Windfall

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Extract

Chapter 1

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Cassia Tallow was scrubbing the altar steps when she heard that she had inherited half a million pounds. She often thought afterwards, given the storybook nature of the whole thing, that it could not have been more auspicious; had she been doing one of the other things that typically filled her life – like bathing her children, or tending to her garden, or presiding over her dinner table, or seeing to the rota for the Women's Institute, or taking one of the hundreds of phone calls that came into her house every week, requesting her husband's presence at some sickbed or other – then it would not have made nearly so poignant a story. However, the juxtaposition of those two events, being down on her knees, scrubbing stone steps, for heaven's sake, and hearing that she had suddenly become extremely rich: that was really very intriguing indeed, worthy of the highest drama.

Of course it hadn't been quite as dramatic as she afterwards remembered it: Edward had simply arrived at the church with her godmother's solicitor, Mr Brewster, who had been very agitated to find her not at the house, given the importance of the news he had to impart. She had in fact arranged for him to come, only she had forgotten, and Edward, irritated by her inefficiency as usual, had brought Mr Brewster down to see her.

'Mr Brewster said it was vital he spoke to you himself, showed you the will, in fact. He's come all the way from London. I do think it's too bad of you to have forgotten,' Edward said.

Cassia apologised, and went to sit in the church porch with Edward and Mr Brewster. He was an extraordinarily dull-looking caricature of a solicitor, dressed in a dark grey suit, dark grey tie, black bowler, and carrying a rather battered black briefcase. His voice was equally dull, monotonous and slightly whining, but Cassia listened to it attentively while he read her the relevant section of the will, and explained it to her carefully. And when he had finished,

when she had heard the extraordinary words, when she had told him that yes, she did understand, and asked him if there was anything she should do immediately, and he had said there was not, she asked if he would mind if she just finished washing the steps. Mr Brewster, who had clearly long ceased to be amazed by any behaviour, however eccentric, said that of course he would not, but Edward followed her down the aisle and stood over her as she started wringing out the cloth again.

'You did realise what he said, didn't you?' Edward said. Cassia sat back on her heels and studied him. 'I mean the amount. You did hear him?'

'Yes. Yes, of course I did. Thank you.'

'Right. I just wondered. Your reaction does seem a little . . . odd.'

'I'm sorry, Edward. What did you think I should do?' she said, smiling at him. 'Burst into song, or perhaps utter a fervent prayer of thanks?'

'No, of course not. You just seem so calm. I . . . well, I don't feel very calm, I must say.'

'Sorry,' Cassia said, not quite sure for what.

'And I do think you should come back to the house.'

'Is there any huge hurry? I mean I ought to finish this. Really. If you take Mr Brewster back and ask Peggy to give him a cup of tea, I'll be back very soon.'

Edward stared at her, then pulled out his handkerchief and blew his nose. He always did that when he didn't know how to react. 'Cassia,' he said, 'I really do wonder if you've actually grasped—'

'Edward, I've grasped it perfectly. Thank you. I've been left half a million pounds. By my godmother. But it's not going to go away, and Mrs Venables will be furious if I leave this unfinished. There's a wedding tomorrow. And as Mr Brewster's come all this way anyway, I'm sure he won't mind waiting another ten minutes or so.'

'Yes,' Edward said, staring at her, as if he wasn't quite sure who she was any more – rather accurately as it happened. 'Yes, all right.' Then he turned his back on her and walked rather quickly back to the porch. She heard him talking to Mr Brewster, and then their footsteps slowly fading as they walked down the path.

Cassia squeezed out the cloth, and wiped the steps very carefully, making sure there were no streaks left on them, then she carried the dirty water out into the vestry and tipped it down the sink.

It was a lovely day; an appropriately lovely day, she thought, as she walked slowly back to the house, and then thought how silly that she should expect the weather to fit in with her extraordinary news.

If it had been an unseasonably horrible day – or seasonably perhaps, given that this was June and England – wet and windy, that might have seemed quite appropriate too, for she could tell herself they could all go somewhere warm and sunny for a holiday, to the south of France for instance, and that might even be rather better.

Cassia wondered why she didn't feel more odd. Maybe she was in shock; shock did strange things to people. When she had worked in Casualty, she had seen people quite literally with their fingers or toes cut off, sitting calmly waiting for the doctor, discussing the weather with whoever was sitting on the next chair. On the other hand, she didn't feel as if it had been a shock, and nor did she feel it couldn't be true, or that there had been a mistake.

