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SOME SECRETS AREN'T FOR KEEPING

GILLY'S SECRET

Ellen Howard



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Gilly's Secret

by ELLEN HOWARD



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Gilly's Secret

Books by Ellen Howard

Circle of Giving
When Daylight Comes
Gilly's Secret
Edith Herself
Her Own Song
Sister
The Chickenhouse House
The Cellar
The Tower Room

For all the Gillys

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Gilly's Secret

CHAPTER ONE

WE WERE UNDERNEATH the rhododendron bush, my sister Honey and me, the first time I heard their voices behind the hedge. They were laughing. That's what made me stop to listen. The laughter. It sounded happy . . . carefree.

"Don't stop," Honey said. "C'mon, Gilly. Finish the story."

I tried to think about the story I had been telling—something about Juliana, my made-up princess. Something about her faerie gown. "Uh, yeah" I said. "Her gown. It's all pearly pink and . . ."

"Like this?" Honey said, twirling the doll we had made from a twig and an upside-down blossom.

"Yeah, like that. That's right. When she dances, her gown whirls out around her legs, all pinky-silk and nice . . ."

The laughter stopped, but I could still hear a voice—not what it said, but just the way it sounded—smooth and warm and silky the way I imagined Juliana's gown.

"Gil-ly!" Honey whined.

But I didn't answer her. I was listening to the voice, to its rippling happiness. And then the voice laughed again,

and I thought of the way Mar used to laugh when I was little, and it made a hard, hurting place in my stomach, and I had to close my eyes.

UNDER the rhododendron bush was my special place. I didn't share it with anyone but Honey.

"That rhododendron needs pruning," Mar had been saying ever since we moved into the house. But Mar never had time, and of course, Dad didn't do it, so it just kept getting bigger. "I'll bet that rhododendron has been growing in this yard for fifty years," Mar would say.

"What rhododendron?" Dad would say, looking up from his book, his eyes unfocused.

"The *pink* rhododendron in the back yard," Mar would say, and I could hear the sharp edges in her voice. "If you ever did a little work around the yard, you'd know which rhododendron!"

And then they'd be off again, fighting, the words flying back and forth harder and louder, until I slipped out the back door, covering my ears.

The rhododendron was a place to go where it was quiet. The leaves were big and shady green, and the criss-crossy branches arched so that, from the house, no one could see underneath. Hunkered down inside, on the smooth, grassless ground, I could look out and see everything, but no one could see me. I was safe.

It was under the rhododendron that I first imagined Juliana and first made a doll of her from the pink rhodo-

dendron blossoms. That was last spring, after Mar got her job working evenings at the hospital, and Dad . . . Last spring, when the secret began.

HONEY was tugging at my arm because I had stopped telling the story again. "Gilly," she was saying. "Gilly!"

"Hush," I said. "Listen."

Honey got quiet, and her brown eyes got big, listening. "A lady," she said in a loud whisper. "I hear a lady and some kids."

"Let's look," I said.

Where the rhododendron had grown up next to the laurel hedge, the hedge didn't have any leaves on our side. It made holes you could look through to see into the yard of the house behind ours. Honey and I crawled around the bush and peeked through.

"A lady," Honey whispered, so loudly I was afraid they were going to hear us. Honey nodded her head solemnly. "It's a lady all right! And two girls. Just like us."

"Shhh!" I was hissing at her, and all the time, I was looking at those girls.

Honey was wrong. They weren't like us at all. Not at all.

HONEY is my little sister. Well, really her name isn't Honey. It's Beatrice. I'm the one who nicknamed her Honey. It was when I was just a kid and didn't know any better. They were calling her "Bea," and I thought they

meant “bee,” like in “honeybee.” It made sense to me then. In a way, it still does, because that’s what she reminds me of—a brown-and-gold honeybee. She even, sort of, buzzes around—“busy as a bee,” like Mar says.

But cute as she is, Honey isn’t pretty, any more than I’m pretty. The girls in the yard behind the hedge were *pretty*—the rosy-cheeked, golden-curls kind of pretty you read about in books. They looked clean and neat and . . . shining. Cared for. I liked the way the lady’s hand rested, light and loving, on the bigger girl’s shoulder. I liked the easy way they talked together, smiling and touching and . . . leaning close.

I thought only Honey and I knew about the new neighbors, until I heard Mar telling Dad about them the next morning.

