

The Secret of the Wild Roses

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About the Book

An enchanting rose garden.

A gracious country house.

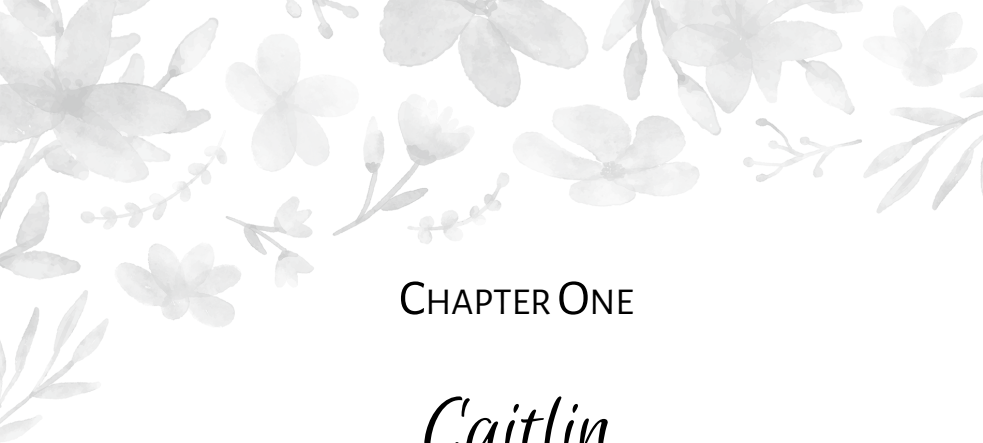
But what secrets linger behind its walls?

Southern England, 1952. From her very first day at Rose Hill Asylum, nineteen-year-old Caitlin senses she will struggle to endure life within its forbidding walls. Only the neglected rose garden offers her a measure of comfort as she tenderly works to restore its faded beauty. Yet the brutal treatments inflicted on the patients soon shatter any illusion of hope. When a new doctor arrives, determined to challenge the cruelty around him, Caitlin dares to believe in a brighter future. But the secret he is hiding may prove more dangerous than all that has come before.

Many years later, Dalina, a young American surgeon, travels to England to claim her grandmother's inheritance. The once-elegant house has fallen into decay, its wallpaper peeling, its rooms heavy with silence. As she begins to explore, she uncovers unsettling traces of the

past, clues that cast doubt on everything she thought she knew about her family. And soon one question haunts her above all:

What happened in the days when the wild roses still bloomed?



CHAPTER ONE

Caitlin

Southern England, 1952

I had imagined a place like this to look quite different—even if the wrought iron gate made it perfectly clear that one did not simply walk in. Nor, I suspected, walk out again.

But what had I expected? A forbidding building with barred windows? From the back seat of our Bentley, I watched my father. He strode confidently up to the gate, announced us through a state-of-the-art intercom system, and moments later, it creaked open with a quiet clatter.

As always, he wore his dark brown suit. Five years after Mother's death, he had at least stopped wearing black—but he'd never progressed beyond brown.

As he returned to the car, he offered me a smile. Did he really think I wouldn't notice how forced it was?

'So here we are, at last.'

I said nothing.

He restarted the engine, and the gravel crunched beneath the tyres as we made our way up the long drive. The manor house emerged from the horizon, built from solid limestone and staring down at us with its white wood arched windows, as if it were taking measure of our arrival. Although the ivy climbing its façade was bare, the building still had something oddly picturesque about it.

Still, there was no chance in hell I was staying here.

‘It’s rather lovely, don’t you think?’

I studied the gabled rooftops, their decorative trim, the dozens of squat chimneys, and the unruly garden, overgrown with roses and wild shrubs. A part of me wanted to roll up my sleeves and cut back the rose bushes just as Mother had taught me, to clear the weeds and tame the hedges. But that wasn’t why we were here.

Without hesitation, Father stepped out of the car. He opened my door and nodded toward the imposing entrance flanked by four white columns. I took a deep breath and got out. The air was cool and carried the earthy scent of damp grass, utterly different from London. It cleared my head in an instant.

Just as we neared the door, a piercing scream rang out, stopping me in my tracks. It was the kind of sound that pierced bone and marrow, a howl of pain so raw it left me frozen. I strained to hear more, but only the trees whispered gently in the breeze.

My father turned towards me, lips pressed into a grim line. He placed a hand on my back as we walked the final steps together, as though afraid I might bolt.

The truth was, I’d already thought about it. But where could I go? The war had stripped us of nearly everything—including options. And who would help a stranger, a girl who sometimes lost control?

Even without the fits, finding a place to belong would have been hard enough.

Father took a deep breath and rapped the circular brass knocker, shaped like a rose, with a loud, echoing thud. After a few moments, a plump woman with rosy cheeks and kind eyes opened the door. A few curled strands of hair peeked out beneath her white cap.

‘Good day, we have an appointment with Professor Berker,’ my father said.

The woman stepped aside. ‘I’ll announce you. Please follow me.’

The entrance hall greeted us with a peculiar scent, aged wood mixed with soap. To the left, a wall of rippled frosted glass partitioned the space; to the right, a double door was set into the tiled wall. She led us, with purpose, through it and into a long corridor lined with closed doors, one every few paces on either side.

After passing seven or eight, she stopped and knocked on one to the right.

A man opened the door, and at once his face lit up with a smile. He was stocky, with a receding hairline that seemed at odds with his full, dark beard threaded with silver. He spread his arms to my father and clasped his hand warmly. ‘John, how lovely to see you. Has it really been that long?’

‘Nearly ten years now.’

‘Goodness me, time flies.’

The professor extended his hand to me as well. I accepted it only out of politeness and instantly regretted it. The skin was clammy and limp, like handling a dead fish.

The nurse slipped away discreetly and he invited us into his office. He took his place behind a heavy wooden desk, seated in a leather-cushioned chair that gave him the air of a minor monarch. I glanced past him to the barred bay window, where grey clouds drifted

slowly across the sky, as he and Father exchanged pleasantries. It was only when Mother's name came up that I began to listen more closely.

'I was so sorry to hear about Mary. It broke my heart, truly.'

My father lowered his gaze. 'We've all suffered losses.' His go-to phrase whenever he wanted to change the subject.

From where I sat, I tried to decipher the titles of the books on a plain cherrywood shelf:

Modern Psychiatric Practices in Clinical Use

Psychosurgery as a Cure for Delusional Disorders

Insulin Shock Therapy for Schizophrenia – A Controlled Study

Mostly psychology. No surprises there.

'So, you're our little problem child, are you?' the professor said, looking at me as though he'd just paid me a compliment.

I chose not to reply. At twenty, I no longer considered myself a child, even if the law still did.

'Caitlin's been suffering from recurring episodes for some years now,' my father said.