The nearest she could get to defining how she felt, finding something to compare it with, was . . . what? When she heard she had passed her finals with exceptionally high marks? No, because that had been down to her, a result of her own work and cleverness. When Edward had asked her to marry him? Or rather told his father she was going to marry him? No, because that had been a rather more complex state of affairs. When Bertie was born? Or even William? No, that had been a pure wild happiness, nothing to do with this calm, warm acceptance.

Perhaps, though, when they had told her Delia was a girl. A nice quiet little girl, she had thought, smiling up at them through the clearing pain, a contrast to the awful, noisy, lovable little boys. That had been a sense of simple straightforward pleasure (not knowing, of course, that Delia was to be the noisiest of the lot). That was nearer, but it did seem rather awful to compare the arrival of a much longed for daughter with that of a large sum of money.

Cassia gave up. This wasn't like anything she had ever known, and how could it be? She didn't feel anything really, anything at all. Not yet.

It was a very nice walk from St Mary's to their house: Monks Ridge House it was called, being built high on the ridge above the village of Monks Heath, with its view right over the small valley, of the winding river, the tight complex of houses round the picture-book green, the church set at the back of it. Square, redbrick early Victorian, it was a classic West Sussex country house, with a very dark slate roof and an exceptionally pretty fanlight over the front door. However tired Cassia was, however discouraged by her failure to perform as the perfect doctor's wife, however cross or anxious over her unruly children, her heart lifted as she

turned the last corner in the lane and looked at Monks Ridge. It was like seeing a friend standing there, waiting for her, uncritical, undemanding, pleased to see her. There was so much that was critical and demanding in her life, she found the house extraordinarily soothing.

Cassia had loved it from the first moment she had set eyes on it. Edward had said they should look at others, but she had known this was the house she wanted. You move in here, it seemed to say, and you won't get any trouble. And they hadn't. It was warm in winter, cool in summer; its pipes never froze, its fires burnt beautifully; its rooms were neither too large nor too small, its garden good tempered and undemanding.

There was a large extension at the side, not beautiful, added in the last year of the old Queen's reign, which made a perfect surgery for Edward, and at the back, a small conservatory with a black and white tiled floor and arched windows, where Cassia had managed to grow a vine, and where on summer nights when she couldn't sleep (usually because she was trying to soothe a crying baby) she would sit in her rocking chair, watching the stars.

Cassia had always loved the stars: one of her very early memories was of standing in the garden at night, holding her father's hand and gazing up at the sky while he showed her the constellation after which she had been named. She could never actually work out the shape of a lady sitting in a chair, holding out her arms, but she pretended she could to please him. She liked too the story he often told her of how Cassiopeia had been sent to the heavens for boasting about the beauty of her daughter Andromeda.

Cassia loved the conservatory – it was known as her room – although Edward said it wasted heat and space. She could see his point about the heat, but the other objection was clearly nonsense: there was at least half an acre of garden beyond it, mostly grass, studded with shrubs and fruit trees and sloping gently down to the valley.

Oddly (significantly even, she thought), she found Edward sitting in the conservatory now, with Mr Brewster.

'Hello. Sorry I was so long. Is Peggy making tea?'

'Yes, and I really should be on my way. Lot of calls this afternoon. Can you manage now?' Edward said.

'Yes, of course. We can manage, can't we, Mr Brewster? I don't suppose there's a lot to manage. You can tell me a bit more, I expect, and I can listen.'

'Yes, indeed,' said Mr Brewster.

As Edward left them, Peggy came in with the tea tray, looking flustered. Strangers in the house unsettled her, made her nervous.

'Thank you, Peggy. Mr Brewster, would you like a piece of cake?'

'That would be delightful. Thank you.'

The cake wasn't delightful at all, of course, as Cassia had made it. It had sunk in the middle and the icing had streaked down the sides, but Mr Brewster ate it uncritically and accepted a second piece.

'Now then, perhaps we should go over this again. So that you are quite clear about it all.'

'Yes, I'd like to look at it properly. Was anyone else left anything?'

'Only a few small bequests to servants and so on. Lady Beatty obviously felt you were the most worthy recipient.'

'Yes. I'm sure I wasn't, though.'

'Well, clearly she made up her own mind on that matter. And having no children, and being estranged from Sir Richard . . .'

'Does he know about this?'

'Not yet. I will be informing him, as a courtesy, as they were married for many years.'