Dad looked up, kind of sharp. “Neighbors?” he said. “In that old, falling-down place? I figured it was ready for demolition like this dump.”

“These old houses would be nice if they were fixed up,” Mar said, kind of wistfully. “It’s a couple with two kids. I’m glad. It’ll be someone nearby for Gilly and Honey to play with.”

Dad looked grouchy. “Gilly and Honey don’t need anyone to play with,” he said. “I liked the neighborhood the way it was. Quiet. Nobody bothering us.”

I *DIDN’T* need anyone to play with. Ever since the secret began, I felt funny with other kids. I thought probably

everyone in my new school could tell, just by looking at me. Anyway, nobody here seemed to like me much. I *didn't* need anyone. I had Honey, after all . . . and Juliana.

I liked playing with Honey. I liked telling her stories and taking care of her. "This is your baby sister. You can help take care of her," Mar told me when Honey was born, and I *did* take care of her. In fact, it was a good thing Honey had me, especially when Mar started working. Dad wasn't very good at taking care of kids. Most of the time, he was busy—reading or, once in a while, involved in a new job. Not that he didn't love us—in his way, as Mar said. He even started telling me so sometimes, after Mar got the job at the hospital.

"You're my own baby girl," Dad would say to me in the evening, when Mar was at work, and Honey was in bed. "I don't know what I'd do without my baby."

That was when he began to want me to stay up to keep him company. The light from the TV would flicker blue at the other end of the room, and he would hold me on his lap and hug me real tight against him. I liked the hugging. It was only the other stuff—the stuff that made me feel smothery and sick—that I didn't like.

"I won't hurt you," Dad would say. "I won't hurt my baby."

I was sure he didn't *mean* to hurt.

TIMES like those were when I most 'specially liked to close my eyes and think about Juliana.

Pretend I'm not me, I liked to think. Pretend I'm not Gilly Harper at all.

Pretend I'm someone good.

And pretty.

And happy.

Pretend I'm someone special.

Pretend . . . *I am Juliana. I am Juliana, dancing in a pearly pink gown that whirls and swirls around my legs. I am dancing beneath the flowering bush for all my kingdom to see.*

How beautiful she is! say the smiling people. How happy she is! How good!

And I swoop and swirl and lift and twirl—lost in the music that twinkles my toes. I am dancing!

I'm not Gilly. I don't want to be Gilly!

I am Juliana, dancing.

CHAPTER TWO

THIS AFTERNOON, after school, why don't you go over and meet those new girls," Mar said, bending to kiss me as I left for school that morning. I could see her eyes slide sideways to see what Dad would say, even as she kissed me. "Why don't you?" she said, and her voice was a little too loud.

Dad pretended he was reading, but I saw the way his eyebrows pulled together in a frowning black line.

"Take Honey with you, and go after school," Mar said. She handed me my lunch money. "Better get going, chicken. It's late. I'm going back to bed for a while," she said, more to the top of Dad's head, showing over the newspaper, than to me.

Dad grunted.

"Do you *have* to go to work today, Mar?" I said, not able to stop the words before they were out.

"You know I do, Gilly. Don't start that again."

I could hear the tiredness in her voice. Dad was between jobs right then, so of course Mar had to work, and the three-to-eleven shift was all she could get. She had explained it to me before when I begged her to stay home. "Your dad's right here if you need anything," she had said.

So now I said, "I'm sorry." I won't start that again, I

told myself, ashamed. "Have a good sleep, Mar," I said, and she smiled at me, kind of grateful, I thought.

"That's my girl," she said as I went out. She closed the door.

OF COURSE, I didn't go meet the new girls. Mar forgot all about it, as I thought she would.

I could feel the emptiness of the house when I opened the door that afternoon after school. I found Mar's note on the kitchen bulletin board.

Gilly —

Would you do a load of laundry? I've got to have some clean uniforms, and I didn't get them done before I had to leave for work.

Mrs. Corliss will bring Honey home from preschool.

Dad's at an interview.

Love,

Mar

I pushed some dirty dishes on the counter out of the way and put my books down. A pile of clothes was mounded on the floor beside the washer. I began to stuff them in, feeling sort of . . . comfortable, listening to the emptiness of the house.

At an interview. Dad was always having interviews. Sometimes, he even got a job. Trouble was, the jobs never