



## *Sixteen Years Ago*

The doll had been in the lake for so long that the water had rinsed almost all the colour from her clothes. What had once been a beautiful cornflower blue was now as dull and pale as a winter sky – more rag than dress. Her feet were bare, and one of her fingers had broken away. The bouncy chestnut ringlets of her hair were now two heavy twists that wrapped around her arms like dark rope. Her face was white and cold to the touch, and the apple blush of her cheeks and the small rosebud pout of her mouth had long since washed away. With unblinking emerald eyes, she stared at the sky as the garland of white flowers and feathers adorning her head slowly loosened and drifted around her like a scattered offering.

By the time she floated towards the banks of the island, the light was beginning to fade. A young woman was walking along the edge of the lake. She came there most evenings to listen to the gentle sound of the water. That evening she heard the flute-like note of a curlew echoing through the dusk. It would not be long until the soft hoot of an owl summoned the moon. She wondered if it was the same one that she had released a few days before, after finding it sprawled on a pile of leaves in its light speckled gown, its wing bent at an odd angle. The month before, she had found a baby robin shivering on the lawn. Unable to find its nest, she had nursed it back to health, waking through the night to feed it bits of hard-boiled egg from a toothpick. She had rescued so many animals on the island – and not only birds, but also salamanders, hedgehogs, mice and even a fox that had torn its neck on a rusty wire. A piece of its fur would forever be missing, but it lived. This is where she came to release them; chosen because it was far enough from the house not to be seen and it offered the secret shade of the chestnut trees. She was thinking of keeping a ledger of them all, like that of a jewel merchant or a curator of the finest museum specimens. Her work was just as important as theirs, and she was determined it would count.

The warmth of the day hadn't yet left her skin as she pulled off her stockings and walked towards the lake. Hitching up her dress, she dipped her toes into the cool

blue water, then, unable to resist, she plunged in her whole foot, feeling the cold splash against her legs. There was no one there to see. Her brother was the only one who might come this way, but he was always too busy mending a broken lock or carving out a new one. She closed her eyes, tilted her face to the sky and inhaled the wispy scent of hibiscus, which every now and then caught on the gentle breeze.

On the island the dark always arrived swiftly. In a blink, the sun's dramatic red flare would vanish from the mountains and the sky would glow like a long-burning fire. It was the magic hour – the hour of water and birdsong and fast-fading light. It was her time.

Something tickled her ankle. At first she didn't give it much attention; wind-swept twigs and ferns were always finding their way into the water. She probably would have continued standing there with her eyes closed and her skirt bunched in her fists, dreaming and drifting, except that whatever it was suddenly grew insistent. It felt like the tapping of tiny impatient fingers on her skin – so strange that she finally opened her eyes and looked down. What she saw floating against her leg made her gasp in astonishment.

Gently, so as not to damage it further, she lifted the doll out of the water. It was heavier than expected, and it didn't break apart in her hands, as she had feared. Carefully she shook away the water and unpicked a twig that had tangled in its hair.

‘Someone will be missing you,’ she said, staring into the doll’s eyes, still bright and shining.

Then she felt it, as she so often did when she touched an unfamiliar object. A vision, a connection. Only this time the feeling was difficult to explain. She waited, hoping that if she grasped the doll a little tighter with both of her hands, the meaning would come.

Usually the sense was sudden and sharp, like a pin-prick. Sometimes there was a sound or a feeling. At other times it came to her as a smell or a taste on her tongue. Her gift was an unusual one. The first time it happened she had been returning a dropped pendant to a lady in the street. As soon as she picked it up, she could hear the relentless sound of a baby crying. It was so loud that she had run away, covering her ears, before the woman even had time to thank her. A few months later she saw the same woman gazing excitedly in the window of a toy shop and, when she turned to leave, she saw the rounded swelling of her stomach, confirming what she’d already known.

Unfortunately the visions weren’t always that pleasant. One winter morning she had bought a bag of chestnuts from the old peddler on the street corner. As she popped one – still warm – into her mouth and crunched it between her teeth, she knew immediately that something was wrong. Instead of the burst of sweetness she had been expecting, the metallic taste of blood filled her mouth. She began to gag in disgust, clawing at her tongue and choking as she tried to spit out all the pieces. The peddler

watched in confusion and guilt, but she hurried away, unable to explain. A week later, when she was standing in the bread shop, she saw a funeral procession go by. She didn't need to look inside the coffin to know she'd find the old peddler lying there.

