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The Last Telegram

Written by Liz Trenow

Published by AVON

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LIZ TRENOW

The Last Telegram

AVON

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Although the plot and all of the characters are entirely fictional, parts of the story are based on real events and for this I owe a great debt to the memories of three remarkable men. From my father, the late Peter Walters, I learned how they kept the mill going during the Second World War, when most others closed, by weaving parachute silk. The family had become increasingly concerned about the plight of their many Jewish friends and business colleagues in Europe, which prompted them to sponsor five German boys to travel to England and work at the mill. One of them, Roger Lynton, fell in love with a local girl and, after internment in Australia and fighting for the Allies in North Africa,

returned to work at the mill, married and had a family, and lived a long and happy life. Thirdly I am indebted to the late Anthony Gaddum, formerly Upper Bailiff of the Worshipful Company of Weavers, who told me about the extraordinary mission undertaken by his father, Peter, to source vital silk supplies from the Middle East at the height of the war.

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In memory of my father, Peter Walters (1919–2011),
under whose directorship the mill produced many
thousands of yards of wartime parachute silk.
All of it perfect.

Chapter One

The history of silk owes much to the fairer sex. The Chinese Empress Hsi Ling is credited with its first discovery, in 2640 BC. *It is said that a cocoon fell from the mulberry tree, under which she was sitting, into her cup of tea. As she sought to remove the cocoon its sticky threads started to unravel and cling to her fingers. Upon examining the thread more closely she immediately saw its potential and dedicated her life thereafter to the cultivation of the silkworm and production of silk for weaving and embroidery.*

From *The History of Silk*, by Harold Verner

Perhaps because death leaves so little to say, funeral guests seem to take refuge in platitudes. 'He had a good innings . . . Splendid send-off . . . Very moving service . . . Such beautiful flowers . . . You are so wonderfully brave, Lily.'

It's not bravery: my squared shoulders, head held high, that careful expression of modesty and gratitude. Not bravery, just determination to survive today and, as soon as possible, get on with what remains of my life. The body in the expensive coffin, lined with Verners' silk and decorated with lilies, and now deep in the ground, is not the man I've loved and shared my life with for the past fifty-five years.

It is not the man who helped to put me back together after the shattering events of the war, who held my hand and steadied my heart with his wise counsel, the man who took me as his own and became a loving father and grandfather. The joy of our lives together helped us both to bury the terrors of the past. No, that person disappeared months ago, when the illness took its final hold. His death was a blessed release and I have already done my grieving. Or at least, that's what I keep telling myself.

After the service the house fills with people wanting to 'pay their final respects'. But I long for them to go, and eventually they drift away, leaving behind the detritus of a remembered life along with the half-drunk glasses, the discarded morsels of food.

Around me, my son and his family are washing up, vacuuming, emptying the bins. In the harsh kitchen light I notice a shimmer of grey in Simon's hair (the rest of it is dark, like his father's) and realise with a jolt that he must be well into middle age. His wife Louise, once so slight, is rather rounder than before. No wonder, after two babies. They deserve to live in this house, I think, to have more room for their growing family. But today is not the right time to talk about moving.

I go to sit in the drawing room as they have bidden me, and watch for the first time the slide show that they have created for the guests at the wake. I am mesmerised as the TV screen flicks through familiar photographs, charting his life from sepia babyhood through monochrome middle years and into a technicolour old age, each image occupying the screen for just a few brief seconds before blurring into the next.

At first I turn away, finding it annoying, even insulting. What a travesty, I think, a long, loving life bottled into a

slide show. But as the carousel goes back to the beginning and the photographs start to repeat themselves, my relief that he is gone and will suffer no more is replaced, for the first time since his death, by a dawning realisation of my own loss.

It's no wonder I loved him so; such a good looking man, active and energetic. A man of unlimited selflessness, of many smiles and little guile. Who loved every part of me, infinitely. What a lucky woman. I find myself smiling back, with tears in my eyes.

My granddaughter brings a pot of tea. At seventeen, Emily is the oldest of her generation of Verners, a clever, sensitive girl growing up faster than I can bear. I see in her so much of myself at that age: not exactly pretty in the conventional way – her nose is slightly too long – but striking, with smooth cheeks and a creamy complexion that flushes at the slightest hint of discomfiture. Her hair, the colour of black coffee, grows thick and straight, and her dark inquisitive eyes shimmer with mischief or chill with disapproval. She has that determined Verner jawline that says, 'don't mess with me'. She's tall and lanky, all arms and legs, rarely out of the patched jeans and charity-shop jumpers which seem to be all the rage with her generation these days. Unsophisticated but self-confident, exhaustingly energetic – and always fun. Had my own daughter lived, I sometimes think, she would have been like Emily.

