1

Somerset, England

2022

The last time Eliza celebrated a birthday where her name was spelled out in jellybeans, she was five years old and prone to squeals of joy. Yet here she was, thirty years later, slicing into a lopsided chocolate cake bedecked with a kaleidoscope of candy. Secretly, she suspected the cake was a symbol of all that her life had become, living in the same house, surrounded by a revolving parade of curios at the Cabinet of Wonders, and following in her parents' footsteps. She may as well have been five years old and marooned on a merry-go-round in her party dress.

'I'm loving the decorations, Jude,' she said, removing a single pink candle and cutting her aunt a generous slice.

'I've exceeded all expectations, if I do say so myself. You wouldn't know it came out of a packet!' Her aunt gave herself a pat on the back before adding, 'Now, how about pouring some of that champagne?'

Eliza did as she was told and they clinked glasses, their knees nuzzled by her schnauzer Bobby, who twirled from one to the other, moustaches twitching. No doubt more interested in cake than champagne.

'You really shouldn't have gone to so much trouble.'

'Well, I know what you're like, pet. If I didn't bother, you'd

ignore your birthday completely.'

Eliza took another sip of champagne, patting Bobby absent-mindedly as she gazed at the cake. Her aunt was probably right; she would have ignored this milestone. But birthdays didn't hold the same appeal they once had, when every day glimmered with possibility. Of late, her days held only the patina of sameness. Work, eat, sleep, get up and work again. *And whose fault is that?* her inner voice sniped if she ever succumbed to even a modicum of self-pity. For as inner voices went, hers was largely devoid of sympathy.

'You really should get out more,' Jude said, raising her glass.

'I get out.'

'To estate sales, yes, but what about a bit of fun?'

'Estate sales are fun.'

'Sniffing through dusty tomes and rattling chipped crockery doesn't sound like much fun to me – and I'm a crusty old lady of seventy-five, not a gorgeous young woman in her prime.'

Eliza leaned over and gave her aunt a chocolatey peck. 'No one could call you crusty, darling, but I'll take the compliment. And stop feeding Bobby titbits under the table.'

'I didn't. I'm not. I am a mistress of restraint. Besides, he had a sausage in the kitchen while you were setting out the plates,' Jude said, exchanging a conspiratorial glance with Bobby.

'You're a sneaky old woman. And you,' Eliza said, gripping the dog's nose and leaning in close to better make her point, 'are a very disloyal dog.' Which only resulted in a wet tongue to the nose.

'Eww . . . that is disgusting.'

'I do have a nicer surprise for you, though.' Jude put aside her plate and glass to reach for a small package wrapped in Christmas paper that had been sitting on the side table beside her. Her aunt had never been one for convention. For Eliza's sixteenth birthday she had given her two tickets to an Oasis concert wrapped in what turned out to be a vintage Pucci scarf.

'Gimme . . .' Eliza held out her hand and waggled her fingers. One was never too old for presents.

The package fitted neatly into her hand; it was light in weight, with a firm exterior and a little give beneath. A manicure case or purse, perhaps. Knowing her aunt, it would be something personal. A jewellery case? She shook it gently, listening for a telltale rattle, but there was barely a whisper of sound.

She glanced over at her aunt, who was beaming like the Cheshire Cat. 'Give me a clue.'

'Hmm . . . I suppose you could say it's a . . . a pocketful of memories.'

'A photograph album?'

'No.'

'Some kind of hard drive?'

'Good God, no!'

'Give me another clue.'

'Not telling. You have to open it.'

Eliza slid a finger beneath the paper's edge and unfolded the wrapping. If anything, her aunt's smile grew even broader when the object inside was revealed: a small case formed from a thick envelope of faded red leather, scuffed, scratched, and marked with the remnants of past water damage.

'Is this what I think it is?'

Her aunt nodded. 'Probably. You're the expert on old things, pet.'

The sides of the case weren't sewn or joined together, and she turned it over to reveal a neat brass clasp. She tore her gaze from the gift to say, 'You shouldn't have. It's too much. I haven't come across one of these in ages.' Actually, two years earlier she had reluctantly passed on one that had been asking $400.

