

MARIANA

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CHAPTER 1

I FIRST SAW THE house in the summer of my fifth birthday. It was all the fault of a poet, and the fact that our weekend visit with a favorite elderly aunt in Exeter had put my father in a vaguely poetic mood. Faced with an unexpected fork in the road on our drive home to Oxford, he deliberately chose the left turning instead of the right. "The road less traveled by," he told us, in a benign and dreamy voice. And as the poet had promised, it did indeed make all the difference.

To begin with, we became lost. So hopelessly lost, in fact, that my mother had to put away the map. The clouds that rolled in to cover the sun seemed only an extension of my father's darkening mood, all poetry forgotten as he hunched grimly over the steering wheel. By lunchtime it was raining, quite heavily, and my mother had given sweets to my brother Tommy and me in a vain attempt to keep us from further irritating Daddy, whose notable temper was nearing the breaking point.

The sweets were peppermint, striped pink and white like large marbles, and so effective at hindering speech that we had to take them out of our mouths altogether in order to talk to each other. By the time we reached the first cluster of village shops and houses, my face and hands were sticky with sugar, and the front of my new ruffled frock was a stained and wrinkled ruin.

I've never been entirely certain what it was that made my father stop the car where he did. I seem to remember a cat darting across the road in front of us, but that may simply have been the invention of an imaginative and over-tired child. Whatever the reason, the car stopped, the engine stalled, and in the ensuing commotion I got my first watery glimpse of the house.

It was a rather ordinary old farmhouse, large and square and solid, set back some distance from the road with a few unkempt trees dotted around for privacy. Its darkly glistening slate roof sloped down at an alarming angle to meet the weathered gray stone walls, the drab monotony of color broken by twin redbrick chimneys and an abundance of large multipaned windows, their frames painted freshly white.

I was pressing my nose against the cold glass of the car window, straining to get a better look, when after a few particularly virulent oaths my father managed to coax the engine back to life. My mother, obviously relieved, turned round to check up on us.

"Julia, don't," she pleaded. "You'll leave smears on the windows."

"That's my house," I said, by way of explanation.

My brother Tommy pointed to a much larger and more stately home that was just coming into view. "Well, that's *my* house," he countered, triumphant. To the delight of my parents, we continued the game all the way home to Oxford, and the lonely gray house was forgotten.

I was not to see it again for seventeen years.

That summer, the summer that I turned twenty-two, is strong in my memory. I had just graduated from art school, and had landed what seemed like the perfect job with a small advertising firm in London. My brother Tom, three years

older than myself, had recently come down from Oxford with a distinguished academic record, and promptly shocked the family by announcing his plans to enter the Anglican ministry. Ours was not a particularly religious family, but Tom jokingly maintained that, given his name, he had little choice in the matter. “Thomas Beckett! I ask you,” he had teased my mother. “What else could you expect?”

To celebrate what we perceived to be our coming of age, Tom and I decided to take a short holiday on the south Devon coast, where we could temporarily forget about parents and responsibilities and take advantage of the uncommonly hot and sunny weather with which southern England was being blessed. We were not disappointed. We spent a blissful week lounging about on the beach at Torquay, and emerged relaxed, rejuvenated, and sunburnt.

Tom, caught up on a rising swell of optimism, appointed me navigator for the trip back. He should have known better. While I’m not exactly bad with maps, I *am* rather easily distracted by the scenery. Inevitably, we found ourselves off the main road, toiling through what seemed like an endless procession of tiny, identical villages linked by a narrow road so overhung by trees it had the appearance of a tunnel.

After the seventh village, Tom shot me an accusing sideways look. We had both inherited our mother’s Cornish coloring and finely cut features, but while on me the combination of dark hair and eyes was more impish than exotic, on Tom it could look positively menacing when he chose.

“Where do you suppose we are?” he asked, with dangerous politeness.

I dutifully consulted the map. “Wiltshire, I expect,” I told him brightly. “Somewhere in the middle.”

“Well, that’s certainly specific.”

