

TALES FROM IVY HILL • BOOK THREE

A decorative border of a vine with leaves and small flowers, framing the title text.

THE BRIDE OF
IVY GREEN

JULIE
KLASSEN



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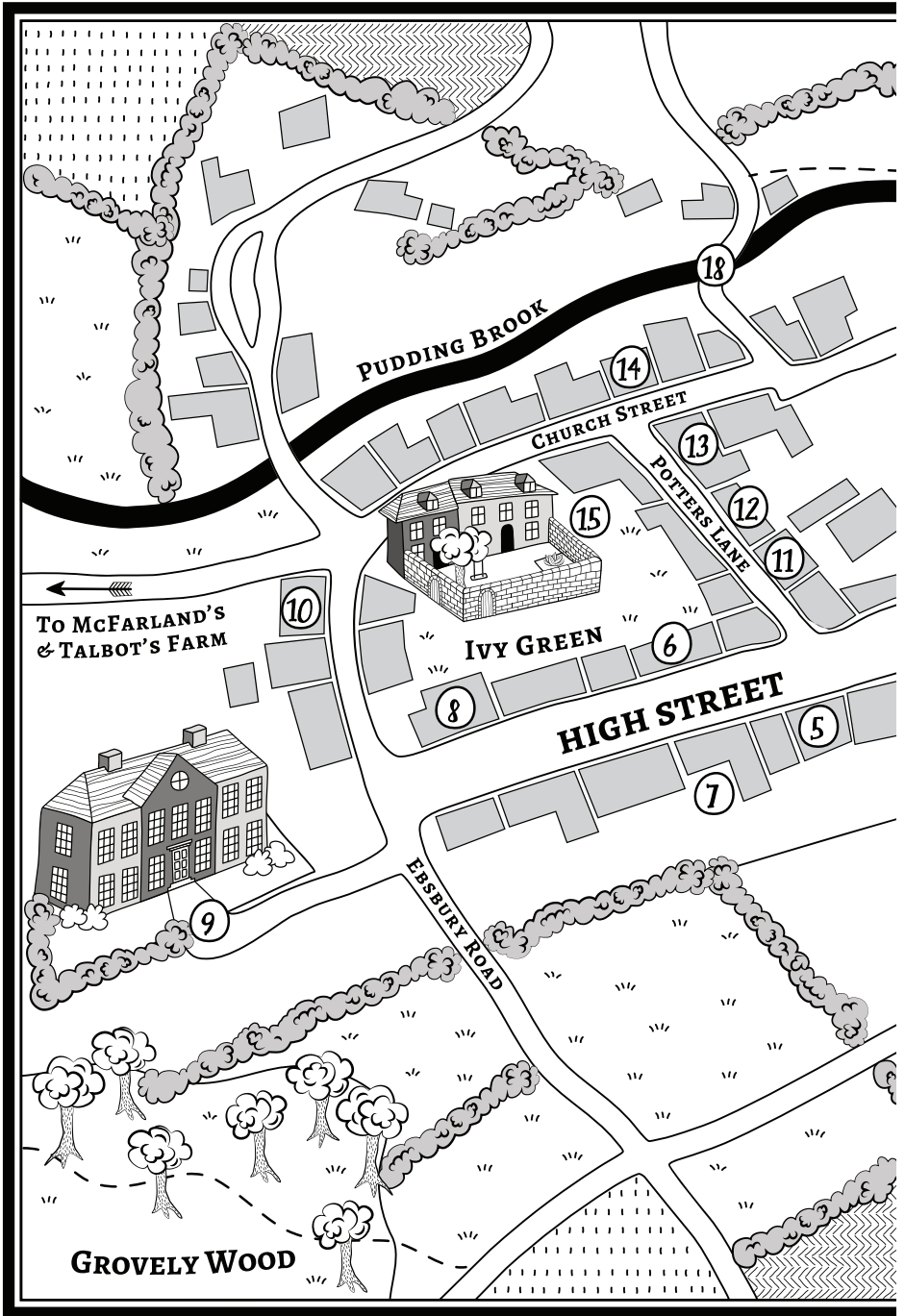
