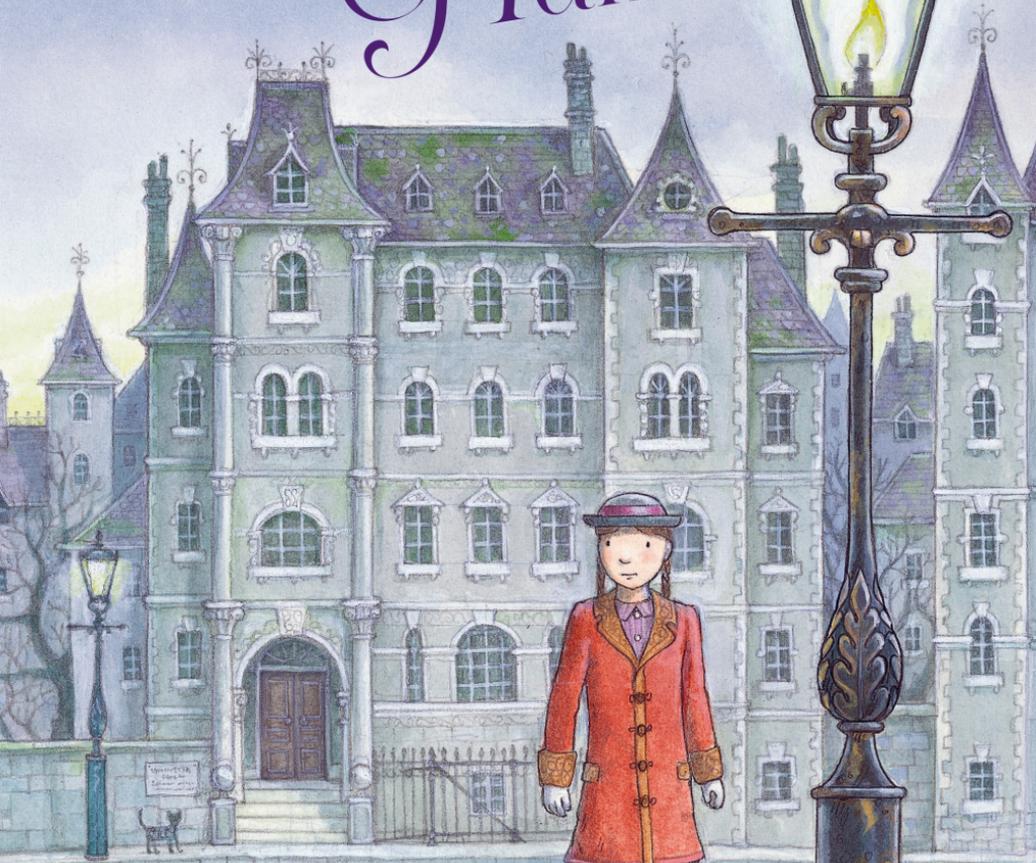


Wakestone Hall



A Stella Montgomery Intrigue

by Judith Rossell

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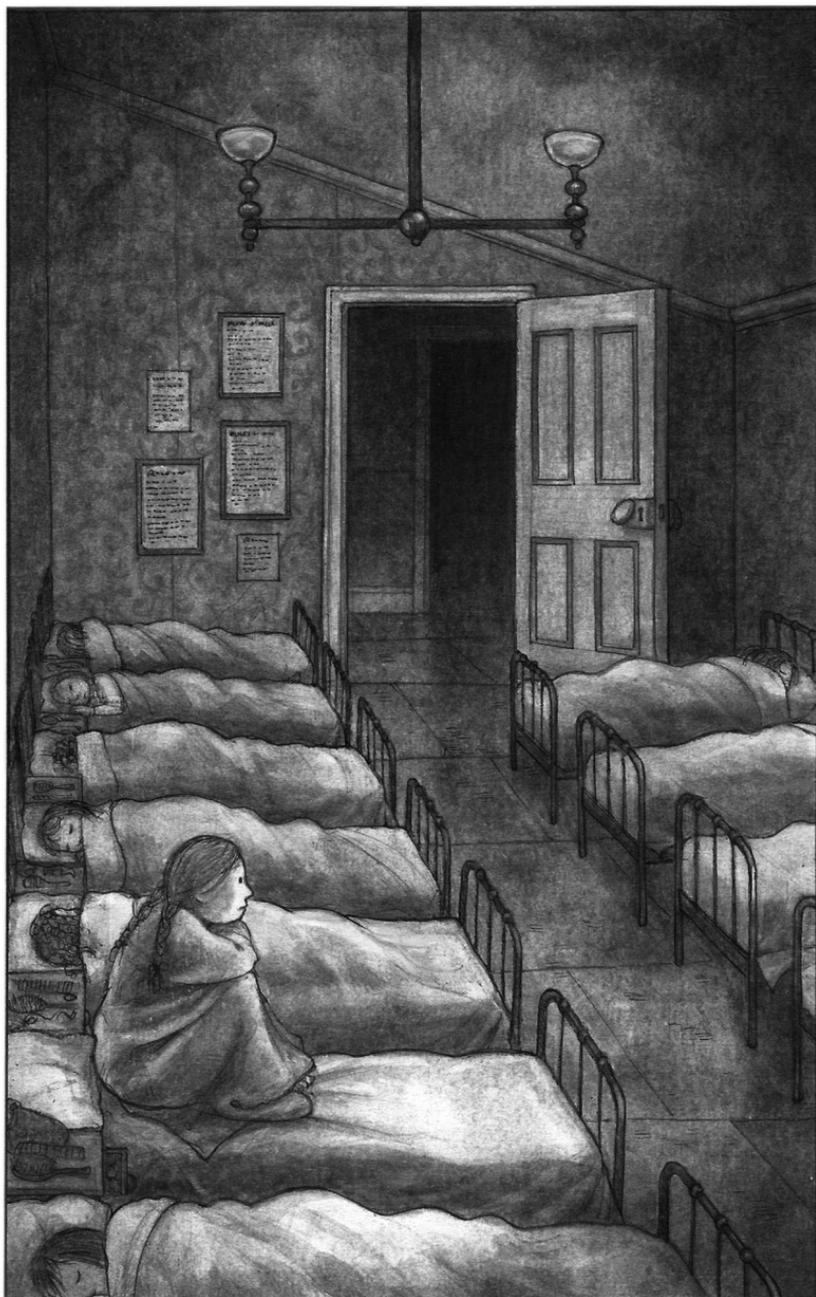
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For Chren, with many thanks







One

Stella Montgomery awoke from a frightening dream. Something was chasing her. Swooping down from the dark sky. A pale creature with papery wings, reaching with long, cold, spindly fingers that snagged in her hair and clutched at her neck.

Shaking, Stella took a shuddering breath and then another one. She sat up and looked around. For a moment, she did not recognise anything at all.

It was a low room with a sloping ceiling. Iron beds were lined up in two rows with a narrow space between them. Fifteen beds in all. Each bed had a small dressing table beside it and a hook for a washbag. At one end of the room was a doorway, and at the other end was a large wardrobe and a small window. Stella could hear someone snoring, someone else sniffing and the rain pattering on the roof.

She was in the First Form dormitory at Wakestone Hall Select Academy for Young Ladies. She was at school.

Stella shivered, pulled the thin blanket around her shoulders and wrapped her arms tightly around her knees. Her heart was still thumping, as if she had been running for her life. She could still feel the flapping creature's cold, clutching fingers.

She rested her chin on her knees, took another deep breath and tried to cheer herself up by thinking about something encouraging. But it was very difficult, because Wakestone Hall was dreadful. Of course, any boarding school chosen by the Aunts was certain to be unpleasant, but Wakestone Hall was even worse than Stella had imagined it would be. The mistresses were strict, the lessons were long and tiresome, and the food was horrible.

There were sixty other girls here, more girls than Stella had seen in her life before. She had hoped that she would make friends, but the girls were oddly subdued. They filed along the passageways of the school in silence and kept their eyes down during lessons. Stella was one of the youngest girls, and she felt very insignificant and lonely. Even one friend would make everything better.

She missed her cousins. But they had sailed away

with their father and their governess, to look at seaweeds in the Sargasso Sea, and Stella did not know when she would see them again. She wished she could have gone with them, but instead the Aunts had insisted she be sent back to live with them at the Hotel Majestic at Withering-by-Sea.

