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Escape by Moonlight

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Chapter One

Elizabeth propped her bicycle against the barn door and stood a moment to watch a buzzard circling above the meadows, searching for prey. She saw it plummet to earth and then rise clutching something in its talons before it flew off towards the line of trees higher up the slopes. She loved this little farm in the foothills of the Haute Savoie, home of her maternal grandparents. To her it was a place of holidays, a place where she was free to wander about the paths and meadows, to enjoy the shade of the woods, to cycle along its narrow paths, swim in the lakes, ice-cold though they were, and come back to huge delicious meals, cooked by Grandmère. In the summer everywhere was lush and green, the meadows where Grandpère's cattle and goats grazed were dotted with wild flowers. Higher up, above the forest, the peaks of the Alps poked upwards,

bare rock in summer, covered in snow in winter.

The summer would come to an end soon, though it was taking its time this year, and she would go home to make up her mind what she was going to do with her life. Would Max ask her to marry him? Would she say yes? She was not altogether sure. She loved him, but was she ready to settle down to domestic life as the wife of a regular soldier? Wouldn't she rather have her own career, do something useful, learn to live a little first? And if there was a war, what then? Max had said war was inevitable, even after Chamberlain came back from Munich waving that piece of paper which he said meant 'peace in our time'. All it did, according to Max, was give the country time to step up its armaments, build more ships, aeroplanes and tanks, and train more troops in readiness. Would there be work for her to do in that event? After all, in the last war, women had done all sorts of jobs normally done by men, and done them well too.

Scattering the farmyard chickens, she turned towards the house. It was a squat two-storey building, half brick, half timber, with a steeply pitched, overhanging roof so the snow would run off it in winter. It was surrounded by a farmyard but there were a few flowers in a patch of garden on the roadside, and pelargoniums tumbled in profusion from its window boxes. It was not large, but roomy enough for her grandparents to have brought up three children: Pierre, who lived a few kilometres to the west of Annecy and had his own small vineyard; Annelise, Elizabeth's mother; and Justine, who had been born when her mother was in

her forties and was only nine years older than Elizabeth. She taught at a school in Paris.

The kitchen was the largest room and the warmest – too warm in summer because the cooking and heating of water was done on an open range. A large table, flanked by two benches, stood in the middle of it covered with a red check cloth. It was laid with cutlery and dishes taken from the dresser that filled almost the whole of one wall. Grandmère, her face red from the fire, was standing at the range stirring something in a blackened pot that smelt delicious. She was a roly-poly of a woman, dressed in a long black skirt, a yellow blouse and a big white apron. Her long grey hair was pulled back into a bun.

‘Where’s Papie?’ Elizabeth asked. Brought up by a French mother who had brought her and her siblings to visit her parents frequently as they grew up, she was completely bilingual.

‘He went into Annecy to see the butcher. The old cow is past milking and will have to be slaughtered. He said he would be back in time for dinner.’ To Marie Clavier the midday meal was always dinner, the evening meal supper.

Elizabeth busied herself fetching out the big round home-made loaf, glasses and wine in a jug which she put ready on the table. ‘I saw a buzzard dive for a mouse just now. It always amazes me that they can see such a tiny creature from so high up.’

Her grandmother laughed. ‘What is it they say, “eyes like a hawk”?’

They heard the noisy splutter of the ancient van her grandfather used to drive into town and two minutes later he came into the kitchen, followed by his black and white mongrel. 'It's all arranged,' he said, sitting in his rocking chair by the hearth to remove his boots. He wasn't a big man, but had a wiry strength that years of working a farm single-handed had bred in him. He had thin gingery hair and an untidy beard streaked with grey. 'Alphonse Montbaun will come for the cow at the end of the week. He'll cut it up and keep it in his deep freeze for us.'

'Will you buy another?' Elizabeth asked him. She had become inured to the idea of eating cattle she had seen munching grass on the slopes. Grandpère had called her soft when, as a small girl on her first visit, she had recoiled at the idea.

'I think I'll get a couple of heifers and introduce them to Alphonse's bull.' He came to the table and sat in an armchair at its head while his wife ladled the soup into bowls. 'When are you going home, young lady?' he asked.

Elizabeth laughed. 'Do you want to be rid of me, Papie?'

'You know I don't, but the rumours are flying. The German army is gathering on the Polish border and this time it won't be like Czechoslovakia; there'll be no appeasement. You'll be safer, at home.'

'*Sacredieu!*' the old lady said, crossing herself. 'You are never suggesting we are not safe here?'

