

Opening extract from

The Dragonfly Pool

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CHAPTER ONE

BALLOONS OVER LONDON

‘I don’t think you ought to be crying at your age. People of fifty-two don’t cry,’ said Aunt Hester sternly.

‘I’m not crying,’ said her sister May. ‘Not really. And anyway, I heard you blowing your nose three times last night when you went to the bathroom.’

‘Anyone can blow their nose,’ said Hester.

‘Not three times. And you’re older than me.’

But then they stopped arguing and clung to each other because the news their brother had given them the night before was so awful that they could only bear it if they were standing side by side.

‘The house is going to be like a tomb without her,’ said May. ‘She’s far too young to go away.’

'Of course we knew she'd go away to get married,' said Hester.

'But people don't marry when they're eleven years old.'

'Except in the olden days perhaps. And in very hot countries.'

But England was not a hot country. Now, on a fine spring day in 1939, it was only pleasantly warm. The men digging trenches in the little park opposite had not removed their shirts, and a fresh breeze stirred the silver barrage balloons that floated over the houses. The government was trying them out to protect the people of London against enemy aircraft if the war, which everyone was expecting, really came.

Tally loved the barrage balloons.

'They're like really kind great-uncles,' she said, 'only a nicer colour.'

All the children of Stanford Street walked home with their heads turned to the sky when the balloons went up.

The war against Hitler seemed likely to come; no one really thought now it could be prevented – the poor man could be heard raving on the wireless, his mad eyes and loathsome moustache appeared each day in the newspapers on Mr Pepper's paper stall. But it was not the thought of the war that was upsetting May and Hester now. They had been quite excited when they were issued with a stirrup pump to put out the flames from incendiary bombs – and the air-raid shelters delivered in sections to the houses in the street were a great comfort, though nobody could quite work out how to put them up. Hitler was nasty; if there had to be a war, they would put up with it. But this was different . . .

‘Help me to make her see what a chance this is for her,’ their brother James had begged them. ‘Help me to keep her cheerful.’

The aunts had kept house for their younger brother since his wife had died, leaving him with a baby less than a week old. For nearly twelve years now that baby had been the centre of their world.

‘We’d better do something about our faces,’ said Hester, looking in the mirror. ‘She mustn’t see we’re upset. She’ll be home from school soon and James wants to tell her himself.’

But the only face powder they could find was some talc that May used on her feet in hot weather, and once they had covered their faces with it they returned to the bathroom to wash it off. It would not help Tally to stand up under the blow that awaited her to be greeted by two white-faced clowns.

It was a friendly, bustling little street, shabby but cheerful. The houses sloped a little downhill in the direction of London’s river and the dome of St Paul’s Cathedral, which you could see from the attic window on a clear day. There was a row of shops – a greengrocer, a butcher, a cobbler and a baker – and at the end of the street a small park with a slightly muddy pond and ducks. On the other side of the road from the little shops was a row of terraced houses. The end one of these – 14 Stanford Street – was the one everybody knew. It was a tall house with a wrought-iron balcony and built on to it on the ground floor was a red-brick surgery, where the patients waited. For number 14 was the Doctor’s House; it belonged to Dr James

Hamilton, and to see him, rather than other, more fashionable doctors, the people of East Stanford would have walked miles. But the people were poor and Dr Hamilton charged them only what they could afford. So in the Doctor's House the rugs were threadbare, the fires were lit as late in the day as possible, there was only a cook general to serve the house, instead of the maid and cook and handyman that other houses in the terrace kept. None of which mattered to the people who came there because, lighting up the house with her warmth and her energy and her laughter, was the doctor's daughter.

There was unrest among the patients waiting in the afternoon surgery. The plain little room was packed because Dr Hamilton was the doctor on duty and not his partner, but there were mutterings and murmurings of discontent.

No one knew if it was true for certain, but if it was, it was bad news indeed.

Joe Smithson sat with his some leg stuck out in front of him, thinking about his wife. Mrs Smithson was an invalid; she seldom left her room and Tally came to read to her – actually more to read *with* her. They were in the middle of *The Prisoner of Zenda* – both of them liked sword fights and plenty of swashbuckling and people leaping off parapets. On the afternoons that Tally came after school his wife was always cheerful. Should he ask the doctor if the rumours were true? Well, they'd know soon enough – nothing stayed secret in the street for long.

