

The
STORMS
OF WAR



KATE WILLIAMS



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PROLOGUE

December 1916

Michael was shaking. If he held his hand, then it was his leg; if he stilled that, then his back wobbled, like a string waved about from one end only. He sat at the back of the trench and felt his body quiver in the freezing air. The whole place was quiet save for the movements of the men, the scrabbling of the rats over the discarded bits of food. Only he was making sounds: his knees knocking together, his teeth chattering. What a joke that normally was – knees knocking. He had laughed at actors playing fake fear on stage, hands popped over mouths, legs quavering. And now here he was, a caricature, and none of it was funny because he just couldn't stop. A tin can fell to the floor and he jumped in horror. The scream was out of his mouth before he knew it. The men turned around. He looked down and a large rat had knocked over Orchard's billy mug. The men turned back to their positions. That was the most shaming thing of all. Now they hardly noticed him, took it for granted.

It was even worse when there were no bombs. When there was shelling, all the men were shaking, even Orchard. In the silence, it was just him.

Orchard manoeuvred himself beside him. 'It's coming up to time, sir,' he said, tapping his watch. 'No orders to the contrary so far?' He was a squat, cheerful man, worked for the fire brigade in Wapping. Michael knew he was beyond fortunate with his second in command. 'Don't you worry, sir,' Orchard said when Michael was holding his gun upside down or had sent the men the wrong way. 'You'll pick it up in half a tick.' Michael made himself do things he hated, so as not to let down Orchard and his beaming face.

‘No, Orchard. No orders to the contrary.’

‘Right, chaps! Attention. Corporal Witt wishes to issue a command.’ The trench was silent. From a distance, you could just hear the French shouting on parade and the boom of the miners making another trench. Michael thought – just for a moment – that he heard a woman singing. Perhaps one of the cooks, although it sounded too delicate for a domestic. He strained for the notes, but there was a gust of wind and they were lost.

Orchard looked at his watch. Michael tried to still his shaking hands. ‘Over!’ a voice shouted. ‘Over the top, men!’ It was his. It wasn’t loud enough.

‘Don’t worry, sir,’ said Sergeant Orchard. ‘The wind ate up your voice that time. I will give it a proper shout so the chaps know what’s what.’

‘Thank you,’ Michael tried to say. But his voice was shaking too and it could not get out.

Orchard stood up. ‘All right, men,’ he shouted. ‘We’re going over. As the captain said, we’ll have fire cover from the top and the barbed wire will be cut. You’ll be as safe as houses.’ He put up his arms. ‘One, two, three, GO!’

Michael held his gun, willed himself to go forward.

1914



ONE

Stoneythorpe, Hampshire, Saturday 1st August 1914

‘There you are!’ Emmeline was pulling apart the willow branches, poking in her perfect, entirely regular nose. ‘Mama wants you. Michael’s American friend has arrived early. And she’s fussing about the party.’

Celia looked to the side so the white and silver of the pond was sharp on her eyes. ‘I’ll come in a moment.’

‘Now, Mama says.’ Emmeline kicked at the soil with her boot. ‘Come along. I think I was good to even try to find you back here. It’s so *dirty*.’ Celia pulled herself out of the willows, ignoring Emmeline’s hand. ‘I don’t know what Mama is thinking, allowing Michael to invite this Jonathan person. We’ve quite enough to do, with the party and my wedding.’

None of us cares about your stupid wedding, Celia wanted to say. Not that it would be true. ‘Let them try to mock us now,’ Rudolf had said, pulling on his beard. ‘My wife was the daughter of Lord Deerhurst and my daughter is to be Lady Bradshaw.’ She scraped her boots in the grass and followed her sister up to the house.

Emmeline walked ahead, her pale pink skirt snaking after her – she was wearing out her old dresses in preparation for her trousseau. The house beckoned to them, the squat frontage of the servants’ hall, the breakfast and dining rooms and the back of the sitting room, its long, pale windows glinting in the sun, the Hampshire stone flashing coolly behind. In summer, Celia would usually be in the Black Forest, visiting her second cousins, Hilde and Johann. ‘We will make a longer visit next year,’ Rudolf had said. ‘When the international situation has calmed.’ She blushed to

herself that she had been secretly relieved. From the age of eight, she had spent two weeks there with her siblings, but now they said they were too old for it, and last year Celia had gone alone. They had done the things that would look like fun to anyone seeing them from outside: fishing for sticks in the river by their house, taking rides with their groom and listening to the gramophone in the parlour. But Johann had been awkward with her and Hilde had wanted to be alone and not talk. 'She is just growing, dear,' Aunt Lotte had said. 'She wishes to be quiet to think.'

Uncle Heinrich sat her down at the table and talked about the family tree, how Wolfgang de Witt had come from Holland in the seventeenth century, married Anna and never returned to his home country – ever. 'Like your father, Celia,' he said. 'Rudolf will never leave England.' Then he asked her questions about home – even about Tom, though he had never met him.

