

• 1 •

# The Trial

I've confessed to everything and I'd like to be hanged.

Now, if you please.

I don't mean to be difficult, but I can't bear to tell my story. I can't relive those memories—the touch of the Dead Hand, the smell of eel, the gulp and swallow of the swamp.

How can you possibly think me innocent? Don't let my face fool you; it tells the worst lies. A girl can have the face of an angel but have a horrid sort of heart.

I know you believe you're giving me a chance—or, rather, it's the Chime Child giving me the chance. She's desperate, of course, not to hang an innocent girl again, but please believe me: Nothing in my story will absolve me of guilt. It will only prove what I've already told you, which is that I'm wicked.

Can't the Chime Child take my word for it?

In any event, where does she expect me to begin? The story of a wicked girl has no true beginning. I'd have to begin with the day I was born.

If Eldric were to tell the story, he'd likely begin with him-

self, on the day he arrived in the Swampsea. That's where proper stories begin, don't they, when the handsome stranger arrives and everything goes wrong?

But this isn't a proper story, and I'm telling you, I ought to be hanged.

• 2 •

# The Taste of Burnt Matches

“I want to go home.” My sister turned from the river and closed her eyes, as though she could wish away the river, and the barge on the river, and Eldric on the barge. But life doesn’t work that way, more’s the pity.

“We can’t leave now,” said Father. “It would hurt Eldric’s feelings, don’t you see?”

But Rose didn’t see. She never saw, not about feelings. “I want to go home.”

Villagers thronged the riverside, but they gave us plenty of room. I’d forgotten that, forgotten how they left a cushion of air around the clergyman and his porcelain daughters. We’d always be outsiders, even though Father’s spent twenty years in the Swampsea, and Rose and I have spent seventeen. We’ve never been anywhere else.

“One hundred and eighty-three steps until home,” said Rose.

The villagers never used to stare, though. If I were an ordinary girl, I might stare too. People like to stare at girls who've been ill, at girls whom they've hardly seen for three years, at girls whose stepmother has killed herself.

"Look!" said Father. "The barge is almost here."

But the villagers are wrong about Stepmother, and so is Father. She would never kill herself. I'm the one who knew her best, and I know this: Stepmother was hungry for life.

"One hundred and eighty-three steps until home." Rose was exactly right. I know; I've measured. The Parsonage sat exactly one hundred eighty-three steps behind us, its back to the river, its front to the village square.

"And," said Father, "just think how happy Eldric's father will be to see his son."

"That I will," said Mr. Clayborne, who was waiting with us in our cushion of air. He was more at home with the villagers than we were, even though he'd arrived from London only six months back. Perhaps it was because he was such a big, comfortable sort of man, while we Larkins are rarely comfortable, especially with ourselves.

"I don't like boys," said Rose.

Neither did I, but I knew enough not to say so.

"Rose!" said Father, but Mr. Clayborne was used to Rose.

"Eldric and I have never been apart this long," said Mr. Clayborne. "Almost six months."

*Almost six months.* Stepmother died two months and three days ago. I must never let myself grow used to Stepmother's death. I must never smooth out time the way Mr. Clayborne had. I'd never say she'd been dead *almost six months*.

I remembered the day she died with absolute clarity. I

remembered standing outside her sickroom door, wondering if I should enter. Why did I hesitate? I was afraid of awakening her, I suppose, which I'd call ironic if I were a poet, but I'm not, and anyway, I hate poetry. A poem doesn't come out and tell you what it has to say. It circles back on itself, eating its own tail and making you guess what it means.

Stop, Briony! Stepmother would tell you to stop. Stop dreaming about her, she'd say, and attend to Rose, who'd just gone into a fit of coughing. *Take care of Rose*. That's what Stepmother always said. I'd promised. I'd promised Stepmother I'd take care of Rose.

"Rose has such a cough, Father," I said. "Oughtn't she to be out of the wind?"

"Another few minutes won't hurt," said Father in his sermon voice, which is his favorite voice, the one he starches and irons every morning.

