

CHAPTER ONE

Menabilly, Cornwall, July 1957

To begin. Where to begin? To begin at the beginning, wherever that might be. Daphne woke, too early, just before dawn, when the sky had not yet come alight, but was as dark-grey as the Cornish sea. The beginning of another day; another day, how to bear another day? She heard the rats running behind the walls and in the attics; she felt the weight of last night's dreams upon her chest; the nightmares hung over her, heavier than the sky.

Daphne considered, for a moment, the idea of staying in bed, pulling the covers over her head, taking another sleeping pill, and another; letting the white roses on the faded wallpaper blur into a mist. But she made herself sit up, get out of bed, put on her clothes. There was a crisis, and she must face it. She must be brave.

She looked at herself, briefly, in the mirror of her dressing table, and shuddered, very slightly. The woman who looked back at her was still beautiful at fifty; but Daphne feared what she might see in the looking glass, not of what she saw now –

that, she could bear, the fine lines and wrinkles, the slackening flesh and greying hair, the shadows under her eyes – but of what she glimpsed in her dreams. Rebecca, she dreamt she saw Rebecca gazing back at her, eyes narrowed, lips smiling, a ghost in the mirror, the story come to life; the other woman in the bedroom last night.

‘Pull yourself together,’ Daphne said to herself, just under her breath, and she turned to her dog, Mouse, a West Highland terrier that was by her side, always; her companion when the family were gone, when the house was empty, though not silent; Menabilly was never silent, there were voices that whispered from its walls. ‘The worst is over,’ she murmured, like a prayer; for today could not be worse than yesterday, when she left Tommy in the nursing home in London. And the day before yesterday, today could not be more terrible than that; though its scenes kept spooling through her head, over and over again, she could not rid herself of what she saw then, when she arrived at the nursing home, having been summoned there from Menabilly.

‘Sir Frederick is unwell,’ his secretary had said to Daphne on the telephone, ‘it seems to be his tummy playing up, and his nerves.’ Her voice was blandly reassuring, so perhaps Tommy had managed to hide the worst from her, and from the rest of his staff at Buckingham Palace; he was such a stickler for protocol, for maintaining a polished and immaculate façade.

But when Daphne arrived at the nursing home, an expensively discreet redbrick Victorian townhouse just off Harley Street, she could not control her own anxiety, it seeped in with her, like the traffic fumes, creeping through the mahog-

any doors and up the dark burgundy carpeted stairs. A nurse directed her to Tommy's room on the top floor, and as Daphne climbed the stairs, her blood pulsed so loudly in her ears that she thought everyone would hear her, even though the thick carpets deadened her footsteps. She paused on the highest landing, and looked out of the window overlooking the mean backyards of Marylebone; all of them too small, thought Daphne, as she glanced down, to support those tall, proud-looking houses that rose up from the pavements; surely their foundations could not be sufficiently substantial to keep everything standing? Surely it would not take much to bring all of it crashing down? She forced herself away from the window, trying to look purposeful, steadfast, though she felt dizzy as she went up the final flight of stairs and into Tommy's room. The floor seemed to be tilting, it was like stepping on to a boat; nothing was stable or firm beneath her, as she walked over to the hospital bed. 'Tommy,' she said to the body lying there, and as he opened his eyes, they filled with tears, her husband was weeping, he would not stop, and his hands were shaking, like her voice. She asked him if he could explain what was wrong, and he did not answer, until at last he whispered, 'I cannot ready myself . . .' She did not understand what he meant, and then he said, 'I can't go on, I can't do this, I'd be better off dead . . .'

As he spoke, tears trickled down his face; this man who Daphne had never before seen cry, Lieutenant General Sir Frederick Browning, Treasurer to the Duke of Edinburgh, but the titles seemed to mean nothing. It was her husband, Tommy, yet he was almost unrecognisable; suddenly become pitiful and weak and shrunken, his hair lank, his face

like yellowing parchment against the starched white sheets. She sat with him for a little while, but he did not stop weeping, and eventually, she went to find a doctor, to ask him to explain what was wrong. The doctor was a young man, not the chap in charge, but he seemed confident enough. 'Your husband has suffered a very serious mental breakdown,' he said to Daphne, and she nodded, as if she was a woman strong enough to hear such news without crumpling, but her head was spinning again; no, not spinning, it was compressed, as if there were too much pressure within it, as if the outside and the inside were misaligned. She tried to follow what the doctor was telling her; it was something to do with nervous exhaustion, the after-effects of Tommy's army career in two world wars, and the pressure of his responsibility for the Royal Family, and he'd been drinking far too much, and must stop. His liver was damaged, but the main problem was . . . the problem was . . . How was she to deal with this problem?

