

A Plum Job

Cenarth Fox

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Reviews

Cenarth Fox tells his story with prose that carries the reader along its fluid course—often with a wry dose of humor. *A Plum Job* is a tale of two lives, one the life of a cheeky English schoolgirl, the other a bold and independent young woman who bares her breasts on stage in Paris and outwits the Gestapo. The scenes are exquisitely set and the characters fully fledged. For the fan of historical fiction, *A Plum Job* is required reading. **Scott Skipper**

A Plum Job is about passion and perseverance, about missed opportunities and great losses. Against the backdrop of a fresh world war and suspicion on both sides it is more than just a tale of a wannabe actress. The fictional tale Fox has woven through historical events is captivating and filled with drama and excitement, it's even a little bit heartbreaking to be honest. It's not 100% historically accurate but it is hard to put down all the same with a story that's filled with drama, excitement, and suspense. There are numerous surprises and unexpected things that keep you interested and engaged and it's a compelling story, you're never quite sure where it is heading but you don't mind the journey getting there. **Amy Brownlee**

I found it hard to put down. I kept getting annoyed by the thought that I was unable to discern the reality and the fictional. I found the light and shade worked very well. Reading about Plum was a pleasure but I kept laying the book aside after the Nazi episodes for a day or so of recovery. Congratulations on a job so intelligently put together. **Trevor Blum**

Throughout the story Louise is involved in dramatic performances and there are many references to well-known lines of famous plays and poems. (These I thoroughly enjoyed.) I also enjoyed the gentle humour throughout the book. The title of the book is very cleverly inserted into the closing of the story. It is well defined on the cover as a theatrical thriller, a tale of romance, death, lies and spies. **Jocelyn Grieve**

I found the book fascinating, weaving fact into an intriguing web of fiction. **Gene Swinstead**

A Plum Job by Cenarth Fox

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Chapter 1

YOU CAN BE sacked from almost any job. You can be ignored, bullied and demoted but there aren't many jobs where you can be tortured, raped and murdered.

You can in acting; in stage acting and when acting in real-life and not many of us are good at either let alone both. Louise was.

Every actor knows you can die on stage. You can dry, miss your cue or get tongue-tied. But if you're acting in real life and fluff your lines you can literally die. It's a tough gig.

In 1923 when she was four Louise Wellesley was an English version of the soon-to-be-discovered Shirley Temple and performed for her eccentric Uncle Crispin, a cat-loving, gin-soaked aristocrat.

Louise patted the cats, checked the ribbons in her hair then entertained. To her performing was like breathing. Nobody knew the source of Louise's show business gene and certainly her parents believed the stage was no place for a refined young lady.

Who could imagine that sixteen years later in a classy brothel in Nazi-occupied Paris her toddler routine would have red-blooded men drooling? But today, Louise was Shirley Temple and got to strut her stuff.

*A duck says "Quack"
A sheep says "Baa"
A happy cow says "Moo"
And after all these farmyard sounds
I'll sing this song for you.
There's a quack and a baa and a neigh and an oink
And very, very, very, long moo
But the first sound every morning
Is a cock-a-doodle-do.*

The applause sent a shiver up Louise's spine as she took a delicious bow then skipped to her mother. Always leave them wanting more. Louise Beatrice Wellesley, a.k.a. Plum, was a natural.

She was also a fighter and as a beautiful teenager clashed, politely, with her conservative father. In the 1930s many upper-class English families still had their daughters educated at home. Louise hated that.

'But Papa, young ladies go to school today. And there are such excellent teachers.'

‘She’s right, Charles,’ said Victoria. Louise’s mother supported her husband in public but spoke freely at home. The mother and daughter team won and Louise became the first Wellesley female to be educated at a public school.

At Roedean her flair for languages and drama delighted staff. The seaside setting was perfect. Rehearsing Shakespeare, Louise stood on a cliff top, shouted her lines at the English Channel and wondered what her parents would think of her love for the theatre and acting.

Papa would never approve. The very idea of his daughter having a job was unthinkable and as for working in the theatre, well, preposterous would be a mild reaction.

After Roedean, Louise went to finishing-school in France to be prepared for adult life. And after her sojourn in this stately chateau, she would return to England and remain at home until the right chap came along as approved by the pater and mater. *Damn*.

In France, Louise fell madly in love with the husband of her etiquette teacher. Louise knew Charlotte Brontë had a disastrous crush on her teacher in Belgium and pondered the etiquette of seducing the etiquette teacher’s husband.

Louise remembered her mother’s stern warnings about sex and wondered when she might encounter such situations in the flesh—so to speak.

Her fellow finishing-school students were preoccupied with marriage, body shape and clothes. The joyful exception was Matilda “Matty” Gonzales-Jones whose Spanish and Welsh parentage produced a flamboyant mixture of rebellion and *joie de vivre*. Her wild and unruly hair matched her personality and love of adventure. As a toddler her nickname was “Cheeky”. In France she perfected the art of escape and Matty and Louise spent various nights wandering the nearby town.

Midnight rambles included smoking and drinking whenever fags and wine were scrounged but their *pièce de résistance* involved “borrowing” underwear from washing lines and placing said items on headstones and statues. The locals were not amused.

One night the truants’ luck ran out. A priest with insomnia saw movement from his bedroom window. These hooligans must be taught a lesson so the man of the cloth crept into his churchyard. Silently he moved toward the unsuspecting females, their giggles mixing with the odd belch.

The priest sprang from behind a gravestone and roared. Matilda nearly died and Louise became Pip when Magwich grabbed the wee boy in *Great Expectations*; wee was appropriate.

The females were trapped as the priest railed against their sacrilegious behaviour. Mind you it did have its funny side.

First it was snowing down south as the priest's nightshirt poked out from beneath his hastily donned cassock. Then in his rage, the man of God grabbed a brassiere the girls had draped over a headstone and as he gesticulated about sin, the flying bra tended to undermine Father Indignation's indignation. But the dancing D-cups were not uppermost in Louise's mind. She thought of the shame of being expelled from finishing-school and of her parents' horror.

Matilda had no such qualms and sprang into action. Her French was passable but her acting was bold. She offered a sexual favour to the man who had taken a vow of chastity. Louise was stunned at the brazen antics of her friend. Could Matilda actually do that? And if so, when and where would it occur? Worse, was Louise part of the deal? And if the man of God declined, was there a plan B?

Matilda's plan failed, miserably. The priest's anger turned to fury as he added eternal damnation to his diatribe. Being Church of England, Louise feared expulsion rather than excommunication.

The priest stopped waving the bra. Both parties paused.

Matilda whispered. 'You kick his shins, I'll kick his balls and we'll run in different directions.' Louise shook her head. 'Got a better idea?' hissed Matty. Louise did have a better idea.

She stood and stepped forward. To her flawless French she added enough of the local dialect to be overwhelmingly convincing. The menacing priest froze. Anger drained from his body. Matilda's mouth opened and remained so. Louise's fluent French became intoxicating and was enhanced by her silky hand gestures and fascinating facial expressions. Finally her performance ended. She bowed.

The priest took a backward step. He replaced the bra on the gravestone and he too bowed. In humble tones he invited the ladies to attend his church. Mass times were listed on the board. He would be honoured to hear their confession. And with a blessing from his creator, the cleric departed. At 0232 hours Matilda closed her mouth.

'My God, Lou that was brilliant. And where did you learn to speak French like that?'

Louise took off. 'Come on,' she called and Matty gave chase.

'Slow down! Louise!' It wasn't until they scaled the school wall and crept up the vine into their bedroom that Louise explained.

'I told the priest my uncle was a Monsignor who worked for Cardinal Joyeuse in Lyon and they were considering our friendly friar for a senior position in Paris.'

‘You what?’

‘His excellent parish work has been noticed and sometime soon the Cardinal will pay our bra-brandishing brother a visit.’

‘Unbelievable, but how do you know the Cardinal?’

‘Matty, I’m C of E and wouldn’t know the cleric from Adam, but last week I read an article about some celebrated Cardinal in Lyon. If you have a good script, perform with conviction and can throw in a powerful name, some people will believe anything.’

