"Katharine Swartz can do no wrong.
The Lost Garden navigates loss and hope with Swartz's
deft hand and unflinching ability to tell a quiet story so well
it resonates in the heart for a long, long while after
the final page."

- Megan Crane, USA Today bestselling author of *Once More With Feeling* and *I Love the 80s*

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"Katharine Swartz always delivers a beautifully written,
deeply emotional read. *The Lost Garden* is a touching and
tragic novel, and yet ultimately it is a story of both
hope and redemption."

- Maisey Yates, USA Today bestselling author of *Part Time Cowboy*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After spending her childhood in Canada and then three years as a diehard New Yorker, Katharine Swartz now lives in the Lake District with her husband – an Anglican minister – their five children, and a Golden Retriever. She enjoys such novel things as long country walks and chatting with people in the street, and her children love the freedom of village life – although she often has to ring four or five people to figure out where they've gone off to!

She writes also under the name Kate Hewitt, and she always enjoys delivering a compelling and intensely emotional story. Find out more about her books at www.katharineswartz.com.

The Lost Garden

Tales from Goswell

Katharine Swartz

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Dedicated to my grandfather Major Norman Albert Thompson of the First Canadian Expeditionary Force, who fought bravely in the First World War from 1915 to 1918.

Other titles by Katharine Swartz

A Vicar's Wife

Far Horizons

Another Country

A Distant Shore

Down Jasper Lane

The Other Side of The Bridge

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PROLOGUE

Goswell, West Cumberland, October 1919

The rain lashes against the windows and the sky is dark with lowering clouds as she gazes out at the lawn now awash in puddles and steeped in mud. It makes her ache to remember how only a few months ago Jack was out there, toiling in the hot sun – it had been such an unusually warm summer for West Cumberland – and the lawn had been verdant, the garden so full of beauty and life. It had all looked so lovely, and her father had been so pleased.

She presses a hand to her thudding heart and turns away from the window, and the view of mud and gloom. As she walks through the house she can hear Tilly, their housemaid, humming under her breath as she moves around to stoke the fires burning in every fireplace on this grey November day. In the kitchen Mrs Stanton is starting on supper, and she can hear the busy clang of copper pots. She passes her father's study, and hears him clear his throat, and then the rustle of papers.

All is well. Or as well as it could be, in the year since Walter's death.

She walks towards the kitchen where the hall narrows. She thinks about going upstairs to change into her walking boots, but there seems little point and she does not want to

have her mother call to her from the bedroom and ask her to come in and read a few verses of the Bible, a bit of poetry, something to while away the afternoon.

She won't take a coat either, or even a wrap. She stands by the kitchen door, waits until Mrs Stanton has gone into the larder and then slips like a ghost – already, she feels like a ghost, and she wonders if Walter must have felt this way, if he had *known* – into the kitchen, out the back door, into the little courtyard where the coal is kept. Through the gates and around past the old stables, along the path that leads to Bower House where Grandmama lives, on the other side of the church.

All around her the churchyard is wet and dark, the bare branches dripping with rain, heaps of soggy leaves clumped by the headstones. Jack should clear those, she thinks, before she remembers. Jack is gone.

She walks down the path and around to Grandmama's garden, the gate to the walled garden in front of her. She knows if Grandmama looked out the window of her dining room she would see her there, standing in front of the wooden door, ivy curling around its arched top. Five hundred years ago it had been the herb garden for the monks, or so her father said, before the Reformation. Now it is her garden, hers and Jack's, and it deserves her farewell.

Already she is soaked and her feet are numb. The rain is relentless, the wind from the sea cold and unforgiving. So unforgiving. Yet after a few moments she forgets the wind, the rain; she feels strangely serene and suddenly surprisingly buoyant because she knows that there is no going back now, and that knowledge brings only relief.

She struggles with the latch to the walled garden, a few rooks wheeling and screeching above her, as if they sense her unnatural purpose. She knows that if anyone came along

now they would see her soaked and shivering in the middle of a garden, wrestling with a latch. Yet even as part of her acknowledges this, another deeper part knows she will not be seen. She is becoming a ghost; she imagines if she looked down she would see her body waver, like a reflection in water. She cannot live in this world, not with the knowledge inside her, the intolerable heaviness of her own reckless cruelty.

The latch finally lifts, and she enters the garden. *Her* garden, the garden her father gave her and that Jack made. Even in the beginning of winter it is beautiful to her, the damson trees thrusting their stark branches to the sky, the borders now full of straggling weeds, although in summer they were rampant and wild, heavy with flower and fruit, which is what she had wanted. Life – pulsing, vibrant life – in all of its glory.

Now she stands in the middle of the garden and looks towards the little house, her house. Once it was warm inside enough for its fragile occupants, but now it is cold and dark and empty. There is nothing left for her here now, nothing but memories.

