

The Swallow and the Hummingbird

Chapter One

Spring 1945

Mrs Megalith stared down at the body and sighed heavily. What an unsavoury sight first thing in the morning. It was rigid and cold and looked like something one of her grandchildren might have made at school out of papier-mâché, except this wasn't a silly prank. She clicked her tongue at the inconvenience and struggled into her dressing gown. Grabbing her stick, she proceeded to prod the corpse. It was little more than a decaying carcass of flesh and bones and fur, rather mangy fur at that. She looked at death and thought how unattractive the body was, even the body of a cat, once the spirit had departed. She felt little, just annoyance. She had so many cats she had lost count. They kept on appearing, though, in spite of the fact that she gave them little attention and certainly knew none of them by name. From where they came and why she hadn't a clue, but they were drawn to her by a mysterious force. As Mrs Megalith was a gifted clairvoyant, this was commendable indeed.

She picked up the cat, wondering why it had chosen to die in her bedroom of all places, and limped down the corridor towards the staircase. It was an omen, a bad omen, of that she had no doubt. She found Max in the kitchen making himself a cup of Ovaltine.

'Dear boy, what on earth are you doing up at this hour?'

It was six in the morning and Max rarely emerged before eight-thirty.

'There was a dead cat in my bedroom,' he replied casually. He still spoke with a Viennese accent and if it hadn't been for the Jewish blood that careered through his veins Hitler would have considered him the epitome of Aryan man: thick blond hair, sodalite blue eyes, a noble though sensitive expression on a wide, intelligent face. In spite of his nonchalant air, he was a pensive young man whose heart was far more complex than anyone would have imagined, with dark corners and deep crevices where shadows lingered. He showed little of the emotions that simmered there, for his father wouldn't have wanted him to bare his fear or pain; he would have wanted him to be strong for his sister, Ruth. Max owed him that.

He chuckled at the sight of Mrs Megalith dangling the dead cat from her fingertips. He was used to the cats and considered them part of the furniture. When he had first arrived at Elvestree House in 1938 as a ten-year-old refugee he had been quite afraid of the solitary creatures that inhabited the place and watched him suspiciously from every windowsill and tabletop, but Mrs Megalith had given him and Ruth a kitten as a present. Although he hadn't known that he would never see his parents again, he missed the familiar smell of home. The kitten had given him comfort.

'You too? Oh dear.' Mrs Megalith shook her head. 'One dead cat is bad enough but two is very worrying indeed. It does not bode well. But what are they trying to tell me? We've won the war for God's sake.' She narrowed her eyes, the same milky grey as the moonstone that always nestled on the ledge of her large bosom, and clicked her tongue. Max took the dead

cat from her and placed it outside the back door with the other one. When he returned she was sitting in the armchair beside the Aga.

‘You are always reading meaning into everything, Primrose,’ he said. ‘Surely it is nothing but a coincidence that two cats die on the same night. Perhaps they ate rat poison.’ Mrs Megalith pursed her lips. ‘Absolutely not. The omen is as clear as quartz.’

‘The war is over,’ said Max. ‘Hitler isn’t coming back.’

‘Thank the Lord! And I’ve already had one near miss so it can’t be me!’ she said, recalling a night during the Blitz when she had stayed with her sister in London. A cat had died then too. But Mrs Megalith was irrepressible; a limp and a grudge but more alive than ever. ‘No, the omen has nothing to do with the war. It’s much closer to home,’ she continued, rubbing her chin thoughtfully.

‘George comes home today from France,’ said Max, thinking of Rita and hoping the bad omen didn’t have anything to do with her. George was another matter entirely.

‘By God, you’re right!’ Mrs Megalith exclaimed. ‘Old age is a humiliating thing. I once had a good memory. Now it’s no better than anyone else’s.’ She huffed. ‘Young George Bolton, it’s nothing short of a miracle that that boy survived in those flying tin cans. It’s because of young men like him that we’re not all having to learn German and that I’m not having to hide you in my attic. Not very comfortable my attic. Though, you would have had an advantage over the rest of us, speaking the language as you do.’ She turned her attention to her granddaughter. ‘Rita hasn’t seen George for three years.’

