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Melanie Welsh

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Mistress *of the* Storm

A Verity Gallant Tale

M.L.Welsh



David Fickling Books

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This book features many sisters but I have only one,
and so it is dedicated with love to Caroline.

People ask me if I miss it. If I miss the adventure of smuggling. And the truth is, I do. I miss the thrill of the chase – I miss picking my way through the rocks, riding out a south-westerly as it batters the coast. Ours were skills that few could master – part practice, part secrets passed down through the generations, and part sheer hellcat daring.

We were natural businessmen. It all came so easily to us: arranging finance; transporting goods; bartering with suppliers; charming . . . those who needed to be charmed. We loved every part of it. We loved the freedom money buys: with enough currency, no door in the land is locked to you. We loved our fine houses and rich clothes. We loved knowing we were as wealthy and powerful as any real Gentry.

Do I regret it? I regret where it took me. I regret what I lost as a result. And if the exchange were mine to make, I'd swap every last penny of profit, every thrilling chase, every porcelain-skinned lady for the chance to tell the story anew.

Book One
AUTUMN

Chapter One

Wellow library was quiet. Verity expected it to be quiet. She came here all the time and always had the run of it. Which is why it came as a shock to see a giant of a man kneeling on the floor, in tears.

Wellow is famed, of course. But it is remote too – a far-flung outpost of this great land we call Albion. And he was the most exotic man she had ever seen. Verity knew it wasn't polite to stare, but she couldn't help it. His skin was so dark it had a sheen of blue to it. Though hunched on the floor, he was clearly tall – well over six foot – and handsome, with high cheekbones, wide full lips and almond-shaped eyes. His clothes were equally foreign: a long velvet coat made of squares of chocolate brown, burnt orange and bottle green covered a white linen shirt and moleskin trousers. His boots were leather with soft flat soles.

Books were scattered on the floor all around him. In his lap lay a large red volume; his head was bowed over it as silent tears ran down his face. His hand clutched a tiny peg doll carved from a dark shiny wood. It was covered with a

few scraps of faded material which might once – a long time ago – have been brightly coloured. An air of unutterable sadness hung over him. Verity's presence didn't seem to have registered at all.

It was like finding a panther in your sitting room. Something so vital, so alive, was never meant for the dust-filled air of Wellow library. Verity was filled with an overwhelming urge to comfort the stranger. Without thinking, she took a step towards him . . . And broke the spell. He looked up as if the world had come into focus.

His cheeks were wet and his gaze direct. Slowly he took in everything about her – and more slowly still, the faintest and saddest of smiles appeared. He sprang up from the floor, clutching the book, and ran past Verity to the front door. With one swift push he was gone.

Verity stared in astonishment at the spot where he had been. Miss Cameron, the librarian, continued with her indexing at the entrance. Verity came to life. Running after the man, she burst through the double doors and chased him down the street. More than anything in the world she wanted to know who he was.

Wellow library sits at the junction of two cliff-top paths. One leads to the harbour. The visitor chose the other, running down the narrow track to Steephill Cove.

'Wait,' shouted Verity, sprinting. 'Please wait.'

Below them on the shore lay the fishermen's boats, their nets gathered in the bilges. Verity was going so fast she had to grab the iron railing every few seconds to steady herself.

The stranger didn't slacken his pace in the slightest. He was on the shore now and heading for a small rowing boat beached there. He untied it and started pushing it out towards the sea.

Verity raced down the last few steps and across the sand. She stopped and stood on the beach, salt water gently soaking its way through her shoes, and called out one last time: 'Please wait.'

Finally he looked up. Lost for words, Verity realized she didn't have one good reason for chasing this man all the way down the cliff. Not one good reason. Just an overwhelming sense that it was important to do so.

'You can't . . .' she started. 'Take books from the library . . . without signing for them.' Her cheeks burned pink with embarrassment. Surely she could think of something better to say than that?

The man looked with surprise at the book clutched in his hand. To Verity's astonishment he laughed. A rich melodic sound.

'Understanding the rules. Yes, that is very important.' Staring at her for a second, he appeared to make a decision. He took something from his pocket and placed it on top of the book, passing both to her. 'The storm is coming,' he said, as if this were an explanation, then turned back to his task.

Verity stood on the shore. Clutching the book under one arm, she examined her other gift. It was a round wooden ball, clearly very old. The surface was smooth from

handling, and polished to a rich sheen. It looked a bit like a nut, with a joining seal along one side. Verity shook it. It rattled. She put it in her coat pocket.

