

A woman in a red Victorian dress and bonnet stands in a landscape. In the background, there is a bridge over a river and a large, multi-story house. The scene is set during a sunset or sunrise, with a warm, golden glow. The entire image is framed by a decorative white border with a repeating floral pattern.

JULIE
KLASSEN

The
BRIDGE
to
BELLE
ISLAND



The
B R I D G E
to
B E L L E
I S L A N D

JULIE
KLASSEN



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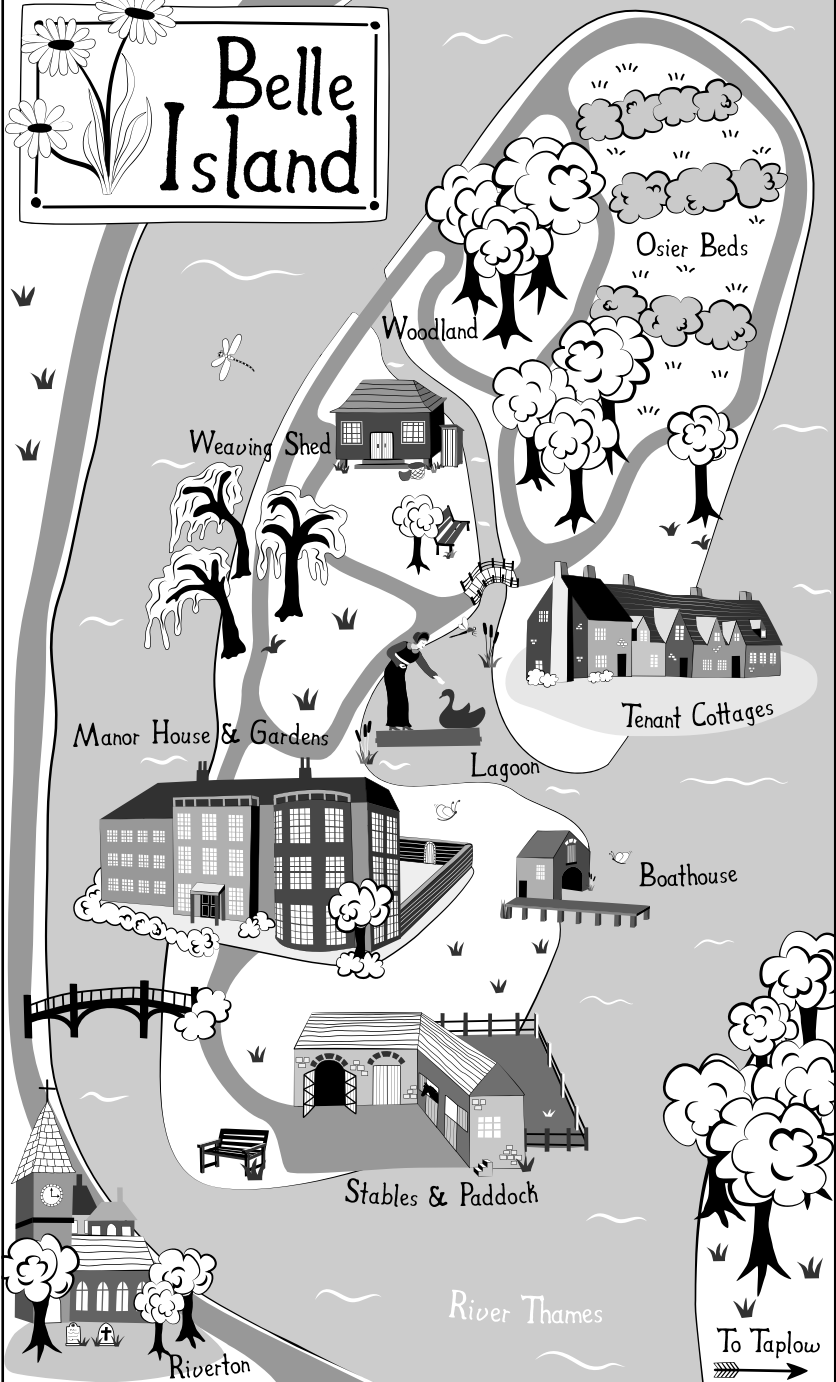
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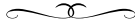
To our sons, Aaron and Matthew.
We love you both so much.
And with deep gratitude to everyone
who has prayed for our family.
We appreciate your prayers more than you know.

