

CORA HAZELTON

The
EMERALD
ROOM

A heartbreaking family secret
buried for generations.





CHAPTER ONE

Anna

West Germany, Kleinthalbach, 1981

Anna flinched as the door to the bookshop burst open, the little bell above it protesting rather than ringing cheerfully. Her portly boss marched into the salesroom, his coat dripping with raindrops that splattered in all directions. Anna's heart sank as she watched the droplets land on the books she had carefully arranged on the entrance tables.

She reached for a cloth to wipe them off, but Mr Weißenfels spoke before she could move.

‘Is she not here yet?’

Anna froze, then shook her head, clutching the cloth to her chest. She would've preferred to slip past him to rescue the books before the water seeped into their precious covers—but that would've seemed rude.

‘God, she’s the most unreliable trainee we’ve ever had,’ he grumbled, shrugging off his black coat and scattering even more raindrops across the book displays.

Anna exchanged a glance with her colleague, Mr Baumgärtner, who—as always—looked oddly overdressed in his suit. He had spent most of his professional life at a major trade publisher and still dressed as if aiming for upper management—even though that same management had let him go two years ago. After a sobering round of applications, he’d ended up here, clearly overqualified.

Despite their differences—his experience and confidence contrasting with her quiet nature—they often understood each other without speaking. Anna especially appreciated having someone to talk to about books. On quiet weekday mornings or during the stifling summer heat, when no customers came in, they’d discuss stories, authors, and even sentences they loved.

They were of one mind this time too. Neither reacted to Mr Weißenfels’s outburst. They had no better report on the trainee themselves, but they knew that agreeing would only backfire.

Fortunately, Mr Weißenfels disappeared into his office—a drab room at the back of the shop, home to little more than a single desk buried under mountains of paperwork and a hulking filing cabinet. The rest of the space was filled with boxes and crates. That part was Anna’s fault. She couldn’t bear to disappoint customers and tried to have as much in stock as possible.

As a result, every corner of the shop was packed with books. In the storeroom, the shelves reached the ceiling, and even that wasn’t enough—which is why she’d stacked the overflow in the office. Her boss only used it a few days each month, and her colleagues, she suspected, didn’t mind being surrounded by books all day. If they were anything like her, they’d feel empty without them.

There were many more things Anna would have liked to change in the bookshop, but whenever she built up the courage to suggest something, Mr Weißenfels rejected it. Eventually, she'd stopped trying. He didn't want a cosy reading nook, and he'd laughed at her idea of arranging the shelves by colour.

Now she used the opportunity to wipe the water from the precious editions her boss had unwittingly attacked. At a small table displaying only white-covered books, decorated with delicate paper flowers, she paused.

This was her favourite display—reserved for literary fiction. The kind of books that didn't follow a genre, that shunned predictability and celebrated the beauty of language. She could spend hours, even years, diving into these intricate structures of carefully chosen words, pondering their meanings and rhythms.

Lovingly, she ran her hand over the soft cover of John Waterfront's latest novel. His words had always touched her deeply. It had been far too long since he'd published anything. She had recommended his books to countless customers—who, more often than not, ended up buying them. Likely because they could sense her genuine admiration.

The bell above the door rang again—this time sounding far more cheerful. A rainbow-bright umbrella blocked her view of whoever had just entered, but Anna didn't need to see her to know who it was.

In addition to the garish umbrella, she wore a bright yellow raincoat covered in large black polka dots. Her miniskirt was paired with rubber boots. The girl shook herself off, folding the umbrella with a flourish.

'Ugh, what awful weather out there!' Mandy exclaimed, though the rain didn't seem to have dampened her mood in the slightest.

Anna pressed her lips together. When she had been eighteen, it had taken a lot to make her smile.

'There you are at last,' thundered a voice behind her.

Mr Weißenfels had returned to the shop floor. Hands on hips, he glared at the apprentice. ‘Do you even know what time it is?’

Then he paused, taking in her appearance. The raincoat was off, revealing fishnet sleeves pulled over her arms and a neon crop top above her miniskirt.

‘You’re not planning to serve customers looking like that, are you?’

Anna instinctively shrank back. She hated it when people were belittled—it reminded her too much of the past. But still, she didn’t dare defend Mandy. She should have, she was more than twice the girl’s age after all. But Mandy didn’t need anyone to fight her battles.

With a theatrical twirl, Mandy spun on the spot.

‘Cool, right?’ She beamed.

When the boss grumbled something under his breath and Mr Baumgärtner gave her a sceptical look, she gestured toward Anna. ‘Well, not everyone can be a fashion chameleon!’

Anna shifted uncomfortably. ‘I... what do you mean by “chameleon”?’ she asked, too quietly. She cleared her throat, tried to steady herself. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

Mandy placed the umbrella into the customer stand and approached her with a grin. ‘It always looks like your clothes are trying to blend in. Like they’ve taken on your skin tone. Everything’s beige. Your trousers, your socks, your shoes, that dreadful long cardigan and—’ She studied Anna a moment longer. ‘—even your strawberry blonde hair is pretty much the same shade as your skin.’

Mandy’s smile suggested she hadn’t meant to be cruel, but the words still hit her like a punch in the gut. Anna had always hated her odd, reddish-blond hair. She didn’t like to stand out.

‘What gives you the right to criticise Ms Lindner like that?’ Mr Weißenfels snapped. ‘That’s out of line.’ Then he turned back to Mandy, folding his arms. ‘Now, tell us why you’re late. Again.’

Triumph gleamed in Mandy's eyes. 'I... went to get the post!' She pulled a small stack of letters from the waistband of her skirt.