Another time she'd found a glove, its owner long gone. She picked it up, intending to lay it on a window ledge, in case someone came looking for it. As soon as she touched it, she felt a terrible burning sensation, so hot that she dropped it back on the ground as though she held a lit coal. She was convinced that it had left scorch marks, but when she turned her hand over, the smooth, unblemished skin said otherwise. The next day she'd heard that a house in the village had burned to the ground and all the people inside had perished. She would never know for sure if one of them had lost a glove, but she was almost certain they had.

This time it was different. It wasn't a sound or a taste that came to her as she held the doll, but rather an unshakeable feeling. It made her heart lift, then fall, then lift and fall again like a choppy wave, but she couldn't tell if it was bringing her closer to the shore or sweeping her further away.

Tentatively she turned the doll over in her hand, hoping she would sense something else, something more. It would have been so beautiful once and expensively made, but now its porcelain arms and legs were stained and its face was chipped. She could see that one of its fingers was

missing and its dress looked like an old dishcloth. If it had once worn shoes, they were long gone.

*But it is not beyond repair*, she thought, her mind turning to the paints she kept in her room. She could use them to revive the doll's cheeks and lips. Curling its hair would be simple enough – she had done her own enough times – and she could wash its dress and sprinkle lavender into the water to banish the mould. After all, she was used to rescuing things. Her brother would laugh and say she was almost grown, and far too old to play with dolls. She knew he was right, but it wasn't the doll she was interested in, it was the person who'd lost it.

The last of the light vanished, deepening the sky from lilac to indigo and, in the lake below, the petals of the sorrowing stars were stirring. It was time to leave.

That night, as she fell asleep with the doll by her side, she could feel her cheeks damp, but the tears that fell were not her own.

Across the lake a young girl was crying into her pillow. A few weeks ago she had left her doll somewhere, but couldn't remember where. Her father and her uncle had gone back to the little park they'd sat in that morning and retraced their steps to the café where they'd all eaten lunch. The following day they'd gone back to see if the doll was lying on the steps of the church they'd admired, but they were empty, aside from a pair of cooing doves. They spent days searching the village without any luck, and by the

time they eventually wandered along the lakeside path, the doll had almost reached the island. Each time they returned empty-handed the little girl's heart broke all over again, and the promise of a new doll did nothing to fix it. As she lay inconsolable in her cousin's arms, her crying continued long into the night, and into the many nights that followed.

Her loss was a ripple in the water that could be felt far across the lake.





# CHAPTER 1

## *The Marchpane Girl*



Liddy spied yet another card lying in a silver tray on the hallway table. It was the fifth one in as many weeks and, just like all the others, it had her name written on the front. She instantly recognised the hand that had left it there, and her heart plummeted. It belonged to Jack Heathcote. Dipping her head to unwind her scarf, Liddy noticed that the top left-hand corner had been turned down, indicating that it had been hand-delivered. She felt a momentary flutter of panic at the thought of him still being there, sipping tea and discussing business with her father in the drawing room. She strained her ears for the sound of voices tucked deeper in the house, but none came. A quick rummage through the coat-stand confirmed that her visitor hadn't stayed and she gave a sigh of relief.

She lifted the card from the tray, a gesture that brought with it a waft of something pungent and much too sweet, like rose petals stewed in rain. His mother's perfume perhaps, or the trace of one of his many lovers. She didn't need to read it to know what it would say – the cards all had the same nauseating sentiment, which was as sickly as it was false. In the last one he described her as his *dearest creature* and declared himself to be her *most ardent pursuer*. She shuddered at the thought. As soon as her mother had discovered that Jack Heathcote was the one sending the calling cards she'd begun planning the most lavish of weddings. Her father was equally delighted by Jack's interest in his daughter; the Heathcote family came from a long line of shipping merchants and, with the right investment, he imagined his marchpane travelling to the distant corners of the world.

Liddy knew it wasn't polite to ignore the card, but she didn't care – she wasn't about to give Jack the satisfaction of a reply. It might please her parents if she became the wife of a man with more lovers than plum puddings, but it certainly wouldn't please her. Down the corridor she heard the rustling and folding of paper and then the swift shuffle of her father's approaching feet. Quick as a minnow, she slipped the card into her pocket, just as he emerged from the shadows, carrying a small bundle of boxes in his hands.

'No, no, no,' he said, shaking his head, before she had a chance to undo the first of her coat buttons. 'I need you

to go out again; there is a very important sugar banquet happening right now, and our marchpane is to be the centrepiece.'

Liddy's father thrust the boxes into her hands and bundled her back onto the street.

