ALDERLEY

THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 1897



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My parents are in the business of death; that is, they run a small undertaker's practice in the village of Alderley where we live, half a day's carriage ride from Bristol.

My pa, a cabinet maker by trade, fashions simple caskets. Mama lays out the bodies. 'The dead can't hurt us' is a much-used phrase of hers.

On the whole, she is right.

The door between our parlour and the small 'dressing room' is rarely locked and my mother's practical approach means death holds little fear for me. The dank sheen of a body in the hours after passing would turn the stomach of many; city folk pay handsomely for potions and powders to stop the body stinking when the rot sets in. I don't know

what the fuss is about. If, like me, you've washed and tidied and cared for a body after death, you know it's a vessel; nothing more. Something for your spirit to get around in, so it can live and love and experience all the good and all the bad . . . and then you die and all that's left is a clammy, stiffening carcass.

When you're dead, you're dead.

When you're gone, you're gone.

Unless, of course, you're not.

And that's where I come in.

'Lardy or Battenberg or iced bun or lardy or Chelsea bun or lardy or –'

'Fine, we'll have a lardy!' I say. 'Lardy, lardy, lardy!' I laugh and nudge Sally hard in the ribs with my elbow.

'Ow! Look at them, though, Pegs! Ain't they proper lush?' She has her nose to the baker's window, clouding the glass with every out breath. She grins, wiping the smudge ineffectually with her sleeve. She isn't wrong. Mr Sweeting and his wife have outdone themselves today. Their display is always a treat early on a Saturday morning, when the weekday necessities of warm, crusty loaves and

fat, brimming pies are complemented by the most wonderful cakes, buns and pastries.

Alderley is popular with visitors, with its riverside walk, picturesque ruins and a tearoom or two. The village is a pretty place, a necklace of shops and houses threaded along a gently curling river, looping up into wooded slopes and farmland. Our house is on Bothwick Hill, which is a pleasing walk for those that have the time. The track leads you up and up, past the school and vicarage, until, red-faced and puffed, you reach the top, where you can stop in the shadow of St Mary's Church and enjoy a view of the village below. On a clear day you can see for miles, and whenever I'm feeling lonesome I fancy I can see Clifton Lodge and give Sally Hubbard a wave. It's where she works in service, as lady's maid to her mistress, Lady Stanton. I've only seen the house in a photograph, a handsome place, tucked away behind a drive lined with feather-shaped trees, but I can imagine Sally there all the same, going about her chores with a cheerful, tuneless whistle.

Today is Sally's one day off a month, and we are spending it together, or at least part of it. We'll make the most of it, and this means lardy cake.

Sally wears her uniform even on her days off, albeit without an apron, but I don't question it. She's walked taller since taking up her position at the Lodge, and what sort of friend would I be if I knocked the shine off that? They don't have much, the Hubbard family, and, other than her Sunday best (which she won't be wearing today, on account of it being a Saturday), her high-neck, black cotton work dresses are the neatest clothes Sally has.

'I'll get it,' she says, and marches in with a 'Mornin', Mr Sweeting, can I have a lardy, please?', her coil of long red hair bobbing at the back of her head as she goes. I watch her through the fogged-up window, pink tongue-tip set in the corner of her mouth as she decides which lardy she wants, while Mr Sweeting waits patiently with a paper bag held open in readiness. 'That one at the front . . . No . . . Left . . . Yes! Ooh, lovely! How's yer ma? Is she any better?'

'Not so good, Sally love, but thanks for asking. How's your lot? Your pa . . . OK?' He hesitates, as everyone does, when he asks about Sally's father.

'Oh, you know, mostly drunk, but Ma says at least she knows his whereabouts when he can't even find the front door without fallin' over!'

‘Oh. Every cloud . . .’ says Mr Sweeting, smiling awkwardly as he folds the paper bag tightly round the cake. Sally peals with laughter, seemingly unaware that her pa being a drunkard really isn’t very funny at all.

There is a poster in the window of the baker’s. I know its wording by heart – we all do, for by law one must be displayed in every public building and every shop, office, inn or place of worship, a reminder that times have changed, that we are modern citizens.

WHISPERLING PROTECTION POLICY:

BY ROYAL DECREE

NO HECTORING.
NO TORTURING.
NO EXECUTING!

