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Florence Grace

Written by Tracy Rees

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Florence Grace

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For my wonderful parents, as ever, with all my love,
and for all the Old Rillas and Laceys who have helped
make my life magical

Chapter One



The damn pony had bolted again. It had to be the most wicked, contrary creature in the West Wivel Hundred. We had been only half an hour on the moors when a pigeon flashed up in front of us, one foolish, startled creature before another. The pony plunged and vanished from under me, sending me sprawling in the mud. From there I watched his hairy white backside disappear into the distance.

'Coward!' I yelled. 'It were a *pigeon*!'

A sea mist had come up sudden and swift. Peaks and dips, track and rock, wholesome ground and steaming, stinking bog were all cloaked alike in the same milky vagueness. Only someone very intrepid or foolhardy would proceed. I considered myself neither but I did not have time to waste waiting out a sea mist. It could last minutes or days and I was already late. A whole day late, in fact.

I wasn't even sure why I had stayed the night in Truro. Lately, life seemed to have become a tyrannical series of

irrational impulses I felt compelled to follow – and a consequent series of exhausting questions to which I had no answers. Is this what womanhood was? If so, I begged I might put off the honour a few more years.

I did not doubt that I would find my way home – the moors were home to me in a way that nobody else could understand – but the mist was a dod-blasted nuisance, clammy and cold and snaking. Stephen would certainly say he told me so. Damnable pony. Let it slip on a rock and break its neck or stumble into a bog and drown in thick black mud, the flighty creature.

So I fumed, stomping along, thirteen years old and knowing I was in the wrong. I wouldn't have cared *how* long I was out there with the mists and the mud and the moor spirits, but for knowing that Nan would be worried. Last night was the first we had spent apart since Da had died.

The previous day I had gone to Truro with Stephen and Hesta for an exciting opportunity – so it seemed to us then, young and inexperienced as we were. This opportunity had come from the most unlikely of sources: my old schoolroom enemy, Trudy Penny.

She had sent me, of all things, a note! I do not believe any inhabitant of our tiny hamlet had ever received correspondence before. It was written on white paper and enclosed in an envelope with a waxen seal. It read thus:

Florrie,

On fifth September coming, my uncle and aunt, Mr and Mrs Beresford of Truro, are having a party to celebrate their son's engagement. They are short several staff due to household changes – bad timing, says my aunt who is losing her mind over it. They need hands and I thought you and your friends might like to earn a little money. They will pay sixpence each person for the day. You would be helping the housekeeper at their house in Lemon Street. If you are interested, please let me know by the end of the week and I will tell them you will come.

Regards
Trudy

I immediately knew I would go. This wasn't one of my 'premonitions' – no special intuition told me it was so – it was simply that I desperately wanted to. It would take time, however, for reality to catch up with me. Hesta and Stephen were unadventurous souls who required much persuading: I said 'sixpence' many times. Nan, who had nothing in the world but me, needed even more convincing. Again, I said 'sixpence'. I patiently argued away every worry and doubt, but suffice it to say I eventually bent them all to my will. If obstinacy runs in families, I have a double share.

I thought it was to be an isolated adventure. If I had known what that gentle party in Truro was to foreshadow, I might never have gone. Then again, that wouldn't have made any difference to anything.

And so we went to Truro, Hesta and I on Stephen's father's pony, and Stephen walking by its side. I had seen towns before – I had been to Lostwithiel and Fowey – but I had not imagined such an air of gentility and prosperity. I had never seen a place like Lemon Street in Truro. It was cobbled and broad and there was no mud. Horses and carts and even *carriages* rattled up and down. Gentlefolk strolled its length, smiling at each other and saying 'good day'. It was a pleasant, sunlit afternoon in early summer as though even the weather had been arranged with gracious intent.

The houses were built of grey stone and adjoined each to the next as though stuck together. They would never blow away in a gale. Their residents would never have to worry about the roof holding up in heavy rain. The three of us stood in the middle of the street, gawping, until a carriage nearly bowled us down. Stephen pulled us onto the pavement, a thing we had not seen before, and we stood before a splendid house. It seemed impossibly audacious that we should enter.

'Is Trudy Penny sure about this?' demanded Hesta. 'Is this some sort of mischief she's playing? Mayhap they'll throw us out and back we go to Braggenstones tonight.'

