

Rose Snow

Ein Augenblick für immer

(A Moment for Eternity)

The first book of The Truth of Lies

The Legend of Green Manor

The landscape of Cornwall has a particular magic to it. This magic is also to be found in countless myths, and for many people Cornwall is the most fascinating and beautiful county of England. Any visitor will be thrilled by its lush green hills, steep cliffs and picturesque bays, and the locals go so far as to claim that those who look carefully will see even more.

And indeed you have only to wander over the deserted moors to understand why in many places here there are whispers of the Otherworld. It often seems that there is only a thin veil of mist between our modern world and the mystical secrets of the past. Besides the famous haunted castles like Pendennis and Pengersick, there are many forgotten places where the wailing of lost souls may be heard and their presence felt.

Green Manor is one such place, an old, ivy-covered manor house set amidst unspoiled nature near to the coastal cliffs. Its mighty walls have defied the passing years and for all that time, it is said, an unquiet figure in a green cloak has walked abroad. Legend has it that this is the murdered sweetheart of Count Winston Winterly, who inherited Green Manor from his grandmother over three hundred years ago and breathed new life into it by making various changes and modernisations to the building.

To this day, Winston Winterly's descendants live in Green Manor, and his unfortunate sweetheart is still reputed to roam around the extensive gardens by night. But it might equally be the ghost of Sir Winston himself, haunting the estate in his green cloak as he searches for his beloved.

"On the trail of Cornwall's undiscovered secrets" by Lewis Campbell, March 2017

Chapter 1

‘Is it far?’ I asked the old taxi driver in his cap as he steered his yellow car along the coast road at a rate which made my stomach turn over. The steeply plunging cliffs on our left merged into a single grey blur from the speed and I desperately clutched on to the back seat.

‘Another twenty minutes, Miss, or maybe thirty,’ he answered, and cleared his throat. ‘Is this your first time here?’

I shook my head and tried to avoid the thought that, with the way he was driving, it would probably be my last. According to the statistics, 7.3 people die for every billion kilometres travelled by road, which ought to have reassured me but at that moment didn’t. Even the fact that yellow taxis cause fewer accidents than black ones would be of little help if the car got into a skid on the wet road and plunged over the cliff. The one ray of light was that the policemen would probably find my body more easily in the yellow wreck.

‘You’ve found yourself a pretty spot for your holiday,’ the driver remarked, smiling at me in the rear-view mirror.

‘Not a holiday, it’s my exchange year.’ I smiled back quickly so that he could concentrate on the road again.

‘Exchange year, even better,’ he grunted. ‘Then you’ll have more time to take a look at our lovely Cornwall. There’s a lot to do here, young lady. St Michael’s Mount or St Ives are definitely worth a trip.’ He nodded and raised his bushy eyebrows to emphasise the point.

‘That’s a lot of saints you have here.’ I looked out through the window. The rain was lashing down on the hilly landscape and thick grey clouds were sweeping across the sky, which was probably the reason there wasn’t a soul to be seen anywhere.

The driver laughed. ‘That’s true, we have. But not everyone who looks like a saint is one. You’re a pretty girl, young lady – watch out for the boys, you can’t trust a word they say.’

‘I’ll keep well away from them,’ I promised and the taxi driver nodded contentedly at my decision.

After the matter with Jasper, I’d had more than enough of boys, and was glad of the change of scene ahead of me.

It was only on my eighteenth birthday scarcely two weeks before that I’d decided to spend an exchange year in England after all. And as all the application deadlines had already passed, my mother had set everything in motion and personally made all the phone calls necessary to enable me to live with my uncle, Edgar Beaufort, for a year and finish my education at the private school here. My father hadn’t been particularly enthusiastic about

the idea. I had always had a certain yearning for the land of my ancestors, one which my father had stubbornly ignored, since his relationship with his English family was not a particularly good one. In the end, though, he had given in to my mother's charm.

'You can also go walking through the unspoiled scenery of Dartmoor,' suggested the taxi driver, as he steered the car into a tight bend and my body drifted slightly to the left. 'And you should definitely take a trip to Pengersick Castle or the stone circles – Cornwall's not only really pretty but very mysterious as well.' His voice took on an eerie tone as if one of the phantoms of legend might appear at the roadside at any moment.

'I think I'd rather concentrate on my schoolwork,' I explained kindly, because, like my father, I didn't think much of myths and legends. I believed in facts and logical explanations, and in things I could actually see. And I thought that my year in England would be perfect preparation for Oxford. Uncle Edgar's remote cottage would give me the peace and quiet I needed to study for the entrance exams.