'I don't know, do I? But we haven't got an English Channel between us and the Boche.'

'We've got the Maginot Line.'

‘A fat lot of good that will do against aeroplanes and bombs.’

‘Albert, you are frightening me. It was bad enough last time, I don’t want to go through that again.’

‘Perhaps you won’t have to. If they come, our armies will drive them back again. That nice young man who came to stay earlier in the summer will see to that.’ The ‘nice young man’ was Captain Max Coburn who had come to share a few days of his leave with Elizabeth. He had charmed her grandparents with his old-fashioned manners, his smart uniform, his blue eyes, golden hair and neatly clipped moustache. It had been a glorious few days; the weather had been perfect and she had taken him all round her favourite haunts: the glittering ice-cold lakes, the little hamlets with their agile goats and the canyon at the Devil’s Bridge Gorge, not to mention the breathtaking scenery with Mont Blanc crowning it all. Not until his last day had either of them mentioned war.

‘It’s going to come, Liz,’ he had said. ‘Hitler will not be satisfied with Czechoslovakia; he wants the Danzig corridor and he’ll go for Poland next. Britain and France will have to honour their commitment to help. Don’t stay here too long.’

‘Oh, Max, you can’t think the Germans will come here, surely?’

‘I don’t know, but I would rather you were safe at home in England.’

‘And you?’

‘I’ll go where I’m sent.’

‘I hope you’re wrong. I couldn’t bear to think of you in the middle of the fighting and Papie and Mamie put in fear of their lives. They remember the last war so vividly. Perhaps I should try and persuade them to come home with me.’

‘Yes, do that. I’m sure your parents would approve.’

‘Mama has tried to get them to come to Nayton many times over the years but Papie would never leave the farm. He always said he wouldn’t trust anyone else to look after his livestock: cows, goats, chickens and his beloved dog. And I think he is a little in awe of Papa, though he would never admit it.’

‘Surely not? Lord de Lacey is the mildest of men and he adores your mother.’ Her paternal grandfather had died when she was small and her father had inherited the baronetcy and Nayton Manor, her Norfolk home.

‘I know.’

Everyone in the family knew how her father had met her mother; it was a tale Papa loved to tell. Already a widower, though childless, he had been a major in the British army in the Great War and had been taken prisoner and shipped off to Germany. He had jumped from the train on the way and made his escape. Annelise, who was working in the hospital at Châlons at the time to be near Jacques, her soldier fiancé, had found him wounded, hungry and thirsty in a ditch, too weak to move. She had fetched help and he had been carried on a stretcher to the hospital where she continued to look after him until he was strong enough to return to duty. He had not forgotten her and when the war ended in

November 1918, went to see her at her home in Dransville before going back to England. By then she had a small son, Jacques, whose father had been killed in the fighting.

They had fallen in love and, defying the conventions of the aristocracy and the ill-concealed disapproval of Papa's friends, were married in March 1919. He had adopted Jacques. Nine months later Elizabeth had been born, then Amy in August 1921, and finally young Edmund in 1927.

'I hope you are wrong. I hope you are all wrong,' she had told Max. 'I can't bear the thought of people being killed and maimed. Why can't governments settle their differences without going to war?'

He had no answer to that and the following day had left to rejoin his regiment, but he left her wondering about her grandparents. Would they come to England with her? 'My Channel crossing is booked for the ninth of September,' she told them as they ate their soup. 'I don't see any need to go before that.'

'Good, then we will have you for a little longer,' her grandmother said.

'I love being here, you know that, don't you? If I could, I'd live here all the time, except that I should miss Mama and Papa.'

'Of course you would. We love to have you, but they will want you home.'

'Come with me.'

'Me?'

'Both of you. Uncle Pierre will look after the farm for you.'

'He's got his own home and the vineyard to see to,' her

grandfather put in. 'And what would I do in England? I can't even speak the language.'

'You would soon learn and I'm sure you would find something to do. There is a farm on the estate.'

'Do you think I'd want to work like a labourer on someone else's property?' He was indignant. 'I've always had my own farm, handed down to me by my father. I won't leave that.'

'It was only an idea. If there's a war . . .'

'If there's a war, we'll carry on as we did before. It can't last. In any case, who'd want to trouble us here? We've got nothing.'

