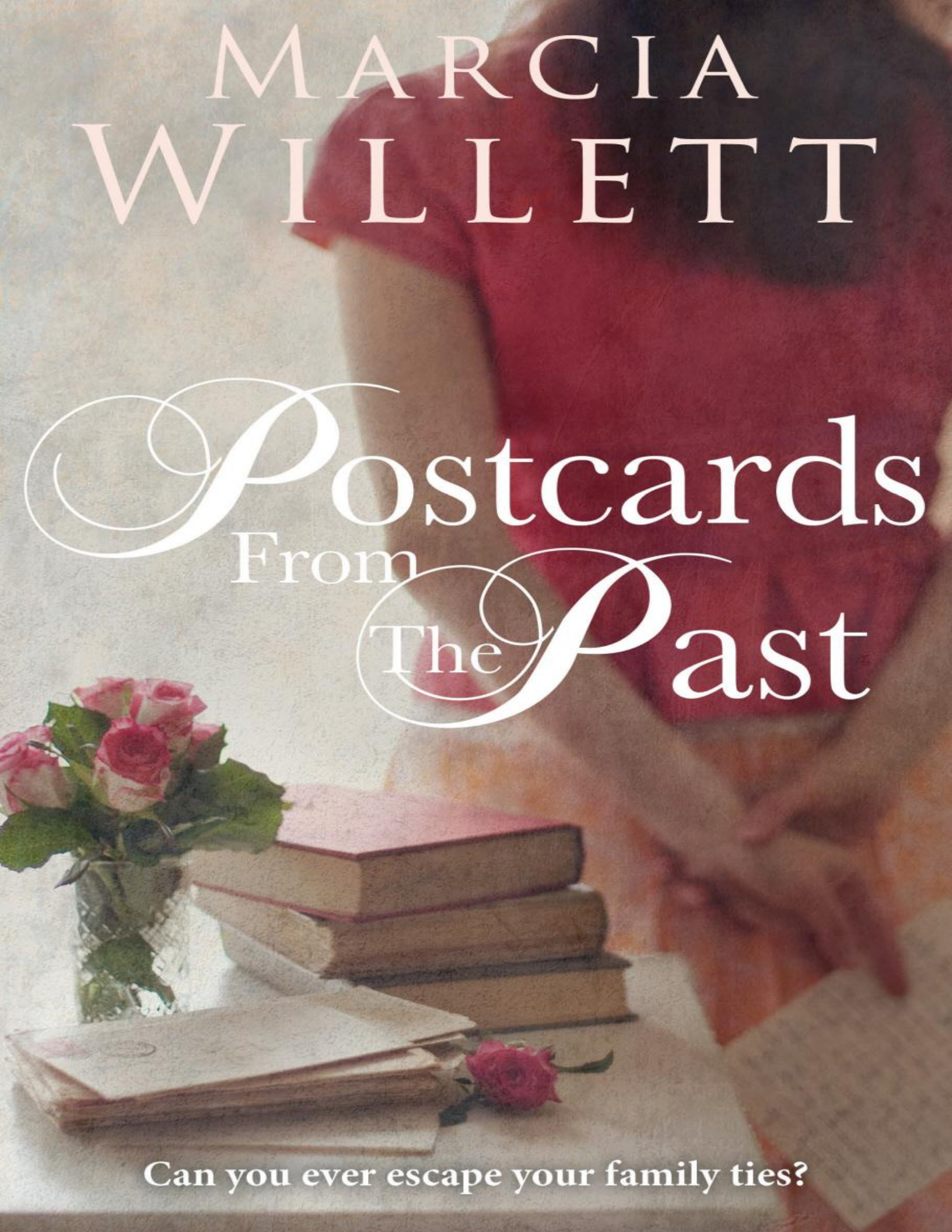
MARCIA
WILLETT
Postcards
From
The Past
Can you ever escape your family ties?

ABOUT THE BOOK

Siblings Billa and Ed share their beautiful, grand old childhood home in rural Cornwall. Their lives are uncomplicated. With family and friends nearby and their free and easy living arrangements, life seems as content as can be.

But when postcards start arriving from a sinister figure they thought belonged well and truly in the past, old memories are stirred. Why is he contacting them now? And what has he been hiding all these years?

