

Finders & Keepers

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

Harry braced himself for the inevitable judder when the train drew into Pontypridd station. He adjusted his cream felt derby to a jaunty angle, picked up the overnight case and suitcase he had moved from the carriage into the corridor, opened the door and stepped down to be deafened by a scream.

‘There he is! Bella, Mam, over here! Harry!’ His fourteen-year-old sister, Edyth, hurtled towards him.

‘Ow!’ He dropped his bags and reeled back when the plaster cast on her left arm caught his cheek.

‘Gosh, I’m sorry, Harry. Did I hurt you? Did you have a good journey? Mam and Bella wanted to pick you up by themselves, but I insisted on coming. They said there wouldn’t be room for me and your luggage in the car – I told them that they could jolly well get a taxi to take your trunk to the new house. You don’t have to bother about it, Mam’s arranging for a porter to take it off the train now. Was the summer ball as gorgeous as it sounds? I can’t wait until it’s my turn to go to grown-up parties. Are you very sad not to be going back to Oxford? No of course you’re not, because you’re off to Paris on Saturday. Dad – well, not just Dad, everyone’s ever so proud of you for getting a First. Oh look, I’ve got chocolate on your white suit. I didn’t realize it was that soft. Do you want a piece?’ She opened her hand to reveal four half-melted squares of Five Boys. ‘Here, let me get it off.’ She pulled a grubby handkerchief from her sleeve with her clean hand, spat on it and dabbed at his lapel, smudging the stain.

‘Edyth, don’t; you’re making it worse. Please, I’ll see to it—’

‘No, let me,’ she interrupted. ‘Boys haven’t a clue when it comes to getting out stains. Guess what—’

‘Edyth, stop gabbling like an auctioneer and let Harry get his breath,’ sixteen-year-old Bella drawled from behind her.

Both sisters were dressed in fashionable, calf-length, dropped-waist, silk afternoon frocks. To Harry’s astonishment Bella looked suddenly and amazingly grown up, in cool, sophisticated cream, with matching accessories and stockings, and amber-coloured cloche hat and gloves. Whereas Edyth – in navy blue, with snagged stockings, her shoes covered in dust – could have just left a hockey field.

Instead of giving him her usual bear hug, Bella offered her cheek. Taken aback, Harry kissed her, then, seeing their mother, ran up the platform and once more dropped his bags. Sali had no compunction about embracing him in public. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held him tight for a moment before pushing him back and studying him.

‘You look tired.’

‘I’m fine,’ he reassured her.

‘There are shadows beneath your eyes. Too many graduation celebrations?’ she said shrewdly.

‘I’ve enjoyed one or two,’ he conceded. Like the girls, his mother was dressed in silk. The smart beige outfit she’d worn to his graduation ceremony was complemented by a brown hat, gloves and shoes. ‘And talking of celebrations, you three look as though you’re going to a party.’

‘We are,’ Edyth blurted tactlessly.

‘Well done, Edyth, for letting the cat out of the bag,’ Bella said.

‘Harry would have found out soon enough.’ Sali frowned at the burgeoning red mark on Harry’s cheek. ‘Is that a bruise?’

‘If it is, it’s down to Edyth’s cast. And what have you done this time, Miss Courts Disaster Wherever She Goes?’ Harry picked up his bag and case again.

‘Fell out of the apple tree in the old house,’ Edyth answered cheerfully. ‘We were flying kites. Glyn’s got caught in the branches. He was crying and no one else would climb up to get it—’

‘We had more sense,’ Bella interrupted.

Edyth stuck her tongue out at her sister ‘The doctor said it’s a clean break and should heal well.’

‘And a trip to the hospital was just what your father and I needed on the day we moved. Your trunk is being sent on to the new house, Harry.’ Sali shepherded the three of them towards the ticket collector, who was sitting in his booth at the top of the flight of steps that led down into the station yard.

‘You brought my car,’ Harry quickened his pace when he looked down and saw the open-topped, five-seater Crossley tourer, which the trustees of his estate had presented to him on his twenty-first birthday.

‘I thought you’d enjoy driving it to the old house one last time.’ Sali handed him the keys.

‘But you’ve already moved.’ A year ago Harry had reluctantly given the trustees of the estate bequeathed to him by his mother’s great-aunt permission to sell the mansion that was part of his inheritance. It had been a hard decision to make as they had lived in it for fifteen years, but the spiralling costs of repairs coupled with the size of the place had made it uneconomical to run as a private house.