The mailbox was located just off the shop's back entrance, in a shared hallway with the neighbouring flats. Her boss didn't look convinced.

'And that little detour took over an hour?'

'Maybe I was here earlier already?' she countered.

He tilted his head. 'And yet you went back into the hall? With your coat on?'

'Look outside—it's raining cats and dogs. Of course I wore a coat.'

'And your backpack, too?'

Mandy let out a long sigh and stepped closer to him. She placed her hands on his shoulders and gave him a gentle shake.

'You really need to loosen up, Dad. No one even comes in this early. It's been the same for weeks—I don't know why we open so early. Nothing ever happens in this town. I should have gone to Berlin, I knew it!'

'If you were in Berlin, you'd have lost your apprenticeship already. No one would put up with this attitude for long. I certainly won't. Shape up or you're out. Now hand me the post.' He held out his hands expectantly.

Mandy's eyes—framed in neon green eyeshadow—were once again sparkling with mischief. She handed him just two of the letters.

'These are for you.' Then she turned with a flourish, lifting the final envelope as if it were a royal decree. 'And this very official-looking one—this one's for the honourable Anna!'

Anna frowned. A letter? Addressed to her? At the bookshop? She hardly ever got post—apart from bills. The only people who still wrote to her were two old friends from the orphanage where she'd grown up. They were the only friendships that had survived from that time, even

though they'd all promised as kids to stay in touch forever. But that's how life went. Out of sight, out of mind. Still, those two friends only had her home address.

She'd started her apprenticeship here straight after finishing school and had never moved out of her tiny flat. She'd been working at this shop ever since. So... who would write to her here?

Mandy placed the envelope into her hand.

'It's from England,' she whispered, eyes wide with excitement.

Anna stared at the crisp white paper. The postage mark confirmed it—Mandy was right. What on earth could this be?

'Shall we open it together?' Mandy practically bounced on the spot.

Anna was dying of curiosity, but there was no way she'd open it here. She shook her head with a smile and slipped the letter into the deep pocket of her cardigan. It might be beige and chameleon-like, but for now, it was safe.



CHAPTER TWO

Elodie

Devon, 1903

‘But why ever not?’

I have to steady myself not to raise my voice, for the slightest hint of rebellion would end the conversation then and there. A woman is expected to submit. The fact that I dared raise the matter at all is already an affront. A woman interfering in business? That is unthinkable in my father’s eyes. He tolerates it only because I have never given him any other cause for displeasure.

‘Please do not misunderstand me, Elodie—your drawing is charming. Very quaint. But this is business, and you know nothing about it.’

That’s because you never let me be part of it, I think, but dare not say aloud. I would love nothing more than to spend time at my father’s wallpaper factory, just like my brother Alistair, who is set to take it over one day. But in my father’s eyes, business and women go together like oil and water.

They simply do not mix.

Still, I had hoped that I might, if only indirectly, contribute to the enterprise—by creating my own wallpaper design. I've always loved painting and drawing, so why not use that talent to design a pattern?

'I may not understand much about wallpaper production yet,' I concede, hoping to soothe him. 'But surely it is mostly women who choose the wallpaper for a home? So why is it so far-fetched for a woman to design it?'

'Elodie, darling, that's not something women do,' he replies gently. 'Besides, we already have our tried-and-tested patterns—designed by professionals. Just recently, I managed to poach an expert from Morris & Co. He has years of experience. Do you truly think you could do better? And as for purchasing decisions: they are made by men. After all, they are the ones who must foot the bill.'

I raise my index finger. 'But those decisions are made after consulting their wives. It's the wife who spends the most time at home. And isn't it her duty to maintain a respectable household?'

Father strokes his beard and purses his lips, studying my design once more.

'I believe it would be wise to consider female buyers,' I continue. 'Mother would find a wallpaper full of blossoms and trees utterly delightful.'

He smiles at me with a hint of pity. 'Your mother finds everything you paint delightful, my dear. But as I said, you lack the experience to contribute to business matters.' He closes my portfolio and hands it back to me.

'One could bring a little piece of nature into the home,' I try once more.

He sighs. 'But not in such finicky detail. People want grand, sweeping panoramas. And those with fewer means prefer little stories—re-

minders of historic events, or scenes of sport and leisure. Not this.' He gestures dismissively toward my sea of blossoms.

But I find the wallpapers our factory produces absolutely dreadful. Clunky murals, or those silly little narratives—it may be amusing to read them once, but to live with them? Day in, day out? That requires something timeless. Something that can inspire wonder again and again. And for me, there is only one such thing.

'But what could be more beautiful than nature?' I ask, clinging to one last shred of hope. Surely this argument must win him over?

He breathes in sharply, then then releases it slowly.

'Elodie?' His expression darkens. 'Out.'

Putting, I leave Father's office. Marly, my companion, rushes over at once.

'Well? What did Mr Talbot say?' she asks eagerly. She is only fourteen—five years younger than I—and still able to delight in things like a child. 'Will he take your design? It's ever so pretty! I should like a wallpaper with flowers.'

I shake my head, resigned. 'No, he won't hear of it.'

'Oh, how disappointing.' She places a hand on my arm in sympathy.

I count myself fortunate that we get along so well. My parents insist she stay by my side during the day, and I have grown quite fond of her. Still, I need to be alone now, to gather my thoughts. And for that, there is only one option.

'Would you have Cinnamon saddled for me? I shall go riding and paint outside. Once I've done that, I daresay I'll be fit for company again. At the moment, even the dog is better company than I.'

'As you wish, Elodie. Might we go into town later and look at new fabrics? Or visit the exhibition at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum?'

I consider it for a moment, then shake my head. All I need now is the steady rhythm of hooves and the quiet companionship of my paintbrush.

