



# THE FOUNTAIN

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# Prologue

THE EARLY MORNING sun glinted on the river and sparkled in the droplets falling from the oars of the boat. The rower, a young man dressed in a dinner jacket, was showering his two passengers with water, making them squeal in pretend outrage. They had been to a college ball and now, at seven-thirty in the morning, were still enjoying themselves.

‘Simon, leave off!’ Penny grumbled. ‘If you ruin my dress, I’ll never speak to you again.’ The garment was made of creamy satin and clung to an enviable figure.

‘Please, Simon, do stop,’ Barbara added. ‘I don’t fancy a swim.’ She had large greeny-blue eyes beneath winged brows, a straight nose and a well-defined mouth, which was obviously more used to laughter than sorrow. Her dress was of cerise-and-cream-striped taffeta with an off-the-shoulder neckline, huge puffed sleeves and a bias-cut skirt.

‘For you, sweetheart, anything.’ He resumed rowing.

It was at Newnham Barbara had met Penny and they had hit it off straight away. Penny had unusual red-gold hair and a flawless complexion. She had been sent to college by her wealthy parents to channel her energies away from the idea of being an actress into something they considered more suitable for a young lady. Barbara didn't think it had worked. Penny only just managed to do the work required of her, being more interested in amateur dramatics and going to the theatre. This year she had taken her finals, while Barbara still had a year to go, but they had sworn to keep in touch.

It was through Penny that Barbara had met Lieutenant Simon Barcliffe. 'He needs taking out of himself,' her friend had told her. 'He's become withdrawn, not the laughing brother I waved away four years ago. You will be good for him.' His hair was slightly fairer, less red, than Penny's and his eyes were cornflower blue, but the family likeness was there in the shape of their faces, the slightly square jaw and firm mouth.

When the subject of the ball had come up, Penny had suggested Simon should partner Barbara and both had been happy with the arrangement. Everyone had been determined to enjoy themselves and try to forget the horror which most of those who had stayed behind could only half imagine. They had danced to the music of two orchestras who took it turn and turn about to keep it going until dawn. No one wanted the night to end, but

when the electrically lit night gave way to a pink dawn, Simon had suggested taking a boat down the river to a pub he knew would be open and serving breakfast.

Simon was fun, didn't seem to be able to take anything seriously, but Barbara guessed that was only a facade. He had come back from the hell of the trenches without a scratch, but sometimes when Barbara looked at him, she noticed a shadow pass across his face and his eyes had a faraway look, as if a ghost had nudged him. It was gone in an instant and he was his usual light-hearted self, making jokes and teasing. She had seen that haunted look on other faces, men in her hometown, who had come back from the front line, changed for ever by what they had endured. But they were the lucky ones: so many had found their last resting place in the mud of Flanders, leaving grieving wives, mothers, sweethearts.

A mile further up the river, they tied up at the landing stage of a riverside pub and sat at one of the outside tables. 'I'm going to have the lot,' Simon said, as a waiter hovered over them. 'How about you, Penny?'

'Coffee will do for me,' she answered. 'Supper at two o'clock in the morning plays havoc with my digestion. What about you, Barbara?'

'Just coffee,' she said. 'I'm going home to Melsham today. Dad's expecting me. We are going to plan a holiday in Scotland, though we can't go until the harvest is in.'

‘Going on holiday with your father,’ Simon mocked. ‘Doesn’t he have lady friends?’

‘He’s not like that!’ Barbara said hotly. ‘Dad’s never looked at another woman. He wouldn’t.’

‘Celibate for six years, how the poor man must be suffering!’

‘Simon!’ his sister exclaimed. ‘You’re not in the army now.’

‘Sorry,’ he said contritely. ‘Tongue ran away with me.’

Penny suddenly noticed the big man standing on the towpath beside his bicycle, wearing a paint-stained check shirt and corduroy trousers. She nudged Barbara. ‘Who’s he?’ she whispered, nodding towards him. ‘He’s been standing there watching us for ages. Giving me the creeps.’

All three turned to look and George, who had heard all he wanted to hear, decided it was time to make himself scarce.

# Chapter One

BARBARA SPENT THE day wandering about the farm with the dog at her heels, exercised her mare, Jinny, across the common near her home and came back in time to have a leisurely soak in the bath, the bathroom having been converted from a small bedroom. It was a life she loved, just as she loved the rambling old farmhouse with its mellow brick and flint exterior and the yellow climbing rose that reached her bedroom window. Her mother had planted that on the day Barbara was christened. ‘I wanted to watch it grow, as you grew,’ she had told her. ‘My golden girl and my golden rose together.’