'Well, we can't stand here all day,' I said, tugging my arms from my friends' and climbing the steps to seize the lion's-head door knocker. Of course, we should have gone to the back, but we did not know – we had no experience of houses large enough to warrant two entryways.

We were shown to the kitchens and told what to do. Everyone was kind enough and I think the housekeeper was sufficiently flustered to see us less as muddy, inexperienced waifs from the country and more as angels of salvation.

The next few hours passed in a flurry of orders and there was no time to do anything but respond to them. If that were my life, if I had been a servant in such a place, I do not think I could have borne the endless direction. But for that once, because it was all so new and lively and different, I flew about with a bright eye and endless energy, earning myself more than a few words of praise. I caught glimpses of Hesta from time to time. Her beautiful white-blonde hair was tied back and her tiny face looked resigned and a little miserable. But then she had orders enough at home. I only caught sight of Stephen once and he looked confused.

But I was happy. It was a new challenge and I was doing well. I was helping, making a difference. I had imagined I might feel lonely or homesick so far from all I knew, but I loved being a new Florrie, a Florrie who could turn her hand to anything and thrive in a completely new place. And when the housekeeper popped her head through the door to announce that the guests had started to arrive, a ripple of excitement ran through the servants.

Suddenly everyone was dipping hands in a pail of water to lay cooling palms on flushed cheeks, and tucking wisps of sweaty hair back under their caps and wraps. Aprons were

untied and skirts smoothed. Then, two or three at a time, the staff were permitted to creep out to 'the nook', a hidden space from where one could see the gentlefolk coming to the dance.

'Come on, Florrie, our turn,' one of the kitchen maids said after a while.

'Me?' I was thrilled. I had thought perhaps only the regular staff of the house could expect such an indulgence. I followed Vera along the passage and up a small flight of stairs to the side door of a large dining room. It had a sort of outer area, curtained off from the room by heavy, thick drapes of plum velvet; this was mostly filled by a table bearing a spare bowl of punch, crystal glasses, white china plates and other things that the guests might need replaced in an instant. We squeezed into this hidden space and peeped our noses past the curtain to see a world of colour and light.

I watched, spellbound, as the gentlemen bowed and the ladies sparkled. I feasted my eyes on pink and peach and ivory gowns. I had never seen such things; even my schoolteacher's pretty pastel dresses were simple compared with these. I longed to touch them and absorb their lustrous sheen. And the jewels! I did not even have names for what I saw then. Deep green, blood red and clear as sunlight in dew; they looked like something from another world, no world that *I* knew.

And then, to watch the people! This, more than the spectacle, was what enthralled. To see disdain concealed behind a

smooth mask of politeness, the mischievous sparkle in the eyes of the demure younger ladies, the self-importance of the moustachioed gentlemen – I could have watched all night. When the band struck up I was in seventh heaven. The way they curtseyed and whirled from partner to partner was nothing like the heavy-footed, red-faced country dances I had been to once or twice in Boconnoc.

And the *music*! I could hardly believe my ears. All my life had afforded me in the way of music so far was Rod Plover sawing away at his fiddle, or occasionally the lusty voices of my neighbours raised in a chorus of country songs. But sometimes in my mind I had heard something I couldn't describe – a tinkling rise and fall of notes, whole passages of music that danced on and on like the wind . . . I had tried to describe the experience to Hesta more than once but all she did was screw up her little face in confusion.

'What can it be, Hesta?'

'It just be your fancy again. You're strange, Florrie Buckley, for all I love you.'

But I knew it was important, just as I knew many other things I could not explain and for which I had no proof. And that night, squashed into the nook next to the punch bowl, I heard for the first time 'my' music in real life.

'What is that?' I asked Vera, tugging at her arm and pointing.

'Why, that be a piano, child,' she said.

'Pi-ah-no,' I breathed in wonder, as though she had said 'Elysium,' or 'Olympus'.

Vera must have seen something in my face for she patted my arm and said, 'Stay a while.' She was soon replaced by another maid who crammed herself in beside me and stood breathing heavily in my ear while we watched.

