Katie Flynn

The Top Ten
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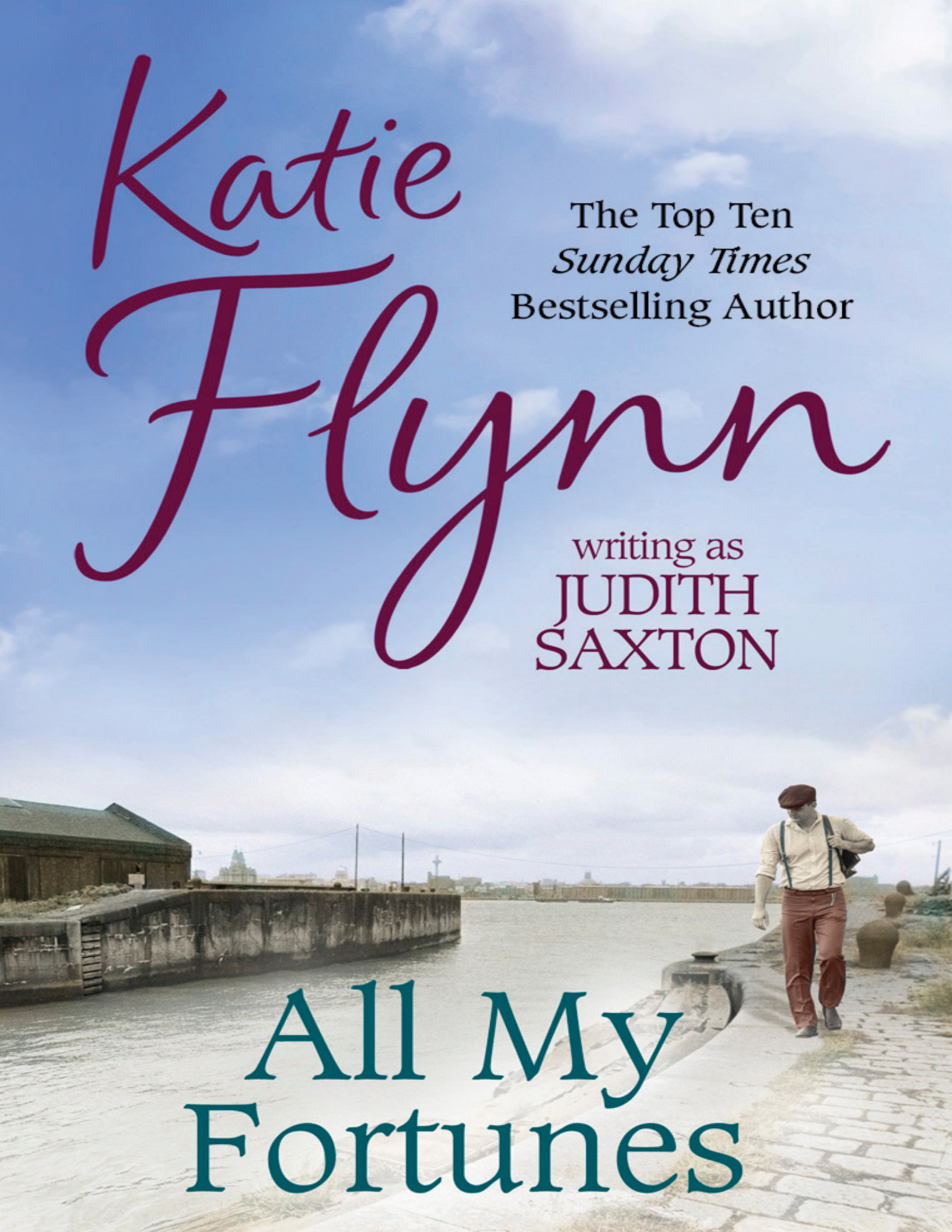
SAXTON



All My Fortunes

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About the Book

‘*Take care of Eva*.’

These words are all that remain of Pavel Fedorovna’s former life, though she can no longer remember who said them. All she knows is that they marked the end of life as she knew it – and a new beginning in the Russian Caucasus.

Meanwhile on Deeside, young David Thomas’s carefree existence is torn apart by a shipping tragedy which will colour his whole life.

A decade later David, now an engineer and working in Russia, meets the young Pavel, just as she is emerging into womanhood. But Russia in the 1930s is no place for young lovers and the story of their struggle to be together is a powerful tale of emotion, adventure, unbelievable hardship and ultimate triumph.

About the Author

Katie Flynn is the author of over forty much-loved novels and has lived for many years in the north-west. A compulsive writer, she started with short stories and articles and many of her early stories were broadcast on Radio Merseyside. For the past few years, she has had to cope with ME but has continued to write.

