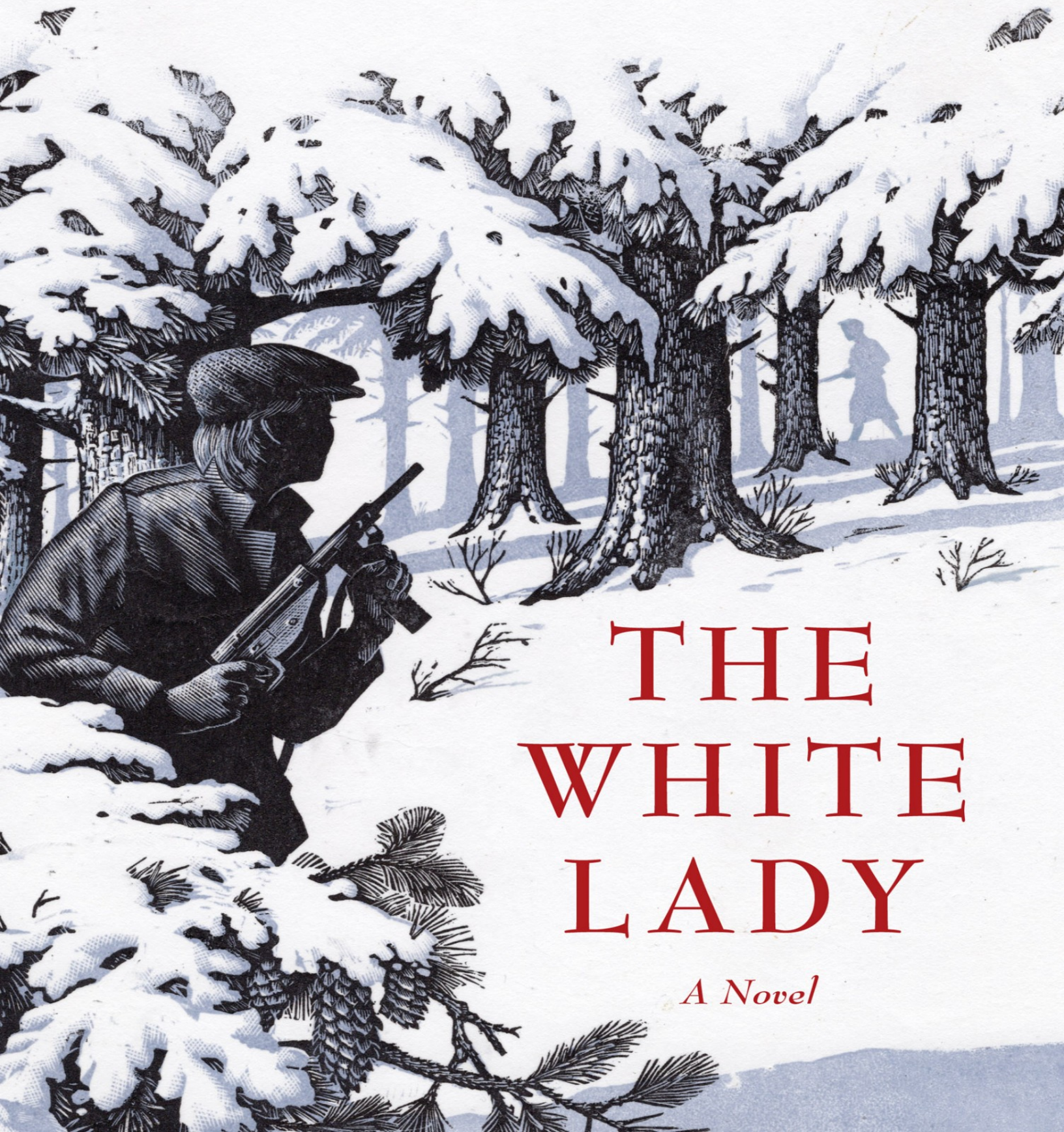


JACQUELINE
WINSPEAR



THE
WHITE
LADY

A Novel

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A Novel



JACQUELINE WINSPEAR



HARPER

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Dedication

In memory of the wonderful writer and teacher, Barbara Abercrombie, who died in 2022. Barbara was a UCLA Writers' Program Distinguished Instructor, and my dear friend.

Epigraph

And remember, where you have a concentration of power in a few hands, all too frequently men with the mentality of gangsters get control. History has proven that.

—John Dalberg-Acton, Lord Acton (1834–1902)

Society prepares the crime; the criminal commits it.

