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Lillian Harry

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Springtime in Burracombe

LILIAN HARRY



Chapter One

Burracombe, Devon, March 1953

On the afternoon of the accident, the village of Burracombe was just waking to Spring after a long, cold winter.

Jacob Prout whistled to himself as he cleared ditches of the debris of the most recent downpour. He always felt that this was the true beginning of the year and an afternoon like this, with the promise of longer, lighter days, and new growth starting up wherever you looked, was one that filled him with hope. It's going to be a good year, he thought, what with the new Queen's Coronation and all. A good year in Burracombe.

'Jacob – *Jacob*!' He turned quickly and saw old Minnie Tozer hurrying as fast as her ancient legs would carry her, out of Constance Bellamy's gate. They'd had a word or two not ten minutes earlier, when Minnie had passed him on her way to see Miss Bellamy with a basket of broad beans for sowing on the Easter full moon. She'd been as chirpy as a cricket then, but now her face was as grey as her wispy hair and her eyes frightened. Jacob dropped his spade and ran towards her.

'Whatever's the matter, Minnie? You look as if you've seed a ghost.'

'It's Miss Constance – her's had an accident.' Minnie stopped, gasping, and put a hand to her side. 'I've not run like this since I don't know when! Quick, Jacob, us needs help.'

'What happened?' They were both hurrying now, back towards the gate set in the high wall around Miss Bellamy's house. 'Have she had a fall?'

Minnie nodded. 'Pruning that old plum tree, if you'll believe it. I told her as soon as I walked through the gate, you never ought to be up that ladder at your age, I said, and her just looked at me cheeky-like, and said "I'm not as old as you, Minnie Tozer, and you'm not my nursemaid now!" and then not two minutes after that, she were lying in a heap at the bottom of the tree and I come straight out to get help. There she is, look – hasn't moved.'

They went closer and bent over the crumpled figure. Gently, Minnie laid her hand against the weatherbeaten face, as seamed and brown as a walnut, and to their relief Miss Bellamy's eyes opened and she looked up at them in bewilderment.

'What's going on? What am I doing here?' Her gruff, well-bred voice was little more than a whisper, and she frowned. 'What's the matter with me?'

'You fell out of that old plum tree,' Jacob told her. 'Which you never ought to have been up in the first place. And why you had to be pruning it now I don't know – should have been done a fortnight ago, before the sap started to rise. You should have asked me to see to it for you.'

'I always do it myself,' the old lady said with a touch of her usual stubbornness. 'That was my old grandfather's tree and he always did it first week in March, and so do I. I've told you over and over—'

'And this isn't no time to be telling him again,' Minnie broke in. 'Here you be, laying on the cold ground with the good Lord knows what injuries you've done to yourself, and arguing about pruning fruit trees. And you'm no better, Jacob Prout. Now, Miss Constance, where have you hurt yourself? Us can't move you until us knows that.'

'You don't need to move me at all,' Miss Bellamy said, beginning to struggle to get up. 'There's nothing wrong with me that a cup of tea won't put right, and I hope you'll both— Oh!' She fell back again, grimacing with pain, and Minnie Tozer looked at her with exasperation.

'You always were an obstinate little toad. Never would stay in her pram, once her could toddle,' she told Jacob. 'Had to be out, stumping along the road as if her was setting out on a day's

march.' She addressed her charge again. 'Now, what have you done to yourself? Hurt your leg? And you must have had a nasty bump on your head too, that ought to be looked at.'

'It's my ankle. It's just a bit of a sprain, that's all. If Jacob will get me up and help me into the house … There's nothing else, Minnie, and I do not need to be "looked at".'

'That's what you think,' Minnie said grimly as Jacob helped the little woman to stand up, leaning heavily against him. 'Bumps on the head aren't things to be took lightly. You might be concussed. Soon as we've got you settled indoors, I'm going round to fetch Dr Latimer.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Miss Bellamy said, but her voice was feeble and her legs wobbled. Jacob put his arm round her and held her up as they made their way slowly up the path towards the house, with Minnie following anxiously behind. She slipped ahead to open the back door and the little procession filed through the porch with its clutter of Wellington boots and waxed jackets, and into the big, untidy kitchen. Jacob lowered Miss Bellamy gently on to a battered old sofa, unceremoniously pushing aside a resentful dachshund, and he and Minnie stood for a moment or two, looking down at her.

'I'll put the kettle on,' Minnie decided, going over to the range. 'Sweet tea, that's what you need for shock. And as soon as she's had that I'm going for the doctor, no matter what her says.'