Also available by Katie Flynn

A Liverpool Lass
The Girl from Penny Lane
Liverpool Taffy
The Mersey Girls
Strawberry Fields
Rainbow's End
Rose of Tralee
No Silver Spoon
Polly's Angel
The Girl from Seaforth Sands
The Liverpool Rose
Poor Little Rich Girl
The Bad Penny
Down Daisy Street
A Kiss and a Promise
Two Penn'orth of Sky
A Long and Lonely Road
The Cuckoo Child
Darkest Before Dawn
Orphans of the Storm
Little Girl Lost
Beyond the Blue Hills
Forgotten Dreams
Sunshine and Shadows
Such Sweet Sorrow
A Mother's Hope
In Time for Christmas
Heading Home
A Mistletoe Kiss
The Lost Days of Summer
Christmas Wishes
The Runaway
A Sixpenny Christmas

The Forget-Me-Not Summer
A Christmas to Remember
Time to Say Goodbye

Available by Katie Flynn writing as Judith Saxton

You Are My Sunshine
First Love, Last Love
Someone Special
Still Waters
A Family Affair
All My Fortunes
Chasing Rainbows
The Arcade
Harbour Hill
Sophie
Jenny Alone

ALL MY FORTUNES

Katie Flynn writing as Judith Saxton

arrow books

For Mike Griffiths, whose deep knowledge and love of the Dee estuary inspired me to write this book.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to thank my editor, Nancy Webber, who first introduced me to the Caucasus, Marina Thomas and the rest of the staff of Wrexham Branch Library for their tireless efforts to chase up the most obscure books, and Jack Baines of Anglesey Books, Holyhead, whose knowledge of mountaineering and mountains proved invaluable.

‘And all my fortunes at thy foot I’ll lay, And follow thee, my lord, throughout the world.’

Romeo & Juliet, Act II, Scene II

CHAPTER ONE
1920

It had been snowing all day, and when night fell a great wind came up and howled through the thin stand of pines behind the village and over the sod walls and roof of the tiny *kosh*, bringing the three little girls within to huddle close to Babushka, as she sat as near as possible to the turf fire, burning sullenly in the fireplace.

Konkordia was nine, old enough to take care of her motherless sisters, so she held Eva, the baby, in her arms and sang to her, though her voice could scarcely be heard above the howling of the wind. Pavel was only five, so she sat between Babushka and her elder sister, pressed against the coarse black of her grandmother's skirt, her eyes half-closed against the smoke. Despite the baby in her arms, Konkordia still felt that she must hug Pavel – had not her mother left her in charge of the little ones? – and she cuddled both her sisters, glad that they were all snug and warm in the *kosh* and not out in the cold, where the sleet rattled against the wooden shutters and the howling might be the wind – or wolves.

Konkordia was afraid of wolves. She had already seen them this winter, just narrowed yellow eyes in the dark when her father had brought her back late one night from cutting peat lower down the mountain. In winter they drove the flock home each night, into the shelter of the stone-walled home field with wolf-fires burning at each corner, or the wolves would carry off a beast at dusk each night until they had no stock left.

Wolves were their enemies. They came right up to the *kosh* when the weather was bad. Babushka had told them hair-raising stories of little girls who ran outside without taking care and were gobbled up on their very doorsteps by wolves made brave by starvation. Of course, if you were a boy, it was different. Boys watched the wolf-fires, huddled up in their little shelters made of rocks piled up one on top of the other, keeping the fuel dry and safe, with their dogs to scare off any wolf which dared approach too near. Boys carried knives, threw stones with force and accuracy, and were altogether superior beings, though Konkordia was always secretly grateful that she was a girl and not expected to stand up to wolves or to go out into the great, howling dark.

Girls worked hard, though, in the *aouls* – the little mountain villages perched high in the Caucasus range. Men might hunt and bargain and herd the sheep and buy and sell horses, but it was the women who cured the skins, dried meat for winter use, beat maize and cooked the thin, crispy biscuits which you ate with goat's cheese, or fish, or pieces of toasted mutton. Girls waited on the men, too, and stood by when they had finished cooking so that the men might take the best of the food. Once they had eaten, of course, the women had their meal, but traditionally the men, the hunters, had the best of what was available.

