



BEES
IN THE
Butterfly
GARDEN

A GILDED LEGACY NOVEL

MAUREEN LANG

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HISTORICAL NOVEL REVIEW



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Butterfly Garden*



MAUREEN LANG



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PROLOGUE

A young lady of impeccable decorum never appears outside her home unchaperoned, uncoiffed, ungloved, or unhappy.

Madame Marisse's Handbook for Young Ladies

APRIL 1879

ALONG THE UPPER POST ROAD, CONNECTICUT

FREEZING RAIN PELTED Meg Davenport. Though her cloak was thoroughly sodden, along with the hem of her gingham skirt, she refused to think about her misery. *This is my last chance. All the blasted rain in the sky won't stop me now.*

A glimmer of warm hope stirred inside when she peered ahead instead of watching her own slippery steps. People, horses, carriages. She'd jumped from the back of a farm wagon nearly a mile ago when it had turned off the main road, and here at last was her first destination—the roadhouse near the train station.

Meg hurried into the modest one-story building, squeezing through the crowd but keeping her hood so low that she could barely scout an opening in the room. Though she wanted to, she wouldn't dare remove her wet cloak. She'd promised herself not to take any risk of being seen, at least not until reaching safe anonymity in the thick of New York City.

So she clutched her travel bag to her chest and pressed on,

hoping to find a spot against the wall. She didn't worry her satchel would be grabbed as much as she feared that dropping it would mean certain trampling in an effort to retrieve it.

It was warmer in here than waiting outside for the train; there was no doubt about that. But the smell of the place almost sent her back out anyway. Besides the odor of smoky wood from a fireplace and burnt onions from the kitchen, smells of many other sorts came from those who, like her, had sought shelter from an icy April rain. Such smells as Meg had never, in all her fourteen years, been subjected to. Unwashed bodies simply weren't tolerated, even among the school staff with whom Meg was rarely allowed to mingle. How long would she have to wait for the train to take her on the next leg of her journey?

Journey. The word tripped her thoughts. *Flight* was more fitting. Fleeing to New York City, where she would be free to do as she pleased, dress as she pleased, eat as she pleased, talk to whomever she pleased. In short, free to *be* whomever she pleased. She'd saved enough allowance money from her father to be entirely independent, at least for the few days it would take her to find employment.

Finding a spot near the fireplace to dry out her cloak would be impossible, judging by the cluster of people already doing the same amid the flicker of firelight casting them all in silhouette. So she followed her nose instead, hoping a place nearer the kitchen might provide preferable odors to those from the press of people. Warmth from the stoves would dry her cloak just as nicely.

Whatever sustenance the roadhouse offered held little appeal to Meg. She'd eaten a full breakfast shortly after setting out, of cold but tastily spiced beef on the same pure-white bread she'd enjoyed ever since Mrs. Hale had been hired as head cook some years ago. Her specialty was baking. A hard-cooked egg and a flaky blueberry muffin had followed, all washed down with the tea Meg managed

to carry in a pouch she'd stolen from one of the school's liverymen. The container had an odd scent to it when she'd first added her tea, something along the lines of the peach cordial that was kept under lock and key. But as Meg had taken her first sip from the pouch, she hadn't minded the flavor the tea acquired from whatever dregs were left behind.

Meg still had a bit of food left. Another sandwich, a sourdough biscuit, and some of the most flavorful cookies served by the exclusive Madame Marisse's School for Girls. They were, in fact, created from a recipe each girl was awarded upon graduation, to be given to whatever kitchen staff awaited her. A signature teatime addition only alumnae of Madame Marisse's were known to serve. If Meg had a mind to, she could probably sell the ones she'd wrapped in a napkin to any one of the roadhouse patrons and make enough money to buy a full meal right here and now.

But she only clutched the bag closer as she found a free place by the wall and pulled back her hood just enough to assess her surroundings.

Her gaze froze on a familiar figure. Mr. Pitt, the oldest, grouchiest liveryman who ever lived. The very person from whom Meg had stolen the pouch she'd used for her tea.

She was ready to bolt when she realized he hadn't seen her. She heard some of his words through the din of the crowd because he was speaking over the noise himself.

"About this height." He held up a hand, just below his own rounded shoulders. "A girl. Fourteen. Blue eyes. You wouldn't miss that—the eyes, I mean."

But the woman he addressed, wearing an apron and a servant's cap, only shook her head, then moved away with a mug-laden tray balanced on her palms.

Meg pulled the hood lower again. Blast her eyes to make her so easily identifiable—just like her father's. Blast him, too. It was

his fault she had to run away. He was the one who made sure she stayed in that blasted school.