One afternoon, as the Aunts were sitting in the long sunroom of the hotel, wrapped up like three puddings, still emitting little wisps of vapour from the wave bath, sipping glasses of murky, greenish water and eating cakes, Aunt Deliverance had unexpectedly announced that they had decided to send Stella to boarding school.

‘Discipline,’ Aunt Deliverance said. She poked a cocoa-nut macaroon into her mouth and chewed it decisively. ‘Strict discipline.’

‘Rules and retribution,’ Aunt Temperance said, as she sipped her glass of water, her wandering eye rolling around in an irritated manner.

‘Yes, indeed,’ agreed Aunt Condolence. Her Particular Patent Corset creaked and twanged as she swallowed a piece of plum cake.

All three Aunts glared at Stella.

‘Wakestone Hall is an excellent school,’ said Aunt Deliverance. ‘A good situation. Not far from our old home, Wormwood Mire.’

‘Deliverance was Head Girl,’ said Aunt Temperance proudly. ‘And she won the Needlework Prize and the Etiquette Prize and the Elocution Prize. And Countess Anstruther’s Correct Conduct Medal.’

‘Three times,’ said Aunt Condolence, simpering.

And then, quite unexpectedly, the Aunts started to sing. They had remarkably high, quavering voices.

*Wakestone Girls, through toil and strife,
Marching sternly throughout life.
Striding through the darkest night,
Always Righteous, Always Right.*

It was a long song with many verses. There were twitters of surprise from the other residents. General Carruthers grumbled into his moustache; Lady Clottington’s nasty little dog, Sir Oswald, gave a shrill howl of distress and shot underneath her chair. Stella felt her toes curl up inside her shoes with astonishment. She had to bite her tongue to stop herself from giggling. Surely, the Aunts had never been schoolgirls. It was impossible.

‘Your late mother was at Wakestone Hall too, of course,’ said Aunt Deliverance. ‘She behaved unforgivably.’ She frowned. ‘Despite this, Miss Garnet has agreed to take you, as a particular favour to me. I trust you will be grateful and obedient.’

‘Yes, Aunt Deliverance,’ said Stella, sounding as grateful and obedient as she could manage. She had never thought about her mother at school. What had she done that was so dreadful? It was no use asking the Aunts. They never answered her questions.

Perhaps it would be interesting to go to the school her mother had attended, so many years before.

Three weeks later, Stella had found herself arriving at Wakestone Hall for the start of the new term. She was stiff and awkward in her new clothes. Her coat and dress were made of a scratchy fabric. Her new boots were tight and pinched her feet. The stockings were itchy, and the underclothes were complicated and uncomfortable. On her hat was a ribbon in the school colour for Wakestone Hall, a spiteful shade of purple.

She arrived at the school as evening was falling, and her first impressions were of a confusing maze of echoing dark passageways and cold, shadowy rooms.

There were two other new girls in the First Form: Agapanthus Ffaulkington-Ffitch and Otilie Smith. Stella had hoped they might become friends, but neither of them seemed particularly agreeable. Agapanthus looked to be about the same age as Stella. She had freckles



and her wiry, gingery hair was twisted into two twig-like plaits that stuck out from her head. She seemed bad-tempered, and when Stella had given her a quick smile, Agapanthus had only scowled briefly in return.

Ottilie was a year or so younger and the smallest girl in the whole school. She was thin, with black hair and dark eyes. She was timid and nervous, and when Stella had smiled at her, she had looked so startled that Stella had been afraid that she would burst into tears.

They had been together for nearly two weeks, but they were no closer to becoming friends. Every day, Stella sat beside Agapanthus and Ottilie for lessons (Elocution, Etiquette, Household Management, French Conversation and Needlework, all equally unpleasant). Each afternoon, they walked together at the end of the long, silent line of girls that filed into the town to visit the Wakestone Municipal Gardens on fine days, or the Wakestone Museum when it was raining, which it generally was. They slept side by side in the dormitory.

It would have been easier to make friends if they had been able to talk, but at Wakestone Hall, the girls were only permitted to speak to one another at mealtimes, and a mistress sat at the head of each table, to ensure that their manners were faultless, and that their conversation was of an elevating nature and in French.

