

BENEATH THE STONE

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Synopsis

Southern Italy, 1943: The German army is quickly losing ground to the Allied assault and retreating towards Rome. The quiet town of Vietri sul Mare has been spared from the ravages of war – until the arrival of an SS officer amidst the confusion of the retreat, armed with a single deadly purpose.

Aylesbury, 1956: David Montefort, a twelve-year-old boy uprooted from his old life, arrives at the lavish Ambrose House. He begins to learn the history of his enigmatic family – and the complicated link it has to the day Vietri sul Mare lost its innocence.

But Vietri was only the beginning – and the SS officer, evading punishment for his war crimes, still has an unfinished agenda that involves the Montefort family.

This thrilling mystery from Margaret M Ford places David in the middle of a bloody legacy spanning three countries and two decades in the race to unravel the mysteries which began in 1943. The truth will turn his idle curiosity about his own roots into the unveiling of a shocking series of crimes – and his own fight for survival.

For Rhoda, Merle, Sue, Margo, Libby, Margaret, Pauline and Sylvia.

PROLOGUE

1943

Vietri Sul Mare (near Salerno), Southern Italy

Ambrose Montefort

Distant heavy mortar fire could be heard. The Allied invasion force was attempting to establish beachheads all along the coast, but the German troops under Field Marshal Albert Kesselring were putting up heavy resistance. And the treacherous terrain in this sector, though not unexpected, was proving difficult to overcome for General Clark's Fifth Army. The first skirmishes were well underway and quite close to Vietri. The Germans were retreating and busily engaged in their scorched earth policy.

A light wind carried the smoky smell of war, faint but regular; a constant reminder that freedom for the nation was near at hand. The allied landings had increased the excited chatter of those who wanted to settle a few scores with their German 'friends'. But until now, that's all it had been – idle chatter.

Two men were hidden in a prickly copse and sharing an old, battered set of binoculars, although they didn't really need them to see what was going on down below in the town square. Taking it in turns, they watched the unfolding scene from their vantage point on the hillside. Right in the middle of the piazza an open-topped Volkswagen squad car was parked at an odd angle. Two of three Waffen SS soldiers were herding the townspeople into a group in front of the Town Hall. The officer in charge was standing aside, legs apart, hands clasped behind his erect back and head held high with a jutting chin; an all too familiar and arrogant pose that seemed to come with the uniform.

Someone either very brave or very stupid had taken it upon himself to make sure some German soldiers never saw home again.

But the SS? Only a fool would mess with them.

“Those Germans are cutting it close,” one of the men said. “Why are they still here? And where’s the rest of their squad? There’s obviously something going on down there. But what?”

“I don’t know. It must be something serious though. Why else would they hang back and risk capture?”

Suddenly, a short burst of gunfire erupted and one of the terrified residents fell to the ground. For a moment there was stunned silence and then a woman’s scream rent the air. Moments afterwards a howl of wailing moved through the small crowd.

The two men reacted instinctively, both jumping to their feet, wanting desperately to do something, anything. How could this be happening? It was several moments before they simultaneously realised they were fully exposed. They quickly dipped below cover again, unable to find the words that would express the horror of what they had just witnessed.

They watched helplessly as yet another execution took place barely a minute later. Both of them knew that troops from the Fifth Army were within hours of Vietri. It made no difference. They certainly wouldn’t arrive in time to save these villagers from this inexplicable and untimely attack.

“Information,” the taller of the two men said. “They’re after information. But what sort of information? What the hell do they want?” All at once he broke cover and sat bolt upright, resisting the urgent pulling of his comrade to bring him back within the concealment of the copse. “Oh my god! My son’s down there,” he gasped, his breathing becoming erratic.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Yes. I see him.” Fear and dread for his friend left the other man struggling for breath. “Get back down. You can’t do anything,” he panted, knowing his plea would likely fall on deaf ears.

“Why? Why is he here? He should be at the villa.”

“Whatever the reason, we can’t do anything.”

They continued to watch in trepidation as the SS officer strode up and down in front of the huddled group of hostages. It was obvious from his demeanour that his rage was building. He yelled something at them in broken Italian, and then he raised his hand. Another burst of gunfire, another fallen figure, another death. The victims seemed to be indiscriminate. So far, they had killed one old man, one woman, and now a young lad.

“I’m sure that was one of Panetta’s sons they just killed. He was only fifteen. We can’t let this go on. At this rate, they’ll kill everyone. My son, my son.” A sob caught in the distressed man’s throat as he rose to his feet. “I have to get down there.”

“No, please, Ambrose. There’s nothing we can do. You’ll just get yourself killed.”

“I have to go,” Ambrose cried, wrenching his arm free from the other man’s tight grasp. He moved off, stumbling down the hillside, his footfalls gathering momentum as he descended the steep slope.

