot but beanpole-thin. Folding her work into an embroidered

cloth bag with wooden handles, she said, 'She is certainly a giant. In every sense. But only to pygmies.'

As she closed the door behind her, Miss White explained that Miss Yates and Miss Fryer shared a house, and she was her deputy, so was therefore somewhat biased, but the headmistress was indeed a fine woman.

Marguerite was mortified.

'I didn't mean to be rude. I'm not doing very well, am I? Shall I go out of the room and start again?'

One of the overworked plaited women reassured her that this room was their sanctuary to relax in; in the tower the staff were free to let their hair down and say whatever they liked, in contrast to the rest of the school where numerous rules had to be strictly observed by staff and pupils alike. They invited her to sit with her cup of tea while they briefed her on the protocol. No running in the corridors, no talking anywhere between classes, and then only when addressed by the teachers. Hats to be worn at all times outside the school when in uniform, skirt length just below the knee, lisle stockings in winter, white socks in summer, pupils to rise when staff entered the room and say 'Good morning' in unison and of course only ever use a teacher's surname prefixed by 'Miss'.

'My goodness,' said Marguerite. 'Is breathing allowed?'

The teachers explained that the school was run on fiercely competitive lines, end-of-term results being read out and put up on noticeboards in order of achievement. Any girl consistently near the bottom was given remedial classes and, if she didn't improve, asked to leave. On Speech Day, once a year, the staff wore their caps and gowns, which the girls judged by their relative prettiness, as opposed to the prestige of the college they represented, which none of them had heard of anyway.

'Why don't you be a devil and take your hat and coat off?'

Mr Stansfield, rose to help her.

‘Mmm, racy gloves.’

Marguerite wondered at the daring innovation of allowing a man into this female stronghold, but surmised that there were few women highly qualified in sport and physical training and Miss Fryer wanted the best for her girls. He was heavily outnumbered and the headmistress would doubtless keep a strict eye out for any hanky-panky. Which, judging by the way he was stroking her leather-clad hands, she would need to.

Miss White slapped his wrist.

‘Stop it, Mr Stansfield. Behave.’

Whereupon he threw his arms around the protesting Miss White.

‘Oh do that again, you naughty teacher. I love it.’

Miss White extricated herself from his embrace and laughingly told Marguerite to ignore him, he was incorrigible.

And full of himself, thought Marguerite. She had met his type at university. Men whose approach to women was monotonously sexual. But at least here, in this women’s world, it was not threatening.

Miss White led her to a classroom and handed her over to her colleagues from the English department who were meeting to discuss the term’s syllabus. An elderly woman with tightly crimped hair, wearing a maroon velvet frock, lightly dusted with chalk, was standing in front of the blackboard. She sported a pince-nez on a gold chain, and several strings of assorted beads. Her appearance suggested she had been here since the school was founded. She indicated for Marguerite to squish into one of the double desks with three other women.

‘Welcome to the fold, Miss Carter. I am Miss Farrington, head of English. I congratulate you on your degree. When I was up at Girton all I got was a certificate through the post with “Titular” scribbled on by hand. Was the ceremony impressive?’

‘Very. And moving.’

‘All those men must have enjoyed seeing you gals on your knees in front of them. I would have been tempted to do them a mischief while I was down there, but I suppose it would have been unseemly in front of Her Majesty.’

A barking laugh set her beads rattling.

‘Now to work. Which is what really matters.’

Miss Farringdon spread a lot of chalk on the board and herself as she illustrated her plans for the term.

‘As you see there are five of us to cover grammar, literature, and composition.’ The chalk squeaked as she drew a chart.

‘You, Miss Carter, will be general dogsbody while you learn the ropes. Have you had any teaching practice?’

‘No.’

‘Since fees were abolished I am afraid we have taken on board some dodgy customers, even worse than the scholarship girls, so you need your wits about you. Watch out for a scabby girl called Elsie Miller, for example.’

Miss Farringdon went on to explain that she had little time for the new emphasis on ‘creativity’, believing that could only come when you knew the basics. Her staff were to focus on grammar, spelling, handwriting, and vocabulary.

“Nice” and “lovely” are strictly verboten.’

These rules would apply to composition and dictation where marks would be deducted for mistakes, however clever the ideas. She had been shocked by a slovenly letter of thanks from one of the girls who left last term. In fact she had corrected it and sent it back. Girls would never make their way in life if they could not write a good letter. Marguerite’s mind wandered to Dr Leavis who took Cambridge by storm with his thrilling lectures on the glory of novels and poetry. He even cycled the two miles to Girton to speak to the women and enthused them

about the value of language. His was a far cry from Miss Farrington's approach. She finished by telling them that Miss Belcher was in charge of the timetable, and would give them their instructions tomorrow.

Marguerite felt dispirited as she walked down the corridor. The staff were not what she had expected. Some seemed jaded, even though term had not started. Then it occurred to her that several had lived through two world wars. Difficult to survive all that with much *joie de vivre*.

Suddenly Miss Belcher swooped on her and proved her wrong. She was fiftyish, cheerful, verging on hysterical. A permanent smile wreathed her pretty face, but as her upper lip did not move when she spoke, the effect was of a ventriloquist's dummy. Her voice too was reminiscent of Archie Andrews', when she welcomed Marguerite effusively, linking arms with her, and begging her not to be discouraged by Miss Farrington, who was a funny old stick, but loved her subject. Would she like to start tomorrow by having a go at the gorgeous Shakespeare sonnets with 2a? It would all be the most tremendous fun, and the girls were smashing, and weren't they lucky to be teaching such a super subject. Marguerite's stomach lurched at the thought of actually standing up in front of a class and teaching but she went with the gush.

'Oh, yes, lovely. Thank you so much. I can't wait.'

In her effort to get back her enthusiasm she seemed to have turned into Joyce Grenfell. She looked and sounded like a woman she didn't recognise as Marguerite. The old Marguerite was *passé*, thank goodness. She was now a teacher, Miss Carter, English. And Miss Carter, despite being filled with trepidation, was, as Miss Belcher would put it, thrilled to tiny bits.