Of course, the doctor didn't know everything, and nor did Daphne, not then in the stuffy, airless rooms of the nursing home, not until she got back to the flat, Tommy's flat; his London lair, even though Daphne paid for it, just like she paid for everything. The telephone started ringing as soon as she put the key in the front door, as if it had been waiting for her, as if someone was watching and waiting, waiting for her arrival: an ambush, of sorts. It took her a minute or two to get the key to turn in the lock, but the telephone carried on ringing, insistent, shrill, and so Daphne picked it up as soon as she'd got into the hall, without even switching the lamp on, caught unawares in the twilight. 'Hello?' she said, not wanting

to give her name, not knowing which title to use here on this unfamiliar territory.

‘Is that Lady Browning?’ said a woman’s voice.

Daphne said yes, though she felt uncertain as she spoke, as if this woman might accuse her of being an impostor, an intruder in Tommy’s flat. The voice sounded familiar, but it was somehow surprising to hear the woman speak out loud, as if she were a character in one of Daphne’s books, suddenly brought to life, yet disembodied at the end of a phone line. Daphne recognised the woman’s name, though she didn’t really know her, not properly; they’d met once at the ballet, in Covent Garden, a year or so ago, when she had been a blurred face from Tommy’s London life. But Daphne sensed some danger, even then, after that single encounter, for in her mind she’d christened her the Snow Queen, like one of the ballerinas they watched on the stage that evening; irresistibly beautiful and bewitching to those under her spell, yet cold at heart, turning everything to ice around her. Not that Daphne said this to Tommy at the time, nor to anyone else, it would have sounded so childish, though the woman made her feel like a child, albeit a suspicious one, and she’d marked her down as one to watch, for she knew her kind.

The woman’s tone was clipped, rather patronising, a little like her mother when she had been angry with her for reasons that Daphne, as a child, did not fully understand. ‘We’ve reached a crisis,’ she said to Daphne on the telephone, ‘a breaking point.’ Those were her words, and as she said them, they stuck in Daphne’s head, and she wanted to say, ‘you’ve broken everything, it’s your fault,’ but she stayed silent, and tried to concentrate on what the woman was saying, on her

relentless stream of words. 'We need to talk,' the woman said, but she was doing all the talking, she was having an affair with Tommy, they were lovers, she said the words out loud. 'We are lovers,' she said, 'and we have been lovers for well over a year. I love him, you must understand this, I've left my husband for Tommy, this is not a passing fling.'

Daphne put her hand to her mouth to choke a sob, and felt her throat constrict. 'I must tell you,' the woman went on, her voice low and urgent, 'that it's clear to me that Tommy's increasing anxiety – his intolerable anxiety – is largely due to the stress of keeping our relationship a secret from you, of leading a double life. And that's also why he's drinking too much: it's his way of trying to cope with you.'

At first, Daphne was shocked, almost too shocked to breathe, she was holding her breath, as if she'd slipped into a pool of icy water. And then a hot flood of rage came pumping through her veins, her heart was thudding, and she wanted to say, 'How dare you, how dare you say these things to me, how dare you talk of yourself as my husband's lover?' But she couldn't lash out at this woman, this interloper that had invaded her life. Daphne didn't want the Snow Queen's voice in Tommy's flat, nor in her head; she didn't want any sort of prolonged conversation, it was too humiliating, she couldn't allow herself to rage at this woman, or to plead or be abject.

'What truly matters now,' she said to the woman, keeping her voice smooth, mouthing the lies, joining in with their duplicity, making it hers, as well, 'is Tommy. We both know that he's terribly ill, and somehow we must rise to the occasion, the two of us together, we must rise above our embarrassment and discomfort, for his sake.'

