

Chapter 2

Monday, October 14

In London and then back to Eynsleigh

I felt weighed down by a cloud of doom as I took the train back to Eynsleigh. No Zou Zou, no Belinda, no Queen Mary and no granddad. It really did look as if I'd have to start meeting those neighbors and getting involved in village life. And what Granddad had said about Hitler and Germany weighed on my mind. If there was another war Darcy would be called up to fight. I closed my eyes, not able to bear the thought.

Phipps had dropped me at the station as I had expected to be away for a while. I thought of telephoning Eynsleigh and asking to be picked up, but it was still a glorious day so I decided to walk. Hazelnuts were thick on the trees beside the lane. I made a mental note to come and pick some. Cows and horses peered at me over gates. Sheep regarded me suspiciously and moved away. I came into the village, down the one main street, passing the Queen's Head pub, the baker's, the newsagents, the greengrocer and butcher. Women out doing their shopping nodded to me. One said "Lovely day, isn't it, your ladyship?"

and I agreed that it was. From the village school came the chant of children learning their four times table. "Four fours are sixteen. Five fours are twenty "

It wasn't such a bad place to be, I told myself. I would learn to get used to life here. I'd join the ladies' guild at the church or help with the Girl Guides or the pony club. Then a few unbidden images formed in my head. Me being asked to iron the church altar cloths, polish the chalices, do the flowers . . . or show the Girl Guides how to tie knots Golly, I'd be hopeless. But I'd be all right with the pony club. I did know a bit about horses. And I'd learn the names of the children in the village school and invite them to Eynsleigh where Darcy could play Father Christmas. That was the sort of thing the owners of the big house had to do. I had bucked up a lot by the time I passed between the tall stone gateposts, each topped with a lion with its foot on a ball, and started to walk up the drive. The gravel road was lined with plane trees and at the end of it lay the rambling Tudor mansion. Its red brick glowed in the rays of the setting sun and smoke rose from its curly chimneys that were etched against a perfectly duck-egg-blue sky. Rooks cawed as they flew home for the night in a big elm tree. It was a scene of peace and contentment and I gave a little sigh.

"My house," I whispered to myself. "This is my house. My home now."

I started to walk up the drive and suddenly realized how hot and tired I was. The day was warm for October and the small suitcase now suddenly seemed to weigh a ton. I thought about leaving it and sending one of the servants to fetch it for me, but I didn't want to admit any weakness to them so I gritted my teeth and marched on, sweating now under my tweed jacket.

Suddenly I noticed a cloud of dust ahead and saw a vehicle coming toward me. A small low vehicle of some sort. Not a delivery van, then. It was a red sports car and it was approaching fast, sending up a cloud of dust behind it. I had to step hastily out of the way. Who on earth

had come to visit driving a car like that? One of Darcy's friends, maybe, disappointed to find he wasn't at home. The car drew level, was about to pass as I stood in the dappled shade of a plane tree, then suddenly screeched to a halt.

The driver leaped out and rushed toward me yelling, "Georgie, darling! It's you! I thought I'd missed you."

Through the cloud of dust the car had stirred up I recognized the flying figure. It was my dear friend Belinda Warburton-Stoke, her sleek black hair hidden under a bright red motoring cap with a jaunty feather on one side and wearing a flame-red cape that flew out as she ran.

"Belinda!" I exclaimed, delighted. "What are you doing here? I thought you were in Paris."

She flung her arms around me, enveloping me in a big hug. "Just got back, darling, and thought I'd come straight down here to surprise you. You can imagine how miffed I felt when your housekeeper said you'd gone up to London for a few days."

"I was hoping to, but nobody was home," I said. "I walked from the station. Thank heavens I didn't stop in the village to get a drink or I'd have missed you."

She released me from the hug and examined me critically. "Yes," she said. "You're looking well. Sex obviously agrees with you, I can see. How is that brute Darcy treating you?"

"He's not a brute, Belinda, as you very well know." I laughed. "Darcy is wonderful, except that he's not here at the moment. He's gone off on some assignment he can't talk about and I'm all alone here. So I'm extra pleased to see you. Turn that spiffy motor of yours around and come and have some tea."

"Hop in," she said. "You can be impressed with my new toy."

I climbed into the passenger seat. "This is yours?" I asked.

"He's an Aston Martin Le Mans. The very latest model!"

"I didn't even know you knew how to drive," I said.

"I did learn on Daddy's estate, years ago," she said, "but I haven't had much chance to practice recently. I don't actually have a license or anything, but it doesn't really matter, does it? I have to confess to being a bit rusty, especially as this beast is quite temperamental when it comes to gears and things."

As if to demonstrate this the gearbox gave an awful grating sound and then the car leaped forward. Belinda managed to change direction after much maneuvering with the accompanying grating of gears.

"I'm sure that can't be good for it," I pointed out.

"He's a good solid British motorcar," she said. "He can stand any amount of abuse." With that we shot up the drive toward the house so fast that my head was thrown against the back of the seat.

"Did you know he can do eighty miles an hour?" Belinda shouted over the roar of the motorcar's engine. "I put him through his paces over the Hog's Back."

"Him? It's definitely a male?"

"Obviously, darling. Can't you feel all that masculine power and testosterone flowing? I've named him Brutus."

I tried not to smirk. "How long have you had it – I mean, him?" I asked.

"Since yesterday. I only got back from Paris two days ago."

"I thought you were planning on staying until the end of the year at least," I shouted back.

"I was, darling, but I got a telegram from the solicitor saying that Granny's will had finally been proved and he needed instructions on what to do with the money. You remember my grandmother had named me in her will, don't you? Lady Knott . . ."

"Not what?" I asked.

She shook her head so that the red feather danced. "Knott, darling. With a K. My mother had to grow up being a Knott. Luckily she married someone with a more normal name like Warburton-Stoke."

She paused to give me an indignant look as I laughed. "Anyway, Granny's will has been proved, so I caught the next boat train home

and, Georgie, you'll never believe it, but I'm actually quite a rich woman!"

We screeched to a halt outside the front steps, narrowly missing the fountain.

"Hence the spiffy sports car," I said.

She was smiling like a cat with the cream. "I came out of the solicitor's office and spotted it in the showroom on Park Lane, and thought why not? So I went in and bought Brutus on the spot."

I opened my door and climbed out, brushing off the dust that still hovered in a cloud around us. "Come inside and have tea and you can tell me all about it," I said.