Contents

POSTCARDS FROM THE PAST

MARCIA WILLETT

To Linda Evans

CHAPTER ONE

THERE ARE TWO moons tonight. The round white shining disc, brittle and sharp-edged as glass, stares down at its reflection lying on its back in the black water of the lake. Nothing stirs. No whisper of wind ruffles the surface. At the lake's edge the wild cherry tree leans like an elegant ghost, its delicate bare branches silver with ice, yearning towards the past warmth of summer days. Tall stands of dogwood, their bright wands of colour blotted into monochrome by the cold brilliant light, guard the northern shore of the lake and cast spiked shadows across the frosty grass.

She stands in the warm room, staring down at the frozen, wintry scene and, all the while, her fingers fret around the edges of the postcard thrust deep into the pocket of her quilted gilet, just as her mind frets around the meaning of the words scrawled on the back of a reproduction of Toulouse-Lautrecs's *La Chaîne Simpson*.

'A blast from the past. How are you doing? Perhaps I should pay a visit and find out!'

It is addressed to her and her brother – Edmund and Wilhelmina St Enedoc – and signed simply with one word: 'Tris'. She fingers the card, breaking its corner; from a room below drift a few notes of music, the lyrical poignancy of the trumpet: Miles Davis playing 'It Never Entered My Mind'. It is one of Ed's favourite CDs.

Instinct made her hide the postcard earlier, shuffling it beneath yesterday's newspaper as Ed came into the kitchen to see what the postman had brought. She made some light-hearted remark, passing him the handful of envelopes

and catalogues, whilst the writing on the postcard burned on her inner eye.

‘… Perhaps I should pay a visit and find out! Tris.’

Later she slid it into her pocket to examine it in the privacy of her own room. The postmark is Paris, dated three days ago. By now he might be in the country, driving west. How could he know, after more than fifty years, that she and Ed would still be here together?

Fifty years.

‘Tris the tick.’ ‘Tris the toad.’ ‘Tell-tale Tris.’ Ed, at twelve, has a whole collection of private names for their new step-brother. ‘We’ll have to watch out for him, Billa.’

‘Try to be nice to Tristan, darling.’ Her mother’s voice. ‘I know it’s hard for you and Ed but I do so want you all to get on together. For my sake. Will you try?’

Fifty years. She takes the card out of her pocket and stares at it.

‘Billa?’ Ed’s voice. ‘Are you coming down? Supper’s ready.’

‘Coming,’ she calls. ‘Shan’t be a sec.’

She glances round, picks up a book from the small revolving table – her mother’s little walnut table – and slips the postcard inside. Drawing the curtains together, closing out the two moons and the lake, Billa goes downstairs to Ed.

He stoops over the supper he’s prepared, checking the sauce. The jointed chicken legs have been marinaded overnight in oregano and garlicky red wine vinegar, then cooked in white wine, and he looks approvingly at the result, now on a dish, with its sprinkling of olives and capers and prunes. It smells delicious. His cooking is capricious, extravagant and occasionally disastrous, but he likes to pull his weight. Tall and wide-shouldered in his navy Aran jersey – unravelling at the cuffs and patched at the elbows – his thick thatch of badger-streaked hair falling forward as he bends to take plates out of the bottom oven of the Aga, he looks like an amiable bear. Ed’s approach to life is simple,

unhurried; he hates fuss or extravagant emotion and believes himself to be inadequate in fulfilling people's expectations of him. The women who are drawn to his innate kindness, his gentleness, grow irritated by his inability to commit. He went straight to a major publishing house from university and stayed there until his early retirement, but always weekended here at Mellinpons. He cherished his authors – naturalists, travellers, gardeners – enjoyed launch parties and lunches but, in his middle fifties, with his childless marriage drifting into an amicable divorce, he decided to move back to Cornwall. His own book, published two years later – *Wild Birds of the Peninsula* – was an astonishing success, partly attributable to his charming ink drawings and beautiful photographs. *Wild Birds of the Cornish Cliffs and Coasts* followed, and now he is planning *Wild Birds of the Cornish Inland Lakes*: Colliford, Crowdy, Siblyback.

To his regret, their own lake is too small to harbour more than a few wild duck; too domestic to be home to tufted duck or great-crested grebe. Frogs in plenty come to carouse in the early spring, slipping and sliding, clasping and clambering in the shallows, their mating songs echoing eerily in the night.

