

TALES FROM IVY HILL • BOOK ONE

A decorative border of a vine with leaves and small flowers, framing the title text.

THE INNKEEPER
OF IVY HILL

JULIE
KLASSEN



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Julie Klassen, *The Innkeeper of Ivy Hill*
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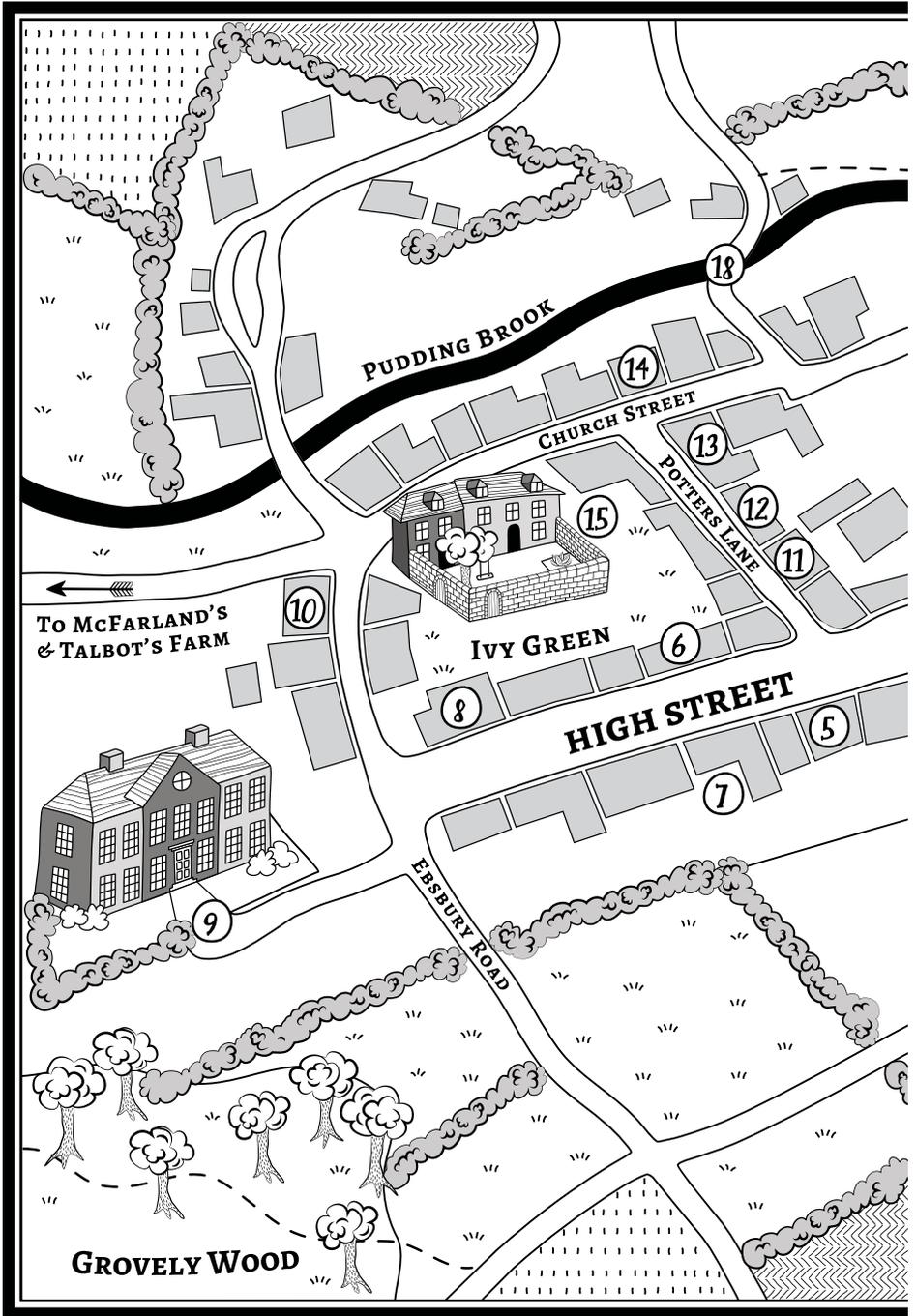
