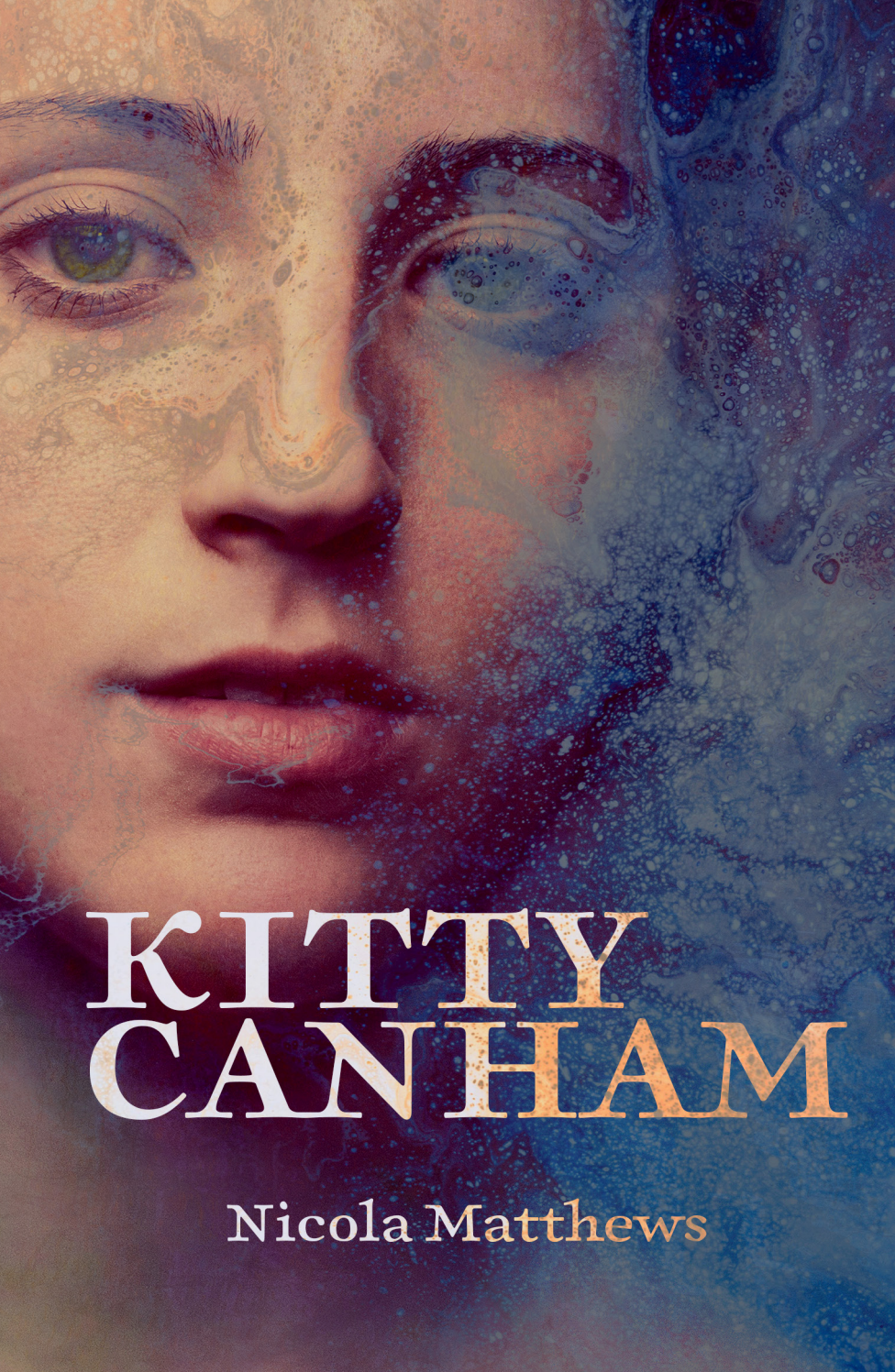




KITTY CANHAM

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Kitty Canham is her first novel.

