



# MEMORIES OF THE STORM

MARCIA WILLETT

TRANSWORLD  
BOOKS

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## About the Book

It has been a house of secrets for over sixty years – Bridge House on the edge of Exmoor, beautiful and remote, a wild place where the sound of the rushing stream is ever present.

Clio is staying there with her godmother Hester, reliving happy childhood memories. Jonah, visiting the area, chances upon the house where his mother stayed as a child in the fevered atmosphere of the Second World War, a time when passions ran high.

They don't yet know it, but their histories are inextricably linked. Hester knows the truth, but how much should she tell them? What would be gained by raking over the past?

As the young couple become closer, Hester realises that they must know the truth, before it is too late . . .

# Memories of the Storm

Marcia Willett

To Father Keith and the Sisters at Tymawr

# PART ONE

## CHAPTER ONE

ALL DAY SHE'D been waiting. A gust of wind, lifting the bedroom curtain so that it cracked and billowed like a sail, had shaken her from a troubled sleep just after dawn. The corner of the curtain caught a photograph standing on the rosewood chest and tumbled it to the floor. She struggled up, the ragged fragments of her dream still wheeling in her head like a cloud of bats, and pushed back the quilt murmuring, 'Oh, no. Oh, no,' as if some terrible calamity had taken place. The glass was smashed: one shard remaining, long and jagged and curving upward, which seemed to cut the photograph in two, separating the four figures. Holding it in her hand she stared down at it, frowning in the half-light from the window. She and Edward smiled out with all the strong confidence of youth whilst the two other boys appeared dimmer by comparison, still imprisoned beneath the glass.

On reflection, this image was appropriate. She and Edward, the younger daughter and the eldest of the boys, had formed a natural alliance based on their mutual love of poetry and music that had set them a little apart from the two middle boys, who were athletic, strong and vigorous, and from the oldest of all the siblings: the gentle, domestic, sweet-tempered Patricia. How proud their mother had been of her sons; how disregarding of her two daughters.

Hester tilted the frame, looking for herself in the old, faded photograph. Is that how she'd been in that last summer before the war: chin tilted, with an almost heart-breaking look of fearless expectation? Edward, much taller – cheerful and careless in an open-necked shirt – had his hand



on her shoulder. Their cousin and Edward's contemporary, Blaise, must have been behind the camera.

Abruptly she laid the photograph face downwards on the chest. The breaking of the glass had caused some kind of parallel rupture in her memory, cracking open the concealing layers of forgetfulness. She was seized by a sudden, formless panic – as if the break presaged bad luck. That was connected with mirrors, not ordinary glass, she told herself firmly. Yet tremulous anticipation, speeding her heartbeat and sharpening her hearing, pulsed into her fingertips and made her clumsy as she collected together the sharp fragments.

Downstairs, wrapped in her warm, faded shawl, she placed the larger pieces of glass on the draining board and bent down to take the dustpan and brush from the cupboard under the sink. Watched by an enormous, long-haired tortoiseshell cat, disturbed from his slumbers by the Aga, she put the kettle to boil on the hotplate, found a torch and went upstairs again to sweep up the remaining pieces of glass. The torch's beam picked out tiny shining specks scattered across the polished boards and the silky faded rug as, painstakingly on her knees, she swept up each one.

Later, after breakfast, she went out through the French windows and stood on the paved terrace above the river. The shining, tumbling water, shouldering its turbulent way between grassy banks, was silvered and glossed by the sun, which glinted through the naked canopy of the overarching trees. The strong south-westerly wind roistered in the highest branches of the tall beeches, plucking at the few remaining leaves and whirling them down in showers of gold. They floated away downstream, past the open meadowland where sunlight and water fused and dazzled, until they were lost to sight.

Hester rested her hands lightly on the stone wall. There had been heavy rain up on the Chains during the night and the boulders below the terrace were covered by the weight

of water flowing down the Barle, but she could see their smooth, rounded shapes. It was here, just here, that Edward had fallen – no wall, back then, to break his headlong crash onto the boulders beneath – and she, held back by the urgent hands of her sister-in-law, had been prevented from trying to reach him.