Since Mother's death, I added silently, but of course he left that part out. Just as he'd never once dared discuss the paralysing terror he had abandoned me to. I would never forget the smell of that basement, or the how helpless I felt as it all unfolded around me.

'They've worsened over the past months. I'm at a loss.' He reached for my hand and gave it a brief, paternal squeeze. 'I just want her to be well again.'

'Hmm.' Professor Berker nodded with exaggerated sympathy. He smiled at me once more. 'Well then, what are we going to do with you? Apart from putting you down, of course!'

He let out a hoarse, barking laugh.

I gave him a withering look. Only when he saw the horror on my father's face did the laughter die. He cleared his throat. 'Just a

joke, of course.’ Adjusting his spectacles, he assumed a more serious tone. ‘They say epilepsy is as old as humankind itself. There are many approaches to treatment now. Being a private institution, we’re fortunate enough to employ the very latest methods—a luxury the public hospitals simply can’t afford.’

My gaze wandered to the wooden phrenology head on his desk, its surface divided into labelled zones: Ambition, Diligence, Devotion, among others.

Following my glance, the professor stroked the model fondly. ‘Phrenology is sadly no longer in fashion. This is an heirloom from my grandfather’s time, when they believed you could read a man’s character from the shape of his skull. We know better now, of course.’ That laugh again.

He checked the time on his gleaming gold wristwatch and stood. ‘Come, let me show you around. That way, you’ll get a real sense of what Rose Hill has to offer.’

‘Delighted,’ my father said, rising enthusiastically, and I followed suit with less conviction.

The professor led us back into the corridor, gesturing towards a white-painted iron door at the far end. ‘To the right are the therapy rooms. We won’t disturb them now.’

He turned left instead, retracing the path we’d taken. ‘We’re in the South Wing, which serves as our administrative area. Staff offices are here, along with quarters for the employees who live on-site. There’s also the common room for the nurses and our lone junior doctor. We’re slightly understaffed at present, but help is on the way.’

He opened a door just before the grand double doors through which we’d entered.

‘Ah, Edmond, perfect timing!’ he exclaimed to a strapping young man with pale blond hair. ‘May I introduce John and Caitlin Montgomery? Caitlin will be staying with us for a while.’

‘Will she now?’ His sharp, reptilian eyes flicked down my body and back again. I tightened my coat around myself. ‘What’s wrong with the little one?’

The professor didn’t seem to find the comment inappropriate. Quite the opposite. ‘The poor girl suffers from falling sickness. But we’ll soon sort her out.’ He winked at me.

‘What kinds of therapies do you use here?’ I asked, my voice sounding oddly formal.

‘Rose Hill prides itself on offering the most modern and effective treatments,’ the professor replied, suddenly all clinical expertise. ‘I keep up with the latest research, of course. Our patients benefit from advanced methods—hydrotherapy, for instance, and insulin therapy. We aim to expand our offering even further in the future.’

He turned to my father, fishing for approval. Receiving a nod, he led us through the doors opposite the entrance.

We stepped into a vast hall, with at least fifteen arched windows letting in a watery light. The sky-blue ceiling was ribbed with white vaults, accented by dark plasterwork. At the far end stood a stage. The sparse furniture—scattered tables and chairs—seemed overwhelmed by the size of the room. But not as overwhelmed as the people occupying it.

In one corner, a dark-haired woman rocked silently back and forth, eyes vacant. Closer to the stage, another woman lay motionless on the floor in a faded dress. Neither the professor nor the grey-haired nurse at one of the tables so much as glanced at her. On the far wall, a bald man sat astride a backward chair, head buried in his arms.

‘Impressive, isn’t it?’ said Berker. ‘This is the dayroom, the very heart of Rose Hill. Some might say all this’, he gestured up to the ornate ceiling, ‘is wasted on a madhouse. But I believe our patients deserve nothing but the best.’

I was surprised to hear even he used the word ‘madhouse’. Still, there was genuine pride in his voice.

A sudden ‘Aeeeh!’ ripped through the room and I jumped. The professor gave an apologetic smile. ‘That happens, now and then.’ To the woman on the floor, he called, ‘Easy now, Lucinda!’

He turned just as the door burst open behind us. A young man with short dark hair charged in, his round eyes lighting up as they fell on me. He rushed forward and, before I could retreat, threw his arms around me and pulled me close.

‘Prettyyy,’ he cried, running his fingers through my hair. ‘Blonde! Monty likes blonde!’

The professor stepped in and gently detached him. ‘All right, Monty, leave the young lady be. Go find your drum or something. You’ll have plenty of time to get acquainted later.’

Monty stuck out his tongue at him—and for the first time, I felt a flicker of kinship.

Berker had already moved on. We followed him into a large kitchen where the plump woman who’d welcomed us was bustling between pots and bowls. So, she wasn’t a nurse after all, she was the cook.

‘What’s on today’s menu, Marigold?’ the professor asked, lifting a lid with theatrical curiosity.

‘Irish stew,’ she said, a little breathlessly.

‘Delicious.’ He gave her a playful smack on the bottom before leading us out. I looked at my father, but he pretended not to have seen.

Soon we were in a dormitory leading off yet another endless corridor. A musty scent hung in the air. Fifteen beds lined each wall, barely a foot apart. Under some blankets, I could make out the shapes of slumbering figures. One bald man sat upright, eyeing us curiously. A woman startled awake and blinked at us sleepily.

Was I meant to sleep here? I turned to my father, whose face mirrored my horror.

‘Is Caitlin to stay in here?’ he asked.

Berker shut the door behind us before replying. ‘Usually, yes. But given the circumstances—and because Mary and I were... well, quite close—I’m prepared to make an exception.’ He led us down another corridor. ‘There are some vacant rooms near the washrooms. I’ll have Carl, our caretaker, move a bed over.’

My father exhaled in relief. I shot him a withering look. He really expected me to stay here?

‘You might be wondering why we don’t separate men and women like most institutions,’ Berker said, as we passed storerooms and linen closets. ‘But in a small place like Rose Hill, it’s simply not feasible. I’d need double the staff, and as I said, we’re already short-handed. It works well enough, though.’ He chuckled. ‘Everything here is under my control and it runs smoothly. You’ll see, Caitlin. In a few months, you’ll be completely restored.’

Months? There was no way I was staying that long.

‘That would be wonderful,’ my father said, beaming at me with affection.

The professor clapped his hands. ‘So! That was my modest little estate.’ He straightened his flamboyant watch. ‘Why not take a stroll in the garden while Carl brings in your bags? I’m afraid duty calls. Caitlin, report to Nurse Agnes when you’re ready.’ He pointed to an unremarkable door. ‘That’ll take you straight to the walled garden.’

I had no idea what a walled garden was, but as we stepped outside, a raised part of the grounds opened before us, bordered by a low stone wall. Narrow paths wound their way through tangled boxwood and untamed roses. You could just about see that it had once been beautiful, though now the weeds had muscled out nearly everything else. Beyond it, a great lawn rolled down to a lake where two grey geese glided peacefully across the water.

