

Chapter 5

Poole, Dorset, August 1972

Simon ran up the short path from the little wooden gate and into his grandmother's arms. He buried his face inside her warmth. She smelled of carbolic soap.

"Well, well, young man." She sounded surprised, but he wasn't sure, because he was only seven.

This was Simon's third summer holidays, away from home and his sisters. They didn't come to his grandmother's anymore, thank goodness. He loved the silence, the grandfather clock that bonged in the hall, and the great, dappled rocking horse in the nursery, so big he had to climb up to reach it. He was going to have a real horse soon.

Granny Horton-Smith had steel-grey hair and glasses that swept up at the corners. Her house was a mock Queen Anne cottage, she said, with lead-pane windows that let in the winter draft.

"A bit of a change after Albury Hall, but needs

must!" she told her friends at St Peter's. "The house is nothing, but the garden is coming along." Her friends called her Granny Smith, but it wasn't her real name.

Outside, under the lime trees, Simon's mother, Jan, unloaded his cases from the back of their old Morris Traveller. It was dark green once. It faded long ago.

"You can park the brake in front of the garage, you know," Granny said to her. "We won't be going out."

"Blasted traffic jam in Shaftesbury," Jan said. "Why do they have to mend the roads on a summer weekend? And then there were not one but two herds of cows."

Jan was small with long hair two shades darker than natural. She wore a string of purple beads. Purple was her favorite. She kissed the air beside her mother's cheek.

"I can't stop—the girls have a ball tonight, and the house is in chaos."

"It's always in chaos, Janey darling. You will stay for lunch? There's a nice bit of silverside, and a pie from the first apples."

"Okay." Jan put on her cross face. "Where's the old

man?"

Granny scowled at her daughter. "Your *father* is on duty at the hospital. He is not expected until six o'clock."

Jan was heading for the stairs. "Where—"

"We've put Simon in the nursery," Granny said.

Simon ran round the house to the Beauty of Bath apple tree. He could have as many windfalls as he liked, but picking was forbidden. He found a freshly fallen fruit, remembered to check for wasps, and scrunched into its sweet-sourness. Why couldn't it be like this at home?

Granny laid the dining room table with napkin rings and silver. Her cooking was famous. Jan took seconds of apple pie, pouring on a small flood of cream.

"I don't know how you stay so thin," Granny said. "Little Simon's the same."

"Genes. Look at you. Best baker in Dorset, and thin as a rake. Or perhaps a friendly worm inside?" She grinned, but only for a second.

"Janey, please, not at luncheon. And you have on

different shoes—”

“Who cares?” Jan looked cross again. “Keep up to date, Mum. This place is so . . . Victorian.”

“There’s nothing wrong with Victorian values, Janette.”

“Oh, it’s *Janette* now, is it? Well, we can’t go on bringing Simon down for the holidays. It’s too far and too old-fashioned. The world is a different place now, mother. Can’t you see? You hide away in your perfect little house and go to your perfect little church on Sundays. What will you turn him into?”

Granny sat still as a statue. She put her napkin down and left the room. Jan’s cutlery clinked against her plate. When Granny returned, her eyes were red behind her glasses. They finished the meal in silence. Simon didn’t know what to say. But he was afraid of what Mum said. Summer at home would be awful.

After lunch, Jan gave Simon a quick hug as she left. “Look after your Granny, now, won’t you.” Her car roared to the corner of the street, made a rapid U-turn, and screeched to a halt outside the gate. “Forgot my bag.”

Granny Smith handed it through the window. The car vanished down the road. "I do love my daughter," she said.

Simon looked up. "Do you mean, like I love my sisters?"

The old lady took the boy's hand and they walked indoors. "Sometimes, my young man, you are too perceptive for words."

The next morning Simon found his suit laid out on the bed. Granny helped him with the buttons. He enjoyed church. He loved the soaring, stone building, and the pretty glass that threw colored sparkles on the floor, and the organ music, and the mingled scents of beeswax and fresh flowers. And the peace. Especially the peace. Was this the last summer for him here?

Grandfather gave him a book of Bible pictures to color in, but he wasn't very good at drawing. Instead, he found a woodlouse under the pew, which curled up when he touched it. If he waited, it would uncurl. When it walked on his hand it tickled and he giggled.

"Shhh," said his grandfather.

Afterwards, the vicar stood in the doorway. "Hello,

Simon, did you enjoy the service?"

Simon nodded.

"Well, say, 'How do you do?'" said Granny. He meekly obeyed.

The vicar had eyebrows like caterpillars. "What do you like to do?"

"Oh. I like . . . plants and dogs and horses. And going out in Granddad's boat."

He grinned. "Ah, a young diplomat, I see."

Grandfather John chuckled. "No, no, Reverend. He's just making clear the expectations of his stay."

John wore gray all the time. He walked stiffly, with a stick. On the way home, John turned to Simon.

"I have a proposition. What do you think of the idea of building a small boat together? It might take a year or two, but you'd learn a lot in the making, and when it's completed, you'd have your very own dinghy."

"Oh, yes, please, Granddad, that would be great!" Next to a horse, nothing could be better than his own boat. "But Mum said I can't come anymore." Simon's tears welled suddenly and he sobbed.

John patted his shoulder. "Well, let's see. I am sure something can be arranged."

That afternoon, John unlocked the side door of the garage.

Simon followed into the gloom. "The car smells of polish, Granddad." He squeezed past and came to the shell of a small boat sitting on blocks.