She turned the book over to read its title. O*n the* O*rigin of Stories: A Disquisition* by Messrs R. Hodge, Heyworth & Helerley. Embossed on the red leather cover was a golden globe. She opened it and read the Foreword.

> *All things were created at the Lord of the Sky's word* [it said]. *All things were made by him, and without him nothing had life. But once he created our world, it was wild and untamed. And his people suffered greatly at the hands of the elements.*
>
> *So He of the Sky said, 'I will give each element a Keeper, to control them and protect my people.' And he read out a story of their beginning: of four sisters whose duty it was to control the elements. It was a joyous event, and as he spoke, the words fell from the sky. Each place where they landed around the world became a sacred one of special powers, so when a story was read aloud there, it would become true.*

Places where stories could become real? Verity thought of the many, many tales she'd read in her short life, and was enchanted. She looked through the rest of the book. It appeared to be a journal or catalogue of some kind. Why had the strange man run all the way down the cliff with it? And why had it moved him to tears?

It was windy, and clouds were skidding across the sky.

Verity noticed that the large, fast-moving one above her looked like an old woman.

Hundreds of years ago people believed that such visions were signs of things to come: portents, they called them. These days, with our sophisticated scientific understanding, we know this to be untrue. And most of the time we are right.

But now the storm was coming. And it would change Verity Gallant's life for ever. Even though she – like a caterpillar wrapped in its chrysalis – knew nothing of it.

Long after the other members of her family had fallen asleep that night Verity was still awake, reading the red leather-bound book from cover to cover.

At first she told herself she was simply looking to see if there was something else tucked between the pages: a written note, some scribbled comments – anything that might explain the interest of the man in the library, or tell her why he had given it to her.

The entire book was about one of the four sisters mentioned in the Foreword: the Keeper of the Wind. The authors had travelled the whole world, it seemed, and each time they came upon a reference to her – be it in folklore, or a manuscript, or even in the architecture of a building – they noted it down.

As the hours passed, Verity grew ever more captivated by the book; or, to be precise, by its heroine. A woman whose ability to terrify only seemed to make her more

fascinating. Verity completely understood why the authors had been obsessed with her.

> *She was the most beautiful of the four* [she read, in an early chapter]*, as if the Lord of the Sky had finally perfected his work in her. She could charm the moon itself from the night sky. Grown men would kill for the promise of her smile. Women fought for the sunshine of her attention. She could make a stone laugh if she chose to. She could draw tears from a mountain.*
>
> (Vellum manuscript, Nordic region, believed to be a precursor of *Tales of Wiser Times*)

Only when dawn started to break did Verity realize she had read the whole thing from cover to cover. And was still none the wiser.

The next morning Verity could be found in the kitchen, buttering toast. She surreptitiously rubbed her eyes and stifled a yawn. What had possessed her? How could she have spent a whole night reading *On the Origin of Stories: A Disquisition* by Messrs R. Hodge, Heyworth & Helerley?

Her sister, Poppy, was busily wolfing down breakfast, consumed by thoughts of her audition for the Christmas revue.

'So *exciting*,' she chattered as Mrs Gallant looked at her proudly. She was such a pretty little girl: petite in every way, with fair hair, clear blue eyes and a sunny charm that people instantly warmed to.

'I'm sure they'll be delighted to have you,' her mother encouraged. 'It must be terribly difficult to find cast members with your looks and talent.'

Poppy glanced across the kitchen. 'You should try too, Verity,' she urged. 'Shouldn't she, Mother?'

Mrs Gallant looked uncertainly at her elder daughter. 'There's no harm in trying,' she agreed hesitantly.

Verity knew her mother didn't mean to be hurtful. Still, as her old friend Alice had often said to her: *Not everything in life turns out as we would like*.

Nor should it, Verity reminded herself. It just seemed a little hard sometimes to be tall for your age – and sturdy – with long brown hair that strayed from its clasp in an unruly fashion. To be the exception that proved the rule in a family of slender blondes.

Verity did not match the rest of the Gallants. Her solemn little face with its pink cheeks and charcoal eyes wavered constantly between very pretty and very plain. But it wasn't just her looks. Like all good parents, Verity's mother and father had lined up the full range of appropriate activities for their daughters: horse-riding, piano lessons, dance classes, choir practice . . . the list ran on and on. Poppy seemed to love them all, and Verity didn't want to be ungrateful, but sometimes, when she was walking down the hill, she caught herself looking out to sea and wishing it was possible to pick herself up in the air and fly away. To feel the wind in her hair, and dirt on her face.