“Look,” I suggested, as we approached village number eight, “why don’t you stop being so pigheaded and ask directions at the next pub? Honestly, Tom, you’re as bad as Dad—” The word ended in a sudden squeal.

This time, I didn’t imagine it. A large ginger cat dashed right across the road, directly in front of our car. The brakes shrieked a protest as Tom put his foot to the floor, and then, right on cue, the engine died.

“Damn and blast!”

“Curates can’t use language like that,” I reminded my brother, and he grinned involuntarily.

“I’m getting it out of my system,” was his excuse.

Laughing, I looked out the window and froze.

“I don’t believe it.”

“I know,” my brother agreed. “Rotten luck.”

I shook my head. “No, Tom, look—it’s my house.”

“What?”

“My gray house,” I told him. “Don’t you remember, that day the cat ran onto the road and Daddy stalled the car?”

“No.”

“On the way back from Auntie Helen’s,” I elaborated. “Just after my fifth birthday. It was raining and Daddy took the wrong turning and a cat ran onto the road and he had to stop the car.”

My brother looked at me in the same way a scientist must look at a curious new specimen, and shook his head.

“No, I don’t remember that.”

“Well, it happened,” I said stubbornly, “and the car stalled just here, and I saw that house.”

“If you say so.”

The car was running again now, and Tom maneuvered it over to the side of the road so I could have a clearer view.

“What do you think it means?” I asked.

“I think it means our family has bloody bad luck with cats in Wiltshire,” Tom said. I chose to ignore him.

“I wonder how old it is.”

Tom leaned closer. “Elizabethan, I should think. Possibly Jacobean. No later.”

I’d forgotten that Tom had been keen on architecture at school. Besides, Tom always knew everything.

“I’d love to get a closer look.” My voice was hopeful, but Tom merely sent me an indulgent glance before turning back onto the road that led into the village.

“I am not,” he said, “going to peer into anyone’s windows to satisfy your curiosity. Anyway, the drive is clearly marked ‘Private.’”

A short distance down the road we pulled into the car park of the Red Lion, a respectable half-timbered pub with an ancient thatched roof and tables arranged on a makeshift terrace to accommodate the noontime crowd. I stayed in the car, preparing to take my shift as driver, while Tom went into the pub to down a quick pint and get directions back to the main road.

I was so busy pondering how great the odds must be against being lost twice in the same spot, that I completely forgot to ask my brother to find out the name of the village we were in.

It would be another eight years before I found myself once again in Exbury, Wiltshire.



This time, the final time, it was early April, two months shy of my thirtieth birthday, and—for once—I was not lost. I still lived in London, in a tiny rented flat in Bloomsbury

that I had become rooted to, in spite of an unexpectedly generous legacy left to me by my father's aunt Helen, that same aunt we'd been visiting in Exeter all those years earlier. She'd only seen me twice, had Auntie Helen, so why she had chosen to leave me such an obscene amount of money remained a mystery. Perhaps it was because I was the only girl in a family known for its male progeny. Auntie Helen, according to my father, had been possessed of staunchly feminist views. "A room of your own," Tom had told me, in a decided tone. "That's what she's left you. Haven't you read Virginia Woolf?"

It was rather more than the price of a room, actually, but I hadn't the slightest idea what to do with it. Tom had stoutly refused my offer to share the inheritance, and my parents maintained they had no need of it, being comfortably well-off themselves since my father's retirement from surgical practice. So that was that.

I had quite enough to occupy my time, as it was, having shifted careers from graphic design to illustration, a field I found both more interesting and more lucrative. By some stroke of luck I had been teamed early on with a wonderfully talented author, and our collaboration on a series of fantasy tales for children had earned me a respectable name for myself in the business, not to mention a steady living. I had just that week been commissioned to illustrate a sizable new collection of legends and fairy tales from around the world, a project that excited me greatly and promised to keep me busily employed for the better part of a year. I was on top of the world.

Ordinarily, I'd have celebrated my good fortune with my family, but since my parents were halfway round the world on holiday and Tom was occupied with Easter services, I had

settled for the next best thing and spent the weekend with friends in Bath. On the Monday morning, finding the traffic on the main road too busy for my taste, I detoured to the north and followed the gentle sweep of the Kennet River towards London.