On reaching the outskirts of the piazza, Ambrose paused to regain his breath after his short but frantic trek, wanting badly to appear calm and in control. Heart beating thunderously, he approached the horrendous, bloody scene with deliberately measured footsteps, his expression composed in the hope of hiding the inner turmoil threatening to boil over and expose his fear and fury.

The German officer turned when the man appeared on the edge of his vision, watching him speculatively as Ambrose walked steadily towards him.

“What is going on here?” Ambrose asked firmly, trying to project an air of authority.

Two of the soldiers immediately pointed their guns at him. “Hauptsturmführer?” one of them threw over his shoulder, speaking in German.

“*Warten!*” the officer told his subordinate, holding his hand aloft. His eyes glittering with undisguised hatred, he shouted at Ambrose, “Who are you? Resistenza?” His Italian was terrible, but Ambrose understood. The officer must be out of his mind if he expected anyone to answer that in the affirmative.

“*Nein,*” Ambrose said, “my name is Ambrose Montefort,” speaking in perfect German. “Perhaps I can be of help, Captain, er – I’m sorry, I don’t recognise you.” He wanted this man’s name in case anyone lived through this.

“Hauptsturmführer Rannulf Nagel,” the captain sniffed superciliously. “My equipment truck was waylaid on the road back there,” he said through tight lips while pointing a jutting forefinger at the north end of the road leading out of town. “I know it was the resistance. They took something very valuable that belongs to me. Bah! You Italians! Cowards,” he fumed. “I want what belongs to me and I want it back now! Tell these imbeciles I will kill every one of them if they don’t give it up and the men who took it.”

At his words, Ambrose felt as if an icy fist had encompassed his heart. Was it possible? Could this stupid ambush be the reason his son was here? The Resistenza was barely active here and couldn’t be to blame, he thought. If his impetuous sons had intercepted the truck on the foolhardy notion of impeding the Germans’ retreat, then he had a responsibility to somehow put this right.

He nodded tightly and turned to look at the huddled group, many of them now weeping copiously. He knew all of them; so many friends, their collective expression one of absolute terror. Actively avoiding looking at his son, he repeated what the captain had said, careful to translate it verbatim, as the captain would most likely understand Italian better than he could speak it. As the final words of the threat left his mouth, a vociferous chorus of cries and

denials tore through the crowd. Some of the women were wringing their hands, pleading for mercy.

Their ignorance of the troubling event was apparent, but it served only to fuel the captain's rage. He stomped along the front line of the group, poking his revolver into the chests of young and old alike. At the end of the line, he turned viciously on his heel and lashed out at the only woman who happened to be standing still and silent, using the butt of his revolver to inflict a severe blow to her head as he screeched in her face. She fell to the ground without a cry, and lay still for what seemed like an eternity, blood pooling from the wound at her temple. When Ambrose saw it was Signora Panetta, a great well of anger raged through him. *First the son, now the mother.* Then, her hand stretched out from beneath her and grasped the foot of the blood-spattered body of her son lying close by. Ambrose felt his heart was going to shatter. But then his attention was diverted as, in a flash, one of the soldiers pulled Ambrose's son to the forefront and began to beat him with his rifle butt, all the while screaming at him to give up the men, meaning any members of the Italian resistance.

Ambrose's throat constricted painfully. Tearing his eyes away from the relentless thrashing of his son, now curled up in a tight ball on the ground, he turned to the captain and said, "Please, Hauptsturmführer Nagel, these people are entirely innocent. They know nothing of this incident. Let me speak to that boy," he pleaded, pointing at the prostrate figure of his son, still jerking from the repeated blows. "He doesn't live in the town and may have seen someone on the road coming in. Please, let me try."

The captain gave an order and the beating stopped immediately. All but the Germans knew this was Ambrose's son, but no one gave him away. And Ambrose sent a silent but expressive message of gratitude as his eyes found familiar faces.

Ambrose stepped over the now still body of Signora Panetta and knelt beside his son, who was torn and bloody but still alive and miraculously conscious. Ambrose hid his face well as

the tears welled in his eyes and dripped copiously to mingle with the blood on his son's face. He put his mouth near to the boy's ear. In English, he whispered, "My beloved boy, it's Papa. Stay still. Don't move again until they've gone."

The boy tried to say something, the blood gurgling in his throat. Ambrose lifted the boy's head slightly and turned it sideways to ease his air passage, gently stroking the hair back from his forehead. Then he put his ear to the crushed mouth.

"I'm sorry, Papa," the boy rasped. "It wasn't my idea. He said we had to do something."

Ambrose's lip curled: he knew precisely who *he* was.

The captain stomped his foot impatiently.

Ambrose held up a restraining hand, and then spoke very softly once more into his son's ear. "I love you. Don't move again. Don't breathe. You must lie like the dead beside you."