Last of all, the dogs were fed – which was unfair, really, when you considered how very brave and useful the dogs were. Every *kosh* had two or three of the huge, skinny, snarling creatures sleeping in the doorway at night while two or three more prowled the sheep-fold. Konkordia loved their dogs, Kal and Baru, and tried to save them bits and pieces from her own meals, because she knew that both animals would attack any stranger – wolf or man – who tried to gain entry into the *kosh.* Baru, the bitch, had killed a she-wolf once which was much bigger than she;

Petchoren boasted of it still when he was bartering Baru's litters for grain, or sheep, or a new foal.

Konkordia knew that she was too timid, but her mother had understood. She had laughed, and caressed her little girl, and told her that it did not matter; timid girls could give birth to brave men. It was not a woman's place to be brave, only to produce sons and work hard at household chores.

But her mother had died a year ago, and sometimes Konkordia thought that she had been more and more frightened ever since. There were so many things to fear when you were trying to take care of two little sisters. Wolves, giants and gins, the evil goblins who lived in the caves, and the great wild eagles who would carry babies off to their nests and eat them up in a trice. Petchoren said they were just stories, but Babushka talked about them as if they were real, and she was so old that she must know more than her son. Of course she had got a little strange in her poor old head, Petchoren whispered to his daughter sometimes, when Babushka was being particularly difficult, but even so … age must bring with it certain knowledge. At any rate, Konkordia was not going to say that giants, gins and goblins did not exist – not while any might have been listening!

It was not only Babushka's stories which frightened her, though. She had not slept well since her mother's death, and lay awake most nights in her bed of sheepskins, listening to the talk around the fire. In their *kosh* there were only two men, Petchoren and Kevi, his brother, but other men from the *aoul* visited them: uncles, cousins, neighbours. Then they spoke of another menace, their voices instinctively lowered, as though the wind itself might overhear. The menace was Russia. Changing ways. The Slavs would come with fire and sword to make all good Caucasians do as they did. From the rich farmers in the

narrow, fertile valleys to the herdsmen living in the scattered *aouls*, the Russians would change them all.

Konkordia did not understand change, but she accepted that it was a bad thing because Petchoren, whom she loved, thought so – and all the other men, of course. Even Uncle Kevi.

Even thinking about Uncle Kevi warmed Konkordia and made her less afraid, because Uncle Kevi was a soldier. He had a long rifle, a heavy overcoat made of some strange material, and boots. He was strong as a stallion, clever as ten schoolteachers rolled into one and beautiful as a woman … or so Babushka said, and she had been alive for more than a hundred years, so she should know.

Everyone loved Uncle Kevi and was glad when he came home, yet this time it was different. Usually he breezed in on a hired nag, saddlebags laden with presents, stayed for a few weeks and was off, bluff, hearty, glad to be back, glad to be gone. This time he had come quietly, in the dark night, and though he still picked up his nieces and threw them up into the air, teased them and cuddled them as their undemonstrative father never did, he was grave for long hours together. Now and then, though, he jerked out of his abstraction and was the old Uncle Kevi, telling Pavel that since her skin was as white as the eternal snows of Mount Elbruz she must be a fairy princess, begging her not to enchant him, rolling her over on the sheepskin rug and tickling her tummy. Or he would pick up skinny old Babushka, laughing at her cackle of alarm, and tell her that her maize cakes were better than any food he had tasted in Russia, from the Caspian sea to Moscow city, and he would take bets that she could outcook any woman in the whole continent.

Konkordia did not mind that this time he brought no gifts save for a big sack of coffee, nor that he was sometimes grave, for no man could be for ever laughing, but she knew that there was an atmosphere of tension in the *kosh*

because of something Uncle Kevi had done, and she did not like that. Round the fire at night, when she and her sisters and Babushka were supposed to be asleep, the men's voices were lower, their talk more frightening. They spoke of strangers coming, of pursuit, of punishment. Konkordia heard the boys being told to watch out for more than wolves … lights in the night, a sound, snow disturbed where it should have been smooth.

So now, with the baby on her lap, Pavel's shoulder in the crook of her arm and her father and Kevi drinking coffee and finishing off the maize cakes and cheese, Konkordia jumped a little when there was a scuffling outside and the heavy wooden door swung outwards. Petchoren and Kevi stiffened, then relaxed as one of the youthful wolf-watchers entered, rubbing his hands and grinning at them.

'Scare you, did I? 'S all right, it's just that we're hungry.' He advanced on the fire, hands held out towards it as the snow on his shoulders and on his sheepskin cap began to melt and trickle down on to the hard earth of the floor. 'It's too wild a night for wolves – or for boys, for that matter. Got any cakes?'

Babushka cackled and shoved Konkordia with her bony knee. 'I baked earlier; get the boy food, girl.'