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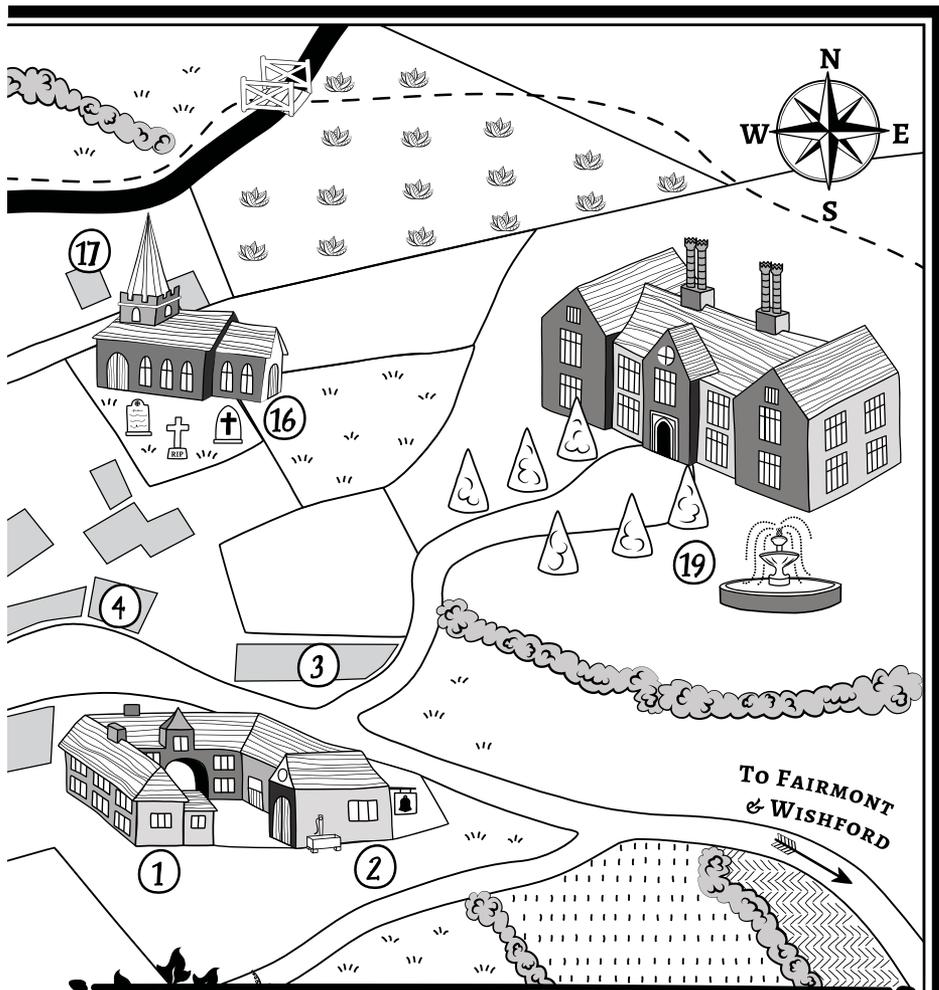
To Stacey,
with fond memories of our girlhood friendship,
and the hours we spent sitting in the gently swaying branches
of the evergreen trees on your grandfather's farm,
sharing our secrets and our dreams.