Now, the sight of Hilde's letters, neatly written on pink-edged paper, illustrated with flowers around the edges, arriving every three weeks or so, made her feel embarrassed for the friendship that they no longer seemed to have, since they were grown. She stuffed them into one of her drawers, guilty also that a cancelled visit meant she could spend the summer months with Tom. That was, if Emmeline would let her escape the discussions about her wedding.

'Come along,' said Emmeline. 'Why are you always so slow? Mama is waiting. She will be pulling her hair out. Well, not literally. But she says she wants to.' Their mother's great pride was her chestnut hair, still as thick as when she was nineteen, Rudolf said.

'Mama is always worrying about the party.'

'You know her, every year she says she will never be able to get everything done. And every year it's a success. Anyway, what were you *doing* down there?'

'I was thinking about Princess May, actually.'

'Hmm. If you ask me, she must have felt lucky to marry the King. She was very plain and her mother had a figure like Mrs Rolls. I shall see them when Sir Hugh takes me to court and introduces me. I simply don't believe she was the ideal bride.'

‘I think it was romantic that he chose her when his brother died. But I still don’t see why anyone would want to get married, even to the King.’ Celia was lying. She’d been thinking of Countess Sophie, the lady-in-waiting, courted by Franz Ferdinand, everybody thinking he wanted to marry one of the princesses of the house.

‘Well, he wouldn’t marry you. You always have dirty knees.’ She was right: Celia did usually have some dust or grime over her dress.

Emmeline was too beautiful, that was the problem. Her fair hair was pinned up by Miss Wilton into a great cloud around her head, and her eyes were so large that they drew your attention away from the rest of her face. She looked like Mixie, Verena’s doll from when she was a child, without flaws. Celia knew that, if you looked closer at her sister’s cheeks, there were slight bumps, dry patches, and that made them pink. But no one ever did look, apart from her.

Emmeline had always taken the lead roles in plays at school – finishing with Miranda in *The Tempest*. In Eversley, the nearest big village, she was like a kingfisher, striking people silent when they saw her height, slender figure and mass of pale hair. Celia sometimes looked in the mirror and wondered how different her days would have been if her reflection had been like Emmeline’s, the snub nose, pale eyelashes and thin frizzy hair replaced by her sister’s easy loveliness. ‘You have a happy face,’ a teacher had once said to her. Not beautiful. If she looked like her sister, people might follow her in the street, as they did Emmeline, offer her biscuits and cakes or ribbons as gifts in shops. Like Emmeline, she could say what she wished and no one would reprimand her, be cross or remember her angry words.

Celia had been a plump child and now she was too tall, too thin, like a lanky bird plopped out of its nest, Michael teased her. Her nose was too wide and her grey eyes too small, and when she smiled, her eyes crinkled smaller and her nose got wider. She tried hard not to envy her sister’s mass of hair, for her own lay flat on her head, fell out of buns and clips, dropped over her face. None

of her clothes fitted because the waist was always wrong, and there seemed to be a permanent thin line of dirt under her nails. If they wore the same gown, it would look pristine on Emmeline, creased and out of shape on Celia, within a week thinned at the elbows and grey. 'Why can't you just be elegant?' her mother said.

Still, she thought, if all beauty got for you was marrying Sir Hugh, perhaps it wasn't worth so very much. Sir Hugh was grass-thin and looked about a hundred, even though Verena said he was forty (old enough, Celia thought). He dressed so neatly that Rudolf said even King Edward would have approved of his buttons. He wore wide ties over his shirts, expansive, shimmering silk, their generous show a dark shock against the rest of him. Last year, after days of fiddling with their gowns, Emmeline and Verena had gone to Lady Redroad's ball at her house ten miles away. They came back talking of Sir Hugh. A week afterwards, he came to visit, sat upright in their parlour, said nothing. Verena was jubilant. All the mothers had been looking at Sir Hugh, she said, and he was visiting *them*.

Celia took one skip – why did they always have to *walk* – towards Stoneythorpe. The dark red stone of the house shone above them in the afternoon sun, the three peaks on the roof and their turrets and towers reaching almost to the clouds, the whole of the back spread with ivy. As a child, she'd count out each of the twenty great windows and try to guess what might be happening behind the leaded panes of glass, whether the furniture was dancing when they weren't looking. Now she only wondered that about her own room. She knew the house was grandest at the front, with its four main rounded windows and the ornate façade with the handsome carvings over the porch and on the roof. But the back was her favourite, she liked its humbler windows, the chips in the stone.

