*The Cloud Designer*

Lord Ormerod Richardson

WILSTONE - 29 October 1886

The waters of the lake have dropped again.

Level at an all-time low. Ground reconnaissance necessary. Unable to pick up supplies in flight.

That brief message was the last she had received, then the White Wings' on-board radio had gone dead, and every time Ally had tried to make contact by activating the studio's transceiver microphone, it had returned only a sinister hiss. If Grover was in Wilstone, there was no hope of communication, Ally knew, her father had been coming and going from the small town in the county of Hertfordshire for years, and at that distance from home, with no radio aerials to carry the signal, the on-board equipment was losing frequency. But a whole day with no news, no drawing, it couldn't just be another delay, no, something had to have happened.

Ally looked up at the grey sky from the small window on the roof of the attic on York Road and immediately felt her heart squeeze with a cold nostalgia. London could indeed be a sad city without her father's touch. The flat, uniform sky was a dreary, empty canvas if deprived of the arabesques that the cloud designer could give him every night. There was nothing but grey: the houses, the roofs, the smoke coming from the chimneys of buildings and factories and from the great pollution control directorate, the whale, as Grover called it, which was just then flying slowly over his head.

*Tump, tump, tump.*

Three sharp, decisive bangs. Ally winced, it had to be him at that time of the morning. She rushed to the stairs, jumping down the steps to the entrance.

"Grover! Dad! Is that you?"

From outside, beyond the wood and frosted glass of the ornate door, there was a fat, grating cough immediately followed by the harsh voice of the prime minister's secretary: "I am Lord Ormerod Richardson."

Ally opened the door, her mouth wide and her eyes dark. "Lord Richardson, good morning."

"What on earth is going on, Miss Mills? Where is your father? Where are the clouds?" blurted the secretary, pointing at the sky with the tip of his cane: his face flushed, his small and green eyes under two bushy red eyebrows, his waistcoat barely containing an over-inflated belly.

"I've already had three unwanted visitors this morning, straight home, you see!" he exclaimed, his round cheeks flecked with purple, two plums out of season. "I'm afraid to get to the palace, Miss Mills, the prime minister, the queen! What am I going to tell the Queen?". Lord Richardson paused long and eloquently to emphasize his foul mood. His eyebrows had closed into a thorny lump in the centre of his forehead, while with his free hand he started to wipe his sweat-slicked brow with a handkerchief. "The work your father does is a job of great responsibility, which requires seriousness and respect. The people of London expect to find clouds every morning, Queen Victoria expects clouds every morning! Everyone, for God's sake, expects a new drawing to accompany them throughout the day! Without the clouds... dear God, I don't even want to think what might happen."

"Lord Richardson..." said Ally as soon as the man had given her a chance to speak, "my father has not returned from his water-supply trip. I tried to contact him but... nothing."

"Nothing? He can't have disappeared into thin air. How long has he been gone?".

"Yesterday morning.

"But how on earth is that possible?" Lord Ormerod scratched his swollen chin with the handle of his cane, a small crown carved from a single piece of silver, then went back to wiping his forehead.

"The transmitter on board is losing signal without radio links. Before landing, it sent its last communication, then nothing."

Lord Richardson cursed. Grover Mills was the biggest thorn in his side. His creative flair was beyond question, there was no doubt about it; a genius, as he was also called by Queen Victoria, and this had made him one of the most famous and praised men in London. But away from his clouds Grover was nothing more than a complete disaster. He was never properly dressed, or on time when summoned to the palace. He didn't bother to take off his aviator's helmet even in front of the ladies, or smile, or bow; and then that damn banger he insisted on flying, what was it called? White Wings? An outdated two-seater balloon, a steam dinosaur that could plummet over Londoners' rooftops whenever it was released into the sky.

"I understand, Miss Mills," he huffed in exasperation. "If I can help in any way... this needs to be resolved as soon as possible and with proper confidentiality."

"I would need a vehicle to get to Wilstone."

Ormerod Richardson cursed again. He turned back to his steam carriage with the engine still running, which he would certainly not have to account for to anyone but his irritable bowels. "Can you drive Miss Mills?"

"Any news of Dad?" Duncan's disdainful face and straight blond quiff swooped down on her when she was trying to slip her coat on.

"No, just someone complaining about the clouds." Duncan pressed his nose to the glass of the small ogival window in the foyer that looked out, covered by a thorny rosebush, onto the front stairs. "Someone? That's...."

Ally put her hands on his shoulders, she was still taller than him but she knew that would soon change. "I have to go out now."

"I want to go with you!" sentenced Duncan crossing his arms. "I'm old enough, even Dad says so all the time."