Alphonse Montbaun fetched the cow on the day the German army swept into Poland. The poor beast, aware that something dreadful was about to happen to her, was not at all keen to go into the truck Alphonse had brought to convey her to the slaughterhouse and it took a great deal of coaxing, pushing and pulling to get her into it. Her lowing struck at Elizabeth's heart and she wished it didn't have to happen. The cow was not the only one to be filled with dread of the future; everyone in the village, all of France, indeed the whole world, was in turmoil. And Elizabeth received a telegram from her father. 'Come home at once,' it said.

Nayton Halt was a typical country station which served the Norfolk village of Nayton and the estate of Lord de Lacey. It had an up line and a down line, two platforms, a waiting room, a ticket office and a house for the stationmaster. On

the other side of the crossing gates was a signal box and a few yards beyond that a siding which had been used in the early days of the railways to transport goods from the estate to the main line. Now it was unused and overgrown.

‘Lucy, the bell!’ Her father always seemed to think it necessary to remind her of her duty as if she hadn’t been doing the job ever since she was big enough and strong enough to manage the levers which held the gates open or closed.

‘I heard it.’ Lucy, who had been weeding the flower beds alongside the platform, took off her gardening gloves, threw them down on the border and went to shut the gates against the traffic on the lane just as a gig came bowling up.

Dressed in an impeccably cut country suit of houndstooth check cloth, the young man driving it was a toff, but a very pleasant toff in Lucy’s eyes. He was tall and muscular without being heavy and had the unusual combination of curly fair hair and deep brown eyes. His mouth was firm and usually smiling. Or was it only when he encountered Lucy?

‘Good afternoon, Lucy,’ he called as he drew the horse to a stop in front of the closed gate. ‘Beautiful day.’

‘Yes, sir, it is.’

‘Sir?’ he queried with an amused smile which made her blush to the roots of her hair. ‘How long have we known each other?’

‘Twelve years, I suppose, considering it is that long since Pa first came here as stationmaster.’ Stationmaster was a euphemism because he was also the porter, ticket collector and general dogsbody.

‘Then why the formality?’

She was flustered. She always was when he was anywhere near and especially if he was looking at her like that, as if he could see right through the plain black skirt and flowered blouse she wore, right inside her, to the muscle and bone and the warm blood coursing through her veins and growing warmer under his scrutiny. She should not have feelings for this man; he was Lord de Lacey’s son and lived at the big house and she was a stationmaster’s daughter who lived in a two-up two-down beside the line, with its workaday kitchen, simply furnished parlour and narrow twisting stairs to its two bedrooms, all of which she was quite sure would fit easily into the smallest room at the Manor. It wasn’t that she was cowed; she was simply overcome by an intense emotion she could not control. ‘Mr de Lacey,’ she said. ‘I am on duty.’

‘So you are.’ He got down from the gig and walked to the gate, putting his hand on the top so close to hers it was almost touching. The contrast between that beautifully manicured hand and the workaday one with its nails ingrained with soil was marked and Lucy hastily took hers away. ‘And so am I.’

‘You? What duty do you have?’

‘I have to meet my sister, Amy, off the train.’

‘Oh, is that all?’ She was dismissive.

‘All? Why, my dear, it is a very onerous task, the horse has to be groomed and harnessed to the gig . . .’

‘Which, I am quite sure, you do not do yourself.’

‘No,’ he admitted. ‘But I have to see that it is done. Then

I have to change out of my riding clothes into something more fitting for driving and escorting a lady, put on a tie and comb my hair and remember to bring a parasol, for the sun is warm today and Amy is bound to have forgotten hers . . .’

‘As you say, very onerous,’ she said, knowing he was teasing her. ‘But you could have sent Mr Bennett with the motor.’

‘So I could, but then I would have been denied the wondrous sight of you.’

‘You should not say such things, sir.’

‘Why not? You are wondrous and I enjoy our little encounters.’ He looked into her face, deciding the rosy blush suited her. ‘Don’t you?’

‘Yes, but—’

‘You see? And do you not agree it is a pity they do not happen more frequently?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘All duty must end sometime,’ he said. ‘Even for you, and you must have some free time.’

‘Only if there are no trains or Pa is able to manage the gates as well as everything else.’

‘What do you do with yourself then?’

‘I read or sew or go shopping in Swaffham or Dereham. Now and again I go to Norwich if Pa wants something we can’t get anywhere else.’

‘And how do you go?’

‘By train, of course.’

‘Of course. Silly me. But do you never go for a walk?’

‘Sometimes of a Sunday after church.’ She wished he would stop quizzing her; he was making her nervous. ‘What do you want to know all that for?’

He smiled. ‘I was just thinking that if we were to meet when you are off duty, by chance of course, whether you would drop the formality and address me by my name.’