Not long after, I leave the house—far too grand for my liking—with my painting supplies slung over my shoulder. I let Cinnamon, my chestnut mare, follow a familiar path through the fields until we reach the forest. This is my favourite place to paint: always new scenes to discover, not only because the woods are vast, but because they change with each passing season. Today, the brook murmurs softly. In autumn, it can grow wild and unruly, and after many frozen winter days, it lies sealed beneath a crust of ice between bare branches.

At a small clearing, where the afternoon sun filters gently through the canopy above, I dismount. Here, Cinnamon can graze while I attempt to capture the scene. If I cannot design wallpapers, I shall at least paint another landscape.

Perhaps it will distract me from my frustration with Father. He acts as though I were a burden, when all I wish is to be of use—to contribute to the family business. Designing that wallpaper gave me such joy. Is it truly so disgraceful for me to want to do something worthwhile? Why must I spend my days on trivialities? In London, perhaps, where one pays endless calls and finds new operas and balls each month, such a life might be bearable. But here in Exeter, the entertainments are few—an occasional charity event, and regular but tedious balls.

Then again, I suspect even London would not satisfy me. I do not wish to spend my life merely enjoying beautiful things. I want to do something. To contribute. To matter.

That is why I long to take part in the company. I truly believe there might be others who would like what I designed. I know my first

attempts are far from perfect, but I am willing to learn—if only Father would teach me what makes a design suitable for wallpaper.

But he won't even give me the chance.

With a sigh, I settle myself on the ground and lay out my tools in their usual, orderly fashion. A soft breeze plays through my hair and rustles the treetops. I hear Cinnamon tearing up mouthfuls of grass nearby.

I love being out here. Already, I can feel myself beginning to breathe more easily.

With brisk strokes, I begin to paint the scene before me. My hand moves lightly, confidently, tracing the outlines of trees, the shimmering brook, and the myriad shades of green in the undergrowth. I adore green. It can be tender and bright, like spring's first buds, or deep and rich, like the glossy leaves of beech trees. Each shade has its own beauty. My favourite is emerald—a vivid, intense green full of life.

The same green I used in the wallpaper design I showed Father... Oh dear. I'm back to thinking about that again.

I close my eyes and focus instead on the gentle burbling of the brook and the birdsong all around me—when suddenly a scream tears through the stillness.

My eyes fly open. I listen intently. Poachers are not unheard of in this area. Are those hooves I hear, galloping?

I hold my breath. Moments later, a black stallion bursts onto the clearing. Breathing hard, he halts when he sees Cinnamon and me. His coat is drenched with sweat, the reins hang far too low on one side, and the stirrups swing loosely from the saddle.

There is no rider in sight. It must have been a man—the saddle is designed for one.

Slowly, I rise, careful not to startle the horse.

‘Well, hello there,’ I say gently, my voice calm and low. I remain still, giving him time to flee if he must, so that he understands I mean no harm.

He stays.

‘Did something frighten you?’ I continue softly, speaking simply to keep the air calm between us. I inch closer, step by careful step, until I am near enough to take hold of his reins. First, I make sure he won’t tread on them—they would pull painfully at his mouth if caught. Then I tuck up the stirrups, just in case he bolts again. If they catch in the trees, he could injure himself.

I speak to him all the while, stroking his trembling coat with a soothing hand.

‘Blaze?’ I hear a strong voice calling in the distance.

How amusing, as if the black stallion could answer. But then again, if Cinnamon had run off, I suppose I would call for her too. Most horses make their way straight back to their stable, but some will heed their owner’s voice.

‘Blaze?’ the voice calls again, and this time I respond.

‘Here! We’re over here!’ I shout as loudly as I can.

It takes three rounds of call and answer before a young man appears between the trees—limping. My heart skips a beat. Aside from polite greetings, I’m not supposed to speak with gentlemen who haven’t been formally introduced to me. But in a case like this, surely an exception can be made?

‘I didn’t know my horse could talk,’ he says, instead of offering a proper greeting, wearing a mysterious smile.

The nerve! Shouldn’t he be grateful that I answered and led him here?

His manner both shocks and intrigues me. Any gentleman I know would be falling over himself to thank me. And yet here he is, saying

something so irreverent, even implying that I may have made a mistake.

‘Should I have whinnied instead?’ I ask, rather taken aback, while eyeing him more closely. Now I notice the fabric of his suit is coarse and poorly tailored. Combined with his conduct, it becomes clear: he must be a worker.

‘Why not? I’d have loved to hear that. Or you could’ve taught him to speak properly.’

‘Quite right. Maybe I should’ve taught him some manners too. A simple “thank you” would have sufficed.’ I cross my arms after he takes hold of the reins.

‘You really believe my horse can talk?’ he asks, instead of thanking me.

What a man! I could scratch his eyes out. ‘A thank you from you. After all, you were calling for your horse quite desperately, weren’t you?’

‘I was not desperate! I merely thought it polite to introduce my horse before he gave you both a fright. But yes—thank you for catching him. I didn’t expect anyone to be brave enough to approach a talking horse.’

He winks at me and, not knowing how to respond, I turn away.

‘You’re welcome,’ I snap and return to my painting. Brush in hand, I pretend to be immersed in my work. But I watch him closely from the corner of my eye.

With some satisfaction, I observe how he tries again and again to mount the horse. With his injured foot, he can’t use the stirrup properly. Normally, I would of course offer my help right away. Even if it’s not quite proper for a lady. He’s clearly in trouble.

But after the way he behaved, I feel he ought to ask first. With the courtesy I’m owed. If I must constantly be reminded of all the things

I'm not allowed to do as a woman, then I will at least claim the little that is permitted. And that includes being treated with respect.