'You needn't talk as if I'd lost my senses,' Miss Bellamy said sharply. 'I can still speak for myself, and I don't want Charles Latimer dragged round here on a fool's errand. I'm just a bit shaken up, that's all, and a cup of tea will put that right. And then if you'll be good enough to make a poultice for this ankle and put a bandage on it, I can look after myself for the rest of the day. A good night's sleep and I'll be right as rain.'

'So you might be,' Minnie said. 'But I'm calling the doctor just the same. What do you think people would say if Jacob and me left you here to fend for yourself and you were took poorly with that old concussion? Us'd never heard the end of it.'

'I haven't *got* concussion!' Miss Bellamy retorted, and as the two old ladies glared at each other, Jacob hastily intervened.

'My stars, look at you – like a pair of fighting cocks! Now, you make that tea, Minnie, and have one yourself, because if you ask me you've had a bit of a shock too, and *I'll* go for the doctor, and no more arguments. And I won't say no to a cup myself, once I get back.' He went out, shutting the door behind him, and the two looked at each other and smiled reluctantly.

'I suppose he's right,' Miss Bellamy admitted. 'And so are you, Minnie. It's better to be safe than sorry and I wouldn't want the village at your throat. You always were a good nursemaid to me and my brothers.'

'Maybe so, but I didn't expect to be still doing it at eighty-seven. And I didn't expect to find you climbing trees, neither. It's time you realised your own age and stopped being so foolish. Jacob would have looked after that tree for you.'

'I know, but I wanted to do it for Grandad. I meant it to be the last time.'

'Very nearly the last time you did anything at all,' Minnie told her grimly, pouring boiling water into the big brown teapot. 'Now, where's my basket? I suppose I must have dropped it in the garden. I've got some broad beans for you to put in, and Alice sent down a few scones as well. I'll just slip out and fetch them in.'

She bustled out and Constance lay back on the sofa. Truth to tell, she did feel rather shaken, and her ankle was throbbing painfully. It was a good thing Minnie had arrived when she did, for nobody else was expected that day and she was aware that she could have lain there for hours, possibly even all night. A fine state I'd have been in by morning, she thought, and here I've been biting poor Minnie's head off as if it was all her fault!

Constance had known Minnie Tozer all her life. She hadn't been Minnie Tozer, of course, when she had been Constance's nursemaid, she'd been Minnie Dodd, and she hadn't been an old woman, either; she'd been a slip of a fourteen-year-old in her first position with the Bellamy family, accustomed, as the eldest of seven, to dealing with small children and standing no nonsense from Constance and her brothers. She had left them four years later to work as a maid at the Tozer's farmhouse, and three years after that she and Ted's father had married. But there had always

been a firm friendship between the two women and Minnie still, at times, treated Constance as the little girl she had been over seventy years ago.

If I had to fall out of that tree, Constance thought, while not admitting that she should never have been up it in the first place, there's no one I'd rather have found me than Minnie.

'Wherever can she have got to?' Alice Tozer asked, looking out of the kitchen window. 'It must be well over an hour since she went down to Miss Bellamy's with that basket of beans. I suppose they'm sitting in the kitchen chewing the fat over a cup of tea you could stand a spoon up in. Those two never stop talking when they gets together, but her ought to be home soon or it'll be getting dark.'

'Would you like me to walk down and meet her?' Joanna asked, settling the second of her baby twins in their cot in the corner. 'These two should sleep now for a couple of hours. I wouldn't mind a bit of fresh air.'

'Well, you could do. I don't want her to think we're fussing over her, but there's a cold wind getting up and she hasn't long got over that chill she had a week or two back. It's all very well to be hale and hearty, but we've got to remember her age, even if she won't, and I don't want her chest getting bad again.'

'I'll go to the shop for something,' Joanna said. 'Then I can meet her by accident. I'll pop an extra scarf in my basket. Robin can come along too.' She called her small son from his game with a handful of wooden bricks, and they set off down the track and crossed the village green. As usual, there was plenty going on. Alf Coker was busy shoeing a horse at the entrance to his forge, and the butcher's van was standing outside Bert Foster's shop where Billy Friend was heaving out a side of beef. He stopped when he saw Joanna and grinned his wide grin at Robin.

'That looks heavy, Billy.'

'It is, but I'm strong.' He lugged his burden into the back of the butcher's shop where Bert would chop it into joints, and then came out for another. 'I've got good muscles,' he said proudly, stretching his arms to show them off.