'Here she is, Mama,' said Emmeline wearily, as they arrived on the lawn in front of the back windows, just at the base of the slope. Closer up, the windows looked slightly fogged around the edges. They'd have to clean them again before the party. The footmen had dragged out a ring of chairs, but only Verena and Rudolf were

seated, Rudolf asleep under his hat, legs stretched out in front of him. Michael was lying on a blanket on the grass, staring up at the sky, and a tall man in a boater was sitting next to him.

Arthur was the only one missing, their handsome, know-it-all older brother, in Paris since last year and saying he had no plans to come back. Without him, there was always a quiet spot, a hole where he would have sat in the middle, talked the most. Celia felt ashamed that she didn't miss him, felt relieved not to be on edge from his sharp jokes. Her first memory of Arthur was when she was four, running away as she tried to catch up, laughing and shouting, 'Go away!'

Emmeline swept herself into the empty chair by her mother. 'I found her sitting in the dirt, as usual. No one would believe her fifteen.' Verena tipped her glasses back on her nose and gave Celia a vague smile. She was sitting bolt upright as ever, her long neck extending out of her ruffled white blouse and blue jacket, glasses glittering on her pale nose under her puff of brown hair. *Your mother pays a lot of attention to her clothes*, a woman at a Winterbourne parents' tea party had said to Celia. Verena did. She wore things that didn't match on purpose, combined dark blouses with pale skirts. Rudolf teased her that sometimes she still thought herself dancing as a doll in *Sleeping Beauty*, wanted always to stand out.

Verena had small eyes, like Celia – it was Rudolf who had the great doe eyes Michael and Emmeline had inherited. Wrinkles snaked out from the sides, down her cheeks, up to her ears. When Celia was younger, she'd traced them on her mother's face, drawing a map, touching the soft skin where it dipped and fell. 'You really should not run off so often, Celia.'

The man in the boater stood and made a mock bow. His skin was sunburnt brown, the colour of Michael's shoes.

'Well, hello,' he said. 'You must be Celia. Short for Cordelia, I understand?' His drawling voice sounded so ridiculous that Celia could almost think he'd invented it for effect. 'I'm Jonathan Corrigan.'

'You're Michael's friend from Cambridge, I know,' Celia finished

for him. He was so white and blond, the sun behind him so bright that her eyes were watering just from looking at him. 'And no one calls me that name. It's too long.' Verena cleared her throat, her usual signal, and Celia dropped her eyes to her boots. Michael had talked endlessly about Jonathan for the past two weeks: his father's two large homes in Boston, summers by the sea, his house in New York where the buildings were as high as the sky. Before Michael went to Cambridge, Celia had imagined him coming back with friends who looked like him, who would want to talk to her as much as he did: tall, thin young men with glasses and Michael's dark hair, smiles that made their whole faces bright, like his. Michael was clever, shy, sometimes nervous; he bit his nails down so they were ragged and the skin underneath showed, fiddled with his clothes in company. She did not think he would have a friend like Jonathan, with his big round face and smile. Jonathan was like Gwendolyn King at school, the type of person who thought everyone was his friend.

Michael waved his hand. 'Now, sis, be nice. Jonathan has driven all the way from Cambridge in time for the Bank Holiday.' He pulled at his tie, his fingers flickering.

Celia shrugged. *I didn't ask him*, she wanted to say. *I didn't ask him and his buttery smile to come here.* Jonathan was staying for three weeks – almost half her holidays. He would be taking her brother off to walk in the gardens, talk and read, leaving her alone. She hated the fact that men like Jonathan saw a side of Michael she did not. She had hopes – so far secret from her parents – that she would go to Cambridge herself, sit in rooms full of books, discussing ideas with other girls just like her. They would toast muffins by the fire and discuss the philosophy of religion. Then she would go on to Paris, read books about philosophy and be cleverer than any boy.

Jonathan turned to Michael. 'You didn't tell me you had such a pretty younger sister.' He had a thick gold ring on his little finger. Celia had never seen a man wear jewellery.

Emmeline laughed. 'You jest, Mr Corrigan.'

'I'd like to paint you, Miss de Witt, if I might be permitted.'

Celia gave him a polite smile. What was worst of all was that Michael had said to her last week that he might go to America one day. If Michael went to New York on a boat, so far away, he would be surrounded by shops with glass windows, and theatrical shows, and he might never come back.

‘I don’t know why you fancy yourself a painter,’ said Michael, nudging his friend’s leg with his hand. ‘Shouldn’t you stick to poetry? Darned hard enough to do that, if you ask me.’

‘If I see something or someone that requires depiction, I do so,’ replied Jonathan, his voice sounding more ridiculous to Celia by the minute. ‘I’d compose you against the house, Miss de Witt, the large oak tree to your side.’

He gave Celia a wink. She sat down by Michael and looked away, towards the house, hoping that Jonathan would see her eyes watering and so his idea of the portrait would be ruined. Michael nudged her shoulder in the way he always did, their sign of secret friendship amidst it all. Michael’s hands had patches of red that flared up from time to time. Verena had said they all had it as babies but Michael worst of all. She had tied his hands together to stop him from scratching.

