

Chapter 1

When I was six, I saw a man bitten by a cobra. It happened in the marketplace in Colombo, where my brother Neville and I had been taken by our ayah, a young Indian woman who was hired to watch us. The cobra belonged to a fakir who earned a few rupees by charming it out of a basket. That day a circle of people had gathered around him. The crowd seemed as mesmerized by the fakir's flute as the cobra that was slowly rising from the basket. It was as if time stood still. The only thing that moved was the cobra, and it rose so effortlessly that it hardly seemed real. It reminded me of a rope trick I had seen another fakir perform. Only this time in place of the harmless rope end was the flat hooded head of the cobra. I watched, entranced, until the music died away. We all held our breath, waiting for something to happen. Then the cobra lunged at a man in the crowd wearing a white turban. The man screamed as the cobra sunk its fangs into the arm he had raised to shield his face. The basket was knocked over, and people scattered in all directions. Our ayah hurried us away and afterward begged us not to tell what had happened. We never told, but for a long time both Neville and I were haunted by bad dreams. To this day it is one of my most dreadful memories of Ceylon.

Neville and I were born in Ceylon, he six minutes ahead of me. Our father was an officer in her Majesty's service who died so young we couldn't remember him. Our mother remarried because she had no way to take care of us, let alone herself. She died when we were six, leaving us orphans at the mercy of our stepfather, a tyrant who begrudged us food and sometimes beat us. When he died thirteen years later, we were sent back to England to be wards of Mr. Honeythunder, a philanthropist who took an interest in orphans of the empire. Mr. Honeythunder had no intention of taking us into his household. Even before we arrived in England, he had made arrangements for us. He had found a cleric in Cloisterham, a sleepy cathedral town some three hours distant from London, who would tutor Neville, and a seminary for young women located near the cleric where I could study as well. This was his plan for us until we would come of age, at which time he would wash his hands of us entirely.

So it was that Neville and I, accompanied by Mr. Honeythunder, who thought it his duty to hand us over personally to our next keepers, arrived in Cloisterham around dusk on a brisk November evening, having traveled first by train and then by omnibus. We were met by Mr. Crisparkle, the cleric at whose house Neville would lodge. Mr. Crisparkle was a boyish-faced, middle-aged man with a kind and generous nature, much to the relief of Neville and myself, for we had feared someone more along the lines of our benefactor. After we had disembarked from the omnibus, he escorted us back to his home in Minor Canon Corner, where dinner awaited us. Several guests had been invited to help welcome Neville and me, and for a few minutes we were engaged in a flurry of introductions.

Altogether there were nine of us at dinner that night. We barely fitted around the lace-covered table in the small parsonage dining room. Mr. Crisparkle sat at one end of the table beaming at us and old Mrs. Crisparkle, his mother, a tiny frail woman, sat quietly at the other. I found myself seated between John Jasper, the local choirmaster, and his nephew Edwin Drood, an amiable young man of about my own age. Across from me was Neville, who had contrived to place himself next to Rosa Bud, or Rosebud, as she was sometimes called, a pretty blue-eyed

fair-skinned girl of sixteen. Neville had barely taken his eyes off her since he walked in the door. Of course she was quite unlike any of the young women he had encountered in Ceylon, but I thought he ought not to appear quite so obviously infatuated with her. He was all solicitous attention. Had she enough meat? Would she care for more potatoes? You would have thought he had personally prepared the dinner. On the other side of Neville was Miss Twinkleton, the head of the Seminary for Young Ladies at which Rosa was a pupil and at which I was soon to be. She was a woman of indeterminate age, who had a mass of corkscrew curls that quivered when she moved and was given to frequently fanning herself. Neville did not seem at all concerned whether she had food on her plate or not.

We sat uncomfortably scrunched together because an extra setting had been added for our guardian Mr. Honeythunder. Although we had known Mr. Honeythunder for only three days, Neville and I were only too eager to be free of him, and I daresay he felt the same about us. His interest in orphans was reserved for those at a distance, not close up. In the time we had been with him, he had barely asked us a word about ourselves, instead heaping all sorts of proclamations and platitudes on us when he paid any attention to us at all. Now he dominated the meal just as he had dominated all conversation since we had arrived in London. In a booming voice he lectured all of us on the plight of the poor and scarcely gave anyone else a chance to speak. It threw a frightful pall over the table. I felt sorry for Mr. Crisparkle, who tried so valiantly to change the topic to the benefits of exercise or the excellence of the mutton. Across the table Neville was showing far more interest in pretty Rosa Bud than seemed to me proper for a young woman who had been introduced as almost engaged to the young man on my right. I tried to catch Neville's eye, but he ignored me just as shamelessly as he did poor Miss Twinkleton, whom he heartlessly abandoned to Mr. Honeythunder. I was worried what Edwin Drood might think about my brother's attentions to his intended, but he seemed not to mind in the least. With the best good will in the world, he divided his attention between the mutton and me.