Along with the vivid memory of the scene – Edward entering unexpectedly through the French doors from the dark rain-swept terrace to see his wife in the arms of his oldest, closest friend – came the familiar sense that something was not quite right. In Hester's mental picture of the drawing-room that evening there was always an unexpected flash of colour, a shape that eluded her but which she knew was out of place: mysterious shadowy corners, golden pools of lamplight spilling across polished wood, bright reflections in the mirror above the fireplace where blue and orange tongues of flame licked hungrily at the wood in the grate. A newspaper, casually flung down, was sliding from the chintz-covered cushions of the long sofa under the window, where damson-coloured damask curtains had been pulled against the wild night, and it was there, from just behind the sofa, that something pale but bright flickered suddenly out into the firelight – and just as suddenly disappeared.

A noise distracted her. Opening her eyes, glancing down, Hester saw a party of mallard being borne rapidly along on the bosom of the river. Quacking enthusiastically, they paddled furiously into the quieter waters beneath the trees and came splashing up the bank and onto the lawn. Hester turned back into the house, picked up the end of a loaf from the table as she passed through the kitchen, and went out across the grass to meet them. She laughed aloud to see their comic waddling as they rolled from one flat splayed foot to the other whilst the females still made their hoarse insistent cry as they approached. She forgot her premonition whilst enjoying the antics of the ducks but,

once their daily ration was finished and they'd plunged back into the river, she was immediately prey again to a formless anxiety.

It was almost a relief when she heard the telephone bell as she was finishing an after-lunch cup of coffee. Willing herself to be calm, she recited her number clearly into the mouthpiece and was almost shocked to hear her god-daughter's voice. Whatever she'd been expecting she hadn't imagined it to have anything to do with Clio.

'Listen, Hes. The weirdest thing. I've met someone here called Jonah Faringdon whose mother stayed with you at Bridge House during the war after her own mother was killed in a raid. She was called Lucy Scott. Mean anything to you?'

Lucy. Little Lucy. Hester took a deep breath.

'Yes. Yes, indeed it does. She was a small child, of course.'

'I was wondering if I could bring Jonah back with me this evening? Give him some supper and have a chat and then I could drive him back to Michaelgarth or . . .'

A slight hesitation.

Hester found that she was responding automatically to the unspoken request.

'He could stay the night here. You won't want to be turning out again. If he's agreeable to it and he's not expected back.'

'That would be great. We'll both have to be back here tomorrow morning anyway. He's a playwright, by the way. It's all shaping up very well and there's a real buzz already. I'm so glad I offered to help Lizzie out. We'll tell you everything later on. Can't quite say when we'll be home but sometime early evening. I'll do the supper and make up his bed. OK?'

'Quite OK.'

'Sure, Hes? You sound the least bit muted. It's just such a fantastic coincidence, isn't it?'

'Yes. Oh, yes, it is. Extraordinary. I can hardly believe it.'

‘It’s really weird. He can’t wait to see the house where his mother stayed. And you, of course.’

‘Of course. And I shall look forward to meeting Jonah.’

When she picked up her cup again the coffee tasted cold and bitter, so she set the cup back in its saucer. Her hands trembled very slightly and she covered them with the folds of her shawl. Little Lucy: so many memories crowding in, some happy, some poignant – and bringing with them a tiny twist of guilt. She’d always regretted that she’d never said goodbye to Lucy. Her departure had been so unexpected, so precipitate, and Hester had had other, more desperate demands to which she’d had to attend. It was too late when she’d realized that she hadn’t said goodbye to the child; too late when she’d begun to wonder if she should have made certain that Lucy was safe.

Deliberately she turned her mind to happier recollections. For just over a year Lucy had lived with them at Bridge House and the whole family had loved her and taken her to its heart. Out of all the memories, one shone more clearly than the others, and Hester smiled a little, remembering.