‘How about it?’ said Jonathan.

‘Celia does not have time to sit for paintings.’ Verena’s mouth was narrowed, her words taut. ‘She has much to do in assisting preparations for the party. She has been given dispensation from her lessons from her tutor in order to help us.’

Jonathan nodded, switched immediately to Verena. ‘Of course, Mrs de Witt. The party. Michael promised I’d see a real English village in full swing. That’s if he can drag himself away from Professor Punter’s reading list. It might just be you and me, Mrs de Witt, if Seneca proves as captivating as usual.’

Celia watched her mother’s mouth soften under the light of Jonathan’s smile. In the pictures of ships going over the sea she’d seen, there was always a tall man walking with a group of ladies. That was exactly what she could see him doing, striding over the deck every morning, looking forward to arriving in England, where he probably thought people still dressed like they did in the

Queen's time. All the while, Michael was reading, Celia thought, preparing for his meetings with Professor Punter, to sit in his room and discuss great thoughts.

'You certainly shall see an English party,' said Verena, pushing her glasses up her nose. 'If I get these lists completed in time.'

'I do wish you would stop fussing, Mother,' Emmeline said, stretching out her skirts so her shiny boots protruded, her delicate calves almost on show, taking care to look away from Jonathan. 'Every year you get in such a turvy over it all.'

Verena shook her head fondly. 'Dear. You young people think great events arise from nowhere.' She patted her bodice and returned to her lists. Verena had wanted to be a ballerina when she was a child, but grew too quickly, she said, even though they all knew that no girl of her family would have been allowed to flutter her way across a hot stage in front of people of the town. Sometimes, when Celia saw her mother presiding over plans, she tried to think of her as a dancer, directed by a gentleman in a suit, but could not. Everything about Verena was stiff, restrained, as if she were a peg doll grown tall and watchful. 'I have much to do. Especially with Mrs Bell away.' Their housekeeper had gone to visit a niece, whose children had promptly fallen ill with measles. The doctor had told her she must remain with them for at least two weeks.

'Mama, my wedding is more important than a party for the village. Those children throw stones, and their parents only come to pocket as much food as they can.'

Verena did not reply.

'You care more about those children than your own daughter's wedding.' Emmeline tossed her hair. Celia wished she could throw a paper aeroplane at her. For Emmeline, every party list inched her further away from her ideal self, resplendent in ivory silk from Worth, intricate beading billowing out from her tiny waist, a glassy tiara propped over her veil, glimmering with the beautiful future ahead of her.

'It is our duty to entertain the village,' said Rudolf from beneath his hat, the consonants catching on his words.

‘Mama! Are you listening to me?’

‘Emmeline, your wedding is not for another three months. There is plenty of time.’ Verena did not look up. The dark brooch on her lace-covered bosom glinted in the light.

‘But you haven’t ordered the decorations. I asked you to.’ Celia had heard every detail, she thought, a hundred thousand times: the flowers for the church, the tents they would erect across the lawns, the menu of lobster, beef and more ornate cakes than King George V’s. For the last six months, Celia had watched Emmeline complain, slam doors and cry about bridesmaids, lace and not having the reception at Claridges. She pinched Michael’s knee and he rolled his eyes. Emmeline had threatened that if Arthur didn’t come back from Paris, she would go there herself and get him. *Try to be patient, Celia*, Verena sighed when she complained.

Soon, Celia told herself, Emmeline would put on the mauve going-away suit ordered by Verena and take the train to Dover, in order to honeymoon in Paris and the Italian Lakes. She would be Lady Bradshaw and Celia would be free.

‘As I said, there is plenty of time.’

‘Time I greatly require to save for the expense,’ snorted Rudolf from under his hat. They all turned to look at him. ‘Celia. Might you go and ask Tom to join us here for tea?’

Verena’s voice cooled. ‘Dear. Marks needs him in the stables. He is without a second groom.’

‘Oh, poor Tom has surely worked sufficiently by now. It is so warm today. Celia, go and ask him.’ Celia watched her parents. Tom had come up for tea before, but only when Verena was inside with a headache. She looked at her mother, then her father. She felt their wants tussling over her head. Then her mother sat back and looked at her lists once more. ‘Go on, Celia,’ said Rudolf.

‘You humour her,’ said Emmeline. ‘She’s too old to be playing with the servants.’

Michael propped himself up on his arm. ‘Better play with lords, you mean?’ His voice caught around the first word. When he was a child, he had had a heavy stutter and Verena and the governesses had practised correct speech with him, over and over again. Still,

Celia heard him reciting at night, bs, rs, ps, stopping and starting for hours.