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Beaumont-cum-Moze, Essex

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CHAPTER ONE

The basket weighed heavy at her side. Her arm ached from the carrying. She lowered it to the ground and stood awhile, gazing out across the meadow towards the backwaters. When the tide was high, vessels criss-crossed the busy estuary. But now, all was still. Kitty was well acquainted with the rounds of the tide and comforted by the familiarity each season brought. When she was a child, it had seemed to her that this is how it would always be; the summers long and hot, autumn aflame with warmth and plenty, the winters cold and harsh, and spring... ah spring. It was the season she had come to love more than any other as she blossomed through her own tender years into the summer of life. But for now the farm was busy with the harvest and the insistent smell of late summer hung in the air. Catching her wayward hair to the nape of her neck, she breathed a deep sigh. She did not want this season to end, because when it did, she sensed that everything would change.

Checking for thistles, she tucked her skirts beneath her and settled on the ground for a moment's rest. Beyond the mudflats, the afternoon sun touched the trees along the shore of Horsey Island and further still, the spit of land they called the Naze curled around into open sea. Aunt Ann's farm was there, but it had long since disappeared. The family had to move away when the sea claimed their land.

She felt the ground, hard beneath her, and shifted. This was her father's farm, safely tucked away in Beaumont-cum-Moze beyond the estuary's furthest reach. It had been her home for all of her eighteen years. She lay back beneath the meadow grasses

and let her mind wander to the picnics of her childhood; she could see her father's young face as he caught her up and swung her around until she was dizzy with delight; she could hear her mother humming as she lay out the picnic. Her mother was always humming when undertaking some delightful domestic task. But that was long ago, before the great sadness took her voice.

The humming persisted. She opened her eyes and smiled; a bumble bee was lumbering nearby. The heady, hopeful, sweet perfume of the fading meadow lulled her tired body. She began to drift. But before she was lost to the world entirely, the sun was overshadowed and the coolness of the waning day touched her skin.

'Kitty?' She started awake to see Tom standing over her, his hair flopping into his eyes, just as it always had. He wiped it away with the back of his hand. 'What are you up to?' He seemed to be scowling.

'Nothing.' She sat up, rather ashamed to be found dozing when others were working so hard to get the harvest in. Tom held out his hand and with one strong tug, Kitty was on her feet. She had known Tom for so long and had never felt embarrassed around him, until now.

'And what's that you've got there?' Before she had a chance to stop him, his hand slipped under the cloth that covered the pies in her basket. She slapped it away.

'Those are for the labourers.'

'I'm a labourer,' he pleaded. She could never resist Tom; he was a year younger than Kitty and she had always looked out for him. So she relented and held out an apple, which he took and bit into. 'C'mon then.' His mouth was full. 'I've got to get this rope to your pa.'

A coil of rope was draped over his shoulder. Brushing down her skirts, Kitty scooped up the basket and trotted alongside Tom. He smelt of sweat and straw, it was not an unpleasant smell. They talked of the harvest; it had been a good year, spirits were high, though the work was hard.

Throwing the apple core aside, he asked, 'You heard about Sarah?'

'Yes.' Kitty tried to smile, but it was no good. Sarah was Tom's sister and Kitty's closest friend. They had shared dolls, stories, and the secrets of their changing bodies, in fact there was nothing they did not share. But now Sarah was courting. The news had unsettled Kitty. It seemed to her that this was a very odd match. Nathaniel Parditer was apprentice to the clerk in the magistrate's office in Thorpe-le-Soken. Kitty had met him on one or two occasions. He wasn't what she imagined for Sarah at all. He was tall and thin and stuttered slightly when he spoke. He never had anything much to say, unless you needed facts, then he was very forthcoming.

Tom stopped and turned to look at her. 'It's a good match, Kitty.'

Kitty pressed a smile to her lips in response, 'I know.'

Tom marched on. Perhaps he was right; Sarah would need to marry, and Nathaniel's prospects were good. She was a sensible girl and wanted someone who would look after her, give her children, and who brought her as little trouble as possible. Sarah would make anyone a wonderful wife. She was a happy, healthy girl with apple cheeks and wide blue eyes who made everyone smile. This could suit them both.