Every morning before breakfast, Hester and Lucy go together to feed the chickens. Each carrying her pail of mash – Lucy’s is a small red plastic seaside bucket – they cross the lawn and pass through the gate into the little meadow. Since the early years of the war most of the grass has been dug up so as to grow vegetables to feed the family, but part of it has been fenced off and here the fat red hens have their house: a rather ramshackle wooden building with a good strong door to shut against the fox. Hester knows how Lucy likes to go inside the little, low-roofed house, to put her hand into the prickly straw-lined laying boxes and feel the smooth eggs waiting. As the hens squawk and scuttle around the feeder, Hester waits whilst Lucy fills her empty, food-encrusted pail with the precious eggs. Nor does she neglect to examine the grassy margins

of Hester's well-dug vegetable patch: the hens are allowed free range and there is sometimes treasure to be found in a clump of grass or a patch of nettles.

Hester watches, tenderly amused by the spectacle of the little girl – her long brown hair falling over flushed cheeks, her small careful hands parting the long grasses – and she enters into the excitement, new every morning, at the discovery of an egg laid secretly away from the little wooden house by a wayward hen. She bends to peer into the pail, held triumphantly aloft – ‘Oh, well done, Lucy. Won't Nanny be pleased!’ – and smooths back the long hair, retying Lucy's ribbon. Lucy's brown eyes sparkle with delight and she takes Hester's hand as they go back to the house.

Hester realized that she was holding her hands tightly together within the folds of the shawl, as if she were clutching at something long since vanished. Sitting back in her chair she made a conscious effort to relax. It would be several hours yet before Clio would be home.

Because of the storm the journey from Michaelgarth was full of natural drama. It was nearly dark when they set out and rain beat relentlessly upon the windscreen of Clio's little car. In the tunnel of light made by the headlamps Jonah watched the trees bending in the wind, their twiggy fingers lashing the car's sides. He was feeling rather apprehensive. It was one thing to come down to the country home of the actress Lizzie Blake to talk through ideas for the film event she was planning; quite another to be speeding through the countryside with this rather dynamic girl who'd picked him up yesterday from the train at Tiverton Parkway.

As they drove away from Michaelgarth, Jonah had the oddest sensation that the whole matter was out of his control; that events were being just as efficiently stage-managed as one of his own plays. The difficulty was that he

couldn't quite decide whom, in this instance, the producer or the director might be.

'I have the feeling that meeting Hester is important to you,' Clio was saying, changing gears, glancing to the right before turning into another narrow lane. 'Not just an idle enquiry but something more than that.'

He remained silent for a few seconds, surprised by her prescience, remembering his mother's unexpected response when he'd phoned a few days earlier.

'I shall be on Exmoor for the weekend,' he'd told her. 'Lizzie Blake has this idea of running a film event in the grounds of her country place and linking it up with the Porlock Arts Festival. She's persuaded a West Country television company to show a thirty-minute drama all written, filmed, acted and produced by sixth-form students, as long as it's up to a reasonable standard. I'm one of a group of professionals who has to show them how it's done. Rather fun, by the sound of it. Lizzie was Margery Kempe in my play *The Pilgrim*. Do you remember meeting her and Piers when we brought it to the Festival Theatre?'

'Of course I remember them both,' Lucy had answered. 'This is so strange, Jonah. I was thinking about Exmoor only last night, being there in the war at Bridge House.' He heard her give a huge sigh. 'I wonder if they are still there, the Mallorys.'

'I could ask around.' He'd tried not to sound too eager. 'Bridge House. That's the one in the photograph, isn't it?'

'It's all so long ago.' She'd retreated hastily, as if she'd been caught with her guard down and was regretting it. 'Nobody will remember.'

'They might. Piers' family has lived on Exmoor for ever. I'll ask him if he knows the Mallorys at Bridge House.'

And so he had, with astonishing results.

'To tell the truth,' Jonah admitted now, in answer to Clio's question, 'it's as if something's happening that I've always been half expecting ever since I first saw a photograph of

my mother as a little girl in the garden at Bridge House.’ He hesitated, not yet ready to discuss his mother’s reluctance to talk about that period of her history. It seemed disloyal, somehow, to try to describe her reaction of fear and denial to a girl that he’d known for such a short time. ‘When I was a small boy it was so strange, to see my own mother as a child, even younger than I was. She lost both her parents as a result of the war and generally she doesn’t talk about it so I was rather surprised when she mentioned Miss Mallory.’