It was a cool but perfect spring day, and the trees that lined the road were bursting into leaf with an almost tropical fervor. In honor of the season, I drove with the windows down, and the air smelled sweetly of rain and soil and growing things.

My arthritic but trustworthy Peugeot crested a small hill with a protesting wheeze. Gathering speed, I negotiated a broad curve where the road dipped down into a shallow valley before crossing over the Kennet via a narrow stone bridge. As I bumped across the bridge, I felt a faint tingling sensation sweep across the back of my neck, and my fingers tightened on the wheel in anticipation.

The most surprising thing was that I wasn't at all surprised, this time, to see the house. Somehow, I almost expected it to be there.

I slowed the car to a crawl, then pulled off the road and stopped altogether, just opposite the long gravel drive. A large ginger cat stalked haughtily across the road without so much as glancing at me, and disappeared into the waving grass. Three times in one lifetime, I told myself, even without the cat, was definitely beyond the bounds of ordinary coincidence.

Surely, I reasoned, whoever owned the house wouldn't mind terribly if I just took a casual peek around...? As I hesitated, biting my lip, a flock of starlings rose in a beating cloud from the field beside me, gathered and wheeled once above the gray stone house, and then was gone.

For me, that was the deciding factor. Along with my mother's looks, I had also inherited the superstitious nature

of her Cornish ancestors, and the starlings were a good-luck omen of my own invention. From my earliest childhood, whenever I had seen a flock of them it meant that something wonderful was about to happen. My brother Tom repeatedly tried to point out the flaw in this belief, by reminding me that starlings in the English countryside were not exactly uncommon, and that their link to my happiness could only be random at best. I remained unconvinced. I only knew that the starlings had never steered me wrong, and watching them turn now and rise above the house, I suddenly made a decision.

I grabbed my shapeless green anorak from the seat beside me and stepped out of the car, nearly tumbling into the ditch in my eagerness. I wasn't exactly dressed to go visiting, I admitted, tugging the anorak on over my jeans and rough sweater—but that couldn't be helped. I ran a hand through my hair in a hopeless attempt to smooth the short, unruly curls, but the damply blowing wind spoiled my efforts.

Now, I thought, what excuse to use? Directions? A glass of water? Trouble with the car? I glanced back at the dented and battered Peugeot and nodded. Car trouble, I decided. Anyone would believe that. Mentally rehearsing my lines, I crossed the road and started up the gravel drive. A cracked and weathered signboard bearing the words "Strictly Private" in faded red paint hung dejectedly from a nail in a nearby tree. Undaunted, I soldiered on, hoping that my footsteps didn't sound as crunchingly loud to the people inside as they did to my own ears.

The house looked exactly as I remembered it—the same red chimneys with their clay chimney pots; the same symmetrically positioned white windows, four panes over four; the same rough-hewn gray stone walls under the steep slate

roof. The only thing different was the door. I had always imagined it to be brown, but now I saw that it was clearly dark green, standing out in sharp contrast to the massive stone portal that surrounded it.

My knocking echoed heavily with a dull and hollow sound. Three times I bruised my knuckles against the heavy wood, before finally conceding that no one was coming to answer the door.

Which meant there was nobody home. And, I told myself happily, since there was nobody home, it followed that no one would be disturbed if I went round to the back of the house and looked in a few windows. Having thus rationalized my trespassing, I retraced my steps to the drive and followed it round the north side of the house.

Here the drive ended abruptly at a squat, low-slung stone building with a weedy thatched roof. Presumably this had once been the stables, but the bumper of a car protruding from one of the open stalls left no doubt as to its present use.

The view from where I stood, looking across the level farmlands and gently undulating downs, broken here and there by clusters of dark-green trees and wild shrubs, was truly beautiful. There was no yard as such, although a tumbled heap of stone a hundred feet or so behind the house looked as if it might once have been part of a boundary wall. And though I had counted three oaks, a fruit tree, and several shrubs at the front, the only bit of vegetation growing close against the back wall of the house was a solitary poplar with gnarled bark, its silvery-green branches trembling in the breeze.