'Hurry,' he called. 'These packages are for Jack Heathcote, and I think it's about time you answered his calls.'

'But—' Liddy began, but her father's face immediately hardened and her protestations fell away.

'I told you, good men don't wait for ever,' he said sternly. 'Especially the likes of Jack Heathcote.'

He slammed the door shut, leaving her alone on the street. Liddy wondered if there even was a sugar banquet or if it were simply a stupid ruse to bring them together. Reaching inside her pocket for the card that her father had obviously already discovered, she scrunched it into a ball. *That's my answer, and it won't change*, she thought, tossing it into the gutter.

A quiet storm brewed, and she strode across town in such a temper that the pounding of her footsteps startled a flock of pigeons into the air like a spray of bullets. She was so angry that she walked straight past her destination, and it was only when she reached the rowdy rabble of the Queen's Head that she realised she'd gone too far and had to double back.

The Heathcote house was a large stone building on the edge of the town. From the outside it was a rather drab and tired affair, with crumbling walls and chipped

paintwork, but once inside it became a different place entirely. When she had been too young to make deliveries by herself, she would accompany her father on his errands, and it was in the early dark of winter that she had first glimpsed the sumptuous world within. She had gasped when the door had opened for the first time to reveal a place of breathtaking opulence, unlike anything she had ever seen before. While they had waited in the grand hallway, her eyes had hurried over everything: a sweeping staircase, a polished floor, a sparkling chandelier, gleaming elegant furnishings. Then through a large open doorway her eyes had fallen upon a boy. He was perhaps a year or two older than her and he was pulling a mewling cat along the floor by its tail. Liddy had watched in horror as the boy began to spin the cat round and round. His laughter made her furious. Her father didn't seem to notice, or perhaps he dismissed it as boyish mischief; either way, he ignored her tugs at his sleeve. Taken by surprise at seeing Liddy and her father standing there, the boy had loosened his grip and the cat seized its opportunity to escape. On frantic paws, it skittered straight for the front door, which had closed behind Liddy and her father. Without hesitation Liddy stepped back to turn the handle. A cold draught blew in and the cat brushed past her legs and was gone. The boy watched her with narrowed eyes and then smiled smugly. He didn't look at her angrily, but as though she was a new challenge, which was even more unsettling. Liddy averted her gaze and shifted her feet

back until she was hidden safely behind her father's oversized coat.

In that moment Liddy learned that wealth couldn't make everything shine and it certainly couldn't buy manners.

On reaching the top of the steps leading to the front door, she now saw her scowling face reflected in the polished brass of the door knocker. The fixture felt too heavy in her hand, and she let it drop before she was ready. A shallow, dull thud half-heartedly announced her arrival. She tutted at herself; the walk across town had done nothing to abate her temper. She stood back, ready to hand over her father's delivery quickly and scarper, but no one came. She tried again, this time with a thud loud enough to rouse the dead, but it seemed the dead were not listening – the door stayed firmly shut.

Behind her on the street, two children ran past, giggling. They were followed by a breathless woman hitching up her skirts, in slow pursuit. 'It's time you rascals were home for supper,' the woman cried to the children, shaking her head and pausing to rest against the railings. After a moment she straightened herself and hobbled away after them. Liddy's attention fell back to the door.

She knocked again and again, but still nobody answered. She felt a drop of rain on her head and looked up, to see an ominous dark sky: rain was on its way. Impatiently she placed the boxes on the step and peered through the nearest window, hoping to catch someone's attention. The

room within was dark and filled with shadows, but on the other side the light through an open doorway revealed a crowded room, and she could hear the very faint sound of laughter. At that moment the front door swung open and the suddenness of it sent her stumbling backwards; her foot slipped and she fell down the steps to the street below. Unharmful but embarrassed, she looked up to see Jack Heathcote standing above her.

‘Let me help,’ he said, moving towards her.

Liddy scrambled to her feet; she did not welcome the weight of his hand upon her arm. Straightening her skirt, she dusted off her coat and climbed the steps, then hastily snatched up the boxes and thrust them towards him.

‘You must be here for my party,’ he said, letting the marchpane boxes hang between them.

‘You are mistaken,’ Liddy snapped. ‘I came to deliver your marchpane – and only at my father’s insistence.’

Jack smirked as she continued to hold the boxes out to him. Part of her wished he would just take them and close the door, but another part of her was intrigued by the laughter and the chatter, and the sound of glasses chinking that she could hear over his shoulder.