I could feel my father watching me. I looked down. Time was running out. I needed to think, and fast.

At the far end of the garden, we came to a crumbling staircase mottled with round moss patches. Oval planters stood on short plinths, and behind them stretched a columned pergola draped in ivy. As if on cue, we climbed the five steps together, avoiding the open paths.

‘It all seems very decent,’ my father said at last.

‘Please don’t leave me here,’ I rasped—my voice not yet used to speaking again.

‘Caitlin...’ he began.

‘Please!’ I pleaded. ‘We can wait. There’ll be a place in London soon—they specialise in epilepsy there.’

‘And the cost?’ he asked, looking away. I felt a wave of despair wash through me. Since losing Mother—and my brother, just a few years before—we’d lost nearly everything else too. Money, it turned out, mattered now.

‘Perhaps it’ll get better on its own.’ I clung to hope with both hands.

‘I know you don’t want this,’ he said gently, gesturing towards the looming manor. Its arched windows seemed to stare at us with quiet judgement. I thought I saw movement behind them, as though the house itself were watching. ‘But we’ve discussed this, haven’t we? Let’s just give it a try.’

‘Father—’

‘Three months.’

I folded my arms and turned towards the lake.

‘Please. Just three months. That’s all I’m asking.’ His voice dropped to a whisper. He looked as desolate as a weeping willow on an open field. ‘Your episodes are becoming more frequent. And I... I couldn’t bear to lose another person I love.’



Sister Agnes thrust a pile of linen into my arms and pointed towards my bed in the dormitory.

‘Professor Berker said I might have a room of my own.’

She gave a bark of laughter.

‘No?’

‘And shall we bring you breakfast on a tray as well? This is a sanatorium, sweetheart, not a hotel. Now, get that bed made.’

It was a simple iron hospital bed on wheels, the last in a long row of identical ones. I hung my clothes on the plain wooden hangers inside one of the drab wardrobes lining the walls, then set about tucking in the stiff sheets. Once, I would never have managed it alone, but since our house was destroyed in an air raid and we had learned to live without servants, such tasks no longer daunted me. Still, once the job was done, I hesitated, unsure what to do next.

At last I made my way towards the recreation hall. My footsteps echoed along the corridor, and I opened several wrong doors before I found the right one.

I linger in the doorway, uncertain. The sight is much the same as earlier. Monty jumps up the instant he spots me, racing across the room and wrapping his arms about me.

‘There you are!’

‘Yes... I... I’m to stay for a while,’ I say, gently peeling his eager arms away and glancing around for the nurse. But she is busy guiding a shuffling man towards a chair.

‘Brilliant!’ He claps his hands together, thrilled. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Caitlin.’

Without warning he hugs me again, squeezing hard. I hold my arms awkwardly out, seeking rescue with my eyes, but no one intervenes. At last he lets go of his own accord.

‘Come on, I’ll introduce you to everyone.’ He seizes my hand and pulls me into the hall. ‘That’s Braylee.’

He points at the bald man sitting rigidly against the wall, arms folded, staring into the bricks. Monty tugs me right across, standing squarely in the man’s line of sight.

‘Look, Braylee, who’s here with us now.’

The bald man narrows his eyes to slits and emits such a guttural snort that a shiver runs down my spine. I retreat a step.

‘This is Caitlin. Isn’t she beautiful?’ Monty announces blithely, as if the man’s hostility were invisible. Heat creeps into my cheeks.

Braylee growls something low and turns his face back to the wall.

‘Never mind, let’s meet the others.’ Monty grabs my hand again. ‘That one, with the striped shirt, is Flint. And this is Lorna.’

He halts before a young woman with dark hair and skin so pale it appears almost translucent. The deep violet circles beneath her eyes lend her the aspect of a ghost. She looks even more lost than I feel.

Monty gives another exuberant introduction, but she says nothing.

‘How long have you been here?’ I ask, when the silence grows unbearable.

Only then does she raise her head, painfully slowly, to study my face. I nearly flinch. Her eyes are filled with raw, unfiltered fear—the same look I had seen so often in the air raid shelters.

‘Is... is everything all right with you?’ I whisper, and realise at once how absurd the question is. If all were well, none of us would be here.

She does not answer. Instead she gazes at me as though I were the mad one. Perhaps I am.

‘She never speaks,’ Monty explains. ‘But she’s still my friend.’ He drapes an arm about her shoulders and she allows it, expressionless.

‘Oh, there’s Lucinda.’ To my alarm, he dashes over to a fair-haired woman lying on the floor and begins talking at her in a rush.

As though rescuing me, the nurse suddenly strikes a gong.

‘Recreation is over,’ she commands, her voice sharp. ‘Everyone to the dormitory.’

I smother a sigh of relief and slip away quickly, before Monty can smother me with further embraces. Just before the doorway I glance back once more at Lorna, but she is already gone again into her private world.

And where is mine? Not here. Never here. I could not last months in such a place. I had my troubles, yes, but I was not like these people.

In the dormitory, everyone is preparing for bed. The man beside me is already beneath his blanket, eyes closed. None of the women seem to mind that men are mixed in among us. Hastily, I pull a nightdress

and washing things from my case and retreat to the bathroom. I will not undress before thirty strangers.

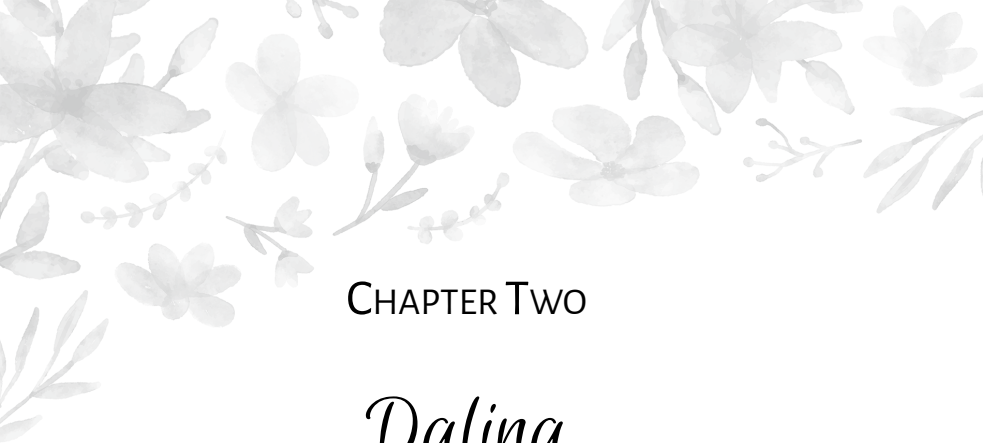
When I return, I slip beneath the stiff, starched sheets just in time for the lights to be switched off. I curl into a ball, rubbing my cold feet together, suddenly acutely aware of the noise in the room: whispers, snores vying with one another, underpinned by a faint rasping, the rustle of sheets, the crackle of movement. From the bed near my head comes a low, steady whimper.

