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The
SECRET
BOOK

of

FLORALEA

❧ A NOVEL ❧

PATTI CALLAHAN
HENRY



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THE
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A Novel

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ATRIA BOOKS

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

*To the fierce and wise women of Friends and Fiction,
Mary Kay Andrews, Kristin Harmel,
Kristy Woodson Harvey, and Meg Walker*

Said the river: imagine everything you can imagine, then keep on going...

MARY OLIVER

CHAPTER 1

Not very long ago and not very far away, there once was and still is an invisible place right here with us. And if you are born knowing, you will find your way through the woodlands to the shimmering doors that lead to the land made just and exactly for you.

HAZEL MERSEY LINDEN, 1939

October 1940 Binsey, Oxfordshire

On a red blanket by the river, six-year-old Flora Lea Linden awakens alone, a dome of blue sky above her and birdsong wild about her. *Someone called my name?* She glances around the green expanse, at the churning water of the River Thames furrowed with winks and puckers as it nearly overflows its banks, taking to the sea anything or anyone who dares to enter its rush.

The river surges toward Oxford where students hurry to and from tutors under pinnacled towers standing guard over cobblestone streets. Then the waters bend and curve, gathering force, bouncing against the stone walls and locks of England until they reach London, where bombs are plummeting to city streets, delivering ruination, where smoldering cathedrals and crushed homes litter the river with their ember and ash.

Did someone call my name? Flora sits and rubs her eyes. She's not exactly alone. She has Berry, her stuffed teddy. And she isn't frightened. Why should she be? Her older sister, Hazel, told her many times that these woodlands belong to them, that the shadowed glade and the sacred sunlit puddles where the canopy of trees opens wide is a safe place meant for the two sisters, created just for them.

She stands and carefully steps closer to the river. Hazel refuses to go with Flora to Whisperwood anymore, so what's she to do but go alone? It's hers!—not to be abandoned: the glowing castle and the grove of alder, the chattering squirrels and animated trees.

Hazel had told Flora that the glinting lights on the river were stars and galaxies, rushing to meet the sea. Hazel had ordered her not to ever *become* the river, as they became other woodland creatures, nor should Flora ever drink from the river. If she did, she was told, she would never find her way back to Mum or Bridie or their warm cottage in the heather-strewn fields.

This enchanting river was—like the apple in the Bible—forbidden.

But Flora doesn't believe this beautiful, starry river can be dangerous. She clings to Berry by his worn, furry paw and ventures nearer to the water's rush, thrilled at her boldness. No one knows what might happen to her on this adventure or who she might become.

She hears a voice nearby in the woods, familiar, but Flora ignores it.

The way here was through a shimmering door, and Hazel was too busy to see it. The river is Flora's companion, her friend, and this intimacy has her creeping ever closer to its edge.

Hazel never wants them to pretend to be bunnies, so that's what she's decided today. Flora will be a bunny.

She stares down at the river's churned-up waters, looking for stars but seeing only mud and silt, humps of river-smoothed rocks underwater. She skids down on a soggy, earthy incline, her wellies slipping where the browned grasses of October change to mud. Falling on her bum, Flora laughs.

What an adventure!

Berry slips from her hand as her palms and fingers dig into the wet earth to keep herself from tumbling into the frigid waters. She scoots closer, wanting to grab Berry. He's too close to the river.

"It's okay," she says as she reaches for his paw, repeating her sister's words: "It's our land. We're always safe in Whisperwood."

CHAPTER 2

March 1960

Until Hazel Linden untied the frayed red velvet ribbon on the parchment-bound portfolio, her last day at Hogan's Rare Book Shoppe in Bloomsbury was as ordinary as any workday spent organizing, sorting, and protecting the store's remarkable inventory—that's of course if you called working among the most rare and collectible books and literary memorabilia in England ordinary.

Hazel noticed every detail of her final workday at the shop with a bit of melancholy, and a note of the dramatic. This would be the last time she'd shelve *The Hobbit* with its snow-capped mountain cover.

The last time she'd enjoy watching a crisp March day punctuated by bursts of quick bright rain from inside the warm, dim-lit shop with its display of leather-bound volumes behind tall, wavy windows that overlooked Charing Cross Road.

