

ONE



My father was a plant hunter—an adventurer—and I

saw little of him my first fourteen years, even less the next two, but after I turned seventeen he became my whole world.

He returned home once a year or so, as was his promise to our mother, venturing to our house in Kent each Christmas bearing strange gifts, such as a cachepot filled with prickly cacti, a geode—a large rock that split open to reveal a crystal treasure within—a brass ship's compass, and once a hessian sack of foul-smelling compost, which my father called bat guano. All things a boy might love, but certainly not a girl, my mother said. And we were a house filled with girls, each of us named after a flower. There were nine sisters, all born around the same time, begotten during my father's annual visit home. I came to regard Christmas as a herald, trumpeting the arrival of yet another sibling in late summer, most likely a girl. One more flower to add to a bouquet already bristling with un-wanted blooms.

One would think my father would be happy in a house surrounded by females named after flowers, but women and flowers are not the same. No matter how much rose attar eau de toilette or lavender powder we wore, we could not compete with the real thing. Flowers lured my father to faraway lands filled with savages, barbarian princes, exotic ladies in silk saris, and even marauding cannibals. My father wrote to us of his time tramping up and down hill and dale, canoeing rushing rivers and climbing rocky mountain passes in search of an elusive bloom heard of but never seen by a Westerner. His plant hunting

continued through my childhood until September of 1860 when my father met his misfortune. Not through the poison-tipped arrow of a pygmy warrior, but by his own miscalculation. His headstrong behavior had come home to claim its due. Or so my mother said. My father said nothing.

The last time I saw him was in 1859 when he came to Christmas totting a large, mysterious box wrapped in brown paper. The year the youngest, Dahlia, was conceived. And the year I was sixteen.

Mamma always looked forward to Papa's visit, growing more and more excited as the date drew near. Instead of visiting the church every day, as was her habit, she spent those hours at her sewing basket, updating her wardrobe in the latest style. When the day approached, she sat near the window peering out at the street, waiting for Papa to arrive. He had always walked from the train station before, but this year he arrived in the back of a delivery cart, his long legs dangling down, his arm across the reason for the cart: a large cumbersome package wrapped in brown paper and tied with rough twine. Although Papa dressed in an elegant tartan waistcoat and a black coat, his bushy beard, befitting his status as an explorer, always gave him a raffish look.

Mamma rushed outside and threw herself in Papa's arms. And as usual, after a cursory hello to us, he whisked Mamma off, and we did not see them again until lunchtime.

"That shan't last long," Violetta said, her face grim. "If this rapprochement continues to Boxing Day, I shall be surprised."

"Violetta," I chided. But she didn't respond. Instead she plonked herself down at the piano and began playing Brahms's Piano Sonata no. 3, crashing her hands down on the keys a little harder than Mr. Brahms required for the somber piece.

Although Violetta was a devotee of gothic novels, she didn't often have fits of melodrama. But over the years she had stopped believing that our parents' affection toward one another would endure. Their love balanced on a knife-edge, and it took little to make it topple to the ground. I suppose Violetta remained cynical because it was too painful

to wish for something that could never be.

Two days later, on Christmas morning, Papa presented the mysterious package.

He stood, his strong hands clasped behind his back, his eyes shining, as he watched my little sisters strip the brown butcher paper away to reveal a domed box made of glass, filled with miniature plants, dainty furniture, and tiny handmade twig dolls. There were ferns, mosses, and jumbles of strange-looking plants, including a clump of tangled roots that perched atop a little carved statue's head like a wig. Peony, Lily, and Delphine stared at the box, unable to make either head nor tail of it.

"Well now," Papa said. "How do you like that, my girls?"

"What is it, Papa?" six-year-old Lily asked.

Papa looked taken aback. "Isn't it obvious?" he said in a booming voice. "It's a dollhouse. I made it from a Wardian case! An absolute miracle of an invention. Plants can travel across oceans in Mr. Ward's cases remaining as fresh as the day they were collected. They are the very reason why your papa is the success he is."

Lily's eyes filled with tears. The other two hid behind my mother's skirts. Two-year-old Fleur didn't care one way or the other. She remained on the floor, happily banging blocks together.

My mother frowned at the little glasshouse. "Reginald," she said. "Is this the . . . *dollhouse*?" I could hear dismay prickling through her voice. I knew she had written Papa a letter asking him to purchase a dollhouse at Hamley's toyshop in London for the little ones.

"I thought the girls would prefer this, my dear," he said. I could see the doubt in his eyes. My heart cracked a little to think of his hands, so deft when handling delicate blooms, clumsily dressing the twig dolls in little scraps of material, gluing acorn caps to sticks, all in the hope of pleasing his daughters. He had no inkling that the contents of such a dollhouse would be torn to bits under my sisters' eager hands. Their fingers, sticky with jam, would smear the glass, and the little dolls

would be lost amongst their jumble of toys in the nursery.