The whole house was full of treasured memories like that. Barbara didn’t believe in ghosts, but the spirit of her mother was everywhere. It was in the bricks themselves, in the decorations and furnishings, in the garden. It was beside her when she cooked. It stood over her when she painted, a silent but accurate critic. Until

her mother died she had not known a minute's anxiety, beyond having to confess to her teacher she had skimped her homework or when the cat's unwanted kittens had to be disposed of. She always cried buckets over those. Safe and loved, she never expected the blow, and when it fell, she had no one to lean on, no shoulder to cry on but her father's, and he had been grieving himself. Together they had weathered it, made a life without the loved one, and now she could look back with a smile at the pleasant memories and reminisce with her father. 'Do you remember when...'

Leaving him to go to college had caused her some soul-searching. As the daughter of a well-to-do farmer she could stay at home and paint pictures to her heart's content and wait for the plaudits if they came, but she wanted to be independent, and though her father never grumbled, she knew the farm was nothing like as prosperous as it had been in her grandfather's time and she did not want to be an added burden. She planned to teach art at a local school, where she could live at home, painting in her spare time. When she explained this, he had smiled and said if she wanted to go to college, then of course he would find the wherewithal to send her.

She pulled the plug on the cooling bathwater, wrapped herself in a towel and went to her room. Her dress was the same one she had worn at the college ball but that did not matter since there would be no one at tonight's

affair who had been there. Sweeping her blonde hair into a chignon and fastening it with combs and pins, she took a last look in the wardrobe mirror and went down to join her father.

He was waiting for her in the drawing room, standing by the hearth with one foot on the fender. At forty-four, he was a good-looking man whose thick, dark hair had the merest suggestion of grey at the temples and whose figure was supple enough to belong to a much younger man. He moved forward and took her hands to hold her at arm's length. 'I suppose it was worth the wait. I shall be the envy of every young blood there.'

Before the war the Harvest Supper, which was grander than a supper, more a dinner followed by a ball, had been held in Melsham each year at the end of the first week in September, but this was the first since the war. Barbara recalled, as a child, watching enviously as her parents went off without her, her mother looking radiant in a flowing ball gown, her father in evening dress, so much in love it hurt her to remember. Now she was going with him, but Simon's remarks preyed on her mind. 'Are you sure you want to partner me?' she asked.

'What's brought this on?' he asked with a smile. 'Are you having doubts about my staying power?'

'No, of course not.' She couldn't tell him what was in her mind, couldn't bring herself to say it aloud, as if

voicing the notion that he might prefer to take a lady friend would put the idea into his head. 'I thought you might be bored.'

'Let me tell you, my girl, I can dance the night away as well as anyone, and just because I have a grown-up daughter, doesn't make me decrepit.'

Relieved, she slipped her arm through his, smiling up at him. 'Let's go, then.'

Dinner was over and the dancing had begun when he made his way over to Barbara's table and stood before her. He was a few years older than she was, a very tall man with broad shoulders. He had dark-brown hair cut short and parted in the middle, matching dark eyes and a serious expression. Everything about him seemed serious, almost sombre, even down to his tailcoat, black cummerbund and his shining patent shoes, though they were really no different from what all the men were wearing. But there was something about him that made him different and she didn't think it was only his size.

'Miss Bosgrove, would you care to dance?'

She glanced at her father, sitting beside her. 'Go on, my dear, don't mind me.'

She rose to face him. A hand, a very big hand, went about her waist and the other took hers in a firm, dry grip. She laid her other hand on his shoulder and they whirled away in a Viennese waltz.

‘How did you know my name?’ She tilted her head to look up at him, wondering where she had seen him before.

‘It wasn’t difficult to find out. Your father is well known in Melsham, isn’t he?’

‘I suppose he is. The family has been farming in the area for generations. Do you always find out the names of people before you ask them to dance?’

‘Only if I intend to ask them out.’

She laughed. ‘That’s a new angle, I must say.’

‘It’s the truth.’ The sombre look had disappeared and he was smiling, making her realise he was handsome in a rugged kind of way. ‘I would like to see you again.’

‘But I don’t know you from Adam!’

‘It’s not Adam, but George. George Kennett.’

‘I’m Barbara.’

‘I know.’

‘What else do you know?’