I tried to impress the sights on my memory, for I could imagine no way that I would ever see them again. As my eyes roved over the crowd they fell on a young man and I felt a little tug at my heart, another moment of uncanny recognition . . .

It was the kindness of his smile that caught me first. He was attractive, yes, with curling hair like yellow gorse, clear brown eyes like moorland pools and a lovely face caught somewhere between manhood and boyhood. That drew me, for I felt so in between myself at that time; from the sunny smile on his face he looked as though he were handling it far more gracefully than I. His patient expression, the way he looked upon each person as though he were truly interested in what they had to say, impressed me in a room full of masks and formalities. As I watched, a number of proud mamas and papas introduced their young daughters to him. At last he caught one by the hand and led her into the dance.

I stifled a giggle. That was the most ungainly girl I had ever seen! And my hero, though moderately graceful, was not so skilled a partner that he could compensate for her. Together they stumbled gamely through a gentle waltz, bumping into

pinch-faced couples and sending them staggering. They were a liability on the floor. When the waltz finished and a lively polka struck up they should have known to retire, but they started leaping and skipping with all the poise of a pair of newborn calves. I covered my eyes briefly, then took my hand down just in time to see them hurtle off-balance. Inevitably the young lady tripped in her skirts and tumbled to the ground, knocking into a trio of chairs upon which were perched more circumspect young ladies – and sending them flying.

I was about to roar with laughter when my companion in the nook flew to her aid. I remembered that I was there to work after all, so I chased after her. The girl's father was at her side in a trice, shooting a fierce look at the young man and helping his daughter to her feet.

'Here, girl, help me,' he said to the other maid. 'Take her arm. Come, Fanny, lean on us. Let us seat you somewhere quiet.'

The little cluster limped off, leaving me standing without purpose in this sparkling room full of people who weren't like me. I noticed one, however, who was doing as I had longed to, and rocking with laughter. He was another young man, sitting in the farthest corner of the room. He shook with a wicked mirth. I grinned, then looked away.

'Be *you* all right, sir?' I asked the golden young man, since no one else had. Everyone seemed to hold him responsible for the catastrophe.

'*Really*, young Sanderson!' muttered more than one portly gentleman, and 'Sanderson, you *must* take more care!' admonished a number of ladies. It seemed hardly fair.

He looked at me in great surprise but before he could answer, a forbidding-looking woman with a sweep of dark hair bore him off. His mother? I could see no resemblance, and yet she behaved very proprietorially towards him. I took advantage of being universally ignored to slip back behind the curtain and continue my evening's entertainment.

A dance or two later, I was thinking that I really should get back to the kitchen when I spied the hapless Sanderson standing alone near my alcove. On a mad impulse I tweaked back the curtain and hissed at him. He turned to me in astonishment and I beckoned him in. Casting a quick look around, he ducked behind the drape and I let it fall again, concealing us.

'Hello,' I grinned, well pleased with my prize. When we were six, Stephen had proposed to me inside a hen coop. This was better.

'Hello,' he said, terribly politely. He was older than he had looked from a distance, I saw, almost grown-up really. I should never have accosted him so had I realised.

'I saw your young lady fall,' I observed. Perhaps it was not my most tactful moment.

He coloured, red as a farm boy. 'She's not my young lady, she's a family friend. I'm afraid I'm not the most accomplished at the polka.'

'*Pish*. It were her. She were terrible. You done well to keep her upright that long. Why is everyone blaming you fer it? Why are *you*?'

'It's the gentlemanly thing to do. One does not admit that young ladies have, er, faults of any description.'

'Truly?' I was intrigued. 'That's stupid, en't it? Of course young ladies got faults. They be people, like everyone else. I got faults. I got heaps of 'em.'

He looked amused and confused both at once. 'Oh, I'm sure you don't.'

'Oh, I do! Heaps!' I fell silent, realising it was not the most impressive introduction I could have made. 'I got heaps of things I do well, though, too.'

'I am certain of it. Like what?'

'Like reading. I can read very well. And I can write. And I can make medicines out of wildflowers and recipes and *spells*.' The last claim was not entirely true but I wanted to impress this pleasant, sweet-smelling young man.

'Spells! Gracious. How clever.' He looked a little nervous but smiled that good-natured smile again.