So I hold back.

He, on the other hand, is clearly too proud to ask a woman for help. He keeps jumping up beside the horse, but each time he falls short of lifting himself onto the tall black back. Likely because he can only push off with his right foot.

It amuses me. Almost as if divine justice is being served right before my eyes. Calmly, I dot some buttercups across the grassy scene I've painted, selecting each spot with care to appear wholly absorbed.

He must try at least twenty times before he finally swallows his pride and turns to me. 'Um... Miss?'

I lift my head.

'Could you perhaps...?' He nods toward the horse.

I'm not letting him off the hook that easily.

'Could I what?' I ask sweetly.

He mutters something under his breath, which I find incredibly satisfying.

'Could you maybe give me a hand?' he finally forces out.

He must hate those words. Generally, women do not assist men. It's always the other way around. And in our case, there's also the difference in class. A working man asking a young lady for help—unthinkable.

But here, he has no other option. The forest is vast, and I rarely encounter anyone on my rides. In fact, I wouldn't even be allowed out here alone if people thought it likely I'd meet someone.

'Oh, you need my help? Silly me—I actually thought you were posing for my painting. I titled it "Failed Gentleman".'

I hold the canvas up for a second, just enough so that he can't really see what I've painted.

He stifles a curse. 'All right, just get on with it.'

I raise an eyebrow.

'Please.'

I smile. I rise gracefully and walk toward him. He watches me as I approach, and finally we stand face to face.

He has a sharply defined face, dark brown hair, and deep, unreadable eyes. He's probably only a few years older than me, yet he's clearly been working for years. I, on the other hand, do next to nothing—and suddenly, I regret making him wait for my help.

'If I may take your leg?' I ask and crouch slightly. The next moment, I get a grip on it and give him all the lift I can muster so he can swing himself into the saddle.

Once up, he adjusts his cap—a gesture that might also be read as a slight nod. Then he rides off.

Against my better judgement, I watch him go. Just as he's about to disappear among the trees, he turns back one last time.

We share a silent glance. Then he turns away again and vanishes into the sea of trees.



CHAPTER THREE

Anna

All afternoon, the letter seemed to weigh her down. She'd moved it from her coat pocket to her rucksack after just thirty minutes—ridiculous, really, but it had felt strangely heavy, as if pulling at her. By the time she arrived home, she could hardly bear it any longer.

Her flat looked exactly the same as always: the faded carpet, the pale curtains drawn halfway, a few sparse decorations in their assigned spots, and the boxy little television facing the sagging sofa. She sat down, pulled one of the three worn cushions onto her lap, and reached for the letter.

For the thousandth time, she read the address—typed with impeccable precision on a typewriter. What could it be?

Official letters always made her fear the worst. Had she missed some deadline? Run a red light on her bike? Forgotten to return a library book twenty years ago and now owed a fortune in late fees?

And yet... there was a flicker of excitement. The letter had come from England. She'd always had a soft spot for the country. She

read every Rosamunde Pilcher novel she could find—always in English—and had taken years of evening classes to improve her understanding of the language.

The only way to deal with this strange mix of dread and anticipation was to open it. The longer she waited, the worse it would get.

With a sigh, she stood, walked into the tiny kitchenette, and took a knife from the drawer. Her hands trembled as she slid the blade under the flap. She sat down again, letter in hand, and held her breath.

Dear Ms Lindner,

I hope this letter finds you well. My name is Jonathan Harris, and I serve as an estate solicitor with Harris & Associates, based in Devon, England.

I am writing to inform you that you may be the rightful heir to a property in England. According to our records, you are the last surviving relative of the deceased owner and, as such, entitled to inherit his house.

The property is located in Exeter, Devon, and appears to hold both personal and historical significance. Our firm has been instructed to handle the legal transfer and to ensure the process runs smoothly.

We kindly ask you to contact us at your earliest convenience to discuss the matter further. Please let us know whether you intend to travel to England to view the property in person, or whether you would prefer to handle the inheritance remotely with our assistance.

Should you have any questions, we are at your disposal.

Yours sincerely, Jonathan Harris Solicitor, Probate Division Harris & Associates

Anna lowered the letter, her fingertips grazing the embossed crest—complete with scales and flourishes—that made the whole thing look terribly official.

A house? In England?

She'd always believed she had no family left. Her mother had died young in a tragic accident. Her father was... well, no one. Or no one she knew. And yet someone must have been out there all along. Someone with records. Someone who knew she was alive.

Why had no one contacted her before?

Without thinking, she stood and poured herself a large glass of wine. She rarely drank—never during the week—but this called for an exception.

She read the letter again. And again. Still, the words didn't seem to stick properly in her brain. Things like this didn't happen in her world. Sure, she'd always dreamed of running her own bookshop. But the reality was far more mundane: at thirty-nine, she still lived in the same one-room flat she'd moved into as a trainee.

And now, apparently, she owned a house?

She paced the narrow space beside her bed like a caged tiger. Back and forth. Back and forth.

Eventually, the more likely truth dawned on her. It was probably a wreck. One of those crumbling estates that drained your savings the moment you accepted the inheritance. Most likely, she'd decline it. And that would be that. Life would go back to its usual muted rhythm.

Because what Mandy didn't know—what no one really knew—was that Anna's entire life had become beige. Not just her wardrobe. Her days. Her choices. Her moods. No deep blues. No lush greens. No blazing reds.

And that was exactly how she liked it. She'd tried being bold once. It hadn't ended well. Even the memory of it—the rough, raw scrape of it—made her flinch. Like sandpaper on teeth.

