Part One

"And so with the sunshine and the great bursts of leaves growing on the trees, just as things grow in fast movies, I had that familiar conviction that life was beginning over again with the summer."

— F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

CHAPTER ONE

June, 1929

The morning of Alice's wedding dawns bright and clear. It is, naturally, the perfect summer morning: nothing but birdsong and pastel-blue skies and the whisper of a breeze rolling in from the sea. Anything less would be completely unacceptable for Alice's big day. When I wake, Alice is already up, her bed rumpled and empty. Aside from the imprint of her head on the pillow, there is no other sign of her. Pulling on a pair of shorts and one of Pa's old shirts, I slip my feet into my battered plimsolls and make a beeline for the kitchen. It is early, but delicious smells are drifting up the stairs to meet me.

"Lou! Lou!" I am greeted by a trio of rowdy little boys in overalls, barefoot, with mouths full of bread and butter.

The triplets are three years old, and until the recent birth of Anthea (usually known simply as "the baby"), they were the youngest members of my ramshackle family. I am the second oldest, after Alice, who is nineteen, then after me comes Freya, who is fifteen, Tom, who is eleven, then the triplets and Anthea. Eight children in all, and Pa says that who knows but there might have been more if it hadn't been for the war, and we should thank God for small mercies. I'm fairly sure he's only joking, but he does sometimes look surprised by the number of children that tumble in and out of our small farmhouse, as if we are the result of an absurd magic trick rather than his own flesh and blood.

In the kitchen, the triplets, Joe, Max and Davy, are finishing their breakfast at the long table while Midge bustles about preparing the wedding feast that the village will enjoy later, the baby squawking cheerfully on her hip. Midge has a smudge of flour on the end of her nose, and a look of determined concentration in her eyes as she wrestles, one-handed, with enormous pats of golden butter and the collection of old tea tins that contain sugar and spices. I know better than to ask if she needs help.

"Where's Alice?" I ask over the noise instead, helping myself to a piece of bread and smearing it with Midge's famous ginger jam.

"Skipped out of the house an hour ago on the hunt for flowers," Midge says, in her gruff little voice. Midge is my mother, and even though her real name is Mary, everyone calls her Midge, including her husband and her

children. At a dab over five foot tall, she is a reassuring, if tiny, force of nature. When I stand beside her I feel gangly and oversized. While she answers my question, Midge is stirring something together in a bowl with a burnished silver knife.

Midge always uses this knife to bake, and once, when our aunt Irene witnessed this, her face took on an expression of horror and she cried, "Ah, Midge! But you're never supposed to stir with a knife . . . stirring with a knife, that's stirring up trouble!"

Midge looked wholly unconcerned, replying placidly, "Well, then, I've been stirring up trouble so long it's hardly worth worrying about now, is it?" before carrying on just as before.

I don't know if it is because of the knife or not, but no one can cook like Midge; she's famous for it. Pa says he proposed to Midge over her Stargazy pie, which sounds quite romantic, I suppose, if you don't know that Stargazy pie is made with pilchards whose heads stick through the pastry and stare up at you with mournful eyes. I don't think I would like a mournful pilchard to be in attendance at *my* engagement, but then I am, as yet, fairly inexperienced in the art of romance. Apart from in books, of course. You can learn an *awful* lot from books . . . but it has always seemed highly unlikely that I'd stumble across any of the dashing heroes I read about on the streets of Penlyn, so what do I know? Perhaps with the right man a pilchard pie can be sheer poetry. Midge certainly seems to think so, and she laughs a pleased, pink laugh whenever Pa tells the story.

I cut myself another piece of bread and munch on the crust. A wail from the triplets alerts me to their own breadless state, and I prepare slices for each of them, although they're more interested in the bread as a jam delivery system than anything else. With three sticky faces enjoying their second breakfast of the day, a hush falls over the kitchen. In this moment of relative calm my thoughts turn – as they often seem to these days – to what is going on at the Cardew House.