'Would you like some punch, sir?' I pressed on, trying everything I could think of to keep him from going. I gestured at the spare bowl on the table and ladled him a glass before he could answer me.

'Thank you.' He took it and peered round the curtain. 'Goodness. This is a splendid hidey-hole, isn't it?'

''Tis, aye. I should get back really. They let me come up and watch only I don't think I was meant to be so long.'

'You work for the Beresfords?'

'Oh no, sir, I'm from Braggenstones.'

'Bragg . . . ?'

'You wouldn't know it. It's in the middle of nowhere. I'm just helping out here for this one night. I never been anywhere like this before.'

'And do you like it?'

'Very much, sir. Do you live in Truro?'

'I live in London. I'm here with my aunt and my brother, representing the family.'

'Which is your brother, sir?'

He smiled even wider and beckoned me to his side so that I could peep out with him. I could feel the warmth of his clean, exquisitely clad body next to mine and relished the feeling of comradeship with someone I considered must walk two feet above the earth.

'Over there, by the punch bowl.'

It was the wicked young man I had spied earlier.

'He be nothing like you!' I exclaimed. It was true. The brother was a funny-looking thing. He didn't have the erect posture and serene expression of the other gentlemen, but sat hunched over like a troll, scowling. People gave him a wide berth. He had a wing of smooth silky hair, as dark as his brother's was fair, which fell across half his face, and his skin was sallow.

'Younger or older than you?' I asked, guessing younger.

'Older by two years. He is the heir and I am the insurance,' he laughed.

I didn't understand him. 'I never seen a boy so miserable,' I observed.

'Oh, Turlington's not miserable. He's resentful. He generally likes to do whatever he pleases and he did not want to come here. My grandfather blackmailed him, so he's sulking.'

I looked again with interest. I liked to do whatever I pleased as well. 'I like your name. It suits you.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Sanderson. Sand. You're all golden like sand.'

He blushed a little. 'Well. Thank you. You're the first person who's ever said that. Normally they ask, "Why do you and your brother have such extraordinary names?" '

'Well, why do you? Sorry, but I must ask now you've said it.'

'It's because my family is so very proud that they'll only marry women from other fine families. Then, to preserve the name of those families, they confer the surnames as Christian names upon us boys.'

I must have looked confused, for he elaborated.

'My mother's name was Isabella Sanderson. I was their first-born son, so I was named Sanderson. Turlington's mother was called Belle Turlington. It's a way for my family to brag about their excellent connections.'

'How odd. Only, don't you and Turlington have the *same* mother, if you be brothers?'

'A good question. The Graces are a complicated family. You see—'

But I did not come to see, for his fierce aunt swept past in that moment. 'Have you seen Sanderson?' she demanded of the gentleman at her side. 'Where has that boy got to? Between his clumsiness and Turlington's appalling manners, I don't know what the Graces are coming to.'

He pulled a face. 'I had better go. I mustn't be found in here. But first may I have the pleasure of knowing your name?'

I would not have wanted to be found by that witch either. I curtseyed. 'Florrie Buckley, short for Florence, sir.'

'A pleasure to meet you, Miss Florence.'

I liked being called Florence. She sounded like an altogether different girl from Florrie Buckley of Braggenstones.

'Thank you, this was a welcome respite,' said Sanderson. And he vanished, back to the world whence he came.

When I got back to the kitchen there was a fine hurrah going on, and Hesta was at the centre of it. She had fallen and cracked her head on the stone floor, bled all over it and fainted. She had been tended to and deemed unfit to continue working by the doctor. Mr Beresford had been summoned. He was stooping with his hands on his knees in front of Hesta, who lolled in a chair by the fire. He offered to send the three of us home in his private carriage, or else to put us up for the night.

'Hesta! Are you all right?' I cried, rushing to her side. Her sweet face was wan and her blue eyes vague.

'I be all right, Florrie.' She took my hand bravely. 'Only I do feel queer and I should so like to be at home in my own bed.'

'Of course, dear, of course,' I soothed her, though my heart sank. 'That be very kind of you, sir, thank you,' I added to Mr Beresford.

'Naturally, child, naturally. I feel terrible that such an accident occurred when you have come all this way to help us.' I thought what a kind man he was and wondered how he could be related to horrible Trudy Penny. 'There were three of you, I understand? A young man?'