She leaves the walled garden and walks back through the churchyard to the vicarage, and then through the rose garden, the bushes' stark branches black with rain, and down the stone steps to the muddy acre of sheep pasture that leads to the beach road. She knows her father could see her if he just turned his head, but she feels he won't. He has most likely drawn the heavy curtains against the cold and dark.

She continues walking, the rain running down her in icy rivulets, her dress soaked completely through, and no one sees her. No one stops her.

If only it would all be this easy, she thinks. If only it was a matter of walking, one step at a time, into eternity.

Walter was pushed – so suddenly, so unfairly – but she will go willingly. She will choose it. And yet she knows the entrance to eternity is not such a simple thing, although as she nears the beach she thinks perhaps it is after all. Perhaps this step is as simple as any other, if you just close your eyes.

And so she closes her eyes, and lets the rain beat over her, and everything in her demands she take that small, final step into forever.

CHAPTER ONE

Marin

It started with a door. Not just any door; a wooden door with an arched top and a rusted latch, set in the middle of a high stone wall. Marin Ellis gazed at the weathered wood in both fascination and frustration, for she'd tried the latch and rusted as it was, it wouldn't budge.

She had never been the sort to indulge in fancy. She'd long ago accepted she was practical to the point of tedium. And yet this door, and whatever lay beyond it, had, briefly at least, captured her long-dormant imagination.

"Is that the entrance to a secret garden?" Rebecca's voice carried across the icy expanse of overgrown lawn. Her boots crunched on the frost-tipped grass as she came over to join Marin, her hands thrust into the pockets of her coat. It was four o'clock on a February afternoon in a remote corner of West Cumbria, and dusk was already settling on the rolling pasture that stretched to the sea, a quarter of a mile away.

"It does look like a door to a secret garden, doesn't it?" Marin agreed with a little laugh. "It's probably just a door to the churchyard, or maybe to a path that leads to the beach. But in any case, I can't open it."

"Let me try." Rebecca pushed at the latch for a moment, but as Marin expected, it didn't move so much as a centimetre. She pressed her face against the door and peered into the crack between it and the wall. "All I see is bramble. If it leads to the churchyard, it's all grown over."

"Oh, well. It doesn't matter." Marin shivered as she turned towards the house; it looked lonely and lost in the oncoming darkness, with its blank windows and funny little turret. Or perhaps she was the one who felt lonely and lost, wondering how they'd both arrived in this place, even though she knew the answer very well.

She glanced at Rebecca, who had turned away from the door, looking, as she did in these unguarded moments, so young and vulnerable and impossible to reach. Marin's heart gave a little aching pulse of sympathy and grief. Rebecca had lost so much, so young… just as she once had.

"Don't be sad, Marin," Rebecca said quietly, catching her half-sister's sorrowful gaze. "This is our new start, remember."

"Yes, I remember." Smiling with effort, Marin walked back to the front door of the little house to lock up.

It had been theirs since just after Christmas, when they'd come up to the Lakes on a brief holiday. They'd been driving through the sleepy village of Goswell, on the Cumbrian coast, when Rebecca had suddenly asked her to stop the car, and surprised, she'd pulled over on the steep, narrow high street that ran through the village.

"It looks like a little castle," Rebecca had said, staring at the house that was perched on a lip of land that jutted out from the churchyard. "And it's for sale."

"It's a funny little house, isn't it?" Marin had answered, nonplussed. It had long windows of stained glass and a crenellated turret on one side, a weedy bit of garden out front. From behind the house Marin could see the square Norman tower of the church.

"It's lovely," Rebecca said, a world of longing in her voice, and Marin glanced at her half-sister in wary surprise. For the last three months, since she'd become guardian of fifteen-

year-old Rebecca, they'd been living in Hampshire, struggling on in survival mode, half-sisters and yet also virtual strangers, separated by twenty-two years in age and now drawn together out of necessity and grief.

Rebecca hadn't been hostile to Marin or her sudden arrival in her life, but she hadn't been overly welcoming either. How could she, when they barely knew each other? Rebecca had been born after Marin had left university and had already been estranged from their shared father for several years. She'd seen Rebecca only a handful of times since then, a few excruciating holidays and weekends where she felt like an interloper in this happy life her father had made for himself, with his new family. She had no place there.

Not until now, when all Rebecca had was her. Both her parents had been only children, their own parents dead. And so Marin had tried to keep Rebecca's life going in Hampshire: driving her to school, sorting out their father's estate, managing the housework and washing and bills. She'd thought about getting a job or going freelance, but all her energy was taken by simply dragging herself – and Rebecca – through each day.

She was, Marin knew, a sad substitute for two loving parents. She wasn't a mother. She'd only had a few semi-serious relationships in her entire adult life. To suddenly become the sole guardian of a fifteen-year-old had been shocking.

And it had, Marin acknowledged, to have been shocking for Rebecca as well; suddenly she was saddled with a thirty-seven-year-old half-sister who barely knew how to fry an egg. Marin had gazed at the row of glossy cookbooks in her stepmother's gourmet kitchen in bemused incredulity, knowing she would never be able to make the kind of elegant meals Diana Ellis had no doubt regularly cooked

with effortless ease. Diana had been carelessly glamorous in everything she did; she'd also only been four years older than Marin. They'd never had anything close to a relationship.