Old Mrs Dawson, whose chest was bad again, stared at the notices pinned to the wall and thought about her dog. Tally took the dog out for her and said she didn't want to

be paid, because she liked dogs. She even liked Horace, who was a dachshund and that was not a popular breed just now. Tally had punched a boy who'd sneered at him for being a German sausage dog. There wasn't anyone else who'd take him out for free, and Mrs Dawson's budget was tight. Surely the rumours couldn't be true? Everyone knew that the doctor thought the world of his daughter. Why, it would break his heart to part with her.

'Next patient, please,' said the receptionist, Miss Hoy, and Mrs Dawson made her way into the doctor's room. She'd ask him whether it was true – after all, she had a right to know.

'Have you heard?' said Mr Cooper as his son Kenny came in from the park. Kenny was the same age as Tally; they'd played together all their lives.

'Yes,' said Kenny and went past the cabbages and the sacks of Brussels sprouts and out of the back of the green-grocer's shop into the mews. He'd be going to the stables, thought his father. When things were rough with him, Kenny often went to talk to Primrose. She was only an old Welsh cob who pulled the vegetable cart, but she was one of those horses that understood things.

Tally's friend, Maybelle, at the corner shop, was angry when she heard the news. She became angry easily, and now she picked up the trowel with which she'd been spooning lentils from a sack and threw it across the room. Tally wouldn't fight, Maybelle knew that. She wouldn't bite and kick and lie down on the floor till she got her own way. Not where her father was concerned. It was going to be a nuisance, doing without her friend. And she'd miss

Maybelle's debut as a powder puff in the Summer Show at the Hippodrome.

'Come on, girl,' said her grandmother. 'We've got all those bags to tie up before tomorrow.'

'Shan't,' said Maybelle, and she marched out of the shop and past the butcher's and the cobbler's till she came to the greengrocer's. She'd see if Kenny knew.

Why can't children be left alone? thought Maybelle angrily.

The nuns were used to children being taken away.

'But I shall be sorry to lose her,' said the Mother Superior.

Sister Felicia who produced the end-of-term plays in the convent was feeling guilty. 'I should have let her be the Virgin Mary, she thought. 'She was always a sheep or a cow coming to the manger. I know how much she wanted the star part but she was so good at controlling the little ones.

Tally, coming down the hill like a lamb to the slaughter was the last person to know. She was carrying a rolled-up, sheet of paper with one-side painting of St Sebastian stuck with arrows and a diagram of the life cycle of the liver fluke on the other. The nuns were poor, and one sheet of paper had to go a long way.

Dr Hamilton came in from the surgery and made his way into the house. A thin, dark-haired man with a high forehead and concerned brown eyes, he was looking very tired. Friday was always a long day: the surgery stayed open till eight o'clock so that patients who came from the

factories and the dockyards could come without missing work.

He was a man who told his patients exactly what to do – to eat regularly, take exercise, get plenty of fresh air and go to bed early – and he himself did none of those things. He snatched meals between the surgery and his sessions at the hospital where he went two days a week, he went out on night calls that often turned out to be unnecessary and stayed up till the small hours catching up with the new medical research.

The hallway was dark – his sisters, so much older than him, were good about saving electricity. Supper would be left for him in the dining room, but he wasn't hungry. He'd come in late like this so often, looking forward to an hour with his daughter before she went to bed. He could hear her upstairs, talking to the aunts. Well, he'd better get it over.

'Ask Tally to come and see me in my study,' he said to the cook general.

Five minutes later the door opened and his daughter came in.

Oh Lord, I can't do it, thought Dr Hamilton. What will there be left when she is gone?

Already as she stood there in the lamplight he was memorizing her face. The pointed chin, the straight fawn hair lapping her ears, the enquiring hazel eyes. Her fringe had a nibbled look – Aunt Hester insisted on cutting it herself.

When his wife had died of puerperal fever a week after their daughter's birth, Dr Hamilton had been completely overwhelmed by guilt and grief. How could it be that he,

a doctor, could not save the woman that he loved so much? For several weeks he scarcely noticed the baby, fussed over by his sisters and a nurse. Then one day, coming in late, he passed the nursery and heard a sound coming from his daughter's room. It was not a cry, nor was it a whimper. It was the sound of . . . conversation. His five-week-old daughter was talking to the world.

He walked over to the cot. The baby's eyes, properly focused now, were wide open. She did not smile at him; she *looked*.

What an idiot I've been, he thought. This is a *person*.

Things had happened to this person in the weeks he had ignored her that he might not have permitted if he'd been aware of what was going on. For example, her name . . . His sisters had had the child christened Talitha, after their grandmother.

