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The Debutante

Written by Kathleen Tessaro

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KATHLEEN TESSARO

The Debutante

HARPER

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For Annabel



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There is a dangerous silence in that hour
A stillness, which leaves room for the full soul
To open all itself, without the power
Of calling wholly back its self-control:
The silver light which, hallowing tree and tower,
Sheds beauty and deep softness o'er the whole,
Breathes also to the heart, and o'er it throws
A loving languor, which is not repose.

Lord Byron, *Don Juan*

Part One



In the heart of the City of London, tucked into one of the winding streets behind Gray's Inn Square and Holborn Station, there's a narrow passage known as Jockey's Fields. It's a meandering, uneven thread of a street that's been there, largely unchanged, since the Great Fire. Regency carriages gave way to Victorian hackney cabs and now courier bikes speed down its sloping, cobbled way, diving between pedestrians.

It was early May; unseasonably hot – only nine in the morning and already seventy-six degrees. A cloudless blue sky set off the white dome of St Paul's Cathedral in the distance. The pavement swelled with armies of workers, streaming from the nearby Tube station; girls in sorbet-coloured summer dresses, men in shirtsleeves, jackets over their arms, carrying strong coffee and newspapers, the rhythm of their heels a constant tattoo on the pavement.

Number 13 Jockey's Fields was a lopsided, double-fronted Georgian building, painted black many years previously, and in need of a fresh coat, sandwiched between a betting office and a law practice. The door of Deveraux and Diplock, Valuers and Auctioneers of Quality, was propped

open by a Chinese ebony figure of a small pug dog, most likely eighteenth century but in very bad repair, in the hopes of encouraging a gust of fresh morning air into the premises. Golden shafts of sunlight filtered in through the leaded glass windows, dust floating, suspended in its beams, settling in thick layers on the once illustrious, now slightly shabby interior of one of London's lesser known auction houses. The oriental carpet, a fine specimen of the silk hand-knotted variety of Northern Pakistan during the last century, was threadbare. The delft china planters which graced the mantelpiece, brimming with richly scented white hyacinth, were just that bit too chipped to be sold at any real profit; and the seats of the 1930s leather club chairs by the fireplace sagged almost to the floor, their springs poking through the horsehair backing. Reproduction Canalettos hung next to the better watercolour dabblings of long-dead country-house hostesses; studies of landscapes, flowers and fond attempts at children's portraits. For Deveraux and Diplock was the natural choice of those once aristocratic families whose fortunes had lost pace with their breeding and who wished to have their heirlooms sold quickly and discreetly, rather than in the very public catalogues of Sotheby's and Christie's. They were known by word of mouth and reputation, having traded with the same European and American antique dealers for decades. Theirs was a dying art for a dying class; a kind of undertakers for antiquities, presided over by Rachel Deveraux, whose late husband Paul had inherited the business when they were first married thirty-six years ago.

Rachel, smoking a cigarette in a long, mother-of-pearl holder which she'd acquired clearing the estate of an impoverished 1920s film star, sat contemplating the mountain of paperwork on her huge, roll-top desk. At sixty-seven, she was still striking, with large brown eyes and a knowing, disarming smile. Her style was unorthodox; flowing layers of modern, asymmetrical Japanese-inspired tailoring. And she had a weakness for red shoes that had become a personal trademark over the years – today's pair were vintage Ferragamo pumps circa 1989. Pushing her thick silver hair away from her face, she looked up at the tall, well-dressed man prowling the floor in front of her.

'It will be fun, Jack.' She exhaled; a long, thin stream of smoke rising like a spectre, floating round her head. 'Think of her as a companion, someone to talk to.'

'I don't need help. I'm perfectly capable of doing it on my own.'

Jack Coates gave the impression of youth even though he was nearing his mid-forties. Slender, with elegant aquiline features, thick lashes framing indigo eyes, he moved with an animal grace. His dark hair was closely cropped, his linen suit well-tailored and pressed; yet underneath his polished exterior a raw, unpredictable energy flowed. He was a man straining at his own definition of himself. Frowning, he stopped, fingers drumming the top of the filing cabinet.