‘Mr de Lacey.’

‘I was thinking more on the lines of Jack.’

‘On no, I couldn’t do that.’

They had been hearing the train in the distance for a minute or so, but now its approach grew louder and a moment later it drew into the station and stopped with a hiss of steam, and then they could hear her father’s voice loud above the bang and clatter of doors being opened and boxes of goods being manhandled into and out of the guard’s van. ‘Nayton Halt! Nayton Halt!’

Jack nipped nimbly through the little gate intended for pedestrians when the main gates were shut and set off up the slope of the platform, calling as he went, ‘Think about it, because I shall see you again, you know, and we will talk some more.’ At least that was what she thought he said; it was difficult to be sure when the train was letting off steam and coach doors were banging. His horse was nervous too and she went over to its head to calm it and also in an effort to calm herself.

‘He is arrogant and self-opinionated and he thinks of me as someone to tease,’ she told the beast. ‘But I do not think he means to be unkind, do you?’

Her answer was a whicker of contentment. ‘Yes, I knew

you would agree with me. But if he really knew what I thought of him, he would run a mile. He has only to smile at me and I shiver all over and that is foolish, when I know perfectly well he is only amusing himself.'

She turned her head towards the platform to see Miss Amy de Lacey emerge from one of the carriages. At eighteen, a year younger than Lucy, although you'd never know it to look at her, she was self-assured, had thick reddish hair, which defied all efforts to keep it confined, and a complexion that had the glow of youth made more brilliant by good food and expensive clothes. Before many more years had passed she would be a great beauty and break a dozen hearts.

After leaving finishing school in July, she had spent the summer holiday with friends in Devon, and that morning she had been driven to Liverpool Street station by her hosts' son, where they had been met by Annie, sent to accompany her the rest of the way home. Annie had been the girls' nursemaid when they were children and still kept a proprietorial eye on Amy.

Lucy knew Annie quite well. She was only a few years older than her charges and the fount of all knowledge as far as the doings at the big house were concerned. Not that Lucy would ever have repeated any of the gossip which was told to her with a great deal of hushed whispering even when there was no one within earshot, and entreaties to swear never to tell a soul. That was how Lucy had learnt that Jack had been Lady de Lacey's son before she married his lordship and that his lordship had adopted him. 'In spite

of only being a stepson, he had high hopes of being the heir,' Annie had said. 'But when Edmund was born, it put an end to them. Not that he seems to mind, he is good-natured to the point of indolence.'

'Goodness what a mouthful!'

'That's what I heard His Lordship telling Her Ladyship.'

He was kissing his half-sister's cheek and laughing with her, and then taking the portmanteau from Annie, which just went to show that he was a true gentleman, for many in his position would not even think of helping a servant. And then they were coming down the platform towards her. She left the horse and returned to the crossing because the train was drawing out and the gates would have to be opened again. There was already a brewer's dray waiting on the other side.

'Lucy, how are you?' Amy asked, as they passed each other.

'Very well, thank you, Miss de Lacey. And you?'

'Glad to be home.'

Jack put her bag in the gig, helped her and the maid into their seats and then climbed up himself and picked up the reins. He winked at Lucy as he wheeled the horse about and set off back the way he had come.

Her day unaccountably brightened by the encounter, Lucy secured the gates and went back to see to the parcels, two crates of hens, a box of herrings and a large bundle of newspapers which had been disgorged from the guard's van. The carrier with his horse and cart would soon arrive to deliver the goods about the village. And then there

were the takings from the ticket office to be totted up and matched against the tickets that had been issued, the weeding to finish, the flower tubs to water and the platform to sweep; and, in between, the dinner to cook and the washing to be mangled and put on the line. None of it, except perhaps adding up the money, needed much thought and she was free to allow her mind to wander. She had a recurring daydream, a fantasy in which Jack de Lacey held her in his arms and declared his undying love for her, and explained he was still unmarried at twenty-three because he had been waiting for her to grow up. She imagined being kissed by him, being held and caressed, and then the vision faded because she was not at all sure she should allow him to go any further, even in a dream.

‘Haven’t you finished that yet?’ her father demanded, toiling up the platform pushing a trolley loaded with Miss de Lacey’s luggage which would have to be sent up to the big house on the carrier’s cart. He was thin as a rake and his uniform hung on him as if it were made for someone several sizes larger, which he had been before her mother left and he had never got around to admitting he had shrunk. Nor would he ever have admitted he was a changed man in other ways. He was irritable and never found anything to smile at and he was so demanding he made Lucy’s life a misery. ‘You’ve got your head in the clouds, as usual.’