'Don't get too excited. It's just a little something I found when I was cleaning out some of Dad's old stuff. I thought you might like it.'

'I wonder where he got it? He and Gran weren't exactly collectors.'

'No, everything had to be new when your dad and I were kids.' Jude smiled at the memory. 'New and preferably shiny. I think it may have had something to do with living through the war and always making do. They rebelled as soon as they had the chance.'

'Well, they certainly didn't pass that trait on to *my* father. The only new things to appear in our house when I was a kid were underwear and socks. And he wasn't above picking up a pair of second-hand socks if he thought they had enough wear left in them.'

Her grandparents hadn't passed their love of the new and shiny on to Eliza either. She glanced down at the outfit she had chosen for this birthday tea at her aunt's cottage: high-waisted Romeo Gigli trousers in a black and white floral straight out of the nineties, a black rib-knitted top with a Peter Pan collar rescued from a sale bin in the high street, and vintage red velvet Dr Martens. Her brown hair was shorn to its usual one-inch crop, and she had completed the look with a lick of mascara, subtle wings lining her green eyes, and a cherry-pink lip, while an enormous retro crocheted bag perched on the sofa beside her.

'I think he may have had a special reason for keeping this,' her aunt said, a glint of mystery in her eyes behind their giant Limoncello-coloured lenses.

Intrigued by this hint, Eliza released the small clasp and opened the case to reveal the miniature book she expected to find. The pages were stitched into the leather cover, a tiny book incorporating a diary and ledger, small enough to fit into a lady's pocket or the palm of a hand. Plus, she knew it would contain a compendium of information both useful and trivial, with the added attraction of that year's fashion plates and engravings of great country estates or scenic vistas. She also noted that someone

had written the date 1832 on the cover in a small neat hand, then added 1833 below.

What she held in her hand was a late-Georgian lady's pocket book. Who could tell what secrets it might hold? Her heart gave a skip as she turned to the flyleaf where the pocket book's original owner had inscribed: *Prudence Jane Merryfield, Somerset, 1st January, 1832*.

'Oh my God,' she gasped, 'where on earth did you find this?'

The owner's name was a shock, one she could never have imagined in her wildest dreams. To think she held in her hand an object once owned by the notorious Prudence Merryfield, possibly the most infamous of all former residents of their village. Prudence, her not-quite ancestor. Family, yet not family. Victim of perfidy and harbinger of disaster.

'I can hardly believe it's real.'

'I found it in an ancient hatbox buried deep in the attic. Full of Dad's old fishing magazines, the only thing he never let our mother throw out. She had an aversion for anything to do with the family history. Said it depressed her. I suppose he hid it from her on purpose. Maybe he was saving it for me, but of course I never thought to look through the boxes before.' Her voice faded, and Eliza caught a fleeting expression of sadness cross her face.

'You shouldn't be going up that ridiculous ladder at your age. And especially not alone.'

'They're stairs, not a ladder. And you are such a worrier.'

'And you, my darling, are . . . a wonder. If a somewhat careless one.' Eliza felt tears pricking her eyes and sniffed them back. 'Such a precious gift . . . and to think it once belonged to Prudence Merryfield.'

The name rippled from her tongue like a pebble tossed into a stream. Prudence Merryfield, long dead and gone, yet her existence still reverberated through the lives of generations of Eliza's

family, the Ambroses. She double-checked the name written inside the flyleaf to make sure she hadn't imagined it. Yes, there it was in faded blue ink – Prudence Jane Merryfield – with the frontispiece on the facing page announcing the publication as *Peacock's Polite Repository or Pocket Companion*.

'It's in a pretty sorry state,' said her aunt, tucking one silver asymmetrical lock behind her ear as she bent to peer at the book. 'And some of the pages are missing from the middle.'

Eliza flipped through a few pages at random, opening the pocket book to one crammed with tiny words written in the same hand. She squinted as she deciphered one entry where the ink appeared darker, as if the pen had been pressed hard to the paper.

