

## CONVALESCENCE

It was 1965, and when tuberculosis hit our family the effects were devastating.

My younger sister, Sally, was the first to succumb, dying within days of her tenth birthday. Always a fairly sickly child, underweight and prone to all manner of childhood illnesses, her death was almost expected. This was not the case with my father, who was a strapping forty-six year old whose rude health was something of a legend, never once taking a day's sick leave in over twenty years of working for the same company.

A month later my mother, overwhelmed with grief, and essentially a broken woman, gave up her battle with the disease and joined her husband at the family plot in the local cemetery.

Which left me, fourteen years old, and determined that the blight that had struck my nearest and dearest would not claim me.

Two months in hospital being plied with an endless supply of drugs, and virtually around-the-clock care, brought me through the crisis, and left me, weak and enfeebled, but ready to face the world alone.

It was decided by powers greater than me that I needed a period of convalescence in order to fully recuperate and to regain my strength. So I was shipped off to the warmer, sunnier, climes of Dorset, to stay with a distant member of the family who I only knew from muted conversations between my mother and father at the dinner table.

I had little knowledge of Uncle Thomas, apart from those few facts I had managed to overhear. All I knew of him was that he was my father's elder brother and that he was immensely wealthy, having made his fortune in the South African diamond mines. He was unmarried, lived in a sprawling estate down on the Dorset/Devon border, and had once played cricket for England. Other than that, I was aware that he and my father had become estranged when they were in their twenties and had never spoken since that time. We never visited him, and he in return had never made the journey to our house in Cambridge to visit us. The only image of him that I could bring to mind was a grainy, black and white photograph, taken when he was still a young man, poised at the crease of Lords cricket ground, taken during his first and only test century.

What had induced him to take on the care of a nephew he had never seen, let alone been in contact with, I'll never know, but I was just a child and the matter was out of my hands, and shrouded by the deep fog of adult mystery.

I was accompanied on the train journey down to Dorset by a middle-aged woman called Miss Holt who, I assumed, worked for the hospital. She was a plain woman, with strong, almost horse-like features, who said little to me on the journey, but shepherded me along in front of her with brisk hand gestures and barked orders. We were met at Weymouth station by a taxi-driver with a thick local accent and a no-nonsense attitude, who took my luggage and stowed it in the trunk of the car, settled behind the steering wheel, and drove us to our destination in near-total silence.

As we pulled into the grounds of my uncle's estate through a pair of huge wrought-iron gates, a sinking feeling settled over me. I was desperately missing my family, my home, even the street where we'd lived, and the thought of spending an unspecified length of time in unfamiliar surroundings, with people I didn't know, in an equally unfamiliar and remote part of the country, filled me with dread, and I made a pact with myself to recover my strength and my health as quickly as possible. I gave no thought as to what might happen to me once that happened. That was something for the future, and my priority was just to get through the present.

"So you're my brother's boy, are you?"

Those were the first words my uncle Thomas ever spoke to me. He had a shock of iron-gray hair and a matching moustache, but in a lot of ways he resembled my father. His face was harder, without the crows-feet of laughter lines that surrounded dad's dark brown eyes, and the skin of his face was dark and leathery, scorched by his years spent in harsh sunshine. His lips were thin, the mouth turning down at the corners, as if laughter was a stranger to him, and in that initial meeting, my spirits sank even lower.

"James, sir," I said, proffering my hand.

He ignored it. "James," he said, rolling my name around his mouth. "Your grandfather's name. He was a fine man. I wonder if you'll ever live up to him?"

We were standing in the cavernous hallway of my uncle's house – a massive building made from yellow stone, with a multitude of deeply-set but very long windows, and a turreted roof of gray slate. From what I had seen of the outside, the place looked huge, with at least two different wings coming off from a fortress-like square structure, at least four times the size of my own Cambridgeshire home. It was the kind of place to get lost in, and I wondered how I would find my way around it.

Uncle Thomas was speaking again. "I'm putting you in the East wing. You'll have a bedroom and a sitting room." He turned to Miss Holt. "I've assigned a bedroom to you, next to my nephew. You will share the sitting room. Meals will be served in the dining room. If you have any special dietary needs I trust you consult with my housekeeper, Mrs. Rogers, and she in turn, will appraise the cook. Care of the boy will be solely your domain while you're here and I do not wish to be troubled with anything other than a full-blown emergency. You have access to this part of the house, including the library, dining room and study, but the West wing is strictly private and totally out of bounds. Are we clear on this?"

Miss Holt nodded vigorously. "Of course, Mr. Bentley," she said.