Tom and Kitty walked on in silence. As they reached the rise, they saw her father's field rolling away from them, golden in the waning sun. The swoosh of the scythe caused dust to rise in

billows. The women and older men were gathering the corn and tying the stooks with proficient hands. Seagulls swooped among the labourers' families who were bent over gleaned what they could. Her father looked up. Seeing them coming, he turned to speak to the labourers. One by one they paused in their tasks. Some drank from great flagons whilst others just looked at her with eager eyes.

Most of them knew Kitty from her childhood. There were the Thompson boys, the Butts, the Trefalls and old Mr Morepig, who, though bent with age, never missed a harvest. And there were those she did not know, usually travellers, just here for seasonal work. Her father never differentiated, he always said that hard work deserves just reward. So she, her mother and Peggy worked hard to provide what they could to keep the labourers going through the long hot days. Laying out the cloth, she offered the food she had brought. Tom grabbed a pie and wandered away to join a group of young men sitting in the shade. Kitty's father sat down beside her; his skin was bronzed from his labours.

'How is it going, Pa?'

Her pa took a large bite out of a pie before answering. It pleased Kitty to see him enjoying her labours. 'It's going well, the weather has been kind. And these are good people, working hard.'

Kitty noticed old Mr Morepig sucking at the side of his hand. She went to him and tended the blister with the cloths she had brought for such occasion. He thanked her, his leathery skin folding into a thousand creases around his keen blue eyes. Kitty wandered back to her pa. He was lifting a flagon over his shoulder and to his lips, drinking thirstily. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and leant in closer to her.

‘When the harvest is done, you know what we will do then, Kitty?’

‘What? What will we do, Pa?’ She mocked her father with childlike expectation.

‘We will celebrate!’ He took her arms and swung them awkwardly in the way of a dance. She could feel the men’s eyes on them and pulled away. ‘Pa, you’ve got work to do.’

‘Indeed I have, Miss Canham, you are quite right.’ Clambering to his feet, he snatched up an apple and set off to talk to Joseph, the farm foreman. He was more serious than her pa, but they worked together well through hard times and good. Joseph had come to work for her pa after his wife died, with young Sarah and Tom in tow. Kitty was always thankful that he did. They were like family to her.

Kitty shook out the cloth, watching as the seasonal labourers shared what little food they had with their families. She wished they could feed them all, but she knew that the farm could only sustain the workers themselves, so she comforted herself that her pa’s generous gleaning rights would be of some help.

The men were now wielding their great blades once again. The dust of the harvest began to catch in her throat, so she set off for home. With the sun on her back, and with her basket lighter, she found herself humming as she walked. The hedgerows were full of blackberries, so she paused to gather a few in her empty basket.

‘Kitty?’ Sarah was calling from along the path.

Kitty didn’t look up at first, not wanting to face Sarah yet, she wasn’t ready, but Sarah called again. This time she looked up and smiled.

‘Oh, Kitty, I’m glad I have found you.’ Sarah was out of breath. ‘I went to your house. Your ma told me you would be out this way.’

‘And here I am.’ Kitty kept on picking. She knew she was sounding churlish.

‘Your ma told me that you know about me and Nathaniel.’ Kitty had heard through farm girl gossip. ‘I am so sorry, I wanted to tell you myself, but I’ve been so busy what with it being harvest and everything, and the Butts have needed attention. You know their littlest has been unwell. She is on the mend now, but I had to attend to her. There’s just been so little time for anything else.’

‘Except courting.’ Kitty could not help herself.

‘Well, yes, except...’

Wiping her hands on her apron, Kitty looked up to see the untidy bundle of vulnerability standing before her.

‘You are not upset with me, are you?’ Sarah could not bear to think that she had let anyone down. She just wanted everybody to be happy and Kitty was her dearest friend.

‘Of course I’m not, I am teasing.’

She offered a blackberry to Sarah in red stained fingers, and popped another into her own mouth, the sweet juice bursting against her tongue. Kitty turned and set off for home, giving her friend a reassuring smile. ‘Why don’t you tell me all about it?’