> *Monday: Father died. Sent for Norris. Weather inclement. Dined with Edward. Six courses.*

The words were so polite, so devoid of emotion. And what a strange juxtaposition of events she had recorded. The weather had been given equal significance with her father's death. *Father died*. Those two dolorous words, with no mention of the diarist's feelings, yet dinner required all of five. And here too, in this first entry Eliza perused, was a reference to her own ancestor, Edward Ambrose – her great-great-something-or-other-grandfather – landowner, gentleman, neighbour and family friend to the Merryfields.

The diary felt warm in her hands, leather and paper – animal and vegetable. It was a custodian of memories, a keeper of secrets. What other surprises might this polite repository of a lady's daily life hold in store?

'This is too much. You must keep it,' she said, holding it out towards her aunt while simultaneously resisting the urge to clutch it to her chest. She was a keeper of old things, of

people's pasts, of lives forgotten, and the pocket book seemed to promise – what exactly?

'Oh, it could just as well have come to your dad if he hadn't kicked the bucket before me. And I doubt I have too many years left,' Jude said, waving it away, 'so you might as well have it now. You'll be getting it one day, anyway.'

'You'd better plan on sticking around for a while yet. Where else is Bobby going to get his sausages?' Some might find Jude's reference to her father's death too casual, but for Eliza this very naturalness brought comfort. Every day, she was surrounded by reminders of her parents, in the store and the flat upstairs, yet she had no one to talk to about them. No one who would mention in passing her mother's fondness for daffodils or her father's pitiful way with a 9 iron.

'I'm not sure why my father buried it at the bottom of a box of stuff no one was ever likely to look through. Do you think he meant to hide it or save it?' Jude asked.

'He probably put it there so Gran wouldn't sell it to buy a new toaster.'

'And I wonder why Prudence added 1833 below the first date,' her aunt said, puzzling over the notation on the cover.

'Maybe she ran out of pages. Books were expensive, and people often reused them. Wrote in the margins, jotted things in the accounts pages, wrote vertically . . . they even bought them second hand and filled up the empty spaces.' Eliza answered her aunt automatically, but the date did ring a bell. No doubt the reason would come to her later.

'And some of the middle pages are missing. Torn out by the looks of it.'

'Just another missing piece in the great Merryfield puzzle,' Eliza sighed. After all, Prudence had set in train a chain of mysteries.

'Maybe you could solve it, love.'

'Solve what?'

'The Merryfield mystery,' her aunt said with an enquiring lift of the eyebrows.

Eliza laughed. 'That trail has almost certainly gone cold after nearly two hundred years.'

'But wouldn't it be nice to know the truth? I mean, for all us Ambroses, past, present and future? I, for one, think Edward got rather a raw deal. Tried and sentenced by rumour and innuendo, if not by a court of law. As if one of our ancestors could be a murderer!' her aunt said indignantly. 'Wouldn't it be nice to repair his reputation?'

'It's so long ago, and I've enough on my plate keeping the shop going.' Sometimes she felt like she was bashing her head against a brick wall trying to keep the doors open, albeit a wall with lovingly restored plaster and an intricate Georgian frieze. 'No, I'm no sleuth. Just a mere hunter-gatherer of bits and bobs.'

All the same, Prudence's words teased her, leaping out from the page like a portent. She scanned the words a few lines further down the open page.

Friday: Late breakfast. Strolled by river . . .

She recognised the word 'Edward' that followed, but what came next? She squinted, trying to decipher the minute old-fashioned script.

Edward proposed. Ruined mourning stockings.

That was odd. According to all reports, Prudence and Edward only became engaged later, after the events of . . . 1833. Not before.

Of course! 1833. She knew the date would come to her. That

was the year of Prudence's first disappearance – the year of the shipwreck.

'I remember the days when you planned to become an investigative journalist,' her aunt said, interrupting her thoughts. 'Remember when you were a girl, you had your own blog. And then after university you worked for that online magazine—'

'Girlish dream,' she said with a shrug. One that she had put aside after her father died and she returned home to help her mother. If she hadn't, the business her parents had built up over a lifetime most likely would have folded. So, instead of chasing stories for a living, she had begun collecting pieces of the past.

She was a keeper, not a seeker.