The taxi driver looked at me in the rear-view mirror again. 'It's all very well to take school seriously. But don't forget you can't learn everything there. *Life* is the best school of all.'

I nodded absentmindedly and thought about how my life would go in the coming year. What would living with Uncle Edgar be like? Was he still the good-natured man I remembered?

I had been unable to attend the funeral of his wife – my Aunt Catherine – a few years earlier because I had caught flu. Before that I had seen Aunt Catherine only once, when we had spent the summer in Cornwall. My father rarely spoke about his sister, and that hadn't changed after her death. My mother had once mentioned that even as children they had not had a particularly good relationship and that my father had turned his back on England and his sister as soon as possible after leaving school.

'Yes indeed, life is the best school,' my driver repeated thoughtfully, and continued racing along the narrow coast road far too fast.

I sank back in my seat and tried to avoid the sight of the craggy grey cliffs on my left. Although it was only early afternoon, it was growing increasingly dark outside. The rain beat incessantly on the taxi roof and somewhere lightning flashed across the sky, followed by a deafening crack. Ahead of us, the road wound its way through the wild landscape and I couldn't help thinking of my cousins Blake and Preston who had already finished school the year before. Although I could barely remember them, we obviously had at least one thing in common: we all felt the lure of distant places. But while I had decided in favour of the cold, rainy weather of England the pair of them were off globe-trotting, according to my mother. At least this way I had no need to worry that my uncle's snug cottage would be too cramped for the four of us.

The sudden shriek of the brakes tore me from my thoughts and I gasped as a violent jolt catapulted me forwards. Instinctively clutching on to the front seat, I tried to understand what had just happened.

The taxi had come to an abrupt stop on the narrow country road.

‘Damn!’ I heard the driver say angrily, as he looked out in disbelief to where billows of smoke were pouring from under the bonnet. ‘Not again.’ He slammed the steering wheel with the flat of his hand and took several deep breaths before turning round to me. ‘I’m sorry, young lady, it seems Hank didn’t take a close enough look under my Dorothy’s bonnet.’

I looked at him blankly.

‘Hank’s my mechanic and Dorothy’s my old lady.’

‘You mean the taxi?’

The old man nodded and took a rag out of the glove compartment. ‘I’ll just see how bad it is this time.’ Grumpily turning up the collar of his dark jacket, he got out and went a few steps round the car in the lashing rain.

I sank back into my seat with a sigh.

Engine trouble.

This was a good start to my exchange year in Cornwall. Tomorrow was my first day at private school, and I just hoped I’d reach my uncle’s cottage by then.

Outside the storm was raging, and gusty winds were tearing at the roadside bushes. The weather was not exactly a welcome gift, any more than the resigned look on my driver’s face as he leaned over the open bonnet. Opening the car door, I got out as well.

‘Can I do anything to help?’ I cried above the roaring.

The taxi driver pressed his lips together. ‘If you’ve a new engine in your luggage, yes please – otherwise, no. My wife’s going to have my guts for garters.’

Shivering I took a few steps towards him. ‘Can we call a breakdown truck?’

‘We’ll have to, but it’ll take time, young lady.’

‘How long?’ The wind was blowing my long hair into my face and the raindrops lashing my body.

The old man shrugged. ‘He’ll be here in three hours, if we’re lucky. We’re quite a long way out here and on Sundays there’s only the emergency service from Newtown.’

‘Three hours?’ Discouraged, I wrapped my arms round my chest and looked out over the romantic wild landscape disappearing behind the rain. By now the sky was almost black and

clouds gathered menacingly overhead. On my right the wind swept furiously over the grassy hills and on the left stretched a line of imposing cliffs. Far beneath, the waves crashed on to the coast and in the distance I could make out a fishing village huddled against the crags for protection.

The taxi driver closed the bonnet using his rag and wiped his hands on his dark trousers before taking his mobile out of his jacket pocket. 'No network. Not surprising in this weather.'

I glanced at my smartphone as well, only to discover I had no reception either.

The old man raised his eyebrows in a way that spoke volumes. 'Then we'll have to wait till the storm goes over – or someone comes past.'

'And how long might that be?' I asked, though I didn't really want to know. We were standing in the middle of nowhere and it seemed an eternity since any car had come from the opposite direction.

'A few hours,' he replied vaguely.

The prospect of spending *a few hours* in the taxi didn't exactly thrill me.

'What about that fishing village behind there?' I pointed to the little place beside the cliffs, whose brown roofs were weather-beaten and covered in moss.

'That's Portfall,' the driver explained.

'Maybe we should try to get help there,' I suggested, but the old man rejected that at once. 'I can't leave Dorothy here on her own.'

