



# University of Chester



This work has been submitted to ChesterRep – the University of Chester's  
online research repository

<http://chesterrep.openrepository.com>

Author(s): Robert Blaney

Title: Soldier bee

Date: 2009

Originally published as: University of Chester MA dissertation

Example citation: Blaney, R. (2009). *Soldier bee*. (Unpublished master's thesis).  
University of Chester, United Kingdom.

Version of item: Submitted version

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/108539>

Rob Blaney

***Soldier Bee***

EN7104. The Writing Project

MA Creative Writing

University of Chester

Supervisor: Francesca Haig

2008-09

## **Soldier Bee; Chapter 7**

### **British Union of Fascists Headquarters, Black House, London, January 1936**

There are black balloons, black confetti, black jewels, Union flags, and infuriating Italian music she can't stop humming. Mendelssohn is out of the question; she wants marching songs, sung loud with bugles and drums, wants silver make-up, her hair permed like a Busby Berkeley girl.

Her wedding day's a cacophony of echoes; voices, songs, speeches brawling in her head, declaring: you are the chosen one, the very first member of the British Union to marry in Black House.

Freda waves from her balcony opposite the courtyard. Her guests are watching guards drill in the snow, a snow which sticks like blistered skin, muffles the smack of jackboots, strangles the cry of bugles; the bugler so chilled by frost his instrument squeals like a fox. Commanders in greatcoats and women staff-officers in black hats and brogues enthuse about Mosley's last speech, their gold badges glinting in the beam of a searchlight as it shoots across the yard. And above the military game, Freda overbalances, spills champagne over her dress, hitches it up, smashes the glass, shouts, 'bugger me!' and as her guests stare upwards at the drunken bride, she totters inside.

'I should have married in uniform.'

'That would look awfully plain,' Nancy from Women's Brigade HQ said before they chose the dress. 'Wear something fit for the occasion and I'll give it the personal touch.' So

Nancy sewed fascist flash and circle motifs on her dress, a willowy close-fitting creation in black lace. 'From a distance they look like swastikas,' she claimed.

Freda wasn't convinced. 'I can't understand why the Party can't just use swastikas instead of pretending to use them in flashes and circles; it makes it look as though we are trying to hide what we really believe in.'

As soon as the dress was ready the Party Publicity Officer asked Freda to pose in the dress next to a poster of *Fascism Needs You* for *The Blackshirt* newspaper. 'I'll be headline news; Mrs. Simpson won't be in the papers as much as me,' she boasted to Joyce, Ray's best man, who said she looked 'becoming', and changed the subject. Freda was excited Joyce had volunteered, telling Ray, 'He's a splendid chap to have as best man. At rallies he fires me up, inspires me; says we must get rid of the old buggers who've ruined us. Three cheers for fascism.'

Joyce has already taken Freda under his wing, made her 'his little apprentice', 'his protégée'. When Ray wasn't happy with her 'forcing Joyce on him', she mocked, 'It was you who said "he's the up and coming man in the movement, a magnificent speaker who can talk for ages without notes"'. You said, "He's not stuck-up at all, he's just like one of the boys. The scars on his cheek are proof of that. When the Reds slashed him he didn't run away; in fact, he calls his scars his medals.'" Hypocrite!'

Ray didn't answer, looked at his shoes, knelt down and polished them with a handkerchief.

Apart from the wedding, Black House is busy; the boys preparing for a march, practising baton drills, studying enemy recognition, and in the garage, wire-mesh is being fixed over the

glass on the armoured car to give them cover. The biff-boys are swarming, hungry for tonight's rally, impatient for the battle. Despite all the drilling, everything is running on time, and that's why Freda loves Black House; things go to plan.

The old place used to be a teaching college with gloomy dormitories and Victorian classrooms, but an army of dedicated fascists scrubbed, bleached, made it spick and span, wiped away all sign of churchy art, statues and stained glass and the like. Freda doesn't even mind the chores because scrubbing floors imbues self-discipline, though she never liked cleaning back at home where it wasn't appreciated. In Black House spotlessness is praised, slovenliness detested, self-respect and pride are the hallmarks of an orderly regime. Freda goes to lectures on speechmaking, takes self-defence lessons to improve herself, and even though there's no pay; accommodation, meals, and lectures are free. In return, she types reports, goes on rallies, sells papers, marches - all this for only a shilling a week subscription. It's fun, and besides, there are even BUF summer holiday camps to look forward to.

Of course it's only a replica wedding. They were forced through a Register office do earlier in the week, but to Freda, this is the real thing. Giddy, a bridesmaid leads her downstairs into the chapel. Heads turn as the bridesmaids lift her train and she marches in past a remarkable picture of Oswald Moseley on the wall next to one of Herr Hitler. Brightened with party banners which replaced the old Stations of the Cross, the chapel's looking gay. All the familiar faces from HQ have crowded in to see them, while at the front, Ray waits, dabs his head with a handkerchief and Joyce taps his foot. The bridesmaids, dressed in BUF uniforms, struggle to hold Freda's train and carry their paper flowers at the same time. Earlier, Freda had given them presents; dolls dressed in black uniform, and copies of *Junior Blackshirt*, not having enough money for expensive gifts.

Angus McNab, Joyce's friend, is giving her away; he looks terrific in his Savile Row suit. 'He's a gentleman, a university fellow, like Joyce,' Freda said when Ray complained McNab was a 'show-off.'

As they make their way up the aisle, Freda is suddenly in two minds about going through with it. Two women drummers beat a crescendo on snare drums; then the band strikes up with *Giovinezza*, the Italian tub-thumper. Catching Ray by the arm, she takes a deep breath, leads him to the front, notices his hands are trembling, but shaking off the effects of the champagne, delivers him up to the chaplain.

Kneeling in front of the eagle they swear an oath on Mosley's book, *The Greater Britain*, and Freda shouts her vows, 'I promise to be loyal to the party and the King, to honour the flag and the leader, to follow him always. I promise to be loyal to my husband and to respect him at all times. I promise to obey the party, to love it.'

Joyce stares at her as if she's gone off her head, Ray is dazed, and the chaplain, a plump chap with a crimson face, mumbles something she doesn't hear. They place hands on the book of rules, promise to be faithful, and provide children for their race and nation. Joyce hands Ray a black onyx ring to put on Freda's finger, but when a scrawny youth near the front laughs, it throws her for a moment. Thrusting a black ring on Ray's hand and turning to face the congregation, they salute, and the chaplain pronounces them man and wife. The congregation breaks into slow rhythmic clapping and lustily sings,

*“Comrades, the voices of the dead battalions,*

*Of those who fell that Britain might be great,*

*Join in our song, for they still march in spirit with us,*

*And urge us on to gain the fascist state!’*

Ray kisses her on the cheek like a slobbering mongrel. He’s besotted; the men say he follows her around like a stray in need of a kennel, and Freda has ‘led him on’, when she really has eyes on a higher pedigree of Blackshirt. Turning to the congregation and giving another triumphant wave, they process back down the aisle to cheers and celebratory salutes. Oswald Mosley waits by the chapel door to greet them, shakes their hands, gives Freda a bouquet of flowers, pats Ray on the back, and the congregation bursts into gracious applause. This is the first time she’s stood close to Mosley; with his powerful eyes and aristocratic face, it’s like being close to nobility.

Leaving the chapel, Storm Troopers form an arch, salute and when they throw black confetti and the congregation sing ‘*Come all young Britain,*’ out of tune, but with plenty of vigour, and not expecting this honour, she shouts ‘hooray,’ and joins the chorus,

*‘We’ve a plan of courageous revival,*

*For the problems and needs of today*

*We must fight for the right of survival,*

*We must turn from the things of decay*

*Come all young Britain and march with the Blackshirt Battalion.’*

Mosley isn’t coming to the wedding breakfast, though Freda keeps looking towards the door hoping he’ll change his mind. It would be a privilege to have him with them. The breakfast’s held in the old refectory, a depressing room, and she can’t help thinking of rows of bored students sitting at long tables eating shepherd’s pie. It has a curious oval ceiling like a church, and the sound disappears into the roof, though an effort’s been made to brighten

things up with white tablecloths, but to her consternation they are too small for the tables. Stacked high on platters, there are too many sandwiches; only twenty people having decided to come back for the wedding breakfast, the rest drifting away to prepare for the rally. There aren't even enough fellows to do an okey cokey, though a few men drop by out of curiosity to hear Joyce, who's considered as good a speaker as Mosley. A typist plays an out-of-tune piano and gives up when no one joins in to sing. They nibble egg sandwiches, leave the cheese, which tastes rancid, and drink bottled Ind Coope. The fug of cigarette smoke makes Freda's silver eye-shadow run, so she faces the wall and wipes it off with her handkerchief. Taking the carving knife to cut a cake coated in dark chocolate and topped with an eagle, she poses for another photograph for *The Blackshirt*. Too near the radiator the cake starts to melt, but she laughs it off, and stabs it with the knife.

Joyce stands up to speak and everyone dutifully goes quiet; his voice eloquent, demanding attention, as he dangles a hand in his pocket and makes circles with the other, like a proper politician, Freda thinks.

'I'm proud to be standing here today with two young people who have committed themselves to each other and to the fascist ideal. To be married in Black House shows dedication. We need disciplined young people like Ray and Freda if we're going to build the fascist state. Resilience is needed if we're going to defeat the enemy, particularly the communists and the Jewish moneyed class. We will conquer Communism if we stay united, and these two young people; Freda who is only eighteen, and Ray, who is twenty one, already have a mature, civilized, understanding of the problems Britain faces. Other young people of their age have been seduced by nigger music, by Jewish cant, by the old politics. Ray and Freda are different, committed to fight against the forces that have brought Britain to its



knees, and join us at a time of great expansion. I want you to raise your glasses to them. I praise them for their ideals, and implore them never to forget the cause which cements their union.'