Have you become a doctor, Father? How do you know it won't hurt? Or did you hear it from God? You don't talk to anyone else.

The wind smacked at everything. It smacked the river into froth. It smacked the willow branches into whips. It smacked the villagers into streamers of hair and shawls and shirrtails. The wind didn't smack us up, though, not the Larkin family. We were buttoned and braided and buckled and still.

But not all the buttons and buckles in the world can protect a Larkin from the swamp cough. When Rose started coughing last week, I actually talked to Father. I asked him whether she might have the swamp cough. Father said what he always says, which is nothing.

That's right, Father. Let Rose cough herself to death. Why

waste money on the doctor? There is, after all, no cure for the swamp cough.

The Shire horses came to a stop, steam puffing from their great pink nostrils. The barge had arrived. I looked for Mr. Clayborne's son among the passengers. I hoped he wouldn't be one of those grubby stone-throwing boys. But they all are, aren't they? I base my knowledge of boys on Tiddy Rex, nine years old, with the requisite grubby hands, but not altogether a bad sort.

At least I needn't talk to Eldric. I believe boys are not much for conversation. If Eldric bothered me, I'd mention Mucky Face. He's the resident river spirit and just loves boys. But to eat, Eldric dear. To eat.

"There he is!" said Mr. Clayborne. "See, on the left—tall, fairish hair?"

"What a good-looking boy!" said Father.

But I didn't see any version of Tiddy Rex, grubby hands or no.

"There!" Mr. Clayborne pointed. "Coming down the gangway. Surely you see him now? Light hair, well built."

"Oh," I said. I hadn't known he'd be so big. He was an enormous child. An enormous giant of a child, all six or seven feet of him.

"There's my bad boy," said Mr. Clayborne, waving Eldric over. He made it sound as though it were quite a good thing to be a bad boy.

Nor had I known he'd be so old. He was a university boy. I recognized the clothes from magazine pictures—the slim trousers, the checkerboard vest, the suggestion of a tie. I understood now why Mr. Clayborne wanted his bad boy to

lodge at the Parsonage, with the clergyman and his daughters. I understood why he didn't want his bad boy to lodge with him at the Alehouse. Bad boys and alehouses are an explosive kind of mix.

"What do you think, Briony?" said Father. "Will the girls of the Swampsea be glad of a new and handsome face?"

I hate it when Father puts on a show, pretending we're the kind of family that chats and gossips and laughs. People always say one thing and mean something else beneath. I'm the worst of all, but at least I don't lie to myself about it.

Anyway, I have no idea what other girls feel, regular girls. I am not a regular girl.

I squeezed a peek at Eldric as he and Mr. Clayborne shook hands. Father was wrong, of course. Eldric wasn't handsome, not in a Greek statue kind of way, not like Cecil Trumpington, who wants to marry me. Well, Cecil actually wants to marry the idea of me. He wants a girl with ivory skin and corn-silk hair; he wants a girl with the face of an angel.

But not even Cecil has such gorgeous, slouchy clothes as Eldric. Everything about Eldric screamed of the things I'd never have, of London and theater and turn-on lamps and motorcars—

"I don't care to shake that boy's hand," said Rose.

And piped-in water—

Mr. Clayborne held Eldric at arm's length and smiled at him.

And piped-out lavatories—

Mr. Clayborne pulled Eldric back and kissed his cheek.

Kissing? Men kissing! We don't go in for that sort of thing in the Swampsea.

But we were country mice. Perhaps the history books will

report that, as the new century entered its second decade, men in London took to wearing mink coats, which led naturally to—

The constable stuck his great brass badge into our air cushion. The rest of the constable followed, which was a pity. The air cushion was filling up—now the Swamp Reeve, now Mayor Brody and his greyhounds, now Judge Trumpington and his wife.

Ah yes, the beautiful Mrs. Trumpington, and the beautiful Mrs. Trumpington's beautiful frock. Mrs. Trumpington, looking just like a May flower—although it was hardly April—a May flower in peach batiste with a lace underskirt and too much embroidery to mention, so I won't. Rose and I wore identical frocks, not to Mrs. Trumpington but to each other. We'd had them for ages and they made us look about twelve rather than seventeen. But Rose likes looking twelve: She also wore a pinafore and a pink hair ribbon. She wears them every day.

