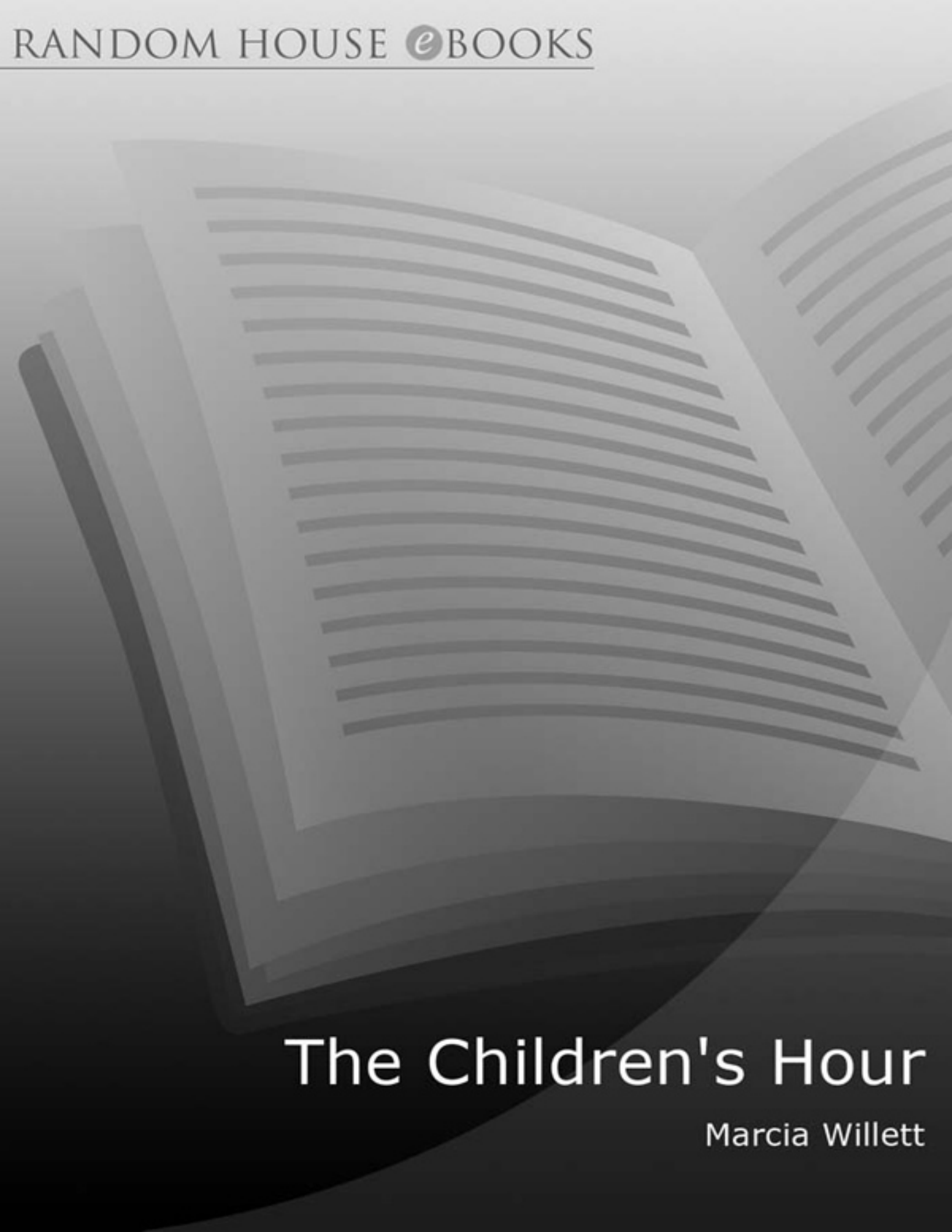


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Children's Hour

Marcia Willett

THE CHILDREN'S HOUR

MARCIA WILLETT



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To Dinah

By the same author

FORGOTTEN LAUGHTER

A WEEK IN WINTER

WINNING THROUGH

HOLDING ON

LOOKING FORWARD

SECOND TIME AROUND

STARTING OVER

HATTIE'S MILL

THE DIPPER

THE COURTYARD

THEA'S PARROT

THOSE WHO SERVE

THE DIPPER

CHAPTER ONE

Early autumn sunshine slanted through the open doorway in golden powdery bands of light. It glossed over the ancient settle, dazzled upon the large copper plate that stood on the oak table, and touched with gentle luminosity the faded silk colours of the big, square tapestry hanging on the wall beneath the gallery. A pair of short-legged gumboots, carelessly kicked off, stood just outside on the granite paving-slab and, abandoned on the worn cushion of the settle, a willow trug waited with its cargo of string, a pair of secateurs, an old trowel and twists of paper containing precious seeds.