'That's the thing about dreams though, pet, they have a habit of recurring,' said her aunt, as she began gathering the tea things.

Not for Eliza. She couldn't afford dreams. She had a business to run. All the same, when her aunt disappeared to the kitchen, she found her fingers wandering automatically to the pocket book. She flipped up the leather flap once more and opened the book to the inside front cover where, as expected, she located a concertinaed pocket. For the pocket book wasn't only designed to fit inside a lady's pocket, it was itself a pocket. A place to store keepsakes. A receptacle for love letters, tickets, sentimental drawings, a lock of hair, a favourite poem. A secret.

She didn't expect to find anything, not after one hundred and ninety years. Nevertheless, she slipped the tips of her fingers inside the silk-lined cardboard pocket, hunting for any memento stowed there by a woman dead for nearly two centuries. At first, she noticed nothing but the smooth silk lining. Then she realised that her nails had touched the crisp texture of folded paper. Turning her hand the other way around, she pinched her thumb and forefinger to grasp the corner of the paper and drew it from

the pocket. She sat looking at it for a few breaths, while Bobby licked hopefully at the rug beneath the coffee table and Jude made clattering sounds with the dishwasher.

'What's that?' asked her aunt, returning from the kitchen.

'I don't know yet. I found it inside the pocket.'

The paper was flimsy, print clearly visible, if not legible, on its inner side. It had been folded in half then both ends folded in to make a second pocket: a pocket that cradled another hidden object. An object that was flat and shaped irregularly.

'Aren't you going to unfold it?'

Her eyes traced the shape of the unknown object through the thin leaf of paper.

'It looks like a pressed flower,' said her aunt.

Eliza wasn't sure why she hesitated. Perhaps she was savouring the suspense, like the moments before she opened a carton containing a job lot she had purchased at a garage sale. In those moments before its contents were disclosed, the carton might contain anything. It might be the bearer of treasure. Or perhaps she was merely afraid that in revealing the paper's secrets she would be drawn so far into the mystery of Prudence's disappearance that she wouldn't be able to ignore it. Well, there was only one way to find out.

She unfolded the yellowing paper carefully so that it lay flat upon the coffee table, revealing a brown flower that may once have been pink or red. The paper beneath bore the printed title 'Cabin Passenger's Contract Ticket', with the words 'Prudence Merryfield' inked in a faded blue hand below.

'It looks like a hibiscus,' Jude said, inspecting the long trumpet shape of the flower.

Gently sliding the desiccated flower on to a piece of discarded Christmas wrapping, Eliza read aloud the words inscribed upon the ticket.

The Keepsake

Cabin Passenger's Contract Ticket

Prudence Merryfield
Alexander and Company, East India Agents
Ship *Exmouth* of 650 Tons Register
To sail from the Port of London for Calcutta
On the Fifteenth day of July, 1832

What she held in her hand was evidence of Prudence's flight from London, the very beginning of her adventures, before events spiralled out of her control, transporting her to a tiny island in the South Seas and marooning her there.

2

Somerset, England

1832

The morning after her father's funeral, Prudence woke to the liberating thought that this was to be the first day of her new life. The thought slipped unbidden into her head before she could open her eyes, to be followed by a twinge of guilt when she recalled the events of the previous days. But since she was accustomed to guilt, and since her father had raised her to be pragmatic above all else, the feeling wasn't severe enough to quell such a heady idea. She was thirty-five years of age, accounted an old maid by anyone's reckoning, yet finally her life might begin.

Her maid interrupted this reverie by entering in a rustle of serviceable linen and drawing the curtains with such vigour that Prudence blinked against the sudden onslaught of light. Wills coughed discreetly, a plump shadow haloed by morning sunshine, and patted her neat white headdress.

'Is that a new cap, Wills?'

Wills was fond of caps, and that morning's fine example was made of linen net, embroidered with daisies and finished with a trim of oak leaf and acorns.

'Yes, miss.'

'It's very elegant.'

'Thank you, miss, I'm quite pleased with how it turned out.'