Lifting their glasses they drink toasts until Freda's dizzy again, and Ray stops her falling over by making her lean against the wall. After a standing ovation for Joyce, the reception peters out and Party members go off to tog-up for the march. Freda sits down, kicks her shoes off, wonders what her father would say if he knew she was married, remembers how he ranted against Mosley, and told her to never bother contacting him again.

Fighting to stay awake, the couple tramp upstairs into Ray's freezing room. Ice clings to the inside of the windows, so they hurriedly undress, but when Ray gropes her, she pushes him off, but gripping her arms, he prises her legs apart and forces himself inside her. When he starts again after a breather, she turns over pretending to be asleep. Sobering up, she wishes she could go back to her own room, thinks about tearing the black lace dress into pieces.

For the next few weeks they share Ray's cramped room, and he forces her to have sex every night, which only lasts for the time it takes to boil an egg, but it makes her sore, and he sulks, says she's not interested in him. By day, Ray follows her around Black House, saying she's too 'friendly' with Bracken, or she shouldn't be 'so familiar with Joyce.' He even goes through her things and tries to persuade her not to go on marches with the Women's Section, 'in case she gets hurt.' She confides in Gloria, who sits her down and gives her a lecture,

'Give it time; you're going at one another like two ferrets in a hen house. He's over-sexed, and you are too interested in fighting. I don't think there should be biff-girls, it's

unnatural. Leave the boot-work to the boys. Slow down, relax, there's more to life than the British Union of Fascists, you know.'

Freda can't agree, shakes her head, Gloria makes no effort to get fit or to learn BUF rules. Lazy like Ray, she sits around reading tuppenny comics, and Ray spends all his time reading motorcycle magazines and wanting sex. A good rally's more satisfying than sex.

Waking with a headache one night about two o'clock, when she's only slept for a couple of hours, she dresses in uniform and wanders downstairs past the Defence Control Room, past piles of yellowing newspapers towards the offices. To her surprise, Joyce's door is open and he sits at his desk, squints at a document under his anglepoise. It's unusually untidy and smelly; the room heavy with cigarette smoke and piles of leaflets strewn on the floor where Joyce leans on his elbow struggling to stay awake. Startled, he looks up when Freda shambles in,

'Oh excuse me, I didn't expect to find anyone awake. Couldn't sleep, I got up to make myself a cup of tea.'

Quickly pushing a document under a wedge of papers, he leans back in his chair, 'You look washed out, little bee, what's the matter? Has Ray let you out? When you first get married it's all about bouncing on bed springs, I'm surprised he hasn't locked you in.'

'Yes, all Ray thinks about is mating.'

He gives a hoarse laugh, pulls himself to his feet, overbalances, regains his footing, smelling of whiskey and slurring. He doesn't sound as posh as when he makes speeches.

'I'll make you a cup of tea, but first ...' He catches her by the arm and walks her through the corridors past the kitchen, pulls her into the gymnasium. It's the first time she's been

inside. Usually it's full of boys, all spunk and gristle, doing press-ups, fencing, or wrestling. Escaping from Ray last week, she remembers standing outside watching the boys line-up, run at full-pelt to vault over the wooden horse, and hanging from crucifix rings for ages, quite remarkable. Joyce is tipsy, but desperate to show her what he can do, he steadies his feet under a barbell with two huge weights on it, and in an instant he lifts it above his head. Astonished such a small chap could do it; she applauds when he lowers the weight.

'See what you can do?' he says, inviting her to try the bar.

'Joyce, it's nearly three in the morning, I'm shattered.'

'Go on, let's see what you can do... I like to come here in the night when nobody can disturb me,' he confides, sliding the large weights off and putting ten pound weights on.

'I don't know what to do. This is silly,' she says, gripping the bar half-heartedly, so moving her aside, he shows her how to squat with her feet apart and position her hands on the bar.

'Breathe like this.'

Swelling his chest, he swivels the bar to his breast and flicks her wrists to press the weights.

Fumbling with the bar, she follows his instructions, tries to swivel her wrists and push the bar above her head, but overbalances, and Joyce has to snatch the bar out of her hands before it drops onto her head.

'Try again, you'll soon get the hang of it.'

Placing her hands on the bar so they are at equal points from the centre and balancing on the flat of her feet as she squats, this time she's able to lift the bar to her chest without much

effort and press the bar above her head. Yelling with delight, she crashes the bar onto the gym floor.

‘No squealing, you’ll bother the guards. See, I knew you could do it.’

Gasping for breath, her hands tingle. ‘It’s incredible. I’ve never done anything like this. Can I put more weight on?’

Joyce grins. ‘No more tonight. Come back another time and I’ll teach you how to load the bar safely. It’s a slow business learning how to lift. I like to think I’m as good as the other lads.’

‘Don’t you ever sleep?’

‘Of course, I sleep a couple of hours after midnight, then I come to the gym until four, and go to bed again for a few hours. I’ve been like this for years. I do my best thinking in the night, speeches, weight training, thinking, thinking ... Why couldn’t you really sleep?’

‘I don’t know, Black House’s too noisy to sleep. I hear guards talking, people running baths, raging arguments, boots scuffing walls, guards tramping down corridors. A wireless was on, Ray was snoring. I felt thirsty. Black House is alive and makes me want to stay awake. I love these weights.’

‘Black House takes getting used to, but, yes, it’s alive. Some say there are ghosts; two nurses who studied at Whitelands died at a forward hospital near the Somme and still patrol the corridors.’ He laughs, slaps her on the back. ‘The truth is, Black House is a deep cavern with clanking pipes and echoing voices, narrow airless tunnels where you can’t breathe. A Minotaur must lurk down here. The walls are so thin you can hear people breathing in the next room, floorboards creak. We work so hard here we’re sick with fatigue, but as in all

good mines you find good seams. Our support's growing, and it's only a matter of time ...'

Joyce stops, realizing he's speech-making, takes her hand - 'You're shivering - this'll warm you up.' He goes over to a box, takes out a blanket and wraps it round her shoulders.

Returning to the bar, he puts the big weights back on. He's forgotten he's packed up for the night, takes off his shirt and she watches him do repetitions. Muscles tighten in his arms and chest as he lifts, sweat trickles down his biceps, his face reddens, and his neck muscles jut out like a prize fighter. He gives a subdued yell each time he lifts. Ray grunts like that after he makes love, like a tamed bull.

'No wonder you're called "Mighty Atom"', she says, then regrets saying it. He hates that nickname and his eyes are wild.

Sitting cross-legged, panting, eyes closed, Joyce shakes; so going over she places the blanket over his knees, stands behind him to massage his neck, sees his shoulders go slack. Smothering him with the blanket she rubs sweat from his body and strokes his hair.

'Are you always so tense after doing weights?' she says, his head sagging toward her as she massages him.

'Stop, don't touch me, Margaret ...' There is a noise by the door. A guard is watching.

'Who do you think you're looking at?' The guard turns round and goes out.

'Who was it?' Joyce says, pulling off the blanket.

'A guard, he was carrying a stick.'

'Damn it! Inquisitive bastard.' Standing, putting his shirt on, he whispers, 'Not everybody in Black House appreciates what I'm trying to do. They think I'm out to replace Mosley. That's rubbish. I've said it before, there's no greater man that God has ever created.'

He turns, says sternly. 'I hope I can trust you to be discrete. Let's keep this get-together to ourselves; in Black House walls have ears, there's no such thing as privacy. Even Mosley's mother snoops around the place listening for gossip.'

'I'm sorry if I've embarrassed you... You're trembling ... Why did you call me Margaret earlier?'

'Did I? Sorry, I'm tired. Look, take the blanket. You need it more than me,' he says, his voice shrill and tense.

Joyce shrinks into himself, stares at the wall and she wonders if he's thinking about Margaret.

'The imperative's to keep the Press informed. I need to brief them about the situation in Spain. Franco could be a great example to the rest of Europe, but we don't want civil war of course.'

Suddenly, it was as if she isn't here. She'd heard rumours about Joyce, separation from his wife, an affair with a recruit called Margaret White. The girls say he's smitten with her.

Joyce makes for the door saying nothing, folds the blanket and puts it back by the window. Cold, she looks at the bar, wonders if Ray could lift it, folds her hands round it, and remembering how he changed the weights, she struggles until she's taken off the heavy weights and put on lighter ones, lifts them again and again until exhausted.

After drinking water in the kitchen, Freda makes her way along the corridors back to the bedroom where Ray's still snoring. He's got oil in his veins; he should have married his motorbike. Her marriage was to Black House not him; it has swallowed her up, put steel into her arms. The sham wedding has become the butt of jokes, and the day was only made

tolerable by Joyce's speech. Forget it, she thinks, tomorrow she will enjoy the women's self-defence class led by a former suffragette who's joined the Party after falling out with Socialism. Freda sits on the edge of the bed watching Ray sleep. How can he be so narrow minded? Self-defence is part of the self-disciplining of mind and body. Last week, the old girl taking the class said she'd once felled a policeman in a single blow. Freda can't wait to try jujitsu out on Ray, who is becoming so lethargic he needs a good shaking.

Going to the gym the following night, Joyce is missing, presumably at his flat in Chelsea which he shares with McNab. Freda sees the coconut matting on the gym floor, and the brown mat reminds her of her mother's eiderdown, and of how her father used to order her to wash mother's face, bed-bath her, wash the sheets, spoon-feed her. She wasn't born to be a bloody nurse but to be famous. Hospital's the best place when you are dying, she decides, thinking of mother.