—Vittori Alfieri (1749–1803)

War is a thug's game. The thug strikes first and harder. He doesn't go by rules and he isn't afraid of hurting people.

—Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *The War Within & Without*

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Chapter 1

Kent, England

1947

Every morning as Rose Mackie leaned over the bars of the wooden cot and picked up her three-year-old daughter, she gave thanks for the cottage. She gave thanks for the roof over her head, and she gave thanks for the fact that she wasn't putting up with Jim's mum and dad, and she wasn't living in a London prefab set among the thousands of other London prefabs built in haste to accommodate families left homeless during six years of war. She gave thanks because her little Susie could run across fields in fresh country air, and the child didn't have to wear a scarf over her nose to protect her tiny lungs from the lumpy yellow-green London smog that looked like something nasty the dog had brought up. Just the thought of those pea-soupers made Rose feel queasy.

A lot of things made Rose feel sick about living in London, the city its dwellers called "the Smoke." There was Jim's family, for a start—in fact, his family alone amounted to a good reason not to feel very well at all. But here, now, Jim, Rose and their precious child were safe. Or as safe as they could be. They'd managed to get out of London, exchanging the Smoke for the quiet of the country. In the past year, since they had altered the course of their lives—forever, they hoped—Jim had lost that sunken look in his cheeks and those lines of worry that no young man of five and twenty should feel every time he ran his hand across his forehead. There were no longer dark circles under his pale-blue eyes, and he didn't startle every time wind rattled the windowpanes. They had escaped London. They had run as far as they could from the bomb sites—and more than anything, they had dragged themselves out from under the fingernails of the Mackie family.

It had been a miracle, the way things had fallen into place. Rose even thought her mum, dad and brothers must all be helping from what her aunt called “the other side.” Without doubt, luck had been with Rose, Jim and their little girl when they stepped off the Victoria to Hastings motor coach in the small village of Shacklehurst, on the winding rural route some sixty-five miles from London. They had gone only as far as their fare budget would take them. Not knowing quite what to do next, they walked into a teashop across the street from the bus stop to ask if there was somewhere in the village they could stay for a night or two. In truth, they knew it didn’t look as if they were there for just a night or two, what with a couple of suitcases, the child on Rose’s hip wearing half the clothes she had to her name, and a tension in their voices that might as well have announced to everyone in the teashop that they were not, in fact, on a bit of a holiday. The proprietor gave them a broad smile when they entered her establishment, which was a good start, Rose thought. She had noticed the spotless shop and that the woman was wearing a clean, starched pinny, with the only indication that she was rushed off her feet being a single errant curler left in her hair. And people weren’t always welcoming in the country when they heard an accent or turn of phrase that screamed “We’re Londoners!” Still smiling, the woman looked them up and down and nodded, beckoning them aside and adding that by chance she had a spare room she could let them have for a few nights, and could put out a breakfast for them into the bargain, perhaps even a supper, though she’d need their ration books. They had to be off the premises during the day because there were customers to consider and she didn’t want anyone hearing heavy feet or a baby screaming above their heads while they were enjoying a cup of tea and a cream bun. That was alright with Jim and Rose; after all, they had a good few things to accomplish during the course of their country sojourn. Finding work was at the top of the list, and a place to live came next—very much next.

Lady Luck remained at their side. In short order their new landlady, Mrs. Butler, told them a local farmer had just lost a worker, the silly old whatsit having ruptured himself so he couldn’t do the job anymore. The absent worker was getting on in years anyway, so the farmer knew it was coming, and what with first losing men to the army and then the land girls demobilized, she said it looked like Jim had turned up in Shacklehurst at the right time because the farmer needed a hand with the cattle and sheep, and

had let the word out that he was looking for a strong bloke who would put his back into anything asked of him. Mind you, the gossip was that every last job on the farm would be asked of him.

The family walked a mile and a half along the road and then on a woodland path through a few acres of pine forest to find Mr. Wicks, the farmer. He was a plain-talking man who took Jim inside the farmhouse and made it clear he would brook no shirking, adding, with a shake of the head, that an aversion to hard work was half the trouble with Fred, the worker who had ruptured himself. Old Fred had forgotten how to lift something heavy because every day of his working life he had done his best to avoid it. “No muscle, that was his problem,” said Wicks, reaching across the table to feel Jim’s bicep. He nodded approval. Jim swore he was as strong as an ox, that he knew cattle and sheep inside and out and could drive a tractor—driving being his specialty. Oh yes, driving was definitely Jim’s specialty. An awful lot of blokes from his part of London thought well of his skill behind the wheel.