‘Some people?’

Matty began to laugh. She couldn’t stop. So loud were her shrieks she had to pull the blankets over her head to smother her glee. Finally, when the hilarity faded, she turned to her friend.

‘And here’s me thinking sex was the key. Goodnight you crazy lady. And thanks for a wonderful, wonderful show.’

In the darkness Louise smiled. *This acting caper can come in handy.* And what a buzz she felt after a live performance. But then she thought about Matilda and her convincing cameo.

‘Matty?’

A rising inflexion from Matilda. ‘Yes?’

‘Would you really have done that to the priest?’

They started to giggle.

Louise and Matilda dreaded the end of finishing-school. They swore to keep in touch. If one was in trouble, the other would help. If one found fortune, it would be shared. They created an oath of allegiance and to respect their parents, the oath was to be declared in English, Spanish and Welsh. Choosing the English version was easy.

We swear to always love and help one another till death us do part.

The translations weren’t so easy. Louise was a linguist. Her French was fantastically fluent, her knowledge of German would pass muster in any Berlin Strasse und café and her rudimentary Spanish was acceptable. But when Matilda wrote the oath in Welsh, Louise was stumped—totally.

*Yrydym yn tyngu I garu a chymorth ein gilyydd tan marwolaeth
wneud ini ymadael.*

They sailed through the English and Spanish but ran aground with the Welsh. Matilda pronounced every syllable. Louise stumbled. Aiming for a guttural sound, she started spitting.

At first they giggled. Then they laughed. Louise spoke louder; louder still. She roared. Matilda rolled on the floor with tears streaming down her cheeks. '*Gilyydd tan marwolaeth*,' they chanted.

'How dare you!' threatened Louise. 'I would never *gilyydd tan marwolaeth* in a million years.' More shrieks from Matilda.

The cacophony was heard by the entire floor including the woman in charge of the dormitory. Normally she would have demanded silence. But as it was their final night, the unladylike pair was ignored. Most of their teachers were delighted the girls were leaving.

The young women's friendship was real. It was heartbreaking to think they may never meet again. Parents were the gatekeepers of young females from wealthy families. Soon it would be Matilda to Spain and Louise to England and ne'er the twain shall meet.

Next morning they cried, hugged and kissed. Matilda left in her chauffeur-driven vehicle and waved until she could no longer see her friend. Louise was chaperoned back to England.

Big brother Henry was waiting for her on a crowded Waterloo station. She heard him before she saw him.

'Plum!' He pushed through the crowd and hugged her. 'How's my favourite sister?'

Louise was happy. She loved her older brothers, Henry and Edmund, and reckoned if she found a husband as kind as they were she'd be truly happy. Well not completely because while marriage did have a lot going for it her heart was set on treading the boards.

On the train down to Farnham, Louise asked about Henry's career as a barrister and he asked about her feelings for Henry's chum, James "Pongo" Fingleton who was absolutely potty about her.

Louise now knew the meaning of unrequited love as she listened to her brother's enthusiastic endorsement of a man she most definitely did not want to marry. Yes he was a nice chap with perfect manners and was almost good looking but Louise had two reasons for rejecting Pongo.

First, in her he ignited no emotional electricity whatsoever and second, as Louise desperately wanted to explore life, education and the theatre, marriage was simply not an option for the foreseeable future.

Henry knew Louise was damning his friend with faint praise. Henry had a straight-shooting relationship with his sister and even though two elderly spinsters and a vicar were sharing the carriage, Henry went for the jugular.

‘So if good old Pongo isn’t Mister Wonderful, I believe as a practicing barrister, I can reasonably infer you have someone else in mind.’ Louise smiled. Henry blanched. ‘Don’t tell me you’ve fallen for some onion-clad Frenchman?’

Their fellow travellers were terrible actors. The more they pretended not to listen, the more their fascination grew. If an ear trumpet had been available, all three would have fought for first use.

Louise lowered her voice which annoyed the eavesdroppers. ‘If I tell you something, you must promise to never breathe a word to anyone.’ The tension moved up a notch. ‘I have a serious problem and need your help.’

Henry was unsure and worried and pretended to be joking. ‘You’re not angling for free legal advice I hope?’ The spinsters were agog.

Louise stared at her brother. ‘I need advice on how I should break my news to Papa.’ The spinsters held their breath. The vicar’s eyes widened.

Henry was suddenly aware their conversation was in the public domain. He edged closer and whispered. ‘Look, old girl, if it’s a female thingy, you should be tackling Mummy, not the old man. We chaps are not much chop when it comes to those things.’

‘What things?’

Louise challenged him. Henry was shocked. What had happened to his innocent baby sister? She both looked and sounded like a woman.

Henry changed the subject. ‘Did you hear old Mister McCorkingdale died?’

‘What things, Henry?’

Henry was squirming. ‘Plum! Behave!’

‘What I want to do requires Papa’s permission.’

‘You *have* fallen for a Frog.’

She was almost angry. ‘Will you stop going on about marriage! I’ve made a decision and unless Papa approves, I’ll jolly well have to leave home.’

Henry’s mind was racing. *What’s happened to sweet, little Plum? And what on Earth is this big decision?* He spoke in a gentle fashion.

‘Well, all right, tell me. I can’t advise without details.’

The train slowed as it approached Aldershot. The sisters got up to depart so Louise leant back and waited. One sister took forever to collect her things. Her sibling reprimanded her about missing their station. The suspense was killing the slow-moving sister. How could she depart without knowing Louise’s big decision? If only the sisters lived in Farnham.

They missed the second act and with the vicar now the only passenger, Henry pressed Louise.

‘Righto, old girl, what’s going on?’

Before she could reply, the vicar got in first. ‘You might be able to see the road from here.’ The smiling cleric pointed to the passing countryside. Louise and Henry were clueless. ‘*The Solitary Cyclist*,’ he said.

‘Of course,’ said a nodding Henry who turned to face his sister and resume the inquisition.

The vicar, who always sat facing the locomotive, was up for a chat. ‘It does go to prove, don’t you think, that the great man did indeed entrust some tasks to his friend?’

Henry had no idea what the priest was talking about and even less desire to chat when far more pressing matters of state were at hand. He was about to say that when Louise chimed in.

‘Ah, but was Mister Holmes entirely fair in telling Doctor Watson his work was remarkably bad?’

Henry was clueless. The vicar beamed. Here was a kindred spirit, a true believer. The priest was delighted.

‘You know I have often asked myself that very question.’ He offered his hand. ‘Stanley Tripe, vicar of St Nicholas, Chawton. I’m delighted to make your acquaintance.’

Henry introduced himself and Louise and thanked his lucky stars Farnham was the next station. But if Henry was surprised at his sister’s new-found maturity, he was amazed at her ability to discuss literature with authority. She engaged the vicar.

‘So as well as knowing about Mister Holmes and his adventure in Farnham, coming from Chawton, I deduce, sir, you must be a lover of Miss Austen’s works as well.’

The Reverend Tripe was in Earthly Heaven. Henry was in no-man’s land and as the trainspotting trees in Surrey watched the train chug by, the two literary luminaries swapped opinions on why *The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist* was one of Dr Watson’s better yarns and whether Miss Austen had ever based any of her characters on neighbours she knew in Chawton. To this animated discussion, Henry added precisely nothing.

Farnham station was reached with Henry never so keen to alight from a train. The reverend gentleman carried Louise’s case, opened the door and gave her a most wonderful blessing. He leant out of the train and the guard’s whistle was not strong enough to hide the enthusiasm in the cleric’s voice.

‘It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves.’

She smiled and called as the waving priest moved away. ‘Farewell. God knows when we shall meet again.’

Henry looked at his smiling sister and shook his head. They walked to the family home. It was no mansion but had enough grandeur to make any passing royals feel “at home” should they pop in for high tea.

As Louise and Henry wandered along a leafy Surrey lane, he was determined to discover his sister’s problem.

‘I must say, old girl, I was impressed by your knowledge of literature back there. And I never knew Sherlock Holmes came to Farnham.’

