

## Chapter 1 - first 3 pages

It was the whisper that started their war. That's how many at the table that evening would recall the summer of 1914.

Naturally, Victoria hadn't even noticed the waiter until then. In their black uniforms, the resort staff slipped about unobtrusively, meeting one's needs without being obvious. Without really existing. It wasn't until he boldly bent over her grandmother's right shoulder and whispered in her ear that Victoria thought how handsome he was. And then realized with a shock that he was the trespasser who had spied her swimming naked yesterday.

He'd sported casual white trousers and shirt, his sleeves rolled up as if he'd just finished a winning set in tennis. He'd perched on the rock and begun scribbling on a pad of paper.

"What the devil are you doing?" she had demanded, immersing herself up to her chin in the chilly lake, but wondering if the crystal clear water provided much cover.

With a massive granite slab sliding into the lake next to a broad crescent of pale sand, this was Victoria's favourite place on the island, which she called "The Shimmering Sands". The others never bothered to come to the north end, preferring to swim in the bay behind the house at the point. But Victoria hated the confining bathing costumes, and would sneak away to indulge in the luxury of stripping off everything and allowing the silky water to caress her.

Unusually flustered, she had challenged, "And who the hell are you anyway?"

"My, my, what language! I thought I was in the presence of a lady," he had replied with a mocking grin.

"You, sir, are obviously no gentleman!"

He had winked at her, and continued to draw, occasionally examining her as one might a captured butterfly.

"What are you doing? Kindly take your leave!"

"I believe I'm sketching a water nymph."

"You are trespassing!"

"Am I?"

"If you are a guest of one of my cousins, I'll have him banish you as an ill-mannered lout!"

Although her cheeks had burned with embarrassment and frustration at her helpless situation, Victoria had become thoroughly chilled. The lake had not warmed up yet, despite the recent heat wave. Indeed, the ice had only been out for a handful of weeks.

He had seemed unperturbed by her anger, even amused by it. The nerve of the man!

His nonchalance had just added to his attractiveness. Under different circumstances, Victoria would have delighted in flirting with him.

But her skin had prickled with cold and she had been in no mood for games. "I'll give you one last chance to leave!"

"Indeed? And then what?" He had stopped sketching and regarded her with amusement.

"I will swim back to the cottage and make a scene, and then you won't be so cocky," she had bluffed, knowing that she would suffer the consequences of her indiscretion. Proper young ladies didn't swim naked, even if there were only loons and chipmunks for company.

He had laughed, a delightful, appreciative laugh that rang out through the woods. And when he'd stood up, he'd ripped off the sheet of paper and placed it on the rock. "A scene I should like to witness. But you are quite right, Miss Wyndham," he had said with a courtly nod. "I have to admit that it's been a great pleasure to make your acquaintance."

With that he had turned and sauntered off towards the north shore, leaving Victoria fuming. "Cad!" she had shouted, and had heard a faint chuckle in reply.

She had emerged warily from the water, dressed quickly, and stretched out to bask on the glittering, sun-warmed rock. When her anger had been replaced by curiosity, she had picked up the abandoned sketch and been impressed by the masterful strokes that depicted a spirited young woman with a sensuality that surprised her. She had secreted the drawing in her skirt pocket.

Upon her return to the cottage, Victoria had discovered that her cousins hadn't invited any friends, and decided to tell no one about the intriguing stranger just yet. She preferred to keep him to herself, to ponder him at her leisure.

It wasn't unusual that he should have guessed her name. The Wyndhams were well known on the lake, and he must have realized he'd been on their island. She'd wondered if he'd dare to return to the Shimmering Sands, or whether she would soon meet him at some soiree or dance. She was determined to have the upper hand at their next encounter.

But now here he was, making her grandmother blanch. The old lady carefully laid down her knife and fork, and turned deliberately to look at him. He did not flinch under her steely gaze, but merely stared back at her with a self-confidence that Victoria's father would term impudence. Victoria sensed the others - her aunts, uncles, and cousins - holding their breath in anticipation of a lacerating reprimand.

But Grandmother's eyes softened, and she said to the waiter, "You do that," before resuming her meal.

"What the dickens was that about?" Victoria's uncle, Albert, demanded. "What did the fellow want? What impertinence! I'll talk to the management and have the scoundrel dismissed!"

"Do be quiet, Albert," Grandmother said. "You have the bad manners of asking a question and then not allowing one to respond."

"That's rich! That boor has the audacity to address his betters without a by-your-leave, and you don't care to do anything about it, but find fault with me instead!"

Victoria's father, James, ignoring his younger brother's outburst, said calmly, "Really, Mother, what was that fellow on about? You can't mean to leave us in suspense."

"Time will tell. And that is all I have to say on the subject this evening."

As if a royal edict had been declared, Albert, exhaling the breath of unvoiced thoughts, shut his mouth and looked disgruntled. The others slowly took up the dropped threads of previous conversations, although it was evident that all they really wanted to discuss was that odd little scene.

Victoria looked discreetly around, but couldn't see the waiter, and

wondered if someone in authority had noticed his breach of conduct and dismissed him. She was surprised that he was, indeed, no gentleman. But Grandmother's astonishing reaction meant that there was something enticingly mysterious about him. How annoying of her to keep them guessing! ...

**The Summer Before The Storm** continues for another 545 pages.