PROLOGUE

In the middle of a forest – so large that it spanned forever, so green as it teemed with life, so ageless that time itself stood still – a new sprout appeared.

It dug its way out of the ground, fighting through the earth, gasping for air. It was only little, barely more than a seedling, nothing like the colossi surrounding it, whose branches reached up to the heavens. It would be a long time before this new sprout even came close.

The forest vowed to watch over the sprout, as it did with all its children, and as the tree grew and bloomed flowers of its own design, the forest would ensure that it never lost its way.

All things happen for a reason, and this is where it begins. A new life had been chosen; a new path formed. The forest had found what it was looking for – it would

do everything in its power to bring the child home.

Because this sprout had a name, one that would someday be carved into its very bark, engraved for all eternity.

Elsie Anne Clarke

And though the sprout felt very small and was a little scared, it needn't be afraid. If only it knew how big it would someday grow to be.

Chapter One

The School in the Woods

Elsie Clarke had never been to a boarding school before, but she had read about them in books and that was enough to leave an unsettling ache in her stomach.

The ache only grew worse with every mile she travelled, her heartbeat synchronised to the *clickety-clack* of the train's wheels against the rails. It would be a long journey from London to Wales, made even longer by the fact that there was so little to do. There were only so many minutes (approximately twenty) that Elsie could stare out the window before she got bored. Then she stood, alive with the thought of exploring the train and perhaps finding something nice to eat, but before she could take her first step, her mother grabbed her hand and pulled her back with a scolding hiss. 'Elsie! Behave!'

Elsie slumped back into their booth. In the seat opposite, her father ignored the both of them, idly turning the pages of his newspaper. The headline read:

COULD THIS BE THE WAR TO END ALL WARS?

'Bloody Germans,' Mr Clarke muttered.

Mrs Clarke shot him the same stern look she'd given Elsie. 'Harry! Watch your language,' she whispered, her green eyes darting around the carriage to make sure no one else had heard. Her lips pursed and she nervously tucked back her short, curly blonde hair.

Mr Clarke's pointed nose twitched in annoyance, and his brown moustache followed suit, but he flicked his eyes up to Mrs Clarke with an apologetic look. 'Sorry, Peg. You know how the paper puts me on edge.'

'Then put it *down*,' she said, and he reluctantly folded the paper and set it aside. 'Besides, it's not worth getting worked up about. It'll be over by Christmas.'

Elsie sat uncomfortably still for the rest of the journey as they went from London to Cardiff, then Swansea and then to Aberystwyth. There, they found a car waiting, which drove them even further into nowhere until they were surrounded by nothing but dense forest with only a single dirt road passing through.

Starting at a new school was frightening enough, but the isolation made it so much worse. The school was so far

away, she'd only be able to return home for the holidays. For the rest of the year, she'd be trapped in the middle of nowhere, far from the city and urban life. Nothing about this new arrangement was ideal but what frightened her most was that she'd never even heard of this new school until a month ago, when a mysterious letter had shown up at their house on Addison Road, Kensington.

Elsie remembered it so clearly, the morning she had bounded down the stairs, ready for breakfast, only to stop when she saw the letter slip through the post flap on the door and land on the floor of the hall. Then the doorbell rang, announcing the letter's arrival. She went to the door, intending to say a quick 'thank-you' to the postman, but when she opened it, she saw no one. The street outside was empty, not a soul to be seen.

Disturbed somewhat, she closed the door and picked up the letter, surprised to see that it was her name written on the envelope in elegant handwriting. That too, struck her as odd. She almost never received letters.

In the dining room, she found her mother setting the table for breakfast.

'Who was that at the door?' Mrs Clarke asked, placing a cup of tea down by Mr Clarke's plate as he sat reading the morning paper. Elsie took a seat opposite him.

'No one,' Elsie replied. 'There was nobody out there.'

Mrs Clarke frowned, looking annoyed. 'I'll bet it was those Jones boys from down the street. Ringing doorbells

and running off. I've heard that's the sort of thing children get up to these days.'

Elsie said nothing, still staring at the letter.

As Mr Clarke turned his page, he glanced over at Elsie. 'What have you got there?' he asked.

'A letter. It was on the floor. It's addressed to me.'

Mrs Clarke stopped in her tracks on her way back to the kitchen. Mr Clarke put down his paper. They stared at her.

'Who's sending *you* a letter?' her father asked and Elsie wished he hadn't put it so bluntly. She was well aware that she didn't have any friends.