At this afternoon's wake the streak of crimson she's emblazoned into the flick of her fringe was like an exotic bird darting among the dark suits and dresses. Soon she will fly, as they all do, these independent young women. But for the moment she indulges me with her company and conversation, and I cherish every moment.

She hands me a cup of weak tea with no milk, just how

I like it, and then plonks herself down on the footstool next to me. We watch the slide show together for a few moments and she says, 'I miss Grandpa, you know. Such an amazing man. He was so full of ideas and enthusiasm – I loved the way he supported everything we did, even the crazy things.' She's right, I think to myself. I was a lucky woman.

'He always used to ask me about stuff,' she goes on. 'He was always interested in what I was doing with myself. Not many grownups do that. A great listener.'

As usual my smart girl goes straight to the heart of it. It's something I'm probably guilty of, not listening enough. 'You can talk to me, now that he's gone.' I say, a bit too quickly. 'Tell me what's new.'

'You really want to know?'

'Yes, I really do,' I say. Her legs, in heart-patterned black tights, seem to stretch for yards beyond her miniskirt and my heart swells with love for her, the way she gives me her undivided attention for these moments of proper talking time.

'Have I told you I'm going to India?' she says.

'My goodness, how wonderful,' I say. 'How long for?'

'Only a month,' she says airily.

I'm achingly envious of her youth, her energy, her freedom. I wanted to travel too, at her age, but war got in the way. My thoughts start to wander until I remember my commitment to listening. 'What are you going to do there?'

'We're going to an orphanage. In December, with a group from college. To dig the foundations for a cowshed,' she says triumphantly. I'm puzzled, and distracted by the idea of elegant Emily wielding a shovel in the heat, her slender hands calloused and dirty, hair dulled by dust.

'Why does an orphanage need a cowshed?'

'So they can give the children fresh milk. It doesn't get

delivered to the doorstep like yours does, Gran,' she says, reprovingly. 'We're raising money to buy the cows.'

'How much do you need?'

'About two thousand. Didn't I tell you? I'm doing a sponsored parachute jump.' The thought of my precious Emily hanging from a parachute harness makes me feel giddy, as if capsized by some great gust of wind. 'Don't worry, it's perfectly safe,' she says. 'It's with a professional jump company, all above board. I'll show you.'

She returns with her handbag – an impractical affair covered in sequins – extracts a brochure and gives it to me. I pretend to read it, but the photographs of cheerful children preparing for their jumps seem to mock me and make me even more fearful. She takes the leaflet back. 'You should know all about parachutes, Gran. You used to make them, Dad said.'

'Well,' I start tentatively, 'weaving parachute silk was our contribution to the war effort. It kept us going when lots of other mills closed.' I can picture the weaving shed as if from above, each loom with its wide white spread, shuttles clacking back and forth, the rolls of woven silk growing almost imperceptibly thicker with each turn of the weighted cloth beam.

'But why did they use silk?'

'It's strong and light, packs into a small bag and unwraps quickly because it's so slippery.' My voice is steadying now and I can hear that old edge of pride. Silk seems still to be threaded through my veins. Even now I can smell its musty, nutty aroma, see the lustrous intensity of its colours – emerald, aquamarine, gold, crimson, purple – and recite the exotic names like a mantra: *brigandine, bombazine, brocatelle, douppion, organzine, pongee, schappe.*

She studies the leaflet again, peering through the long fringe that flops into her eyes. 'It says here the parachutes

we're going to use are of high quality one-point-nine ounce, ripstop nylon. Why didn't they use nylon in those days? Wouldn't it have been cheaper?'

'They hadn't really invented nylon by then, not good enough for parachutes. You have to get it just right for parachutes,' I say and then, with a shiver, those pitiless words slip into my head after all these years. *Get it wrong and you've got dead pilots.*

She rubs my arm gently with her fingertips to smooth down the little hairs, looking at me anxiously. 'Are you cold, Gran?'

'No, my lovely, it's just the memories.' I send up a silent prayer that she will never know the dreary fear of war, when all normal life is suspended, the impossible becomes ordinary, when every decision seems to be a matter of life or death, when goodbyes are often for good.

It tends to take the shine off you.