“It’s a little fairy garden, Lily.” I knelt next to her and put my arm around her thin shoulders. She shoved her fingers in her mouth and looked at me, her chin quivering. “Can you not see the little fairies Papa has caught for you?” She pulled her fingers from her mouth and reached out a curious finger to touch the glass. I folded it back down. “Mustn’t touch, darling. Mustn’t disturb the fairies.”

“Fairies,” she repeated. Her breath fogged the glass. “Where are the fairies?”

“Just there, darling.” I pointed at the sticks. “Can you not see them hiding?” Lily leaned closer. Peony and Delphine crept out from behind my mother and joined her, staring into the tiny jungle.

“I thought little girls would like such a thing, Elodie,” Papa said to me later.

“It’s lovely, Papa. They are only young and don’t understand how to look after such a treasure.”

It was a kind gift, made from my father’s heart, but I was sure I was the only one who saw it as such. My mother, constantly disappointed by my father, saw everything he did as a slight. But I didn’t blame her. Papa could be a difficult man.

Mamma had married my father when he was a student at Oxford, studying to become a priest. She was a bishop’s daughter, and for her the church was everything. But Papa, like many men of the church, studied the natural world as a fancy. Inspired by the writings of Mr. Charles Darwin, he went on a voyage to the Canary Islands of Spain, where he collected cacti. He was so good at acquiring plants that he was hired by wealthy men to gather plants for them to display in their fashionable glasshouses. Papa turned away from the church and from God and to a life of plant hunting. The year he turned away from the church, Mamma lost her firstborn, a son. Since then she has only given birth to girls, and Mamma believes this is God’s way of punishing

Papa.

Later on Christmas evening, Mamma and Papa had a horrible row. It was over the simplest thing: Mamma's choice of wallpaper. Mamma had recently papered the youngest children's room in a brilliant and beautiful shade of green, like the brightest emerald. Mamma had been proud of the room, but Papa was incensed. As soon as he laid eyes on the walls he tore the paper down, exclaiming and shouting. Mamma followed behind him, shrieking and grabbing at his hands.

"Poison, this is poison, don't you understand?" Papa said, tearing a long strip of paper down, exposing the whitewashed wall behind it. Some of the paper clung stubbornly to the walls, as though taking my mother's side.

"How can you say such a thing?" Mamma said, sinking onto Lily's bed in a flood of tears. "It's beautiful. Why do you ruin everything that's beautiful?"

Papa stared at her, stricken. He started to speak and then saw me standing in the doorway. He straightened up. "Elodie. My dear. Do you understand why I took the paper down? Do you know what makes this paper green?"

I stepped inside the room and looked at my mother. Her eyes were red from crying. "I . . . from the green dye, I expect, Papa," I replied hesitantly.

"This brilliant green can only be gotten from copper arsenite," he said. "As I have told your mother repeatedly." He cast an angry look at her.

"Arsenite?" I repeated.

"Arsenic. Poison. The paper puts off vapors that can cause constriction of the throat. And then death." Papa shook the clump of paper. "This . . . this prevalent color, most likely papering acres and miles of British walls, will kill people. Mark my words. I told your mother no when she wrote to me with her request to paper the room, but she's only gone behind my back . . ." Papa's words trailed off, and he looked down at

the crumpled paper in his hands.

“No one believes that is true,” Mamma said through sobs. “The paper man said he’d eat a pound of it himself.”

Papa’s face turned red with rage. “If the blaggard were here, I’d cram a pound of it down his throat!” he shouted. “And how can you take his word but not mine?”

I stood there, a few feet inside the room, unable to speak, almost in a trance, viewing the tableau as someone else would see it. Mamma sitting on Lily’s bed, her bell-shaped skirts flowing over the tiny mattress, staring down at her slippers in despair. Papa, standing with one hand braced against the wall, a wad of green paper in the other, and an expression of anger mixed with confusion on his face. My parents were both beautiful: Mamma with hair light as a sunbeam, Papa’s dark as a raven’s wing. Mamma lovely and delicate, Papa handsome and strong. I used to think my parents were Staffordshire porcelain dolls come to life, stepping down off the mantelpiece, hand in hand, to become human. But now I think there was a mistake. The dolls were mismatched, created in different workshops but yet placed inside the same box.

I knew then that they really weren’t arguing over wallpaper; I knew they were arguing over something that was far deeper and far more destructive.

Mamma went to her room and shut the door behind her. Papa closed himself in the children’s room and finished stripping off the paper. My sister Violetta and I took all the children, frightened by the shouting, into our bedroom and made them beds on the floor and read them stories until they fell asleep.