‘You’ve been very sensible,’ said the woman, at the end of the telephone call. But Daphne did not feel sensible. She felt . . . she felt she did not know where to begin.

Afterwards, she thought about ringing her daughters, and confiding in them. But what, exactly, was she to say to them? They were both still so young, Tessa an army wife at nineteen, and now her hands were full with two babies, and Flavia was also just a newly-wed, married to another soldier, a captain in the Coldstream Guards; and it wasn’t fair to expect the girls to deal with problems that were not of their own making. Daphne glanced over to her daughters’ wedding photographs on the sideboard, she and Tommy looking like proud parents, such a charming couple, everyone said. But it was all a sham, because he was already betraying her when he stood beside her in the church while Flavia and Alistair were saying their wedding vows this time last year, and yet she was so foolishly oblivious then, blind to Tommy’s treachery; she suspected nothing as he smiled at her, all the while a traitor to their own wedding vows.

And now the entire family was supposed to be gathering for a party at Menabilly in less than a fortnight’s time, that was the hell of it, to celebrate her and Tommy’s twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. The invitations had already been sent out, everyone was expected: Tessa and her husband Peter and their children; Flavia and Alistair, and Daphne’s beloved youngest son, her only son, her boy Kits, home from Eton. And Daphne’s mother, of course, and her two sisters, and her cousins, the Llewelyn Davies – the entire clan were invited to Menabilly. But Daphne knew she must find the strength to tell all of them that there was to be no party, and an

acceptable excuse must be found, as well, for she could not tell them the truth; the truth was too terrible to be told.

The phone calls to the girls would have to wait until tomorrow, though; she was too exhausted to speak, let alone come up with reasonable explanations. She drew the dusty curtains in the flat, ran a bath and sat in the tepid water, allowing herself to cry, turning on the taps to hide the sound of her sobbing, and then she let the dirty water drain away, and she felt drained as well, and empty, there was nothing left, she didn't want to feel anything, she couldn't bear the feeling to come back again. She dried herself on one of the threadbare towels, wondering why the flat was so comfortless; and was it part of the problem, her fault, another of her faults, for she'd not been constant, she failed to be a good wife at Tommy's side; and was that why he sought comfort elsewhere? She started shivering, her legs trembling, the numbness ebbing away; so she swallowed two sleeping pills, to blot everything out, to be shrouded in blessed nothingness, just for a few hours.

And then in the morning, she took a taxi back to the nursing home through the dusty London streets, beneath an opaque city sky, stretched tight like the skin of a drum, enclosing everyone within it, sealing them in, so that there could be no escape for any of them. 'We are all in this together,' she whispered to herself, as she went into the nursing home, yet she did not want to be seen there, she did not want to see anyone, so she hurried out of the taxi, head down, furtive, like a woman with a guilty secret.

It would be so much easier to turn a corner and vanish into the city, but she forced herself up the stairs again, and through

the door into Tommy's room, closing it quietly behind her. There he lay, like yesterday, dishevelled and unkempt, as if he had left his impeccably dressed public self back in Buckingham Palace, abandoning it as easily as a snake sheds its skin. She sat on a chair by his bed, and reached for his left hand, held it in both of hers, so that she could feel his wedding ring as she spoke, keeping her own hands from shaking, keeping her voice gentle and calm against the muffled, churning background of the London traffic on the other side of the locked window.

'I had a phone call last night,' said Daphne, 'and now I know everything about the affair, more or less.'

Tommy looked at her, saying nothing, but his eyes widened in fear, and she said, 'Don't worry, darling, I don't want a divorce, and I hope that you don't, either. We just need to straighten things out between us, don't we?'

And still he was silent, so she kept spooning out banalities, in a soothing voice she barely recognised as her own. 'We've had to lead such separate lives,' she said to him, 'almost from the beginning, haven't we? There was your army career, right from the start, and all those long years when you were posted abroad during the war, you doing your duty, and me writing away all the while, keeping the home fires burning, and then you got your grand job at Buckingham Palace, which was such an honour, darling, I know that, I truly do, and I'm so proud of you, I've always been proud. But that's kept you in London during the week, and you know I can't work there, it's too noisy and busy for me to think straight, I have to be in Cornwall to write, I must be in Menabilly, or the books will dry up, and so will the money. But we've been so happy together, and we can be happy again.'