She took another sip of wine and eventually fell into a deep sleep, dreaming of walking through a beige world in beige clothes, under a beige sky.



CHAPTER FOUR

Elodie

‘Oh dear, what am I to do?’ Mother sounds desperate as she closes the door behind the messenger. ‘Harold is out, escorting Marly and Lauren to the market, and now this telegram has arrived—for your father, of all people.’ Her shoulders droop under the weight of the envelope. ‘It could be important. Why on earth didn’t the boy deliver it straight to the factory?’

‘I could take it to him?’ I offer carefully, trying not to sound too eager. A trip to the factory would suit me quite well. I might be able to sneak a glance at the wallpaper samples and perhaps figure out why Father finds my designs so unsuitable.

I can practically see the cogs turning behind Mother’s high forehead. A factory is no place for a young lady of good standing. Then again, she detests the noise of the factory herself. Loud spaces make her unwell; after a single ball, she sometimes needs to rest for days.

‘Very well,’ she agrees at last, though hesitantly. ‘But you’re to deliver the telegram and return directly. No distractions.’

‘Of course.’ I take the beige envelope from her hand, bearing the post office’s stamp, and head out straight away. It’s warm for July; I need no shawl.

I’m already a few steps from the house when I hear her call, ‘Elodie!’ Obediently, I turn.

‘Your gloves. And your hat.’ She holds them out with a reproachful look.

‘But I’m only going to the factory...’

‘A young lady must be presentable at all times. Especially the daughter of the house.’

Without complaint—at least none that shows on my face—I return and put everything on. I would hide them in the nearest hedge if I dared, but our house has far too many windows, and if Mother noticed, I’d be confined to the indoors for days. I’d die of boredom. My walks in the woods are the only times I’m not being watched like a hawk.

I wave to the gatekeeper long before I reach the factory. Gustav has known me since I was little. He opens the ornate iron gate for me with a nod, and I thank him before heading toward the main building.

The metal door is heavy, and I have to pull with all my might before it gives way. At once, the clatter and rumble of machinery fill my ears. The vast hall is bustling. The scent of fresh paint and adhesive hangs in the air—slightly noxious, yet oddly exhilarating.

Everything here is so utterly different from my world. Rolls of wallpaper line the walls like enormous scrolls, shimmering with colour and pattern. Workers move quickly, dodging between shelves and presses. I make my way through the maze, eyes flicking to every design I pass. Each one is intricate, detailed—masterful in its own way. But they’re not what I would create. Too heavy, too ornate. I want something different. Simpler. More alive.

A familiar voice cuts through the noise. 'Well, if it isn't Her Ladyship.'

I spot Alistair at his desk, glasses perched on his nose, expression wry. He stands when he sees me.

'I've brought a message,' I say, holding up the telegram. He reaches for it, but I draw it back just in time.

'Mother said to give it to Father myself.'

He smirks. 'So little trust?'

'I trust you perfectly. But if I'm already inside Talbot & Son, I intend to make the most of it. There's nothing waiting at home but the pianoforte and my embroidery hoop. It's excruciating.'

'I've tried talking to Father, you know. About you joining us here.' He shrugs. 'But you know our parents.'

'I am a Talbot too.'

'I know. But they've probably picked out a husband for you already.' He sighs dramatically. 'Still, I'll play chess with you again this weekend. Small mercies.'

'Brave of you, considering your last defeat.'

'I'll survive. Anything to keep you from dying of boredom.'

I laugh. He tells me Father is in the adjoining hall, and I follow the sound of footsteps and voices until I spot him, notebook in hand, absorbed in a wall of wallpaper samples. He doesn't notice me.

I step forward and tap him gently on the shoulder. He whirls around, face twisted in frustration.

'Damn this cursed day. I'll have to start all over again.'

Then he sees me—and his expression darkens further. 'What are you doing here?'

Clearly, it's been a miserable day.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. Were you taking inventory? I could help, if you like.'

He laughs, sharp and humourless.

‘I mean it. Counting wallpaper rolls doesn’t seem all that difficult. Even a woman could manage that.’

I say it deliberately. He often jokes about women’s limited intellect. I don’t share the sentiment, but if playing along gets me closer to the work here, I’ll do it. I’m not afraid of menial tasks if it means understanding the factory better.

‘This isn’t a playground, Elodie. This is real work.’

‘I’m aware of that.’

‘Oh really?’ His eyes flick over me with mocking disbelief. ‘Then why show up dressed like that? The green dress that sets off your red hair. Hat and gloves like you’re off for a Sunday stroll...’

‘I...’ I start, but the tightness in my throat betrays me. His voice drips with contempt.

He raises a hand to silence me. ‘Spare me. Just tell me why you’re here. We’ve had multiple absences today—no one has time to breathe.’

Wordlessly, I hand him the telegram. He takes it without another glance.

‘Thank you.’

That’s all. He turns away, already moving.

I clench my fists. If they’re really that short-staffed, wouldn’t it make sense to let me help?

And that’s when I see him. The man from the woods.

It’s been nearly a week since our encounter, but I recognise him instantly. He pauses mid-step, as if he hadn’t expected to see me here.

A strange pang rises in my chest—ridiculous, really. Where he works is none of my concern.

Yes, he’s striking. But I know what he’s like. Rough. Dismissive. And from the beginning it’s been clear: our worlds do not belong together.

Especially not if he's working in my father's factory.

I raise my eyebrows, composed, and walk away.



CHAPTER FIVE

Anna

‘Well?’

Mandy dropped the broom the second Anna walked into the shop. Her eyes widened as she froze on the spot—only her neon pink lightning bolt earrings swung back and forth. She stared at Anna intensely, as though she was scared she’d miss a single word unless she kept her gaze glued to her face.