Konkordia passed the baby to Pavel, who took her almost in her sleep. Pavel, named for an old friend of her father's, was a thin, wispy child, dreamy and obedient, but that, Konkordia thought wisely, as she scrambled over to the cupboard where Babushka kept the food, was how Caucasian men liked their women. Pavel was not beautiful, but she could work hard. Someone would be glad to marry her when her time came; Uncle Kevi was always telling them so.

Putting cakes, cheese and butter into a skin bag, Konkordia reflected that being a boy had its advantages. At night they were all together in the stone shelters, singing songs, keeping each other awake, taking it in turns to go

out and tend the fires. Petchoren had already promised her to a family in the village as a wife for one of their sons, and they had said recently that the younger son, who worked by the wolf-fires, might take Pavel as part-payment for his services. Petchoren had only grunted, but Konkordia supposed he would agree, in the end. He had agreed to Dzera having herself, for instance, although she did not like the heavy, surly boy with his thick lips and small eyes, who enjoyed his ‘ownership’ of her, frequently pinching and squeezing when they were together, so that she dreamed of his early demise with some satisfaction. Childlike, she was sure that someone would rescue her from her fate before she was old enough to be married in earnest.

She carried the food over to the boy, who took it with a grunt which could have been interpreted as thanks were one not used to the ways of boys. Aping the men, they took little notice of girls, having been taught from babyhood that women were put on earth as handmaidens for themselves and nothing more. A pretty girl might get more sly glances than a plain one, but … she was only a woman, after all, so what did it matter if she was beautiful? If she could work, spinning, threshing and cooking, she would do well enough.

After the boy had left and the dogs had settled down again against the door, Babushka piled the sheepskins to one side of the hearth and put turf on the embers in such a way that the fire would not break through until morning. Then she and the three girls curled up together, baby Eva in the middle and their shawls and more sheepskins over them. It was a snug nest, and from within it Konkordia heard the wind howling and the sleet lashing the roof with less anxiety. Very soon now, sleep would drag her lids down, cuddle her body close, and she could stop worrying about life until tomorrow morning. She opened an eye, checking that the girls were snug. Babushka’s ancient, smelly body was against one wall, her own back, well protected by the piled sheepskins, against another, and

Pavel and Eva were curled up in the middle. Soon, very soon, she would sleep.

But the deep murmur of Petchoren's voice would not be stilled; soldiers would come, and agents from the Russians. Life would never be the same again. Kevi had brought this on them a little earlier, perhaps, than it would have happened left to itself, but they bore him no grudge; this was his place, and he had every right to come back to it when he needed help. Anyway, why should they search for him here? If they used all the logic they were so fond of talking about they would know there was nothing for him here. They would search the big cities, the factories and collectives they were so proud of, not this remote, uncivilised backwater!

'I'll go,' Kevi said, 'I won't bring trouble down on you,' and Petchoren scoffed gently, beneath his breath, and assured his brother that trouble, when it came, would be less concerned with one man's leaving the army than with the dozen or so in the village who were content with the life they lived and wanted no other.

A cold draught was coming under the door. It was the boy's fault; the snow had been piled up against the wood before the boy had trampled it flat and pulled the door open against it. Now, until it piled up once more, the wicked wolf-wind would howl under the door and chill Konkordia's nose and the tips of her pointed knees where they poked out through a gap in the sheepskins. It would have been a simple matter to turn over and hitch her knees into the warm, but though Eva had not woken Konkordia could tell by Pavel's breathing that the little girl had not yet sunk into slumber. Better lie still and put up with chilly knees for a while, and then, later, she could remedy it.

But now Petchoren's voice was beginning to lull her, its deep tones soothing. Without thinking she turned over and her knees began to warm up. She tucked her chin below the sheepskins and her breath fanned out, warming,

soporific. Insensibly, as she began to fall asleep, she began to fight it. She wanted to listen to what Petchoren and Kevi were saying. They had begun to talk more naturally, probably believing that everyone but themselves was asleep. She would just stay awake until they finished talking …

'We'd all fight for you, if the Russians try to take you away,' her father was saying. 'We won't let them have you, Kevi. We're only a small village, and scattered, but we'll hang together.'

'There's no sense in that; what about the women and the children? I wouldn't want their lives on my conscience.'

'They'd stay out of sight, in the *koshes*, where they belong, or they could go and hide in the caves,' Petchoren said. 'We wouldn't let them be taken. You'll be all right.'

'I won't have the children suffering. They need you, and …'

But Konkordia heard no more; Kevi's voice became one with the howling of the wind as she sank into sleep, blissfully relinquishing her hold on the realities of life and letting her mind rest … and dream.