‘That is a long time, isn’t it?’ said Max hopefully. Ever since

he had first set eyes on Rita Fairweather he had been hopelessly in love. The infatuation of a child had slowly matured into something more profound, for Rita was three years older than him and her heart was no longer hers to give away.

'In the Great War I didn't see Denzil for four. Thought nothing of it.'

'But you're not like other people,' teased Max. 'You're a witch.'

Mrs Megalith's face softened and she smiled at him. Few dared tease the 'Elvestree Witch' and it was well known that she found most people intolerable. But Max was beyond reproach. Mrs Megalith could see what no one else saw, those dark and shadowy corners of his heart where he hid a great deal of suffering. She would never forget the day those two frightened little strays were brought into her care. She loved Max and Ruth intensely, more intensely than she loved her own privileged children who had never known fear. She was the closest they had to family and she cherished them on behalf of the mother and father who were no longer alive to give them what is every child's right.

'I might be a witch, Max dear, but I'm as human as the next woman and I missed Denzil. Of course I took lovers.'

Max raised an eyebrow. 'You might laugh,' she said, pointing a long finger at him. 'But I was something of a looker in my day.'

'Why don't you go back to bed? You look tired,' she said, getting up stiffly, leaning on her stick.

'No point now. The day has begun. I might as well bury the dead,' he replied, making for the back door.

'Throw them into the bushes, dear boy.' She waved a hand and her crystal rings glinted in the sunshine like boiled sweets.

'I'm going outside to enjoy the early worm.'

Mrs Megalith's house was a large white building, fine looking in both proportion and symmetry. One half was covered in a delicate pink clematis, its petals fluttering in the wind like confetti, the other half in climbing roses and wistaria. The open windows revealed floral curtains and potted geraniums and the odd cat asleep in the sunshine. Mrs Megalith also kept two cows for milk, chickens for meat and eggs, and five white Aylesbury ducks for the sheer pleasure of watching them swim prettily on her pond. Foxes especially loved Aylesburies because they couldn't fly so she kept a hurricane lamp alight all night long to scare them away. She was an avid gardener and planted without design, sowing wherever there was a space. With the help of Nestor, the ancient gardener, she had dug up half her lawn to scatter poppies, cornflowers and wild grasses, and under-planted the rose beds with forget-me-nots. These seeded themselves throughout the borders where she grew love-in-the-mist, campanulas and euphorbia. Hollyhocks were carried on the wind and by birds and thrived among the cracks in the York stone terrace and between the bricks in the wall that surrounded the garden. The air was filled with the sweet scent of cut grass and balsam poplar, and the rich smell of bluebells from the wood above the house drifted down on the breeze.

Elvestree House also had the advantage of overlooking the estuary, which was filled with every type of sea bird, from the soft grey herring gull to the black cormorant. Their clamour now resounded across the wide expanse of sand where the receding tide left sandworms and small crustaceans exposed in an enviable banquet. Mrs Megalith gazed into the mouth

of the sea and to the horizon beyond and pondered on the dead cats and the omen that clouded an otherwise clear blue day. She knew that Rita was out on the beach, staring at the same view, willing George's safe return from France and reflecting on her future and the realisation of all her dreams.

Rita hadn't slept. The anticipation was too much. In her hand she held the letter George had sent from France specifying the date and time of his arrival. It was transparent, the words nearly worn away by the gentle corrosion of love. She sat on the cliff top, gazing out over the sea that swelled below the circling of gulls – the same sea that had divided them for so long and was now bringing him home.

Today even the sunrise seemed lovelier. The sky paler, more translucent, and the sunlight like the gentle brush of a kiss. She loved more than anything to watch the sea, for the sea had moods like a person, one moment calm and serene, the next displaying the full force of its fury. But those waters were far deeper than a person could ever be. In spite of its mercurial nature the sea was constant and dependable and capable of filling Rita with a lightness of spirit unmatched by anything else in her life. The sight of that vast expanse of ocean touched her at the very core of her being. Sometimes at dusk, when the sky reflected the golds and reds of the dying sun and the sea lay flat and almost still, as if awed by the heavenly scene being played out above it, Rita felt sure there was a God. Not the remote God she learned about at school and in church, but her grandmother's God: a God that was an integral part of the sea, the clouds, the trees, the flowers, the animals and the fish, and an integral part of her too. Sometimes Rita would close her eyes and imagine she

was a bird soaring high above the earth, with the wind on her face and blowing through her hair.