Prudence had always admired her maid's ability to take pride in her work without any protestations of false modesty. She could not say the same of herself. Not from false modesty, for she had small talent to be modest about, but for lack of handiwork in which to take pride. No matter how dutifully she laboured over embroidery and such, her hands quite simply refused to follow instructions. They appeared to have a mutinous streak.

As Wills busied herself setting out the mourning attire, Prudence withdrew a hand from beneath the bedclothes and considered it. It showed no visible signs of rough work or hardship and yet she would not have called it pleasing to the eye. It was shaped well enough, with long slim fingers and oval nails, yet sprinkled with unsightly freckles despite Wills' many and varied potions. The same might also be said of her face, splattered with tawny spots across nose and cheeks, an inevitable companion to her particular shade of red hair unless guarded against with vigilance. Perhaps that's what came of not having a mama to enforce the wearing of bonnets and gloves. A governess may only command so much.

'Your work is so intricate. My hands are good for nothing but snipping roses or managing a recalcitrant nag,' she said. Even so, the butler made a better job of arranging the roses.

'Nought but practice is needed, miss.'

This comment, however kindly intended, served only to remind Prudence of the many sorry examples of needlework littering the house.

'I dare say.' She flicked a glance at the ragged stitches embellishing an antimacassar draped over the back of a chair.

'Breakfast will be going cold,' Wills reminded her.

Breakfast was always served at nine at Westcott Hall, and her maid uttered these words with the hint of disapproval one tended to overlook in a maid of fifteen years' service. But Prudence was not to be deterred from her objective – not by her maid, and not

on this first day of her new life. Now was as good a moment as any to begin a new regime.

'I believe I will breakfast in my room today,' she announced. 'In fact, unless we are to have guests, I believe I shall breakfast in my room hereafter.' She made this declaration with all the authority she could muster, given she was barely awake and dressed only in her chemise.

Wills glanced at the miniature portrait of Prudence's father that took pride of place upon the chiffonier, and wrinkled her nose. Another grander portrait of Sir Roderick looked down from the lofty heights above the fireplace in the library, flanked by more modest portraits of Prudence and her Merryfield grandmother. The master of the house usually stared out from this small silver frame with studied dignity. There were no curling locks or dandified neckcloths for him. However, today his image was veiled in black crêpe.

'Sir Roderick always insisted upon breakfast in the dining room,' Wills ventured through pursed lips.

And woe betide the person who arrived late for breakfast in Sir Roderick's house, for they would find in place of a crisp rasher and warm roll, a dry quarter of orange, or a crust of desiccated rye served upon an admonitory silver salver. The servants had their instructions, after all. Except her father had been gone these five days past. He could reprimand neither her tardiness, nor any other of her faults. On Monday he had risen at six o'clock as usual, breakfasted at nine, chastised her housekeeping at ten, complained of a headache at midday, and was dead by six that evening. He had been such a robust figure in life, fuelled by a thousand opinions, never suffering the vagaries of uncertainty, nor deterred by the imprecations of others. If she had not been the one to discover him, slumped over a copy of the *Gentleman's Magazine* in the drawing room, she would not credit it true.

Yet there it was. Her father was gone. And she was an

unmarried, orphaned daughter on the brink of middle age. Yesterday she had bid him farewell in a fashion befitting a man of his station and dignity. His corpse had been laid out in an elm coffin lined with silk crêpe, his body shrouded in superfine wool with his head resting upon a pillow of the same stuff. A velvet-draped hearse drawn by six horses adorned with black feathers and guided by a coachman dressed in the finest livery had transported him to the church. She had followed in one of six carriages ordered for the occasion, garbed in a gown of black bombazine with sleeves fashioned from a full yard of fabric each, and jet trimmings embellishing the bodice. Despite the concerns of her friend and neighbour, Edward Ambrose, she had remained dry-eyed throughout the service and wake that followed. It was the grandest occasion the neighbourhood had enjoyed for many a year and her father would have baulked at the extravagance, were he consulted.

But now he was gone, and she was mistress of Westcott Hall. She could break her fast at midday if she wished. A fact of which she could not remind Wills without seeming like a heartless, unnatural daughter.

