

Part One

The Family

‘Love is the crowning grace of humanity, the holiest right of the soul, the golden link which binds us to duty and truth, the redeeming principle that chiefly reconciles the heart to life, and is prophetic of eternal good.’

Petrarch 1304–1374

‘Man has no greater enemy than himself.’

Petrarch 1304–1374



Chapter One

August 1939

‘There she is, the scarlet woman herself.’

‘She’s back then.’

‘Back to flaunt herself right under our noses. She’s no shame, that one.’

‘No shame at all.’

‘She’s a fast one and make no mistake.’

‘And just look what she’s done to the running of Island House, got rid of Mr Devereux’s old housekeeper, maid and cook as soon as she had her feet firmly under the table, didn’t she? Brought in her own staff too.’

‘We all know what that means. She has that Mr Devereux right where she wants him.’

‘Under her thumb,’ said three voices in unison. ‘That’s where.’

The three women watched with hostile curiosity the progress of the open-topped red sports car that had just been driven at breakneck speed into the market square of the village. With an abruptness that implied the driver had stopped on a sudden whim, the car skidded to a halt.

They continued to watch as the young woman threw open the driver’s door and leapt to her feet with a vibrant and youthful energy. In her early thirties and undeniably attractive, she was exactly the sort to turn heads. Her clothes were expensive and well cut and she carried herself with confidence and an easy grace. Tall and slender, with dark hair making a bid for freedom from beneath a silk scarf, she hooked a handbag over one of her bare arms, removed her sunglasses and entered Teal’s grocery shop.

Minutes later, she emerged into the August sunshine with a paper bag from which she pulled out a peach, biting into it with

undisguised delight. As she paused on the pavement to relish the moment, licking the juice from her painted red lips and smiling happily to herself, the three disapproving women sitting at their table in the window of the Cobbles Tea Room shook their heads and shuddered collectively.

‘Mark my words, no good will come of that one,’ said Elspeth Grainger.

‘Never does when you live in sin,’ said Ivy Swann.

‘That’s what comes of writing those dreadful books,’ said Edith Lawton. ‘All that blood and twisted thinking, it warps the mind.’

In full accord, the three women shuddered again.

Romily Temple was well acquainted with the coven of Melstead St Mary who daily occupied the best table in the Cobbles Tea Room in order to carry out their malicious brand of espionage. Not for a second did she doubt the depths to which they would go in order to establish everybody’s business, or, more particularly, the contempt in which they held her.

With a roar of engine, Romily gaily waved to the three women and, still eating the peach, drove out of the cobbled market square ringed with a topsy-turvy assortment of shops and cottages, some with thatched roofs, others with slate, all of them as neat as new pins. As she slowed her speed to turn onto the main street, she spotted Miss Gant and Miss Treadmill trudging up the road. Following a few feet behind, and as if mimicking their slightly waddling gait, was a pair of white geese, each with a green and yellow ribbon around its neck. They were as well behaved as any faithful hound trailing after its owner and were a familiar sight in the village; nobody batted an eyelid, apart from strangers.

It was a short distance to Island House, and after tossing the peach stone into the shrubbery at the entrance, Romily drove through the gates and brought her MG to a stop alongside Jack’s prized 4½-litre Bentley saloon CXF 114. They had been planning to drive it down to the French Riviera next month, but now, with all the talk of war becoming a grim reality, the holiday was unlikely to happen. She had spent the last two weeks touring Europe carrying out a series of speaking engagements about her latest book, and everything she had seen and heard, particularly in Vienna and Berlin, told her that Nazi Germany was intent on

spreading its vile roots, and by any means. War was going to happen – it wasn't a matter of *if* any more, it was *when*.

Out of the MG, and taking a moment to stare up at the beautiful house she now regarded as her home, she thought how exceedingly glad she was to be back. Then, with eager hands, she hurriedly gathered up her handbag and the small amount of luggage she had brought with her. She was about to let herself in at the front door when it was opened by her maid, Florence. The dear girl had been with her for the last four years, having come to work for Romily in London when she was just fifteen. Back then she had been a shy and timid thing who had jumped at her own shadow, but Romily had soon cured her of that. The girl's unswerving loyalty and devotion was matched only by her willingness to accept the unconventional manner in which Romily chose to live.

'How was your trip, miss, I mean, madam?' asked Florence, reaching out to take the heavier of the bags from her.