Rita loved nature. As a child she had enjoyed only nature classes; all the others she had found difficult and pointless. While the rest of the children played rowdy games in the playground, Rita had lain on the grass watching ladybirds or a ball of dew on a leaf or taming a titmouse with a walnut from George's father's garden. She would sit and sketch insects, observing every minute detail with great curiosity. She had few close friends. No one else had the patience or the interest to sit for so long. But she was well liked, if considered a little eccentric, for she was a gentle child with a great deal of charm.

But today there was more on her mind than the fluid circling of gulls or the beetles that scurried about the grass in search of food, for George was coming home. She prayed for his safe journey, whispering her words into the wind as she had done throughout the war and especially during those painful moments when Reverend and Mrs Hammond's son had been killed and Elsa Shelby's fiance' lost in action. But her George had been spared. She was ashamed to speak of her gratitude in case it was somehow jinxed. So she thanked God in whispers that were lost in the roar of the sea and in the cry of birds that flew with their wings outspread on the back of the breeze. She extended her arms and ran along the sand in imitation, her heart inflated with joy and hope, and no one could hear her laughter and frown upon her childish exuberance.

Rita had known George for as long as she could remember. Their parents were friends and they had gone to the same village school although George hadn't been in her class for he was three years older. He would wait for her at the end of

the day and walk her home before continuing his journey by bicycle for his father was a farmer and lived a few miles outside the village. He taught her how to play conkers and Pooh sticks, how to find shrimps and sea urchins in the rock pools on the beach, and in summertime he demonstrated how to start a fire with nothing but a pair of glasses. On her thirteenth birthday he had been the first to kiss her, because, he claimed, he hadn't wanted anyone else to. It was his responsibility to see that she was initiated with care because a nasty first experience could put her off for life. He had held her in the dark cave that had become their special place and pressed his lips to hers as the tide crept in to witness their secret then wash it away. Thus they had discovered a new dimension to their friendship and, with the enthusiasm of two children with a new toy, they had visited the cave as often as possible to indulge in hours of kissing interrupted only by the odd tern or sea gull that wandered unexpectedly into their cavern.

George had always longed to fly. He, too, loved to sit on the cliff tops watching the birds circling above the sea. He observed them closely, the way they glided on the air then swooped down to the water. He studied their take-offs and their landings and vowed to Rita that one day he'd fly like them in an aeroplane. When war came he grabbed the opportunity to make his dream happen regardless of the danger to his life. He was young then and sure of his immortality. He had set out on his big adventure and Rita had been proud and full of admiration for him. She had watched the sea birds in flight and thought of him. Then she had watched the pheasants and partridges his father shot down and feared for him.

She sat on a rock in their cave and remembered those

kisses. She recalled the spicy scent of his skin, of his hair, of his clothes, all so familiar and unchanged over the years. She could picture him there, his presence so overwhelming that he dwarfed the small cavern. She imagined him lighting a cigarette, running his fingers through his curly brown hair, fixing her with those speckled grey eyes, grinning at her with only half his mouth as was his way – an ironic, mischievous grin. She recalled his wide jaw, the squareness of his chin, the lines that fanned out from his eyes when he laughed. She pondered the bond that held them together, excited at the prospect of a future that was so reassuringly a continuation of the past. They would grow old together here on this beach, in this cave, in this small Devon village imprinted with the indelible footsteps of their childhood.

When she returned home her mother was making porridge, her dyed auburn hair drawn into rollers and her strong matronly figure wrapped in a dusty pink dressing gown. 'My dear, Friday's arrived, I can't believe it. I never thought today would dawn. After all these years. I'm quite overcome.' She put down her wooden spoon and embraced her child with fervour. 'God has blessed you, Rita,' she added seriously, pulling away and fixing her daughter with eyes that were moist with emotion. 'You must go to church this Sunday with gratitude in your heart. There are many who have not been so lucky. Trees and Faye must be beside themselves with excitement. To think their boy is finally coming home. It brings a lump to my throat.' She turned back to the porridge, wiped her eyes and sniffed.

