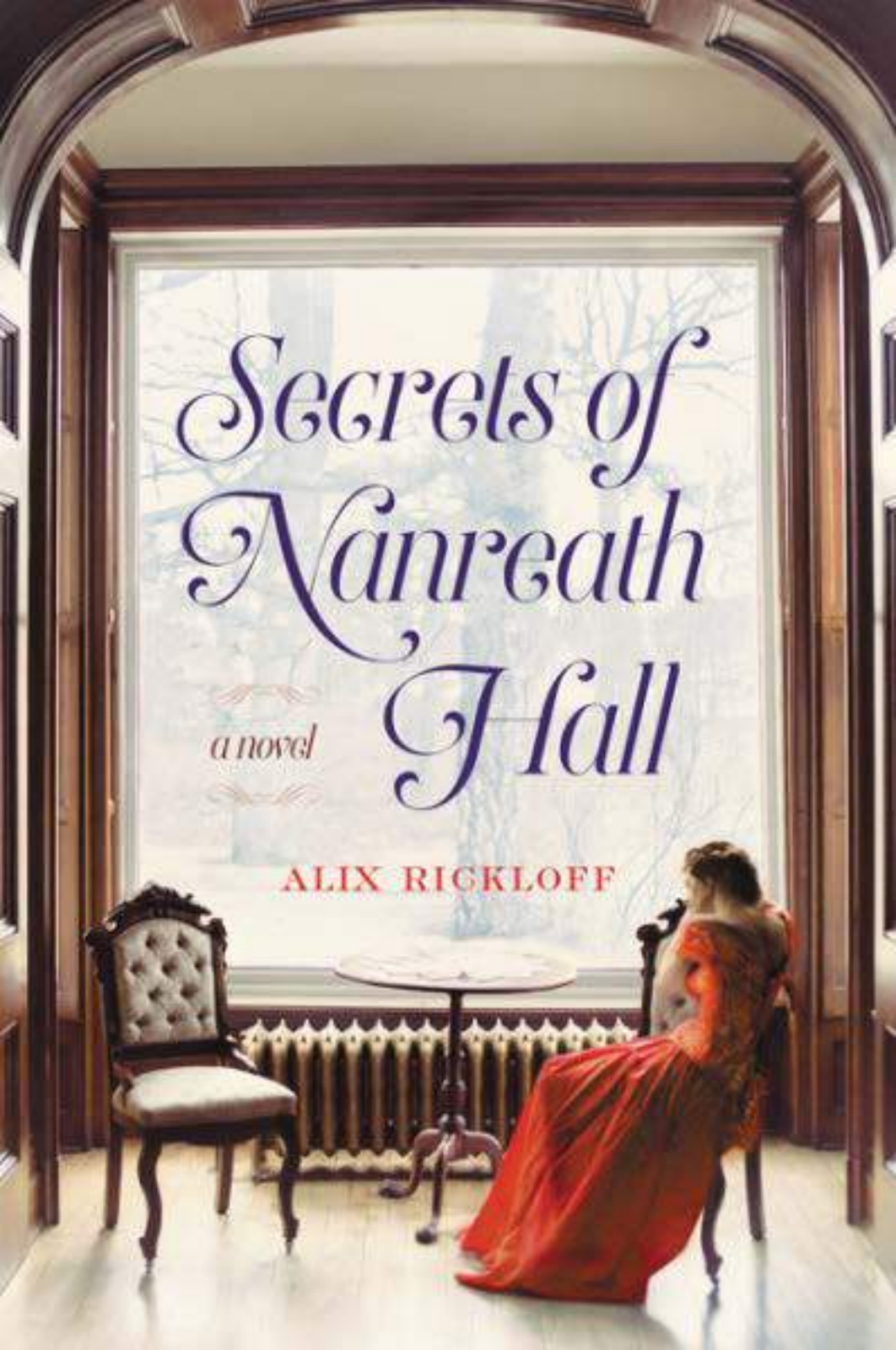
Secrets of Nanreath Hall
a novel
ALIX RICKLOFF

Prologue

London, England
February 1923

I am dying."

Prue puts down her sewing and eyes me through her cheaters, but in no other way does she reveal the shock she must be feeling at my news.

"Cancer, so Mr. Porter tells me." I blunder on before she can gather herself to speak. "He suggests I put my affairs in order while my strength remains, but what's there to organize? The last payment I received for modeling was just enough to pay the doctor's consultation fee. By the time Andre returns from Biarritz or San Remo or wherever he's gone in search of lucrative commissions, I won't be in any position to pose for him or anyone else."

We are taking advantage of a mild winter's afternoon to take the air in Prue's small back garden. Laundry flaps on the line, and in the corner by Graham's potting shed, the earth has been turned in preparation for planting cabbages and cauliflower. My journal lies

open in my lap where I have tried to capture the poignant intimacy of the scene, but my mind won't focus. Memories laced with regret and grief simmer too close to the surface for me to concentrate on my work.

I chose my moment carefully. Graham is at the pub, leaving Prue and me alone in the little house on Queen's Crescent. I know I can no longer hide my illness from her. She is far too observant and has already noticed my lack of appetite and how quickly I grow tired from the least strenuous of activities. It's just as well. I need her counsel and her quiet common sense. She'll not burden me with useless sympathy. That isn't her way. For good or ill, life must be faced head-on. She has taught me that if nothing else.