‘Doctor,’ Clio corrected him. ‘Hes was the Professor of Nineteenth-Century English Literature at Lincoln University. She’s been retired for a while now.’

‘I see.’ Jonah wanted to ask lots of questions but suddenly felt rather shy of this practical, quick-witted girl. ‘It’s very kind of her to ask me to stay. After all, she doesn’t know me.’

A particularly savage blast of wind battered the car and he recoiled in his seat. Clio seemed unmoved, driving with speed and efficiency.

‘You’re not quite a stranger,’ she said. ‘She knew your mother and she’s known Piers and his family for ages.’

‘Even so . . .’ Jonah was beginning to be aware of a heightening of tension, of some approaching calamity. The headlights of a wide, high vehicle travelling in the opposite direction blinded them so that the car swerved a little as the lorry rocked and splashed past them.

‘Sorry about that.’ Clio’s laugh was a little shaky. ‘He seemed to need rather a lot of road. Not far now. This is Winsford.’

Twinkling lights shone comfortingly through the rain-streamed windows; cottages clustered in around them and then fell away behind as Clio changed gear and the car began to climb. They seemed to be on open moorland now and, so great was the wind’s force, it was as if some giant fist were pressing down upon them. Suddenly there was the rattle of a cattle-grid beneath their wheels and then they

were plunging downhill again through a great avenue of trees; drifts of sodden beech leaves gleamed wetly at the sides of the road. Gradually Jonah became aware of another sound beyond the howling of the gale and the hiss of rain and the rhythmic swish of the wipers: a growling, roaring, restless voice that seemed to be travelling with them.

‘Can you hear the river?’ cried Clio. She seemed almost elated by the wildness.

A stone wall loomed up in the headlights’ beam and the car began to slow.

As they turned onto the narrow bridge, Jonah saw a figure of a man leap out of the darkness: he was signalling them to stop, his mouth wide open as if crying for help. It seemed that Clio would drive right over him and Jonah shouted and caught at her arm, trying to wrench the wheel.

‘What is it?’ Her voice was high and frightened. ‘For God’s sake . . .!’

He felt the juddering of metal on stone as she slammed on the brakes and the car scraped the wall but he was already undoing his seatbelt and fumbling with the door catch. The rain beat down on him, plastering his clothes to his back, as he ran back over the bridge. His voice was caught and flung away on the wind, drowned by the insistent roaring of the water, but there was no sign of any man. Clio was beside him, grasping his arm.

‘What was it? What did you see?’

‘There was a man. You must have seen him.’

‘No, there was nobody. The headlights must have played some trick with the shadows. There’s nobody here. Come on, we’re drenched. Let’s get inside.’ And, still holding his arm, she led him across the bridge and into the house where Hester was waiting.



## CHAPTER TWO

LATER, UPSTAIRS IN her room at the end of the house, Clio sat on the tapestry stool and stared at her reflection in the ancient spotted looking-glass. It creaked and protested in its mahogany stand as she tilted it a little, before picking up her brush. She was still shaken by Jonah's violent reaction and by the jarring physical shock of the car hitting the bridge. No real harm had been done but she was confused, not only by Jonah's insistence that he'd seen someone but also by Hester's behaviour. Instead of reassuring him by telling him that there could have been no man on the bridge, she'd watched him with a kind of anxious compassion that had made Clio feel quite angry, possibly because of her own fright.

'The bridge leads only to the house and the garden,' she'd said, sounding cross in her attempt to rally Jonah. 'It doesn't go anywhere else. It's private. Hester's already told us that she's been alone all day. Why should anyone hide on the bridge in this weather just to jump out at us and run away?'

She'd looked at Hester, seeking confirmation, but Hester's eyes had been fixed on Jonah's face.

'I saw him,' he'd repeated stubbornly.

'I think we need a drink,' Hester had said – much to Clio's relief – and Jonah had swallowed two fingers of Scotch and begun to pull himself together. At this point Clio had left them, coming upstairs to make up his bed.

