

Prologue

I remember it clearly, although it was years ago now. For I remember everything.

The year was 1810. I was a girl of fifteen, standing on the arched Honeystreet Bridge—which I often did when I was not needed in Father's shop—gazing upon the brightly painted boats that floated past. There a blue barge, and there a yellow-and-white narrowboat. In reality, I was searching. Searching the face of every person on every narrowboat that passed by on the newly completed K and A Canal. There were not many women, but a few. For though men worked the canals as pilots, navigators, and merchants, entire families sometimes lived aboard—as wives and children made for less costly crews.

My mother had disappeared on one of those narrowboats two months before, or so the villagers whispered when they thought I could not hear. I suppose I hoped she would return as she left, declaring her absence a lark, an adventure, a mistake . . . anything. How many hours had I stood there? How many boats had I seen pass beneath that bridge—boats with names like the *Britannia*, *Radiant*, or *Perseverance*? Where had they come from, I always wondered, and where were they bound? What cargo did they bear—spices from the West Indies, perhaps, or tea from China? Coal from the Midlands or timber from as far away as Norway? How often I dreamt of stowing away and leaving Bedsley Priors for the bright unknown beyond.

That day, however, I watched the yellow-and-white narrowboat for another reason. A gangly boy with a cinched bag slung over his shoulder climbed unsteadily from the moored boat. My father, standing on the bank, extended his hand in greeting, just as the boy leaned over and was sick.

I winced. Not a very propitious beginning for a new apprentice. Father's shoes were likely spoilt.

I sighed. I knew I should go down to them. Father had not seen me there or he would have called for my help. He always did. With Mother gone and my only brother slow of mind, many responsibilities for both the household and shop fell to me.

But no. I would wait and meet young Mr. Baylor later, once he'd had a chance to collect himself. I would brew ginger tea for him and find an old cloth for Father's shoes. But first I wanted a few more moments on the bridge.

Several minutes later, a red-and-blue narrowboat approached from the west, from as far away as Bristol, perhaps, on its way to the Thames and then to London some eighty miles east. A man led one boat-horse along the towpath. A lone person sat in the curved bow deck. Far behind, aft of the cabin, two crewmen stood on the tiller deck.

As the boat drew nearer, I saw that the figure in the bow was a woman, head low, as if in prayer. Or perhaps she was reading. A wide bonnet concealed her face from the sun, from me. My heart leapt. Something about the woman's posture and tilt of her head struck me as familiar. *Mother loved to read.*

I leaned across the wide brick ledge, peering hard, heart beating. The boat drew closer. I saw that the man leading the horse was deeply tanned and broad-shouldered. *The man she left us for?* As he led the boat-horse along the strip of land beneath the bridge, he disappeared from view. The bow of the boat reached the shadow of the bridge, and one of the crewmen gaped up at me. I barely saw him. Instead I read the vessel's name painted in decorative lettering on the side, *The Gypsy*, and I thought, *How apt.* Still, I could not see the woman's face.

I whirled and raced to the other side of the bridge, hoping my angle would be better, that I would see her from that side as they passed.

Perhaps she does not even realize where she is, I thought, engrossed as she was in her reading. *Should I call to her?*

I only stared, afraid to be a fool before this woman, before the men labouring at the nearby timber mill. *If only I could see her face. . . .*

I squinted. Tried to focus. Dimly, I heard a voice. Someone was calling my name. "Lilly!"

The boat passed further down the canal and she began to disappear all over again. *Look up!* I urged silently. *See me.*

The woman stood and looked up, but away from me—ahead toward the man and horse. The back of my mind registered pounding footsteps. The voice grew urgent. *Is she calling me?*

"Lilly!"

"Here I am!" I called.

The woman turned around. She held a hand to her forehead, shielding her eyes from the sun. Her brow wrinkled in perplexity as she stared back. I raised my hand and waved.