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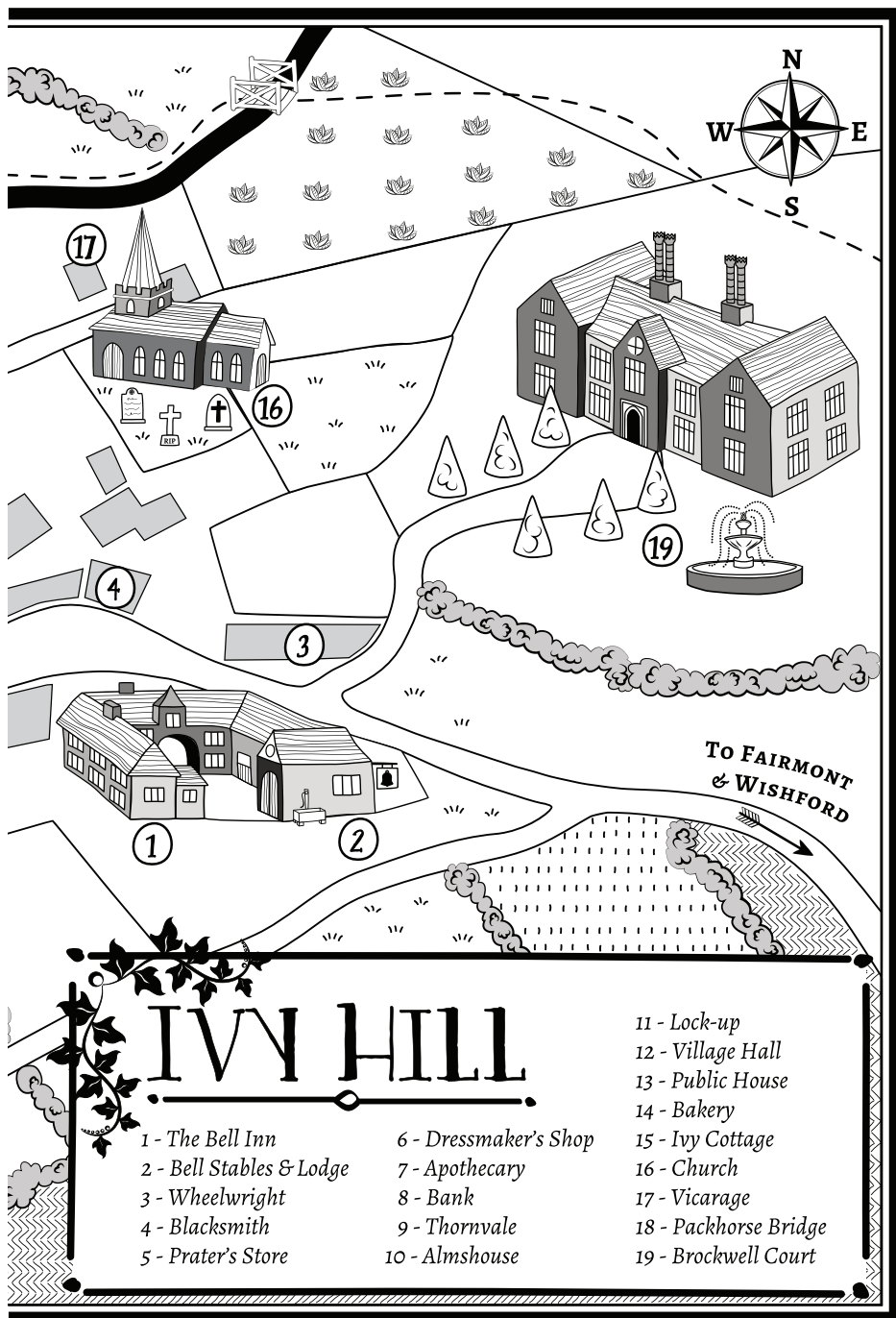
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To Karen Schurrer,
So thankful for your skill, love of story, support,
and encouragement for so many years of my writing journey.
I'm blessed to count you as a friend as well as editor.





