

PROLOGUE

Number Two, Bolton Gardens
South Kensington, London
1 December, 1909

“Come not between the dragon and his wrath.”
—William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

“I can’t quite see,” Mrs. Potter said in a complaining tone, “why you feel you *must* go to the Lakes tomorrow—so soon after your last visit there.” It was after nine, but Mrs. Potter was not an early riser. “Surely, there is nothing so urgent at that wretched little farm that it can’t wait until after our dinner party. And then there’s Christmas.”

“But the dinner party is almost three weeks away,” Beatrix pointed out. “I’ve already taken care of all the details—the guest list, the place cards, the menu, the shopping list. It’s all done.” She paused and added quietly, “And of course we never do anything special for Christmas.”

Her parents were Unitarians and—to Beatrix’s bitter disappointment—Christmas was always just another day at the Potter household. As a child, she would have loved to have a tree with candles and holly and ivy in the hall and mistletoe over the door. Now, grown up, she still longed, child-like, for the magic of the holiday. While everyone else celebrated, she could only watch. That was one of the reasons she desperately wanted to go to the village: to have a little taste of the holiday that the villagers enjoyed so much. The houses would be decorated with green ivy and hollies laden with red berries. There would be carols in the lane, and hopeful children waiting for Father Christmas, and perhaps even snow. Beautiful snow, white and clean and magical, nothing at all like the dirty brown stuff that occasionally fell on London, clogging the streets and creating a catastrophic mix of motor-lorries, horse-drawn hansoms, delivery carts, and struggling foot-travelers. Snow in London was a disaster. One never wished for it.

“It doesn’t matter about Christmas,” Mrs. Potter said, straightening the pink coverlet over her knees. “It’s the dinner party I’m worried about.”

“I’ll only be gone a fortnight,” Beatrix said in a soothing tone. “You will scarcely miss me.”

“But I need you *now*,” Mrs. Potter complained, her voice rising petulantly. “And I do worry about you, you know, out there in that old farmhouse in that remote village, miles from civilization. Anything could happen.” She put her hand to her forehead and shuddered. “After that appalling murder at our lovely old home just last month— Oh, it doesn’t bear thinking about!” She closed her eyes.

For once, Beatrix had to agree. She had always loved visiting Gorse Hall, the lovely old family home at Stalybridge, near Manchester, where her mother had grown up. After Grandmother Leech died, the big old house had sat vacant for a long time. It was finally sold to a local builder and mill owner, who gave it to his son—George Harry Stores—as a wedding present. Unbelievable as it seemed, Mr. Stores had been murdered in the house the previous month, stabbed to death by an intruder.

“I know, Mama,” Beatrix said with a sigh. “But what happened at Gorse Hall is hardly likely to be repeated in my little village. And in any event, terrible things occur right here in South Kensington. Why, just last week, a woman was—”

“Don’t be disagreeable, Beatrix,” Mrs. Potter snapped. “You are not to go, and that’s my final word. Your father is of the same opinion—he said as much to me last evening.” She sighed heavily. “He is so impatient and ill-tempered these days. I must have you here to keep him amused. Now, be a good girl and tell Lucy to bring up my tea and toast straightaway. This odious

business has given me a headache, and you know I'm a martyr to migraines. I shan't come down to breakfast."

"Yes, Mama," Beatrix said. She took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. When her mother got into one of these states, she was a perfect dragon, and there was no point attempting to make her see reason. One simply had to state one's intention, get on with doing whatever one meant to do, and leave her mother to her wrath.

"I am sorry for any inconvenience my absence may cause you, but I shan't be changing my plans. Now I must be on my way, or I shall miss my train." With an effort, she smiled. "Goodbye, Mama. I'll write as soon as I arrive at Hill Top."

"You are the most *obstinate* girl I have ever known!" Mrs. Potter cried, her voice rising on each word. "Why must you always put yourself before others? If you are murdered in your bed, don't blame me, Beatrix! I told you so!"

But she was shouting at the door, for Beatrix had already closed it, quietly, with scrupulous politeness, behind her.

Now, if you are thinking that mothers should not talk to their children (whether little children or grownups) in this disagreeable way, I will tell you that I heartily agree. It is true that many Victorian mamas of Mrs. Potter's social class were in the unfortunate habit of treating their spinster daughters as if they were servants. Beatrix's mother, however, carried the habit to an extreme, expecting her daughter to tend to all the tedious household details as well as make herself available whenever she was wanted.