After lifting weights for an hour she walks around the gym in circles to calm down, feels the muscles in her arms stiffen, and goes back to the bedroom to sleep for a couple of hours. When Ray wakes her she lunges at him as if she's still lifting weights,

'What's the matter, you silly bitch? You're saturated in sweat... Your hands are covered with blisters. I didn't see those yesterday.'

'Leave me alone, I'm sleepy.'

'Tell me how did you get the blisters?'

'You're not very observant. You don't know much about me, do you?'

'Your hands have been bleeding, tell me how this happened?'

She shakes her head. 'Bitches don't talk, they bark.'

‘Why are you being so secretive? I’ll put cream on your hands before we go down to breakfast.’

‘I can see to the blisters myself. I’m not hungry, go down and I’ll follow you, that’s a good chap, Ray.’

He shrugs, dresses and disappears downstairs. Not wanting to face eating with him, she puts on her coat to go for a long walk, can’t stop thinking about the gym and the weightlifting, wanting to go back down and lift heavier weights.



## Chapter 8

### Henchmen.

A week later, Ray wakes to the blast of the reveille trumpet, rubs his eyes, turns over, notices she's pinned a new quotation on the wall; "*I don't regard Jews as a class. I regard them as a privileged misfortune*".

'Need your head examining,' he mutters. Freda, lying awake, who is staring at a picture of herself in uniform in a silver frame on the dresser, throws off the blankets, leaps out of bed. Watching her dress, he notices how the uniform sags on her, and as she tightens her belt another notch, he whispers, 'little Hitler.'

'I heard that!' Rummaging under clothing in wardrobe, she takes out a knife and slips it into a scabbard around her waist.

'What do you want that for? Is that another of Joyce's great ideas? Fix bayonets girls! Don't you think you might hurt yourself with that thing?'

'Bloody hell, it's only for self-defence. Are you going to lie in the sack all day?' She says, stamping into her brogues, grabbing her coat and turning towards the door.

He hears her clatter down the steps, quickly dresses, and follows her into the grounds. Snow drops in fistfuls but drill hasn't been suspended, eager new recruits foot-slogging it up and down. A huge wedge of snow slithers off the roof soaking him. Snowfall softens the grumble of traffic, aggravates sores on marching feet, and intensifies Ray's melancholy.

Trudging round the back of Black House to see if she's wandered into the copse he notices there's no birdsong from the gallows of winter oaks streaked with ice; he could be in a tract of virgin forest. To his surprise he finds new earthworks; deep trenches with wooden

pillars strengthening their sides like newly dug graves, six feet deep, with just enough width for coffins. He watches them fill with snow. Biff-boys are playing mock battles again; he hasn't joined up to fight battles just to see the back of hunger marches - *Where the bleeding hell is Freda?* he thinks.

A guard watches him emerge from the trees, 'Can I see your identity card, Mister? These woods are out of bounds.' He's an ugly brute; ice-blue eyes, a face scarred from acne, his hair waxed with frost.

'Sorry, I'm looking for my wife. She went for a walk and must have got lost,' Ray says, waving his membership card at the guard, who examines it without even a stab at a smile,

'You're the ones who married in the chapel, the recent affair.' He turns Ray's card over and over. 'You'd better go back inside, mate, she isn't out here.' He shivers, gives Ray a frostbitten stare and tosses the card back. Ray hesitates, walks towards Black House, the guard pacing a few yards behind, but as Ray reaches the front entrance, he turns to watch the guard pad through the snow in a half-crescent back to the wood like a lone wolf.

Warming his chapped hands and with no sign of Freda he goes inside to put on dry clothes. He's made up his mind up, he's had enough of the BUF, and it's time to get out, spend time on the farm, work on the bikes, get them ready for racing. Freda's still worshipping tin gods in here and he yearns for the old happy-go-lucky girl she used to be.

He finds her in the gym, which is packed with coils of rope and metal contraptions, the haunt of thugs who use them to show off. Two boys wrestle on a mat and others crowd round like apes, egging them on to trip and knobble one other. A wrestler grunts, picks up the smaller man, hurls him to the ground, stamps on him and the others cheer.

Freda's in the corner messing around with a foil with Joyce, who's demonstrating lunge and parry. Copying him, stabbing thin air, laughing, yelping with joy, she jumps back and forward as Ray watches her wriggle about making a fool of herself. Joyce seems to be a skilled swordsman, testing her in flourishes, and Freda becoming wilder, slashes and hacks, the foil whooshing round as she works up a sweat, her hands dropping as she tires.

'All right, rest,' but Freda continues to slash and stab; the weapon seems to have a mind of its own. Wrestlers give up fighting to watch her, and embarrassed, Ray shouts, but she doesn't hear, so he tries to grab her by the shoulder,

'For Christ's sake, Freda, put that damn thing down.'

Lunging at him, the tip of the foil pierces his arm, and she's about to strike again, but backs off when Joyce parries the weapon out of her hand with a neat counter-strike.

'You stupid bitch, now look what you've done.' Motionless, wildness in her eyes, fists clenched, legs wooden, Freda watches him bleed. The biff-boys go quiet, grinning, hoping he'll get up and strike her back.

'Billy, take him to first aid, be quick,' Joyce orders, and Ray's helped down the corridor towards the store room where they hoard medical supplies. Billy Noone peels back Ray's shirt sleeve and crudely ties a bandage round the bloody arm. Joyce arrives, searches a drawer, pulls out a half-bottle of whiskey and pours the patient a large measure,

'Here, have a dram or two to take away the pain.'

Blood seeps through the bandage and blackens like pitch. Joyce smiles, but after knocking back his own drink, and thinking he's done his bit, he abandons Ray and goes off with Billy, leaving the victim to nurse the wound alone.

Ray squats on the floor and sips whiskey, tries to keep still, but Joyce, inquisitive as to why Ray has not returned to the gym, comes back to find him.

‘You shouldn’t have shouted at her like that. She’s very upset, what came over you grabbing her like that?’

Ray lifts his arm, leans against the wall for support. ‘It’s this damn place, Joyce. It’s taken her over. Since she came here she’s turned into a spiteful vindictive tart.’

Joyce’s steel-grey eyes narrow, his square chin juts out, ‘Don’t be a Prima Donna, it’s only a nick, she was having fun ... After all, she’s in training. You’ve got a face like a spoilt child. Learn to give her a little bit of freedom, old man, then she’ll appreciate you more.’

‘I’ll going to take her back to Staffordshire so she can forget about both you and this place; she’s obsessed with all this weight lifting and fencing. It isn’t womanly.’

‘Don’t be a fool, she’s enthusiastic, she loves sport, we all do. She’s under no pressure to stay here, she stays because wants to.’

‘Then why’s she become so aggressive? Why are we *all* so aggressive here? Training to fight, digging trenches, picking fault with the Jews? Isn’t there another way? I saw how Freda used that sword. I’ve seen the way she marches like a mad hatter on parade. I’ve heard her learning chunks of Moseley’s book, and reciting it parrot-fashion. When I met her, Freda was a sweet girl. I took her to one of your rallies, because mistakenly, I thought the BUF were telling the truth. Afterwards I took her to a branch meeting and then she wanted to move into Black House to get away from home. I thought she’d settle down here but she’s become uncontrollable.’

‘Ridiculous, she hasn’t changed; you have. You knew what you were getting into. You’re wrong, Freda’s an interesting example of a young person frustrated by lack of opportunity. We’re all frustrated. We’ve made progress; thousands are joining the party and marching with us, but despite all that we’re stifled by the press who spread lies. Most British people don’t even know what the Jews are doing to this country.’

‘The Jews? How can you argue a whole race is at fault? That’s a sweeping statement. When I joined the party in thirty three we never used to single out the Jews; we had Jewish members.’

‘It’s a trait, a racial trait. It’s how they’ve conned their way in the world. Can’t you see? The Jewish financiers are ruining our economy, and in America they’re forcing cheap imports into England to make huge profits for themselves.’

‘What about the thousands of poor Jews in London who can’t earn enough to feed their own families? Are they money grabbers too?’

‘Haven’t you learnt anything while you’ve been at Black House? Why is our economy in ruins? Because the Jews have bled it dry. You want to watch your step; don’t go shouting your mouth off like that. Party members won’t tolerate it.’

‘You bastard, don’t threaten me just because you think you’re important, it doesn’t mean you can beat me up. I know you’re carrying on with my wife - I wouldn’t trust you as far as I could throw you.’

He swings at Joyce, misses, his arm hurting as if it’s been split by an axe. Joyce pushes him over; Ray’s arm spurts with blood again and his glasses fall off. Cracking the lenses under his heel, Joyce stands over him, triumphant, hovers his boot over Ray’s head.

‘No, I won’t do it, but I want you out of Black House in thirty minutes. By the way, I have no interest in your bloody wife, except, she’s a good sort, and she deserves better than you.’

‘Call yourself an educated man; you’re a common criminal. You’re all mad here!’ He drags himself up and staggers to his bedroom, blood dripping from his arm.

Freda’s sitting on the bed reading a pamphlet. ‘Oh God, is that what I did?’ She stood to help him onto the chair.

‘Yes, but Joyce finished what you started. He defended you when I said you were out of control.’

‘I wasn’t out of control, you barged in, and I lunged by instinct. Joyce wouldn’t hurt you unless you provoked him. And I certainly didn’t mean to hurt you; you surprised me turning up like that. I was in a temper, I couldn’t help it ... Let me see to that arm.’

‘No, I’ll see to it myself.’ He unravels the bandage, bathes his arm with a wet towel and dabs cream on.

‘That sod broke my glasses. I couldn’t even defend myself. We’ll have to get a taxi; I’ll pick the car up later. I’ve got a spare pair of glasses in Staffordshire. Joyce said I’d have to be out in half an hour. We’d better be quick, he means what he says, he’ll be organizing his boys now.’