I looked at the smoking car bonnet. 'But no one will steal Dorothy. In this weather nobody's going to come past anyway.'

He frowned. 'You never know.'

'Then I'll go,' I said decisively, not wanting to sit out the storm for hours then possibly wait another age for a breakdown truck. 'Does the road lead directly into the village?'

'It does.' The taxi driver gave a slight cough. 'All on your own, though, I can't allow that, young lady'

'But it's only a short walk,' I objected, looking down the coast road which seemed to wind all the way to Portfall.

'When *you* walk, yes, probably,' growled the driver, rubbing his left thigh with his hand. Getting in at the airport I'd already noticed he slightly dragged one leg.

'I'll leave the luggage with you and get going.' I nodded once more and strode off.

There was no let-up in the rain, not that it mattered by now since my jeans and trainers were already soaked through in any case. Only my jacket offered a little protection against the stormy weather. My dripping wet hair was plastered to my head and raindrops streamed down my face as I followed the twists and turns of the narrow road down into the fishing village.

I didn't, however, seem to be getting much nearer to the village in the next few minutes. The wind blew through my clothing and I was shivering all over. All I wanted now was to be by the fire in the little cottage. Just then I heard the roar of an engine behind me and hoped it was a car that would give me a lift to Portfall.

I wheeled round and saw someone on a motorbike standing behind me. The bike was gleaming black and even its driver was dressed entirely in black. He pushed the visor on his helmet up and I couldn't help gasping when I looked into his eyes. Never in my life had I seen eyes like that. They were such a piercing blue that I felt as if I were diving into a huge radiant ocean. My heart missed a beat and suddenly I was no longer aware of the rain and driving wind.

'Nasty day for a stroll,' observed the motorcyclist in a husky voice.

I pushed a strand of hair out of my face. 'My taxi's broken down.'

'You don't look like a taxi driver.'

I took a deep breath. 'The taxi which I took has broken down.'

'Took? So you nicked it?' The irony in his voice was unmistakable.

'Exactly. I nicked the taxi, wrote it off and then decided to go for a romantic walk in the rain.' I shook my head in irritation. I couldn't bear the guy treating me like an idiot.

Only his shining blue eyes stood out under his helmet while the rest of his face was hidden.

'You seem to be making nothing but bad decisions today.'

'Yes? Then it's fitting that I'm here talking to you now.'

'If you say so.' He slammed his visor down before starting his motorbike again.

'That's it then? You exchange a few sentences with me then leave me standing.' I looked at him, shaking my head. 'So that's an example of famous English manners, is it? Without waiting for an answer I turned and continued on my way towards Portfall.'

The guy carried on by bike but didn't race off, just went slowly along beside me. 'And that's an example of famous German manners?' he mocked.

I wrinkled my brow and looked at him in confusion. Since I'd grown up bilingual I really had no German accent he could have noticed.

'How can you tell I'm German?'

He stopped his motorbike again and switched off the engine. ‘I just can. Here, put this on,’ he ordered, pulling off his helmet.

I gulped when I saw his face for the first time. He had a slim nose, dark stubble and a strong chin, but his lips looked so soft I couldn’t help wondering what it would feel like to be kissed by him.

Suddenly I noticed with embarrassment that I was just staring at him while he looked disparagingly at me.

‘Why should I put that on?’ I asked hurriedly.

He pushed his damp hair out of his face. It was slightly longer at the front and exactly the same colour as his biking leathers. ‘I thought even in your country people would know what a helmet’s for.’

‘Very funny.’

He took a deep breath and my eyes automatically slid down to his leather jacket, stretched taut over his sculpted chest.

‘You should put the helmet on so I can take you to Portfall. You do want to go there, don’t you?’ He raised one dark eyebrow. ‘And you obviously won’t get there in one piece by yourself.’

I snorted. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

He shifted slightly on the gleaming black machine with rain dripping from it. ‘A motor cyclist you don’t know meets you on a deserted road and speaks to you, and you complain that he’s not offering to help you?’

‘What should I say, in your opinion?’ I replied, annoyed. ‘Thanks for leaving me standing in the rain?’

‘You shouldn’t say anything. Did it even cross your mind I could be an axe murderer?’

I looked at him in disbelief, this was absurd. ‘An axe murderer isn’t going to say straight out that he’s an axe murderer.’

The left-hand corner of his mouth twitched. ‘Maybe I’m a particularly intelligent axe murderer who knows exactly how to manipulate you.’

I narrowed my eyes. ‘Sorry, but you don’t look that intelligent. More like someone who likes playing games.’