Jim landed the job. A tied cottage went with it, though the two-bedroom accommodation needed a coat or three of paint, and there were vermin to be evicted. That was nothing to Jim—he’d come face-to-face with pests who were a lot more trouble than a few rats or mice. As he emerged from the farmhouse, having shaken hands with the farmer, adding that yes, he’d be ready to start work at six the following morning, Jim opened his arms, ready to embrace his wife and daughter. “Nice work if you can get it, Rosie, and I’ve got it! And guess what? The missus in there needs a hand with a bit of cleaning a couple of mornings a week. You up for it?”

Of course she was up for it. So there they were, settled, with no furniture, no pots and pans and no crockery. Then Mrs. Butler said she had some old china she could let them have, and by the way, could Rose help her out on Saturday afternoons, because it was when day trippers came out to the country and rolled in for a cup of tea and a cream bun or scones after they’d had a walk through the forest, which meant she was run off her feet and could hardly keep up. Jim worked Saturday mornings, so it all fell into place—he’d look after Susie when he returned to the cottage at one o’clock, while Rose brought home some pin money in the evening. Every little bit helped. Now they had a roof over their heads, they had work and they would get the other bits and bobs to make their house a home as they went along.

That was over a year ago now, and they hadn't seen any family since—which was alright with Rose. Not that she had much in the way of family. She had been evacuated to Sussex at the end of August 1939, just before war was declared, and was living with her foster family when everything in her world changed. The billeting officer came to the door to tell her that her mum, dad and two brothers—who were fifteen and sixteen, old enough to remain in London and work, but with not enough years on them for the army—had perished when a bomb came down on the house while they were halfway through dinner. There they were, Mum, Dad, Andy and Bill, minding their own business, eating sausages with mashed-up turnips and a few peas, when, boom! Now they were on the other side.

She'd gone to live with a maiden aunt as soon as she turned fourteen—working age—just a few months later. Rose, Andy and Bill had been close in years. Her dad always joked that her mum hadn't seen her feet for a good while, what with those babies coming one after the other. Her brother Bill earned himself a clip around the ear when he grinned and said, "And whose fault was that, Dad?" Rose missed her family, truth be told.

At eighteen Rose was employed on the sweet counter at Woolworths, and one evening met Jim at a dance in Camberwell. Jim took to Rose from the minute they began talking. She was a down-to-earth girl, with no side to her. She wasn't mouthy—not like some when a soldier chatted them up—and she wasn't a wallflower either. Solid, that was Rose, an honest sort, and it didn't take long for Jim to love her for it. In fact, Jim adored his Rose. He was with the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers—REME—where his ability to remain calm under pressure led to training in bomb disposal before being stationed in London, where his skills were needed most. Experience had taught him how to keep breathing and retain a steady hand while executing the precise movements required to remove the detonator from one of those great big UXBs—unexploded bombs. He explained to Rose that the Germans deliberately made a lot of bombs so they didn't explode when they landed, because they knew the strain of having a UXB in the street, its menacing tail fins sticking out of the tarmac, would cause the British people to get nervy. It was all to undermine morale. Rose remembered those words when she met Jim's family. It seemed to her that Jim's dad was like that, and so were his brothers; they had dodgy detonators that scared the you-know-what out of people and undermined their morale.

Jim's family, all still very much alive, lived south of the river in Walworth. John Mackie—Jim's dad—was angry when Jim told the family he and Rose were planning to move to the country. He told them Jim was mad to leave the manor—that's what he called it, his "manor," as if he owned the streets, which really, Rose supposed he did. The old man disowned Jim after the young couple added that they were going anyway because they wanted to bring up Susie in fresh country air, away from bomb sites. John Mackie got up from the table, took an ornate china bowl and ewer from a marble-topped sideboard, poured water from the ewer into the bowl and began scrubbing his hands. He made a show of shaking out the water and taking a towel to dry himself. "I wash my hands of you—but you will be back. You wait and see. Even if you leave her and the girl behind, you will be back. You belong in this family, Jim Mackie, and don't ever think otherwise—you're nothing, nothing at all without us, and let's see the look on your yellow face when you come crawling home."

"That was horrible," said Rose later.

"We both know what he's like," said Jim. "He's a hotheaded, miserable old sod."

In those early weeks, every day without word from the Mackie family was a relief, and now Rose had begun to believe she would never see them again. As far as she and Jim were concerned, his people could languish away in his father's so-called manor for a long time. They'd had enough of their London lives to last them all the way to the other side, wherever it was. To be fair, Jim's mum had cried when they walked away, but she was no angel either.