‘Joyce wouldn’t do that, you’re making it up. You must have said something horrible. You can’t expect me leave now, this is my home, why should I desert it?’

She starts to tear up an old shirt and wind it round the wound.

‘We can’t stay here, start packing your bags and I’ll hail a taxi outside.’

‘No, I don’t want to go. Make your peace with Joyce and we’ll all be laughing about it tomorrow. We’re not going to spoil everything because of a silly tiff.’

Breaking away from her he drags a suitcase from under the bed, flings clothes in and squints around trying to find his documents while she folds her arms and watches. After he’s finished packing he pulls down Freda’s case and starts packing her clothes. Throbbing with pain, he struggles on and she does nothing to help.

‘Stop it, that’s enough. I won’t go. I don’t want to leave and go back to crummy Staffordshire to your daddy’s filthy farm. I hate it there; I couldn’t wait to get away in the first place. I never want to leave Black House again. You’re making a big mistake - If you go, I won’t go with you.’

He looks at her, holds her hand but she snatches it away. Opening her case she begins to hang her clothes back in the wardrobe.

Her gaunt face and muscular arms, thin body, dead-pan expression; it’s as if she has been hypnotized. He sits down to regain his balance.

‘I can’t believe what’s happening. We went through that charade of a marriage a few weeks ago and you behave as if you never wanted me in the first place. If you love me you’ll come home. You’ll be reneging on your vows if you don’t.’

She continues to hang up clothes. ‘I thought I was marrying someone who believed in the same ideals, but you’re a weakling. When I saw you racing motorbikes, I thought you were strong, but you’re a piddling coward, running away the first time someone’s stood up to you ... Well go, and don’t come back. You’ve no backbone. I should have seen it before. Go! I made my vows to the party, not you.’

'I made my vows because I love you.' Wiping blood from his hand he sits in the chair dazed; it's all his fault, introducing her to these fanatics. His father had been right to warn him off, telling him she was gullible and immature. He should have listened to him. Ray crumples up the marriage certificate and tosses it onto the floor.

There are footsteps on the landing, and summoning energy he waits for Joyce's henchmen to burst in, but it is only the recruits back from drill. Finishing putting her things away, she lights a cigarette, watches Ray from the door, inhales deeply and blows smoke at him. Tired from lack of sleep, her hair is matted, her skin leathery from long walks in the icy wind. He remembers how she used to rub the middle of his back and insist they stay up and watch the sunrise. When Joyce suggested the fascist wedding, he thought he was joking and laughed out aloud, but Freda was flattered, set on it. It was as if she didn't care who she was marrying, as long she married in Black House.

Standing by the door with his suitcase and looking through the window onto the drill square reminds him of a fat man with a public school accent who arrived at Black House several months before and announced he'd been appointed Chief Accountant. He reorganized the office, instructed staff to change bank accounts, gave new task lists for the girls to follow. He took petty cash to buy 'essential stationery,' but provided no receipts. When Mosley came back from France and asked who this man was, the "accountant" disappeared along with hundreds of pounds. Ray remembers seeing the swindler the day before he disappeared. He must have seen Mosley arriving back and expected him to be away in France for longer. Stopping mid-sentence, the "accountant" shoved papers in his briefcase and walked out. The next day there were meetings behind closed doors, a lot of shouting, banging on tables, and accusations. Three party members were seen leaving, dismissed.



So this is the great British Union, deceived by a con-man and Mosley is treated like a Messiah, Britain's Hitler, the national saviour, when he's nothing more than a Charlie Chaplin.

'I'm not leaving without you. They'll destroy you. Come home, please?'

Shaking her head, she stubs out her cigarette in the ashtray, and as Ray picks up his case she opens the door, 'Go and don't come back.'

A guard stops Ray as he makes his way across the courtyard, 'Hey, where're you going? Have you got permission to leave?'

'Permission for what?' he replies, continuing to walk towards the main gate just as Joyce appears, jangling a bunch of keys from his belt.

'Let him go, he's not up to it.'

Within the hour Ray is waiting at Euston station for a train home.

\*\*\*\*\*

Watching Ray limp through the main gate she sits down, listens. Black house is never silent. There were times when she lived in Staffordshire that she'd wished her mother would cry to break the silence, or the Tom might kick-start one of his motorbikes. She hates silence, every day when she wakes to reveille she feels safe in Black House, but outside she expects to be attacked. It's as if behind these gates is a force protecting her.

'I bet you're glad to see the back of that clown.' Joyce's eyes bulge with tiredness. 'Have a drink?' He pours her a whiskey and she sits opposite. 'You haven't met my fiancée, Margaret, yet have you? She wouldn't be amused if she knew you've been tiptoeing down here after hours.' He slurps his whiskey. 'I don't think I have Mosley's energy for women. He

takes them to a secret apartment, you know. The Mitford girl knows all about it and turns a blind eye. I don't recommend you chase after the Leader though, you wouldn't stand a chance with his aristocratic tastes. As for us, we should remain pals.'

'I need you.'

'Don't be silly. You look so sad ... Tell me more about yourself, how did you come to join us?'

'Well, Ray took me to meetings then I went to listen to you. There were lots of other young people in the audience. It was exciting; the banners, the drums, the lights; I loved the clothes, the smart black ties and silk shirts, narrow trousers tucked into polished boots, the thick belts with the emblem on the buckle. I didn't know then it had spikes under the buckle – what a weapon. Then, it was you - I loved the sound of your voice. The atmosphere changed when you started speaking, you work a crowd like a magician.'

Joyce rises from his seat and squeezes her until she gasps for breath. 'You are sweet, -my father used to squeeze me like this. He's strong, a lion. We lived in New York once, but I can't remember it because I was only three when we came back to Ireland. So, I'm really American. That's my secret. When father moved us back to Ireland we were caught in the civil war, the Irish civil war. The Catholics hated us because my mother was Protestant, and the Prods hated us because father was a Roman. We came to England to escape the Micks, but what do I see in England? A bloody country infiltrated by the Jews. Now the King's dead at least young Edward gives me confidence things will change. He's sympathetic to us, so let's keep our fingers crossed. Another *hush-hush*; I've just been given a British passport. I've had it so I can go to Berlin with Mosley. I've cheated I suppose, said I was born in Ireland,

which is a white lie. Ireland *was* part of Britain in those days which gives me British nationality. The important thing for you to know is that I would die for England. ’

Joyce holds her face in his hands close to his. ‘I’ll tell you something. When I was at university I was fascinated by a woman lecturer. I wasn’t *attracted* to her, but I encouraged her to seduce me. That’s how I am about you, fascinated, intrigued, flattered, and I don’t want you to stop wanting me. The trouble is I enjoy watching you want me. It’s a cruel streak in me and I can’t shake off. It’s like a scene from that Greta Garbo film, *Mata Hari* - have you seen it? She falls for a man and her infatuation leads to her downfall ... There, have I broken the spell? You can hate me now and be free if you want.’

‘Don’t be silly, you know how I feel, I won’t stop loving you that easily.’

‘You’d be better being my protégé not my lover. Mata Hari - she was so mysterious, an enigma. ’ Joyce says, taking his hands off her.

‘Don’t talk like that, I’m not a girl in a film, I’m real, so what’s stopping us? I don’t care if you don’t love me - yet. We could keep it a secret, like your little secret about being American. No one needs to know. We could be Black House’s secret.’

He shakes his head. There’s the clatter of typewriters, staff working into the night, and outside a guard dog barks. Freda drinks her whiskey, looks at herself in Joyce’s mirror and thinks she’s become too thin.

‘There are no secrets in Black House, so if we were lovers everyone would know about us, even my fiancée. Everyone keep a constant watch on me, but I know what they’re up to; and Bracken, he’s sleeping with more than one girl in here.’ Joyce takes the glass from her. ‘I

will stay at the top of this party and I don't want Mosley to lose confidence in me. I think you'd better go now, I have a speech to finish.'

As she walks upstairs she has an idea to make him change his mind, win him over. He won't reject her again.

## Chapter 9

### Secrets

Struggling to cope with flurries of rain I found the weight of the bike pulling me over. Near the end of the Great North Road, numb from side-winds, I stopped to clean dirt off my goggles. A lorry skidded past covering me with mud. Feeling around in my motoring coat for the map, I squinted through the drizzle, traced a finger down the cloth page. Kick-starting the BSA and driving through monotonous suburbs, I approached inner London, its buildings blackened by smoke. I'd been to London for the AAA Championships with the Staffordshire team, but that had been on a motor coach so I didn't know the way. I was missing training and risking injury; but I was resolute, I had to bring Freda home.

I'd been told the BUF headquarters were near to Chelsea Barracks and followed an army wagon along the Embankment into the Kings Road. Changing down, I stopped the bike outside the gates of a rambling stone Georgian building with a steeply pitched roof and mock-Tudor chimneys. I had taken the trouble to look up details of the property in Stafford library so I might recognise it. The former Whitelands House was a teacher's college, set up in 1841 "to produce a superior class of parochial schoolmistresses." In 1874, William Morris and Sir Edward Burne-Jones, leaders of the Pre-Raphaelite artistic Movement, designed the windows and fixtures for the new chapel. It is incongruous how the Church of England could allow itself to sell the college to a bunch of Nazis. What was the Church thinking of to permit it to be desecrated like this? I had read that John Ruskin, the writer, who had been a great supporter of Whitelands, had instigated a May Day ceremony in the 1880s. What would he have thought about the genteel women's college becoming a barracks for thugs?

I propped my bike on its stand and looked over the wall. It reminded me of Stafford Prison, an impenetrable, decaying fortress, with rolls of barbed wire, sentry boxes, and iron bars on windows. Its grey stone battlements were sullied with London grime; the only building of merit being the chapel with its square tower, but behind it stood another lopsided building with a warped slate roof. There was enough work for years for me to put this place right; stone masons like me hate to see buildings deteriorate like that. The splendour of the old college had been replaced with a building with all the mystique of an abattoir.