There was another dark-green door here, with an old-fashioned latch, and another double row of white-painted windows. Beneath what I assumed must be the kitchen window, someone had piled a precarious stack of ancient

flowerpots, their sides encrusted with thick black moss from lack of use. I stretched on tiptoe and leaned closer, cupping one hand against the glass to shield my eyes against the reflected glare of the sun. It *was* a window to the kitchen, or perhaps the pantry. I could just make out a shelf of tinned goods and an old porcelain sink. I was angling my head for a better look when a man's voice spoke suddenly out of the air behind me.

“He's not there.”

It was a friendly voice, with a faintly un-English burr to it, and had come from some distance away. But I didn't register any of that immediately. I spun round, startled, and sent the pile of flowerpots crashing to the ground.

At first I could see no one, but as I stood there staring, the figure of a man detached itself from the tumbled stone wall and came across the grass towards me. He was a young man, perhaps five years my senior, dressed in rough work-ing clothes and wearing leather gauntlets that looked oddly medieval and out of place.

“I didn't mean to frighten you,” he apologized. “I just thought, if you're looking for Eddie, he's not there.”

He was quite close now, close enough for me to clearly see the combination of auburn hair and flint-gray eyes that is, somehow, so distinctively Scottish. He smiled, a friendly smile that matched the voice.

“Are you a friend of Eddie's?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“A relative, then.”

“No.” To my credit, I blushed a little. I had a hunch my tale of phony car trouble would not make it past those shrewd gray eyes. “No, I don't know the owner. Will he be back soon, do you know?”

The man tilted his head to one side and gave me a long, measuring look that rather reminded me of my brother.

“I hope not,” he said evenly. “We buried him last month.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” I blushed deeper. “I really am sorry.”

“No harm done.” He shrugged. “You’re just having a poke about, then?”

My face, by this time, was crimson, and I had a feeling that he was enjoying my obvious discomfort. It took a moment, but the full importance of what he’d just told me finally sank in, and I abruptly forgot my embarrassment.

I lifted my eyes quickly. “Is the house for sale, then?”

“Aye. Did you want to have a look at it?”

“I want to buy it. I’ve waited twenty-five years for this house.”

The man raised a russet eyebrow, and for some absurd reason I found myself babbling out the whole story of “The House and I,” to which he listened with admirable patience. I can’t imagine he found it very interesting. When I’d finished my childish narrative, his level gaze met mine for a second time, and the resemblance to my brother was even more pronounced.

“Well, then,” he said solemnly, “you’d best see Mr. Ridley in the High Street. I’ve not got my own keys with me, or I’d show you round myself.” He stripped off one gauntlet and extended a hand in greeting. “I’m Iain Sumner, by the way.”

“Julia Beckett.” I must have altered my expression at the sight of his hand, because he smiled again, looking down at the tiny lacerations marring his skin.

“Brambles,” he explained. “They’d choke out my garden if I didn’t thin them back. It’s not painful,” he assured me, pulling the glove back on. “I’d best be getting back to my work. Good luck with the house.”

“Thank you,” I said, but he was already out of earshot.

Five minutes later I was sitting in the offices of Ridley and Stewart, Estate Agents. I confess I don’t remember much about that afternoon. I do recall a confusing blur of conversation, with Mr. Ridley rambling on about legal matters, conveyances and searches and the like, but I wasn’t really listening.

“You’re quite certain,” Mr. Ridley had asked me, “that you don’t want to view the property first?”

“I’ve seen it,” I’d assured him. To be honest, there seemed no need for such formalities. It was, after all, my house. My house. I was still hugging the knowledge tightly, as a child hugs a present, when I knocked on the door of the rectory of St. Stephen’s, Elderwel, Hampshire, that evening.

“Congratulate me, Vicar.” I beamed up at my brother’s startled face. “We’re practically neighbors. I just bought a house in Wiltshire.”