He sighed, and then coughed, a small, dry, pathetic little cough. 'I love you, my darling,' she said to Tommy, even though she loathed him at that moment.

'I love you too,' he said, but he whimpered the words as he wept; and she felt nothing but contempt for him then, for he sounded like a little boy, not a man; he'd lost the commanding authority she had fallen in love with, her handsome major in the Grenadier Guards, a quarter of a century ago. She did not refer to their physical relationship, or its decline in the last decade; they did not talk about that; they never had done. She was fifty, and he was ten years older; she assumed that these things happened, this slow fading away of desire, this dwindling of the flesh. Boy Browning: that was his nickname in the regiment when she first met him in 1932, and it stuck, even as his boyish good looks aged; and now she was following in his footsteps, youth shrinking behind them, everything withering away.

Daphne could not bear to stay another night in London knowing that she was sleeping in the bed where her husband had been with his lover, her head on the same pillows, tangled in the same sheets; knowing that this place contained their words of endearment, their secrets, so she'd already crammed her things into a suitcase and taken it with her to the nursing home. She wondered if she should feel guilty about abandoning Tommy alone in his room on the top floor; and what would the doctors think of her, leaving her husband in London? 'Sir Frederick will need complete bed rest here for at least another week,' the young doctor said, taking her to one side as soon as she arrived. And she knew then that she would go mad if she stayed there with her husband;

she would end up a wreck like him, locked up in that suffocating attic, with just a square of sky glimpsed through the window.

'I'm going to have to go home to sort everything out, darling,' she said to her husband, trying to keep her voice bright. 'I'm cancelling the wedding anniversary party, so you don't need to worry about that, you just concentrate on having a jolly good rest here, and catch up on your sleep.' She despised herself for sounding like a mother talking to a child; but she could not help herself, she could not help him, everything was twisted and distorted out of shape.

'Where are my boys?' he said to her; and that was all he could say, a grown man asking for his teddy bears, the boys, he called them, the tattered teddies he'd kept since childhood, that had travelled in his case to and from London and Menabilly for years, and before then, around the world with him, while he fought wars and led regiments of men; a steely-eyed general upon whom a nation depended, yet who himself relied on the comfort of a baby's soft toys. 'You must find my boys,' he said. 'I need to have them here with me.'

'I'm not sure where they are, darling,' she said. 'When did you see them last?' And he starting crying again and shook his head, unable to speak. They stared at each other mutely for a few seconds, and then she fled from the room, and went straight to Paddington Station. It seemed the only thing to do, to take the train back down to Cornwall, to make the long journey home.

And so here she was, alone again; not that she would ever be entirely alone in Menabilly; not here, with all the voices murmuring, soft yet insistent, asking her to listen . . .

‘I’m not listening,’ said Daphne, and went downstairs to let the dog out in the garden. The sun was just rising, but not yet visible in the flushed pink sky above the tall trees that surrounded Menabilly. She decided, suddenly, to walk down through the woods to the beach; to keep moving, she must keep moving. ‘What is past is also future,’ she muttered to herself, but she was not quite sure what this meant, though she believed it to be true when she wrote it late last night in a letter to Tommy. She did not know whether she would send the letter; she did not know the right thing to say to him; she feared that words had failed her, had failed them. Would they ever find the right words for each other again? It was as if they had somehow drifted into speaking in two different dialects, with no translator; and yet, right up until this crisis, they were still pretending to understand each other, they picked up on the occasional familiar word or phrase; they nodded and smiled, they were always apparently civilised.

As for Rebecca, the shape-shifting mistress of dissembling and pretence . . . ‘I know you’re here,’ said Daphne, quietly. ‘What do you have to say for yourself now?’