The holiday up to the Lakes had been an escape from the oppression of life in Hampshire, yet Marin had never intended to make it permanent. It had been Rebecca who had suggested it.

"We could buy it," she'd said quietly, as they sat in the car and stared at the little house, with its stained-glass windows and turret. It looked like the kind of folly you'd see in the garden of a large estate. A sign on the gate announced in grandly curling script that it was Bower House. "*You* could buy it," Rebecca amended before Marin could think to reply. "With the money from my trust."

"Buy a house in Cumbria?" she finally said, shaking her head. "Why—"

"We could start over. It's beautiful here, you said so yourself. We don't need money, not really, and if we rented out or even sold the house in Hampshire we'd be fine. You told me you could work from anywhere if you started freelancing. Why not?"

Marin had just kept shaking her head, overwhelmed by this utterly unexpected leap in Rebecca's thinking. "The question isn't so much why not," she finally said, "as why."

"Because I'm tired of everyone looking at me funny because they know my parents died," Rebecca answered fiercely. "I'm tired of wandering around the rooms where they were and knowing they're never coming back. I'm stuck, and so are you, and I want to start over."

"Starting over won't change things," Marin told her quietly. "Your parents will still be gone." A lump rose in her throat. Her father would still be gone. And there had been so

much she'd never said. "And even if you moved somewhere new, you couldn't keep their deaths secret. You wouldn't even want to, Rebecca. It would be almost like a lie if you did."

"I know." Rebecca nibbled her lip, her face turned towards the window, and once again Marin had been struck by how young Rebecca was. How alone, except for her. In the three months since the accident Marin had never seen Rebecca cry. She'd sometimes go very quiet or sullen, but she never shed a tear.

But then neither had Marin.

"It would be different here," Rebecca said after a moment, turning back to Marin. Her jaw was set stubbornly, a flash of something like ire in her eyes. "It wouldn't be this huge shadow looming over everyone and everything, the way it is now. People wouldn't *remember* all the time."

"Maybe not, but what about your school? Your friends?"

Rebecca shrugged. "When something like this happens, you find out who your real friends are."

"Oh, Rebecca."

"There's nothing I wouldn't leave. You left your life in Boston, Marin. Why can't I do the same?"

Marin sighed, both tempted and torn. To start over… to have something new and different to look forward to… yes, she could see the appeal, unlikely though this place was. "This is hardly something to rush into," she said.

"Can we at least look at it? The inside?"

"I suppose…"

Rebecca had insisted on ringing the estate agent from the bed and breakfast they'd booked into that afternoon, and they had a viewing the next morning.

"It was built in 1905, by the vicar of the church," the agent told them as they wandered through the rooms, dust-

ridden and yet with lovely proportions and elegant, tiled fireplaces. "He had it built for his mother-in-law. A sort of dower house."

"And yet it's called Bower House," Marin had observed, and the woman let out a trill of laughter.

"Yes, odd, isn't it? But in any case, it was gifted to the diocese in 1929, and they let it to various tenants over the years. The garden overlooks the church—"

They hadn't spent any time in the garden, because it was drizzling an icy rain and Marin wasn't much of a gardener anyway.

"And yet completely private, of course," the woman continued. "Separated from the churchyard by a wall, so you won't have people nosing about. The vicarage was sold recently, about a year and a half ago, to an American family. Are you moving to the area?"

"Thinking about it," Rebecca answered before Marin could demur.

The kitchen, they both agreed, was the best part of the house. A large square room with sashed windows that overlooked the garden, and a huge blue Rayburn that took up nearly an entire wall.

"Heats the whole house," the agent informed them cheerfully. "I know it's freezing in here at the moment, but this thing will keep everything cosy and warm when it's running."

Marin had laid one hand on top of the range, the enamel ice-cold under her hand. She had been able to imagine, quite suddenly and surprisingly, how the kitchen would look with sunlight pouring through the windows, everything cheerful and clean, a kettle whistling merrily on the range, a jar of early daffodils on the windowsill. A place of both comfort and hope, the kind she couldn't remember ever having.

Rebecca had given her a beseeching look and Marin turned to the agent. "We'll have to think about it," she said.

Over a lunch of fish and chips at the local pub, Rebecca laid out all her arguments. She was halfway through her first year of GCSEs, so the sooner they moved, the better. They could come up after February half-term; that would give them enough time to sort out the Hampshire house. She'd looked at the local secondary school online last night and it had received a very good OFSTED report.

"Rebecca, you currently attend one of the best public schools in the country. A state school in a remote part of—"

"Don't be a snob. I can get a perfectly good education there if I apply myself, which you know I will."

Marin had just shaken her head, helpless in the face of Rebecca's determination. "I don't understand why you want this so much," she said quietly. "It's miles from anywhere, Rebecca. No shops, no museums, no distractions—"

"Maybe that's what I like about it."