Miss Mangan, the First Form mistress, was very strict and immaculately neat. She sat as rigid as a poker and her pale eyes gleamed behind her spectacles, alert for mistakes. Despite many years of lessons with Aunt Temperance, Stella knew how to say only the simplest things in French — certainly she could not manage anything elevating — and so she just concentrated on not attracting Miss Mangan’s attention, and ate her way miserably through bowls of plain porridge, which tasted rather like glue, cold mutton with boiled cabbage, bony fish pie with watery white sauce, dry bread with a scrape of margarine, and heavy suet pudding drowning in thin, lumpy custard.

Stella sighed, feeling dispirited.

Usually, whenever she needed to comfort herself, she thought about her sister. It was always encouraging to think of Luna. She often dreamed about her. In her dreams, she became Luna. Slipping silently through the trees in the wood at night, or singing softly in the moonlight, or sometimes flying through the dark sky on the back of an enormous owl.

But tonight, there had been a frightening, clutching creature in her dream. What did that mean? Was Luna in danger? It was a horrible thought. Stella wished there was a way she could be sure that Luna was sleeping safely in Mrs Spindleweed’s

sweetshop at Wormwood Halt. It was not very far away. Stella wished she could send her a message. *Be safe*, she whispered silently. She imagined the words, like tiny, flickering candle flames. Perhaps Luna was dreaming of her, and she would hear the message in her dream.

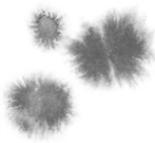
Stella shivered. What would Agapanthus and Otilie, or any of the girls at Wakestone Hall, think if they knew she had a twin sister who was invisible? Or that she could sometimes turn invisible herself? That she was fey? She was determined that they would never discover her secret.

She thought about the last time she had seen Luna. It had been at night, in the middle of a wood. She remembered Mrs Spindleweed standing in the moonlight, holding her shawl tightly around her shoulders and saying fiercely, *I've kept her safe, all this time. And I will now.*

She had made Stella promise that she would keep Luna a secret. Then she had transformed into an owl and flown away, with Luna riding on her back.

'You would hate it here,' she whispered to Luna, in the darkness. 'You would hate it even more than I do.'

She heard a muffled sob. It came from Otilie, in the next bed. Stella could see only a dark shape



huddled under the bedclothes. She opened her mouth to whisper something, and then hesitated.

No girl shall Converse with Another, after Lights Out, for any Purpose whatsoever.

There were many rules at Wakestone Hall. There were lists of them pasted up on a wall of every dormitory and classroom, and the new girls had to learn them by heart. If a girl broke a rule, she was made to copy it out many times, in perfect handwriting. There were so many rules that it was remarkably easy to get into trouble without even realising it. Stella had already spent several evenings sitting in the cold classroom, copying out the rules she had broken, while all the other girls were having supper, or darning their stockings and listening to one of the mistresses read an improving story from *The Young Ladies' Magazine and Moral Instructor*.

Girls who misbehaved were sent to the Headmistress's parlour. Stella had not yet caught sight of the Headmistress, Miss Garnet, and she did not know exactly what happened in her parlour, but that only made the prospect more dreadful. The previous week, one of the new girls from the Third Form had been sent to the parlour. When she had returned an hour later, she had looked pale and shaken, and had not spoken at all for two days afterwards.

In the darkness, Otilie gave another hiccupping sob.

Stella whispered, 'Are you all right?'

Otilie did not reply.

Stella whispered again, 'Please don't cry.'

The only answer was a sniff.

Stella felt a bit discouraged, but she tried once more. 'It's dreadful here. But perhaps —'

A sudden sound startled her. Stella froze, listening.

It was probably the matron, Miss McCragg. She had a wooden leg and used a stick, so she made a clumping sound as she walked. She wore a starched white apron and lurched like a frightening battleship around the passageways of Wakestone Hall at night, inspecting all the dormitories to make sure no girl was awake or out of bed.

Stella heard it again. It was a scrabbling sound. But it did not come from the passageway; it came from the window.

Excepting in the Advent of an Emergency, no girl shall Arise from her Bed before the Waking Bell.