Joanna smiled and went into the village shop, where Edie Pettifer was serving Betty Culliford with her sweet ration. 'That's two ounces of sherbet dabs,' she said, pouring the sweets into a cone of blue paper and folding in the top. 'That's threepence, please, Betty.' She took the threepenny bit the child handed over and passed back the cone of sweets. 'I'm thankful the sweet rationing's stopped,' she told Joanna as Betty skipped out, already unfolding the top of the cone. 'There's only a few things left on ration now. I seem to have been counting out little squares of paper all my life. I'd never have believed when it started that we'd still be doing it nearly eight years after the war ended. You'd never think we'd won, would you? Oh!' She stopped suddenly. 'I should have asked you straight away – how's old Mrs Tozer?'

Joanna stared at her. 'She's all right. Why do you ask?'

'Well, I thought she might be a bit shook up, you know. It was her found the old lady, after all, or so I heard from Freda Dawe when she came in not ten minutes ago. I dare say it'll be all round the village by now, the way news travels in Burracombe. Why, I remember—'

'What accident?' Joanna broke in. 'What will be all round the village? What's happened, Edie?'

'You mean you don't know? Miss Bellamy fell out of her plum tree, apparently, and it was your gran that found her. Got Jacob Prout to help her get the old lady indoors and he went for the doctor. I'd have thought someone would have sent up to the farm straight away. You didn't hear nothing about it?'

'No, not a word. But Mother was out in the barns all afternoon, seeing to the hens, and I've been upstairs with the babies – if anyone had come to the door or telephoned, I wouldn't have heard them. Is Miss Bellamy badly hurt? Have they taken her to hospital?'

'Not that I've heard. You'd better go straight round, Joanna, and see what's what. It's bound to have been a shock for your poor gran.'

'Yes, I will.' Joanna took Robin's hand and led him out, ignoring his protests. 'I'm sorry, love, we haven't got time to stop for sweets and it's not our day anyway. We bought some yesterday,

didn't we? Come on now, let's see what's happened to your great-granny.' She hurried him along the lane towards the school, where they met Charles Latimer coming out of Miss Bellamy's gate.

'Ah, Joanna,' he said, sounding relieved. 'Just the person. You've heard what happened?'

'Only that there's been some sort of accident and Granny Tozer was there. Is she all right? Is Miss Bellamy badly hurt?'

'Not too badly, but both ladies are a bit shaken. I was just coming to find someone to go in with them for a while. Can you spare the time? What about your babies?'

'They should be all right for an hour or so, and Tom's mother's with them. But what happened, doctor? Edie Pettifer said they were climbing trees but surely that can't be true.'

The doctor smiled. 'It's not far off, actually. It seems Miss Bellamy was pruning her grandfather's plum tree and she fell just as old Mrs Tozer came through the gate. Jacob Prout was working nearby, as luck would have it, and he got them both indoors and came for me. Luckily I was just back from my afternoon rounds. They're in there having a cup of tea together, but I don't want Miss Bellamy left alone and your grandmother ought to be at home, where she can rest properly. At the moment she's fussing about like a mother hen and talking about staying the night.'

'Oh, she mustn't do that,' Joanna said quickly. 'It's because she used to be Miss Bellamy's nursemaid – she feels she must look after her. But did Miss Bellamy hurt herself badly?'

'A nasty sprain to her ankle, and a bump on the head, which is why I don't want her left alone. That sort of thing can have a delayed effect and if she starts to be sick or feel drowsy she may need to be taken to hospital for observation. To tell the truth, I'd like her to go anyway, but she flatly refuses. I wondered if your sister-in-law would be willing to stay with her.'

'Val? I'm sure she would. She's very fond of Miss Bellamy – we all are. I think she's home now – shall I go and ask her?' Joanna hesitated.

'No, I'll do that. You go and find your grandmother and try to get her to sit down. She's made tea but when I came out she looked all set to start a bit of spring-cleaning!'

‘My goodness,’ said Joanna, who had been in Miss Bellamy’s kitchen and knew what that meant. ‘She’ll be there until next spring if she does that.’ She hurried through the gate and along the garden path, with Robin still clinging to her hand, while the doctor made his way to the cottage where Val Ferris lived with her husband Luke. Val was a nurse at Tavistock Hospital, and the best possible person to keep an eye on the old lady.

Joanna knocked on the back door and made her way into the kitchen without waiting for an answer. As predicted, she found Constance Bellamy on the old sofa she kept there, with her legs stretched out and her dachshund beside her. Minnie was busy at the range with an old rag.