"You're fifteen. Don't you want friends around and things to do? Places to go—"

"Not really." Rebecca had glanced away, her mouth turning down at the corners, her eyes shadowed. "I'm not like most fifteen-year-olds, Marin. Not any more."

And Marin knew that all too well.

It had taken a week, but Rebecca had worn her down eventually. She'd done her own research on the village and the school, had toyed with the possibility of going freelance, setting up her own business offering IT services. Nothing was keeping them in Hampshire except for Marin's reticence, her fear of taking Rebecca into something so different and unknown. Her fear, perhaps, of going there herself.

"Why don't you let the Hampshire house for a while?"

Rebecca had suggested. "Then, if we decided it's an epic failure, we could go back after, say, six months. We have to give it at least that long." She spoke firmly, as if she suspected Marin would sneak back as soon as she could.

And so Marin had done as Rebecca had said, and let the house out; the solicitor had approved the use of Rebecca's trust fund for the purchase of Bower House. They'd packed up their things – leaving nearly all of the furniture behind – and driven up to Goswell on a grey day in late February and now they were here, about to start their new lives.

"I can't wait till our things arrive," Rebecca said as Marin locked up the house. It was just past four o'clock and it was almost dark. And freezing. Marin didn't remember it being so windy the last time they'd been here, but now an icy wind blew off the sea, making her eyes water and sting. The windowpanes had rattled with it as they'd walked through the house. She hadn't remembered that, either. She found the rattling, along with the lack of traffic or people noise, quite unnerving.

"We don't even have many things," she told Rebecca as they headed back to the car. "We'll have to buy the basics from charity shops." They'd both agreed it was better to leave the Hampshire house furnished with all of its sleek, modern pieces, and beyond a couple of mattresses and chests of drawers that the movers were bringing tomorrow, they hadn't anything but their clothes and personal items.

"I can't wait," Rebecca answered cheerfully. Marin hadn't seen her so animated before, but then there had been precious little to get excited about. She wanted, for Rebecca's sake, to feel just as excited, just as optimistic, and yet as she gazed down the darkened street, the howl of the wind a lonely, mournful sound, sheep huddled miserably in the pasture by the church

lane, she wondered what on earth they'd got themselves into. They weren't even in the middle of nowhere, she thought with something close to panic. They were on its *edge*.

When you were already struggling with grief, already feeling isolated and alone, was it really a good idea to move somewhere as remote as this? What if Rebecca wasn't able to make friends? What if the school was awful? What if they both hated it here, and they had no one to turn to?

They could always go back, and yet Marin acknowledged that option wasn't all that appealing either. Life in Hampshire had become nothing more than an endurance test for both of them. She hadn't made friends there; the few neighbours who had stopped by with casseroles and sympathetic smiles had seemed cloying, unnatural. She didn't want to go back and she was afraid to go forward. Not a very good place to be.

"Tomorrow let's try to open that door in the garden," Rebecca said as Marin started the car. "I want to know what's behind it."

"Probably nothing but bramble, as you said," Marin answered, and suppressed the little flicker of curiosity she still felt about that door.

"It might be something, though," Rebecca insisted. "Maybe some kind of secret garden."

"Maybe," Marin answered dubiously. She glanced back at the garden, but the door was lost in darkness.

CHAPTER TWO

Eleanor
November 1918

The telegram came on a grey day in mid-November, two days after the Armistice had been signed and everything was meant to be *over*. All morning Eleanor Sanderson had been restless, uneasy, flying from this to that, never settling to anything, as if a part of her, some deep, barely understood part, already knew what was going to happen.

"What is wrong with you today, Eleanor?" her mother asked, putting down her book of poetry as she gazed at her nineteen-year-old daughter who sat perched on a velveteen armchair in the sitting room, by the front window that overlooked the muddy sheep pasture.

"Why hasn't Father done anything with that pasture?" Eleanor asked, nodding rather truculently towards the few sheep that were huddled together under a slate-grey sky. "It's meant to be our garden, you know."

Her mother raised elegant eyebrows. "Do we need so much garden?"

The vicarage had a sizeable garden at the side of the house, with enough space for garden parties – they hadn't had any of those in a few years – and vegetables and anything else they could need. Reasonably, Eleanor knew they didn't need a muddy acre of pasture that stretched from the front

of the house all the way to the beach road. Her father leased it out to a local farmer for his sheep; the dumb beasts kept lumbering up the stone steps that led from the pasture into the rose garden and nibbling on the blooms, much to the chargrin of Mr Lyman, the church gardener.

Yet as Eleanor stared out at the once grand stone steps now crumbling and covered in brambles, leading to nothing but mud and sheep, she felt an almost angry surge of feeling that things should be better than that. They should have an acre of lovely, verdant lawn on which to play croquet when the weather turned warm and Walter was home.

Walter had always liked croquet; he'd jauntily swing the mallet round by the handle while waiting for his turn and call out to Eleanor, teasing her about hitting the ball too hard.