Ambrose swallowed his tears, gently let go of his son's head and then wrenched himself to his feet on wobbly legs. Drawing in a deep breath, he steeled himself and then walked back to where the captain was standing. "He told me he saw someone on the road. He gave me a name. But we'll get nothing more from him. The boy's dead," he lied. Then, in a louder voice, so everyone could hear him, he told the officer, "The name he gave me was Gerada Miceli. I know him. I know where he is, but you'll never find him. I'll have to take you." All this, he said in Italian. Then, as if remembering to whom he was speaking, he repeated it all in German.

Again, except for the Germans, everyone knew instantly that this name was entirely fictitious. And they knew, too, that Ambrose Montefort was not only trying to save his son; he was desperately attempting to save all of them.

The survivors watched as they bundled Ambrose into the vehicle. They collectively held their breath, expecting to be slaughtered. But it seemed the officer no longer had an interest in them and never gave them another glance. The vehicle careened across the square and with a

squeal of tyres turned onto the road. Just before it disappeared from view Ambrose looked back over his shoulder at the huddled group and gave them a slight nod.

And no one saw him again.

CHAPTER ONE

1945

Occupied Germany (Western Zones)

Rannulf Nagel

Hauptsturmführer Rannulf Nagel had been studying the soldier for a little over an hour now, and was beginning to think he was the perfect victim. Rannulf had imprudently given the man his name straight away but had had the presence of mind not to reveal his rank or unit; something he was normally proud of. It wasn't long, however, before Nagel realised the man was easy prey. In addition, he was practically the same height and colouring, and only two years younger than himself. So far he had learned that the man's parents had been wiped out in the Dresden firestorm following the fourth bombing raid in February. He was unmarried and had no girlfriend or family waiting for him.

Up to now, all that Nagel had managed to do was ditch his distinctive SS uniform, which had deeply grieved him, and perform a little self-mutilation by cutting out the distinguishing tattoo on his underarm that would have identified him as not only Waffen SS but eventually given up his name if stopped by the Americans who were only a little way up the road. Of course, the open wound was a bit of a giveaway in itself but he hoped no one would ever see it.

His biggest fear at the moment was the risk of infecting the untreated gash with the torn and filthy clothes he was wearing, picked off a corpse he had come across three hours ago. A few minutes ago, he had started to feel a little hot and feverish, and was worried that the raw flesh might be even now festering. And until he was once more alone, he couldn't check it,

which only added to his growing frustration. He knew that if he was going to make a move he had to make it soon. Darkness was encroaching and he might not get another chance. It would afford him the best opportunity he was likely to get.

“So where are you making for then?” asked Rannulf.

The man shook his head disconsolately. At length, he said, “I don’t know. I don’t know where to go. No one’s told us what we should do.”

Nagel nodded and, knowing the German psyche all too well, said in a tone full of confidence and authority, “What we’ll do is bed down here for the night. In the morning, we’ll go to the checkpoint and see what the Americans say.”

“Why not go now? Maybe they’ll give us some food. Or will they imprison us?”

“Probably. I’m not sure. But why would they do that? They’ve got their unconditional surrender. *Schweins!* They’ll keep us only for as long they have to, I expect. They have to process everyone crossing. But I’m quite sure they’ve got no beef with good German soldiers like us.”

“So why are they stopping and searching *everyone?*”

The man’s an imbecile, thought Nagel. “I expect they’re looking for our Reichstag bigwigs.”

“The Führer is dead.”

Tell me something I don’t know, idiot! “Did you make any close friends in the army?” Nagel said, abruptly changing the subject.

“Yes, Gebard. Gebard Himmel. We were together all through the war. We got separated at Remagen. There was so much smoke on the Ludendorff Bridge. One minute he was there, setting a charge, and the next he was gone. He must have taken a bullet or something and fallen in the Rhine. There was artillery fire all around us. When the smoke cleared and there was a break in the fighting, I looked for him everywhere. I think he must be dead, but I

couldn't find his body. I took so long I got left behind. My own fault. Arg, but poor Gebard. To have come so far and then die in the final hours." He shuddered. On the verge of tears now, he murmured, "So many dead. So many. And what was it all for?"

"Will you inform his family?"

"He wasn't married. His parents are dead; killed in the bombing like mine. He has a brother. Aldrich, his name is. Probably dead as well. He was on the Russian Front, but I don't know where he is now. I wouldn't know where to look for him."

"Where did Gebard come from?"

"Dresden, like me."

"But you met in the army, not in Dresden."

"Yes. Funny that. Dresden's nothing but rubble now. I don't know where to go. I think we would've gone to Dresden. Without Gebard it's so difficult to think what to do."