‘No, Pa, I was thinking about finishing the weeding. I need to keep on top of it.’

‘Well, you can do it later. There isn’t another train for an hour, so you can go indoors and get my dinner now.’

She rose, picked up her basket of weeds, and made her way along the platform to the house. If she were married to Jack de Lacey, there would be no getting of dinners, and even if there were, it would be a pleasure not a chore. For him she would cook beautiful meals and they would eat off the best china and drink wine from crystal glasses. She emptied the weeds onto the compost heap, left the basket, gloves and trowel in an outhouse and went indoors to cook stew and potatoes and jam suet pudding, in an effort to please her father and give him something that would put some weight on him.

Here, in this small cottage full of reminders of her mother, the dreams stopped; here was reality, the day-to-day grind of work in a house where love had died on the day her mother disappeared, perhaps even before that. Pa said she had upped and left them, but Lucy found that hard to believe. Her mother had been sweet and gentle and loving, even in the face of Pa's unkindness towards her. She had no idea what had caused her to leave and he wouldn't say. He wouldn't talk about his wife at all and he forbade Lucy to mention her name. 'She's gone,' he had said the evening Ma was no longer in the house to put her to bed. 'An' she ain't a-comin' back. And it's no good you snivellin',' he had added, when her lip trembled and tears filled her eyes. 'We shall just hev to rub along as best we may.' Over ten years ago that had been and never a word had they heard from her ma since. Sometimes Lucy thought she would leave home and try to trace her, but she had no idea where to start. Besides, her pa would never let her go.

* * *

‘Well, how was your holiday?’ Jack asked as they bowled along the familiar lanes, past farms and cottages.

‘Fine. Lazy days walking and swimming and playing tennis.’

‘Did you meet anyone new?’ He turned in at the gates of Nayton Manor, past the hexagonal gatehouse and up the long curving drive lined with chestnut trees.

‘One or two, no one special.’

‘No young men to make your heart beat faster?’

‘Course not. There was only James and he thinks he’s so superior, always teasing me about my hair and tweaking it with his fingers. Belinda’s all right, though.’

‘And how was finishing school?’

‘Boring.’

‘Boring? How can learning to be a lady be boring?’

‘You cannot learn to be a lady. Either you are one or you are not.’

‘Mama might not agree with you.’

‘Mama is different.’

He made no reply to that because both knew their mother was not of aristocratic birth. She was French, her father farmed a few acres in the Haute Savoie, and she had been brought up to do her share of the work, something that real ladies never did. And yet there was no one more ladylike, more diplomatic, or more beloved, especially by her husband. The children knew the tale of how they had met and married and as far as the girls, Elizabeth and Amy, were concerned it was a true love story, but Jack, who had never known his real father, tried to expunge

it from his memory. His shameful birth, his feeling that he did not belong, was a chip he carried on his shoulder, though to see him and hear him, you would never know it.

‘I only went to please Papa, you know.’

‘So you were telling the truth when you told Lucy you were glad to be home.’

‘Of course I am.’ She sighed. ‘In some ways, I envy her.’

‘Envy her?’ He ignored the stifled choking sound Annie made. ‘What is there to envy?’

‘I envy her her freedom. She may work if she chooses to. She is not tied by convention.’

‘My dear sis, it is not a question of choosing to work, it is a matter of having to and she is just as tied to convention as you are, surely you can see that? And in the fullness of time she will be expected to marry someone of her own kind, probably chosen for her by her father . . .’ He paused a moment, thinking about that and suddenly felt very sorry for poor Lucy Storey.

‘So will I, though that’s not to say I will.’

He laughed. ‘Not ever?’

‘Oh, well perhaps one day, if I meet the right man, but not before I have done something with my life.’

‘Such as?’

‘Earning a living, doing something worthwhile.’

‘Oh dear, not home five minutes and already I can see squalls on the horizon. You know Father will never allow it. And there is no need; everything you want you can have within reason.’

‘Except my independence.’

‘What can you do, anyway?’

‘I don’t know yet. A doctor perhaps, or a lawyer or a politician.’

He smiled. ‘Oh, Amy dear, you will make Papa throw up his hands in horror at the thought. And you aren’t brainy enough in any case.’

‘Thanks for that, brother dear.’ She sighed, realising he was probably right. ‘But if there’s a war . . .’

‘And that will happen, you may depend on it, but I don’t see how it will affect you.’