You don't do anything by halves, Ellie. That's what I like about you.

Perhaps it was the thought that he would be home soon that was making her restless, although some had said troops wouldn't be back until near Christmas or even after. But maybe he would be able to come home sooner, since he was an officer. He'd never been much of a soldier, really; he'd studied English Literature at Oxford and had wanted, eventually, to teach.

"All you like are fusty old books," Eleanor had teased him, snatching whatever tome had captured his interest at that moment, and Walter would just smile and sigh.

"You should try one sometime, Ellie." She could picture the way he would lean forward and take his book back between his long, elegant fingers, perhaps ruffle her hair. "You might like it."

She'd flounce away, bored, because she'd never been much of a one for books or school. "Why don't you play the piano instead?" she'd plead, and eventually, as he always did

with her, Walter would give in and play some ragtime before Father came in and scolded them, smiling a bit, to be quieter.

When Walter was back, the house would be filled with music again. Eleanor and her older sister Katherine had taken lessons, but neither of them had Walter's easy talent. Eleanor had banged out Chopin and Katherine had played every piece meticulously yet without any real enthusiasm or passion; Walter had once said, not unkindly, that Katherine approached music the way a physician approached surgery.

When Walter came back again. It felt like a prayer. When Walter came back again, the world would have righted itself. Things would go back to the way they were, the way Eleanor needed them to be. They would laugh on the lawn as they played croquet; they would have garden parties and tea dances and Walter would teach her a ragtime duet, taking over her part when her fingers fumbled with the keys, as they always did. Katherine might even come in to listen; Walter had always managed to soften her hard edges whereas Eleanor just rubbed up against them, drawing blood from them both.

The war was over; it couldn't be long now before things settled down, and they became just the way they were before.

"Eleanor," Anne Sanderson murmured, the word a gentle reproof, and Eleanor realized she'd got onto her knees right there on her chair, her hands balled into fists, everything in her aching for Walter to be walking up to the door right now, his officer's cap in his hand, his dark hair ruffled by the wind, that whimsical, slightly crooked smile on his face.

"I'm sorry, Mother," she said, and was about to scramble down when she saw Robbie Sykes from the telegraph office on his bicycle – he was so proud of that broken-down old thing – his cap jammed low on his head, and everything in her went terribly still.

"No…" she whispered and Anne looked up from her book again, her worn face creased into a tired smile.

"What is it now, my dear?"

Eleanor just shook her head. She felt suspended in that moment, as if by denying it she might keep them from hurtling forward into the future, when Robbie Sykes knocked on their door and handed them that telegram. When they read it. "No," she said, louder now, and Anne frowned.

"Really, my dear. You sound like a child."

And she felt like a child, a child who wanted to bang her fists and drum her heels against the floor. Who wanted to cover her ears and hide her eyes.

Robbie Sykes propped his bicycle against the side of the vicarage, his expression grim underneath his cap. He glanced up, and met Eleanor's gaze through the drawing-room window before quickly looking away.

No.

She stood by the window now, her hands pressed flat against the glass, her heart beating with slow, sickly thuds. Perhaps it would stop altogether. Perhaps she'd fall down dead right here, crumpled on the Turkish carpet, just like Walter might be—

No.

She would not think like that. She couldn't, because it felt disloyal to Walter. He was alive – of course he was; the war was over and in summer she would ask Father to turn the sheep pasture into a lovely lawn for croquet. They would all play together, even Mother, if she were well enough, and Katherine would take ages to line up the ball, so Walter would do a jig to hurry her up. Eleanor would hit the ball too hard, as she always did, and Walter would pretend that he couldn't find it, that it had gone all the way into the sea, and Father would quote some obscure poet or philosopher as he stared

up at the clouds, and Tilly would bring them all lemonade.

Robbie Sykes was at the door. Eleanor pressed harder against the glass, her nose nearly touching the pane, everything in her silently imploring him not to knock. Not to make them move from this last moment of sweet ignorance.

"Eleanor." Her mother rose from the chair, her pale-grey day dress swishing about her ankles, and crossed to the window. "You'll smear the glass," she said, and gently removed Eleanor's hands from the windowpane. They fell limply to her side and Anne Sanderson stilled, one hand on Eleanor's shoulder, for she'd seen Robbie's bicycle.

They heard the sound of the brass door knocker, two terrible thuds.

"Shall I get that, miss?" called Tilly, their downstairs maid, in her cheerful Cumberland brogue. Katherine had teased Eleanor that she sounded like a local; Eleanor had been furious, even though she knew she shouldn't be. She'd been born here, after all. Katherine had been born in Wigton, which made her from Cumberland too, even if she made sure not to have a trace of accent in her clipped voice.

Anne was frozen by the window, still staring at Robbie's bicycle. It had a basket at the front, Eleanor saw, and one of the leather straps had snapped, so it hung crookedly.