For as long as I can remember that place has held me firmly under its spell. The island it stands on is separated from the mainland by a cobbled causeway. The road vanishes and rematerializes as the tide rushes in and out, submerging it entirely as if it were never there at all, or leaving it exposed and shockingly solid. There is something magical about this process, I think, the disappearance and reappearance of the ancient road – it comes and goes with the tide, but each time it emerges from the water it feels like a surprise. Its peculiar magic means that half of the time the house is cut off, a world of its own, remote and separate from the bustling life of our tiny fishing village.

When I had returned home, bedraggled and elated from my near-escape several months earlier, it was to the news that the owner of the Cardew House, Robert Cardew, was planning to holiday there for the whole summer, and so had come to look the place over for repairs.

Even in deepest, darkest rural Cornwall, we've heard all about Robert Cardew. Perhaps it is his connection to the village that sends whispers of his wild lifestyle and his

fashionable friends snaking furiously from door to door through the winding lanes of Penlyn, but I think that even if it wasn't for the Cardew House, Alice and I would still be fascinated by the exploits of this man and his glittering band of bright young things. We devour the society pages, giddy on the glimpse they give us into a world so different to our own. It seems outrageous that a boy of twenty-three – not so much older than us – should have so much, that his life could be so completely unlike ours. When Lord Cardew died a couple of years ago the village was agog to see if the young heir would turn up, but there was no sign of him, no hint that he even remembered the old house lying empty and unloved. Until now. I lick the jam from my fingers thoughtfully. We have seen the photographs of him, of course, of the outlandish clothes, the outrageous parties, and we know that Robert will bring his fiancée, the *deeply* glamorous American heiress Laurie Miller, along with a menagerie of other exotic creatures, when he comes to stay.

According to the papers the couple have been engaged for about six months now. They've been positively splashed about on the pages. They've attended every party, every fashionable event, and they've looked *spectacular* while doing it. Alice and I have followed their romance closely. To us, they are paper dolls, characters in a story, and each week we eagerly await the next instalment.

And soon, I remind myself with a delicious thrill, the subject of all this juicy gossip will be right here in Penlyn. It's hard to imagine a less likely place for such birds of paradise to roost. Our village is a world away from the

bustling metropolis of nightclubs and dazzling parties that Robert Cardew usually inhabits.

But they *are* coming. Builders and decorators have been in and out of the house with increasing frequency over the last couple of weeks. Unfortunately, they all seem to be coming down from London, so no one in the village knows a thing about what is going on inside. This has been the subject of much ire because local workmen feel snubbed, and there has been some dark muttering that the "young people" who own the house now aren't behaving properly by bringing in outsiders. We're all also very nosy and, truthfully, the whole village is fizzing like so many overeager bottles of ginger beer to know what the place looks like and exactly when the new arrivals are due. Of course I haven't been able to visit the house again, not since my escape on that rainy afternoon. I did try once, but already the place was teeming with people and I was lucky to get away unseen.

My thoughts are interrupted by the triplets, who are being rackety, and the baby, whose squawks appear to be building up to a wail. Chaos seems inevitable, but this is the moment that Alice drifts in looking like an actual Greek goddess, and everything stops as she enters the room.

A halo of blue cornflowers crowns her golden head and her arms are full of trailing honeysuckle and delicate pink roses. "Give me a hand, Lou!" she huffs, rather spoiling the picture she's created by unceremoniously dumping the fragrant bundle into my arms and pinching the bread from between my fingers in one swift move.

"Where did you get all these roses?" I ask, admiring the fat, perfect blooms as I lay them gently on the kitchen table.

"From Mrs Penrith's garden," Alice mumbles through a mouthful of bread and jam, and a dimple appears in her left cheek.

I raise my eyebrows.

"Alice Trevelyan." Midge stops her stirring and waves the knife rather menacingly in Alice's direction. "Tell me that you didn't steal those flowers from Susan Penrith's rose garden! You know she's so particular about them."