"There's Anna," she says simply, as if reading my thoughts. "You must make arrangements for her."

Anna. My daughter. My dearest treasure.

I sent her to school this morning in a crisply starched pinafore, her wild red hair tamed into two slick braids. She made me leave her at the corner, too old at six to be seen holding hands with her mother. But at the last moment, she threw her chubby arms around my neck and kissed me on my nose. I wanted to crush her close and never let her go. It took every ounce of strength I possessed to release her. Too many times have I watched silently as those I loved walked away. As she marched proudly, back straight and head high, down the sidewalk, I clamped my jaw shut to keep myself from calling her back.

"Of course, but I don't want her to know, Prue. Not about the cancer. Promise you won't say anything." My throat aches, and I shiver with unexpected cold. My fingers knot, and I'm surprised to see how knobby my knuckles have become, the veins running blue under the translucent skin of my wrists.

"Are you certain that's wise?"

I force myself to relax my hands so they lie flat on the pages of the journal, but I can't make myself leaf back through the pages. Not yet. "I've weighted her with enough burdens, don't you think? I won't add to her load."

Prue pours out two cups of tea, adding four heaping spoonfuls of sugar to mine, just the way I like it. The sweet, syrupy heat coats my throat and warms my stomach. I take a deep breath and the ghosts of the past recede, though they never completely leave me. Now I am glad of their company.

"You should write to your family," Prue urges, her own tea prepared with only a thin slice of lemon. Her expression is grave, though I can see she is already looking ahead to what must be done, checklists mentally ticked off in her head. "Tell them what you've told me. Ask them for help. If not for your sake, for Anna's. She's a Trenowyth, no matter what side of the blanket she was born on."

Next door, crazy old Mrs. Vaisvilaf begins playing the piano. Some of the neighbors dislike the noise, but I enjoy her concert-worthy performances of Haydn and Mozart as she relives her youth on a St. Petersburg stage. Perhaps because I know how she feels when the past becomes more real than the present. "You make it sound so simple. You forget that in their eyes Lady Katherine is already dead and has been for years."

Despite my protest, Prue's suggestion makes perfect sense. Anna *is* a Trenowyth. I've made her one through my own arrogance. And I wish I had the courage or, perhaps, the shamelessness, to write and beg my family's aid.

I imagine Anna moving from room to room at Nanreath Hall, her shoes scuffing the same crooked floors, her fingers trailing along the carved oaken banister as she is led downstairs for her daily obligatory visit with the grown-ups, staring out the same nursery window toward the glittering gray-green sea and listening to its

purr as she lies in the narrow iron bedstead with Nanny snoring a comforting room away.

But I know even as I imagine it, that it is a dream with no hope of coming true. Nanreath is lost to me. There is no going back.

I close my journal and run my hand over the tooled calfskin cover, worn smooth over years of use. It is warm to the touch, as if the souls of the people and places within might be conjured with a word and a breath. "It's funny, but I'm not frightened of dying. I'm more terrified that when Anna understands who and what she is, I won't be here to explain. That she'll despise me."

"And why would she do that?"

"Bastards are rarely treated gently." I hate the taste of the word. Prue winces, too, and she catches back a little breath. "Sometimes I regret not feigning a marriage," I continue. "It would have been easy enough after the war. There were so many widows, who would question one more? I know you thought I was mad not to."

"I didn't want you hurt any more than you already were. You were so fragile, so lost. I didn't see the honor in wearing your shame like a badge."

"Perhaps not." I give a little shrug. Now that the confession has been made, I find I am weary, my strength deserting me. "But I'd lied to myself for so long that when I finally realized the truth, I couldn't lie anymore. Not even for Anna's sake."

"She won't despise you." Prue reaches across to take my hand, squeezing it gently in a wordless note of comfort. "Graham and I will make sure of that."

Her motherly gaze behind her glasses holds the reassurance I seek even if I don't ask outright. I could not have wished for a better friend or a better guardian for Anna when the time comes. But not even Prue knows the whole story.

There is no one left alive who does.

The sun chooses that moment to break free of the clouds and spear the sea of belching chimney pots, falling warm and golden upon my face. Spent, I close my eyes, and though I am in London where my life is ending, I see the glittering expanse of ocean stretching on forever and feel the June sun burn my cheeks as a briny wind tosses my hair into my face. Mrs. Vinter's house sits at the bottom of the lane where riotous beds of camellias and jasmine and verbena frame a pink front door, and Nellie Melba on the gramophone floats through an open window to war with the cry of gulls.

It is Cornwall the summer before the Great War, and though I am already twenty and, to my mind, quite grown up, my life is just about to begin.

Chapter 1

September 1940

This is London." American newscaster Edward R. Murrow's nightly send-off repeated itself in Anna Trenowyth's head as she emerged from the Aldersgate Tube station into the dusty yellow glare of a late summer afternoon.

This certainly was not the London she knew. In the weeks since German bombers had begun concentrating their nightly raids on the capital, the city had taken on a surreal feeling, as if the entire population clenched its fists and held its breath. Even the air seemed charged and heavy, coating the back of her throat with a taste of grit and cinders.