He examined me intently, and for a moment I thought I could see a flicker of something like interest in him. ‘Then tell me what sort of game that would be. Pick a soaking wet girl up from the road?’

‘More like: Find a soaking wet girl and drive her insane.’

He gave me a serious look and then threw me the helmet which, in my surprise, I caught.

‘Not a bad idea. But first put the helmet on.’

I turned the black motorbike helmet round in my hands, as if challenging him. ‘Why? So I don’t have so much as a scratch on me when you do away with me with your axe?’

‘Precisely. Well – are you getting on, or do you want to go on standing around here in the rain?’ By now his deep voice sounded quite impatient.

‘And you?’

‘What about me?’

I took a deep breath. ‘If I put the helmet on, you won’t have one anymore.’

‘I don’t need one.’

‘But what if you have a crash?’

‘I won’t have a crash. Now put the damn helmet on or you’ll be walking.’ The expression on his face showed he meant it, and as I was shivering all over I decided to put the helmet on this time.

Pulling the helmet over my wet hair without a word, I climbed on to the motorbike behind him. Of course the helmet was much too big but I didn’t let on.

‘Put your arms round me.’

Rather diffidently, I put my arms round his middle and wondered whether this was really a good idea.

‘Tighter,’ the guy demanded over his shoulder. ‘And slide closer to me, otherwise you’ll fall off at the first bend.’

I hesitated briefly. I didn’t like the way he was ordering me about but it was probably better than landing in the ditch. I resolutely moved a bit closer to him and wrapped my arms more tightly round his waist.

‘Haven’t you ever done this before?’ he asked harshly. Lightning flashed across the darkened sky, followed by the deafening noise of the thunder. ‘Tighter still.’

I gulped and moved my hips as close to him as I could before pressing my upper body against his back.

‘That’ll do,’ I heard him say. Then he started up his bike with a loud roar. ‘And pull down your visor.’

I obeyed his instruction and the already murky surroundings became even darker. The next moment the guy accelerated and the bike suddenly shot forwards. I slid backwards for a moment and, shocked, clutched him tightly. He raced off up the road at a speed which made my earlier taxi ride seem like a Sunday stroll. Breathlessly I wrapped my arms more tightly round his body and dug my fingers into the damp material of his leather jacket. I could feel his abdominal muscles beneath my hands and noticed that my heart immediately began to beat faster. I tried to tell myself it was only the result of the breakneck speed but a little voice whispered to me that this was nonsense.

Despite the driving wind and rain in our faces, the guy handled his bike with impressive safety. He didn't seem in the least bit bothered by the storm and gradually I relaxed. Although my visor was down I was aware of his smell, clinging to him and his things. It reminded me of a mixture of wind and ocean with a dark note, and what I'd really have liked to do was bury my nose deep in his leather jacket to inhale the smell. Fortunately we reached Portfall before I could dwell on this embarrassing idea for too long. The motor bike slowed down and the guy steered it through the narrow streets of the fishing village to the harbour. We hadn't met a single person the whole way here, and only a few boats were tossing on the foaming water which beat loudly against the jetty. The raging wind brought the smell of the ocean and seaweed with it, and I held my breath for a moment as I looked out over the storm-whipped sea.

Beside the weather-beaten quay wall stood a tiny house, the plaster on its façade already crumbling. The guy stopped his bike in front of it and cut the engine.

'We're there. You can let go of me.'

I slid back a little, feeling annoyed, before climbing off the bike and taking off the helmet. 'Thanks, I'm lucky I'm still alive.'

The corner of his mouth twitched. 'I went especially slowly.'

I smiled humourlessly. 'I wouldn't like to see 'fast' then.'

Thrusting the helmet into his hand, I took a few steps towards the dilapidated building we'd stopped outside. It seemed to be a pub, built so close to the quayside that I could feel the spray on my face. I walked determinedly to the door of the pub, hoping there would be a landline so I could call a breakdown truck. There was no light on behind the tinted windows, it was true, but I wasn't going to be discouraged by that. I put my hand on the door handle and tried to open the door but it was locked. Irritated, I rattled it again then turned to my companion who was still sitting on the bike, watching me.

His incredibly blue eyes sparkled provocatively. 'Problems?'

Chapter 2

I let go of the door handle again. ‘You *knew* the pub was closed, didn’t you?’

He raised a mocking eyebrow. ‘Do I look like someone who’s learned the opening times by heart?’

I took a step towards him and pulled my mobile out of my damp jeans. ‘You look like someone who’d enjoy this at any rate.’

He gave a quick grin and I noted reluctantly that my stomach gave a little skip when I saw the flash of his white teeth. I hurriedly dropped my gaze to my screen and looked to see whether I had reception here. As before, however, my phone showed no bars.