"I understand you're from Ceylon, Miss Landless," he said, not raising his voice enough to draw Mr. Honeythunder's attention. In fact, so loud was Mr. Honeythunder and so absorbed in pontificating on his favorite causes that he probably would not have noticed if we had all commenced to talk.

"Yes, we only arrived a few days ago," I said, keeping my voice low too. "Everything still seems quite strange."

"England strange?" he said. "Fancy that! And to me it's all so ordinary."

"I assure you it's very different from Ceylon," I said.

"And did you like it there?" he asked.

I hesitated. He had very blue eyes I noticed. Altogether he was a handsome young man and seemed sincerely interested in my opinion. I could of course have told him about the flowers that bloomed everywhere, the lush gardens, the heat, the rains, the bazaars. On the other hand, I couldn't very well tell him about my stepfather or how Ceylon had not been a happy place for me because of him. In the end I simply said:

"Not having lived anywhere else, I'm afraid I've very little to compare it to." It was a truthful answer, even if it wasn't the whole truth.

"You were born there?"

"Yes, Neville and I."

"Ah, your twin brother." He glanced across the table at Neville, who had just turned once more to share some pleasantries with Rosa and was regarding her as if she were the most exquisite

creature he had ever seen. I would have kicked Neville if I could have been sure of getting his legs under the table and not someone else's. I wondered if I ought to apologize for the attention he was lavishing on my dinner partner's intended. I would definitely have to have a talk later with Neville about how to behave around other men's fiancées.

"I believe Septimus said you were orphans?" Edwin Drood remarked, gallantly overlooking my brother's behavior.

"Septimus?" I repeated.

"Mr. Crisparkle. He was named Septimus because he was the seventh child born into his family, and in fact all the others before him died."

I glanced at Mr. Crisparkle, who seemed completely untouched by this family tragedy. "Yes, our parents died when we were young."

"Rosa and I are orphans too."

"I'm very sorry to hear it," I told him.

"Well, I have Jack, and he's wonderfully good to me."

Jack, I surmised, was Mr. Jasper, the dark brooding man with a mustache who sat on my left. Thus far he had rebuffed any small attempts on my part to strike up a conversation. I wondered if he was always so antisocial or just in a bad humor on this occasion.

"Are all the women in Ceylon like you?" Edwin said, reaching for his wineglass.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Oh, you know, do they have that sort of air of mystery about them that you have?"

He gave me such a charming smile that I couldn't help but smile in turn. I liked his breezy manner. He was so artless. He simply said whatever he thought. I had always heard that Englishmen were reserved, but Edwin wasn't like that.

"I don't think there's anything mysterious about me," I protested.

"Ah, but you're wrong," he said. "Take your name, for instance. Beautiful and mysterious."

"Landless?" I asked, surprised, for it had never seemed to me either beautiful or mysterious.

"No, I meant your given name—Helena."

He said my name so softly I think I blushed. I glanced across the table to see if Rosa Bud was listening, but apparently she was not. She was telling Neville something that they both seemed to find highly amusing.

"I guess I'll get to see the East for myself soon enough," Edwin said, sounding a little less sunny. "I go to Egypt to work in our foreign office as soon as I turn twenty-one." He sighed and reached for his wine. "I'm not happy about it, but I haven't much choice. It's all arranged. I must go."

He looked again across the table at Rosa Bud. "Pussy's not happy about it either."

I gathered Pussy was his nickname for Rosa but did not want to ask why he called her that. Maybe she reminded him of a kitten. She was such a pretty thing with her golden hair and fair skin. She had a glow of pink in her cheeks and a pink ribbon in her hair and was wearing a pink frock.

"Miss Bud goes with you then?" I asked.

"Yes, as my wife. It was all arranged for us years ago by our fathers." He heaved a deep sigh.

