

'Sure to delight' DILLY COURT

*Will she
ever return
home?*

The Girl
with the Amber
Comb

LINDA FINLAY

Linda Finlay

The Girl with the Amber Comb

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A heart-warming tale from the Queen of West Country Saga, LINDA FINLAY... The Girl with the Amber Comb, will she ever return home? Sunday Times No.1 bestselling author Dilly Court says Linda Finlay is 'sure to delight'! Orphaned at birth, Eliza lives with her beloved Grandparents in a waterlogged Somerset cottage surrounded by willow beds where she ekes out a living making laundry baskets and eel traps. Although poor she is content, until childhood friend Clem, regales her with tales of his adventures along the river and she begins to wonder what life is like beyond the Drovers. When fate brings handsome, wealthy Theo to her workshop she is instantly attracted and a rosy future beyond the Drovers beckons. Only things don't go to plan and naive Eliza finds herself in Lavender House where she is expected to care for gentlemen in a way she never imagined. Forced to flee for her life, she ends up in a woollen mill run by a corrupt foreman, working for crumbs and pennies with only her grandmother's comb in her pocket. Now she knows what matters in life – but is it too late? And will she ever be able to return home to those who love her? Set amongst the stunning wetlands of Somerset, this tale of triumph and tragedy will delight fans of Rosie Goodwin and Dilly Court. Praise for The Girl with the Amber Comb: 'A treasure of a read with romance, rural history and a happy ending' Devon Life 'Evocative' Frost Magazine 'Rich with carefully drawn characters who really come to life in the hands of this skilled writer' Northern Reader Praise for Linda Finlay: 'Sure to delight her ever-growing legion of fans' Dilly Court 'Warm and atmospheric, you can practically taste the sea breeze' The Express

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LINDA FINLAY lives on the Devonshire coast and is the author of eight novels. From lace-making to willow weaving, each one is based on a local craft which, in order to write authentically and place herself firmly in the shoes of her heroines, she has learnt to do herself. However, it is people and their problems that make for a good story and, with so much interesting material to work with, it is easy for Linda to let her imagination run as wild as the rugged West Country landscape which has inspired her writing.

Also by Linda Finlay

The Royal Lacemaker

The Girl with the Red Ribbon

A Family For Christmas

The Sea Shell Girl

Monday's Child

Orphans and Angels

The Flower Seller

The Bonbon Girl

The Girl with the Amber Comb

Linda Finlay



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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*To my loving husband, Pern,
for his continued support and encouragement*

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Prologue

Sedge Moor, Somerset. Autumn 1834

The harvest moon hung like a buttery orb, gilding the withies that stood like sentinels alongside the dykes. The smell of apple pressings from a cider house drifted across the land. Beyond rose Aller Moor, the black holes scored by peat cutters staring down on the Drovers like watchful eyes.

Suddenly the quietude of the night was broken by a piercing scream that disturbed a heron from its roost. Mary cuddled her daughter closer, wiping the sweat from her brow before bending to ease the sac from her body. Although she worked quickly, she knew in her heart it was already too late. Sure enough, as the tiny form whimpered and took its first breath, Della shuddered and breathed her last. Mary shook her head, hot tears bouncing from her cheeks to mingle with the waters of the rhyne that now ran red with blood.

All she could feel was despair for a young life lost and hatred for the man whose selfish lust had been the cause. Another whimper sounded from the withies and she steeled herself to look. Yet even as she stared, the wail became impatient, its insistence demanding attention. It was just as Mary had thought, but now her worst fears had been realized, did she have the nerve to perform the task she'd sworn she would?

Chapter 1

Sedge Moor, Somerset. Seventeen years later

‘Oh Grammer, why didn’t I listen to you?’ Eliza cried as, oblivious to the dew glistening like stars in the pale light of early morning, she dropped to her knees on the grass. Gently, she placed her posy between the two graves, one recently dug, the other flattened with time. Grammer Mary now united with her daughter Della, the mother Eliza had never known.

‘May St Michael give you protection from darkness and evil,’ she murmured. The bright blue daisies symbolized farewell and Eliza knew she wasn’t only saying goodbye to the woman who had raised her, but to her own dreams for the future. As the willows rustled their leaves, she dashed away a tear, scarcely able to believe her beloved grammer had gone to sleep the previous week never to wake and greet another new day.

It was now the end of September and the swallows were taking flight from the nearby reed beds on their way to warmer climes and a new life. Eliza wished she was going with them, for winter was fast approaching bringing the wild winds and incessant rains that would batter their home for weeks on end.

Sighing, she got to her feet and stared over the withy beds that glinted yellow in the swirling autumn mist, towards the scattered stone cottages and farmhouses which made up the hamlet of Worth.