I try to push aside the thought that I am surrounded by strangers—strange people. Wasn't it a little like those years before, when we children were sent away to a country house for safety during the war? We had slept in shared rooms then too. Only none of those children had worn that same glacial expression as the bald man, Braylee. And I cannot bear to think of Lucinda, inert on the floor.

Sleep will not come. Everything is alien. I stare into the shadowy outlines of the room, focus on the starch-scent of the linen, willing away the other odours. At last, after hours, my eyes close.

But not for long.

The screams tear me awake.



CHAPTER TWO

Dalina

Boston, today

‘Dr Woodrow! Please, just a moment!’

Dalina stopped, closing her eyes briefly before turning back to the hospital receptionist. ‘Yes?’

The woman heaved herself from behind the desk and waddled over. ‘The attending surgeon needs you in Theatre Four. Emergency.’

Dalina’s exhaustion lifted at once, despite the double shift. She hurried back towards the lifts, jabbing the call buttons for all three at once. As she stared at the glowing arrows above the iron doors, trying to will one to reach her sooner, her pocket buzzed.

She pulled out the drab little phone. Her mother. Again.

Three missed calls already during her shift. This time, she surrendered.

‘I’m still on duty, Mom. What is it? Please be quick—I’m needed in theatre.’

‘Oh—’ her mother faltered, then rallied. ‘Well then: could you fly to England for me?’

Dalina gave a short, incredulous laugh as the lift finally arrived. She stepped in and pressed for the fourth floor.

‘Absolutely not. What on earth are you thinking? I’m on the brink of promotion; I can’t just abandon everything and hop across the Atlantic.’ She might have gone on, venting her outrage at such a careless suggestion, but cut herself short. ‘Why are you even asking?’

‘I’ve had the most extraordinary letter. I’ve been desperate to tell you all weekend, but you never pick up.’

‘Because I’ve been working, Mom!’

‘And you never come by either. It’s been weeks since you visited. You don’t even notice, do you? Always work, work, work. And your poor mother, left here all alone in her flat, doesn’t matter to you one bit. You doctors are so intent on saving the world, yet it never occurs to you to start with your own family...’

Not this again.

‘I’m sorry, Mom.’ Dalina slipped from the lift and lowered her voice to a whisper—the corridor was empty, and she didn’t want to wake patients. ‘The last few years haven’t been easy for me either. Which is why I’m not about to jeopardise everything I’ve worked for.’

She paused with her hand on the ICU door. Her mother was muttering something resentful, but Dalina cut across her. ‘Listen, I have to get into theatre. I’ll call you tonight, and you can tell me all about this letter then.’

Without waiting for an answer, she hung up and strode towards the operating suites.

At the scrub sink, Dr Duncan was already lathering up. She joined him, working the antiseptic soap into her hands.

‘I asked for you specially,’ he remarked, glancing at her sidelong.

Dalina snorted. ‘Couldn’t you have asked for Maja? She’s just started her shift, and I’ve been awake thirty-six hours straight.’

‘But you’re the best with C-sections under local. You calm the patients beautifully.’ His lips brushed her neck as he added softly, ‘Not only the patients, by the way.’

A smile tugged at her mouth, and for a moment she considered pushing George away—but that would mean starting the entire scrubbing ritual again.

When the theatre nurse entered, George leapt back as though scalded. His voice was brisk now. ‘What have we got?’

‘Amelie Steward, twenty-two. She came in with severe cramps. Turns out she’s thirty-four weeks pregnant. Twins.’

George shook his head, towelling off. ‘Where do these young things leave their brains? Martha knew the moment she was nine weeks, and by twelve she was swelling like a dumpling.’ His laugh was thin. ‘Theatre ready for section?’

‘Everything’s prepared,’ the nurse confirmed.

They moved into the operating theatre. George introduced them, explaining to the patient what would happen. A drape was rigged thirty centimetres above her belly, shielding her from the sight of scalpel and flesh. Most patients couldn’t bear to watch their own bodies opened, however numb the anaesthetic left them.

Dalina settled in beside the young woman’s head, her smile warm and steady. She wouldn’t need to do more than assist if complications arose.

Gently, she swept the damp strands of hair from the woman’s clammy forehead.

‘Amelie, is that right?’

The girl gave a nervous nod.

‘I know it all looks rather frightening, but it will be over quickly. You’re in good hands—the chief surgeon himself is here for you today.’

A faint smile flickered across Amelie’s lips.

‘Sometimes it takes no more than five minutes before that wrinkled little creature arrives, staring up at you with enormous eyes. You’ve two of them, so perhaps it’ll be a touch longer. But in twenty minutes at most, you’ll be holding your babies.’

For a heartbeat, Amelie glowed with bliss—then uncertainty clouded her again.

‘But I...’

‘What is it, my dear?’

‘I don’t know if I can be a good mother,’ she whispered. ‘None of this was planned. My boyfriend and I have only been together three weeks.’

Not the father, then. But at least she wasn’t facing it alone.

Tears slid down Amelie’s cheeks. Dalina clasped her hand, squeezing gently. ‘You’ll be all right. Truly.’

‘And here’s number one.’ George held up the slippery, squalling infant, passing it swiftly to the nurse, who swaddled it and placed it in the mother’s arms.

‘And number two.’

This time Dalina received the tiny bundle, since Amelie couldn’t cradle both. She gazed into the deep blue eyes and wondered how utterly these two small beings would overturn their mother’s world. Unplanned pregnancies were rarely convenient. She, for one, had no idea what she’d do if she ever found herself expecting. It would be nothing short of disaster.

Thank heavens it was impossible. She was meticulous about contraception. Only last month she'd had her period—she remembered well her frustration at being unable to swim in the sea during George's brave gesture of a proper weekend away together.

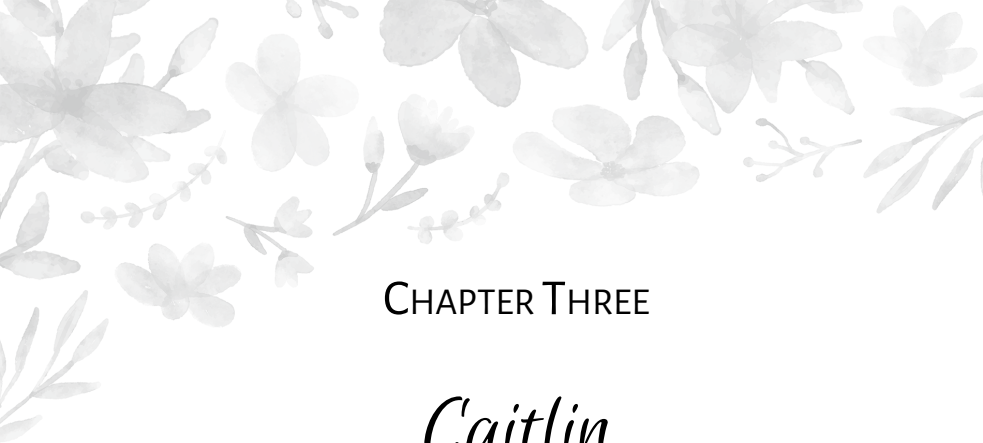
That had been in June. Early June.