John stroked the unfinished plywood. "The hull is already made, but there's still a great deal to do." Under the windows stood an ancient carpenter's workbench and vice. Mysterious tools hung on the walls.

"Can we start now?"

"Well, first we must check the plans. Then ensure we have all we need. Good preparation means good progress." He smiled at his grandson and picked up a scrap of wood. "First I will show you how to use a saw."

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The following morning Simon stood gazing at the pictures in the hall. Granny came in with a large bunch

of flowers. "These are for tomorrow." The aroma of summer.

Simon pointed to a drawing of Albury Hall, a large house among cedar trees. "Is that where you used to live? It's got a lot of chimneys."

"Yes, that is where we grew up, in Sussex. It was a lovely house. During the war the army borrowed it for their headquarters. It was bombed. I believe it's a school now." She smiled a sad smile. The clock behind them chimed. "Come on, let's put these into water."

Jars of pickles and fruit filled the kitchen walls with color. Pans steamed on the stove. In the center of the room, a large woman with a red face stood at a pine table.

"You remember Sally, don't you, Simon?" Granny put the flowers in the sink.

"Hello, young Simon." Sally was arm-deep in flour. "My, you've grown. It won't be long 'fore you're in long trousers. I see you got help in the garden, then." She laughed and her whole body shook. "Beg pardon, Mrs. Smith. Don't mind my Dorset ways."

Granny tasted the soup. "We had forty last week,

Sally. Even though it's summer, they're still coming, so we'd better make a second batch of rolls."

"Can't say I'm surprised, missus, what with your cooking, an' all. Every week 'tis a different soup and a different bread. Proper *gor-mett* dinner, if you ask me. Better'n my kids ever got back home. Mind you, 'tis a good thing you'm doing, and no mistake. There's not a lot of folk 'round here'll look out for 'em, and many with a lot more to spare, an' all."

Granny was trying not to laugh. "Simon, your grandfather will be several hours, I'm afraid. You'd better go and play in the garden. And don't pick the raspberries."

The garden was large and tidy, with a sludgy-green pond of frogs and dragonflies. Butterflies covered the purple buddleia. He breathed in its tangy scent.

"Flowers turn a house into a home," Granny had said. Past the flowers were vegetables, an orchard, and a fruit cage with the forbidden raspberries.

He wandered to the old apple tree, hands in

pockets. Here the knots of Simon's year unraveled—knots from anxious parents, demanding sisters, and school bullies. But not today.

Granny's cat, lazing in the sunshine, rose and raised its tail in greeting. Simon lay down and stroked it. "I'm going to miss you, Eliot. You'd have me to stay, wouldn't you? Was your mum cross too? Or could you go where you wanted?"

Simon curled up on the grass, wrapped the cat in his arms, and wept.

* * *

On wet days, Simon worked on the boat with his grandfather only emerging, powdered in sawdust, for meals or home-made biscuits. Simon loved cutting and gluing the pieces together. It was like a jigsaw puzzle. He hated the sandpapering though.

"This is too hard, Granddad."

"You've done well, Simon. I can finish that tonight."

On bright days at full tide they'd wheel grandfather's dingy to the slipway in Poole Harbour. "Can I sail her? Can I?" Simon cried until his

grandfather relented.

Tuesdays was Granny's soup run. They loaded the old car, and Granny drove over the railway bridge to the Salvation Army. The aroma from the fresh bread made Simon's mouth water. He carried the boxes and flowers from the car.

The helpers greeted them. "Morning, Granny Smith. Hello, Simon. Isn't it warm?"

"Sally calls it a *gor-mett* dinner. What does *gor-mett* mean?"

The assembled ladies roared with laughter. Simon's face turned hot.

"Oh, but you are quite right, that is what she says." Granny Smith was still laughing. "It is French, Simon, and should be pronounced *gour-may*, not *gor-mett*. However, I do think the *Gor-mett Run* sounds rather suitable." There were chuckles and *gor-mett* jokes for the rest of the day.

At midday the customers trickled in. Even in summer many wore coats, worn and shiny around the edges. Their pockets clinked. Their weather-creased faces lit with unfamiliar smiles when they saw Simon.

Granny said grace and served dinner.

“Hello, Bob, nice to see you again. Hello, Maisie, how’s that knee? How do you do, Jane? You are most welcome.”

After the meal, they made tea and the clients sat with the servers. Simon toured the tables in charge of the milk and sugar. One was a trained accountant but fell into debt and began drinking. Another was a cabinet maker until his hands shook too much. Simon listened to their stories, amazed.

In the evenings, Granny and Granddad settled in their small drawing room with *The Times* crossword. “Off you go, Simon,” Granny said. “Teeth, hair, prayers, and no reading under the covers.”

* * *

The night before he was due home, he couldn’t sleep. He cried silently, knowing he wouldn’t come back. They were still talking downstairs. Maybe they were arranging something after all? He had to know and sneaked down to listen.

“I think you should know, John. Sally’s daughter

has had a child. Illegitimate, I'm afraid."

"How terrible. Poor Sally. What will they do?"

"Sally said her sister is adopting it. It's awfully good of her."

Silence. Then Granddad, said, "Have you heard Tom and Enid are seeking a divorce?"

"Oh, John, no, that's too bad."

"One of our own friends, Edna. I can't believe it."

"Hush, John dear. You'll wake the child."

Simon fled back to bed. They hadn't arranged anything at all. What is divorce? What does illegitimate mean? Why are they so terrible?

In the morning his mother arrived in the Morris, and they sped home to another world.