That settles it! Nagel suspected the man was war weary and half out of his mind. And if there was one type he couldn't stand it was a coward or defeatist, and this man was surely nothing less. Bad luck that he didn't die on the bridge with Gebard – *but very good luck for me*, thought Nagel.

"So you have no one," Nagel murmured, almost to himself. "Well, don't be upset, my friend. You must think of yourself now. Gebard's not your problem." He grasped the man's shoulder and gave it a friendly squeeze. "Don't worry now. If he has any family, they will be informed of his death by the army."

"You think so?"

"Of course. They'll send them his *Wehrpass* identification. Like you, I have no one. We shall stay together, my friend, and make our way with no trouble at all, I promise. Germany will shortly need men such as you and me. So, now we sleep. We shall face the Americans

tomorrow with our heads held high. We are proud Germans, remember ... we are the finest men in all the world and we *shall* prevail.”

All the same, he was glad it was the Americans he would have to face and not the Russians.

CHAPTER TWO

December, 1956

Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, England

David Montefort

Outside it was dark and very cold; a clear starlit night, surface frost twinkling like a scattered layer of diamonds. Inside the car, though, it was a little too warm. Condensation had gathered on the windows and it was difficult to see much of the passing scenery. I started to clear a patch with my coat sleeve.

“David! Stop that. You’ll dirty your coat.”

I saw the driver throw a sharp glance at my mother in the rear-view mirror. He pursed his lips, and, judging by his sour expression, I sensed that he wanted to say there was no dirt on his windows.

“Mama, when will we get there? I’m hungry,” asked my annoying seven-year-old sister.

“Oh, Miriam. Stop fussing,” my mother said. “It’s not much further now.”

“But it’s so dark. Will they let us in?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Will they give us something to eat? Where will we sleep?”

“All these questions! I’ve told you, there’s nothing for you to worry about.”

While Mother was busy fending off Miriam’s questions and complaints, I snatched a moment to swipe a clear patch on the window at my side. The car had halted. I peered out through the small space and could just make out a set of tall gates opening to admit us. As the car started off again I turned and peered out of the back window. Through the running

condensation I managed to catch a brief glimpse of the heavy, ornate gates as they closed behind us, and I wondered who was operating them, considering the driver hadn't moved. The car travelled on for several minutes, turned off the narrow road and entered a circular area before coming to a halt in front of a big, shadowy structure, which I presumed was the house and our final destination.

The driver donned his chauffeur's hat and quickly got out of the car to open the door on my mother's side. I didn't wait and swiftly got out on the other side, anxious to see where our long journey had ended.

I stared in wonder at the magnificent surroundings, stunned and awestruck. This was not what I had been expecting. There were very few windows lit but I could see by the light of the moon in the frigid clear night that the house was four storeys high, much too wide to be modest, and seemed to have a wing either side of a middle block which was set back with a circular set of steps leading up to the entrance. The house appeared to be stone built but it was difficult to tell just by moonlight. Our figures seemed dwarfed by the immense size of the edifice as we climbed the steps up to the great double front doors, which were sheltered by the grandly pillared portico. The immediate area was suddenly flooded with light from two overhead lamps just as the doors were thrown wide.

We were greeted by a tall angular man with regular features and greying hair. His immaculate three-piece black suit and pristine white shirt indicated he was the doorman. At least, that's what I thought he was, because surely this was a hotel, and a rather grand one, at that? I didn't see how it could be otherwise as our family was of very modest means and, surely, Mother didn't know anyone who could afford to live in any house other than a two-up, two-down? But how could we afford to stay in a hotel? In fact, how come we could afford a chauffeur-driven taxi? It was all very bewildering, especially after the events of the past few weeks.

The man's ready smile suggested he was expecting us.

I followed my mother and Miriam into the entrance hall. I felt dwarfed by the high-ceilinged vestibule, which was big enough for a game of football. One quick look around immediately signified that this was not a hotel. For one thing, there was no reception desk. Right away my mind flooded with questions far more weighty than Miriam's, but I held my tongue for the time being.

"There's no one here, I'm afraid," said our host. "The family was expected back this morning, but we received word at lunchtime they'd been delayed. Miss Alma, it seems, has fallen victim to a nasty cold and they don't expect to return for another four or five days now. I'm sorry."

My mother cleared her throat and I detected she was a little nervous – unusually so. "I see. And you are?"

"Oh, do excuse me. It's Stiles. We've been expecting you, Mrs Bleich."

"Well, I'm pleased to meet you, Stiles. Only, it's Montefort, not Bleich. We kept my surname. The war, you know." She looked away, appearing momentarily embarrassed. As if to avoid further discussion on the subject, she then added quickly, "And this is David and Miriam, my children."

Bleich? This was a revelation to me. Was this my father's name, then? So why had my parents adopted Mother's surname? *The war?* But why? The memorial stone on his grave had yet to be erected at the time we left. Would it read Jacob Bleich or Jacob Montefort? Given our financial circumstances, would there even be a tombstone? So many questions struck my mind in quick succession.