'I prefer to do it alone. There's nothing more tedious than talking to strangers.'

'It's a three-hour drive.' Rachel leaned back, watching him. 'She'll hardly be a stranger by the time you arrive.'

'I'd rather go on my own,' he said, again.

'That's the trouble with you; you rather do everything on your own. It's not good for you. Besides –' she flicked a bit of ash into an empty teacup – 'she's very pretty.'

He looked up.

She arched an eyebrow, the hint of a smile on her lips.

'What difference does that make?' Jamming his hands into pockets, he turned away. 'Perhaps I should point out that this isn't some small turn-of-the-century Russian village and you're not an ageing Jewish matchmaker eking a living out by tossing complete strangers together and adding a ring. We're in London, Rachel. The millennium dawns. And I'm perfectly capable of doing the job I've been doing for the past four years on my own – without the assistance of young nieces of yours, fresh from New York, trailing round after me.'

She tried a different tack.

'She's an artist. She'll be very helpful. She has an excellent eye.'

He snorted.

'She's had a difficult time of it lately.'

'Which what, roughly translates to "she's broken up with her boyfriend"? Like I said, I don't need a companion. And especially not some moody art student who'll spend the entire time on the phone, arguing with her lover.'

Stubbing out her cigarette, Rachel took out her reading glasses. 'I've already told her she can go.'

He swung round. 'Rachel!'

'It's a large house, Jack. Even with two of you, it will take you days to value and catalogue the whole thing. And whether you deign to acknowledge it or not, you need help. You don't have to talk to her at length or share the contents of your innermost heart. But if you can manage to be civil, you might just notice that it's actually nicer not doing everything on your own.'

He paced like a caged animal. 'I can't believe you've done this!'

'Done what?' She looked at him hard over the top of her glasses. 'Hired an assistant? I am your employer. Besides, she's smart. She studied at the Courtauld, Chelsea, Camberwell –'

'How many art colleges does a person need?'

'Well,' she grinned slyly, 'she was very good at getting *into* them.'

'This isn't helping.'

She laughed. 'It will be an adventure!'

'I don't want an adventure.'

'She's different now.'

'I work alone.'

'Well –' she rifled through the stacks of invoices and receipts, searching for something – 'now you have an assistant to help you.'

'This is nepotism, pure and simple!'

She looked up. 'Nothing about Katie is pure or simple. The sooner you understand that, the easier it will be.'

'What did she do in New York anyway?'

'I'm not sure.'

'I thought you two were close.'

'Her father had just died. He was young; an alcoholic. She wanted a new start and we had some connections there; Paul knew one or two dealers who might be willing to help her find her feet. Tim Bolles, Derek Constantine –'

'Constantine?' Jack stopped. 'I thought he only catered for the super-rich.'

'Yes, well. He took a shine to her.'

'I'll bet he did!'

She gave him a look. 'I don't believe he's that way inclined.'

'I'm sure he inclines himself to whoever's got the cash, which doesn't exactly add to his charms.'

'New York is not a city a young woman can just waltz into. You need contacts.' Opening the top drawer, she sifted through its contents. 'I'm just guessing, but I take it you don't like him.'

'My father had dealings with him. Years ago. So –' he changed the subject – 'she's staying with you, is she?'

'For the time being. Her mother lives in Spain.' She sighed; her face tensed. 'She's so different. So entirely, completely different. I'd heard nothing for months . . . not even a phone call . . . and then out of blue, there she was.'

Suddenly a courier bike, buzzing like a giant wasp, tore past the doorway at breakneck speed.

'Good God!' Jack turned, tracking it as it narrowly avoided a couple of girls, coming out of a coffee shop. 'They're a menace! One of these days someone's going to get hurt!'

