

A woman in a red velvet jacket and floral dress stands in a garden with a large stone house in the background. The scene is framed by ornate gold borders at the top and bottom.

WHISPERS
at
PAINSWICK
COURT

JULIE
KLASSEN

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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To Carol Maxwell and all the members of
the Painswick Local History Society, whose
excellent publication, the *Painswick Chronicle*,
guided me as I wrote this book.



Gloucester[shire] is a fine county, and Painswick is one of the pleasantest places in the world.

—King George III, *Gloucester Journal*, 1789



Anciently, parishioners were obliged by law to plant yew trees in their church yards through England for the purpose of supplying the king's archers with materials for bows.

—James Malcolm, *A Compendium of Modern Husbandry*, 1805



My shroud of white, stuck all with yew,
O, prepare it!
My part of death, no one so true
Did share it.

—William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 1602



In the moment of affliction, a skilful medical attendant, an affectionate and sympathizing friend, with a kind and experienced nurse, are invaluable blessings!

—*The Good Nurse; or Hints on the management of the sick and lying-in chamber*, 1828

1



GLOUCESTERSHIRE, 1821

Miss Anne Loveday sat in the parlour with the widower Mr. Shufflebottom—that truly was his name—while he droned on about his eight adult children, and how much they all still missed their mother, who'd died many years ago giving birth to a ninth. He described in tedious detail his fine house filled with said adult children and several grandchildren besides.

Anne wasn't really listening.

Instead she was somewhere more pleasant in her mind. She was revisiting a lovely summer picnic with her parents, sister, and a few friends, celebrating her grandparents' anniversary. Grandpa and Grandmamma sat on a blanket beneath the entwined boughs of the wedding tree in the Painswick churchyard, the cheerful courtship song of goldcrests high in the branches. Mamma, healthy and vibrant, bustled about passing plates of cold chicken and slices of beef and Stilton pie and refilling cups of lemonade.

All of Anne's loved ones together and happy, the future stretching brightly before them.

She had asked her grandfather, “I love a picnic, but why under this tree? I thought yew trees were a symbol of death?”

“They are indeed, my poppet. Yet death is a part of life. A yew will grow a thousand years. See how the branches bend to the ground? They’ll take root there and new growth will begin. That’s why the yew also symbolizes rebirth and eternal life. The trees are useful as well, providing shelter for woodland creatures.”

“You’re such a romantic, Tom,” Grandmamma chided teasingly. “I thought we celebrated here because this is where you asked me to marry you.”

“I was getting to that, impatient woman,” he said, a warm twinkle in his eyes as he gazed upon his wife of many decades.

“But aren’t yew trees poisonous?” Anne persisted.

“Deadly so, poppet. And never forget it. . . .”

Anne was jerked back to the present when she realized the widower was staring agog at her, a ginger biscuit halfway to his lips. “Poisonous?”

“Oh! Not those.” She chuckled weakly. “I was thinking of something else.”

“Ah, your mother mention—”

“Stepmother.”

“Yes, she mentioned your unusual predilection for herbs and medicines. Don’t worry, marriage will smooth out those undesirable qualities. You’ll be too busy managing a house and children to dwell on . . . less traditional pursuits.”

Anne rose abruptly. “Do excuse me.”

On the pretense of needing to use the privy—it was indiscreet to say the words aloud, but she did so anyway—Anne slipped from the room and tiptoed to her favorite hiding place. With a sigh of relief, she tucked herself behind the draperies of the window seat in her father’s study and resumed reading her prized medical book, hidden from her

would-be suitor, stepmother, and half siblings, and dreaming of a different life.

She'd barely finished one page when familiar footsteps strode into the study. Her father threw back the drapes, exposing Anne's sanctuary, which he alone knew about.

"Mrs. Barker is in labor," he began. "Her eldest just came to alert me. Remind me. Did we use the forceps or vectis last time?"