The woods were all shadows, tangled and overgrown, slippery with mud and moss, scented with a sweet decay, even in the high summer, but Daphne was sure-footed, she walked this path so often, Rebecca’s path from the house to the sea. She passed the corpse of Tommy’s old boat, *Ygdrasil*, that he sailed on their wedding day to the little church just along the estuary at Lanteglos, slipping through the rippling, silvery water, and afterwards they’d spent their honeymoon aboard it, hidden away in Frenchman’s Creek, the waves lapping at them like a secret caress, only the birds as witnesses to their kisses, and the

crescent of a new moon. But now the boat lay abandoned on dry land, rotting into a ghost ship, choked with ivy, tendrils of rhododendrons reaching out to it, threatening to submerge it for good; the trees encroaching on it, as always at Menabilly, their roots like dead men's fingers, ready to advance and recapture their lost ground. They sighed in the wind, the leaves rustling in warning around Daphne, as if she were the intruder, here in her own kingdom, as she followed the ribbon of her path through the woods, until she reached the beach, where the trees must make way for the waves.

The tide was low this morning, the ancient shipwreck visible, a century-old skeleton half covered in sand, its funeral wreath of rotting seaweed draped about it still; and there was something almost obscene about its nakedness, its humiliation, revealed for all to see; the seagulls swooping over it with their mocking cries. But there was no sign of Rebecca, that sly girl, whom time did not fade. 'Where are you?' called Daphne, and her voice was caught by the wind and echoed against the rocks. 'You, you, you . . .' murmured the echo.

Daphne picked up a stone and threw it, and another one, and another. They cracked against the shingle, like gunshots, and she thought of Tommy's revolver, back at the house, she must hide it before he came home to Menabilly, it wasn't safe for him to have a gun, or his bows and arrows, which stood ready in sharp serried rows by the front door. He was at breaking point, something might snap, irrevocably, the act would be over, the veneer cracked; and in a blind rage, he could shoot her, like Maxim killed Rebecca, in the sinister little cottage on the beach. But Rebecca wouldn't die, even now, twenty-one years after Daphne first wrote her into

existence; except then Daphne imagined herself as the second Mrs de Winter, shy and young and inexperienced, obsessed and possessed by Rebecca, haunted by the ghost of her glamorous predecessor. And slowly, slowly, the pattern turned in on itself, like a kaleidoscope, until Daphne was Rebecca, and her husband was ready to kill her, and replace her with a younger woman, but a clever one, no innocent anonymous girl, this time; for Daphne must face the implacable Snow Queen, who put a sliver of icy glass into Tommy's eye, as well as his heart, so that he could no longer see straight, he was cold to everything he once loved: a doomed and frozen de Winter.

'Stop it,' said Daphne, out loud, shocked at how fast these thoughts had risen and consumed her, like the tide on the turn, and the dog looked at her, surprised. 'Get a grip,' she whispered; she must get a grip; she could not let herself *be* gripped by the wild ideas that twisted and coiled within and without her; by these irrational thoughts of plots. There were no plots. 'This is it,' she said to herself, 'there is nothing more than this.' She was a fifty-year-old woman, walking on the beach, not long before her silver wedding anniversary, with a family gathering to postpone, lists to make and dates to check. Her husband was having an affair, but this could be dealt with, it was a messy episode in the ordinary muddle of life; the marriage would recover, just as it did after Daphne's affairs, not that poor Tommy necessarily knew about them all those years ago though perhaps he guessed, except surely not about Gertie, Tommy could not begin to comprehend such a thing. But Gertie was dead and gone; disappeared from the world of the living in a way that Rebecca was not.

Not Rebecca. She was not Rebecca. She wrote Rebecca, and she could write her off. She killed Rebecca, after all; she made her die, chose the manner of her ending, and if Rebecca rose again, why, she was nothing without Daphne; for she was Daphne's creation.