And perhaps she was an unnatural daughter. Perhaps she was missing some element of womanly feeling that other women took for granted. She had not wept into her pillow through the night, nor required a gentleman's arm to support her through yesterday's proceedings. She had remained upright until the bitter end, despite a pounding head and galloping pulse. Yet she did not believe herself to be heartless. She had loved her father as dearly as any daughter might, despite such evidence to the contrary. She had waited upon his needs and deferred to his wishes for three decades, with little complaint. She had built her life about his. And without him, the house would surely ring like an empty bucket. It was only that at the age of five and thirty she could not help feeling suddenly, unexpectedly – free.

She was free to roam the Pennine Hills in a pair of stout boots or engage a bathing machine at Sidmouth to hazard the waves – an activity her father had always discouraged. She might even sail to far-off Calcutta without having to guard her pennies or her virtue, these two activities having been the key responsibilities of her life thus far. Without a husband or father to accommodate, her life would be limited only by her daring.

Of her first thirty-five years, little might be said other than they had been more akin to the notations in her pocket book than one of Miss Fanny Burney's novels. Indeed, if one were to peruse her *Pocket Repository* one would soon discover, alongside a precise accounting of expenditure upon theatre tickets, headdresses and the like, as detailed a record of daily pursuits as can be accommodated in a dozen or so words.

Monday: Father died. Sent for Norris. Weather inclement. Dined with Edward. Six courses.

Years later, long after the strange sequence of events that followed, she would recall the shock of that day. Those scant words jotted in her diary could not convey the truth that each of those six courses had lain like a lump of lard in her stomach while her father's corpse awaited the undertaker upstairs; nor that the rain drumming against the windows had seemed like a counterpoint to her throbbing head and thumping heart. She could not remember the days that had followed her mother's death, having been only five years of age, so she had no point of reference and no one she could ask. Upon her father's death, she could only wonder if this was how grief usually felt.

But by this morning, five days later, the heaviness had subsided somewhat, leaving a hollow with nothing obvious to fill it except, she was ashamed to admit, a quiet anger with the world. About what exactly she could not articulate. The anger pervaded her

body like a low-grade fever that does not put one to bed yet infiltrates one's every waking activity. She was conscious that she needed to clear her head of its influence. Anger, although sometimes useful, is never held to be an attractive trait in a woman.

Wills was still fussing with the folds of bombazine, humming a soft dirge as she worked. Apparently, she had bitten her tongue and no further opinions regarding breakfast would issue forth from those lips. The humming, however, said it all. It would not do for Prudence to defend her wishes upon the matter of breakfast. Explaining only made matters worse. The last time she explained herself to the butler over a quite straightforward instruction regarding the placement of the joint at dinner, they had narrowly avoided mutiny in the dining room. The house followed a rhythm of her father and the butler's design. Breaking it would require time and determination if she did not wish to raise a tempest. A tempest she did not have the strength for this day. So, in thrall to the silent demands of routine, she sighed rather loudly, slid from the refuge of her bed, and allowed herself to be readied for the day to follow. Hopefully, there would yet be bacon.

Afterwards, it was a relief to escape a house festooned in black crêpe and step on to the terrace. It swept in a sward of grass towards a low stone wall and lavish plantings of rose and lavender. A statue of Mercury on his winged feet took flight at the lawn's centre, while further away the yew hedge – clipped to within an inch of its life for her father's funeral – marched across country with military precision. Beyond the terrace, the park stretched before her in a lush green cloak, with an avenue of ancient chestnut trees leading southwards towards the darker gleam of the river. While behind her, the house spanned the terrace in an elegant line of soft Ham stone seven bays wide, with mullioned windows, stately portico, and a vista of ancient oak trees rising

above the lichen-etched roof. For all its sombre interior, the only clue that a house of mourning lay inside was a twist of black crêpe about the doorknob.

She set off across the terrace at a brisk pace, intending to escape the house if only for an hour, and walk off her second cup of hot chocolate. Wills never could be persuaded to allow for breakfast when lacing her corset. Sometimes she missed the more comfortable short stays of her youth, although she did not regret the passing of thin muslin gowns that did not flatter a more mature figure, especially one of diminutive stature and fond of chocolate. Nevertheless, it was almost summer and she stepped lightly; glad to be out of doors, breathing in the scent of freshly scythed grass, the sweet perfume of damask roses and the dusky aroma of lavender. It might have been any summer morning where she set off for her walk, leaving her father ensconced in the library with one or other of his friends or men of business.