The store glistened with dark green walls that could almost appear black and brass sconces with their arms bent over the shelves. Photos of famous authors in black lacquer frames hung on the wall behind the register. A mother and daughter, Jane-ites Hazel called them, both in bright red rain slickers, were currently swooning over an edition of *Pride and Prejudice* they could never afford. The aroma of pulp and dust and history mixed with the sweet scent of the lilacs, ones she'd clipped from her backyard hedgerow and arranged in a vase on the checkout counter. She took it all in from behind the ancient cash register wearing a new Mary Quant knockoff she'd bought at the street fair in Notting Hill, her shoulder-brushing tawny hair now with newly fringed bangs not quite looking like the photo she'd taken to the salon. A slight drummy feeling pounded behind her eyes. She shouldn't have had the final whiskey last night. (It

was always that final whiskey that did her in.) But it was worth the morning's dull fuzziness for the fun she'd had at the pub with fellow booksellers Tim and Poppy. They'd morbidly called it Hazel's "going-away wake."

"To us, you're dead," Poppy declared with laughter. This was followed by cheers and lifted pints for her employment at Sotheby's. Her new job on the international team of specialists in rare books and manuscripts in English literature was a job they all had wanted but it was Hazel who had been offered it. Her colleagues were awfully good to her about it when she well knew that in their place, she'd be green with envy.

Tim chimed in. "But you must work with that insufferable Lord Arthur Dickson. I have to say a well-placed surname, to be accurate." He faux-shuddered.

Hazel shook her head and lightly hit Tim's shoulder. "A small price to pay to see private collections and be part of the London auctions."

"Seriously, it's not the same as the shop. It's much stuffier and quite snobby," Tim told her. "With us, the glory of the trade is that no two days are the same. I can tell you won't have nearly the jolly fun you have with us."

"I'm sure I won't. But I will come see you all the time. I promise. I'm not moving or leaving the city."

Poppy twirled her pint glass between her palms. "I'd rather be assigned the atlas and maps specialty."

"Don't give up," Hazel said. "Maybe one day you will be."

Poppy shrugged and took a long sip of her pint. "Girls like me don't end up at Sotheby's, even though I knew from the first moment I walked into Hogan's what I'd been designed for."

"That's not true," Hazel said, but what was true was that she had mixed feelings leaving Hogan's for Sotheby's. Taking the dreamed-of job in rare literary collections meant she was forsaking the safety and coziness of the shop. When she'd started there, she'd thought it a quick stop, an after-university job to keep her afloat until... until what? She hadn't known. After the war, no one in England had known what might be next.

Now, on her last day she would leave behind the shop and her wonderful colleagues there: the elderly owner, Edwin Hogan, and his sixty-year-old son,

Tim, who'd been waiting to take over the store for far too long. There was also Poppy, the youngest of them at twenty-five, who'd been working there since she was eighteen years old. As a teen, Poppy had wandered into the store so often, leafing through old copies of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* for hours, that Edwin had finally told her she needed to start working there or get out. It wasn't until later that Hazel discovered Poppy had not been loitering; she'd nowhere else to go. She'd been a war orphan who'd aged out of the London Orphan School near Hampshire, sleeping in parks or on the couches of old pals who might let her stay for a while. She'd been looking for a job, but no one was willing to give her a chance.

Edwin gave her a new life. He taught her what he'd taught all of them: Cultivate a love of fine and rare books in a customer and you didn't just have a sale that day but also a devoted customer for decades. Poppy took it to heart and she now lived in a two-bedroom flat with four other women and dreamed of a future.

Hazel promised all three of them that she'd stop by often. They were, after all, as close as family.

"Hazel!"

Hazel looked up. Edwin, ninety-two years old and somehow looking even older, hobbled from the back room, silver cane clicking his familiar walking rhythm on the parquet floor. "There are a few new arrivals in the back. Please process them and place them in the safe."

No squishy sentimentality for Edwin, not even on her final day. But she knew that beneath that gruff white beard and narrowed pale watery-blue eyes beat a heart soft as a down pillow. She'd seen it in the gentle words he spoke to a patron who needed to sell his prized first edition of Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in the manner in which he'd saved Poppy from the streets, in the flash of tears when his great-grandchildren burst into the store, even as he sternly told them, "Do not touch a bloody thing with your sticky fingers."

"I'll get right to it, sir."

This was her favorite part of the job, unwrapping and cataloging what had arrived through the back door. She would check each volume against the Book Auction Reference catalog bound in red cloth, and then with each pull of a

string or tearing of the packing tape she'd reveal a new treasure. And although this would be the last shipment she would handle here, the last time she'd hope to dig through boxes donated by an old professor to find something worthy, there might be rarer, fancier ones to come at Sotheby's. She smiled, felt the thrill of her new employment: the largest auction house in the world.

Loss and gain. As nearly every myth told: birth, death, rebirth. One thing dying, another born. An old job. A new one.