"Yes, please, Tilly," Anne called finally, her voice a little faint, and she squeezed Eleanor's shoulder. Eleanor risked a glance towards her mother and saw her face was nearly the same colour as her dress. "Come, Eleanor," she murmured, and walked with slow, measured steps to the hall.

The door was open and a draught blew in from the porch. Robbie Sykes stood on the front step, his cap now crumpled in one hand as he offered that terrible, thin envelope with the other.

"Hello, Robbie," Anne said, stepping forward with a wan smile. "You must come inside. It's dreadful out there today."

"I won't, ma'am—" Robbie began, abjectly, and Eleanor wondered how many telegrams he'd delivered, how many cups of tea he'd refused. There had been over thirty deaths of village boys in the last four years of fighting. Had Robbie delivered the telegrams for them all? He was the Grim Reaper, she thought with a sudden spike of bitterness and fury, dressed in a woolly jumper, flat cap, and muddy boots.

"Nonsense," Anne said kindly. "Tilly will take you to the kitchen. I believe there's some marmalade cake left over from luncheon." She smiled and with her hand trembling only slightly, held it out for the telegram.

Robbie handed it to her, hanging his head. "Sorry, ma'am," he mumbled, and with a firm hand on his shoulder, Tilly bustled him towards the kitchen.

Anne glanced over at Eleanor. "Will you read it for me please, darling?" she asked quietly.

Eleanor opened her mouth to say she wouldn't, *couldn't*, but then she saw her mother sway slightly before reaching out to steady herself on the hall table, her knuckles white as they gripped the marble edge, and wordlessly Eleanor took the telegram.

She slit the envelope and held the slip of paper in her hands without unfolding it, wanting to suspend this moment forever. Then a sudden, blazing thought occurred to her: maybe it wasn't about Walter. Perhaps it was about James, Katherine's fiancé. *Of course*, Eleanor thought in a rush of giddy, and only slightly guilty, relief. *Of course it can't be Walter.*

Walter couldn't die. Not now, not ever. He was too alive and important for that, with his crooked smile and his soft

laugh and the way he'd gaze out at the distance when you were talking, but you still knew he was listening. *Really* listening, and more importantly, understanding. She thought of the way he whistled when he walked, his hands jammed in the pockets of his trousers, and how he'd ruffle her hair and slip her mint humbugs. She was his favourite; everybody knew it. Katherine said he spoiled her, but Eleanor didn't think it was true. He loved her. He couldn't be dead.

But even as these thoughts were tumbling wildly, desperately, through her mind, awful realization trickled in coldly after. If it were James, the telegram wouldn't come here. It would go to his parents, in Whitehaven.

"Eleanor," Anne said, her voice sounding soft and yet somehow broken. "Please."

Eleanor opened the telegram.

"Dear Reverend and Mrs Sanderson," she began, and then her voice faltered and she felt as if she couldn't breathe.

Anne pressed a hand to her chest. "Go on."

Eleanor took a shuddering breath and continued: "It is my painful duty to inform you that a report has been received from the War Office, notifying the death of—"

She broke off, not wanting to say the words, as if saying them would make them true, and Anne just nodded, her eyes closed. Eleanor forced herself to read on: "—the death of Lieutenant Walter Sanderson of the Border Regiment, Second Battalion, on the Fifth of November, 1918."

She lowered the telegram, unable to go on. Walter was dead. He'd been dead for *days*, less than a week before the war had ended. It was so unbearably unfair that Eleanor wanted to rail against it, she wanted to stamp her feet and insist, like a child, that it simply *couldn't* be true.

"Finish it, darling," Anne said quietly.

"It just says a full report will be posted on receipt," Eleanor answered dully. The fury she'd been feeling left in a rush; now she felt empty inside, which was preferable, she suspected, to the grief that would surely overwhelm her, if she let it.

Anne nodded slowly. "His commanding officer will send a personal letter, I should think," she said, and took a few steps into the hall.

"I don't care about *that*—" Eleanor burst out, her voice accusing. "How can you even think of such a thing?" Walter was *dead*. Her beloved brother with his thoughtful eyes and whimsical smile, his dark hair that stuck out every which way unless he plastered it down with pomade, was dead, never to return, never to smile at her and chuck her under the chin—

She felt the tidal wave of grief rising within her, and she whirled to glare at her mother, angry, resentful, childish words ready to spill forth about how her mother didn't even seem to *care*, but they died on her lips when she saw Anne in the hall, doubled over, one arm wrapped around her waist.

"Mother," she cried, and ran to her. Her mother sagged against her as soon as Eleanor put her arm around her; she staggered under the weight.

Tilly must have heard her cry, for she came running from the kitchen, Robbie Sykes not far behind, looking alarmed and also strangely guilty, as if this really was all his fault for bringing the wretched telegram.

"It's all right, Mrs Sanderson," Tilly said quietly, and put her arm around Anne's shoulders. "All right, now." She looked at Eleanor. "Where's the Reverend?"