'Yes. I wrote to him when Leonora – Lady Beatty – died,' Cassia said.

'You were notified of her death by her brother, I imagine?'

'Yes. Well, actually by her brother's wife. Cecily Harrington. We have remained quite close. Nothing for any of them in the will?'

'Only a small bracelet for the eldest child. Here, see.'

'Oh, yes, Fanny. Dear little thing, she is. Well, not so little now, she's nearly ten. I'm sorry, Mr Brewster, not very interesting for you.'

Mr Brewster smiled at her. 'Fortunately, I do find other people's families of endless fascination.'

Cassia stared at the will, at the words: 'I exercise my power of appointment in relation to the Maple Trust, in favour of my goddaughter, Cassiopeia Blanche Tallow . . .'

'It doesn't say how much money it is, though,' Cassia said.

'No. That is because the money was invested by the trustees, and at the time the will was drawn up, it was not possible to say how much it would be worth. As it happens, it is worth a little more than five hundred thousand now, five hundred and eleven to be precise.'

'Goodness,' said Cassia. 'It grows, doesn't it, money?'

'Well invested, yes. Of course it can also shrink.'

'Why didn't she just leave it to me? I mean, why the trust and everything?'

Mr Brewster cleared his throat. 'I believe Lady Beatty was a

little . . . extravagant. She explained to me that it was thought best to put the money in trust for you.'

'Yes, well, that's certainly true. I see. And the Harringtons, they don't know about this either?'

'No indeed. I visited your godmother in Paris last March, at her request, to draw up the document. You are naturally the only person to have had sight of it. You and your husband, that is.'

'That was at the apartment in Passy, I suppose?'

'Indeed so. Very beautiful it was, I must say.'

'Yes, I heard it was very nice. She must have been quite ill then?'

'She certainly did not appear to be in robust health, no,' said Mr Brewster, 'although she was clearly being very well taken care of.'

'Was she alone?'

'Yes, I saw her quite alone. Apart from the staff in the apartment, of course, and I understood there was a resident nurse.'

'I see.' So at least Leonora had lived out her last days in comfort. Cassia had wondered – wondered and feared. 'Well, what happens now, Mr Brewster?'

'There are certain formalities. The money is not available for your use quite yet. As the executor, I have to obtain grant of probate, but you need have no concerns about it. Oh, and here is a letter, also lodged with me, from your godmother.'

Cassia took the slightly worn-looking envelope from him, opened it very carefully. It felt odd, almost as if Leonora had come suddenly into the room, and was holding it out to her. Reading the extravagant writing, slanting loopily across the thick cream paper, was like hearing her voice, her husky, amused, voice.

'My darling Sweet Pea . . .' Oh, that stupid name, Cassia thought, that ridiculous name, and suddenly she was back there, on the terrace at the Ritz, twelve years old, led in by Benedict . . .

Cassia had come to London for the Peace March, invited to stay with Leonora, her rich and glamorous godmother. She had only met Leonora a few times at that stage, and not at all for the last three years. Although she was very excited, she was also extremely nervous as she stood on the platform at Euston, trying to spot Leonora in the crowds of people, all arrived for this great national celebration.

After a very long hour it had been Benedict Harrington, Leonora's brother, who had appeared beside her, charmingly apologetic for his lateness: 'Leonora has been held up, God knows how. She phoned me out of the blue and asked me to come and

fetch you. I came the minute I could, but it must have seemed a very long wait, I'm so sorry.'

Benedict was tall and slim, golden haired and rather unusually brown eyed, very handsome, Cassia thought, and most beautifully dressed in a dove-grey suit and very soft leather shoes. She had smiled at him, and assured him she had been perfectly all right. He said she must, in that case, be extremely brave, that he would have been terrified at being all alone in London at her age. He had been instructed to take her to meet Leonora at the Ritz hotel, where she was having tea with some friends. 'She thought that would be more fun for you than just going back to the house.'

Cassia had said politely that it did sound great fun, although she was beginning to feel increasingly shy and would actually have preferred tea at home with Leonora.

As they travelled through the streets of a London turned red, white and blue, Benedict took out a gold cigarette case with a slightly shaking hand, and proceeded to smoke all the way to the Ritz, while pointing out to her the various London attractions they were passing. She wondered why he should be nervous, and decided it must be the thought of the march the next day, in which she knew he was to lead his regiment. Nervous or not, she liked him very much: he handed her out of the taxi when it stopped, as if she was an adult; picked up her shabby brown leather case and ushered her through the swing doors into the Ritz.