She whistled for the dog, turned her back on the waves and the melancholy wreck, avoided looking at Rebecca's cottage, empty now, and walked homewards. It was a mistake to come down to the sea so early, it was not part of her routine; she should still be fast asleep, the routine must be resumed, the routes, she and Tommy called them, the safe routes by which their lives were mapped and secure. She needed a bath and breakfast and then work, she must concentrate on another book, nothing to do with Rebecca, this would be the way to recovery, this was the only way forward, step by step, moment by moment, until lunch and an afternoon walk with the dog, as usual, to clear her head, and more writing, she had letters to send, and dinner and reading and bed, and so on, and on and on, inching to safety, away from the abyss, until everything became clearer again

Tod was awake by the time Daphne returned to the house, pottering around the kitchen, making breakfast. She looked at Daphne but did not question her; they knew each other too well for that, for Tod had been with Daphne for nearly forty years, on and off, more often than not, first as Daphne's governess in childhood, and then as governess to Daphne's own children, and now at seventy, she was still part of the household, though installed in a little flat of her own at the end of a long passage on the other side of the house. Tommy

did not like her; he called her Mrs Danvers, after Rebecca's macabre housekeeper, which was absurd, of course, for there was nothing unnerving about Tod, just as there was nothing inherently murderous about Tommy, and though she was devoted to Daphne, it was not at all the same as Mrs Danvers' obsessive love for Rebecca.

What was clear, thought Daphne, as she looked at the familiar figure of Tod – rounded and comfortable, more like Mrs Tiggywinkle than Mrs Danvers – was that something would have to be done, if Tommy was to give up the London flat and the London job and the London woman, and live full-time at Menabilly, as Daphne suspected might be necessary in order to save their marriage. But he was often irritable and angry with Tod, and her feelings would be hurt, as had happened before now, like that uneasy Sunday lunch, not long ago, when Tod said that her throat hurt and asked Daphne for a remedy, and Tommy snapped, 'just cut it'. It would be impossible for the three of them to live together here, and yet Daphne felt responsible for Tod, who would be lonely if she was dismissed from Menabilly.

And then it came upon her again, the dread, with its choking sensation familiar from her recurring nightmares, not those of Rebecca in the mirror, but the other dreams, of the high tide, when Daphne was in the dark water, trying to keep afloat, but it was overwhelming, and she knew that she might drown. She must not panic: if the panic became too strong, she would be sucked under, dragged down to the depths; she must remember to breathe, though her throat was closing up.

'My dear,' said Tod, 'you look so peaky. You must eat something, you need your strength at a time like this.'

Daphne wanted to cry – it was easier to be alone, not to hear the kindness in her old governess’s voice – but she would not break down in front of Tod; not after witnessing Tommy’s terrible gulping tears in the nursing home, his face contorted, looking like a nightmarish gargoyle version of himself; Boy Browning turned into a weeping old man. She cleared her throat and told Tod that she was going to have some tea, and then she would be writing in her garden hut, as usual.

‘Very sensible,’ said Tod. ‘Settle yourself into a routine, again. Best get on with your work.’

As Daphne walked across the roughly mown lawns in front of the house, she tried to gather her thoughts, her strength; she needed her strength, like Tod said. She could not run away from here. This was it; this was the task ahead of her, to . . . to do what, exactly? To return to her work, when her marriage was not working? She opened the door of her writing hut, breathing in its familiar smell of dust and wood and paraffin fumes from the old heater that warmed it in winter. Scattered across the desk were the untidy sheaves of notes and books she’d abandoned before rushing to London, to Tommy . . . was there any point in trying to pick up the pieces of what she had left here? What was she thinking, before the unthinkable happened? Daphne looked at the opened books – the Shakespeare Head edition of the Brontës; four volumes of their letters and juvenilia, filled with her pencilled marks in the margins – and it seemed to her as if it had been years since she had leafed through the pages, even though she recognised some of her notes as those she scrawled just a few days ago, along with the beginnings of

a letter to the editor of these books, a Mr Symington. And then there was that name she'd written in capital letters on the front of her latest notepad. 'Branwell Brontë . . .' Daphne spoke his name out loud. 'Branwell?' she said again, but there was no answer, just the creaking of the floorboards as she walked across to her desk.