Belle Island



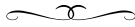
All mankind is of one author, and is one volume. . . .
No man is an island, entire of itself.

—Poet John Donne



Let every man praise the bridge that carries him over.

—English Proverb



Therefore let all the faithful pray
to you while you may be found;
surely the rising of the mighty
waters will not reach them.

—Psalm 32:6 NIV

❖ CHAPTER ❖

one

APRIL 1819

Benjamin Booker sat in the Old Bailey, pulse pounding. His most important case to date had finally been called to trial—his chance to prove himself to the firm’s partners.

The courtroom was the usual raucous scene: noisy spectators and newsmen in the gallery, milling witnesses awaiting their turn, and wigged barristers goading one another like boxers in the ring.

The grand chambers gleamed with polished, paneled wood, and a crowned cross adorned the wall above the elevated judgment seat, where a white-wigged judge sat resplendent in his robes. To his left, twelve male jurors congregated in their three-tiered box, listening to testimony.

As an attorney, Benjamin’s work had all been preparatory and in the background. Now it was up to the barrister he’d retained to argue the case. Sitting off to the side, Benjamin breathed a prayer for success. With a shot of guilt, he realized he’d neglected prayer lately. He’d been so sure Susan Stark was

telling the truth that he had wagered his career and reputation on the outcome of this trial.

And it was turning out to be a disaster.

The case was this: William Stark had married Susan Wetenhall, a breathtaking beauty without fortune. And now, having met a rich heiress with five thousand a year, he regretted that decision. Since divorce was nigh unto impossible to obtain, he'd decided to charge his current wife with bigamy in order to free himself, claiming he'd discovered she'd already been married.

But his wife had evidence on her side: letters between her husband and the heiress he wished to marry, witnesses who had seen the two meeting in clandestine fashion, even a newspaper advertisement Mr. Stark had placed, offering a reward for anyone named Jane Wilson—a very common name—who would testify in the case.

Benjamin himself had interviewed the vicar who'd married Mr. and Mrs. Stark the year before. All seemed in order. Even so, he'd had to use all his powers of persuasion to convince a noted barrister to defend the wronged wife in court. Mr. Sullivan had initially resisted, but after Ben assured him they would win, he'd accepted the brief.

Mr. Knowles, for the prosecution, had begun by calling the parish clerk of St. James's, Piccadilly, where Susan's first marriage had allegedly taken place.

The clerk produced a marriage register with an entry for an Enos Redknap and Sukey Hall. The bride's name was similar to Mrs. Stark's maiden name but not the same. The clerk admitted he had no memory of the persons involved, nor could he identify the defendant at the bar.

They had been off to a good start.

But then a second witness, a Mrs. Pruitt, formerly Jane Wil-

son, had identified the defendant as Sukey Hall, saying she had been present at the wedding.

Prepared for this possibility, Sullivan asked her, “Can anyone prove you are the Jane Wilson who signed the register?”

“My husband and sister could testify to my maiden name, of course.” The witness tapped the register before her. “And that is my name in the book. I will swear to my handwriting.”

The woman was quite convincing. Benjamin’s chest tightened, and he began to feel dizzy. *Keep calm, Booker*, he admonished himself.

Sullivan displayed the advertisement Mr. Stark had placed and asked the witness if she’d received any remuneration for her testimony. She denied it, but Benjamin hoped doubt had been planted in the jurors’ minds.

Next, a former lodging-house owner testified, and their case began to fully unravel. She too identified Mrs. Stark as the former Sukey Hall. She had not witnessed the wedding itself but had raised a glass to the couple afterward in her home, where Miss Hall had been lodging at the time.

Benjamin felt Sullivan’s shocked and angry gaze on his profile but stared doggedly ahead, stomach churning. Had he misjudged this client? He doubted the partners would excuse such a blunder. Worse, if he lost his position, there would be no end to his father’s I-told-you-so’s.

