One

Cornwall, August 1933

The rain was heavy now and the hem of her dress was splattered with mud. She’d have to hide it afterwards; no one could know that she’d been out.

Clouds covered the moon, a stroke of luck she didn’t deserve, and she made her way through the thick, black night as quickly as she could. She’d come earlier to dig the hole, but only now, under veil of darkness, would she finish the job. Rain stippled the surface of the trout stream, drummed relentlessly on the earth beside it. Something bolted through the bracken nearby, but she didn’t flinch, didn’t stop. She’d been in and out of the woods all her life and knew the way by heart.

Back when it first happened she’d considered confessing, and perhaps, in the beginning, she might have. She’d missed her chance though and now it was too late. Too much had happened: the search parties, the policemen, the articles in the newspapers pleading for information. There was no one she could tell, no way to fix it, no way they would ever forgive her. The only thing left was to bury the evidence.

She reached the place she’d chosen. The bag, with its box inside, was surprisingly heavy and it was a relief to put it down. On hands and knees, she pulled away the camouflage
of ferns and branches. The smell of sodden soil was overwhelming, of wood mouse and mushrooms, of other mouldering things. Her father had told her once that generations had walked these woods and been buried deep beneath the heavy earth. It made him glad, she knew, to think of it that way. He found comfort in the continuity of nature, believing that the stability of the long past had the power to alleviate present troubles. And maybe in some cases it had, but not this time, not these troubles.

She lowered the bag into the hole and for a split second the moon seemed to peer from behind a cloud. Tears threatened as she scooped the dirt back, but she fought them. To cry, here and now, was an indulgence she refused to grant herself. She patted the ground flat, slapped her hands against it, and stomped down hard with her boots until she was out of breath.

There. It was done.

It crossed her mind that she should say something before she left this lonely place. Something about the death of innocence, the deep remorse that would follow her always; but she didn’t. The inclination made her feel ashamed.

She made her way back quickly through the woods, careful to avoid the boathouse and its memories. Dawn was breaking as she reached the house; the rain was light. The lake’s water lapped at its banks and the last of the nightingales called farewell. The blackcaps and warblers were waking, and far in the distance a horse whinnied. She didn’t know it then, but she would never be rid of them, those sounds; they would follow her from this place, this time, invading her dreams and nightmares, reminding her always of what she had done.
Cornwall, 23 June 1933

The best view of the lake was from the Mulberry Room but Alice decided to make do with the bathroom window. Mr Llewellyn was still down by the stream with his easel, but he always retired early for a rest and she didn’t want to risk an encounter. The old man was harmless enough, but he was eccentric and needy, especially of late, and she feared her unexpected presence in his room would send the wrong sort of signal. Alice wrinkled her nose. She’d been enormously fond of him once, when she was younger, and he of her. Odd to think of it now, at sixteen, the stories he’d told, the little sketches he’d drawn that she’d treasured, the air of wonder he’d trailed behind him like a song. At any rate, the bathroom was closer than the Mulberry Room, and with only a matter of minutes before Mother realised the first-floor rooms lacked flowers, Alice had no time to waste in climbing stairs. As a skein of housemaids waving polishing cloths flew eagerly down the hall, she slipped through the doorway and hurried to the window.

But where was he? Alice felt her stomach swoop, thrill to despair in an instant. Her hands pressed warm against the glass as her gaze swept the scene below: cream and pink roses, petals shining as if they’d been buffed; precious
peaches clinging to the sheltered garden wall; the long silver lake gleaming in the mid-morning light. The whole estate had already been preened and primped to a state of impossible perfection, and yet there was still bustle everywhere.

Hired musicians slid gilt chairs across the temporary bandstand, and as the caterers’ vans took turns stirring dust on the driveway, the half-assembled marquee ballooned in the summer breeze. The single static note amidst the swirl of activity was Grandmother deShiel, who sat small and hunched on the cast-iron garden seat outside the library, lost in her cobwebbed memories and completely oblivious to the round glass lanterns being strung up in the trees around her—

Alice drew a sudden breath.

Him.