A little later Emily's brother appears and loiters in his adolescent way, then comes and sits by me and holds my hand, in silence. I am touched to the core. Then her father comes in, looking weary. His filial duties complete, he hovers solicitously. 'Is there any more we can do, Mum?' I shake my head and mumble my gratitude for the nth time today.

'We'll probably be off in a few minutes. Sure you'll be all right?' he says. 'We can stay a little longer if you like.'

Finally they are persuaded to go. Though I love their company I long for peace, to stop being the brave widow, release my rictus smile. I make a fresh pot of tea, and there on the kitchen table is the leaflet Emily has left, presumably to prompt my sponsorship. I hide it under the newspaper and pour the tea, but my trembling hands cause a minor storm in the teacup. I decant the tea into a mug and carry it with two hands to my favourite chair.

In the drawing room, I am relieved to find that the slide show has been turned off, the TV screen returned to its innocuous blackness. From the wide bay window looking westwards across the water meadows is an expanse of greenery and sky which always helps me to think more clearly.

The house is a fine, double-bayed Edwardian villa, built of mellow Suffolk bricks that look grey in the rain, but in sunlight take on the colour of golden honey. Not grand, just comfortable and well-proportioned, reflecting how my parents saw themselves, their place in the world. They built it on a piece of spare land next to the silk mill during a particularly prosperous period just after the Great War. 'It's silk umbrellas, satin facings and black mourning crepe we have to thank for this place,' my father, always the merchant, would cheerfully and unselfconsciously inform visitors.

Stained-glass door panels throw kaleidoscope patterns of light into generous hallways, and the drawing room is sufficiently spacious to accommodate Mother's baby grand as well as three chintz sofas clustered companionably around a handsome marble fireplace.

To the mill side of the house, when I was a child, was a walled kitchen garden, lush with aromatic fruit bushes and deep green salads. On the other side, an ancient orchard provided an autumn abundance of apples and pears, so much treasured during the long years of rationing, and a grass tennis court in which worm casts ensured such an unpredictable bounce of the ball that our games could never be too competitive. The parade of horse chestnut trees along its lower edge still bloom each May with ostentatious candelabra of flowers.

At the back of the house is the conservatory, restored after the doodlebug disaster but now much in need of repair. From the terrace, brick steps lead to a lawn that rolls out

towards the water meadows. Through these meadows, yellow with cowslips in spring and buttercups in summer, meanders the river, lined with gnarled willows that appeared to my childhood eyes like processions of crook-backed witches. It is Constable country.

'Will you look at this view?' my mother would exclaim, stopping on the landing with a basket of laundry, resting it on the generous windowsill and stretching her back. 'People pay hundreds of guineas for paintings of this, but we see it from our windows every day. Never forget, little Lily, how lucky you are to live here.'

No, Mother, I have never forgotten.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

The room smells of old whisky and wood smoke and reverberates with long-ago conversations. Family secrets lurk in the skirting boards. This is where I grew up. I've never lived anywhere else, and after nearly eighty years it will be a wrench to leave. The place is full of memories, of my childhood, of him, of loving and losing.

As I walk ever more falteringly through the hallways, echoes of my life – mundane and strange, joyful and dreadful – are like shadows, always there, following my footsteps. Now that he is gone, I am determined to make a new start. No more guilt and heart-searching. No more 'what-ifs'. I need to make the most of the few more years that may be granted to me.

Chapter Two

China maintained its monopoly of silk production for around 3,000 years. The secret was eventually released, it is said, by a Chinese princess. Given unhappily in marriage to an Indian prince, she was so distressed at the thought of forgoing her silken clothing that she hid some silkworm eggs in her headdress before travelling to India for the wedding ceremony. In this way they were secretly exported to her new country.

From *The History of Silk,* by Harold Verner

It's a week since the funeral and everyone remarks on how well I'm doing, but in the past couple of days I've been unaccountably out of sorts. Passing the hall mirror I catch a glimpse of a gaunt old woman, rather shorter than me, with sunken eyes and straggly grey hair, dressed in baggy beige. That can't be me, surely? Have I shrunk so much?

Of course I miss him, another human presence in the house; though the truth is that it's been hard the last few years, what with the care he needed and the worry I lived through. Now I can get on with the task in hand: sorting out this house, and my life.

Emily comes round after school. I'm usually delighted to

see her and keep a special tin of her favourite biscuits for such occasions. But today I'd rather not see anyone.

'What's up, Gran? You don't usually refuse tea.'

'I don't know. I'm just grumpy, for some reason.'

'What about?'

