

# FRIENDS AND TRAITORS

HELEN PETERS

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crow



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**HELEN  
PETERS**

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For my father, Robert, who grew up during  
the Second World War, and my mother,  
Ruth, who was born in the middle of it.

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## CHAPTER ONE



### Right in the Middle of the Chaos

Nancy gaped at the enormous mansion in the distance. *Oh my giddy aunt*, she thought. That's not a house. It's a palace.

Her stomach squirmed as she stood at the bend in the drive, clutching her little cardboard suitcase. How would she ever fit in here?

She took a deep breath. *You'll be fine*, she told herself. *Mother did it. Granny did it. And it's not as if you've never cleaned a house before.*

But *this* house?

Nancy had an overwhelming urge to run back to the station and catch the next train home. But she made herself keep walking.

As she rounded the bend, she saw that the house formed three sides of a massive square, set around a huge courtyard. And every inch of the courtyard was littered with school desks, chairs, pianos, mattresses, music stands, bed frames, easels, tables, boxes and packing cases. It looked as though a mischievous god had picked up a school building, dangled it above the house and emptied its contents on to the grass.

As she stared at the scene, a boy about her own age, in a flat cap several sizes too big for him, swaggered out of the main entrance. He grinned at Nancy.

“Hey, redhead! Watch out, your hair’s on fire!”

She rolled her eyes. “Very funny. Never heard that one before.”

“Nancy!” said a voice behind her.

She turned and saw a man in a chauffeur’s uniform carrying a packing case. What a relief to see a familiar face.

“Oh, hello, Mr Burford,” she said.

“Hello, Nancy. How was your journey?” he asked, setting down the case and wiping his sweaty brow with a handkerchief.

“Not too bad, thank you. The train was packed with soldiers and evacuees, though.”

“Seems like the whole country’s on the move since Hitler reached the French coast,” Mr Burford said. He beckoned to the boy to come and join them. “This is Albert. He helps out in the gardens and stables. Nancy’s the new housemaid, Albert.”

The boy nodded to Nancy and she raised her eyebrows with a look that said, *Not so cheeky now your boss is here, are you?* She noticed that he only had one arm. His right shirtsleeve was tucked into his belt.

“I’m afraid you’ve arrived right in the middle of the chaos, Nancy,” Mr Burford said.

“Yes, what’s going on?”

“Girls’ school, moving from the Sussex coast in case Hitler invades. We only found out on Friday.”

Nancy's eyes widened. "A whole school? Will I have to clean for them too?"

Mr Burford laughed. "No, they're bringing all their own staff."

*Thank goodness for that*, Nancy thought. If she had to skivvy for a school too, she'd pretty soon be looking for another job.

"The removal men were meant to take the furniture indoors," Mr Burford said, "but they had to go and evacuate another school. You'll have to pitch in straight away, I'm afraid. Lucky you came in uniform."

"Yes, thank you for sending it. And for getting me the job."

"Well, they wanted a good strong country girl, and I thought you'd be ideal. Your mum said you won a scholarship to the grammar school, but it's better to be out at work, eh? Not much point getting a fancy education with the world as it is at the moment."

"No," said Nancy. "Anyway, I've always wanted to travel."

He laughed. "Stanbrook's not exactly Timbuktu. You've only moved twenty miles."

"It's the furthest I've ever been. And one day I'll go further."

Nobody knew how disappointed Nancy was that she'd had to leave school on her fourteenth birthday. She had told her parents she didn't mind, because what was the point in being upset? The scholarship didn't include the expensive uniform or the books, so that was that.

“How’s your dad these days?” Mr Burford asked.

“Not so bad, thank you.” She tried not to think about Dad’s terrible coughing fit this morning. His lungs had never been right since he had been gassed in the last war.

An older girl in a green dress like Nancy’s walked up a stone staircase from the basement and picked her way through the furniture towards them.

“Rosa, this is Nancy,” said Mr Burford. “Nancy, this is Rosa, the head housemaid. She’s an evacuee of sorts. Came over from Austria two years ago.”

Rosa smiled at Nancy. “Pleased to meet you,” she said. She had a slight accent, and her pale, anxious-looking face was framed by long dark plaits pinned up on her head. Nancy tried not to stare as she said hello, but she wondered why Rosa had left Austria and where the rest of her family were.

“You two take the dining tables in,” Mr Burford said. “Albert and I will make a start on the beds.”

As Nancy followed Rosa to a cluster of tables, a gleaming green sports car came speeding up the drive.

“Oh!” breathed Nancy. “Look at that!”

“That’s Lord Evesham’s car,” said Rosa. “I’m sure he wasn’t expected today.”