Inside, Cassia stopped and gasped aloud. Nothing she had ever seen could have prepared her for this place, with its tall, tall ceilings, its gilt chairs, its chandeliers, the unbelievably smart people everywhere.

'Come along, through here,' Benedict said. 'Oh now, there she is, look,' and there Leonora was, coming towards them, smiling and holding out her arms.

'My darling!' she said, giving Cassia a kiss. 'How incredibly lovely to see you, come with me.' She led her up a couple of steps on to a wide terrace, set with tea tables and large palms, to a table where several other ladies were sitting. They were all dressed most wonderfully, Cassia thought, in pastel-coloured afternoon dresses with elaborate hats. Leonora's dress was apricot silk, and her hat a wonderful confection of roses and feathers. But it was the ladies' stockings that Cassia noticed first, for they were not black or even dark brown but very very light beige. She had never seen stockings like that, had not even known they existed.

Leonora put her arm round her as they reached the table, and

looked down at her. She was tall like her brother, with the same golden hair and brown eyes. 'How pretty you are!' she said. 'And very tall for your age. Now what am I to call you? Cassiopeia is a bit of a mouthful.'

'Most people call me Cassia,' said Cassia, smiling at her, 'but—'

'I don't like to do what most people do. Cassia sounds very dull to me. I shall call you – let me see – Sweet Pea. How will that do? A little bit of your name, and that is how you look: one of those flowers, very curly and colourful and delicate. Everyone, I want you to meet my goddaughter, Cassiopeia Berridge, but we shall all call her Sweet Pea. Benedict, darling, sit down and have some tea with us, won't you?'

'No, Leonora, thank you, I have to go. I have a great deal to do before tomorrow.'

'Oh, very well. Sweet Pea, go and sit down there, darling, next to the lady in yellow.'

Benedict smiled at Cassia, bowed briefly over her hand. 'Goodbye,' he said. 'I shall see you tomorrow after the march.'

'Goodbye and thank you,' she said, 'and good luck tomorrow.'

'So divinely handsome, your brother,' said one of the ladies.

'Still not engaged, then?' said another.

'No, not yet,' said Leonora quickly. 'Now, Sweet Pea, have a cup of tea, and would you like a cake or some sandwiches?' and she waved at a waiter.

And then, to Cassia's absolute horror, Leonora rummaged in her small bag and drew out a very pretty cigarette case and picked out a cigarette. The waiter was hurrying towards them, and Cassia felt sure he was going to ask her to put it away at once, or even to tell her to leave the restaurant. Smoking in public was the most terrible thing a lady could do, she knew that. However, he did nothing of the sort, but produced a book of matches from his pocket and lit Leonora's cigarette for her.

In the corner of the terrace a pianist was playing 'If You Were the Only Girl in the World'. Cassia sat listening to it and gazing at these ladies in their light stockings smoking their cigarettes, and knew she had entered an utterly and most wonderfully different world.

Cassia wrenched her mind back from her memories, forced it on to her letter.

My darling Sweet Pea,

By the time you read this, I shall no longer be with you.

Nasty thing that I've got, there is no hope at all, the doctors say. I just hope it carries me off quickly.

You are to have the money and to spend it not wisely – heaven forbid, darling – but well. Do anything at all you like with it – even what I might have done, although that would probably be a waste – but have fun with it. Lots of fun. You were my dearest child, the one I never had. I've missed you horribly, more than any other person or thing since leaving England. Watching you grow up, having you to live with us, presenting you at Court, all those things made me terribly terribly happy. This is to say thank you.

Bless you, darling.

Best love, Leonora.

The letter swam, blurred as she read it, read it again.

'Are you all right, Mrs Tallow?' Mr Brewster's voice was concerned.

'Oh, yes. Yes, thank you,' she said, fumbling for her handkerchief, wiping her eyes. 'It was a bit of a shock, that's all. Reading the letter. It brought her alive again. I did love her very much.'

'Of course. She was a friend of your mother's, I believe?'

'Yes. She was much younger than my mother, but their mothers were great friends, and my mother used to treat Leonora like a doll – push her around in her dolls' pram, carry her about, dress her, bath her. Leonora adored her.' She really couldn't imagine Mr Brewster would be interested in this, but she wanted to explain just the same. It seemed important, to set Leonora in context in her life. 'Right to the end, they were friends – well, till my mother died – although their lives were so different. Leonora married twice, both times to terribly rich men in London; my mother to a very modestly paid librarian in Leeds.'