When the dream came, as it did every now and then, Konkordia never recognised it but simply enjoyed being a small child again. It always started the same, always continued in the same way too, until at last she woke.

She was sitting on the flat patch of ground in front of the *kosh*, playing with pebbles and sticks and a carefully mixed ball of mud. Her indulgent mother had gone all the way down to the deep, hurrying river and dipped out a small pot of water and brought it back to her only child, so that Konkordia could make mud pies with soil and water and bake them in her pretend oven, a flat stone in the full sun.

The long afternoon wore away in the game, but the dream-child began to realise that all was not well; there were mutterings from older children that a battle had been

raging all day, that the men from their village had got embroiled in a fight with a band of wandering tribesmen over grazing rights, cattle stealing and similar things.

As the sun made its way down the sky, the sound of fighting came closer and closer to the village and even little Konkordia knew that their own men were being driven back. Restlessness prevailed. The wild, beautiful women of the tribe grew tense and afraid. They were like their men: they would die rather than let themselves be taken captive.

The fighting went on all night, and as dawn broke and the sun began to climb the mountains, lending its radiance to each face, each dew-dropped blade of grass, there came a terrible cry from above and the enemy began to pour down the steepness of the crags to enter the *aoul.*

Even in the dream, Konkordia was so afraid that she was unable to move or speak. Her mother seized her in her arms and ran with her towards the cliff-edge. Other women all around were following suit, taking their children and making for the sheer drop into the gorge beneath. The child Konkordia had heard many stories of how the women of her tribe would throw themselves off the cliff and perish on the rocks below rather than be taken captive, but now, in the dream, her gentle, beautiful mother was following the ancient custom.

As her mother ran, bumping her up and down so that the breath caught in her throat, she looked round and saw that if the enemy would only stop, hold back, then everyone could be saved. But the men poured down the rocks into the *aoul*, bloodstained knives waving, faces cruel with victory and lustful for the spoils of war. They began to pursue the women, who, panic-stricken, rushed even more desperately towards the great, echoing drop.

The men ran fast but the women ran faster, corn before the wind. The thin arms round Konkordia were tight, squeezing the breath out of her, bruising her tender ribs. To cry was impossible, but she opened her mouth and a

thin, high wail emerged … just as her mother reached the edge, hesitated – and leapt.

The wind tore at Konkordia's hair; ice-cold, it speared her cheeks and the soft wetness of her screaming open mouth. Crazily, their bodies turned and spun in the long, fatal drop. Konkordia saw the rocks beneath her in the gorge rushing up, death in their snarling fangs. She wanted to close her eyes but the wind had torn her eyelids wide and would not let them droop. The rocks below had mouths, each one was grinning at the meal about to be crunched up, each was screaming death, *death*, DEATH, and Konkordia felt her body shrink at the pain to come, the crushing, the tearing, the brutal forcing of bone through organs, organs through skin, splatter … splinter … finish.

She woke. Curled up in the dark beneath the sheepskin she was soaked in sweat, her heart beating nineteen to the dozen, her throat dry and aching from fear and pain. She lay there for ten minutes or so, trying to recover, to remind herself that it was only a dream and over now. But once it had happened, perhaps to a child just like her. She had heard Babushka tell many times of the brave women leaping from the rocks rather than face life as captives of another tribe. And Father, earlier, had been talking of soldiers coming … it had sounded threatening, yet it was beyond her understanding why it should be so, for Uncle Kevi was a soldier!

Presently and very quietly, she struggled up, her fair head popping out of the sheepskins; sleep was impossible, so she might as well get up and start seeing to the fire and getting breakfast. But someone was up before her; Babushka slumbered still, and Petchoren was just a hump beneath his *burka*, but Uncle Kevi was pulling the pot over the fire and easing the turves apart with the blackened stick which Babushka used for the purpose. He winked at her, then spoke as she emerged from her nest.

‘What’s all this? No need for you to get up. Why not snuggle down again and …?’ Too late, for Konkordia was out of the sheepskins and tugging her skirt into position, putting her trousers right. ‘Well, Kon, since you’re up, you might as well make yourself useful. Fetch me some food.’

She was taking the black bread from the cupboard when Petchoren spoke behind her, making her jump.

‘What are you doing? Kevi, I can read your mind. You think you’ll bring us trouble, but you won’t get over the Klukhor Pass, not in this weather. Leave it until spring becomes summer … wait until you’re forgotten, until you’ve a fine, dark beard and less flesh on you, and then go over the Pass and into Georgia and find yourself a farm and a woman and settle down. Until then, stay here with us.’

