

The Forget-Me-Not Sonata

Chapter One

The English Colony of Hurlingham

Buenos Aires 1946

'Audrey, come quick!' Isla hissed, grabbing her sixteenyear-old sister by the arm and tugging her out of her deckchair. 'Aunt Hilda and Aunt Edna are having tea with Mummy. Apparently, Emma Townsend has been discovered in the arms of an Argentine. You have to come and listen. It's a hoot!' Audrey closed her novel and followed her sister up the lawn to the clubhouse.

The December sun blazed ferociously down upon this little corner of England that resisted with all its might integration with those nationalities that had come before and fused into a nation. Like a fragile raft on the Spanish sea the English flew the flag and flaunted their prestige with pride. Yet the heady scents of eucalyptus and gardenia danced on the air with the aromas of tea and cakes in an easy tango and the murmur of clipped English voices and tennis echoed through the grounds against the thunder of Argentine ponies and the chatter of the gauchos who looked after them. The two cultures rode alongside each other like two horses, barely aware that they were in fact pulling the same carriage.

Audrey and Isla had grown up in this very British

corner of Argentina situated in an elegant suburb outside the city of Buenos Aires. Centred around the Hurlingham Club where roast beef and steak and kidney pie were served in the panelled dining room beneath austere portraits of the King and Queen, the Colony was large and influential and life was as good as the cricket. Palatial houses were neatly placed behind tall yew hedges and English country gardens and joined together by dirt roads that led out onto the flat land of the pampa. The sisters would compete in gymkhanas, play tennis and swim and tease the neighbouring ostrich by throwing golf balls into his pen and watching in amusement as he ate them. They would ride out across the vast expanse of pampa and chase the prairie hares through the long grasses. Then as the sun went down and the clicking of the crickets rose above the snorting of ponies to herald the dying of the day, they would picnic with their mother and cousins in the shade of the eucalyptus trees. They were languorous, innocent times untroubled by the pressures of the adult world. Those pressures awaited their coming of age, but until then the intrigues and scandals, passed about the community in hushed voices over scones and cucumber sandwiches, were a great source of amusement, especially for Isla who longed to be old enough to create ripples such as those. When Audrey and Isla wandered into the Club they became aware at once of the faces that withdrew from their cups of china tea and scones to watch the two sisters weave their way gracefully through the tables. They were used to the attention but while Audrey lowered

her eyes shyly Isla held her chin high and surveyed the tables down the pretty slope of her imperious nose. Their mother told them it was because their father was a Chairman of Industry and a very important man, but Isla knew it had more to do with their thick corkscrew hair that reached down to their waists and glistened like sundried hay and their crystalline green eyes. Isla was born fifteen months after Audrey and was the more striking. Wilful and mischievous, she was blessed with skin the colour of pale honey and lips that curled into a witty grin, which never failed to charm people even when she had done little to deserve their affection. She was smaller than her sister but appeared taller due to the joyous bounce in her step and the large overdose of confidence that enabled her to walk with her back straight and her shoulders broad. She relished attention and had adopted a flowing way of moving her hands when she talked, like the Latins, which never failed to catch people's eyes and admiration. Audrey was more classically beautiful. She had a long, sensitive face and pale alabaster skin which blushed easily and eyes that betrayed a wistfulness inspired by the romantic novels she read and the music she listened to. She was a dreamy child, content to sit for hours on the deckchairs in the grounds of the Club imagining the world beyond the insular one she belonged to, where men were passionate and unrestrained and where they danced with their lovers beneath the stars amid the thick scent of jasmine in the cobbled streets of Palermo. She longed to fall in love, but her mother told her she was too young to be wasting her thoughts on romance. 'There will be plenty of time