'Jack.' Rachel pressed her hand over his and gave him her most winning smile. 'Do this for me, please? I think it will be good for her; a trip to the country, time with someone closer to her own age.'

'Ha!' He squeezed her fingers lightly before moving his hand away. 'I'm not a babysitter, Rachel. Where is this house anyway?'

'On the coast in Devon. Endsleigh. Have you ever heard of it?'

He shook his head. 'Look, I'm not . . . you know, good with people.'

'Maybe. But you're a good man.'

'I'm an awkward man,' he corrected, wandering over to the fireplace.

'You don't need to worry. Katie won't be a problem, I promise. You might even enjoy it.' She caught his eye in the mirror hanging above the mantelpiece. Her voice softened. 'You need to make an effort now.'

'Yeah, that's what they tell me.'

Rachel was quiet. A rare breeze rustled the papers in front of her.

'Well. There we go,' Jack concluded. He picked up his

briefcase from where he'd left it, on the seat of one of the sagging leather chairs, and headed for the door. 'I've got work to do.'

'Jack . . .'

'Tell your niece we leave at eight thirty tomorrow.' He turned. 'And I'm not wasting the whole morning waiting for her, so she'd better be ready. Oh –' he paused on the threshold – 'and we'll be listening to *Le Nozze di Figaro* on the way down, so no conversation necessary.'

She laughed. 'And if she doesn't like opera?'

'She doesn't need to come!' He waved, striding out, quickly lost in the stream of people on Jockey's Fields.

Rachel pulled off her glasses, rubbed her eyes. They hurt today; not enough sleep.

Digging through her handbag, she pulled out her cigarettes.

This job wasn't good for him. He needed to be somewhere he could be around people, back in the thick of life, not picking through the belongings of the dead. Perhaps she ought to hire a secretary. Some cheerful young woman to bring him out of himself. A redhead, perhaps?

Catching herself, she smiled. He was right; she wasn't a Jewish matchmaker.

Swivelling round in her chair, she flicked through the piles of paper, looking again for the phone number. Her late husband always claimed her very distinctive filing system would fail her one day. Today was not the day

though; she needed more than anything to talk to her sister Anna. Especially now that Katie was back. The role of matriarch was Anna's forte. Rachel did Bohemia, Anna domesticity. That was the way it had always been. At least that was the way it had been until Anna's recent decampment to a small town outside Malaga left Rachel feeling unexpectedly abandoned and strangely affronted. Her shock was purely selfish, she knew that. Her sister had dared to change the well-worn script of their roles without consulting her, tossing off her old life as if it were nothing more than a garment, grown shapeless and ill-fitting from too much use.

'I'm tired of London,' Anna had declared, as Rachel helped her pack up the flat she'd owned in Highgate for twenty-two years. 'I want to start again, somewhere fresh, where nobody knows me.'

She'd had a child's optimism that day; a purpose and energy Rachel hadn't seen in her for years. And secretly she'd envied her courage and the audacity of her sureness. Anna's life hadn't been easy. The childhood sweetheart she'd married failed her, turning into a desperate, unreliable alcoholic. She'd struggled to raise Katie on her own, only to endure her silences and rebellion, followed by her sudden desertion to America. It was no wonder Anna decided to escape. And she deserved a new life in a country bathed in sun and warm Latin temperament. Still, when she'd rung last week, Rachel had been short with her; fractious. She'd scribbled her number down on some

scrap, promising herself she'd transfer it to her address book later. Now it was later and she couldn't find the damn thing.

Hold on. What was this?

She tugged at the corner of something jutting out beneath a pile of overdue VAT forms.

It was a postcard.

At first glance it appeared to be of Ingres's famous painting *Odalisque*. But on closer examination the blue eyes of the reclining courtesan were painted pale green, the same clear celadon as Katie's. One half of her face was bathed in shadow, the other in light. Her unnerving gaze managed nevertheless to be elusive; her very directness a mask behind which she remained hidden. Turning it over, there was a message scrawled across the back in Katie's near-hieroglyphic hand.