Now, as she brushed her hair, Clio's attention was caught by the glimmer of a white envelope propped against one of the pretty hand-painted glass candlesticks. Because this small room, with its one electric socket, was difficult to light

adequately, Clio had placed candle-holders in every possible place: two shallow pottery bowls on the high, narrow mantelshelf above the tiny Victorian grate, one tall brass serpent on the small bamboo table beside the bed, and four in different styles of glass on the polished Edwardian washstand that served as a dressing-table. She'd lit them all as soon as she'd come into the room and immediately had grown more calm, soothed by the familiar pattern of objects and the sense of security this little room always projected.

Putting down her brush, Clio reached for the envelope and studied the impatient, curling writing. Oh, how well she could imagine him, crouched at his desk, fielding interruptions, dashing down the words. Quickly she tore open the envelope and unfolded the sheet, her whole attention fixed on his message to her.

Honestly, darling, I can't believe that I ever agreed to let you go. Not even for a whole wilderness of godmothers who have had hip replacements. I simply can't do without you a moment longer. I know that these four weeks are part of your holiday but the place is in chaos; nobody understands how I *work* and no quiet sanctuary to flee to at the end of the day.

Can we meet somewhere? *Please!* Bristol? Exeter? I suppose you couldn't escape to London for a few hours? Please, Clio, give your mind to a meeting next week, however brief, or you won't have a job to come back to because the agency will simply have ceased to exist. You are essential to it and to me.

His signature was unreadable. Clio pressed the paper to her face, hunched on the stool, longing for him. Falling in love with him had ruined everything: all her well-laid plans, her sensible goals for the future, smashed by her absolute need – and his.

'This is Peter Strong,' her boss had said, introducing them. 'This is Clio Taverner, Peter. Clio runs the place actually, but don't tell the MD I said so. I wish I could take her to Boston with me, but there we are.'

'We can't talk here,' he said – and took her out to lunch, bombarding her with questions about the advertising

agency, her PA work, herself. To begin with she was mesmerized by the sheer force of his personality but as she grew accustomed to him – and with the assistance of a large glass of Sauvignon Blanc – she began to enjoy herself: responding and expanding under the warmth and intensity of his concentration.

She was so sure, so joyful in this new and overwhelming love that possessed her, that when she heard about his wife and his brood of children she was certain that there must be some mistake: not just for the obvious reason – that she did not want to see him as a philanderer – but because he was so *not* the ordinary sort of man who had those kind of dependants. His character was an interesting mix: single-minded toughness and a brilliant flair for words combined with minute attention to detail and an amazing memory for small sweet things. He never avoided mentioning his family if the subject were relevant but he talked about them as if they existed in a different sphere that was quite remote from his work and his relationship with Clio. He separated his life into watertight compartments and, because this was perfectly natural to him, she seemed able to accept it too. When she tried to rationalize this to herself she realized that his sense of urgency, of immediacy, made anything other than the present dimension unreal. When he was at the agency his work was of paramount importance; when he was alone with her *she* was all he saw or heard or wanted, and she found it impossible – almost foolish – to worry about anything beyond her delight in his company. She'd never been so concentrated on before and she was bewitched by it. His attitude seemed all the more reasonable because his family lived in Hampshire, where his wife ran a livery stable, and Peter stayed in London four nights each week. It underpinned the ability to compartmentalize that came so readily to him.

He liked Clio's tiny slice of a house – three rooms on three floors – much better than his rather bleak apartment though

he always returned to it each night, however late.

Before too long reality asserted itself. She became accustomed to weekends without him, outings put off at the last moment, the unexpected arrival of one or other of his family at the flat; and yet the sheer quality of the time they had together cancelled out the loneliness. She kept up with her friends, went skating, to Pilates, to aerobics classes, knowing that she would see him each weekday morning and that his eyes would light with a kind of relief and joy.

'Aaah,' he'd say – as if she were a long, cold refreshing drink. '*There you are.*'

Clio put the paper back into its envelope and resumed the hair-brushing but her thoughts were busy. For the first few weeks after the operation, Hester had been looked after professionally. It was Clio who'd suggested that she could take four weeks of her holiday time to be with her until she was strong and self-sufficient again. Peter had agreed to it, and there was only one more week to go, but it would be heaven to see him briefly. How could they meet – and where? An idea so simple that it took her by surprise suggested itself. Why not invite him here, to Bridge House? It would be interesting to see Peter and Hester together: Peter so vital and intense; Hester so intelligent and detached. Clio laughed aloud at the prospect, and wondered how her godmother was getting on with Jonah. She hoped they were having a good heart-to-heart about the war. Remembering that she was supposed to be making up his bed, she went out onto the landing and along to the airing cupboard to find some sheets.