‘And have you brought me anything else? Perhaps a reply to one of my many calling cards?’ he asked with a smirk.

His words drew her back, and Liddy shook her head. Despite her earlier defiance, she felt a twinge of guilt at her own rudeness.

‘Very well,’ he said, with a touch of disappointment. ‘I would like you to arrange the marchpane on the table. That is what you do, isn’t it?’

*No, it isn’t what I do*, she thought, her irritation returning. But the glow behind him held her gaze, and Liddy hesitated a beat too long. Sensing her indecision, Jack moved back and the door widened.

Ensorcelled by all the glitter, she stepped inside.

The house was warm – too warm – and the glare of so many lights hurt her eyes. Jack led her down a wide hallway with a gleaming marble floor and past a grand sweeping staircase that led to who knew how many bedrooms. A sweet scent coated the air, making her teeth tingle, and she smoothed her tongue over their ridges to make them settle. On the wall hung a portrait of the Heathcote family, and there was Jack as a boy, staring back at her with an expression of arrogance and entitlement. Even then, you could tell he was used to getting his own way. She remembered the poor cat and her skin prickled.

The voices grew louder, and Liddy suddenly regretted her decision to follow him into the house. *This was a mistake*, she thought too late, as she found herself in a room full of people. For a moment it felt like time had stopped and all eyes were upon her, cold and disapproving and full of mockery. Standing there in her drab coat with its missing button and her boots all scuffed at the toes, Liddy felt a flush of shame. She did not belong in such a polished world. Her stomp through the street had left her



more dishevelled than usual and she remembered her pale reflection in the brass knocker. She swallowed hard and continued to follow Jack further into the room, trying her best to ignore all the giggles and nudges. The women in the room wore flamboyant parrot-coloured dresses and had ribbons tied in their hair. From their ears and necks dripped jewels, like molten gold. Liddy lowered her head; she felt like a beetle scuttling over treasure. Self-consciously she smoothed down a strand of loosened hair and tucked it behind her ear, and immediately hated herself for caring what these people thought of her.

‘Who’s this?’ chortled a young man. Despite having the plump red cheeks of a farmer, his soft leather boots, without a single scratch upon them, confirmed that he had never set foot in a muddy field, much less baled any hay.

‘You didn’t tell us you had invited another guest, Jack,’ purred a girl with large blinking eyes. She clung onto the arm of the red-cheeked man as though he was going to save her from stepping into a cowpat.

‘Don’t be silly, Emily, she’s not a guest,’ sang a voice from across the room.

The girl who had spoken – similar in age to Liddy, but far more immaculately preened – walked over and, without giving Liddy time to object, lifted the boxes from her hand.

‘She’s just the marchpane girl,’ she said dismissively. Putting the boxes on the table, she ripped them open in greedy delight. Liddy felt herself bristle.

With a swish and a rustle, all the girls quickly arranged themselves around her like shiny baubles. They watched with wide and eager eyes as she carelessly tipped the multicoloured squares onto a large three-tiered stand in the middle of the table. Some landed on the table and others fell to the floor in an avalanche of sugar. Liddy had to resist the urge to pick them up. Instead she stepped back. The girl popped one in her mouth immediately and closed her lips around it with an undisguised squeal of pleasure, her performance captivating the men in the room. All except one – Jack Heathcote – whose eyes were still firmly fixed on Liddy. She turned away as the other girls shuffled forward, desperate for a taste of the exquisite marchpane. A wicked thought suddenly sparked in her mind: if only she had added a spoonful of salt to the mixture – that would have taught these snotty girls a lesson.

‘Try one, they are truly divine!’ the girl exclaimed, licking her fingers and wiping them on the fabric of her beautiful dress. *What a waste of such fine silk*, thought Liddy. On first sight she had thought the woman to be beautiful, with her shiny blue eyes and her tiny button nose, her perfectly ringletted hair tied in a pretty pink ribbon like a doll. But when she opened her mouth to laugh, all Liddy’s thoughts of beauty quickly evaporated. Where her teeth should have been, there were mostly gaps, and the very few that remained wobbled from blackened gums. Liddy wouldn’t have been at all surprised to

find one left behind in a piece of marchpane, and she wrinkled her nose in disgust at the thought. Holding another marchpane square between sticky fingers, the girl skipped over to where Jack was sitting and bounced onto his knee with a giggle.

‘You simply have to taste them,’ she insisted, forcing one into his mouth.

