PART ONE

THE SATCHEL
We came to Birchwood Manor because Edward said that it was haunted. It wasn’t, not then, but it’s a dull man who lets truth stand in the way of a good story, and Edward was never that. His passion, his blinding faith in whatever he professed, was one of the things I fell in love with. He had the preacher’s zeal, a way of expressing opinions that minted them into gleaming currency. A habit of drawing people to him, of firing in them enthusiasms they hadn’t known were theirs, making all but himself and his convictions fade.

But Edward was no preacher.

I remember him. I remember everything.

The glass-roofed studio in his mother’s London garden, the smell of freshly mixed paint, the scratch of bristle on canvas as his gaze swept my skin. My nerves that day were prickles. I was eager to impress, to make him think me something I was not, as his eyes traced my length and Mrs Mack’s entreaty circled in my head: ‘Your mother was a proper lady, your people were grand folk and don’t you go forgetting it. Play your cards right and all our birds might just come home to roost.’

And so I sat up straighter on the rosewood chair, that first
day in the whitewashed room behind the tangle of blushing sweet peas.

His littlest sister brought me tea, and cake when I was hungry. His mother, too, came down the narrow path to watch him work. She adored her son. In him she glimpsed the family’s hopes fulfilled. Distinguished member of the Royal Academy, engaged to a lady of some means, father soon to a clutch of brown-eyed heirs.

Not for him the likes of me.

His mother blamed herself for what came next, but she’d have more easily halted day from meeting night than keep us apart. He called me his muse, his destiny. He said that he had known at once, when he saw me through the hazy gaslight of the theatre foyer on Drury Lane.

I was his muse, his destiny. And he was mine.

It was long ago; it was yesterday.

Oh, I remember love.

This corner, halfway up the main flight of stairs, is my favourite.

It is a strange house, built to be purposely confusing. Staircases that turn at unusual angles, all knees and elbows and uneven treads; windows that do not line up no matter how one squints at them; floorboards and wall panels with clever concealments.

In this corner, there’s a warmth, almost unnatural. We all noticed it when first we came, and over the early summer weeks we took our turns in guessing at its cause.
The reason took me some time to discover, but at last I learned the truth. I know this place as I know my own name.

It was not the house itself but the light that Edward used to tempt the others. On a clear day, from the attic windows, one can see over the River Thames and all the way to the Welsh mountains. Ribbons of mauve and green, crags of chalk that stagger towards the clouds, and warm air that lends the whole an iridescence.

This was the proposal that he made: an entire summer month of paint and poetry and picnics, of stories and science and invention. Of light, heaven-sent. Away from London, away from prying eyes. Little wonder that the others accepted with alacrity. Edward could make the very devil pray, if such were his desire.

Only to me did he confess his other reason for coming here. For although the lure of the light was real enough, Edward had a secret.

We came on foot from the railway station.

July, and the day was perfect. A breeze picked at my skirt hem. Someone had brought sandwiches and we ate them as we walked. What a sight we must have made – men with loosened neckties, women with their long hair free. Laughter, teasing, sport.

Such a grand beginning! I remember the sound of a stream close by and a wood pigeon calling overhead. A man leading a horse, a wagon with a young boy sitting atop straw bales, the smell of fresh-cut grass—Oh, how I miss that smell! A clutch of fat country geese regarded us beadily when we reached the river before honking bravely once we had passed.
All was light, but it did not last for long.
You knew that already, though, for there would be no story to tell if the warmth had lasted. No one is interested in quiet, happy summers that end as they begin. Edward taught me that.

The isolation played its part; this house stranded on the river-bank like a great inland ship. The weather, too; the blazing hot days, one after the other, and then the summer storm that night, which forced us all indoors.

The winds blew and the trees moaned, and thunder rolled down the river to take the house within its clutches; whilst inside, talk turned to spirits and enchantments. There was a fire, crackling in the grate, and the candle flames quivered, and in the darkness, in that atmosphere of delicious fear and confession, something ill was conjured.

Not a ghost, oh, no, not that – the deed when done was entirely human.
Two unexpected guests.
Two long-kept secrets.
A gunshot in the dark.