"I don't care to shake hands with that boy," said Rose. She has only one way of speaking, and it is loud.

Oh, Rose! Now Eldric would look at us and pity our shattered, fragile family and our shabby, childish clothes; and I'd be obliged to hate myself, and to hate him too, although I've had a lot of practice and it's not terribly burdensome. Hating, I mean.

I hate myself.

Eldric had certainly noticed us now, his eyes first on Rose, now swiveling to me, now back to Rose; assuring himself, as everyone did, that we were that interesting freak of nature, the identical twin. What did he think as he looked at our an-

gel faces? What would he think if he knew what lay beneath the face of the angel named Briony?

“I don’t care to shake hands with that boy.”

Father gave up; I saw it in his shoulders. You can never win with Rose. He must have forgotten that while he was talking to God.

“Please allow me to introduce my daughter Rosy.”

Rosy? Honestly, Father, there you go again, putting on your pretty mask, playing at the game of Perfect Family. We are not the sort of people who go in for pet names.

“How do you do?” Eldric smiled. He had golden lion’s eyes and a great mane of tawny hair.

“I knew it,” said Rose. “I knew it.”

“Knew what?” said Father.

“I’m not rosy,” she said, which is true. The two of us are alabaster girls, lovely to look at, or so we hear.

How could I bear it, Eldric living with us, this non-child, this boy-man? I’d have to keep on my Briony mask. I’d have to keep my lips greased and smiling. I’d have to keep my tongue sharp and amusing. Already, I was exhausted.

“And you?” said Eldric. After a heartbeat of silence, I glanced up. Eldric was looking at me, this golden London boy, looking at me with amber eyes. “What am I to call you?”

“You may call me Briony,” I said, “which makes it awfully convenient because so does everyone else.”

After a hiccough of silence, Eldric laughed. Then so did the others, except Rose. And me, of course. I don’t have much laughter left. I’ve looked after Rose for years and years, and she drained me dry long ago. What’s she feeding off now, I wonder. My soul juice?

I'd have to talk to Eldric, wouldn't I? Talk to this foreign boy-man animal. I knew nothing of boy-men and I didn't care to learn. And he wouldn't merely be living with us, but sleeping in Stepmother's sickroom, sleeping in the very bed on which she had died.

And eat with him?

Mealtimes had been so awkward after Stepmother died and Father started spending time at home again. Neither of us with anything to say, and Rose no great conversationalist herself. We hadn't had proper mealtimes while Stepmother was ill. Skipping meals is terrifically convenient: It gives one lots of time to brood and hate oneself.

Anyway, I hate cooking and I hate the kitchen and I hate Rose when she begins gulping air, which she was doing now as a way of limbering up for a fit of screaming. I'd warned Father, reminded him Rose doesn't like strangers, but Father never listens.

I used to be embarrassed when Rose screamed in public, but I was glad now. Once we got it over with, I could take the two of us home, peel off my mask, and let my face fall into its witchy folds.

But first there's the getting it over with. Rose's screams are like knitting needles. They jab right through your ear, into the soft squish beneath. She'd start any second. At least Rose doesn't hide what she feels. At least she's not silent, like Father.

There are several kinds of silence. There's the silence of being alone, which I like well enough. Then there's the silence of one's father. The silence when you have nothing to say and he has nothing to say. The silence between you after the investigation of your stepmother's death.

We've never spoken of the inquest, at which the coroner testified that Stepmother had died of arsenic poisoning. Of the inquest, at which Father testified that Stepmother might have taken her own life. Of the inquest, at which I testified that Stepmother would never have taken her life.

Not ever.

The air shattered; Rose's scream had begun. The others jumped, then looked about, wondering if they should pretend not to notice. But I was still thinking about silence.

Father's silence is not merely the absence of sound. It's a creature with a life of its own. It chokes you. It pinches you small as a grain of rice. It twists in your gut like a worm.