‘What do you propose to do now?’ The guy pushed his wet hair off his forehead and leaned back casually against his motorbike.

‘No idea. Maybe knock at every door here until someone answers and helps me call a breakdown truck?’

‘You’re sure you want to go knocking at strangers’ doors like that? Just think of the more or less intelligent axe murderers.’

I pocketed the mobile again and scowled at him. ‘Statistically, it seems to me rather unlikely that there are so many axe murderers going around here.’

‘OK, as you wish.’ He folded his arms across his chest, not appearing the least bit worried that rain was running down him, completely drenching his gear.

I took a deep breath. ‘And what do you suggest?’ His arrogant manner was gradually getting on my nerves – but it annoyed me even more that my gaze kept being drawn to his blue eyes.

‘You could ask *me* to call a breakdown truck.’

‘You’ve got reception here?’ I asked doubtfully. I’d assumed the storm had knocked out all the networks.

He looked at me impassively. ‘Call it...magic.’

I snorted. ‘Very funny.’

Just then his mobile did indeed ring and he got off his bike. ‘Wait here.’ He took a few steps towards the edge of the quay where the reception was obviously better.

I watched him and couldn’t bear his decisive manner any more than the fact that he clearly got pleasure from leading me up the garden path. It was still pouring and he was holding his phone to his ear, staring out at the sea. Since I had no wish to wait here doing nothing, I

strode over to the harbour as well and took out my mobile. This time there was one bar on the reception indicator, which promptly disappeared again however. The road went right up to the sea and at the weathered quayside there was around a three-metre vertical drop with no parapet. I tried holding the phone out in all directions and grinned in triumph when the bars reappeared; all I had to do was hold the mobile far enough over the sea for it to work.

The guy was standing about two metres away with his back to me, but with the din the waves were making as they crashed against the seaweed covered wall I could barely make out his words. I had no intention of waiting for him to help me anyway. Instead I switched the speaker on and dialled the number for English information. It took a moment before I heard a soft click and shortly afterwards a woman's voice answered.

'Hello, can you hear me?' I cried against the wind. The next moment the connection was lost. I stifled a curse and carefully took another step closer to the edge of the quayside, bracing myself against the gusts of wind. Then I dialled Information again. Just as I heard ringing, the wind changed direction very suddenly and I cried out in fright as a storm gust caught me in the back. Arms flailing wildly, I was attempting to keep my balance when a strong arm came from the side to go round my waist, and I felt myself pulled in against the motorcyclist's chest.

I dropped my mobile in shock and instinctively clung on to the shoulders of my rescuer who swore and tugged me a few steps back to the street. He was holding my body so tightly against his that I could feel every muscle beneath his jacket.

'Damn it, what were you doing? Do you want to kill yourself?' he barked at me and his deep blue eyes drilled into mine. Little flashes of light appeared to be flickering in his eyes and for a moment I was incapable of answering because it felt as if the air around us was beginning to crackle and all the tiny hairs on my skin stand on end. The sensation was so powerful that the raging storm receded entirely into the background. I could hear neither the wind howling nor the waves crashing – the only thing I was aware of was my violently beating heart.

For several seconds we stared at each other. His eyes seemed to glow from within and I had a feeling of being drawn into them, until a lightning bolt flashed across the sky, closely followed by a mighty clap of thunder.

The deafening crash broke the strange spell and breathlessly I stumbled back a step. My whole body was tingling and the guy seemed equally bewildered for an instant before he recovered himself. Then he turned away to pick up my phone which was lying on the ground at the edge of the quay.

I watched him in utter confusion. What had just happened? What were those lights I had seen in his eyes? I told myself off with a frown. His eyes couldn't glow; all that adrenalin in my body had probably just altered my perception.

At that moment he came back with my mobile and held it out to me, stony faced. 'Here,' he growled. 'It seems there's no need for an axe murderer to kill you – you can manage that all by yourself.'

His brusque manner strangled my gratitude and I took the phone with trembling hands. 'I wasn't trying to kill myself.'

'There's already been one woman who drowned when she plunged into the sea at this same place. It's said that to this day her ghost wanders through Portfall on stormy nights.'

I raised my head defiantly. 'Firstly, there are no ghosts and secondly I'm a good swimmer.'

'Not in this weather,' he barked, going over to his motorbike.

His bad mood was contagious. 'You needn't be so annoyed!' I cried. 'I never asked you to look after me.'

'Would you have preferred me to stand by and watch you plummet to your death?'

I bit my lip to stop myself answering back and letting the situation escalate even more. Besides, he wasn't entirely wrong. I had been careless and almost ended up in the water.