for love, my darling, when you come of age.' Then she would laugh at her daughter's dreaming, 'You read too many novels, real life isn't a bit like that.' But Audrey knew instinctively that her mother was wrong. She knew love as if she had already lived it in another life and with an aching nostalgia her spirit yearned for it. 'Ah, my lovely nieces!' Aunt Edna exclaimed when she saw the two girls approach. Then she leant over to her sister and hissed, 'Rose, they get prettier every day, it won't be long before the young men start courting. You'll have to watch that Isla though, she's got a naughty glint in her eye, to be sure.' Aunt Edna was a widow and childless but with typical British stoicism she managed to smother the tragedies in her life with a healthy sense of humour and satisfy her nagging maternal instincts by embracing her nephews and nieces as her own. Aunt Hilda stiffened and watched Audrey and Isla with resentment, for her four daughters were thin and plain with sallow skin and insipid characters. She wished she had had four sons instead, that way the odds on a good marriage would have been more favourable.

'Come and sit down, girls,' Aunt Edna continued, tapping the chair beside her with a fleshy hand made heavy with jewellery. 'We were just saying . . .'

'Pas devant les enfants,' Rose interjected warily, pouring herself another cup of tea.

'Oh, do tell, Mummy,' Isla pleaded, pulling a face at Aunt Edna who winked back. If she didn't tell them now she would later.

'There's no harm in relating this tale, Rose,' she

said to her sister. 'Don't you agree, Hilda, it's all part of their education?' Hilda pursed her dry lips and fiddled with the string of pearls that hung about her scraggy neck.

'Prevention is better than cure,' she replied in a tight voice, for Aunt Hilda barely opened her mouth when she spoke. 'I don't see the harm in it, Rose.'

'Very well,' Rose conceded, sitting back in her chair with resignation. 'But you tell, Edna, it makes me too distressed to speak of it.'

Aunt Edna's blue eyes twinkled with mischief and she slowly lit a cigarette. Her two nieces waited with impatience as she inhaled deeply for dramatic effect.

'A tragic though utterly romantic tale, my dears,' she began, exhaling the smoke like a friendly dragon. 'All the while poor Emma Townsend has been engaged to Thomas Letton she has been desperately in love with an Argentine boy.'

'The worst is that this boy isn't even from a good Argentine family,' Aunt Hilda interrupted, raising her eyebrows to emphasise her disapproval. 'He's the son of a baker or something.' She burrowed her skeletal fingers into her sister's packet of cigarettes and lit up with indignation.

'The poor parents,' Rose lamented, shaking her head. 'They must be so ashamed.'

'Where did she meet him?' Audrey asked, at once moved by the impossibility of the affair and eager to hear more.

'No one knows. She won't say,' Aunt Edna replied, thrilled by the mysterious nature of the story. 'But if

you ask me he's from the neighbourhood. How else would she have bumped into him? It must have been love at first sight. I've been told by a very reliable source that she would creep out of her bedroom window for midnight rendezvous. Imagine, the indecency of it!' Isla wriggled in her chair with excitement. Aunt Edna's eyes widened with the fervour of a frog who's just spotted a fat fly. 'Midnight rendezvous! It's the stuff novels are made of!' she gushed, recalling the secret meetings in the pavilion that she had enjoyed in her youth.

'Do tell how they were discovered,' Isla pleaded, ignoring her mother's look of gentle disapproval.

'They were spotted by her grandmother, old Mrs Featherfield, who has trouble sleeping and often wanders around the garden late at night. She saw a young couple kissing beneath the sycamore tree and presumed it was her granddaughter and her fiance', Thomas Letton. You can imagine her horror when she failed to recognise the strange dark boy who had his arms wrapped around young Emma and was . . .'

'That's enough, Edna,' Rose demanded suddenly, placing her teacup on its saucer with a loud clink.

'Dear Thomas Letton must be devastated,' Aunt Edna went on, tactfully digressing to satisfy her sister.

'There's no chance that he'll marry her now.'

'From what I hear, the silly girl claims she is in love and is begging her poor parents to allow her to marry the baker's son,' Aunt Hilda added tartly, stubbing out her cigarette.