But no matter how hard Beatrix tried, she could not satisfy her mother, who seems to have been by nature an unhappy woman. In the numerous family photographs taken by Mr. Potter, Mrs. Potter's dark hair is always pulled back into a severe bun and the corners of her mouth are drawn down in an unfailingly disagreeable expression. Perhaps you have known people like this, who are out of sorts even when things are going well, and when things go badly, have a special knack for making everyone around them feel exactly as miserable as they do. I think we may forgive Beatrix—who had the gift (or perhaps it was a curse) of seeing people as they were and not as they tried to seem—for picturing her mother as a perfect dragon.

But that is not how Mrs. Potter saw herself. Not at all! In fact, she quite confidently understood herself to be perfectly superior to everyone else in the world, with the possible exception of Queen Alexandra and the Royal Princesses (and on some days she felt herself superior to even *them*). That was why she had been so utterly, appallingly mortified when her daughter (her only daughter!) received a marriage proposal from Norman Warne, a young man of no special consequence, connections, or fortune. A man employed in the printing trade, who earned his living by making and selling Beatrix's story books. (Indeed, had not Mrs. Potter warned Mr. Potter from the beginning—the very beginning, when Beatrix began to think of commercializing her hobby—that those foolish little books were bound to cause trouble? Drawing pictures was one thing, and certainly respectable enough, even admirable, as a hobby. Selling them was quite another. Selling was so indisputably *vulgar*.)

So the marriage proposal was patently absurd, quite out of the question, and Mrs. Potter (and Mr. Potter too, of course, for he always agreed with Mrs. Potter) had quite rightly insisted that it be rejected, immediately, firmly, and finally. But Beatrix had an unfortunate obstinate streak (in this, she took after her Potter grandmother) and proved even more perverse than usual. The foolish girl not only refused to reject the proposal, but insisted—*insisted, mind you!*—on accepting it, along with a mean little ring. She could not be persuaded to yield on the matter, only to agree that there would be no immediate public announcement of the engagement. Mrs. Potter felt this, at least, with a dizzying relief, for if the announcement had appeared in *The Times*, everyone who was anyone would know what an inferior person the Potters' daughter meant to marry. It would have been a social humiliation from which the Potter family could never recover. The appalling business had to be kept secret until Beatrix could be brought to see reason.

There was no telling what might have happened, or how low the Potters might have been brought, socially speaking, by their daughter's wretched insistence on having her own way. But fate intervened, and they escaped the appalling situation by a stroke of great good luck, or at least, that's how Mrs. Potter saw it. Beatrix's suitor (she could not bear to think or speak of him by name) fell ill and died, quite suddenly, only a month after he had caused the uproar. Very sad for his family, of course, and as a Christian, one had to regret the loss. But as a mother, Mrs. Potter offered thanks and rejoicing to a gracious heaven, only just barely managing not to do this where Beatrix could hear her. The importunate person was dead, the Potters were safe once more, and life in Bolton Gardens could go on with its usual respectable sedateness, under no threat of change or upheaval.

But only for a little. The fellow was scarcely buried when Beatrix took it into her head to do another unthinkable thing. She had purchased a neglected farm in an unfashionable village located in an out-of-the-way corner of the Lake District, where there was no Society of any stature whatsoever and nothing at all to recommend it but some pretty views of mountains and lakes.

Of course, it would have been one thing if Hill Top Farm had been merely an investment, even a bad investment. Women were not expected to have a very good head where property was concerned, after all, and Beatrix might have been forgiven for making a financial mistake. But it was altogether another thing when her daughter, having transferred her affections from an unsuitable person to an unsuitable place, began to behave as though she considered the farm the dearest place in all the world. She announced that she meant to renovate the old house and rebuild the barn and add to the flocks and herds (pouring money down a rat hole, in her mother's opinion) and spend all her spare time there. And then, *and then!* she bought yet another run-down farm in the neighborhood, and was constantly writing to Jennings, her farm manager and to the solicitor who had handled the purchase—Heelis, his name was—about the place, which seemed to require a great deal of repair and renovation.

So whenever Beatrix announced her intention to travel to the farm, Mrs. Potter did her best to raise as many objections as possible, as fervently as possible, and insist that Mr. Potter object as well. From her point of view, this was absolutely necessary, to keep Beatrix from shirking her responsibilities and running off to the country every few weeks.