The smile spread across her face before she could stop it. Joy, delicious star-spangled joy as she spotted him on the small island in the middle of the lake, a great log balanced on one shoulder. She lifted a hand to wave, an impulse, and a foolish one because he wasn’t looking towards the house. Even if he had been, he wouldn’t have waved back. Both of them knew they had to be more careful than that.

Her fingers found the ribbon of hair that always fell loose by her ear and she wound it between her fingers, back and forth, over and over. She liked watching him like this, in secret. It made her feel powerful, not like when they were together, when she brought him lemonade in the garden, or managed to sneak away to surprise him when he was working in the far-off reaches of the estate; when he asked after her novel, her family, her life, and she told him stories and made him laugh and had to struggle not to lose herself
within the pools of his deep green eyes with their golden specks.

Beneath her gaze he bent, pausing to steady the log’s weight before easing it into place atop the others. He was strong and that was good. Alice wasn’t sure why, only that it mattered to her in a deep and unexplored place. Her cheeks were hot; she was blushing.

Alice Edevane wasn’t shy. She’d known boys before. Not many, it was true – with the exception of their traditional Midsummer party her parents were famously reserved, preferring one another’s company – but she’d managed, on occasion, to exchange surreptitious words with the village boys, or the tenant farmers’ sons who tugged their caps and lowered their eyes and followed their fathers about the estate. This, though – this was . . . Well, it was just different, and she knew how breathless that sounded, how awfully like the sort of thing her big sister Deborah might say, but it happened to be true.

Benjamin Munro was his name. She mouthed the syllables silently, Benjamin James Munro, twenty-six years old, late of London. He had no dependents, was a hard worker, a man not given to baseless talk. He’d been born in Sussex and grown up in the Far East, the son of archaeologists. He liked green tea, the scent of jasmine and hot days that built towards rain.

He hadn’t told her all of that. He wasn’t one of those pompous men who bassooned on about himself and his achievements as if a girl were just a pretty-enough face between a pair of willing ears. Instead, she’d listened and observed and gleaned, and, when the opportunity presented, crept inside the storehouse to check the head gardener’s
employment book. Alice had always fancied herself a sleuth, and sure enough, pinned behind a page of Mr Harris’s careful planting notes, she’d found Benjamin Munro’s application. The letter itself had been brief, written in a hand Mother would have deplored, and Alice had scanned the whole, memorising the important bits, thrilling at the way the words gave depth and colour to the image she’d created and been keeping for herself, like a flower pressed between pages. Like the flower he’d given her just last month. ‘Look, Alice – ’ the stem had been green and fragile in his broad, strong hand – ‘the first gardenia of the season.’

She smiled at the memory and reached inside her pocket to stroke the smooth surface of her leather-bound notebook. It was a habit she’d brought with her from childhood, with which she’d been driving her mother mad since receiving her very first notebook on her eighth birthday. How she’d loved that little nut-brown book! How clever Daddy had been to choose it for her. He was a journal-keeper, too, he’d said, with a seriousness Alice had admired and appreciated. She’d written her full name – Alice Cecilia Edevane – slowly, under Mother’s watchful eye, on the pale sepia line in the frontispiece, and felt immediately that she was now a more real person than she had been before.

Mother objected to Alice’s habit of caressing her pocketed book because it made her look ‘shifty, like you’re up to no good’, a description Alice had decided she didn’t mind one bit. Her mother’s disapproval was merely a bonus; Alice would have continued to reach for her book even if it didn’t make that faint frown appear on Eleanor Edevane’s lovely face; she did it because her notebook was a touchstone, a
reminder of who she was. It was also her closest confidante and, as such, quite an authority on Ben Munro.

It had been almost a whole year since she’d first laid eyes on him. He’d arrived at Loeanneth late in the summer of 1932, during that glorious dry stretch when, with all the excitement of Midsummer behind them, there’d been nothing left to do but surrender themselves to the soporific heat. A divine spirit of indolent tranquillity had descended on the estate so that even Mother, eight months pregnant and glowing pink, had taken to unbuttoning her pearl cuffs and rolling her silk sleeves to the elbow.