‘Happy birthday, Eliza.’ She started as her gramfer came up behind her. ‘Were a time of mixed emotions the day you were born and that’s the truth,’ he said gruffly. Turning, she smiled and linked her arm through his, for he said the same thing every year. ‘You’ve brought such joy and Lord knows how I’d manage without you now that ...’ his voice cracked and he turned towards the old oak where the two crosses were flanked by the bright flowers.

Although she didn’t feel like celebrating today, her birthday had always been an occasion to be marked. A specially baked cake followed by a toast to Della.

‘I’m sure Grammer’s staring down from heaven to see what you’ve got for me,’ Eliza teased, forcing a smile as she tried to lift his spirits.

‘Mary were never one to miss out on anythin’.’ His lips twitched, hazel eyes pensive as he stroked his greying beard. ‘I might have a little somethin’ but you’ll have to wait ’til later. Birthday or no, there’s work to do first. Old Man Conger’s callin’ for those eel traps he ordered this art’noon. Mary was that busy she didn’t have time ...’ his voice trailed off again.

‘I’ve a basket to make for Mr Batstone then I’ll see to them,’ Eliza assured him, for the man was a good customer who always paid promptly, sometimes even giving them fish for their evening meal. Besides, their flour sack was almost empty and the money would help pay for another.

‘You’re a good girl,’ he murmured. ‘I’ll be out checkin’ the beds. The cattle have made a good job of clearin’ the weeds so hopefully we’ll be able to harvest before the first frosts set in.’

‘I’ll have a brew ready when you return. We can have it with a slice of the bramble manchit I baked yesterday,’ she told him, knowing how he lost track of time when he was checking his precious withies.

‘Your pastry’s almost good as your grammer’s,’ he grunted, his eyes suspiciously bright. Eliza watched as he made his way slowly down the drove, a stout hazel stick supporting the body that was stooped from a lifetime spent bending over his precious beds.

As a fresh breeze blew in from the moors, Eliza shivered and hurried over to the ramshackle barn that served both as store and workshop. The letter in her pocket crackled, reminding her of the decision she’d had to take. Although she loved helping the school mistress teaching the young girls their lessons, with Grammer gone there was nobody else to fulfil the orders for the quality baskets her family were renowned for making. It was up to Eliza to take over the business. There was no

way she was letting Izziah Gliddon get his hands on it. The odious merchant had called with indecent haste the moment he'd heard Mary had been taken, insisting he would be doing Eliza a favour. He'd even insinuated a young girl such as herself wouldn't be able to cope. However, she'd helped her grammer often enough and would take great delight in proving him wrong. There was no denying the fact that Gramfer had aged considerably over the past week and she couldn't leave him alone all day to manage by himself.

Still, it was no good brooding for, as he was fond of reminding her, time was tucker. And she'd have precious little of that now she also had to look after their cott and continue tending the vegetable plot. With Clem's help, she'd turned it into a profitable concern that supplemented their income.

Settling herself down on the thin piece of matting, she placed their old flat iron on the lapboard between her legs. Then taking up a pliant osier from the pile beside her, she began making a new basket for the baker at Stathe. To lift her mood, she started singing the song she'd learned as a child.

*One cane round, neat and tight,
insert a decent border.
Upset tight, wale alright,
to keep my stakes in order.*

Once Eliza had finished up-setting the uprights around the base, she began weaving in and out. Despite working quickly, she prided herself on the standard of her work. Competition was fierce and only perfection acceptable. With the body finished, she picked another, more flexible rod and wound it into a rope handle, finally adding the flower twist that her grammer's work was known for, which would now become Eliza's own trademark.

*Twisting, binding, winding,
willow wand, now fold.
Handle strong, but not too long,
for ladies' hands to hold*

Her fingers weaving to the rhythm of the words, she worked until the basket was completed. Placing it ready for collection, she went over to the stooks stacked along the walls and selected the strong sticks she would need for the eel traps. Firmly holding three of the thicker ones, she made a split in the centre of each of them. Setting these together and inserting another three horizontally through the holes, she took up a thinner cane and began the figure of eight weave that would become the base. *Over and under with another two, pull up the sides*, she chanted, determined to get on with her work. As the basket began to spread out, she took the weaver over and under singly and was just inserting the spokes into the base when a shadow fell across her.

'Marnen, birthday girl.'

'Clem, how did you get here?' she cried, looking up from her work.

'By boat, same as ever,' he grinned, flicking his unruly dark hair back from his head. 'Your gramfer said you needed flour and as I was passing the mill at Stathe it was easy to pick up a sack.'

'But I didn't give you the empty one and you know what Miller's like.'

'Ah, but when I explained it was a special day, he said you could have it with his blessing.'

'That's kind of him but ...' she stopped, not wishing to sound ungrateful.

'You don't think you should be celebrating,' he finished, as ever picking up on her thoughts.