Emmeline turned to Verena. 'Next thing Father will be inviting Tom Cotton and all his family to sit in the front pew at my wedding.'

'Lord Snootypants might like that,' Celia said, jumping to the side so her sister could not reach her.

Emmeline swung out her hand for Celia's skirts. 'Papa! Did you hear what she said?'

'Oh, leave her be,' said Michael, dropping back to the grass. 'She's right. Sir Hugh detests the fact that he needs our German money, our *canned meat* money, to patch up his precious old pile of a house.'

'Nothing wrong with a bit of canned meat,' said Rudolf. 'We've got a new range in next week, straight from Alsace. Sir Hugh should try some.'

'It might do his pinch nose some good.'

Emmeline struggled to her feet through her tangled skirts. 'You're hateful! Well, when I'm married and living at Callerton Manor, I shall only invite Mama. And if you think I'm going to find a husband for her' – she gestured at Celia – 'you are quite wrong. Just look at her hair! And all that grime under her nails. I would rather die than introduce her to Sir Hugh's friends.'

'Never mind, Emmy,' said Michael. 'We could all turn up as organ grinders and do a German spot at your ball. Crown you the Canned Meat Queen.'

Jonathan spat out a laugh.

'I've had enough,' said Emmeline, her hand on her pink silk hip. 'You can all stay and mock. I'm the only one in this family actually *doing* something. *You* spend more time at Cambridge playing cards than anything else, and heaven only knows what Arthur is doing in France, and Celia looks like a tramp, and nobody cares! Well, I give up on you all!' She turned and hurried up the lawn, stumbling into her skirts.

'Oh, let her go,' said Rudolf to his wife, who was beginning to follow. 'She will cry it out, then Miss Wilton will arrange her

hair and it will all be better.' Verena inclined her head, sat down again. Celia watched her sister hurry up towards the house, her shoulders dipped, the thick curl of hair behind her head bobbing in time with her feet. She looked too big for Stoneythorpe already. She could preside over whole ballrooms at Callerton, smiling graciously at queues of Sir Hugh's hunting friends.

'May I go to find Tom now?'

'If you must,' said Verena at the same time as Rudolf smiled and said, 'Right this minute!'

Celia leapt up and hurried away. She could hear Michael shouting that Sir Hugh wanted to wring them dry, declaring that lords and ladies would be nothing in the future. Verena was trying to calm him, Rudolf shrugging it off, Jonathan making some joke about rich Americans.

Secretly, alone, hoping that God could not read her thoughts, Celia sometimes imagined Sir Hugh changing his mind about Emmeline. Then things would go back to how they used to be, and Michael and her father wouldn't be arguing all the time. Then she chastised herself for being cruel to her sister. All Emmeline had ever wanted was to be a society bride.

'The future is a ham in a can!' sang Celia to herself, softly. She had never tasted a de Witt ham. Verena said they were for the poor, and young ladies and gentlemen should never eat them. But Celia followed what her father said about his products and felt a swell of pride every time they used to pass the large advertisement on the boards near the church in Hampstead. 'De Witt, de Witt, keeps you fit,' she sang as she ran.

TWO

Celia ran across the garden, hurried out through the hedge at the side of the lawn, down the dry grass by the willows and cut past the edge of the forest to the stables. She heard the horses first, kicking and whinnying in the heat. She could just see Silver through the door, nuzzling the hay bale. Marks was speaking loudly. A hand hit a flank and she crept closer to the door.

‘You staying here, hanging around this lot, wasting yourself.’

‘And you’d know.’ Tom’s voice was high and angry. He’d worked in the stables during his holidays from school for as long as Celia could remember. It was a special school founded by a lord for boys without much money; it took Tom an hour to walk there every morning. In the holidays, he worked at Stoneythorpe to earn the money for his books.

‘Your loyalty is old-fashioned, Cotton. You can do better than this.’

‘Why should I care what you think?’

She could hear Tom walking towards the door, so she leapt forward and knocked.

‘Tom!’ she said, entering, seeing both their faces redden. Marks dipped his sunburnt face towards the side of Moonlight, Emmeline’s brown mare. Each of the children had their own horse: Moonlight for Emmeline, Red for Arthur, Arrow for Michael, and Celia had Silver. She had ridden Silver for three years now, since she’d been allowed to have a proper-sized horse. She walked over to her stall and held her close. ‘Hello, beautiful,’ she said. She had ridden her out yesterday, escorted by Tom. Last summer, she and Tom had spent almost every day together after she returned from the Black Forest, when he was not working in the stables. Yesterday morning, he had taken her out into the fields outside

Stoneythorpe, where there had been no one but them. She'd spurred Silver into a gallop and he'd followed her on Red, Arthur's stallion, who needed exercise now his owner was away.