Blast, blast, blast. It was a word Madame Marisse had more than once reprimanded Meg for using.

Blast . . . *everything.*

The door through which she'd entered was on the other side of Pitt. There must be another way out . . . perhaps from the kitchen.

But no sooner had she slid into the kitchen than a woman raised her voice, shouting nearly into Meg's ear.

"You can't be in here, dearie. Have a seat, and we'll serve you as soon as we can."

Then the serving girl ushered Meg out, making sure the door swung closed behind her.

Meg stole another glance at Mr. Pitt. He was already looking around; even if he didn't see her face, she knew that when he spotted a girl of the right height, cloaked and alone, it would mean the end of her dreams. Her heart pounded and heat rushed to her limbs, preparing to transport her away.

But she froze; too many people made running impossible.

The nearest table offered barely a single spot of clear space, and there was no empty chair in sight. Meg crouched at its side as if she were part of the group seated. She could see only a portion of the table itself, too afraid to pull back her hood to see the faces of those she joined.

"Mama! Who's that?"

Meg spied the child next to her, who pointed one wobbly finger her way.

"Shh! Hush!" Meg tilted her head back to see beyond her hood: other children and adults—parents, no doubt, and grandparents, too—all staring at her. Clearly she needed to speak. "I—I wonder if you would permit me to join you?"

Her perfect diction did little to impress them; she saw that

immediately. She must appear to be the invader she was, though this was hardly a private table.

Perhaps she could crawl *under* the table—

But it was already too late.

A hand from behind cupped her elbow while another pulled back her hood.

“Don’t you think you’ve gone far enough this time, Miss Meg?”

Perhaps if the room hadn’t been so crowded, Meg might have sprinted away. Perhaps if Mr. Pitt hadn’t such a strong hold on her arm, she might have succeeded.

Or perhaps if she thought she could get away—though every previous attempt to escape had failed as well—she might have resisted.

But today’s venture had been her best effort, and she’d promised herself it would be her last. Her heart—the very heart that had thrummed at the thought of escape—now sailed to the lowest corner of her being. Trapped.

She’d gotten farther than ever before; there must be something to be said for that, anyway.

Blast.



Part One



A young lady who attains the grace of self-discipline rightfully earns the admiration of others. Indeed, her place in genteel society will not be won without it.

Madame Marisse's Handbook for Young Ladies

NEW HAVEN COUNTY, CONNECTICUT

FOUR YEARS LATER

MEG DAVENPORT STOOD barefoot on the warm, loose garden soil. She watched a butterfly hover on a breeze above the garden as if it danced before a banquet, contemplating which nectar to sample first. Yellow celandines, purple coneflowers, or red verbena? Not far off, the sweet briar rose beckoned, trimmed with a skirt of pinks and zinnias. All planted under Meg's direction to attract butterflies of every sort.

She knew this butterfly. As a caterpillar he had, along with so many of his butterfly siblings and moth cousins, undoubtedly been hosted among the clover beds or colorful sweet peas that festooned the white columns of the gazebo where Meg often sat. But while many of the moths and butterflies boasted shades of black and white and gold and orange, this one lit a delicate shade of blue as the sun blended its sheer wings with the summer sky. How she wished she could fly like him, beyond the walls of the school,

and see what the world looked like from a butterfly's view. It had been so long since she'd let herself dream of such things that she'd nearly forgotten how.

Perhaps it was as silly a whim for herself as for this pretty blue butterfly. He wasn't as adventurous as the others. She'd seen him before and knew he rarely floated beyond the edges of the garden.

She bent to remove another weed, although if Madame Marisse were still alive, she'd have quietly but firmly directed Meg back to the gazebo to merely enjoy what even she had called "Meg's garden." Even with the school nearly empty for the off-season, there were others employed to do such menial tasks as pulling weeds. But Meg enjoyed the satisfaction to be found in keeping the garden pure of anything but what she'd intended for it to present. Besides, the earth was softer than any carpet beneath her toes.

"Meg!"

Hazel Hibbit beckoned, but beside the stout school matron bustled her sister, Beatrice. Meg smiled, far from alarmed. The Hibbit sisters were forever distressed about something, perhaps more often now that Hazel had become the matron. Meg added the weed to the others she'd collected and set to the side for the gardener to remove, then stepped back onto the grass.

"A message!" Hazel called.

"Yes!" Beatrice added. "For you!"