'Well yes,' she admitted. 'Grammer's only just ...' her voice trailed away. As she brushed away the tears that rolled unbidden down her cheeks, Clem leaned forward and took her hand. 'She were a fine woman and wouldn't want you grieving,' he murmured.

'I know but I can't help feeling guilty,' she admitted.

'Whatever for? It were a natural passing,' he frowned.

'But Grammer prophesized it,' Eliza burst out, anxious to share the worry that had been plaguing her. 'You know her life revolved around her beliefs in nature, Wicca she called it. Well, the night before she died, she told me that one of the willows had grown so large it had cast a grave-sized

shadow over her as she passed by. It was a portent of her death and I took no notice. No, worse than that, I told her not to be so silly.'

'Mary and her superstitions,' he smiled sadly, his grip tightening. 'And that's what it was, Red. Ma's just as bad, mind. Thinks if she gets a double-yolked egg it means a hurried wedding's in the offing. Not that I've seen that happen – yet,' he added, giving her a look that made her feel strangely uncomfortable.

'Well, getting back to that sack,' she said, removing her hand. 'It was a nice gesture and I shall dye it and make a new top. Goodness knows I could do with one,' she added, frowning down at her frayed and well-worn blouse.

'You look good from where I'm standing,' he smiled, shooting her another of those looks that made her flustered. Although they'd been friends since her first day at school when he'd offered her his kerchief after she'd fallen and cut her knee, it was only lately he'd started paying her compliments. 'Well, it's been a long day already and I'm fair parched,' he added, looking at her hopefully.

'When aren't you?' she smiled, pleased to be back on familiar footing. 'I'll go and make us a drink.'

'And I'll unload the flour and put it in the pantry out of the way of those meddling mice of yours. Then I might have a little something for you myself.' Giving her a cheeky wink, he strode back to the flat-bottomed trow he used for transporting goods along the narrower waterways.

Eliza watched as Clem tossed the sack over his broad shoulders as if it weighed no more than a feather. It had been a relief to share her worries with him, but then she'd always been able to talk to him she realized, her mood lifting like the mist in the heat of the sun as she made her way towards the cott.

Indoors was strangely quiet without Grammer's humming. The smell of bittersweet smoke that curled from the smouldering peat fire hung in the air and she grimaced at the cobwebs swinging from the low beams. Still, the sound of the kettle singing was welcoming and Eliza poured water into the pot then set out the crisp pastry filled with her latest preserve.

'Now there's a sight for sore eyes,' Clem murmured, blue eyes gleaming appreciation as his muscular frame filled the doorway.

'I made it fresh yesterday,' Eliza replied.

'Hmm, the manchit looks good too,' he told her, chuckling when her cheeks flushed bright as the berries in the jam. He waited until she'd served their tea then bent and kissed her cheek. 'Happy birthday, Red,' he said, tweaking her Titian tresses as he handed her a small package.

'Thank you,' she cried as, worries temporarily forgotten, she tore excitedly at the wrapping. 'Oh, this is beautiful,' she exclaimed, running her fingers over the polished handle of a wooden spoon.

'Like the girl I made it for,' he said, his gaze holding hers. 'It's for your jam pot, being as how you make the best ever,' he added quickly.

'Not that the damsons were plentiful this year. I had to mix them with brambles,' she told him.

'Well, you've certainly worked your magic,' he grinned, eying the plate hopefully.

'Go on then, but save some for Gramfer,' Eliza told him, pleased he'd enjoyed it, though she knew she had some way to go before she reached her grammer's standards. 'This really is a beautiful piece of carving, Clem,' she said, admiring the spoon again.

'Not as good as those the Welsh carve. Love spoons, they call them. Idris was telling me they give them to their sweethearts as tokens of affection, to show their intentions as it were.' Again, his clear blue eyes bore into hers, making her blush so that she had to turn quickly away.

'More tea or anything?' she asked, her voice unnaturally high.

'Anything, Eliza?' He cleared his throat. 'I ... well the thing is ...' he stopped as footsteps sounded outside.

'Gramfer,' Eliza cried, jumping to her feet. 'You're just in time for a brew. Clem's brought us a sack of flour.'

‘That’s good of you, my boy,’ George said, sinking into his chair beside the fire and holding out gnarled hands to the meagre warmth. Eliza, busy filling another mug from the pot, didn’t see the look the two men exchanged.

‘It was no trouble, sir.’

‘You staying for supper? Old Conger’s placed an order for two eel traps so I should have the money for Miller later today,’ George said, staring knowingly at him.

‘Goodness, I’m only halfway through making them,’ Eliza exclaimed. ‘I’d better get on.’

‘Happy to help,’ Clem said, trying to keep up with her as she hurried out to the barn.