"Father's at the Carmichaels'…" He was meeting with the grieving parents of another village boy who had died in the days before the Armistice. And only hours ago Eleanor

had felt a passing flicker of sympathy for his family, no more than that. It had seemed so *unfair*, for a boy to die so close to the end. And yet the injustice of it had been trifling rather than the overwhelming devastation she felt now. She could feel the pressure of the sobs she longed to let out, a burning in her chest, and she swallowed hard.

"Miss Eleanor," Tilly said sharply. "Listen to me now. We must get your mother upstairs to bed." She glanced at Robbie, not without some sympathy. "You'd best get yourself off now, lad."

Robbie nodded, looking thoroughly miserable, and headed towards the door.

Eleanor glanced at her mother, whose face was still sickly pale. Anne's health had always been fragile, although no one would guess it from the way she taught Sunday School most weeks, and had people to supper and ladies to afternoon tea. She was always graciously welcoming, always putting her own needs or wants aside, even if it meant she spent a day or more in bed to recover.

Looking at her now, Eleanor wondered how long it would take her to recover from this. Could you ever recover from the death of a child? The death of a brother?

"Come on, Mother," she said, her voice trembling only a little. "We'll get you to bed with a nice cup of tea and a hot brick for your feet."

Her mother moved woodenly, as if she were a puppet with an invisible hand pulling her strings, and jerkily at that. Her eyes were closed, her face looking so lifeless Eleanor felt a chill of foreboding. Neither of them spoke as she helped her mother up the stairs, and then down the hallway to her bedroom.

She pulled back the coverlet and helped her mother to take off her shoes; she was like a child, silent and obedient,

lifting each foot in turn so Eleanor could ease the shoe off. Anne lay back on the bed, and Eleanor pulled the coverlet up to her mother's chin; her face was nearly the same colour as the pillow slip.

"Let me stoke the fire," Eleanor murmured. She took the poker and pushed at the coals rather ineffectually; Tilly usually saw to the fires. She straightened, wishing she could do something more, something to make this better.

But it would never be better; nothing could ever go back to the way it was.

Eleanor blinked, the room seeming to slide and waver before her eyes. *Walter dead…* It was impossible, it had to be…

She could picture him the last time he'd come home for leave, in the summer. Mother had fretted a little because he'd been rather pale, seemed rather listless. And yet when they'd all sat outside when the weather had been fine, he'd agreed to a game of boules on the lawn and teased Eleanor about her hair, which she'd put up in a too-elaborate style because she'd wanted to appear grown up. She was nineteen and yet she'd had no beaux, no courtships, no mild flirtations, and even less of a prospect of any romance in the years to come, with so many young men dead or wounded.

But she hardly cared about that now. She could only think of Walter, and how he couldn't be gone, and yet she knew from the horrible hollowness inside her that he was. She was afraid of what might happen if she probed the emptiness inside her; it might fill up with emotions she couldn't bear to feel. And yet she knew they would come anyway, a gathering horde that would stampede over her sensibilities, make life nothing but grief.

"Thank you, Eleanor," Anne said. Her voice sounded distant and her eyes were still closed. "You must tell

Grandmama, you know. And Father." She let out a tiny sigh. "And Katherine, when she returns from Carlisle."

"I can't—"

Anne opened her eyes, gave her a wan smile of sympathy. "I know it's difficult, my dear. We've spoiled you in some ways."

"*Spoiled*—" Eleanor blinked, stung. "I don't feel very spoilt now," she snapped, childish hurt easier to feel than the endless grief. "Don't make me tell everyone, Mother. It isn't fair."

Anne closed her eyes again. "Please, Eleanor. I haven't the strength. And you do. You're so young, so full of passion and fire…" Her mother's voice trailed off and in shock Eleanor wondered if she'd fainted or fallen asleep.

"Mother—"

"Please," Anne whispered, her eyes still closed, and Eleanor swallowed past the burning lump in her throat once more.

"I'll go tell Grandmama," she whispered, and turned from the room.

Downstairs Tilly and Mrs Stanton, the cook, were huddled in the kitchen, weeping. Eleanor could hear their murmured words and hushed sobs as she took her coat from the porch and stepped out into the blustery afternoon. It had been raining for days, the wind blowing it sideways, the sky dank and grey and low. Now Eleanor hunched against that unforgiving wind and walked towards the church, past the ancient, nail-studded doors, and around the corner, following the worn slates that led to Bower House.

Father had had the house built for Anne's mother ten years ago, after she'd been widowed. He'd come into money when his own parents had died, and he'd known Anne had wanted her mother close.

It was a funny little house, perched on a lip of property on the other side of the church, and the walled garden in the back had been said to be the herb garden for the monastery before the Reformation. Grandmama had had it dug over for potatoes and lettuces since the war started, and Tilly and Mrs Stanton had worked it with Mr Lyman, although he was getting too old and arthritic to manage much more than clipping hedges or offering advice.