Why Branwell Brontë? Why try to write a biography of him now? It was risky, of course – he was a notoriously hopeless case, famous only for his failures – yet could she simply cast him aside; could she abandon the research she had already begun on him? Perhaps Tod was right, it would be good for her to get on with the book; Branwell might even be a lifeline. Yet the thought of Branwell in the water with her was not much help; he would be drowning, drunk already, or stupefied with opium, a dead weight dragging her down into the darkness, into the depths, the two of them tangled together, their limbs embraced . . . And really, what was the point of submerging herself with Branwell, or attempting to rescue him, when she had so many immediate problems to face? There were the conversations with Tommy to be had, and with his doctors; and she must find excuses for Kits to explain his father's stay in the nursing home, though perhaps the girls were old enough to understand the truth now, they'd seen enough of his drinking already, and the bouts of depression and melancholy which had led to his family nickname: Moper. ('Don't call me that,' he'd often said, but Daphne simply laughed. 'That laugh,' he said, 'the famous du Maurier laugh . . .')

Yet despite all the obstacles, despite everything, Daphne knew that to give up the book might be worse than continu-

ing; for she couldn't bear the thought of being without it, of the emptiness and sense of futility that would engulf her otherwise; she must have some sense of purpose, a steady framework within which her mounting anxiety might be contained. If words had failed her with Tommy, then she must somehow grope her way into putting other sentences together, piecing them into paragraphs, into pages, however slowly; reminding herself that she was still a writer, even if she was a failure in every other part of her life.

And she was almost sure that Branwell was her subject. She had been preoccupied by him, ever since her pilgrimage to Yorkshire last winter when she visited the Brontë Parsonage in Haworth and walked through the austere stone house where the Brontës lived, and died, in the shadow of the graveyard; Branwell the first to go at thirty-one, the failure of the family, haunted by his sense that he had achieved nothing great nor good in his life, by the spectre of his unwritten masterpieces, his unpublished novels, his unfinished paintings; tormented by the knowledge of unfulfilled promise, of hope turned to ashes, to dust.

Daphne sat in front of her typewriter, keeping her eyes down, well away from the view of the sea, away from the wreck, away from the depths. 'Stay away from the water,' she said to herself, 'keep your eyes on the page.' And she tried to force her writing brain into action, making it tick over, clicking, forming connections; but would it misfire? The nagging anxiety could not be kept at bay; no, it was in the bay, along with the shipwreck. She glanced over at her notebook from the trip to Haworth, when she'd spent hours in the library of the Brontë Parsonage, reading fragments of diaries

and letters, and the childhood stories of Angria, willing herself back in time; and then when the stone walls became too oppressive, she'd gone outside, following the path up across the moors, trying to walk herself into *Wuthering Heights*.

Closing her eyes against the sunlight, Daphne pictured a pen moving across a page; Branwell's hand, writing his Angrian chronicles, feverish and furious, shut away in an airless room on a sultry afternoon, when the thunder and the rain was pent up behind the clouds, and he was waiting, waiting to escape out into the world. Or was there no escape from the imaginary world that he conceived for himself and his sisters, the fantastical landscape they called 'the infernal world'? Was there no better place to be than there, amidst the Angrian wars and conquests, or the romances and tragedies of Gondal?

'Gondal,' she whispered, aloud, speaking the word that she'd already seized upon for herself, for Gondal was what she called her own, most private make-believes and secrets and fictions; Gondal was an island that she had already explored, if not yet conquered . . .

Daphne imagined reaching out and taking Branwell's pen from him and writing him into life on the page; the red-headed boy who burnt out in that infernal world, reincarnated in her brilliant book, her best yet; to match the best of Charlotte and Emily's work, to match Branwell, too, for in proving him to be a lost genius, she would also prove herself.

And then she heard it again, the mocking laughter, just behind her, or was it inside her? Was it a magpie's laugh or a seagull's cry or a call of the curlew, wheeling and soaring in the sky? Where was it coming from?

Daphne remembered a game she played as a child with her sisters and their friends in the garden at Cannon Hall; the other girls called it 'Grandmother's Footsteps' but Daphne christened it 'Old Witch'. She had to stand at the end of the garden, with her back turned to the rest, and one by one they crept closer to her. Every few minutes she spun around, suddenly, to try to see them moving, and if she caught one of them out, that girl would have to go back and begin again. But there was always one who moved silently and pounced while your back was still turned. Now, the rear of Daphne's neck prickled as she waited for a hand to tap her on the shoulder or to feel another's breath in her ear, but she would not turn round, she must not look behind her, she could never go back again.