Chapter 2

‘Are you sure you’re not too busy?’ Eliza asked, still puzzling over his behaviour.

‘Got no more deliveries to make and two pairs of hands will work quicker,’ he replied. She nodded, knowing he was right. There was no telling what time the fisherman would be calling for his traps, and Old Conger wasn’t a man to be kept waiting.

‘Well if you’re sure,’ she said, sinking gratefully onto her stool and picking up the basket she’d started earlier. ‘You know what to do?’ Clem let out a loud guffaw that almost raised the rafters.

‘Been making these since you was in cradlehood,’ he snorted, stooping to gather up a pile of withies from the stack in the corner.

‘I’ll have you know I’m only three years younger than you, Clem Galton,’ she spluttered.

‘In years maybe, but experience?’ he shrugged. ‘Travelling the waterways of Somerset, collecting and delivering for Father, I meet lots of people, see what goes on in life. You’ve not really been away from the Drovers, have you, Red?’ he asked.

‘That’s where you’re wrong. I’ve enjoyed spending time in Stoke helping Mrs Poundsberry at the school, but now of course, I shall have to give that up,’ she sighed.

‘I’m sorry, I only meant you haven’t seen much of life,’ he murmured, reaching out and patting her shoulder. Then never one to stay serious for long he added, ‘At least those poor little girls have had a narrow escape.’

‘Ha ha. I’ll have you know they worked well for me,’ she retorted.

‘Mother Eliza, eh?’ he grinned, then sobered. ‘Seriously though, is there really no way you can carry on with your job? What about Izziah Gliddon, I’m sure he ...’

‘Don’t even mention that man’s name to me,’ she cut in. ‘He called the day after ... she was taken, offering to take on Grammer’s orders. You know how she prided herself on her work with it all coming by recommendation. Gliddon’s associated with shoddy tatt and she’d turn in her grave if she thought I’d let him take over her business.’

‘She would that,’ Clem agreed.

‘Besides I daren’t leave Gramfer so soon after losing her. He looks so frail and lost without her,’ she sighed.

‘Still in shock, I suppose. When he’s had time to adjust, I’m sure you’ll be able to work something out. In the meantime, keeping busy is best.’

‘Well there’s certainly enough to do,’ she sighed, raising her brows. ‘Which reminds me, I lifted some more potatoes and carrots from the plot for Mrs Gill the greengrocer in Stoke earlier. The sacks are outside if could you deliver them for me on your return trip?’

‘Of course. Usual terms of business, extra tea and cake next visit,’ he bartered.

‘Thanks Clem,’ she smiled gratefully. ‘And do you think you could drop this letter into the school, it would save me a lot of time today,’ she replied, delving into her pocket for the envelope and handing it to him.

‘Certainly madam. Any more orders whilst I’m out and about?’ he asked with a grin.

‘I’ll try and think of some,’ she teased. Silence filled the barn as they resumed their work and before long, the slightly astringent smell of tannin and the rhythmic weaving began to soothe her. She couldn’t help thinking about the school though.

‘It’s not just about the money I earned. I really enjoyed teaching those little girls their letters.’ she added, picking up the knife and attacking the bottom spokes that would help trap the fish.

‘Here, let me. You’ll do yourself a mischief hacking away like that,’ Clem said, reaching out and taking the basket from her. ‘I can understand why you wouldn’t want to work for old Gliddon though,’ he said, looking up.

‘You can?’

‘Of course. I wouldn’t want to be employed by someone with one eye higher than the other. Bit shifty, don’t you think?’

‘Oh Clem, that’s a dreadful joke,’ she groaned.

‘Made you smile, though,’ he chuckled, handing the trap back to her.

‘I’m sorry for being miserable, Clem,’ she sighed. ‘I really miss Grammer, and know it’s up to me to take over her role but ...’

‘But?’

‘I feel as trapped as those poor fish swimming into here will be,’ she admitted, holding up the basket.

‘Handy for dinner though,’ he grinned, then looked sheepish when she shot him a look. ‘I do feel sorry for those eels actually. There they are happily swimming up our rivers going about their business, when bang they get caught in the trap with no way out.’

‘I know it sounds bad Clem, especially after all Gramfer’s going through, but that’s exactly how I feel at the moment,’ she admitted. He was quiet for a moment, then he laid down his basket.

‘Come on Red, you’re seventeen yet sound as though your life’s over. Here you are on the verge of woman—’ Embarrassed, he looked down at his hands. ‘Earlier when I was telling you about those Welsh love spoons and their intentions, I was hoping you might see what I was getting at, but obviously I’m not very good at explaining myself.’ He took a deep breath and turned to face her, his expression unusually serious.

Fearing what he was about to say, and wanting to keep their relationship as free and easy as it had always been, Eliza opened her mouth to reply. However, Clem continued.