The light went out and everything was black.
Summer was curdled. The first keen leaves began their fall, turning to rot in the puddles beneath the thinning hedgerows, and Edward, who loved this house, began to stalk its corridors, entrapped.
At last, he could stand it no longer. He packed his things to leave and I could not make him stop.
The others followed, as they always did.
And I? I had no choice; I stayed behind.
CHAPTER ONE

Summer, 2017

It was Elodie Winslow’s favourite time of day. Summer in London, and at a certain point in the very late afternoon the sun seemed to hesitate in its passage across the sky and light spilled through the small glass tiles in the pavement directly onto her desk. Best of all, with Margot and Mr Pendleton gone home for the day, the moment was Elodie’s alone.

The basement of Stratton, Cadwell & Co., in its building on the Strand, was not an especially romantic place, not like the muniment room at New College where Elodie had taken holiday work the year she completed her master’s. It was not warm, ever, and even during a heatwave like this one Elodie needed to wear a cardigan at her desk. But every so often, when the stars aligned, the office, with its smell of dust and age and the seeping Thames, was almost charming.

In the narrow kitchenette behind the wall of filing cabinets, Elodie poured steaming water into a mug and flipped the timer. Margot thought this precision extreme, but Elodie preferred her tea when it had steeped for three and a half minutes exactly.

As she waited, grains of sand slipping through the glass, Elodie’s thoughts returned to Pippa’s message. She had picked it up on her phone, when she’d ducked across the road to buy
a sandwich for lunch: an invitation to a fashion launch party that sounded as tempting to Elodie as a stint in the doctor’s waiting room. Thankfully, she already had plans – a visit to her father in Hampstead to collect the recordings he’d put aside for her – and was spared the task of inventing a reason to say no.

Denying Pippa was not easy. She was Elodie’s best friend and had been since the first day of Year 3 at Pineoaks primary school. Elodie often gave silent thanks to Miss Perry for seating the two of them together: Elodie, the New Girl, with her unfamiliar uniform and the lopsided plaits her dad had wrestled into place; and Pippa, with her broad smile, dimpled cheeks and hands that were in constant motion when she spoke.

They’d been inseparable ever since. Primary school, secondary school, and even afterwards when Elodie went up to Oxford and Pippa to Central Saint Martins. They saw less of one another now, but that was to be expected; the art world was a busy, sociable place, and Pippa was responsible for a never-ending stream of invitations left on Elodie’s phone as she made her way from this gallery opening or installation to the next.

The world of archives, by contrast, was decidedly *un*-busy. That is, it was not busy in Pippa’s sparkling sense. Elodie put in long hours and engaged frequently with other human beings; they just weren’t the living, breathing sort. The original Messrs Stratton and Cadwell had traversed the globe at a time when it was just beginning to shrink and the invention of the telephone hadn’t yet reduced reliance on written correspondence. So it was, Elodie spent her days communing with the foxed and dusty artefacts of the long dead, stepping into
The Clockmaker's Daughter

this account of a soirée on the Orient Express or that encounter between Victorian adventurers in search of the Northwest Passage.

Such social engagement across time made Elodie very happy. It was true that she didn’t have many friends, not of the flesh-and-blood variety, but the fact did not upset her. It was tiring, all that smiling and sharing and speculating about the weather, and she always left a gathering, no matter how intimate, feeling depleted, as if she’d accidentally left behind some vital layers of herself she’d never get back.

Elodie removed the teabag, squeezed the last drips into the sink and added a half-second pour of milk.

She carried the mug back to her desk, where the prisms of afternoon sunlight were just beginning their daily creep; and as steam curled voluptuously and her palms warmed, Elodie surveyed the day’s remaining tasks. She had been midway through compiling an index on the younger James Stratton’s account of his 1893 journey to the west coast of Africa; there was an article to write for the next edition of Stratton, Cadwell & Co. Monthly; and Mr Pendleton had left her with the catalogue for the upcoming exhibition to proofread before it went to the printer.

But Elodie had been making decisions about words and their order all day and her brain was stretched. Her gaze fell to the waxed-cardboard box on the floor beneath her desk. It had been there since Monday afternoon when a plumbing disaster in the offices above had required immediate evacuation of the old cloakroom, a low-ceilinged architectural afterthought that Elodie couldn’t remember entering in the ten years since she’d started work in the building. The box had turned up beneath a stack of dusty brocade curtains in the
bottom of an antique chiffonier, a handwritten label on its lid reading, ‘Contents of attic desk drawer, 1966 – unlisted’.