But Beatrix saw it all very differently, of course. Wouldn't you, if you were in her shoes? As far as she was concerned, her mother was simply attempting to assert a dictatorial authority, as she had done throughout the whole of Beatrix's life. The only way to resist was to do as she must, as quietly and as firmly as necessary. Hold fast to her intention, and the unpleasantness would be severe and distressing but short-lived. Give way once, and every future battle would be lost.

So Beatrix (who was truly a dutiful daughter and couldn't help feeling guilty for having replied as she did) went down to the kitchen to ask Mary to take up tea and toast, then climbed back up the stairs to her third-floor bedroom to pack her bag. In earlier years, her animals—the mice, rabbits, hedgehogs, and guinea pigs she used as models for the drawings in her little books—had always gone with her when she traveled. At the moment, she had no pets of her own, only a pair of guinea pigs named Thackeray and Nutmeg, whom she was taking to her young friend Caroline, at Tidmarsh Manor. She popped the little creatures into a wicker traveling cage and fastened the lid. Then she sent the cage and bag downstairs and asked the coachman to drive her to Euston station, where after only a little delay, the train for the Lake District appeared. Beatrix settled herself and her possessions in the railway carriage, the whistle blew three times, the engine let out a big puff of steam, and they were on their way north.

Beatrix closed her eyes and leaned her head against the seat back with a smile, feeling as she always did that the train's shrill whistle signaled something magical: another escape, however short, from dirty, dreary London and the prison of her parents' house. The railway journey would

be a long one, and tiring, but every weary moment was worth it. She was riding a magic carpet to a world that was entirely her own, far removed from London and the dragons that dwelt there.

In the cage at Beatrix's feet, the two guinea pigs held conflicting opinions about the business. "*Hidy-ho, here we go, off on another adventure,*" Nutmeg squealed excitedly, as the car jolted from side to side on the bumping, humming rails. "*Where to this time, d'you suppose? And what shall we do when we get there?*"

"*Who cares?*" grumbled Thackeray, already sick to death of Nutmeg's childish chatter. "*Personally, I should prefer to arrive wherever we are going and stay. I do not care for adventures, and I am sick to death of being trundled from pillar to post as if I were a cabbage.*"

Nutmeg, who loved adventures, was not darkened by Thackeray's gloom. She had been born in a hutch in Battlesea, then taken from her mother with the rest of her brothers and sisters, and the lot of them bundled off to market. They were sold to a pet shop in the West End of London, which was where she had met Thackeray, whose very long hair (long enough to trail on the floor all round) was black streaked with elegant silver. In fact, his hair covered both ends of him so completely that Nutmeg sometimes found it hard to tell whether Thackeray was coming or going. He was forever combing himself with an ivory comb that he kept in his pocket along with his pipe, tobacco, and gold-rimmed reading glasses. Nutmeg's shaggy fur, in contrast, always looked rumpled and unkempt, as if she'd just got up from a longish nap and hadn't yet found her comb. But she didn't mind. Her hair was a such lovely color—exactly the color of rich, spicy nutmeg—that she felt quite proud of it.

Thackeray (his full name was William Makepeace Thackeray, after the author of *Vanity Fair*) had lived a different sort of life altogether, having spent most of it as a friend and companion to an elderly gentleman named Mr. Travers, a collector of rare books. Thackeray and Mr. Travers had enjoyed many evenings together before the fire, reading and reflecting on fine literature, and Thackeray had from time to time assisted Mr. Travers in the cataloguing of his collection. Upon Mr. Travers' unfortunate death, Thackeray was crated up by Mr. Travers' manservant and taken to the pet shop in South Kensington, where (horror of horrors!) he was put up for sale in the shop window, like a common animal. He had suffered there for nearly a week in the company of an enthusiastic creature with unruly brown hair and the ridiculous name of Nutmeg, at the mercy of unmannerly children who made faces at him through the glass or (worse yet) raced into the shop and poked their grubby fingers into his cage.

But then Miss Potter had chanced to pass by. She noticed them, bought them, and took them to her house in Bolton Gardens, which had been nice and certainly quiet enough, after the commotion of the pet shop and the humiliation of being put on display. Thackeray's only complaint was that Miss Potter neglected to provide any reading matter. For him, a day without reading was an empty day, without any sort of satisfaction at all. He had been driven to read the newspaper in the bottom of his cage, and counted it a good day when there was something beside the classified advertisements: *Flat to let, mod. cons., two flights, no pets* or *Ladies' hats for sale, straw, felt, fancy veils, all colors*. Not much food for thought there.