'I don't know, I haven't opened it yet.'

'Well, go on then,' Mrs Clarke urged and she sat down at the table to watch.

Elsie tore open the envelope and withdrew the letter. It was typewritten and professional-looking, with an emblem in the top corner of a blue shield bearing three white stars, the middle of which was bigger with more points.

Elsie read the letter.

Dear Miss Elsie Clarke,

I am writing to you on behalf of Miss Coleridge's Academy for Gifted Youths to inform you that there are several first-year places still available for this upcoming school year, beginning 1 September 1914. Miss Coleridge's Academy is one of the finest

learning institutions in Wales, with a rich history and unfaltering reputation. It is a place of undisturbed learning, suited for students with an aptitude for the academic and an ambition for higher education.

We are aware of your current school record at Rochester Academy, your above-average grades, and your success in three national spelling-bees, and it is because of your flawless record that we invite you to take one of our remaining vacancies this year. You would be a welcome fit for our school.

If you wish to accept, please have your parent or guardian respond to this letter before 15 August and we will discuss further the matters of tuition and travel arrangements. Be aware of the long train journey required to reach the school but rest assured that our fine academy has all the necessary amenities to keep you well looked after until the school holidays.

We do hope you'll consider our invitation and we look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,
Miss Coleridge's Academy for Gifted Youths

Elsie's stomach sank with each word she read. She would have liked to tear the letter up and throw the pieces away but with her parents' eyes still fixed on her, she had no choice but to read it aloud to them. Once she'd finished, she looked up to see her parents gaping, their breakfast long forgotten.

'One of the finest learning institutions in Wales?' Mr Clarke repeated, sounding intrigued.

'Sounds rather prestigious to me,' Mrs Clarke said, her lips curling into a smile. 'Well, won't that stick a bee in your headmaster's bonnet? I've always said you were too good for Rochester.'

'But Mum, you can't … We've never heard of this school before! You can't seriously be considering it?' Elsie fought.

'Why not?' her father joined in. 'You're always saying how much you hate it at Rochester. Perhaps it's time for a change.'

'To another school in London, sure, but not Wales! Besides, it sounds like a boarding school and the boarding schools in books are always awful.'

Mr Clarke huffed. 'Nonsense. *I* went to a boarding school and it was perfectly alright. You read too much fiction and it's giving you false ideas.'

'The Cruises next door, they sent Sara off to a boarding school last year,' Mrs Clarke said. 'Mrs Cruise was bragging about it for *months*, how Sara's grades had

improved drastically after making the switch. Just wait till I tell her about *this*.'

'No!' Elsie pushed her chair back and stood, brushing her long blonde hair out of her face. 'There's no need to tell anyone because I'm not going!'

'I think you should,' Mr Clarke said.

'Give me one good reason.'

In answer, Mr Clarke picked up the newspaper and turned it back to the front page. He held it up for Elsie to read the headline.

WORLD ON THE BRINK OF WAR

Elsie's shoulders sagged as she remembered.

'If this escalates any further then the world is going to be a very dangerous place for everyone. Outside the city is the safest place you can be, I assure you,' he explained. He made a good point, one she couldn't argue with, and on the thirtieth of August, when they arrived at Paddington Station and saw the crowds of young men in uniform, ready to be shipped off to who knew where, Elsie finally agreed that her father was right.

In the back of the car, Elsie hugged her carry-bag to her chest, knowing that inside, buried deep under her reading books and spare pyjamas, was her stuffed toy rabbit, Flopsy. Her mother had been adamant that she leave it behind – 'You're not a child anymore!' she'd insisted – but Elsie couldn't imagine facing a new school without her oldest friend.

She stared out the window, her eyes losing focus until the forest became one big blur of green and somehow, that helped to calm her. She felt a faint tug in her heart, reminded of a world she'd left behind long ago.

Six years old and running through green fields and muddy puddles, going home with wellies and overalls soaked. Those years in Australia, living in the rural parts of Victoria, felt like a dream to her now. She remembered cows, her father's medical clinic and her tiny schoolhouse but couldn't name any of her old classmates.

Then she'd moved to England, returning to her father's homeland to be closer to her grandparents. Elsie remembered how excited she'd been to see the city she'd read about in books, only to be disappointed upon arrival. The dim, grey sky, the smoke in the air, even the brown and murky river Thames sapped all the joy out of her heart. The population was bigger, the streets were noisier, the voices were different and they said words Elsie had never heard before like 'brollies' and 'bangers and mash'. Not even the sight of Tower Bridge, St Paul's Cathedral and Buckingham Palace could cheer her up. They were just buildings.