‘The council took possession of the grounds months ago,’ Sali confirmed, ‘but they don’t take over the house until tomorrow.’

‘So we thought we’d have one last “do” there. Your welcome home from Oxford and bon voyage to Paris, and our farewell-to-Ynysangharad-House party. It’s great for dancing because all the furniture’s been cleared out,’ Edyth chattered as she ran down the steps alongside

Harry. 'I wish I were going to Paris. Uncle Joey says the girls dance the cancan there. And they eat frogs' legs and snails. Can you imagine that? Are you going to eat frogs' legs and snails when you get there?' Edyth charged up to Harry's car, hurdled over the back door and landed on the bench seat in the back.

'I hope you realize that the whole of Tumble Square saw your knickers then, Edyth.' Bella waited until Harry had opened the passenger door for her mother so he could open the back door for her.

'Miss Prissy Bossy Boots,' Edyth chanted the nickname she and their three younger sisters had invented for Bella. She stuck her thumbs in her ears and wiggled her fingers.

'Very pretty, Edyth.' Bella settled her handbag squarely on her lap.

Harry listened to his sisters squabbling while he stowed his luggage in the boot of his car. 'You two make me feel as though I've well and truly arrived home.' He climbed into the driving seat beside his mother and pressed the ignition. The engine roared into life. 'How is Dad?'

'Working too hard organizing the miners' strike as well as seeing to his parliamentary duties. I wish he'd take it easy,' Sali answered.

'He wouldn't be Dad if he did.'

'You're right.' Sali had married Lloyd Evans when Harry was four years old. Harry had adored Lloyd then, and they had grown even closer after the five girls had been born, sticking together as the 'men' in the family.

'Mind you, I never thought the miners would hold out alone for so long after the General Strike was called off in May.' Harry stopped the car so a cart could cross from Taff Street into Market Square in front of them.

'If there's one thing I've learned in seventeen years of marriage to an Evans, it's that the miners will carry on every fight until the absolute bitter end.' Sali waved to the doorman of Gwilym James as they passed the Taff Street entrance of the store.

Harry heard a slap, and suspected that Bella had finally lost her temper and lashed out at Edyth. He leaned back towards the rear seat, and asked, 'So who is going to be at this party?'

'Everyone.' Edyth draped her arms around Sali's neck and rested her head on her mother's shoulder. 'All the uncles, the aunts, the cousins, heaps of friends. But you'll be sorry to hear that Bella invited Alice Reynolds—'

'She's a friend,' Bella interrupted.

'Some friend. She only talks to us because she's stuck on Harry. She clung to him like a slug on lettuce at our Christmas party. All slime and simpering smiles—'

'Really, Edyth, I don't know where you get your ideas from. Slugs are disgusting creatures,' Bella said.

'So is Alice Reynolds, and you're beginning to sound more like a school marm every day. I bet you're going to die a dried-up old spinster, Belle.'

'Edyth, enough!' Sali reverted to the 'special' voice she used to silence her children whenever their bickering turned ugly.

'You don't have to worry about me and Alice Reynolds, Edyth, she's a baby.' Harry steered the car through the main gates of the private drive to Ynysangharad House.

'She's the same age as me,' Bella bristled.

'Sorry, Belle, but she's nowhere near as mature as you.' Hoping he'd mollified his sister with the compliment, Harry winked at his mother and slowed the car to a walking pace. The afternoon was warm, the garden perfumed with the scent of roses. 'That music doesn't sound as though it's coming from a gramophone.'

'Striking miners.' Sali straightened her scarf and eased a wrinkle from one of her kid gloves. 'A few of them formed a jazz band using instruments donated by the union. Your father asked them to play for us today.'

Harry stopped outside the front door and pulled on the handbrake. Seconds later a sea of family and friends poured out of the house and engulfed the car.

‘Surprise!’ Nine-year-old Susie tugged open the driver’s door, and his three younger sisters piled on to him.

‘Maggie, Beth, Susie.’ He kissed each of them in turn.

‘I’ve learned the charleston, Harry, so you have to dance with me.’

‘I’m older than you, Susie, so you have to dance with me first, Harry.’

‘And I’m older than both of you, Beth, so that means he’ll dance with me first.’

‘Edyth and I are older than the three of you.’ Bella took the hand of a boy about her own age, who opened the door for her and helped her out of the car.