Silence clawed at my throat. It left a taste of burnt matches.

No, our family doesn't talk much.

• 3 •

## A Crown for the Steam Age

“I don’t prefer to talk about it,” said Rose from behind the cupboard door.

“She mislike all them new gentlemen, Rose do,” said Pearl Whitby, except she was Pearl Miller now and I always forgot. She was Pearl Miller and she was married and she had an extremely ugly baby.

Pearl was right. She used to help out before Father remarried, and she knew that Rose didn’t like strangers, especially not in the house. Eldric was bad enough, but Father had invited a third gentleman whom Rose had never even seen. I’d never have believed Father could do something so stupid, and I have a great deal of faith in Father’s stupidity.

Didn’t he remember that Rose hated surprises? That she’d especially hate a surprise guest, and a man, at that. She and I are not used to men.

“Happen Rose’d fancy a sweet?” said Pearl, flushed from

fighting the stove, which was possessed of a mercurial temperament.

I pressed my forehead into the kitchen window. "I know something that will be interesting to a certain girl named Rose."

I blew her name onto the window; breath-roses bloomed on the glass. "We're to have iced buns for tea."

There was only one reason I wanted to coax Rose from the cupboard: I could never leave off caring for Rose; which meant if she stayed in the cupboard, I had to stay in the Parsonage; which meant I couldn't call upon poor Tiddy Rex, who'd been stricken with the swamp cough; which meant I couldn't take note of Tiddy Rex's symptoms and compare them to Rose's; which actually wouldn't do me any good anyway, because if she did have the swamp cough, there was nothing I could do about it; but at least Stepmother couldn't say I wasn't doing anything, which she couldn't in any event because she's dead.

Except that maybe the symptoms wouldn't match up. Then, at least, I could stop fretting about Rose and the swamp cough and fret about something else.

The kitchen door groaned. It was arthritic and cranky from the flood, and it took advantage of every opportunity to complain. Red and yellow checks swam into the window glass, and I knew without turning that it was Eldric who'd entered. There was no mistaking that university waistcoat.

"I like iced buns," said Rose, her voice deadened by the cupboard—not that her real voice has ever been what you might call lively.

"A talking cupboard!" said Eldric. "I've always wanted to see a talking cupboard."

Rose would never come out of the cupboard now, not with Eldric in the kitchen. I was trapped in the Parsonage. I turned away from the reflected waistcoat to a flesh-and-blood Eldric, who quite filled up the doorway.

"I have a message for you." Eldric nodded at me. "Your father asks if you might step into the dining room."

"Who will care for the talking cupboard?" I said.

"I will," said Pearl. "You goes along, miss."

"You'll watch her like a hawk?" I said. "A hawk that can see through cupboard doors?"

Pearl laughed and said she would. Anyway, the dining room is only twenty feet away. I'd know if Rose needed me. Rose is not one to keep her feelings to herself.

But still I had to ask. "You're sure?"

"Us'll get along grand, me an' Rose."

"Thank you." But why should I thank Pearl? She was being paid. Anyone could stand a screaming girl if she was paid, but the sister of such a girl is never paid. I'd like to go farther than twenty feet. France would be nice, and I speak tolerable French. Or Greece, although I speak intolerable Greek, and only ancient. But if I couldn't manage to order a glass of wine, I'd order a wine-dark sea; and I like olives; and I believe I might like squid; and I would certainly like anyplace far away from Rose.

The dining room was absolutely littered with men: Father, Mr. Clayborne, Eldric, and the surprise guest, Mr. Drury, who was also Eldric's tutor. Men—their great boots clogging up the floor, their greedy lungs sucking up the air, their stubbly faces filling up the looking glass.

Men, I don't like them a bit. I'm not an ordinary girl, pin-

ing after romance and a husband. May the Horrors take me if ever I grow ordinary, like Pearl!

I know what Pearl had to do to get herself that baby with Artie Miller. I know, and I don't think much of it. Father would be astonished at what I know.