Not everything in life turns out as we would like. But things can change.

Verity's father – a tall, fair man – entered the room, already absorbed in a new manuscript which had just been delivered. Mr Gallant edited books for a living and spent most of his time at home in the study – a room Verity loved.

'Sleep well?' he asked his elder daughter.

Verity perked up. Perhaps her father might be able to throw more light on the matter? This was a little optimistic: Verity's parents rarely discussed any subjects other than school and ladylike behaviour.

'I was wondering—' she started.

'Good, good . . .' Mr Gallant said, benevolently rubbing the top of Verity's head, clearly not listening at all.

Seeing her husband, Mrs Gallant began to clear her throat. 'Now, girls,' she announced in a carefully cheerful tone, 'we have some news for you. Rather an event actually.'

Verity wondered what she could possibly be about to announce that would make her so anxious. Her mind raced with possibilities. Were they planning a journey perhaps, or a long voyage? She drifted off for a second: would they be going by sea, or maybe even by car?

'. . . so you'll have another little sister, or brother,' her mother finished, smiling tentatively. 'Isn't that nice?'

'It's wonderful,' declared Poppy, running to give her a hug.

The words dragged Verity's focus unceremoniously back to the here and now. Her face filled with confusion.

Mrs Gallant sighed. Why was her elder daughter always off in a dream world? 'We're expecting a baby, Verity,' she said.

'I . . .' murmured Verity uncertainly.

Mr Gallant smiled and patted her arm fondly. 'There's nothing to worry about,' he reassured her. 'Isn't that right, Felicity?'

'Of course . . .' said Mrs Gallant brightly.

Verity found herself staring at her mother's fingers, which were anxiously twisting and untwisting a tassel from the tablecloth.

'There's nothing to say we'd have three girls in a row . . .' her mother finished.

'We agreed, Felicity,' insisted Mr Gallant, 'that superstitious nonsense has no place in a modern household.'

Verity's mother avoided her husband's gaze. 'I'm sure it will all be fine,' she said.

Verity ambled slowly towards Priory Bay College, a few yards behind a group of girls from her year: all slim, all pretty, and all allowed to choose their clothes on the basis of fashion, not practicality.

The school sat at the top of Wellow's overcliff and could be approached by a number of paths that ran through its surrounding parkland. As the imposing gothic towers of a more recent extension came into view, scores of children could be seen trudging towards it.

Verity, meanwhile, battled with her own internal struggle. Her mother was having a baby, and she wasn't sure

how she felt about it. She was used to things as they were. What would a baby be like? Would it cry all the time? In truth, Verity didn't see the appeal of babies. They seemed to keep everyone awake at night, and she was fairly sure there was sick involved. They took up quite a lot of time, didn't they?

Was it wrong to feel sad – more lonely still – at the idea that there might be yet another person in your home who was better at getting on with people than you were? Was it shaming to be jealous of a baby that hadn't even been born yet? Why couldn't she just be pleased for her parents like Poppy?

A strong gust of wind buffeted her. Verity buried her hands deep in her coat pockets and gripped the strange wooden ball. She shook it. It was oddly comforting. Was it a rattle of some kind? A thought occurred to her: if Mother was having a baby, then their family would get bigger. She smiled. That would be fun.

Two large boys loomed on the horizon: George Blake and his brother, Oscar. Jostling past Verity, George grabbed her bag. The girls in front giggled as he raced ahead brandishing his prize.

'Give the bag back, George,' chanted one, Bella, in a tone that clearly implied this was the last thing she thought he should do.

'You are mean,' chimed in her friend, Amanda, batting his shirt flirtatiously.

The most popular, Charlotte Chiverton, moved to

Verity's side and nudged her. 'Aren't you going to ask for your things back, Gallant?'

George Blake was obviously very pleased with himself. He walked backwards, opening the bag, investigating its contents and grinning ear to ear.

'Sure there's nothing you want to keep?' he asked as he extracted Verity's things. 'Pencil case? No. Exercise books? No. *Three* bags of sweets,' he exclaimed, pulling out his latest find. 'Tut, tut, Verity. No wonder you're so hefty.'

Verity blushed as the girls pealed into chimes of laughter.

'And what's this tatty old volume?' he continued.