Ed lifts out the warmed plates from the lower oven. Billa and he were always happiest here at Mellinpons; always glad to leave the big town house in Truro at the beginning of the summer holidays. He can remember the excitement of heading out of the city with their father driving the big Rover, their mother beside him, and he and Billa packed into the back with their favourite toys and books. Mellinpons: built as a mill in 1710, extended and converted into a butter factory by a cooperative of local farmers in 1870.

Their branch of the St Enedoc family made its wealth from mining, and Great-grandfather bought this piece of land with its mine – now defunct – the mill and some cottages back in the 1870s. In 1939 the butter factory closed when

the men were called up for war, and it lay derelict until Harry St Enedoc decided to convert it. Mellinpons was his post-war project. He'd had a bad war and afterwards took very little interest in the family business, passing more responsibility to his fellow directors, resigning from the boards of the great mining companies, until at last he moved his family out of Truro and settled in this quiet valley. He lived only six years at Mellinpons before he died.

It's odd, thinks Ed, that, though his father lived here for such a short time, his influence is still so strongly present in the butter factory. It was his idea to use the old millstone as a hearthstone beneath a granite chimney-breast, which takes up one whole corner of the hall from where it is possible to look up and up, past the galleried landing, to the massive black beams in the roof. The great window facing down the valley was his idea, too. The recess, cut into the thick granite walls, is big and deep enough to take two armchairs. It was he who named the old butter factory Mellinpons: the Mill on the Bridge.

Ed places the dish beside the plates on the huge slate kitchen table, on which the butter was once patted into blocks, glancing up as Billa comes in.

'That looks good,' she says appreciatively

The kitchen is warm and full of delicious smells, Miles Davis is playing 'I'll Remember April' whilst Ed's Newfoundland – the colour of tobacco and called Bear because, as a puppy, he looked like a brown bear-cub – sleeps peacefully on an ancient, sagging sofa beneath the window. Keeping her eyes resolutely away from the mess Ed will have made at the business end of the kitchen, Billa sits down at the table. The huge dog raises his head, checks her arrival and slumps down again. His tail beats gently, just a thump or two of welcome, before he resumes his slumber.

'Don't get up,' Billa tells him drily.

'He won't,' Ed says comfortably. 'Far too much effort would be required.'

He spoons some chicken and sauce on to a beautiful old Spode plate, whose gold leaf is nearly worn away, and passes it to her. There is roasted parsnip mash in a Clarice Cliff bowl and some purple heads of broccoli in a Mason's Ironstone dish. Ed chooses his dishes for their designs and colours but with no sense of uniformity. Oddly, it works; old and new, priceless and valueless, all existing happily together. The table is only partially cleared: seed catalogues, a pair of binoculars, the latest edition of *Slightly Foxed*, as well as the diary – bursting with crucial pieces of paper containing addresses, telephone numbers and all the notes Ed makes to himself whilst on the telephone – are scattered across the black slate. A terracotta pot planted with cyclamen stands beside a pretty branching silver candlestick.

Ed fills Billa's glass with wine – a mellow South African Merlot that has been warming by the Aga – and sits down. He talks enthusiastically about his plans for seeding the small meadow with wild flowers and grasses, for planting more bulbs beneath the great copper beech, and all the while, as she nods and says, 'Mmm. Good idea …' her mind skitters around the words written on the postcard.

Ed notes her distraction but says nothing. She is generally more involved in her charity work for the local hospice than in his writing and drawing, his continuing development of the land along the stream and his study of its wildlife. This is where Ed reigns supreme and Billa doesn't attempt to advise him on any of these subjects.

As he clears the plates, shovelling a few tasty morsels into Bear's bowl, he reflects on Billa's marriage to the much older, well-known physicist, Philip Huxley. Ed's always believed that the relationship was based on hero-worship on Billa's side, rather than passion, and by an almost paternal kindness on Philip's. Gradually she was undermined by a series of devastating miscarriages, subsuming her grief into a growing absorption with her work as the head of the fund-

raising wing of a big charitable organization for disabled children. She'd nursed Philip through his last, long illness and then come back to live at Mellinpons. Yet even now, widowed and retired, Billa is still tough and he is glad that his expertise is outside her own areas of endeavour. They get along very well together.

Bear climbs down from his sofa and goes to inspect the contents of his bowl. He glances up at Ed as if to say: 'What d'you call this?'

'Don't you fancy it, old man?' Ed asks, concerned. 'Too much oregano?'

Billa rolls her eyes. 'Perhaps he'd rather have it on the Spode plate.'