I caught my mother's sleeve, and whispered, "Why is our surname Montefort rather than Bleich?"

She shrugged off my touch, clearly irritated. “Not now, David. I’ll explain another time,” she whispered back. Turning to Stiles, she said, “By the way, what happened to Hilton?”

“The previous butler? He died. It was very sudden. I believe it was an undetected heart condition. I’ve been here for nearly four years now.”

Mother was a little put out at hearing this, and she seemed at a loss, momentarily, as to what to say or do next.

Stiles took charge. He turned to the chauffeur who was just bringing in the last of the cases. “Take the luggage up to the third floor in the right wing, Tilley, please. Leave the cases outside the first three rooms. Miss Jaida will be in the middle room and the children either side.”

Tilley, the chauffeur, looked as if he was going to object but seemed to think better of it. With a sigh, he picked up two of the suitcases and started up the wide staircase situated in the middle of the magnificent hall.

The opulent setting had at least stilled Miriam’s runaway tongue for once. She gazed in fascination at the luxurious surroundings, probably thinking she was dreaming. She wasn’t the only one.

Stiles extended his arms in apology. “I was told to prepare the rooms on the third floor, you understand. There’s only one room left available on the second floor, and Mr Rufus thought you’d want to be close to your children.”

Mother nodded, acceptingly. “That’s fine. We’ll be fine. So, none of the family is here, then?”

Stiles hesitated, and then said, “Well, Miss Gertrude is here, of course. But, as I’m sure you know, she never sees anyone.”

A flicker of emotion swept across Mother's features but she quickly looked away. "I don't want to trouble anyone, really. Nevertheless, the children are hungry. I know it's late but they'll need some supper before bed."

"Of course. Mrs Weaver prepared something before she left for the day. She anticipated you might arrive late, so it's cold fare, I'm afraid. Would you like it served in the dining room or ...?"

"No, no. It'll be fine in the kitchen. Thank you."

Mother took hold of Miriam's hand and led her off to the right of the hall. She gestured for me to follow. It was obvious she knew where she was going. I was flabbergasted. Who were these people? I couldn't remember Mother ever being away from us. So when had she visited this house and become so well established here that she knew the layout, and the people, so well?

A little over six weeks earlier my father had been killed by falling masonry when a building partially collapsed due to subsidence. It had already been cleared of the residents and their belongings. The only reason he was there was to take inventory of the remaining removable items such as doors, or anything that could be safely removed and recycled. The man who should have been there, the official estimator, was attending a funeral and my father, merely a clerk in the demolition company's office, was dispatched in his place as time was of the essence.

For several days Mother was beside herself with grief, and I did my best to comfort her while trying to contain my own anguish. Then the facts of life intruded on our heartache: there was no life insurance, apparently. And the question of compensation was going to be a long drawn-out affair.

My parents lived on a meagre income. But until my father's death I hadn't realised we were so poor. Mother said nothing at all to Miriam, as my sister was too young to understand.

But she told me that her poorly-paid job as a dressmaker wouldn't be enough to pay the rent, let alone put clothes on our backs or feed us properly.

Though only twelve years old (almost thirteen) I thought it my duty to become the man of the house, so to speak, and confidently announced that I would get a weekend job and work in the evenings, too; all this with very little thought as to how I was to achieve this lofty goal. Her only comment was to reassure me that there was another option. She promptly sat down to write a letter, the contents of which she didn't reveal to me. After sealing the envelope, she placed it in my hand along with tuppence for the stamp and sent me running to the post office to catch the last collection. Still breathless from the run, I licked the stamp, pressed it in place and then posted the letter, almost immediately cursing my stupidity for not reading the postal address first.

I still didn't know the address, but this was undoubtedly where the letter had ended up.

* * *

A little later that night, as I lay in a strange bed in a room full of unfamiliar shadows, I felt overwhelmed by the questions arising from our arrival at Ambrose House, the name of our new residence, which I learned just before my mother pushed me into what was to be my room for many years to come.

It would be a lie to deny that I wasn't scared or worried. This sudden turn in my life had all come about because of the loss of my father. I experienced a moment of deep distress, more so than when I first learned the news of his death. He was the kindest man I'd ever known; so patient and polite. He was always quite skilful at putting a brake on my mother's quick temper and harsh ways. Now, that balance was lost.

In my child's mind I tried to work out the best way to approach Mother with my doubts and uncertainties. I was determined to find out as much as possible the following day. Right up until the moment my eyes involuntarily closed in sleep I was trying to prioritise the questions I intended to put to her, but kept changing the order of them. I suspected Mother might try to avoid the answers if the past few hours were anything to go by.

And why should she do that? That's a question in itself.

