

The background of the entire cover is a dark, rich blue bookshelf filled with numerous old, leather-bound books. The spines of the books are decorated with intricate gold and blue patterns. In the center of the middle shelf, a cutout of a two-story yellow brick house with a grey roof and a red door is visible. Green vines with heart-shaped leaves are draped over the left and right sides of the bookshelf, framing the central elements.

How far will you go  
to find your story?

*The*  
Lost  
Bookshop

EVIE WOODS



# THE LOST BOOKSHOP

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EVIE WOODS



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*To all the book lovers*

# Contents

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Thank you for reading...](#)

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## Prologue

The rainy streets of Dublin on a cold winter's day were no place for a young boy to dawdle, unless that very same boy had his nose pressed up against the window of the most fascinating bookshop. Lights twinkled inside and the colourful covers called to him, promising stories of adventure and escape. The window was packed with novelties and trinkets; miniature hot-air balloons almost reached the ceiling, while music boxes with mechanical birds and carousels twirled and chimed within. The lady inside spotted him and waved him in. He shook his head and blushed slightly.

'I'll be late for school,' he mouthed through the glass.

She nodded and smiled. She seemed friendly enough.

'Just for a minute,' he said, having fought the urge to go inside for all of three seconds.

'A minute it is.' She was behind the counter, taking more books out of a big cardboard box. She glanced over at his untucked shirt, his mop of hair that had managed to evade a comb for quite some time and mismatched socks. She smiled to herself. Opaline's Bookshop was a magnet for little boys and girls. 'What class are you in?'

'Third class in St Ignatius,' he replied, craning his neck to look up at the wooden airplanes suspended mid-flight from the vaulted ceiling.

'And do you like it?'



He scoffed at the thought.

She left him leafing through an old book of magic tricks, but it wasn't long until he approached her desk and began looking at the stationery.

'You can help if you like. I'm sending out invitations to a book launch.'

He shrugged and began mimicking the way she folded the letters and stuffed them into the envelopes with a little too much enthusiasm. He wrinkled his nose with the effort, changing the constellation of freckles that spread out to his cheeks.

'What does Opaline mean?' he asked, pronouncing it with far too many syllables.

'Opaline is a name.'

'Is it your name?'

'No, I'm Martha.'

She could tell that he wasn't satisfied with that as an explanation.

'I can tell you a story about her, if you like? She didn't like school very much either. Or rules.'

'Or doing what she's told?' he suggested.

'Oh, she especially didn't like that.' Martha smiled conspiratorially. 'Here, you finish jamming those letters into envelopes and I'll make us some tea. A good story always begins with tea.'

## Chapter One

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OPALINE

*London, 1921*

I let my fingers run along the spine of the book, letting the indentations of the embossed cover guide my skin to something tangible; something that I believed in more than the fiction that was playing out before me. Twenty-one years of age and my mother had decided that the time had come for me to marry. My brother, Lyndon, had rather unhelpfully found some dim-witted creature who had just inherited the family business; something to do with importing something or other from some far-flung place. I was barely listening.

‘There are only two options open to a woman your age,’ Mother pronounced, putting down her cup and saucer on the table beside her armchair. ‘One is to marry, and the other to find a post in keeping with her gentility.’

‘Gentility?’ I echoed, with some incredulity. Looking around the drawing room with its chipped paint and faded curtains, I had to admire her vanity. She had married beneath her station and had always been at pains to remind my father, lest he forgot.

‘Must you do that now?’ my brother Lyndon asked, as Mrs Barrett, our housemaid, cleared out the ashes from the grate.

‘Madam requested a fire,’ she said in a tone that showed no inflexion of respect. She had been with us for as long as I could remember and only took orders from my mother. The rest of us she treated like cheap imposters.

‘The fact of the matter is that you must marry,’ Lyndon parroted as he limped across the room, leaning heavily on his walking stick. Eighteen years my elder, the entire right side of his body had been warped by shrapnel during the war in Flanders and the brother I once knew stayed buried somewhere in that very field. The horrors he held in his eyes frightened me, and even though I didn’t like to admit it, I had grown fearful of him. ‘This is a good match. Father’s pension is barely enough for Mother to run the house. It’s time you took your head out of your books and faced reality.’

I clung tighter to my book. A rare first American edition of *Wuthering Heights*, a gift from my father, along with a deep love of reading. Like a talisman, I had carried the cloth-covered book, whose spine bore the duplicitous line, tooled in gold, ‘by the author of *Jane Eyre*’. We had come across it by complete chance at a flea market in Camden (a secret we could not tell Mother). I would later discover that Emily’s English publisher had permitted this misattribution in order to capitalise on *Jane Eyre*’s commercial success. It was not in perfect condition; the cloth boards were worn on the edges and the back one had a v-shape nicked out of it. The pages were coming loose, as the threads that sewed them together were fraying with age and use. But to me, all of these features, including the cigar-smoke smell of the paper, were like a time machine. Perhaps the seeds were sown then. A book is never what it seems. I think my father had hoped my love of books would instil an interest in my schooling, but if anything, it only fuelled my loathing for the classroom. I tended to live in my imagination and so, every evening, I would race home from school and ask

him to read to me. He was a civil servant, an honest man with a passion for learning. He always said that books were more than words on paper; they were portals to other places, other lives. I fell in love with books and the vast worlds they held inside, and I owed it all to my father.

‘If you tilt your head,’ he told me once, ‘you can hear the older books whispering their secrets.’

I found an antique book on the shelf with a calfskin cover and time-coloured pages. I held it up to my ear and closed my eyes tight; imagining that I could hear whatever important secrets the author was trying to tell me. But I couldn’t hear it, not the words at least.