On the boundary wall Whitelands College was rubbed out and above it scratched, Black House- BUF- Trespassers, Keep Out. The flash insignia of the British Union of Fascists had been etched crudely into the stonework, red paint splattered down the wall and road by demonstrators.

My throat was dry, my tongue swollen, so when a sentry asked me my business I could only stammer my sister's name and said I needed to see her.

'You can't come in here without an identity card or invitation, chum, go away and get authority.' The sentry tapped his baton against his thigh. I leaned against the wall.

'I'm not going anywhere until I've seen my sister.'

The sentry laughed, kicked a stone. 'A supply lorry will be along in a minute and if you don't move on it'll mow you down. What do you want with your sister anyway?'

I pulled a dog-eared photograph out of my coat pocket and showed the sentry a picture of mother lying in bed.

'It's her mother; she's on her last legs. I've come to ask my sister if she will go up and see her.'

The sentry glanced at the picture. 'What's your sister's name did you say?'

'Freda.'

'We've been told the reds will do anything to get in here, even lie about their mothers.'

I shook my head, told the sentry I was sincere. He shivered, his trousers soaked from persistent rain. He had sunken cheeks, a cold greyness in the face, and he must have been on duty for hours.

'I'm telling you the truth. If you can get a message to Freda, I'll make it worth your while. I'll give you a pound now and another pound if you can bring me more news.' I pulled out my wallet and retrieved a grubby pound note and waved it at him. His eyes came alive at the sight of money.

'I can't leave my post now, I'd get shot ... All right mate, you wait here, I'll try to find her. What was her name again?'

After ten minutes he returned, 'Sorry mate, she's gone away. The lads say she was last seen going out of the front entrance with a suitcase, but Mr Joyce wants to see you. He's a commander in here, and he's instructed the staff to report back with anything to do with Mrs Bithel. I've been told to take you into Black House to see him. Now then, where's my pound?'

I was shown into an untidy, damp office, paper peeling off its walls. A thickset man with a large scar across his left cheek sat behind a desk.

'Good evening, Mr Cotton, sit down, I'm Joyce, take off your wet coat.' There was a pause while he looked me up and down. 'Freda's mentioned you. You're the racer aren't you - the young brother? How old are you, seventeen? I don't know how you boys can hold a bike

upright round a hair-pin' He noticed my hands were trembling slightly. 'Don't look so worried, Tom, relax, I'm a friend of your sister's. She's done sterling work here. She said you were considering joining us?'

'Sorry, I have considered and rejected the idea. By the way, I'm *John* Cotton, Freda's older brother, not the motorcycle racer. I've borrowed one of Tom's bikes to ride down here to persuade my sister to go home; her mother's ill and wants to see her.'

'Sorry to hear about your mother.' Joyce sighed, lifted a foot, and leaning back in his chair stuck it on the top of the desk. 'You're the runner aren't you? I've heard about you, you're promising, chance of making the Olympics?' He put his hands behind his head. 'There's a problem - you see we don't know where Freda is. A couple of days ago she simply disappeared. Are you sure she hasn't made her way back home? She went away without telling us where she was going. It's a mystery. She hasn't gone back to Bithel has she?'

'Ray's not heard from Freda since he left here. He's very upset. A friend, Bevan, has picked up his car, but Freda wouldn't speak to him. That was a week ago.'

I despised Joyce at first sight. He wasn't interested in Freda, only interested in her gossiping about what might be going on in Black House. 'Did Freda leave any clue to where she's gone?' I asked, trying to control my anger.

Joyce pulled his leg off the table and searched in his desk drawer. 'Just this,' he said, pushing a letter across the desk towards me. It was Freda's handwriting,

*To William; I'm going away for a short time. It's in the interest of the Party. I am going to serve it and do some good work. You will be proud of me. I can't tell you what I'm doing yet, but you will be proud of me. xx Freda.*



Joyce took the note back. 'She's impulsive, only eighteen and she has a few wild ideas. She sauntered in here last week, threw herself in the chair, said she wasn't doing enough for the Party. Biting her nails, shaking, she told me marches and speeches weren't enough and she wanted to prove her worth. Frankly, I'm worried about what she might get up to. Some of our own boys say she'll get herself into trouble, but I like her. She's an enthusiast, dedicated.'

'What trouble? Will she get hurt?'

Joyce shrugged, swivelled a paperweight on his desk around and around, 'I shouldn't think so, she might get into a bit of mischief, but I trust her, she's a good soldier bee.'

I wanted to pull the chair from beneath him but decided to ignore his arrogant opinion of Freda to get more information out of him, 'I am worried about her,' I said, 'There're things you don't know, things she doesn't know about her own family. I don't think she will be able to cope when she finds out.'

'Find out what? Family secrets, eh? How intriguing. You're being dramatic now; isn't she old enough to make her own mind up what she wants to do? Look, if she comes back I'll let her know you've been.'

I could no longer control my feelings and stood up and grabbed my coat.

Joyce stood, came over and patted me on the shoulder like a schoolboy. 'You're knackered, lad, you'd better sleep in Freda's room tonight. I'll write you out a pass. Get some grub in the refectory, but when you find her tell us straightaway won't you?'

I was escorted up to Freda's room. It was as if she'd left in a hurry, a few clothes dumped inside the wardrobe, a picture of her taken in uniform giving a Roman salute. Looking closer, Joyce was in the background looking on. Searching through Freda's

belongings, I found Freda's crumpled wedding certificate in the bottom drawer of the dressing table and one of my running medals on a blue ribbon. There was a party newspaper on the floor with a picture of Freda in a peculiar black dress with the headline, 'Wedding bells at Black House'.

I ate in the canteen, kept myself to myself, went back, lay on Freda's bed, closed my eyes but couldn't sleep, tried to put her out of my mind, re-read mother's letter. The letter and my subsequent discussions with mother had changed the way I feel about the world, changed my perceptions. Learning about my heritage was like was one of those times when everything seems clearer. Things I'd not noticed before seemed vivid, understandable. I'd focussed on things around me, the criss-cross pattern on the wood-block flooring, the opalescent shine on a silver cup, the crease in my best suit. It was like putting on glasses for the first time, blurredness disappearing in an instant. It was like seeing for the first time fine detail in a painting, the warmth of sunny days captured in a glowing fire. Mother had opened my eyes to who I was. I had discovered my birthright, but as I lay on Freda's bed the sense of euphoria I'd felt evaporated.

I folded the letter, found a torch, and after midnight explored the lower reaches of the Black House. Dank rooms, dark corridors, damp walls, echoes, shouts, cellars stinking of urine. I shone my torch at a cellar door, *Punishment Room* scrawled on it. To my surprise the door was open. There were manacles, chains and sticks on the floor but no evidence of them being used. Dust from the crumbling walls made me sneeze. Terrified I'd be discovered I made my way back to Freda's room, just avoiding the guards.

I left at first light, showing the letter of permission from Joyce to get me out. After a fruitless day visiting hospitals and police stations I rode north, scared I would never see Freda

again. I went straight to see mother; to find out more about her past, and to tell her I understood everything.

## Chapter 10

### Gladiators

Joyce speaks from a makeshift podium surrounded by a rump of standard bearers holding BUF flags. His supporters have made their way to Hackney town hall to listen to their new prophet, but marauding groups of socialists jostle and heckle, infiltrate like rats coming out of holes.

Despite being in the middle of the crowd, Freda can hear Joyce's voice singing like a tenor at the top of his range; resonant, clear, persuasive. Britain needs Joyce to bring control to this lawless country. Here he is, suave, shoulders back, his voice soaring above the chorus, passionately defending British farmers against cheap imports, warning us that Jews, leeches on the poor, are flooding cheap goods into Britain. Not just an orator, Joyce is a gladiator up there, sparring, jabbing, upper-cutting, so when a heckler calls him a "fascist bastard," his knock-out reply is to say, "give my regards to our mother."

Hemmed in by a burly socialist, Freda gropes for her knife but it's slipped out of its sheath during the struggle. As the crowd pitches forward the man is tossed aside.

Blackshirts cheer, Communists taunt, and police struggle to divide the warring groups. Not wearing uniform so she can slip through the crowd unnoticed, Freda breaks cover, loses self-control, calls the enemy 'scum,' picks up a stone and hurls it at a pack of them. The multitudes are driven leftwards and she's pushed onto the town hall steps away from the enemy. Losing a shoe she sits down to put it back on.

Reaching the climax of his speech Joyce stands defiantly, hands on his hips like Signor Mussolini, while loyal Blackshirts shove back the opposition, the biff-boys going in wielding batons and kicking out with their hob-nailed boots.

On the other side of the steps Freda notices Joyce is ushering Margaret White away from trouble. If only the Reds could get to her, she can't possibly love Joyce as much as me, she thinks. Placing a comforting arm around White, Joyce guides her away in such an unwarranted display of public affection, Freda is compelled to shout 'whore,' but her voice is lost in the melee. Leaving the skirmishing behind she escapes down a side street, rests against a wall to get her breath back, and seeing a Lyon's Tea House, goes in and sits down at the same table as a commie. He's definitely a communist because he is wearing a red scarf around his neck.

'Do you mind me joining you? I hate sitting alone.'

'Of course; you look out of sorts, been in the protest?'

'Yes, quite a battle, it's winded me.'

'Have some cake and tea?'

'Oh rather,'

'I'm David.'

'Margaret White,' she says, taking off her hat and gloves and hanging her coat on the back of the chair. Glancing round, the café's empty. Hot tea brings colour to her cheeks.