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IVY HILL

- 1 - The Bell Inn
- 2 - Bell Stables & Lodge
- 3 - Wheelwright
- 4 - Blacksmith
- 5 - Prater's Store

- 6 - Dressmaker's Shop
- 7 - Apothecary
- 8 - Bank
- 9 - Thornvale
- 10 - Almshouse

- 11 - Lock-up
- 12 - Village Hall
- 13 - Public House
- 14 - Bakery
- 15 - Ivy Cottage
- 16 - Church
- 17 - Vicarage
- 18 - Packhorse Bridge
- 19 - Brockwell Court

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The Crown was a coaching inn
licensed to a widow called Sarah Smith.
“Mrs. Smith deserves particular commendation
and support, as being the first . . . to add to the
accommodation of visitors by every species of
comfort, neatness, and domestic attention.”

—*Powell’s Guide*, 1831

.....

THE IVY

It cloaks and climbs
Up steep inclines
This stubborn evergreen disguise.

The walls it twines
With creeping vines
Welcome it, as if to hide.

What treasures lurk
And secrets lie
Within the walls that ivy climbs?

—Anna Paulson

.....

I am the vine; you are the branches.
If you remain in me and I in you,
you will bear much fruit;
apart from me you can do nothing.

—John 15:5 NIV





CHAPTER
ONE

May 27, 1820

Ivy Hill, Wiltshire, England

Jane Fairmont Bell sat alone in the keeper's lodge she had once shared with her husband. There she began her solitary breakfast, delivered by a maid from the coaching inn across the drive. Her inn. She still struggled to credit it.

Jane ate in dainty politeness, as though at a formal dinner—or as though her old, eagle-eyed governess sat beside her. In reality, she had eaten alone for a year now. The clink of china and cutlery seemed louder than usual, the courtyard outside strangely quiet for that time of day.

At the thought, she glanced at the nearest window, framed by ivy. The leafy vines had grown unchecked and narrowed the visible glass. She could cut it back, but she liked the privacy it afforded. And how it blocked her view of the often-chaotic coaching inn.

Jane rose and walked into the bedchamber. The view from its window was more peaceful. There, an ivied oak tree and stone wall. And in the distance, if she looked for it, the tall brick chimney stacks of Brockwell Court. The elegant manor might once have been her home, if life had turned out differently. Beyond it lay a patchwork of farms, pastureland, chalk downs, and small villages.

A soft knock interrupted her thoughts. Returning to the sitting room, Jane called, "Come."

Cadi, the young maid who helped her dress and brought her meals, stepped inside, her face cheerful as usual. "Finished your breakfast, I see."

"Yes, thank you." Jane nodded toward the arranged flowers—spring blooms from her own garden combined with a few purchased from the greenhouse. "And would you mind taking these back with you? This one for the entry hall, and that one for the front desk."

"Happily. They're beautiful. You ought to come over and see how they brighten the old place."

"Just set them in their usual places, if you please. I would only be underfoot."

"Not at all. You're the landlady now, and more than welcome."

"Another time, perhaps." Jane had offered to help with the inn early in their marriage, but John insisted her place was here, in the small, separate house he'd built for them. After all, gentlewomen did not "work." After a few attempts, Jane stopped offering. And soon . . . other concerns occupied her mind.

"I am off on an errand this morning," she added.

"An errand?" The girl's gaze shifted from Jane's black bombazine to the long box on the sideboard. "Then . . . might you wear the new gown?"

Jane shook her head. "I am only going to the churchyard."

Cadi sighed, clearly disappointed. "Very well." She carried the vases to the door. "I'll come back for the breakfast tray."

Jane nodded and lifted a deep black bonnet from its peg. She stood before the long mirror to tie its strings, then pulled on her gloves.

A few minutes later, she left the lodge, a clutch of flowers in her hands. As she passed the coach archway that led into the stable yard, movement caught her eye. The farrier stood in the courtyard, burly arms crossed, in conversation with a young postillion who looked to be no more than sixteen. Joe, she believed his name was.

Noticing her pass, the postboy tipped his cap to her, and she sent him a warm smile in return.

The farrier nodded in her direction. “Mrs. Bell.”

Jane nodded but did not stop to greet him. There was something about that man. . . . Seeing him always stirred up bad memories. After all, he had been the one to bring John’s body back to Ivy Hill.