‘What do you hear?’ he asked.

I waited, let the sound fill my ears.

‘I hear the sea!’

It was like having a shell to my ear, with the air swirling through the pages. He smiled and held my cheek in his hand.

‘Are they breathing, Papa?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘the stories are breathing.’

When he finally succumbed to the Spanish Flu in 1918, I stayed up all night by his side, holding his cold hand, reading his favourite story. *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, by Charles Dickens. In some silly way, I thought that the words would bring him back.

‘I refuse to marry a man I’ve never even met purely to aid the family finances. The whole idea is preposterous!’

Mrs Barrett dropped the brush as I spoke and the sound of metal on marble churned my brother’s features. He loathed any loud noises.

‘Get out of here now!’

The poor woman had very unreliable knees and it took three failed attempts before she got up and left the room. How she managed to refrain from slamming the door behind her, I will never know.

I continued with my defence.

‘If I am such a burden to you both, I will simply move out.’

‘And where on earth do you think you would go? You have no money,’ my mother pointed out. Now in her sixties, she had always referred to my arrival in the family as their ‘little surprise’, which would have sounded quaint had I not been aware of her loathing for surprises. Growing up in a household of an older generation only compounded my urge to break free and experience the modern world.

‘I have friends,’ I insisted. ‘I could get a job.’

My mother shrieked.

‘Damn and blast, you ungrateful brat!’ Lyndon growled, grabbing my wrist as I attempted to get up from my chair.

‘You’re hurting me.’

‘I will hurt you far worse than this if you do not obey.’

I tried to free my arm, but he held fast. I looked to my mother, who was making an intense study of the rug on the floor.

‘I see,’ I said, finally understanding that Lyndon was the man of the house now and he would make the decisions.

‘Very well.’ He still held on to my wrist, his sour breath in my face. ‘I said, very well.’

Meeting his eyes, I again tried to pull away. ‘I will meet this suitor.’

‘You will marry him,’ he assured me and slowly he released his grasp.

I smoothed down my skirts and tucked my book under my arm.

‘Right. That’s settled then,’ Lyndon said, his cold eyes looking somewhere just beyond me. ‘I shall invite Austin to supper this evening and all will be arranged.’

‘Yes, Brother,’ I said, before retreating to my bedroom upstairs.



I searched the top drawer of the dressing table and found a cigarette that I'd stolen from Mrs Barrett's stash in the kitchen. I opened the window and lit the tip, taking a long slow inhale like a femme fatale from the films. I sat at my dressing table and let the cigarette rest on an old oyster shell I had picked up at the beach last summer, a carefree holiday with my best friend Jane before she herself got married. Despite the fact that women now had the vote, a good marriage was still seen as the only option.

Looking at my reflection in the mirror, I touched the nape of my neck where my hair ended. Mother had almost fainted when she saw what I'd done with my long tresses. 'I'm not a little girl any more,' I had told her. But did I really believe that? I needed to be a modern woman. I needed to take a risk. But without any money, how could I do anything other than obey my elders? That was when my father's words returned to me ... *Books are like portals*. I looked again at my bookshelf and took another long drag of my cigarette.

'What would Nellie Bly do?' I asked myself, as I often did. To me, she was the epitome of fearlessness – a pioneering American journalist who, inspired by Jules Verne's book, travelled around the world in a mere seventy-two days, six hours and eleven minutes. She always said that energy rightly applied and directed could accomplish anything. If I were a boy, I could announce my intentions to do the Grand Tour of Europe before getting married. I longed to experience different cultures. Twenty-one years old and I had done nothing. Seen nothing. I looked again at my books and made my decision before I finished smoking my cigarette.



'How much can you give me for them?' I watched as Mr Turton examined my hardbacks of *Wuthering Heights* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.



He was the proprietor of an airless shop that was in reality just a very long corridor without any windows. His pipe smoke gave the air a viscous quality and my eyes began to water.

‘Two pounds and that’s being generous.’

‘Oh no, I need much more than that.’

He saw my father’s copy of *David Copperfield* and before I could stop him, he began to leaf through the pages.

‘I’m not selling that one. It has ... sentimental value.’

‘Ah, now this is interesting. It is known as the “reading edition”, as Dickens would have read from it at his public readings.’ His bulbous nose and tiny eyes gave him the look of a badger or a mole. He sniffed out the valuable book like a truffle.

‘Yes, I am aware,’ I said, trying to snatch the book back from his greedy paws. He continued with his appraisal, as though he were already selling it at auction.

‘Sumptuously bound in full polished red calf. A charming edition; ornate tooling in gilt to the spine; all page edges gilt; original marbled endpapers.’

‘My father gifted me that book. It is not for sale.’

He looked at me over the rim of his glasses, sizing me up. ‘Miss ...?’

‘Miss Carlisle.’

‘Miss Carlisle, this is one of the best-preserved examples of these rare issues I have ever handled. ‘

‘And the illustrations by Hablot K. Browne. You see his pen name, Phiz,’ I added, with pride.

‘I could offer you fifteen pounds.’

The world fell silent, the way it often does the moment before a life-changing decision. On one path lay freedom along with the unknown. The other was a gilded cage.

‘Twenty pounds, Mr Turton, and you have a deal.’

He narrowed his eyes and his lips betrayed a grudging smile. I knew he would pay, just as surely as I knew that I would devote my life to getting that book back. As his back was turned, I slipped my *Wuthering Heights* back into my pocket and left.

That was how my career as a book dealer began.