

Chapter 1

In my dream I smelled the dark sulphurous stink of a passing witch and I pulled up the coarse blanket over my head and whispered, “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us” to shield me from my nightmare of terror. Then I heard shouting and the terrifying crackle of hungry flames and I came awake in a rush of panic and sat up on my pallet and looked fearfully around the lime-washed cell.

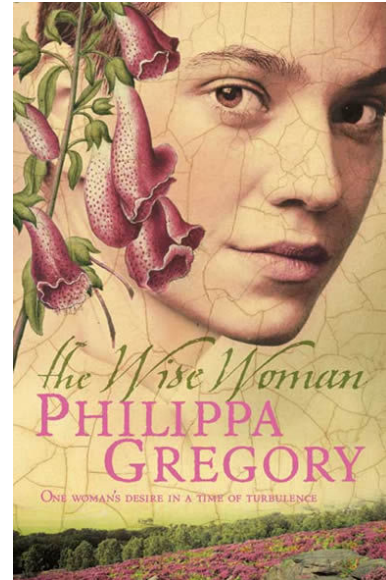
The walls were orange and scarlet with the bobbing light of reflected flames, and I could hear yells of angry rioting men. I knew at once that the worst thing had happened. Lord Hugo had come to wreck us, Lord Hugo had come for the abbey, as we had feared he might come, since King Henry’s visitors had found us wealthy and pretended that we were corrupt. I flung on my gown and snatched my rosary, and my cape, crammed my feet into my boots, tore open the door of my cell, and peered into the smoke-filled corridor of the novitiate dormitory.

The abbey was stone-built, but the rafters would burn, the beams, and the wooden floors. Even now the flames might be licking upward, under my feet. I heard a little whimper of fear and it was my own craven voice. On my left were the slits of open windows, and red smoke swirled in through them like the tongues of hungry serpents licking toward my face. I peered out with watering eyes and saw, black against the fire, the figures of men crossing and recrossing the cloister green with their arms full of treasures, our treasures, holy treasures from the church. Before them was a bonfire, and while I watched incredulously these Satan’s soldiers ripped off the jeweled covers and threw the fluttering pages of our books into the flames. Beyond them was a man on a big roan horse – black as death against the firelight, with his head thrown back, laughing like the devil: Lord Hugo.

I turned with a sob of fear and coughed on the smoke. Behind me were the single cells where the young novitiates, my sisters in Christ, were still sleeping. I took two steps down the corridor to bang on the doors and scream at them to awake and save themselves from this devil inside our gates and his fiery death of burning. I put my hand out to the first door, but the smoke was in my throat and no sound came. I choked on my scream, I swallowed and tried to scream again. But I was trapped in this dream, voiceless and powerless, my feet wading through brimstone, my eyes filled with smoke, my ears clogged with the shouts of heretics wrecking their way to damnation. I tapped on one door with a light hand. I made no sound.

No sound at all.

I gave a little moan of despair and then I picked up my skirts and I fled from my sisters, from my duty and from the life I had chosen. I scuttered down the breakneck spiral staircase like a rat from a burning hayrick.



The door at the foot of the stairs was barred; beside it was the cell where my mother in Christ, the abbess Hildebrande, slept. I paused. For her above them all, I should have risked my life. For all of my young sisters I should have screamed a warning: but to save Mother Hildebrande I should have burned alive and it would have been no more than her due. I should have banged her door off its hinges, I should have screamed out her name, I should never, never have left without her. She was my guardian, she was my mother, she was my savior. Without her I would have been nothing. I paused for a moment – a bare half second I gave her – then I smelled smoke spilling under the refectory door and I flew at the bolts on the back door, rattled them open, and I was out in the west garden with the herb-beds around me cool and pale in the darkness.

I could hear the shouts from the heart of the abbey but out here in the gardens all was clear. I raced down the formal garden paths and flung myself into the slim shadow of the door in the outer wall and paused for one moment. Over the rapid thudding of my pulse I heard the noise of the colored windows cracking in the heat and then the great crash as they were smashed by a thrown candlestick or silver plate. On the far side of the door I could hear the river flowing, splashing over the stones, showing me my way back to the outside world like the pointing finger of my own especial devil.

It was not too late, I was not yet through the door. For a second, for half a breath, I paused, tested my courage to go back – pictured myself hammering on the doors, breaking the windows, yelling for my mother, Mother Hildebrande, and my sisters, and facing whatever was to come at her side, with her hand in mine, and my sisters all around me.

I waited for no more than a moment.

I fed out of the little garden door, and slammed it shut behind me.

No one saw me go.

Only the eyes of God and His Blessed Mother were on me. I felt their gaze burning into my back, as I kilted up my skirts and ran. Ran from the wrecked chapel and the burning abbey, ran with the speed of a traitor and a coward. And as I ran, I heard behind me a single thin scream – cut off short. A cry for help from someone who had woken too late.

It did not make me pause – not even for a second. I ran as if the very gates of hell were opening at my heels, and as I ran, leaving my mother and my sisters to die, I thought of Cain the brother-killer. And I believed that by the time I came to Bowes village the branches of the trees and the tendrils of the ivy would have slashed at me as I ran – laid their stripes upon me – so that I would be marked forever as Cain, with the curse of the Lord.