Finding archival materials in the disused cloakroom, let alone so many decades after they’d apparently been delivered, was disquieting and Mr Pendleton’s reaction had been predictably explosive. He was a stickler for protocol, and it was lucky, Elodie and Margot later agreed, that whoever had been responsible for receiving the delivery in 1966 had long ago left his employ.

The timing couldn’t have been worse: ever since the management consultant had been sent in to ‘trim the fat’, Mr Pendleton had been in a spin. The invasion of his physical sphere was bad enough, but the insult of having his efficiency questioned was beyond the pale. ‘It’s like someone borrowing your watch to tell you the time,’ he’d said through frosted lips after the consultant had met with them the other morning.

The unceremonious appearance of the box had threatened to tip him into apoplexy, so Elodie – who liked disharmony as little as she did disorder – had stepped in with a firm promise to set things right, promptly sweeping it up and stashing it out of sight.

In the days since, she’d been careful to keep it concealed so as not to trigger another eruption, but now, alone in the quiet office, she knelt on the carpet and slid the box from its hiding place . . .

The pinpricks of sudden light were a shock, and the satchel, pressed deep inside the box, exhaled. The journey had been long, and it was understandably weary. Its edges were wearing thin, its buckles had tarnished, and an unfortunate musty odour had staled in its depths. As for the dust, a permanent
patina had formed opaquely on the once-fine surface, and it was now the sort of bag that people held at a distance, turning their heads to one side as they weighed the possibilities. Too old to be of use, but bearing an indefinable air of historic quality precluding its disposal.

The satchel had been loved once, admired for its elegance – more importantly, its function. It had been indispensable to a particular person at a particular time when such attributes were highly prized. Since then, it had been hidden and ignored, recovered and disparaged, lost, found and forgotten.

Now, though, one by one, the items that for decades had sat atop the satchel were being lifted, and the satchel, too, was resurfacing finally in this room of faint electrical humming and ticking pipes. Of diffuse yellow light and papery smells and soft white gloves.

At the other end of the gloves was a woman: young, with fawn-like arms leading to a delicate neck supporting a face framed by short black hair. She held the satchel at a distance, but not with distaste.

Her touch was gentle. Her mouth had gathered in a small neat purse of interest and her grey eyes narrowed slightly before widening as she took in the hand-sewn joins, the fine Indian cotton and the precise stitching.

She ran a soft thumb over the initials on the front flap, faded and sad, and the satchel felt a frisson of pleasure. Somehow this young woman’s attention hinted that what had turned out to be an unexpectedly long journey might just be nearing its end.

*Open me*, the satchel urged. *Look inside.*
Once upon a time the satchel had been shiny and new. Made to order by Mr Simms himself at the royal warrant manufactory of W. Simms & Son on Bond Street. The gilt initials had been hand-tooled and heat-sealed with enormous pomp; each silver rivet and buckle had been selected, inspected and polished; the fine-quality leather had been cut and stitched with care, oiled and buffed with pride. Spices from the Far East – clove and sandalwood and saffron – had drifted through the building’s veins from the perfumery next door, infusing the satchel with a hint of faraway places.

_Open me . . ._

The woman in the white gloves unlatched the dull silver buckle and the satchel held its breath.

_Open me, open me, open me . . ._

She pushed back its leather strap and for the first time in over a century light swept into the satchel’s dark corners.

An onslaught of memories – fragmented, confused – arrived with it: a bell tinkling above the door at W. Simms & Son; the swish of a young woman’s skirts; the thud of horses’ hooves; the smell of fresh paint and turpentine; heat, lust, whispering. Gaslight in railway stations; a long, winding river; the wheat fragrance of summer—

The gloved hands withdrew and with them went the satchel’s load.

The old sensations, voices, imprints, fell away, and everything, at last, was blank and quiet.

It was over.

Elodie rested the contents on her lap and set the satchel to one side. It was a beautiful piece that did not fit with the other items she’d taken from the box. They had comprised a
collection of rather humdrum office supplies – a hole punch, an ink well, a wooden desk insert for sorting pens and paperclips – and a crocodile leather spectacle case, which the manufacturer’s label announced as, ‘The property of L. S-W’. This fact suggested to Elodie that the desk, and everything inside, had once belonged to Lesley Stratton-Wood, a great-niece of the original James Stratton. The vintage was right – Lesley Stratton-Wood had died in the 1960s – and it would explain the box’s delivery to Stratton, Cadwell & Co.