I leaned against the red damask wallpaper, which had once been so beautiful. But it was blistered and peeling now; like the kitchen door, it had never recovered from the flood.

Mr. Clayborne looked at Eldric; Eldric nodded. It was as though the Claybornes shared a silent language, which was utterly unlike the way we Larkins shared silence, which was not at all. We don't share anything.

I supposed that Mr. Clayborne's look meant, *Go talk to the clergyman's daughter*; and Eldric's nod meant, *Well, if you insist*, for he strode right over. What sort of excuse would he give for seeking me out? What sort of mask did Eldric wear?

"We didn't have a chance to become properly acquainted this morning," he said.

"My sister has a knack for making scenes in public."

Eldric nodded. "My father's mentioned Rose in his letters but speaks rather more frequently of you. He thinks you're quite the model daughter. He mentions you whenever he gets to wishing he had a model son."

Adults tend to view me as being mature beyond my years. I think it has partly to do with being a clergyman's daughter, partly to do with looking after Rose, and partly to do with being rather clever. But I can't take any credit; I'm stuck with all of it.

"A father tends to be disappointed," said Eldric, "when his son has achieved the great age of twenty-two and failed to graduate from university."

“You’re to continue your studies here, with Mr. Drury?”

Eldric bent toward me, his whisper-breath warm in my ear. “It’s *Mr. Dreary*, actually. Don’t tell him, but I’ve given him a name that suits him better. Yes, Father insists I finish my studies.”

I should love to finish my studies. I was to have gone to school in London after Father dismissed my own tutor, but in the end, I was obliged to stay in the Swampsea to care for Stepmother. Rose and Stepmother. And the worst of it is that I have only myself to blame.

“Am I to study with you?”

“Absolutely not!” said Eldric. “I can’t have you showing me up in every subject.”

Of course he couldn’t. Girls weren’t supposed to be cleverer than boys. It’s quite a good thing I don’t suffer from normal-people feelings, such as disappointment.

I felt rather than saw Eldric’s gaze. “I didn’t mean it, you know. Yes, you are to study with me, and outshine me in every subject.” Eldric smiled, a long, curling lion’s smile. “Every subject but one.”

“What subject is that?”

“Boxing!” said Eldric.

Boxing? I should love to learn to box! Not only are girls supposed to be less clever, but content to sit by the fire and spin. Father believed this, of course, but Stepmother knew the truth. She knew that learning to run a household was a waste of a girl’s time.

“This will come as a surprise to you, I know, but I have never studied boxing. I wish I’d thought to want boxing lessons. If I had, my stepmother would have seen to it, I assure

you. She thought girls should study whatever they liked.”

Stepmother encouraged me in everything I loved. I used to tramp about the swamp, and I wrote lots of stupid stories. She encouraged my writing, in particular, which was kind, for now I realize that my stories were simply awful. What a relief they burnt to cinders and no one will ever read them.

“I’m so sorry about your stepmother,” said Eldric, which is something I’ve heard often these past two months and three days, but I still haven’t gotten used to it. I understand it’s not an apology, of course, but still, it sounds strange. I’m the one who should apologize. I don’t exactly blame myself for Stepmother’s death. I didn’t feed her arsenic, and it was arsenic that killed her. But I did cause her to injure her spine. She might have died from that if the arsenic hadn’t gotten to her first.

We fell silent. Eldric took to fidgeting with some fidgety-boy thing. I knew what he was thinking. In his position, I’m sure I’d be wanting to know all about Stepmother: It’s so wonderfully interesting when a person kills herself. But she didn’t, Eldric. She wouldn’t!

The gentlemen had gotten on to talking about Mr. Clayborne’s official business, which was to drain the water from the swamp. This was going to improve life in the Swampsea, at least according to Queen Anne. Less water meant more land. More land meant more crops, and more grazing for sheep and cattle. More land also meant no swamp and no swamp cough.

“Might we creep away?” said Eldric. “When Father starts talking of draining the swamp, he starts thinking he ought to put me to work, but that would be a disaster. I’d turn my shovel

wrong way up, and set the water to running upside-down.”