'I haven't a clue, perhaps just with the world.'

She looks at me too wisely for her years. 'I know what this is about, Gran.'

'It's a crotchety old woman having a bad day.'

'No, silly. It's part of the grieving process. It's quite natural.'

'What do you mean, the grieving *process*? You grieve, you get over it,' I snap. Why do young people today think they know it all?

She's unfazed by my irritation. 'The five stages of mourning. Now what were they?' She twists a stub of hair in her fingers and ponders for a moment. 'Some psychologist with a double-barrelled name described them. Okay, here we go. Are you paying attention? The five stages of grieving are,' she ticks them off on her long fingers, 'denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – something like that.'

'They've got lists for everything these days: ten steps to success, twenty ways to turn your life around, that kind of rubbish,' I grumble.

'She's really respected, honestly. Wish I could remember her name. We learned it in AS psychology. You should think about it. Perhaps you've reached the angry stage?'

She goes to make the tea, leaving me wondering. Why would I be angry? Our generation never even considered *how* we grieved, though heaven knows we did enough of it. Perhaps there was too much to mourn. We just got on with it. Don't complain, make the best of a bad lot, keep on smiling. That's how we won the war, or so they told us.

Emily comes back with the tea tray. Along with knowing

everything else she seems to have discovered where I hide the biscuits.

'No school today?'

'Revision week,' she says, airily. 'What are you up to?'

'Packing. Sorting out stuff for the charity shop.'

'Can I help?'

'There's nothing I'd like more.'

After tea we go upstairs to the spare room, where I've made a tentative start at turning out cupboards and wardrobes that have been untouched for years. Inside one of these mothball-scented mausoleums we find three of my suits hanging like empty carapaces. Why have I kept them for so long? Ridiculous to imagine that one day I might again wear a classic pencil skirt or a fitted jacket. It's been decades since I wore them but they still carry the imprint of my business self; skirts shiny-seated from office chairs, jacket elbows worn from resting on the table, chin in hand, through many a meeting.

'Now that's what you call power dressing,' Emily says, pulling on a jacket and admiring herself in the long mirror on the inside of the door. 'Look at those shoulder pads, and such tiny waists. You must have been a looker, Gran. Can I keep this one? Big shoulders are so cool.'

'Of course, my darling. I thought they went out in the eighties.'

'Back in again,' she says, moving the piles of clothes and black bin liners and sitting down on the bed, patting the empty space beside her. 'You really enjoyed your job, didn't you?'

'I suppose so,' I say, joining her. 'I never really thought about it before. We were too busy just getting on with it. But I suppose I did enjoy it.' I hear myself paraphrasing Gwen's analogy, 'It's a kind of alchemy, you know. Like

turning dull metal into gold. But better because silk has such beautiful patterns and colours.'

'That's rather poetic,' Emily says. 'Dad never talks about it like that.'

'Neither did your grandfather,' I say. 'Men are never any good at showing their emotions. Besides, even with something as wonderful as silk, you tend to take it for granted when you work with it every day.'

'Didn't you ever get bored?'

I think for a moment. 'No, I don't believe I ever did.'

'You didn't seem especially happy when I asked you about parachute silk the other day.'

I wish the words would not grip my heart so painfully. 'It's only because I don't like the idea of you jumping out of a plane, dearest girl,' I say, trying to soothe myself as much as her.

'I'll be fine, Gran,' she says breezily. 'You mustn't worry. We're doing other stuff to raise money, too. If you find anything I could put in for our online auction when you're turning out your cupboards, that would be amazing.'

'Anything you like,' I say. She turns back to the wardrobe and seems to be rummaging on the floor.

'What's this, Gran?' comes her muffled voice.

'I don't know what you've found,' I say.

As she pulls out the brown leather briefcase my heart does a flip which feels more like a double cartwheel. It's battered and worn, but the embossed initials are still clear on the lid. Of course I knew it was there, but for the past sixty years it has been hidden in the darkest recesses of the wardrobe, and of my mind. Even though I haven't cast eyes on it for decades, those familiar twin aches of sorrow and guilt start to throb in my bones.

'What's in it, Gran?' she asks, impatiently fiddling with the catches. 'It seems to be jammed.'

It's locked, I now recall with relief, and the key is safely in my desk. Those old brass catches are sturdy enough to withstand even Emily's determined tugging. 'It's just old papers, probably rubbish,' I mutter, dazed by this unexpected discovery. I know every detail of what the case contains, of course, a package of memories so intense and so painful that I never want to confront them again. But I cannot bring myself to throw it away.