“Albert, fetch Mr Armitage,” called the chauffeur, straightening his cap and heading down the steps to the forecourt. “Rosa, Nancy, stand by the main entrance to greet his lordship.”

From their position by the front steps, Nancy watched, entranced, as the car came to a screeching



halt. "A BMW 328. Oh, my goodness! It's even more beautiful than in the photographs."

Mr Burford opened the driver's door and saluted. A tall, immaculately dressed man in a trilby sprang out of the car and glared at the furniture-strewn courtyard.

"Armitage!" he barked.

A smartly suited man appeared as if by magic, gliding across the courtyard so elegantly that you could almost have imagined the furniture was parting to make way for him.

"That's the butler," Rosa murmured.

"Welcome back, my lord," said the butler with a bow.

"What the devil is all this junk, Armitage?" said the earl. "It looks like a Boy Scouts' jumble sale."

"It is unfortunate, my lord, that you should have arrived at a time of some upheaval, but, rest assured, it will all be cleared by nightfall."

"Nightfall's no bally good to me, Armitage. I've got several vanloads of priceless porcelain arriving any minute. Get the servants to clear a path, and look sharp about it."

"Curtsy as his lordship passes," Rosa whispered.

Lord Evesham completely ignored the maids, but Mr Armitage, following him, stopped and said, "Move those tables inside quickly, then start on the chairs. The headmistress will show you where to place them." He glanced at Nancy. "You must be the new housemaid. Good."

*Some welcome*, thought Nancy. Still, you couldn't

blame him for being a bit tense. Lord Evesham didn't seem like the most easy-going employer.

As she and Rosa headed back to the tables, a fabulous red sports car pulled up on the forecourt. Nancy's mouth dropped open. A Jaguar SS100! This place really was a whole new world.

She gazed in admiration as Mr Burford opened the door. The driver got out and removed her cap, goggles and gloves.

Nancy gasped. It couldn't really be her, could it?

"What is it?" asked Rosa, grasping one end of a table.

Nancy stared at the trouser-suited woman. "Oh my giddy aunt, it's Dorothy Taylor."

"Do you know Miss Taylor?" asked Rosa.

"Of course I do," said Nancy. "I mean, I don't *know* her, but I know everything about her. Is she a friend of Lord Evesham's?"

"Yes," said Rosa. "I think she is a racing-car driver?"

"She's an *incredible* racing-car driver," said Nancy. "She beat all the men at Brooklands last year in *that* Jaguar. She races motorcycles and flies planes too. She's *amazing*. Oh, wait until I tell Jack!"

"Jack?"

"My brother. He's with the British Expeditionary Force," Nancy said with that mixture of pride and fear she always felt when she thought of Jack fighting in Europe. "He loves racing too – we used to read all the race reports together, and he's going to take me to Brooklands one day."

They heaved the table into a marble-floored entrance hall that was quite a lot bigger than Nancy's entire house. A woman who was surely the headmistress stood in the hall like a column of steel-grey tweed.

"Take that into the dining room and place it at the far end on the left," she said.

They staggered into the grandest room Nancy had ever seen. Vast oil paintings in gilt frames hung on red-silk-covered walls. A huge crystal chandelier was suspended from the ornate ceiling.

"It took eight men to move out his lordship's dining table yesterday," Rosa said.

"Where is it now?" Nancy asked.

"In the library." Rosa gestured to a door on the other side of the hall. "That will be the earl's dining room while the school is here."

As they walked back through the room, Nancy saw Lord Evesham and Dorothy Taylor in the entrance hall. Mr Armitage stood at a respectful distance.

Nancy gazed at the impossibly glamorous woman in her elegant trouser suit. She still couldn't believe her heroine was actually here.

"Do you think I could ask her for her autograph?" she whispered to Rosa.

"Her what?"

"To write her name on a piece of paper for me."

"No!" whispered Rosa, looking shocked. "You must never speak to the family or their guests unless they speak to you first."

They couldn't get out of the dining room, as the

headmistress was hovering in the doorway while the butler introduced her to Lord Evesham. Nancy watched in amusement as she blushed and bobbed a curtsy.

Lord Evesham smiled graciously. “Delighted to meet you, Miss Hathersage. Welcome to Stanbrook.”

“Thank you so much, your lordship. I cannot express how much we appreciate your kindness.”

“Not at all, not at all. We must all do our bit for the war effort, eh?”

The headmistress gushed a reply, but he was already walking away, with Dorothy Taylor beside him. Miss Hathersage turned to the maids. “Fetch the classroom lists from the desk in my study,” she said to Rosa. “It’s the Green Drawing Room, on the first floor.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Rosa, and headed down the hall.