‘What did it say?’

Anna chuckled. ‘What are you even doing here this early? No experimental creativity techniques for your writing to try out today?’

‘Dad gave me a lift.’ Mandy rolled her eyes. ‘Says as the boss’s daughter, I should be setting a good example. You’re awfully late, by the way.’

She tapped her wrist repeatedly in a perfect imitation of her father, and sure enough, Mr Baumgärtner peeked curiously over the top of the new arrivals trolley. In twenty-three years at this bookshop, Anna had never once been late.

Mandy stepped up, and before Anna had time to react, she grabbed her jacket and rucksack then disappeared into the office with them. She returned at once rubbing her hands together.

‘Right then.’ Without a thought for the books, Mandy plopped herself down on one of the display tables, crossing her legs and settling in like she expected a long, juicy story. ‘Spill it. What did the letter say?’

Anna gave a small laugh and tucked a reddish-blond strand behind her ear. Mr Baumgärtner pretended not to listen, but even he glanced over his shoulder as he shelved the top row.

‘Uh... well... I mean...’

Mandy jumped off the table so fast she sent a whole stack of crime thrillers sliding out of place. She marched over.

‘No slow-burn tension, please. I know it’s a legitimate narrative device, but honestly, I can’t take it.’

She pulled a pack of bright pink Hubba Bubba from her pocket, unwrapped a piece and popped it in her mouth, offering one to Anna as well.

‘And if you tell me this is just a parking fine or something, I swear to God.’

‘No, nothing like that. I...’

It felt odd to be the centre of attention like this. She was just about to continue when the bell rang above the door. Mr Aldemir, one of their regulars, was already reaching for his hat, but Mandy waved him off.

‘We’re not open yet,’ she snapped.

‘B-b-but...’ He pointed at the sign with the opening hours.

‘Stocktake,’ Mandy muttered, not even looking at him. ‘Come back in an hour.’

‘Now tell me!’ she begged, barely waiting for the door to close behind him. Even Mr Baumgärtner had drifted a little closer, giving up on pretending to be disinterested.

At this point, Anna wanted to get it off her chest, too. The news was far too big to carry alone.

‘Well... as strange as it sounds—’ she laughed, half to underscore how absurd it felt to even say it out loud. ‘Apparently, I’ve inherited a house.’

‘A house?!’ Mandy and Mr Baumgärtner said in unison.

‘Yes.’ Anna held out her hands. ‘Though it’s in England.’

‘A house in England? That’s insane! That’s amazing!’ Mandy all but squealed.

Anna waved her off. ‘It’s probably a dilapidated old shack. Or a complete ruin. I should probably refuse the inheritance straight away. Anything else would be a headache.’

‘You can’t just turn down a house in England! What if it’s a rose-covered cottage by the sea? Or—better yet—a manor house!’

Quick as a flash, she snatched up a Rosamunde Pilcher paperback and pointed to the idyllic cover.

‘Look—your house could be right here!’

Anna laughed. ‘Highly unlikely.’

‘Did they even say where it is exactly?’

‘I’m not sure yet. The solicitor’s office is in Exeter, so maybe somewhere near there? Honestly, I couldn’t even tell you exactly where Exeter is.’

‘One sec!’ Mandy dashed to the back and returned moments later with a giant atlas. She flipped to the map of England in record time, and the three of them leaned over it together.

Mr Baumgärtner got there first. ‘Down here,’ he said, pointing with a wrinkled finger to a spot on the lower western edge of the country.

‘Ooooh, not quite Cornwall, but right next to it. I bet it’s gorgeous down there. Do we have a photo book on the south of England?’

She looked from Anna to Mr Baumgärtner hopefully.

‘What’s going on here?’

Anna jumped. She hadn’t heard the manager come in, and she immediately felt self-conscious, standing around doing nothing.

‘Anna’s inherited a house in Devon,’ Mandy blurted out.

‘In England?’ Mr Weißenfels’ eyebrows climbed halfway to his hairline. ‘Well, well. Congratulations. You’re not planning to run off and live on the island, I hope?’

Anna laughed. She’d barely ever left Germany—Holland a few times, maybe—and the idea of moving abroad filled her with nothing but fear.

‘Of course not. My English is barely passable, and I doubt it’s anything impressive anyway.’

‘She wants to refuse the inheritance!’ Mandy blurted out, arms planted firmly on her hips.

Mr Weißenfels frowned. ‘Why on earth would you do that?’

Anna shifted uncomfortably. ‘Well... I just can’t imagine it’s anything but a mountain of debt.’

‘That’s exactly why you should go and see it!’ Mandy turned to her father, her voice pleading. ‘She could take some time off, couldn’t she, Dad? It’s dead quiet in here anyway, and in June it’s always the same—everyone’s off reading books on the beach.’

‘Are you mad? I can’t just up and go to England!’ Anna’s voice was sharp, and she could feel her heart thumping in her chest. The mere thought of navigating another country all by herself sent waves of panic through her.

‘Of course you can!’ Mandy threw a few playful punches in the air. ‘Eye of the tiger!’ she sang loudly, that overplayed tune from the radio

echoing through the shop. It might've been motivational for a boxer like Rocky, but Anna felt like the exact opposite: drained, hesitant, and small.

Her boss merely shrugged. 'You've still got plenty of annual leave. And some from last year you haven't even touched.'

Anna lowered her gaze. Mr Weißenfels had often urged her to use her holidays, but she never knew what to do with them. Without any family, the long weekends already stretched out endlessly—what was she supposed to do with even more free time?