You're so dramatic. She could hear the words of her love, Barnaby, cloaked in admiration.

She pushed open the swinging green-painted door with her palm pressed to the same spot as always. After fifteen years, there might be a permanent but unseen handprint.

Four packages in brown paper and twine crowded a pine table at the center of the dusty room. For Hazel, this part of the job was like Christmas. Edwin had a wonderful knack for locating interesting volumes before anyone else even knew they were available. "To be a proper bookseller you need a researcher's brain, knowing which questions to ask and where to find the answers."

A thick black leather logbook sat open at the left side of the packages. Edwin's tight script filled thin lines of the grid. It had taken Hazel almost a year to decipher his handwriting, like learning hieroglyphics. How long would it take the next employee to understand Edwin as she did?

To the right of each entry in the tattered logbook ran two columns for Hazel's own neat entries: quality and ID number. She cataloged the condition of everything that came through the back door, assigned it an inventory number, then stashed the item in the safe until Edwin decided where and how it would be displayed.

She read the list.

1. First edition Dickens *A Christmas Carol*
2. Handwritten letter from Hemingway to Fitzgerald, 1932
3. A signed (but not first) edition of Tolkien's *The Hobbit*
4. A first edition of Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* with the dust jacket made of a WWII map

5. A signed first edition fairy tale by American author Peggy Andrews with original hand-painted illustrations by Pauline Baynes

Edwin adored nabbing the original illustrations for books, for they only grew in value with time. The more popular the book, the more the original drawings became a coveted item for collectors. But it wasn't always about a first edition; to Tim especially it was about the journey of the actual book. Tim valued each one not for its number in the printing order but for the narrative of who had held, loved, and even handed down the book itself. This package with Baynes's paintings sounded intriguing, so Hazel saved it for last.

She slipped on a pair of white gloves, and thirty minutes passed as she cataloged each of the items. Dickens's *A Christmas Carol's* canvas cover was slightly ripped at the bottom right and had a bit of discoloration on its front left corner. But other than those small defects, it was a glorious edition that would be displayed in the locked glass case of the main showroom. Hazel jotted down the facts in the ledger and set the book aside. She opened the Hemingway letter, checked it for stains or rips, compared the signatures to originals in the files. *The Hobbit*: in perfect condition and obviously kept as a treasure, not as a book to be read and loved. Then the Russell book with a prime example of how, during the paper shortage after WWII, old maps were used as dust jackets. This one was of Stettin, with routes and roads clearly mapped, and a warning: "For the War and Navy Departments only."

Her mind wandered. Tonight she and Barnaby had a dinner planned with her mum, stepdad, and half brother. How could she get out of it? She couldn't, Barnaby would remind her, then kiss her to let her know he was on her side.

And after that: freedom! She had three glorious weeks of holiday before starting the new job.

She planned to luxuriate in the empty days ahead of her. She might board a train to Scotland or a ferry to Ireland. She might escape to Brighton Beach and sit on a patio with a book and nothing else to do but read. And yet she hadn't made any plans but for one: to take a weeklong trip with Barnaby to Paris. Hotel reserved. Ferry tickets purchased. She'd drink fancy cocktails at bars, not pubs. She'd ascend the Eiffel Tower, amble through the Louvre, hopefully make mad

love in their hotel room overlooking the Tuileries. She'd saved her pence and pounds for two new dresses now hanging in her closet, awaiting this trip.

Spring in Paris.

"Hazel?" Tim's voice snapped her out of her dream, the last package still taped tight.

"Someone's out here looking for you," he called.

She made her way down the dark back hallway to the main room to find waiting for her a tall man with a black felt hat and an overcoat dripping with rain. Next to him, a woman with raven hair was dressed nearly all in red from her coat to her hat.

"May I help you?" Hazel asked.

"My colleague at Foyles sent me here and said to ask for you," said the man. "You might know about an edition of the 1928 privately printed Auden poems? I hope you do."

"Ah, Tim always says that optimism is an essential quality in a book collector," Hazel said with a confident smile. She motioned for him to follow her to the showroom's back corner, where the red pamphlet was locked tight.

The woman stayed put and Hazel barely noticed her again, even after the man had purchased the pamphlet. She slipped it into a waxed envelope.

"A collector?" she asked, curious.

"No." He shook his head. "My love." He motioned out the front window where Hazel saw the woman who had been with him, her face now raised to the sun. "She's enamored of Auden, and it's for our wedding day."

"Time will say nothing but I told you so." Hazel quoted Auden with a smile.