'I remember your mother very well,' Hester was saying. 'Such a pretty little girl. We were all very fond of her.'

She realized that she was making an effort quite as much to raise her own spirits as to distract Jonah from his preoccupation. She knew, too, that she could not take him into the drawing-room. After her day-long premonition had

culminated with such violence in his experience on the bridge, her usual detachment and common sense had deserted her: the drawing-room held other vibrations to which, in his present state, he might respond. Instead, she poured him another Scotch and led the way out of the large square hall, with its inglenook fireplace and comfortable chairs, into the book-room where she had been sitting earlier, beside a small wood fire.

‘Mum never talks about the war,’ he answered, looking around him appreciatively, taking in the book-lined walls, the small revolving table beside the wing-chair, the chaise longue under the window. ‘She’s got a thing about it. I suppose that losing both her parents gave her a horror of it all. I knew the name of your house from some photos we have at home of my mother when she was little. She’s made a bit of a mystery of it all, to tell you the truth, and when she mentioned your name I felt as if an opportunity I’d been waiting for had suddenly come. And then that thing happened on the bridge.’ He glanced at Hester apologetically. ‘I’m behaving like an idiot but it was very real, you know. I *saw* him . . . Sorry. This is an amazing room.’

She acknowledged his attempt to pull himself together and gestured to the other armchair.

‘Sit down,’ she said. ‘This was my mother’s favourite room. She said that it was the only room in the house where you couldn’t hear the river.’

Jonah sat down and stretched out his legs towards the fire. ‘Didn’t she like the noise of water?’

‘She found it rather relentless. There are moments, you know, when you want to turn it off, just for a moment; to shout at it to be quiet. Especially at this time of the year.’

‘I wondered what it was,’ he told her. ‘When we were in the car, I mean. I could hear it in the background, like some growling, angry voice. Rather menacing. I can understand

how your mother must have felt about it. It must be rather frightening sometimes.'

'Towards the end she found it so. Especially at night. She seemed to hear voices in its roaring.' She fell silent, sipped at her Scotch, trying to see her way ahead.

'Voices?' His own voice was reflective as if he were imagining it. 'Particular voices, d'you mean, or what?'

Hester hesitated. 'She wasn't quite herself at the end. My two brothers were killed early on in the war and the eldest, Edward, was in Singapore in 1942 and taken prisoner by the Japanese. She adored her sons and the shock of losing them weakened her. She was never particularly strong and she just seemed to lose interest in living. Worse than that, she had no desire to live in a world where such appalling things were happening. Edward's capture was the last straw. She couldn't co-exist with the thought of his imprisonment. She died in the autumn of 1942. Sixty years ago.' She nearly added, 'This very night,' but felt that this would simply add to the emotional tension.

'How terrible for you to lose your brothers and your mother within such a short time.' His horror was genuine. 'You must have been terribly young. Was my mother here then? Was she evacuated?'

'She arrived later in the war.' She responded instinctively to his sympathy, abandoning some of her caution. 'Your grandfather Michael and my brother Edward were at Cambridge together. They were very good friends and, when your grandmother was killed, Michael asked if he could bring Lucy to us.'

'So you knew him? You actually knew my grandfather. He came here to this house. How amazing! So you really do remember my mother?'

Hester hesitated again for a brief moment, then reached into her pocket and drew out a small snapshot. 'I thought this might interest you.'

Jonah bent over it eagerly: two figures posing just outside French windows opening on to a sunny lawn. The bigger girl with short dark hair was kneeling beside a small child. One arm was round the little girl, the other gesturing towards the camera as if to fix her attention. 'Look,' she might be saying. 'Look, Lucy. Smile.' On the back in fading ink were the words: 'Hester with Lucy in the garden at Bridge House. June 1945.'