Could it be?

Dalina calculated. Then calculated again.

A fourth and fifth time she checked the dates. The answer refused to change.

Seven weeks.

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CHAPTER THREE

Caitlin

I stand at the arched window beside the stage when Edmond approaches, grinning so broadly it seems his skin might split at the corners of his mouth.

That boy, Monty, has clung to me all morning like ivy to a wall, only letting me go when Sister Agnes finally scolded him. I tried to question her about the screams in the night, but she merely shrugged and said it sometimes happened. No one else would speak to me. Breakfast had been dreadful. Everyone sat at the wooden tables, shovelling porridge into their mouths. The room was filled with the wet sound of chewing, broken only by Lucinda's sudden, guttural cries of 'Aeeehh!' Flint sat opposite me, strings of grey mush clinging to his chin, little milky puddles spreading across the table.

I could barely force down a mouthful. Marigold, the cook, asked whether I hadn't liked it as she bustled past with the bowls, her brow furrowed in concern—no doubt because I had left my sprouts untouched yesterday.

‘Time for your first therapy, Caitlin.’

I lower my gaze, catching sight of food lodged between Edmond’s teeth, and follow him down a corridor tiled prettily, towards a sweeping staircase upholstered in red velvet.

‘What sort of therapy will it be?’ I ask.

‘The professor has ordered hydrotherapy to begin with.’

Hydro. From Latin lessons, I recall it means ‘water’. Yesterday the professor spoke of water cures. Perhaps this is what he meant.

We enter a room partitioned in one corner by a folding screen. Edmond gestures towards it. ‘You’ll need to undress before we proceed to the treatment room.’

Heat floods my cheeks. Never in my life have I undressed before a strange man. ‘Completely?’

He must read the alarm in my face, for he adds, soothingly, ‘Yes, entirely. Unless you fancy taking a bath in your clothes?’ A hoarse chuckle escapes him. ‘I realise it feels improper for a fine young lady like you to disrobe in a gentleman’s presence, but the nurses are all engaged. You’ve no cause to worry. I am a doctor. You’re far from the first woman I’ve seen unclothed.’

He nods encouragingly towards the screen. With reluctant steps I retreat behind it. As slowly as possible, I remove each garment, folding them with care and stacking them neatly on the mahogany chair with its carved legs.

Edmond clears his throat.

‘I’ll be just a moment,’ I call through the flimsy fabric barrier. At last, with stiff movements, I shed my underthings too. ‘Might I have a towel?’

‘Nonsense—we’re nearly there.’

Patience gone, Edmond strides behind the screen. His eyes roam my body, hungry, and I feel not merely naked but exposed, like a cut of meat laid out in a butcher's case.

'Come along!' He heads for a pair of swinging doors with round glass panes. Beyond lies a vast chamber lined with ten white tubs, each raised on gleaming brass feet, each fitted with a tap. Yet something feels missing, though I cannot at once tell what.

A nurse looks up as we enter. With her soft brown eyes and hair to match, she reminds me of a startled doe. After a brief glance at me, she turns questioningly to Edmond.

'This is Caitlin. She'll be having hydrotherapy today.'

'But the professor—'

'—ordered precisely that,' Edmond cuts her off. 'Prepare a bath.'

She nods and scurries to a vacant tub. Couldn't they have prepared it earlier, while I still had clothes on?

To pass the waiting time, I study the cavernous room. Only four of the baths are occupied. The patients lie swathed beneath heavy linen sheets, tied with ribbons at the sides, with small towels placed across their foreheads. Only their heads protrude above the rims, their faces slack and blank. The sight prickles my skin with gooseflesh, not merely from the chill tiles beneath my feet.

Suddenly, a soft fabric settles across my shoulders. 'It will take a few minutes to fill,' the nurse says in a piping voice. My heart warms to her at once as I draw the towel tighter.

Only then do I notice Lorna, in the bath beside the one being filled for me. Yet she does not glance my way.

'Well then, Caitlin. If you'd be so kind...' Edmond stands by the prepared tub, holding out his hand.

'I can help her!' the nurse protests, stepping forward.

But Edmond gives a smug smile. ‘No need—I’ll oversee this one myself.’

I swallow a sigh and approach with unsteady steps. Reluctantly, I take his hand, let the towel slip from my shoulders, balancing awkwardly on one leg to lift the other over the rim. My face comes close to his, and a rancid smell wafts up from him. I force myself not to recoil. In moments, I tell myself, I’ll be cleansed in warm water, all this vileness washed away. With hopeful anticipation, I dip one toe into the bath—then snatch it out at once.

Every hair on my body rises.

‘It’s freezing!’ I gasp.

For an instant Edmond’s expression puzzles me: some strange blend of strain and... something else. Only later will I understand. He was fighting, with every fibre, not to laugh.



Where did my skin end and the water begin? I ask myself this again and again, long hours later. Perhaps by now my skin has dissolved, and I am lying in a milky-red broth of blood and flesh. Perhaps I should be grateful for the linen sheet stretched across the bath, shielding me from the sight.

The moment Edmond left the room, I begged the nurse.

‘Please—let me out of here.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered. ‘I cannot go against the doctor’s orders.’

‘Please! I am certain this sort of... therapy won’t help me.’

She only shook her head with an apologetic smile, then hurried away to change the damp cloth on a patient's forehead before slipping out of the room entirely.

At first I had strength enough to be angry. I shouted for the doctors, for the nurses. Polite at the beginning, firm, then ever more desperate. But nothing happened—no one came, not for hours.

Soon the only thing left in my voice was panic. Despair.

I had screamed myself hollow, yet no one came. The house threw my cries back at me, shrill and distorted, until they no longer sounded like my own. I turned to Lorna, to the others, imploring them to join me, but they hardly seemed to register my presence.

After that, I kicked and struggled, tugging at the sheet until my fingers burned, but it was tied too tightly to the rim. My fury ebbed slowly, like water draining from a basin. But if there is one thing we have in abundance here, it is time.



After hours, the cold has dulled into a heavy numbness. I lie still, staring up at the ceiling, forcing myself to recall the stories Mother told me when I was a child.

My head turns to the side and, to my astonishment, there is life in Lorna's eyes. They are an unusual, piercing shade of blue.