Alice had been sitting that day on the swing beneath the willow, swaying idly and pondering her Significant Problem. Sounds of family life, had she been listening, were all around – Mother and Mr Llewellyn laughing distantly as the boat oars splashed a lazy rhythm; Clemmie muttering beneath her breath while she turned circles in the meadow, arms outstretched like wings; Deborah relaying to Nanny Rose all the scandals of the recent London Season – but Alice was intent only on herself and heard nothing more than the mild burr of summer insects.

She’d been in the same spot for almost an hour, and hadn’t even noticed the creeping black ink stain her new fountain pen was bleeding on her white cotton dress, when he materialised from the dark wooded grove onto the sunlit reach of the drive. He was carrying a canvas kitbag over one shoulder and what appeared to be a coat in his hand, and walked with a steady, muscular gait, the rhythm of which made her slow her swinging. She watched his progress, the rope rough against her cheek as she strained to see around the willow’s weeping bough.
By quirk of geography, people did not come unexpectedly to Loeanneth. The estate sat deep in a dell, surrounded by thick, briar-tangled woods, just like houses must in fairy tales. (And nightmares, as it turned out, though Alice had no cause to think that then.) It was their own sunny patch, home to generations of deShiels, her mother’s ancestral home. And yet here he was, a stranger in their midst, and just like that the afternoon’s spell was broken.

Alice had a natural bent towards nosiness – people had been telling her so all her life and she took it as a compliment; it was a trait she intended to put to good use – but her interest that day was fuelled more by frustration and a sudden willingness to be distracted than it was by curiosity. All summer long she’d been working feverishly on a novel of passion and mystery, but three days earlier her progress had stalled. It was all the fault of her heroine, Laura, who, after chapters devoted to illustrating her rich inner life, now refused to cooperate. Faced with the introduction of a tall, dark, handsome gentleman, the dashingly named Lord Hallington, she’d suddenly lost all her wit and pith and become decidedly dull.

Well, Alice decided as she watched the young man walking up the driveway, Laura would just have to wait. There were other matters come to hand.

A narrow stream chattered its way across the estate, delighting in the brief sunny respite before being reeled inexorably back towards the woods, and a stone bridge, the legacy of some long-ago great-uncle, straddled the banks allowing access to Loeanneth. As the stranger reached the bridge, he stopped. He turned slowly back to face the direction from which he’d come and seemed to glance at
something in his hand. A scrap of paper? A trick of the light? Something in the tilt of his head, his lingering focus on the dense woods, spoke of deliberation and Alice narrowed her eyes. She was a writer; she understood people; she knew vulnerability when she saw it. What was he so uncertain about, and why? He turned again, coming full circle, lifting a hand to his brow as he cast his gaze all the way up the thistle-lined drive to where the house stood behind its loyal guard of yew trees. He didn’t move, didn’t appear to do so much as breathe, and then, as she watched, he set down his bag and coat, straightened his braces to the top of his shoulders, and released a sigh.

Alice experienced one of her swift certainties then. She wasn’t sure where they came from, these insights into other people’s states of mind, only that they arrived unexpectedly and fully formed. She just knew things sometimes. To wit: this was not the sort of place he was used to. But he was a man on a date with destiny, and although there was a part of him that wanted to turn around and leave the estate before he’d even properly arrived, one did not – could not – turn one’s back on fate. It was an intoxicating proposition and Alice found herself gripping the swing’s rope more tightly, ideas beginning to jostle, as she watched for the stranger’s next move.

Sure enough, picking up his coat and hoisting his bag over his shoulder, he continued up the drive towards the hidden house. A new determination had entered his bearing and he now gave every appearance, to those who knew no better, of being resolute, his mission uncomplicated. Alice allowed herself a smile, slight and self-satisfied, before being hit by a burst of blinding clarity that almost knocked her
from the swing seat. In the same instant that she noticed the ink stain on her skirt, Alice realised the solution to her Significant Problem. Why, it was all so clear! Laura, grappling with the arrival of her own intriguing stranger, also gifted with greater perception than most, would surely glimpse beneath the man’s façade, discover his terrible secret, his guilty past, and whisper, in a quiet moment when she had him to herself—

‘Alice?’