"Neither one! Time and patience were all that was required, and a little gentle encouragement." Anne rose. "I'll come with you. Her last delivery was difficult indeed."

"No need. They are summoning a midwife as well this time, and you know Nancy does not want—"

"What's this?" Her stepmother's shrill voice rang out from behind him. A moment later, she appeared at her husband's elbow. "Is this where you've been hiding?" Displeasure pinched Nancy's pale face. "Oh no, no, no. Anne will *not* be going with you. She is going to apologize to the gentleman caller she rudely abandoned. Besides, she is not a midwife. Nor your orderly."

"Of course not," her father began. "I only—"

Nancy threw up her hands. "You want a better life for her, do you not? Her own home, her own family?"

"Well, of course, in time, but—"

"But *I* don't want that," Anne interjected. "Marriage leads to unhappiness, babies, and death." She knew she was overstating the matter, but several women *had* died in childbirth during the years she'd helped her father.

"Marriages are not always unhappy," Nancy retorted.

"No?" Anne raised her brows. "What about Fanny?"

Her stepmother huffed. "You and your sister! Determined to be unhappy because life didn't give you exactly what you wanted, all the while ignoring what might truly bring fulfillment. No, women cannot be doctors. And yes, Mr. Dalby

married someone else. Do you really think there is only one path to happiness? God is bigger and life is more complicated than that. You waste so much time pining for what you can't have that you miss—even scoff at—other excellent opportunities right in front of you.”

Indignation flared. “Are you seriously suggesting Mr. Shufflebottom is my excellent opportunity? My path to fulfillment? Is that all I'm good for—to yoke myself to a near stranger and bear child after child, hips expanding and patience thinning with each one?”

Hands on ample hips, Nancy challenged, “Like me, I suppose you mean?”

“If the cap fits.”

“Anne Louise Loveday!” Her father scowled thunderously. “I am ashamed of you. Apologize to your stepmother this instant.”

Anne looked at her father, the betrayer, and lifted her chin. “I will apologize for being rude, but not for speaking the truth.” Anne wasn't usually mean-spirited, but her father's second wife brought out the worst side of her nature. She could not help resenting the woman, only a few years older than she, who was preventing her from carrying out her life's ambition.

Heated silence followed as the two glared at her, tension radiating off her father and his much-younger wife.

Nancy took his arm. “I told you it was time for her to go. We need the room with another on the way, and her constant rebellion is not good for my health.”

Her father looked at Nancy and did not disagree. Instead he sighed. “Speaking of going, I had better set out for the Barkers’.”

“Without me?” Anne asked.

“Exactly,” Nancy answered for him. “I am sure he and the midwife can manage without you.”

Anne opened her mouth to protest, but at that moment a little hand took hers. She looked down and, through a red haze of anger, saw Matilda's tear-streaked face. "Anne, I scraped my knee again. Will you help me? Before I bleed through my skirts?"

Relieved for the distraction, Anne replied, "Of course, Matty." She eyed her young half sister with fondness and guilt. She was not to blame for any of this.

"Excuse us," she said, leading the girl away.

Anne knew she should not begrudge her father the happiness of his second marriage and second batch of children. Nor resent the woman he had married six years ago, less than two years after her mother's death.

She had managed, to some degree, until the new Mrs. Loveday had taken on the role of matchmaker as well as stepmother—and then started limiting Anne's involvement in her father's practice.

It was not Nancy's fault women were not allowed to be physicians, surgeons, or apothecaries. But did that truly mean her only other option was marriage to an older man she barely knew? At seven and twenty, Anne realized she was well beyond the first blush of youth, and beyond the first pick of suitors too. At her age, she was unlikely to marry for love, and she vowed not to marry under any other inducement.

She thought again of her sister's unhappy marriage and of her stepmother's exhaustion after bearing four children in the last six years, with a fifth on the way. *No, thank you.* Anne would forgo all that and live a single, useful life, helping others—like Miss Lotty did.