'Tiring, but successful,' Romily replied with a smile, amused at being called 'madam', a form of address she had yet to get used to. 'Is Mr Devereux at home?' she asked.

'Yes, he's in his study. He's been in there since after lunch listening to music and told me he didn't want to be disturbed, not for anything.'

Romily smiled again. 'We shall see about that. Could you ask Mrs Partridge to rustle up a sandwich for me, please? I'm ravenous. Oh, and here, have a peach, they're delicious.'

Taking her handbag and leather briefcase with her, she went upstairs to her dressing room, next door to the bedroom she shared with Jack.

Older than Romily by twenty-seven years, Jack Devereux was the first man she had truly loved, and the first man who had allowed her to be the woman she wanted to be. Most men in her experience had wanted to tame her and effectively turn her into something she wasn't – their social inferior. Invariably the very things that attracted these men in the first place – her independence and spirit of adventure – were what they set out to squash once they thought they had ownership of her.

Jack hadn't been like that. Perhaps that was because he was so much older and didn't feel threatened by her success as a writer, or the strength of her character.

They had met earlier in the spring at Brooklands, although

she had already known of him through her love of racing. Her passion for cars had come about as a result of being invited to watch her best friend's brother compete in a race. Both Romily and Sarah had enjoyed themselves so much they had immediately signed up for racing lessons, wondering why they had reached the grand age of twenty-six and never done so before. They took to it with gusto, and after buying herself a second-hand Bugatti 35C, Romily made it to the podium in her first official race. From then on there was no stopping her, or Sarah, and together they began to race in earnest, competing against each other as much as the rival drivers on the track. They had been the same at school, always trying to outdo one another. Their exploits as solo racers took them to the circuits on the Continent, and then they decided to have a go at racing in a team and were lucky enough to be selected for MG at Le Mans.

But unlike Sarah, who had unlimited funds at her disposal – the Penhaligans had made their fortune in the tea trade, going back as far as the eighteenth century – Romily was not quite so blessed. What family money there was had been largely swallowed up by her parents, who, after the Great War ended, her father having survived the trenches, threw themselves into an extravagant lifestyle. Once they'd got through their combined inheritances, they had existed mostly on fresh air and the generosity of wealthier friends as they moved from one new home to another, ricocheting between Paris, Cannes, Saint-Malo, Béziers, Deauville, Rome and Venice, and all without a care in the world as to what tomorrow would bring.

Romily's nomadic childhood came to an end when both sets of grandparents persuaded her mother and father that it was time for her to be given a more settled environment in which to grow. At the age of fourteen, she was sent to boarding school in England. Carefully chosen by her mother, it had been an unconventional school on the South Downs with a progressive headmistress who believed in teaching the girls horticulture, dressmaking, carpentry and basic mechanics. It was also where she met Sarah.

Not long after her twenty-first birthday, her parents died in a tragic boating accident in the Adriatic. It took her a long time to get over their deaths; she simply couldn't accept they were gone. When eventually the worst of her grief had passed, she promised herself that she would honour their memory by living life to the

full – as if each day might be her last – just as they had. It was a promise that made her realise that if she were to pursue her love of racing to the extent she wanted, as well as gain her pilot's licence – another expensive hobby she and Sarah had taken up – she needed a decent income, and so she seized upon the idea of writing, something she had always been good at while at school.

Her first published novel, much to her amazement, was a great hit, in the United States as well as the UK and Europe, as were the four books that had followed since. Funnily enough, writing gave her almost as big a thrill as racing or flying did; there was a freedom in it, that and an absorbing sense of control, of being solely in charge.

Fourteen months ago, when she'd met Jack at Brooklands, she had just come second in a race and had not been in the best of moods. She knew him by sight as a driver of some repute in his younger days, and for being a notorious womaniser, so when he came over to congratulate her on driving a good race, she had been less than gracious. 'But I finished second,' she'd replied, snatching off her gloves furiously.

'It's not always about the winning,' he'd said.

'The hell it isn't!' she'd declared.

He'd thrown his head back and laughed. 'Good for you! It's not a cliché I subscribe to either.'

'So why did you say it?'

'To see how you'd react. Now I'm wondering how you'd react if I asked you out for dinner.'

'Try me.'