'Portrait of the artist'
xx K

Across the bottom it read, '*The Real Fake: Original Reproductions by Cate Albion*'.

Cate. She'd changed everything she could about herself – her name, her hair colour, even her work. Reproductions of old masters were a far cry from the huge triptychs she produced in art school; full of rage and surprising power. But then again, part of her talent was always her ability to reinvent herself, ransacking wide-ranging styles and

iconography with a ruthlessness and speed that was frightening.

Nothing was pure and simple about Katie. Even her career was layered with illusion and double entendre.

It wasn't what she was looking for, yet Rachel slipped it thoughtfully into the large leather handbag at her feet.

The real fake.

As a child Katie was shy, introverted; looked like she was made of glass. But if there was something broken, something missing, she was invariably behind it. Or, later on, if there was a party when someone's parents were out of town, it would turn out to have been Katie's idea. The girl caught not only smoking behind the bicycle sheds at school, but selling the cigarettes too? Katie. There was fire, a certain streak of will that burned slowly, deeply, beneath the surface; flaring when challenged. It was surprising, perverse; often funny and ironic.

Rachel thought again of the lost young woman, wandering around her flat in Marylebone. So quiet, so unsure.

When she'd asked Katie what had brought her back to London, she'd simply shrugged her shoulders. 'I need a break. Some perspective.' Then she'd turned to Rachel, suddenly wide-eyed, tense. 'You don't mind, do you?'

'No, no of course not.' Rachel had assured her. 'You must stay as long as you like.'

She'd dropped the subject after that. But the expression on Katie's face haunted her.

Lighting another cigarette, Rachel cradled her chin in her hand, taking a deep drag.

It wasn't like Katie to be frightened.

Secretive, yes.

But never afraid.

Jack drove up in front of number 1a Upper Wimpole Street the next morning in his pride and joy, an old Triumph, circa 1963. There on the doorstep was a young woman, slight, slender; hair in a sleek bob, white blonde in the early-morning sun. Her face was oval, with green eyes; her skin a light golden tan. She was wearing a pale linen dress, sandals and a cream cashmere cardigan. In one hand she had an overnight case and in the other a vintage Hermès Kelly bag in bright orange. Silver bangles dangled from her delicate wrists, a simple, slightly pink strand of pearls round her neck.

She was beautiful.

It was disturbing how attractive she was.

This was not the struggling artist he was expecting. This was a socialite; a starlet; a creature of style, grace and poise. Walking down the steps, she moved with a slow undercurrent of sexual possibility. When she slid into the seat next to him, Jack was aware of the soft scent of fresh-cut grass, mint and a hint of tuberose; a heady mix full of sharp edges and refined luxury. It had been a long time

since an attractive woman had sat next to him in his car. It was an unsettling, sensuous feeling.

Turning, she extended her hand. 'I'm Cate.'

Her palm slipped into his; cool and smooth. He found himself not shaking it, but instead holding it, almost reverently, in his own. She smiled, lips parting slowly across a row of even white teeth, green eyes fixed on his. And before he knew it, he was smiling back, that slightly lopsided grin of his that creased his eyes and wrinkled his nose, at this golden creature whose hand fitted so nicely into the hollow of his own; who adorned so perfectly the front seat of his vintage convertible.

'You don't want to do this and neither do I.' Her voice was low, intimate. 'We needn't make conversation.'

And with that, she withdrew her hand, knotting a silk scarf round her head; slipping on a pair of tortoiseshell sunglasses.

And she was gone, removed from him already.

He blinked. 'Do you like . . . is opera all right? *Le Nozze di Figaro*?'

She nodded.

He pressed the play button, started the engine and pulled out into traffic. He'd been dreading the social strain of today so much that sleep was an impossibility. Earlier, while packing his bag, he'd cursed Rachel.