Ally then tried the best smile she had and looked him straight in the eye, like when he was a baby and there was no way to stop him crying except by staring at him for a long time, even trying not to blink, until his restless spirit could relax and give in to sleep. He, like Lucius, Olive and little Quinnie, the latest arrival, appeared in the morning when Grover came home after work, hidden in an old suitcase, an egg basket, a rotten wooden box; without a name, a note. Entrusted to the fate and heart of Grover who, everyone from the West to the East End knew, would never close the door on a child. Small, howling like dogs, frightened more than foxes by the sound of hunting horns. Brothers by the will of fate.

"And that's exactly why I need you here. In father's absence you will be the man of the house."

Duncan sketched a half-smile. "Of course, but...."

"No buts; when Olive wakes up, let her know you'll have to take care of everything today, I'll be here before dinner." She went out running, with Lord Ormerod Richardson waiting for her inside the narrow cabin of the carriage and set off at full speed as he continued to puff and wipe her forehead with the now to be wrung handkerchief. "My driver is waiting behind Vincent Square. I will leave the carriage there and expect to find you there by teatime. For any further communication, my receiving channel is five."

Ally nodded as the reflection of the still grey sky stained the windscreen of the steam carriage with sadness, and the radio tuned to the royal channel played the latest Royal Navy successes in a pompous voice. She felt cold, in spite of her padded coat, right down to her heart.

*Tell me my story, Dad.*

*But you must know it by heart by now.*

Grover's voice materialised in her head and brought a tear to her eye.

*Please, one more time, the last.*

And then he smiled, in that way that made his eyes squeeze shut so tight they almost disappeared, knowing full well there would be a hundred, a thousand more "just one more time". He put down the book he was reading, fetched the tobacco on the small table next to the old armchair and tucked in his pipe, then stretched his arms and legs, growing even taller, and slowly, as if he were an actor in front of his audience, began to count: "It was night, and the snow was coming down thickly and together with the cold it brought sleep. Everything, every creature, every piece of iron or stone, seemed only to want to sleep that day. The streetlamps along the road were all out, asleep, the carriages empty, the streets deserted, the windows dark. Even the whale had stopped flying, dozing off somewhere in a hidden corner of the sky. So, I should have expected this when I arrived at the depot to start work, but instead, at first, I got angry. I was late, I needed time for the drawing I had been asked to do, but White Wings, like the rest of the city, was sleeping. I went through the whole system: canals, turbines, onboard navigator; nothing, my white-winged lady just wouldn't hear of it, with the engine flooded and unable to start even with the manual starter. So, I thought it was time to reset the system, reset everything, and hurried back home to get the spare navigation system. I ran in and ran out again. And there you were. Appearing out of nowhere, wrapped in a blanket on the glistening ice steps. Hush, hush, with only two big eyes staring up at the sky in admiration, at my sky. So, I picked you up and without thinking I went back to the shed, to the White Wings which had now suddenly woken up with the propellers spinning and the tyres screeching and stuck in the chocks. I held you on my lap that night, and for as long as it took to draw, you never cried and never stopped keeping your eyes open, so you became my Ally, my ally in the sky.”

A tear ran down her cheek, silently down her raised lapel. Lord Ormerod Richardson pulled over and got out, leaving the keys in the ignition. "Teatime Miss Mills."

Ally nodded as she slid into the driver's seat. She switched on the navigator and programmed the destination as the Clock Tower from afar chimed seven o'clock in the morning.

*Where are you, Dad?*

She asked herself as she turned into Victoria Street, still almost empty.

*You can't leave us alone.*

CHAPTER 2

The Deer Inn

The Deer Inn was the first place she thought to look. Grover loved to dine on a good steak roasted over the embers of Celeste's stone fireplace, a fireplace big enough to hold a whole quarter of a deer or, if necessary, a little girl complete with all her shoes if she were disobedient.

The warmth of the memory made her smile. It had always been nice to follow Grover in the sky, and even there, at the small lake for supplies, where, with a full tank of fuel, Grover never failed to leave a drawing for the farmers who had remained faithful to the land, brave men, as he always said, who resisted every day in spite of the lure of the industries open in the city.

*Everyone has the right to raise their head and dream*, he said, *and it is we who must remind people of this, we cloud designers.*

There had always been room for her on the White Wings, despite the whims of Duncan, who daily insisted he was old enough to join the team, and Lucius, who would follow his older brother into the muddy waters of the Thames. The White Wings had remained a space just for them, a moment to hover over the city, copying the sketches that came on time every evening from the mechanical mouth of the transceiver in the attic, with Queen Victoria's coat of arms at the top and at the bottom the usual sentence signed by Lord August de Bethencourt, the official communications officer: "Details at your discretion. Make the Queen proud."