'Perhaps he would,' answers Ed, unruffled by her sarcasm, 'but there are only two of them left. They were Greatgrandmother's, as far as I can remember, and I rather treasure them. I do agree, though, that your old chipped enamel bowl is rather mere, isn't it, Bear?'

Billa bursts out laughing. 'Poor old Bear. We'll buy him a new one for his birthday. Do you want me to make the coffee or will you do it?'

Her laughter relieves some of her tension and she feels stronger again. After all, what can Tristan do to them now? That particular part of the past has long gone; finished.

But, as she watches Ed making coffee, his figure dislimns and fades and she sees her mother instead, standing there fiddling with cups and saucers, eyes averted from her children, sitting side by side at the table.

'I know it will be difficult at first,' she was saying rapidly, hands busy with the kettle, with the tea caddy. 'But I know that you'll love him as much as I do when you get to know him. After all, it is more than five years now since your father died and …' The kettle began to sing and she lifted it from the hotplate. 'And I want you to try very hard to

understand how lonely it is for me with you both away at school …’

‘We don’t both have to be away at school.’ Billa’s voice was harsh with anxiety. There was something frightening, embarrassing, at the sight of her mother so nervous and beseeching. ‘At least, *I* don’t have to be away,’ she said. ‘Ed does, of course, especially now he’s got a place at Sherborne, but I could be a day-girl. I could go to Truro School.’

‘But, darling …’ Their mother looked at them at last and Billa saw that she could not hide her happiness; her excitement. She stretched her hands to them, like a child at a party inviting them to join in the games. ‘You see, Andrew and I love each other. I think you are old enough to understand this. I am so happy, you see.’

Ed, feeling his sister’s tension, said politely: ‘Perhaps we will understand when we’ve met …’ he stumbled over the words ‘this man’ or ‘him’ and settled rather waveringly on ‘Andrew’. ‘When we’ve met Andrew,’ he finished more strongly.

Their mother made tea, though Billa could see that her hands were shaking. ‘And,’ she said, in a special voice, as if this was an extra bonus, ‘and Andrew has a son of his own, called Tristan. He’s ten, two years younger than you, Ed, and I’m sure we shall be very happy together. A proper family again. They will both live with us here at Mellinpons.’

Billa and Ed were stunned into silence: a boy of ten. Tristan. Living here in their house.

Out of sight, under the table, Billa’s hand stretched out to Ed and fastened round his wrist. They stared stonily at their mother as she came across the kitchen and put their tea on the table.

Ed pushes Billa’s coffee cup towards her and stares at her, bending down a little to peer at her more closely.

‘Are you OK?’ he asks.

She looks back at him, frowning, and then nods. ‘Sorry,’ she says. ‘I went off there for a minute. I was just remembering Mother telling us that she was going to marry ghastly Andrew.’

‘I suppose he wasn’t that bad,’ Ed says. ‘It can’t have been easy for him, either.’

‘We were just the wrong ages,’ says Billa reflectively. ‘Fourteen is no age to watch your mother falling passionately in love. Of course he was very attractive in an edgy kind of way, but she was so mad about him that it was embarrassing, especially in public. I stopped telling her about events at school because I couldn’t stand the humiliation. Girls can be so cruel.’

‘It was easier for me.’ Ed sits down at the table. ‘Andrew was quite clued up about things like rugby and cricket. It was that little tick Tris that I couldn’t stand. He was such a stirrer, wasn’t he?’

Billa is silent, thinking of the postcard, panic twisting again in her gut. ‘Mmm,’ she says, not wanting to talk about Tristan, bending her head over her cup lest Ed should see her expression. After a moment she gets up, picking up her coffee mug. ‘I’m going to check emails,’ she says.

Ed continues to drink his coffee and Bear comes to lean heavily against his chair, which shunts slowly sideways across the big rug flung down over the slate floor until Bear collapses gently to the floor. Miles Davis’ trumpet fades into silence and Ed stands up, bending to blow out the candles, and begins to clear away the supper. As he sorts the plates that will go into the dishwasher from the more delicate pieces – the Spode and Clarice Cliff – he broods on Billa’s preoccupation. All day she’s been on edge but he knows that any kind of questioning or concern will evoke a quick denial that anything is wrong. And on those rare occasions when she shares some anxiety or fear with him she’ll immediately add: ‘But it’s fine. It’s fine, really,’ hurrying

away from any comfort he might offer, turning the conversation.