Perhaps I will retrieve it when she is gone and get rid of it once and for all, I think. Yes, that's what I'll do. 'Pop it back in the wardrobe, darling. I'll have a look later,' I say, as calmly as I can muster. 'Shall we have some lunch?'

After this little shock my enthusiasm for packing goes into a steep decline. I need to pop to the shop for more milk, but it's just started raining, so I am hunting in the cupboard under the stairs for my summer raincoat when something catches my eye: an old wooden tennis racket, still in its press, with a rusty wing nut at each corner. The catgut strings are baggy, the leather-wrapped handle frayed and greying with mould.

I pull it out of the cupboard, slip off the press and take a few tentative swings. The balance is still good. And then, without warning, I find myself back in that heat-wave day in 1938 – July, it must have been. Vera and I had played a desultory game of tennis – no shoes, just bare feet on the grass court. The only balls we could find were moth-eaten, and before long we had mis-hit all of them over the chain link fence into the long grass of the orchard. Tiptoeing carefully for fear of treading on the bees that were busily foraging in the flowering clover, we found two. The third was nowhere to be seen.

'Give up,' Vera sighed, flopping face down on the court,

careless of grass stains, her tanned arms and legs splayed like a swimmer, her red-painted fingernails shouting freedom from school. I laid down beside her and breathed out slowly, allowing my thoughts to wander. The sun on my cheek became the touch of a warm hand, the gentle breeze in my hair his breath as he whispered that he loved me.

'Penny for them?' Vera said, after a bit.

'The usual. You know. Now shut up and let me get back to him.'

Vera had been my closest friend ever since I forgave her for pulling my pigtails at nursery school. In other words, for most of my life. By our teens we were an odd couple; I'd grown a good six inches taller than her, but despite doing all kinds of exercises my breasts refused to grow, while Vera was shaping up nicely, blooming into the hourglass figure of a Hollywood starlet.

I was no beauty, neither was I exactly plain, but I longed to look more feminine and made several embarrassing attempts to fix a permanent wave into my thick brown hair. Even today the smell of perm lotion leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, reminding me of the frizzy messes that were the catastrophic result of my bathroom experiments. So I'd opted instead for a new chin-length bob that made me feel tremendously bold and modern, while Vera bleached her hair a daring platinum blonde and shaped it into a Hollywood wave. Together we spent hours in front of the mirror practising our make-up, and Vera developed clever ways to emphasise her dimples and Clara Bow lips. She generously declared that she'd positively die for my cheekbones and long eyelashes.

In all other ways we were very alike – laughed at the same things, hankered after the same boys, loved the same music, felt strongly about the same injustices. We were both eighteen, just out of school and aching to fall in love.

'Do I hear you sighing in the arms of your lover?'

'*Mais oui, un très* sexy Frenchman.'

'You daft thing. Been reading too much *True Romance*.'

More silence, punctuated by the low comforting chug of a tractor on the road and cows on the water meadows calling for their calves. School seemed like another country. A mild anxiety about imminent exam results was the only blip in a future that otherwise stretched enticingly ahead. Then Vera said, 'What do you think's really going to happen?'

'What do you mean? I'm going to Geneva to learn French with the most handsome man on earth, and you're going to empty bed pans at Barts. That's what we planned, isn't it?'

She ignored the dig. 'I mean with the Germans. Hitler invading Austria and all that.'

'They're sorting it out, aren't they?' I said, watching wisps of cloud almost imperceptibly changing their shapes in the deepest of blue skies. That very morning at the breakfast table my father had sighed over *The Times* and muttered, 'Chamberlain had better get his skates on. Last thing we need is another ruddy war.' But here in the sunshine, I refused to imagine anything other than my perfect life.

'I flipping well hope so,' Vera said.

The branch-line train to Braintree whistled in the distance and the bruised smell of mown grass hung heavily in the air. It seemed impossible that armies of one country were marching into another, taking it over by force. And not so far away: Austria was just the other side of France. People we knew went on walking holidays there. My brother went skiing there, just last winter, and sent us a postcard of improbably-pointed mountains covered in snow.

The sun started to cool, slipping behind the poplars and casting long stripes of shade across the meadow. We got up and started looking again for the lost ball.

'We'd better get home,' I said, suddenly remembering. 'Mother said John might be on the boat train this afternoon.'

'Why didn't you say? He's been away months.'

'Nearly a year. I've missed him.'