‘Oh he did indeed; both he and Doctor Watson.’

Henry was serious. ‘I wonder if the old man ever met them.’

Louise smiled inwardly. The great consulting detective had indeed become flesh and blood.

Henry was curious. ‘So how do you know so much about Sherlock, Jane Austen and the Bard? I thought finishing-school was all about flower-arranging and dinner-parties.’

Louise laughed. ‘The Law has no monopoly on books.’

‘Yes but even so, you seem to know so much for a girl.’

‘For a girl!’ Louise was indignant. It was time to tease big brother. ‘But literature is not my only area of interest. I know all about that famous Chancery case of *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*.’

Henry stopped. Louise walked on then turned to see his puzzled expression.

‘I’ve heard of that. Don’t know the exact details but ...’ He caught up with her. ‘Don’t tell me you’re also reading Law books.’

Louise grinned whilst laughing inside and, having outsmarted one of her intelligent brothers, returned to her topic.

‘If I tell you about my problem, you must promise not to be cruel or laugh.’

‘I promise.’

‘I need your advice on how and when I should tackle Papa.’

Henry looked at his serious sister. ‘I promise I won’t be cruel or laugh and will give the best advice I can.’ They stopped. The pause lingered before Louise spoke.

‘I want to go to Cambridge.’

Henry blurted his immediate response. ‘But you’re a girl.’

Instantly Louise slapped her brother’s arm, hard. The siblings froze. Louise had slapped both her brothers before, many times, mainly when she was a child, to stop them tickling her, but this was like no other time. This was a slap of anger, frustration and disbelief.

Louise was immediately upset. She hugged her brother. This was tricky as he held Louise's case plus his own bag and briefcase.

'Henry, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me.'

Henry struggled with bags and a hug. 'Only if you let go,' he said.

She slowly released her hug. He smiled and she smiled then launched back at him. He let her cling to him before he finally spoke.

'So you want to go to Cambridge?'

She released him staring into his eyes. 'More than anything else.' She took her case from Henry. 'I can make my own way in this world, sir. Anything you can do, I can do better.'

He nodded. He knew she was no longer his "baby" sister. They resumed their journey. Louise spoke.

'I'll understand if you don't want to help but I do value your advice. You know Papa. I have a plan and ...'

'He'll never agree.'

Louise felt a pang of sadness. She longed for the slightest crumb of encouragement or, better still, some practical advice. It was too much to hope Henry would support her. Her only hope was her mother. She would calmly explain to Louise's father how times had changed, that Cambridge now welcomed female students and that Louise had a glowing report from Roedean.

'I'm going to ask him, Henry and I'd greatly appreciate your advice on when I should do so. Is there a good time? Can I soften him up first?' She paused. 'Will you support me?'

'I just don't want to see you disappointed.'

'So is that a *yes* or a *no*?'

They stopped. 'I'll help you on one condition.' Louise held her breath. She prayed a silent prayer. *Not Pongo Fingleton, please.* 'If Mother disapproves, you drop the whole idea.'

Louise beamed, stood on tip-toe and kissed Henry. 'Thank you, kind sir. I shall happily abide by your wishes.'

Getting into Cambridge in 1937 wasn't easy. One needed first-class results and having a title or connection to the Establishment certainly helped. But all that applied to gentlemen. Ladies were seriously handicapped.

Louise set her heart on Cambridge as a career path. By studying Shakespeare and other dramatists, she could use that training to hopefully become an actress.

She had no theatre contacts and her parents would be horrified at their daughter's thespian ambition. Louise believed studying literature and drama at Cambridge was logically her best hope.

The first female students at Cambridge in 1869 did it tough. They were not to live at the university. They had to study subjects of a lower standard than their male counterparts. They were not permitted to sit for exams. When they were permitted they could only obtain a certificate. When they could obtain a degree that did not entitle them to become members of the university. And so on.

The initial ferocious opposition to female students had faded by the 1930s but Louise knew her stumbling-block would be Papa.

After a tearful reunion with her parents, brother Edmund, Mrs Crossley the cook and Horatio the dog, Louise went to her room. Henry had promised to warn Edmund of the possible future fireworks. Louise needed to speak to her mother alone. Getting her support was essential. With Mummy's blessing, Henry and Edmund would swing in behind leaving Papa alone in his opposition.

Not that that meant anything. It wouldn't be three votes for Louise and one against; ipso facto Louise is off to Cambridge. No, Father's word was law.

There was a knock and Louise's mother entered. Victoria and Louise were a glowing example of the claim that the most powerful of relationships is between a mother and her daughter. They thought as one, loved each other deeply and even looked alike. Both had blue eyes and neither had need of make-up as their natural beauty shone.

'My darling girl, I have missed you so much.'

'I'm so happy to be home, Mummy.'

They sat on Louise's bed. Her heart beat faster. Louise had the words rehearsed. *Mummy, I want to study at Cambridge.*

Louise knew her mother would be realistic and rather than discuss Papa's intransigence, would talk about how to win his blessing. For Louise this was one of the happiest times of her life. She was about to speak when Victoria raised a hand. Louise knew this sign. Be still and listen. A knot formed in her stomach.

'My darling, I have sad news.'

Louise barely breathed. Sad news is terrible but when unexpected it's worse. It was like a powerful surprise punch.

'Your Papa is not well.'

Louise was crushed. She knew this was her mother being gentle, preparing her for something far worse. Her father didn't have a cold or a sore thumb. And in that instant, Louise's dream vanished.

‘Is he dying?’ she whispered.

‘He’s been unwell for weeks and last month went up to London for tests. The doctors believe his war wounds have weakened his heart. He has chest pains and is taking tablets. I’m telling you this, my darling, because I know you would want to know.’

‘Of course I want to know,’ cried Louise.

Victoria squeezed her daughter’s hands. ‘Be brave my darling and as I’ve always said, live every day to the full.’

Louise tried to smile through her tears.

‘I haven’t told the boys yet so please don’t mention anything until I do. And there’s no need to treat Papa in any different way. The only thing I would ask is that you do nothing to upset him. But as you never do, it’s silly to even mention it.’

They hugged and Louise believed her Cambridge dream was dead.

‘Now,’ said Victoria, ‘we need to discuss the *débutante* ball. I’ve collected a few magazines with some simply gorgeous gowns.’

The next few days were pure misery for Louise. Only Henry knew of her Cambridge dream and once he’d heard the health news about the old man, waited till he and Louise were alone.

‘Bad luck old girl but maybe it’s all for the best. He would have said *no* anyway.’

Chapter 2

IN GERMANY cousins Max and Kurt Hartmann were catching up in a Berlin coffeehouse. Max was a soldier and Kurt a policeman. “Ripe for promotion” was an apt description of both these dashing, young men. If the police or army wanted photogenic poster boys to boost recruiting, the Hartmann cousins would have made the final cut.

They saw less of each other these days with Max serving in Lower Saxony and Kurt in the capital.

Max was always curious. ‘So cousin, what wonderful feats of bravery have the police been up to this month? Have you moved on from petty criminals to joining the Nazis in harassing innocent elderly citizens?’

Kurt hissed. ‘Keep your voice down. Good Germans have been arrested for a lot less. Besides the Führer does have his good points.’

Max snorted. ‘I joined the army to defend our once mighty nation, not to help some warmongering lunatic.’

Kurt knew they were drifting apart and defended his beliefs. ‘You know I’m not a Nazi but look at the drop in unemployment. Millions of Germans are back in work. We have magnificent autobahns and great German engineering. Hitler has restored national pride.’

Kurt’s politics had veered to the right.

‘National pride is fine,’ said Max, ‘but at what cost? You remember Herr Bruckner, that superb watchmaker our fathers went to every Christmas?’ Max pushed back his cousin’s sleeve to reveal a favourite timepiece. ‘That magnificent watch came from Herr Bruckner. He disappeared.’

Kurt shrugged. ‘So?’

‘So?’ Max was angry. ‘I went to his shop and there was some incompetent Nazi in charge. The truth strikes home, Kurt, when the people we know are being dragged from their beds and taken away, God knows where, with their home and business gifted to the Reich. It’s happening to people we know.’