Hannah Fairweather was a deeply sentimental woman. She had a wide, generous face, eyes that wept easily, especially where her children were concerned, and a large, spongy

bosom that had nursed each of her three daughters for well beyond their first year. She was one of nature's earth mothers whose sole purpose in life is to raise and love children, which she did with enormous pride. Like a magpie she kept everything: Rita's first pair of shoes, Maddie's first drawing, a lock of Eddie's hair. The mantelpieces and walls were cluttered with memories that would mean nothing to a visitor but which meant everything to Hannah; a veritable museum of her past.

The Fairweathers' rambling cottage was situated in the small seaside village of Frogna Point, hidden behind tall yew hedges and lime trees, surrounded by a manicured garden filled with birds. Hannah's youngest child was now fourteen and spent all day at school, so the birds that she tamed and cared for were like children to her. The nightingale who made her home in the tangled hedgerow, the dainty titmice who arrived in the autumn and ate crusts out of her hand, and the swallows, her favourite, who returned each spring to build their nests in the top corner of the porch. As mild and modest as the little hedge sparrows, Hannah had a good heart and a soft one – as is often the case with children raised by overbearing mothers.

'I wonder why our Rita is glowing this morning?' said Humphrey as he entered the kitchen, drawn by the aroma of porridge and toast. Short and stocky in grey trousers with scarlet braces over a neatly pressed white shirt, he was almost bald except for the thick white curls about his ears. He bent down, planted a kiss on his daughter's temple and patted her back with a warm hand.

'She's been down on the beach,' Hannah replied. Humphrey took his seat at the head of the table and poured himself a

cup of tea.

'Nothing to do with the fact that George is coming home then?' He chuckled and opened the paper, the Southern Gazette, which he edited. He grunted his approval of the front page, emblazoned with a large picture of a young woman kissing a soldier on his return from the war. If George had any remarkable stories of bravery and adventure Humphrey would be only too pleased to put them in his paper. That's what people wanted now, tales of heroism and victory.

'I'm so excited, Daddy, and yet I'm frightened too.'

Humphrey peered at his daughter over the paper. 'There's no reason to be frightened, Rita. He'll be delivered home safely.'

'No, that's not why.' She paused and nibbled at a piece of toast. 'You don't think he will have changed, do you?'

Hannah spooned porridge into a bowl for her husband.

'Of course he will have changed,' she said. 'He'll be a man now.'

Rita smiled and blushed. 'I hope he won't be disappointed in me.'

'Who could be disappointed in you, my dear?' Humphrey laughed and disappeared behind the paper again. 'You're home to George, like your mother was home to me. Don't underestimate that.'

'I remember when your father came back from the Dardanelles. He was so brown I barely recognised him, and thin too. I had to feed him up like one of Mother's chickens. But we soon got to know each other again. George will take a while to adjust, but he'll be home and reunited with his beloved. War teaches you that nothing matters but the people you love. You've been his lifeline for all these

years, Rita.' Hannah's voice faltered and she coughed to disguise it, recalling the horrors of the Great War and the broken spirits who lived to return. 'Where's Eddie? She'll be late for school.' She bustled out of the room to wake her youngest daughter.

When Eddie wandered into the kitchen, clearly still half asleep, she mumbled a brief 'good morning' before remembering that today was the day of George's return. 'You must be excited, Rita,' she said, waking up. 'Are you going to let him make love to you now?'

Humphrey's startled face popped up over the paper and Hannah swivelled around and stared in horror at her fourteen-year-old daughter.

'Eddie!' she gasped. 'Humphrey, say something!'

Humphrey pulled an exaggerated frown. 'What do you know about making love, Eddie?' he asked, wondering who had polluted her mind.

'Elsa Shelby's fiance' got back a week ago and they made love that very day. I know because Amy told me.' Elsa Shelby's little sister was as indiscreet as Eddie.

'What does little Amy know?' said Hannah, hands on hips, nearly shaking the curlers out of her hair.

'Elsa told her. She said it was like bathing in a tub of warm honey.' Eddie grinned mischievously as she watched her father's face extend into a wry smile.

'My dear child,' said Hannah severely, ignoring her husband's obvious amusement, 'physical love is for the procreation of children within the union of marriage.'