Before Harry had a chance to ask Bella to introduce him to her friend, a shrill voice resounded above the chatter.

‘What about me?’ Two-year-old Glyn, his only brother and the youngest member of the family, who Lloyd joked was Sali’s ‘best ever afterthought’, was struggling to escape their father’s arms.

‘What about you, little man?’ Harry took him from Lloyd, left the car and set him on his shoulders. He shook his father’s hand, kissed his aunts and, surrounded by his cousins, went inside. The band had set up in the hall, so they could be heard throughout the house, and they broke into the strains of ‘For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow’ as soon as Harry walked through the door. Harry stopped and, feeling slightly foolish, stood with Glyn on his shoulders until everyone finished singing.

Sensing his embarrassment, Sali guided him towards the french doors in the dining room. They made slow progress as people continually stopped him to offer their congratulations on his degree and wish him well in Paris. Trestle tables had been set up outside on the terrace, and they were covered with plates of savouries, sandwiches, cakes, jellies and blancmanges.

‘Mari’s outdone herself.’ Harry looked around for their housekeeper.

‘She has, but none of us have succeeded in getting her

out of the kitchen.’ Sali took Glyn from him and handed the toddler a fairy cake.

‘I’ve told the others that I’m first and that’s all there is to it.’ Harry’s youngest sister, Susie, who had all the confidence of a girl twice her age, grabbed his hand and pulled him back towards the house when the band struck up ‘Yes, Sir, That’s My Baby’.

‘What about Maggie and Beth?’ Harry asked when they reached the middle of the drawing room where the dancers had congregated.

‘I told them Mari needed help in the kitchen.’

‘And did she?’ Harry resolved to pay the housekeeper a visit as soon as he could get away.

Susie just grinned before waving her hands and kicking her legs in an imitation of the chorus girls at the Town Hall.

‘Sorry you have five sisters,’ Lloyd commiserated when Harry managed to escape into the library five dances later to join the men who had laid claim to the room as a refuge and smoking parlour.

‘Sorry Edyth hasn’t learned to be more careful with that cast.’ He rubbed his arm. ‘I haven’t been back in Pontypridd an hour and she’s managed to thump me twice. Uncle Joey, thank you.’ He took the cigarette his father’s youngest brother offered him. ‘And thank you very much for the wallet you sent me when I graduated. I hope you and Aunty Rhian got my letter.’

‘We did.’ Joey lit Harry’s cigarette.

‘And thank you for the pen, Uncle Victor.’ He shook his father’s younger brother’s hand. ‘It was much appreciated.’

‘First Oxford graduate in the Evans family – you deserve something special. But I don’t deserve the thanks, Megan chose it. What would we do without our women?’

‘Have more money in our pockets to get drunk on every night?’ Joey suggested. He had been strikingly good-looking

before the war but the years in the trenches and serious wounds had taken a toll on his health.

‘It’s just as well Rhian knows you don’t mean a tenth of what you say.’ Victor passed round a plate of sausage rolls he’d filched from one of the tables outside.

‘I won’t be the last one in this family to graduate from Oxford. Not with the number of cousins I have.’ Harry looked around the room. ‘Isn’t Granddad here?’

‘He complained he couldn’t breathe in here so he went outside.’ Lloyd handed him an ashtray.

‘How is he?’ Harry asked. Billy Evans had lost the lower part of one of his legs in a train accident fifteen years before. Forced to leave mining, he hadn’t allowed his disability to stop him from moving in with Victor and Megan so he could help Victor out on his farm. But it wasn’t only the loss of his leg that had affected his health. Like most miners who had spent twenty or more years underground he had succumbed to ‘miner’s lung’.

‘You know Dad.’ Victor swallowed a mouthful of sausage roll. ‘He’s not one to complain. Even when he’s in pain.’

‘You’re a brave lady venturing into the men’s lair,’ Joey said archly to Alice Reynolds, who was standing on tip-toe in the doorway.

‘I’m looking for Harry. It’s a lady’s excuse me.’

‘Far be it from me to interfere with a lady’s wishes.’ Joey divested Harry of his cigarette and pushed him towards Alice. Linking her arm into his, Alice led Harry back into the drawing room.

‘Please, not near Edyth,’ Harry begged.

Edyth was flinging around her one good arm and both legs under the pretext of teaching her younger sisters the Charleston. Harry felt sorry for Maggie, Beth and Susie, who all received a couple of inadvertent kicks from her. He also noticed Bella dancing a practised and more expert version with the boy who’d helped her from the car.