"I didn't *steal* them," says Alice, and she sounds as if she's offended by the very idea, even though it wouldn't exactly be out of character. "I *asked* for them, perfectly nicely, and Mrs Penrith *gave* them to me." She pops the last mouthful of bread into her mouth and chews slowly. "It is my wedding day, after all," she finishes, and the expression on her face is one Midge would describe as "butter wouldn't melt".

It should really come as no surprise that Mrs Penrith parted with her prizewinning roses at Alice's request. It's difficult to refuse my sister anything when she decides to be charming. One reason for this is that Alice is a beauty, plain and simple. People sometimes say we look a little alike when they're trying to be kind, but where Alice's hair shines smooth and golden blonde, mine is curly and more of a muddy brown with just a touch of red. (Though sadly not enough to be described as auburn, let alone the longed-for and deeply romantic "titian".) Alice's eyes are as blue as the cornflowers she is wearing on her head, and

mine are a murky, troubled grey. Alice's skin maintains a peaches-and-cream complexion no matter how much time she spends outdoors, while mine tans unfashionably and freckles scatter themselves across my nose with great abandon, despite my liberal and frequent application of lemon juice. We are the same height and we share similar features, but there is no question that I am my sister's shadow – a distorted, much less brilliant reflection of her perfect beauty. Alice through the looking glass.

And now, today, Alice, *my* Alice, is getting married! The thought rattles through me once more, as shocking as ever. She, on the other hand, seems unfazed. I watch her gathering flowers together and tying them with string, her movements deft and certain, and I think about the ways her life is about to change – the way all of our lives are about to change. No more Alice in the house. No one to chatter with while seeing to the chores, no older sister in the bed next to mine to whisper secrets to. The thought is strange and unnerving. Alice is humming, and she looks up and catches my eye. "Don't mope, Lou," she says with a laugh. "It's a wedding, not a funeral." She winds an arm around my waist and squeezes gently. And of course she's right, plus Alice is only moving a few minutes away, into the tiny cottage that Jack found for them in the middle of the village. Still, it feels as though it may as well be on the moon. It isn't the physical distance that I can't wrap my mind around, it is that Alice will be leaving us – me – behind, and becoming someone else. A grown-up. A wife.

And – I hardly want to think of it – if Alice leaves,

becomes someone else, then I suppose I have to as well. Everything will change. I touch my finger to one of the creamy rose petals, and the morning dew is still clinging to it, quivering like a tear about to fall. I sigh deeply, wallowing quite happily in the beautiful melancholy of it all and thinking that it would make a pretty line in a story.

Alice snorts with knowing laughter. "Lou's writing melodramas again." She rolls her eyes, and I can't help laughing back, caught in the act.

"I was thinking about the wedding in *Lady Amelia's Revenge*," I offer, "and the way I can foreshadow the death of. . ."

Alice clamps her hands over her ears. "Don't tell me!" she shrieks, and then her hands drop to her sides and her eyes widen. "It's Rudolpho, isn't it?" she asks in tragic accents. "You can't kill him, Lou, you *can't*."

I keep my face as bland as possible, and mime locking my lips shut and throwing away the key. *Lady Amelia's Revenge* is a story that I've been working on for months, and Alice demands new pages all the time. Usually, I'm more than happy to provide them, but I lost one of my notebooks recently so things have been a bit slower, and Alice's questions and guesses about what's to come have become increasingly frantic. She's quite invested in the grisly adventures of my feisty heroine, and I have to admit that I love it. Although I suppose Alice won't have much time for silly stories when she's a married lady.

We are interrupted by Midge, who seems, as always, to be wholly unmoved by the crashing waves of my emotional

turmoil. “Well, you two had better go and get ready,” she says. “Take these boys out from under my feet, and try and mop them up a bit, will you? I’ve got a million and one things left to do here, and your father’s still not back from seeing to the top field.”

The triplets groan and weep and protest as though they are deathly allergic to clean water and cotton face flannels, while Alice and I herd them up the higgledy-piggledy stairs. Finally, after a tense and rather soggy stand-off, we send them off with a stern warning to stay away from anything sticky, and Alice and I make our way up another flight of stairs to our room.