Back in the Loeanneth bathroom, Alice jumped, hitting her cheek on the wooden window frame.

‘Alice Edevane! Where are you?’

She shot a glance at the closed door behind her. Pleasant memories of the previous summer, the heady thrill of falling in love, the early days of her relationship with Ben and its intoxicating link to her writing, scattered around her. The bronze doorknob vibrated slightly in response to rapid footsteps in the hallway and Alice held her breath.

Mother had been a nervous wreck all week. That was typical. She wasn’t a natural hostess, but the Midsummer party was the deShiel family’s great tradition and Mother had been enormously fond of her father, Henri, so the event was held annually in his memory. She always got herself into a spin – it was constitutional – but this year she was worse than usual.

‘I know you’re here, Alice. Deborah saw you only moments ago.’

Deborah: big sister, chief exemplar, prime menace. Alice gritted her teeth. As if it weren’t enough having the famed and feted Eleanor Edevane for a mother, wasn’t it just her luck to follow an older sister who was almost as perfect?
Beautiful, clever, engaged to be married to the catch of the Season . . . Thank God for Clementine, who came after, and was such a curious scrap of a girl that even Alice couldn’t help but seem vaguely normal by comparison.

As Mother stormed down the hall, Edwina padding behind her, Alice cracked the window ajar and let the warm breeze, fragrant with fresh-cut grass and salt from the sea, bathe her face. Edwina was the only person (and she was a golden retriever, after all, not really a person) who could stand Mother when she was like this. Even poor Daddy had escaped to the attic hours before, no doubt enjoying the quiet good company of his great work of natural history. The problem was that Eleanor Edevane was a perfectionist and every detail of the Midsummer party had to meet her exacting standards. Although she’d kept the fact hidden beneath a veneer of stubborn indifference, it had bothered Alice for a long time that she fell so far short of her mother’s expectations. She’d looked in the mirror and despaired of her too-tall body, her unobliging mouse-brown hair, her preference for the company of made-up people over real ones.

But not anymore. Alice smiled as Ben hoisted another log onto what was fast becoming a towering pyre. She might not be charming like Deborah, and she’d certainly never been immortalised, like Mother had, as the subject of a much-loved children’s book, but it didn’t matter. She was something else entirely. ‘You’re a storyteller, Alice Edevane,’ Ben had told her late one afternoon, as the river tripped coolly by and the pigeons came home to roost. ‘I’ve never met a person with such a clever imagination, such good ideas.’ His voice had been gentle and his gaze intense; Alice had seen herself then through his eyes and she’d liked what she saw.
Mother’s voice flew past the bathroom door, something further about flowers, before disappearing around a corner. ‘Yes, Mother dearest,’ Alice muttered, with delicious condescension. ‘No need to get your knickers all in a tangle.’ There was a glorious sacrilege in acknowledging the fact of Eleonor Edevane’s underwear and Alice had to clamp her lips to keep from laughing.

With a final glance towards the lake she left the bathroom, tiptoeing quickly along the hall to her bedroom to liberate the precious folder from beneath her mattress. Managing not to trip in her haste on a tatty patch of the red Baluch carpet runner Great-grandfather Horace had sent back from his adventures in the Middle East, Alice took the stairs two by two, seized a basket from the middle of the hall table, and leapt outside into the brand-new day.

And it had to be said the weather was perfect. Alice couldn’t help humming to herself as she made her way along the flagstone path. The basket was almost half filled and she hadn’t even been near the wildflower meadows yet; the prettiest blooms grew there, the unexpected ones as opposed to the usual tame, showy suspects, but Alice had been biding her time. She’d spent the morning avoiding her mother, waiting until Mr Harris took his lunch break so she could catch Ben alone.