'Prudence! You do walk with a purpose!'

She had reached as far as the avenue when she heard a voice hail her from a distance. She did not need to turn to know that it was her friend and neighbour, Edward Ambrose, and could not refrain from bristling somewhat. Could he not have left off his official condolence call for a day or two? She had seen him only yesterday. Could he not leave her to grieve, even a moment, in private? But Edward was nothing if not punctilious in his courtesies. In deference to her grief he had organised the printing of the memorial cards, and conferred with her father's solicitor, Norris, about the funeral so that she did not have to bother her head with the arrangements. He was known far and wide as a good neighbour and a true friend.

As he drew closer she noted that he looked quite spruce this morning, despite being garbed in deep mourning as a courtesy to her father. Since his wife's passing, three years earlier, his appearance had suffered somewhat. He wore his sandy hair

without a lick of pomade and had never suffered the use of curling tongs, despite his late wife Alice's urgings. Presumably he had more pressing matters on his mind; without his wife to see to his neckcloths they were invariably greying and arranged with no care for fashion. Most days, he dispensed with a double waistcoat – even last month, on the occasion of the Whitmarshes' annual ball. And he had not ordered a new coat for at least two years.

But today he had donned what appeared to be a new black tailcoat with a velvet collar, and swapped his usual breeches for the more fashionable trousers. He wore a second waistcoat of purple figured silk, and his neckcloth was arranged in the latest style. Although Prudence was not fond of a long sideburn, she had to admit that Edward wore his rather well. They accentuated his strong chin and long straight nose and drew the eye upwards to his rather fine blue eyes so that you forgot his pale brows and lashes.

'Carp told me where to find you.'

She had long been aware it was impossible to escape Westcott Hall without the butler knowing her whereabouts and thus took this information in her stride.

'I hope you don't mind if I accompany you. I wouldn't want to intrude upon your grief,' he said, a trifle more hesitantly than his usual manner.

She wondered briefly what he would do if she said she did mind, and for a moment was tempted to do just that. But courtesy won out and she indicated her acceptance with a nod so that he fell in alongside, matching her swift pace with his long strides, her head bobbing at his shoulder level. Once or twice, as they headed towards the river, she felt his sleeve brush hers, but this was to be expected when they both wore the voluminous cut of the day, and she thought nothing of it. As luck would have it, Edward was not a romantic soul.

3

By the time they reached the river, a quarter mile distant, Prudence and Edward had exchanged precisely thirty-three words.

'I thought the funeral went off rather well yesterday.'

'Yes, thank you for your assistance, Edward.'

'We did your father proud.'

'Father was a proud man.'

'Have a care for that deer scat.'

The scat in question was a neat pile of shiny black fallow deer pellets. She sidestepped them neatly, thus saving her new kid half-boots from one more indignity, before they continued on in silence. Between two persons thrown so often into company, this paucity of conversation might be blamed upon the sombre nature of the occasion, but in truth it was characteristic of Prudence and Edward. Although they were neighbours and frequent visitors to one another's homes, he had always been more her father's friend. Younger than Sir Roderick by a good ten years, and older than Prudence by a similar number, he had married when she was not long out of the schoolroom. Despite the long years and myriad events since, she still blushed at the memory of the day he informed her of his forthcoming

marriage, and the childishness of her response. Even now, at five and thirty, he still regarded her as a child, she sometimes thought, from the manner in which he sought her opinion at the dining table then demurred to her father's.

So it was with small surprise that they arrived at the river without further personal observations and certainly no outpouring of feeling or venturing of opinion upon recent sad events. Prudence was suffered to grieve quietly, while ruminating upon her future and enjoying a quiet stroll across the park. Edward likely weighed the merits of introducing willow to his lower fields or leaving them to sheep. Thus they walked in silent companionship, turning downstream of the river by unspoken agreement.