She'd thought the pair of them speeding through the bare grass could be the standard-bearers for a medieval king, hurrying forward to check the land so the soldiers behind could move forward and conquer. She'd hoped, afterwards, that he might have been free so they could go to the pond and look for frogspawn. Last summer they had found piles of the stuff and dropped it into the old stone trough by the back kitchen door. She'd planned out the afternoon, thinking they might beg scraps from Mrs Rolls for a picnic and sit under the trees behind the stables. But he said he had to go back to the horses, and she'd had to wander back to the house alone. This summer, she thought, things were different: she could not always think of what to say to him. Sometimes, words she had thought quite ordinary would make him turn angry and quiet, his eyes smaller, as if they were focusing on arrows sent from far away.

'Did you want a ride, miss?' said Marks, his tone not as polite as his words.

She held Silver tighter. 'No, I'm coming with a message. Tom, Father asks if you can join us for tea.'

'Like this?' He looked down at his dirty breeches. 'I can't.' Marks sniggered.

'I'm sure it won't matter.' Tom always looked smart, the material of his clothes undarned, his shoes without holes. Silver. The horse nuzzled her cheek and Celia wondered if it was possible to love anything more than she did Silver. Papa had taken her to choose a horse at the farm. The minute she'd seen Silver, grey, dappled, she knew she was the one. She had gone to stroke her nose and the horse had shuffled up to be nearer, closed her eyes as if to say *I'm your friend*.

'Better obey the master,' said Marks slyly behind Tom, his bad eye flickering. Celia wished she could push him hard, send his cold smile away.

Tom's mouth twisted. Then he straightened. 'Well, I shall come then. Mrs Rolls will let me wash my hands in her kitchen.'

'Enjoy your silver forks, my lad,' said Marks. 'And you too, my lady.'

Celia kissed Silver's nose. 'I will come and ride you tomorrow,' she whispered, then turned away from Marks and out of the door. A few moments later, Tom came to join her.

'I don't know why Father keeps Marks on,' she said.

'Good with the horses,' he shrugged, looking ahead. His eyes were so pale, they seemed to reflect the air in front of them. When he had arrived, she had been the same height as him. Now he was almost as tall as Michael, able to look down on her. He had grown up in so many other ways. He was sixteen to her fifteen. His skin had lost the spots that had sprouted the previous year, and his face had grown thinner. Tom's great feature was his nose, everyone said that. It wasn't snub like Celia's or too big like Michael's (and Emmeline's, even though she would never admit it). It was what the art history teacher, Miss Quinn, would call a Roman nose. She might want to paint him.

'The horses like you more than Marks. Silver does.'

'I must obey him,' he replied. 'Like you have to obey your father.'

'Emmeline is being terrible about her wedding,' she declared. The forest loomed above them. She never went in there, forbidden by Rudolf. Arthur used to, took two friends from school there years ago; they all came back screaming that they'd seen a ghost.

'You'll be bridesmaid,' he said, smiling.

The sun beamed into her eyes and she covered her forehead. 'I have to.'

'You'll wear orange blossom in your hair and a fancy dress.' He drew his hands to his head, as if there were flowers there.

'The dress is awful.'

'What a pretty girl you'll be. Sir Hugh's friends will think you *quite* the young lady.'

'Stop that!'

She stretched out for him, laughing. He jumped to the side. 'So *ladylike*.' He danced away from her towards the pond. 'Pretty

Celia!’ He started to run and she picked up her skirts and hurtled after him. He ran around the tree, laughing, and then into the shrubbery, shouting out all the time. She hurried after him, past the old trees, over the grass, and when they were both breathless he let her catch him and they fell to the ground, laughing. ‘Pretty,’ he called out one last time. The willow tree over them touched their faces.

‘Why don’t you write to me when I’m at school?’ she said, when they were both lying on the ground.

The leaves cast shapes on his cheeks. ‘I wouldn’t know what to write.’

‘Don’t say that. Anything you wrote would interest me. You don’t know what it’s like there. Day after day of the same thing. It’s terrible.’ Winterbourne was full of people. Girls, teachers, even gardeners, all of them, everywhere: behind trees, doors, the cupboards of books, all the places she tried to hide.

He turned on to his back, looking up at the sky. ‘Those school-marms wouldn’t have it, me writing to you.’

‘No one would know.’ Her voice came out weak. She wouldn’t tell the girls at Winterbourne that she was writing to him. She’d once tried to tell Gwen King about him, only for her to laugh that Celia was friends with a *servant*. She wished she could say: *Your father might have died early and then you might be poor too!* But she knew that even if Rudolf died, there would be money for them. She quashed the thought, horrified that she had even considered the idea of his death.

‘They’d all know I was writing.’

She squeezed his hand. ‘I hate it there. I don’t want to go back.’