'I thought you hated him,' she giggled, walking backwards in front of me, 'I certainly did. I've still got the scar from when he pushed me off the swing accidentally-on-purpose,' she said, pointing to her forehead.

'Teasing his little sister and her best friend was all part of the game.' The truth was that like most siblings John and I had spent our childhood tussling for parental attention, but to me he was always a golden boy; tall like a tennis ace, with a fashionable flick of dark blond hair at his forehead. Not intellectual, but an all-rounder, good at sports, musical like my mother and annoyingly confident of his attractiveness to girls. And yes, I had missed him while he'd been away studying in Switzerland.

Vera and I were helping to set the tea in the drawing room when the bell rang. I dashed to the front door.

'Hello Sis,' John boomed, his voice deeper than I remembered. Then to my surprise, he wrapped his arms round me and gave me a powerful hug. He wouldn't have done that before, I thought. He stood back, looking me up and down. 'Golly, you've grown. Any moment now you'll be tall as me.'

'You've got taller, too,' I said. 'I'll never catch up.'

He laughed. 'You'd better not. Like the haircut.' Reeling from the unexpected compliment, surely the first I'd ever received from my brother, I saw his face go blank for a second and realised Vera was on the step behind me.

'Vera?' he said tentatively. She nodded, running fingers through her curls in a gesture I mistook for shyness. He recovered quickly. 'My goodness, you've grown up too,' he

said, shaking her hand. She smiled demurely, looking up at him through her eyelashes. I'd seen that look before, but never directed at my brother. It felt uncomfortable.

'How did the exams go, you two?'

I winced at the unwanted memory. 'Don't ask. Truth will out in a couple of weeks' time.'

Mother appeared behind us and threw her arms round him with a joyful yelp. 'My dearest boy. Thank heavens you are home safely. Come in, come in.'

He took a deep breath as he came through the door into the hallway. 'Mmm. Home sweet home. Never thought I'd miss it so much. What's that wonderful smell?'

'I've baked your favourite lemon cake in your honour. You're just in time for tea,' Mother said. 'You'll stay too, Vera?'

'Have you ever known me turn down a slice of your cake, Mrs Verner?' she said.

Mother served tea and, as we talked, I noticed how John had changed, how he had gained a new air of worldliness. Vera had certainly spotted it too. She smiled at him more than really necessary, and giggled at the feeblest of his jokes.

'Why are you back so soon?' Father asked. 'I hope you completed your course?'

'Don't worry, I finished all my exams,' John said cheerfully. 'Honestly. I've learned such a lot at the *Silkschüle,* Pa. Can't wait to get stuck in at the mill.' Father smiled indulgently, his face turning to a frown as John slurped his tea – his manners had slipped in his year away from home.

Then he said, 'What about your certificates?'

'They'll send them. I didn't fail or get kicked out, if that's what you are thinking. I was a star pupil, they said.'

'I still don't understand, John.' Father persisted. 'The course wasn't due to finish till the end of the month.' John

shook his head, his mouth full of cake. 'So why did you leave early?'

'More tea, anyone?' Mother asked, to fill the silence. 'I'll put the kettle on.'

As she started to get up, John mumbled, almost to himself, 'To be honest, I wanted to get home.'

'That's nothing to be ashamed of, dear,' she said. 'We all get homesick sometimes.'

'That's not it,' he said, in a sombre voice. 'You don't understand what it was like. Things are happening over there. It's not comfortable, 'specially in Austria.'

'Things?' I said, with an involuntary shiver. 'What things?'

'Spit it out, lad,' Father said, gruffly. 'What's this is all about?'

John put down his cup and plate, and sat back in his chair, glancing out of the window towards the water meadows at that Constable view. Mother stopped, still holding the pot, and we all waited.

'It's like this,' he started, choosing his words with care. 'We'd been to Austria a few times – you know, we went skiing there. Did you get my postcard?'

Mother nodded. 'It's on the mantelpiece,' she said, 'pride of place.'

'It was fine that time. But then, a few weeks ago, we went back to Vienna to visit a loom factory. Fischers. The owner's son, a chap called Franz, showed us round.'

'I remember Herr Fischer, Franz's father. We bought looms from him once. A good man,' Father said. 'How are they doing?'

'It sounded as though business was a bit difficult. As he was showing us round, Franz dropped a few hints, and when we got outside away from the others I asked him directly what was happening. At first he shook his head and

refused to say anything, but then he whispered to me that they'd been forced to sell the factory.'

'Forced?' I asked. 'Surely it's their choice?'