‘Grandmother!’ Joanna scolded. ‘Whatever are you doing? The doctor said you’d got to sit down and have a rest. You’ve had a nasty shock.’

‘I’m not the one who fell out of a tree!’ Minnie retorted, and looked round. ‘Oh, it’s you, Joanna. What are you doing here?’

‘Looking for you. Mother was getting worried about why you’d been gone so long. Now, sit down, do, and drink your tea.’ Joanna turned to the other woman. ‘And how are you, Miss Bellamy? You had a bad fall, didn’t you?’

‘Not that bad, no,’ the old lady said, but her voice had lost some of its accustomed robustness. ‘Had plenty of falls worse than that in my young days but these old bones don’t bounce like they used to.’

‘Old bones indeed!’ Minnie snorted. ‘You’m still a good few years younger than me, Miss Constance, but you’ll never be any wiser. Scrambling about up trees pruning branches – you were lucky you didn’t saw your own leg off!’

‘Don’t,’ Joanna said, shuddering. ‘And please, Granny, sit down. If there’s anything that needs doing, I’ll do it. I’m sure Miss Bellamy doesn’t want you fussing about her kitchen.’

‘No, I don’t,’ Constance said. ‘But she won’t be told. Always a bossy-boots, Minnie Dodd was. Mind you, I’m glad she was here when this happened. I could have lain there all night, and Rupert never get any supper.’ She fondled the dachshund’s ears and he growled softly and licked her hand.

'Rupert would manage,' Minnie said grimly, catching Joanna's eye. 'There's enough bits and pieces lying about on this table to keep him fed for a week. How long's this ham been on this plate? And those biscuits are as soft as new bread.'

'I like them like that,' Miss Bellamy said defiantly, and untruthfully. 'And the ham was left over from lunch. Not that it's any of your business.'

'I really think you ought to rest,' Joanna said. 'Both of you. And try not to talk too much. The doctor said you'd had a bump on the head, Miss Bellamy. If you get overexcited you may have to go to the hospital for observation.'

'Overexcited! I'm not likely to get overexcited reclining here like a princess,' Constance retorted. 'It's that old busybody over there you want to be talking to. Stop fussing about that range, Minnie, and sit down and drink your tea, as your granddaughter tells you. And then she'd better take you home and leave me in peace.' She moved her leg and winced. 'I'll probably stop here for the night. Be more sense than trying to get up those stairs.'

'Yes, it might,' Joanna said, handing Minnie her tea. 'Val will be here soon and we'll see if we can make you up a more comfortable bed.' She turned as the back door opened and her sister-in-law came in. 'Oh, there you are, Val. We were just saying, it might be better for Miss Bellamy to sleep down here tonight.'

Val came over and knelt by the sofa. She put her hand on the old lady's forehead and looked into her eyes. Then she turned her attention to the sprained ankle, which the doctor had bandaged, and felt it gently. 'Does it hurt much?'

'A bit,' Constance admitted. 'No more than you might expect. I'll be right as rain in the morning.'

'Yes, you probably will,' Val agreed. 'But I'm staying tonight, just in case. No arguments, now,' she added in her best nurse's voice. 'It's doctor's orders – that or go to hospital. Which do you want it to be?'

'Oh, very well,' Constance said grudgingly. 'But you can send these two home. Minnie Tozer needs to be in her own bed by the look of her, and this young woman's got those twins to see to. Not that I'm not very grateful to you both,' she added, and they knew

she meant it, 'but if young Val is going to be here there's no need for anyone else. And to be perfectly truthful, I'd like to have a bit of peace and quiet now. It's been a busy afternoon.'

'Come on, Gran,' Joanna said. 'And you, Robin. Let's go home.'

They went towards the door but just as they reached it Miss Bellamy called them back and they turned.

'I thought you said you brought me some broad beans to put in,' she said to Minnie. 'Don't you go taking them home with you. I'll be out in the garden again before you can blink, and I want to be sure of getting them planted.'

Minnie picked up her basket and took out a paper bag which she laid on then table. 'Don't cook them by mistake,' she said. 'And here's the scones Alice sent down for your tea. But just you be careful if you go out in the garden for the next few days, see? No more pruning – understand?'

'Yes, Minnie,' Constance said with unaccustomed meekness. 'No more pruning.'

She waited until they had left, then looked at Val and winked.

'I'd just about finished anyway,' she said.