‘Bella has a boyfriend?’ Harry asked his mother as soon

as the dance was over and he'd managed to shake off Alice.

'Gareth Michaels.' Sali glanced across the room at them. 'He's seventeen and so smitten it's painful to watch the way she treats him.'

'Isn't she a little young to be going out with boys?'

'The protective older brother.' Sali looked amused. 'So far he's only taken her to the church social. Perhaps I should remind you how old you were when you escorted your first girlfriend to the theatre.'

'Point taken.' Harry followed Sali back outside. She retrieved Glyn, who was sitting on the grass watching Joey's youngest son and daughters play ball.

'Too much cake isn't good for one small boy, Glyn.' She took an iced bun from him and wiped the crumbs from his mouth. 'I hope everyone is enjoying themselves.'

'Judging by the smiles on their faces, they seem to be. It was a brilliant idea to hold a last party here.' Harry looked up at the house. 'It's a pity it had to be sold but Dad and the trustees were right – a house this size needs an army of servants to run it. And in this day and age it's simply not practical.' He smiled wryly. 'Despite Dad's Marxist ideals, we enjoyed the best of the vanishing world of the privileged.'

'We did.' Sali pressed a plate of sandwiches on a group of colliers who were hanging back diffidently from the table.

'From that look on your face, I can see that I'm not the only one who's sorry to leave,' Harry commented.

'We all are. The girls didn't stop crying for days, and although your father would deny it, I caught him wiping away a tear or two.'

'While you, of course, were indifferent,' Harry teased.

'You know me. I'm sentimental at the best of times. Don't forget, I knew and loved this house long before we lived in it. Some of my happiest times were spent here with Great-aunt Edyth before you were born.'

'Is the new house easier to run?'

‘Much,’ she said brightly. ‘Mari and I manage it with the help of two dailies, although it has almost as many rooms. But they are a lot smaller. Your father sold two of the houses he owns in the Rhondda and paid the builder to extend the original plans so each of your sisters could have their own bedroom. As he said, it’s worth the extra expense to stop their squabbling. Now, when they start, we just say, “Go to your rooms” and peace is instantly restored.’

‘It’s good to be home.’

‘You’ll be in Paris this time next week.’

‘I’ll write,’ he promised.

‘Like you did in Oxford? Letters that ignored the questions I asked in mine,’ she reproached. ‘You never did tell me how much you drank at the party after your graduation.’

He adopted what he hoped was an innocent expression. ‘Not that much.’

‘You expect me to believe that?’

‘Of course.’

‘And Anna?’

‘Anna?’ He looked blank.

‘She’s the reason I only allowed two of the girls to drive to the station with me. I thought you might bring her home. You introduced her to us before the ceremony,’ she reminded him.

‘Oh, that Anna.’

‘Given the way and the number of times she kissed you, I assumed it was serious between you two.’

‘She’s a poet who believes in free love and she’s gone to practise her creed with Guy in an artists’ commune in Mexico, or perhaps it was Cape Cod. I’m not sure even they knew where they were going,’ he said carelessly.

‘Guy, your friend who shared rooms with you?’ Sali asked in surprise. ‘Aren’t you upset?’

‘About Anna? Good Lord, no. I’m twenty-one, not sixteen, Mam. There have been a few Annas in the last three years.’ His mother and stepfather had encouraged

him to discuss every aspect of his life openly with them and because they had rarely been disapproving or critical, he told them, if not everything, a great deal more about his life than most of his friends told their parents.

‘Lloyd said you weren’t serious about her.’ (What Lloyd had actually said was, ‘Don’t get your hopes up of seeing Harry walking down the aisle just yet, sweetheart. She’s just another one of his aristocratic flibbertigibbets.’)

‘Dad was right.’

She changed the subject. ‘The builder is progressing well with the house next door that the trustees have bought as an investment for you. Not that they expect you to move in right away. And we put all the furniture you wanted from here in storage.’

‘The trustees don’t expect me to make a successful career as an artist, do they?’ he said quietly.

‘I think hope is a better word than expect,’ she replied diplomatically.

‘I wish they’d see me as a person, not a lump of clay to be moulded into the ideal owner of Gwilym James stores and associated companies.’ In some ways Harry had come to resent the wealth that he would inherit in full at the age of thirty and not only because of the interference of the trustees in what he regarded as his personal decisions. He disliked the privileges it brought him, such as his Oxford education. He would have been happier winning a scholarship to an art college on his own merit, and would have tried to get one, if Lloyd hadn’t pointed out that if he succeeded it would be at the expense of a poverty-stricken student who desperately needed the money.