'Aye, sir, Stephen Trevian.'

Mr Beresford nodded. 'Mrs Chambers, please fetch Stephen Trevian at once. I am sending these three children back to the moors. Wallace, fetch the carriage. Now, young ladies, I must return to my guests but I wish you a good journey. And a speedy recovery to you, poor child.' He sloped off and I held Hesta's hand and murmured words of comfort until Stephen appeared, all concern.

'I'm concerned enough myself,' muttered Mrs Chambers. ''Tis a long night ahead and I needed the hands. You do *all* have to go, I suppose?'

'Aye,' said Stephen at once. 'We came here under the promise we'd stick together. We can't let Hesta go in a carriage alone,

and she's not fit besides.' He stood over Hesta protectively, so stocky and serious, so sure of right and wrong, that Mrs Chambers looked resigned.

But I had glimpsed a shred of hope. Hesta was looking pinker already. Stephen was as staunch and reliable as anyone could wish in a friend . . .

'I would stay, ma'am,' I ventured, 'but that I couldn't travel back over the moors on my own at night. My grandmother would skin me, and that's a fact.'

My hope was reflected in her face. 'If you were willing, child, you could stay the night. You could share a room with Sarah, there's a spare bed. You could help in the morning with the tidying and I'd pay you another sixpence besides the one that's promised. You're a good worker, you've been moving like lightning all day.'

'Florrie, no!' said Stephen at once. 'What would Nan say? She'd skin me, leaving you here all alone. We must go together.'

'But Stephen, how will we get the pony back?'

'Well, he can run alongside the carriage, I expect.'

'He'd never keep up with Mr Beresford's fine horses. No, I'll stay, and help out here and earn another sixpence for Nan. I won't be on my own –' I waved my hand around the crowded kitchen – 'and I've somewhere safe to stay. I'll ride back in the morning, when I've done all that Mrs Chambers wants.'

'Oh, child,' she said wistfully. 'If only you would!'

'She can't,' said Stephen.

'I will,' I said.

'Florrie, *no*,' added Hesta. Always agreeing with Stephen she was. 'This en't home. You don't know what will happen. You can't stay without us. Nan would *burst*! Come in the carriage with us.'

A boy stuck his head around the door. 'Carriage ready,' he called.

'No,' I decided. 'We said we'd do this and I want to see it through. Hesta, you can't help, you're hurt and you're better off at home. Stephen, of course you must go with her, she needs someone. But I'm fine and I like it here and I want the sixpence. I'll be back in Braggenstones before lunch tomorrow. Nothing to worry about. Off with you both now. Hesta, be well, my dear.'

I gave her a hug as she wavered to her feet and Stephen cast me a very displeased look. It was his nature to look after people and by splitting us up I was putting him in a very uncomfortable position; he could not take care of us both. But Mrs Chambers was bustling me off and I was put to work washing plates. I looked over my shoulder to see my friends walking out slowly, Hesta leaning on Stephen, his arm fast about her shoulder. Then I turned back to my dirty suds.

★

Secretly I'd hoped to see that strange pair of brothers again, but in the end it was an unexciting evening. I washed dishes, I peeled vegetables. I ran back and forth, a thousand miles or so, I reckoned, carrying trays and stacks of crockery and towers of linen for the overnight guests. I dropped into the spare bed in Sarah's tiny attic room at three in the morning, so tired I could not sleep.

'I saw that dark-haired Mrs Grace tonight. She looks fierce,' I said, hoping for conversation.

'Ooh, that nephew of hers with the golden curls!' Sarah murmured at once. 'What a fine-looking gentleman. Mind you, I wouldn't go with him no matter his pretty face. He's a Grace, you know, and that means trouble. Oh, *he* may be nice enough but the rest of them? Trouble.'

'Really? Why so?' I asked, yawning, as if my insides were not sparking to know. But Sarah was already asleep, flat on her back as she lay, and not another word was to be had from her.

I lay on that unfamiliar mattress, every muscle aching, my head spinning. My body was fizzing like cider. I had never had such a feeling of being so incredibly alert, like an animal ready for anything, yet so tired, tired, tired . . .