‘What with it being your birthday and us good friends, well better than that I was thinking. You must know how fond I am of you, and I was hoping you felt the same.’

‘Of course, I do,’ she cried, for he really was her best friend and, as he helped sell the extra vegetables she grew, her business partner too. Seeing hope flare in his eyes, she knew she had to stop him from saying anything further. ‘You’re the brother I never had, Willow Man,’ she replied, using her pet name for him. There was silence for a moment then he got to his feet.

‘That’s something I suppose,’ he sighed. ‘Enjoy the rest of your birthday, Red.’

‘But I thought you were staying for supper,’ she called, as he made for the door.

‘If you want your letter and supplies delivered today, I’d better get going. Tell George I’ll have that talk with him next year. It’d probably a bit insensitive now anyhow.’

‘What talk?’ she asked but he was already outside hefting the sack over his shoulder. Picking up his unfinished trap, she continued weaving, her thoughts running amok. While she had great affection for him, she couldn’t even think of furthering their relationship at this time.

‘Somethin’ smells good,’ George said sniffing the air appreciatively as he shuffled wearily into their tiny living room. Throwing his battered felt cap down onto the settle, he noticed the table set for two and frowned. ‘No Clem?’ he asked.

Eliza looked up from the pan where she was frying the eel Old Conger had skinned and presented to her as a birthday gift. Luckily, she’d just managed to finish both traps before he’d arrived.

‘He was delivering my letter and vegetables to Stoke for me,’ she replied tipping the sizzling food onto two plates. George frowned again, sinking into his chair and barely giving his supper a glance. He waited whilst Eliza poured tea from the pot then stared at her questioningly.

‘Been bossing him about again have you?’ he asked, hazel eyes sharp as they bored into hers.

‘Not at all, although he was acting strangely today. Kept going on about us being friends when we’ve known each other since school. Oh, and he said something about having his talk with you next year, whatever that means. Seeing her Gramfer’s frown deepen, she changed the subject. ‘We might not be able to afford to have the traditional goose for Michaelmas Day but this eel’s really tasty with the taiters fried alongside, don’t you think?’

To her relief, he nodded and began tucking into his meal. He was looking pensive though, and Eliza had a feeling the subject wasn't over. Sure enough, as soon as he'd finished eating, he pushed his plate to one side.

'That were grand, Eliza.' He sat back in his chair and began stroking his beard, a sure sign something was troubling him. 'Hard to believe you're seventeen, young lady. Did I tell you that your grammer were the same age when we wed? Right bonny she was, flaxen hair curlin' round her head like a halo, lips red as the ripest cherries. Didn't stand a chance when she looked in my direction, I can tell you. We had a good marriage,' he sighed and stared into the fire. Then pulling himself back to the present, he leaned forward and patted Eliza's hand. 'Want the same for you now. And young Clem—'

'Is a friend,' she butted in. 'A good friend, but that's it,' she added firmly.

'And that's a very good foundation on which to base a marriage. It's not all hearts and flowers, you know.'

'Look Gramfer, I'm not ready to begin thinking about marriage. 'It's bad enough I've had to give up the job I loved.'

'Oh yes, sorry, I forgot,' he mumbled, his brow puckering.

'I'm happy taking over the basket business but one day, I want to go out and meet new people like Mammer did.'

'Pastures new aren't always greater or greener. Sometimes they're full of prickles and creeps, folk who take advantage as Della found out, to all our costs,' he sighed.

'Yet you let her go and find out for herself,' she persisted.

'Couldn't stop her. Wilful as an unbroken filly she was.'

'I know you and Grammer have lived here all your lives but—'

'Now that's where you're wrong, young lady,' he exclaimed, cutting her short. 'We haven't always lived in a dank cott like this.' He grimaced and waved his hand around the shadowy, smoke filled room. 'Moved here from Bridgwater when Della got herself ... well we moved away from the nosebags to spare her reputation. Cors we didn't know there'd be ... complications,' he shook his head and sighed again.

Assuming he was referring to her mother dying in childbirth, Eliza nodded and remained quiet.

'Started out by rentin' a few withy beds,' he went on a few moments later. 'And through sheer hard work, managed to buy and increase them year on year. Now our plot extends as far as you can see. Mary, bless her, supported my venture by learnin' the basket-making from old Harry in Worth.'

'I never realised,' she murmured, taken aback by his revelation. She'd never dreamt they'd lived anywhere other than on Sedge Moor.

'There's a lot you don't realise, my girl. Now my Mary's been taken, tis up to me to see you settled before I'm called to join her. When Clem said he wanted to talk about your future, I were that pleased I intended giftin' you my withy beds. Thought it'd give you a good start so you won't have to scrimp and save like we had to. He's a good fellow, one of the best. Works hard making all them deliveries along the Parrett on his father's barge then navigatin' the narrow rhynes on his trow. Which he bought through his own efforts. He'll make a fine husband, girl, mark my words.'

