

SURFACE TENSION

Prologue: Back Then

August 1976

That was the summer when the lush green of the English landscape was bleached pale as parchment. Streams dwindled to a trickle, then dried up entirely. Reservoirs were barren and fissured like elephant hide. Blue skies above and sunshine, day after day for weeks, weeks that stretched into months.

That was 1976, the summer of the drought.

For the six friends who had taken up residence in the lofty rooms of Grays Orchard, those summer days of heat were a long indulgence. The biscuit-coloured lawns round the house were permanently dotted with rugs and pillows, and a hammock slung between two apple trees was hardly ever empty. At night they lay on their backs on the grass and searched the heavens for shooting stars.

One morning in late August, a morning hazed with gold like all the other mornings of that endless summer, Gus Ridley woke late. The air drifting through the open window was sweet with pollen and hay. From outside came the murmur of voices and, far off, the steady drone of a combine harvester. Another flawless day.

He planted both feet firmly on the wooden floor, squatted on the edge of the double mattress he mostly shared with Katie and ran his fingers through his tangled thatch of dark hair. Then he coughed, reached for the packet beside the anglepoise lamp and tapped out the first cigarette of the day. Pausing only to pull on a pair of threadbare shorts, he padded barefoot down to the kitchen, where he plugged in the electric kettle and spooned Nescafe from an enormous jar into a mug. There were tomatoes and new potatoes heaped on the table: Pauline had taken advantage of the early-morning coolness to work in the garden.

Gus headed towards the door to go out and join the others on the lawn, then thought better of it and retreated into the cool gloom of the house. Today he wanted to observe, without being seen.

Quietly, he padded from room to room, pausing each time to gaze out of the window at the group on the lawn. He went into the drawing room, the morning room, the library, the smoking room, the dining room – grand names, all of them, for rooms whose function was interchangeable, since all were equally bare of furniture. A few cushions, perhaps, a battered armchair, a rickety table. A pile of magazines or a plate with an ancient meal congealing round its rim. The room most used was the breakfast room, which had a gramophone on the floor in one corner with a heap of records fanned out beside it.

Gus loved these rooms; he loved their echoing purity and the way the dust spun through them in shafts of sunlight. His love for the house at Grays Orchard, and all it represented, had become a fierce pain in his chest, now he knew their tenure was running out.

He tossed the stub of his cigarette into the grate, where it snagged on a cobweb and remained hanging above the pile of cinders and old butts, then he went upstairs. From the bow window on the landing he looked down again at the group on the lawn.

Raymond, as usual, was sitting a little apart from the others. Feet tucked up on opposite thighs in a full lotus position, he looked like a small Indian god with his dark, exquisite features ... Gus never knew, with Raymond, where the pose ended and reality began, and he had a hunch Raymond wasn't sure, either.

Katie and Harriet were the centre of the group. Of course. Two such beautiful women were bound to be the centre of attention wherever they went. Harriet's brown hair was bleached by the sun. Tall and strong and regal – Gus had always wanted to paint her as a warrior or an archer. Boadicea must have looked like Harriet, he thought. Boadicea in a flowered dress. By contrast Katie under her straw hat was all blue-eyed, pink and blond femininity. As he watched them, Katie laughed and leaned over to press her ear against Harriet's stomach. Harriet smiled and shoved her gently away. Too soon, she must be saying; it's far too soon to feel the baby move.

From opposite side, Pauline and Andrew looked on. Gus knew that, although their mouths were smiling, their eyes would be cautious, holding back.

He felt a piercing sadness. Already this unborn child of Harriet's had become the most important member of their group. Raymond, cross-legged under his tree, was no doubt reciting a mantra designed to ensure its spiritual pre-eminence. The first Grays Orchard baby. Since Harriet's pregnancy had been confirmed, they're devoted their spare time – and most of their time was spare, that summer – to discussing how the child was to be reared. 'Not like we were' was the common theme. Andrew had already started looking out wood for a crib, Katie and Harriet discussed names endlessly, and Pauline, God help her, had bought knitting needles and a ball of lemon-coloured wool.

Gus could have wept. They honestly believed this present contentment was to be the foundation of all their future happiness; he could have told them that time was running out and their best times were already in the past.

A little later he was in his studio, the high, vaulted space that used to be the apple loft and was still permeated with the acid scent of old apples. All the canvases for his next exhibition were propped against the walls, on chairs and easels. They showed the members of the Grays Orchard group doing all those vaguely pastoral activities they delighted in: Andrew chopping wood; Pauline scattering corn for her brown hens; Harriet hoeing her vegetables.

His first exhibition, a year ago, had been a runaway success. Dealers and galleries and private buyers fell over themselves to purchase those first twenty pictures of his friends at Grays. The Grays Orchard style. The paintings had been described as 'dreamlike', 'mesmerising', 'luminous'.

If he could, Gus would buy back every one and destroy them all. The light that had so enchanted the public was phoney, he saw that now.

Stepping back, he narrowed his eyes to examine the painting on the easel. It was one he'd done in the spring: a figure lying in the hammock, a blinding shimmer of appleblossom and radiance all around. A waterfall of light.

A treacherous lie.

He took a soft brush and loaded it with a wash of paint, weighed down like a fat bumble bee with pollen. Then, concentrating hard, he began to apply the shadows.

Disaster was approaching. He didn't know how or when, but he knew it was coming.
It had to.