Even as a child, once their father died, she shouldered her own burdens; made her own decisions. He'd relied on her so much when they were small. Her eager, passionate vitality lent colour to his quiet, subdued personality, investing it with some of her own brilliance. She made him brave, laughing at his terrors, spurring him beyond the modest limits he set himself.

After their father died suddenly, one cold March day, she was silent with shock for weeks, her face rigid with suffering. She was just nine years old, Ed was seven, and the quality and depth of her grief frightened him, diluting his own sense of loss. He subsumed his pain, his terror of death, into focusing on the life that continued to riot heartlessly around him. The cold sweet spring: how vital and generous it was, almost profligate in its abundance. He began to notice that many of the wild flowers were yellow and for the first time – the first of many – he made a list. It became a test; a challenge. It wonderfully concentrated his mind.

Catkins – he wrote in his round childish hand – cowslips, daffodils, primroses, dandelions, buttercups, celandines, kingcups. Alongside each name he drew a picture of the flower and painted it carefully, noting nature's wide range of the colour yellow: egg-yolk, lemon, cream. Pussy willow might be a bit of a cheat, being more grey than yellow, but he put it in anyway. Billa watched him, clenched in her misery.

'What are you doing?'

'It's a list of all the yellow flowers I've seen,' he said, defensively, lest it might be seen as too light-hearted an occupation under the circumstances. 'Nearly all the wild spring flowers are yellow, Billa.'

He could tell that she was trying to think of some that weren't, to prove him wrong, but even this seemed beyond her – which frightened him even more.

'What have you got so far?' she asked dully.

He read his list to her and watched while she racked her brain to think of something he'd forgotten. He willed her onward, longing for the old, vital Billa who kept him up to the mark.

'Gorse!' she cried at last, triumphantly – and he felt quite weak with relief, as though some important corner had been turned. 'And forsythia.'

She spelled it for him, and he wrote obediently, although he forbore to say that forsythia was not a wild flower but a tame garden shrub. Nevertheless, his heart beat with ungovernable joy: their roles were reversed and he'd drawn her back from the edge of the abyss. But it was Dom who really saved them from their despair.

'Dominic is a kind of relation,' their mother told them. She looked uncomfortable, as though she would rather not discuss it, but Ed and Billa had been full of the news that Mrs Tregellis's grandson had come to stay with her at her cottage down the lane.

'He's twelve,' Billa had told her, 'and he came all the way from Bristol on the train on his own. And he and Ed look alike. It's so odd. Mrs Tregellis says that we're related.'

And that's when their mother said, 'Dominic *is* a kind of relation.' Colour burned her cheeks a dull red, and her mouth compressed into a thin line, but they were too excited to notice much. The arrival of Dom distracted them from their grief and gave them something new to think about.

The sharp trill of the telephone bell cuts across Ed's thoughts. As he dries his hands and reaches for the handset the bell stops and he knows that Billa has picked up the extension. It will probably be one of her co-workers from the

charity. He pours himself some more coffee and takes the Miles Davis CD from the player. He puts it away, hesitating at the shelf on which other CDs are piled, and then chooses a Dinah Washington recording.

Billa finishes her conversation with the treasurer, replaces the handset on its stand and stares at the computer screen. The small room off the kitchen is now her office. An old pine washstand is her desk and Ed's tuck box, which accompanied him to school, is her filing cabinet. She is amazingly untidy. Even Ed, who is not methodical, is silenced by the disorder of Billa's office.

'However did you manage when you were working?' he asked once, awed by the magnificence of such chaos.

'I had a PA and a secretary,' she answered briefly. 'I wasn't paid to do the filing. I was paid to have ideas about how to raise money.'

Pieces of paper, books, letters, are piled on the floor, on the desk, on the Lloyd Loom chair, on the deep granite windowsill. At intervals she has a tidying session.

'Thank heavens so much is now done by email,' she'd say, coming into the kitchen with her short fair hair on end and her shirtsleeves rolled up. 'Be a duck and make me some coffee, Ed. I'm dying of thirst.'

Now, she stares at an email about fund-raising at an event in Wadebridge and thinks about Tristan. Her first instinct is to protect Ed; her second is to talk to Dom. All her life – since her father died and her sense of security irrevocably shattered – she's turned to Dom for advice and for comfort. Even when he was working abroad in South Africa, and after he was married, she'd write to him, sharing her woes and her joys. She feels inextricably linked to him. From the beginning it was as if their father had come back to them in the form of a boy.