The last time she saw him he’d said he had something for her and Alice had laughed. He’d offered her that half-smile of his then, the one that made her weak at the knees, and asked, ‘What’s so funny?’ And Alice had drawn herself up to her full height and told him it just so happened she had something to give him, too.
She stopped behind the largest yew tree at the end of the stone path. It had been neatly hedged for the party, its leaves tight and freshly cut, and Alice peered around it. Ben was still out on the island, and Mr Harris was all the way down at the far end of the lake helping his son Adam ready logs to be boated across. Poor Adam. Alice watched as he scratched behind his ear. He’d been the pride of his family once, according to Mrs Stevenson, strong and strapping and bright, until a flying piece of shrapnel at Passchendaele lodged in the side of his head and left him simple. War was a dreadful thing, the cook liked to opine, pounding her rolling pin into a blameless lump of dough on the kitchen table, ‘taking a boy like that, so full o’ promise, chewing ’im up and spitting ’im out a dull broken version of his old self’.

The one blessing, according to Mrs Stevenson, was that Adam himself seemed not to notice the change, seemed almost lightened by it. ‘That’s not the norm,’ she always added, lest she betray the deep Scottish pessimism at her core. ‘There’s plenty more come back with all the laughter hollowed out of ’em.’

It was Daddy who’d insisted on employing Adam on the estate. ‘He’s got a job here for life,’ she’d overheard him saying to Mr Harris, his voice reedy with the strength of his feeling. ‘I’ve told you that before. As long as he needs it, there’s a place here for young Adam.’

Alice became aware of a soft whirring near her left ear, the faintest breath of wind against her cheek. She glanced sideways at the dragonfly hovering in her peripheral vision. It was a rare one, a yellow-winged darter, and she felt a surge of old excitement. She pictured Daddy in his study, hiding from Mother in her Midsummer state. If Alice were
quick she could catch the darter and run it upstairs for his collection, bask in the pleasure she knew the gift would bring, and feel herself elevated in her father’s esteem, the way she had as a little girl, when the privilege of being the chosen one, permitted inside the dusty room of science books and white gloves and glass display cabinets, was enough to make her overlook the horror of the shining silver pins.

But of course there wasn’t time to go now. Why, even in considering it she was falling victim to distraction. Alice frowned. Time had a funny way of losing shape when her mind got busy on a matter. She checked her watch. Almost ten past twelve. Twenty more minutes and the head gardener would retreat to his shed as he did each day for his cheese-and-piccalilli sandwich, and then contemplation of the racing pages. He was a man of habits and Alice, for one, respected that.

Forgetting the dragonfly, she crossed the path at a clip and made her furtive way around the lake, avoiding the lawn and the band of groundsmen sweeping near the elaborate fireworks contraption, keeping to the shadows until she reached the Sunken Garden. She sat on the sun-warmed steps of the old fountain and set the basket beside her. It was the perfect vantage point, she decided; the nearby hawthorn hedge provided ample cover, while small gaps in its foliage permitted a fine view of the new jetty.

While she waited to catch Ben alone, Alice watched a pair of rooks tumbling together in the sea-blue sky above. Her gaze fell to the house where men on ladders were weaving huge wreaths of greenery along the brick façade and a couple of housemaids were busy attaching delicate paper lanterns to fine strings beneath the eaves. The sun had lit up
the top row of leadlight windows and the family home, polished to within an inch of its life, was sparkling like a bejewelled old dame, dressed for her annual opera outing.

A great swelling wave of affection came suddenly upon Alice. For as long as she could remember, she’d been aware that the house and the gardens of Loeanneth lived and breathed for her in a way they didn’t for her sisters. While London was a lure to Deborah, Alice was never happier, never quite as much herself, as she was here; sitting on the edge of the stream, toes dangling in the slow current; lying in bed before the dawn, listening to the busy family of swifts who’d built their nest above her window; winding her way around the lake, notebook always tucked beneath her arm.