Sarah hopped alongside, babbling excitedly about getting married and where they would live and such.

Whilst Sarah talked, Kitty’s mind drifted to her own life. She was young and strong and had no intention of becoming a wife. The farm was her life and she intended to stay on it as long as possible. Father was showing her the ways of farming, and she had Joseph teaching her accounting. He said she had an aptitude for it, which pleased her father no end. Her mother had agreed to it all, so long as she learned some of the finer

things like needlework. So on winter evenings, Kitty would sit with her mother and dutifully sew. She was never very good at it, but managed to glean some pleasure from the small tapestry of flowers that she had completed and which now hung on the wall by the settle.

As they approached the house, Sarah concluded her excited exposition. 'So you see, I shall be very happy and we will still be the best of friends.'

Kitty took her by the shoulders and kissed her on the cheek, looking into her concerned blue eyes. 'Of course we will, and I will be the best aunty to your children.' Sarah smiled, reassured. 'Now, I have to feed the chickens. Are you going to help or just stand there, gabbling away?' Sarah laughed and followed Kitty as she set off for the chicken pen.

As Sarah left for home that evening, she turned and waved, smiling and carefree, just as she was made to be. Kitty turned towards the house. In the evening sun, the thatch lay heavy like a young beaver's pelt. Smoke rose from the newly laid chimney in a single column; there was now no breath of wind to disturb its course. Bouncer, the ragged spaniel, trotted out of the back door to greet Kitty. She fondled him and followed him into the house.

Peggy was standing at the table preparing supper. She had come to the house when Kitty was toddling and was very much a part of the family. Kitty couldn't help smiling. Pa had always said that Peggy chopped vegetables as if they were her greatest enemy. They certainly were today. Peggy looked up from her labours. 'Did they like the pies?'

'Of course.'

Peggy nodded in response, aware that she had never made a pie that was less than perfect. 'Did you see your pa?'

‘Yes, he said the harvest is going well. It should be finished in a day or two.’

Peggy offered Kitty a piece of carrot. ‘That’ll be in a week or so then.’

Kitty laughed and made her way into the hall; it was dark in the lowing light. Through the parlour door, she could see a candle flickering on the table in the window. Judith, her mother, was sitting in her favourite chair beside the table. Her cap was neatly tied under her chin, which lolled forward on to her chest as she dozed. She was once beautiful, Kitty could see that. Her fine features were not diminished, but her sorrows had etched their way into her skin. Usually, Kitty was irritated by her mother, but now, as she watched the rise and fall of her mother’s breathing, she felt her sadness. Mother had lost all her boys at birth; she couldn’t seem to keep them. Kitty was eleven when the last little one died. Mother named him Samuel, hoping for God’s blessing upon him. But he died at three weeks old. She remembered cradling him there before the fire. His dear little face never looked quite right. A sadness settled over her mother that day that never left. However hard Kitty tried, she knew she could not bring her mother comfort and for that she was sorry. It was only her father who could soften her and bring out moments of her youthful past.

Mother jerked awake. ‘Kitty?’

‘It’s only me, Ma, I’m going to get cleaned up.’

‘Yes, you do that.’ Judith took up her sewing. ‘Your father will be home soon.’

Kitty went to leave.

‘Did you do the chickens?’

‘Yes, and I cleaned out the far pen.’

‘Good, what about Nelly?’

Nelly was the old cow that had kept them in milk for years, but now she was too old to be of any use. Kitty couldn't understand how father allowed it. In Kitty's mind, once they stopped producing they should be slaughtered and the fodder saved for those that could use it. But mother wouldn't hear of it. Nelly had worked hard all her life and should be looked after in her old age. So that was that. Kitty assured her mother that Nelly was well and made her way upstairs to her room.