Damaged roads had been roped off, so that just navigating the short distance between the station and Graham and Prue's house became a game of snakes and ladders, with every move forward requiring three moves back. Homeless queued in front of a burned-out department store where volunteers handed out blankets and coffee. A group of boys rooted near a rubble-filled crater, hooting

and whistling over bits of shrapnel and twisted metal. A family hustled, heads down, toward a bus, carrying a few bits of scarred luggage.

She'd been warned what to expect. She'd listened to the news reports from her hospital bed in Surrey, fingers clenched white in her lap, stomach tight and tense. Whitechapel, Clerkenwell, Holborn, the names familiar and dear. Places she could picture when she closed her eyes. Her city. Her home. But not even Mr. Murrow's impressions of devastation had been enough to prepare her for the harsh reality.

"Pardon, miss. Street's closed off. Unexploded bomb." A policeman barred her way, twirling his whistle round his finger, rolling back and forth on the balls of his feet. "Bomb disposal's on its way, but you'll have to go round." He eyed her dark blue gabardine Red Cross VAD uniform and the valise she carried, the weight of it dragging against her bad shoulder. "Home for a bit?"

"A week's leave. My family lives just north of here. I thought I'd surprise them."

His frown deepened. He caught his whistle in a closed hand. "A good daughter, you are, miss. I hope you find them well."

Anna nodded her thanks and began the roundabout track that would take her east then back north. At this rate, it would be dinnertime before she dragged herself into the small front parlor in Queen's Crescent. It was Friday, so Graham would be at the pub for his weekly pint of bitter and a jaw with the lads. Prue would be in her chair by the radio, listening to Vera Lynn or the comedy of *Band Waggon*, chewing nervously at the end of her spectacles.

Anna hadn't seen either of them since July, when they'd visited her in hospital. She'd tried talking them out of the difficult trip from London to Surrey, but Prue had insisted, and Anna hadn't the stamina to argue. It took all her energy just to scribble a few hack-

neyed lines on a postcard each week. There was no way she could make them understand her desire to be left alone without sounding cold and unfeeling. And she'd not hurt Graham or Prue even if it meant gritting her teeth through their hovering attentiveness.

Just as she'd expected, it had been an awkward reunion. They'd not known what to say as she lay plastered like a mummy, her face gaunt and marked by the constant nightmares that left her sick. She'd had too much to say and no words to speak of the horrible images seared upon her heart. By the time they left, she'd felt nothing but guilty relief and an overwhelming urge to be sick.

Then she'd received her new orders, and she'd had to speak to them. They were the only ones who might understand her emotional tug-of-war. She'd foregone a letter, choosing instead to ring them up with the news, spilling her confusion and doubts over the wires. Graham had listened to her calmly before handing the phone to Prue, who urged her to come home for a long-delayed visit. They needed to talk with her—about her mother.

Anna had hung up the receiver with shaking hands and arranged for leave to travel up to London. Now, a week later, she was finally home, though home seemed sadly changed.

She shifted the heavy weight of her valise off her shoulder to relieve the growing ache of stiff muscles as a trickle of sweat ran down her spine. The day was warm, and it had been months since she'd walked so far. But she'd not the fare for a cab even if one could be found. Besides, she couldn't very well complain at being passed over for a posting due to her injuries and then wilt at a bit of effort. There would be effort and more if she returned to the front.

No, not if . . . when. When she returned to the front. There was no *if* about it. She had not become a VAD to sit safely in Blighty making tea and playing cards while others risked their lives.

She passed the church and the greengrocer's, rounded the

corner, her steps hastening as shattered glass crunched under her boots. Her hands slid clammy on the leather strap of her bag, and her damp skin itched beneath the heavy wool of her uniform.

Buildings leaned drunkenly on their foundations, their windows blown out, doors knocked from hinges. A jagged gap like a missing tooth was all that was left of the butcher's shop. The pub looked comfortingly unscathed until she approached, then she noticed a tumbled slide of bricks and shingles where the roof had collapsed. A gleam of brass railing poked up through fallen plaster and splintered beams. A pint glass stood half-filled on a table in a corner. A dart stuck dead center in the dartboard still hanging on the back wall.

Ten paces. Twenty. The damage greater, the houses tumbled and spilled like a child's toppled building blocks. Smoke hung low like a morning fog across the Thames. A few firemen replaced their hoses upon a truck. A policeman unrolled a coil of rope across the pavement where a set of marble steps led to . . . nothing.

No.

Anna's chest tightened. Her throat closed around a hard painful knot. Pain lanced down her leg, buckling her ankle. The awkward weight of the valise knocked her to her knees. Dirt bit into her skin, scraped her hands raw. She retched, but there was nothing in her stomach except the weak tea she'd drunk this morning on the train. Still, she felt her insides shriveling, darkness crowding the edges of her vision.

It couldn't be. There was some mistake. She was having another nightmare. She would open her eyes to see curtains at the windows and geraniums on the stoop. Graham and Prue standing on the steps to meet her.

"Here now, miss. Are you all right? You took a nasty spill on these cobbles."

One of the firemen.

Anna opened her eyes, her memories as ephemeral as the smoke blowing east toward Shoreditch. She swallowed down her horror, clamped her mouth over the sobs threatening to overwhelm her. "The people who lived here . . . do you know what shelter they might have been taken to?"

The firemen exchanged awkward glances before one shouldered the burden for all and faced her, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, miss. Ten died in this block alone. Seven more around the corner."