The woman slowly, tentatively, raised her own hand. Not in greeting, but in somber

salute. The motion revealed her face—a stranger's face—kind and plain. In her hand, not a book but a rumple of cloth. Mending.

A hand shook my shoulder. "Lilly?"

Numbly, I tore my eyes from the fading sight of the woman and turned. My younger brother, Charlie, stood before me, clearly agitated and breathing hard. "I called you. Why did you not answer?"

"I . . . thought . . ." I blinked away the pathetic vision of what I had thought and in its place saw his wide eyes, his frightened tear-streaked face. "What is it, Charlie?"

"'Tis Mary. Oh, how she shakes! Father sent me. He needs—" He paused, eyes searching the air above me.

"He needs what?" Pulse accelerating, I grasped him by both arms, frustrated at his limited ability to focus, to remember.

He winced and bit his pronounced lower lip.

"Valerian?" I prompted. "Hyssop?"

He shook his head, still squinting in attempted concentration.

"Musk pod? Peony?"

"Peony!" he shouted. "Yes!"

I was incredulous. "But we have syrup of peony on the shelf. The jar marked *S: Poeniae*."

"Father says 'tis empty!"

Dear Lord, no.

"Oh, Lilly! How she jerks about! Will she die?"

"No," I bit out. Running from the bridge, I yelled over my shoulder, "Tell Father to set water to boil!"

I knew of only one place to get peony root. One nearby garden where it grew. I began perspiring—not from exertion, but from fear. Fear for my oldest friend. Fear for myself. For to trespass in this garden was to break the law and risk *his* wrath. But he was far away at university, was he not? *Lord, let him be far away. . . .*

I ran.

I had always loved to run, across the vale, or up the chalk hills beyond Bedsley Priors. But this time I felt no pleasure in the exercise. I ran because I had no other choice—it would take far too long to return home and hitch up the gig. True, Mrs. Mimpurse had often admonished me not to go running about the village, that I was practically a young lady now and ought to behave as such. But I knew our kindly neighbor would not blame

me for running this time. For Mary was her daughter.

I ran up the Sands Road and veered right onto the High Street, nearly colliding with a man coming out of the wheelwright's.

"Sorry, Mr. Hughes!" I called, without breaking stride.

I sprinted across the village green, around the enclosed churchyard, past the Owens' farm, and up the lane to Marlow House. Once there, I darted around the stone garden wall, ducking to keep out of sight as I ran toward the closed garden gate. Fear gripped me, but I had only to imagine Mary, writhing in pain, and I pushed the gate open, wincing at its high-pitched screech. Rushing across the path to the gardener's shed, I threw back the door and grabbed the first spade I saw. Dashing to the cluster of staked peonies—the late Lady Marlow's *prized* peonies—I swallowed, realizing I had no time to be neat or exacting.

As I lanced the soil with the spade, I heard the first cry of alarm. A man yelled "Stop!" but I shoved the spade in again, deeper now. I heard footfalls and cursing on the other side of the wall. Mr. Timms, the surly gardener, I supposed. Another few seconds and I would reach the roots. I put all of my slight weight on the spade and jerked the handle back and forth. *Come on. . . .*

Just as I pulled up the plant by its roots, a man's head and shoulders appeared over the garden wall. Not surly Mr. Timms. Worse.

"Stop where you are," the young man ordered. "Those are my mother's."

Steady . . . I tried to find my voice, to explain, but found I could not speak. I knew Roderick Marlow put peony blossoms on his mother's grave every spring. I knew he was infamously cruel.

"I need one . . ." I finally croaked out, "for a friend."

"Do not move! I am calling the constable."

I had no time to explain and no time to wait for the constable. I darted across the garden, and again I heard him curse. Over my shoulder I glimpsed him hauling himself up and over the garden wall. Heard his feet hit the ground and pebbles fly as he bolted after me, his long stride stretching no doubt twice the length of my own. I ran through the garden gate and slammed it closed with all my strength. His exclamation of pain and anger chased me across the lawn. There I glimpsed a groom leading out a tall black horse—already saddled.