From the dock, Mrs. Stark protested, “Are you getting a share of the five thousand as well, madam? You must be!”

“Unfortunately not, my dear,” the old woman cheerfully replied. “I haven’t a feather to fly with these days.”

Sullivan asked the elderly witness a few questions, hoping to find fault with her memory, but the octogenarian was still very keen.

Finally, Mr. Stark himself entered the witness box.

“Look at the young woman at the bar,” Knowles directed him. “Did you marry her?”

“Yes, on the sixth of April last.”

“Was her first husband living at that time?”

“Yes—and living now. Though I only recently learned of his existence.”

“How did you come by this knowledge, when it has so clearly evaded the defense counsel?” Knowles sent a sly look at Sullivan, who in turn glared again at Benjamin.

Mr. Stark explained, “My father was suspicious and engaged a Bow Street man to investigate his new daughter-in-law. It was he who discovered that I had unknowingly been taken in by a woman already married.” Mr. Stark colored at the admission. “I was deceived in her.”

Susan turned plaintive eyes to the judge. “I never asked Mr. Stark for a farthing, so help me God. And he worried me every day of my life to marry him. He knew what I was. It was no secret to him. And he married me anyway.”

There it was. She had all but confessed. Ben felt sick, realizing the woman had lied right to his face, and he’d believed every conniving word.

Mr. Stark looked at her and said coldly, “If you think I would have knowingly entered into a bigamous marriage with a woman of easy virtue, you are grossly mistaken.”

Bile rose in Benjamin’s throat.

Sullivan made only a perfunctory cross-examination of Mr. Stark and called none of the witnesses they had waiting to testify. Benjamin knew it was over. His heart sank and his career with it. He had been taken in by a beautiful, lying woman just as Mr. Stark had been. He had failed utterly.

In the end, the defendant threw herself on the mercy of the court, and claiming poverty and distress, begged for leniency.

After consulting briefly together, the jury pronounced her guilty. The judge sentenced her to six months' imprisonment in the house of correction and a token fine of one shilling.

Clearly she would not be paying the barrister's fees herself. Having retained Sullivan, the firm would be liable for his fees. Benjamin determined to pay them from his own meager savings.

Sullivan was livid and humiliated at such a resounding defeat. He hissed under his breath that he would tell everyone Benjamin Booker had vouched for the woman's innocence and persuaded him to take the case against his better judgment.

Benjamin could not blame him. He was angry at himself and mortified as well, dreading Mr. Hardy's reaction when he learned of his colossal failure. Everyone would hear of it soon enough, thanks to the buzzing spectators, gloating adversaries, and scribbling newspapermen.

As the defendant was being led away, Benjamin forced himself to face her.

"I am sorry, Mr. Booker," she said. "I never thought they would find Jane—not after she married. And who would have guessed that old woman was still alive? They tore down her lodging house years ago. Well. Thank you for trying."

"I would not have done, had I known you were lying through your teeth."

"Ah . . ." she said sadly. "I miss the admiration I once saw in your eyes." She blinked back unexpected tears. "The truth is, Enos abandoned me six months after we wed to pursue some opera singer, leaving me to shift for myself. I learned too late how dangerous he is, so I changed my name to protect myself. When Mr. Stark began courting me, it seemed like a gift from heaven. I felt I had no choice but to marry again in order to survive."

Is any of it true? Benjamin wondered. He steeled himself

against her ploys—if only he had done so sooner—and walked out of the courtroom, head bowed and face burning. Catcalls followed him as he exited.

Benjamin retreated into the offices of Norris, Hardy, and Hunt. Mr. Hardy was out of the office meeting a client, so Ben would have to wait until that evening to talk to him. He dreaded the conversation to come even as he longed for it, hoping for absolution from his mentor, or at least understanding.

Benjamin tarried until it was almost dark before emerging from the office. The lamplighters had already lit the streetlamps when he crossed Lincoln Inn's Field and then trudged along Coventry Street to the Queen's Head. Mr. Hardy had long preferred this out-of-the-way public house to the much nearer Seven Stars, which was so crowded with members of the legal profession that every conversation was certain to be overheard by rivals.