'They don't have any choice,' John said. 'The Nazis have passed a new law which makes it illegal for Jewish people to own businesses.'

'That's outrageous,' Father spluttered.

'His parents think that if they keep their heads down it will all go away,' John said as I struggled to imagine how all of this could possibly be happening in Vienna, where they trained white horses to dance and played Strauss waltzes on New Year's Eve.

'Is there any way we can help them, do you think?' Mother said, sweetly. Her first concern was always to support anyone in trouble.

'I'm not sure. Franz says it feels unstoppable. It's pretty frightening. They don't know where the Nazis might go next,' John said solemnly. 'It's not just in business, you know. I saw yellow stars painted on homes and shops. Windows broken. Even people being jeered at in the street.' He turned to the window again with a faraway look, as if he could barely imagine what he'd seen. 'They're calling it a pogrom,' he almost whispered. I'd never heard the word before but it sounded menacing, making the air thick and hard to breathe.

Mother broke the silence. 'This is such gloomy talk,' she said brightly. 'I want to celebrate my son's return, not get depressed about what's happening in Europe. More cake, anyone?'

Later, Vera and I walked down the road to her home. She lived just a mile away and we usually kept each other company to the halfway point. 'What do you think?' I asked, when we were safely out of the house.

'Hasn't he changed? Grown up. Quite a looker these days.'

'Not about John,' I snapped irritably. 'I saw you fluttering your eyelashes, you little flirt. Lay off my brother.'

'Okay, okay. Don't lose your rag.'

'I meant, about what he *said*.'

'Oh that,' she said. 'It sounds grim.'

'Worse than grim for the Jews,' I said. 'I'm not sure what a pogrom is, exactly, but it sounds horrid.'

'Well there's not much we can do from here. Let's hope your father's right about Chamberlain sorting it out.'

'But what if he doesn't?'

She didn't reply at once, but we both knew what the answer was.

'Doesn't bear thinking about,' she said.

When I got back Father leaned out of his study door.

'Lily? A moment?'

It was a small room with a window facing out onto the mill yard, lined with books and heavy with the fusty fragrance of pipe tobacco. It was the warmest place in the house and in winter a coal fire burned constantly in the small grate. This was his sanctuary; the heavy panelled door was normally closed and even my mother knocked before entering.

It was one of my guilty pleasures to sneak in and look at his books when he wasn't there – *The Silk Weavers of Spitalfields*; *Sericulture in Japan*; *The Huguenots*; *So Spins the Silkworm*; and the history of a tape and label manufacturer innocently entitled *A Reputation in Ribbons* that always made me giggle. Most intriguing of all, inside a plain box file, were dozens of foolscap sheets filled with neat handwriting and, written on the front page in confident capitals: *A HISTORY OF SILK, by HAROLD VERNER*. I longed to ask whether he ever planned to publish it, but didn't dare admit knowing of its existence.

I perched uneasily on the desk. From his leather armchair by the window Father took a deep breath that was nearly, but not quite, a sigh.

'Mother and I have been having a chat,' he started, meaning he'd decided something and had told her what he thought. My mind raced. This was ominous. Whatever could it be? What had I done wrong recently?

'I won't beat around the bush, my darling. You've read the reports and now, with what John told us this afternoon . . .'

'About the pogrom?' The word was like a lump in my mouth.

He ran a hand distractedly through his thinning hair, pushing it over the balding patch at the back. 'Look, I know this will be disappointing, but you heard what he told us.'

I held my breath, dreading what he was about to say.

'In the circumstances Mother and I think it would be unwise for you to go to Geneva this September.'

A pulse started to thump painfully in my temple. 'Unwise? What do you mean? I'm not Jewish. Surely this pogrom thing won't make any difference to me?' He held my gaze, his expression fixed. He'd made up his mind. 'It isn't fair,' I heard myself whining. 'You didn't stop John going.'

'That was a year ago. Things have changed, my love.'

'The Nazis aren't in Switzerland.'

He shook his head. 'Not yet, perhaps. But Hitler is an ambitious man. We have absolutely no idea where he will go next.'

'But Chamberlain . . .?' I was floundering, clinging to flotsam I knew wouldn't float.

'He's doing his best, poor man.' Father shook his head sadly. 'He believes in peace, and so do I. No one wants another war. But it's not looking too good.'

I couldn't comprehend what was happening. In the space of two minutes my future life, as far as I could see it, had slipped away and I was powerless to stop it. 'But I *have* to go. I've been planning it for months.'