No.

The gate screeched open behind me. Roderick Marlow whistled and shouted, "Bring

my horse. Quick!”

Immediately, I changed course. I knew that if I followed the open road as I had come, he would overtake me seconds. I could not let that happen. Instead I headed for the wood, pushing past branches that scratched at my arms and legs. Horse hooves beat the ground behind me as I wove through the trees. I left the wood and ran across a narrow pasture—a sheep fence crossed the landscape ahead. I vaulted over it, stumbled, but ran on. Behind me horse and rider cleared the fence without pause. One chance left. Ahead of me stood the tall privet hedge around the churchyard. And beyond it, the village. My pursuer galloped closer. *Does he plan to run me down? I wondered wildly. For a simple plant Father will happily repay him for?* He would, I did not doubt.

I ran along the hedge, and there it was. I stopped abruptly, my back to the seemingly impenetrable wall of privet. Far too tall to jump. Too dense to push through. Roderick Marlow leapt from his horse and came striding toward me, anger in his eyes and riding crop in hand. I swallowed, suddenly grateful that my long frock covered the bottom reaches of the hedge behind me. *Wait until he is a little further from his horse. One second more. . . .*

Suddenly I turned and dove into a hole in the privet, the tunnel barely large enough for a child to wriggle through. Dug, I knew, by the vicar’s hound. Terror gripped my heart as I felt Roderick’s hand trying to grip *me*. Fingers clawed at my skirt hems as I scrambled through the hedge and stumbled to my feet on the other side. He swore in frustration, and I knew he was not giving up. *If only the horse would bolt.* But I doubted such a well-trained beast would dare. At least it might take a second or two for him to regain his mount. I dashed across the churchyard and out its front gate, and ran down the High Street. I saw the sign for my father’s shop ahead, just as I again heard pounding hooves behind. *If I can just make it inside and deliver the root, he can do what he likes with me then. Just let me reach Mary in time.*

I ran through the door and gave it a shove. But Roderick Marlow caught it and pushed in behind me, the shop bell jingling crazily. He grabbed my arm before I could hand the plant to my startled father.

Roderick raised the crop in his hand.

“Roderick Rupert Marlow!” Maude Mimpurse commanded. “Put that down and unhand the girl. Lillian Grace Haswell. What have I told you about running through town like a stray?”

Roderick froze, and I was stunned to see him lower his arm in mute submission.

That's right, I remembered to my immense relief. Our robust, dark-haired neighbor had once worked as the Marlows' nurserymaid. Her powers of persuasion were legendary.

"She is a vandal and a thief!" the furious Marlow shouted. "She trespassed upon our garden."

"I sent her for peony root, young sir," Father explained, concern straining his features. "It was an emergency. Miss Mary has had her worse case of falling sickness yet."

The rest of the room came into focus then. I spun about and, through the surgery door, saw my dear friend lying still on the cot. Deathly still.

"Am I too late? Is she . . . ?"

"The fit has finally passed," Father said. "I believe the valerian took effect after all."

"She's fallen asleep, poor lamb," Mrs. Mimpurse said, her voice returning to its customary softness. "So exhausted was she."

I held up the peony—stalk, root, and all. "Then . . . I stole this for nothing?"

"Stole? Good gracious." Mrs. Mimpurse tutted. "We are all neighbors, are we not?"

"I will reimburse your family, young sir," Father offered, reaching up to lay his hand on the young man's shoulder. "We still need to distill a batch of syrup in any case. Or we can endeavor to replant the peony, if you prefer."

Roderick Marlow shook off Father's hand. "No. Just stay away from our gardens." He aimed his blazing glare in my direction and a chill ran through my body. "And away from me."

I would obey that command for almost three years.

Not nearly long enough.