At half past five Sarah was up, exactly one minute before a loud bell clanged through the attic. She was halfway into her dress before I had managed to sit up, let alone muster any questions. I did not have to change, for I had slept in my dress, but

I would have to wash and see to my hair before appearing in front of my temporary employers.

I resumed my duties – though at half the pace of the night before. A lavish breakfast was already being prepared for the guests, despite there being no sign of any of *them* so early.

When everything was ready and there was a lull before the guests descended, Mrs Chambers took pity on me. 'You've worked well, especially considering you've never done it before,' she approved. 'We can manage now. Go home, child, you look fit to drop and you've a way to go.'

By then, I was ready to come away. I thanked her – and thanked her again when she placed not a shilling but a florin into my hand. I could not wait to hand *that* over to Nan. That would surely button her nagging about my staying overnight in Truro. A footman showed me to the stables.

I was saddling Stephen's father's pony when I heard a rustle in the straw made by something much larger than a mouse. I whipped round to see a boy sit up, straw in his hair, looking around in confusion.

I jumped, but recovered myself quickly. 'Morning,' I said tartly, smoothing out the girth.

He frowned and scratched his head. 'Morning. Is this . . . the *stables*?'

I snorted, looking pointedly at stalls full of straw, horses

and steaming heaps of dung. 'What makes you think that then?'

He rolled his eyes. 'I *mean*, what am I doing here?'

I shrugged and took the reins. 'How should I know?'

'Too much champagne,' he groaned, getting to his feet and looking all around him. I recognised him then. Turlington Grace. Brother of the delightful Sanderson.

'I know you!' I exclaimed. 'At least, I know who you are. I met your brother Sanderson last night. I'm Florrie Buckley. Florence.'

He squinted at me. 'Ah! You're the one he told me about. I wish *I'd* been kidnapped by a beautiful girl last night. But my biggest adventure was drinking too much. And ending up here.'

'Don't sound much of an adventure to me. And aren't you too young to be drinking? You don't look much older 'n me.'

'How old are you?'

'Thirteen.'

He looked thunderous. 'I'm almost eighteen! Everyone thinks I'm younger but I'm not. For the love of God! I'm a grown man.'

'If you say so. Well, I must be off. Say hello to your handsome brother for me.'

'Where are you going?'

'Home.'

'Where's home? Truro?'

'No. I live in Braggenstones. A tiny place way over on the moors. Long way from here.'

'And you're going to ride there alone?'

'O' course. I do it all the time,' I lied.

'Won't you be afraid? I heard the moors are full of restless spirits and vile marshes.'

'Aye, that they are, but that don't worry me. I'm no city girl.'

He came over to me and stared into my face. 'I can see that,' he said, and I sensed that it was a compliment. I could smell the alcohol pouring off him.

Turlington Grace had brown eyes, darker than his brother's, dark like moorland peat, fertile and precarious. I could see a thousand conflicting thoughts doing battle there. I wondered what his life was, his history, and I was suddenly acutely aware that his body was near to mine. Even huddling close to his brother in the nook had not felt like this. Last night, Turlington had looked so shrunken and hunched I was surprised to realise now that he was taller than me, much taller, and everyone in Braggenstones called *me* a young birch tree. He was slender, where his brother had been robust. I felt suddenly sorry for him, and I did not know why. The moment stretched on and there was an intent silence between us.

Sad. Sorry. In need of a friend. The words sprang to my mind unbidden.

'Turlington Grace,' I murmured, for want of anything else to say.

'Grace,' he agreed bitterly, which I thought was strange. Then he did an even stranger thing. He dipped his head and rested his forehead on mine so that we stood, brow to brow, for a minute at least. Impatient, the pony butted us and we stumbled. I fell against him and he caught me in his arms, stronger than he looked. I suddenly wished I was not wearing a dress I had been working and sleeping in. He set me back gently to the vertical, for which I felt grateful, since my legs failed me in that moment and I could not do it for myself. His nostrils, I noted, were slightly flared and his eyes were quite lovely. He still had straw in his wing of dark hair and I reached up and picked it out.

'I'd better be off,' I said, wishing he'd detain me, but he stepped back at once. 'Are you all right?' I added, for he looked lost and lonely. A strange way for a girl of thirteen to feel for a grown man. But then my soul was hundreds of years old, they told me.