“Well, don’t idle about,” the headmistress said to Nancy. “Go and fetch some dining chairs.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Nancy. *Bossy old bat*, she thought.

On her way out, she glimpsed Lord Evesham and Miss Taylor turning off the main corridor. Her heartbeat sped up. What if she *could* get Dorothy Taylor’s autograph? Imagine sending it to Jack! Wouldn’t he be amazed!

Boxes sat piled up by the front door. On some impulse, Nancy picked one up and followed the pair at a distance. They walked into a room near the end of the corridor. Nancy slowed her pace as

she approached.

The door was slightly ajar, and she heard Lord Evesham say in a low voice, "We can't discuss this now. Too many people around, what with this dratted school turning up."

"Well, I don't know how else we can discuss it," said Miss Taylor. "We can't say anything on the telephone, and you might not be in London for weeks."

"Keep your voice down," he said. There was a pause, and the sound of a match being struck. "All this waiting is jarring my nerves."

"Well, Saturday is all in hand," said Miss Taylor. "So there's no need to fret where that's concerned."

"I'm still not sure you should be doing it yourself," said Lord Evesham. The smell of cigarette smoke drifted into the corridor.

"I've done far more dangerous things, Gerald. In any case, there's no risk. I've had the place watched for weeks and there's never any guard at the side gate."

"Don't take your own car," he said. "It's far too recognisable."

"Of course I won't. What sort of fool do you take me for?"

A door opened nearby and Nancy hurried on, her heart thumping and a queasy sensation in her stomach. She had no idea what they'd been talking about. But there was something about the tone and the secrecy of it that made her feel extremely uneasy.

# Sidney to George

A train  
Somewhere between London and Stanbrook  
27<sup>th</sup> May 1940

Dear Dorcy,

Oh, goodness, your last letter was so hilare it made me snort milk through my nose at the breakfast table. I can't *believe* Douglas said that to the wing commander – will he be court-martialled or don't they do that in the Air Force?

Well, you *will* be surprised to get another letter so soon, but the fact is I'm stuck in a compartment with the vilest girl in the land, poor me, so I'm pretending to work on an English essay. Of course, now she thinks I'm the most terrific swot, but the good thing is she has absolutely no interest in what I'm writing. If Miss Verney finds out I've been using my English book for letter-writing, I'll probably be expelled, so just think of the heroic risk I'm taking for your entertainment.

How are you? Are you being terribly brave, shooting enemy planes out of the sky and doing victory rolls all day long? Everybody here thinks I'm awfully lucky to have a brother in the RAF. Of course I don't tell them you spend most of your time drinking whisky in the officers' mess. It all sounds terrific fun, lucky you.

We were early to the station, since Mother as usual was terrified of being late, so I beetled into an empty compartment and snaffled the corner seat. I was

thinking how well I'd done, when – horrors!! – Lucinda and Ginny and Phyllis came waltzing along the corridor, and beastly Lucinda looked in and said, "Oh, good, an empty compartment." Then she barged in and banged my shoulder with the corner of her bag as she swung it up on to the luggage rack, the little brute.

Ginny did actually say hello to me, and Phyllis looked as though she might have liked to, but she's such a frightened rabbit, she never dares so much as breathe without Lucinda's permission, so she didn't say a word. Lucinda terrifies everyone with that vicious tongue of hers.

I do think it was terribly thoughtless of the parents to send me to a new school in the summer term, it's practically impossible to make friends, everyone's in their little gangs already, but that's just typical of Pa – one word from the admiral about what a splendid place it is and how happy his daughters were at St Olave's, and his mind's made up. Did you loathe St Thomas's at first? Do tell.

It was heaven having time at home while the teachers packed up the school – I managed to read five detective stories! I've brought *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* to Stanbrook. Did you know we're only allowed to bring one book – the utter cruelty of this place! Were they that barbaric at St Thomas's?

I'm excited to see Stanbrook. Vanessa in the Upper Fifth has visited and says it's heaven. The house is four hundred years old, so it's bound to be absolutely heaving with ghosts. I shall be utterly crushed if I don't bump into headless knights in suits of armour every time I turn a

corner. Do you remember that story I wrote where all the portraits came alive and followed the children around, and you were too petrified to go into the drawing room for months in case Great-Grandfather Dashworth leaped out of his frame? Oh, I do miss you, Dordy. Take good care of yourself in that Spitfire, won't you?

Must go now as mistresses in terrific panic about gathering belongings, etc. Will send regular updates on headless knights.

Best love from your little sis