Verity's heart jumped anxiously. Not her book . . .

George opened the front cover to inspect it. Tapping the library form glued inside, he shook his head in mock disapproval. 'Past the return date, Verity,' he scolded. 'How are you going to maintain your reputation as the world's biggest swot when you're making silly errors like that?'

The girls shrieked with delight.

Tired of this particular game, George threw the book over his shoulder and thrust the bag into Verity's hands. 'Cheer up, Gallant,' he told her. 'Might never happen.' Then he ran off, giving her skirt a quick parting flick. She fended him off with an anxious flap of her hands – which just made everyone laugh all the harder.

As her tormentors headed towards the school gates, Verity bent over to pick up the red leather-bound book and dusted it down. In the distance the girls' giggles rang out as the two

brothers tauntingly slapped their hands at each other. 'Not my books, not my books,' she heard Oscar simper.

Verity knelt forlornly on the grass and began to put the rest of her belongings back in her bag. She could feel a familiar pricking in the corners of her eyes. Staring hard at the ground, she concentrated on not crying. A new peal of laughter prompted her to look up. Charlotte was leaning on Amanda, the two of them bent over in mirth.

Verity's chest squeezed with misery. Uncontrollable hot tears streamed down her cheeks. She had never felt so out of place and alone.

At the edge of the park an elderly man stood watching. His once handsome face was lined and scored but his blue eyes burned. He looked troubled. As Verity began to walk dispiritedly towards the school gates, he appeared to make a decision. Turning round, he headed for the town.

Verity's day hadn't got any better by the afternoon, when she found herself sitting on a gym bench, filled with quiet dread. She hated games lessons. She hated the cold, damp changing rooms for a start. But she also hated trudging up and down muddy fields in winter. She hated being stuck in some rubbish position on the pitch. She hated indoor athletics. She hated cross-country runs in the rain. But most of all she hated the way she felt standing there on her own, shivering from the cold: the last person to be chosen for any team.

'Ready, girls?' boomed the head of games as she strode in. Mrs Watson wasn't just heavier than the other teachers; she also seemed to be taller, wider, and somehow . . . denser. A heated discussion had been taking place amongst the rest of the class. And now an envoy was dispatched to communicate with her:

'Charlotte's bailing out of Sunday's sailing match. And it's our first against the Whale Chine girls.'

'I have to,' insisted the same girl who'd witnessed Verity's humiliation that morning. 'Mother says it's this weekend or never for shopping and I've simply *nothing* to wear.'

Verity listened with half-hearted interest as she pulled on an ugly games sock in a particularly virulent shade of blue. She wondered what it would be like to look forward to a shopping trip. Mother's store of choice was Dereham's: a small, dour emporium that took a Puritan approach to girls' clothes. Mrs Dereham believed that apparel should have purpose.

'Gallant,' Mrs Watson announced. 'Gallant can take Chiverton's place.'

Verity froze with shock. She'd never sailed before. She'd never even set foot on a dinghy.

'*Gallant*?' howled one particularly incensed member of the group, backed immediately by a chorus of disapproval.

'Don't see why not,' said Mrs Watson. 'Can't believe we've never fielded you before. Probably been out on the water with the family.'

A fleeting vision of her parents trying to manoeuvre a dinghy on the open sea flashed through Verity's mind. She stifled a giggle. Laughing was not going to help. 'I won't be much use to the team,' she agreed. 'Couldn't someone else fill the place?'

'You'll be fine, girl,' Mrs Watson replied, to Verity's dismay. 'May be a little below your standard, but it's a day out. Tactics session Friday at the club – four o'clock – don't be late.'

'*Below her standard*?' snorted a frustrated classmate.

'Verity can't *sail*,' moaned another girl.

'Verity isn't good at *anything* sporty,' said a third.

The accusation stung, but Verity nodded her head earnestly in agreement. 'It's true. I can't,' she said.

For the first time ever, she saw something like astonishment on Mrs Watson's face. 'Can't sail?' she repeated. 'Verity *Gallant* can't sail? Extraordinary.'

Verity felt slightly disgruntled. Lots of people couldn't sail, she reflected to herself. She didn't see the need to make such a fuss about it.

'Well, you can crew anyway,' Mrs Watson continued, to a collective groan of disappointment.

'Really?' asked Verity. She'd never been deliberately chosen for anything before.

'Absolutely,' confirmed Mrs Watson. 'Apparently the wind will be getting up so we could do with some weight.'