Removing his hat, Benjamin entered the quiet establishment and surveyed the interior. The dark wood, warm fires, and cozy nooks and crannies usually promised comfort and pleasure. But not this time.

Mr. Hardy had arrived before him and sat smoking a cigar in their customary high-backed inglenook. The senior partner typically drank nothing stronger than the occasional half-pint. Tonight, a glass of whiskey sat before him.

Benjamin understood. He too longed for the relief of strong drink but refrained, knowing how temporary the relief would be and how painful the consequences. "I am sorry, sir. Deeply sorry. I was thoroughly convinced of her innocence."

The older man's thin, handsome face looked suddenly older than his fifty-five years. "I know you were. Staked your name on it . . . and Sullivan's."

Benjamin cringed. "And now I have irrevocably damaged

not only my own professional reputation but that of the entire firm.”

Robert Hardy raised a hand. “No need to rehash it all again. Sullivan tracked me down and acquainted me with the particulars. He declares he will represent no more of our clients. And he is one of the best.”

Benjamin sat down, enveloped in a haze of tobacco smoke—citrus and spice. “Again, sir, I am sorry. I—”

“Enough apologies,” Hardy snapped. “Sorry will not address every problem. Sometimes action must be taken.”

The sharp words were like a slap to Ben’s face. Instantly, he was a boy again, cowering under his father’s stern disapproval. Did Mr. Hardy intend to cut him loose? He could not blame him if he did.

His mentor studied him, and his gaze softened. “Well, I’ll not pour more ashes on your head. You have already condemned yourself sufficiently for the both of us. I blame the blasted woman.”

Benjamin nodded. “I truly believed her, sir. What an actress she is. And what a fool I am—a stupid, gullible fool.”

The older man sighed. “You are not the first man to be taken in by a beautiful woman, nor will you be the last.” Hardy swirled his drink. “It’s over. You did what you thought had to be done. You risked a great deal to protect someone you esteemed, even if that regard turned out to be falsely placed. It is commendable, in a way. Though there will be a price to pay for it, make no mistake.”

Again the senior partner sighed, eyes distant in memory. “What a trying few years this has been. My dear wife passing on. My daughter’s disappointing marriage. Norris retiring. Capstone leaving the city to practice in some rustic hamlet of all things. A country solicitor! You won’t do the same, I trust?”

“Never, sir. You know I am a Londoner, born and bred.”

Hardy nodded. “And now this. . . . It is a blow, I can’t deny.”

Benjamin ducked his head, shame heating his ears.

Noticing, Hardy leaned across the table and gave Ben’s shoulder a comforting squeeze. “Chin up. We’ll soldier on somehow.”

Hardy sat back and fiddled with his glass. It slipped from his fingers, spilling a few drops. Rarely had Ben seen the man so distracted.

Mr. Hardy glanced at his watch and rose abruptly. “I did not realize it had grown so late.” He pulled on a pair of worn, stained gloves little better than Benjamin’s own. He supposed that without a wife, the care of a man’s garments suffered.

Hardy added, “Cordelia expected me an hour ago.”

Benjamin rose as well, swallowed, and asked, “How is your daughter?”

“She is well. Big as a house. Expecting my first grandchild any day.”

“Oh . . . Congratulations, sir. You might have said earlier.”

“I did not wish to rub salt in the wound.”

“Not at all, sir. I am happy for you both.”

“Thank you.”

Benjamin followed him outside, and they walked around the corner and started down Haymarket Street, the sour-sweet smells of the public house lingering on their clothes.

Knowing footpads often prowled after dark, Benjamin said, “I’ll walk you home, sir.”

“No need.”

Benjamin remained by his side anyway. He had been at this man’s side for years, and it seemed only right to walk beside him after such a difficult day.

As they neared St. James’s Square, a shout rang out—a night

watchman raising the hue and cry. Following the sound, they turned toward the square.

A female voice wailed a loud lament. Exchanging looks of concern, the lawyers hurried past the statue of William III and across the central garden.