He built dams across the stream and a tree house high in the beech tree in the wood – though not too high because of Ed still being little – and showed them how to light a campfire and cook very basic meals. All that long summer – the summer after their father died – Dom was with them. He was tall and strong and inventive, and they recognized that look of his, the way he laughed, throwing back his head, the way he used his hands to describe something, shaping it out in the air. How safe they felt with him; just as if their father was back with them – but young again, and reckless and fun.

Their mother was cool in response to their enthusiasm – and they were too conscious of her grief to want to upset her – and, anyway, Dom preferred the cosiness of his granny's cottage and the wild countryside beyond it to the old butter factory and its grounds.

'I wonder how we'll manage now,' Billa said to Dom as they watched Ed splashing in the quiet, deep pool behind the dam. 'Without Daddy, I mean. Ed's too little to be able to be in charge yet, and Mother is …'

She hesitated, not knowing the right word for her instinctive awareness of their mother's neediness and dependence on others; for her emotional swings between tears and laughter; her instability.

Wood pigeons cooed comfortably amongst the high leafy canopy that dappled their camp with trembling patterns of sunlight and shade; tall foxgloves clung in the stony crevices of the old footbridge that spanned the stream where tiny fish darted in the clear brown shallows.

'My father's dead, too,' Dom said. 'I never knew him. He was in the navy in the war and he got killed when I was very small.'

And here again was another wonderful coincidence. 'Our father was in the navy, too,' she said. 'He might have been killed but he was only injured. That's why he died, though. It

was the injury and then he had a heart attack. I don't know what Mother will do without him.'

She didn't mention her own overwhelming sense of loss and pain.

'My mother works,' Dom said. 'She's working now. That's why I've come on my own. She says I'm old enough now.'

'I'm glad you've come,' Billa said. 'We both are. And we're glad you're a relation.'

He looked at her then, his face serious. 'Funny, though, isn't it?' he murmured, and she felt a little shock of fear – and excitement. He was so familiar, yet a stranger. She wanted to touch him, to be close to him always.

Now, on an impulse, Billa picks up the telephone and presses buttons.

'Dominic Blake here.' Dom's voice, cool, impersonal, calms her at once.

'It's me, Dom. I was just wondering if I could come down and see you in the morning.'

'Billa. Yes, of course. Everything OK?'

'Yes. Well …'

'You don't sound too certain.'

'No. The thing is,' instinctively she lowers her voice, 'we've had a postcard from Tristan.'

'*Tristan?*'

'Yes. Weird, isn't it, after all these years?'

'What does he want?'

'That's the whole point. It just says that he might come down and see us.'

In the silence she can imagine Dom's face: that concentrated, thoughtful expression that narrows his brown eyes; his thick hair, black and grey badger-streaked like Ed's, flopping forward; his straight brows drawn into a frowning line.

'What does Ed say?'

'I haven't told him. I didn't want to worry him.'

She hears the tolerant, amused snorting sound with which Dom acknowledges her ingrained sense of responsibility for Ed's wellbeing.

'You assume there's something to worry about, then?'

'Don't you? Fifty years of silence and then a postcard. How did he know we'd both still be here?'

'What's the postmark?'

'Paris. Is Tilly with you?'

'Yes. We've just finished supper.'

'Will she be there tomorrow morning?'

'She should be gone by about ten.'

'I'll come down about eleven.'

'OK.'

Billa sighs with relief. As she puts the phone back on its rest, she can hear Dinah Washington singing 'It Could Happen to You'. She passes through the kitchen to the hall where Ed is piling logs on the fire whilst Bear lies in his favourite place across the cool slates by the front door. Billa watches them, filled with overwhelming affection for them both.

Tomorrow she will talk to Dom: all will be well.

CHAPTER TWO

DOM STANDS STILL, arms folded across his chest, his face thoughtful. Tristan: Ed and Billa's stepbrother. In his mind's eye he calls up the boy's face: thin, sharp, attractive; frosty grey eyes that stare with a bland challenge. Dom was eighteen when he first met Tristan Carr and never before had he been so aware of the capacity for destruction in one so young. Even now, more than fifty years later, Dom remembers the shock of that meeting; the sensation of a fist in the guts.

He was back in Cornwall with a place at the Camborne School of Mines to study mining engineering. He felt strong and proud and free, and he couldn't wait to see Billa and Ed; especially poor Billa, who'd written to him telling him about the disaster of their mother's second marriage.