Now, as he drove into the wide avenue of Portland Place, the cool green of Regent's Park spread before them, he was baffled, bemused. He'd anticipated a nervous

self-absorbed girl; someone whose inane questions would have to be fended off. It was his intention to create an unspoken boundary between them with the briskness of his tone and the curtness of his replies. But now his mind raced, trying to devise some clever way of hearing the sound of her voice again.

Of course, he could always ask a simple question. But there was something delicious about sitting next to her in silence. Their intimacy was, after all, inevitable; hours, even days, stretched before them. He sensed that she knew this. And it intrigued him.

Keenly conscious of every movement of his body next to hers, he downshifted, his hand almost brushing against her knee. The furious zeal of the overture of *Le Nozze di Figaro* filled the air around them with exquisite, frenetic intensity. They sped round the arc of the Outer Circle of the park. The engine roared as he accelerated, ducking around a long line of traffic in an uncharacteristically daredevil move.

And suddenly she was laughing, head back, clutching her seat; an unexpectedly low, earthy chuckle.

She's a woman who likes speed, he thought, childishly delighted with the success of his manoeuvre. And before he knew it, he was overtaking another three cars, zipping through a yellow light on the Marylebone Road and cutting off a lorry as they merged onto the motorway.

Horns blared behind them as they raced out of London.

And, for the first time in a long while, all was right with the world. It was a beautiful, sun-drenched morning – the

entire summer spread out before them. He felt handsome, masculine and young.

And he was laughing too.

High on a cliff where the rolling countryside, dotted with cows and lambs, met the expanse of sea, Endsleigh stood alone. Part of an extensive farm, it commanded a view over the bay beneath and the surrounding hills that was breathtaking. Built in pale grey stone by a young, ambitious Robert Adam, it rose like a miniature Roman temple; its classical proportions blending harmoniously into the rich green fields that surrounded it, mirroring the Arcadian perfection of the landscape with its Palladian dome and restrained, slender columns. High stone walls extended for acres on either side of the house, protecting both the formal Italian rose gardens and the vegetable patches from the stormy winter winds, while the arched gravel drive and the central fountain, long out of use, lent the house an air of refined, easy symmetry.

It was impressive yet at the same time unruly, showing signs of recent neglect. The front lawns were overgrown; the fountain sprouted dry tufts of field grass, high enough almost to blot out the central figure of Artemis with her bow and arrow, balanced gracefully on one toe, mid-chase. There was no one to care if the guttering sagged or the roses grew wild. It was a house without a guardian;

its beautiful exterior yielding, slowly, to the inevitable anarchy of nature and time.

Just before the drive, a discreet sign pointed the way to a campsite on the grounds, nearly a mile down the hill, closer to the shore and out of sight of the occupants in the main house. Below, the bay curved gently like an embracing arm, and beyond, the ocean melted into the sky, a pale grey strip blending into a vast canopy of blue. It was cloudless, bright. Cool gusts tempered the heat of the midday sun.

Jack pulled up, wheels crunching on the gravel of the drive, and turned off the engine.

They sat a moment, taking in the house, its position; the view of the countryside and the sea beyond. Neither of them wanted to move. Silence, thick and heavy, pressed in around them, tangible, like the heat. It was disorientating. The internal compass of every city dweller – the constant noise of distant lives humming away in the background – was missing.

'It's much bigger than I thought it would be,' Cate said at last.

It was an odd observation. The beauty of the place was obvious, overwhelming. Could it be that she was calculating how long they would be alone here?

'Yes. I suppose it is.'

Swinging the car door open, she climbed out. After so much time driving, the ground felt unsteady beneath her feet.

Jack followed and together they walked past the line of rose bushes, full-blown and fragrant, alive with the buzzing of insects, to the front door.

He pressed the bell. After a moment, footsteps drew closer.

A tall, thin man in a dark suit opened the heavy oak door. He was in his late fifties, with a long, sallow face and thinning, grey hair. He had large, mournful eyes, heavily ringed with dark circles.