St. James's Square was fashionable and popular with the upper classes and aristocracy. However, the terraced houses on the more modest south side were occupied by artists, statesmen, and professionals.

As they approached these houses, Benjamin saw an elderly night watchman under the portico of number 23, its lamps lit.

Mr. Hardy drew in a jagged breath. "The Wilder residence . . ." He turned to Benjamin, mouth tense. "This is where Percival Norris lives."

Mr. Norris had all but retired from Norris, Hardy, and Hunt to focus his attentions on the Wilder estate, of which he was sole trustee. Benjamin had not seen the man in some time, but his name remained on their office door, stationery, and many old files.

Behind the watchman stood a middle-aged servant, weeping into her handkerchief.

Mr. Hardy addressed the watchman, "I know the gentleman who lives here. What's happened?"

"I'm afraid he's dead, sir."

At that, the servant wailed again.

The silver-headed watchman grimaced and hooked a thumb toward the house. "The parish constable just went in."

Benjamin looked at his mentor, heartsick for the man who had already lost so much. "I am sorry, sir."

The constable came out the front door a short while later. Benjamin recognized young Buxton from a few previous cases.

Noticing them, the constable said, “Oh, evening, Mr. Hardy. Mr. Booker. I suppose you heard. Your Mr. Norris has been killed.”

“Killed?” Mr. Hardy echoed. “Heaven forbid. How? Are you certain?”

The constable nodded. “Looks that way. An intruder, I’m thinkin’. I’m off to notify Bow Street and the coroner.”

Grim-faced, Hardy asked, “May I go in? He was an old friend of mine.”

Constable Buxton hesitated, then shrugged. “Don’t see why not. You lawyers know not to disturb anything. There’s bound to be a coroner’s inquest on this one.” Instructing the night watchman to stand guard, he strode away to alert the appropriate authorities.

Benjamin offered, “I’ll go in with you.”

Hardy hesitated. “Thank you, Ben. But you go on home. You’ve had enough crises for one day.”

“No, sir. It’s the least I can do. You shouldn’t be alone.”

When the older man protested no further, Benjamin started up the steps, eyeing the door latch. “No sign of a break-in here. Is there a back door?”

“That’s right,” the watchman replied. “Unlocked and open when I arrived.”

The servant wiped her nose. “I am the housekeeper here. I’ll show you the way.” She led them through the house to the garden door at the rear. Benjamin walked beside Hardy, the older man’s face set in determined lines. How horrible to know you were about to see the body of a friend, especially one who’d apparently met with a violent end. Benjamin’s throat tightened at the thought. He reminded himself that he had seen death before and was more accustomed to hearing details of people’s demises than he would like.

At the rear door, they again looked for signs of damage but saw none.

“We don’t always lock this door,” the housekeeper apologized.

“Any windows broken?”

“Not that I’ve noticed.” She pointed along the passage. “First door on the right. He’d taken over the morning room as his office.” She, however, went no closer, quickly retreating the way they had come.

The door indicated was closed. Seeing Hardy hesitate, Benjamin reached over and pushed it open for him.

Inside, a lamp burned on a tall cabinet, illuminating the room. A grey-haired man lay facedown on the desk, one cheek pressed to its surface, hair over his brow, his exposed eye staring unseeing. His right arm lay outstretched across the desk, a pistol clutched in hand. The left hand lay fisted on the other side.

Mr. Hardy’s gaze landed on the weapon. “I did not know he even owned a gun.”

Benjamin looked from his stunned companion to the body once more. He remembered Percival Norris as stout and confident, full of swagger. All gone. Now only a pale shell of the man remained.

Benjamin surveyed the scene. “Easy to see why the constable believes he was killed by an intruder. Desk drawer open. Gun in hand. Perhaps he heard or saw a stranger and reached for his gun. Before he could shoot, the blackguard killed him.”

Hardy looked around, face creased in disbelief. “How? With what?”

“I don’t know.” Benjamin saw no likely weapon either, except perhaps an empty decanter on the desk. Nor did he see blood or an obvious wound on the deceased.