Jack seemed to have finally forgotten all about Liddy and happily played along, nodding his agreement, *ooing* and *aahing* and closing his eyes as the marchpane sat on his tongue. Liddy watched as his jaw ground like a miller’s wheel, and the thought of his mouth being anywhere near hers made her quite nauseous. The girl on his knee was laughing now and stamping her feet in a pitter-patter of excitement that made the crockery in the cabinet rattle. Liddy wondered if perhaps they were all high on sugar – the sugar mountain on the table had already been half-conquered. Watching Jack and the girl didn’t fill her with envy; it simply confirmed that she would never ever want to be with someone like Jack Heathcote, and she felt only disappointment that her parents thought him to be such a suitable match.

Thankfully the whole room seemed to have forgotten she was there, including Jack, and when he opened his eyes again, the marchpane girl was long gone.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Disappointment*



**H**urrying through the damp streets, Liddy was careful not to let the hem of her skirt drop in the grimy puddles. Only when she was finally back on the cobbles of Wingate Square did she release the fabric from her clenched fists. Her house was slotted right in the middle of a modest red-brick row, all tall and slender and as upright as the people who inhabited them. Their roofs were neatly assembled, their windows shone like military medals and the steps were routinely swept clean of leaves. It may not have been as grand as the Heathcote residence, but it was a respectable neighbourhood and her father had worked hard to afford it.

Upon reaching the front door, she paused at the sight of a small package. She glanced up and down the street,

but no one loitered and whoever had left it there was nowhere to be seen. Liddy wondered if it was once again Jack Heathcote's doing; rather than pursuing her with simple acquaintance cards, perhaps he had decided that a gift would be a more persuasive way of gaining her affection. But as she thought about it, she realised it was impossible; she had just seen Jack at home with his sugar queen, and the package hadn't been there when she left, had it? Unwelcome thoughts of Jack Heathcote filtered back into her mind and she stomped up the steps with the same frustration as she had descended them less than an hour before. At least she could be reasonably confident that neither her father nor her mother had discovered this package yet – she was thankful for small mercies.

The paper in which it was wrapped was torn and weather-worn as though it had travelled a great distance to get there. Scooping it up, she heard its contents rattle within. She turned it over to find a perfectly square label, and written upon it in a careful but unfamiliar hand was her name, Madeleine Harchwood. She had never seen such controlled and crafted calligraphy before; the letters were a collection of fine inky swirls and loops – a little timid perhaps, as though whoever had put them there was too shy to reveal themselves fully.

*If not Jack Heathcote, then who?* She pondered the thought fleetingly and then her mind solved the mystery. Although she hadn't been expecting another arrival of her secret ingredients so soon, this was surely what she was holding

now in her hand. For months she had been adding to her father's recipe, without telling him and without arousing his suspicions. With increasing regularity she had begun to swap the rosewater for orange-flower water to give it more of an exotic flavour: a sharp burst on the tongue. At other times it was honey that she substituted for sugar, and found that not only did the customers comment on how smooth the marchpane tasted, but she was saving them a potful of money in the process. Sugar always came at a high price.

Her father's sole heir, she had been brought into the business several years ago. She had grown up watching in wonder as her father blanched handfuls of almonds and ground them to a thick paste in a mortar. He always worked swiftly and silently, whipping egg whites, sifting sugar and mixing in the occasional spoonful of rosewater, stirring it all with a deft hand. Once it was ready, he would roll it out on the worktop and then cut it into small, equal squares, placing each one on little wafers and setting them to bake. She would wait for him to give her the sliced-off edges, so that she could make weird and wonderful patterns and shapes out of them. *Why did he only choose squares?* she often wondered. How boring! Where was his imagination? Once she had tried to make a seahorse, because she'd seen one in a book and thought it was pretty, but it had looked more like a serpent and, with a stab of disappointment, she squished the marchpane back into a gooey ball and then reshaped it into a slightly more convincing heart.

Now that she was older, her father trusted her with more responsibility and sometimes, when he was busy with his accounts, he let her make the paste all by herself. He had even been convinced to let her shape it into fruit: pears and cherries and apples, with a clove for a calyx. Her favourites were strawberries, which she'd roll in fine sugar to create a dimpled finish. He knew nothing about Liddy's experimentation with ingredients, however, and she knew he wouldn't be pleased. Any money she saved she invested straight back into the business, to fund the purchase of other fine ingredients. Her deception was profiting them well. Once she'd daringly added cherry liqueur to a batch of almond paste, much to the delight of Lady Goldman, who gobbled it up in a single evening, proclaiming it was the most wonderful thing she had ever tasted. Liddy promptly ordered a month's supply and did so every month thereafter. Whenever her father queried the arrival of these strange packages, she told him they were oils to perfume her bath water and creams to soften her skin. He was quick to accept the lie, satisfied that his daughter was making herself desirable. But if he'd looked more closely, he would have seen that her skin was no softer than before and carried the simple scent of soap and nothing more.