'I lived with Leonora and Sir Richard all the time I was doing my medical training. She gave a dance for me, presented me at Court, oh, all sorts of wonderful things, but I first went to stay with Leonora in 1919, for the Peace March. She invited me down. I thought I'd landed in Wonderland. I was a little girl from the provinces, very unsophisticated, only twelve years old, and there I was, in this great house, with servants, meeting all these wonderful exotic people . . . More tea, Mr Brewster?'

'Yes, please. Do go on. Tell me about the Peace March. My father was involved in that, but I didn't see it.'

'Oh, it was amazing. How sad you missed it. I shouted and

shouted until I was completely hoarse. It went on for hours, all the noise and colour and pageantry. The King marched, of course, and the princes, and all the Heads of State, Haig, Admiral Beatty, Sir Roger Keyes, Field Marshal Smuts, the Old Contemptibles, all the bands, and horses, great groups of men, all marching down Whitehall, past the temporary Cenotaph, saluting it, saluting the glorious dead. And I thought, we all did that day, that to have died for your country was truly the next best thing to living. I'd lost three uncles in that war, and just for that day I felt it was somehow worth it. Only of course it wasn't . . .'

'My father lost both his legs,' said Mr Brewster quietly. 'Fortunately for him, for all of us, he had a small private income. But so many of those wretches have spent the next ten or fifteen years selling matches. It's a disgrace.'

After another silence he smiled at Cassia again, then said, 'Well, this won't do any good, will it? I mustn't take up too much of your time.'

'It's me taking up the time, Mr Brewster. I'm sorry. It just seemed . . . appropriate somehow. To talk about Leonora, and those days.'

'Of course.' He patted her hand. He really was a very nice man, Cassia thought, not nearly as dreary as she had first thought. 'Now, if you have any more questions, do ask me. As soon as the money becomes properly available to you, then I will notify you. Otherwise, I should be getting back to London. I wonder if I could telephone for a taxi to the station?'

'Yes, please do. I'm sorry I can't take you, but Edward needs the car for his rounds.'

'Naturally. No, a taxi will do splendidly.' His face eased suddenly into a conspiratorial smile. 'You might consider buying a little car of your own now. Just a suggestion of course.'

'Goodness,' Cassia said, 'yes, I suppose I might. We'll have to see. Anyway, I'll just go and phone.'

As she stood in the hall, waiting for the local taxi service to answer its phone, she thought how very odd it would be to be able to consider buying anything, anything at all for herself, of her own volition, without asking Edward, without having interminable discussions first.

It did seem a rather agreeable prospect.

After Mr Brewster had gone, Cassia went out to the kitchen and did a bit of clearing up. She never managed to get the kitchen properly clear, because it was like the Forth Bridge, and as soon as

one end was tidy, the mess spread to the other side, but she did like to keep trying. Actually, she didn't like it, she loathed it, as she loathed any kind of domestic work, but she knew it had to be done. Monks Ridge was much too big really for her to look after with only Peggy's rather incompetent help, especially with three small children. 'How you manage without a nanny, Cassia, I can't imagine,' Cecily had said once, and Cassia had replied quite briskly that she managed somehow, like everyone else who couldn't afford one.

She looked at the clock: almost two. Delia had been asleep for much too long. She'd never sleep tonight – or rather she'd sleep even less tonight. She'd have to wake her up and perhaps take her for a walk – that might be a good idea, because then she could think. Bertie wouldn't be back from his little school until four, and William had gone to play at the vicarage, so she and Delia could have the afternoon to themselves. Delia was always better when the boys weren't there.

She went to find Peggy, who was ironing Edward's shirts. Peggy liked doing that: she didn't do them nearly as well as Mrs Briggs, the daily, but it made her feel important.

'Peggy,' Cassia said tactfully, 'Peggy, do leave those, I'd much rather you got on with the supper. I thought we could have fish pie and I won't have the time to make it. I've got to collect William and—'

'It's all right, Mrs Tallow, I can do both,' said Peggy, smiling at her and pushing her straggly mouse-coloured hair back from her face, 'and I know the doctor's particular about his shirts.'

'Er . . . yes, he is, but—'

'Don't you worry, Mrs Tallow. Is everything all right? That wasn't bad news from that man, was it?'