Rose popped Susie into her pushchair, tucked a blanket around her chubby little legs, handed her Teddy One Eye and locked the door, pressing hard against it to make sure the lock held. It was always important to make sure. She stopped for a moment as she maneuvered the pushchair along the path, turning to glance back at the dwelling. It wouldn't have been much to most; a sixteenth-century weatherboard cottage with only cold running water—and yes, it could do with a drop of paint, some new flashing around the base of the chimney, and that outside toilet was bitterly cold in winter—but it had become her beloved home. She tucked a strand of coppery hair behind her ear, smiled and said aloud, "Thank you, my lovely house." Then

she went on her way, wondering if she'd see the quiet woman this morning, the one who walked along the road every single day. That's what they called her in the village—"the quiet woman"—and Rose could understand why, though she was also known as "the White lady" on account of her surname and the fact that she seemed like, well, a lady.

Although Rose had never heard a word pass the woman's lips, she must have said something to someone, because she went into the village every few days. Rose noticed that as soon as the woman saw her emerging from the cottage or walking along the road toward her, she would adjust her hat as if to hide her face under the wide brim, then pull up the collar of her dark-grey mackintosh and walk on, for all the world as if Rose were invisible. But Rose persisted because she wanted to greet her neighbors; after all, for a London girl it could be lonely in the country if you didn't know people.

"Good morning," she would say, hoping the woman would look up.

Nothing. Never a reply. Never a smile, though once or twice there was a nod on those days when it appeared as if the woman had seen Rose. And perhaps that was it—she was so deep in thought, she hadn't heard a thing.

Then one day, as the White lady approached, little Susie took the initiative. Rose thanked the house, as usual, and as she turned around to open the gate and step out onto the road, she saw the woman just a few steps away. Susie beamed a smile, waving Teddy One Eye as if determined to gain the White lady's attention.

"Hello quiet lady," Susie had said, before Rose could even open her mouth, then threw Teddy One Eye in the woman's direction. Susie's babyish effort at communication came out as "Hayo kite yadey."

The woman stopped, picked up the toy and looked down at Susie as if she were taking in her blond curls, scarlet rosebud lips and that little nub of a nose with its liberal smattering of freckles. Susie reached forward, fists opening and closing in anticipation of Teddy's return.

"Well, good morning to you, Miss Susan Mackie," said the woman as she brushed a few fallen leaves from Teddy One Eye before handing him back to the child.

She smiled and nodded, bidding Rose a good morning before continuing on her way.

Rose watched her walk away until she turned right to step over the stile that gave way to a narrow path leading into the densest part of Denbury

Forest. Rose was perplexed. The woman knew Susie's name.

I can't say I know much about the woman," said Mrs. Wicks, sitting at the farmhouse kitchen table with Susie on her knee while Rose finished mopping the floor.

"She lives along the road, doesn't she?"

"Hmmm, yes—in a 'grace-and-favor' house. There's a few around here, though that's a nice one. Big garden, and apparently she does it all herself. She doesn't have a daily going in to clean either, and that's unusual for a woman of her sort."

"Grace-and-favor?" Rose squeezed out the mop.

"You know—belongs to the crown, just like the forest here. They give these estate houses to people highly thought of, people who've done something for the country—a sort of favor granted by the grace of the monarch, or something like that. It's a bit like you having a tied cottage because Jim works here on the farm—mind you, your little cottage isn't like her nice big one. A person with a grace-and-favor home can live in the house until their life's end, because they served the crown."

"Did she work for the government?"

Mrs. Wicks shrugged. "She was probably a lady-in-waiting, or a private secretary to the king. Mind you, she's a clever one, is Miss White."

"That's really her name then—Miss White?"

"Miss Elinor White. And like I said, very acute she is. Mrs. Marchant told me that a couple of weeks ago, there she was at the back of the queue at the butcher shop, and Mr. Hatcher, the butcher, was weighing up some bacon for Mrs. Larch. Well, he does his usual, you know, puts the bacon on the scale, then does his little flourish with another rasher, winks and says, 'A bit over for you, Mrs. Larch.' He does that for everybody, so we think he's generous going over on the ration, but of course we still have to pay for it."