As he looked, a memory, whole and complete, slid into his mind. He was standing at the door of the small attic room watching his mother searching for something in a chest. The musty scent of old clothes and books was in his nostrils and the unshaded bulb glimmered weakly, lighting pieces of broken, dusty furniture but leaving cobwebby corners unlit and rather menacing. His mother wrestled with the drawer, tugging at it sharply so that it slid out suddenly and a big envelope with old snapshots came spilling to the floor.

He ran forward and caught at one of the snapshots, peering at the small figures before turning it over to see the names written on the back: 'Lucy with Robin and Jack at Bridge House. August 1944.'

'Who are these children?' he asked his mother curiously. 'Lucy. That's you, isn't it? But who are these little boys?'

'I don't know.' She took the photograph from him quickly and put it back into the envelope, shoving it into the drawer and closing it. 'It's all too long ago to remember.'

An atmosphere of fear and distress alerted him, young though he was, and later he crept back to look at the snapshot again: the three children captured in the grainy texture of the past, beaming at the camera, and the name typed on the big buff envelope: 'Major Michael Scott', his grandfather's name.

Now Hester watched him as he turned the snapshot over and he glanced at her almost unseeingly and shook his head.

‘This is extraordinary,’ he said at last. ‘This reminds me of the one we have at home except that, in that one, it’s my mother with two little boys. Jack and Robin. Their names are written on the back of the snapshot just like this.’

‘That would have been my nephews. My sister, Patricia’s, two little boys,’ said Hester. ‘Jack and Lucy were very close friends.’

‘The photograph always fascinated me but she simply refuses to talk about it. Can you imagine why that should be?’

‘It was a very painful time for her,’ Hester replied cautiously. ‘Tell me, how is Lucy? Where does she live?’

‘In Chichester.’ Jonah was reluctantly diverted. ‘My parents have lived there all their married lives. My father was a science teacher but he’s got this ghastly disease called lupus. Have you heard of it? The body’s immune system goes into overdrive and attacks itself. It’s pretty grim.’

‘I am so sorry.’ It was Hester’s turn to be horrified. ‘How frightful for him. And for poor Lucy.’

‘She’ll be amazed when she knows I’ve actually been here. I hope she won’t be upset. How long was she here with you? I didn’t realize that you were all friends. I assumed it was just a normal evacuation thing.’ Jonah settled more comfortably in his chair, ready for confidences. ‘It must have been wonderful for her to come here to you all, having just lost her mother. Did my grandfather bring her down?’

Before Hester could answer, the door opened and Clio put her head round it.

‘I thought you’d be in the drawing-room,’ she said. ‘Supper’s ready and Jonah’s bed’s made up. Come and eat.’

The breakfast-room was connected to the kitchen by an archway through which the working area could be glimpsed. The paraphernalia of cooking, pots and pans and utensils hastily cast aside, was prevented from intruding on the comfortable simplicity of the room by the simple mechanism



of an amber-coloured velvet curtain twitched across the archway after the last plate had been carried through. Coming in from the small, cosy book-room, Jonah was struck by the light, uncluttered space: honeysuckle-coloured walls, a stripped wood floor with several blue rugs making deep pools of colour, a square table covered with a cream oilcloth patterned with tiny, dark green ivy leaves.

Clio appeared to have recovered from her fright on the bridge. A smile of suppressed excitement was pressed upon her upward-curving lips and she was wrapped in a large apron that had 'Kiss the Cook' printed across it. An enormous tortoiseshell cat – so large that Jonah doubted he was real – was curled in a basket chair.

'That's St Francis,' said Hester. 'He was called Billy to begin with but his unusually philanthropic attitude towards birds and rodents required some kind of public recognition.'

'It doesn't matter what you call him,' said Clio, noting Jonah's doubtful expression. 'He'll ignore you anyway. I call him Frank.'

Jonah put out a cautious hand and stroked the soft warm animal rather gingerly. St Francis stirred, licked his left flank once or twice and resumed slumber without acknowledging Jonah's caress.

'Told you so,' said Clio with some satisfaction. 'Come and sit down. I've made a mushroom omelette and then there's a casserole.'