'I told my mate on the phone the location of the taxi,' he went on coolly. 'The breakdown truck will be there in about an hour. I'll take you back over there if you like.'

We were still completely alone in the street. An old awning was flapping noisily as a squall caught it, and I hugged myself, shivering. When he noticed how much I was trembling in my thin jacket, his expression softened for a moment. 'Or I can take you straight to wherever it is you need to go.'

At first I was about to object but by now I was so cold that the prospect of a warm fire in the cottage was enough to make me swallow my pride. In silence I pulled out the piece of paper with the address and handed it to him. 'The taxi driver thought we weren't too far away, before,' I murmured and tried not to look so deeply into his mesmerizing eyes.

He glanced briefly at the paper and nodded. 'Climb on.'

I followed him to his motorbike and felt my legs trembling slightly as I climbed on behind him. I put the helmet on, slid up close to him and put my arms tightly round his upper body.

'Well, you do learn, that's something,' he said dryly, before he started the engine and sped off.

We followed the road uphill towards the south and then drove about ten minutes inland, past impressive gardens, their colours admittedly fading in the dim stormy light. By now it had grown even darker; the bike's headlights were reflected in the pouring rain, making the fat raindrops glimmer.

Once we had turned off on to a gravel lane, the guy stopped the motorbike in front of an imposing double set of brass gates. Two roaring stone lions flanked the entrance and I wondered why he had come here.

I lifted my visor in irritation. ‘Why have we stopped?’

‘This is the address you showed me.’

I shook my head and squinted at the impressive manor house I could see behind the fence, totally different from my uncle’s cottage.

‘No, this is the wrong place.’ I took off the helmet.’ ‘That is definitely not my uncle’s house.’ Although my memories of my one visit to Uncle Edgar’s and Aunt Catherine’s ten years ago were not exactly fresh, I could still remember my parents and I had spent the night in a little cottage beside the sea and not at this grand residence.

‘Then you’ll have to ring at the door and enquire.’

Even before I had time to answer he climbed off the bike, went up to the gate and flung it open.

‘You can’t just go on to a stranger’s land like that!’ I shouted frantically, following him up the gently illuminated gravel drive winding up to the manor house. He walked very fast and I had almost to run to keep up with him.

The guy turned to me and the gaze from his blue eyes struck me like lightning. ‘But I can, June, as you see.’

I stopped short, watching him march confidently up to the front door. My pulse rate shot up, even before I fully knew why. ‘How do you know my name?’ I shouted after him in bewilderment.

‘The ghosts told me,’ he tossed back.

I watched anxiously as a few steps in front of me he rang the brass bell, and a second later the door was opened. A man appeared, corresponding in every detail to the stereotype of a butler and perfectly in keeping with this manor house. He was tall and slim, with salt and pepper hair and wise eyes which examined me briefly before fixing on the motorbike. ‘Good evening, Mr Beaumont,’ said the elderly man in a tail coat then, with a friendly nod to me, ‘Good evening, Miss Mansfield.’

‘Good evening,’ I replied, taken aback, and glanced at the guy beside me in disbelief. The butler had just addressed him as Mister Beaumont – did that mean he was one of my cousins? Thoughts flew through my mind as I tried to grasp the situation. And if so, did that then mean I really *was* on my uncle’s estate?

‘Hello, Wilfred,’ said the guy in black beside me, much more friendly than before, and the butler stepped aside to let him in.

I followed him hesitantly into an enormous entrance hall, worlds apart from the small cottage I remembered.

‘What *is* this?’ I asked, feeling overwhelmed as my eyes were drawn to the ceiling-high stained-glass windows in the wood-panelled walls. A wide staircase carpeted in red led up to the first floor and there was a smell of beeswax as if everything here had recently been polished to a shine.

‘My home,’ answered the guy curtly, who, it appeared, really *was* one of my cousins.

Bewildered, I tried to reconcile the way he looked today with my vague memories of the ten-year old boys back then, but failed miserably.

The butler shut the heavy front door behind us.

‘Mr Beaufort is waiting for you in the drawing room. Follow me.’

I was still totally confused and trying to make logical sense of everything that had happened so far. Mama had told me my cousins were travelling the world just now, which clearly wasn’t the case. Now at least it made sense that the guy had known I was from Germany.

The butler opened the second door on the left and showed us in. Inside, a Frank Sinatra song was playing and a man in a brown tweed suit rose from a beige wing armchair when he saw me. ‘June, it’s lovely that you’re here,’ he said, coming to greet me. Although his hair had grown greyer in the meantime, his affectionate smile had stayed the same.