He need say no more. There would be no welcoming embrace. No comforting advice. And no revelations about her mother. She stared disbelieving at the wreckage.

"Have you a place to go?" the fireman asked in a deep, smoke-harshened voice. "Someone you can stay with?"

"No," Anna said, finally looking away. "No one at all."

The grammar school served as a temporary shelter for those who'd lost their homes in the air raids. With nowhere else to go, Anna climbed its steps as the sky purpled to twilight, the streets emptying of crowds, the growing dark slashed only by the sweep of arcing spotlights from antiaircraft batteries.

The building was packed, a lucky few finding seats on the narrow benches, the rest making do with the cement floor. Sleep was impossible, though a few managed catnaps curled on blankets, some wrapped in their coats, heads on their arms. Every now and then, the heavy krump of Bofors guns could be heard, followed by distant dull explosions and the constant moan of sirens.

Anna was handed a cup of coffee and a sandwich upon her arrival, but she'd no stomach for food and the coffee cooled untouched to a black tarry goop. With fumbling fingers, she pulled her locket from its place at her throat. What began as a childish charm against

the bogeyman when she was six had become a talisman during her long, painful months recovering in hospital. A link to the familiar when the rest of the world seemed bent on chaos.

She ran her thumb over the enigmatic inscription engraved upon the back—*Forgive my love*—before flipping the locket open to stare at the grainy photographs nestled within: the woman's delicate features at odds with her mulish chin and defiant posture; the soldier's lean good looks still obvious beneath his battle-weary scruffiness.

As always, she sought shades of herself in these two ghostly figures, the curve of an eyebrow, the slope of a nose, the firmness of a chin. Did she have her mother's laugh? Her father's smile?

She snapped the locket shut with a disgusted snort.

Mother? Father?

Those terms should signify more than egg and sperm and a name on a birth certificate. The faces immortalized in her locket might be better termed sire and dam; clinical names that didn't confuse conception with parenthood.

In every way that mattered, Graham and Prue Handley had been her mother and father. They gave her a home when it would have been all too easy to send her to an orphanage or workhouse. They had comforted her when she broke her arm falling out of a tree at seven years old and when she had her appendix removed at twelve. They had tolerated her teen complaints at being forced to practice the piano while other girls her age were going to the cinema with boys. And when they introduced her to strangers it had been as their daughter, a statement of love and belonging she'd always taken for granted.

Where did she belong now?

"Anna? Anna Trenowyth? Is that you?"

She looked up to see her old next-door neighbor Mrs. Willits pushing through the crowds toward her. She wore a flower-printed

nightgown under a man's mackintosh and gum boots on her feet. Her hair was wrapped in a red chiffon scarf, and a string bag dangled on her wrist. She barreled her way through a group of chattering housewives and stepped over an old man curled on his coat, who grumbled and turned his back.

"It *is* you," Mrs. Willits announced, as if she were broadcasting for the BBC. "I thought I recognized that ginger hair of yours."

Anna smoothed a curl back from her forehead, suddenly self-conscious of the wild tangle of red-gold curls barely contained beneath her storm cap.

"What on earth are you doing here, my dear?" Mrs. Willits shoved herself onto the bench beside Anna with a huff of breath. "We'd all heard you were still recuperating in Surrey."

"I came up on the train this morning. I . . ." Anna disguised her emotion with a sip of her cold coffee.

"Oh dear, yes, I see." Mrs. Willits patted Anna's knee. "Not the homecoming you were expecting, I daresay."

Rage and grief sat like a sour weight in the pit of Anna's stomach, but it was regret that gnawed at her nerves until she shook as if she were fevered. She had taken them for granted, imagining they would always be there as they had always been. As unchanging and familiar as the cluttered little terrace house that forever smelled of Graham's Grousemoor tobacco and Prue's rosewater perfume. Anna stared hard into her cup, vision blurring, but now was not the time to fall apart. She blinked back her tears and forced herself to straighten her shoulders, though she felt as if her spine might snap with the effort. "Forgive me, Mrs. Willits. I'm all at sea."

"Of course you are, and there's nothing to forgive, child. I know it's hard, but we mustn't lose heart. We must carry on and keep faith in our soldier boys and Mr. Churchill." She pulled a perfumed handkerchief from her cleavage and handed it to Anna. "The Hand-

leys wouldn't want to see you all red-nosed and blotchy. Not when you've only just got yourself healthy again after that horrid mess in France."

Anna dabbed at her eyes with a weary smile. "It doesn't seem real yet. I mean, I know they're gone, but I can't feel . . . I don't want to feel. If I do, then I'll have to face the truth that they're really gone, and I can't do that. Not yet. Is that wrong? Is it disloyal?"

"Of course not. When you're ready, you'll mourn them properly, and until then, you can take solace knowing they were happy in each other to the end, and few can make that claim, can they? They were proud as peacocks of you and your war work. Always bragging to the neighbors, reading us your letters from France to let us know how their girl was getting on over there."

She crushed the handkerchief in a trembling fist. "But I wasn't their girl, was I? Not really."

"Pish tush! Of course you were. Has someone been needling you?" Mrs. Willits eyed the sea of weary faces, as if seeking out a perpetrator to confront. "Has someone been talking out of turn?"