After she had cleaned and administered a sticking plaster to young Matilda's knee, Anne once again opened the recent letter from her mother's old friend, Charlotte Newland, with whom Anne had corresponded over the years. A spinster in her mid-forties, Miss Lotty had invited Anne to come and

stay with her in Painswick. Initially, Anne had hesitated. Now, after the day's events, the choice seemed clear. Anne reread the lines, which brimmed with local news, friendly greetings, and how much the dear woman missed her, reminding Anne how long it had been since they'd seen each other. She'd ended the letter with a rather mysterious plea.

P.S. My dear Anne, someone in Painswick could use your help, though I hesitate to name the person, for fear it will put you off coming here.

How curious.

Mystery or no, Anne wrote back to accept. Miss Lotty's invitation seemed the perfect opportunity. It was time to leave her father's house, and her stepmother's matchmaking attempts, once and for all.



By the time her father returned, Anne was feeling a bit sheepish for losing her temper earlier. Tentatively she asked, "How is Mrs. Barker?"

"Perfectly well, as is her newborn son. The midwife was able to turn him, and together we delivered the child without resorting to either instrument."

Anne sighed in relief. "That is good news. And, um, speaking of news, Miss Charlotte Newland has invited me to visit her in Painswick. I have decided to accept her offer."

Her father hesitated, then slowly nodded. "I understand."

Anne felt an unexpected pang at his easy acquiescence, and at the thought of parting from him. They had once worked so well together.

"I know you miss how things were when it was just you, me, and Fanny," he said, "but—"

“No, Papa. I miss when it was the four of us. I miss Mamma. You may have forgotten her, yet I cannot.”

“What do you mean, forgotten her? I think of her every day and wish I had done things differently. I should never have left her alone in your care.”

Another stab to Anne’s heart. He no doubt wished he had been on hand to rectify Anne’s failings. If he had been there, her mother might have lived.

2



Anne wrote to her sister, explaining her plan to go to Painswick for the summer or perhaps longer. Fanny, who lived with her husband some ten miles away, wrote back immediately, insisting she would deliver Anne there herself. Anne questioned the wisdom of Fanny traveling to Painswick. In fact, she was fairly certain it would not be wise at all.

Despite Anne's protestations, less than a week later, Fanny came for her as promised.

While Anne stood at the window, watching the carriage rattle up the road, Nancy came and stood beside her. "You are leaving on my account, I suppose."

"You did say it was time for me to go," Anne replied. "And in this, I agree with you."

"So now your father will blame me."

He blames me for something far worse, Anne thought but did not say the words. She supposed she should tell Nancy her leaving was not her fault, but Anne could not honestly say so. She swallowed and said rather awkwardly, "I hope you . . . remain in good health."

Picking up her things, Anne went outside. Nancy remained

in the house, but Papa came out to see them off. Tears threatened, but Anne willed them away and said briskly, “Now, you will remember Mr. Cowley needs more horehound for his cough, won’t you? And Miss Bates her feverfew tablets?”

“I will remember.”

He kissed her cheek, and Fanny’s as well. Then, a few moments later, Anne and her sister were on their way back to Painswick after an absence of nearly three years. Painswick, the place of ninety-nine yew trees and many more memories. A place where loved ones had once lived . . . and a few friends, and one foe, still resided.

Inside the small vehicle, the sisters occupied the single bench, while Fanny’s young maid sat on the pull-down seat at one side. She soon fell asleep, her chin bobbing against her chest as she dozed.

Anne glanced at her watch pin, then asked her sister, “I suppose Mr. Norton was . . . busy today?”

“Oh, no more than usual. He offered to come along, but I preferred to bring Betsy.” Fanny nodded toward the slumbering maid. “She is quiet and will better serve as companion for the return journey.”

At the dismissive words, Anne felt a stab of pity for her sister’s well-meaning husband.