"You mean it was arranged that she would go with you to Egypt?" I asked. It seemed strange to me, but then so did many other things in this foreign land which was supposed to be my mother country.

“Oh, no, I meant our marriage,” Edwin said. “We were just babes when our fathers decided we ought to marry. They were good friends and I suppose it seemed the thing to do. We’ve grown up all our lives knowing we would be married. There was never any question about it.”

I wondered if that meant he didn’t love her, but of course I couldn’t ask him that. Besides, how could anyone not love a creature so pretty and sweet? I saw how close Neville’s dark curly head was to hers as he whispered in her ear. I hoped nobody else noticed and glanced quickly at Miss Twinkleton, Rosa’s chaperone. That good lady was so flustered by Mr. Honeythunder suddenly demanding how many young women of the lower classes she had in the course of her years as headmistress admitted as charity cases to her school, that she was quite speechless and apparently far too distracted to notice any impropriety regarding her charge.

“You’re so fortunate not to have your future all mapped out,” Edwin said, poking at his potatoes as if they were at fault. “It must be wonderful to have the freedom to choose what you will do with your life.”

“My brother and I have little choice right now about our lives,” I told him. “Mr. Honeythunder controls our money, and so we must do as he says and go where he sends us or we will find ourselves out on the street without a shilling. We had no choice about coming to England, nor had we any choice about where we were born.”

“But the future—” Edwin said, “you do have a choice about the future.”

At that moment Mr. Honeythunder struck his hand on the table so hard we all jumped. “Do any of you know how many widows of soldiers are in need of assistance?” We all looked at him guiltily. Miss Twinkleton dropped her fork as if she had been caught in an act of theft. “I thought not,” he declared with an air of satisfaction, as if we had all confirmed his worst suspicions about us.

“It’s the not having a choice that I find hard to bear,” Edwin said so close to my ear that I felt his warm breath. “There’s nothing wrong with Pussy. And going to Egypt could be a lark if I wanted to go there.”

“Perhaps it won’t be so bad as you think,” I suggested. “Sometimes places turn out very different from what we expect.” I didn’t add that in fact they sometimes turn out worse. England, for example. I had had no idea it would rain so much, that the sky would be so relentlessly gray, that the cold would chill me to the bone, or that the customs would be so baffling. After all, in Ceylon I had always thought of myself as English.

“That’s what Jack says. He’s been in the East too you know.”

I turned to Mr. Jasper and made another attempt at conversation. “Mr. Drood said you were in the East. Where, Mr. Jasper?”

Edwin’s uncle looked at me distractedly. His dark eyes blinked, as if trying to focus. “What?”

Was it possible he had drunk too much wine, I wondered. I had seen a similar look on my stepfather’s face when he had drunk too much. I always knew that was the time to stay out of his way. However, this was not my stepfather. I knew I shouldn’t be quick to judge. I repeated my question.

“It was a long time ago,” he said coldly. Then he turned back toward Mr. Honeythunder as if I had rudely interrupted, and I felt I had once again blundered. No doubt I was remiss in not devoting my attention to Mr. Honeythunder, yet I had now heard him holding forth on widows, orphans, and the poor for three consecutive days and the topic was becoming quite tedious.

I must confess that I had no great inclination to have a conversation with Mr. Jasper, while Edwin, on the other hand, I could have talked to all evening without growing bored. I had led a

very confined life in Ceylon, where I had had little opportunity to receive the attentions of young men. Perhaps for that reason I found the attentions of Edwin, who was overall so charming, to be sweet indeed. It was hard to understand the relationship between him and Mr. Jasper, who was his guardian and his uncle but could not have been yet thirty. The two were completely opposite in appearance and temperament. Edwin had blonde hair and blue eyes, and was friendly and good-natured. Jasper, on the other hand, was dark and morose with tormented eyes. I wondered if something had happened to him, if he had suffered some unhappiness that had left its mark upon him, or if he had come into the world with that air of melancholy. A few minutes later I noticed Jasper's hand start to tremble as he reached for his wineglass. He quickly drew it back and hid it in his lap. It occurred to me that he might be ill. I wondered if I should say something.

"I daresay you must think me awful," Edwin said, drawing my attention back to him again. "Here we've only just met and I'm baring my soul to you. Do you mind?"

"No, of course not," I said. "You are a most entertaining dinner partner."

"Am I?" He beamed as if I had paid him a wonderful compliment. "Pussy says I'm an awful bore. Whenever we're together, we end up quarreling."