"No, nothing like that." Anna paused to gather her breath and her scattered thoughts. Spoke before she could think twice. "Do you recall my mother? My real mother?"

Mrs. Willits leaned back with a lift of her brows. "Of course I do. She was a dear sweet thing. Not at all what you'd expect from a . . ." She pressed her lips together, as if threading through a difficult problem.

"Earl's daughter?" Anna offered. "Or fallen woman?"

Mrs. Willits's shoulders gave a quick, agitated jump before she recovered with a shrug and a wave of her hand. "Take your pick. She was quiet but always polite and never standoffish. You'd never have known the one by her demeanor nor expected the other if you weren't toddling about the back garden."

"What about my father?"

Mrs. Willits's open gaze grew shuttered. "Your mother never spoke of him and it wasn't my place to pry. I don't think even the Handleys knew who he was, only that he'd perished in the Great War and left your mother with a child but no wedding ring." She paused. "What do you remember, Anna?"

She gave a sad shake of her head. "Not much. I was only six when she died. She's more like a dream than a real person."

Not that Graham and Prue hadn't tried to keep the memory of her mother alive. They had told Anna stories until in her eyes, Lady Katherine Trenowyth became imbued with the same glamour and mystery as the most fantastical characters in her Grimms' fairy-tale book. A tragic princess driven from her beautiful home by evil forces. But where did the fairy tale end and the truth begin? Who was the real Lady Katherine? And did Anna really want to find out?

She'd hoped her parents might be able to help her make that decision. Now they were gone. Who would help her now?

Her gaze fell on Mrs. Willits, who watched her, eyes pinched with sorrow and her own losses.

Reaching into her pocket, Anna pulled out the crumpled letter, the letterhead stark and businesslike. "May I ask you a favor?"

"Of course, my dear, anything."

"I received this last week." Anna passed her the letter. "I'd wanted an overseas posting—Egypt or the Far East. Somewhere I could be of use. Instead, I was assigned to . . . well, you can see for yourself."

Mrs. Willits scanned the letter with a pursing of her lips. "Yes, I can understand your dilemma."

"I know I've been refused because of my health. Still, of all the convalescent homes in England, did it have to be Nanreath Hall?"

"It does seem a cruel twist of fate to be sent to your mother's old home."

"I came to ask Graham and Prue what I should do. Now I'm asking you."

Mrs. Willits folded the letter carefully, tracing a line across each pressed seam, her penciled brows drawn low in thought. "Perhaps you should look at this chance as a gift rather than a curse. You've been given the opportunity to step into your mother's world, to meet the family you never knew. Who's to say what doors might open?"

Anna snatched the letter back and stuffed it in her pocket. "Or what doors might be slammed in my face. Why should I want to meet them? They certainly never cared a tuppence for me."

Mrs. Willits tapped the locket with her finger, a knowing smile curving her lips. "Perhaps you have questions only they can answer."

The sky was a perfect blue with high, thin clouds stretched like fingers toward the Continent. Birds called in the yew hedges and far off could be heard the hum of morning traffic. A postman cycled by with a ring of his bell. A woman walked her dog. A normal day but for the red, raw cemetery earth and the mourners clinging round the new graves, taking comfort from one another.

Anna stood beside Mrs. Willits, who had shed her mackintosh and gum boots for a donated skirt and blouse, serviceable but sadly out-of-date. Her gas mask hung in its cardboard box from her shoulder. "Is there anyone you can call on now that Graham and Prue are gone?"

"No, but I'll be all right." Anna offered a game smile. "I'm used to being on my own. What about you?"

"I've had word from my daughter in Cardiff. She's asked me to come stay with her."

"Ginny's in Wales?"

A clever, popular girl, Ginny Willits had been in Anna's class at school, and the two had been close friends until Anna's enlistment

with the VAD took her from home. Even then, they'd kept in touch until the evacuation from France left no time for letters. And afterward . . . well, silence had been easier.

"Nah, my Ginny's a WAAF, working here in London for the War Office. You should see her. Looks spanking in her uniform. This is my eldest girl by my first marriage, I'm talking of. Her husband's been called up and she could use the company."

Anna laid a bouquet of autumn flowers on each grave, her hands steady, her eyes dry, only a painful tightness in her chest and a lump that made eating impossible. "I'm glad you'll be safe out of London. I'm sure Ginny feels better knowing you're safe, as well."

Mrs. Willits sniffed her disdain. "It's too much like running away for my tastes, but there's no help for it, I suppose. And to look on the bright side, I'll have a chance to spend time with my grandchildren. George is seven and little Kate almost three."

"It sounds lovely."

"It does, doesn't it? Perhaps if I concentrate on that bit of it, I won't fret over the rest." She slid her gaze toward Anna. "Family can be a boon in hard times. Nothing better than kin when you've your back to the wall."

Anna ignored her clumsy salvo as she sent a final prayer heavenward. Graham and Prue were gone. That stark fact hammered against her mind until her head ached. She would not wake from the dark tunnel of this nightmare to the soothing murmur of a nurse and the quiet calm of the hospital ward.

"Have you decided what you're going to do yet? Whether you'll take the posting?"

The mourners began to filter away. Anna turned to follow the rutted gravel path toward the lych-gate. Or rather, where the gate once stood. It, along with the rest of the iron fencing surrounding the cemetery, had been pulled up and taken away for war scrap.