'How long?' I whisper, my voice raw.

She gives the faintest shake of her head.

'All day?' Panic creeps into my tone before I can stop it.

For a moment she closes her eyes. When she opens them again, the look she gives me is steeped in such pity that a hard knot swells in my throat, making it almost impossible to swallow.

It cannot be! I have been in this water nearly five hours. Another stretch like that—I could not endure it.

With a click, the door opens and the timid nurse returns.

‘At last,’ I breathe, my body lifting with relief at the thought of release.

But she wheels in an iron trolley laden with little glasses. I watch as she replaces the damp towel on the first patient’s brow, smoothing his head. He lets out a grunt, animal-like.

She repeats the ritual with the others until she comes to me. A wave of leaden weakness sweeps through me. Food—if that is what she brings—can mean only one thing. We are to remain here longer.

Summoning the last of my strength, I plead, ‘May I get out?’

She avoids my gaze.

‘Please.’

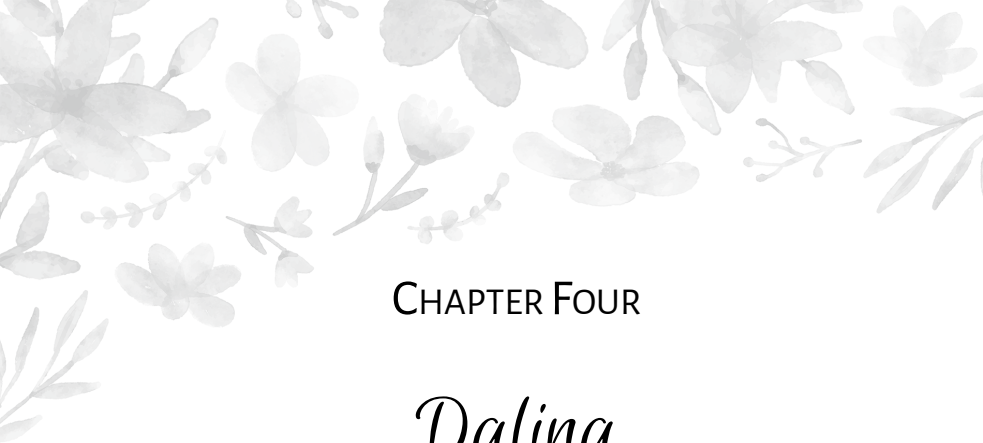
Her lips press into a thin line as she changes the towel on my forehead. Then she holds a glass to my mouth. I want to refuse, but hunger and thirst win. I gulp it down greedily. A sugary sweetness spreads across my tongue, and for a moment I feel stronger.

‘How long will this go on?’

‘Until the course of therapy is complete.’ She sets the empty glass back on the trolley and turns for the door.

‘How long does a course last?’ I call after her.

But she leaves without a word.

A decorative border in the top left corner of the page, featuring light grey watercolor-style flowers and leaves. The flowers are of various sizes, some with five petals, and the leaves are simple, elongated shapes. The border extends from the top left towards the center of the page.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dalina

Dalina's phone began to ring just as she was groping past her purse, lipstick, and the discreet paper bag from the chemist, towards the tiny inner pocket she always reserved for her key. She paused, fished the phone from her coat, and glanced at the screen. It might be important. The hospital. Or George. But when her mother's carefully posed smile appeared yet again—the photo Dalina had saved to her contact—she slid the phone back into her pocket without answering.

At last, she found the key, pulled the door sharply towards herself as she turned it in the lock, and stepped inside. Relief washed over her at the familiar scent in the air, touched faintly with coffee. Coming home after a string of night shifts always felt like returning from some long, exhausting journey. With a sigh, she dropped her handbag onto the generous armchair, hung her tailored wool coat neatly on the stand, and ran her fingers through her chestnut hair, staticky from the fabric.

She sank onto the sofa, gazing uncertainly towards the window. Her eyes flicked back to the handbag, watching it as though it were some rare creature, docile for now but ready at any moment to strike.

It was in there.

The phone rang again, muffled this time from within her coat pocket. Dalina sat listening to the tinny distortion of the ringtone, her gaze sweeping her flat. The striped mug still stood abandoned on the shelf above the dishwasher. She'd been late again. Too late. The rest of the kitchen was immaculate, though only because she so rarely used it.

The bedroom door stood ajar, revealing the rumpled whiteness of her duvet. Her mother had once scoffed: as though she didn't see enough white sheets at work every day. Just as incomprehensible, in her opinion, was Dalina's attachment to the old leather sofa, a relic from her father's bachelor days, long before her mother had swept in with her impeccable taste and stylish furniture. Dalina loved the coffee-brown couch fiercely, though it was sagging and frayed at the edges.

She leaned back, heavy with weariness. The phone had fallen silent, leaving the kind of stillness that pressed against her chest.

She really ought to face it.

Pushing herself upright, she took two steps towards the handbag before veering away, into the kitchen. A drink first. That was sensible. Almost automatically, she set a cup beneath the machine, slotted in a capsule, and stood watching the stream of coffee froth and bubble into the mug.

What would she do, if her suspicion proved right?

The stream subsided, leaving a thin foam trembling on the surface. She didn't lift the cup.

Wasn't coffee even forbidden at a time like this? If her worst fears were true, the consequences went far beyond caffeine. The thought lodged hard in her throat. How would her mother react? And George? He would explode, no question. Naturally, the blame would be hers alone. She should have been more careful.

But she had been. She was careful.

Mostly.

Unable to bear the uncertainty any longer, she abandoned the untouched coffee and strode back to the handbag. The white bag gleamed accusingly from inside. On her way past the coat rack, her phone rang once more. With a sigh, she pulled it free. Her mother never gave up until she got her way.

'I can't talk now, Mum. I'll call you back later, all right?'

'But something extraordinary has happened.' Her mother's voice was breathless, excited.

'Maybe so, but I really don't have time. I'll call as soon as I can.' Before her mother could argue, Dalina ended the call and carried the bag into the bathroom.

She perched on the closed toilet seat and unfolded the instructions. She didn't need them—she knew exactly how it worked. She had even considered sneaking a test out of the hospital, but what if someone had seen? There was already enough whispering behind her back. George and she had always been careful, discreet. He wasn't one for open gestures, anyway. A fleeting smile in the hospital corridors was about as much as she could expect. Lunch together was out of the question. Yet her colleagues seemed to sense something. She caught it in the glances, the conversations that broke off when she entered.

Better to spend twenty dollars on an overpriced chemist's test than risk that kind of exposure. She unwrapped it and followed the steps.

She had thought it would take longer. In films, it always did—minutes of pacing outside the door before the answer appeared. She had half planned to wander restlessly about, then creep back in, heart hammering, to discover her fate. Instead, the result was staring at her almost at once, before she had even buttoned her trousers. Two lines.