She had been seven years old when she realised that one day she would grow up and that grown-ups didn’t, in the usual order of things, continue to live in their parents’ home. She’d felt a great chasm of existential dread open up inside her then, and had taken to engraving her name whenever and wherever she could: in the hard English oak of the morning-room window frames, the filmy grouting between the gunroom tiles, the Strawberry Thief wallpaper in the entrance hall, as if by such small acts she might somehow tie herself to the place in a tangible and enduring way. Alice had gone without pudding for the entire summer when Mother discovered this particular expression of affection, a punishment she could have borne but for the injustice of being cast as a wanton vandal. ‘I thought you of all people would have more respect for the house,’ her mother had hissed, white with fury. ‘That a child of mine could behave with such careless disregard, be the author of such a cruel and thoughtless prank!’ The shame Alice had felt, the heartbreak, at hearing
herself described in such a way, at having the results of her passionate need for possession reduced to a general mischief, had been profound.

But never mind that now. She stretched her legs out in front of her, lining up her toes, and sighed with deep contentment. It was in the past, water under the bridge, a childish fixation. Sunlight was everywhere, glittering gold off the bright green leaves of the garden. A blackcap, concealed within the foliage of a nearby willow, sang a sweet fanfare and a pair of mallards fought over a particularly juicy snail. The orchestra was rehearsing a dance number and music skimmed across the surface of the lake. How lucky they were to get a day like this one! After weeks of agonising, of studying the dawn, of consulting Those Who Ought to Know, the sun had risen, burning off any lingering cloud, just as it should on Midsummer’s Eve. The evening would be warm, the breeze light, the party as bewitching as ever.

Alice had been aware of Midsummer Eve’s magic long before she was old enough to stay up for the party, back when Nanny Bruen would bring them downstairs, Alice and her two sisters in their finest dresses, and prod them into line for presentation to the guests. The party was still in its opening throes then, well-dressed adults behaving with stilted decorum as they waited for night’s fall; but later, when she was supposed to be asleep, Alice would listen for Nanny’s breaths to grow deep and slumbersome, and then she’d creep to the nursery window and kneel on a chair to watch the lanterns glowing like night-ripe fruit, the raging bonfire that appeared to float on the moon-silvered water, the enchanted world in which places and people were almost as she remembered them, but not quite.
And tonight she’d be among them; a night that was going to be extra special. Alice smiled, shivering lightly with anticipation. She checked her watch and then took out the folder she’d tucked inside the basket, opening it to reveal the precious cargo inside. The manuscript was one of two copies she’d painstakingly typed on the Remington portable, her latest effort and the culmination of a year’s work. There was a small error in the title where she’d accidentally hit a ‘u’ rather than a ‘y’, but other than that it was perfect. Ben wouldn’t mind; he’d be the first to tell her it was far more important to send the pristine copy to Victor Gollancz. When it was published he could have his very own first edition, she’d even sign it for him, right beneath the dedication.

*Bye Baby Bunting*: Alice read the title under her breath, enjoying the little shiver it still sent down her spine. She was very proud of the story; it was her best so far and she had high hopes for its publication. It was a murder mystery, a proper one. After studying the preface to *Best Detective Stories*, she’d sat down with her notebook and made a list of the rules according to Mr Ronald Knox. She’d realised her mistake in trying to marry two disparate genres, killed off Laura, and then started again from scratch, dreaming up, instead, a country house, a detective and a household full of worthy suspects. The puzzle had been the tricky bit, figuring out how to keep whodunit from her readers. That’s when she’d decided she needed a sounding board, a Watson to her Holmes, so to speak. Happily, she’d found him. She’d found more than that.

*For B.M., partner in crime, accomplice in life*

She ran her thumb over the dedication. Once the novel was published everyone would know about them, but Alice
didn’t care. There was a part of her that couldn’t wait. So many times she’d almost blurted it out to Deborah, or even to Clemmie, so desperate was she to hear the words said aloud, and she’d been dodging conversations with Mother, who harboured suspicions, Alice knew. But it was right, somehow, that they should find out when they read her first published book.