"I know it's not my place, Anna, but I feel responsible for you. I don't like the thought of leaving and not knowing what's to become of you."

"You think I should go."

"I do. The Trenowyths are your blood, and in times like these, blood is important. Knowing who you are and where you come from is important."

"And if they toss me out on my ear?"

"Then you'll know that, too, won't you? You won't spend your life wondering what might be. You'll know what is, and that's good, steady ground to start on."

"Mrs. Willits, you knew Graham and Prue better than anyone. When I told them about my posting, they asked me to come home. They said they wanted to discuss my mother. That it was very important and they were afraid they might have left it too long." She kicked a chunk of concrete from her path, eyes cast on the pavement ahead of her. "Do you know what they might have wanted to tell me?"

"I'm afraid not, dear."

Anna tried to hide her disappointment. "Oh well. I just thought . . ."

Mrs. Willits patted her hand, sympathy shadowing her motherly gaze. "I'm glad you asked, dear, and if I think of anything, I shall write and let you know immediately. You have my word. And write to Ginny if you can. She'd be happy to know you're better and doing well."

"I will. I promise." Ignoring the hustling passersby, Anna stopped in the middle of the pavement and hugged the older woman. "Thank you for everything. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"Pish tush, dear. I've done nothing but pry my nose into your

business and offer you a lot of unwanted advice, as if you were one of my own girls."

"No, you've made me see clearly, just as Graham and Prue would have done had they been here." Anna jerked her chin sharply in decision. "I'll report to Nanreath Hall as ordered. Even if the high-and-mighty Trenowyths brush me off, I'll still be able to work hard and help as I can. Perhaps if I do a very fine job, I'll get the posting abroad that I want."

"That's the fighting spirit, my girl. And who knows, Anna—the high-and-mighty Trenowyths may surprise you."

Her smile felt awkward and uncertain, but Anna's heart lifted and the lump in her stomach unknotted. She threaded an arm through Mrs. Willits's, and together they walked briskly down the street away from the church. "They may, but one thing is for certain—I will definitely surprise them."

Chapter 2

Nanreath Hall, Cornwall
August 1913

Lady Katherine, I would say this is a surprise, but I woke this morning with the most delicious premonition that you were coming to see me today."

Mrs. Vinter welcomed me with her usual exuberant, patchouli-scented embrace, so different from my parents' parsimonious affection.

A somewhat mysterious and glamorous figure, she had retired to the village of Melcombe after an exhilarating, globe-trotting, cosmopolitan life I could only imagine and envy. And while most of her neighbors considered her nothing more than a harmless eccentric, I alone knew her true worth. She was a stiff wind of freedom and unwavering approval where everything about my life was planned and every shortcoming noted with weary resignation.

"You see? I had Minnie lay the best china and bake those jammy cakes you enjoy so much."

I followed her billowing, parrot-colored figure into the tiny breakfast room where sunlight streamed in through windows thrown open to the sea air and an extra plate had been laid for tea. Puccini's "Addio di Mimi" from *La Bohème* wove itself into the softer strains of the ocean and the maid's pleasant humming as she worked. A sleeping cat kept time with the tip of its orange-striped tail.

I shed my hat and gloves, feeling a release from familial expectations with each article removed. "I'm sorry it's been so long. Lady Boxley's been ill and Mama needed me at home."

Mrs. Vinter merely nodded sagely, and I had the feeling she knew all too well what truly ailed my new sister-in-law. Since William, my elder brother and heir to the earldom, had left for London, Cynthia dragged about the house like a martyr, her growing stomach and shrinking temper setting everyone's teeth on edge.

"You're a good girl, Lady Katherine."

"I don't know about that."

"Take it from a very bad girl, I know your kind well. You make the rest of us appear positively beastly." She winked, her fingers clacking the long strands of beads she wore in excited agitation. "Now, let me look, let me look."

She clapped her ringed hands until I handed her my portfolio of sketches. Then as I poured the tea and sliced the cake, she intently studied each work, her brows furrowed, her gaze solemn and assessing. I never spoke during these critiques but sat silently on pins and needles awaiting her judgment.

She reached the final drawing, sat back in her chair, a smile creasing her lined parchment face. A small sigh of pleasure escaped her lips. "This one, Lady Katherine. This one is your best yet." She laid a picture of William on the table beside her cup of Lapsang souchong.

I sat up in my chair. "Really? But it's just a quick pen and ink. Barely more than a doodle."

"And yet you can feel his patient frustration, the unhappiness he seeks to hide behind the quiet solemnity of his features, and then there is perhaps a touch of the hangover behind the eyes . . . just there."

"You can see all that?"

"I see it because you put it there. You are a talented artist. You have a gift."

I looked upon my sketch with new eyes, trying to see what Mrs. Vinter did in the hasty dash of my pen over the page. I had done it in the final moments before William's train had come. We sat on the station platform, just he and I, with nothing to say that wouldn't embarrass us both. I had understood his desire to leave. I had longed to go with him.

That was a month ago.

My desire had only increased over the ensuing weeks.

"Have you given any more thought to my suggestion about sending your work to my friend Mr. Thorne at the Slade?" Mrs. Vinter asked. "The school would welcome a talent such as yours. You could study under some of the best artists of the day."