Although it was a river in name, if one were to happen upon it without prior acquaintance, one might take it for a mere stream or creek. For the majority of its course, the river was narrow and not above thigh deep. However, it flowed quite reliably for almost thirty miles, collecting rivulets and streams along its journey, before joining a wider, grander watercourse further downstream from the hall.

The river bordered the estates of both Westcott Hall and Edward's residence of Queens Knoll. The neighbouring families were intimate with its quirks for a good five miles, from the village watermill upstream that had tamed its waters for at least three centuries, to the ancient stone bridge that spanned its widest, deepest section downstream. And here, at the bottom of the Westcott home farm, it skipped nimbly along, its banks lined with a profusion of alder, before diverging to flow around a section of slightly higher ground to form an islet.

'Oh look, a tree has fallen,' she said, stirred from her reverie by the sight of an elderly alder lying across the river. As they drew closer she saw that its bark was rutted and crusted with lichen, its leaves yellowing and sparse when the leaves of those around it fluttered like a profusion of bright green coins. In falling it had

formed a bridge across the river to the islet, its top branches now lying enmeshed in the reed bed.

'Not much good as firewood, but your father was planning a footbridge over yon stream in the lower pasture.' Edward considered the stricken tree with an eye for economy. 'It might serve for footings.'

Although unladylike, she could not refrain from rolling her eyes in silent sympathy with the tree. 'I suppose we could also set the tenants to carving clogs from the timber.'

For as long as she could remember this particular alder had stood with dignity upon the riverbank, its leaves sustaining caterpillars and moths, its catkins nourishing birds and bees, its roots providing a home to otters. It deserved to rest in peace. But Edward would reduce it to footings without taking even a moment to mourn its passing.

'I suspect they purchase their clogs,' he observed.

Prudence was a pragmatic soul but in her idle hours, like any other lady, she was not averse to reading a volume of verse or a novel. She always suspected that her neighbour did not have a poetic bone in his body, and now he had confirmed this. For Edward, every object or person had its use or purpose. It was only necessary to discover what that use might be and put them to it. She wondered what use he would put her to if asked. She possessed few useful talents, unlike his wife Alice, who had been a fount of housewifely knowledge, an excellent horsewoman, and always happy to play the pianoforte should her hosts wish to get up a ball. Although he never breathed a word of it, she suspected he missed her greatly, as did they all.

This day, something about his comment, inoffensive as it might have seemed at another time, contributed to the ripple effect of the previous few days' events and a lingering disappointment with her lack of resolve over the vexed question of breakfast. In short, she was in an ill mood. Most of her acquaint-

ance would acknowledge that she was rarely in bad temper, a smile being her usual armour against unpleasantness, but today she was feeling uncharacteristically contrary.

Gathering the stiff folds of bombazine and a froth of petticoats in one hand, and taking a steadying hold upon a branch with the other, she stepped up on to the fallen log. She wavered there for a moment, the trunk being no more than a foot in diameter, but two decades of balls with oft-inept dance partners, rescued her. Once sure of her balance, she set out along the tree's length, dodging branches that sought to disarrange her hair at the least, or knock her from her perch at worst.

'Prudence, what are you doing?'

'I'm making use of this bridge with which nature has so kindly provided us,' she answered, turning to look back at him with what she hoped was an air of nonchalance, as if she was in the habit of balancing upon logs every other day.

'But you may fall – or worse.'

She wondered what might be worse than the indignity of a fall. A stab in the eye with a stray twig? A dousing in the river? Surely the water was barely waist deep.

'I am perfectly safe, Edward, and have always wished to explore this islet. Now may be my only chance.' Before the poor tree was chopped into pieces and put to better use. Before she was dried out and put upon a shelf.

Edward gazed up at her with one palm raised, as if he would curtail her foolishness with sleight of hand or silent command. When she ignored him, he stared down at his new trousers ruefully, rocked twice on his heels, before proceeding to consult his watch.

'It is one o'clock already. Luncheon will be waiting.'

'I'm sure it can wait a little longer,' she called over her shoulder, half expecting him to follow.

But Edward was made of sterner stuff than the romantic