‘They don’t see you as a lump of clay, darling. And most of them may be elderly and a little old-fashioned, but they are truly fond of you. And although it may not always seem like it, they do have your best interests at heart.’

He slipped his arm around her shoulders and gave her

an affectionate squeeze. 'I know, and I also know just how much trouble you had to persuade them to let me spend this next year in Paris.'

'I think your threat to give up your inheritance if they tried to stop you from going to France had more effect than anything I said.'

'It's good to know that you are behind me. Most of my friends' parents have insisted that they start in some business or other after three years at Oxford. Anyone would think all we did there was laze around, drink and have parties.'

'Didn't you?' Sali's question wasn't entirely humorous.

'I admit I had some jolly good times, but they didn't give me a First for my social life. I had to work for it.'

'Of course you did, darling.' She sensed she'd touched a raw nerve. 'And knowing that you wanted to go to art college, not university, made your father and me even prouder of the effort you made. You've dreamed of being an artist for years. It's only right you have the chance to find out if you have what it takes to become one. And now, given the way the food's disappearing, I'd better go and see if Mari needs help in the kitchen.'

Harry noticed Alice Reynolds bearing down on him again. 'And I need to say hello to her. Come on, Glyn,' he picked up his brother again, 'let's go and see what goodies Mari's kept back for us in the kitchen.'

'Welcome home, Master Harry.' Their housekeeper, Mari Williams, who was supervising the colliers' wives Sali had paid to help her in the kitchen, dusted breadcrumbs from her hands, opened her arms and hugged him.

'How's the most beautiful and best cook in Pontypridd?' Harry handed Glyn to his mother and, despite her bulk, swept Mari off her feet.

'I can see that degree of yours hasn't changed you, Master Harry.' She heard her helpers giggling. 'Put me down, you rascal.'

‘Seeing as how you asked nicely, I will.’ Harry set her gently back on her feet and kissed her cheek.

‘What are you after?’ Mari eyed him suspiciously.

‘Oh, a couple of hours after this party, one of your roasts followed by an iced raspberry bombe would go down a treat, Mari,’ he said hopefully.

‘Then it’s a pity we’re having fricassee of tripe and bread and butter pudding for dinner.’ They were the only two dishes Harry wouldn’t eat.

Sali saw Alice hovering in the passage behind them and whispered, ‘If you want to return to the library, use the scullery door.’ She raised her voice and pretended she’d just seen the girl. ‘Alice, how lovely of you to come and offer to help. There’s a tray of cheese patties ready to be carried outside.’

Harry sneaked out of the door and past the stables. A suspicious pall of blue smoke hung above the shrubbery. He crept inside. His Uncle Victor and Auntie Megan’s twelve-year-old twins, Tom and Jack, were puffing on a cigarette they were sharing with Eddie, his Uncle Joey’s eldest son.

‘Got you!’

Jack’s eyes rounded in alarm. ‘You won’t tell on us, will you, Harry?’

‘Not if you tell me who you stole this from.’ Harry picked up the cigarette Tom had allowed to fall to the ground and held it up in front of them.

‘We didn’t steal it. Granddad dropped it accidentally, we just picked it up,’ Eddie blurted breathlessly. ‘Honest, Harry, it’s the truth.’

‘I believe you, thousands wouldn’t. Where’s Granddad now?’

‘He was sitting on the seat under the chestnut tree.’

He handed the cigarette back to Tom. ‘If anyone else catches you, or you start being sick, you didn’t see me. Right?’

‘Right, Harry,’ they chorused.

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Harry found his grandfather where the boys said they had last seen him, sitting on the bench under the tree, filling his pipe.

‘Granddad, I’ve been looking for you.’ Knowing the old man would be embarrassed by a hug, Harry sat next to him and shook his hand.

‘I wandered out for some air and caught your cousins trying to smoke dried leaves in bits of newspaper.’

‘So you went back into the house, and cadged a real cigarette for them to practise smoking with,’ he guessed, recalling the time when he’d been thirteen and Billy had slipped him a cigarette when he had seen him trying to smoke one of his father’s cigars.