The farmer's wife took a sip of tea, her captive audience now leaning on the mop handle. "Well, everyone got what they came in for, but Mrs. Larch had forgotten something, so she was about to walk back into the shop when she heard Miss White, who had finally reached the counter. No one else was in the shop. Mrs. Larch told me that Miss White leaned toward old Hatcher and said, 'Mr. Hatcher, I am sure you don't realize this—or perhaps you do

—but your scales are off, so when your customer thinks you're giving them a bit extra, you're still not handing them the weight they're paying for. You're shorting your customers and you're charging them the full whack. I would imagine that rather mounts up in your coffers, over the days.' Mrs. Larch said he flushed beetroot, mumbled something about his scales, then said he'd check the weights directly." Wicks nodded. "She caught him out, did Miss White, and more power to her."

"I don't see her around the village much," said Rose.

Wicks shook her head. "No, you wouldn't. Apparently a van from London comes to the house once a week, sometimes once a fortnight, and she walks out to collect a box of groceries, all sent down from up there. She's looked after, make no mistake. Mind you, she has a motor car herself, but she only takes it out every now and again on account of the government limits on petrol—you know, if you've a motor you can't go more than ninety miles distant in a month, so it's not as if she can wander far from home, is it? Anyway, the royals look after these ladies-in-waiting when they've stopped working—though I would have thought she was a bit young for being retired."

"How old is she, do you reckon?" asked Rose.

"I would put her at about forty-two, forty-three, something of that order. Bit more, perhaps, but not less. Anyway, none of our business, is it? Now—do you think you could go over that bit of floor again, there, in the corner?"

Rose pushed the mop into the bucket of water and scrubbed away at the heavy red tiles in the corner of the kitchen. There was no mark left after the first mopping, but she knew Mrs. Wicks liked to find fault by way of keeping her on her toes.

"Mind you, one thing I know," continued Wicks. "She's handy with a gun. Saw her early one morning, just past dawn it was, when I was out picking mushrooms for Sunday breakfast. Couple of pheasant went up and she had them." The woman snapped her fingers. "Just like that, one after the other, boom-boom. I didn't think she had any idea I was there, because it was all I could do to see the fungi at that time in the morning, but she picks up the birds and calls out, 'Good morning, Mrs. Wicks. I wouldn't touch that clump of mushrooms because they're set among a few Destroying Angels—they're the ones with a bright white cap.' Then she was gone, and I hardly saw her set off on her way. But she had a steady hand, I'll say that for her. And she knows her mushrooms, because when I got back to the

kitchen, I looked into the basket and she was right, there were a number of the bad ones she'd told me to look out for. I could have killed me and Mr. Wicks with just one of them if she hadn't warned me." She paused. "Could you do a bit of laundry for me? My smalls, if you don't mind—I like to get them done before Mr. Wicks comes in from the fields. Not right for a man to see his wife's knickers, is it?"

While Rose stood at the sink washing half a dozen heavy-duty bloomers that must have pre-dated the Great War, Mrs. Wicks continued talking about their neighbor.

"And she reminds me of that funny sort of lizard I read about once. You know, the one that changes color to match whatever leaf it's sitting on. Can't say I remember what they're called. Anyway, I was at that kitchen window one morning, wondering if the snow would stop and whether the pipes would freeze—they say last winter was the worst on record for years and years, perhaps even a century. Well, as I said, I was looking out of the window, and I thought I saw something move. I squinted, peeled my eyes to have a good look, and then I saw her—Miss White wearing a white coat, marching across the field, her hunting rifle over her arm. A white coat in the snow!" The farmer's wife shook her head. "It's like she never wants to be seen. Funny, eh?"

"Chameleon," said Rose.

"What, love?"

"The lizard you were talking about—it's called a chameleon."

As time went on, Rose thought the woman was more like a hermit crab, one that Susie had tempted away from its shell house. It seemed the White lady smiled a little more with each encounter, and sometimes even waved when their paths crossed as Rose and Susie were on their way to the farmhouse. She often stopped to talk now, just a few words here and there, though Susie remained the focus of her attention. It occurred to Rose that the woman might have trouble making friends—perhaps she never knew quite what to say. Some people were like that. "Fumblers," her aunt had called them: people who weren't very good at having a chat or passing the time of day with a neighbor. Perhaps Miss White was one of those—more at ease in the company of children, though it had taken a while. Or she could have been widowed and lost a child, because there was a sort of melancholy

about her. Rose couldn't help speculating—after all, she was an orphan on account of the war, so anything was possible, and she knew what it was like to lose people you loved.