‘Plenty of people wouldn’t mind having a good education like that.’ Celia blushed. It would be Tom’s last year at school and then, he said, he had no idea what he might do; he couldn’t go to university. Celia secretly hoped he might work at Stoneythorpe, but she knew that was selfish.

Tom shook his head. ‘You’re dreaming, miss.’ His voice was all sarcasm.

‘Don’t call me miss.’ They’d agreed between them that he would

only call her that when there were others around. 'Anyway, it's not the books I mind. It's the girls, the whole place. It smells of fish.' The boarding house was tiny and always dusty, and it was so hard to sleep with the sound of the other girls snuffling and crying around her. Without the English teacher, Miss Lowen, who lent Celia books meant for the sixth formers, Celia thought she might go mad.

'What else do you want? Stay here and have Mr Janus teach you instead?'

'No thank *you*! Mr Janus is dull, he says the same things every day. All he really wants to do is moon after Emmeline.' Pale-haired Mr Janus walked over from Helmingham, the next town. He had been a master at the boys' school there until he had caught a virus that meant he could not get out of bed for weeks. Working with Celia was his steps towards recovery, as Verena put it. He was Celia's first tutor, and she preferred him to the governesses who had gone before – until, that is, he had started following Emmeline around with his eyes.

'Don't let your mother hear you say that. She won't let him back if she thinks he is being disrespectful to the future Lady Hugh.'

'I know, I know.'

Tom got to his feet. 'Well now. In a few years, you can marry like Miss Emmeline herself and then you'll never have to go to school again.'

Celia hit her hand on the grass. 'It is a chain, just like those lady demonstrators say. If you are married, you are your husband's thing; that's why he votes for you.'

'You don't know a thing about politics, Celia.'

'I do! Well, I could if I wanted to.'

'I think your father would be pretty cross if you started burning down tea rooms in Kew Gardens. Or cutting up the paintings in the National Gallery.'

'Well, the King should let ladies vote then.' The women had stepped up their campaign recently, wrapping up bricks in paper, arrested and re-arrested by the police.

'Your father will make you marry, you know that. You're his pet.'

He'll have you dressed up in white and being presented by your sister to the Queen before you know it. You'll be deb of the year, like in those magazines.'

'Stop it. You're beastly sometimes, Tom.'

His face clouded. 'Celia, you have to marry. Women must.'

'Women only need husbands if they have babies,' she said stoutly. Marriage, if you asked her, didn't seem to do much that was good. The King and Queen, of course, were very happy, and her parents, but not many other people seemed to be so content. Mrs Cotton was married, and the few times Celia saw her, she saw only unhappiness.

Tom nodded. The sun dropped through the branches on to his face. He hardly ever talked of his mother – and never of his father. She thought: if only I knew the right question, he might tell me. 'Anyway, it was not your mother's fault that your father ran away and deserted her. He was a man of little moral worth, obviously. She married him properly.'

He flushed. 'Yes. Come, your father is expecting us.'

She stood up and squeezed his arm. 'One day he'll come back from far-off lands and you'll be a family again.'

'Celia, let's talk of something else.'

She dusted down her dress, not that it did much good, forced herself to put the subject out of her mind. 'Will you take me riding tomorrow?'

'If Marks says I can.' The rose garden in front of them was hysterical with colour, so much that you'd think it had been daubed all over by a child equipped with a new paintbox. It was a great pond of pinks, yellows and reds. The flowers were curling at the edges, Celia knew. The summer was too hot for them, made them thin, brown, thirsty.

'Life is about improvement,' her father often said. 'The human race must go forward.' When they'd arrived, Verena had applied herself to the grounds, appointing Mr Camlett from London to regulate the overgrown wilderness behind the house with an open array of flowers and ornamental hedges. But even Verena could not turn the grounds of Stoneythorpe into the fantasy of a

Versailles-like eighteenth-century garden, with strips of paving, neat flower beds and rectangles of grass. It was too old, the shrubs were too dug down and Rudolf said he would not disturb the historic plants at the back. Verena had to confine Mr Camlett and his men to the first hundred metres, planting grass and making out paths of small pale stones. Instead of Versailles, a gentle slope led to a perfect lawn, shrubs cut into neat rounds standing like toy soldiers next to the paths, a stone fountain in the middle, fed by a tiny canal coming from the pond behind the trees. Celia thought you could imagine Marie Antoinette walking around it, never even needing to lift up the silk material of her gown. She jumped over the strip of grass that was to her the channel, the break between her garden – overgrown roses, willows and old ponds – and the ornamental perfection of her mother's.

'I'll ask Marks if I can go with you.' Soon, she supposed, she would have to ride side-saddle like a proper lady. Verena was already talking about letting down her skirts. She could not bear the thought of it, the heavy material down to her feet, making it impossible to walk or run or do anything, ever. She wouldn't be able to catch tadpoles with Tom then.