'You don't need to make any quick decisions. We'll let Geneva know you won't be going in September, but other than that you can take your time.' Father's voice was still calm and reasonable. I felt anything but.

'I don't want to take my time. I want to go now,' I whined, like a petulant child. 'Besides, what would I do instead?'

He felt in his pocket for his tobacco pouch and favourite briar pipe. With infuriating precision he packed the pipe, deftly lit a match, held it to the bowl and puffed. After a moment he took it from his mouth and looked up, his face alight with certainty. 'How about a cookery course? Always comes in handy.'

I stared at him, a hot swell of anger erupting inside my head. 'You really don't understand, do you?' I registered his disapproving frown but the words spilled out anyway. 'Because I'm a girl you think my only ambition is to be a perfect little wife, cooking my husband wonderful meals and putting his slippers out every evening.'

'Watch your tone, Lily,' he warned.

To avoid meeting his eyes I started to pace the Persian rug by the desk. 'Times have changed, Father. I'm just as intelligent as any man and I'm not going to let my brain go soggy learning to be a wonderful cook or a perfect seamstress. I don't want to be a wife either, not yet anyway. I want to *do* something with my life.'

'And so you shall, Lily. We will find something for you. But not in Geneva, or anywhere else in Europe for that matter,' he said firmly. 'And now I think we should finish this discussion. It's time for bed.'

I nearly slammed the study door behind me, but thought better of it at the last minute and pulled it carefully closed. In my bedroom I cursed Father, Chamberlain and Hitler, in that order. I loved my room, with its pretty damask curtains and matching bedcover, but these treasured things now seemed to mock me, trapping me here in Westbury. After a while I caught sight of myself in the mirror and realised how wretched I looked. Self-pity would get me nowhere, and certainly not into a more interesting life. I needed to get away from home, perhaps to London, to be near Vera. But what could I do? I was qualified for nothing.

I remembered Aunt Phoebe. She was a rather distant figure, a maiden aunt who lived in London with a lady companion, worked in an office somewhere, drove an Austin Seven all over Europe and cared little for what anyone else thought about her unconventional way of life. Perhaps I could train as a secretary, like her? Earn enough to rent a little flat? The idea started to seem quite attractive. It wasn't as romantic as Geneva, but at least I would get away and meet some interesting people.

Now all I had to do was convince Father that this was a reasonable plan.

At breakfast the next day I crossed my fingers behind my back and announced, 'I've decided to get a job in London. Vera and I are going to share a bedsit.' I hadn't asked her yet, but I was sure she would say yes.

'Lovely, dear.' Mother was distracted, serving breakfast eggs and bacon from the hotplate.

'Sounds fun,' John said, emptying most of the contents of the coffee jug into the giant cup he'd bought in France. 'Vera's a good laugh. What are you going to do?'

'Leave some coffee for me,' I said. 'I could do anything,

but preferably something in an office. I'll need to get some experience first. I thought perhaps I could spend a few weeks helping Beryl at Cheapside?' Beryl managed Verners' London office. 'What do you think, Father?'

'Well now,' he said, carefully folding his newspaper and placing it beside his knife and fork. 'Another Verner in the firm? There's an idea.' He took the plate from Mother and started to butter his toast, neatly, right to the edges. 'A very good idea. But you'd have to work your way up like everyone else.'

'What do you mean, "work my way up"?' Was he deliberately misinterpreting what I'd said?

'You'd have to start like John did, as a weaver,' he said, moving his fried egg onto the toast.

'That's not what I meant. I want *secretarial* experience, in an *office*. Not weaving,' I said, sharply. 'I don't need to know how to weave the stuff to type letters about it. Does Beryl have to weave?'

He gave me a fierce look and the room went quiet. Mother slipped out, muttering about more toast, and John studied the pattern on the tablecloth. Father put down his knife and fork with a small sigh, resigned to sacrificing his hot breakfast for the greater cause of instructing his wilful daughter.

'Let me explain, my dearest Lily, the basic principles of working life. Beryl came to us as a highly experienced administrator and you have no skills or experience. You know very well that I do not provide sinecures for my family and I will not give you a job just because you are a Verner. As I said, you need to learn the business from the bottom up to demonstrate that you are not just playing at it.'

He took a deep breath and then continued, 'But I'll make you an offer. Prove yourself here at Westbury and if, after

six months, you are still determined to go to London and take up office work, I will pay for you to go to secretarial college. If that is what you really want. Otherwise, it's a cookery course. Take it or leave it.'