'Some day, maybe,' she agreed, to appease him. 'But just now isn't the time to think about it.'

'Well, don't dally too long, Eliza. I hear young Bethan's set her bonnet at him and her brother's encouraging her. They've only been in Stathe a few months and she's not wastin' any time.'

'Well, not having a brother, I shall have to make my own choice, won't I?' Eliza retorted. Her gramfer winced, clutching at his chest so that she wished she hadn't spoken so brusquely. 'I'm sorry,' she murmured, patting his shoulder. He smiled at her sadly through rheumy eyes.

'Just think on, Eliza. Clem passes by their cottage most days. Happen he'll not wait around for a hurdy 'ead like you to make up her mind.' Eliza grimaced at the reference to her wild red tresses. Although her grammer had insisted they were one of her best assets, she considered them the bane

of her life. 'Still, I've no right to expect you to stay here. I'm quite capable of lookin' out for myself,' he declared stoutly.

'Oh Gramfer, there's no need, I'm not going anywhere anytime soon,' she assured him. Even as she uttered the words her heart was sinking lower than the uppers of her well-worn boots as she saw her dream disappearing. But he'd looked after her since she was born and it was obvious that the loss of his beloved wife, along with years of being out in all weathers, were taking their toll. Not that he'd ever admit it. However, she loved him dearly and it was now her turn to care for him. Summoning a smile she patted his hand, and eyes suspiciously moist, he turned away.

'Fire's smokier than ever this night,' he grunted.

Giving him time to collect himself, Eliza pondered on her future. Perhaps when her gramfer had had time to adjust, and the outstanding order from Longstones was fulfilled, she could go and see the school mistress, ask if she'd consider re-engaging her for a few hours a week. Their humble home wouldn't take long to clean, apart from those cursed cobwebs, she thought watching them swaying like filmy ribbons of lace in the draught from the chimney.

'Nearly forgot,' Gramfer said, smiling as she refilled his mug and sat back down beside him. 'Mrs Finch's darter's expecting and she'd like you to make one of them virtue rattles for her future grandchild. Over the moon she is. Must be nice to have something to look forward to,' he smiled, his features softening. Eliza smothered a sigh, all too aware of where his thoughts were taking him.

'Well that is good news,' she agreed.

'And everyone's rallying round to help. Parsonage Farm have placed an order for ten sparrow traps,' he added. 'Not only that, Longstones are fed up with them shoddy laundry baskets Old Gliddon supplies and have transferred all of their orders to us. They've customers all over the county so that should put welcome coppers in the coffers. I only hope we've enough withies to keep us going until we harvest the new ones in December. Perhaps we could start early. I'll check the leaves come mornin'.'

'In that case we are both going to have a lot to do so we'd best have an early night. Good night Gramfer, try and get some sleep,' she said quickly as she bent and kissed his whiskery cheek.

'Night Eliza. Clem's a fine man and thinks the world of you. But he won't wait for ever.'

Up in her room, breath spiralling in puffs before her, Eliza quickly changed into her calico nightgown. Too cold and dispirited to give her hair more than a cursory brush, she dived beneath the covers of the iron bedstead, pulling the patchwork cover right over her head. Her dream of resuming her position at the school had disappeared almost as soon as the idea had occurred, for now it seemed she was going to be busier than ever. Closing her eyes tightly to stop the tears escaping, she hardly heard the birds scrabbling in the old thatch above her or the mice scratching in the walls.

'Oh Grammer, why did you have to die?' she sobbed.

Chapter 3

Next morning with the sun promising to break through the mist, Eliza determined to give their living room a thorough clean. She smiled, recalling her grammer's fierce pride in keeping the place spick and span. *Tidy house, tidy mind*, had been her mantra.

Brushing the cobwebs from the beams, she thought back over the previous night's discussion. It had been a shock to discover her grandparents hadn't always lived here and she wondered what their lives had been like in Bridgwater. If her gramfer didn't look too downcast when he came in for his midday meal, she would ask about it. Talking about the past might be good for him, she thought, dragging the rush mat outside and throwing it over a bush.

Snatching up the beater she gave a fierce thwack sending dust and ash rising into the air, coating the golden leaves grey. A sudden gust of wind shook the branches, dislodging the mat. Eliza cursed as a cloud of the smitch blew back into her face and clung to her curls. No wonder her grammer always covered her head with a mob cap, she thought giving another whack.

'Hey, watch what you're doing,' a voice shouted.

'Sorry Clem,' she called, grinning as he coughed and thumped his chest. 'That'll teach you to sneak up on me.' He snorted then turned to face her, his expression changing to one of mirth.

'You're blacker than a beast from the bogs,' he hooted.