‘That you live with your father at Beechcroft Farm, that you are studying at Cambridge and you have friends called Penny and Simon.’

Cambridge! The man with the bicycle, the man in the checked shirt and the paint-stained trousers, who had stared so long and so hard. ‘What were you doing in Cambridge?’

‘You noticed me?’ He had certainly noticed her. The redhead was the more glamorous of the two girls, but

it was Barbara who had caught his eye. Somewhere, sometime, he had known he had seen her before and that had been borne out when she mentioned Melsham, his own home town.

‘That’s what you intended, wasn’t it?’

‘Not at all. I was hardly dressed to impress, was I?’

‘Everyone has to work,’ she said, though her mind went back to Simon. He seemed to get along quite happily without it but, according to Penny, their father was putting pressure on him to join the family stockbroking firm. ‘What do you do?’

‘I’m a builder. I was in Cambridge converting an old house into student accommodation. It was easier and cheaper to live in lodgings and cycle back and forth than travel forty miles home every day.’ An influx of undergraduates coming back to complete their studies after serving in the armed forces needed accommodation. George had won the contract for the painting because he had put in a bid that was ridiculously low. He was single, lived at home with his mother and had no overheads. Until he had bought a van he had pushed his paint, brushes, tools and dustsheets from job to job in a handcart. He could not afford to stable and feed a horse, and besides, he was convinced the horse had had its day.

But painting and decorating were only the beginning: he had plans. One day, he would have a thriving business,

a grand house and a motor car, and not a second-hand van which had cost him thirty hard-earned pounds only the month before. Half the time he could not afford to put petrol in the tank, which was why he carried his bicycle in the back of it.

‘The work in Cambridge is finished now and I’ve just won a contract to convert a couple of old houses in Melsham town centre into flats,’ he told her. He would need help for those but he could take on casual labour and there was plenty of that about: soldiers who had survived the bloodshed had come home to find jobs hard to come by and were grateful for whatever work came their way. Lloyd George had promised homes for heroes and the government was encouraging builders by giving them grants to build them. George meant to have a slice of that, but to do that, he had to have a viable business. A strong pair of shoulders, a few brushes and a handcart hardly qualified, which was one of the reasons he had invested in the van and found a yard which he could call business premises. You couldn’t run a business from a small terrace house with no front garden and only a narrow back entry.

‘Do you live locally?’ she asked.

‘Yes, Melsham born and bred. Doesn’t my accent give me away?’

‘I didn’t notice your accent particularly.’

He was pleased to hear that: he had made a great

effort to eradicate the Norfolk accent he had grown up with; it didn't help when trying to impress the people he had to do business with.

The music ended and he took her arm to escort her back to her table. There was no sign of her father. 'I meant it, you know,' he said, sitting beside her.

'Meant what?'

'That I want to see you again.'

She laughed, unnerved by his intense gaze. 'You've got a nerve...'

'If you don't ask, you don't get,' he said. 'I've nothing to lose.' He paused and looked closely at her again. 'Have you? Anything to lose, I mean.'

'No, I suppose not.'

'Would you like me to fetch you a glass of wine?'

'Yes please.'

She watched him go. It was difficult to tell his age but she surmised he must be in his late twenties. He had lost the slimness of youth, if he had ever had it, and was well developed and self-assured. A big man in every sense. He paid for the wine and came back, carefully carrying two glasses through the throng of people who crowded at the edge of the floor, waiting for the band to begin playing the next dance.

She thanked him and began to sip the bubbly wine. 'Don't you have a partner?' she asked as he resumed his seat.

He smiled. 'Now, would I have brought a girl with me when I intended to ask another out?'

'You came with that intention?'

'Of course. I thought I'd made that clear.'

She laughed in an embarrassed way. 'I don't know what to make of you.'

'I saw you in Cambridge and heard you talking about Melsham and decided I'd like to get to know you. It was no good mooning about because I hadn't the gumption to do anything about it, was it? I go for what I want. Always. Do you blame me for that?'

He didn't seem the sort of person to moon anywhere. He was a pushy, overconfident young man who fancied his chances. 'No, I suppose not.'

'Then have dinner with me on Saturday evening.'

'I don't know...'

'Dinner, nothing more, just a meal. At The Crown. I'll book a table, shall I?'

'So long as you understand I'm not making any kind of commitment.'

'Of course not. I wouldn't expect you to.' He rose to go. 'I'll pick you up at seven.'

She didn't tell him her address: he was bound to know it.