'No, Peggy. Just a bit of . . . well, family administration.'

Cassia walked slowly up the stairs and into the nursery. Delia was still very firmly asleep, her small bottom stuck into the air, her thumb stuck into her rosebud mouth, her fair curls coiled damply on to her head. She was so lovely when she was asleep, it seemed a terrible shame to wake her. But it had to be done. Cassia moved about the room, carefully noisy, humming to herself. Delia squirmed, moved, opened her large dark blue eyes – her mother's eyes – and promptly started to grizzle.

'Darling!' said Cassia, deliberately cheerful. 'Hello. Want a cuddle?'

Delia shook her head, buried herself deeper into her corner and grizzled more loudly.

'Come on. Time to get up. I thought we'd go for a walk.'

She shook her head again.

'Well, I'm going,' Cassia said, feeling rising irritation, trying to fight it down, 'and you'll have to come with me. We can go to the woods, might see a bunny . . .'

Cassia carried Delia downstairs, gave her a drink, then strapped her in the battered old pram which stood in the porch. She told Peggy to take any calls very carefully, then called Buffy, a basset hound of quite extraordinarily sweet temper, and set off down the lane, thinking about Leonora. She sang 'One Man Went to Mow' loudly, trying to drown the sound of Delia's wails. She didn't feel very much like a half-millionairess.

Cassia was twenty-eight. She was arresting to look at, rather than conventionally pretty, with rich corn-coloured hair, very dark blue eyes, and a sensuously full mouth that curved upwards at the corners. She was slim and very tall – five foot ten – a factor which she claimed had had a great effect on her personality, leading people to assume from her earliest years that she was older than she really was.

She had been born in 1907, exactly nine months after her parents' marriage. Duncan Berridge and Blanche Hampton had fallen passionately in love over an overdue library book, and been married only eighteen months later, a rather hasty courtship by the standards of the time. It was a love affair that had never faltered in any way: each adored and admired the other equally, and despite some rather dark prognostications by Blanche's father, who felt that the only daughter of a prosperous solicitor could have done rather better for herself than marrying someone he persisted in labelling a clerk. However, since Blanche was rather serious and didn't have a capacity for attracting large numbers of young men, and he had very little money to settle upon her, he agreed to Duncan's request for her hand.

Serious Blanche might have been, but she was beautiful in a quite unconventional way, with heavy dark hair drawn back from a pale, oval face, and the startlingly dark blue eyes she had passed on to her daughter. Repressed by her four brothers and an oppressively dictatorial mother, she blossomed in her happy marriage and became, besides a supportive wife and talented housekeeper, a champion of women's rights. Some of Cassia's earliest memories were of her mother reading to her father reports from the paper of

the Suffragettes and their battles, and expressing her admiration for them – an admiration which, most unusually for a man of his generation, he shared.

Cassia's birth, so soon after their marriage, had led Duncan and Blanche to expect a large family, but in fact for many years there were no more babies. This had a profound effect on Cassia: the absence of brothers led her to assume that there was nothing remotely superior about the male sex, and the absence of any rivals for her parents' affection gave her a serene self-confidence. Her parents were proud of her, but did not spoil her. She was also, as a result of spending a great deal of her time in their company, very mature for her age.

She was educated initially at boarding school. It was fairly unusual for a small girl in 1916 to be sent away to school, and it was in some ways Cassia's misfortune that her parents, who both loved her dearly, were so anxious to see her well educated. Her father had had to leave school at the age of fourteen, on the death of his own father, and although he was well read and musically accomplished, frequently performing on both the piano and the clarinet, he had no professional qualifications, and felt painfully disadvantaged in the company of those who did. Blanche, who had been the only member of her family deprived of a decent education, purely on account of her sex, felt her own daughter deserved better, so when Cassia was only nine and there was no good prep school of any kind in their neighbourhood a solution was found in a small boarding school thirty miles away. A few decades later she would have been transported there and home again each day by a rota of parental chauffeurs, but in 1916 only the very rich had cars, and boarding school fees of twenty pounds a term seemed more affordable.