Then he noticed a drinking glass lay shattered on the floor

across the room, a streak glistening down the wall. A glass thrown in anger, or self-defense?

The young constable returned, announcing, “The coroner should be here any minute.” He stood near the door as sentry, rocking back and forth on his heels while he waited.

A few minutes later, a tall, dark-haired man of five and thirty entered, drawing up short to discover people in the room. Or at least, two particular people. He was young to have been appointed coroner to fill a Westminster vacancy. But he always had been ambitious.

The coroner frowned. “What are you doing in here? Is this a crime scene or a social club?”

Flinching, the constable said, “Sorry, sir. I know these two. Lawyers. Friends of the deceased.”

The coroner’s frown deepened into a scowl. “I know them as well, but that does not mean I would have let them in here.”

“Sorry, sir. Won’t happen again.”

Benjamin greeted the man without warmth. “Evening, Reuben.”

“Benjamin.” The coroner dipped his chin, pinning him with a scathing look. “Don’t you have more important things to do, especially now?”

Had word traveled so fast? Benjamin lifted his chin. “More important than a man’s death?”

“That’s my responsibility. Not yours.”

“Better get to it, then.”

Reuben humphed. He surveyed the room, the body of the deceased, and the gun.

Benjamin pointed out the broken glass.

Reuben turned to Mr. Hardy. “Was it Mr. Norris’s habit to throw glasses against the wall?”

“No,” Hardy replied. “Only to empty them, often and quickly.”

“Meaning he was a heavy drinker?”

Hardy winced. “I’m afraid so. In fact, when I heard he died, my first thought was that he’d finally drunk himself to death.” Mr. Hardy looked down as if embarrassed for his old friend.

This was news to Benjamin. Mr. Hardy had said nothing to him about Mr. Norris’s drinking, probably hoping to protect the man’s reputation.

Reuben nodded. “The empty decanter corroborates that.” He pulled off the blue glass stopper and took a whiff. “Gin.”

Then he extracted a narrow instrument from his inner pocket and pushed the hair off the deceased’s temple, revealing a small gash, the blood congealed. Benjamin flinched in sympathy.

The coroner bent and studied the wound. “A minor contusion. He’s been struck by something.”

Mr. Hardy’s eyes widened in shock. “Thunder and turf.”

Benjamin murmured, “Perhaps when he fell to the desk?”

“I don’t think so.” Then Reuben leaned near the dead man’s mouth and sniffed. “Not gin. Perhaps . . . oranges?”

Benjamin stepped to the wall, ran a finger through the sticky substance trailing down it, and sniffed. Amid the room’s smells of leather, polish, and tobacco, he smelled oranges, both sour and sweet at once. “Orange wine, I believe.”

Benjamin had been gifted with a keen sense of smell. A blessing or a curse, depending on his surroundings. He looked around the room again but saw no wine bottle or second decanter.

He moved nearer to the desk and studied Mr. Norris’s face, several details catching his attention. Hearing his father’s somber voice in his mind, he pointed them out. “See the spittle there? The foam? And how he’s fisted his hand as though in pain? Might that suggest poisoning?”

Reuben frowned down at the body for a moment, then turned

to Benjamin. “Are you the coroner or am I? Always said you ought to go into medicine instead of the law. But you would not listen, so I will thank you to keep your uneducated opinions to yourself. The only poison I see is this.” Reuben tapped the empty decanter again.

Then the arrogant man straightened and squared his shoulders. “Of course I shall do a thorough examination during the formal inquest. But for the present, I’ve seen enough to know we are not dealing with accidental death or natural causes.” He nodded to the constable. “Summon a coroner’s jury.”

Reuben returned his annoyed gaze to Benjamin. “Now, if you and your *esteemed* Mr. Hardy would step out of the room . . . ?”

When they hesitated, the coroner raised his arms, shooing them out like an angry goose flapping its wings. “Out with you. No one must disturb the body until the inquest takes place.”

As they stepped through the door, Mr. Hardy muttered under his breath, “I see your brother is as charming as ever.”

“Yes,” Benjamin agreed.

They followed the constable into a nearby parlour to await the Bow Street runner.