‘Of course it will. I could work then, do something useful, perhaps in Papa’s railway business.’

The first Lord de Lacey had been one of the first to recognise the revolution the railways would bring about, and besides involving himself in the construction of the railways, he had built up a large herd on the home farm, whose milk was sent in churns to London in the early hours of every morning, some of it destined to be canned. All these enterprises needed labourers and supporting industries like horsemen, farriers, harness-makers, basket-makers, shops, breweries and alehouses, carriers to take produce from the farms to the station and railwaymen to run the trains. His son and then his grandson, Amy’s father, had carried on where he left off. When other aristocrats were having to sell their estates because they could not afford to keep them up, nor employ the army of servants needed to run them, he had prospered.

‘Like Lucy?’

‘No, silly, in the offices, like you do. Or you are supposed

to do; I haven't seen much evidence of it. You'd rather live the idle life of a gentleman.'

'I haven't yet found my niche.'

'You are certainly taking your time about it.'

'Oh, don't let's quarrel about it. I have enough of that from Father and Mama. And you will need all your wits about you if you mean to go toe to toe with them over your plans.'

'I shan't go toe to toe, I shall be more subtle than that. I'll get Mama on my side.'

'She won't go against Father, you know that.'

'We'll see.'

She sat forward to have her first glimpse of the house through the trees. It was a magnificent building, its brick and stone weathered by three hundred years of wind and rain, its rows of windows gleaming in the afternoon sunshine. Whenever she came home from a journey, be it short or long, she breathed in the essence of it; it was almost like meeting a lover after a long absence. It was home and she could not imagine living anywhere else. If she married, she would have to leave it and go wherever her husband chose to live and he would have to be a very special man to persuade her to that.

He drew up at the front door, which was flung open almost before the wheels had stopped turning, and Annelise de Lacey ran down the front steps to greet her younger daughter, her arms wide, ready to embrace her as she stepped down onto the gravel. It was typical of their mother to forget or ignore her position as his lordship's wife and

allow her exuberance and joy to show. Not for her the stiff hauteur of the born aristocrat.

‘Amy, darling, let me look at you.’ She held her at arm’s length. ‘Why, how grown up you look. Don’t you think so, Jack?’ At forty-four she was still beautiful, her figure only slightly thicker than it had been twenty-odd years before. Her lustrous hair, with no hint of grey in it, was wound in a heavy coil at the back of her neck.

‘Oh, yes.’ He grinned mischievously. ‘Quite the lady.’

Annelise put her arm about Amy’s shoulders and together they went indoors, followed by Annie, leaving Jack to drive the gig round the house to the stables. ‘Did you have a good journey?’

‘Yes, but the trains are as smutty as ever and I feel filthy. I’ll have a bath and change before I do anything.’

‘Of course. Papa is out riding with Edmund but they know what time the train was due in, so they will be back soon. Peters will take your portmanteau up. What have you done about your trunk?’

‘Mr Storey is sending it up from the station on the carrier’s cart.’

‘Good. I’ll have it taken up to your room as soon as it arrives.’

The hall was big and cool and smelt of polish and roses because a huge bowl of them stood on the table beside a silver tray. Amy breathed deeply, looking round at the portraits of earlier de Lacey’s that lined the walls and marched up the stairs to the top, where a gallery went round the upper level and where, as a child, she had peered through to look

at the guests whenever her parents had company. ‘Oh, it is so good to be home.’

She ran lightly up to her room and an hour later, bathed and dressed in a gown of blue silk, went downstairs again to be greeted in the small parlour by her father and her eleven-year-old brother, Edmund, still dressed in their riding clothes. She hugged Edmund, who bore it stoically, and went forward to be kissed by her father. He was a tall, well-built man who, at fifty-six, was still a handsome man. ‘Well, Amy?’ he said. ‘Home for good, this time.’

‘Yes, Papa.’ She had meant what she said when she told Jack she wanted to earn her living, but she was not going to spoil her homecoming by saying anything too soon. She would bring up the subject in her own time. ‘I am just going to explore everywhere before dinner, see what’s new.’

‘Oh, nothing is new. Everything is just as it was when you first went away, but off you go. You’ll find Patch in his stable.’

Her father knew, as everyone else in the family knew, that her first port of call when she had been away was the stable to visit her horse and the first opportunity after that, she would be off riding him. But not today; it was already late and she must not keep dinner waiting

They dined *en famille* at seven o’clock. Everything operated like clockwork, as it had always done, and the conversation was lively. Amy recounted tales of her finishing school and her holiday and reiterated her pleasure at being home. She heard about Edmund’s adventures at Gresham’s, the boarding school he attended, and her parents’ worries about the prospect of war.

