

THE
HUMMINGBIRD
DAGGER

CINDY ANSTEY

Swoon READS
NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK

An imprint of Feiwel and Friends and Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

THE HUMMINGBIRD DAGGER. Copyright © 2019 by Cynthia Ann Anstey. All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America.

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please
contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at
(800) 221-7945 ext. 5442 or by email at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-1-250-17489-5 (hardcover) / ISBN 978-1-250-17488-8 (ebook)

Book design by TK

First edition, 2019

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

swoonreads.com

FOR MIKE, CHRISTINE, DEB, AND DAN,
ALWAYS STANDING BY MY SIDE.

Before

The dark, narrow room was rife with the fetid odors of mold and decaying fish. The only light came from a slit high above her head. Beyond its insipid glow were shadows, some deep and inert, others blurred and in motion.

In this cell of unknowns, only the dagger stood out. It swung from hand to hand, side to side. Words accompanied each movement, but the roar of panic obscured them.

All but the dagger ceased to exist.

Her eyes locked on its menacing beauty. The artistry was both simple and inspired, its form a study of opposites. The dark wood hilt gently curved into the shape of a hummingbird. The long bill that nature had fashioned to sip, man had fashioned to drink—to drink the nectar of life. And it was a thirsty bird.

Evidence of its last feed still dripped from the pointed steel beak. Dripped until it formed a red oozing puddle, small at first but growing steadily.

Blood. Her blood.

CHAPTER ONE

Disastrous Encounter

WELFORD MILLS, 1833

Guiding his horse to the top of a grassy knoll, young Lord James Ellerby toured Hardwick Manor and its grounds. The Baron hadn't gone far when he heard the scraping of wheels against stone, and he jerked around to witness a curricule emerge from the stable yard in a rush.

Walter, James' younger brother, stood on the flimsy bouncing floorboard of a carriage, urging his horses from a trot to a run as he dashed pell-mell toward the manor's gate. Walter wasn't thinking of his safety or oncoming traffic. His friend Henry Thompson clung to the side rail, looking anything but confident.

"Walter, stop!" James yelled, though he was certain the noise of the racing curricule prevented his words from carrying to the fourteen-year old boys. James' heart pounded as he watched, fearing dire consequences. Had Walter learned nothing from their father's accident and death a year ago?

Then James heard the jiggling equipage and thundering hooves of an approaching coach coming down the London road. He turned

to stare down the hill at the large vehicle as it sped toward the Torrin Bridge—and Walter’s emerging lightweight carriage.

James shouted again, but to no avail. He was too far away.

As Walter’s carriage and the lumbering coach disappeared behind the trees, a great cacophony of crashes and screams rent the air. Heeling Tetley to a gallop, James’ heart pounded in double time. Within moments, he jerked to a stop in front of the bridge.

The road was empty, though the wind was filled with the high-pitched terror of the horses. Snippets of foul memories flashed through James’ mind. He saw the ruined body of his father in the wreckage of a different accident, his neck bent at an impossible angle.

In near panic, James called again. “Walter! Henry?” Guiding Tetley to the edge of the road, he looked down into the gully.

Walter’s curricule sat to the left of the bridge at an awkward angle, but still on its wheels. The boys were wide-eyed and motionless on the bench, but otherwise appeared unharmed. The horses stood at the edge of the river. The shrill sounds of their distress abated as Henry crooned soothing words of comfort from his seat.

Walter looked up, meeting James’ gaze. The color slowly drained from his brother’s face and he swallowed convulsively. “I . . . umm . . . I . . .”

James exhaled a tortured breath and then huffed in relief. He wanted to shout, pummel, and hug his brother all at the same time. Instead, he turned Tetley to the opposite, considerably steeper, bank of the Torrin.

The momentum of the near collision had propelled the larger carriage down the slope on an angle. It had almost overturned and now hung precariously. Mire covered the doors. The coach’s horses were knee-deep in water, but other than being spooked, looked fine.

And then, James saw a figure on the ground—a very still figure. His stomach clenched and he jumped from Tetley, scrambling and slipping down the muddy slope in his haste.

A young woman lay on her back in the shallows of the river. Her face was pale, and long strands of brown hair floated beside her. James' view was partially obstructed by two squatting men at her side. One was only visible from the back. His great coat dropped from his broad shoulders to blanket the mud. The other man had a smudge of blood smeared across his cheek; his face was unremarkable except for a scar on his chin.

Stepping forward, James' path was suddenly blocked by the coachman. The man's pockmarked face was flushed with anger, and his black-and-gray peppered head jerked in agitation.

"Is she all right?" James asked, indicating the figure in the water.

The coachman stared past James to where Walter and Henry watched from the roadside. His eyes narrowed. "Not to worry, sir. Her'll be right as rain in a tick." His harsh tone contrasted sharply with the reassuring words; he didn't even look toward the unconscious young woman. It left James unconvinced. "I needs 'elp rightin' me coach," the man said. "The sooner we gets this here coach of mine up, the sooner I can gets her to a doctor."

Glancing at the figures by the water, James frowned and then nodded. "Time is of the essence." He turned back to his brother and his friend. "Get down here!" he shouted, trying to instill authority in his tone. He pointed to the far end of the coach deeply embedded in the mud. "When I say so, push. And push hard!"

It was no surprise that Henry was the first to move, rushing through the mire, though Walter joined him quickly enough.

"Hitch your horses to the back," James told the coachman. A

lord expected compliance, even if he was only twenty years old and newly endowed with authority. “And get her out of the water!” he shouted to the men by the river.

At first, the men showed no signs of hearing. Then, without rising, one leaned over and slowly pulled her closer to the shore, into the mud.

“Are you *sure* she is all right?” James asked again. The words almost stuck in his throat. Memories of his father’s broken body churned his mind yet again.

“A’ course, sir,” one of the passengers said. His cheek was red and bruised.

“Who is she?”

“Don’t know.” The man stood. “She got on at the Ivy in Ellingham. Didn’t exactly introduce herself.” He turned to the coachman. “Hurry up, man.”

The coachman bristled. He had already unhitched the horses and rigged a line to the back of the coach. “You could always get your arses up here an’ ’elp!”

The bruised man looked at the coachman with something akin to disgust, though he did take a position opposite to James, behind the coach door. The other man stayed by the water, nominally watching over the injured young woman.

James anchored his hands and shoved his shoulder against the filthy coach. His face was so close to the wood that he could almost taste the paint. Sweat trickled down his nose. He took a deep breath as much from disquiet as to prepare for the weight of the large coach. He shouted and the four men pushed while the coachman bellowed and pulled at his horses.

The coach was old and top-heavy; bandboxes and trunks

clung to the back, adding to the burden. The horses, nervous and fatigued, were almost at their limit. Then James felt a budge, a slight movement upward. James strained further and yelled to the others to push harder until, at last, the coach defied gravity and came to a standstill on the crest of the road.

Leaning over, hands resting on his knees, James gulped at the air, trying to regulate his breathing. Suddenly, the road was a hive of activity as half a dozen field hands converged on them.

“You needs ’elp, Lord Ellerby?”

“Yes, Sam.” James nodded as he straightened. “Could you get the team hitched? They need to get to a doctor.”