‘Who says I was making for the Pass? I could have been going back to the plain … the steppes for all they’re so flat can hide a man, and the Cossacks have a free life.’

Petchoren tossed off his *burka*, yawned, stretched and got to his feet, though no man could stand upright in a *kosh* and even Konkordia, at nine, had to bend her head.

‘Ah, Kevi, I *know* you! Stay. If they come, there’s always time to get away quietly, either over the Pass or down to the plain. Stay away a day or so and then return. Last night I thought I talked some sense into you. Now I find you stealing out when you think I’m asleep.’

‘I’d rather go now, Petchi, than cause trouble for you and yours. The Cossacks …’

‘Oh, don’t go, Uncle Kevi!’ Pavel had woken unnoticed and now she flew across the floor and cast herself at her uncle’s knees. He smiled and stroked the fine, silky hair, then crouched to chuck her under the chin. Konkordia hurried across for her share of the petting and got her amber curls tugged reprovingly.

‘This wicked woman woke, or I might have escaped and no harm done! Your father’s right, I suppose, and the storm is too severe to get through the Pass, but when it’s over

and the glacier's firm and the snow will let a horse cross it, then I must go. I'll drop down into Georgia, Petchi, as you advise, and when these little monkeys are fine grown-up ladies they may come and stay with me and I'll find them a fat Georgian farmer each to take them to wife.'

He squatted down and pulled the children into his lap. Konkordia cuddled closer, basking in his love, but Pavel pulled back and flicked a tail of hair out of her large, almond-shaped eyes.

'Must we wait until we're grown-up ladies, Uncle Kevi? You'll be back to see us, won't you? Won't you come back often, like you did before?'

Uncle Kevi pushed them gently off his lap and made his way over to the fire where the water bubbled in the black iron kettle.

'I dare say I shall,' he said lightly. Too lightly. 'Now who's going to make the coffee and who's going to toast the bread?'

The girls rushed to help, and before Babushka had stirred they had a meal ready for the two men. Konkordia, pouring warm water from a jug over Kevi's hands so that he might wash before he ate, wondered why her uncle had decided to leave them today, right away. Did he have some premonition of danger, or was it just that the *kosh* was crowded and boring when you had to remain in it day and night – for Petchoren had been unwilling for his brother to ride with the herds.

'If you go down to the coast and be a rich farmer, Uncle Kevi, how will you go on being a soldier?' Pavel's words fell into a little silence which grew and grew until it became a great silence, and Konkordia realised that her sister had unwittingly hit the nail on the head; Kevi had loved being a soldier, had boasted and talked and sung of his happiness. Now, abruptly, it seemed it was no longer what he wanted.

'One can grow tired of soldiering …' Kevi began, but was abruptly cut short by his brother.

‘Pavel, you talk too much. Have you fed the dogs this morning? Or let them out? No?’ A heavy hand clipped Pavel’s small ear and then caught at her shoulder, swinging her round to face the door. ‘Get on with it!’

Pavel stuck out her lower lip but nevertheless went over to the dogs, pushed them aside and began gallantly struggling with the big wooden bolt. Konkordia smiled and went over to help her. The door creaked open, the dogs shot out through the gap and Pavel retreated once more, but Konkordia stood there for a moment, savouring the change in the weather. The wind still howled, to be sure, but there was a difference in the air, a softness, and it was rain which fell now and not sleet. Soon it would be spring and the snow would melt. Soon there would be grass showing and the lambs would be born and the mares would drop their foals. Uncle Kevi could not be bored in the *kosh* when spring came.

Behind her, Babushka was stirring and sitting up, her scraggy hair falling in elf-locks round her thin, grey face, her voice sharp with temper because her sons were up and had not roused her to get their breakfast. Baby Eva, abruptly noticing the absence of warm surrounding bodies, woke and began to whimper and then to wail. Pavel picked her up by the back of her full woollen dress and sat down, sticking her little finger into Eva’s open bawling mouth. Eva mumbled on it, realised she had been tricked, pushed her sister’s hand aside and began to howl again, louder this time.

Konkordia did not wait to be told what to do, but ran out into the rain in her bare feet and pulled the nanny goat out of the rough byre. Into the *kosh* she brought her, the goat bleating and swinging her heavy udder, and began to milk her into one of the round wooden bowls which were kept in a tottering pile by the fire. Baby Eva, recognising the sounds which heralded the imminent arrival of breakfast, spluttered into a listening silence.

Another day had begun.