About an hour later, the carriage topped a rise and rounded a bend, and the tall tower and spire of St. Mary’s came into view through the side window. Anne glanced at her sister next to her, concern for her making Anne uneasy. Fanny stared straight ahead, not reacting, her view obstructed by the flapping coattails of the coachman on the box. Anne guessed she was seeing more scenes from the past than present scenery anyway.

“We shall be there in a few minutes,” Anne said softly, gentle warning in her tone.

“Hm?” Fanny stirred from her reverie. “Oh. Yes.”

“It was kind of you to bring me,” Anne said. “I hope this will not prove difficult for you. Being here. The memories.”

For Anne, memories of Painswick were primarily pleasant. Their mother had been born there. And Mamma’s parents had continued to live in the thriving wool town long after she and Papa had married and moved away. Together Anne and Fanny had spent many happy summers visiting their maternal grandparents before their deaths a few years before. So Anne was grateful for a chance to return. Then again, she had not had her heart broken there, her plans to marry the man she loved destroyed.

Fanny’s expression remained distant. Dreamy. “Painswick might have been my home, even now. If only it were. If only his aunt had not interfered. I might be happy instead of trapped in a loveless marriage.”

“Fanny, Mr. Norton loves you. That’s easy to see.”

“Then that makes one of us.”

When Fanny had broken her heart over a man who’d promised to marry her, their stepmother had urged her to recover her spirits by marrying a lonely clergyman she knew—a rector with an excellent income and a fine home. Her sister did so yet seemed unable or unwilling to forget her first love. Anne felt sorry for her sister but also frustrated with her for making no real effort to learn to appreciate the man she had married. A man she resented for not being Jude Dalby.

After Fanny had wed, their stepmother turned her efforts on Anne, trying to marry her off as well. She also insisted Anne begin acting like a young lady and cease assisting her father in his surgery and the apothecary shop. Her father did not contradict her.

How the rejection had stung.

Fanny suddenly gripped her hand. “Do you think we will see him?”

The frenzied light in Fanny’s eyes unsettled Anne anew.

Taking a deep breath, she replied evenly, "I would not think so. Even if we do, remember he is married now, as you are."

"I know that. You need not remind me. You must promise that if you meet with him while you are here, you will not flirt with him. I remember you liked him first."

"I did not!" Anne protested. She could not deny she'd thought him handsome, but she'd liked his cousin Jasper far better.

"Besides, I am hardly likely to flirt with a married man. Especially one who promised to marry you and then changed his mind."

Fanny shook her head. "His aunt forebade the match. It was her fault, not his. You are wrong to judge him harshly."

All the old arguments gathered in Anne's mind. *He was a grown man. If he had really wanted to marry you he could have, inheritance or no.* But Anne bit her tongue. There was no point in rehashing that now. It was all in the past. If only Fanny could see that too, resign herself to reality, and commit herself to the husband she had.

They reached the outskirts of town and then rattled along New Street, passing the half-timbered post office, familiar shops, houses of honey-colored stone, and the Falcon Inn, before halting in front of Yew Cottage. The two-story home stood across the street from the magnificent parish church set in its large, park-like churchyard.

"You will come in and greet Miss Newland?" Anne asked. "She invited us both to take tea with her."

Her sister did not move.

"Fanny?"

Her sister stared out the window at the many yew trees in the churchyard. Tears pooled in her eyes. "Actually, I won't. I thought I wanted to see Painswick again, but now we're here . . . no. I don't even want to set foot on its cobbles." She sniffed and raised her chin. "Please pass along my greetings

to Miss Newland and instruct John to take us on to Stroud. We'll rest the horses and have dinner there before heading back."

"Very well. If you are certain . . . ?"

"I am."

Anne descended alone, reticule and medicine case in hand. The coachman carried her travel trunk and valise to the front door of Yew Cottage and then climbed back on the box. A moment later the carriage was once again in motion, continuing on its way. Anne raised her hand in farewell, but Fanny's face remained averted, staring straight ahead.