‘I’ve sent Lizzie a wire and told her to come home,’ her father said. ‘I don’t suppose anything will happen immediately, but I would rather she was safely back here.’

‘She hasn’t got herself engaged yet, then?’ Amy asked. ‘I gather Max went out to spend some leave with her.’

‘If she has, she’s keeping it pretty quiet,’ Jack said.

‘There’s plenty of time to think about things like that,’ their mother put in. ‘He’s a soldier, who knows what will happen if there’s a war . . .’

‘Oh, don’t,’ Amy said. ‘It doesn’t bear thinking about. I saw hundreds and hundreds of children on Liverpool Street station when I came through. They were all labelled like parcels with gas masks in cardboard boxes hanging round their necks. Many of them were crying. And their mothers weren’t allowed past the barriers and they were crying too. It brought home to me what going to war will mean.’

‘Yes, I know,’ her mother said. ‘Mrs Hutchins came to see me today. She has been appointed welfare officer for the evacuees coming to this area. She asked me to give one or two of them a home.’

‘You never said yes?’ Jack queried in surprise.

‘Of course I did. Poor things, dragged from their homes to live in strange places with strange people, you can’t help feeling sorry for them. We’ve got plenty of room, the whole of the nursery suite. I’ve given instructions to Mrs Baxter to have the rooms made ready. They’ll be here tomorrow.’

‘I do hope they’re house-trained,’ Jack said.

Edmund stifled a giggle. He was allowed to have his meals with the rest of the family on sufferance and was

expected to be seen and not heard. But it might be fun to have a pal or two he could boss around, at least until it was time to return to Gresham's. It was a great pity he would have to go back to school. It didn't seem fair when all the fun would be here at Nayton. The prospect of war didn't frighten him.

'I wonder how long it'll be before we start losing some of the staff,' Charles said, when they retired to the drawing room, leaving the servants to clear the table of the dinner things. The room was decorated in a delicate light green and cream, with a thick Brussels carpet whose rose pattern was echoed in the curtains at the long windows. It was furnished with two or three mahogany tables, a large glass-fronted cabinet containing a collection of porcelain figurines, two green-covered sofas, several armchairs and a grand piano. There were vases of flowers in the hearth, an ormolu clock on the marble mantel, flanked by two bronze sculptures of horses, a couple of busts and several papier mâché boxes with oriental designs on them, above which hung a heavy gilded mirror. The walls were covered in pictures, some very valuable, one or two painted by Jack who had discovered a talent for art at school. It was an elegant room, but it had a comfortable lived-in feel about it.

'I suppose some of the men will go,' Annelise said. 'But I don't know about the women.'

'Women did war work in the last war,' Amy said. 'They did all sorts of jobs normally done by men, driving buses and ambulances, working in factories, nursing. I want to do something like that.'

‘Good heavens, child, why?’ her father exclaimed. ‘You do not need to . . .’

‘I may not need to, but I want to. I want to be useful. I was never born to be an ornament.’

Charles smiled. ‘And a very pretty ornament you are too.’

‘You won’t put me off by paying me compliments,’ she said.

‘You are too young, not yet nineteen.’

‘Men died at nineteen in the last war and no doubt they will again.’

‘You are not a man, Amy.’

Jack could see an argument developing and he did not want his sister calling on him for support; it might lead to questions about what he intended to do with his own life and he was not prepared to answer them, simply because he had no answers. His mother had had two miscarriages between Amy and Edmund, both boys, and by the time Edmund had come along Jack was thirteen and had become used to being considered Lord de Lacey’s heir. It was his only ambition; he needed to be recognised as a gentleman, not the grandson of a French farmer. The fact that his mother had married an English nobleman did not mitigate his shameful origins and his feeling of inferiority. It was irrational, he knew. His mother adored him and Lord de Lacey treated him as if he were truly his son, except in the matter of the inheritance. He could hardly expect anything else, but it made him feel like a rudderless ship, tossed by every wave that came along. He excused himself and left them to it.

Stopping only to put on walking shoes and a hat, he left the house and set off through the wood which surrounded the estate. It had been planted by an earlier de Lacey to give the house some privacy and protect it from the prevailing north-east wind coming straight down from the Arctic. It was a mix of oak, ash and elm and a whole copse of sweet chestnuts, not to mention the ubiquitous elder. Its heavy scent filled his nostrils and reminded him of his childhood. He had always liked the woods, the darkness of them even when the sun was shining; their dank, peaty smell; the strange rustling sounds made by small animals and the chirrup of an occasional bird. It was here he used to hide from his tutor when he first arrived in Nayton, here he would talk to himself, a lonely little boy whose mother had suddenly found a new love.