Liddy dropped the package soundlessly into the deep dark of her pocket, where it was quickly forgotten.

She hurried into the house and out of the cold, but before she had even slipped off her shoes, she heard her

father's voice summoning her to the drawing room. Taking a deep breath, she pushed down the handle and entered the room.

'Ah, here she is at last. Tell us everything!' her mother cried joyfully, rushing over to greet her. Liddy knew her mother's delight had nothing whatsoever to do with her return, and everything to do with Jack Heathcote. She pulled Liddy's hands into hers and opened her eyes wide in anticipation. Liddy offered nothing.

'How is Jack?' her father prompted.

'A flirt and a philanderer at best,' she announced loudly.

There was a sharp intake of breath and Liddy's mother dropped her hands as if burned. 'Really, Madeleine!' she exclaimed, looking to her husband for support.

Liddy took the opportunity to move quickly away from her hysterics. She slid a book off her father's shelf and settled into a chair in the corner. It was where she went to escape. From the corner of her eye, she saw her father shake his head at her mother; the gesture was enough to return her to her chair, where she quietly pulled her knitting onto her lap. *Thankfully I am nothing like her*, she thought, opening her book.

'So, have you given him your answer?' Her father tried to sound nonchalant, with his eyes still focused on his newspaper.

Liddy hesitated, wondering if she should feign ignorance, but it would only prolong the inevitable and provoke them both further.



‘Jack is not a serious man,’ she protested. ‘His eye is turned too easily by ribbons and curls, and his ear loves nothing more than the tune of a playful giggle—’

‘What man doesn’t?’ interrupted her mother, quick as ever to come to Jack’s defence.

Liddy rolled her eyes in despair. ‘Mother, please!’

‘He is from a fine, respectable family,’ said her father evenly.

‘So am I.’

Her father half-smiled and his voice softened, almost to a whisper. ‘You are different from most other girls – more intelligent, more thoughtful and much more capable. Jack told me so himself.’

Liddy shook her head. She knew what Jack really thought – that she was a novelty, a challenge, someone who needed to be put in her place. She didn’t bow to his every whim and so she must be conquered. Her father might be a successful businessman who had earned himself a good reputation, but they were still a world away from people like the Heathcotes. She wondered if his parents would even agree to such a union, but then he was incredibly spoiled. Whatever Jack Heathcote wanted, Jack Heathcote got.

‘You will never have to struggle for anything,’ said her father, interrupting her thoughts.

*Maybe not for money,* she thought. Her mother’s heavy sighs grew louder and the gaps between them closer together, like the count between the thunder and the lightning – a storm was rolling in.

'I will not accept his invitation,' said Liddy firmly.

'You will never get a better one,' snapped her mother.

'I have no interest in Jack Heathcote or his whims,' she protested.

'This is not just about you,' she continued. 'There is a lot to be gained from this union. Can you not for one moment think of anyone but yourself?'

'I don't care what is to be gained. I will not be spending a single second with Jack Heathcote. I would rather contract cholera.' Liddy's voice was growing more defiant.

Her mother whitened, and her knitting slipped from her lap to her feet. 'Madeleine! What did I do to deserve such a selfish, stubborn child as you?' Her voice had taken on the rising pitch of helium gas. 'Less than a year separates you from Tabitha, and yet Matthew's proposal came three years ago, and we were all blessed with such a beautiful summer wedding. Why can't you be more like your cousin? So gentle and sweet.'

Tabitha was the daughter of her mother's sister. She had known her husband Matthew since they were both children and had always been in love with him. She had shared her feelings with Liddy behind closed doors and they'd giggled over the poems he'd written for her, which she'd kept locked in a little pink box. Tabitha had longed for marriage and, when the proposal had finally come, she cried with happiness and couldn't wait to announce it to the world.

'Tabitha would have married Matthew at sixteen if she could!' declared Liddy.

Her father loved his niece – her theatrical performances amused him greatly – and Liddy saw the sides of his mouth lift ever so slightly to form a secret smile at the mention of Tabitha. It was all the encouragement she needed and so she changed track, instead arguing that she should be able to choose not for convenience or money, or for any reason other than love. After all, wasn't that why Tabitha had chosen Matthew – because she loved him, and he loved her too? Liddy's vehement words somersaulted through the air, leaving her mother shaking and on the verge of tears; and, too late, Liddy realised that the smile had gone from her father's lips, leaving his face dark with anger. She finally bit her tongue.