'She was a saint,' they reminded their brother. 'She used to wash the socks of the tramps she met on the London Underground. Wash them and dry them and give them back.'

Dr Hamilton would have preferred to call his daughter something simpler: Ann, perhaps, or Jane. Yet as she grew, her name seemed entirely suitable, for in order to wash the socks of tramps you have to get them to take their socks *off*, and it was the kind of determination this would need that Tally showed from a very early age.

Tally meanwhile had crossed the room and come over to his chair to give him a hug. She could see that he'd had a bad day – he looked like that when a patient at the hospital died who should have lived, or when the pile of bills on his desk became unmanageable, or, lately, when he had

been listening to Hitler raving on the wireless, and she was already thinking of ways to cheer him up. Sometimes they played chess, and sometimes she told him about something funny that had happened at school, but today she had a feeling that neither of these things would work.

‘I’ve got something to tell you, Tally,’ he said, putting his arm round her shoulder.

‘Is it important?’ she said apprehensively. She had learned early in life that important things were usually not nearly as nice as unimportant ones.

‘Yes . . . I suppose it is. At any rate, it’s good news,’ said the doctor resolutely.

Tally looked at him suspiciously. She knew his face better than she knew her own, and the lines round his mouth and the furrows on his forehead did not seem to indicate good news.

‘Perhaps I’d better explain. I have a patient at the hospital – I won’t tell you his name but he is someone important in education – a professor and a very nice man. He thinks I saved his life, which is rubbish, but it’s true we were able to help him. Afterwards, while he was waiting to be discharged, we talked about you, and . . .’ Dr Hamilton paused, looking at the window, which was just a square of darkness now, ‘he told me about a school he knows – he’s on the governing board and he thinks very highly of the staff and the ideals of the school. It’s in the country, in south Devon, not far from the sea.’

Tally waited. Her heart was beating fast; but surely it was all right? A school in South Devon must be a boarding school, and one of the advantages of being poor was

that she could never be sent away to those places that cost the earth.

'Apparently they give scholarships from time to time. Not for schoolwork but to children who they think might benefit from being there. Complete scholarships, where everything is taken care of. He says he thinks he could get you a place there.'

'I don't want to go away.' She tried to speak in a sensible, grown-up way, but already her voice was letting her down. 'I'm all right here. I'm fine.'

Her father was silent, jabbing his pencil on to his blotter. The blotter was a present from one of his patients: four sheets of pink paper pasted on to a piece of lumpy leather. His study was full of presents his patients had made for him: knitted sausages to keep out draughts, lop-sided letter racks . . . Among all the strange objects was a plaster head of Hippocrates, the patron saint of medicine, who, two thousand years ago, had laid down the rules for treating patients with dignity and respect.

'I don't want you to go away, Tally, believe me . . . We will all miss you very, very much.'

'Well, then why do I have to go? Why? Why?'

'The nuns are very kind but I want you to have a broader education. Science, modern languages . . .'

'But I'm learning French. And you could teach me science. You've always said, as soon as one can read one can teach oneself anything. Please, oh please, don't make me go away.' She looked at him. Then: 'It isn't about the teaching is it? It's because there's going to be a war.'

There was a long pause. Her father reached out for comforting words, but he had never lied to his daughter.

‘Yes,’ he said heavily. ‘I think there’s going to be a war. There may not be but . . .’

But if there was, everybody expected that London, like all big towns, would be heavily bombed. A man who did not protect his daughter from that horror must be the greatest criminal on earth. This chance to send her to safety in one of England’s loveliest counties had been a godsend.

But Tally was angry.

‘Well, what if there is going to be a war? Why can’t I share in it?’ Kenny’s father says we’re all getting gas masks and they’re digging a big shelter in the park and Aunt May has got lots of khaki wool to knit balaclavas for the troops, and anyway we’ve got the balloons to protect us. Why should I miss everything just because I’m a child? And why should I be buried in the country and you be in danger? Everybody talks about sharing – you and the aunts and the nuns. Well, why can’t I share the war?’

Dr Hamilton leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes for a moment. ‘Most of the children will be sent away. The government’s made all the plans for evacuation. You don’t want to go to strangers with a label round your neck.’

‘No, I don’t. And I wouldn’t go. They tried to make Maybelle go to a rehearsal for evacuation at her school and she just screamed and kicked and bit and now they’ve said that she can stay.’

But even as she spoke Tally knew that she wouldn’t scream and kick and bite. Not about something that concerned her father whom she loved so much.