The satchel, though – unless it was a replica of the highest order – was far too old to have belonged to Ms Stratton-Wood; the items inside looked pre-twentieth century. A preliminary riffle revealed a monogrammed black journal (E. J. R.) with a marbled fore-edge; a brass pen box, mid-Victorian; and a faded green leather document holder. There was no way of knowing at first glance to whom the satchel had belonged, but beneath the front flap of the document holder, the gilt-stamped label read, ‘James W. Stratton, Esq. London, 1861’.

The document holder was flattish and Elodie thought at first that it might be empty; but when she opened the clasp, a single object waited inside. It was a delicate silver frame, small enough to fit within her hand, containing a photograph of a woman. She was young, with long hair, light but not blonde, half of which was wound into a loose knot on the top of her head; her gaze was direct, her chin slightly lifted, her cheekbones high. Her lips were set in an attitude of intelligent engagement, perhaps even defiance.

Elodie felt a familiar stirring of anticipation as she took in the sepia tones, the promise of a life awaiting rediscovery. The woman’s dress was looser than might be expected for
the period. White fabric draped over her shoulders and the neckline fell in a V. The sleeves were sheer and billowed, and had been pushed to the elbow on one arm. Her wrist was slender, the hand on her hip accentuating the indentation of her waist.

The treatment was as unusual as the subject, for the woman wasn’t posed inside on a settee or against a scenic curtain as one might expect in a Victorian portrait. She was outside, surrounded by dense greenery, a setting that spoke of movement and life. The light was diffuse, the effect intoxicating.

Elodie set the photograph aside and took up the monogrammed journal. It fell open to reveal thick cream pages of expensive cotton paper; there were lines of beautiful handwriting, but they were complements only to the many pen and ink renderings of figures, landscapes, and other objects of interest. Not a journal, then: this was a sketchbook.

A fragment of paper, torn from elsewhere, slipped from between two pages. A single line raced across it: I love her, I love her, I love her, and if I cannot have her I shall surely go mad, for when I am not with her I fear—

The words leapt off the paper as if they’d been spoken aloud, but when Elodie turned over the page, whatever the writer had feared was not revealed.

She ran her gloved fingertips over the impressions of the text. When held up to the last glimmer of sunlight, the paper revealed its individual threads, along with tiny lucent pin-pricks where the sharp nib of the fountain pen had torn across the sheet.

Elodie laid the jagged piece of paper gently back inside the sketchbook.
Although antique now, the urgency of its message was unsettling: it spoke forcefully and currently of unfinished business.

Elodie continued to leaf carefully through the pages, each one filled with cross-hatched artist’s studies with occasional rough-sketch facial profiles in the margins.

And then she stopped.

This sketch was more elaborate than the others, more complete. A river scene, with a tree in the foreground and a distant wood visible across a broad field. Behind a copse on the right-hand side, the twin-gabled roofline of a house could be seen, with eight chimneys and an ornate weathervane featuring the sun and moon and other celestial emblems.

It was an accomplished drawing, but that’s not why Elodie stared. She felt a pang of déjà vu so strong it exerted a physical pressure around her chest.

She knew this place. The memory was as vivid as if she’d been there, and yet somehow Elodie knew that it was a location she’d visited only in her mind.

The words came to her then as clear as birdsong at dawn: *Down the winding lane and across the meadow broad, to the river they went with their secrets and their sword.*

And she remembered. It was a story that her mother used to tell her. A child’s bedtime story, romantic and tangled, replete with heroes, villains and a Fairy Queen, set in a house within dark woods encircled by a long, snaking river.

But there had been no book with illustrations. The tale had been spoken aloud, the two of them side by side in her little-girl bed in the room with the sloping ceiling—

The wall clock chimed, low and premonitory, from Mr Pendleton’s office, and Elodie glanced at her watch. She was
late. Time had lost its shape again, its arrow dissolving into dust around her. With a final glance at the strangely familiar scene, she returned the sketchbook with the other contents to its box, closed the lid, and pushed it back beneath the desk.

Elodie had gathered her things and was halfway through the usual motions of checking and locking the department door to leave, when the overwhelming urge came upon her. Unable to resist, she hurried back to the box, dug out the sketchbook, and slipped it inside her bag.
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