I choked down my last bite of cake. "I have. And I want to. But Mama would never allow it. She would say it's not what a proper lady should do with her life."

Mrs. Vinter leaned forward, her face alive and intent. "Then the question you must ask yourself is this—are you a proper lady?"

I folded and refolded my napkin. "I am. At least I want to be. It's complicated."

"I know well this tangle of loyalties, so will say no more about it—for now." Her eyes twinkled, and I knew she would bring it up again and again until I surrendered. Her vision for my future

might be different from my mother's, but her persistence was very similar.

"You chafe at your fetters like a wild thing, Lady Katherine. One day, you will fight your way free. I only hope I'm alive to watch you soar." She spread her arms wide, the scarlet and yellow drape of her scarves wafting in the sea breeze as she laughed with joy.

We finished our tea in pleasant accord, chatting about the latest London exhibitions, the newest novels, and the most provocative plays. It was an exhilarating afternoon, all too soon over. The brass ship's clock she kept on her mantel chimed four, sending me into a mad panic. I threw myself from my seat, shouting for Minnie to bring me my hat and gloves.

"We're expecting guests this afternoon, and Mama wanted me home in time to bathe and change. She's going to kill me . . . worse, she'll offer me one of her freezing stares that makes me feel the size of a worm."

"I know well that maternal stare, my dear. Think no more about it. But come again when you can. Minnie and I shall be here with tea, cakes, and conversation."

I gave her one last wave as I hurried across the meadow toward the stile separating her property from the edge of our park. Cutting across the fields would take a mile from my walk back to the house. I might even be able to slip inside and to my rooms unnoticed.

"Katherine Trenowyth, why can you not remember simple instructions for more than two minutes together? Your father's guests will be here any moment and here you are, looking like a gypsy hoyden."

So much for my grand plan. Mother waited for me on the terrace, a hand shading her eyes against the afternoon sun, her tone expressing her all-too-familiar disappointment. "Amelia's already dressed and waiting."

"I'm sure she is," I muttered under my breath.

"Why can't you be more like your sister?"

"And spend all my hours planning out my wedding? No, thank you."

"Green has already drawn your bath. If you hurry, you can be dressed and in the drawing room before your father realizes you're late."

"An awful lot of bother for one of Father's tedious friends, if you ask me," I continued to grumble. "All they do is complain about Lord Asquith's government and smell up the house with their cigars."

"If you must know, it's not one of your father's political allies this time. He has commissioned portraits of the family, and the artist is arriving today, Mr. Balder or Balzac. Something like that. It's quite a coup. He painted Ena, the late queen's granddaughter, you know."

"Arthur Balázs?" My disgruntlement faded.

I'd read about Balázs in *Country Life*. The great families of England were lining up to have their likenesses painted by the talented Hungarian-born artist. Every noble heiress and prominent peer in the country passed through his studio in London. How on earth had Papa convinced the sought-after painter to leave the center of the social universe to travel all the way to Cornwall?

I couldn't help but catch some of Mama's excitement as she ushered me into the house. Not even Cynthia's moods could sour this unexpected treat. Perhaps that was why I lost myself for a moment and let my normally wary tongue run away with me. "Mrs. Vinter says I have real talent, Mama. Good enough to attend art school in London if I chose to. She has a friend there who—"

Mama swung round, a cloud heavy upon her brow, lips pursed. "Don't say any more. You know full well there is no question of art school, and any talent you have would be better spent assisting me."

"But Mr. Thorne is a famous professor there. He's exhibited his works at the Grafton and the New English Art Club."

"Enough. You're too old for these childish flights of fancy. It won't be long before you're married with your own household. It would serve you well to know how to run it."

"But what if I don't want to marry or . . . or . . . settle down with a family? I want to be an artist. I want to travel and experience the world. I want to do something important with my life."

"And raising children, making a good and happy home, isn't enough?"

"No . . . at least not yet."

"Green is waiting for you. We'll discuss this later."

But we wouldn't. I knew that for certain.

She drifted up the staircase on a cloud of lilac perfume and gray silver-shot chiffon.

I dropped my gaze to the floor to follow meekly in her wake. I never even noticed the young man until he spoke, his voice hitting me like a hammer blow between the eyes. "Have you ever seen such an architectural monstrosity? It must be like living inside a wedding cake."

He was loose limbed and confident, dark hair brushed back off a broad forehead, a mocking twinkle in his deep-set eyes as he set down the luggage he carried and wiped his brow.

"It is a bit, but one gets used to it," I replied boldly.

The man's startled gaze met mine, and a cold shiver splashed across my shoulders as if I'd been dunked in the ocean. A humiliating heat crept into my cheeks.

He offered a sheepish smile and held out a hand. "The name's Simon Halliday. I've come to assist Mr. Balázs. And you are—"

Mother's rules of proper etiquette had been drilled into me from birth—servants were to be treated kindly, but never encouraged into

familiarity—yet something about this brash, handsome young man with his expressive eyes and paint beneath his fingernails caused me to blurt, "How do you do? I'm Kitty. Kitty Trenowyth."