Rose considered inviting the woman in for a cup of tea, now that they were on friendlier terms. She said as much to Mrs. Wicks, who frowned and tutted, then counseled that it was never a good idea to get too familiar with your betters. They might seem gracious enough, but they were all the same, those sort of people—nice to your face, but the bonds of fellowship were limited to their equals. Rose agreed that Mrs. Wicks probably knew best, but she still thought it would be a good idea, one day, because that White lady seemed a very nice person. And after all, she might be lonely, on her own in that grace-and-favor house along the road. She had probably been used to having lots of people around her when she worked for the king and queen or the government. Indeed, the image of a hermit crab was uppermost in Rose's mind; she remembered learning that they were quite social creatures, down there on the sea bed, though they scurried back to their shelters on account of their outsides being quite fragile. They had to protect their insides, those hermit crabs. Rose had liked nature study—it was her favorite subject when she was a girl in school. That's how she knew about chameleons.

Elinor White stood at her kitchen sink and stared out of the window, across fields where in the distance cattle grazed, flanked by lush woodland. If she turned and walked through the house to the front door, she would view another part of the garden, one that a passing rambler might stop to admire—a very traditional English garden, with a poetic blooming of narcissus, daisies and foxgloves bordered by a goodly planting of heritage roses. The narrow country road was just beyond her white picket fence. The opposite side of the thoroughfare formed the eastern perimeter of Denbury Forest, a mixed woodland of conifer and deciduous trees that extended for miles, dissected by a branch of the South Eastern railway and dotted with farms and cottages.

Elinor's back garden was devoted to the practical, to the growing of vegetables, the mulching of compost and a trellis bearing honeysuckle, chosen with care to provide pollen for the farmer's bees working away in hives on the other side of the fence. Her father had kept bees when she was

a child, in Belgium, so nurturing something that gave such sweetness was a thread stretching down through her past. She enjoyed this benign memory; there were other strands of reflection reaching back over the years that were akin to electric cables, able to shock if touched. Those hot wires of remembrance were all around her.

She took up a pair of binoculars and held them to her eyes, scanning the landscape from her window. Dozens of crows, sparrows, blackbirds and starlings swooped down to follow a farmer's plough as it moved across a field, the horses pulling hard, finding balance in the rich clay soil. It was the only sign of life she could ascertain beyond the house, so she put the binoculars aside, pulled on a pair of leather work gloves, and set off into the garden, having pushed her feet into a pair of black rubber boots.

Elinor worked for two hours—a good use of a Sunday morning, she thought. She would down tools at noon, then go into the house for a sandwich and a cup of coffee. Good, strong coffee made with real beans she prepared in a small box grinder. The grinder was another connection to Belgium. Born of a Belgian father—who loved good coffee—and English mother, Elinor had spent her early years living in a small community not far from Antwerp, where her father was a diamond merchant. It was, until 1914, a lovely life. They had been a happy family—her father, mother, and her sister Cecily, who at thirteen was three years older than Elinor. So very happy.

Elinor changed her mind. She couldn't be bothered to make a sandwich, but she craved the coffee—it would set her up for her walk. Every day she walked in the forest, and every day she found or created another path. She couldn't say she knew the forest like the back of her hand—after all, she had only moved in to the house some eighteen months earlier—but she was at home among the conifers, the oaks, hornbeam and hazel. Sometimes she stood in one place for so long, she wondered if her feet might sprout roots reaching down into the soil, anchoring her to this new life. Then she would move on into deeper, darker parts of the forest that offered her a quiet, lonely place to polish, perfect and retain skills that had stood her in good stead over the years. She had yet to feel safe enough to relinquish them.

Elinor put on a light jacket and hat, both in a pale green reflecting the colors of late spring, and stepped out of the cottage. She checked the locked door once before taking a sliver of tape from underneath a window ledge

and rubbing it with a firm hand across the top of the door where it met the frame. It would not fall away of its own accord.

Sunday was her favorite day to walk. There was less chance of an encounter with another human being. It was not a well-traveled route anyway, which was another reason to be grateful for the home provided for her after the war, as if it were another medal bestowed in exchange for services rendered. But there again, she had worked hard for every brick, every peg tile on the roof, every door and every stick of furniture already in place. Yes, she had earned it, she thought, stepping out along the road. The day was fine, though brisk—early June was not quite flaming yet, though it was warming up and July promised more sunshine. Elinor looked forward to summer, not for the pleasure of discarding a cardigan or because there would no longer be a need to chop firewood, but for the light and those late evenings when the sun seemed as if it would never go down. She remembered staying at the manor house in Scotland, during the war, when on a midsummer's eve nighttime was but a flash of darkness before dawn.