*Bye Baby Bunting* had been born out of conversations with Ben; she couldn’t have done it without him, and now, having plucked their thoughts from the air and put them down as words on paper, she’d taken something intangible, a mere possibility, and made it real. Alice couldn’t help but feel that by giving him his copy she was making the promise that stretched unspoken between them more real, too. Promises were important in the Edevane family. It was something they’d learned from Mother, the adage drummed into them from as soon as they could talk: a promise should never be made that one wasn’t prepared to keep.

Voices sounded on the other side of the hawthorn hedge and instinctively Alice snatched up the manuscript, hugging it to her. She listened, alert, and then hurried to the hedge, peering through a small diamond-shaped gap in the leaves. Ben was no longer out on the island and the boat was back at the jetty, but Alice found the three men together near the remaining pile of logs. She watched as Ben drank from his tin canteen, the knot in his throat that moved as he swallowed, the shadow of stubble along his jawline, the curl of dark hair that reached his collar. Perspiration had left a damp patch on his shirt and Alice’s throat caught; she loved his smell, it was so earthy and real.

Mr Harris gathered up his tool bag and issued some part-
ing instructions, to which Ben gave a nod, the hint of a smile. Alice smiled with him, taking in the dimple in his left cheek, his strong shoulders, his exposed forearm glistening beneath the fierce sun. As she watched he straightened, a noise in the distance having caught his attention. She followed his gaze as it left Mr Harris and settled on something in the wild gardens beyond.

Visible, just, in the tangle of foxtail lilies and verbena, Alice spotted a small figure making his way, jouncy and intrepid, towards the house. Theo. The glimpse of her baby brother broadened Alice’s smile; the large black shadow hovering behind, however, doused it. She understood now why Ben was frowning; she felt the same way about Nanny Bruen. She didn’t like her one bit, but then one tended not to develop fond feelings for people with despotic dispositions. Why the sweet, pretty Nanny Rose had been fired was anyone’s guess. She’d obviously adored Theo, doted on him in fact, and there wasn’t anyone who didn’t like her. Even Daddy had been seen chatting with her in the garden while Theo tripped after the ducks, and Daddy was a very discerning judge of character.

Something had got up Mother’s nose, though. Two weeks ago, Alice had seen her arguing with Nanny Rose, an exchange of heated whispers outside the nursery. The disagreement had been to do with Theo, but vexingly Alice had been too far away to hear precisely what was said. The next thing anyone knew, Nanny Rose was gone and Nanny Bruen had been dusted off for duty. Alice had thought they’d seen the last of the ancient battleaxe with her whiskery chin and bottle of castor oil. Indeed, she’d always felt a certain jot of personal pride, having overheard Grandmother deShiel
commenting that it was unruly Alice who had broken the last of the old nanny’s spirit. But now, here she was, back again, more crotchety than ever.

Alice was still lamenting the loss of Nanny Rose when she realised she was no longer alone on her side of the hedge. A twig snapped behind her and she straightened abruptly, swinging around.

‘Mr Llewellyn!’ Alice exclaimed, when she saw the hunched figure standing there, an easel under one arm, a large sketch block clutched awkwardly to his other side. ‘You frightened me.’

‘Sorry, Alice, dear. It would appear I don’t know my own stealth. I was hoping we might have a little chat.’

‘Now, Mr Llewellyn?’ Despite her affection for the old man, she fought a wave of frustration. He didn’t seem to understand that the days of Alice sitting with him while he sketched, of bobbing downstream together in the rowing boat, of her confessing all her childish secrets as they hunted fairies were gone. He’d been important to her once, there was no denying that; a treasured friend when she was small and a mentor when she was first getting started with her writing. Many times she’d run to present him with the small childish stories she’d scribbled in a fit of inspiration and he’d made a great show of providing earnest critique. But now, at sixteen, she had other interests, things she couldn’t share with him. ‘I’m rather busy, you see.’

His gaze drifted towards the hole in the hedge and Alice felt her cheeks glow with sudden warmth.

‘I’m keeping an eye on party preparations,’ she said quickly, and when Mr Llewellyn smiled in a way that sug-
gested he knew precisely whom she’d been watching and why, she added, ‘I’ve been gathering flowers for Mother.’