Anxiously she waited for him to break the silence – for the sound of his words to heal the stricken air – but nothing came. Instead he paced quietly across the room, stopping when he reached the window. If it had been an open door, she was quite sure he would have continued walking, ousted from his home by the disobedience of his daughter and the hysterics of his wife. He stared into the darkness as though the answer to all his problems lay far beyond the confines of the house. He kept his face turned away from her, and she was grateful not to see it.

When the words came, they were not the ones she was expecting.

'I have allowed you too much freedom.' He sighed, as though this were all his fault and he was the one to blame. His disappointment was even worse than the anger Liddy

had expected. ‘Do you think I didn’t realise what the honey and the orange-flower water were really for?’

Her heart sank. She should have known he would guess – he was not an easy man to deceive. At least the look of astonishment upon her mother’s face told her that she had fooled one person in this house.

‘Please, Father—’ she began, but he held up his hand and Liddy fell into the safety of silence.

‘Nobody takes that many baths.’ He shook his head despairingly. ‘I allowed you to continue your charade, and in many ways I admired your ingenuity, but I can see now that it was a mistake. My mistake.’

‘Were there complaints?’ she asked, suddenly appalled by her own transgression. She could not stand the thought that she had put her father’s business in jeopardy.

Her father sighed. ‘There were many complaints.’

Liddy felt her heart sink at the thought of her impulsive stupidity. How much damage had she caused?

‘But the complaints weren’t about your marchpane; they were about mine.’

Liddy frowned in confusion, waiting for him to explain.

‘It seems our customers prefer their marchpane to taste of oranges.’ He turned to her and smiled then. ‘It is *your* recipes they want, not mine. That’s why I left you alone in the kitchen; it had nothing to do with my paperwork.’

‘But I thought—’

His smile faded. ‘Yes, that’s the problem: you thought . . . And now your head is filled with magic and daydreams,

from reading too many books. Because I gave you free rein, and it worked, you think you know everything and you can do as you like. But I'm afraid there is no choice now. We will no longer live with the shame of an unmarried daughter – the time has come for you to accept Jack Heathcote's invitation, and whatever may follow it. He is a worthy match and, with his support, the business will grow even more and you can keep creating marchpane. Unless you can think of another way to leave this house, then you will take what is being offered to you. I am your father, and my word is final.'

'Please,' she begged. 'My heart feels nothing for him. Nothing at all!'

'Then we must fetch a doctor,' said her mother, who until then had remained in watchful silence. 'A heart that feels nothing for a man such as Jack Heathcote must surely be suffering from some grave malady.' There was a quiet tut.

Panic-stricken, Liddy looked back at her father, desperate for some reprieve, but none was forthcoming.

'It is getting late,' said her father quietly. 'We have a large wedding order to prepare tomorrow, and you will need to rest.'

Thus dismissed, she ran from the room before her distress turned to tears; a sight that would surely have given her mother great satisfaction. For her this was a small triumph, but for Liddy it was the painful stab of defeat.

'A wedding!' harrumphed her mother. 'Chance would be a fine thing.'

## Interlude

*The quiet is deep this evening. It arrives on tiptoes, but if you listen carefully enough you can still hear what it leaves behind. Fading light holds the wispy notes of birds as they finally settle to sleep. The water is calm, but it gently laps the shore. Her window is ajar and the scents of hibiscus and oleander drift in from the garden below. I listen for every small sound she makes: a gentle sigh, the shuffle of paper on the desk where she is sitting, the tapping that her feet make upon the wooden floorboards. She is restless, and uncertain; I can tell.*

*She is taking her time. She picks up her pen and dips it into a pot of the finest blue ink. After a moment's hesitation, she begins. She has written letters before, but something about this one is different. There is more thought and deliberation, as though she is hoping to impress the recipient, or perhaps convince*

them of something. Usually a letter is finished faster than it takes a pot to boil on the stove, or for the leaves to be swept from the path, but not this one. I can hear the scratches made by the nib as the words emerge across the thick vellum paper; it is like the quiet, purposeful rustle of a nesting mouse. There is a deftness, an assuredness to her stroke, but then abruptly she stops. The pen lingers a little too long on the page, leaving a dark clot of ink behind. I hear her tut as she lifts the pen from the paper and sets it down. It rolls along the desk and she is too slow to catch it before it clatters to the floor. Instead of stooping to search for it, she leans back in her chair and closes her eyes, exhausted by her own words. Fine lines pattern her pale marble face and speak of things lost. She lifts her hands and wipes them across her cheeks as though she could rub the lines away, but grief cannot be erased so easily. Her once-bright eyes are tarnished, dulled by anguish, and I can see the swift clenching and unclenching of muscles in her firm jaw. There are so many words to be spoken, but there is no one to hear them.