'I'm ravenous, first food I've had all day,' he says, scooping a second forkful of omelette into his mouth before he's finished the first.

Bushy eyebrows which need trimming, a curious red-tinged skin like a cider drinker, he's a queer fish. She warms her hands round her cup of tea, while he eats, sits back and stares at her.

Street fighters rush past the window, too preoccupied with getting home to be tempted into the café. It's like watching a Soviet film about the revolution; men hobble past, blood oozing from heads, a woman limps by shouting out for help. Two policemen drag a protester away between them. Watching, detached, nonchalant, Freda sticks out an elbow, leans her chin on her hand. Behind her, the café owner offers a commentary,

'First the Blackshirts then the Reds gained the upper hand, then the Police got in the middle of 'em and beat 'em back with truncheons... it was a spectacle.'

Rain, crimson as blood in red lamplight, the yellow sky with storm clouds like sizzling fat; there's a scraping of plates as the proprietor cleans away a day's waste. David wipes his plate with a slab of bread and swigs down his tea. The café owner tunes in the radio; an announcer's voice waltzes as he introduces *Saturday Night is Music Night*, and a soothing melody bleeds from the wireless. Pushing his plate aside, David wipes his hands on the side of the tablecloth.

'Look's as if we've won this one; the Nazis are on the run. It's a famous victory. You ought to have seen me smack one of those biff-boys on the chin; keeled over and didn't get up,' he says, jabbing his left fist and giving her a toothy grin. Offering her a cigarette, they smoke and a capriccio nocturne on the wireless lulls them into a reflective mood. As the tune peters away, and cheered by her companionship, David begins a long story about how he joined the communists after reading about state co-operative farming systems; rambles on how his best friend has been beaten up by Mosleyites, how the British press have

misrepresented Russia. His voice races faster and louder. She listens until it he runs of out things to say, and orders more tea, moves his seat closer.

‘How many marches have you been? You seem too calm for this to be your first rally.’

‘At least a dozen, I’m what you call an old hand. What about you?’

‘This is my second. The last one was bloody awful. I was coshed on the head and I vowed to come back and give a fascist a bloody nose, and that’s what I’ve done.’

Yawning, she puts on her hat, searched her purse to pay for the tea. David pulls out half a crown.

‘I’ll pay for yours, put your money away.’

‘Thank you, you’re too kind.’

Waving over the proprietor, he gives him half crown. She notices David has a bruise budding under his left eye. So, he didn’t come out of today without scars.

‘Which way are you going home, are you taking the tube?’

‘Oh, I’m from Kent,’ she replies, looking at her watch. ‘Gosh, I’ve missed my last train. Damn it ...I’ll have to book into a hotel. Can you recommend one? I’m really stuck.’

‘If you’re stuck, comrade, you can stay at my place,’ he whispers so quietly she can hardly hear him.’ It’s safe, don’t worry – I’ll be a perfect gentleman ... You’ll save yourself a packet. Hotel prices are daylight robbery in London.’

Taking her coat from the back of the chair she puts it on, grins at him, screws up her face and giggles. ‘Won’t your wife mind? She’ll be proper upset if you turn up with another woman.’

‘Oh no, I live alone, separated. I haven’t seen her for over a year. She’s taken the boy. He’s only six and he knows the alphabet and six times table. Of course, I miss him, but I don’t miss her.’

‘Clever boy ... Look, it’s good of you to offer me a bed. It doesn’t sound proper. I don’t know if I should. I couldn’t possibly ...’

‘It’s the least I can do for a comrade who’s in a fix.’

‘Aren’t you at work tomorrow?’

‘I’m at the East India docks, not due on until two tomorrow afternoon, so you can stay and not worry about getting up early. If I can’t help a comrade in need ...’

‘Well, if you’re certain I’m not going to be in the way, I accept ... but separate rooms please, I’m not that sort of girl, you understand,’ she says, offering him her hand to shake on it. He hesitates, stretches out a clammy hand and squeezes hers.

It’s quieter around the town hall as they manoeuvre through broken glass and stones. Blackshirt and Communist pamphlets blow together like ragged flags and snag against railings. Hackney Town Hall, with its new white walls, glistens in the rain, Union Jacks flap in the gathering wind. Theatregoers brave the weather, dribble in ones and twos inside the terracotta Hackney Empire. David marches along, Freda struggling to keep up, so she links arms and they plummet into the tube station, sit in silence on the train, gaze at the overhead map. Counting stations, listening to the drone of the engine, she closes her eyes, drifts to sleep. When he shakes her she’s in the middle of a dream, her father shouting at her, so when



he takes her hand and leads her off the train, she doesn't notice which station it is. Following him like a sleepwalker up the steps, rain seeps into her eyes and splashes her awake.

It doesn't take them long to reach David's flat. There's no electricity, only an old gas mantle which he lights and turns the room mustard yellow. Stepping out of her wet shoes, she takes a deep breath and pinches her nose when a nasty smell of sweaty clothes and damp linen overwhelms her. She takes off her hat and coat, unpins her hair, shakes it free and accepts his offer of a towel to dry herself. Rainwater trickles down her arm, so unbuttoning the sodden sleeves on her blouse, she rubs her face. The communist, watching her intently, is still wearing his overcoat.

'It's not much, but it's home. What do you think of these?' he says, pointing to a poster on the wall of young men with angular, hard faces. They're holding huge iron tongs carrying hot ingots, and daubed at the bottom is a jumble of letters she can't understand.

'Russian sailors gave it to me in exchange for a pair of shoes. They're steel workers. Wonderful aren't they? I'm not sure what the writing says.'

Sniffing and nodding she interrupts, 'Do you have a drink, something to warm us up?' Looking about, there's a six headed candlestick like the Jews have dominating the mantelpiece, and like an old cobweb on the tablecloth is a woven Star of David.

Taking off his coat, he rummages through his cupboard, comes back with a bottle of sherry, pours drinks into two teacups, gestures towards a chair. Swallowing it like medicine, it burns her throat, eases her nerves, but as he lights the gas fire, the sudden stink of gas forces her to hold her nose again until he manages to get the thing lit. No heat seems to come out of it, and thinking it's gone out and they're going to be poisoned, she covers her mouth. In

the dim light she can see the outline of a single bed in the next room. Accepting a refill she drinks another sherry in one gulp.

‘I saw you looking at the bedroom. You can have my bed if you want and I’ll sleep on the floor. You have my promise I won’t come in....’

‘No thanks, I’ll sleep here on the floor, just give me a spare pillow ... I don’t know about you but I’m shattered ... Please excuse me, I’m nodding off.’

Going into his bedroom, he returns with a damp pillow. He finishes his drink, makes excuses, goes into his bedroom and shuts the door. She pokes around through letters on the mantelpiece, discovers he’s called David Isaacs, and she spots his Communist Party membership card. Swigging back more sherry, she turns off the gas mantle, lies down, sleeps like a dog curled up on a mat and dreams of Joyce.

When she awakes her left shoulder’s sore as hell. Stretching, and hearing the kettle whistling on the gas ring she sits up. He’s scraping burnt toast with a knife and stops to heave open the window to rid the room of smoke. Standing up, her feet stick to the lino where she’s spilt sherry, and it’s cold, so reaching for her coat and sitting down she pulls it over herself to keep warm. A heavy object in her coat pocket rubs against her knee. Remembering what it is, she gently walks her fingers inside her coat to it as if it’s an insect that’s going to sting. She foragers for the handle, sits up straight, hatches the gun from her pocket and rests it on her lap to check the safety catch is on.

‘Bloody hell, where did you get that?’

‘From a good comrade.’

‘Why do you need a gun? You scare me holding that thing.’

'It's for self protection, – against the Blackshirts.'

'Self protection? Does the Party know?'

He picks up the kettle, fills the teapot, closes the window ... 'A gun, you're having a prank. Very funny.'

Freda dances with the handle so he can't snatch it. 'I've told you, it's for self-protection. I don't let anyone touch it.'

He offers her tea; she refuses, smooths the barrel of the gun with her left hand. Taking a step back she lifts the gun, leans back against the wall.

'I know it's only a toy, but don't wave it at me like that.' He's dressed in a clean white shirt, black working trousers, clean shaven, his hair, thinning on top, is brylcreemed back. He's almost handsome. Sitting on a stool, he pours tea into a cup, his hand shaking so much he has to put the cup down.

Clicking off the safety catch she points the gun in his direction.

'I've told you; don't point that thing at me. I didn't make a pass at you last night. You look at me as if I've raped you' His voice rattles and trying to distract her, he lifts a box of pamphlets down from the tallboy, shows her yellowing pictures of Karl Marx and places them onto the table like playing cards for her to inspect.

'Here, put the pillow behind your back Margaret,' he says, lifting the pillow from the floor and trying to shove it behind her back. It smells of brylcreem and sweat.

With venom in her voice, she orders, 'Put it down,' so he backs off, turns up the gas fire, stares at the gun.

When he calls her, 'Margaret,' she's forgotten it was the name she's given him at the tea house. There are footsteps. He tells her it's his neighbour going to work. It goes quiet again, only the hiss of the gas mantle breaks the silence, and when the rain stops, sunlight the colour of stewed tea strains through the window, warms her up. She smells cologne on him, wonders how his wife put up with the stink. He laces, unlaces his hands, presses his lips together. Freda thinks about David's son, whether he misses his father.

'I want you do to exactly as I say. We'll play a game. The way you looked at me in the café yesterday, you wanted me, didn't you? Well, you can have me,' she says without emotion. She throws the coat from her lap, stands to pull her knickers off, sits again, opens her legs wide, points the gun at him again.

Sprawling on his seat, he gutters, 'You want sex and point a gun at me. What is this sick game? I can't work you out. I behaved properly last night, never came near.'