Julie Klassen, *The Bride of Ivy Green*
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IVY HILL

- 1 - The Bell Inn
- 2 - Bell Stables & Lodge
- 3 - Wheelwright
- 4 - Blacksmith
- 5 - Prater's Store

- 6 - Dressmaker's Shop
- 7 - Apothecary
- 8 - Bank
- 9 - Thornvale
- 10 - Almshouse



- 11 - Lock-up
- 12 - Village Hall
- 13 - Public House
- 14 - Bakery
- 15 - Ivy Cottage
- 16 - Church
- 17 - Vicarage
- 18 - Packhorse Bridge
- 19 - Brockwell Court



MADAME VICTORINE
(from Paris)
Milliner & Dress Maker
4 Stratford Place, Hastings
—*West Sussex Advertiser*, circa 1850

E. CLAPHAM,
Fancy Dress and Mantua Maker,
Begs Leave to inform the
Ladies of Leeds, and its Vicinity,
That she has just received a Variety of
Fashionable Fancy Models from London,
Which may be seen by those
Ladies who please to honor her
with their Commands, and hopes
through her strict Attention,
to merit their future Favors.
Two Apprentices Wanted.
—*The Leeds Intelligencer*, 1798

POLITO'S MENAGERIE
Indisputably the most grand, rich, and complete
collection of rare and beautiful living animals ever
known to travel in any part of the world,
is now offered for the inspection of the public.
By the very last arrival from India, was received the
HORNED HORSE OR NILGHAU,
Universally acknowledged the most
elegant quadruped of the Hindustan. . . .
—*Perthshire Courier*, 1816





CHAPTER



ONE

February 1821

Ivy Hill, Wiltshire, England

Mercy Grove could no longer put off the painful task. Her brother had recently married and would soon return from his wedding trip, ready to move with his new bride into Ivy Cottage—the home Mercy and Aunt Matilda had long viewed as their own.

Mr. Kingsley and one of his nephews had already relocated the bookcases to the circulating library’s new location in the former bank building and helped return the drawing room to its original purpose. It was time for her schoolroom to follow suit.

The Groves’ manservant had carried the desks, globes, and schoolbooks up to the attic, and now all that was left to move was Mercy’s prized wall slate.

Resigned to the inevitable, she asked Mr. Basu to take down the slate for her, but the manservant stood, knuckle pressed to his lip, uncertainty written on his golden-brown face. He sent her an apologetic look.

“If it breaks, it breaks,” Mercy said, more casually than she felt. She reminded herself she was no longer a teacher, but rational or not, she wished to save the slate intact. Just in case.

She recalled her father’s consoling words. “*I know you will miss*

your school. But if nothing else, you might help educate George's children one day." But as George had just married, it would be several years at least until she had a niece or nephew to teach.

As the two stood contemplating the framed slate, the sound of knocking on the front door reached them. Mr. Basu hurried off to answer it, clearly relieved for an excuse to postpone the task.

A few moments later, her aunt poked her head into the school-room. "Mercy? Mr. Kingsley is here."

"Oh? I did not know we were expecting him."

"I happened to mention you were unsure how to remove the slate in one piece, and he offered to help."

"Aunt Matty, we have asked too much of Mr. Kingsley already. He—"

Before Mercy could complete her objection, her aunt opened the door wider, revealing tall Joseph Kingsley standing behind her, hat in hand. His sandy hair looked damp from a recent bath.

"Morning, Miss Grove."

Mercy's hand went to her throat. Could he see her pulse beating there? She fiddled with the fichu tucked into her neckline. "Mr. Kingsley. Thank you for coming, but are you not needed at the Fairmont?"

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "Oh, my brothers will get along without me for one morning. Besides, work has slowed to a trickle with Mr. Drake away so much."

Mr. Drake had taken Alice home to introduce her to his parents. Mercy had yet to see them since their return. How she missed the dear girl.

Aunt Matilda backed from the room, eyes twinkling. "Now that Mr. Kingsley is here, Mr. Basu and I will see if Mrs. Timmons needs any help in the kitchen."

Not very subtle, Mercy thought, cheeks self-consciously warm.

When the door closed behind him, Mr. Kingsley stepped forward. "You traveled after the holidays, I understand. I came to call once and found only Mr. Basu in residence."

Mr. Kingsley had come to call? Mercy had seen him on a few occasions since then, and he'd never mentioned it, although his

nephew had been with him at the time. “I am sorry to have missed you. Was there . . . something you needed?”

“Nothing in particular. Just to see how you fared and if you’d had a happy Christmas.”

“That was kind of you. Aunt Matilda and I spent some time with my parents in London, and then we all traveled north to attend my brother’s wedding.”

“You traveled with *only* your parents and aunt?” he asked.

“Yes. Why?”

He looked down, twisting his hat brim. “I recall that you planned to give your suitor an answer by Christmas.”

Embarrassment heated her face once more. Why had she burdened poor Mr. Kingsley with all her woes?

“I did, yes.”

“And may I ask what your answer was?”