ALL INCIDENTS OF THE ABOVE CRIMES AGAINST WHISPERLINGS ARE TO BE REPORTED TO A PERSON OF AUTHORITY.

THE PERSON OF AUTHORITY IN THIS PARISH IS THE REVEREND SILAS TATE.

There was one of these ‘incidents’ you see, somewhere in a village up north. A young girl

was accused of being a whisperling. They tried her, found her guilty; she protested her innocence, but they drowned her anyway.

'Hurry up, Sal!' I glance back at the decree. Whisperlings. Those that can talk to the dead. A flush creeps up my neck.

'All right, all right, keep yer hair on! I got us a big 'un, the very fattest!' She giggles as she dips one hand into the bag and licks a dusting of sugar from her finger. 'You lookin' at that notice again, Peg?'

I shrug. 'I can't stop thinking about that poor girl. If only – oof!' A shove from Sally knocks me fair off my feet.

'*Pfft!* If only what? If only they'd thought to stick up a poster or two!' she scoffs. 'Bleedin' 'eck, Peg, half of the lummoxes that'd do such a thing can't read, an' if they could they'd only grumble about do-gooders forcing them to give up "the old ways". Can't see the point of it, meself. Anyway,' Sal adds, giving me a theatrical wink and waving goodbye to Mr Sweeting, 'there's been no whisperlings – or creepers, if you wants to be rude about them – reported in these parts for decades, has there, babber?'

'Shush, you gommo – someone might hear!' I hiss as we start walking back through the village.

Sally's rosy face is beaming as we link arms, nodding to folk as we pass.

At fourteen, Sal's older than me by two years but you'd never know it. There's a lack of guile about her that makes her appear much younger. Everything is close to the surface with Sally, good and bad. Mama says she's 'young at heart', and that's a perfect way to describe her.

There are others in the village, like Mrs Dulwich, for example, who say Sal is a 'bit soft, like all them Hubbards'. There she is now, white-haired and as brittle tempered as that skinny black cat of hers, lurking behind her potions and unctions in the window of her chemist's shop. It's the last building on the corner before we turn up the hill to home. Inside, the shelves are laden with glass bottles, jewel coloured and stoppered, with a handwritten, white paper label stuck to each one.

'Good morning, Mrs Dul-witch,' we singsong, pausing on purpose between the syllables: discreet but brave enough to make Sally feel better, because this is a small place and Sally has heard what the mean old bat has been saying about her. And then we run, picking up the pace until our chests burn and legs scream, and we laugh and squeal our way

past the shopfront and round the corner, until we're safely out of view.

'See 'er starin' at me?' Sally cries, slowing down, and I side-eye her. Her jaw is set and her pretty grey eyes have hardened to lead shots. A Sally storm has rolled in.

'She isn't starin' at you, Sal – she's jus' looking out the window, that's all.' I nudge her playfully in the ribs, trying to blow her clouds away. 'Let's go. You don't want to be causing any trouble, not with your new job and all.'

'She thinks she's better than me, don't she? Because I'm a Hubbard, an' everyone thinks they're better than us.'

'No one thinks that, Sal. Come on now – we've got cake to eat, if you don't squash it first.' I nod at her hands, one gripping the paper bag, the other balled into a fist.

She ignores me, head down, scanning the ground, then dropping to the floor as if to curtsey. She picks up a stone, throws it up and catches it one-handed, bouncing it in her palm to assess its weight. She looks me straight in the eye and shoves the paper bag towards me. 'Here, hold the lardy.'

'I will not.' I fold my arms and twist away from her. 'I'll have no part of this, and if you've got any sense at all in that head of yours you'll put that stone down right this minute.'

'But she deserves it! She's proper horrid and –'

'And what? Throwing a stone through her window will help how, exactly?'

'Well, it'll make her feel bad for a minute, like what she makes me feel.' There's a catch in Sally's voice and for a moment I want to yank the stone out of her hand and lob it myself.

'But what if she gets word to Lady Stanton? You know what she's like, Sal. She's nasty old baggage. Imagine her face, all pinched and pleased with herself if you lost your job because of her. Come on, let's go. Please, Sal.'

Sally sniffs and wipes her nose with the back of her hand, leaving a trail of sugar from the cake glinting on her cheek. 'She said I could go with her to the seaside next time she goes.'

'Who? Mrs Dulwich?'