Which he did. There then followed what could only be described as a whirlwind romance that led to Romily experiencing love – true love, the kind that made her want to sing from the rooftops – for the first time. No matter that she was thirty-two and Jack was nearing his sixtieth birthday, and that he had grown-up children not much younger than herself. None of that mattered. All that counted was the love she felt for him and the sheer joy she experienced whenever they were together. More than a year on and she still felt exactly the same way about him. She had only to think of him and her pulse quickened.

Going over to the largest of the built-in wardrobes and opening it, Romily pushed aside a row of dresses. She turned the dial on the safe door, and when it opened with a soft clunk, she took out

two velvet pouches from her handbag; they contained diamond necklaces, ruby earrings, a collection of diamond and emerald rings and a pearl and diamond brooch that the owner had said meant more to her in sentimental terms than any monetary value.

From her leather briefcase she withdrew a file containing the lecture notes she had used during her book tour. At the back of her notes was an A4 buff-coloured envelope; feeling she ought to check that the contents hadn't come to any harm, she opened it and stared in wonder at the simple sketch of a young girl reading in the light of a candle. The signature of the artist was 'Rembrandt'. Handling the drawing as though it were as fragile as a newborn baby, Romily very carefully slipped it back inside the envelope and placed it with equal care in the safe. The picture had belonged to an Austrian family, having been treasured by several generations. Its clandestine journey with Romily across Europe to this small village in rural Suffolk had all the hallmarks of a gripping opening to a novel. Who knew, maybe one day Romily might write it.

Her hand poised to close the safe door, she had a sudden change of mind, and reached further in, right to the back to where a small black ring box lay. Pushing the lid up, she smiled at the sight of the three rings nestling companionably together. Two were simple platinum wedding bands; the other was an engagement ring with a central rectangular emerald-cut 2.2-carat diamond and four rectangular baguette-cut diamonds either side. Jack had surprised her with the ring, and a proposal, shortly before she departed for her book tour.

At the time, and on an impulse, Romily had suggested they marry straight away, and in secret. The ceremony had taken place at Kensington Registry Office; their witnesses were Jack's oldest and most trusted friend, Roddy Fitzwilliam, and Florence. Along with Mrs Partridge, they alone knew that Jack and Romily were now a respectably married couple and that officially she was Mrs Romily Devereux-Temple. For the sheer hell of it, she was tempted to continue with the pretence; she enjoyed fooling people, particularly the coven, who had her painted as a scarlet woman.

She put the box of rings back in the safe, closed the door and went through to the bathroom to freshen up before going down for something to eat, and to stir Jack from his lair in his study. Knowing how eager he would be to hear how she had got on

with her mission, she was surprised he hadn't come to seek her out. Perhaps he had fallen asleep after eating an excellent lunch prepared by Mrs Partridge, she thought. She would pull his leg if he had. 'You have a young wife to stay awake for now,' she would tease him. 'You're not allowed to grow old and fall asleep in your favourite armchair.'

She took the stairs swiftly, her spirits high. She was quietly proud of herself for her smuggling exploits and wanted to regale Jack with how she had kept her nerve throughout the train journey from Vienna to Holland, and then on the boat to Harwich, all the while hiding a collection of priceless heirlooms in her luggage. The treasures belonged to the Friedbergs, a Jewish family who were long-time friends of the Penhaligans and were fearful of what Nazi Germany might do next. Sarah had offered to bring them to safety, but after falling off a horse and breaking an ankle, she had enlisted Romily's help.

Romily had had no qualms about carrying out the commission; after all, she was perfect for the task – who would suspect Romily Temple, a respected English novelist, of such a thing? On her return this morning, as soon as she had reached London and her flat overlooking Regent's Park, she had telephoned Sarah with the good news that all was well and she was on her way to Suffolk, where the Friedberg treasures would be kept until Sarah had organised a security box at the bank.

At the bottom of the stairs, she hesitated. Her rumbling stomach urged her to go to the kitchen and find what Mrs Partridge had for her to eat, but her heart compelled her to go to the study and see Jack.

He was sitting with his back to her when she pushed open the study door, looking out towards the garden. With its book-lined walls, comfortable armchairs covered in soft chestnut-brown leather, and French doors that led onto a small terrace, it was his favourite room in the house.

'Hello, darling,' she said, 'I'm home.'

When he didn't respond, and noticing that the gramophone player had reached the end of the record and the needle was stuck, she smiled. So he *had* nodded off, had he? Well, she would wake him with a kiss.

But when she placed her lips against his cheek, she let out a cry of shock.