'Good gracious!' Aunt Edna exclaimed, fanning her

round face with the menu in agitation, but clearly savouring every detail of the affair.

'Oh dear,' Rose sighed sorrowfully.

'How wonderful!' Isla gasped with glee, wriggling in her chair. 'What a delicious scandal. Do you think they'll elope?'

'Of course not, my darling,' Rose replied, patting her daughter's hand in order to calm her down. Isla always worked herself up into a lather of excitement over the smallest things. 'She wouldn't want to bring shame upon her dear family.'

'How sad,' breathed Audrey, feeling the full force of the lovers' pain as if she were living it herself. 'How desperately sad that they can't be together. What will happen to them now?' She blinked at her mother with her large, dreamy eyes.

'I imagine she'll come to her senses sooner or later and if she's lucky, poor Thomas Letton may agree to marry her still. He's so fond of her, I know.'

'He'd be a saint,' Aunt Hilda commented, dismissing the girl with a swift sweep of her knife as she spread jam onto her scone.

'He truly would be,' Aunt Edna agreed, extending her arm across the table to help herself to a piece of Walkers shortbread. 'And she'd be very fortunate. There's a great shortage of men now due to the war, it'll leave an awful lot of young women without husbands. She should have had the sense to hold onto hers.'

'And the poor boy she's in love with?' Audrey asked in a quiet voice.

'He shouldn't have hoped,' Aunt Hilda replied crisply. 'Now, did you know Moira Philips has finally dismissed her chauffeur? I think they were right to do so considering there was a high chance that he was reporting their conversations to the government,' she continued in a loud hiss. 'One can only imagine the horror of it all.'

Audrey sat in silence while her mother and aunts discussed Mrs Philips' chauffeur. She didn't know Emma Townsend well for she was a good six years her senior, but she had seen her at the Club. A pretty girl with mousy hair and kind features. She wondered what she was doing now and how she was feeling. She imagined she was suffering terribly, as if her whole future was a bleak, loveless hole. She looked across at her sister who was now playing with her sandwich out of boredom; Mrs Philips' chauffeur was extremely dull compared with Emma Townsend's illicit affair. But Audrey knew that their shared interest in the scandal differed greatly. Isla was riveted by the trouble the girl had caused. The romantic, or tragic, elements of the story couldn't have interested her less. She delighted in the fact that no one could talk of anything else, that they all spoke with the same hushed voices that they adopted when talking about death and that they devoured each sordid detail with hungry delight before passing it on to their friends. But most of all the glamour of it enthralled her. How easy it was to rock their orderly lives. Secretly Isla wished it were she and not Emma Townsend who basked in the centre of such a whirlwind. At least she would enjoy the attention.

It was a good two weeks before Emma Townsend was seen at the Club. Like a forest fire the scandal spread and grew until she was wrongly accused of being pregnant by the gossiping Hurlingham Ladies. The Hurlingham Ladies consisted of four elderly women, or 'Crocodiles' as Aunt Edna wickedly called them, who organised with great efficiency all the events held at the Club. The polo tournaments, gymkhanas, flower shows, garden parties and dances. They played bridge on Tuesday evenings, golf on Wednesday mornings, painted on Thursday afternoons and sent out invitations to tea parties and prayer nights with tedious regularity. As Aunt Edna pointed out, they were the 'protocol police' and one knew when one had fallen short when the little lilac invitation failed to find its way to one's front door, though it was at times a relief not to have to think of an appropriate excuse to decline.