'And you don't look so good yourself,' she giggled, pointing to the dirt clinging to his clothes. 'What are you doing back so soon?'

'George sent a message for me to fill your stack. Reckons weather's on the turn,' he replied, unloading turves of peat from his trow that was lying perilously low in the water. Eliza stared up at the sky, cobalt blue now that the mist had lifted.

'That's odd. It looks to me like this good weather's set to last,' she replied.

'He doesn't usually get things wrong,' Clem muttered pushing his cloth cap to the back of his head. 'By the way, here's the money for the carrots and potatoes,' he said, diving into his pocket and handing over a few coins.

'You haven't taken your cut,' Eliza reminded him. 'We are meant to be business partners after all.'

'Mrs Gill's sent an order for onions and turnips, and Ma's short of some too, so if I can take her a few, that'll square things.'

'Deal. You can dig them up while I fill the sacks. Then I really must get on with making those baskets. I don't think Gramfer realises how difficult it will be for me to fit everything in, for he's accepted yet more orders.'

'We'd best get on then,' Clem replied, following her round to the higher ground at the back of the cott where the vegetable plot stretched halfway across their field to the orchard. Clem looked thoughtful as he took up the fork and began lifting the vegetables. Eliza was loading the pungent onions into the hessian sacking, when he turned to her.

'This ground is very fertile and your vegetables are in demand. I know you're busy but have you thought of extending the plot for next year? It would give you more income.' And more work, Eliza thought, though there was no denying the extra money would be useful.

'Seeing as it's your bright idea, you can help me dig it over next month. After you've helped me pick the apples,' she grinned, nodding towards the laden trees beyond.

'You're a slave driver, Red, do you know that?'

'Bit of hard work never hurt anyone, and think of all those scrumptious pies and crumbles,' she quipped, knowing his fondness for puddings.

‘You win, as always,’ he sighed. ‘Now, before you find me another job, tidy up here while I unload the rest of the peat,’ Clem said, putting down the fork, and throwing the full sack of vegetables over his shoulders.

‘Suppose you want a drink now?’ Eliza asked, when he’d finished restocking their peat stack. He looked up at the sun that was nearly overhead then shook his head.

‘Best not, I’ve more deliveries to make for Father,’ he sighed, climbing into his trow. ‘I’ll make sure I have time to stop next time and we can finish that conversation we began in the barn.’ Giving her a meaningful look, he picked up the oars.

She watched as he pulled away from the bank then bent and rinsed her grubby hands in the water. Clem and his talks, she thought, shaking her head then grimacing at the dust that fell onto her shoulders. There was no time for hair washing, she needed to make a start on that rattle for Mrs Finch’s grandchild. Bending down, she searched around until she found seven smooth pebbles, then made her way to the barn.

As ever, the tang of tannin in the air focused her thoughts. Selecting seven suitable withies, she dropped down onto her stool and began weaving the rods in and out to create the conical body. Carefully she inserted each pebble as she went; one for pride, another for envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony and lust. Not that the little mite would have a clue what they signified, but superstition was rife around Sedge Moor and tradition adhered to. Taking up the rest of the lengths, she plaited the seven canes so that they wrapped the seven virtues. *Faith, hope, charity, fortitude, justice, prudence and temperance*, she intoned as she wove.

‘How lovely to see a maiden reciting her virtues, and a beautiful one with tresses soft as silk.’ Eliza’s head snapped up, her eyes widening as she took in the tall young man silhouetted in the open doorway. With the sun burnishing his locks golden, she couldn’t help thinking how handsome he looked.

‘Oh, you startled me,’ she cried, jumping to her feet and brushing bits of bark from her skirt.

‘Then please accept my apologies. My horse cast a shoe some way back and whilst waiting for the farrier to attend him, I began exploring. Somehow, I found myself inexplicably drawn to all those funny trees standing alongside the water,’ he explained, gesturing towards the rhynes. ‘I mean, I know they’re willows but I’ve never seen them shaped in such a way.’ His voice was cultured and he spoke in a quick tone, quite unlike the local drawl.

‘They are pollarded in order to encourage new shoots to grow straight upwards.’

‘Gracious, I can see my education is sadly lacking,’ the man replied. She stared at him, wondering if he was making fun of her, but although his green eyes were twinkling, his expression was serious. He was immaculately dressed in clothes so well cut, she couldn’t begin to imagine how much they cost. Their eyes locked and she felt a tingling down her spine. She could see by the way he stared that he’d felt something too, but before she could think of what to say to dispel the intensity of the moment, his glance lowered to the withies in her hand.

‘I’m making a rattle for a baby,’ she explained.

‘Oh,’ he replied, a frown creasing his forehead.

‘Hence the virtues.’