But in the years since then, she had grown accustomed to it all. She was used to looking out the window and seeing narrow brick houses squished together like sardines instead of open fields. Rather than playing outdoors, she spent more time in her room than ever, poring through books and learning as much as her brain could hold because her parents

said a quiet pastime was more befitting of a growing lady.

She was eleven now and knew London like the back of her hand. She had excelled at Rochester – even if she hadn't made any friends – and her father held a permanent position at a clinic in Shoreditch. Mrs Clarke, who like Elsie had also been born in Australia, had made friends with the neighbours and did her best to learn their customs and habits, applying them to her home as well. She began to dress differently and altered her speech in order to hide the unmistakable twang of an Australian accent. She implored Elsie to do the same until she was sure that her family were 'English through and through'.

Now, Australia was nothing more than a distant memory.

After half an hour's drive, the forest finally opened up to her first glimpse of her new home. Her heart deflated. In her head, she had imagined a magnificent castle, with towering turrets, a feeling of wonder and awe surrounding it. But what she saw was an old building with a single turret, sat atop a hill, made of dark brick and missing tiles on the roof. Ivy grew up the walls, twisting around the window shutters. In the distance, to the right of the school, Elsie spotted a greenhouse so enshrouded in vines and leaves that it must have been abandoned long ago.

The car passed under rusting iron gates with a sign that read:

Miss Coleridge's Academy for Gifted Youths

They followed the road up to the school and stopped before the front steps. As Elsie got out of the car, the pit in her stomach grew bigger and bigger with each step. Mr Clarke opened the trunk to retrieve her suitcase, while Mrs Clarke straightened Elsie's blue dress, fixed her collar and wiped her pale, freckled cheeks clean.

'Well, this is it,' her mother said in her usual impassive way. Mrs Clarke didn't like getting emotional and so often hid her feelings behind vague, meaningless sentences. Elsie was used to it and had long since learned to translate. 'Well, this is it' usually meant something along the lines of 'I'm going to miss you.'

Elsie pulled her mother in for a hug and Mrs Clarke allowed it before letting go and straightening Elsie's dress again.

'Promise me you will be on your *best* behaviour,' she said, her gaze intense.

Elsie almost sighed out loud but stopped herself. 'I will.'

Footsteps sounded nearby and they turned to see two teenagers, a boy and a girl, making their way down the steps. The boy was tall with blonde hair and broad shoulders. He wore grey pants and a black shirt, with a grey blazer over the top and a stripy blue and white tie. The girl was tall too, with fiery red hair trapped neatly in a

long braid that ran down her back, just like Elsie's blonde one. She wore an ankle-length black pinafore over a grey long-sleeve shirt. Her dress and the boy's blazer both bore the school's emblem – the same starry blue shield from Elsie's invitation letter.

The girl reached them first, holding a clipboard. 'Hi, are you,' she consulted her list, then looked up, 'Elsie Clarke?'

Mrs Clarke nodded for her. 'That's us.'

The red-headed girl held out her hand to shake Mrs Clarke's. 'Lovely to meet you. I'm Millicent and this is Julian. We're head girl and boy here, so it's our job to watch over the first-years.'

'Wonderful,' replied Mrs Clarke, sounding pleased.

'Here, let me take that,' Julian said, taking Elsie's suitcase from her father, who looked pleased to be rid of the burden.

Seeing her suitcase in a stranger's hands made the pit in Elsie's stomach grow so large she feared she might fall in. A month ago, she'd never even heard of a Miss Coleridge and yet now, here she was, at her new school in the woods, being handed over to these strangers like she was the last piece of apple pie at a village fete. She hugged her carry-bag tighter, thinking only of Flopsy.

Elsie expected the introductions to last longer, for her parents to ask all kinds of questions about the school, the faculty, the curriculum, any extra-curricular studies and what musical instruments were available, but it seemed

the long train ride had worn all this out of them as Mr and Mrs Clarke hugged Elsie in turn and said, 'We'll see you at Christmas then, love.'

Then they got back in the car and drove away.

Elsie watched until they were a speck in the distance before a gentle touch on her shoulder made her turn around. Millicent stared down at her, offering a kind smile.

'It's lovely to meet you, Elsie. Welcome to the academy.'