"That's one of my favorites," he said. "And yet her favorite is 'Let the more loving one be me.'"

"Ah, that's so lovely," Hazel said. "Many happy returns."

By the time she'd finished with the besotted groom, Edwin was off to run an errand and Tim was crouched down, reorganizing a shelf of children's books that had been scattered on the floor by an unattended toddler.

Before she could head to the back room, the door's bell rang its tinny song, and Hazel turned to find her dearest friend, Kelty, and her daughter, Midge, an eight-year-old sprite.

She smiled at Midge, her legs long and the rest of her body trying to catch up in bits and spurts, her auburn hair springing free from two braids just as Kelty's had done all those years ago when Hazel met her during the evacuation.

Images often came back to Hazel that way—quick as hummingbirds—memories of that September day, cold and clear, the day they filed out of Bloomsbury to board trains.

“Auntie Hazel!” Midge threw her arms around Hazel's waist. “Mum said I could get two books today at Foyles. Two!”

“Well, that's jolly,” Hazel said, leaning in as Kelty greeted her with a peck on the cheek.

“Just on our way back from school and thought we'd stop by.” Kelty wore an emerald dress with a cinched waist and patent leather shoes, looking more like a student than a mum. Her auburn hair was pulled back in a high ponytail with a wide green headband. Every single man looked at her twice—some, a third time.

Midge bounced on her toes. “I'm going in the back to stare at Swallows and Amazons since you won't let me touch it,” she said.

“Not now, love,” Kelty said. “We're meeting your father.” Then to Hazel, “You know her book love is your fault.”

“I gladly take full credit.” Hazel took a fake bow with a wide sweep of her hand toward Midge, who giggled.

“Come with us?” Kelty asked with hope.

Hazel nodded toward the back room. “I still have work to do.”

“I thought so. Well, we just wanted to stop in and see you on your last day at Hogan's. Can't let it go by without some kind of recognition, can we?”

Hazel kissed her godchild on the cheek and gently pulled her pigtails. “See you both tomorrow? I have dinner with Mum and Alastair tonight.”

“Good luck there,” Kelty said with a hug.

Hazel watched them leave, Kelty holding Midge's hand as she skipped out the door. A surge of love and regret washed over her. How she loved them, but also how she'd resisted having a child of her own, a family of her own. But now a new life was unfurling. She and Barnaby were finally talking of marriage.

There was so much good ahead. After so much loss.

With Tim in the main room, Hazel returned to the packages in the back. She rested her hand on the rectangular bulk of the last one. *The last one*, she noted to herself, then laughed at her dramatic rendering of a simple job.

The carton had arrived from America with bright red airmail stamps. Hazel zipped off the tape to find a parchment-bound portfolio wrapped in red velvet ribbon. She could always tell when a book had been saved for money or for love, and this was love.

She pulled at the end of the ribbon and it gently fell away.

White gloves on, she opened the portfolio to find a stack of hand-colored drawings on thick cotton paper, each one separated by tissue paper.

The illustration on top was an enchanting rendering of two girls holding hands and running through thick emerald woodlands, their pigtailed flying behind them, their dresses covered in yellow roses. On the right side was a river. In the background, a glistening white castle where red and green pennants flew from the tops of towers.

Hazel's breath puddled in her chest. She suddenly felt dizzy, untethered. Goose bumps prickled the back of her neck. Her world narrowed to the pile of illustrations on the pine table.

She bent closer. What was it? What was it about this drawing that made it feel as if one might fall into the scene, into the obviously magical land? Small woodland creatures—chipmunks, birds, squirrels, butterfly, beaver—hid among mint green leaves and gnarled branches. An owl, large and looming on a branch above, watched over the girls.

Hazel shivered.

The river, on closer inspection, was glittered with what looked like stars.

Stars.

A river of stars.

Hazel set her white gloved hands on the table and steadied herself. It wasn't possible. Of course it wasn't. She was being fanciful. Too theatrical. There could be other imagined lands with starry rivers. Of course there could be.

She carefully lifted the pile of thick papers and peeked at the book beneath. The title: *Whisperwood and the River of Stars*. By Peggy Andrews. The green-and-blue cover featured the illustration of the girls.

“It can’t be,” Hazel said quietly. “No.”

Whisperwood belonged to her and her lost sister, Flora. It was a private realm that had sprung to life between them, a make-believe world to endure through the worst of the war, a place to find comfort where little existed.

And it had disappeared with Flora into the river.

For the first time in twenty years, in pure astonishment, Hazel said the name out loud. “Whisperwood.”