The tranquil stillness was emphasized by the subdued churring of the crickets, their song just audible above the murmur of the stream. Soon the sun would slip away beyond the high shoulder of the cliff, rolling down towards the sea, and long shadows would creep across the lawn. It was five o'clock: the children's hour.

The wheelchair moved out of the shadows, the rubber tyres rolling softly across the cracked mosaic floor, pausing outside the drawing-room. The occupant sat quite still, head lowered, listening to voices more than sixty years old, seeing chintzes scuffed and snagged by small feet and sandal buckles, an embroidery frame with its half-worked scene . . .

Hush! Someone is telling a story. The children group about their mother: two bigger girls share the sofa with the baby propped between them; another lies upon her stomach on the floor, one raised foot kicking in the air – the

only sign of barely suppressed energy – as she works at a jigsaw puzzle. Yet another child sits on a stool, close to her mother's chair, eager for the pictures that embellish the story.

'I'll tell you a story,' said the Story Spinner, "but you mustn't rustle too much, or cough or blow your nose more than is necessary . . . and you mustn't pull any more curlpapers out of your hair. And when I've done you must go to sleep at once." '

Their mother's voice is as cool and musical as the stream, and just as bewitching, so that the children are lulled, familiar lands dislimning and fading as they are drawn into another world: the world of make-believe, of once upon a time.

In the hall, outside the door, Nest's eyes were closed, picturing the once-familiar scene, her ears straining to hear the long-silent words, her fingers gripping the arms of her wheelchair. The telephone bell fractured the silence, breaking the spell, a door opened and footsteps hurried along the passage. She raised her head, listening until, hearing the clang of the receiver in its rest, she turned her chair slowly so that she was able to survey the gallery. Her sister Mina came out onto the landing and stared down at her.

'At least the bell didn't wake you,' she said with relief. 'Were you going out into the garden? I could bring some tea to the summerhouse. It's still quite warm outside.'

'Who was it?' Nest was not deflected by the prospect of tea. Some deep note of warning had echoed in the silence, a feather-touch of fear had brushed her cheek, making her shiver. 'On the telephone. Was it Lyddie?'

'No, not Lyddie.' Mina's voice was bracingly cheerful, knowing how Nest was inclined to worry about the family's youngest niece. 'No, it was Helena.'

Their eldest sister's daughter had sounded uncharacteristically urgent – Helena was generally in strict control of her life – and Mina was beginning to feel a rising anxiety.

She passed along the gallery and descended the stairs. Her navy tartan trews were tucked into thick socks and her pine-green jersey was pulled and flecked with twigs. Silvery white hair fluffed about her head like a halo but her grey-green eyes were still youthful, despite their cage of fine lines. Three small white dogs scampered in her wake, their claws clattering, anxious lest they might be left behind.

'I've been pruning in the shrubbery,' she told Nest, 'and I suddenly realized how late it was getting so I came in to put the kettle on. But I got distracted looking for something upstairs.'

'I should love a cup of tea,' Nest realized that she must follow Mina's lead, 'but I think it's too late for the summerhouse. The sun will be gone. Anyway, it's too much fuss, carrying it all out. Let's have it in the drawing-room.'

'Good idea.' Mina was clearly relieved. 'I shan't be two minutes. The kettle must be boiling its head off.'

She hurried away across the hall, her socks whispering over the patterned tiles, the Sealyhams now running ahead, and Nest turned her chair and wheeled slowly into the drawing-room. It was a long narrow room with a fireplace at one end and a deep bay window at the other.

'Such a silly shape,' says Ambrose to his young wife when she inherits the house just after the Great War. 'Hardly any room to get around the fire.'

'Room enough for the two of us,' answers Lydia, who loves Ottercombe House almost as much as she loves her new, handsome husband. 'We shall be able to come down for holidays. Oh, darling, what heaven to be able to get out of London.'