Unable to sleep myself, I went to the kitchen and made a pot of tea. I’d forgotten my slippers upstairs with the children, and so my feet were bare on the cold tiles. I sat on the chair and tucked my feet under my nightgown, cupping the mug in my hands.

“Father is beastly,” Violetta said. She stood in the doorway holding my

slippers in her hands, her long dark hair hanging in a braid over one shoulder. “Is there any tea left?”

I pushed the pot toward her. She handed me my slippers and then went to fetch a cup from the scullery. Presently she returned, and I poured her tea.

“Papa isn’t beastly, Violetta,” I said. “He feels the wallpaper is poison, and I’m inclined to agree with him. But I do think he was wrong to rip it down like that. He should have been more tactful.”

Violetta snorted. “Tactful? May as well ask a monkey to be tactful.” She blew on her tea and took a cautious sip.

“That’s unkind. Papa thought the children were in danger. Mamma saw her beautiful paper in ruins. The two had their own views on the matter, and they are both very passionate people. It was inevitable that they should become overly emotional.”

Violetta eyed me over the cup and then sighed. She set her teacup down and dragged her shawl around her shoulders. “How can a color become poison? It’s absurd!”

“How can water become poison? How can gas become poison?” I said. “There are many things we don’t understand. Papa is a man of science, and he loves beauty, despite what Mamma says, so he’d be the last person to destroy something if he didn’t think it important to do so.”

“He did it to hurt Mamma,” Violetta said, unwilling to see any other side in the matter. She picked her cup up. “And I shan’t forgive him. I hope he never comes back.”

“Violetta!” I chided, but she turned her face away.

My heart ached over the division of our home. I tried to make it better, but the cracks were too wide, too difficult to bridge. But I knew myself. I knew I would not stop trying.

Papa left the following morning, saying nothing to my mother and only a cursory good-bye to us. The little ones’ eyes grew wide when Papa

approached to kiss them, so he let them be. Violetta bobbed a curtsy and kissed his cheek, but her face was stone. I alone saw him out.

He held his hat in his hand, an old felt homburg that looked as though it had been sat on once too often. “You understand me, don’t you, my dear?” Uncertainty skittered over his face. “You understand why the paper had to go?”

“I do, Papa.” I hadn’t the heart to tell him he should have been gentler and kinder when tearing the paper down. I knew that worry and fear can make people act in ways they wouldn’t ordinarily.

He smiled, and it was the saddest smile I had ever seen. He put his battered hat on his head and fumbled in his satchel, pulling out a book. He handed it to me. “I meant to give this to you on Christmas morning, but I wasn’t sure your mother would approve.”

The book Papa handed me was called *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* by Charles Darwin.

“Have you heard of this book, Elodie?” Papa asked, his face eager. “Mr. Darwin published it in November. Quite extraordinary. I went round to the bookshop and secured a copy, and I’m quite glad that I did. The book sold out immediately.” He took the book back and flipped through a few pages until he found the one he wanted and turned the book to face me. “Here Darwin makes a case for transmutation of species through natural selection. He says that every plant is shaped perfectly for its own pollinator, the two evolving side by side. That everything on the earth evolves according to its needs.”

I took the book from him, glancing at the page he had sought. I had heard of this book. The deacon of our church, Bernard Wainwright, had preached a sermon against it recently, claiming that Mr. Darwin was trying to kill God. I should have handed it straight back to Papa, but I wanted to read it. I wanted to read it very much, if only to see what all the fuss was about. I had been taught that God had created the world and all the creatures within it. But I also knew that people had discovered ancient creatures not mentioned in the Bible, in rocks

throughout the world, even in our own England. These creatures no longer existed, and no one could explain them. Many people, even those in the church, were saying this proved stories in the Bible were meant to be parables and not to be taken literally.

My father had met Mr. Darwin many times. His home, Down House, was not far from our own, and both he and Papa belonged to the Geological Society. Like my father, Mr. Darwin had once been very devout, and a clerical student. But after he'd made his voyage on HMS *Beagle*, he became critical of the Bible and thought all religions might be valid, not just Christianity.

I hugged the book to my chest. Papa had always been very free about sharing his books with us, encouraging us to explore his library. Our parish school taught us girls the very basics, with an emphasis on religion and housewifery, and only until we turned thirteen. Papa hated that our education was so sparse, so he had a standing order with a London bookseller who sent us several books each month. I alone received them to unwrap the brown paper and twine and to shelve them by category, carefully writing down the titles in Papa's library journal. Violetta availed herself of the novels, but I loved the books on geography and natural history. My favorite book was an enormous leather-bound atlas that sat perched on a stand near Papa's desk. I spent hours turning the pages and then locating the countries on his globe, spinning it round slowly, reciting the names of the countries—exotic names like Ceylon, Malaya, and Zanzibar—wishing that I might someday see them for myself. “Thank you, Papa. I would love to read it,” I said.