Emerging onto a lane on the far side, he saw Bert Storey walking towards him, his dog at his heels. He was on his way to the Nayton Arms for his usual evening drink.

‘Good evening, Mr Storey. Lovely evening, isn’t it?’

‘It’ll rain come morning,’ was the only response he got and that without a smile.

He was a miserable so-and-so, Jack decided, not like Lucy, who always seemed cheerful, no matter what. But that didn’t mean Amy was right to envy her. Nothing could be worse than poverty and having to work all the hours there were to scrape a living. He was glad he was saved the necessity. And he could give Lucy a little pleasure if he chose. Making up his mind he strode off to the station.

* * *

Lucy was just opening the gates after a coal train had passed through when she saw Jack, walking towards her, his hat set at a jaunty angle, one hand in his pocket, the other twitching a stick he had cut for himself in the woods. Instead of turning to go back to the house, she waited for him to come to her. ‘Good evening, Mr de Lacey.’

‘Good evening, Lucy. Still on duty?’

‘I have to look after the gates.’

‘Day and night?’

‘So long as there are trains. Of course there aren’t so many between midnight and four in the morning when the milk train goes through.’

He wondered if her father ever considered opening and closing the gates himself, but then he supposed he would consider that beneath him. ‘Surely you do not stay awake all night?’

‘No, we leave the gates closed to road traffic and go to bed. If anyone comes along, they can open them, but usually one of us gets up to check they have been shut again. You must have done it yourself hundreds of times.’

‘So I have.’ He paused, thinking of her looking from her bedroom window in her nightdress to make sure he had fastened the gates properly. Next time he would look up and catch a glimpse of her. ‘How long before the next train comes through?’

She laughed. ‘Mr de Lacey, you know the timetable as well as I do. It’s the ten-thirty to Norwich.’

‘So you have over an hour before you are needed again.’

‘I can always find something to keep me busy.’

‘I am sure you can, but that’s not what I meant. I am at a loose end. Take a stroll with me and you can tell me all about yourself.’

‘You know all about me.’

‘A feeble excuse if ever I heard one.’ He paused to scrutinise her face. It was a lovely face, he realised and, in spite of her blushes, a serene kind of face. There was softness there and sweetness and he knew without being told that she was not given to selfish tantrums as so many of the young ladies of his acquaintance were. ‘Don’t you want to walk with me?’

‘It’s not fitting.’

‘That’s not an answer. I asked you what you wanted.’

‘Pa—’

‘Your father has gone to the Nayton Arms, I saw him not ten minutes ago. He won’t be back until they throw him out at closing time.’

‘H-how do you know that?’ She was taken aback that her father’s habits were known to the gentry. She knew he drank too much, probably to cheer himself up, but it made him even more morose and sometimes violent if she was so unwise as to provoke him.

‘It is not a secret.’ He wondered whether she knew that drinking in the Nayton Arms was not Bert Storey’s only leisure activity and that there was a certain little widow whose company he enjoyed before he wended his way homeward. ‘Come now, a gentle stroll. The woods are lovely at this time of the evening. I could show you a badger set.’

‘You could?’ Her eyes lit up.

‘Yes. And if we are very, very quiet we might see them come out.’

It didn’t sound as if he had any ulterior motive and to be in his company even for an hour was a treat not to be missed. She might find out if her idol was all she dreamt he was or if he had feet of clay. She was half afraid to say yes, in case she was disappointed, but on the other hand, if it should lead to her dreams coming true . . . No, that was foolish. He would not marry her when he could have the pick of any number of young ladies. But why was he bothering with her? To have his wicked way with her? She was not at all sure what that meant.

‘Well?’ he queried, looking into her eyes and seeing her doubts mirrored there. ‘I am not going to eat you.’ He smiled, looking her up and down; she was slim but she curved in all the right places and he felt his loins stir at the sight. ‘Though I am quite sure you would taste delicious. It is only a few steps to see a badger set. Do you think I would harm a hair of your lovely head?’

‘No, of course not,’ she said. ‘I’ll fetch a shawl.’ She sprinted up the slope of the platform and disappeared into the house, emerging several minutes later in a fresh cotton dress and a pink shawl.