Turning the palms of his hands towards her, he pleads, 'Please go, I'll give you money. Go now, before that thing goes off. I don't want sex.'

'I want you to enjoy it. Go and lie on your bed, take off your clothes now. If you don't undress now I'll have to shoot you. Enjoy the game. As long as you play it you won't get hurt. Take off your clothes.'

He undresses, stands naked with his hands shielding his penis. She orders him into the bedroom and she hears him fall on the bed, its springs grinding like a butcher's bacon wheel. Freda undresses, stands naked in sunlight allowing it to warm her back. She picks up the pillow, places the gun behind it.

'Close your eyes, relax and enjoy it,' she coaxes from the other room.

He opens his eyes as she enters the bedroom and lies on his back, his flabby stomach wobbling. Holding the pillow in front of her body like a flower, she smiles, inches towards him. He takes a deep breath, his mouth goes dry, his hands stiffen as clay.

‘I told you to shut your eyes, don’t spoil the game.’

‘Sorry. Look, if you want sex you can have it, where’s the gun?’ He closes his eyes, waits for her to stretch her body on top of his.

She lifts the pillow, hovers it over his head. He groans, shifts around on the mattress when her breasts touch his chest. Taking them in both hands, he moans, ‘You didn’t need to threaten me. I’ll do anything you want.’

In the small space she had to play with, she places the pillow over his head, kneels and with left hand pushing his chest, lifts the gun, places the muzzle against the pillow and pulls the trigger. The recoil knocks her backwards. Regaining her balance and kneeling again on the bed, she drops the gun. Feathers drift around, stick to her breasts and fingers like tree pollen, stick to the back of her throat. Wiping his blood from her breasts she notices the only noise she can hear is the hiss of the gas fire.

Thinking of Joyce, she feels he has pulled the trigger for her, and he will tell her what to do next. She remembers how calm Joyce was at the rally against the sneering and booing communists, but he stood firm, never flinching when they threw stones at him.

Clenching her trembling hands, unable to decide what to do next, the sun burns her back through the window, drops of sweat drip off her but she still shivers. The sensation of cold and burning reminds her of the village bonfire one freezing November, her face burning as she faced the fire, her back freezing from icy winds. Wishing she could burn David’s body on

a bonfire, and be rid of it, she inspects him, waits for him to sit up and cry out, but he's perfectly still, his body like the carcass in a butcher's shop, a hole in the side of his head masking he had ever been David Isaacs. She places her hand on his penis but it is cold, and turning, she wipes her sticky hand on her thighs.

When she was five, her mother used to walk her into Eccleshall to the butchers. She could smell the cows, hear them bellow before the butcher's son killed them in the abattoir next door. She remembers, when the killing stopped, she heard the boy brushing and swilling away the blood. The splash of water, jangling of the bucket, and swishing of the broom comes back to her as she gazes around the bloody room. 'David?' She thinks she's heard him speak, but it's only the gas fire hissing again.

She crawls over, turns off the fire to stub out the noise. Her clothes are lying in the middle of the room but she's too shaky to put them on. There's a photograph of David with a boy on the mantelpiece. His son? He's a thin child with sunken, unhappy eyes. She turns the photograph round to face the wall.

Thirsty, she takes a swig from the sherry bottle, drinks again, the alcohol shrivelling her insides, then, feeling giddy, she lies on the cold lino and listens...

There's a knock at the door, a clanking of milk bottles. She tries not to breathe.

'Milk; you owe four weeks, Mr Isaacs.'

Waiting until he's gone, she dresses sitting on the floor, moving from side to side because she can't stand without overbalancing. Rubbing her leg with the towel, blood comes off like thick paint, and wiping her hands and legs only seems to make the colours run like a child's watercolour. Standing and picking up the kettle, she pours water onto the tea-towel and

scrubs harder to remove the stains, searches his jacket, finds ten bob, and takes three sixpences by the meter, puts the money in her coat pocket. Taking a knife, she slashes his Russian poster, picks up the gun, finds her hands have stopped shaking. The gun's still warm and she holds it in both hands like a puppy, turns on the safety catch, puts it inside her coat. Going into the bedroom she checks in the mirror her hat is on straight, and there is no blood on her face. Behind her the corpse appears to smoulder in the shadows.

It is Sunday and the streets are deserted so Freda starts walking, trips over a beer bottle, staggers on, trying to remember where the tube station is. Unable to get the image of a slaughtered pig's head out of her mind, she concentrates on the street signs, finds the tube station after ten minutes of laboured walking. A newspaper seller sits half asleep by his pile of Sunday papers. A poster reads: *Hitler's army marches into the Rhineland*. She buys a copy and waits for the next train. She can't understand what the fuss is about; the Germans are only taking back land which is theirs anyway, and throws the paper away in frustration.

Her train pulls into South Kensington. She walks up the steps, past the library. No one's about. And no one has seen her except the newspaper seller and the ticket men on the underground. If she is caught she will say the communist had taken her captive and she'd managed to break free, kill him with his own gun. No, they won't believe that if she doesn't report to the Police. She will tell no one except Joyce. Walking up the Kings Road she feels safer, shows her party membership card and goes into Black House. Inspecting herself, there's just a bruise or two where she's been flung against a wall and a few dried bloodstains. She picks feathers off her coat, considers going straight to Joyce, but decides to wash and clambers upstairs to her room. Searching for her key she remembers she'd left the door open,

remembers she will have to get her suitcase back from left luggage later. John's letter is propped up on the table.

*March 6<sup>th</sup>, 1936.*

*Dear Sis, I don't know if you are coming back to this awful place but I've left this letter in the hope you'll find it. The man called Joyce let me use your room for the night. Ray's beside himself with worry and pleaded with me to ride down to London to see if I could persuade you to come back home. He wants you to give up the Mosleyites. He's seen sense, sees them now for what they really are, a bunch of thugs. I think things will be better when you come home. Mother wants to see you. She wants to explain about the past and why she'd been secretive with us. I can't explain this now. I'm going to the police station to see if they've found you, but if I have no luck I'll ride home. We love you. Remember, if you read this letter, telephone home. We are desperate for news of you,*

*John.*

Her first impulse is to find a telephone box, speak to John. The gun is heavy in the inside pocket of her coat, and thinks if she leaves Black House now the Police will be looking for her. David Isaac's body might have already been discovered, the café owner might have given the police her description, and the milkman might have seen her leaving the flat. She can smell David Isaacs on her clothes; see his bloodstains on her blouse. She sobs, lies on the floor, closes her eyes, but his face will not go away.

There's a faint knock, so taking the gun she hides it under her coat. Rita, the girl in the next room, sticks her head round the door.



‘Heard you crying, what’s wrong? You look awful, girl,’ she says, stepping inside and helping Freda to her knees. ‘Here, let me take the weight, come on, lie on the bed.’

Doing as she’s told, Freda lies on her back and stares up at Rita.

‘Your clothes are filthy. Looks as if you have you been dragged through a hedge backwards.’

Freda rubs her eyes, kicks off her shoes. ‘Oh don’t worry about me; I got caught up in that Hackney do. I’ve only just made it back, there’s nothing to worry about.’

‘Hang on; the others saw you leaving with a suitcase. We’d thought you’d packed us in.’

‘Oh, it’s complicated. I was moving out, but I’ve changed my mind. I’ve left my things with a friend. Do you have a Players?’

Rita disappears and comes back with cigarettes. She lights one, takes a drag and hands it to Freda. ‘How did you get roughed up? You aren’t wearing uniform.’

‘No, I decided not to, gave myself away, bloody stupid of me. I’ll be all right after a good bath.’

‘You’d better report it to Neil Francis-Hawkins. He’s noting down every time someone’s roughed-up.’

‘No, I’m not telling anyone, I’m really all right, but I need to speak to Joyce. Is he in?’

‘... Look if you want my advice, I’d leave Joyce alone. The rumour is he’s thick with Marg White. It’s said there’s a wedding coming ... We know all about your trips to see Joyce. Not very discrete are you? Best leave him alone. There’re plenty of beefy chaps in here, you

won't go without ... Your marriage didn't last long did it? What was the matter? Couldn't he?  
...'

'Don't give me advice about my private life; I've heard your groans through the wall. You're not exactly an amateur when it comes to men are you?' Freda takes a hard puff on her cigarette.

Rita snatches the fag out of Freda's mouth. 'Little slut, don't tell me what to do, and by the way, you stink,' and bangs the door shut as she goes out.

Freda pulls out the gun, thinks of shooting Rita. No, she's only jealous.

Finding some old clothes, Freda goes down to the bathroom to wash. As she lies in the water she debates whether to phone John, decides she must see Joyce. After all, she's done it for him and he'll be so pleased. He will tell her what to do.

## Chapter 11

### Hiding Places

Barging into Joyce's study, Freda wraps her arms around his neck.

'It's wonderful to be back.'

He's labouring through *Seneca's Morals*, diligently using his primer to check a declension. 'I'm used to my people knocking on the door before entering.'

'Oh, so I'm *people* now. When we were making love in here, I wasn't just one of your people. Do you entertain many other *people* in here?' She says, laughing and starting to massage his back.

Smoothing down page three hundred and thirty seven he grunts with pleasure at Seneca's wit. Looking up he stands and points his pen at her, 'I've never touched you and you know it. Telling fibs doesn't impress ... We thought you'd buggered off. By the way, your highly-strung brother's been snooping around.' He picks up his book, 'Listen to Seneca, "Life is one point of flying time, and that which is to come is more mine than which is past."'

'I don't understand, you'll have to explain it one day.' Sitting down in his armchair opposite him she neatly folds her coat over her knees and declares, 'I went to hear your speech in Hackney. It was magnificent; you had them in the palm of your hand.'