He tapped my nose with his forefinger, smiling. “Perhaps do so when you’re on your own. Your mother is angry enough with me as it is. I don’t think she’d like you to have such a controversial book.” He kissed my cheek, put his hat on, and climbed into the waiting carriage. The horses stamped their hooves and chewed their bits, eager to be off. The carriage driver spoke gently to them, waiting for my father’s command. Papa let down the window and leaned out. “Look after your mother and sisters for me, Elodie. I’m leaving for China next week to

collect plants.”

“Isn’t China quite dangerous right now?” I asked. The Second China War, sparked by China’s seizure of a British merchant ship, had been ongoing for several years, and although China was a large country and Britain was prevailing, I worried that Papa might be swept up in the violence.

Papa waved his hand. “Oh, no. I’ll be moving through the interior, well away from the action. The China War is not a conflict of the common man but rather one between the emperor and the West. Some of the villagers won’t even know there is a war ongoing. I’ll be perfectly safe.”

“How long will you be away, Papa?” I asked, dreading the answer.

“I plan to return in October.” “Perhaps you will be home in time for my birthday.” “Your birthday?” Papa furrowed his brow. “Yes, of course, your birthday is in October, is it not? The twenty-seventh, I believe?”

“The first,” I replied.

“Yes, yes of course. The first.” He thought again. “I’m not sure, but I will try. I will write to you all, but remember it may take months for the letters to reach you. I don’t want for you to worry, but if anything goes awry, you can write to Sir William Jackson Hooker at Kew, and he will assist you in my stead.”

“Are you collecting for Kew now?” I asked, thrilled at the thought of Papa working for such a venerable institution.

“I have collected for Kew for the past several years.” He smiled. “Only don’t tell my employer. I don’t think he’d like to know he’s not my only priority.”

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, held the largest collection of plants in the world. Plant hunters traveled to the far reaches of the earth to discover new wonders for the garden. The most exotic of these lived in a marvel of glass and iron engineering called the Palm House, which

resembled an upside-down ship. Inside, massive palm trees from faraway lands towered over delicate flowering plants below. Visitors stepped over the threshold, leaving cold, rainy England behind, and into a warm, steamy rainforest, the mist gentle on their faces and the scent of the jackfruit trees and flowering vines filling their senses.

Or so I'd read. I'd never been to Kew, which lay in Richmond upon Thames, an hour's train journey away. Indeed, I'd never left Kent in the whole of my life. Edencroft was my life and always would be. I would have loved nothing more than to see Kew for myself. *Dash it*, I wanted to go farther than Kew. I wanted to feel a real rainforest's mist on my face and smell the jackfruit trees in their native land and not in a glasshouse, no matter how marvelously built.

"I long to go with you, Papa," I blurted out.

"Oh, my dear," Papa said, his voice wistful. "If you were a boy, I'd take you with me directly you asked." He smiled. "The things I would show you! But alas, such adventures are not for you. Besides, I need you here to look after Mamma and the girls. You are my eyes and ears whilst I'm away, and I depend on you to remain my steadfast and dependable Elodie."

I felt ridiculous for showing Papa my heart and for making him voice what I loathed to hear: Because I was a girl, I would always fall short in father's eyes. I would never be able to make up for the loss of my brother. I would never be able to walk by his side. The only way I could make him proud was to remain home, locked like a fairy doll inside of a glass Wardian case, looking after the other fairy dolls. I looked down the road that led to the train station, unable to meet his eyes. "I know, Papa."

"Please tell your mother . . ." He hesitated and glanced at her bedroom windows, where the drapes remained closed. "Never mind. Good-bye, my dear." He tapped the roof of the carriage with his walking stick, and the driver clucked to his horses.

"Good-bye, Papa." I stood on the gravel drive and watched until the carriage had crested the hill and disappeared down the other side.

The weather was threatening snow, the sky grim and foreboding. I went inside and up to Violetta's and my bedroom. I tucked Mr. Darwin's book on top of my wardrobe, behind the ornate carving where no one would look, to read later. Then I went in search of the little glass dollhouse, finally finding it in the scullery. Our maid had placed it on a high shelf next to a stack of saucepans and copper bowls. I stood on a stool and fetched it down, trying not to jostle it and upset the plants. I carried it to my bedroom, where I placed it on my dressing table. I looked at the little dolls, the wee twig figures with the faces drawn on and little dresses made from scraps of hessian, and I couldn't help it. A great sadness overtook me, and I cried. I cried for my father's kind gesture, so misunderstood, and for my mother's broken heart, but most of all I cried for myself, because I wanted my papa.

I wouldn't see or hear from my father again until April of 1861, when the bailiffs came to take our possessions away.