'You must be Mr Coates, from Deveraux and Diplock,' he surmised, unsmiling.

'Yes.'

'Welcome.' He shook Jack's hand.

'And this is Miss Albion, my . . . assistant,' Jack added.

'John Syms.' The man introduced himself, inclining his head slightly in Cate's direction, as if he'd only budgeted for one handshake and wasn't going to be duped into another. 'From the firm of Smith, Boothroy and Earl. We're handling the liquidation of assets on behalf of the family.' He stepped back, and they crossed the threshold into the entrance hall. 'Welcome to Endsleigh.'

The hall was sparse and formal with black-and-white marble tiles and two enormous mahogany cabinets with fine inlay, both filled with collections of china. Over the fireplace hung a large, unremarkable oil painting of the house and grounds. Four great doors led off the hall into different quarters.

'How was your journey?' Mr Syms asked crisply.

'Fine, thank you.' Cate turned, examining the delicate Dresden china figurines arranged together in one of the cabinets. Their heads were leaning coyly towards one another, all translucent porcelain faces and pouting pink rosebud mouths, poised in picturesque tableaux of seduction and assignation.

'Yes, traffic wasn't too bad,' Jack said, immediately wishing he'd thought of something less banal.

Mr Syms was a man of few words and even fewer social graces. 'Splendid.' Pleasantries dispensed with, he opened one of the doors. 'Allow me to show you around.'

They followed him into the main hall with its sweeping galleried staircase, lined with family portraits and landscapes. It was a collection of country-house clichés – a pair of stiff black Gothic chairs stood on either side of an equally ancient oak table, stag's heads and stuffed fish were mounted above the doorways; tucked under the stairwell there was even a bronze dinner gong.

Cate looked up. Above, in a spectacular dome, faded gods and goddesses romped in a slightly peeling blue sky. 'Oh, how lovely!'

'Yes. But in rather bad repair, like so much of the house. There are ten bedrooms.' Mr Syms indicated the upper floors with a brisk wave of his hand. 'I've had the master bedroom and Lady Avondale's suite made up for you.'

He marched on into the dining room, an echoing, conventional affair with a long dining table tucked into the bay-fronted window overlooking the fountain and

front lawns. 'The dining room,' he announced, heading almost immediately through another door, into a drawing room with an elaborate vaulted ceiling, library bookcases, soft yellow walls and a grand piano. Marble busts adorned the plinths between shelves; two ancient Knole setees piled with cushions offered a comfortable refuge to curl up with a book and a cup of tea. A ginger cat basked contentedly in a square of sun on top of an ottoman, purring loudly.

'The drawing room.'

He swung another door open wide.

'The sitting room.'

And so the tour continued, at breakneck speed; through to the morning room, the study, gun room, the fishing-tackle room, the pantry, the silver room, the main kitchen with its long pine table and cool flagstone floors leading into the second, smaller kitchen and cellars. It was a winding maze of a house. No amount of cleaning could remove the faint smell of dust and damp, embedded into the soft furnishings from generations of use. And despite the heat, there was a permanent chill in the air, as if it were standing in an unseen shadow.

Mr Syms returned to the sitting room, unlocking the French windows. They stepped outside into a walled garden at the side of the house where a rolling lawn, bordered by well-established flower beds led to a small, Italian-style rose garden. It was arranged around a central sundial with carved stone benches in each corner. In the

distance, the coastline jutted out over the bay; the water sparkling in the hazy afternoon sun.

Mr Syms guided them to the far end of the lawn where a table and chairs were set up under the cool shade of an ancient horse-chestnut tree. Tea things were laid out; a blue pottery teapot, two mugs, cheese sandwiches and a plate of Bourbon biscuits.

'How perfect!' Cate smiled. 'Thank you!'

Mr Syms didn't sit, but instead concentrated, going over some internal checklist.