It was their daughter, Mina, who, forty years later, rearranged the room, giving it a summer end and a winter end. Now, comfortable armchairs and a small sofa made a semicircle around the fire whilst a second, much larger, sofa, its high back to the rest of the room, faced into the garden. Nest paused beside the french window looking out to the terrace with its stone urns, where a profusion of red and yellow nasturtiums sprang up between the paving slabs and tumbled down the grassy bank to the lawn below.

‘We’ll be making toast on the fire soon.’ Mina was putting the tray on the low table before the sofa, watched by attentive dogs. ‘No, Boyo, sit down. Right down. *Good* boy. There’s some cake left and I’ve brought the shortbread.’

Nest manoeuvred her chair into the space beside the sofa, shook her head at the offer of cake and accepted her tea gratefully. ‘So what did our dear niece want?’

Mina sank into the deep cushions of the sofa, unable to postpone the moment of truth any longer. She did not look at Nest in her chair but gazed out of the window, beyond the garden, to the wooded sides of the steep cleave. Two of the dogs had already settled on their beanbags in the bay window but the third jumped onto the sofa and curled into a ball beside her mistress. Mina’s hand moved gently over the warm, white back.

‘She wanted to talk about Georgie,’ she said. ‘Helena says that she can’t be trusted to live alone any longer. She’s burned out two kettles in the last week and yesterday she went off for a walk and then couldn’t remember where she was. Someone got hold of Helena at the office and she had to drop everything to go and sort her out. Poor old Georgie was very upset.’

‘By getting lost or at the sight of her daughter?’ Nest asked the question lightly – but she watched Mina carefully,

knowing that something important was happening.

Mina chuckled. 'Helena does rather have that effect on people,' she admitted. 'The thing is that she and Rupert have decided that Georgie will have to go into a residential nursing home. They've been talking about it for a while and have found a really good one fairly locally. They can drive to it quite easily, so Helena says.'

'And what does Georgie say about it?'

'Quite a lot, apparently. If she has to give up her flat she can't see why she can't live with them. After all, it's a big place and both the children are abroad now. She's fighting it, naturally.'

'Naturally,' agreed Nest. 'Although, personally, if it came to a choice between living with Rupert and Helena or in a residential home I know which I'd choose. But why is Helena telephoning us about it? She doesn't usually keep us informed about our sister's activities. Not that Georgie is much of a communicator either. Not unless she has a problem, anyway.'

'I think Helena has tried quite hard to keep Georgie independent, and not just because it makes it easier for her and Rupert,' Mina was trying to be fair, 'but if she needs supervision they can't just leave her at their place alone. Anyway, the reason for her telephone call is to say that the home can't take Georgie just now, and would we have her here for a short stay?'

Nest thought: Why do I feel so fearful? Georgie's my sister. She's getting old. What's the matter with me?

She swallowed some tea and set the mug back in its saucer, cradling it on her knee, trying not to ask: 'How long is a "short stay"?''

'What did you tell Helena?' she asked instead.

'I said we'd talk it over,' answered Mina. 'After all, this is your home as much as mine. Do you think we could cope

with Georgie for a month or two?’

A month or two. Nest battled with her sense of panic. ‘Since it would be you who would be doing most of the coping,’ she answered evasively, ‘how do *you* feel about it?’

‘I expect I could manage. What I feel is,’ Mina paused, took a deep breath, ‘or, at least, what I *think* I feel is that we should give it a try.’ She looked at her sister. ‘But I suspect that you’re not happy about it.’ She hesitated. ‘Or frightened of it? Something, anyway.’ She didn’t press the point but stroked Polly Garter’s head instead, crumbling a little of her shortcake and feeding her a tiny piece. Nogood Boyo was up from his beanbag in a flash, standing beside her, tail wagging hopefully. She passed him a crumb and in a moment all three dogs were beside her on the sofa.

‘You’re hopeless.’ Nest watched her affectionately as Mina murmured to her darlings. ‘Utterly hopeless. But, yes, you’re right. I’ve been feeling odd all day. Hearing voices, remembering things. I have this presentiment that something awful might happen. A hollow sensation in my stomach.’ She laughed a little. ‘But this is probably just a coincidence. After all, I can’t think why poor old Georgie should be cast as a figure of doom, can you?’

She leaned forward to place her mug and saucer on the tray and then glanced at Mina, surprised at her lack of response. Her sister was staring into the garden, preoccupied, frowning slightly. For a brief moment she looked all of her seventy-four years, and Nest’s anxiety deepened.