Audrey and Isla had spent the fortnight looking out for poor Emma Townsend. She hadn't appeared at church on Sunday, which infuriated the Hurlingham Ladies who sat with their feathered hats locked together in heavy discussion like a gaggle of geese, criticising the girl for not showing her face to the good Lord and begging His forgiveness. When Thomas Letton walked in with his family the entire congregation fell silent and followed his handsome figure as he walked up the aisle with great dignity, his impassive features betraying nothing of the humiliation that Audrey was sure burned beneath his skin. The Hurlingham Ladies nodded in sympathy as he passed, but he pretended

not to see them and fixed his eyes on the altar in front of him before settling quietly into his seat next to his mother and sister. Emma hadn't been seen at the polo either or at the picnic which followed, organised by Charlo Osborne and Diana Lewis, two of the Crocodiles, who spent the entire afternoon muttering that if she so much as showed her face at their event they would send her home in disgrace while secretly longing for her to appear to give them more to gossip about. Then finally after two long weeks she arrived on Saturday for lunch with her family.

Audrey and Isla sat in the lounge with their brothers and parents and, of course, the indomitable Aunt Edna, when Emma Townsend crept in with her head bent, staring with determination at the floor in order to avoid catching anyone's eye. Audrey looked about as the chattering ceased and every eye in the room rose to watch the solemn procession file in and take their seats at a small table in the corner. Everyone, that is, except Colonel Blythe, who was too busy with his grey winged moustache buried in the Illustrated London News, smoking his Turkish cigarettes, to notice the silent commotion that made a small island out of him. Even Mr Townsend, a large-framed man with silver hair and woolly sideburns, seemed to swallow his indignation, choosing silence over confrontation which would normally have been his response at such a moment. He meekly ordered drinks and then turned his back on the rest of the community who were waiting like jackals to see what he would do next.

'Well,' Aunt Edna exploded in a loud hiss, 'so unlike

Arthur not to growl at us all.'

'That's enough, Edna,' Henry chided, picking up a handful of nuts. 'It isn't our place to comment.'

'I suppose not,' she conceded with a smile, 'the Crocodiles do enough of that for all of us.'

'They'll be furious they're missing this.' Isla giggled and nudged her sister with her elbow. But Audrey couldn't join in the merriment. She felt desperately sorry for the family who all suffered so publicly along with their daughter.

Just when the Townsends' shame threatened to suffocate them a gasp of astonishment hissed through the room like a sudden gust of wind. Audrey turned around to see Thomas Letton striding across the floor with his chin jutting out with resolution. Isla sat up with her mouth wide open as if she were about to scream with excitement. Albert, hating to miss an opportunity to pay his sister back for years of teasing, grabbed a peanut and flicked it down her throat. She stared at him in surprise before turning as red as a beet as the nut caught in her windpipe and prevented her from breathing. Pushing her chair out with a loud screech she swept the glasses off the table where they shattered onto the floorboards causing everyone to avert their attention from Thomas Letton and the Townsend family to see what the disturbance was. Isla's bloodshot eyes rolled around in their sockets as she choked and waved her arms about in a frantic attempt to get help. Before Audrey knew what was happening her father had grabbed Isla from behind, pulling her off the ground and wrapping his strong

arms around her stomach, thrusting his wrists into her lungs, again and again. She spluttered and gasped, all the time turning redder and redder until the whole lounge had formed a circle around their table like a herd of curious cows, anxiously willing Henry Garnet to save his daughter from a hideous death. Rose stood petrified with terror as the life seemed to leave her little girl's body in agonizing spasms. Silently she prayed to God. Later she would praise Him for His intervention because with one enormous thrust the peanut was dislodged and the child gulped in a lungful of air. Albert collapsed into tears, throwing his arms around his mother with remorse. Aunt Edna rushed to embrace Isla as she lurched back from the brink of death and began to shake uncontrollably. The crowd of onlookers clapped and cheered. Only Audrey noticed Emma Townsend leave with Thomas Letton. It didn't escape her notice, either, that they were holding hands.

'Great Uncle Charlie died from choking,' Aunt Edna remarked solemnly when the clapping had died down. 'But it wasn't a peanut. It was a piece of cheese, a plain piece of farmhouse cheddar, his favourite. After that we always referred to him as Cheddar Charlie, didn't we, Rose? Dear Cheddar Charlie.'