‘I think sending children away like parcels is wicked

and wrong,' she said. 'I could take messages and look out for nuns coming from the sky. At school they say Nazi spies are going to come down on parachutes disguised as nuns. Well, I know nuns; I wouldn't be fooled – you can tell by their shoes. And anyway there may not be a war in the end. You always say the German people are good, it's only the Nazis who are wicked, so maybe they'll rise up and overthrow Hitler and everything will be all right.'

But her father was near the end of his tether.

'Delderton is a first-class school,' he said making a final effort. 'Children come there from all over the world – and with the kind of scholarship they give, you can do all the extras: music and horse riding . . .'

'I don't want to ride a horse, I've got Primrose. I want to stay here and be part of things and help. And anyway who's going to look after you?'

But she had lost, and she knew it.

CHAPTER TWO

RICH COUSINS

For two nights Tally cried herself to sleep. Then she pulled herself together. What was done was done and she would have to make the best of it.

It was her father who had taught her that knowledge is power – that if one could find out about something one is afraid of, it made the fear less. So now, when she wanted to know what to expect when she went away to boarding school, she decided to consult her cousin Margaret.

James Hamilton had a brother called Thomas, who was also a doctor but a very different kind of doctor. He saw only special patients in his elegant rooms in Harley Street and he charged them about ten times as much as James charged his patients, so that his family was as rich as his brother's family was poor.

The house he lived in was in one of the smartest streets in the West End, with a gleaming brass plate on the door giving a list of all his degrees and qualifications – and his two children, Margaret and Roderick, went to the most expensive boarding schools in the country.

Margaret and Roderick were obedient, tidy children. Their manners were good but inside they were chilly creatures, thinking of themselves the whole time – and they looked down on Tally, who lived in a shabby street and wore old clothes and played with the children of green-grocers and butchers.

But when they heard that Tally was going to go to boarding school and wanted some advice they were ready to be helpful, and their mother, Aunt Virginia, asked Tally to tea.

So now Tally rang the bell and followed a maid in uniform up the thickly carpeted stairs to Margaret's room, which looked like a room in a furniture catalogue, with looped curtains and a kidney-shaped dressing table and fluffy white rugs.

'I was wondering about, oh you know . . . well, everything really . . . ' said Tally. 'I mean, is it true you have prefects and feasts in the dorm and pashes on the head girl and all that? And . . . do you like being away?' asked Tally, longing to be reassured. 'Do you like your school?'

'Oh yes,' said Margaret, 'I like it very much. I couldn't bear to stay at home' – and Tally sighed, thinking how very much she could have borne just that. 'It's strict of course but all boarding schools are strict, and St Barbara's has everything. We have four titled girls there and a millionaire's daughter and the head girl is related to one of

the queen's ladies-in-waiting. She's absolutely super; we all want to do things for her. And we have such fun. Last term we had a midnight feast and one of the girls stepped on a tin of sardines, and she shrieked like mad – the tin was open – and that brought Matron rushing in. Only they couldn't do much to us because the girl who was the ringleader had a terribly rich father who'd just given the school a new sports hall. And we're always making apple-pie beds for people we don't like and putting spiders in Matron's slippers.'

'Yes, I see.' Tally was trying not to think of the poor spiders, squashed to death by unexpected feet. But Margaret was in full cry now, explaining the rules.

'You have to curtsy when you meet the headmistress and call her Ma'am and always walk on the left side of the corridor, but you soon get the hang of it. And of course you have to have exactly the right clothes. We've just finished buying my uniform for next term and you wouldn't believe how expensive it was. Mummy nearly died when she got the bill from Harrods!'

She went to her wardrobe and took out, one by one, the clothes she would need for St Barbara's and laid them on her bed. There were two bottle-green gymslips with pleated skirts and a matching sash to tie round the waist. There were four pale blue flannel blouses, a tie, a pudding-shaped velour hat with a hat ribbon, a straw hat for later in the term and a blazer edged in braid. The blazer, like the tie and the hat ribbon, was striped in the St Barbara's colours of bottle green and blue, and the motto on the pocket said: 'BE THE BEST'.

'The best at what?' asked Tally.

'Oh, everything,' said Margaret airily. She picked up one of the gymslips and held it in front of her. 'There's always a big fuss about the length of the skirt. Matron makes us kneel down and if the hem is more than four inches off the ground we get detention.'

Tally tried not to panic. The whole bed was covered in clothes; there was a smell of starch and newness.