‘Your expression isn’t particularly reassuring,’ she said. ‘Is there something I don’t know about Georgie after all these years?’

‘No, no.’ Mina recovered her composure. ‘Let’s have some more tea, shall we? No, I’m simply wondering if I can

cope with Georgie, that's all. I'm only a year younger. Rather like the halt leading the blind, wouldn't you say?'

'No, I wouldn't,' answered Nest sharply, not particularly comforted by Mina's reply. 'You don't burn out kettles or go for walks and forget where you are.'

'Just as well.' Mina began to laugh. 'There wouldn't be anyone to find me up on Trentishoe Down.' A pause. 'What made you think it was Lyddie?'

'Lyddie?' Nest looked at her quickly. 'How d'you mean?'

'The phone call. You asked if it were Lyddie. Has she been part of this presentiment you've had all day?'

'No.' Nest shook her head, grimacing as she tried to puzzle it out. 'It's difficult to explain. More like a very strong awareness of the past, remembering scenes, that kind of thing.' She hesitated. 'Sometimes I'm not certain if it's what I actually *do* remember or if it's what I've been told. You were always telling me stories, interpreting the world for me. Giving people names of characters in books. Well, you still do that, of course.'

Mina smiled. 'Such fun,' she said, 'although a little bit tricky when you called Enid Goodenough "Lady Sneerwell" to her face. Poor Mama was horrified. I was praying that Enid hadn't a clue what you were talking about. Still, it was a sticky moment.'

'It was fright,' Nest excused herself, laughing at the memory, 'coming upon her unexpectedly after everything you'd said about her.'

'Lady Sneerwell and Sir Benjamin Backbite. What a poisonous pair the Goodenoughs were.' Other memories were connected with this thought and Mina bent to stroke Nogood Boyo, her face momentarily grim.

'I was remembering the stories,' Nest was saying, 'earlier when I was crossing the hall. I was thinking of us all down the years. Sitting on the sofa listening to *Naughty*

Sophia and Hans Brinker, or the Silver Skates. Do you remember?’

‘And *A Christmas Carol* on Christmas Eve while we decorated the tree. How could I forget? So. Not Lyddie, then?’

‘Not particularly. At least, I don’t think so.’

‘Good.’ Mina fed Captain Cat the final piece of shortbread and dusted the crumbs from her knees. ‘So what do we do about Georgie? Are we up to it? Perhaps we should ask Lyddie what she thinks about it?’

‘Why not? Let’s clear up first, though.’

‘Good idea. By then she’ll have finished work for the day and we won’t be interrupting her.’ Mina put the tea things onto the tray and, with the dogs at her heels, crossed the hall to the kitchen, Nest wheeling more slowly behind her.

CHAPTER TWO

Lyddie made a final note on the typescript, fastened the sheets of the chapter into a paperclip and leaned both arms on the desk, hunching her narrow shoulders. Black silky hair, layered into a shiny mop, curved and flicked around her small, sweet face: ivory-skinned with a delicately pointed chin. Dressed warmly in a cloudy-soft mohair tunic, which reached almost to the knees of her moleskin jeans, nevertheless she was chilly. Her tiny study, the back bedroom, was cold, the light dying away, and she was longing for exercise. The large dog, crammed into the space between her desk and the door, raised his head to look at her.

‘Your moment just might have come,’ she told him. ‘You just *might* get a walk. A quick one.’

The Bosun – a Bernese Mountain dog – stood up, tail waving expectantly, and Lyddie inched round her desk and bent to kiss him on the nose. He had been named, after consultation with her Aunt Mina, for Byron’s favourite dog, Boatswain, whose inscription on the monument to him at Newstead – ‘*beauty without vanity, strength without insolence, courage without ferocity, and all the virtues of Man without his vices*’ – was particularly apt for his namesake, at least so Lyddie believed.

‘You are very beautiful,’ she told him, ‘and good. Come on, then, and careful on the stairs. You nearly had us both down yesterday.’

They descended together and he waited patiently whilst she collected a long, warm, wool jacket and thrust her feet into suede ankle boots. As they walked through the narrow alleys and streets that led into the lanes behind Truro, Lyddie's attention was concentrated on keeping the Bosun under restraint until, freed at last from the restrictions of the town, he was released from the lead. She watched him dash ahead, smiling to herself at his exuberance, remembering the adorable fluffy puppy that had been waiting downstairs for her on the morning of her first wedding anniversary: a present from Liam.