'Wait till you meet the ghastly Tris,' she wrote. 'He's utterly loathsome. I'm glad Ed and I are away at school all term. Ed'll never be able to compete with Tris. Nor will I …'

He wrote back, trying to comfort her, to make light of her antagonism.

'He can't be that bad, can he?' he replied. 'Didn't you say he's only ten? I'm sure you're more than a match for a ten-year-old …'

And now, as he walked along the lane to the old butter factory, a shadow moved beneath the ash tree and a wiry, russet-haired boy stepped out into Dom's path. This boy stared for a moment – he had to look up at Dom but that didn't faze him – and then his left eyebrow shot up and his lips quirked as though in amused recognition.

'So you're the bastard,' he said lightly.

Even now, all these years later, Dom's hands ball into fists at the recollection of that meeting. Memories hurtle back, fragmented and random: the little house in Bristol where he and his mother lived with a cousin, and how the three of them huddled beneath the kitchen table when the bombs fell. His father, James Blake, was away, they told him, he was at sea, at war – and then, he was dead. Later, there was the little school round the corner and, when Dom was eight and the war was long over, there was the interview at the cathedral school. He won a scholarship, sang in the choir, grew taller. And, all the while, there was a shadowy presence of someone in the background who sent money and supported them.

'He's a relation,' his mother said evasively. 'You have relations down in Cornwall. No, not Granny. Other relations. I'll tell you when you're older.' But, in the end, it was Granny who told him.

And now the memories shift and change. He was in the potager with Billa on a hot June afternoon. With the scent of the herbs and the lavender drifting on the warm air, Granny's potager was a magical place. When her husband died in the Levant mining disaster in 1919 she was twenty-one years old. Old Matthew St Enedoc allowed her to stay in the cottage as long as she could pay the peppercorn rent, so she got a job at the old butter factory and channelled all her passion into her six-month-old daughter, Mary, and the garden at the back of the cottage.

She grew the necessary vegetables – as many as she could in her small patch – but she loved flowers and, in amongst the vegetables, she planted her favourites. Delicate sweet peas climbed amongst the pea-sticks, yellow-headed sunflowers peeped from the willow wigwams that supported runner beans, lavender grew at the edges of the narrow paths. Nasturtiums tumbled over the stone wall alongside campanula, geranium and dianthus. Between the lettuces and beetroot and chard, with its red and yellow

stems, grew clumps of herbs: fennel, basil, chive, rosemary, thyme.

The young widow cherished her garden almost as passionately as she cared for her child, who trundled around beside her, falling over, chasing a butterfly, sitting down suddenly to examine a stick or a stone. The child grew, attended the little village school, became beautiful – and, all the while, the rumours of another war grumbled like distant cannon-fire. And then young Harry St Enedoc came calling. His father had died and he was their new landlord. He drove a smart shiny car and he was kind and amusing. The two women were shy to begin with and then began to relax. He drank tea in the little parlour, teased Mary and complimented her mother on the delicious cake, before continuing along the lane to the butter factory.

'He's nice,' said Mary, eyes glowing, cheeks bright as the poppies in the potager.

'Yes,' answered her mother, watching her daughter with a mix of fear and heart-aching compassion. 'A bit too nice for us, perhaps.'

But Mary wasn't listening; she twirled a strand of hair dreamily and presently wandered out into the lane …

But on that June afternoon eighteen years later, when he and Billa were picking peas in the potager, Granny hadn't yet told Dom this story.

Billa was angry. She talked and talked as she twisted the pea pods from their stalks, telling him that her mother was going to marry this man called Andrew and that he had a son called Tristan who would live with them and that life could never be the same again. Billa was fourteen; Dom was nearly eighteen. For five years, during the long summer holidays, she and Dom and Ed had been inseparable. Today, her barley-fair hair was snagged by the leaves and her pansy-blue eyes gleamed with tears. She looked up at him, mouth trembling, and, without considering his action, Dom put an arm around her and held her close. To his surprise –

and pleasure – she flung both arms round him and clung to him.

‘Whatever shall we do?’ she sobbed. ‘It won’t be the same now, will it? Everything will be spoiled.’

He held her, comforting her, and then he saw Granny watching them from the little path. Something in her face made him disentangle himself quickly, though he treated Billa gently, bringing her on to the path where Granny took control and led Billa into the cottage.