Anne lifted the knocker, and a few moments later a young maid she didn't know opened the door and led her into the parlour.

As soon as Anne entered, her gaze fastened on the sight of dear Charlotte Newland with her faded auburn hair parted at the center, slender nose, and kind, fawn-like eyes.

Charlotte rose awkwardly on a bandaged ankle and enfolded her in a tender rosewater-scented embrace.

"Welcome back to Painswick, Anne. How I've missed you."

"And I you, Miss Lotty. Now, do please sit down and tell me what has happened to you."

"It's only a sprain." Releasing her, the woman gestured to the other occupant of the small parlour, a somewhat older woman with curly ash-grey hair and spectacles. "You may remember my neighbor, Miss Ursula Birt?"

"Of course I do. How good to see you again, Miss Birt."

"Miss Loveday."

"Call me Anne, please. And thank you so much, Miss Lotty, for inviting me to stay."

"My pleasure, my dear. I trust your father could spare you?"

"Yes, rather readily it seems." Realization struck. "Ah!

You were referring to yourself when you wrote, ‘Someone in Painswick could use your help.’”

“Well, actually . . .” Lotty exchanged a covert glance with Miss Birt. “My needs are small compared to others’.”

“You should have let me know you’d injured yourself,” Anne went on. “I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

“I was afraid you would postpone if I told you. Or insist on fussing over me. This is only a trifle, and I shall be back to full speed in no time. For the present, however, the accommodations here may not be all one might wish. Dinah is a good girl but inexperienced. I haven’t braved the stairs to see what condition the guest room is in.”

“Never mind that. I shall be happy to lend a hand while I’m here. Much pleasanter than chasing toddlers and changing soiled baby cloths all day.”

Miss Birt gave a theatrical shudder. “Horrors.”

“I am fond of my half siblings,” Anne clarified. “Just not the role of nursery maid.”

“There are three children now, is that right?” Lotty asked.

“Four, and a fifth is on the way.”

“Good heavens! And your mother has been gone, what, less than eight years?”

Anne nodded.

Worry creased Lotty’s brow. “Forgive me. Perhaps I should not have mentioned her.”

“That’s all right. She is never far from my thoughts. I think of her every day.”

“I am sure you do, my dear. I miss her too. Still, I’m surprised you’ve had time to act as nursery maid. I thought you helped in your father’s surgery and apothecary shop, and with his female patients and such?”

“I used to . . . and took great satisfaction in doing so. But Nancy disapproved. Said it was part of the reason I had yet to marry.”

“Your stepmother forbade you? And your father went along with it?”

“Well . . . yes.” Pain pricked Anne anew.

“Evil stepmother, indeed,” Ursula Birt muttered.

“No, not evil. She just doesn’t understand me, even after all these years. All she wants is to contrive a suitable match for me. For that is her definition of happiness.”

“Like she did for Fanny?” Lotty asked.

“Yes.”

“How is your sister?”

Fanny’s pinched, teary face appeared in Anne’s mind, and she heard again her sister’s bitter tone. With a glance at Miss Birt, Anne mustered a smile. “She’s fine. She asked me to pass along her greetings.”

It was one thing to share her own personal woes, but quite another to spread her sister’s. Fanny sometimes chastised Anne for being indiscreet as it was.

Perhaps noticing something amiss in Anne’s expression, Miss Lotty changed the subject. “Well, let’s get you settled.” She rang a small bell on the side table.

The maid of all work hurried in again and bobbed a curtsy.

“Dinah, if you could please show Miss Loveday to the guest room.”

“Yes, miss.”

“You remembered to take up fresh water and towels?”

“I did, miss.”

“Good.” Lotty turned back to Anne. “I would take you myself, but the doctor insists I avoid stairs for the time being.”

“I agree.” Anne picked up her case and valise, while Dinah hoisted her small trunk. “Thank you again for having me.”

After a simple meal, Anne excused herself to take a stroll, eager to stretch her legs and see Painswick again.