But Margaret had not finished. She went back to the wardrobe and brought out a big carrier bag full of brand-new shoes.

'The lace-ups are for out of doors, and indoors we have strap shoes and on Sundays we wear these pumps. Then there are plimsolls and dancing shoes . . . and I have skating boots . . .'

After the shoes came Margaret's underclothes: woollen socks and garters and a liberty bodice that buttoned into Margaret's bottle-green knickers. The knickers had pockets and elastic round the knees.

'Mummy thought I could wear the same knickers as I had last term, but I told her I couldn't. They have to be new because people can see you take your handkerchief out of your knicker-pocket. And here are the things we have for games . . .'

From another cupboard Margaret produced a pair of nailed hockey boots, a brand-new hockey stick, a woollen bathing costume with the St Barbara's crest on the chest and the school scarf. Like the blazer and the tie, the scarf was striped in the school colours of bottle green and blue. It was not a joyful colour scheme.

Like a bruise, thought Tally, but a very expensive one.

'And we have to have regulation nightclothes too: some

schools are sloppy – they let you wear what you like at night – but not St Barbara’s. Even the slippers are regulation – and on Sundays we wear special dresses: green velvet with lace collars; I can’t show you everything because the maid is still sewing on name tapes. But here’s my satchel – we have to have proper leather ones with our names stamped on, and hymn books, of course, and a tuck box.’

But even Margaret, who seldom noticed other people, saw that Tally was beginning to look worried and now she said, ‘The school will send you a list of the things you need and your aunts will help you buy them. Only you must have absolutely the *right* things – a girl came last term without her Sunday shoes and she got into awful trouble. Being different is the thing you mustn’t do.’

At this point Roderick came into the room. He was nearly two years older than Margaret – a fair, good-looking boy who seldom spoke to girls if he could help it. Roderick’s school was so famous and so grand that he didn’t really need to show off about it, but since Tally wasn’t usually easy to impress he mentioned that the Prince of Transjordanian was in the class above him and that this term they were expecting a boy who was related to the family of the ex-Emperor of Prussia.

‘But we don’t treat them any differently to the other boys at Foxingham,’ he said carelessly.

The rules at Foxingham were of course even stricter than those at St Barbara’s – there was fagging and caning – and it was a famous rugby school, which had beaten Eton at the game.

‘Have you bought your uniform too?’ asked Tally.

‘Of course,’ said Roderick.

For a moment he hesitated. Then he went to his room and came back with his brand-new blazer, his tie and his cap.

All of these were striped fiercely in red and yellow. Walking out together the boys, thought Tally, must have looked like a swarm of angry wasps or ferocious postmen. The motto on Roderick’s blazer was: ‘OUT OF MY WAY’.

‘I’ll lend you some books if you like,’ said Margaret. ‘School stories. I want them back of course, but I’ve read them millions of times. They’ll give you an idea of what to expect.’

She went to her bookcase and took out *Angela of the Upper Fourth* and the *Madcap of the Remove* and gave them to Tally, who thanked her warmly.

Aunt Virginia came in then and told them to come down to the dining room because tea was ready.

‘You needn’t bother to do that,’ said Margaret as Tally began to gather up the clothes on the bed. ‘The maid will do it.’

But after tea, just as Tally was getting ready to go home and was alone with her cousins, Margaret said: ‘By the way what’s the name of your school? The one you’re going to.’

‘It’s called Delderton.’

Margaret and Roderick looked at each other. ‘Delderton? Are you sure?’

‘Yes. Why?’

There was pause.

Then: ‘Oh, nothing,’ said Roderick, shrugging his shoulders. ‘Nothing at all.’

But as the maid opened the front door to let her out, Tally heard them titter. The titter turned into full-scale laughter – but the door was shutting, and Tally was out in the street.

CHAPTER THREE

THE TRAIN

Aunt Hester and Aunt May had always done their best to share in Tally's life. When Tally was six years old and had been cast as a sheep in the nativity play they had read books about agriculture and sheep farming and taken Tally to the zoo to watch the cloven-footed mammals move their feet – and Tally's performance on the day had been very much admired.

So now they tackled *Angela of the Upper Fourth* and *The Madcap of the Remove*, and enjoyed them very much, though they were a little worried about how Tally would get on, having to say 'spiffing' and 'ripping' all the time, and shouting, 'Well played girls!' on the hockey field.

What they couldn't do however was get Tally's school uniform together because no list came from Delderton.