Her mind scattered in a thousand directions at once. She had suspected as much, yet the confirmation hit her like a blow. She wanted to scream, to run, to bury her head under the covers like a child who refuses the truth. Instead she just stood there, staring.

Forcing herself to breathe deeply, she returned to the sitting room with measured steps and lowered herself onto the sofa, test still in hand. She studied the flimsy pink-and-white plastic, as though it might conceal some deeper logic if she stared long enough. But the message was stark, unambiguous. Two lines. A margin of error of barely three percent.

Which meant, with ninety-seven percent certainty, she was precisely what she least wanted to be.

She was pregnant.



A short while later, Dalina had shrugged back into her coat and was wandering aimlessly through the streets. Pregnant. The word clanged through her mind, over and over. She had heard it a thousand times, spoken it in conversations about other women, other lives—but now it sat inside her own thoughts, attached to her, and it felt utterly alien.

Pregnant.

A baby in her belly. She had never wanted children. At twenty-eight, it was hardly a scandal to fall pregnant unexpectedly, but she had never imagined it could happen to her. That was something that happened to careless teenagers, not to someone like her. She had taken the pill diligently, never missed a day.

How could she possibly tell George? Should she tell him at all? In the distance, a white 'U' shone against a royal-blue sign—one of Boston's underground stations. No, she decided, she wouldn't make this easy for him. He had played his part in this.

She hurried towards the steps, quickening her pace as the approaching groan and rattle of the train filled the air. The noise swelled until the carriage burst from the tunnel and shrieked to a halt. At the doors, she stepped back to let a young mother with a pram board first. The woman flashed her a grateful smile, but Dalina couldn't return it.

A burning lump rose in her throat as she caught sight of the plump baby inside—round cheeks beneath a white woollen hat, tiny fists pressed to its mouth.

There was no space in her life for children. Certainly not for wailing infants. She was on the verge of promotion, and not only because of George. For years she had thrown herself into every shift, devoured textbooks long after midnight, searched forums for obscure medical puzzles. The next senior position should be hers. But with a baby? Impossible. Even if she returned after three months part-time—how could she manage it alone?

No, she would have to end it.

She barely noticed the ebb and flow of passengers at each station, the blur of colours around her, until the kiosk she had so often stared at during late-night waits slid into view, with its three wobbly magazine stands and stained tiles. Then the familiar blue-and-white sign

appeared: Bowdoin. Her stop. She leapt up just as the doors beeped. Wedging herself between them, she forced them to reopen and slipped out.

What would it feel like, afterwards?

She walked the familiar streets in a daze until the glass bulk of Massachusetts General Hospital rose before her. The sliding doors sighed open, and she made her way towards Radiology.

Her phone rang again. Her mother—still. Dalina couldn't face her, not now. Not the inevitable judgement, the disapproval.

'Hey, Dalina, still not sick of us lot?' Michael, one of the other residents, grinned as they crossed in the corridor.

'I—I just left something behind.' She forced a smile, feeling like an actress mouthing her lines on stage.

Luckily, she turned off soon after, sparing her more questions.

On the way to Radiology, one of the ward nurses called out cheerfully, 'Shouldn't you be asleep?' Dalina managed a grin, scanning the hall for him. And then—there he was, at the far end, emerging from a patient's room. George. Even in a crowd, she would have known that tall, upright figure instantly. He was deep in discussion with Dr Morrigan, one of the senior consultants, a man with the tenacity of a bloodhound.

She strode forward. 'Could I have a word, Dr Duncan?'

George frowned. 'Come to my office later. I'm busy.'

'Please—it's important.'

He hesitated, then gave a faintly irritated sigh. 'Fine. Walk with me. Patient in Five.' He turned back to Morrigan. 'Catch you later.'

Dalina quickened her step to keep pace.

'What is it—hungry again?' His eyes gleamed with insinuation. As always, he flipped a switch the moment they were alone, turning intimacy on and off at will. He called it discretion.

Dalina shook her head. 'I think we should speak in private.'

'All right.' Abruptly, he veered into the stairwell. 'I wanted to show you something anyway.'

Breathless, she followed him up two flights. Was shortness of breath already a symptom?

At the top, George pushed open a heavy metal door. A rush of cold air struck her as they stepped onto the roof.

'Isn't this something?' He spread his arms, triumphant. 'I paid the janitor handsomely for the key. We can meet here whenever we like—no one will ever know.'

Dalina frowned at the view: the hulking ventilation shafts, the cracked skylights, the towering masts bristling with antennae. Rain had pooled in blackened patches on the concrete, reflecting the ashen sky.

'So—what was so urgent?' His gaze pinned her, and she realised with a start that she hadn't prepared the words. A mistake. How did one announce such news? Perhaps she should have brought the test itself, let the pink lines speak in her stead.

'There's... news,' she managed, eyes dropping from his.

'And?' His impatience sharpened.

'I... I'm pregnant.'

'What?' His eyes widened, then darkened with fury. 'You said you were on the pill!'

'I am.'

'Then how the hell—' He broke off with a near-shout, slamming his hand against the metal door. 'Christ, this is a disaster.'

The wind whipped her hair across her face, stinging like a slap. She had known he wouldn't be pleased, but she hadn't expected the rejection to feel like this—so raw, so final. Even though she agreed with him.

He pressed his fingers to his temples, pacing. 'It's all right. We'll sort this out.' His voice was low now, as if convincing himself.

Dalina gave a small nod.

He returned to her, resting his hands on her shoulders. 'You'll end it, of course. After everything you've achieved, you wouldn't throw it away. Dr White's leaving, that post could be yours. This is the worst possible timing for a baby.'

'I know,' she whispered.

His hand smoothed over her hair, and she couldn't help wondering whose colour it would inherit—her chestnut or his blond.

'Good. Then that's settled. Don't worry. It'll be as though it never happened—quick, straightforward.'

Dalina stood unmoving as he drew her into an embrace.

'Damn, five o'clock—I've a patient. I'm glad we're agreed. Thank you for not making a drama out of this. That's what I like about you—you're uncomplicated.' He kissed her forehead before striding back to the door. 'A baby is the last thing I need in my life right now.'

Dalina closed her eyes briefly. George and children—about as natural a pairing as the Teletubbies and Stephen King's clown. The image of the baby in the pram on the train drifted back: the soft little fist, the miniature fingernails, the button nose, those ancient, knowing eyes. All of that could come from the cluster of cells inside her. Or she could make it vanish—quick, uncomplicated.

Vanish. As if it were nothing more than a pile of dirt, swept up and thrown away.