The coachman frowned at the good Samaritans and yanked the reins from Sam’s hands when the laborer picked up the leathers. Incensed, James was about to deliver a set down, when he was distracted by the sounds of wheels on gravel. A grocer’s cart appeared on the far side of the bridge.

“Lud, Mr. Haines, am I glad to see you,” James said as the small wagon drew up beside him. He leaned over the edge, assessing. Not big, but big enough. “Might we ask your help?” At Mr. Haines’ nod, James motioned to Sam and another hand, Ned. “Clear room in the cart.”

The coachman tried to block their way. “No, sir. I be almost done.”

James sidestepped, slid back down the riverbank, and elbowed the ineffectual men out of the way. With one arm behind the injured woman’s knees and the other under her shoulders, James lifted slowly and gently. She was no weight at all. James noted the dark red stain growing in her hair and across her forehead. It flowed freely, dripping on his boots.

His belly clenched. This did not bode well.

The bruised passenger dogged James' heels. "We will take her now."

James ignored the man, brushing past him without a glance, and carried his burden up the bank. Lifting the young woman over the side rail of the grocer's cart, James gently laid her down among the carrots and cabbages. Shucking off his coat, he covered as much of her as he could. "Take her up to the manor, if you would, Mr. Haines. I will be right there."

He turned back to the boys. "Walter, ride over to Kirkstead-on-Hill. Get Dr. Brant."

Brant was the only person James would trust with this dire a situation, someone trained as a physician and a surgeon. It didn't matter that Brant had only been in practice for a year; he knew what he was about and he was a good friend.

Walter jumped onto the seat of his curricule. Henry, mud and all, leapt up beside him. Walter turned the grays and hurried down the London road.

"Drive sensibly," James shouted after them, likely to no avail.

The coachman was livid. "Y've no right, sir! To take away me fare."

"Your fare could die before your next stop. She needs immediate medical attention." James tossed a sovereign at the callous man. "That should cover the remainder of her fees."

The coachman caught the coin easily enough, but looked far from pleased.

"Sam, you and Ned get her trunks off the coach," James instructed, "and bring them up to the manor."

James mounted his horse and galloped after the wagon. He

quickly caught up to the lumbering cart as Mr. Haines negotiated the drive with diligent care.

James pulled Tetley to a walk.

In the full sun, he could now see the woman more clearly—she was young, perhaps eighteen or nineteen. Her face was smudged with dirt and covered with cuts and bruises, so much so that it was hard to discern what she really looked like. Her dress was ripped and soiled beyond repair. Her bodice was soaked, adding the possibility of a chill to their worries.

James sighed with impatience and concern—a contrary combination. He reached over and tucked the corner of his coat under her side. She did not look well.

“I will ride ahead, Mr. Haines, and get the household ready for her.” James nudged Tetley with his heels. He didn’t need to get the household ready as much as he needed to solicit his sister’s help.



AT THE MANOR James tossed his reins to the groom and headed into the main hall.

“Where might I find my sister, Robert?” he asked the footman as the door opened. Feeling besieged, James *almost* wished his mother were here to consult . . . *almost*. The Dowager Lady Ellerby had not yet regained her equilibrium, which was tenuous at the best of times, since his father’s passing. Fortunately, she was in Bath visiting her sister and not due to return until the end of June.

“Miss Ellerby is in the garden, sir. I believe she took her colors out there,” Robert replied.

James nodded and quickly walked to the back of the hall and

into the saloon. His wide gait sped him across the floor of the large room, and then through the French doors to the patio.

At eighteen, Caroline was two years his junior and was, unlike Walter or his lady mother, of a steady, if somewhat unconventional, character. James had always relied on Caroline's good sense, never more so than his first year as Lord Ellerby. Just out of mourning, Caroline's yellow gown was easy to spot through the misty green lace of the new foliage. She was at her easel, not far from the sheltered arch of the conservatory.

"There was an accident on the London road," James said bluntly when he finally reached her side.

Caroline put down her brush and turned toward him. If she was surprised to see him covered in mud and without a coat, she showed no signs of it. "Was anyone hurt?"

"Yes, a young woman riding the London coach. With," he added in a tight voice, "no one to see to her welfare." The soiled, sodden face came to mind once again, constricting his breathing.

Caroline frowned. "Badly? Was she hurt badly?"

"I do not know. Mr. Haines is bringing her in his cart and Walter is fetching Brant."

"Is Walter involved?" Caroline stood and started toward the manor.

James followed. "I am afraid so. But he is fine. Even his ridiculous curricule is undamaged."

"That is almost too bad."

James chewed at his lip and nodded as he stepped through the door directly behind his sister.

Mrs. Fogel and Daisy were in the main hall observing the mud tracked across the tiled floor when Caroline interrupted their conversation. "Mrs. Fogel, Mr. Haines will be arriving at any moment

with a casualty—a passenger from the London mail coach. Could you prepare one of the maid's rooms? Perhaps, Daisy, you could move in with Betty for a few days. Yes, I'm sure that's what Mother would recommend . . . if she were here."

No sooner had Mrs. Fogel rushed away to carry out her instructions, when James heard the squeak and rattle of the cart as it pulled up to the kitchen door. Help ran from every direction. Caroline shooed all but Robert and Paul, the groom, back to work.

"Poor girl. She does not look good," Caroline said as the men carried the young woman up the back stairs and placed her carefully on the bed in one of the maid's rooms.

Caroline sat on the edge of the bed and lifted a lock of hair that had fallen over the young woman's bruised and bloody face. "Do not worry, dear. We will have you to rights in no time. Dr. Brant is an excellent physician." She patted the motionless hand as if the young woman could hear her.

James watched silently from the doorway, praying his sister was right.



BY THE TIME Caroline heard activity on the stairs, she had begun to clean the young woman's rough, bruised hands. She could only imagine the difficult life this girl had had to live. When Dr. Adam Brant entered the room, he hurried past James with a perfunctory nod, almost filling what little space remained. A tall young man, he bent over to accommodate the slant of the roof.

Caroline backed away from the bed to give him room. "Thank you for coming so quickly, Doctor."

"She does not appear to have broken anything." Dr. Brant said after performing his examination. He opened his mouth as if about

to speak and then closed it, shaking his head at some internal thought. Finally, he spoke. "While this," he indicated a cut on the young woman's right jaw, "*looks* nasty, this," he pointed to the wound on the side of her head, "might be a greater concern."

Caroline swallowed against the sudden lump in her throat and turned to meet James' troubled gaze. She offered him a tepid smile of reassurance and then turned back to watch as the doctor dressed the patient's gashed jaw. From the corner of her eye, Caroline watched James slip from the room, his expression grim and determined.

"I don't believe she has a broken head," Dr. Brant told her, "but we will not know for certain for a few more hours. Her pupils seem to be reacting to light, though it is hard to tell in this bright room." He looked over at Caroline. "I can wait with you, if you wish."

Caroline left Daisy, whose room had been commandeered, to tend the patient and led Dr. Brant downstairs to the front of the manor. As they neared the central hall, they could hear a loud voice issuing from the library. Although James' words were indiscernible, his tone was not. Walter was being taken to task in no uncertain terms.

