

## Meet Matty...

An extract from *The Butterfly Summer*

I wasn't lonely. I wasn't very happy, but I learned pragmatism. Then, when I was almost nine, I met Matty, and then I had her.

Down on the creek one day, with the *Red Admiral* moored up at the neck of the river, I was at the shoreline desultorily picking at the sand with a stick, skirts tucked up into my bloomers, boots caked in mud. I was trying to catch live whelks for Digby, and was debating whether to sail out a little further, or whether to walk up over the meadow. But when the tide was right and the wind and the sun were playing together, it was hard to be away from the water. Digby, next to me, was snuffling at a shell when we heard a cry.

'Hey! Get away, you're trespassing!'

I looked up to see a tanned, scruffy creature running down the slippery steps to the shore. 'Excuse me, this is my land,' I said, trying not to sound haughty. '*You're* trespassing.'

The figure passed a hand in front of its face, wiping mud off its nose and staring at me to reveal a pair of bright green eyes, which widened. It began to laugh. 'This is good! You're a girl, ain't you? I've got that clean wrong.'

Patting the old straw hat I had crammed on my hair, and looking down at my navy bloomers and thick boots, I stared up in annoyance. 'Yes, of course. How rude,' and then I laughed. 'Oh. Are you a girl, too?'

'I'm a girl all right,' she said, and held out her hand, gazing frankly at me. 'I'm Matty. I live in the gatehouse.' I knew the gatehouse of course, though I'd never been in. It had a neat curve of lemon-yellow roses that flowered around the front door each year and was the kind of house I dreamed of living in. Well-tended, pretty, compact. Two up, two down. I nodded recognition. 'Are you the little lady

they talk about, the one who'll have that big house all t'herself one day?'

Her tone was mocking. I took her hand, and shrugged. 'Matty's the name of someone in a book. My – she was a servant here, a long time ago. Did you know that?'

She shrugged. 'My name's Matilda. We been here for centuries, just like you, you know. Plenty of Mattys in my family. My ma says we used to serve you, long afore your grandmother were born. My gran, she was a wet nurse to your gran.'

'Oh,' I said, slowly. I knew there must be a grain of truth to what she said and I liked the idea that the Matty who helped Nina nearly three hundred years ago had a descendant called Matty who was here now, on this beach with me. 'More like great-great-great-great-however-many-grandmother.'

She shrugged, obviously bored of this topic. 'Something like that. What you doing?'

'Looking for whelks. This is Digby.'

'Lo.' She nodded at the dog; Digby cocked his head on one side. 'There's plenty more over by the old Wyckhams' beach, if you want to sail round there. I was up there yesterday.'

'Right,' I said, and with the straightforwardness of youth we didn't ask each other any more questions. I turned the *Red Admiral* over, helped the strange girl in, and we cast off.

I remember that day still, the scent of saltwater burning on skin, the mackerel we caught and roasted, the smell of woodsmoke. Lying on the tiny secret beach, wet sand and silver shingle cold between our toes. I remember the conversation, as if it were yesterday.

'What do you do all day, then?' she asked me.

'Me? I catch butterflies and I play by myself and I study with my governess. What about you?'

'I do what I want,' she said, and I glanced at her, admiringly. She was leaning back on her elbows, face to the sun.

'Well, I can't do that. Someone would stop me.'

'Yes, you can.' She turned to me then, green eyes glinting, as though stray beams of sunlight had become trapped in them. Her skin was like caramel – in those days, still, it was rare to see

someone deliberately tanned. Most of our lives were spent covering up from the sun's rays, for the shame of looking like a labourer. 'You can do anything you want, Teddy. Don't go thinking you can't.'

'Not me.' I laughed. 'It's Keepsake. I have to carry it on, no matter what.'

'Why? Because there's all that nonsense about your grandmother dying here and them over at Manaccan church refusing to bury her and all o'that?'

I put down the mackerel I was grilling. 'I . . . I hadn't heard that.'

'Oh.' Matty stood up, in front of me, blocking out the sun. 'Oh, right. Well, I'm sure you know better than me.'

'What do you mean, though? She was ill and she died—'

Matty raised one hand. 'Ain't none of my business. You forget it, yes? I'm right about one thing. There ain't nobody going to stop me doing what I want when I grow up, either. One day I'll just – I'll fly off, and I won't come back. If I fancy it.'

That morning Jessie had laid out my dress with the frilled, pin-tucked apron over the top, my black laced boots, polished so they gleamed, a new red ribbon for my hair. The idea I'd just do what I wanted was laughable. It was inconceivable.

I smiled at her. 'You'll have to show me.'

'You bet I will,' she said, fiercely.

We were friends from that day onwards. Probably I never had a better friend. Matty was two years older than me and could roam freely all day. She knew how to shoot an arrow, shoe a horse, light a fire, catch, bone and cook a fish, and after my grandmother died and my mother turned away from me she became the centre of my world. I had never had a friend my own age before, someone to explore with, to talk to, to share an apple with. Matty made everything better. I let her come hunting with me, and together we caught all manner of butterflies in my grandmother's laurel boxes and nets. I told her stories of the house, the sounds at night which terrified me. She made up ridiculous tales about goblins and circuses, invented wild jokes about Jessie and Turl and Talbot the agent and Reverend

Challis over at Manaccan church, which made us hysterical with laughter. She was naughty, I suppose; I'd never been that way and I loved it. We dared each other to greater acts of danger, balancing on cliff edges. We stayed out all day, coming back after dusk.

And then my tenth birthday arrived.

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# *The Butterfly Summer*

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