Tom walked ahead. 'No. Celia, don't. He won't like it.'

She shrugged. 'If you say so.' She would ask Rudolf to ask Marks. Then Tom would be allowed.

He smiled at her. 'Are you looking forward to the party?'

'Mama is fussing. I don't know why. It's the same thing every year. Mrs Rolls does it all.'

'You enjoy it. You'll do it yourself when you're a grand madam in charge of a house like this.' They edged past one of Verena's ornamental flower beds. Tom drew his hand lightly over the fountain. 'Even this stone's hot,' he said, absently.

She nudged him. 'I shall go to live in Paris and read books. I told you.' On their last shopping trip to London, she'd bought a copy of a book on dreams by Sigmund Freud by hiding it under a copy of *The Water-Babies*. Some of it did not seem very clear to her, but she was determined to reach the end. 'I shall take an apartment by the river and discuss ideas.' She would find her own

Professor Punter, who would tell her clever things. What was the point of sending her to Winterbourne and hiring Mr Janus (and his predecessors every summer before) if they really only wanted her to get married?

‘You’d have to make your own tea if you lived in Paris.’

‘I can make tea, thank you.’ Although really, she had to admit to herself, she rather hoped that she would be the type of rich lady intellectual who would have everything done for her, so she could think only of books.

‘Not once seen you do it.’

‘And since when did you know it all?’ She hopped over to the other side of the ornamental canal, hoping she sounded brave, hoping he would not dare her to go to the kitchens and show him.

‘True. Never.’ He nodded, and then stepped back so that she could walk up the path first. ‘Looking good, the Hall,’ he said.

‘Is it?’ Celia looked up at the back of the house.

‘Your father had the roof done again while you were away. He redid the windows and the guttering. It must have cost him a fortune.’

She gazed at the windows and they did look shinier. ‘I suppose it was to impress Sir Hugh. I wish Father would stop building.’ As soon as they had moved in, Rudolf had set about what he called modernising the house. He had repainted it, put up new wallpaper and even installed electric lights in the parlour, the dining room and the front hall. Verena, however, tended to decline to turn them on, and the staff were afraid of them – Smithson told Celia that they had heard that an electric light in a house near Winchester had burst and cast yellow stuff all over the entire company under it, and they were burnt quite to a cinder. Rudolf had also recently installed a telephone in a special small booth in the hall, even though no one had yet used it and Verena complained bitterly about the expense. Celia sometimes crept to look at it when nobody else was around. She would pick up the receiver and speak into it. ‘Hello,’ she whispered. ‘Is there anyone there?’ The line crackled and fizzed; no one spoke.

‘I think the place looks better for all his work. If you’ve got the money, why not spend it, I say?’

Something caught her heart then, and she could not help herself. She pulled his hand. ‘Tom.’ She could almost feel urgency flooding between her lips. ‘You will never leave. Promise me you won’t leave.’

He looked up at the sky, away from her. ‘I won’t. I don’t have anywhere to go. You will, though. You’ll go somewhere else.’

‘No. Say it to me, promise me. If we leave, we go together.’ She stared at the grime on the back of his hand, begging him to answer.

‘Life is different for me.’

‘What makes you so sure? Please, Tom. Promise me you won’t leave.’

He shifted on to the other foot. ‘I promise. Things will always stay the same.’

That was enough. She pulled her hand free and took three steps away. ‘Race you first!’ she cried at him, waving, and then gathered her dress in her hand and began running, hurtling headlong to Stoneythorpe.

Thompson was coming towards them, dragging his bad leg behind him, his souvenir from the Boer War, he said. The rest of the family were no longer sitting at the back of the house. Tom and Celia were running so fast they almost crashed into him.

‘Hello, miss,’ he said. ‘I was looking for you. Your father asked me to tell you. There has been a change. They have returned inside and they are not taking tea.’ He looked at Tom. ‘He asked me to convey his apologies.’

‘What do you mean, there is no tea?’

‘That is the case, miss.’

She was about to protest again, but Tom put his hand on her arm. ‘Don’t, Miss Celia. There is no space for me when Sir Hugh might be near, that is all. It is not Mr Thompson’s fault.’ His voice was calm but his face was red with fury.

‘Why did my father not wait to explain?’ Celia demanded. ‘It’s unfair. He should be here to tell us.’

Tom squeezed her arm harder. 'I'm going back now. Good day, miss. Wishing you a pleasant evening.' She heard the sarcasm in his voice as he turned. She stood next to Thompson and watched Tom run across the lawn to the side exit in the hedge. *I hate Sir Hugh Bradshaw!* she wanted to cry, so loud that the noise bounced around the fountain, echoed as far as the back of the garden.

'What was that you said, miss?' Thompson asked.

'Nothing. You go inside. I will come in one minute.' The windows at the back glittered hard, shining out over the ivy that was already creeping past.