Embarrassed by the emotional display, Caroline steered Dr. Brant toward the drawing room. "Perhaps we should wait in here." She turned to the footman. "Robert, let Lord Ellerby know where we are, please. When he is free." She quickly closed the doors. The heavy oak did its job; the echoes of anger were now muffled and almost inaudible.

"James will be here in a moment." Caroline said needlessly. She led the physician to the settee and perched on the seat of an adjacent chair, pretending to be oblivious to the tension emanating from the library.

She sighed, feeling sorry for her brother . . . her *older* brother. Being the disciplinarian was a new role for James—one in which he took no delight. But Walter had to be reined in, held accountable for his actions. For too long, he had run amok, coddled by their mother.

Caroline was certain that James would not lose the argument this time when their mother returned. Come September, Walter would be returning to Eton.



“WHAT WERE YOU *thinking?*” James demanded. His words and tone might have been a tad loud as the question echoed around the room. Doing his best to temper his anger, James took a deep breath. While relaxing his stance, he tried to emulate his father’s most severe expression. “There was no sensibility in the way you were driving, no propriety or modest behavior. All of which you promised!”

“Give over, James. It wasn’t my fault . . . not really. The road is seldom traveled. How was I to know that the London coach was there?”

“Right,” James said with more than a hint of sarcasm. “It’s only lumbered down the road at the same time every day since before your birth . . . But how could you have guessed that today, of all days, it would do so again.”

“I couldn’t!” Walter glared at his brother for some minutes.

James stared back, giving no quarter. If he were not stern and unyielding, Walter would take advantage, pushing the limits, denying James’ authority again.

Finally, Walter lowered his gaze to the floor. “I should have been more cautious.”

James waited, hoping for an apology or a promise to never again race down a road without checking first. But there was neither. Instead, when Walter lifted his eyes, his expression was of derision, his mouth partially open, a scathing comment undoubtedly at the ready.

James could see the strain on his brother's face as he fought the urge to argue, to shout that James couldn't tell him what to do. It had been Walter's contention since their father's demise. Hardly the truth, but the truth hardly mattered.

The standoff continued far beyond what was necessary, but eventually, James considered his point made. He crossed the hall to the drawing room, Walter shuffling in behind him with his shoulders bowed and his eyes glued to the floor. His younger brother crossed the room and sat down—well away from James.

"Sam and Ned left a trunk in the hall, Caroline," James said. "Where should it go?"

Caroline frowned. "Trunk?"

"The young woman's—from the coach."

"Oh, of course." She turned to the footman who stood by the door waiting for instructions. "Take it to the storeroom for now, Robert. Keep it to the front, though. I am sure she will want her things as soon as she awakens."

There was a brief silence after the door latch clicked.

"So, what have you been up to lately, Brant?" James asked, hoping to lighten the atmosphere. He knew he could count on his friend for florid and diverting anecdotes, something to keep Caroline distracted.

He, on the other hand, was restless and took a post at the window. There was nothing to see, nothing to watch except a large coach that lumbered down the road in the twilight hours. If James

hadn't known better, he would have thought it to be the London stagecoach. But that was impossible. The mail coach from London only came through Welford Mills once a day and it had skated down the bank of the Torrin River, leaving behind a sorely injured young woman now resting in their attic.

CHAPTER TWO

The Enigma Awakens

Shadowed faces, in a twisted blur of colors and sound, lurked and menaced before her eyes. Echoes ricocheted through the chambers of her dreams. One moment was calm, the next brought fear. Struggling to break free, she reached out and up, her lungs giving vent to an unidentified terror.

When her eyes focused, she was sitting up in the bed of a sunlit chamber with whitewashed walls. The bed was hard, the linens rough, and her nightdress plain, but all were clean and smelled fresh. And the room was occupied not by shadows but by two women with very wide eyes.

The older of the two stood on the threshold. Her gray hair was tucked neatly beneath her starched muslin cap. Her face was firm but not unfriendly, despite the sharp nose. A black linen dress covered her ample form and her stance was that of authority.

The other woman, who had been leaning over the bed, was considerably younger. A full apron covered her flower print dress. A wet cloth, clutched tightly to her bosom, soaked into the upper bib.

"Gawd! Didn't you half scare the life out of me." The young woman shook the dripping cloth at her, and then she smiled. "Here, you lay yourself back down. Did I hurt you? Is that why you sat up screaming like that?"

"No, oh no. It wasn't you," the patient said absentmindedly. She allowed the young woman to grasp her by the forearms and lower her to the bed, distracted by a strange tightness around her head. She gingerly lifted a hand and fingered the wound cloth that she found there. It ran over her forehead and circled to the back above her ears.

The older woman stepped into the room. "Dr. Brant will be so pleased to see that you're awake. You gave us quite a fright last night. Lying so still, and then your fever started ta go up." Taking a deep breath, the woman straightened. "I'm Mrs. Fogel, the housekeeper, and this here is Daisy."

Mrs. Fogel reached over, taking the wet cloth and shooed Daisy to the door. "Let Dr. Brant know that she's awake." The housekeeper dabbed at the patient's mouth with the cloth. "You won't be able to smile for a while, dear. Never you mind. It's a small concern. Everything's going to be just fine. Miss Ellerby will see to that . . ."

Mrs. Fogel's reassuring words had a lulling quality to them. The shadows dissolved in the nurturing warmth of the housekeeper's voice. Her eyelids grew heavy. Slowly the room faded, sounds drifted away.

Thudding footsteps grew louder. Fear filled her mind and her heart raced. Her eyes flew open and she gasped when a figure appeared in the doorway, but the tall man was a stranger, and a grinning one, at that.

"Good morning," he said. "You look *much* better." He had a slightly protruding chin and a crooked nose. "I'm Dr. Brant."

Mrs. Fogel shifted, trading places with the doctor so that he could take a closer look. He checked under the bandage on her jaw first. "Excellent, healthy pink skin. Yes, indeed, most excellent." His eyes were wide and excited. "If I weren't trying to maintain some dignity, I'd whoop. Yes, indeed, whooping is called for."

He looked expectantly at his patient but when she didn't comment, he continued in a calmer tone. "You have a strong constitution. An infection started but it didn't take hold. It seems to have abated already." He replaced the wrapping and picked up her hands.

After toe wiggling, finger spreading, and even nose touching, the doctor declared that not only would sitting up be permissible but so would the consumption of that most restorative of elixirs, tea.

The recommended broth sounded less appealing.



JAMES SMILED AS he entered the small attic room. The patient was sitting up in easy conversation with Brant. Her straight brown hair was now neatly pushed behind her shoulders and some of the swelling above her ear was gone. Her skin was no longer ashen; her cheeks no longer rosy with fever. And her eyes were open, clear, and full of questions.

"Good morning," James said, standing at the end of the bed. His presence in the woman's room was rather untoward, but he had needed to see their . . . guest. See that she had, indeed, survived the night and was feeling better. "I am James Ellerby . . . Lord Ellerby." He flushed, still uncomfortable with the title. "And

I imagine you have already been told that you are at Hardwick Manor, just outside Welford Mills.”

“Thank you for taking me in, Lord Ellerby. It was generous of you.”