During supper it was easy for Hester to divert the conversation away from the war to Jonah's work: the scripts he'd written and the novel he was presently adapting for television. Clio had seen one of his plays, which they discussed at length, and he entertained them with stories about productions and famous actors. He was a witty raconteur, making them laugh and encouraging their questions, so that it was much later, when Clio was stacking the dishwasher in the kitchen and Jonah and Hester were

still at the table drinking coffee, that tension crept back to chill the cheerful atmosphere.

‘It’s stopped raining,’ Clio called through the archway, ‘though there’s a terrific gale blowing. Listen to the river.’

She leaned across the sink and opened the window so that the restless voice that had distantly accompanied their supper was suddenly borne in upon them on a wild rush of wind, clamouring now with a renewed violence.

‘Can we go out and see it?’ asked Jonah. ‘The river must be pretty impressive after all that rain.’

To Clio’s surprise, Hester rose and took him out through the kitchen into the yard rather than on to the terrace outside the drawing-room where visitors were usually shown the river. A light outside the door illuminated the courtyard and he passed Clio’s car and went on to the bridge. Hester watched him from the doorway, Clio at her shoulder. The noise of the water was overwhelming: brawling, brutal, black and oily-looking in the darkness, its sheer force was breathtaking. Branches and other detritus swirled upon its swollen breast, smashing against the stone piers of the bridge and vanishing beneath the arch, and all the while the river roared and thundered as it raced between its imprisoning banks.

Jonah came back to them slowly, his face clenched painfully as though his head hurt; his eyes looked at them unseeingly. He staggered slightly as the wind gusted even more strongly, and Clio put out her hand and drew him into the warm shelter of the house.

‘I’ll show you your room,’ she said, concerned by his expression. ‘Let’s get your bag. I left it in the hall.’

They went upstairs together and Hester returned thoughtfully to the kitchen to finish the clearing up. When they reappeared about ten minutes later, both looked equally strained.

‘I’m sorry we didn’t get round to talking properly about Mum and the war,’ Jonah said rather awkwardly to Hester.

‘I’d like to know more. It’s odd but I feel strangely affected by this place.’ He grimaced, as if embarrassed by his admission. ‘Probably overwork. I think I’ll turn in.’

Hester, who was not given to endearments or shows of affection, touched him lightly on the shoulder. ‘We *will* talk, I promise. When the moment is right. Sleep well, Jonah.’

He went away from them, up the stairs, and Clio gave a little shiver. It was obvious that Jonah’s reaction had renewed her earlier anxiety and convinced her that something mysterious was happening. She came up close to her godmother, looking seriously into her face, and Hester took a deep, steadying breath.

‘Who was it that he saw?’ asked Clio. Her natural poise had deserted her and she seemed vulnerable, even frightened. Nevertheless, Hester decided that this time she must answer truthfully.

‘He saw his grandfather,’ she said.

## CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS WITH an unexpected light-heartedness that Hester woke next morning. The gale had roared away to the east, leaving a freshly rinsed, clear blue sky, and the air was cool and still. The weight of premonition and anxiety that had arrived so suddenly with the wild south-westerly wind had now swept off with it, leaving Hester with an unfamiliar sense of anticipation. This morning the bright sunshine that glittered on the dripping trees and gleamed over the rain-drenched garden mocked at the fears and terrors of the night and dispelled the shadows.

Hester, congenitally uncommunicative until after her second cup of coffee, was relieved to discover that Jonah was not inclined to early morning conversation. He smiled at the two women, accepted some coffee and picked up a section of the newspaper. Clio, recognizing the familiar signs, shrugged mentally and ate her toast in silence. Jonah ate nothing, drank his cup of black coffee and then went away to pack his overnight bag, which gave Clio the opportunity of proposing her plan to invite Peter down.

‘Of course,’ said Hester, pausing in her daily battle with the crossword. ‘It was so kind of him to let you have the time off to look after me. By all means invite him to stay. I should very much like to meet him.’

She was aware of the sharp look Clio shot at her but pretended to be absorbed again in her crossword. She suspected that Clio was trying to decide whether she should speak openly about her relationship with Peter – about the personal aspect of it – and Hester knew that such a disclosure would require explanations, justifications, even