‘Uncle Edgar,’ I said, glad to see a familiar face at last. A friendly one at that. I smiled at him and my uncle’s features took on a mixture of joy and amazement. For an instant he looked at me so intently that I felt almost uncomfortable.

‘You’re dripping wet.’ He took hold of my hand to draw me close to the stone fireplace where a cosy fire was burning. ‘First you have to warm up – and change your clothes. Where are your things?’

‘Still in the taxi,’ I answered, holding my hands over the crackling fire. Next I allowed myself to look around the drawing room, without staring too much at the guy who had brought me here. I still couldn’t think why he hadn’t simply introduced himself as my cousin – but maybe he really was just one of those guys who simply like playing games. With his good looks he probably thought he could allow himself that.

For a moment he looked at me as if he could read every single one of my thoughts, and I tore my eyes away to concentrate on the house instead.

I had definitely never been here. At the floor-length windows, with their view of the manicured lawns and the raging storm, hung dark green velvet curtains just the same shade as my eyes. The walls were adorned with oil paintings, probably portraits of some ancestor

or other, and on a little table by the window stood a few framed photographs I couldn't really make out from this distance.

I was struck by the bust of a woman which stood on a narrow chest of drawers beside the fireplace; it reminded me of my late Aunt Catherine.

'Where is the taxi?' my uncle asked, while Frank Sinatra went on singing about love in the background.

'It broke down,' replied my cousin. The similarity to Uncle Edgar was not especially noticeable but now that I was paying attention it struck me. He had the same dark hair, the same determined chin and the same athletic build.

I couldn't help wondering whether my cousin got his shining blue eyes from my aunt; for my uncle's were brown and radiated a sweetness of nature which was out of keeping with my cousin.

'And where did it break down, Blake?' Uncle Edgar sounded as calm as if vehicle breakdowns in storms were an everyday occurrence here.

'On the road to Portfall.' My cousin answered as if I weren't even in the room. Outwardly his posture was relaxed, but there was a challenging gleam in his eyes which I did not like. At least I knew his name now: Blake Beaufort. The name suited him; it exuded the same cool distance as he himself did.

For a minute I was cross with myself for thinking about him so much – and I was even more annoyed that a tiny part of me was disappointed that Blake and I were related, for a much larger part of me found him and his manner downright unlikeable.

'I've called the breakdown people. Old Bailey's taking care of that.' Blake still wasn't looking at me. His lack of interest in me was unmistakable, and I tried to ignore the similar mixture of irritation and disappointment his behaviour awakened in me. He clearly didn't think much of family reunions.

'Then Bailey can bring June's luggage over too,' decreed my uncle and, surprisingly, Blake nodded without objecting.

'Preston's not back yet?'

Blake shook his head and the right hand corner of his mouth twitched. 'No.'

Uncle Edgar went over to the serving trolley by the fire. 'I hope he's not having trouble with the weather. They put out a storm warning.'

'Oh, he won't die,' said Blake, and if I hadn't known better I would have sworn I could see a silent 'Unfortunately' on his face. At the same time he turned his head towards me and my heart gave a little leap, as his penetrating gaze hit me. Although I was quite entitled to look at him, I felt I'd been caught out in some way.

‘Do you need anything else?’ Blake asked my uncle, without taking his eyes off me.

Edgar smiled. ‘No – and thank you for bringing June here in one piece.’

Blake nodded silently before he disappeared from the drawing room, closing the door behind him. No sooner had he gone than I took a deep breath, relieved no longer to be exposed to his intense gaze.

My uncle poured two glasses of a gleaming, gold liquid and handed one to me. ‘Whisky. That’ll warm you up from the inside.’

‘I feel better already,’ I said hurriedly. ‘The fire’s wonderful.’ I sipped at the glass, however, so as not to look impolite. The liquid tasted bitter and burned into my throat, but shortly afterwards a welcome warmth spread through me.

‘It’s so lovely that you’re here, June,’ said Uncle Edgar, looking at me as if with my presence he had found again something long lost. His eyes appeared sad though. ‘I’m sorry you had such a difficult journey. When I heard about the surprising change in the weather I sent the boys out to look for you, for safety’s sake.’

‘That was kind of you,’ I said, wondering as I spoke whether it might perhaps have been more pleasant to have been found by my other cousin, Preston. Most probably. ‘Thank you so much for taking me in at such short notice and for making all the arrangements with the school,’ I added.

‘But that goes without saying. Do you think that after all these years I would let the chance to get to know you better escape me? He spoke with an affectionate smile which reminded me that it had been my father who had broken off all contact with his family. ‘Besides, generations of our family have gone to King’s School and I’m pleased you’re going to spend a year there. We’ve been among the school’s principal benefactors since time immemorial so it was really no trouble to arrange a place for you.’