“You are most welcome.”

James was pleased to find the girl articulate. More than articulate; her enunciation was cultured and educated. It contrasted deeply with the ripped and ruined gown that she had arrived in, as well as her bruised hands and dirty, broken nails; it was a bit of a puzzle. “It was the least we could do considering Walter, my half-witted brother, caused your accident.” The recollection brought anger to James’ face. “But enough of that,” he said, unclenching his jaw. “We must let your people know where you are. They are probably frantic or at the very least wondering why you have not arrived with the coach. Were you destined for Exeter?”

The young woman stared at James for what seemed like a long time; her thin brows slowly pulled ever tighter together, and her eyes became distant. “I am . . . not sure. I do not know.”

The room was still and silent. The sounds from the yard that had been drifting in the window muted. The young woman in the bed seemed to shrink. Her breathing became quick and shallow. She clamped a hand over her mouth.

Brant grabbed the basin just in time. He held her hair out of the way and watched helplessly until the young woman was spent. “Too much excitement all at once,” he said. He tried to ease the patient to the pillow, but the young woman flailed as if pushing against her own distress.

“I don’t know. I don’t know,” she kept repeating. Her eyes were wild. She searched their faces from one to the other, and back

again. Then, her posture stiffened, and her chin rose. "I do not know who I am," she said, staring across the room.

Silence echoed resoundingly.

Brant took a noisy breath. "Don't be concerned," he said in a voice slightly elevated from its usual bass pitch. "Memory loss is common with injuries such as yours. It is usually temporary."

James watched as the young woman met the doctor's eyes; almost imperceptibly the patient shook her head.

He frowned, searching for a distraction. "Temporary." Then he nodded a little too enthusiastically. "We don't need your actual name right now. Why not just pick something for the moment, until you remember it? Young-woman-thrown-from-coach is a little too long," James said with false humor.

The young woman attempted a smile. It was wistful and accentuated her vulnerability. "The only name that comes to mind is Beth."

James' heart ached for her. "Beth it is."

"But I do not think that is my name."

"Beth will do for now," James said as bile churned in his stomach. He would have to eventually ask what she did remember, but slowly, with no pressure and without causing anxiety. To do otherwise might cause more damage . . . or so he thought. He'd best check with Brant about that—when not standing in front of the patient.

A rustle from the door broke the spell; Daisy entered with a tray. The teacup rattled against the bowl as she set it on the bedside table.

James met Brant's gaze and then he followed the doctor to the door. They gestured for Daisy to do the same and spoke in whispers in the hall.

“Stay with her, Daisy. Keep her talking, but do not ask any questions,” Brant told the maid. “Not as yet. Keep it light . . . talk about the weather or the retriever’s new pups or your last half day, but do not mention her name or her family.”

Daisy bobbed a curtsy and turned back to the small room.

James glanced in. Beth had not moved; the young woman stared, sightless, at a spot beyond the end of the bed. She didn’t seem to blink or even breathe, and were it not for the occasional shiver there would have been no movement at all.

At the bottom of the stairs, James felt they were far enough away from all and sundry to speak candidly. “Is she likely to remember anything, Brant? Ever?”

“Hard to say. Best not ask her too many questions for a day or two. Give her mind a chance to relax and heal. You could send one of your footmen to Ellingham. Leave word at the inn for anyone who inquires.”

“Yes,” James agreed, though he was distracted. His mind had returned to the small upper room and the forlorn girl who had lost her name and her family in an instant. Her future was now as murky and uncertain as her past.



LOCATED IN THE center of the west wall, the fireplace in the library was opposite the entry from the main hall. The elaborate design and proportion of the parquetry desk in the corner lent James the prestige and large surface required to oversee the running of the estate—his father’s estate. No, he had to stop thinking that he was temporarily filling his father’s shoes. It was a permanent condition—one could not get more permanent than dead.

James shook his head. Morbid thoughts, but James missed his

father terribly. He had yet to find solace in the role of Lord of the Manor. It would come in time.

James had anticipated running the estate in conjunction with a qualified land agent, but Old Dickens was still entrenched and the Dowager Lady Ellerby seemed disinclined to pension the man off. No, that wasn't true. His mother was more disinterested than disinclined . . . but the outcome was the same; the weight of overseeing the estate was on his very inexperienced shoulders.

James frowned at the letter before him, trying to force his mind back to the seed tally. He was aware that the door opened, the swish of a skirt registered and announced his sister's arrival. However, Caroline was not alone. James watched as she and Brant made themselves comfortable in the burgundy leather chairs by the fire.

Scribbling a reminder across a paper, he placed the letter in a growing pile and pushed away from the desk. He joined his sister and friend, flopping inelegantly into a chair.

Caroline huffed. "This is a fine how-do-you-do," she said. "The girl cannot remember who she is or where she was going."

"Yes, I know. I was there when she realized." James shifted his gaze to Brant, not surprised to see his friend's relaxed manner; he was not fazed easily. Not as adept at appearing calm, James shook his head, deeply troubled. There would be people fretting, anxious for the young woman's return. Every day not knowing what had happened to her would be interminable.

"Her people will inquire after her, James." Caroline said, as if reading his mind. "I think we will be surprised by her circumstances. Her voice and manner seem educated. She might even be a gentleman's daughter."

No bonnet or gloves, a torn gown and filthy hands, traveling alone. This did not sound like any lady that James knew. Still, he

did find her direct gaze intriguing; it was almost a challenge. Yes, there was something about her, something . . . interesting.

Without a knock or a by-your-leave, the library doors burst open. Walter entered with great energy; Henry followed in his wake. Paying no heed to the fact that he was interrupting, Walter launched into a dramatic declaration.

"Life is so wild and unexpected! Life holds such excitement, especially in the spring. Do you not find?" he asked no one in particular and continued without hesitation, "Here I was in a fit of blue devils, for I was cruelly deprived of my curricule, suffered unwarranted criticisms, and then duties were pressed unjustly upon me. Bored and bored again, only to find Henry this morning with great news." Walter's drama was affecting no one but himself. "They have a guest at Risely Hall, Henry's uncle recently of the West Indies. Full of stories and adventures. I am revived!" He turned to leave the room, as self-involved as when he entered it. "I am off."

"Walter." James did not raise his voice. "Where are you going?"

Walter's smile slowly disappeared. "Why to Risely Hall, of course."

James crossed his arms, and without taking his eyes off Walter, addressed Henry. "Thank you for dropping by, Mr. Thompson. Walter will, unfortunately, be unable to join you at Risely today. Or tomorrow."

Walter snapped his jaw shut.

Henry bowed without a word and stepped into the hall. The footman quietly closed the door behind him. Stealthy footsteps faded away.

"Now see here, James. You cannot keep me here twiddling my thumbs in penance. I did not mean to force the stagecoach from

the road." Walter turned his appeal to Caroline. "Do not let him bully me like this, sweet sister. I will be miserable."

James watched Caroline struggle to maintain her composure. Her mouth opened and closed silently until the heat in her face flushed to the roots of her hair.

"How dare you! How *dare* you think of your own selfish wants while that poor girl lies in bed half demented because of your carelessness!" She rose and stood in front of her younger brother. Somehow she managed to tower over the taller boy. "You had better make yourself useful, not only to James and me, but more important, to the young woman that you injured.