'I know, but...' she began, then gave a helpless little shake of her head. There were so many reasons, she didn't even know where to begin listing them. 'It's just... it's so far. I'd have to fly, or take a ferry. And then I've no idea how to get around in England. I certainly won't be driving on the wrong side of the road. And how would I get from the airport to wherever this house is? I don't even know how the trains work over there. Or the buses. And what if the house is a complete ruin? What if there aren't any hotels nearby? If it turns into some complicated legal matter, it'll cost a fortune. On top of the travel costs—I can't afford that.'

Mr Weißenfels scratched his beard, thinking. 'I know someone in Devon. He has a large house, too. Let me ask if he might be willing to put you up for a few nights.'

Anna squirmed inwardly. It was kind of him to try to find a solution, and she felt rude rejecting it, but even if accommodation were sorted, the journey itself still loomed terrifyingly large. And all those little things she had no clue about.

'I'd still be going on my own,' she whispered.

That shouldn't bother her—she'd always been on her own. But here, in Kleinthalbach, she knew where she stood. She knew the rules. The rest of the world? That was unfamiliar territory. She'd never

checked in for a flight. Had no idea how to book a train in a foreign country, or how to find the right platform. What if she got stranded? Or mugged? Maybe it was best if everything just stayed the way it was.

Suddenly, Mr Baumgärtner cleared his throat. 'Well, if it's all right with you, Miss Lindner... I'd be happy to accompany you.'

He adjusted his hearing aid and gave a bashful smile to the small crowd now watching him.

You? The word sat unspoken on all their lips, Anna's included. But for three whole seconds, the room was completely silent.

'Well then,' Mandy said, grinning as she rubbed her hands together, 'Sounds like it's all settled. Anna doesn't have to travel alone, and Dad and I will run the shop for a few days. Right, Dad?'

He considered for a moment, then nodded. 'Just let me know once you have the exact travel dates.'

Anna returned to her work with a strange heaviness in her limbs, but a surprising lightness in her chest. It had all happened so fast. But now that she wouldn't be going alone, it didn't seem quite as impossible anymore.

And no matter how much she tried to suppress it, there it was again—bubbling up quietly: a sense of anticipation. A house she'd never laid eyes on now, inexplicably, belonged to her. And part of her, a small, traitorous part, wondered if it would feel like home?



CHAPTER SIX

Elodie

Mother enters my room with a secretive smile. At first I think nothing of it—until she asks Marly to leave us alone. That’s when I feel the first hint of unease. She never sends the staff away unless it’s something private. Something delicate.

I set my paintbrush down and turn to face her. She sits on the chaise longue like a queen holding court, hands folded neatly in her lap. Her gaze softens. That look always makes me nervous.

‘My dear,’ she says, ‘I have exciting news.’

I smile automatically, but something inside tightens.

‘What is it?’

‘A letter arrived this morning. Lord Harrington has invited us to his estate. I believe he wishes you to spend time with his son.’

Digby.

My smile falters, just a little. I manage to keep my voice light. ‘Lord Harrington’s son? What an honour.’

But my mind's already racing. I know exactly what this is. The Harringtons own a pigment factory in Cornwall. A large one. Digby will inherit it someday. Their old money, our growing business—it would be a perfect match. On paper.

And yes, I want to support our family's factory. Of course I do. Just... not like this.

It's not about Digby's overbite. Or the ears. I could overlook those things. But I've seen how he treats the servants—like they're insects. He brags about money, lifestyle, status. And never quietly.

Mother touches my shoulder gently, as if she's sensed my hesitation.

'I know this may come as a surprise,' she says, 'but he's a very eligible young man. A true gentleman. His prospects are excellent.'

I nod. 'Naturally. I... barely know him.'

My room feels suddenly small. The walls closer than before.

'Do you think,' I ask, 'this visit has... a particular meaning?'

She smiles like a cat with cream. 'I do. They wouldn't invite us like this just to be polite. Their grand ball is next month. Why single us out unless something more is intended?'

I know I'm supposed to smile again. This is what I was raised for. To marry well. To secure a future for our family.

Love? That's for fairy tales. For Queen Victoria, maybe. Not for girls like me.

Father says I don't understand the real world. Alistair agrees. Maybe they're right. Maybe respect and shared goals are enough.

But something in me rebels. Quiet. Steady. Unshakable.

I haven't given my heart away. There's no one else. And yet the thought of meeting Digby Harrington again—of shaking hands with my future—fills me with dread.

And something else. Something I can't name.



As soon as I'm able, I mount Cinnamon and ride out toward the woods. I can't bear to stay at home any longer. The walls feel like they are closing in.

We gallop along the narrow paths until my thoughts begin to settle. The wind in my hair and the rhythm of her hooves dulls the ache for a while. Eventually, I rein her in by the stream, letting her drink, and crouch down beside her.

I scoop water into my hands, the chill biting pleasantly against my hot skin, and splash it onto my face. Slowly, my breath evens out. The tension in my chest loosens.

And yet... something feels off.

There's a restlessness beneath my ribs that won't let go. Is it still the idea of that horrid engagement? The thought of becoming Lady Harrington, standing beside a man I cannot respect?

The trees sway gently in the breeze. A moment of peace—then I realise what's wrong.

The birds have gone silent.

The woods are unnaturally still. Then I hear the sharp crack of the underbrush. Cinnamon tenses, her ears flicking sharply. Before I can react, two figures burst from the thicket. I freeze. My breath catches. They're men—unkempt, bearded, their clothes torn and reeking of damp and sweat. Poachers. A spike of fear surges through me.

'Well, look what we've found,' the taller one sneers, stepping forward.

'How lovely,' says the other, grinning, his voice thick with mockery.