The atmosphere grew frosty. ‘You have a short memory,’ replied Kurt. ‘Remember our proud fathers after the war? They came home humiliated. They survived horrendous trench warfare to be struck down by shame. But Hitler’s changed all that. The man you call a “warmongering lunatic” has made Germany and its people prosperous and proud.’

Max was worried. Some of what Kurt said was true. But their relationship was definitely changing. Max continued.

‘I fear for our future, Kurt. I know from personal experience there are massive rearmament projects going on all over Germany. If ever there is another war ...’

Kurt scoffed. ‘There won’t be another war. The British and French aren’t stupid. They see our booming economy and magnificent Wehrmacht. Germany will never be humiliated again.’

There was a pause. They were not used to arguing and certainly not over politics. They’d been close as children and their family ties were still strong. Max changed the topic of conversation.

‘So how are your parents and dear sisters?’

Kurt wanted to keep talking politics but a scuffle began in the street. The shouting grew louder. The cousins moved quickly.

Two men were being arrested by some of Kurt’s colleagues. Two citizens against four policemen was an uneven match until several women joined the fray. They grabbed the police causing them to pay less attention to the men being arrested who in turn fought back. The police began to struggle.

Kurt ran to the melee, drew his pistol and whipped a woman’s face. She screamed and fell. The other women bent to help her and the police dragged away the two arrested men.

Kurt replaced his pistol, adjusted his uniform and turned. All he saw was his cousin’s back as Max strode down the street.

Oberst Hans Reidle was a Wehrmacht officer admired by all. He was turning sixty and Max Hartmann was invited to his commanding officer’s birthday party.

The atmosphere was relaxed and Max felt a sense of pride mixing with his fellow professional soldiers. Reidle tapped his glass bringing instant silence.

‘Gentlemen, thank you for your attendance. I must say turning sixty is not nearly as satisfying as turning fifty but much nicer than turning seventy.’ Everyone laughed. ‘But I have a confession. I’ve invited you to not only celebrate my birthday but to consider a plan I’ve thought long and hard about for some time. It concerns the future of the Fatherland.’ You could almost touch the silence.

‘I know as professional soldiers you share my love for our country.’ He raised his glass. ‘Gentlemen, to Germany.’

Every man toasted the land of their birth. But there was tension in the room. Reidel was silent as if reluctant to speak. The pause seemed endless. When he continued his voice was wavering slightly as he battled his emotions.

‘Gentlemen, it’s obvious our great nation is being prepared for war. We see this massive build-up in arms. We play war games and read or hear the threats of aggression made by our political masters. Everything points to warfare.’

Max felt his heart-rate increase. This was not a relaxed and informal party. This was serious; no *dangerous*. Reidel continued uninterrupted.

‘Having seen the horrors of the last conflict, I pray it never happens again. If it does, we soldiers know it will be catastrophic. We know the destructive power of our modern planes, ships, subs and tanks. Any future war will be disastrous even for the victor.’

Reidel paused. Nobody knew what to say. Reidel seemed to be waiting for someone, anyone to respond.

His close friend, Major Bayer broke the silence. ‘Begging Herr Oberst’s pardon, but are you saying Germany’s re-armament is a bad thing?’

Max, everyone was transfixed. The atmosphere was electric. Where was this conversation going? Reidel paused then spoke.

‘Gentlemen, a powerful nation will deter enemies and that I support. But in my opinion our present leaders re-arm not to defend but to attack. They obtained power illegally using intimidation and murder. What our leaders have done, and even to our own citizens, demonstrates what the government will do to other countries. It’s obvious the Führer intends to extend Germany’s borders by force and that action always leads to war.’

Max was perspiring. He felt trapped. He was scared with no idea what to do. His thoughts kept changing. *What are the others thinking? Is this some type of test? Should I say something? If I speak up will they see me as a traitor? If I walk out will they ostracize me? If I stay am I a co-conspirator? What the hell is happening?*

Reidel moved around looking deep into the eyes of his fellow soldiers. He stopped in front of Max but spoke to everyone.

‘Gentlemen I have a plan to save Germany from a disastrous war. All I ask is that you listen and then, if you wish no part, please walk away and we’ll never mention this gathering again. And if you do not wish to even hear my plan, please, feel free to leave and forget we ever had this conversation. Naturally I will respect your decision but I ask that you choose—now.’

Reidel turned his back and poured a drink. The room was silent, the men in shock. Max couldn't even move his eyes. He stared straight ahead. Suddenly an officer in front of him turned, brushed past him and left. Two others followed; then another. Max saw his chance. His mind screamed, *Go now. Now!* But something kept him rooted to the spot. Finally Reidel turned, smiled and spoke.

'Thank you, gentlemen; now, let us eat, drink and be merry because soon we discuss my plan to assassinate Hitler.'

Kurt Hartmann remembered his father coming home from the Great War a broken man. A teenage Kurt tried to reason with him.

'But Father, why can't Germany become great again?'

'Because our leaders are fools. We should have rejected that outrageous Treaty of Versailles. Look at our country; food shortages and massive unemployment with criminals running amok.'

Kurt wanted Germany to recover so as a young man joined the police. But being a policeman in Berlin in the 1920s was tough. Germany was chaotic. Politicians and the monarchy were despised. Violent political parties thrived.

Kurt couldn't catch the crooks. Police budgets were cut to the bone. Their firearms belonged in a museum. Forensic equipment was antiquated. Criminal gangs operated with impunity. The press attacked the police for failing to arrest criminals. Kurt was depressed.

Then things got even worse. The global recession saw the already troubled German economy collapse.

At least Kurt had a job, if you could call it that. One cold Berlin morning he was on patrol when he turned a corner and saw a thief robbing a man lying on the road.

'Hey!' yelled Kurt and raced towards the thief who took off. Kurt knelt beside the victim.

'Are you hurt?'

The victim looked terrible. He was barely alive. He tried to speak but Kurt couldn't understand the pathetic creature.

'Are you in pain?'

What ridiculous questions; of course he was hurt and in pain. The victim summoned his last ounce of strength.

'Food,' he gasped then groaned and died.

This was a first for Kurt. He'd seen dead bodies before but nothing like this. Right in the heart of the magnificent city of Berlin a man died of

starvation—in the street! Kurt hated his job and with good reason. He was living in Hell.

Unemployment exploded, crime boomed and people died of starvation—again, even in the streets. Berlin and Germany were broke and broken.

Kurt and his police colleagues were helpless. Germany was in desperate trouble until the revolution began. Enter one Adolf Hitler. The National Socialists took power and thanks to Hitler, Kurt and his colleagues won the lottery.

Suddenly the police had better pay and conditions, better training, more opportunities for promotion, modern forensic equipment and the latest firearms. And it got even better.

Hitler muzzled the press ending public criticism of the police. Criminal gangs were smashed. Kurt's frustration faded and his pride in Germany grew. Everything was perfect. Well not quite.

Kurt was suddenly wary when the Nazis created a new police force, the Brownshirts. They were not your average conservative German policemen; in fact many were criminals. They bashed law-abiding citizens and trashed Jewish-owned shops with impunity. Kurt watched their mindless thuggery and did nothing. The real police had to turn a blind eye. Very few complained about or to the Brownshirts.

And if that wasn't bad enough, along came a third police force even worse than the Brownshirts. The Gestapo were the secret police and they made the Brownshirts look like choirboys. Gestapo agents arrested "enemies" of the state such as Jews, homosexuals and communists. Gypsies copped it too.

Again Kurt couldn't or wouldn't do a thing. The government made the Gestapo above the law. Criticize them and you disappeared.

So Kurt kept quiet and kept his job. And he persuaded himself that all this violence, police brutality and secrecy was good for Germany. The country's problems were so deep, radical action was justified; no pain, no gain. But deep down he was worried.

For some time he thought he was being watched and felt sick when he received a letter inviting him to a former arts and crafts building in Berlin. He had no interest in painting or pottery but knew that number 8 Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse was the headquarters of the Gestapo.