"Her family and friends will be sick with worry, sitting up night after night watching and waiting, praying for some word of her safety. And you, you are worried about being *bored*!" Caroline sat down, shaking with emotion.

The room was silent. No one mentioned that only one night had passed.

Walter had the good sense to look contrite and cowed. "I had not thought of it that way. Mrs. Fogel said she was doing fine. I thought . . . I thought—"

"That is the trouble, Walter; you were *not* thinking." James shook his head, swallowing the lump of anger in his throat.

Walter's shoulders dropped, and he found great fascination in the pattern of the carpet.

Caroline took a deep breath and rose to her feet. "James, could you introduce *your* brother to our guest? I am in need of some fresh air." She turned to Walter. "You will do whatever you can to make her comfortable. You will talk to her, you will make her laugh, and you will read to her. You will ease her troubled mind and distract her. You will fetch her tea if she wants it." She raised her hand to

silence him before he spoke. "Daisy has other duties. Beth will be yours. There will be consequences if I find you dallying."

Tight-lipped, Caroline left the room. Her careful footsteps and the swish of her gown could be heard through the doorway.

DAISY BABBLED, HER mind on other things. She had covered the pups, the weather, the horses, the kitchen staff, and her cousin that had moved to Exeter. Through it all, Beth had only nodded or made vague sounds of acknowledgment. When Beth suddenly squeaked, Daisy almost dropped the tray she had been balancing on her knee. "What?" she gasped. "What is it?" She glanced over her shoulder, expecting something large and scary coming through the door.

Beth touched Daisy's arm to regain her attention. "Can we get it? Right away?"

Daisy blinked, surprised by the change in Beth's expression; she looked excited. Sitting straight up in bed, wide-eyed, her teacup teetered, dangerously close to toppling.

Daisy recalled her last comment. "Oh, the trunk—the one from the coach."

"Yes! My trunk! It will have papers and records, perhaps a book with my name in it or better still, letters! Daisy, I have been so worried that I would never learn my name, or of my family, where I'm from . . . my entire past."

"Calm yourself down, Beth dear. We can get yer trunk out when yer feelin' better. After you've rested a spell."

"There is no need of rest." Beth sat up as if to prove the point. "I'm feeling much better. Entirely better." She slapped her hand on the bed to prevent spilling forward.

"Entirely?" Daisy snorted a laugh. "I think not. Look at ya. You can hardly sit straight, let alone stand. You're tiltin'." She reached over, grabbing Beth by the shoulders, and maneuvered her into a balanced position. "There. That's better. Now, don't ya think I am goin' to have your trunk hauled up here anytime soon. You're not ready. Perhaps in a day or two."

"No, no. A day or two is a day or two too long." Beth shook her head adamantly, almost knocking herself over again. "The trunk will give me back my life. My memories are inside. My family . . . there might even be pictures. Oh, Daisy, please, if you won't bring it to me . . . bring me to it."

Daisy looked askance. "Bring you to the storeroom? In your weak and confused state? Most certainly not. If Dr. Brant didna give me a good dressing-down, Miss Caroline or Lord Ellerby certainly would. There would be a brouhaha—a loud . . . terrible brouhaha." She looked at Beth and bobbed her head as she agreed with herself. "Indeed. A terrible ruckus. So, let's hear no more about it. I am *not* bringin' up your trunk and that is that."

"Please, Daisy. No one has to be disturbed. I'll just—"

Beth put her foot down on the cold hard floor. Taking several short breaths, she exhaled and then slid her other foot off the bed. But before it touched the floor, Daisy grabbed her leg and pushed it back under the covers.

"No, no, no. You're not ready. You're goin' to have to wait."

CHAPTER THREE

A Proclivity for Melodrama

Beth knew that Daisy was right but, even as her belly roiled and her head felt cleaved in half, she couldn't stop resisting. She needed her trunk, needed her identity. "Please, Daisy. Just imagine how you would feel in the same situation."

Daisy stared at Beth's anxious face. "True enough . . .," she said slowly.

"Whatever is the matter?" a voice asked.

Daisy turned to the doorway, still holding Beth in place. "Thank the heavens you are here, Lord Ellerby. She wants 'er trunk, sir. The one in storage. Can hardly blame 'er. Shall I see to it?"

Discouraged, Beth watched James Ellerby frown. Then he lifted his eyes and met her gaze. As their eyes locked, he smiled. It was a calm sort of display, not grandiose or frivolous. Then he nodded, and Beth thought her battle won, but his words proved otherwise.

"I will speak to Dr. Brant and if he agrees, perhaps this afternoon we will bring it to you." Lord Ellerby shifted to allow another

figure to enter the room. "Until then, I have brought you a visitor."

Beth looked at the young man standing in the doorway. Was she supposed to know him? He was highly overdressed for a sick room, perhaps even for a country manor. Tall and broad shouldered, he had green eyes and dark wavy hair much like James Ellerby.

It could be none other than *Walter* Ellerby. Here was the author of Beth's misfortunes.

Beth held her tongue as James ushered his brother into the room, passed him a tray, and then departed. Wordlessly and awkwardly, Walter handed her the bowl of broth and a spoon. He grabbed a book from the reed chair placed beside the bed and slumped into it. She ate her soup in silence; he began reading in a bored, hard done-by tone. Eventually, Walter emerged from his self-involvement long enough to realize that she was not pleased by his company.

"It was an accident," he said, as if *that* were an apology.

"And therefore . . ." Beth paused, giving him ample opportunity to express his regrets. The silence lengthened until Beth harrumphed in disgust and passed him her empty bowl.

Leaning against the stacked pillows at her back, Beth's thoughts returned to the trunk in the storeroom. She did not want to ask Walter, of all people, for a favor, but she needed that trunk. It represented her identity, her past.

"Do you think your brother mentioned my trunk to Dr. Brant?" Beth asked.

He snapped the book shut. "How would I know?" Walter asked and then chuntered when she continued to glare at him. "I will

check.” With shoulders bowed and an expression of being overly burdened, he quit the room.

Time passed slowly—or so it seemed. Finally Beth heard movement on the steps, and she sat up in eagerness. However, it was not Walter’s somber face that peeked into the room but the physician’s.

“Do you really think you are strong enough?” Dr. Brant asked.

“I am exhausted,” she admitted. “My head aches abominably and my belly does not want to stay still. But I need to know who I am.”

Dr. Brant’s eyes trailed from her clenched fists to her stiff back and then up to her tight lips. “You do, indeed. Walter is bringing your trunk up.”

Within moments, a thump and thud rolled down the narrow corridor and burst into the room. It was followed by a loud bang, a few choice words, a sharp reprimand, and lastly, a scraping sound. James preceded the trunk into the room. The trunk preceded Walter. Or at least it would have but the room was now full. Walter found himself in the undignified position of watching the drama unfold from the hallway.

Beth glanced at James, meeting his gaze and sharing a look . . . of what she knew not, but it offered reassurance. Then they turned to stare at the trunk. There were no initials or labels, and it had certainly seen better days. For several moments no one moved, and then there was a scurry of activity as they all did. Dr. Brant pulled the trunk closer to the bed, James struggled with the buckles as the trunk moved, and Walter squeezed into the room and tried to turn the trunk so that the opening was toward Beth.