She gestured around the empty space. “I should think that obvious, as we are dismantling my schoolroom to make way for the new master and mistress.”

He winced, and Mercy instantly regretted her sharp tone.

“Forgive me,” she said. “I know bitterness does not become me. I thought I had accepted the situation, but apparently not.”

“I understand. I did not want to assume. The professor must have been terribly disappointed.”

“I don’t know. He wrote back to tell me he postponed his retirement for another term. I suppose you think it was foolish of me to refuse him. My parents certainly do.”

“Wise or not, I cannot say. I am not sorry to hear it, only surprised. Your mother described him as perfect for you. Educated, well-read, an Oxford tutor. Not many in this parish have such qualifications.”

She looked down. “I am not so exacting, I assure you.”

“You should be. You deserve the best, Miss Grove.”

Mercy was taken aback by his earnest tone. Was he applying for the position? But when she found the courage to look into his face, he quickly averted his gaze.

Mercy swallowed. “And you, Mr. Kingsley?”

“Me? I would never presume to be worthy, uneducated as I—”

“I meant, did *you* have a happy Christmas?”

“Oh.” A flush crept up his fair neck. “I . . . yes. I spent Christmas with my parents and brothers, and Twelfth Night with . . . in Basingstoke.”

“Basingstoke? With your wife’s family?”

His eyes flashed to hers in surprise.

She hurried to explain. “You mentioned that was where you met your wife.” And, Mercy recalled, where she had died in childbirth only a year after they wed, their child with her.

He reached up and rubbed the back of his neck. “Right.” He turned abruptly to the slate mounted on the wall. “Let’s see about taking this down, then.”

Seeing his obvious discomfort, Mercy was sorry she had mentioned his wife.

He walked closer and ran his fingers over the frame. “I’ll do my best, but slate is fragile. There’s a high risk of cracking.”

“I understand. I trust you. You can do it if anyone can.”

“I’ll try to live up to that, but I haven’t much experience with slate. I will need help lowering it once I begin prying the frame from the wall. Perhaps Mr. Basu?”

“Yes. I will go and ask him to join us.”

Mr. Basu reluctantly followed Mercy back up to the schoolroom, padding quietly on his pointed leather slippers. He stood at the other end of the slate, awaiting instructions. Curiosity and keen intelligence shone in his dark eyes as he glanced from Mr. Kingsley to her and back again.

From his toolbox, Mr. Kingsley extracted a crowbar. Then both men looked at her once more.

“You’re certain?” Mr. Kingsley asked.

The two simple words meant so much more.

She made do with a nod, fearing if she spoke, her voice would crack, and she wanted no cracks today.

Mr. Kingsley held her gaze a moment longer, then nodded to Mr. Basu.

“Just hold that end steady as I pry around this edge.”

The two men worked in silence, communicating with looks and small gestures.

Mr. Kingsley pried slowly and carefully, and Mercy held her breath. As he levered up the last corner, a sickening *snap* rent the air, and a jagged line snaked up one side.

“Dash it,” he murmured.

Mr. Basu muttered something in his mother tongue.

Mercy pressed a hand to her mouth. She felt that crack run straight through her heart.

Mr. Kingsley looked at her over his shoulder, crestfallen. “I am sorry, Miss Grove.”

“It isn’t your fault. Besides, it is not as though I have any plans for it.”

He carefully extracted the loose piece, and then the men lifted the frame. “Where shall we put it?”

“Let’s store it in the attic for now.” *With the rest of my hopes and dreams.* Mercy reminded herself that God did not promise ease and happiness in this life. But He did promise peace and joy, and she was determined to hold on to both, somehow.



The next morning Mercy and Matilda helped the servants begin an early spring cleaning to prepare Ivy Cottage for its new residents. There was a great deal to do and only a few of them to accomplish it.

Becky Morris offered to paint the walls of the former school-room, which showed signs of fading once the large slate had been removed. To spare Mr. Basu the task of washing the outside windows—he was not as young as he used to be—Mercy borrowed a tall ladder from Becky and hired one of the Mullins boys to do so. The strapping boy, who was always looking for extra work, also helped Mr. Basu bring down her grandparents’ old bedroom furniture stored in the attic these last ten years.

Needing to stretch their household budget after so many added

expenses, they economized with simple meals and scant meat while planning a more extravagant dinner to welcome George and Helena home. At her mother's suggestion, they had engaged a kitchen maid to assist Mrs. Timmons. Her father had said he would increase their allowance accordingly but had yet to do so. Mercy hoped he would, especially now that she no longer received any income from her school to help make ends meet.