With so many questions on my mind, I started thinking about keeping a journal.

CHAPTER THREE

I had set my internal clock for 7:00 am the next morning but the previous day's long journey and very late night had caused it to malfunction. When my eyes finally fluttered open I had no idea what time it actually was as Mother was yet to make good on her promise to give me Father's watch. Albeit, at the end of the hallway there was an absolute monster of a grandfather clock: the mere swing of the pendulum would be enough to keep me awake, I feared, on first setting eyes on it.

I swung my legs out of bed, scurried over to the window and drew back the heavy velvet curtains. The flood of light alerted me to the lateness of the hour. But I took a moment to scan the room properly. It was much bigger than I was used to with rather plain but fine furnishings. The high ceiling was richly decorated in blue and white painted plaster mouldings of intricate patterns. There was a watercolour painting of a landscape on one wall, which I later discovered was a scene from the grounds of the house, but it would be some time before I found out who had painted it. The bed was generously proportioned and so delightfully comfortable that it was easy to lay the blame for my tardiness on it. The bed sheets were dazzlingly white, and aside from the painting there were only three colours in the room: browns, creams and beige.

I couldn't quite make up my mind whether the furnishings of the room leaned towards male or female, but given their plainness concluded it was definitely male. Not to worry, I mused – I would soon make it my own, providing we were to remain here for any length of time.

Taking a chance the hallway would be empty I carefully opened the door and popped my head out. No doubt I looked like a bedraggled turkey offering itself for execution. Finding it

clear, I darted along the carpeted floor in my bare feet to check the time on that awful monstrosity of a clock. I was shocked to find that it was almost eight-thirty. I dashed back to my room and made a token pretence of washing and dressing, which I regarded as a nuisance. Then I rushed downstairs fervently hoping that I hadn't missed breakfast, since my stomach was growling fit to put a dog to shame.

From the main reception hall I found the stairs leading down to the kitchen where I expected to find Mother and Miriam but, instead, found only a portly lady of indiscriminate age sitting at the long pinewood table enjoying a large mug of steaming hot tea.

"Hello," I said forthrightly.

The poor woman almost jumped out of her skin, spilling some of her tea and almost dislodging her floppy, old-fashioned mob cap.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

Wiping the drops from her chin, she threw me a nod, saying, "Well, now. There you are. Mornin'," she flustered, "I expect you're Master David."

"That's right. And I expect you're Mrs Weaver."

Her left eyebrow shot up and a smile played at the corner of her mouth as if to indicate she'd got my measure right away. "Spot on! And I *expect* you're looking for your mum."

"Yes. Though ... that is, I haven't missed breakfast, have I?" I asked, striking a note of dejection when I noticed there wasn't even a single piece of toast on the table.

"No. You'll find it in the dining room along with your mum and sister. Miriam, is it? Back up the stairs, across the hall, third door on the left. You can't miss it, just follow your nose."

I liked her immediately but was more concerned with finding fuel rather than instigating a getting-to-know-you-conversation at this point in time. "Thanks, Mrs Weaver." I threw her what I hoped was one of my best smiles, turned on my heel and hastily clambered back up

the stairs, my acute hunger being my immediate concern. Only when that was sated could I begin to take stock and promote alliances. It could be one way to satisfy my curiosity.

I entered the dining room slightly out of breath and marched over to the long dark-oak refractory table, situated smack in the middle of the room, my eyes darting over the startling white tablecloth, covered only in a few measly crumbs, which I thought must be the remnants of breakfast.

“Is there anything left?” I asked, acute disappointment evident in my tone.

“*Good morning*, David. Over there, on the sideboard,” Mother replied sarcastically, pointing over my shoulder with a jutting finger.

I spun around to see a sideboard that seemed to stretch half the length of the wall, covered with a seemingly endless plethora of covered dishes. *Silver? Goodness*, I thought, *our ship’s come in at last*. I didn’t waste a moment and peeped under all the lids, one after another. When I saw the array of food on offer I let out a whoop of glee, thinking I must be hallucinating. I snatched up a plate and filled it with scrambled eggs, bacon, sausages, tomatoes and some sort of fried potato patty – hash browns, I was informed on enquiry. After depositing my feast on the table I dashed back to the sideboard for toast to complete it.

“I hope you’re going to eat all that!”

“Don’t worry, I will. I’m so hungry I could eat a manky horse.”

“Mama,” piped up Miriam, “are you really going to let him stuff himself like that?”

In response, Mother just rolled her eyes and sighed, and then turned her gaze to a set of French windows and the expansive view of the garden beyond.

“Mind your own business, Miriam,” I mumbled, my jaw already working.

“Piggy, pig, pig,” she retorted, sticking her nose in the air.