And so Cassia became a pupil of Hammond House, a large rather forbidding Victorian house on the outskirts of Leeds, filled with a lot of other generally friendly and jolly little girls. Miss Hammond, the headmistress, was an enlightened and warm-hearted woman, educated under the wonderful aegis of Miss Beale and Miss Buss at Cheltenham Ladies' College. She held a passionate belief that girls were not only as clever as boys, but could and should do as well in their chosen careers, and indeed many of her students went on to the excellent Leeds Girls' High, Cassia among them. She also loved her girls and wanted them to be happy, and held tea parties every Sunday afternoon in her study, where the children sat on the floor in front of the fire toasting teacakes on long forks and drinking hot cocoa and were allowed to talk to her about anything at all. In

Cassia's case, this was very frequently of her absolute and unswerving determination to become a doctor.

When Cassia was ten, Blanche had enlisted as a VAD and worked as a nurse in a hospital just outside Finchfield. She had always wanted to nurse, and she wouldn't say she was exactly grateful to Kaiser Bill for giving her the opportunity, because that would have been unpatriotic, but in some ways she had never been happier than she was then, setting off early in the morning on her bicycle for the three-and-a-half-mile ride, and returning late at night, her back aching, her legs throbbing, to tell Duncan of the sometimes rewarding but more frequently dreadful events of her day. Blanche found herself totally unsqueamish, and with a genuine talent for her new task: she could change a dressing, soothe a fretful patient, distinguish between a genuine need for pain-relieving medication and an irritable demand for it, and anticipate a deteriorating condition more easily and swiftly than many more experienced and fully trained nurses. She saw things which horrified her, heard things which broke her heart; but overall she felt properly fulfilled for the first time in her life.

The war had not really entered Cassia's consciousness very strongly. Of course she knew it was going on: their prayers every day, and in church every Sunday, were for its satisfactory conduct and the welfare of the men at the Front. Every so often a girl would be called out of a lesson and into Miss Hammond's office, and would emerge weeping at the news that a brother or uncle or, most dreadfully, a father had been killed or injured.

Cassia knew also that the fighting was very terrible, but that our men were very brave and were winning the war steadily and indisputably under the superb direction of their generals. She knew also that bombs were dropped by Zeppelins over London and the big dockland cities like Hull, but that there was very little likelihood of that happening anywhere near Leeds. Three of her mother's brothers were at the Front.

She was deeply grateful that her father was not fit enough to have to go to France, and glad too that he looked quite old, as it meant he wouldn't be handed a white feather in the street for being a coward, a terrible fate that had befallen several men in the town. Most of them were physically unfit, but two of them were pacifists, and although they worked very hard at the same hospital as Blanche, they were still considered outcasts.

One afternoon in the summer holidays in 1917, Blanche asked Cassia if she would like to come to one of the hospital concerts and sing for the men. 'Poor things, they have very little to live for, some of them, and these concerts cheer them up so much. I've asked Matron and she is more than happy for you to do so. Your father will play for you.'

Cassia was more than happy too. She had a very pretty voice, and had performed in several concerts at Hammond House. She practised a few of the favourite war songs, like 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary' and 'Pack Up Your Troubles In Your Old Kit Bag', and a couple of more romantic favourites, like 'If You Were the Only Girl in the World' and 'Daisy, Daisy'.

Blanche told Cassia to wear her new white muslin dress with the frills and white stockings and shoes, and tied a white ribbon in her dark gold hair. The three of them set off together in the governess cart that one of Blanche's brothers had lent them, along with a rather lazy pony, for the duration of the war.

The concert was to take place in the early evening, and Cassia, who had never seen the hospital, felt suddenly nervous as they drew up outside its great, grim walls. The grounds were full of men, some of them in wheelchairs, others sitting with their eyes bandaged, or walking slowly about on sticks or crutches, all dressed in the dark blue flannel suits of the wounded. Most of them looked at the cart and its occupants and smiled, and even waved at Blanche whom they recognised, but a few remained motionless, staring blankly in front of them with white, gaunt faces. Cassia knew they were suffering from shellshock. Blanche had explained it to her, and how its sufferers lived partly or totally withdrawn in a dreadful, haunted, half-real world, unable to communicate with anybody much of the time: 'In time, it is hoped, with good nursing and the love of their families, they will return to a proper life and rediscover themselves, but meanwhile, poor things, they are in a terrible way.'

Far worse, Cassia thought, were the men sitting in wheelchairs, with both legs amputated; and she was amazed to hear two of the blind men laughing raucously. It seemed almost impossible to her that anyone should ever smile, let alone laugh, with so much to endure. She would rather have died. But she smiled and waved back to them all, and followed her mother over to a few of them and said 'How do you do?' and shook their hands; 'Bless her' she heard several times and 'Pretty little angel', and she stopped being nervous and when it came to her turn in the concert, she greatly

enjoyed standing on the stage and singing her songs, and when they were all cheering and shouting 'Encore, encore' and Duncan beamed at her and nodded and started to play 'Are There Any More At Home Like You?' and they clapped even before she had sung the first note, she felt she had done something properly useful for the first time in her life.