Chapter 3

IN LONDON in 1937 the débutante ball was a major event in the life of young women of a certain class. The coming-out season was highly anticipated by the débutantes and probably even more so by their mothers. Being presented to royalty gave the event, if it needed it, an added touch of class.

And just as stage mothers pushed their offspring to become stars of the stage and screen, there were many upper-class mothers who pushed their daughter's triumphant entrance into society.

Their thinking was simple. *I must allow my daughter to meet as many eligible and suitable gentlemen as possible.*

And these upper-class mothers "fought" hard to ensure their "gel" looked, sounded and moved with exquisite grace and style. The best dressmakers and the best elocution and ballet teachers were engaged. Making a curtsy to royalty required expert tuition and hours of practice.

The expression *marriage market* was outrageous but apt. As farmers fatten their livestock for market, the wives of wealthy and titled gentlemen groomed their daughters for matrimony.

Nothing was left to chance. A well-arranged marriage took exhaustive planning. Like a dedicated punter, mothers noted the names of the colts drawn to race in the Débutante Stakes. These mothers discovered the form of each horse and used codes to describe the bow-tied starters.

CE (*Chaperone Essential*) or WH (*Wandering Hands*) meant such gentlemen were definitely not to be introduced to my daughter. Other codes included VSSPQ (*Very Safe So Probably Queer*) and POMBAT (*Pots of Money but Awfully Thick*).

A POMBAT created a quandary because the mother, keen on a fortune for her daughter, needed to weigh up the boredom factor. Her son-in-law's house would be substantial but Christmas dinner with His Nibs would cause even her hair to become ill.

And all this endless discussion about dress materials and design, hairstyle, gloves, jewellery and the curtsy, the smile and proper response when asked to dance was now the lot of one Louise Beatrice Wellesley. Oh bliss, oh joy.

Louise went from what she believed would be the excitement and challenge of studying literature and drama at Cambridge to the suffocating boredom of being "prepared" for marriage. But worse was the

fact that some fine gentleman would one day call with Louise the object of his affection.

How could she politely say “No”? How could she resist the gentle prodding of her well-meaning parents? How could she escape this ritual and do what she desperately wanted to do?

She couldn't offend her mother and now, could do nothing to upset her seriously ill father. It wasn't an option. She could never say the words she was thinking. *Mummy, I don't wish to attend the Buckingham Palace débutante ball. Papa, I wish to go to Cambridge.*

So she read and took the dog for long walks. She was polite and cooperative. Her parents thought that something was wrong but were in a bind. It was their duty to present their daughter to society in the way society demanded. Tradition rules.

To be fair, Louise did enjoy the elocution and curtsy sessions delighting her teachers with her winsome but powerful performances. She turned her lessons into a challenge and experimented with different moods. For one rehearsal she would be sultry and untouchable; the next her body language made her coy almost a tease. Her acting skills were honed in the least likely of places. Some girls struggled but Louise oozed confidence and her movements were rock solid yet full of grace.

Finally the day of the débutante ball arrived. Louise's father was overcome with emotion when his daughter appeared. Her beauty was dazzling and her transformation from girl to woman was breathtaking.

He wanted to tell Louise how proud he was but couldn't speak. Louise breezed towards him, kissed his forehead and squeezed his hand. Charles was dying. Nobody spoke of it. It was so quintessentially English.

Up to Buckingham Palace went Louise and her mother, to the gaiety, pomp and circumstance with the Establishment's wealth on display.

It was rude to stare but on this occasion débutantes looked over the dresses, hair and make-up of their peers. Mothers compared their daughter with other daughters. Young gentlemen, stamping the ground as feisty colts, stared intently, mentally judging which fillies they would most like to encounter in the mounting yard. Some chaps were mentally judging which fillies they would most like to mount in the encountering yard.

Louise found the dancing hard work. It seemed the skill of her parents' generation was fading. Her partners were dull even nervous. The one delightful dancer with whom she waltzed was so taken by his own image his best friend was a mirror.

It was a rotten night for Louise. It would pass and she knew she could survive but for what? No Cambridge and no theatrical career with instead

just the waiting for Mr Approved-by-Mummy to commence the mating ritual. She had the gumption to stand up to her parents but not the heart.

Heading to a powder room, Louise was stopped in her tracks. 'Well I never; Miss Louise Wellesley.'

For the first time that evening Louise felt happy. Forgetting the formal nature of the occasion, she almost ran to the speaker and kissed and warmly embraced the middle-aged woman.

One of Louise's favourite teachers from boarding school smiled and enjoyed her former pupil's greeting. Louise said, 'Miss Vestey, what a wonderful surprise.'

Elizabeth Vestey had once taught Louise both French and Drama at Roedean. The two had clicked and Louise was desperately sad when her teacher departed during Louise's final year.

Miss Vestey said, 'I might have known you would grace this occasion with your usual *joie de vivre*. So is this the prologue before you launch your brilliant theatrical career?' The look on Louise's face instantly changed the mood. 'My dear child, whatever is wrong?'

The women drifted towards a corridor away from prying eyes. They sat and Louise poured out her soul. Her dream was no more. Her life was planned in fine detail and all that remained was to find the right husband. Louise became teary.

Some say getting a problem off one's chest is good for the soul. Elizabeth Vestey would have made an excellent guru under the catchcry of, "Don't bring me problems; bring me solutions".

Regarding the business of marriage, Miss Vestey spoke from experience. Forty years ago she rejected suitors gathered by her parents and plumped instead for a career. A young woman from a wealthy family, working albeit in teaching, was not common in Edwardian England. Tonight Miss Vestey was chaperone to another of her former students at Roedean whose mother had recently died.

Louise felt a flood of pleasure. Instead of discussing obstacles, Miss Vestey looked for escape routes. But one of her comments brought Louise back down to earth with a thud.

'My brother's a Don at Cambridge and I'm afraid he wouldn't support a woman being accepted at that hallowed institution. And his daughter, Molly, is most definitely in the stay-at-home-until-married basket.'

Louise explained her father's health and war service. Miss Vestey kept asking questions.

Finally she held Louise's hands. 'Let me think about this. I'll write the moment I have a plan. It's been lovely to see you again, Miss Wellesley and let's not make it as long before our next meeting.' And with that she

squeezed Louise's hands, stood and went off to resume her chaperone duties.

In a corridor of Buckingham Palace, Louise suddenly felt a flicker of hope.

Driving home from the débutante ball Louise lied. 'No really, Mummy, there were one or two gentlemen I would welcome should they choose to call. I think you and Papa would approve of both.'

'And do these possibly interested young gentlemen have names?'

'Oh Mummy, you know how it works. A girl smiles at her partner and imagines he is flattered. If he finds me attractive he will write allowing you and Papa to conduct your exemplary vetting process.'

Victoria half-smiled. How could her daughter say, "If he finds me attractive"? Most of the eligible young men at the ball and almost all of the débutantes and their mothers knew her daughter was stunningly attractive.

The next morning Louise gave her father a detailed description of the débutante ball, her superb curtsey before the royals and the gentlemen with whom she danced. Charles was delighted. His health was gradually failing but his illness was forgotten with the pleasure he took from the sight and sound of his beloved daughter. She was a tonic, his best medicine.

And then letters arrived addressed to Miss Louise Wellesley. Victoria was thrilled and intrigued.

Charles felt a surge of happiness. His sons, like their father, were Cambridge graduates and now making their way in the Law. For Charles to have his daughter well married would be the crowning glory. He was determined to remain alive long enough to give her away.

At first Louise was shocked. She received invitations to house parties and requests to call and as they continued to arrive, her surprise turned to despair. The sheer number meant she would have to accept some. A weekend house party, no matter how well chaperoned, would mean participating in the ancient art of husband hunting. Even her best acting skills might not hide her distinct lack of interest.

But her heart skipped a beat when a letter arrived from Elizabeth Vestey.

Louise hid the missive from her parents and read and re-read its contents. The divine Miss Vestey had come up with a plan designed to spring Louise from her societal bind. Her dream of going to Cambridge

might yet come true. Miss Vestey's final sentence was intriguing. "Stand firm, dear girl; all's well that ends well".