She continued on, past the front of the inn, before crossing the High Street to avoid the nosy greengrocer arranging his bushels of produce. Thankfully, the rest of the shops were still quiet at this time of morning. She walked up narrow Potters Lane, past the lock-up and village hall, and then turned onto Church Street. At its end, she pushed open the listing gate and stepped into the churchyard, passing ancient tombs and faded headstones until she came to a more recent grave.

John Franklin Bell
Beloved Son & Husband
1788–1819

A visit on the first anniversary of John’s death had seemed fitting. But he was not the only loved one she had lost.

Jane stood at that particular spot because it would raise no questions. Anyone seeing her at her husband’s grave would walk by without a second look.

She pressed the modest bouquet to her abdomen as though to quell the ache there, and then bent low. She divided the bouquet into six individual flowers—a single pink rose and five white moss roses—and spread them across the grave.

Jane glanced around to make sure no one was watching, then kissed her fingers and touched the headstone. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

The creak of a hinge startled her, and she looked up.

An elderly man emerged from a work shed nearby, pushing a wheelbarrow with shovel handle protruding. He wore a drab coat and flat cap atop scruffy grey hair. The sexton, Jane recognized,

who maintained the church grounds and dug the graves. He set the wheelbarrow down and picked up his shovel with gnarled hands.

Suddenly self-conscious, Jane straightened, watching the man from the corner of her eye.

A church door opened and the Reverend Mr. Paley came striding out. Seeing Jane, he diverted from his path and walked toward her.

“Hello, Mrs. Bell. I am sorry to intrude on your private moment, but I wanted to express my condolences. I know this must be a difficult day for you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Paley.”

The vicar glanced over at the sexton, leaning on his shovel. “Haven’t you some work to do, Mr. Ainsworth?”

The old man grunted and began digging up a bramblebush growing between the headstones.

For a moment, Mr. Paley continued to watch the sexton. In a low voice he said to Jane, “That man is one of God’s more . . . interesting creations. I’ve heard him talking to the church mice more than once. He refuses to set traps, so I shall have to do it.”

Jane had heard the sexton was odd. Apparently the rumors were true.

The vicar sighed, then gave her a sad smile. “Well. I shall leave you. Please let me know if there is anything I can do. Mrs. Paley and I will be praying for you—today especially.”

Jane thanked him again. He bowed and continued on his way.

With a final look at John’s grave, Jane left the churchyard with little solace from the visit. Behind her, the gate swung on its hinges. She wished the sexton would repair the latch. It would not stay closed, no matter what she did.

On the walk back, Jane passed the vicarage, public house, and bakery without really seeing them, her head bowed to discourage people from seeking her out. She reached the High Street without having to speak to anyone. The Bell Inn was just across the street. She had almost made it.

To her right, the door to the dressmaker’s shop opened and Mrs. Shabner, mantua-maker and milliner, poked her head out.

“Mrs. Bell!”

Jane winced. She had never liked that address. *Mrs. Bell* was John’s mother. Hearing it, she squelched the impulse to look around and see if her mother-in-law was standing nearby, a disapproving look on her face.

The dressmaker asked, “What do you think of the new gown? I know you received it, for my girl delivered it to your door herself.”

“I did not order a new gown, Mrs. Shabner,” Jane replied, gently yet firmly.

“My dear, you have been in full mourning for a year now. You ought to change to half mourning, at least.”

The elderly woman wore a frock of bright yellow-and-blue stripes, and a feathered cap. The phrase “Mutton dressed as lamb” whispered through Jane’s mind, and she chastised herself for the unkind thought.

“I am sorry, but I don’t need a new gown at present.”

“Yes, you do, my dear. Look at that old thing. The elbows are worn shiny, and the buttonholes frayed. When I made that, I still had all my teeth.”

“You exaggerate.”

“Try it on, at least,” Mrs. Shabner urged. “I think the lavender will suit you very well. I made it according to your previous measurements, but I shall be happy to alter it as needed. You know my door is always open, though few enough pass through it.” She sighed. “I think I shall retire. Or move to Wishford, where my talents would be better appreciated.”