You’d think I’d despise this great shiftless lad. Here I was, caring constantly for Rose and complaining only to myself, which is not at all satisfactory; and there he was, doing nothing and boasting of it all the while. But I liked him. That is, I liked him as much as I liked anybody.

“I’ll show you about the house,” I said. “That will please Father.”

It did, too. Father was delighted that his daughter was acting like a regular girl, playing hostess and chatting to a young man.

We set off down the corridor. The flood had been two years ago, but the cracked-plaster walls still smelled of dead water and mournful fish. The front parlor was rimmed round with windows, and in the light, I saw Eldric fidgeting with the most fascinating bits of curled wire.

“Are those paper clips?” I’d seen them in catalogs, but the pictures don’t do them justice. They’re beautiful, in an industrial sort of way.

Eldric poured a clinking waterfall into my palm. “Aren’t they lovely! I can’t keep my hands off them. But I give you fair warning: It was a box of paper clips that got me expelled.”

“Expelled?”

“A box of a thousand paper clips,” he said, his long fingers curling, coiling, twisting. “And a sack of colored glass.”

“Expelled!” I might be a wicked girl who’d think nothing of eating a baby for breakfast, but I’d never allow myself to get expelled. It’s far too public.

“Quite definitely expelled,” said Eldric. “The dean left me in no doubt. But really, was it my fault? When the fellow

down the hall bet me a thousand paper clips I couldn't chuck a certain stone far enough to reach a certain chapel?"

"You took the bet?"

"I ask you—for a thousand paper clips! Had I any choice?"

I acknowledged that he had not. "And the chapel?"

"Let's just say I have quite a good arm. Let's just say the stone reached the chapel with room to spare. Let's just say it reached the chapel with the kind of room that took it right through the stained glass."

Eldric laughed at himself, and I found myself laughing too. It had been ages since I'd heard my own laugh. It was rusty, but serviceable.

"Father will not find that an amusing anecdote."

"But you do," said Eldric, "which is far more important. When you're a bad boy, you find that people either laugh at you or with you. I prefer the *with*."

"You'll have some competition. Cecil Trumpington fancies himself the local bad boy."

"A rival?" said Eldric. "Shan't we have fun!"

I opened the door of Father's study, which is just a little less tidy than you'd expect. And he doesn't realize that his armchair smells of tobacco. *Do as I say, not as I do*.

At the end of the corridor lay the charred remains of the library.

"A flood and a fire!" Eldric looked at the blackened floor, at the boarded-up windows, at the great black cavern that had once contained bookshelves. It still whiffed of smoke. "You've had more than your share of misfortune."

I nodded, but it actually had nothing to do with misfortune and everything to do with me. Six months ago, the

library shelves held all my stories. Then I set the fire and cremated them all.

And I have the scar to prove it.

But I don't mind, really. I don't read much anymore.

"Father would want me to point out the church, which lies just to the other side of the library." The church and the library shared the wall, conjoined like Siamese twins. "But you probably don't care about the church, being a bad boy, that is."

"Don't tell your father," said Eldric.

"I probably have an obligation to point out all the local hazards. When they say *safe as houses*, they weren't thinking of ours." I led Eldric through the foyer and flung open the front door. "You'll notice the porch has fallen right off."

"Good Lord!" Eldric's eyes were very bright. It was because of the whites of his eyes—yes, that was it. They were whiter than anyone else's.

I explained we lost the porch to the flood. "Father hasn't gotten around to rebuilding it, although he's quite a good carpenter. He says if Jesus was a carpenter, it's good enough for a clergyman. But I don't remember that Jesus let his house fall down."

Beyond the ghost of the porch lay Hangman's Square, its cobblestones strewn with the lengths of steel that were growing into the railroad line between London and our village of Swanton, which meant that Swanton was living beautifully up to its reputation as the end of the line.

Eldric stared at me with those bright eyes. What a contrast we must have made: my eyes, blacker than black; his eyes, whiter than white, plus an interesting little scar that dipped into his eyebrow.