With each new day Louise grew more anxious when no further news arrived so was delighted when the local vicar announced that a play-reading group would begin under the leadership of a newly-arrived parishioner, Mr Beauford Nightingale. He was an actor of the old school with even his eyebrows having joined Equity. Surely her parents wouldn't object to her joining the play readers and so Wednesday evenings became an escape for Louise as a motley group of locals gathered to celebrate the spirit of Thespis.

To those who detest the theatre believing it is dominated by effeminate fops and prostitutes, Beauford "Nightie" Nightingale was proof positive of their prejudice. His use of the word *darling*, flamboyant gestures and eye-catching handkerchiefs convinced the naïve and ignorant he padded up for the other side which could not have been further from the truth. The elderly and avuncular Nightie was impossible to hide and effortlessly easy to love. He took huge delight in seeing others catch the theatrical bug.

When at their second meeting Nightie suggested the group perform a parish concert there was no more enthusiastic volunteer than Louise.

Shakespeare and Noël Coward were the chosen playwrights and Louise thought all her Christmases had come at once when Nightie asked her to play Juliet in a Shakespearean excerpt and Amanda from *Private Lives* in a Coward piece.

The young man playing Romeo was a talentless bank clerk who was instantly besotted with Louise. His class prevented any possible romantic link and the fact that the gormless dolt was christened Desmond Longbottom hardly helped. The line of local spinsters wanting their future children to be known as a Longbottom had yet to be formed.

Nightie was to play opposite Louise in the Coward scene. He was too old and she too young but Nightie knew talent when he saw it and the two would make music without singing a note of *Someday I'll Find You*.

When Mr Coward wrote the play, parts of the second act were deemed unsuitable. The fact that a divorced couple could rekindle their love and actually consummate same was deemed scandalous. The *Theatres Act 1843* gave sweeping powers to the Lord Chamberlain who alone decided if every play "is fitting for the preservation of good manners".

Private Lives was deemed unsuitable and only an appeal in person from the playwright, lyricist, composer, director and leading man—all played by Mr Coward—managed to persuade the guardian of public

morals that the play would not result in the collapse of civilization. In 1930 *Private Lives* went ahead as writ.

Charles and Victoria were unaware of this saga and would certainly not have allowed their daughter to portray Amanda had they known the facts. But as Coward persuaded the Lord Chamberlain, so Louise persuaded her parents.

They sat in the church hall and were amazed. Their four year-old daughter performing for Uncle Crispin was entertaining but now their teenage daughter was breathtaking.

Her diction and emotions, her ability to become both Juliet and then the much older Amanda meant Charles, Victoria, their sons and the entire audience were spellbound. Louise was blessed with a rare and precious gift. She could act. She was superb seemingly without trying. Her expertise was effortless. Her segments were outstanding. The applause at the end of the concert was prolonged. Being an old hand, Nightie indicated he wished to speak just as the applause began to fade. He waited for pin-dropping silence then thanked all concerned. His final words were clear.

‘But tonight, ladies and gentlemen, would not be complete without special mention of one performer. I’ve spent my entire life in the theatre but never have I seen an actress of such rare talent, grace and beauty than our own, Miss Louise Wellesley.’

The resultant applause was immediate and strong. Even those for whom the theatre meant little felt something special about this future star. Louise hesitated. She was thrilled but surprised. Nightie offered his hand. Louise stepped forward and bowed and Nightie stepped back joining the applause.

Louise smiled at her family and saw her mother and brothers rejoicing while her father was busy wiping his eyes. A loud cry of “Bravo” came thrice from the back of the hall. The Reverend Stanley Tripe was overjoyed to have made the journey from Hampshire.

At home the family gathered for a light supper. Charles sat in a newly-acquired wheelchair with a thick blanket over his knees. It was a mild night but his doctor had warned against chills and the dreaded pneumonia.

Over coffee the family continued to heap praise upon the delighted Louise. The boys joked about the hapless bank clerk. His tights were too tight and his underwear should have been branded, “Not fit for purpose”.

The family’s laughter was on song when Louise added the punch line, ‘Actually Mister Longbottom gave me a lovely floral bouquet and asked if he might call next Saturday.’

Uproarious laughter from Henry and Edmund and Charles smiled knowing his daughter was up to her usual teasing self. Victoria was taking no chances.

‘I trust you put a swift end to such nonsense.’

‘Tell him to join the queue,’ laughed Edmund.

‘Tell him he’s less chance than Pongo,’ laughed Henry.

Louise smiled but knew Henry was disappointed she had no interest in his friend. The laughter settled and Charles cleared his throat.

‘Louise, my dear, your mother and I have been discussing your future.’

The atmosphere was instantly changed and became electric. The siblings were certain the topic was *Husband Selection*. Emboldened by her recent theatrical triumph and determined to have at least one final defiant shout into the wind, Louise interrupted her father.

‘Papa, please may I say something?’

The silence became loud. From a young age the children understood the unwritten but imperative rule that once the patriarch began to speak, silence was mandatory. The brothers looked at their father. Was he too ill to become angry?

He remained calm. ‘You may say something, my child, when I have finished.’ A pause pushed up the tension. ‘I have received a letter regarding your future from a gentleman I regard most highly.’

Louise’s heart sank. It was as much shock as sadness. Her parents had settled on one of her would-be husbands without telling her. Charles held up an envelope.

Risking eternal damnation, Louise spoke quietly but with strength. ‘If you’ll excuse me, Papa, I believe I should be permitted to read all proposals which are addressed to me.’

The brothers held their breath. Victoria looked lovingly at her daughter. Charles remained calm.

‘I agree entirely, Louise, but this envelope is addressed to me.’

Louise was crushed. Charles looked at her then continued.

‘This letter arrived at an auspicious time. I believe in the acting profession it would best be described as “perfect timing”. Your mother and I are of the opinion that you are not yet ready to consider matrimony and believe a time away from here would assist in your development.’

Not yet ready for matrimony? A time away from here? Louise entertained horrible thoughts. *Not another finishing-school? Did Papa just say, “Get thee to a nunn’ry”?*

With no theatrical training, Charles was making excellent use of the dramatic pause.

‘Your mother and I do not wish to push you into any hasty decision regarding your choice of husband.’

Louise was in turmoil. Papa had departed from the script. He was speaking gibberish. He continued.

‘If you are willing, we have received an offer for you to reside in Girton College which, I’m told, is the finest establishment for young women at Cambridge.’

Louise froze. She lost her ability to act. Nobody spoke. In a daze Louise stumbled towards her father.

‘I say, good for you old girl,’ congratulated Henry.

‘Bravo,’ added Edmund.

Louise hugged and kissed her father tears welling in her eyes. She repeated the routine with her mother.

‘Little Plum, off to Cambridge,’ said Edmund with open arms. It was the season for hugs. For once in living memory Louise Wellesley was speechless.

‘Plum, you’ve forgotten your lines,’ laughed Henry. Everyone was amused while at the same time tense. Then came more silence. Now the actress could speak with permission. It was her cue. But Louise dried. She was struggling with a thumping heart, weepy eyes and a lump in her throat. Charles broke the ice.

‘I take it you are prepared to accept the offer?’

Charles wanted to continue but Louise was unable to listen. She could not stop the tears. Her joy was unconfined. Her emotions took centre stage. Victoria again embraced her daughter.

Charles was delighted to see such happiness and felt relief having made the decision to let his daughter go. Henry and Edmund were thrilled with a tinge of concern. Victoria was both proud and worried. Shunning an excellent marriage could damage her daughter’s future happiness. But Victoria’s loyalty to her dying husband meant she supported him with conviction. Charles spoke sincerely, convinced he’d done the right thing not knowing how, yet again, he’d been outmanoeuvred by a woman.

Still, what you don’t know can’t hurt you.

Elizabeth Vestey was an interesting woman. She was tall and slim with handsome even regal features. She would have made an outstanding suffragette. Her Yorkshire-based family had wealth but no title. And because of this wealth, Elizabeth’s childhood was dominated by large houses, servants, a private education and travel.