'No, you lemon, Lady Stanton. She hasn't been feelin' too well and likes the sea air on account of her "constitution", whatever that is. I wouldn't want to miss a trip like that.' She drops the stone.

'Have you ever been to the seaside, Peg?' And, just like that, the clouds are lifted and the knot in my chest unravels. Sally has got *such* a temper, but I can usually pull her out of it.

I link arms with her and drag her towards home before she sees that Mrs Dulwich has stepped out of her shop and crossed the road to watch our progress, hands on her skinny hips, her cat snaking round her ankles.

'No, Sally, I've never been to the seaside,' I reply. 'We'll go when we've made our fortune. That's a promise.'

Minutes later, we sit on my bed and unwrap the lardy cake, tearing open the paper bag and smoothing it flat like a plate. 'Save some for me!' Pa shouted from his usual spot in the parlour as we scurried past, but there's no chance of that.

'This is heaven,' says Sally, shovelling a chunk of cake into her mouth. She's right. It's really good. It's squidgy and gloopy in the middle – if you squeeze it, it oozes with sweet stickiness – and bursting with plump raisins, topped with a crunch of baked sugar. Sal signs her name, *Sally Hubbard*, with her finger in the syrupy paper and I swallow a smile – it wasn't so

long ago that she couldn't read a word, let alone write, and now she doesn't miss an opportunity to show off her swirly script. Mama taught her in school and with *hours* of extra lessons at home. Sally tucks half of her share of the cake in its wrapping for later, and we lick our fingers before the syrup trickles to our wrists and rinse our hands in the washbowl in the corner. As I push my hands into the water, a pulse of energy like the buzz of static flashes through me, knocking me back. *What was that?*

'You all right, Peg?' asks Sally.

'Yes, yes, I'm fine,' I say. 'It was nothing, really.'

She's at my side, eyes darting mischievously round the room. 'Ooh, is it a ghost? Is there a ghost here? What they sayin'? They whisperin' at you, Peg? Is it right here?' She pauses, then jumps to one side. 'Or here?'

'Stop it, Sally.'

She grins, then jumps again. 'Here maybe?'

'Sally!' I'm laughing now because she's acting so daft and, whatever it was, it has gone. It's been happening more and more lately, although I've kept that to myself. I'm used to feeling a ripple in the air or a flutter in my chest letting me know a spirit is close by, hesitating for some reason before

they move on from this world. I *should* be used to it by now, given it's been happening since I took my very first breath. Except . . . this time it was more than the usual flutter or ripple.

This was a whip-crack.

I probably imagined it. It's likely that poster at the bakery has put me on edge; all the posters have, ever since they started springing up. There's a cloud of suspicion hanging over everyone, and that chills me, for was it not the same with the witches? Anyone odd or difficult was suspected of being one. The harmless old woman who looked a bit funny; the wise-woman who grew medicinal herbs; the poor childless widow who talked to herself; that stubborn girl who wouldn't be tamed . . . Witches, all of them, or so it was decided. That last one gives me the shivers the most.

It became a pastime, witch-hunting, like dancing or scrapbooking. Some whisperlings were killed in those times too, Pa told me, before folk came to their senses and it was put a stop to. Little wonder he tells me to keep my mouth shut: no one can know my secret. Pa says it's best that way.

Sally knows, though. She's known since I was three, when I told her about the 'nice lady with the

rainbow round her' who asked if I would remind her husband to 'feed the poxy dog'. She giggled at my potty mouth, but believed me without question. Things are never complicated with Sally, and that's why she's my best friend.

A knock at my bedroom door. 'Peggy, when Sally goes home, there's half a dozen eggs going spare, and a quart of milk that we won't get through before it turns. She'd be doing me a favour taking it.'

'ThankyouMissusDevona,' Sal calls. She has cause to say it so often it's become one word.

'And, Peg,' adds Mama, 'I'll need your help in the dressing room in a bit.'

'Of course, Mama.'

Sally waits until the pad of my mother's feet has reached the stairs. 'Do you know who it is?' she asks.

'The boy from the dairy farm, Barney something or other. Got the consumption, poor lad.'

'I knows him! Ooh, there's a shame. He was a right looker, all tall and strong and fair-haired.'

'I wouldn't know,' I lie, remembering the blush that crept up my neck when I peeked in on him earlier. I can't sense his spirit at all now, which is both a crushing disappointment and a huge relief.