Curiosity stirred, Meg held the puffed flounces that trimmed the bottom of her silk day dress out of the way to wipe her feet on the downy lawn. Obviously it wasn't a letter from a former schoolmate, an invitation to a soiree, or even a note from some prospective beau. Such things wouldn't have warranted any more attention than to be left with the others upon her silver card holder by the door.

Only a message from one person would hasten Hazel's step and add a bloom to Beatrice's cheeks. It must be from Meg's father.

“Open it, child! Look, it’s bordered in black.”

Meg reached for the sealed envelope. Indeed, the stationery was outlined in black, though her name was written neatly in the center where the paper had been left white. She tore it open, seeing it was dated that very day.

June 7, 1883

Dearest Meggie,

I write to you today with a heavy heart and unsteady hand. Your beloved father passed on to his reward this very day. I will, of course, see to all the arrangements of his burial.

Please be assured he did not suffer but breathed his last in the peacefulness of sleep.

Respectfully,

Ian Maguire

“He’s dead.” Meg’s words, like her heart, were untouched by the news. So it was over. Her hope that he would one day arrive knowing how to be a father to her, or to share with her anything of the family to which she was bound by blood.

“Your father?” Beatrice’s voice was usually high-pitched, but just now piercingly so. “He’s—he’s gone?”

Meg nodded, folding the note and slipping it back into the envelope. She walked past the sisters, back to the three-story house that had once ranked among the finest Federal estates on the hills between Boston and New York. For the past twenty-five years, this home had been one of the most expensive, exclusive schools in New England. One that taught European grace and manners to the next generation of accomplished wives and mothers, all under

the far-reaching umbrella of Christian love. Even after Madame Marisse died two years ago, the staff had carried on in her absence so that it was still regarded as one of the finest schools along the East Coast.

Beatrice fluttered behind Meg, taking one of her arms. “Oh, dear, we’re so very sorry for the news!”

“Yes, of course we are,” Hazel added, reaching for Meg’s other arm. “How sad the world has lost such a gentleman.”

Indeed.

Meg stepped up to the porch that served as the entrance to the back of the school, walked past the sunroom, where she and countless others had learned not only the art of watercolor and charcoal drawing, but the art of conversation and genteel manners. Here they had been taught how to be demure yet confident, all the while reminded of the delicacy of a woman’s constitution and the greater delicacy of a woman’s reputation. She passed the music room, where she’d learned not only to sing and dance and play piano, but the history of musical elements as well, because Madame Marisse had believed in the depth as well as the breadth of knowledge—at least as it pertained to becoming an asset to a husband. And she continued past the sitting room, where she had rested after lawn tennis or horseback riding or long afternoon walks. Or had spent time with the mundane to the profound, from idle embroidery to discussing the greatest literature known to man. Where she’d prayed with other students and the staff alike in English as well as French. Because Madame Marisse had believed in educating the whole person, physically, intellectually, and spiritually.

Meg passed all the rooms in which she had been a student, a friend, a protégé. But never a daughter.

In the front hall, at the foot of the stairs, she turned back to the sisters. “Thank you for your concern, but I wish to be alone for now.”

“Oh yes, of course,” Beatrice said.

Meg put a foot on one stair, then another, realizing for the first time that she’d left her shoes in the garden. But they didn’t matter now.

“But . . .”

One hand on the polished walnut handrail, Meg turned back.

Hazel looked up at Meg with the oddest expression, one of uncertainty rather than sympathy.

The look disappeared as Hazel turned away. “It’s too soon, my dear. Never mind. Go upstairs, and we’ll talk when you’re ready.”

“Pertaining to what?”

Hazel faced Meg again. “Pertaining to your father, dear.”

“There is nothing to be said.”

“You’ll want to go to his funeral, of course,” Beatrice said.

Meg shook her head. “Even if I did, I wouldn’t know how. That boy—” She amended her thought of him; the last time she’d seen Ian Maguire, he *had* been a boy, but surely he was as grown as she by now. “A Mr. Maguire will be attending to all of the details.”

Hazel pulled at the bottom of her cuirass bodice, which shifted despite the finest of corsets beneath. It would fit even tighter by the end of summer, during which time Hazel annually added a few pounds, eating quantities she would never permit herself—or others—to consume while school was in session. “Yes, well, that isn’t exactly what I meant, but we needn’t discuss anything right now.”

Meg descended the two stairs she’d mounted. The school was newly quiet with only her and the sisters there, besides the reduced year-round household staff.

“If there is anything to be said regarding my father’s death, Miss Hibbit, you might as well tell me now. Has it something to do with my place here?”