And now they were on their way again. Nutmeg was light-hearted and gay. But the bouncing made Thackeray even more short-tempered than usual, and he growled deep in his throat every time the train gave a lurch.

Hearing the noise, Miss Potter opened the top of the traveling cage and looked in. "All this to-ing and fro-ing must be a bit uncomfortable," she said, smiling down at them. "But I'm sure you'll like it where you're going. A pretty young girl is waiting for you at Tidmarsh Manor. There'll be a lovely garden, and an outdoor hutch under the trees, and two other guineas, very nice ones. Their names are Tuppenny and Thruppence."

"*Tuppenny and Thruppence!*" Nutmeg exclaimed. "*What clever names!*"

Thackeray rolled his eyes. "*Clever, very clever,*" he muttered darkly. "*Small change. Exactly the sort of clever names a clever lady would give to a clever little pair of guineas.*"

“Really,” sniffed Nutmeg, “it would be nice if you were a little less sarcastic. Life is such an amazing adventure—we should all enjoy every minute of it.”

“Sarcasm is in my nature,” retorted Thackeray. “And I for one could wish for a little more thoughtful conversation in those around me. I could also wish,” he added sulkily, “that the clever lady had thought to bring a newspaper.” The bottom of the cage was bare. “I miss *The Times*. Mr. Travers and I used to read it at the breakfast table.” He sighed regretfully. “I miss the breakfast table, too. We always had eggs and sausages.”

“Have some sunflower seeds, my dears,” said Miss Potter, taking a small sack from her bag. “Perhaps they’ll make you feel better.” She put down a piece of folded newsprint in the bottom of the cage and spilled the seeds onto it.

Now, it may seem strange to you that a grownup lady would bother to talk to a pair of guinea pigs, but Beatrix did not consider this at all unusual. As children, she and her younger brother Bertram had collected animals, observed them, sketched them, held conversations with them, and told stories about them and to them. There had been Benjamin and Peter, fine rabbits both; Punch, the green frog; Judy, the adventurous lizard from Ilfracombe; a very dear hedgehog; a ring snake and some silly snails and any number of mice. Beatrix had been devoted to her animal friends in those long-ago nursery days, and still cared deeply for them. Not in a sentimental way, though, for she had always taken a scientific interest in her animals, watching closely in order to draw them, and listening intently in order to learn their ways, as any naturalist would do. Now, of course, she took the same sort of interest in the animals who lived on her farm, the Herdwick sheep and the Galway cows, the pigs and chickens and ducks and dogs and cats, each of whom had its own habits, its own special interests and concerns. If she had any talent as a farmer, she often thought, it came from caring enough about the animals to pay them a close and careful attention.

Beatrix closed the cage and looked out the railway-car window at the landscape flashing by. She, too, was growing tired of to-ing and fro-ing. She had always liked to travel—the childhood holidays she and Bertram had spent in Scotland were among the sweetest memories of her life—and she loved getting away to the Lake District, where she could spend happy days at her farm, walk through the moors and fells, and get reacquainted with the villagers. But her pleasure was always shadowed by the knowledge that the days would fly past and soon she would have to go back to Bolton Gardens, where the tall, gloomy house seemed to smolder with her mother’s anger and her father’s impatience. She sighed. It was too bad, really, that she couldn’t escape from her prison without thinking how soon she would have to return, and how gloomy and wretched she would feel when she got there.

But Beatrix was by nature a cheerful and optimistic person, so she put Bolton Gardens firmly out of her mind and began to think ahead to the pleasant chores that awaited her. There was plenty to think about, too, not just at Hill Top but at Castle Farm, which had been sorely neglected. Her new purchase was going to require all sorts of attention before it could be what it once had been.

Nutmeg was also thinking ahead. “*Tuppenny and Thruppence*,” she mused happily. “*Why, that will make four of us. Why, that’s enough for a party or a picnic--even a parade! And there’s a garden and an outdoor hutch. Won’t that be fun?*”

But Thackeray, who wasn’t interested in parties or picnics and detested parades above all other things, did not answer. He had put on his reading glasses and was sitting in the corner, studying the editorial page of *The Times*.