Her chosen route was to clamber over the stile just past the Mackie cottage. She hoped she could pass without seeing the child and her mother again. She thought it best because she didn't want close associations, not anymore, and as much as the little girl enchanted her, she was afraid another "Hello, how are you?" could fast become an invitation to tea, and an invitation to tea heralded idle chatter, and idle chatter might segue into the sharing of secrets. She was not in the business of sharing secrets.

These considerations were running through Elinor's mind—sometimes she wanted to stop her mind wheeling around and around dissecting the machinations of every thought—when she saw the motor car. It was a black vehicle, and it was outside the Mackies' cottage. It was a strange addition to her Sunday walk, and anything unexpected in her daily round was a most unwelcome visitor.

She identified the marque even from a distance—it was a Ford Pilot motor car, a new vehicle with a three-liter engine capable of reaching high speed, even while maneuvering around a tight corner. Then, as she approached the cottage, she saw Rose Mackie in the front garden, clutching her child while pacing back and forth. Elinor quickened her pace.

"Rose? Rose, are you alright?"

Rose Mackie looked up, her eyes red-rimmed as she held on to Susie.

“Oh, nothing. It’s nothing, Miss White. We’re just getting a bit of fresh air out here. To be honest, Jim’s older brothers are visiting us, and those boys never saw eye to eye, so I thought us two girls would leave them to it and get a ray or two of sunshine.”

Elinor looked up as raised voices came from behind the closed front door, then back at Rose. She could see the reddish outline of a bruise beginning to form along Rose’s cheekbone. “What’s happening, Rose? What’s going on?”

“N-nothing. Nothing at all. As I said, it’s just a bit of a family upset, about . . . about Jim’s . . . about Jim’s granddad.” Rose Mackie stalled; Elinor knew another lie would follow. “You know, he’s getting on, and the family want to put him in a home, and well . . . there’s a bit of a row. And silly me, I picked up Susie and she had her toy train in her hand and bonked me on the nose with it. I’m perfectly alright—but you know how it is if you’re hit on the nose, it causes a few drops of water to run.” She paused, smiling through tears at her child. “Let’s tell the nice lady we’re perfectly happy—shall we, Susie?”

The child mimicked her mother, saying only the word “Happy” while waving Teddy One Eye.

Elinor nodded, then smiled at Susie, running her fingers through the child’s curls. “Rose, look, if you and Susie—”

“Well, I’d better get going inside,” said Rose, interrupting whatever Elinor White planned to say next. “I’ll make Jim’s brothers a nice cup of tea so they all calm down. I tell you, family! Can’t live with them or without them, eh?” Rose Mackie smiled. “Wave to the lady, Susie. Wave goodbye.”

Elinor returned Susie’s wave, knowing it was time to turn away. She had been dismissed, her concern neither required nor welcome. She nodded to Rose, then began to walk toward the stile—though she did not proceed toward her intended route through the forest. Instead she clambered over a five-bar gate to her left and ran alongside the field toward her home, which she approached from the back garden, then along the gravel path at the side of the house to the front door. She tore off the tape from above the doorjamb, unlocked the door and closed and bolted it after entering. Speed was of the essence, but speed should never compromise diligence—even if she could not help but imagine a livid bruise beginning to flower around Susie’s eye, and not her mother’s. Elinor knew that if a man hit a woman, then a level of societal restraint had broken down, and in time—even a

short time—brutality against a child might not be far behind. Perhaps it had already happened. And if Jim had seen a brother strike his wife and not acted, it meant he had been restrained. There was a visceral feeling deep within Elinor, a sudden internal commitment to protecting her neighbors—one in particular—so the young family would not have to endure another unexpected drop-in from Jim’s siblings, who she was sure had no interest in any future arrangements for an aging grandfather.

With haste Elinor changed into a dark-grey skirt and jacket, a silk blouse, silk stockings and a pair of shoes that were both stylish and practical, the heel enough to draw attention to a well-turned ankle, but not so high that she could not run. Or drive. Picking up a black brimmed hat and her shoulder bag, she opened a drawer set underneath her desk and took out cash and a set of motor car keys. She ran down the stairs, out the front door, locked the door, replaced the tape and stepped along the path to a small barn that served as a garage at the side of the house. Selecting a key, she released a padlock securing the double doors, pulled them open and removed the cover from a black and maroon Riley RMB motor car—an automobile that could achieve a speed almost equal to that of the Ford parked outside the Mackie house. She started the motor car, then stepped out—the engine had been dormant for a while, so she had to allow a minute for the oil to get around the engine—and pressed another key into the lock of an adjacent cupboard. She nodded as she chose a silenced 9-millimeter Welrod pistol, a weapon she was well familiar with. They had called it the “bicycle pump” in the war because it could be concealed with ease and was close to silent. She locked the cupboard, took her place in the driver’s seat and slipped the pistol into her shoulder bag—if she carried a bag, it would always have enough room to conceal a weapon.