He nodded. 'I'm fine. Thank you, young witch of the moors. And will *you* be all right, out there with the ghosts and ghouls. Can I offer any assistance? I or my brother?'

I imagined the pair of them, in their fine suits and clutching a champagne glass each, escorting me over the moors, and giggled. 'No thank you, Turlington. You stop drinking so much now. It can't be good for you, not knowing how you come to wake up in a stable.'

I led the pony outside then leapt aboard and clattered off down Lemon Street. I was soon lost – I could find my way much better with trees and stars and rivers for landmarks than amid streets and houses and crowds. I was distracted, too, by my encounters with two such different, beautiful boys. Funny how, even then, Sanderson was *sir* – a young gentleman – but Turlington was always Turlington.

Half an hour on the moors and the pigeon flew and the pony bolted and now here I was. Walking through the mists towards home. It was a devil of a fog; I couldn't see more than six inches ahead. But I had been walking these moors all my life. They had been my refuge through every trial and tragedy. I felt an affinity with them that I could not explain to the satisfaction of Nan or anyone I knew. Only Old Rilla – our local wise woman and charmer – understood. She said the moors were my soul-home: the place I could never be lost. When I couldn't see I simply relied on my other senses – I could feel the thudding or squelching of my boots, the tussocks or smoothness of the way, and I knew what sort of land I was on. I could hear the trickle of the streams and knew which way they were flowing. I could smell the trees on the slopes and the sea from the peaks. My senses were unfailing guides, along with the spirits Turlington had spoken of.

Marsh spirits were widely acknowledged to thrive in this

lonely place. They were held to be malcontents who liked to lure, torment and otherwise play havoc with humans. And it *was* true that people died on the moors every month. The people of Lostwithiel and Boconnoc swore it was a diabolical place. Even the Bodmin folk avoided it and they knew something of desolate moorland.

But to me these spirits were only ever friends. I felt them all around me and it would no sooner occur to me to fear them than it would to fear my neighbours in Braggenstones. The moors were their place, and somehow also my place, and that made us kin.

While I walked that day I thought long and hard about the two Grace boys. It had all felt so momentous – going to Truro, making a good impression on the housekeeper, meeting those strange brothers. It seemed certain that it would not be the end of the story. But common sense said that it must and would be. For what did I expect? That the ambrosial Sanderson would remember the outlandish village name he had heard just once and come cantering over the moors on a white horse to claim me? It was clearly impossible, yet somehow my imagination sought about frantically to *make* it possible. Or perhaps that the rebellious Turlington would come striding out of a storm, billowing smoke, and snatch me by the hand and throw me down in the heather? Even while I blushed at my own inclinations I knew that was not about to happen either.

It seemed clear to me that I had fallen in love with at least one of them, that I would certainly never see them again and that my life would be the poorer and greyer for it. It was agony. I longed to go straight to Old Rilla and tell her everything; she could always help me understand, she always helped me see a bigger picture than I could conjure alone. But I knew that today, at least, I could not go. As I neared home, I could feel that Nan was worried, so I picked up my feet and hurried at last.

Was it a gift or a curse, my ability to sense so acutely what others were feeling? I have never been sure. I couldn't always do it from a distance, and sometimes it came only in small, barely comprehended flashes. But that day I could feel everything Nan had endured since the previous night when Stephen and Hesta had returned to Braggenstones without me and she had cuffed Stephen's ears for leaving me behind.

I knew that the stupid pony had trotted into Braggenstones, halter trailing, legs coated in thick white mud like columns of clay. I knew Nan was even now pushing away thoughts that I might be lying with my head broken on a rock. I knew that when she saw me appear on the horizon, her heart would lift in relief. So I could not tarry, not even to go and see Old Rilla. No, I could not keep Nan in her anxiety any longer.

At last, I mounted the last ridge above Braggenstones. It was late afternoon. The sun burst forth brilliant and brash, mocking my journey, mocking the expanse of moor that lay behind,

still shifting and sifting in mist. It was like two different worlds, me standing on the threshold between them. Truro lay behind me and Braggenstones, all familiar and solid and safe, lay ahead. I paused for a minute and closed my eyes, feeling the sun on my face and the clammy mist still cold and clinging to my back. Then I stepped forward into the sunshine.