They worked steadily until the day of her brother's return. The new-married couple was due to arrive at four. By half past three, old Mrs. Timmons was perspiring and red-faced from her extra exertions over a hot stove, and the new kitchen maid, Kitty McFarland, looked about to weep. Agnes Woodbead ran between kitchen and dining room, laying out the best china and silver and arranging flowers from Mrs. Bushby's greenhouse on the table.

Mercy and Matilda scurried about as well, straightening and adding finishing touches to the newly restored master bedroom. Mercy set a vase of hothouse flowers on the bedside table, checked to make sure freshly laundered hand towels were folded neatly at the washstand, and smoothed the lace cover, purchased from the Miss Cooks, on the dressing table.

Soon the room was fresh and tidy, but a passing glance in the mirror told Mercy *they* were not.

"Aunt Matty, do take off your apron. They shall be here at any time."

Matilda surveyed Mercy as she did so. "And you ought to change your frock and comb your hair, my dear."

"Perhaps we had both better change."

Matilda readily agreed, and in the jerky nod and distracted gaze, Mercy realized her aunt was as nervous about the new arrivals as she was.

The two women retreated to their rooms, helping each other into gowns more suitable for receiving guests. Then Mercy quickly brushed and repinned her hair and turned to her aunt for approval. "All right?"

"Very nice, my dear. Me?"

Mercy regarded the thin flushed face, out-of-fashion primrose yellow gown, and wispy grey curls. She extracted a stray cobweb from her aunt's hair and smoothed an errant tuft. "Perfect. Remember, we must be on our best behavior. We are the visitors now."

Matilda nodded. "I shall try."

When the hired chaise arrived, Mercy and her aunt waited in the vestibule while Mr. Basu went out to meet it, looking smarter than usual in a crisply ironed high-colored jacket over his traditional loose trousers. As always, a soft cotton cap covered his black hair.

They watched through the window as a groom hopped down to lower the chaise step and open the door. Then he returned to the boot to unfasten trunks and valises and hand them to Mr. Basu.

Mercy's tall brother alighted first, reaching back to help his dainty wife down. Helena looked regal in purple-and-gold carriage dress and fashionable hat. She glanced up at Ivy Cottage and, if Mercy was not mistaken, was not overly impressed with what she saw.

Mercy's stomach tightened. She silently asked God to help this first encounter go well and for Helena to approve of the Ivy Cottage servants, who were worried about their future employment if they failed to please their new mistress. A second woman, dark-haired and dressed in serviceable black, emerged next, a stack of bandboxes in hand. Helena's lady's maid, Mercy guessed. She hoped Agnes had remembered to ready the room next to hers as well.

Mercy's heart pounded. *Foolish girl, it is only your brother and his wife.* There was nothing to be frightened of. Beside her, Aunt Matty clutched her hand.

Mercy reached out to open the door, but Matilda kept hold of her hand, gesturing with a nod for Agnes—in her best dress and freshly laundered apron—to open it. Mercy supposed her aunt was right. First impressions mattered. A woman like the former Helena Maddox would expect a servant to open the door. She would no doubt prefer a tall liveried footman, but short Agnes Woodbead or silent Mr. Basu would have to do. At least for the present. Mercy

wondered if, and when, Helena would begin making changes. It was her household to manage now as she saw fit.

As he entered the vestibule, George stretched out his arms, a charming smile dimpling his face. “Well, here we are.”

“Welcome home, George.” Aunt Matty returned his smile.

George kissed his aunt’s cheek and Mercy’s, then turned to his wife. “You remember my darling wife, I trust?”

Helena said coolly, “Of course they do, George. We met at the wedding. And I have a name, you know.”

“You do indeed, Helena. Although I prefer *Mrs. Grove*.” He winked at his wife, but she ignored his teasing.

“A pleasure to see you again, Helena,” Aunt Matty said.

“Yes, welcome to Ivy Cottage,” Mercy added. Noticing Mr. Basu still carrying baggage through the side door, she said, “Here, let Agnes take your things.”

Helena’s gaze swept over Agnes’s plain form with a small wrinkle between her brows. Mercy reminded herself not to be prejudiced where her new sister-in-law was concerned. Just because Helena was raised in a wealthy home did not mean the woman would be critical or difficult to please—she hoped.