'You need company,' he'd said, watching her ecstatic reaction with amusement. 'Working away up there, alone all day while I'm at the wine bar.'

It was just over two years since she'd given up her job as an editor with a major publishing house in London, married Liam and moved to Truro, to live in his small terraced house not far from the wine bar that he ran with his partner, Joe Carey. It was a trendy bar, near the cathedral, not sufficiently prosperous to employ enough staff to enable her and Liam to spend many evenings alone together. Usually he was at home for what he called the 'graveyard watch' - the dead hours between three o'clock and seven - but this week one of the staff was away on holiday and Liam was taking his shift. It made a very long day.

'Come in as soon as you've finished,' he'd said, 'otherwise I'll see nothing of you. Sorry, love, but it can't be helped.'

Oddly, she didn't object to going to The Place; sitting at the table reserved for staff in the little snug, watching the clients and joking with Joe; eating some supper and snatching moments with Liam.

‘No fertilizer like the farmer’s boots,’ Liam would say. ‘We have to be around for most of the time. The punters like it and the staff know where they are. It’s the secret of its success even if it means irregular hours.’

She never minded, though. After the silence and concentration of a day’s copy-editing she found the buzz in The Place just what she needed. Liam’s passionate courtship had come as a delightful, confidence-boosting shock after a three-year relationship with a man who’d suddenly decided that he simply couldn’t commit to the extent of he and Lyddie buying a house together or having children, and certainly not to marriage. James had accepted the offer of a job in New York and Lyddie had continued to live alone for nearly a year, until she’d met Liam, after which her life had begun to change very rapidly. She’d missed her job and her friends, and the move had been a frightening rupture from all that she’d known, but she loved Liam far too much to question her decision – and her darling old aunts were not much more than two hours away, over on Exmoor.

Aunt Mina’s call had caught her within ten minutes of finishing work but she’d let her believe that she was all done for the day. They were such a pair of sweeties, Mina and Nest, and so very dear to her, especially since the terrible car accident: her own parents killed outright and Aunt Nest crippled. Even now, ten years later, Lyddie felt the wrench of pain. She’d just celebrated her twenty-first birthday and been offered her first job in publishing. Struggling to learn the work, rushing down to Oxford to see Aunt Nest in the Radcliffe, dealing with the agony of loss and misery: none of it would have been possible without Aunt Mina.

Lyddie hunched into her jacket, pulling the collar about her chin, remembering. At weekends she’d stayed at the family home in Iffley with her older brother, Roger; but she

and Roger had never been particularly close and it had needed Aunt Mina to supply the healing adhesive mix of love, sympathy and strength that bound them all together. In her own grief, Lyddie had sometimes forgotten that Aunt Mina was suffering too: her sister Henrietta dead, another sister crippled. How heavily she and Roger had leaned upon her: sunk too deeply in their own sorrow to consider hers. The small, pretty house had been left to them jointly and it was agreed that Roger, an academic like his father, should continue to live there until he could afford to buy Lyddie out. Until she'd met Liam, Lyddie had used the house as a retreat but, when Roger married Teresa, it was agreed that between them they could afford to raise a mortgage which, once it was in place, would give Lyddie the sum of one hundred and fifty thousand pounds.

Running the wine bar meant that she and Liam rarely managed to visit Oxford but Roger and Teresa had been to Truro for a brief holiday and, for the rest of the time, the four of them maintained a reasonable level of communication. Nevertheless, Lyddie felt faintly guilty that she and Liam had more fun with Joe and his girlfriend, Rosie – who worked at The Place – than they did with her brother and his wife.

'It's all that brain,' Liam had said cheerfully. 'Far too serious, poor loves. Difficult to have a really good laugh with a couple who take size nine in headgear. Roger's not too bad but dear old Teresa isn't exactly overburdened with a sense of humour, is she?'

Lyddie had been obliged to agree that she wasn't but felt the need to defend her brother.

'Roger can be a bit insensitive,' she'd said. 'He's generally a serious person but there's nothing prissy about him. At least he's not patronizing about other people having a good time.' She'd added quickly, 'Not that I'm

implying that Teresa . . .' and then paused, frowning, trying to be truthful without criticizing her sister-in-law.

Liam had watched her appreciatively. 'Careful, love,' he'd warned. 'You might just have to say something really unkind if you're not careful.'