A snowball, well aimed and travelling fast, caught David on the chin as he turned out of the stableyard, intending to cross the park and make his way to the lake. He stopped and slid two steps sideways, taking shelter back in the yard once more. Odd! He had left the younger kids where they belonged, in the nursery – Alice had moaned and grumbled a bit, but she had a cold and Nurse would be frantic and furious if she made it worse by going outside, so she had stayed. His elder brother, Ned, had gone off with their mother immediately after lunch, to buy clothes or some such thing. So who on earth was chucking snowballs? And lying in ambush as well, he decided, taking a peep round the edge of the wall and only just jerking his head back in time as another missile grazed his nose.

Still keeping out of sight, he began, in his turn, to gather ammunition, whilst furiously pondering on his attacker. The estate was a large one, but although local children probably did trespass in the grounds it was unlikely that anyone would come this close to the house – why should they, with the woods and meadows and the broad, flat stretches of sand down by the Dee to play on? The servants all lived in the village except for the chauffeur, but Hawke was too old for chucking snowballs and had, to the best of David's knowledge, no children. Ned had a few friends, but they were all much older than David and presumably long past snowballing, and since he had been at boarding school now for nearly five years he had few friends in the vicinity himself – certainly none who would hide just outside the stableyard and bombard him with snowballs!

When he had a good pile of ammunition, David laid his skates down very carefully, picked up the best missile he had manufactured, and tried to peep round the corner without being immediately obvious. He cursed his black curls, though, when they received the full force of yet

another direct hit, and dodged back behind the wall, blinking snow out of his eyes. Whoever was out there was an enemy worthy of his steel; he had actually managed to throw without showing himself. David had caught a glimpse of the drive and the oak trees which bordered it – sure as anything his assailant was sheltering behind one of them – but he had not seen any movement before the snowball was literally upon him.

He risked another peep. This time the snowball smote him on the nose … Damn my beak, David thought furiously, rubbing the reddened tip and using what his mother would call stable language as he shook snow out of his scarf; Father might say what's wrong with having a large nose but if he'd seen me just now he'd have known. This would never do. Whoever was ambushing him would have to be taught that David Thomas knew a thing or two about war himself. Abandoning his skates and most of his ammunition, David took one good, hard snowball in each hand and crossed the cobbled yard as quickly and quietly as the thick snow allowed. If he went under the arch on to the front drive, then ran like hell all the way round the outside of the stable wall, he would be in the shelter of the shrubbery before he could possibly be spotted. From there, he would be able to dodge from tree to tree until he could see his assailant, whereupon … wham … wham … David told himself, slithering round the side of the house. Whoever it was would get quite a surprise!

It was a good plan, and it worked up to a point. He ran fast, dived into the shelter of the huge old rhododendrons and azaleas which edged the drive and actually managed to find the ambush point. Behind the third oak on the opposite side of the drive, footprints and a conical pile of snowballs showed where the sniper had stood. Standing very still and tracing the prints which he could now clearly see, David could read the story of the attack. The boy – for it must have been a boy – had been wandering aimlessly, as boys

will, across the smooth, untrodden snow of the park. He had been trying, though, to reach the stableyard without being seen, for even from here it was clear that he had gone from cover to cover rather than merely meandering. He couldn't have known I was going to appear, because that was just chance, David reasoned, so he was just playing, the way one did.

Having reached this conclusion, David looked around to see what the ambusher had done next. The footprints proceeded from tree to tree in what must have been quick, jinking runs between throws, and ended in a small, trodden patch right by the stable wall, on the other side of which, until a few moments earlier, David himself had crouched. Then they proceeded round and into the stableyard itself.

If I'd stayed there it would have been hand-to-hand fighting, and I'd probably have been whacked because of the surprise, David told himself, awed. Still, I got away in time, so now if I …

Wham!

The snowball caught him right behind the ear, almost pitching him on to his face, so great was the force, so considerable the surprise. From behind, as he struggled to free himself from the azalea bush into which he had stumbled, a voice said triumphantly: 'Gotcher!'

David turned. Standing no more than six feet from him, one arm raised, snowball in fist, was an urchin of about his own age. He had a shock of mousy, nibbled hair, a nose as red as a radish, and was wearing a shabby greatcoat, a red and white striped scarf and rubber boots. When David emerged from the bush and turned to grin at him, however, he looked quite as astonished as David had felt moments earlier.

'Hey … who are you? I thought you was that girl.'

'Which girl? Do I look like a girl, man? Who are you, anyway? I don't know you, do I?'

‘Naw!’ The boy’s voice expressed scorn at the idea. ‘I’m Nibby Hawke, chauffeur’s lad.’

‘Hawke’s son? I didn’t know he was married,’ David admitted. He held out a leather-gloved hand. ‘Hello – I’m David Thomas. Do you live with your father, then, over the stables?’