She was grateful for a room of her own where she could be alone. Pouring what was left of the water into the basin, she splashed it on her face. From her pocket she drew a small stone that she had picked up in the meadow. It was perfectly round. She turned it in her fingers. Today had been a day of moments that hung in her mind like an old melody. She placed the stone on the table under the window amongst all her other keepsakes: a feather, a glass bead, a ribbon and such like. Alongside them was the most prized of all; a small pile of lace kerchiefs, embroidered by her ma on her birthdays when she was young. Each one had a pink heart nestled in the corner among a spray of flowers. Her favourite was the last her mother had given her, when she was twelve. It was embroidered with forget-me-nots. Laying on top of the pile, was a little wooden soldier toy her father had made when she was tiny. She never really knew why she kept these bits and pieces, but she always had. Suddenly Kitty felt exhausted and flopped back on the bed. An extraordinary drowsiness came over her and soon she drifted into sleep.

Kitty awoke to hear the front door slamming and voices below. It was Father, certainly, and there was another voice. A voice she didn't recognise. Gathering her shawl, she made her way

downstairs. Mother stood in the hall, needlework in hand, looking quite lost. Voices came from Father's study behind the stairs.

'What is it, Mother? Is everything alright?'

Her mother's eyes were on her, but their intention was elsewhere.

'Mother?'

'Ah, Kitty, of course ... there you are.'

She was making little sense. Then, as if she were waking from a dream, she said, 'Let's help Peggy get supper. Come along.'

As they entered the kitchen, Peggy looked at Mother. 'Is everything well?'

Mother cut her off, 'Yes ... yes. It is merely a business acquaintance of Robert's.' She took up the slops bucket and handed it to Kitty. 'Take that to the porker, Kitty.'

Kitty took the pail and stepped outside. The light had almost gone. It was a clear evening. A sharp breeze freshened the moment and lifted Kitty into wakefulness. The chickens, who had clucked around her feet earlier, were silent now. The old porker snuffled and grumbled as the slops landed beside her.

On the way back to the house, Kitty noticed a horse tethered by the door. He was a fine, tall fellow, but to Kitty's mind not at all well kept; his head hung low. She placed the pail by the back door, and went to greet him. 'Here, boy, here.'

Pulling a tuft of grass, she held it out in her hand. He nuzzled her palm as he took the offering. Just then the front door opened and a stranger walked out. Kitty stepped back.

'Ah, you must be Kitty.' The man was thickset and had an old hat pulled down on his head. 'Let me look at you and see if you are as beautiful as everyone says.'

He went to take her by the shoulders, but she was too quick for him and stepped back. He smiled. 'Yes, yes,' he said in a soft

voice that she was sure was not his own, 'very lovely.'

Thankfully, at that moment, Pa marched out of the house. He had a determined look on his face that she rarely saw. He stood beside her, fixing the man with his gaze. 'Kitty, get inside now, it is time for supper.' She was happy to do as she was bid.

Inside, Mother was sitting on the settle with Peggy at her side. Kitty had to ask, 'What's going on? Who is that man?'

Peggy stood and brushed down her aprons. 'He's just someone your father knows and is not a nice man at all. I should stay away from him.'

Kitty shuddered. 'I can assure you, I will.'

'Now, fetch the bread to the table, Kitty, and we can all eat.'

Supper was a strange affair. Having given thanks, Father ate hungrily and talked of the harvest, Peggy spoke of the new pickles she was trying out and Mother was silent. Kitty supposed that it was not so very different from other suppers but later, in her journal, she could only describe the evening as having an air of disappointment hanging over it. After supper, when all was tidied away, Mother and Peggy went to bed. Father sat by the fire, filling his pipe. Kitty asked about their earlier visitor.

'You need not worry about him, Kitty, he was an old acquaintance. You know how it is, people see you better off than them and always want something from you. I am sorry if he upset you. We won't see him again.'

She was no longer a child and wanted to know all she could of the farm's affairs. 'But, Pa, what did he ...?'

'Let's not talk anymore about it, eh? It has been a long day. We are all tired.'

Kitty looked at her father, bent heavily over his knees as he filled his pipe, his greying hair falling about his shoulders.

After a long draw, he straightened up, pulled her close and smiled. 'My Kitty Kat.' Pa had called her that for as long as she could remember. She snuggled into his strong body. These were the moments she lived for; her and Pa, alone together. The smoke from her father's pipe drifted in the flickering light. Kitty was home.