They move fast, flanking me before I can back away. One draws so close I can feel his breath on my skin.

‘What do you want?’ I ask, trying to keep my voice steady, though my hands have begun to shake.

I reach for the silver chain around my neck—my birthday gift from years ago—and hold it out. ‘Take this. Please. Just take it.’

The tall one snatches it without hesitation. But he doesn’t leave.

His hand closes around my arm with brutal strength. I try to pull back, but the second man grabs my wrist and yanks me off balance.

‘No!’ I cry, struggling against their grip. Panic surges. I kick the tall one, striking his shin. He shouts in pain.

But the other retaliates instantly, twisting my arm behind my back until I gasp in agony. The position is so tight, any movement sharpens the pain. Now the tall one’s eyes drift to my blouse. My chest. A terrible awareness sets in.

He tugs at the ribbons and the fabric falls open.

‘Don’t,’ I plead, my voice breaking as tears sting my eyes. But he’s not listening. Neither of them are. I feel trapped, like an animal cornered with no hope of escape. Helpless. Humiliated.

He fumbles at my corset but grows impatient, leaning in, his breath sour and hot against my cheek. I turn my head and scream.

I kick out, flailing, doing anything to keep them at bay, but they only seem to enjoy it.

‘Oh, I do like the wild ones,’ the tall one says, leering, and reaches for me again. He squeezes my breasts through the corset, and then I see him undo his trousers.

For a split second, I freeze. He’s exposed. And for the first time, the true horror of what they intend crashes down on me.

‘You’re still untouched, aren’t you?’ he says, shoving at my skirts, trying to force his way through the layers.

That's when the fear turns into something sharper—pure survival. I slam my knee into him, hard. He cries out, doubling over.

The smaller one hisses, 'You little bitch!' and wrenches my arm again.

Pain shoots through me like fire.

And then—

A gunshot.

The world holds its breath.

'Step away from the lady. Now,' comes a firm, commanding voice.

I look up, heart pounding, and relief washes over me. It's him—the young man on the black horse.

Instantly, the pressure on my arm disappears. The poachers flee into the trees. I don't even watch where they go.

All strength leaves me. My legs give out. I sink to the ground, trembling, barely able to breathe.

I collapse into the grass and can't help but weep, even though I'm ashamed of it. I have never known fear like this before. Not just the fear of pain, although that was real enough. No, what terrifies me even more is what could have happened. If they had succeeded... I would have been ruined.

Not just hurt—disgraced. A stain no woman ever escapes. My life, as I've known it, would have been over. I would have become a source of shame to my family, and nothing more. It's over now. I know that. But still I can't stop crying. Relief and horror wash through me in equal measure. My body shakes violently with sobs.

Then, suddenly: strong arms envelop me. A warm, comforting scent. A voice—low, calm, gentle. He's holding me.

Another wave of tears overtakes me. But he doesn't let go. He stays, steady and silent, letting me collapse against him, though we barely know each other.

It takes a long time for the tears to stop. When they finally do, he's still here, patient and composed, grounding me with his presence.

We sit in the grass together, surrounded by wild lilies and cornflowers, the fading light turning the woods golden. We must have been out here for hours.

At last, I find the courage to meet his eyes. I burn with embarrassment that he saw me like this, clothes dishevelled, nearly dishonoured, tears streaking my face. A lady is meant to keep her composure. To never unravel.

I half expect a cutting remark—something smug, like last time. But he says nothing. He only watches me, thoughtful.

'Thank you,' I whisper, meaning every syllable.

'I'm sorry you had to go through that,' he replies.

Only now do I realise how close we're sitting, here in the deep grass. As if we were lovers. Startled, I shift away from him and my hand flies to my blouse. But it's no longer open.

I glance at him, cautious. He offers a faint smile. Has he... buttoned it for me?

Heat rushes to my face. I turn quickly, searching for Cinnamon. She's grazing calmly beside his black stallion.

'I... I should go home. My parents must be worried sick.'

He nods. 'May I escort you through the woods?'

I blink at him, surprised. After our last encounter, I wouldn't have expected such courtesy. But after what just happened, I'm grateful not to be alone.

We ride side by side in silence along the sandy path, now bathed in the orange glow of the setting sun. My cheeks are still burning.

Even an exposed ankle can spark a scandal in my world—let alone what he saw. My blouse open, me held down, half-undressed... If he were a gentleman of society, my reputation would already be in ruins.

But he isn't. He's a worker. In his world, the rules are different.

He catches my gaze and there it is again, that quiet smile that softens his entire face.

As we reach the edge of the woods, I slow my horse and turn to him.

'I'm afraid I must ask you to leave me here.'

A flicker of something crosses his face. 'Because I'm such a danger to you?'

I let out a nervous laugh. He has a point. Logically, I'd be far safer continuing with him. But propriety doesn't care about logic. A young woman, alone with a man she isn't married to? The gossips would dine out on it for weeks.

'My parents...' I begin.

He holds up a hand. 'I know. The rules.' He pauses. 'But shouldn't we tell them what happened?'

My heart skips. 'Heavens, no! They'd never let me ride out again. And I couldn't bear that. I can't spend every day trapped at home, with only the occasional walk into town for relief.'

'But... as we've seen, it's not entirely safe out here.'

I think quickly. 'Perhaps if I never dismount again. Or if I bring my companion next time? Though... they might overpower both of us.' I frown. 'Maybe Father's revolver?'

He chuckles softly. 'Before you turn outlaw, may I offer another idea?'

'Oh? And what would that be?' I glance at him, curious.

'I ride into the village twice a week to oversee the paper deliveries at the station. While the poachers are still active, why don't we meet here again? Just to be safe.'