An elderly woman emerged from one of the doorways leading off from the hall.

"Ah, Daphne," my uncle said. "Could you please show our guests to their rooms?"

Daphne Rogers, the housekeeper, was a woman in her late-fifties, early-sixties, with a round, kind face framed by a bird's nest of gray hair, clipped and pinned elaborately around it. "If you'll come this way," she said, and led us from the hallway to a long corridor that took us to the furthest reaches of the East wing. As we walked I could feel Miss Holt's hand on my shoulder, urging me forward as if I might turn and flee at any moment, which was probably just as well because the thought wasn't a million miles away from my mind.

Paintings hung from the walls of the corridor we were walking through – dark paintings depicting bleak landscapes, and empty moorland vistas with twisted, stunted trees, and the occasional derelict building. Their bleakness mirrored my mood as we made our way to our rooms and, as we finally emerged from the corridor into another fairly brightly lit hallway, I felt a great sense of relief.

Mrs. Rogers led us up a curving staircase that gave onto a carpeted landing with doors set every few yards into a wall decorated with floral paper and thankfully no depressing paintings. In an alcove halfway along was a small table holding a single vase of multi-colored sweet peas. She stopped at a doorway and pushed the door open.

"I've put you in here, Miss Holt. I've tried to make the room as comfortable as possible, but we've not been used to entertaining guests at the Manor lately, so if there's anything you need, please don't hesitate to ask me."

Miss Holt thanked her and disappeared inside.

The housekeeper turned to me. "Now, Jimmy, let's get you settled in. You don't mind if I call you Jimmy, do you? Only James sounds so stuffy."

I shook my head. "No," I said. "Everyone at school calls me Jimmy."

She smiled. "I guessed they would. You look like a Jimmy."

I was beginning to warm to the elderly woman with the kind face. She seemed to be out of place here. Out of place but very welcome nonetheless. Perhaps this wasn't going to be such an ordeal after all.

My bedroom was large and airy with two long sash windows flanking a wide and intricately-patterned, veneered wardrobe, with double doors and heavy brass handles. In the corner was a writing desk with leather top, complete with a studded, leather-upholstered captain's chair, and set against the adjacent wall was a deeply filled couch covered with a chintz material that matched the curtains that hung either side of the windows and the counterpane that was spread over the iron-framed bed.

"It's probably not as comfortable as your bedroom at home, but it was the best I could come up with," Mrs. Rogers said.

"It's very nice," I said.

She seemed delighted by my response. "I don't know about that. I'll bet your walls at home are covered with football posters. I know my son's were."

"You have a son?" I said.

She nodded, her eyes becoming misty. "Grown up now, of course. Grown up and gone. It's going to be lovely having you here, Jimmy. I do so miss my boy."

"What's his name? Your son?"

Her eyes clouded and she sucked in her breath. "Hughie," she said. "His name was Hughie."

"Do you see much of him?"

She shook her head, and stood for a long time, not answering my question. Finally she appeared to shake herself. "Anyway, as I said to Miss Holt, if there's anything you need, please ask me. I want your stay here to be as comfortable as possible...and I'm sure your uncle wants that too."

I thanked her and she left, promising to return later to take us down to the dining room.

I waited until the door had closed behind her and then opened my suitcase, that had been placed on a wooden stand under one of the windows, and started to unpack.

The first thing I took out of the case was my small transistor radio. I switched it on and twisted the tuning dial until I picked up a weak and fractured signal from Radio Luxembourg. As an unfamiliar song from the hit parade filled the room I went and lay down on the bed. I was missing mum and dad. I was even missing my annoying little sister, Sally. Tears were pricking at my eyes and I let them come. Perhaps when I was feeling stronger I would be able to fight them, but for now I indulged them, let them flow down my cheeks.

The journey down here must have tired me more than I realized and I fell asleep. An insistent knocking at my bedroom door woke me. I roused and called sleepily, "Come in."

Mrs. Rogers came into the room, smiling broadly. "Sorry to wake you, sleepyhead. It's time for dinner."

I sat up, yawning. "I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean fall asleep."

She clucked her tongue. "Don't you worry about that. It's why you're here – to rest and to get your strength back. I was talking to your Miss Holt earlier and she told me just how ill you've been. But she says you're making excellent progress and you should be as right as nine-pence soon. A few more weeks should have you fit and healthy enough to go back to school."

*A few more weeks! Was that how long I was going to have to stay here?* She must have seen the disappointment on my face. "Don't you worry. Time flies down here. It will be gone before you know it."

I doubted that but pretended to smile, nodded my head, and accompanied her down to the dining room.