Sally taps her lip with her finger. 'Do you . . . Would you . . . Nah, I can't say it!'

'What? Do I, would I what?'

Sally smiles impishly and nibbles at her thumbnail, her eyes gleaming with devilment. 'Would you sit with him? Hold his hand and pretend he's your sweetheart?'

'Sally!'

'What? Where's the harm?' She rolls back on my bed in delight. 'Go on, I dare you!'

'No!' I say, all the more indignant as I can't honestly say it didn't cross my mind. I'm not sure about boys yet. Mama says there's plenty of time for all that. I look at Sally, flush-cheeked and giggly.

'It's fine,' says Sally. 'You can do it and confess afterwards cos you'll be dissolved of all your sin.'

'It's *absolved*, you banana. What are you talking about though?'

'Oh . . . Mr Tate was at the Lodge in the week. He came to pay his respects to the lady of the house.' She pulls a face. 'But the lady of the house can't stand him. Oh, Peg, the names she calls him when his back is turned! Nothin' very ladylike about them at all!' She grins, then her face falls. 'He's been there a lot lately, whisperin' in Lady

Stanton's ear.' She pauses. 'He was askin' about you again.'

The Reverend Silas Tate. His name makes my skin scuttle. Sally reaches for my hand and squeezes it, tight.

'I know, Peg.'

A pink doll-like splodge appears on her cheeks, deepening in colour as I look at her.

'Sally? What's wrong?' I ask.

'He wanted to know if you'd been up to any of your old tricks.'

'My old . . . What did you say?'

'Nothin',' she says, snatching her hand away and tucking it under her skirts.

'Sally?' Blood thuds in my ears. 'Great greengages, Sally, please say you didn't –'

'I can't lie to a vicar! He might get me sent to hell or somethin'!'

'No, Sally! No, no, no, no, NO! He can't do that – we've been through this! What did you tell him?'

'I said I didn't know what he was talkin' about.'

I relax. 'Well, all right then. That's fine. You had me worried for a minute.'

'But then,' she hurries on, 'he got me all confused an' started askin' loads of different questions an' I got

a bit flustered, an' then I think I said that if you *could* speak to dead people – only if you could, mind – then I definitely wouldn't tell him anythin' about it an' folks should mind their beeswax an' not listen to rumours an', besides, if you *could* talk to dead folk, then there's no harm in it an' really it's just a skill – like speakin' French or somethin'.' Her cheeks are scarlet now, as well they might be. How could she be so *stupid*?

'Oh, well done – that definitely put him off the scent, didn't it?'

'I. Didn't. Say. Nothin'. Wrong.'

'Yes you DID, Sally! Why did you have to say *anything*?'

'All right, Miss High and Mighty, don't get yer bloomers in a bunch!' Sally shifts on the bed, shoving the wrapped cake to the floor in a swift, angry motion, her eyes burning. 'YOU weren't there! YOU don't know what he's like –'

I'm on my feet, hands clenched. 'Of course I know what he's like! That's why I stay out of his way!' I boot the paper bag so hard it slams into the wall, the cake Sally's carefully saved for later exploding over the floorboards. 'At least that way I don't have to worry about saying something so bogging STUPID!' I shout.

I want to take it back, straight away. Heavy tears wobble in Sally's eyes and I step towards her, reaching out a hand, but she slaps it away. The heat of her mounting fury is already drying her eyes. 'Don't,' she says. 'Don't you dare.' She gathers her things, scrabbling at her coat and gloves. 'You think you're so special, don't you, Peg?'

'I . . . What do you mean?'

'You with your *gift*.' She sneers at the word. 'But it doesn't make you better than other folks, Peggy Devona, and it definitely don't make you better than *me*! Jus' because your *pa* says you're special doesn't mean everyone else thinks so. You're a really terrible friend. Maybe Mr Tate is right – maybe you are an abominable-ation.'

'Abomin–' I see Sally's fist curl and I bite down on my lip, stopping the urge to correct her. 'If you really think that,' I say, 'then get out.'

She hesitates. I should say sorry, and then *she* will say sorry, and then we will be fine, as we have been a hundred times before.

I say nothing.

Sally turns on her heel, marches out of the room and down the stairs. Mama calls after her but she's gone.