If someone were to ask me my favorite place in all of Nanreath's acres, it would have to be the ancient cliff ruins. Perched at the mouth of a deep, tree-lined creek, the moss-covered remains of an ancient fortress guarded the coast between Hendrum Point to the north and Dizzard's Pool to the south. In days long past, Bronze Age soldiers manned the ramparts, scanning the sea for potential invaders. Today there was little left but a tumble of crudely carved stones outlining the old perimeter, like an architect's floor plan, and a gaping archway leading to a set of worn stone steps that climbed to a crumbling watchtower.

Simon and I walked there after a morning spent working; or rather I sat unmoving in a girlish confection of lace and ruffles that made me look twelve while Simon ran about fetching and carrying for Mr. Balázs. The painter had turned out to be a lively man with bushy side whiskers and a jovial laugh, who immediately put me at ease. He treated Simon more like a prized pupil than an assistant, and I envied him such support for his artistic ambitions.

"We used to clamber all around this place when we were children," I explained as I reached the small, sheltered platform of rocks and old lumber built years ago with childish ingenuity and enthusiasm. I had spent many an hour battling dragons with William or braiding daisies into my younger sister Amelia's hair. Now William was gone and Amelia had no interest in such grubby pastimes. These days I came alone with my journal to watch the scuttle of clouds overhead and plan out my life as if I actually controlled my fortunes.

I would be a great painter and travel the world—Spain, France,

the Orient, perhaps even Africa—and when I was old and gray, I'd come to live in a cottage by the sea, keep cats, and dine when I wished and wear what I wanted.

Those dreams seemed as high and thin as the haze above me this afternoon, and I scolded myself as sternly as Mama ever could for being a ridiculous little girl.

"Then William had a bad fall and broke his ankle. My father forbade us from coming here after that. He said it was too dangerous."

"Why do I have the feeling you don't follow Papa's orders?" Simon high-wired his way along the parapet to stand at the very edge where cliff met sky. His face had a distant eager quality as it scanned the ocean, his eyes bright and fixed upon the horizon, as if he might step out into the very air and take flight.

"It's a good place for thinking . . . and dreaming."

He shot me a smirky glance over his shoulder. "And what does a top-drawer earl's daughter dream about? Parties and fancy dresses and a handsome young man to sweep her off in his expensive motorcar?"

If he'd been talking to my sister, Amelia, he'd be right, but I felt his joke like a punch to the stomach. "Is that all you think I'm good for? Parties and shopping and chasing men?" I swallowed my disappointment. Why did I care what he thought of me? I stared out at the sea, thunderclouds gathering like mountains along the horizon.

"I'm sorry, Kitty." Simon joined me on the platform, a boyish flop of hair curving over his brow, an apologetic bent to his features. "Can we start fresh? Pretend the bit where I made an ass of myself never happened?" His eyes twinkled as he spoke, fluttering my heart.

"I don't know. Can we?"

His shoulder felt nice where it touched mine, and his cologne

smelled woodsy and masculine. He lit a cigarette, offering me a drag, which I tried, coughing madly as my eyes watered like faucets.

"I see what you mean about thinking and dreaming." The tip of his cigarette turned to ash. He fumbled in his leather bag, retrieving a pad and a sharpened pencil. With deft, precise movements, his hand moved over the paper; a line here, a curve there. A bit of shadowing with the side of his finger.

I watched mesmerized, my body crackling as if an electric current passed through it. Even my scalp tingled.

"What do you think?" he asked.

I paused for only a moment before taking the pencil and pad from him, adding a stroke here, a shadow there. Working quickly and with purpose, lost completely in my desire to capture the truth with a bit of lead and my imagination.

I handed the pad back, my stomach tight, my fingers trembling.

There was no way to discern his thoughts from the strong line of his jaw or the flecked green gleam of his eyes. I could only grip the rough plank of my seat and wait.

"I stand corrected, Kitty Trenowyth," he said quietly.

A slippery excitement curled up my spine, and I shivered.

"So if you aren't dreaming of jewels and a closet full of ball gowns, what *do* you want?" he asked.

Dare I speak? I felt his eyes on me, a little curious, a little admiring, and courage spread warm like honey along my stiff limbs. "I want to attend art school in London."

I waited for his laughter. Instead, he nodded thoughtfully. "So why don't you?"

"You've met my parents. I'm destined for an advantageous marriage with a young man of good family and the proper political aspirations."

"They can't force you to marry some dull clod with an upper-class lisp and the right school tie."

I hugged myself against the chill as the day's heat was replaced by a cool storm breeze and stared out at the ocean, now sullen and white-capped. The air smelled of rain.

"Are you happy, Kitty?"

His question hung suspended in my mind. Three little words that I could not adequately answer. Was I happy? I had everything a girl could want: a family that loved me even if they didn't understand me; a beautiful home, fine clothes, freedoms other young ladies my age would kill for. So why was I so discontented? Why did I feel the need to escape at every opportunity? Why did the security of family and rank and wealth feel less like a net and more like a noose?

He leaned close, and before I understood what was happening, his lips touched mine. A soft brushing that sent my senses tumbling. I knew I should recoil with a slap to his cheek to put him firmly in his place, but I couldn't breathe for the glorious expectation of something . . . though I knew not what at the time, only that I ached for it with every cell in my body. His body was hard and muscular. I could feel his strength as he held me and smell his aftershave and hear his breath.

When it was over he smiled, not the impish grin or the cynical smirk but a smile of genuine warmth and respect. "Papa would definitely not approve."