'Not the Reds; they would have lynched me, but if it wasn't for the police we would have seen them off. Union ringleaders were barking orders at the lemmings ... So, you were in Hackney. Why didn't you march? Breaking ranks, eh?'

Bloodshot eyes, a mouth which sags with tiredness, a street orphan. Feeling sorry for his protégée Joyce pours her a sherry, strokes his cheek and subconsciously fingers the scar running across it. 'I'm sorry if I was abrupt, but you mustn't tell lies. I'm wound up because we're getting bad publicity from the *Mail* which has been all for us, but now they're worried about losing their fat Jewish investors ... We need the *Mail*.'

'I've done my bit and I want you to help me in return.'

'You do look shot-up girl. When I was a boy in Ireland, the IRA evicted Protestants from parts of the south, even the women ... Strange thing memory; your eyes are all puckered like a Protestant girl called Eileen I used to know. She was forced out during the civil war and looked so pitiful, trudging down the road with her suitcase ... You need to get your strength back, have a rest.' He picks up his book again and began to make notes. 'I'd love to talk another time, but I've reached a section which is very interesting. Come on, don't pull a face like that, what's the matter, have you had another tiff with lily-livered Bithel?'

Hunching forward she shakes her head, 'I'm in trouble and you're the only one I can trust, despite you cheating and having a fling with Margaret White. Yes, I know all about her ... I've done something serious.'

Head down, Joyce continues to translate the Latin into English, scribbles, smiles, says something she can't understand. She watches and waits,

'I've killed a Jew.'

Joyce glances at his Latin Primer.

'I shot him with a gun I got from one of the old army boys. I didn't think I had it in me but you helped me. I couldn't pull the trigger with him looking at me so I put a pillow over

his head so he didn't know he was going to die. If he'd have looked at me in the eye, I don't think I could have done it. I didn't feel pleased with what I did at the time, but now I'm happy, but I'm scared. I won't go to the gallows will I?'

Joyce put his pen down. 'You're fibbing again. Don't bother, it doesn't impress. Go back to Bithel and forget the crusades for a while.'

She pulls out the gun, points it at Joyce. 'Now do you believe me?' Her arm's shaking so she steadies it with other hand, and fixes her gaze on Joyce. 'I think I can shoot someone who's looking at me now.'

There isn't a flicker of fear in Joyce's eyes. She expects him to be on his knees begging for his life, but instead, he leans back in his chair. Freda thinks back to the Jew; how he'd been terrified of the gun.

“‘And we have this for our comfort too, that whosoever now fears death will some time or other come to wish it,’” he says, reciting Seneca from memory.

She takes a deep breath points the gun at the ceiling, lowers it again. With her arm steadier she puts the gun on her lap. She pulls a bloody tea towel out of her coat pocket and throws it onto the floor.

Joyce sits up straight, reaches for a glass of whiskey on his desk, drinks, put the glass carefully down. His face is white and he whispers so quietly she can hardly hear him.

“‘It is of great madness for a man to fear that which he is not to feel.’” Is that safety catch on? We don't want to disturb the other chaps do we?'

‘No, the safety catch isn’t on, but I won’t kill you, not even for sleeping with Margaret White, or for letting me go away, or for the horrible things you’ve said. You’re the only one I love, the only one I can trust ... Will you make love to me here and now?’

‘Don’t be stupid, we need to talk. Tell me, what happened, take your time.’

‘I went back to a communist’s house. He wore a red scarf. I knew he was a Jew because he had Jewish things around. He wasn’t one of those Jews in a wide hat. He looked like one of us and wore ordinary clothes. He had Russian posters on the wall. He leered at me.’

‘So, he attacked you? Was it self defence?’

‘No, I planned to kill him.’

‘You’re nuts, I can’t believe ... If you are telling the truth and you have killed this man in cold blood you’ve gone too far. We don’t teach you to kill, we teach you to defend yourself.’

Leaving the gun on the chair, she goes over to Joyce, kneels down and reaches out for his hand.

‘Get off. Don’t think you can get round me like that. This killing’s nothing to do with me or the Party. If it’s true, and I think you did kill this man, you did it because you wanted to, not because the Party ordered you That’s right, isn’t it?’

Hanging onto his arm she presses herself against him, ‘You told me we must deal with the Jews and rid ourselves of communists. That’s what you’ve been telling me since I came here. Every speech you’ve made has been to say we have to free us from the Jews. Don’t you remember? It’s the truth.’

Joyce pulls his arm away. 'Yes, I was telling the truth, but the way to power is through the demonstrations and the ballot box. Defend ourselves, yes, street protests, yes. We can't expect to win with revolution. We aren't the bloody IRA ... Where's this corpse?'

'I don't know, I went back to his flat and slept on the floor. I shot him this morning. Nobody came running when the gun went off. He lived alone, except the milkman came so I kept quiet until he went away.'

'My God, if this gets out we're sunk. You'll have to go. Nothing must associate you with me or Black House. Can you imagine the papers when they trace the story back to here? We'd lose thousands of members. They'd shut us down ... I'd be arrested. I'm sorry; we'll have to burn the records which connect you to us. You'll have to go. What about Ireland? I've a few contacts over there ... No, I don't want you to be traced back to me. You'll have to find your own hiding place.'

'I don't want to go. I want to be near you. I'll promise I'll throw the gun away. The police won't find us here.'

'Us? You mean, you! You killed him and I'm not going to take the blame.'

'But what about our struggle? You taught me how to fight. You showed me self-defence.'

'I taught you how to defend yourself, not to kill. Where's the Jew's body?'

'I've told you, I don't remember. I followed him home to a block of flats. The underground station was on the Circle Line but I don't know the name of the street. I would never find it again.'

'I'm not asking you to find it again. That would be stupid. Have you ever heard of fingerprinting?' Joyce grabs her hand and twists it. 'Have you?'

‘No, that hurts.’

He stretches her fingers apart. ‘Look, fingerprints are where you leave your grubby paw marks all over that man’s flat for the police to find and trace them back to you. I can’t believe you’ve never heard of fingerprints. Everyone has a unique set of prints.’ He pushes her away.

She looked at her hands. There was a blood blister on her thumb like honeycomb but she could still see the rings in her skin. His blood was on the tea towel, in her pocket, everywhere. ‘I’m only eighteen, I don’t know everything. Can they hang me if I’m only eighteen?’

‘The minimum age for hanging’s eighteen. You’re old enough to swing for it. Didn’t you think of all that before? What’s his name again?’

He leans over and takes her by the throat with both of his hands and presses his fingers into her neck.

‘Don’t!’ she gags.

He lets go. ‘“We are many times afraid of dying by one thing, and come to die by another.” Seneca was right.’

She takes time to catch her breath. ‘His name is, was, David Isaacs. I met him in the café near to Hackney town hall. The café owner will recognise me. I don’t know. He could have been a regular customer for all I know. Oh what have I done?’ She bursts into tears and tugs at his leg.

‘Don’t let them hang me.’

‘Hang you? I would like to dissolve you in acid so there’s no evidence left ...’

‘What about Mosley, or Francis-Hawkins, can they help?’



‘Most certainly not! They must never know. I’ve told you, I have enemies in here and they’d love to pin the blame for murder on me. They’d say I’d led you astray, made you kill the Jew ... Let me think about it? ... First, you have to get rid of that gun ... Walk over to the Embankment and throw it in the Thames, Not now, tomorrow morning at first light. Come back here at four tomorrow afternoon. Hopefully, I’ll have thought of something. Go!’

She does as she’s told; she likes to be told what to do by Joyce, but she’s confused, she expected him to be pleased she’d killed Isaacs. At dawn the following morning, she picks up her identity card, doesn’t bother to put her coat on, hides the pistol in a scarf, runs downstairs and out of the front gates. The guards don’t stop her, knowing she’s close to Joyce, his ‘bit of stuff.’

Outside the front gate, she looks out for the Police. There’s usually a pair of plain clothes men keeping a watch on Black House taking it in shifts to monitor the coming and goings, noting down car numbers and deliveries. She makes her way unchallenged, crosses the road, cuts through the side streets to the embankment. Her shoes pinch her toes and the gun weighs like a house brick. The old Chelsea Bridge is being demolished, so she’ll have to throw the gun from the Embankment. She wraps the gun in the scarf with a stone, throws the bundle with both hands into the Thames. It disappears without much of a splash, but she waits a while, watching where it disappeared.

She returns to Black House waits until four, descends to the ground floor, raps on Joyce’s door. A woman’s voice answers and she enters. Margaret White is sitting behind Joyce’s desk. She wears a cream suit, sits up straight like a headmistress.

‘Don’t look so surprised, love, did you think that I conveniently disappear every time you came to visit him? He’s told me about your little difficulty, dear. What a shame when you

were just getting your feet under the table, so to speak. Of course, I wish you'd just jumped in the Thames with that gun. You have thrown it in the river haven't you?

Freda nods, stands like a child ready for the cane.

'We're sending you away. You might never return here, do you understand? You must never talk about Joyce or Black House or anything to do with the movement.'

'What if I don't want to go away?'

'If you don't go you'll be caught by the Police, tried and hanged. You could commit suicide? In the circumstances The Party is being charitable to you. If you were a man or an older woman you'd be dead by now but Joyce wants us to save your neck. I said you should be shot. ... As you're just a slip of a girl Joyce feels compassionate. You can live, for now.'

'Where are you sending me?'

'To Germany; but you'll have to lie low until we've organised your boat. You can become a good German subject; be a good fascist. How lucky – it's better than having a bullet in the head, isn't it? Our German friends have been so helpful. Two telephone calls and we fixed it up. They were impressed when we told them what you did to the Jew. They said you have, "potential."'

Freda glares at her, wishes she had shot Margaret White instead of the Jew.