'The housekeeper, Mrs Williams, thought you might need something. Her flat is there.' He indicated a low cottage at the back of the property. 'She's prepared a shepherd's pie for tonight. And apologises if either of you are vegetarians.' He checked his watch. 'I'm afraid, Mr Coates, that I have another appointment and must be going. It's my understanding that you and Miss Albion will be spending the night, possibly even two, while you value and catalogue the contents of the house. Is that correct?'

'Yes.'

'Here's a set of keys and my card. If you need anything while you're here, please don't hesitate to contact me. Otherwise, you may leave the keys with Mrs Williams upon your departure and I anticipate hearing from you in due course regarding the value and sale of the contents.'

Jack took the keys, frowning. 'And is everything to be sold? There are no pieces the family would like to keep?'

'There is no family left in this country, Mr Coates. The

entire estate has been purchased by developers who wish to turn it into a luxury hotel, the proceeds of which go to a number of charitable causes. So, sadly, no. Again, if I can be of any help –'

'Forgive me, but who were they?' Cate interrupted, settling into one of the chairs. 'Who lived in Endsleigh?'

'I thought it was common knowledge. The late Lady Avondale, more famously known by her maiden name, Irene Blythe, lived here, the widow of Colonel Sir Malcolm Avondale. She died two months ago, aged ninety-two. She was a wonderful woman; very loyal and generous. Lady Avondale was an extremely active campaigner for children's causes, especially of UNICEF. She received her OBE in 1976. Unfortunately, of course, it's her sister everyone knows about. But that's the way, isn't it?' he sighed. 'The good in this world are never as glamorous as the bad. I'm sorry but I really must go. I'm reading a will in Ottery St Mary in an hour.' He nodded to them. 'It was a pleasure to meet you both. Mrs Williams is always on hand if you need anything. I hope you enjoy your stay.' Then, with a small bow, he took his leave, cutting across the lawn with long strides.

'Is it just me or does it feel like he's running away?' Cate poured out two mugs of tea. 'Sugar?'

'No, thank you.' Jack picked up a sandwich. 'He wouldn't be the first. I have that effect on people.'

'I've never heard of the Blythes.' She passed him a mug. 'And who is this infamous sister?'

'Diana Blythe. The beautiful Blythe sisters. They were both debutantes; famous for being famous between the wars. Do you really not know who they are?'

Cate shook her head. 'Am I just a mass of ignorance? Tell me everything you know.'

'Well,' he admitted, 'to be honest, that's it. I know Diana went missing during the war and was never found. Some say she went to live in America. Others think she was murdered. I'm surprised you haven't heard of her.'

'Obviously my education is lacking.' Cate sipped her tea. 'How strange and romantic!'

'You have a very odd idea of romance.'

'I have odd ideas about a lot of things.' The wind blew across the lawn, gently ruffling her skirt. 'What an old relic!'

'The house?'

'Hmm.'

'You don't think it's charming?'

'Well, it may be. But it's sad too. And so staid; a great big cliché of a house.'

'All these houses have a sameness about them. I've seen dozens and dozens over the years. It's the position and the grounds that make this one special. I love looking out over the sea. And although it's only small –'

'Small!'

'Ten bedrooms is nothing.' He settled into the chair opposite. 'I mean, it must've been wonderful for entertaining but it's no size, really.'

'Now there's only you and me and Mrs Williams.' Cate closed her eyes. 'It's peaceful,' she sighed. 'And the name is so evocative. Endsleigh!'

The sea was too far off to be heard but the sound of the wind through the trees, the birds and the warm smell of freshly cut grass bathed in sunlight soothed her.

'It is peaceful,' Jack agreed.

The dull, persistent ring of a mobile phone buzzed, coming from her handbag.

Her eyes flicked open.

It continued to ring.

'Aren't you going to answer it?'

'I didn't think there'd be a signal here.'

Finally, it stopped.

'So,' Jack grinned, 'avoiding someone?'

The look on her face was cold, like being splashed by a bucket of iced water.

'I was only –'

'It doesn't matter.' She stood up. 'It's too hot out here. I'm going upstairs to unpack. Let me know when you'd like to begin.'