‘Ah yes. Well, thank you again for the arboreal lesson, er ... I didn’t catch your name?’

‘Eliza, sir, Eliza Priddle.’

‘A pretty name for a pretty young lady,’ he said, smiling so charmingly Eliza felt sparks closing the gap between them. ‘As soon as I arrive home, I will make it my business to enquire of our estate manager about pollarding. Now, please excuse me, I must away and collect my steed. He is apt to become more than a little spirited if kept waiting. Good day to you.’

‘Good day to you, sir. Do feel free to call by again,’ she added impulsively. Heavens, had she really said that? Whatever must he think of her? Yet even as she flinched at her forwardness, he turned.

‘Should I find myself around these parts again, I might just do that,’ he replied, his eyes locking with hers once more.

‘Oh, please do,’ she whispered, hugging her body and suddenly feeling more alive than she ever had before.

Humming happily, Eliza picked up the baby’s rattle, her thoughts racing as fast as her fingers plaited. What a charming man. And so beautifully dressed. She grimaced down at her old skirt, criss-crossed with snags where the withies had pulled at the threads. How she wished she’d been wearing something smarter and brighter. Even the new dress Grammer had made for her was a sober dove grey, befitting the position of a school helper. If those smart garments were what he wore for riding then she could only imagine how he dressed when formally attired. Where had he come from, she wondered. It was only then she realized that, overawed by his appearance, she hadn’t thought to ask his name. Still, he’d said he might call by again, hadn’t he? And he knew where to find her.

Staring down at the rattle, her eyes widened in surprise. She’d been so busy musing, she’d finished it without her movements registering. Impulsively, she began singing, shaking it in time to her tune.

Then, once again, Eliza found her light blocked by a figure in the doorway. Her heart flipped only to flop when she saw it was her gramfer.

‘Someone sounds happy,’ he murmured.

‘Oh Gramfer, it’s you,’ she sighed.

‘And who was you expectin’, the queen?’ he grinned. ‘Haven’t seen you this chirpy for ages. Why, your cheeks are as rosy as the apples in the orchard.’

‘Sorry Gramfer,’ Eliza murmured, guilty at being caught singing so soon after her grammer’s passing.

‘Well don’t be. Mary wouldn’t want either of us moping about the place. Life won’t be the same without her but we has to carry on. I see Clem’s delivered them turves. Inside, is he?’ Seeing his hopeful look, Eliza shook her head.

‘He said he had a lot to do. I don’t think he was expecting to be making a delivery here, especially peat on such a sunny day.’

‘Ah, well you know how quickly the weather can change this time of year.’ He turned away but not before she saw the flush creeping up his neck. So, her suspicions were correct, he had got Clem here under false pretences. ‘See you’ve finished that rattle so I’ll drop it into Mrs Finch. Hopefully she’ll have been doin’ some baking,’ he said, changing the subject. ‘I need to check how the beds on the northern boundary are comin’ along, anyhow.’

‘Well you’re the expert on all things arboreal,’ she told him, the pebbles jangling tunelessly as she handed over the baby’s toy.

‘Yer what? Heavens girl, I don’t know where you gets fancy words like that from, I really don’t,’ he said, shaking his head. She was about to reply but as he shuffled back outside, she saw he was leaning heavily on his stick again and held her tongue.

Knowing he’d be gone for the rest of the day, Eliza decided to wash out the flour sack. She would make a start on her new top, just in case a certain stranger called by again, she thought, her heart flipping at the thought.

Hurrying indoors, she blinked as the peat smoke stung her eyes, then made her way up the steps and through to the tiny lean-to which her grammer had proudly referred to as the scullery. In reality it was little more than a glory hole that housed their dishes and mugs and a chipped sink with the wonkiest draining board alongside. Behind it was a store, grandly called the pantry, where their meagre provisions were set up on bricks to deter the marauding rats and other vermin that shared their damp environs.

Catching sight of her reflection in the old spotted mirror on the wall, she gasped. Her cheeks were smudged with smitch, while ashes and grass still clung to her windswept hair. To think the most

attractive man she'd ever met had seen her looking like this. Clearly, it wasn't only the flour sack that needed washing, she thought, lifting the old tin bath from its nails on the wall and dragging it in front of the smouldering fire. Snatching up the jug, she hurried outside to the barrel. It took quite a few journeys before she had sufficient rain water for it to be deep enough. Although it looked brown and uninviting, at least it would be soft.

It felt indulgent bathing in the middle of the day but needs must, she thought, climbing into the tub and laying back in the water. She'd bet her new flour sack that the handsome man never had to bathe in a smoky living room. Goodness, wherever did that notion spring from, she wondered, feeling the heat creep up her cheeks. His appearance had certainly stirred her emotions. Quickly she dunked her head but the cold water did nothing to deter the wild thoughts that were pounding her brain.

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