“Oh no, of course not!” Beatrice spoke before Hazel could, shaking her head and taking one of Meg’s hands, patting it. She

was as wont to be thin as her sister was to be plump. When the students returned in the fall, one sister would eat with those whose diets were curbed, while the other ate with those whose diets were embellished. At the end of every summer they were able to provide guidance and personal example for those girls who had to work at becoming the ideally sized debutante.

“Your position is secure as long as you like,” Beatrice added. “Madame Marisse made that so very clear, you know, before . . . well, before she passed on.”

Meg turned her eyes back to Hazel, and as so often happened when Meg leveled a gaze at anyone, man or woman, Hazel let her own stare linger. It happened because of the color of Meg’s eyes; she knew that. The eyes she’d inherited from her father. Eyes that people simply wanted to peer into.

Hazel took Meg’s other hand, leading her from the hall and back toward the wide, curved threshold into the parlor. It was a large room appointed in the finest fashion: furniture designed by such famous people as Phyfe, Lannuier, and Roux; side chairs and sofas and a pair of French ladies’ desks trimmed with inlaid mahogany; and nearby, a rococo center table of marble and rosewood offering an inviting surface for a silver tea set imported from London.

Hazel headed to one of the desks. “I wonder if you might think this a bit sudden, considering the news has had but a moment to make an impression.”

Meg stared at Hazel, wondering if the older woman truly believed her own words. Did she think Meg’s lack of emotion was simply because her father’s death hadn’t sunk in yet? Did she expect Meg to mourn a man she barely knew? Other women might not have been immune to the charms of John Davenport, but unlike them Meg had never once wanted to simply stare at his handsome face.

“What is it you’d like to say about the matter, Miss Hibbit?”

Hazel looked from Meg to the desk beside her, the one used only by the staff. Meg expected, one day, that she would use that desk. Knowing there were few other options for her future, Meg had decided to transform this school from a luxurious factory of wives and mothers to an institution that could offer women more choices: to be instructors or lecturers, doctors or lawyers, or anything else they wished. It wasn't the kind of future she'd envisioned as a child—one in which she made others' dreams come true as she ignored her own—but with so little choice left open to her, it would have to suffice.

Hazel withdrew a key from her pocket. "Please, make yourself comfortable. Perhaps Beatrice could summon some tea."

Meg could hardly sit, let alone drink tea. "What is it you want to share with me?"

"I have a letter for you." She opened the desk as she spoke. Meg had seen the interior a thousand times or more: little compartments neatly holding bills and records, a small inkwell, pens and tips, stationery and envelopes. Nothing unusual. It was, in fact, the perfect model for students to reproduce while studying household management.

But then, after Hazel withdrew a small stack of envelopes, she pushed the edge of the corner compartment. In one surprising instant the rear wood piece dropped down. A shadow appeared, from which Hazel drew another lone envelope.

Holding it in her thick fingers, Hazel turned back to Meg. "It's from Madame Marisse regarding your father. We were instructed to look at it if you were ever at death's door. Otherwise it was to be given to you upon the day you left our school or the day your father died. Whichever came first."

How silly of Meg not to have had some kind of premonition of this. But she hadn't; Meg was completely, utterly stunned that Hazel knew something concerning her father that she did not.

“A letter from Madame to me, about my father. Do you know what it says?”

Hazel shook her head.

Meg took the envelope, instantly disappointed in its weight—or rather, the lack of it. Surely it was a short letter.

She didn’t open it right away. Instead, she stared down at the familiar script. So precise, so feminine. The perfect handwriting, as perfect as everything Madame Marisse had done. As controlled as Meg had learned to be.

Meg broke into the envelope, withdrawing the paper inside. She recognized at once the school stationery, upon which was written a few meager lines and a New York address.

The address below is to be used to contact John Davenport, should anything happen to Meg. If there has been any change, the proprietor of this business will know where Mr. Davenport can be reached. Only to be used in the most dire of circumstance.

Meg allowed the sisters to read the words over her shoulders.

“Well, then, there is no reason for you not to attend his funeral,” Beatrice said. “You have means to contact his estate now.”

Hazel nodded. “We’ll accompany you, of course.”

Meg shook her head. “No. I’ll not be going.”

She folded the letter, slipped it back into the envelope, and crumpled it with the other one, the one from Ian Maguire that had revealed her father’s death. Then she walked from the room.

It wasn’t until she was up the stairs, down the hall, through the very last bedroom door, and inside the perfectly decorated room that she fell to her knees, pressing those letters to her breast. And then she burst into tears.