'They are engaged,' Eddie protested, beaming at her sister who had suddenly grown hot and fidgety. 'After all, she thought he was dead!'

'They still should have waited. What are a few months?' Hannah argued.

'George and Rita will be engaged soon.' Eddie turned to Rita. 'You will tell me what it's like when you do it, won't you?' Rita let her long, brown hair fall over her face in thick curls and wriggled in her chair in embarrassment.

'Edwina, eat your breakfast. You'll be late for school,' said Hannah, changing the subject. She was used to Eddie's tendency to say exactly what she thought, without reflecting on whether it was appropriate. That she had inherited from her grandmother. Eddie watched her mother spoon large dollops of porridge into a bowl then caught eyes with her father. His expression was indulgent.

'Eddie, dear, do you have to bring Harvey to the table?' said her mother, noticing the little black bat that clung to the sleeve of Eddie's woollen cardigan.

'I told you, Mummy, he doesn't like being left on his own. He's used to me now.'

Hannah sighed and picked up her cup of tea, which was as weak as dishwater. 'The fighting might have stopped but it's going to take a long time for this country to get back on her feet again. Oh, for a decent cup of tea with a healthy serving of sugar!'

Maddie was nineteen, a young woman of single mind, so there was no need to get up at such an unsociable hour. Although her parents encouraged her to get a job, she felt there was no urgency. Besides, she'd find a husband and then she wouldn't have to work. She watched Rita leave in the morning to toil away as a land girl on Trees Bolton's farm; how she'd come home in the evenings with her hands dirty and her hair full of dust, smelling of cows and manure, and was grateful that

she had managed to avoid that kind of manual labour. There were enough people keeping the home fires burning for her not to have to add to their numbers. It was a shame the men on the farm were so old and ugly for if they had been as young and handsome as those GIs she might have found something worth doing, like boosting morale in the haystacks. She rolled over and contemplated doing her hair and perhaps painting her nails. Then she remembered that today was the day George was coming home from the war.

Throwing on a dressing gown she padded downstairs to find Rita and her father on the point of leaving. 'Good luck, Rita,' she said. 'I'll be thinking of you. Four, isn't it? Leave in good time so that I can do your hair,' she added, noticing her sister's unkempt appearance. But she knew it was useless. Rita was as natural as the sea she loved and her locks would always be as tangled as seaweed. 'I'll help you. You must look your best for George.' Then she turned to her mother and seemed to wilt with emotion. 'Isn't it simply the most romantic thing in the world, Mummy?'

Rita departed on her bicycle, Humphrey in his Lee Francis, and Eddie wandered reluctantly off to school with Harvey so that Maddie was left alone with her mother to eat what was left of the porridge, now cold beneath a thick layer of skin. Hannah hadn't had the heart to tell Rita to tidy her room and had overlooked her scruffy appearance on purpose. She turned to her middle daughter. Rita might be untidy but at least she wasn't idle like Maddie. 'What are you going to do today?' she asked, wondering how she could encourage her to do something useful with her time.

Maddie sighed and pulled a face. 'I'm going to do my hair,' she said, nibbling a piece of toast like her sister had done.

'My dear, is it really necessary?'

'I want to look nice for George too!' she insisted, knowing full well that George had absolutely nothing to do with it. 'I thought I could do my hair like Lauren Bacall. Besides, it's George's welcome home party tomorrow night. You never know who'll be there. Maybe I'll meet the man I'm destined to marry. I want to look my best for him.'

'Why don't you come to Megagran's with me?' Hannah said. Mrs Megalith had been rather rudely nicknamed Megagran by Humphrey many years before. 'The bluebells are out in the wood and her garden's looking lovely. We can have lunch. Make the time go faster.'

Maddie screwed up her nose. 'She'll only insist on giving me a reading.'

'And tell you to get a job.'

Maddie rolled her eyes. 'She never tells me what I want to hear,' she complained.

'That's because she would never lie.' Hannah began to clear away the breakfast. 'You know Megagran. She takes those cards very seriously.'

'Tools for Spirit,' said Maddie, imitating her grandmother's deep voice. 'All right, I'll come, but only because there's nothing better on offer.'

Maddie wished those GIs hadn't gone back to America. She smiled secretly to herself as she thought of them all returning to their wives and girlfriends with her Polyphotos in their breast pockets.