When they were done Beth found herself reluctant to touch the lid. She bit her bottom lip and took a quick glance at the faces

around her. Dr. Brant and Walter stared at the trunk. James watched her.

Beth braced herself and slowly lifted the lid.

At first she couldn't determine what it was that she was seeing. The swath of brown cloth turned out to be a cloak. Beth placed it on the foot of the bed. Underneath she found a lilac waistcoat, several shirts with winged collars, soft leather boots, a walking cane, ankle length trousers and toiletries . . . a man's toiletries.

"This is not my trunk."

Beth lay back on the pillows and closed her eyes. She raised her arms slowly and wrapped them around her bandaged head, hiding her face. The sound of scraping told her that the offending object had been dragged from the room. Whispers filled the air, and then footsteps announced the departure of the doctor and Lord Ellerby.

Beth knew that Walter remained in the hall. His muttered words echoed into the small attic room. He complained heartily as he threw the articles of clothing back into the trunk's cavern. The lid snapped closed, and the buckle jingled.

Another scrape indicated the trunk's relocation to the wall.

"This makes a very uncomfortable sitting stool. But do not worry about me. You just let me know if there is anything that you might wish. Oh yes, I will be right here. Waiting for your beck and call. Think not at all about my comfort. Oh no, I shall wait right here, just as I was ordered."

An unintelligible sound ricocheted through the hall. It sounded like a groan of frustration. It was followed by a mantra. "Boring, boring, boring."

Beth had a mantra of her own. *Go away. Go away.* "Go away!"

But Walter was too involved with his own misery to hear her.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, Sam retrieved the trunk. He had been instructed to leave it at the post inn in Exeter, and repossess the unclaimed luggage that was likely waiting. So Walter, now deprived of his seat, had no choice but to reenter the sick room and try to keep company with the poor, broken lump that hardly talked.

Cook, in her infinite wisdom, had sent up a meal worthy of a feast—certainly plenty for a cautiously nibbling young woman and a ravenous, growing fourteen-year-old boy. Walter found himself once again perched on the reed chair, trying to distract Beth from her worrisome thoughts while he patted his satiated belly.

“I know what it is like to suffer as a result of a carriage accident,” Walter commiserated. “My father was killed in one a year ago.”

Beth lay passive on her pillows, staring in the direction of the window.

He shrugged to no one in particular and returned to his memories. “Both Caroline and James simply carried on. Can you imagine? My whole life had been turned on its end and yet they still expected me to go back to Eton. Well, that was what James wanted . . . expected. I persuaded Mother to let me sit in on Henry’s lessons. Mother took to visiting relatives, not wanting to be here. Caroline was Friday-faced for months. And James, well, he stopped riding and shooting. He used to be one for a great lark . . . but no more.” He sighed deeply. “It was *very* hard on me.”

Beth shook her head at Walter’s self-involvement. Concerns about family and fathers surged through her mind but without form . . . leaving her with more questions.

She chewed at her lip, trying to focus on the wisps of memory. "I believe I have lost someone as well."

Walter started. "Really? Who? Can you remember anything? Anything at all?"

Beth sighed. "Just what has happened in this room."

"Not even your favorite color?"

"Blue," Beth answered quickly.

"Your favorite sweet?"

Beth smiled. "Plum pudding."

Walter quizzed Beth on everything from pets to poets, countries to composers. Whenever she hesitated, Walter simply volleyed another question at her until she had an answer. It became a race as much as a discovery, and led to great mirth and merriment. When Caroline came in to release him, Walter was somewhat reluctant to go—although not entirely.



AS THE DAYS passed, Beth slowly regained her strength. Her bruises healed and her appetite improved. Eventually only the deep cut on her jaw remained as a testament to her ordeal. However, her memories continued to elude her, and not a single night passed without a gut-wrenching nightmare.

It was always the same. A room full of shadows, a flutter of movement just beyond her sight, and a crushing fear pressing into her soul until she could no longer endure it.



THE FORCE OF the thrust almost threw her past the large box that she had been directed to sit on. The sharp wood corner pushed into her corsets and took her breath away. Fighting for air, she heaved herself

up, splinters from the rough wood imbedding themselves into her soft palms. The door slammed before she could right herself, and she was plunged into darkness.

She sat in the dank silence. The room reeked of filth and decay. She felt the gentle touch of a feather across her cheek and the hum of rapid wings; bile rose in her throat.

Unaware that she had moved, she found herself on the floor jammed into the corner, hands flailing. But now there was no soft menacing touch, no hum—just her own ragged breath. She dropped her arms, lifeless, into the sawdust at her side and she prayed for oblivion.

But her prayers were not answered. Instead sensibility returned and her eyes adjusted. She became aware of a dull glow; it came from a small slit in the wall high above her head. Beyond the lifeless beam it cast, were shadows, boxes and barrels stacked high and precariously.

After a time there was a flash of blinding light as the door opened and then closed behind three silhouettes. Nothing was said, but their presence was ominous. Shapes in motion, blurred from constant change. She was pulled back to the box and forced to sit. Her gaze directed toward a shape just beyond the glow of the beam.

There were no sounds in this small room overcrowded with malevolence. It was eerily quiet, as if she were suddenly and inexplicably deaf. But she was not blind, and what little there was to see was terrifying. A hand reached forward, toward her, it brought forth a shiny and honed form—a hummingbird whose sharp beak dripped with blood. In this room full of dark, the hummingbird stood out. It had found the light.



IT WAS OFTEN a long, wailing scream that dragged Beth out of the depths of horror—her own scream. She would find herself sitting

up in bed, her heart pounding. She was breathless and shaking, fearful of closing her eyes and even more of seeing a hummingbird—the tiny, iridescent bird that instilled terror in her.

The first night, her screams brought Lord Ellerby bursting through the door. He glanced around the room as if he expected monsters to be hiding in the shadows. But there were no monsters, just dreams, terrifying dreams.

“Are you all right?” he asked, out of breath, looking frazzled. “I was just going to my room when I heard you . . . You were screaming. What’s wrong?” Again he glanced around, but there were still no monsters.

Mortified, Beth sat in bed, covers pulled up to her chin, a deep flush colored her cheeks. “It was a dream, nothing more.”

Taking a deep breath, James lifted his lips in a half-hearted attempt at a smile. “That must have been quite the dream.”

“It was not pleasant. The stuff of nightmares.” She laughed, realizing what she had said, and then shook her head. “I—”

“Beth, Beth,” Mrs. Fogel called from the doorway. She had her hand to her chest and gasped as she dragged in a ragged breath. Her dressing gown was askew and hair fell about her face. “I heard you—Oh, Lord Ellerby? What are you . . . ?”

“Is Beth all right?” another voice called from the hallway. It sounded like Daisy.

Mrs. Fogel shooed her back to bed and then turned to Lord Ellerby. “Perhaps it’s best if I take care of Beth, m’lord.”

James slipped out of the room without another word, though he did glance back. He watched as Beth stared with haunted eyes at the empty space above the foot of her bed. She seemed unaware of Mrs. Fogel’s arrival or his departure.