She'd been embarrassed by his implication but Joe had intervened. They'd been sitting together in the snug and Joe, seeing her confusion, had aimed a cuff at Liam's head.

'Leave her alone,' he'd said, 'and get the girl a drink. Just because you can't understand true nobility of spirit when you see it . . .' and Liam, still grinning, had stood up and gone off to the bar, leaving Lyddie and Joe alone together.

As she paused to lean on a five-bar gate, watching the lights of the city pricking into the deepening twilight, Lyddie attempted to analyse her feelings for Joe. He was always very chivalrous towards her, unlike Liam's rough-and-tumble way of carrying on, and his evident admiration boosted her confidence which, because of Liam's popularity, could be slightly fragile. She'd been taken aback by the hostility she'd encountered from some of Liam's ex-girlfriends and it was clear that a few of them did not consider his marriage to be particularly significant. Two or three women continued to behave as if he were still their property: they obviously had no intention of changing their proprietorial habits and treated Lyddie as an intruder. Liam tended to shrug it off and she quickly learned not to expect any particular public support from him: they were married and, having made this statement, he expected her to be able to deal with these women sensibly. This was not quite as easy as it sounded. Apart from the fact that her confidence had been seriously damaged by James's departure, her husband was extraordinarily attractive - hair nearly as black as her own silky mop, knowing brown eyes, lean and tough - and he knew it. Without his presence

The Place was a little less exciting, the atmosphere less intimate. He had an indefinable magic that embraced both sexes, so that men called him a 'great guy' whilst their women flirted with him. There was a sense of triumph at a table if he spent longer than usual talking and joking: the male would have a faintly self-congratulatory air - Liam didn't waste too much time on dullards - and the woman would preen a little, a small, secret smile on her lips, conscious of the other females' envious stares.

Joe's quiet, appreciative glance, his protectiveness, helped Lyddie to deal with the competition and she rather liked to hear Liam protesting against Joe's attentions. Of course, there was Rosie to consider. Lyddie had hoped that she and Rosie might become more intimate but, although she was friendly, Rosie had a touchy disposition, and a searching, calculating gaze that held Lyddie at arm's length. There might be several reasons for this: perhaps Rosie felt less secure in her relationship with Joe because of Lyddie's married status; maybe she slightly resented the special treatment that Joe, Liam and the other members of staff accorded Lyddie. At The Place, Rosie was one of the waitresses and that was all. Lyddie was careful never to respond too flirtatiously to Joe when Rosie was around but it was often hard, when Liam was chatting up an attractive female punter, not to restore her own self-esteem by behaving in a similar manner with Joe.

Lyddie turned away from the gate, called to the Bosun - who gazed reproachfully at her, as he always did, amazed and aggrieved that his fun should be cut short - and headed back towards the town, thinking about the Aunts. It seemed rather unfair of Helena to ask Aunt Mina to cope with her older sister for so long.

'Two months?' she'd repeated anxiously. 'It's an awfully long time, Aunt Mina, especially if she's being a bit dotty. I

wish I could help but I'm booked up for the next six weeks ...'

She could hear that Aunt Mina was battling with several emotions and so she'd tried to be practical, pointing out the obvious problems of dealing with an elderly and strong-minded woman - who was probably in the grips of dementia or Alzheimer's - with no help except limited assistance from another sister who was confined to a wheelchair. At the same time, Lyddie was able to identify with Aunt Mina's need to help Georgie.

'She is our sister,' she'd said - and once again, Lyddie had remembered how, ten years before, Mina had had the strength to bear the horror not only of Nest's injuries but also of the death of their sister Henrietta.

Lyddie had swallowed down an onrush of sadness.

'You must do what you think is right,' she'd said, 'but do tell me if it gets tricky. Perhaps we could all club together for you to have some help if Helena and Rupert don't suggest it themselves. Or I could work at Ottercombe if necessary, you know.'

'I'm sure you could, my darling,' Mina had answered warmly, 'but we'll probably manage and it will be a change for us. Now, tell me about you. Is everything all right . . .?'

'I'm fine,' she'd answered, 'absolutely fine. And Liam too ...'

By the time they'd finished talking she'd had the feeling that Aunt Mina had already made up her mind about Georgie, and suspected that the telephone call had actually been to make certain that all was well with her niece in Truro rather than to seek advice. Lyddie was filled with a warm affection for her aunts; there was a toughness, an invincibility about them both. Nevertheless, a trip to Exmoor would put her mind at rest. Lyddie put the Bosun on his lead as they made their way back through the

narrow streets, thinking now of the evening ahead, her spirits rising at the contemplation of supper at The Place with Liam and Joe.

