
WILDLORD

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WILDLORD

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For my daughters
Xenia and Amalia Womack von Preussen

Chapter 1

14th April, 1846

Look long into the eyes of a Samdhya, he said, and you shall change. I looked long. I looked deep. Blossom fell from the tree, yet I did not notice. Already, I sense myself changing.

—From the diary of Margaret Ravenswood, daughter of the Reverend Laurence Ravenswood, Rector of Haughley

White Quad bell rang out into the mid-morning air, and Tom Swinton slumped down onto a wooden bench underneath a statue of his school's founder. In front of him, a lone figure moved across the well-tended lawn, picking up and bagging detritus from last night's Summer Ball. Tom was still wearing his dinner jacket, his bow-tie poking out of his pocket, his top shirt buttons undone.

He closed his eyes.

The party had continued into the early hours, and he'd fallen asleep on someone's study floor, wrapped in a duvet. Sunlight had woken him at dawn. His friends were snoring gently, sprawled on their beds or on rugs. He'd gone to walk

in the woods, which he always liked to do, taking with him a cold can from a vending machine.

He wanted to be alone among the trees. He hadn't wanted to say goodbye to anyone. He'd wandered around the grounds for hours, making the fizzy drink last, waiting until he was sure all the cars, with their loads of schoolbooks and sports clothes and teenage boys, had gone.

Now, sinking back, the hard slats of the bench pressing into him, he counted the tolls of the bells.

8, 9, 10 …

It was almost eleven o'clock, and at some point he would have to properly face the fact that he was the only pupil left in the whole school, for the entire summer holidays.

A cough made him look up. A boy he didn't recognise was standing on the gravel path in front of him. Almost eight hundred boys attended the school. Tom, being in the lower sixth form, did not come across many of the younger ones; but he knew most of them by sight. There was something distinctive about this one, though, and Tom wondered why he hadn't noticed him around. He would have remembered him.

Tom couldn't tell how old the boy was. He was very pale, with short black hair oddly combed so that it lay almost flat to his skull, and a snub nose. He looked like he might be in one of the junior forms, but a challenge in his eyes suggested otherwise.

Big fawn's eyes and long trembling lashes. His uniform didn't quite fit him, the purple jacket with its absurd gold

stripes hanging off his shoulders; his tie in the school colours, green and grey, done up askew.

The badge on his blazer was odd. Instead of the school crest it showed a small square inside another square and another one inside that.

The boy was holding something to his chest, arms tightly across it. Tom wasn't in the mood to be disturbed and savagely dragged a hand through his long blond hair, letting it fall across his eyes before blowing it away in displeasure. 'Shouldn't you have left?' he snapped. 'Everyone else has.'

The boy didn't reply. Instead, he uncrossed his arms and offered up what was in his hands.

At first Tom ignored him. But there was a tightness in the boy's shoulders. An insistence.

Tom took it carefully.

It was a letter. A heavy cream envelope of a type Tom hadn't seen for years. The address was written in spidery ink.

'Where did you get this?' Tom straightened. 'Did you take it from my pidge?' The boy didn't answer.

It was clearly addressed to him:

> Master Thos. Swinton
> Downshire College

There was no postcode, no county.

The boy shifted slightly, as if expecting something. Tom continued to stare at the letter. There was a silence around him; everything seemed so still, and he could hear no birds.

Even the litter-picker seemed to have paused, deep in thought, and a cloud hung partway over the sun.

Thos? What did that mean? Nobody had ever called him *Thos*.

He turned the heavy letter over and was surprised to see that it was sealed with scarlet wax, which bore the imprint of a heraldic animal like a leopard's head. He didn't want to break the seal, but after a second's thought, he slid his finger under it and opened the letter, leaving the body of the wax intact.

There was a single piece of thick card inside and two other small bits of orange card which fluttered out. Tom caught them without giving them a glance.

The writing was hard to decipher, flowery and scratchy, with flourishes in unexpected places. Somebody had spent a long time writing this letter. The boy, standing patiently in front of him, scratched his nose. Tom struggled to make out the writing.

Mundham Farm
Mundham
Suffolk

To my well-beloved cousin Thomas James Swinton,

You will come to stay with me, your dear Uncle James who has thought of you for so long and with such hope.

There is not much here but it is time for you to see and time for you to understand.

There are many things that I need you to do and many things that you shall need to learn.

You are the only other Swinton who remains.

Zita has arranged everything. You shall use the coupons herein. I am to hope that you shall know and do what is required. You shall be met at the post.

I remain, your most affectionate uncle,

James Swinton, Esquire

It was signed with an elaborate, curlicued swoop.

Uncle? Tom didn't have an uncle. At least, nobody had ever told him he had an uncle. His father had been an only child. Could this James Swinton be a great-uncle? No, his grandfather only had sisters, and they'd changed their names when they'd got married, and as far as he knew those cousins were ranching in Australia or playing golf in Canada.

He looked more closely at the cards he held in his hand. A train ticket – a single one – and a receipt for it. Paid in cash, he noted. On the back of the receipt were scribbled the names of his stops, in different, more conventional handwriting.

It was for tomorrow. The 09.03 from Houghton to London, a quick change on the underground to Liverpool Street Station, where he had to get off, then a train on to Colchester, and then another change to a small station he assumed was in Suffolk. Mundham must be near enough to it.

What did 'You will be met at the post' mean? Maybe there was a post office outside the station where you waited. It could be local slang. He didn't know anything about Suffolk. The whole thing was very strange.

Tom sensed a shadow passing over him.

He looked up. He had forgotten about the boy who'd delivered the letter.

But there was no boy. There had been no crunch of gravel on the path as he'd left.

The quad bell was still ringing: … II.

The litter-picker finished his stretching and began to cross the lawn once more. Clouds scudded across the sky.

All this had happened in the gap between the bell sounding the tenth and the eleventh stroke.