With her heart like a stone inside her, Eleanor skirted the side of the walled garden and came out to the front of Bower House, built like a little castle, complete with a turret. Grandmama liked to call it Father's Folly; he'd named it Bower House – a play on words, since it was a kind of dower house.

"I always thought you had aspirations to a dukedom," Grandmama had teased once, and Father, Eleanor remembered, had swanned about for a bit, as if he were royalty. They'd always liked to tease each other, Grandmama and Father, and Walter had often joined in; he had a flair for the dramatic, just as they did. He'd had, Eleanor corrected herself. He didn't any more; he was gone.

Thinking about Walter was like probing a raw wound; Eleanor gasped from the sudden flash of pain. She stood immobile by her grandmother's front door, reeling from the realization that had shocked her yet again, one hand raised to knock. She'd been about to lift the heavy brass knocker but she felt now as if she couldn't.

And in the end she didn't; Grandmama must have seen her coming and opened the door herself, her face pale, the set of her mouth resolute.

"Eleanor, my darling. Come inside before you're soaked." Elizabeth Chorley drew her granddaughter inside by the

shoulders and Eleanor went as woodenly as her mother had gone to bed.

"Grandmama…" she began, and found she could not go on.

"Don't say anything, dear. Not until you're warm and dry. It's dreadful out there today. You're already soaked, and just from walking across the churchyard. I'll have some tea brought into the sitting room."

Eleanor let her grandmother lead her into the sitting room with its bow window facing the high street, now awash in mud. Mary Sutherland, Grandmama's housekeeper, bustled forward with a tea tray.

"There, now," she clucked. "Let's get something warm inside you."

Eleanor sat down and stared at Mary; she'd never given the woman much thought at all, if any, but now it occurred to her that Mary had been widowed in this awful war; her husband had died a few months ago, at Havrincourt. She had a small son too, little more than a baby; Harry, his name was. Mother had given him a silver rattle on his christening day, and Mary's sister, also widowed, watched him while she worked.

Mary pressed a cup of tea into Eleanor's hands; her fingers closed round the porcelain, registering the comforting warmth for a second before it all came rushing back.

Walter.

"Grandmama…"

"Don't say anything, not yet." Elizabeth shook her head, her lips pressed together. "Not yet," she said again, and with a jolt Eleanor understood that her grandmother already knew.

"How—" she began, and Elizabeth smiled sadly and gestured to Eleanor's thin slippers.

"Why else would you come out on a day like this with nothing more than slippers on your feet?" she asked, and when she pressed her lips together again they trembled. "I don't suppose you know the details," she said after a moment, and Eleanor shook her head.

"It was just a telegram."

Elizabeth nodded and took a scrap of lace handkerchief from inside her sleeve. She dabbed her eyes, her only concession to grief, and took a deep breath. "Your mother will take this badly," she said. "Your father will be devastated, of course. His only son…" She shook her head, took another shaky breath. "But Anne… you know she's not strong, Eleanor. Not like you."

That was the second time she'd been called strong in the space of an hour, and Eleanor wanted to fly at her grandmother, to rage and rail and insist that she wasn't strong at all, and she certainly couldn't be strong enough for everyone else.

Elizabeth levelled her granddaughter with a single look. "You must be strong, Eleanor. For your mother's sake. Your cheerful, bright ways will do her a great deal of good. Katherine won't be able to manage, not with her own fiancé to look after."

"James isn't even back yet," Eleanor protested. "Although why he should live and Walter die – it's his fault, you know. He insisted they join up—"

"Hush, Eleanor, you don't mean such things."

"I do," Eleanor snapped. She'd cling to anger rather than grief. "I'd rather James died than Walter! I'm not even sure Katherine loves him, anyway. They barely spoke the last time he was here on leave—"

"That is quite enough." Elizabeth's voice was like the crack of a whip. Eleanor blinked, chastised. "You are nineteen

years old, Eleanor, and nearly a woman grown. You must learn to control your tongue."

Eleanor stared down at her mud-caked slippers. "It's just not fair," she muttered.

"No, but our idea of justice is not the same as God's. We want everything to go our way, and that simply isn't possible."

"Why not? If God is all-powerful, He should be able to manage it."

"Oh, Eleanor." Elizabeth sank into a chair opposite her granddaughter, her face grey with fatigue and loss. "If you want to argue theology, go speak to your father. But trust that just because something bad has happened—"

"Something bad?" Eleanor cried. "The *worst*, Grandmama."

"Even the worst," Elizabeth answered steadily. "God is greater than even the worst, Eleanor."

He didn't seem very great to her at that moment, Eleanor thought, but even so, she knew it was useless to argue with her grandmother, or be angry with God. It wouldn't change anything. It wouldn't bring Walter back.

"Be strong, Eleanor," Elizabeth said quietly. "For your family. For *Walter*. He'd want you to remain as bright and happy as you ever were – you know that." Her grandmother took a deep breath, gave her a shaky smile. "And when it all gets too much and you need to cry, you may come over here," she finished, and after a tiny pause, Eleanor, her throat now too tight for words, just nodded.