She crossed the street to St. Mary's and started up one of the churchyard paths. She stopped to pluck and smell a stalk of lily of the valley and then paused under the wedding tree to recall again that last happy family picnic.

Next, she visited her grandparents' grave. The two had died within a fortnight of each other. Their names and birth and death dates were carved there, as well as an epitaph they had chosen themselves:

Farewell vain world, I've seen enough of thee,
In grief and pain, sickness and misery.
Thy smiles I value not, nor frowns do fear,
Thanks be to God, I sleep at quiet here.
What fault you've seen in me, still strive to shun,
And look at home, there's something to be done.

The verse was not unique to them, yet it summed them up so well: their faith, their stoic suffering, their humility, and a belief in hard work and responsibility.

Thomas and Sarah Spring had been instrumental in shaping Anne's character, as had her parents, of course, and she would always be grateful and always love them.

She tenderly ran a finger over the carved letters of their names and whispered, "I miss you." She trusted that her mother and grandparents were in heaven and certainly hoped to see them again one day.

Anne then continued on, of old habit, to the favorite hiding place of her youth—an ancient chest tomb, its epitaph worn illegible, half covered by a low-hanging yew tree. She ducked beneath its lowest boughs and rose within the shelter of scratchy branches above the chest-shaped tomb. Oh, the many times she had hidden there during long-ago games of hide-and-seek with Fanny, Jasper Paine, and other local youths. It had been her special place. Hiding there as a child,

she imagined she'd shrunk to the size of a tiny fairy concealed under a mushroom cap.

Emerging again a few moments later, Anne brushed yew needles and spring pollen from her sleeve.

She felt someone watching her and glanced around.

No one. Slowly scanning the area, she lifted her gaze, and there, over the high stone wall, loomed adjacent Painswick Court, its stone slate roof and tall chimney stacks rising like an angry hand toward the heavens. Was someone watching her from one of its upper-story windows? Or was the nearness of the old house itself, rumored to be haunted, the cause of her unease? She shivered, her skin prickling with gooseflesh.

Anne quickly walked on, out of the churchyard to St. Mary's Street, past the market and then down Vicarage Street, passing humble cottages until she reached the Friends meetinghouse. Here she turned right down a narrow track she had enjoyed walking along as a girl.

One side of the path was bordered by a dense thicket of scrubby trees and brush, and the other looked onto a broad valley dotted with wool-drying racks and lofty Beacon Hill beyond.

There she paused to relish the view of the lovely vale draped in twilight.

From the other side of the thicket came the hum of voices in low conversation. Whoever it was probably thought themselves shielded from hearing as well as from sight.

A man said, "You should not have come here."

A woman's voice murmured a reply Anne could not hear.

"And you should definitely not stay at Painswick Court."

Anne turned, attention caught by the name.

"Why not?"

"Shh. Keep your voice down. And you know the answer to that."

“That’s why *you’ve* come, is it not?”

“No!” the man insisted. “Nothing good can come of this scheme of yours. Let it lie, I beg of you.”

“How can I? Besides, it’s too late. I . . .”

Anne could not make out the rest of her sentence, but whatever she said caused the man to groan an epithet under his breath.

Silence followed, and thinking they’d moved on, Anne took a step forward. *Snap!* A branch cracked beneath her half boots. Stopping in her tracks, she looked up and found herself peering through a small gap in the foliage. A man’s face looked in her direction, clearly startled. Through the narrow tunnel their gazes caught. With her back to the gap, his shorter companion remained out of sight. Anne glimpsed the top of a straw bonnet and no more.

A second later, the man turned, apparently leading the woman away. “Come. We shouldn’t discuss this out in the open.”

Anne remained where she was, oddly fearful the man might find a larger opening in the thicket and emerge to confront her. But their footsteps faded.

Heart pounding, Anne turned and retraced her steps, hurrying to leave this deserted track for the busier streets of town and the safety of Yew Cottage.