Later, in the scullery at Ottercombe, Mina was clearing up after supper. The routine was generally the same each evening: Mina prepared to wash up whilst Nest, sitting beside the draining-board, would wait, cloth in hand. Once dried, each item would be placed on the trolley next to her chair and, when it was all done, Mina would push the trolley into the kitchen whilst Nest went away to prepare for the remainder of the evening's entertainment: a game of Scrabble or backgammon at the gate-legged table, a favourite television programme, or a video of one of Mina's much-loved musicals. She had never lost her talent for reading aloud and books were another mainstay of their amusement. Their simple diet included not only the well-loved classics – Austen, Dickens, Trollope – but also included Byatt, Gardam, Keane and Godden and was interleaved with travelogues, a thriller or *The Wind in the Willows*, depending on their mood. Lyddie occasionally brought along a current best-seller or the latest Carol Ann Duffy volume to liven up their appetites.

Mina dried her hands on the roller towel behind the scullery door and wheeled the trolley into the kitchen whilst the dogs continued to lick at their empty, well-polished bowls.

'You've finished it all,' she told them. 'Every last scrap.'

Polly Garter and Captain Cat pattered after her into the kitchen but Nogood Boyo remained, quartering the floor, just in case some morsel had been mislaid.

As she put the plates back on the dresser and slid knives and forks into the drawer, Mina was making plans for Georgie's arrival. Although she'd known almost immediately that this visit couldn't be avoided – how could

she deny her own sister? – nevertheless, she was deeply unsettled by the thought of it. Her own anxieties about whether she could cope had been overshadowed by Nest's formless premonitions. Or were they formless? Every family had skeletons of one shape or another – and Georgie had always loved secrets. She'd used them as weapons over her siblings, to shore up her position as eldest, to make herself important.

'I know a secret' – a little singsong chant. Mina could hear it quite clearly. Her heart speeded and her hands were clumsy as she arranged the after-supper tray, lifted the boiling kettle from the hotplate of the Esse, made the tea. Was it possible that Georgie knew Nest's secret?

'Don't be more of an old fool than you can help.' She spoke aloud, to reassure herself, and the dogs pricked their ears, heads tilted hopefully.

If Georgie had suspected anything she would have spoken up long since. And, if she'd kept silent for more than thirty years, why should she speak now? Mina shook her head, shrugging away her foolish forebodings. It was Nest's fear that had infected her, bringing the past into the present. There was no need for all this silly panic. Yet, as she refilled the kettle, her heart ached suddenly with a strange, poignant longing for the past and she thought she heard her mother's voice reading from *A Shropshire Lad*: Housman's 'blue remembered hills'.

Mina stood quite still, her head bowed, still holding the kettle. The land of lost content: those happy, laughter-filled years. The tears had come much later . . . Presently she placed the kettle on the back of the stove and bent to caress the dogs, murmuring love-words to them until the moment passed and she was in command again. Picking up the tray, willing herself into calm, Mina went to find Nest.

CHAPTER THREE

Despite the games of backgammon, Mina's thoughts strayed back to the past; to those long-ago years with Papa away in London for much of the time so that the children had Mama all to themselves, reading to them, taking them to the beach, for excursions on the moors; the rules belonging to the smart London house relaxed into permanent holiday.

Mina is eight years old when her mother, Lydia, is sent down to Ottercombe for a long rest. The youngest child, Josephine – for Timmie and Nest are not yet born – has just had her fourth birthday and in the last three years there have been two miscarriages. Ambrose believes that the sea air will do Lydia good, strengthening her, so that she will be able to give him the son for which he craves.

'All these women!' he cries – but she hears the irritation rasping beneath the geniality and feels the tiny tick of fear deep inside her. She has had twelve years in which to discover the seam of cruelty buried deep in Ambrose's bluff good temper. He is not physically cruel – no, not that – but he uses language to prick and goad so that Lydia learns that a voice can be both instrument and weapon.

Her own voice is an instrument: pure, sweet, controlled. She sings to her babies, lulling them with nursery rhymes, and reads to them.

'All these books,' says Ambrose. 'Oh, for a boy to play a decent game of cricket.'