Stella took a breath, glanced at the door, and then climbed out of bed. The linoleum felt like ice under her bare feet and she shivered. She hugged her arms around herself as she crept past Otilie's bed to the window.

Every Dormitory Window shall be opened by precisely Two Inches to prevent the Accumulation of Noxious Miasmas.

Stella cautiously pulled the window further open and leaned on the sill, looking out at the cold, rainy night.

From the narrow attic window, the steep roof sloped down to an iron gutter. The tall houses around the school made jagged black shapes against the night sky. Four storeys below, the wet cobblestones glimmered in the light of the street lamps.

The clock on the town hall began to strike. Stella counted the distant chimes. Twelve o'clock. Midnight.

She heard the scrabbling sound again. Just below the window, a dark shape was moving on the roof. Stella almost shrieked. Then the shape gave a squeaking mew, and she gasped with relief. It was a cat, clinging to the slippery slates. It mewed again.

'Don't fall,' whispered Stella. She leaned out of the window and tried to grab the cat, but could not reach far enough. She climbed up onto the windowsill, stretching out as much as she could. The cat tried to scramble up the roof towards her. Stella leaned out a bit further. Her heart lurched as she felt herself overbalance. There was nothing to hold on to. Her fingers slid on the wet slates. She was going to topple headfirst out of the window. She gave a squeak of terror.

Someone gripped her around her middle.

'I've got you,' whispered a voice. It was Otilie.

'Hold tight,' gasped Stella. She took a steadying breath, reached down as far as she could and managed to grab a handful of fur on the cat's neck. 'Got him.'



Otilie heaved, and Stella wriggled backwards, dragging the cat with her. She climbed down from the windowsill, wet and shaking, holding tightly to the struggling cat.

'Thank you,' she whispered.

Otilie nodded.

The cat scrambled up onto Stella's shoulder. He dug his claws in with enthusiasm and made several happy mewling sounds. Clearly, he was delighted to be inside and out of the rain.

'*Shhh*,' Stella whispered, stroking him. He was a darkish colour, black or grey, with gleaming round eyes. She could feel his bones under his shaggy, wet fur. His claws were like needles.

'What will we do?' she asked Otilie. 'He'll wake everyone up, and we'll be in so much trouble.' There was sure to be a rule about having a cat in the dormitory. There were probably several rules about it.

She was certainly breaking half-a-dozen rules, right now, all at once.

The cat miaowed again, loudly and unhelpfully, and bit her ear, quite hard. Stella stifled a squeak. One of the sleeping girls muttered something and turned over, but did not wake up.

Ottilie stroked the cat's head. 'P-poor cat. He's hungry.'

'I'm sorry, cat,' Stella whispered, 'but you can't stay here.' She stroked him again as she considered what to do. 'I think I will take him downstairs. Perhaps I can open a window and put him out.'

'I could come with you, if you like,' whispered Ottilie nervously.

Stella said, 'If we get caught, we'll be in so much trouble.'

Ottilie hesitated, and then nodded.

Stella thought about Miss McCragg. What if she came in while they were gone? 'We should push our pillows under the blankets. Like this.' A bit awkwardly, Stella passed the wriggling, protesting cat to Ottilie. Stella bunched up her blanket and pushed her pillow underneath. Ottilie returned the cat to her and did the same to her own bed. The cat clambered up onto Stella's shoulder again. Ottilie gave her blanket a few tweaks and pats. They stood back. From a distance,

in the darkness, it might fool Miss McCragg, if she did not look too closely.

Stella took a breath. 'Let's go,' she whispered.

Then they tiptoed to the door and looked out into the passageway.

Stella swallowed. There were many dangers to pass. There were two other dormitories along the passageway, a washroom and a row of maids' bedrooms. On the floor below were three more dormitories, and below again were the mistresses' rooms and classrooms. Below that, and most terrifying of all, they would have to go right past the door to the parlour of the Headmistress, Miss Garnet.

They would have to be very careful, and very lucky, and as silent as mice.

'Come on,' Stella whispered.

The two girls crept out into the passageway. There was a clumping sound and a gleam of candlelight. The cat dug his claws into Stella's shoulder and hissed.

Ottilie clutched Stella's arm. 'Oh no!' she whispered.

A huge shape loomed into view at the end of the passageway.

Miss McCragg was approaching.