He tried again. 'Look, I'm sorry if I –'

'It's nothing,' she cut him off. 'It's of no importance at all.'

Taking her handbag, she walked across the lawn. Jack watched as she stepped between the layers of sheer fabric floating in the breeze by the French windows, disappearing into the house.

17, Rue de Monceau
Paris

13 June 1926

My dearest Wren,
Muv sent me a copy of the article in The Times featuring your lovely photograph. Miss Irene Blythe – one of the Debutantes of the Season! And rightly so! How did they get your hair to look like that? Have you had it shingled? Remember that I want to hear every tiny detail, especially about anything that HAPPENS to you – even a brief fumble in a corridor is thrilling for me, as I am in EXILE till next year.

As for me, I am limp with boredom, despite the romance of the Greatest City in Europe. That is Madame Galliot's constant refrain. 'You girls are spoilt! Here you are in Paris – the Greatest City in Europe – your parents are spending a fortune on you . . .' on and on and on . . . Of course she doesn't actually allow us to go anywhere, which is too vexing. Apart from our drawing classes and trips to Ladurée (the French cannot make a decent cup of tea) and endless expeditions to churches – you can see she is truly exerting herself on behalf of my education – we are

rarely allowed to venture foot into Paris itself – a theatre or nightclub, let alone two Les Folies-Bergère. She also has perfected a sneer she reserves for me when she says things like, 'There are certain subtle refinements that simply cannot be taught,' (cue said sneer), referring of course to the fact that you and I were not born into our class so much as thrust upon it. To her we are and always will be counterfeits. Which is why it is so thrilling to leave cuttings of The Times around for her to see!

Under her tutelage I have learned precisely three things:

* *How to eat oysters.*
* *How to wear my hat at a beguiling angle.*
* *How to engage in surreptitious eye contact with men in the street, who, being French, are only too glad to ogle you back.*

She has two other English girls staying with her – Anne Cartwright, who is charming, great fun and not at all above herself (she has taught me how to smoke quite successfully and without the least bit of choking) and Eleanor Ogilvy-Smith, who is a great lump of wet clay. Eleanor lives in terror of any possible form of enjoyment and every time Anne and I campaign for some tiny inch of freedom, she immediately sides with Madame Galliot and suggests another outing of the religious variety. She

also spends far too much time in the bathroom. Anne and I have bets as to what she does in there – all of which would offend your propriety.

So, please! More news of the Season and every man you dance with and every single dress you wear and what you have for supper (each course) and how many marriage proposals you receive this week and if they kneel and blush and stutter with nerves, etc., when faced with your overwhelming beauty or simply faint. Also, please, please, please give me some small commission here in Paris so that I may have a legitimate reason to set forth into some of the Forbidden Zones – for example, do you need any gloves from Pigalle? Or stockings from the Lido?

I am too, too proud of you, darling! And I think Fa would be too. How am I ever to live up to my beautiful sister? J'ai malade de jalousie! (See how my French improves!)

Send my love to Muv, who must be finding the fight to keep you both chaste and marry you off at breakneck speed quite an exhilarating moral dilemma. She does, as always, write the most fantastically boring letters. They read more like housekeeping accounts than anything else. How did a woman so dull marry so well? (Anne says she must have Hidden Longings, which is quite revolting, especially when you consider what our step-father probably looks like sans clothes. I told her surely

such things should be outlawed amongst the elderly and besides, ma chérie maman does a very good line in Virgin Queenism – her poor Consort has Jesus to contend with now. I wonder she hasn't invested in a life-sized crucifix to hang above the bed, now that we are so hideously rich.)

Oh! To Be In London!

I do so long to join you and be in the thick of life at last!

Yours, as always,

Diana xxxx

PS Have just tried to cut my own hair with a pair of sewing shears and now look like the boy who delivers for the butcher's. Anne has kindly lent me a cloche. Pray for me.