Far from appearing vain, his words sounded caring and I could tell from his face that he really was pleased to have me here.

‘Uncle Edgar, may I ask you something?’

‘Of course.’ He sat down on one of the two settees.

‘In my memory you lived in a little cottage by the sea – I didn’t imagine that, did I?’

He laughed and shook his head. ‘No, of course not. The cottage you remember does indeed belong to our family. Earlier, when your aunt was still alive we always spent the summer there...but since her death... - well, since then we haven’t been there so often. Blake’s still out there from time to time, but Preston and I less often.’

‘And this?’ I gestured with my hand, taking in the whole estate. ‘It’s really....big.’

Uncle Edgar couldn't help laughing. 'Yes, it really is big. Green Manor has been in the family for generations – to be honest, I'm surprised you haven't heard about it.'

I shook my head, sadly. 'Papa doesn't talk about Cornwall much.'

'Well, there were always certain tensions between him and your Aunt Catherine. But you don't have to worry about that, June my dear.' Uncle Edgar cleared his throat and seemed to want to change the subject. 'Your mother told me that you intend to apply for Oxford after you leave school?'

I nodded. 'Yes, my godfather studied there and for a long time his stories were the only connection I had to England.' I hesitated briefly. 'It might seem strange but I've always wanted to get to know Papa's home country better, and to go to Oxford then become a lawyer.'

Uncle Edgar smiled, deep in thought. 'I can very well see you doing that. I still remember you as a little girl making sure that everything was done fairly and my boys didn't cheat each other when they were looking for sea shells.' He laughed, leaning back on the sofa. 'If you want to go to Oxford, then King's School is the right choice. It has an excellent reputation. Blake and Preston will be taking their leaving exams there this year too.'

I frowned. 'I thought those two were a year older than me.'

My uncle nodded. 'You remember rightly. But there were a few.....occurrences, which mean the boys have to repeat their final year.' He paused briefly. 'Didn't your mother tell you anything about that?'

I shook my head. 'No, she must have forgotten.' It was more likely that with her rudimentary knowledge of English, a few items of information had eluded my mother.

Uncle Edgar gave a polite nod and sipped at his whisky.

Silence reigned for a few seconds, during which I tried to master my curiosity. 'What sort of occurrences?' I eventually probed, nonetheless.

My uncle hesitated briefly. 'Let's just say there were a few absences which didn't exactly help their marks,' he answered evasively. 'And good marks are vital for a successful career – although being successful isn't everything of course. But I want my boys to be well prepared for everything.'

'And that's why their plans to go travelling fell through?'

Just as he was about to reply, there was a knock at the door and I turned round. The next moment a tall young man entered the room; this had to be Preston. He had short, light brown hair gelled into a cool surfer look and still had his summer tan. When my cousin's eyes fell on me, my heart skipped a beat. Not only was he just as tall and good looking as

Blake but he also had the same radiant eyes as his brother, eyes which appeared to look right into my soul.

‘Hello,’ he said, adding with a teasing smile ‘You must be June. A very wet June, I see.’

‘And you must be Preston. A dry Preston, I see,’ I replied in the same tone.

He grinned broadly and his smile gave me a warm feeling in my stomach. Like Blake, Preston had nothing in common with the twins I remembered, who had worn braces on their teeth. Like his brother he was now simply gorgeous, though Preston seemed to prefer lighter colours, since he was wearing a plain white tee-shirt with his ripped jeans. I could scarcely believe how much the twins had changed in the last ten years.

‘I drove down the Darktrew road, but it seems the taxi driver chose the other route.’

‘Blake brought June here about ten minutes ago,’ explained my uncle, and a strange expression flitted across Preston’s face. For an instant I thought I saw a flash of jealousy in his eyes.

‘That explains why you look so bedraggled. You wouldn’t have got anywhere near as wet in my Mini. I hope you won’t catch a cold.’ Preston’s voice sounded caring, but at the same time he was staring at me so hard that I couldn’t take my eyes off him. Suddenly I felt as if a cold draft were blowing over me, and goose pimples formed on my arms.

‘I’m just glad to have arrived at all,’ I said, rubbing my forearms.

Preston knit his brow in annoyance, but my uncle didn’t appear to notice. He stood up with a sigh and came over to me. Then he laid his hands on my shoulders. ‘We all are, June. And I’d like you to feel at home at Green Manor. If there’s anything you need – anything at all - just let me know. You shall have everything you want here.’ He smiled at me. ‘But first let’s show you to your room.’