He glanced at her discarded basket, the blooms wilting now in the midday heat.

‘A task I really should be getting on with.’

‘Of course,’ he said with a nod, ‘and I wouldn’t normally dream of interrupting while you’re so busy helping. But there’s something rather important I need to talk to you about.’

‘I’m afraid I really can’t spare the time.’

Mr Llewellyn seemed unusually disappointed and it occurred to Alice that he’d been quite flat lately. Not moping exactly, but distracted and sad. The buttons of his satin vest were done up crookedly, she noticed, and the scarf around his neck was tatty. She felt a sudden wave of sympathy and nodded towards his sketch block, an attempt to make amends. ‘It’s very good.’ It was, too. She hadn’t known him to draw Theo before and the likeness was exceptional, the lingering hint of babyhood in his round cheeks and full lips, the wide trusting eyes. Dear Mr Llewellyn had always been able to see the best in all of them. ‘Shall we meet after tea, perhaps?’ she suggested with an encouraging smile. ‘Sometime before the party?’

Mr Llewellyn gathered his sketch block closer, considering Alice’s proposal before frowning slightly, ‘What about at the bonfire tonight?’

‘You’re coming?’ This was a surprise. Mr Llewellyn was not a social gentleman and ordinarily went out of his way to avoid crowds – especially those crowds comprising people intent on meeting him. He adored Mother, but even she had never managed to entice him to attend Midsummer
before. Her mother’s precious first edition of *Eleanor’s Magic Doorway* would be on display, as it always was, and people would be vying to meet its creator. They never tired of kneeling down by the hedge and hunting for the buried top of the old stone pillar. ‘Look, Simeon, I can see it! The brass ring from the map, just as it says in the book!’ Little did they know that the tunnel had been sealed for years against the explorations of curious guests like them.

Ordinarily Alice might have probed further, but a burst of male laughter from the other side of the hedge, followed by a comradely shout of, ‘It’ll keep, Adam – go with your dad and have some lunch, no need to lift them all at once!’ jolted her back to her purpose. ‘Well, then,’ she said, ‘tonight, yes. At the party.’

‘Shall we say half past eleven, beneath the arbour?’
‘Yes, yes.’

‘It’s important, Alice.’

‘Half past eleven,’ she repeated, a touch impatiently. ‘I’ll be there.’

Still he didn’t leave but remained, seemingly glued to the spot, wearing that serious, melancholy expression and staring straight at her, almost as if he were trying to memorise her features.

‘Mr Llewellyn?’

‘Do you remember the time we took the boat out on Clemmie’s birthday?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Yes, it was a lovely day. A rare treat.’ Alice made a point of gathering her basket from the fountain steps, and Mr Llewellyn must have taken the hint, because when she finished he was gone.

Alice felt the nag of an unspecified regret and sighed
deeply. She supposed it was being in love that made her feel this way, a sort of general pity for everyone who wasn’t her. Poor old Mr Llewellyn. She’d thought him a magician once; now she saw only a stooped and rather sad man, old before his time, constrained by the Victorian dress and habits with which he refused to part. He’d had a breakdown in his youth – it was supposed to be a secret, but Alice knew a lot of things she shouldn’t. It had happened back when Mother was just a girl and Mr Llewellyn a firm friend of Henri deShiel. He’d given up his professional life in London and that was when he’d come up with *Eleanor’s Magic Doorway*.

As to what had prompted his breakdown, Alice didn’t know. It occurred to her now, vaguely, that she ought to make a better job of finding out, but not today; it wasn’t a task for today. There simply wasn’t time for the past when the future was right there waiting for her on the other side of the hedge. Another glance confirmed that Ben was by himself, gathering his things, about to go back through the garden to his accommodations for lunch. Alice promptly forgot about Mr Llewellyn. She lifted her face towards the sun and relished the blaze that graced her cheeks. What a joy it was to be her, right now, in this precise moment. She couldn’t imagine that anyone, anywhere, could be more content. And then she stepped towards the jetty, manuscript in hand, intoxicated by an enticing sense of herself as a girl on the precipice of a glimmering future.