The woman was forever threatening to move to Wishford. Jane pressed her eyes closed, stifling a sigh of her own. “If you have another customer in mind for the gown, then, by all means, I shall send it back without delay.”

“No, no. You are the only recent widow in town at present. Take your time. But once you try it on, you shall see that I am right.”

Jane left her with a wave and crossed the street.

Reaching *The Bell*, Jane paused, noticing the small *Vacancy* sign hanging by a single chain, the other chain dangling uselessly. A

breeze blew up the hill, and the sign slowly revolved on its chain, the word spinning past Jane's eyes again and again.

Vacancy . . . Vacancy . . .

That sign had hung there more often of late. And the word perfectly symbolized how Jane felt.

Empty.

She pulled her gaze away and returned to the refuge of her lodge.



Three days after the somber anniversary of her son's death, Thora Stonehouse Bell sat pressed against a carriage window, the bony shoulder of a young clergyman digging into hers at every turn. On the bench opposite sat an elderly couple, he snoring away, and she fanning herself with a copy of the *Lady's Monthly Museum*.

Thora popped a ginger candy into her mouth to allay her queasy stomach. She offered one to the woman, who listlessly accepted.

The clergyman beside her had put away his New Testament half an hour before, and now read from a traveler's guidebook. Noticing her glance at it, he asked, "Are you a first-time visitor to this area?"

Thora hesitated. It *was* her first trip back—her first time to feel like a visitor in her old home, and probably not a welcome one. "Yes, I suppose I am."

His eyes shone with eagerness. "Then allow me to share what I've read. We are now some ninety miles southwest of London, in Wiltshire, known for its white horses carved into chalk hills, the Salisbury Cathedral, and ancient marvels like Stonehenge. It seems we are in for a treat at our next stop." He ran his finger along the printed page and read, "The Bell is a fine old coaching inn, licensed to a John Bell and managed expertly by his widowed mother. The Bell accommodates visitors with every species of comfort, neatness, and domestic attention."

"Apparently your guidebook is out of date," Thora said dryly. "Better stick to the Scriptures, Parson. Beyond that, you can't believe everything you read."

He gave her a confused look—brow and mouth puckered—but

she did not bother to explain. Instead, she turned away, discouraging further conversation.

She looked out the window, but instead of the passing countryside, memories passed before her eyes and sadness pressed down hard.

Poor John. . . .

Her firstborn had been gone over a year now. The thought lanced her heart. It seemed a lifetime ago that she and Frank and their sons had all lived together under the same roof. She knew where Frank and John were now. Buried in St. Anne's churchyard. But she had little idea where Patrick might be. Her youngest. Her blue-eyed boy. What an angel he had been as a lad. What a disappointment as a man. She wondered what whim he was pursuing now, and if he were in good health and out of trouble. Thora whispered a prayer. It was all she could do for him now.

Very soon she would be back at the coaching inn that had once belonged to her parents, then her husband, then her eldest son, and now her daughter-in-law. She wondered what sort of reception Jane would give her and doubted it would be a warm one. She hoped Talbot, at least, would be glad to see her.

Thora took a deep breath and surveyed her surroundings. The coach crossed the River Wylde bridge, and passed the village of Wishford with its tall, battlemented church tower. Then they began the climb up Ivy Hill, which gave her a fair view of the Salisbury Plain out one window, and Grovely Wood out the other.

Thora could hardly believe she was returning after less than a year away. When she left, she had foolishly imagined she would live with her sister—two independent women together—for the rest of her life. But soon she had seen those impractical dreams fading away.

You can take the woman from the inn, but not the innkeeper from the woman, she mused.

Yet Diana had managed it. Her sister had hated growing up in a coaching inn and had left as soon as she could, never looking back. The same was proving more difficult for Thora.

THE INNKEEPER OF IVY HILL

What would she find upon arrival? She hoped the cook, Mrs. Rooke, had exaggerated in her recent letter, which stated that the place was falling into disrepair without her.

Either way, Thora would not grovel. She would say she had come only for a visit. She would not admit that her future with her sister—and her living situation—had come to an end.