Like Louise, as a young woman Elizabeth wanted to further her education and knew marriage and children would prevent that. Her parents gave her opportunities to meet eligible gentlemen then reacted with dismay and anger when their teenage daughter declined them all. Arguments became heated and Elizabeth was threatened. She ran away.

She had enough money for the train fare to London, a change of clothes and equal amounts of optimism and fear. She had an address and sometimes fortune favours the brave.

As a child, her family holidayed in Cornwall and over several summers Elizabeth became friends with another holidaymaker, Virginia Stephen. Virginia was fascinating and although they only met for a few weeks each summer at St Ives, the two girls became close friends. So when the teenage Elizabeth Vestey chose to leave home and make her way as an independent woman, the person to whom she turned was her friend Virginia Stephen.

In London Elizabeth walked to 22 Hyde Park Gate and with trepidation rang the bell. Her fear became joy when Virginia welcomed her friend with open arms.

The Stephen household was filled with family, books, visitors and pets. Inviting Elizabeth to stay was a perfectly natural step; the unofficial family motto being, "The more the merrier".

And thus began an exciting time in the life of Elizabeth Vestey. With the help of her friend Virginia, Elizabeth studied literature and languages at the Ladies' Department of King's College in London. She found work as a tutor and became a teacher at Roedean where she met the young Louise Wellesley. Miss Vestey never married and never regretted it.

As the years went by, Elizabeth never forgot the Stephen family for their love and support and always wrote to Virginia keeping her informed about her life and activities. Elizabeth didn't need Virginia to reply as everyone knew Virginia Woolf.

Elizabeth's parents never forgave their daughter and died not knowing she had become a highly respected teacher. Her only sibling, her brother, Alfred, a Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge, had always been sad about Elizabeth's estrangement from their parents and having traced his sister's whereabouts, wrote to Elizabeth and they kept in touch. When Louise was at Roedean, Alfred wrote a special letter to his sibling.

The letter was about Alfred's dying wife. Her illness was terminal. Could Elizabeth, would Elizabeth come to Cambridge, help care for his wife and be a tutor to his daughter, Molly, Elizabeth's niece? Elizabeth would be handsomely rewarded and become part of the Vestey family again.

Once Elizabeth would have politely declined but as the years bring change to hearts and minds, she agreed, moved to Cambridge and re-joined the Vestey family after some 40 years.

And now she faced a new and exciting challenge. How could she assist the exceptionally talented Louise Wellesley obtain her father's blessing and enter Cambridge University?

Elizabeth was meticulous in her preparation. Of all her ideas, one stood out—*noblesse oblige*. An English gentleman well understood the obligation of nobility. Alfred Vestey and Charles Wellesley were steeped in the concept.

Elizabeth discovered all she could about Louise's father and, armed with the facts, approached her brother. Alfred was under stress. His wife was dying and his darling daughter was watching the slow and painful death of her mother.

Elizabeth asked for Alfred's guidance. Oh the wisdom of the woman. Here she was controlling the situation yet allowing her brother to believe he was indispensable. Elizabeth painted a picture.

Charles Wellesley is a gentleman; Eton, Cambridge and a successful law career. He volunteered for service in the last war, was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel where his courage in battle stamped him as a selfless and wounded hero. His two fine sons are graduates of their father's alma mater. But now his health is in jeopardy. Charles is dying a slow and painful death. Alfred was never more in sympathy with any man as he was with Charles. *Noblesse oblige* was alive and well.

Then Elizabeth described Louise. A brilliant student, a wonderful linguist and actress and a loving and devoted daughter who brought honour and pride to her parents but who now was living at home watching her beloved father die. Louise became Alfred's daughter, Molly.

So having created the scenario, Elizabeth described her predicament and asked for her brother's wise counsel. What a magnificent pitch.

What could Alfred suggest to help this brilliant young woman and relieve the terrible pain being suffered by a dying father?

There was no need for tears or melodramatic music. Alfred, who believed a young woman's place was not at university, immediately discarded his conservative beliefs and wrote two letters. The first was to the Mistress of Girton College some two miles from his Cambridge home.

The second was to Charles Wellesley Esquire. Alfred respectfully urged his former fellow soldier to allow his daughter to avoid watching her beloved father die. Alfred would be honoured to watch over Louise's progress should Charles allow his daughter to enter his alma mater.

These thoughts were contained in the letter held by Charles when he asked Louise if she would accept an offer from Girton College. Both men believed they were doing the right thing; Alfred in writing and Charles in changing his mind. But the happiness both fathers felt was but nothing to the joy Miss Vestey and her former pupil soon entertained.

And that was how Louise Beatrice Wellesley, a.k.a. Plum, began her undergraduate life at Cambridge University.

Chapter 4

WHAT AN ENORMOUS change awaited Louise. No parents, siblings or chaperone to rule her life. She would soon be free to do whatever, wherever and whenever she fancied.

She told Nightie Beaumont her news. He was thrilled, gave her his blessing and advice.

‘Learn as much as you can about Chaucer, Shakespeare and Shaw but always remember acting is very much a doing thing. Nobody ever learnt to act by reading a book.’

Saying goodbye to her parents was extremely difficult. In recent years she’d spent time at Roedean and in France but now there were new and powerful emotions. Her father’s health weighed heavily as she knelt beside him.

Both were thinking this may be the last time they would ever see one another yet neither mentioned it.

‘I don’t know how to thank you, Papa.’

He stroked her hair and whispered, ‘Shhhh.’

Louise stood, kissed her father then spoke softly in his ear, ‘I love you so much, my darling Papa.’

She found it very difficult to look into his eyes. She and her mother hugged for a long time. Not a word was exchanged but many thoughts and much love passed between them. Louise fondled the ears of Horatio the elderly black Labrador.

A baggage-carrying Henry called, ‘Come on, Plum. We’ll miss our train.’ Edmund was to drive them to the station. Louise stopped at the door, turned and blew a kiss to her parents then left wondering who might be there when she returned.

Charles insisted that Henry accompany his sister to Cambridge and so the two siblings shared another rail journey. On the train Henry teased his sister.

‘I suppose you know your jolly Girton College is a million miles from Cambridge.’

‘I think you’ll find it’s about two.’

‘But do you know *why* it’s so far from the University?’

‘No, but I’m sure you’re going to tell me.’

‘It’s to keep you safe, old girl, safe from all those male undergraduates desperate for female company. When they chose your college, the

Victorians knew a thing or two about separating the sexes.’ Henry winked and Louise raised an eyebrow.

After a while, Henry decided to make his big brother speech. ‘Now look here, Plum, if you ever find yourself in a spot of bother, you just tell them that Henry Wellesley is your big brother.’

‘Oh and that will save me, no doubt.’ Louise grinned but Henry feigned seriousness.

‘Listen, Miss Wellesley, there are at least three Law Dons who swear I was the best opening batsman they ever saw and having won a Full Blue in rowing, let me tell you my name counts for plenty.’

Louise smiled and patted his arm, ‘My hero.’

Henry smiled. ‘Oh and I looked up that legal case of *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*.’

‘Really?’ replied Louise with an even bigger grin and slapped his arm. Henry joined her laughter.

They changed trains in London and from Kings Cross travelled down to Cambridge. Their compartment was crowded and despite this both wanted to talk about their father.

‘Plum, about the old man ...’

‘I know,’ interrupted Louise. ‘I can’t bear the thought he’ll die and I’ll be in Cambridge. Promise you’ll telephone the moment you have any news—promise.’

Henry squeezed her hand. Both were unsure how they would handle the death of their father. The train pulled into Cambridge and Henry took his sister’s belongings.

They wandered along the crowded platform with Henry looking for a taxi. He didn’t fancy taking a bus out to the sleepy village of Girton. Then a cockney voice was heard calling.

‘Taxi for Miss Louise Wellesley. Taxi!’

No taxi or driver could be seen. And what was a Cockney cabbie doing in Cambridge? Louise thought it was one of Henry’s pranks but he looked blank and shrugged.