After reversing the motor car out of the garage, she ensured the doors were secured again and drove at a low speed toward the Mackies’ cottage. Pulling over to park on the grass verge, where she knew the shadow of a giant conifer would obscure the fact that she was there, she waited.

Her timing was good. Within a few minutes, two men came out of the cottage, one looking back and waving a fist at Jim Mackie, who turned away into his home, an arm around his wife and child. Was it instinct on her part? Foreknowledge? Experience? Whatever the source, Elinor knew the men must in some way be disabused of the notion that they could prevail,

for she understood that the only reason for the visit was to bring Jim Mackie back to London, and not because his family missed him.

And how did Elinor know all this? Because she made it her business to know. Just as she knew the butcher was fiddling the books and his customers, just as she knew Mrs. Butler at the tea shop in Shacklehurst was a receiver of black market goods. She also knew that Wicks, the farmer, spent many an evening in Mrs. Butler's company and not walking the perimeter of his land checking fences, which is what he'd told his wife. To be sure, she recognized the Mackie name—anyone who read the newspapers would have seen it on occasion in connection with a police inquiry, though as far as she knew, nothing had ever been pinned on the family. A few days after her first encounter with Rose and Susie, Elinor had taken the train into Tunbridge Wells—just for a change and to visit a shop or two—and used the opportunity to spend a couple of hours in the library, leafing through a clutch of old newspapers. She told the librarian that she was writing a novel, a mystery, and she wanted to find out more about the criminal underworld. The librarian was most enthused—indeed, she was a fan of mysteries—and proved to be a helpful accomplice in the quest. Elinor thought it was enlightening, what she learned about crime and the Mackie family. Of course, there was another source of information she could have approached—a man who had an intimate knowledge of organized crime—but at that point, early in her acquaintance with Rose and Susie, Elinor thought she understood enough about the Mackies to be going on with. And she wasn't ready to consult that particular oracle.

As the Ford accelerated away from the cottage, Elinor released the handbrake, slipped the Riley into gear and kept a discreet distance behind the Ford. She knew they were bound for London; she would follow them all the way to be sure her information regarding their identity was correct. Then she would go to the flat. The flat was her secret. If the house in Shacklehurst had become her retreat, the flat was her safe house. To her knowledge, it was her best-kept secret, and Elinor White knew how to keep secrets.

Tomorrow morning she would go to see Steve. It was time. Her reappearance in his orbit would come as a surprise, might disarm him at first—she knew that much. He would ask why any of this was her business,

and he would doubtless lecture her about London's gangs, about the machinations of organized crime. Naming his adversaries, Steve would tell her more than she wanted to know about the Sabatinis, about the likes of the Maltese Alfred Messina, his brothers and their gang, and the types of ne'er-do-wells who toiled for a nasty piece of work known as Jack Spot, and then he would list every other crime lord in London who was giving him and his men a headache. Finally he would tell her to go home. He would insist she return to her safe, quiet and secure house in the country and put all wars behind her. He would tell her the underworld wasn't her battle. In the meantime, she would devise an answer for him, a counter to convince Detective Chief Inspector Stephen Warren that she was serious, that she knew something was going down with the Mackie family, though her motive for taking immediate action would not be the truth. But he might guess. He might well intuit that it was the child. And he would smile at her; the penny would drop, and he would know that for Elinor, Susie Mackie was both the reason and the opportunity. The little girl had triggered something elusive she had yearned for since the war. It was the possibility of atonement.

Yes, she needed Steve's help, even though she was aware that any assistance from him could open a very big bag of worms. But Elinor White—a woman fluent in English, French, Flemish, German and Italian—was trained for almost any and every eventuality. It was a training that had begun in 1916 when she was just twelve years old, when her name was Elinor De Witt. Her parents had teased Cecily and Elinor that it was a wonder their hair wasn't white, given their mother's maiden name—White—and the meaning of De Witt, their father's name. Perhaps it was ordained from the earliest days of her parents' union that the women of the family would in time be introduced to La Dame Blanche—the White Lady.