‘It was either that, or risk them poisoning themselves. Besides it’s a family tradition. Your father and Victor sneaked their first puffs of tobacco about that age. Your Uncle Joey was an early developer. I caught him with a packet of twopenny tube when he was seven. His mother brought out her carpet-beater when she found out he’d saved his halfpenny a week sweet money to buy them. Not that she used it other than to threaten him.’

‘Let’s hope Jack, Tom and Eddie don’t give the game away by turning green.’

Billy reached for his stick and rose awkwardly to his feet. ‘Sad to see the old house go?’ he asked, limping on his artificial leg.

‘Mam and I were just talking about that.’ Harry walked alongside his grandfather as he headed for the door closest to the library. ‘It’s the sensible thing to do. Are they really going to turn it into a clinic?’

‘I think so.’

‘I’m glad the War Memorial Committee managed to raise the funds to buy the gardens and grounds outright before handing them over to the town. It would have been awful if the park had been burdened by debt.’ Harry held the french door open for his grandfather.

‘The people of the town gave every penny they could spare.’

‘They wouldn’t have managed to meet the price set by the trustees if you and Dad hadn’t persuaded the miners’ unions to chip in.’ The sale of the grounds had given rise to the first serious argument between Harry and his trustees. If the decision had been his, he would have donated the land and gardens. But nine of the twelve trustees had voted against him and all he had managed to do was set the price at slightly below market value.

‘Joey’s right, a free park dedicated to the dead of the Great War and owned by everyone in the town is a more fitting memorial than any number of statues.’ Billy looked proudly towards his youngest son, who was talking to Harry’s solicitor, Mr Richards. Joey had enlisted in 1914 and fought in France and Mesopotamia for four years before being wounded and invalided out of the army.

‘And here’s the man himself, Mr Richards.’ Joey buttonholed Harry. ‘We were just talking about you and your trip to Paris. Ooh la la. All those artists’ models—’

‘I’m going there to study.’ Harry rose to Joey’s bait.

‘So you say.’ Joey lifted his eyebrows. Away from the influence of his wife, Rhian, his humour tended towards the risqué.

‘You putting your car in storage, Harry?’ Victor asked, deliberately changing the subject.

‘Unless Dad or Mam want to drive it.’

‘Not us.’ Lloyd handed round a tray of beers. ‘I think you were mad to want an open-topped car given the amount of rain we have in Wales. And before you ask, no one has driven it since you returned to Oxford for the summer term apart from your mother when she took it up to the new house and picked you up from the station today. We prefer to sit in the dry when we drive.’

‘You have no sense of adventure.’

‘Because we don’t want to risk pneumonia?’

‘Dad, come and dance with me?’ Joey’s eldest daughter, Rachel, stood in the doorway, Edyth behind her, both with pleading looks on their faces.

‘It’s times like this I’m glad I have four sons.’ Victor

watched Lloyd and Joey being dragged into the drawing room as the band struck up 'I'm Sitting on Top of the World.' 'Can I get you anything to eat, Dad?'

'No thanks.' Billy saw Harry slip upstairs and followed him.

The bedrooms had also been stripped of furniture and Harry's footsteps echoed over the floorboards as he walked around the old nursery. He gazed at the seven columns of lines drawn on to the wall next to the fireplace. Each was topped by a name and inscribed with ages and dates in keeping with the family tradition of measuring every child on his or her birthday. All his half-sisters' and -brother's marks started with age one, his with age six, marked by his mother the year they had moved into the house. He fingered his topmost line, his age, twenty-one, his height neatly inscribed in Lloyd's careful writing beside it – 6 ft 2 in.

He stared at the unpolished square of boards, where a rug had been, and recalled the times he had sat, ostensibly reading on the window seat, while secretly watching his sisters hold dolls' tea parties under Bella's bossy tutelage. The scorch marks that marred the tiles of fairy scenes around the fireplace brought back memories of a traumatic Christmas Eve when Edyth had thrown lamp oil onto a sluggish fire and set the chimney ablaze. But that was Edyth; her well-meaning attempts to be helpful invariably ended in catastrophe.

Harry went to the bay, knelt on the window seat and ran his fingers over the names inexpertly carved there. Mansel James, the father he had never known because he had been murdered before his mother even knew she was pregnant. Edyth James had created the nursery for Mansel – her husband's nephew – when he had been orphaned. And, knowing that he was Mansel's illegitimate child, she had bequeathed her estate to him, to be held in trust until his thirtieth birthday. He had chiselled his own name with his penknife below Mansel's. He remembered doing it

shortly after his mother and Lloyd had told him about his birth father and his inheritance.