Only a few minutes later as I buttered my toast, I casually asked, “Are you going to tell us why we don’t have Father’s surname, Mother?” I leaned across the table, reaching for what looked like a bowl of strawberry jam. *Scrumptious!* This was a banquet fit for a king.

“Oh, David. Please!” she snapped back, surreptitiously jerking her head at Miriam.

I nodded in understanding, but then broached the second question on my mental list. “You seem to know your way around this house. How is that? I mean, who does it belong to?”

“It belongs to my family. I grew up in this house.”

“Really?” I gasped, inadvertently shooting crumbs out of my mouth. “What family? You never mentioned anything about relations. Why? Did you fall out with them?”

“These questions shouldn’t concern you, right now,” she bristled. “Suffice to say we’re safe – for the time being, anyway.”

“Are we rich now, Mama?” Miriam asked, smiling broadly.

“Hardly!” Mother’s expression turned dark. Then she sighed deeply and pushed back her chair. Taking hold of Miriam’s hand, she helped her off the chair, saying to me, “When you’ve finished eating I want you to go back to your room and put away your things. And mind you unpack properly. After that, I suggest you get some fresh air and explore the grounds a little. But you’re not to bother anyone. Is that clear?” Not waiting for an answer, she threw me a decisive nod and hurriedly left the table, pulling Miriam along with her towards the door – thus avoiding any further discussion.

So much for my prowess at solving mysteries, I thought, feeling a little frustrated. Thwarted for the moment, I shrugged abstractly and then consoled myself with another mouthful of the deliciously sticky strawberry jam.

* * *

Unsure of the size of the grounds and precisely what I was supposed to do in them – besides look – I went searching for Stiles. I found him on the same floor as the dining room in what I assumed was the parlour – one of several reception rooms, I later learned – chatting to a young woman who was introduced to me as Bessie Crawford, the daily help.

“Master David will be staying with us for the foreseeable future. There’ll be an additional three rooms and bathrooms in the right wing to do now, Bessie. Don’t worry,” he urged, raising his hand to still what was undoubtedly an objection to the extra work, “I’ll have a word with Miss Gertrude about hiring someone to share your workload. Though it’s almost impossible to get staff nowadays. Now then, young man,” he said, laying a hand on my shoulder and manoeuvring me away from Bessie, “what can I do for you?”

“Mother says I’m to go out and explore the grounds (I almost tripped up and said ‘go out and play’) but I’m not sure where they begin and end. I don’t want to be accused of trespassing on my first day.”

Stiles gave a hearty guffaw, and said, “There’s not much danger of that. The gardens and rest of the grounds are quite extensive, you know. And the entire estate is enclosed by a ten-foot wall. Well, now, it all depends on what your preference is, I suppose. Are you interested in horticulture, animals, dangerous trees for climbing or water?” He smirked knowingly.

Water! The nearest I’d come to water was the dirty-looking canal at the back of the warehouses on the edge of town, which was highly polluted from the waste products of local factories. But there was also that time when Father had robbed his paltry savings – much to Mother’s horror – and taken us all on a train trip one Sunday. We had spent a wonderful day on the river, messing about and getting our clothes wet without Mother spoiling it with her usual rancour. We’d been in a rowboat for hours, and the day had been rounded off by a *real* meal in a *real* restaurant instead of the local chippy before returning home exhausted but happy.

“Water,” I echoed with what must have been a wistful look in my eye. “I don’t suppose there’s a rowboat, is there? I’m quite an experienced rower,” I fibbed. “My father taught me.”

“I believe there’s several. But be careful,” he added, as if suspecting I might be exaggerating my boatmanship. “It’s not really boating weather. The lake might be frozen. But there’s no harm in taking a look.”

Once downstairs, he led me to yet another set of French windows, unlocked them and indicated for me to follow him. We emerged onto a paved area of clean plain slabs with potted shrubbery and not a rotten leaf in sight.

“Hop over there,” he said, pointing to the low brick wall. “At the bottom of this lawn you’ll find a path. Follow it round to your right until you come to the folly. Right opposite that, the path splits. Take the one to your left and keep going till you reach the boathouse. Lunch is at twelve-thirty sharp. Don’t be late or you’ll end up in Mrs Weaver’s bad books.”

With a throw-away wave he turned on his heel to go back indoors.

“Oh, Stiles. Er, Mr Stiles –”

“Just Stiles,” he said, halting in his tracks.

“Right. I wonder, would you mind telling me who Gertrude is, please?”

“Miss Gertrude is the owner of Ambrose House, my employer and, I believe, your grandmother,” he replied matter-of-factly, his expression giving nothing away.

Attempting to conceal my shock, I nodded tightly, turned away and hopped over the wall, calling my thanks for his help. *I have a grandmother!* With a sudden tremor of excitement running through my fingers, I mimicked his casual wave and didn’t look back to see if he was watching my abrupt departure.