By the third night of nightmares, only Daisy arrived to sleepily inquire after her, and by the fourth, no one came at all.

SITTING UP IN bed, anxious to be out and about, Beth rubbed her forehead and huffed a sigh. No matter how much she concentrated, the facts of her previous life eluded her. It was all well and good to remember favorite foods or color, but what about family, friends, where she lived? Did she have any siblings? Was she married? How old was she?

Dr. Brant had told her, many times, that her memories would return when she least expected them, when she was thinking about something else. But it was hard *not* to think of the past . . . or at least wonder about the past, as it was still a blank. A pristine slate, James had said. She could fill it as she wished.

Still, Beth was almost certain that her past was painful—the circumstances of her arrival shouted of danger, disaster, and ruin. Her nightmares reinforced that foreboding. Yes, something had happened. Were her injuries all a result of the carriage accident or something else?

Something. The word kept coming up. It was so undefined, so nebulous. It was not in the least helpful. Something. She had to find out what . . . And she had to figure out why.

JAMES STRODE ACROSS the tiled floor of the white main hall as Caroline and Brant descended. Stopping at the bottom of the staircase, James' eyes were glued to a letter in his hand.

"I'm going to be called into London for a vote this summer,"

he said, swallowing with discomfort. "The House wants to stop the licensing of privateers. The vote is going to be tight and Lord Hanton has withdrawn." James frowned and snapped his tongue, demonstrating his disapproval. It was all bluster, of course. He wanted to exude confidence despite his trepidation. He had hoped his duties in the House of Lords would wait, that he could secure the advice of others first and make his way into the fold slowly.

"Perhaps Mama can suggest someone," Caroline said. "Such as Lord Levry or Lord Wolcher. Someone who can lead you through the proceedings. I know you are uncomfortable taking Papa's place in Parliament this soon."

James shook his head, still staring at the paper in his hand—his sister knew him well. "Let's not concern Mama. I will write Lord Levry directly and see what comes of it." James made a great act of folding the letter into quarters. "So, how is our patient?"

"Much better," Caroline and Brant answered together as they made their way into the drawing room.

"Other than the occasional headache, I believe she has recovered complete health," Brant continued. "I wish I could say as much for her memories." He dropped clumsily onto a chair.

"It would seem that her memories are not going to come back without some sort of prod," James said with a deep sigh. "And since no one has arrived to identify her, *we* must find her people. *We* must find the prod. Until we do, Mrs. Fogel will have to secure a place for her in the manor."

"James, we should bring her into the family wing until we know her background. I am convinced that she is a gentleman's daughter." Caroline smiled in that irritating manner she adopted when she was trying to get her way. "Talk to her; you will see what I mean."

"I have talked to her. Many a time." James didn't want to admit that he knew exactly what his sister meant. Beth had the demeanor, language, and attitude of a well-educated young lady. It complicated the matter tremendously; she *had* been traveling alone in a public conveyance wearing a filthy and torn gown. It was all very mysterious and confusing.

"I will send Beth to you this afternoon," Caroline continued to press. "So that you can assess her yourself."

James nodded, turning his face toward the fireplace.

"WELCOME. COME IN." James stood and waved toward the armchair by his desk. He tried to exude nonchalance, but it was difficult under the circumstances. Chuckling to himself, he recognized Beth's gown. It was one of Caroline's, covered with paint splatters, though still stylish and flattering.

Beth gracefully glided across the room and bobbed her head before sitting.

At a temporary loss for words, James tried to remember the point of their meeting. "Ah yes, Beth. We must decide on our next steps." He paused for a moment, watching as Beth licked her lips. "We had expected your people to make an appearance by now," he continued. "Inquiries at the post inn would have sent them our way. However as no one has arrived, we must start our own search."

"Indeed. Thank you, Lord Ellerby, for taking me in under such unusual circumstances." The silence that ensued was slightly uncomfortable.

James shifted uneasily. "It was the least we could do under the circumstances," he said finally, excessively aware of her gaze. "Have you had any recollections?"

James held his breath, waiting for her to answer. Hoping that she could offer something—a new memory, a sense of the past, a place in her childhood.

Beth dropped her eyes and huffed a sigh. “No, I’m afraid not.”

James shrugged half-heartedly. “Worry not,” he said. “We will not throw you to the wolves, but we will move you into the family wing for now.”

“I appreciate your offer, but I would rather stay in the servants’ hall. I’m not comfortable with the idea of giving myself airs only to discover that I’m a dustman’s daughter.”

James barked a laugh until he realized that Beth was serious. He swallowed his mirth with an audible gulp. “That is highly unlikely, but I bow to your wishes. There is no need to move out of the servants’ hall if you are not so inclined.”

“Excellent. Mrs. Fogel will find me something to do. I shall not be idle,” she said as if to assure James of her usefulness. “Thank you, Lord Ellerby.” Beth lifted her head and surprised James once more.

Beth’s expression was not embarrassed or troubled. Had he given it a name, James would have said *determined*. It was a remarkable response, in a brave and impressive sort of way.

“I think I will ride over to Ellingham,” he said casually. “One of your fellow passengers said you got on at the Ivy. We may not know much, but we do know where your journey began.”

The statement rang hollow, for in truth, they knew nothing.

CHAPTER FOUR

Puppies and Impatience

James Ellerby sat in the corner of the Ivy, sipping a pint. Despite appearances, he was not there to relax. He was tense and frustrated and he wanted answers.

James had arrived on time, but the coach was late. And so he waited.

Finally, the sounds of jangling reins, pounding horse hooves, and grating wheels turned heads toward the door. Travelers stood and began to collect themselves.

Abruptly, the silhouetted form of a man stood in the doorway. “Goin’ ta Exeter, leavin’ in ten,” he shouted. He then moved out of the way to allow his new passengers through while he accepted a pint. He downed it in a gulp and was reaching for another when the innkeeper pointed him to James.

The man was tall and angular with brown hair and deep side-whiskers. “Can I ’elp ya, sir?” His attempt at a smile displayed more space than teeth.

James slumped. This was not the right man. “Actually, I was

waiting to speak to the driver of the London-Exeter coach of a fortnight ago." He tried to keep the vexation out of his voice, with limited success.

"That be me."

"No, no. I spoke with him when he had an accident by the Torrin Bridge. I need to ask him about one of his passengers."

"Oh no, sir, I didna have no h'accident by the Torrin. I lost me wheel near Ellingham. It took close on four hours to get it fixed."

James' frown deepened. "What time did you go through Welford Mills?"

"Well, I don't rightly know, sir. But it were gettin' on the dusky side. It were full dark when I hit Exeter."

Scrubbing at his face, James huffed in frustration. "Do you know a driver with black and gray hair with pockmarks on his face? He has a stocky build."

"No, sir. I don't."

James muttered a barely intelligible *thank you* and marched to the door.



JAMES CHUNTERED MOST of the journey back to Hardwick. Frustration ate at his thoughts. Certainties, in fact, were not certain at all. The driver of Beth's coach had lied. The coach was *not* the post from London; the trunk wasn't Beth's trunk. Even her name was . . . well, not her name.