Granny made tea, listened to Billa, and then walked with her back to the old butter factory, leaving Dom with some digging to do in the potato patch. He worked hard, driving himself in the hot sunshine, until Granny came back and told him, sitting there on the little bench amongst the scents of the potager, about young Harry St Enedoc and his fast, smart car.

She explained that Harry hadn’t known, that he’d gone off to war a few months before Mary, weeping and distraught, told her mother the truth about secret meetings in the woodland along the stream – and the result that was growing in her womb. And her mother thought hard and fast about what must happen. She imagined the local talk: hot gossip licking its lips as it passed from tongue to eager tongue. She thought of her cousin Susan, in Bristol. Susan had done well for herself but she had been widowed young, and was childless, and might welcome some company during these dark days of war. So Mary was sent across the Tamar, away to Bristol, to help cousin Susan, and presently, when the news spread that Mary had found a nice young sailor called James Blake and that a child was on the way, her old friends and neighbours in Cornwall were very happy for her. And when three years later, in 1942, that nice young sailor was killed at sea, well, by then it was a very common story and people were sympathetic but not shocked or even surprised.

Dom was both. He sat on the little bench, his mind whirling with this amazing story. Granny watched him. She didn't touch him and made sure to keep her voice firm and light.

And then, she went on, Harry St Enedoc came back from the war. He'd been torpedoed twice and wasn't in very good shape but he'd got married along the way and he was now planning to convert the old butter factory. He'd asked after Mary and that was when she, Granny, had told him the truth.

She sat in silence for a moment, as if remembering the shock on Harry's face. 'Oh my God,' he'd said. 'Oh my God, I never knew. I swear I didn't, Mrs Tregellis.' And she'd believed him and made him some tea and told him about Mary and about Dom – and showed him a snapshot of his six-year-old son.

Harry hadn't doubted it or denied it. He'd stared at the snapshot and said: 'I've got a little girl. Wilhelmina. And my wife is expecting another baby.' He'd looked at her then – and he'd seemed like a child himself for all his twenty-eight years. 'I can't tell Elinor,' he'd said. 'I can't. She'd never forgive me.'

And somehow things were managed between him and Granny. When old Mr Potts in the adjoining cottage died Harry put both cottages in Granny's name in trust for Dom. He paid for school uniforms and any fees over and above Dom's scholarship, and helped however he could. But he didn't go to the little house in Bristol, and Mary and Dom only came to Cornwall when the St Enedocs were away. Granny travelled by train to see her daughter and her grandson until Harry St Enedoc died when Dom was twelve and he was considered old enough to travel to Cornwall alone on the train.

Another little silence whilst Granny watched him and Dom remembered that first visit to Cornwall on his own on the train; Billa and Ed running into Granny's kitchen to meet

him, commenting on how alike he and Ed were. He sat with the sun on his back and tried to grapple with the thought that Billa was his half-sister.

‘They don’t know?’ he said to Granny quickly. ‘Billa and Ed and their mother? None of them?’

But it seemed that Mrs St Enedoc knew. When Harry died, his will made it clear but Mrs St Enedoc refused to tell her children. Even when Dom began to spend his summer holidays with Granny she continued to refuse to tell Billa and Ed, despite Granny’s pleas that they should know the truth.

‘But I’ve told her that she must tell them now,’ said Granny. She stood up, pausing for a moment to pass her hand lightly over Dom’s bent head. ‘And if she doesn’t, then I shall tell them myself.’

She went away, leaving Dom sitting with his hands clenched between his knees, trying to come to terms with such cataclysmic news, wondering what he would say to Billa.

But it was Ed who saved the day: Ed, running down the lane with Billa trailing behind him, who flung himself at Dom, shouting with delight, ‘I knew it really all the time. I just knew it. You’re our brother, Dom. Tris might be going to be our stepbrother but you’re our *real* brother.’

Dom looked over his head to Billa, who hesitated; she looked nervous and awkward.

He thought: she’s only fourteen. I must deal with this. I must be the strong one.

He grinned at her. ‘It’s a bit of a shock, isn’t it? But Ed’s right. It explains lots of odd things … and feelings, and why we’re all so close.’ And he saw her relax a little.

‘Dom will sort Tris out,’ said Ed eagerly. ‘Tris the tick; Tris the toad. Dom will put him in his place.’

And a few months later, as Dom hurried along the lane with the good news of his place at the Camborne School of