Hannah and Maddie cycled up Mrs Megalith's drive as petrol was still scarce. Spring had thrown the countryside into flower and painted the trees and bushes with a fresh palette of colour. The pink hawthorn and white apple blossom glistened among

the phosphorescent green of leaves and grasses. The sky shone a cerulean blue upon which small white clouds floated like foam on the sea. Hannah breathed in this delightful scene, feeling God's presence in the beauty and power of nature.

* * *

'Isn't this rose quartz glorious?' said Mrs Megalith as her daughter and granddaughter appeared through the kitchen door. She raised her eyes above her spectacles and smiled at them warmly. Maddie looked at the crystals of every colour and size placed in rows on the kitchen table and grimaced at the strong stench of cat.

'What are they for?' she asked, scrunching up her nose at her grandmother's eccentricity. Ever since Megagran had visited India between the wars she had been obsessed with the strangest things.

'This, for example,' she replied, holding up the rose quartz, 'is the stone of gentle love. Its energy is soft and silky and calming. It restores harmony and clarity to the emotions. But the poor little fellow needs a good clean. I'll wash him with salt then leave him in the garden for twenty-four hours so he can soak up the elements. He'll feel a lot better after that.' She patted it affectionately. 'Still loafing around, Madeleine?' Maddie rolled her eyes. 'I'm going to marry someone very rich so I won't have to work,' she said, raising her eyebrows provocatively at her grandmother.

'That might be harder than you imagine. There's been a war, in case it's escaped your notice,' Mrs Megalith replied, digging her chins into her neck. 'How's our Rita?' she asked Hannah.

'She needs a rose quartz, I should imagine,' said Maddie, picking up a fulgurite absent-mindedly.

'So excited,' enthused Hannah. 'I doubt she's been much use on the farm today.'

'Dear girl. I hope young George marries her this summer. She's been a paragon of patience. Pass me my stick.' She waved her bejewelled hand at her granddaughter then struggled to her feet. Her sky-blue dress fell about her legs like a tent, supported by the ledge of her large breasts and her thick shoulders. 'Now, come and see the garden. It's like heaven out there.' They walked down the corridor where cats draped themselves across the sunny window ledges. Maddie sneezed. She didn't much like cats. Mrs Megalith thought of the two dead cats. 'Tell Rita to come and see me tomorrow. I want to do a reading. I feel something in my bones. Don't ask me what it is, I don't know. But now George is coming back I think she needs a bit of guidance from an old witch.'

'They would have burned you at the stake a few hundred years ago, Grandma.'

'I know, Madeleine, my dear. I was burnt during the Spanish Inquisition and it wasn't pleasant. But I bounced back to live again, many times. Truth withstands flames and one day people won't be afraid of the power that lies in all of us. Even sceptics like your Humphrey, Hannah. Even him.' They strolled around the garden, admired the 'clever little fellows' that seeded themselves and popped up in such unforgiving places as walls and terraces, and fed the ducks that swam contentedly beneath weeping willow and poplar trees. They sat on the terrace and drank elderflower cordial that Mrs Megalith had made herself. The war seemed not to have touched Elvestree House where eggs, milk and cheese were bountiful. She bartered butter for meat and fish, and managed to buy coupons on the black market for £1 each.

She even grew bananas in her greenhouse, giving all the credit to the crystals she placed among them. Everything thrived at Elvestree and, much to Hannah's chagrin, Megagran's garden was a rich playground for every possible bird, even those like the puffin and wagtail who weren't supposed to stop off in England. For some reason, Elvestree was a paradise for migrating birds, even when they had to fly miles out of their way to get there.

They lunched on a succulent chicken and home-grown vegetables, then Hannah and Maddie helped Mrs Megalith clean crystals. By the time they had laid them outside, the air had changed and the light grown mellow. One by one they looked at their watches. It was 3.30p.m. They had barely noticed the passing of time.

'Good God, Hannah,' Mrs Megalith gasped, fiddling with the string of beads she had tied to her glasses to avoid losing them. 'George!'

'And I promised I would do her hair!' Maddie lamented, feeling guilty. But her grandmother turned on her, berating her dizziness.

'George isn't going to notice her hair, Madeleine. He loves her just the way she is.'