James felt his gray stallion turn; they had reached the drive of Hardwick Manor. The arching bridge over the Torrin was just beyond. Guiding Tetley back to road, James drew nearer to the

accident site. The rain had softened—almost obliterating—the sharp cuts from the carriage wheels.

Jumping from his saddle, James draped the reins over the parapet of the bridge. He slid on the soft earth to the bottom of the bank and squatted by the water's edge. He stared into the gently lapping water looking for answers, knowing he would find none.

An object just below the surface caught his eye. He reached into the water, pulling up a shapeless mass.

A coiled dirty mess. Rope. Just rope, cut and now useless.

He dropped it back into the water but, as he did so, a glint caught his eye. Soaking his cuff in the effort, James pulled up a blackened silver button. It had likely been encased in the mud for eons, uncovered when they had churned up the bank. He slipped the tarnished object into his waistcoat pocket for a closer look some other time.



AS THE GROOM led Tetley into the Hardwick stables, James' curly-coated retriever, Jack, greeted him with great enthusiasm—jumping and wagging with fervor . . . a little too much fervor as James stumbled back into someone who had been kneeling by the last stall. They nearly landed in a heap.

"Lord Ellerby?" Beth braced herself on the open gate.

Embarrassed, James offered his arm to help her rise. "My apologies, Beth. I did not see you."

She dropped a cursory bob. "I have a tendency to be in the wrong place at the wrong time." Then she caught his eye and continued in a rush. "I heard that you were going to Ellingham today. Did you visit the Ivy?"

Beth's eager expression was painful. "No news I'm afraid, Beth." He preferred to discuss the ramifications of the wrong coachman with Caroline first.

A pucker briefly appeared between Beth's pretty hazel eyes and then she turned the corners of her mouth up in mechanical-like increments. James breathed heavily through his nose; it sounded dangerously close to a sigh.

Fortunately the exuberance of six fat pups behind Beth could be used as a distraction. James smiled. "So this is what drew you here."

He reached down into the straw-covered stall and lifted one of the squirmy bodies to his chest. Jack hopped over the board that sequestered them from the myriad of hooves, and was welcomed in style by the curly pups and Amber, their mother.

"Indeed. They are little bundles of curiosity wanting to explore the world. Playing at full tilt one moment and fast asleep the next." She pointed to one pup, bulkier than the rest, dozing in the corner, completely oblivious to the tugging and pouncing of its brothers and sisters. Beth knelt again and placed a puppy on her lap. "This one is my favorite."

The pup was identical to the others. James laughed and squatted beside her. "How can you tell? They all look alike."

Beth grinned. "Well, it's actually easy to tell. She always greets me first. She is almost the tallest, and she is almost the skinniest."

James snickered. "In other words, you can't tell at all. You simply guessed."

"Of course I can tell." In a conspiratorial manner, she looked right and then left. She dropped her voice to a whisper and reiterated her conviction as if imparting a secret. "Of course I can tell."

She lifted up the right forepaw of the wiggling pup. One white claw stood out from all the rest.

James smiled. He met, and then unintentionally locked on to Beth's eyes. A few moments or seconds passed. It was only when the pup tried to lick Beth's chin that they came out of their reverie together. Surprised and uncomfortable, James realized that his behavior was not appropriate.

"I am glad you are enjoying the retrievers, Beth." He dropped his squirming bundle back into the straw, rose, and dusted off the paw prints. "Good day."

James called to Jack and left Beth still kneeling in the straw.



TWITCHING WITH IMPATIENCE, Caroline sat with the appearance of calm on the edge of an overstuffed chair, ready to pounce. She knew that James would wend his way to the quiet warmth of the library as soon as he had changed. And this was where she intended to confront him.

Caroline was resolved that neither was going to dine until James agreed that Beth should move into the family wing. Beth's manner, speech, talents, and countenance all indicated that she was misplaced in the servants' hall. And now after this afternoon in the garden, there was no doubt. James had to listen.

So intent on formulating her arguments, Caroline missed the sound of the opening door.

"Relaxing with a good book are you?" James eyed the closed novel on her lap. He reclined into the facing chair.

"Oh, James. I wish you wouldn't creep about so. You scared the life out of me."

"Did I? Next time I'll have Robert announce me."

“Very funny.” Swallowing and then taking a bracing breath, Caroline delved straight into the cause of her disquiet. “James, I must speak to you about Beth.”

“By all means, Caroline.”

“This afternoon I was painting in the garden. The crocuses are up as well as the tulips, by the by. And as much as I adore florals—as well you know—today, I was inspired to do a landscape.”

James blinked and then tilted his head, as if to see her better from a different angle. “Most excellent . . . and this regards Beth how?”

“Well, I felt like doing something different. I wanted to do a vista. It started out just fine . . .”

“Ah, we are still talking about painting.” James raised his eyebrow questioningly, wordlessly reiterating his query about Beth’s involvement.

“But I decided to put leaves on the trees.” Caroline continued, ignoring his rejoinder. “I could not make it look right. Beth was at one of the upper windows and heard my frustrated mutterings.” She shifted back in her chair and lifted her chin as if preparing for an onslaught. “She came down to help me. James, in less than a quarter of an hour she showed me three ways to render the impression of full trees without painting each leaf, which is what I had been trying to do. The first method was to take the fan brush and tip it in not one but three colors—”

“I am sure, Caroline, the point of your story is *not* to teach me how to paint leaves.”

“No, indeed not, James. I simply wanted to assure you of my confidence . . .” She swallowed awkwardly, exuding anything but confidence. “I want to assure you that Beth is a gentleman’s daughter. I am all but certain. That we do not know who this gentleman is

should not prevent us from providing the proper shelter for her until such time as her relatives come looking for her. I would like to ask her to be my companion.”

“She would be a welcome addition to our small clan.”

Caroline laughed and relaxed into her chair. “You had already decided she belongs with the family, hadn’t you?”

“Yes. Staying in the servants’ wing was Beth’s suggestion, not mine,” James admitted. “But I could tell that you had gone to a lot of thought. Worked yourself up and all that. I wasn’t about to steal your thunder.”

“You brute.” Caroline threw her book at him without much force.

He caught it handily and then dropped the abused novel on the table between them. He sighed—rather deeply, world weary-ish. “There is more to this accident than meets the eye, Caroline.”

“What do you mean?”

“Beth was not on the London stagecoach.”

Caroline sat forward again, listening to James describe his visit to Ellingham.

“There was no one waiting in Exeter,” he said, “because that was not her destination.”

“But where then?”

“That is the trouble, Caroline. I have fewer answers now than before.”

“But, James, you said one of the men at the accident mentioned the Ivy.”

“Yes, one of the passengers on the coach. Now I know that he lied. If the carriage was not the post or stagecoach, it had to be a coach for hire. But I am beginning to think I should not assume anything. It is a baffling business, Caroline, make no mistake.”

“Will we tell Beth?”

“Perhaps not. It is unsettling to say the least.”

“We could ask Dr. Brant what he thinks. I will send a note. Invite him to sup with us tomorrow.” Caroline stood, nodded absentmindedly to James, and quick-stepped into the hall. She wanted to speak to Beth before dinner.