‘Yup.’ The shaggy head nodded vigorously. ‘Going skating?’

‘That’s the idea. Got any skates?’

‘Yup. Shall I fetch ’em?’

‘That ’ud be fine,’ David said. ‘Any good at it?’

‘Not bad. Wait here?’

‘I’ll walk back to the yard with you and wait there,’ David said, falling into step with the other. ‘Have you lived here long? I know I’m at school a lot, but I don’t see how I could’ve missed you in the summer, if you were here then.’

‘Been here two weeks,’ Nibby said, shooting a quick, sideways glance at David under his fringe. ‘Mam run off, so Dad said to come to ’im.’

‘Oh,’ David said, not understanding. He looked thoughtfully at Nibby. About his own age, a bit smaller but strong and wiry … just the sort of chap he’d wanted to meet, someone who could mess about with him during the school holidays. Alice was all very well, but you couldn’t get away from the fact that she was a girl and did, at times, horribly girlish things, and Ned was a dead loss, thinking of nothing but growing a moustache, drinking beer and chasing females. The others were too young to count, though Michael was a nice little chap in his way. But he was only three … fun to tease and play with and so on in the nursery, but useless – worse than useless – for outdoor pursuits.

‘They’re in the stable … my skates. Coming?’

Silently, David followed him to the end stall and up into the loft above. The skates were very old and made of wood. They had been owned by some long-ago Thomas, no doubt,

but David saw no reason to point this out. He watched as Nibby got them down from the rafter on which they hung, and they were out of the stable and crossing the yard before he spoke again.

'Those skates … have you tried them on? Do they fit?'

'Yup.'

A man of few words, evidently. David nodded and picked up his own skates as they passed under the arch once more. Brightly gleaming, each blade looked as though you could carve a turkey with it. But probably Nibby would turn out to be a marvellous skater – look at him with a snowball!

They reached the lake, sat down on a wooden bench and donned their skates. Presently they clambered on to the ice and began to show off, turning, twisting, speeding, crashing. Nibby was best at crashing. David suspected that his new friend had never skated before, but what did it matter when you saw how quickly he picked it up, how he watched and copied and then did it his own way, even possibly a little better than yours!

When the sun reddened and sank behind the blue hills of Wales they made their way reluctantly back to the house. In the stableyard they said their brief goodbyes.

'Cheers, now. See you tomorrow?'

'Aye. I'm free after me dinner.'

'Grand. Same place?'

'Yup.'

Alice, doomed by her cold to stay indoors, had sat and sulked for five minutes in front of the nursery fire before remembering the attics. It was very cold up there and forbidden territory beside, but what did she care? Her favourite brother home for the Christmas holidays and she must needs catch a vile, horrible head-cold … life was too cruel! She might, of course, be punished for going up to the attics, but it would be worth it to get away from the nursery for a bit, and to spy on David. Beast that he was, going

skating without her, and she a much better skater than he, able to twirl, pirouette, make a figure eight and go backwards at great speed. She would jolly well go up to the attics, watch him through the little low window, and put a hex on him the way old Maud down in the kitchen said someone had done on her cousin Joan, so that Joan's fellow had jilted her at the altar. And when he fell, or made a fool of himself, she would know she'd done it, and wouldn't she just laugh?

It was, however, extremely cold in the attic and even Alice's feverish cold, which had made her head ache, her nose and eyes run and her skin alternately burn and freeze, did not appreciate the icy chill. However, all round the wide, low-ceilinged room with its sloping walls and low windows there were chests full of last year's rubbish – curtaining, upholstery, bedding, clothing … you name it, it was there. So Alice opened up a trunk, abstracted some faded plum velvet curtains and wrapped herself up in them until only her face showed. Then she went and pulled faces at herself in last year's gilded and cherubimed mirror, and hated her swollen red nose and tearful eyes, her pale cheeks and her droopy mouth, hated her limp, dark brown hair and longed for black curls, like David's, or glossy chestnut locks like Lydia's or soft blond fluff, like Michael's.

After that she went over to the window and stared down into the stableyard and waited for David to appear. She adored David! Mrs Beckle, the housekeeper, had once remarked that David's beauty lay in his ugliness, and Alice had known just what she meant, for her brother was like a bulldog pup, ugly yet lovable. David's dark curls were matched by thick dark brows which met over the prow of his commanding nose. His chin was square, cleft and obstinate, his eyes, dark and liquid, could look impenetrably black and wicked when he was cross and his person, like that bulldog pup's, was square, vigorous and without grace.