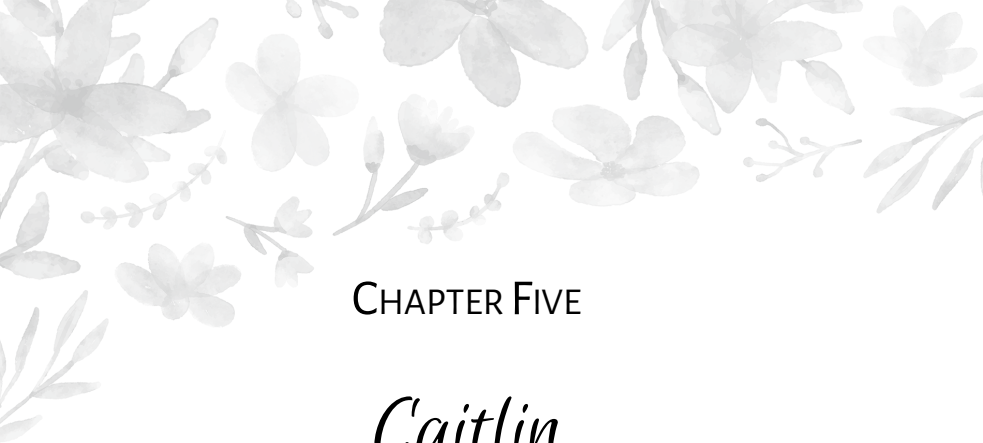
With his hand on the door handle, George glanced back. 'I'll call you tomorrow.'

He seemed like a stranger. Had those tight, angry lips really kissed her only days ago?

George frowned. 'Did you hear me, Dalina? I'll be in touch. No need to leave a message—I'm on shift for the next twelve hours and won't be able to call before then.'

Dalina nodded slowly, lifting her head to look at him without truly seeing him.

He shook his head and walked away.



CHAPTER FIVE

Caitlin

Two days and two nights. That is how long they kept us in the water. I can still recall the panic rising in me when, after evening rounds, I realised they were not going to lift us from the baths before nightfall.

‘We’ll be here all night, won’t we?’ I whispered to Lorna.

She gave the barest nod.

‘And then? Will they finally let us out?’

Her eyes held only pity.

‘How long? How long must we stay like this?’ With a splash I raised my arm, pushing it as far as I could beneath the sheet that held us down, desperate to grant the skin a few minutes’ relief from the devouring water.

Lorna blinked twice.

I swallowed, knowing she meant days, not hours.

At some point I must have drifted into a shallow sleep despite the cold. It felt as if the water seeped straight into our minds, eroding thought and leaving only a sluggish, watery indifference. Perhaps I

ought to have been grateful. Everything hurt. The pressure of my bones against the metal, the joints whenever I shifted the tiniest fraction, my raw skin.

‘When I was a child, we used to spend our summers at my grandparents’ house,’ I told Lorna, my voice hoarse and little more than a murmur. She turned her head, curious.

‘It was a white house with dark green shutters. The garden brimmed with wildflowers, left to themselves most of the year. Great swathes of wild roses climbed over the white picket fence. From afar the pink blossoms shone, and in late summer Grandmama brewed them into tea. It was the most delicious tea I have ever tasted. Even now, I can still summon the sweet, fruity tang on my tongue.’

A faint smile touched Lorna’s lips.

‘That house was nothing like their London villa. Grandfather was a doctor. His townhouse had three storeys, golden doorknobs, marble floors, and an immense chandelier that dazzled you the moment you entered.’

He had earned his fortune through pioneering research, but I seldom spoke of that.

‘Still, I would have traded it all for the summer house,’ I went on. ‘I longed to live there all year round.’

‘What... what became of it?’

I started. For a heartbeat I thought Lorna had spoken, but the voice was deeper, rougher. It came from across the room. I had almost forgotten the other patients were there, they had been so silent.

‘The war...’ I said softly, and heard the murmur of sympathy. The little house was requisitioned, and when the war was over, we had too many broken pieces to gather to worry about it.

I slipped back into my half-dreaming state, lulled by the house’s hum, steady and hypnotic, rocking me into sleep. But then the rattle

of a key snapped me awake. I jolted, water slapping against the iron walls, and in an instant remembered where I was. Edmond was leaning over the first bath, taking notes. I waited, heart tight, until he reached mine. I forced myself to meet his eyes and mustered what was left of my voice. It came out more a groan than speech.

‘Is it... is it finally enough?’

He studied me.

I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, a single tear slid down my cheek, born of the hope that this ordeal might at last be ending.

Edmond consulted his notes, then sighed. ‘Sister Brittany, with Sister Edith—bring the patients back.’

Without another glance, he turned and walked away. Relief burst from me in a flood of tears, as though there were not water enough around me already.

Sister Brittany slipped out, then returned to unfasten the sheet stretched across my bath. A moment later, stout Sister Edith—who looked more a midwife than a nurse—entered. Together they hauled me upright. The water drained with a gurgling rush I knew I would never again hear without shuddering.

My legs buckled like twigs. Now I understood why they needed two of them to manage each patient. I sagged between their arms, teeth chattering, my skin a chalky blue-white. As Edith braced me, Brittany draped a towel over my shoulders. Though the fabric was stiff with age and washing, to me it felt as soft as cashmere. I imagined each little fibre drawing the destructive dampness from my skin.

They guided me towards the side room, past Lorna’s bath. I felt a pang of guilt at being freed first, but she surprised me with a faint smile. I marvelled at her strength.

My clothes still lay folded on the chair where I had placed them two days before. It took both women to dress me without my collapsing. Then they half-walked, half-carried me to the dayroom.

‘Might I spend the rest of the day in bed?’ I pleaded, realising where they were taking me. I would have borne the noise and smell of the dormitory gladly. I was still frozen to the marrow and wanted nothing but to curl up with a book beneath the covers. And I had to find a way of telling Father about this. He would be beside himself if he knew what they meant by “hydrotherapy.”

‘All patients remain in the Day Room during the day. It is called that for a reason,’ Edith replied, gruff and dismissive. I thought better of reminding her that on my first day some patients had been left in the dormitory.

Brittany swung open the Day Room door. Sunshine poured across the floor, but I could not rejoice in it. It felt as if, during those two days, the seasons had changed—and that I was no longer the same Caitlin who had once been brought here for treatment.

‘Caitlin Montgomery, returned from hydrotherapy,’ Edith announced to the supervisor, before the two disappeared again.

‘Caitlin!’ There it was—that voice of irrepressible joy. Monty bounded towards me. ‘I missed you! Where’ve you been so long?’

‘I was... in therapy.’

‘Ohhh.’ His face clouded. ‘Bad therapy?’

I nodded.

He hugged me tightly. To my surprise, it soothed me.

‘Then you must rest. Sit there, in the sunshine.’

My waterlogged brain was grateful for such simple instruction. I obeyed.

I remained in that chair the rest of the day. From time to time Lucinda’s strangled cries rang out, but I no longer flinched. My thoughts

crawled, slow and heavy, and I knew that if some visitor entered to inspect the asylum now, they would see no difference between me and the others.

I looked like one of them.