The photographs that remained of Mansel were identical to those of himself. Mansel had also been tall, slim and fine-featured with slender hands, blond hair and blue eyes. And his mother had once mentioned that Mansel had wanted to be an artist. But, unlike him, he had willingly given up his dreams to run his Great-aunt Edyth's businesses.

Was he being selfish in wanting to extend his education beyond the three years he had spent at Oxford by studying art in Paris? He had only read English at the insistence of the trustees, who believed that a degree would prepare him to take control of his affairs. They assumed he wanted nothing more than to make money, which he considered peculiar given that he already had more than one man could reasonably spend in a lifetime.

'Am I interrupting?' Billy joined him.

'Not at all, Granddad.' Harry smiled at the old man. 'I came up to say goodbye to my bedroom but got side-tracked.'

'It's understandable if you feel miserable. This is the only home you've ever really known.'

'No, it isn't,' Harry contradicted. 'I remember moving into your house when Mam was your housekeeper.'

'You were a scrap of a half-starved boy. The biggest thing about you was your blue eyes.'

'I was scared to death of you, Uncle Victor, Dad and Uncle Joey. You all seemed so big.'

Billy laughed. 'You soon came round. I hope it all goes well for you in Paris, Harry.'

'Thank you for sounding as though you really mean it.'

'Everyone should have the chance to make their ambition come true.'

'I know I'm privileged.' Harry was very conscious that if it hadn't been for the trust fund he would have had to go down the pit like so many of the boys he had played with as a child.

'I'm not having a go at you, just trying to say that it's good to see you doing something you want to. Victor may have been forced out of the pit when management wouldn't take him back after the nineteen-eleven strike, but he should never have gone down there in the first place. He's a born farmer and he loves it. And Joey would never have had the chance to exercise his salesman's charm underground. He's far happier running Gwilym James.'

'Where I'll be sooner or later.'

'Only if you want to, Harry,' Billy advised, sensing a hint of bitterness in Harry's pronouncement. 'Life's too short to waste time doing things you don't want to. Remember that. And now you should rejoin your guests.'

'And be dragged on to the dance floor again.' Harry made a face.

'You're determined to be a Harry with a hump today, aren't you?' Billy joked. 'Since when haven't you liked dancing?'

'Since I've been surrounded by babies like Alice Reynolds.'

'Give her a couple of years and she'll be a charming young lady.'

'Perhaps I'm too impatient to wait.' Harry followed his grandfather to the door. 'Thanks, Granddad. You've always been there whenever I've needed someone to talk to.'

'I may have sixteen grandchildren but you're the oldest, and the one I practised on, Harry. You taught me as much as I taught you.'

'There you are, Harry. We've been looking for you everywhere.' Edyth ran up the stairs when she saw Harry and Billy leaving the nursery. 'Mari's made a bon voyage cake; it's got a red ribbon round it . . . Granddad, you all right?'

Harry put his arm around Billy's shoulders when he began to cough, helping him back to the nursery window seat and lowering him on to it. To his alarm, Billy's cough

grew sharper and more pronounced, his breathing more laboured. Seeing him fumble in his pocket, Harry produced his own handkerchief.

‘Edyth, run downstairs and get a glass of water.’

His sister stared at them, mesmerized.

‘Edyth!’ Harry looked down at his grandfather as his sister backed towards the door. To his horror, bright red blood was pouring from Billy’s mouth. He held his handkerchief to Billy’s lips. ‘Edyth,’ he struggled to keep calm, ‘please, go downstairs. Tell Dad to call a doctor.’

She turned and fled. Seconds later he heard a scream and a series of thuds.

Still coughing blood, Billy tried to rise to his feet. He pushed Harry away from him, then fell back and pointed to the door.

‘I’m going to get help, Granddad.’

Billy nodded weakly and leaned against the window pane.

Harry ran on to the landing. The band had stopped playing. A crowd had gathered around Edyth, who was lying face down at the foot of the stairs. His mother and Lloyd were crouching over her.

‘Dad?’ Harry had to call three times before his stepfather looked up. ‘We need an ambulance.’

Lloyd was hoarse with shock. ‘The phone’s disconnected. Joey’s gone to fetch the doctor in his car.’

Harry’s voice rose precariously. ‘It’s Granddad. We need an ambulance for Granddad as well.’