I didn’t know what a folly was. I knew what the word meant – foolhardy, reckless – but it sounded as if Stiles was referring to a thing, an object.

Gertrude is my grandmother.

I made a mental note to find out what a *folly* was.

Gertrude never sees anyone.

As I kicked my heels along the narrow path, it proved impossible to push aside my intense curiosity about the Monteforts and their mysterious intrigues. I couldn't understand why we – Miriam and I, that is – had been kept in ignorance of my mother's family. And if Mother was going to avoid enlightening me it was going to be difficult to find someone who would. Nevertheless, by hook or by crook, I was determined to learn as much as I could in as short a time as possible. I'd frequently heard it said that domestic help often proved to be *terrible* gossips. I came to a fork in the path and knew that I had to take the left hand one, but took a few moments to look around before carrying on. After careful scrutiny, the only *thing* I spotted was the ruin of a tall, single battlement-type building. It was almost entirely covered in creeping evergreen ivy, giving it a look of total abandonment. The ruin sat on a small hillock and looked out of place. I hesitated, torn between reaching my ultimate destination and exploring this oddity. Curiosity won. As I walked towards the ruin, the closer I got the more mystified I became. What purpose had it served? Upon reaching it and walking its circumference, I found a narrow door which I almost missed due to an abundant growth of tightly wound lush green leaves. There didn't appear to be any windows. To gain entrance I would need a good set of hedge cutters.

I stepped back and gazed up at the turret. I was excited to think this could be the remnants of an old castle, and I was momentarily enthralled, fantasising as I cast myself in the roll of handsome prince in a bloodcurdling fairy story with a beautiful princess to rescue.

“Oi, you!”

It was my turn to jump out of my skin. I turned on my heel in the direction of the voice and saw a man at the fork in the path. He left an overburdened wheelbarrow and started towards me, brushing his hands over a well-worn heavy coat and dark-blue overalls covering

chunky legs. He had on a flat cap, which he brushed back off his forehead, revealing a bushy mop of ginger curls.

“How did you get in? Who are you?”

As he came within striking distance, I drew myself erect and said, “Master David Montefort,” in a haughty tone. I’d only been there one night and already I was adopting the everyday vernacular of the household.

“Oh. Never heard of you. Distant relative, are you?” he asked, though his tone wasn’t particularly abrasive.

“Not at all. Gertrude Montefort is my grandmother.”

For a minute or two he stayed silent, just nodding and staring at me, assessing my appearance. I wasn’t dressed to impress and was conscious of the frayed cuffs on my worn shirt, poking out of my short coat sleeves. I stuck my arms behind my back, hoping he hadn’t noticed them.

“I see. Were you looking to get into the folly, then?” he asked, jerking his head at the barely discernible door.

“Actually, I’m on my way to the boathouse. I just stopped for a closer look at the *folly*. Is it used for anything nowadays?” I ventured.

“It’s never been used for anything. It’s just for decoration. But if you climb up you get a good view all round. On a clear day you can see as far as the town.”

I was envisioning ropes and climbing gear, until he said, “I’ll clear the door for you, perhaps tomorrow. Not a lot to do in winter.” He took off his cap and shook it out, absently slapping it against his thighs before replacing it over his thick curls once more. I estimated his age to be about forty-five, but it was difficult to be sure as he was heavily muffled against the chilly weather, and his weathered face certainly wasn’t anything to go by and simply reflected a love of the outdoors.

“Thanks. Sorry, I don’t know your name.”

He suddenly smiled, and the abandonment of his severe expression completely altered his craggy face. “Emery.” He didn’t offer his hand. I wouldn’t have expected him to.

“Right. What’s your first name?”

His smile blossomed into an even broader grin, revealing a good set of clean healthy teeth. “Ted. Assistant head gardener,” he said with a hint of pride in his voice.

Had I been anywhere else and with anyone else, I would naturally have addressed him as Mr but my newfound self-importance knew no bounds, and I said, “Well, Ted, I’d best be off if I want to try out a boat ride before lunch. See you later.”

“Up to you, but it’s a bit cold for it, I’d say. I reckon you’d be better off looking for a pair of ice skates. If you can go boating in this, I’ll eat my hat.” He chuckled. Then his smile vanished, as if remembering something, and he added, “If you’re set on it, though, best watch out. Some of those boats need overhauling and they haven’t been used since the accident last summer.”

I halted in my tracks. “Accident? What accident?”

Ted nodded grimly. “Last Easter, Luther Montefort was on one of the boats. There was an unexpected fire ... nearly killed the poor blighter. It certainly left its mark on him, that’s for sure.”

As Ted recounted the events of the boat fire, I found myself looking towards the lake as I listened, wondering how such an event could happen in this pristine place. I suddenly felt terribly vulnerable.

Is nowhere safe?