Then the driver stepped into view. Elizabeth Vestey wore a double-breasted dust coat, a flat cap and a big grin. The women embraced with Henry nonplussed. Then his ego took a beating when he discovered Miss Vestey had borrowed her brother’s Austin Ten to deliver Louise to Girton.

It did look comical with Elizabeth and Louise in the front seats and Henry and most of the luggage squeezed into the rear. He used a hatbox to hide his face as they drove past many of his old Cambridge haunts. A chap has a reputation to protect.

Girton College was, by comparison with other Cambridge institutions, almost brand new having only been built in the 1870s. It sat in spacious grounds in a tranquil rural setting.

The car purred up the College drive with Henry feeling ever more redundant. Big brother was reduced to station porter as he traipsed inside with Elizabeth making all the introductions.

Soon Henry saw he was in the way. He caught Louise's eye and she moved to him. He said, 'Look old girl, you're in good hands. I'll pop along and leave you to it.'

Louise could see his embarrassment. She kissed him. 'Thank you, Henry. I'll write often, I promise. And don't forget to phone with any news of Papa.'

They hugged and he waved to Elizabeth and began to leave. She moved quickly to join him.

'Oh Mister Wellesley, please, you must allow me to drive you back to the station.' Henry politely declined citing the excuse of wanting to call on an old professor who lived just up the road.

Henry waved and left. There was no old professor just up the road but a chap does have his pride.

Louise was in love with the Girton library, dining-hall, gardens and chapel. She loved her eccentric teachers and the company of her fellow students. She loved the ancient village of Girton and the ancient city of Cambridge with its history and architecture and music and students; students on bicycles, on foot and on song. This was a world apart for Louise and a time and a place she adored. She dived in head first.

At Girton she became friendly with the girl in the room next door. Emily Fraser was demure, quietly spoken and as introverted as Louise was extroverted but opposites attract and the two women became the best of pals.

Emily was a scientist with a burgeoning knowledge of chemistry and mathematics. She knew little about the theatre and even less about sex. Partying was not an agenda item. Louise would lie in bed thinking about Matilda and their escapades in France; no chance of any such activities with Emily.

A fortnight after she arrived at Cambridge Louise received an invitation from Elizabeth Vestey to take tea next Saturday. If she could accept, Miss Vestey would collect her at 4pm. Louise was delighted but declined the offer of transport as she was now mobile. Many Girton

women caught the bus into Cambridge but Louise joined those hardy students who took to the road on their own two wheels.

There are some who believe Cambridge and Oxford were chosen as university sites simply because of their cyclist-friendly topography. It's an interesting theory until one discovers the universities pre-dated the bicycle by several centuries.

The Vesteyes lived in Cambridge, a short walk from the University colleges. Louise rode along thinking happy thoughts when a loud car horn blasted from behind. She looked back, lost her balance, tried to correct and fell off her bicycle. A grassy landing helped so only her pride was hurt but her temper was raring to go. The car pulled over and its two male occupants strolled back towards her.

'All right, Miss?' asked the driver. 'You might learn to ride that contraption.' Louise was furious. She had been riding safely and sensibly. True, her mind was miles away but how dare they speak to her like that and surely a gentleman would show some concern.

The second gent was blatantly offensive. His accent was smeared with Welsh cream. 'Bloody women; they want the right to go to university yet can't even learn the road rules.'

Louise fumed and struggled to speak. Without thinking she blurted out the Welsh oath Matty had taught her in finishing school. 'Yrydym yn tyngu I garu a chymorth ein gilyydd tan marwolaeth wneud ini ymadael.'

Because her Welsh accent mingled with her fury, the words took on a sense of authority and venom. The motorists were shocked.

'My God, Gareth,' said the driver, 'she's a bloody Blodwyn.'

'Now I've seen everything,' smirked Gareth. 'Not only women at Cambridge, but Welsh women!'

Both men laughed, walked back to their car and drove off. Louise checked her bicycle and herself, gingerly mounted and resumed her journey. As she cycled along her mood improved when she realized she'd convinced her latest audience, including a boyo from the valleys, that she was Welsh. Without trying to play a role she'd done just that—naturally.

Then she remembered her Welsh lesson with Matilda and couldn't stop smiling.

At the Vestey home Elizabeth introduced her brother Alfred and his daughter, Molly. Louise had already written to Professor Alfred Vestey expressing her immense gratitude. Now, meeting the Don in person, she explained again that without his letter she would not be here today.

Alfred said. 'Elizabeth tells me you're interested in the theatre. Have you had time to join any performing clubs?'

'Not yet, sir, but I've heard there are several groups.'

Molly was keen. 'I belong to an amateur group here in Cambridge. You'd be most welcome to join.'

Louise was bubbling. Her ego-battering tumble and the rudeness of the men in the car were a distant memory. She savoured the scrumptious high tea, thanked the professor and his daughter and felt she'd found a new family. Elizabeth walked Louise down the drive and spoke kindly.

'Thank you for being so sensitive about my dear sister-in-law. Alas her health is failing and having your smiling face certainly helped Alfred and Molly to think of more pleasant things.'

'You know I'll never be able to repay you, Miss Vestey.'

Elizabeth laughed. 'Oh I do wish you'd stop calling me Miss Vestey. Please, call me Elizabeth.'

Louise feigned mock surprise.

'Call my teacher by her Christian name—whatever next?'

They laughed. Louise leaned in and kissed her mentor, hopped on her trusty bicycle and rode back to Girton.

Life could not be better; new friends, possible new theatre opportunity, a kind if somewhat unusual fellow student in the room next door and literally all was well with the world.

But that was about to change. There was a letter on her pillow and its contents had news to make Louise suddenly feel ill.

She picked up the envelope. It was from Spain and addressed to her home in Surrey. Louise's mother had re-addressed the envelope to *Girton College, Cambridge University*.

Louise had only been at Cambridge for three weeks but a twinge of homesickness came over her as she thought of her parents and father in particular.

Two miles away Molly Vestey was living with her mother who drifted towards death. Had Louise been still at home she would have faced a similar situation. But those distressing thoughts were pushed aside when she began to read Matty's letter.

Dearest Louise

How I have missed you. Your smile, your wonderful acting, your friendship, your brilliant mind, your terrible Welsh accent; I miss them all more than I can say. How I wish we could meet every month, every week, every day, and do crazy things as we did in France.

How are you? Married? Surely those dreadful débutante balls will have given you the best selection of thoroughbreds in England. How are your riding skills?

Louise smiled. She could hear Matilda speaking these words.

My darling, I have news. Are you sitting down? Good because, believe it or not, I am to become engaged! I wanted you to be the first to know. And yes my beautiful friend, you must, must, must be my bridesmaid. Mother wants my boring cousins but I've said there will be no wedding without Miss Louise Wellesley. How's that for standing up to the folks? And just to make you jealous, I've enclosed a photograph of my handsome husband to be. Father wanted a Spanish suitor but I told you about Welsh females—women who don't know the meaning of surrender. So a Welsh husband it is. I do hope you like him. Write soon with all your news.

Love and kisses

Matty

Louise opened the envelope and removed the photo. She suddenly felt ill. The man looked familiar. He should have; it was Gareth, the brutish passenger who, with his equally rude driving companion, ran Louise off the road that very afternoon.

In shock Louise read Matty's writing on the back of the photograph—*Gareth Llewelyn, husband and doctor to be.*

So Mister Rude Welshman, presumably reading medicine at Cambridge, was to marry my dear friend Matilda.

What could Louise remember of her cycling incident? The driver at least enquired if she was injured. The passenger, Gareth, the man in Matilda's life, was a cad. Surely Matty would never marry such a man. She was intelligent, witty and kind and would never fall for an arrogant oaf.

So should Louise warn Matty? And if so, say what? Perhaps Gareth was really a nice chap who was just having a bad day.

Louise's natural impulse was to tell the truth. But what was the truth and could she base a character assessment on a momentary experience?

She decided. To help her friend she would investigate the future Dr Llewelyn. After all, Louise was to be part of the wedding party.

But she needed facts and the words of the consulting detective sprang to mind. *I cannot make bricks without clay.*

And of course she must investigate anonymously. This was new—Louise Wellesley the spy.