Afterwards, Blanche left Cassia with Duncan while she had a discussion about her duties the next day with Matron. They were standing in a corridor, waiting for Blanche to return, when they heard a dreadful groaning coming from a small side room. Cassia, drawn to it, she felt, quite against her will, ran over to the room and opened the door.

A man lay there in a high-sided bed, clearly in agony. He was writhing about, tossing his head like a terrified horse. His eyes were bandaged, his breath rasping, but as he heard the door open, he turned towards her. 'Please,' he said, 'please, I can't stand it. Please, for God's sake, help me.'

Cassia looked at him for a moment, then said, 'Wait, I'll come back, I promise,' and turned and collided with her mother who was standing in the doorway.

'Mama, Mama,' Cassia said, clasping her mother's hands, pulling her into the room, 'this poor man, you must help him, he is in the most dreadful pain. Give him something for it, please, please.'

'Cassia, I can't possibly give him anything,' said Blanche. 'That is not for me to do.'

'But you're a nurse! You must, you've got to, please, listen, he's crying—'

The man uttered a strange mixture of groan and sob, calling out again for help.

Cassia burst into tears. 'What is it? Why won't you help?'

'Cassia, he has gas poisoning. It's a dreadful thing. He's only just been brought here and—'

'But he is here, and you must be able to help him. That's what this place is for.'

Blanche looked at the man's notes, hanging at the foot of his bed, then drew Cassia outside the room, and closed the door on the man. His cries were stronger, could still be heard as loudly.

'Mama, please. You're cruel, it's horrible. Why won't you—'

'Cassia, listen. It is not for me to decide what drugs he has. Only the doctors can do that. They know best, and they have decided he cannot have anything more until the morning.'

Cassia looked at her for a moment, trying to ignore the dreadful sound of the man's pain, and then turned and walked very determinedly towards her father who was standing talking to the matron: a tall, imposing woman, rather beautiful, with dark red hair and a very long, elegant neck. 'Ah, Cassia! What a pleasure your singing was. I was just telling your father how much you must have pleased the men—'

'Please,' said Cassia, 'please go and help that man in there.' She pointed towards the door. 'He's in such pain, and my mother says—' She stopped, tears spilling over her lashes, frightened horrified tears.

'Yes? Your mother says what?'

'That only the doctors can do anything, decide what he can have.'

'That is quite right. A doctor saw him only an hour or so ago, and prescribed what he must have. He has had it, and is much better for it.'

Cassia stared at her. 'He's not better for it at all. He's suffering terribly, you know he is!'

'Cassia!' said Blanche, shocked.

'Cassia,' said Matron, kneeling down and taking her hand, 'I know how it must seem to you. And it's not that I won't help. I can't. We are doing all we can for that poor man. I'm sorry you should have had to see him.'

'It doesn't matter that I've seen him,' said Cassia, pulling her hand free, 'just that he's in such a lot of pain. Surely you could give him some more? The doctor must have got it wrong, not realised how bad he was. I think you should tell him—' She brushed the tears from her eyes again.

'I'm afraid that's not how it works,' said Matron. She was beginning to look a little less patient. 'We all work together here, and it is not for us to question the doctors' decisions.'

'Well, I think you should,' said Cassia staunchly.

'Cassia, be quiet immediately!' said Blanche.

'Cassia,' said Matron, 'you are obviously a very kind, caring person. I admire your courage in all sorts of ways, but you really do not understand this situation. Perhaps one day you can come back here and learn for yourself. And put your courage and your kindness to good use. As a nurse.'

Cassia looked at her. 'No,' she said, 'not a nurse. I really don't want to be a nurse. I want to be able to decide things for myself. I'm going to be a doctor.'

Only, in spite of that moment of vision, a passionate determination to succeed, and her graduation from one of the finest medical schools in the country with the highest possible marks, the nearest she had come to medical practice was acting as unpaid secretary to her husband, giving unofficial advice to pregnant and recently delivered young women, and making up cough mixture and bandaging the occasional knee as its owner sat wailing in the surgery. And that hurt, hurt very badly, every day of her life.