Eventually the quiet music of the garden interrupts her thoughts; she opens her eyes, reaches down to retrieve her pen and continues her task. When she has finished, she pushes her chair back to stand. It scrapes noisily against the floor, disturbing the now-resting birds, and a squabble and a flutter of annoyance come from the tree outside. Allowing the ink to dry, she walks across the room to the window and pushes it wide open. The air is still, warm and heavy with fragrance. There is little relief or, if there is, she cannot find it. She rests her elbows on the ledge and listens to the evening's quiet incantations, breathing it all in, wondering.

*She looks more tired than usual – there is a strange transparency to her eyes, and the skin below them is a mottled lilac. Suddenly she splutters and then coughs, and then the cough turns into a spasm. Covering her mouth with the crook of her arm, she tries to muffle the sound, in case the Keymaker hears her. It is unlikely that he will come to see if she is well, but if he does, he could find the letter and she can't let that happen. She waits for the coughing to pass. For a while it sounds like there are peppercorns loose in her chest, but eventually the rattling settles. When it does so, she pulls the window sharply closed and drops the latch with a gentle thud.*

*Crossing back to the desk, she sees the little square of marzipan sitting there and holds it up between her fingers. She spends the next few minutes inspecting it carefully from all its different angles. To anybody else, it is quite ordinary and unremarkable – a table decoration, a birthday gift, a sweet treat – but to her it is so much more. When she puts it back on the desk there are small sugary granules still on her fingers and she brushes them away in mild irritation. Then she picks up the letter and wafts it in the air, like a white flag of surrender, before folding it and placing it carefully into a waiting envelope. She pauses. I can almost hear her mind whirring, as she wonders whether to read it one last time. Deciding against it, she reaches hastily for a taper. Like a drop of blood impressed with the image of a key, the wax safely seals the message within. The thrum of her heartbeat is soft and expectant, like the wings of a bird waiting for release, suddenly alive with possibility. She mutters something, half-prayer, half-spell, and I feel a strange flutter of hope.*

*Letter in hand, she leaves the room. All we can do now is wait.*



## CHAPTER 3

### *Forgotten Package*



Usually Liddy slept quickly and without interruption, but that night she lay wide-eyed, finding little comfort in her bed. Her father's disappointed tone had chased away any hope of slumber. He hadn't given her an ultimatum – there was no need. He was her father, and if it were his will that she marry Jack Heathcote, then she had little choice other than to obey. She wished she could change his mind, make him see that Jack was no more in love with her than she was with him. His pursuit was no more than a game that had started when she opened the door for the cat all those years ago. She wouldn't be at all surprised if he planned to jilt her at the altar, just to bring shame on her and her family. The thought turned her mind into a tangle of misery and

desperation. She pushed her head into the pillow so that no one would hear her muffled scream of frustration.

In the distance she heard the church bell chime twice, followed by the gekkering of a fox down in the dust yard. With a heavy sigh she kicked away the quilt and stepped onto the wooden floorboards in search of a distraction. At the bedroom door she quietly lifted the latch and crept onto the landing. She knew the house well enough to avoid all its creaks and groans and she trod where its betrayal was the quietest. She could easily find her way down to the kitchen, unheard, in the dark, where sometimes she'd start blanching almonds before the bread in the town's bakery had begun to rise.

Downstairs the hallway stretched out before her; it was filled with night-time shadows and Liddy flinched, mistaking them for silent intruders. She stifled a giggle at her foolish imagination and hurried towards the kitchen, where the welcoming smell of almonds lingered long after the marchpane had gone. After brewing a small pot of tea, she took her mug and sat at the table. The ticking of the hallway clock filled the whole house and she tried to match her breaths to its rhythm, so steady and constant, hoping it would be enough to summon the sleep she wanted.

As she sat there, her thoughts returned once more to Jack Heathcote. Was she overreacting? Was the idea of marrying him so utterly terrible? After all, he had wealth, status and a face that wasn't displeasing to the eye. But