Ambrose is an attractive man; not much above average height, with brown curling hair, which is cut very short. His eyes are a bright, sparkling blue and he has an easy, confident approach which makes people, at first, feel very comfortable with him. It is he who names the children: Georgiana, Wilhelmina, Henrietta, Josephine. Only later does Lydia understand that these lovely names are part of his strange humour, related to his frustration at being the father of girls. He is not the type of man to be interested in babies, and she thinks it is just a joke when he asks after George or Will, but, as they grow, the joke wears thin. She hates to hear her pretty daughters addressed as George, Will, Henry and Jo but he does not relent.

‘Don’t be so sensitive, darling,’ he says, the blue eyes a little harder now, less sparkling, as they look at her; she tells herself that she must be careful not to irritate him, and that it’s simply, like most men, he longs for a son. She feels inadequate, as if she is failing him, and hopes for another child to follow Josephine; a little boy, this time. After her first miscarriage Lydia begins to suffer asthma attacks and during the winter of 1932, so as to avoid the London fog, she is despatched to Ottercombe. She cannot quite believe her luck. Since a child, Exmoor has been her idea of paradise and, although Ambrose has consented to summer breaks in the old house at the head of the cleave, he does not like to leave her behind when he returns to London. He is a senior civil servant and his delightful wife is a great asset to him. Lydia is beautiful, popular – and useful. So she is deeply touched when he announces that he is prepared to manage without her for as long as is necessary. Her health, however, is not the only reason for Ambrose’s unexpected attack of philanthropy. Ambrose has made a new friend, a wealthy widow whose robust appetites and tough ambition match his own, and he seizes this opportunity to know her better.

He is too clever, though, to rouse Lydia's suspicions, and he makes certain that – by the time the party is due to set out for the South-west – she feels too guilty at leaving him to think of her husband with anything but gratitude. He drives them himself, in his handsome, much-cherished Citroën, and settles them at Ottercombe. The young local couple, who are glad to earn extra money to caretake the house, are given instructions to shop and clean and care for Lydia and her children so that the following morning, when Ambrose drives away, his thoughts are all directed towards a certain house in St John's Wood.

As the sound of the engine dies in the distance, Lydia gives a great sigh of relief. Her children run shouting and laughing on the lawn and Wilhelmina tugs at her arm.

'May we go to the beach, Mama? If we wrap up warmly?'

Lydia bends to hug her. 'Of course we shall. After lunch. Afternoons are the best times for the beach, even in the winter.'

'And we'll come back and have tea by the fire, won't we? Will you read to us?'

'Yes, my darling, if that's what you'd all like. I'll read to you.'

So it begins.

*

In her bedroom, which had once been the morning-room, Nest was very nearly ready for bed. The room, adapted for her needs, was austere, simple and unadorned, no roads back to the past by way of photographs or knick-knacks; no idiosyncrasies by which to be interpreted; no possessions with which she might be defined. Only necessities stood on the small oak chest, although several books were piled upon the bedside table along with her Walkman. She was

able to stand for short periods, to haul herself along using furniture and her stick as aids, but she tired quickly and the pain was always there, ready to remind her that she was severely limited. At first, in the dark months immediately following the accident, she hadn't wanted to move at all. Suffering was a penance for her guilt. She'd lie on her bed, staring at the ceiling above, reliving the appalling moment: Henrietta at the wheel, Connor beside her, head half-turned to Nest in the back seat. If only she hadn't spoken, hadn't cried out in frustration, maybe Henrietta wouldn't have been distracted for that brief, vital, tragic moment.

It was Mina who had propelled Nest back into life, both physically and emotionally; bullying her into her wheelchair so as to push her into the garden, manhandling Nest and her chair into the specially adapted motor caravan, forcing her to live.

'I can't,' she'd mumbled. 'Please, Mina. I don't want to see anyone. Try to understand. I have no right . . .'

'Not even the deaths of Henrietta and Conner give you an excuse to wall yourself up alive. Anyway, Lyddie needs you . . .'

'No!' she'd said, straining back in her chair, head turned aside from Mina's implacability. 'No! Don't you see? I *killed* them.'

'Lyddie and Roger know only that Henrietta misjudged the bend, not why. They need you.'

Lyddie's love and sympathy had been the hardest burden to bear.

'I think you'll find,' Mina had said much later, 'that living and loving will be just as cruel as self-imposed seclusion could ever be. You'll be punished quite enough - if that's what you want.'