Mercy smiled at Helena. “Dinner will be ready soon, and I imagine you will want to freshen up first?”

“Dinner . . . so early? Ah yes, we are in rural Wiltshire now, with its charming country manners. We are accustomed to dining later. I will need time to rest and change.”

Mercy felt her smile falter, thinking of Mrs. Timmons’s exhausting efforts to prepare an elegant meal and to have everything ready at just the right time.

Helena directed her next comment to Agnes. “And a hot bath, if you please.”

A hot bath—now? When every inch of the stove was covered with cooking pots and simmering sauce pans, and their small staff stretched thin as it was?

George glanced from woman to woman, then spoke up. “My dear, might your bath not wait a bit? I can smell our dinner, and

my mouth is watering already. It has been far too long since I've tasted Mrs. Timmons's cooking. Come, my dear. We can alter meal times in future, but if everything is ready now . . ."

Mercy's heart warmed to her brother, who at that moment seemed less like the stranger she had felt him to be at the wedding and more like the sibling she recalled.

His wife's eyes shone icy blue. "Heaven forbid you should miss a meal, my dear. If the bath must wait, so be it. But I will need an hour at least to rest and dress." She patted George's waistcoat and looked at Mercy. "Married life agrees with your brother, as you see, Miss Grove. He has gained a stone or more since we became engaged. He ate his way through every city on our wedding trip."

An uneasy smile lifted her brother's handsome features. "And why not? What a delicious opportunity to sample the cuisine of several different regions."

"Sounds wonderful," Matilda agreed. "We look forward to hearing all about your travels."

While the newcomers went upstairs to rest and change, Mercy hurried to the kitchen to inform Mrs. Timmons to delay the meal. Mrs. Timmons grumbled, doubting it would look or taste nearly as good after being kept warm for an hour, predicting the new mistress would send her packing for serving fallen Yorkshire puddings, reheated meat, and congealed sauces.

"She will understand," Mercy said, trying to reassure her. "After all, she was the one who postponed the meal."

At least Mercy hoped she would understand. Kitty and Agnes were still young and could likely find new employment, but if Helena dismissed Zelda Timmons or Mr. Basu, both would struggle to find new positions—Mrs. Timmons because of her age, and Mr. Basu because he was a foreigner in a land sometimes unwelcoming to darker-skinned people. Both were dependable and hardworking. She hoped Helena would come to think so as well.

An hour later, Mercy reached the dining room first and watched as her sister-in-law descended the stairs in a vibrant indigo gown

with a high lace collar. The petite woman possessed fair skin and delicate patrician features. Cool hauteur pinched her small mouth, but she had likely been an angelic-looking child with a halo of blond curls. Now Helena wore her hair in an ornate style, with braids from ear to ear and tight pin curls fringing her forehead like curtain tassels.

Mercy felt large, awkward, and ill-dressed in her presence, especially as Helena's gaze traveled over her inelegant form with silent censure, or at least pity.

When they had all gathered and taken their seats, Helena surveyed the table with its soup tureen, fish course, and more dishes to follow. After two weeks of sparse meals, Mercy's stomach growled in anticipation.

Helena said, "Quite a feast. Do you two always eat so well?"

"No, but we wanted your first meal here to be special."

"I see."

Mercy added, "Mrs. Timmons has been with us for years. And we recently hired a new kitchen maid, as Mother suggested."

"I trust your father has increased the household allowance?"

She was surprised Helena would raise the topic in company. "He plans to, I know."

"George, you will have to write to him. I won't see my dowry spent on the butcher's bill."

"Yes, my love. Straightaway."

As they began the next course, Matilda changed the subject. "Now that you have returned to England, George, what will you do?"

Helena smiled. "Oh, we expect great things. Parliament, perhaps."

"Ah," Matilda murmured doubtfully.

Helena prodded a limp puff of dough with her fork. "Is this meant to be Yorkshire pudding?"

"Yes. Made in your honor."

Helena did not appear impressed, and even less so when she lifted a ladle of lumpy gravy.

Mercy's enjoyment of the generous meal was diminished by

the tense atmosphere of the room. Aunt Matty, she noticed, also ate sparingly.

Surely things would improve after everyone grew more accustomed to one another. After all, they had weathered many changes in recent months, and hopefully they'd endure this one as well. *Peace and joy*, Mercy reminded herself. *Hold on to peace and joy.*