Then suddenly it was all over. One night Grover had gone out without waiting for her, another night he had contacted her by radio to ask for a description of the drawing that had been sent, and then not even that. The sky had suddenly become her business only.

The astonished and then insulted remonstrances had been to no avail, nor the sulking, the silences that had lasted for days, the ceasing of duties at home, or the hunger strikes.

*Olive take care of it; Lucius I'm counting on you; Duncan, are you still hungry? Ally's plate remained full.*

Everything was simply finished, and without explanation, as it was in Grover's habits.

Ally took a deep breath, the countryside surrounding her along the edge of the dirt road was empty, sad: dark expanses cleared for the next planting, a sea of earth like coal, interrupted by sudden patches of forest and abandoned fields. Ally felt a weight on her heart again. It seemed that the nostalgia of memories had been able to come up and make an indigestion of the world, ripping away all its beauty and colour.

*Dad, where are you?*

The icy air, as she stepped out of the car, stung the pale skin of her face. Ally pulled on her long coat and walked briskly towards the entrance. She entered. The fire was lit as she expected, the musician was performing for a meagre audience of customers, as she remembered, and Celeste at the stone counter was busy drying some large soup bowls, just like last time. A huge woman, with a voice powerful enough to make the dead jump in their graves, as Grover said, and a fist that, try as she might, could lay you straight to sleep if you complained about the bill or too much garlic in the soup.

"Celeste!"

The frowned woman turned around and fixed her deep-set eyes on Ally's face. She was wearing that funny fringed headdress on her head. "Ally!" a sincere smile broke out on her plump mouth, her big arms spread out along with the dishes and the rag soaked from endless days of work. "Come, let me greet you properly! I always tell Grover he has to take you to the old aunt in the hills now and then, and at last at least one has thought of it herself!"

Ally took a few steps, ready to be hugged. It was nice, that contact, even if it was a bit too tight and impregnated with garlic. Grover never hugged her, he was incapable of it. He patted her shoulder, patted the curly hair that surrounded her face; that was manly stuff.

"Let me have a look at you," continued the innkeeper, who now had her by the skinny arms. "You're a lady now, a very pretty girl. Indeed! And in spite of that rotten father of yours! So, it's true, there are miracles!" and she laughed so loudly that a couple of customers sitting next to her jumped and the musician shut up.

"I'm here for him, Celeste. Have you seen him?"

The woman changed her expression. "Of course, I saw him, yesterday morning for the usual portion of venison, before loading up and heading back."

"Well, that's exactly why I'm here, Grover didn't come back."

Where else could she look? The town was small, except for a couple of streets, the blacksmith's shop and the tiny church, and it was as deserted as the countryside crossed to get there; cholera, the call of London, the bad hop harvests, year after year had emptied the fields and the stomachs of too many people. Ally had a photograph around her neck, a portrait in a brass oval engraved with the letter 'Y'. She as a child, Grover in overalls and a helmet on his head, the same one he still wore for good luck every time he took to the skies his white-winged keel lady, the White Wings. And he had shown it to everyone: harried women, dusty children, passing travellers, farmers. Many had recognised him, Grover was a celebrity even outside London, but nobody seemed to have seen him around. The blacksmith's shop was the last place she went to ask, then, hopelessly, as she reached the edge of the town, she leaned against a fence in the honeysuckle and, with the locket clutched between her fingers, went back to staring at the clouds.

*How do you draw clouds, Dad?*

*We need clear, uncontaminated water, that's why we've come so far, and I'm afraid we'll soon have to go further away. Factories are advancing every day to conquer air and water without anyone noticing. But the clouds do, the clouds know, and dirty water will never give you the white you need.*

His smile, the big hand in the hair for a manly dishevelling.

*And then you'll need your dreams.*

Ally remembered her father's face suddenly becoming sad, his brow frowned in thoughts that remained secret. A cloud passed inside his head and then flew away as he spoke to her again.

*How many people do you see raising their heads to the sky? Look around and try to count them. You won't fill the palm of your hand. Nobody dreams anymore. People have stopped imagining, and that's what we're for, that's what drawings are for: to remind people of lost dreams.*

Ally sighed. She never thought she would miss her father so much. Not after the last few fights, after he'd ousted her from the White Wings and their joint work. She hunched her shoulders. All that was left was the lake, she thought as she put the locket back around her neck, though it was unlikely. The bottom was low, loading was always done "on the fly" with a single descent to fill the entire tank, and then there was the last message: "Impossible to draw, level at an all-time low".

But where to look then? Ally decided it was a good idea to try, the lake was always a hope... then she'd have to go back home and, maybe, if someone in heaven was listening to men's prayers, she'd find him in front of the fireplace, with his pipe in his mouth, a friendly smile and one of his strange mechanical gifts to make up for it.