It seemed a bit disloyal of him to tell me this. I glanced at Miss Bud and my brother and wondered what they were talking about with such animation. Certainly not widows and orphans.

"I do wish I could show you around Cloisterham," Edwin said. "There are ever so many quaint old nooks and crannies I'd like you to see."

"Can't you?" I asked, tempted by the prospect of spending more time in his company and exploring our new world.

He laughed, and I saw my mistake at once. Of course he couldn't show me around. He was practically engaged to Rosa Bud. It wouldn't have been proper for him to be seen strolling around Cloisterham with another young woman.

"How I admire you," he said. "You aren't a bit like us. We must seem awfully stuffy to you. All this fuss about what is proper and what is not. It's such a lot of nonsense, isn't it?"

I tried to protest, but he interrupted me. "You're absolutely right. Why shouldn't I show you around? Pussy wouldn't mind. Why should it matter what the good people of Cloisterham think? They live in this little backwater and know nothing about progress. But the world is changing, Miss Landless. Twenty years from now you won't recognize it."

His enthusiasm was infectious. "I'm sure you're right."

"Of course I'm right. There will be more railroads, more people, bigger cities."

"And will people change?" I asked him.

"They'll have to. It stands to reason."

I felt caught up in the vision he had conjured up. He made me want to step into that future world and see what it was like. It would be better than ours. Of that I was certain. People would be happier.

"I wish—" he said.

But I never got to find out what he wished because at that moment Mr. Crisparkle said, "Good heavens. It's almost seven."

We all turned our heads toward the mantel clock.

"There's still plenty of time to catch the omnibus," Mr. Crisparkle told Mr. Honeythunder, "but perhaps it would be wise to start back now."

"Goodness, yes," Edwin said, pulling out a gold watch on a chain and scowling at it.

"It takes at least twenty-five minutes to walk back," Miss Twinkleton observed.

"More like five," Edwin whispered in my ear.

The rest of us chimed in with our concern that Mr. Honeythunder not miss his ride. We helped fetch his hat, gloves, and cane. Mr. Crisparkle and Neville volunteered to escort him, and soon they were off.

After the door had closed behind them, we were like children let out of school. Even old Mrs. Crisparkle and Miss Twinkleton looked relieved to be rid of Mr. Honeythunder. The atmosphere was suddenly lighter and more festive.

“Rosa, you must sing for us,” Jasper announced, sitting down at the piano to accompany her.

“Oh, I couldn’t,” she said, looking alarmed.

“Nonsense, of course you can.”

“Oh, go on, Pussy,” Edwin said. “Show us what Jack has been teaching you.”

She looked as if she wanted to refuse, then reluctantly went to stand beside the piano.

Edwin promptly sat down on a chair so close to me that my skirt brushed against his leg.

“Do you sing, Miss Landless?” he asked, leaning closer.

“I’m afraid I don’t,” I told him.

“Ah, you just don’t want us to ask you to sing for us, do you? I’ll bet you have a voice like an angel.”

Before I could protest, Rosa began to sing. She sang with a sweet true voice that well matched the plaintive love song Mr. Jasper had chosen. He watched her lips intently while she sang, his fingers moving skillfully over the piano keys. Such scrutiny must be unnerving, I thought, as if he were waiting for her to make a mistake; but as she sang bravely on, her eyes avoiding his, I realized that was not it. He stared at her lips as if nothing else in the room mattered, as if he and Rosa were alone. Was this the way he conducted her music lessons I wondered? There was something disturbing about it. I looked quickly around the room—at Miss Twinkleton and old Mrs. Crisparkle, who were politely attentive, and at Edwin, who smiled back at me, as if he had been waiting for me to look his way, but no one else seemed to notice anything amiss.

I felt sorry for Rosa. She was pretty and charming but seemed so vulnerable. We were both orphans, but clearly she had not had to endure the kind of abuse I had at the hands of my stepfather. She had been coddled. Everyone loved her. Who would not love such a sweet child? And yet, there was something she lacked. The strength to stand up against the world when it has done its worst to you and defy it. My stepfather had beat me but he had not broken my spirit. The wrongs I had suffered had made me stronger. Rosa had never suffered like that, and I would not have wished it on her for the world, but I feared what might befall her. I knew the world could be cruel and it was a lesson she had yet to learn. My heart went out to her as a fellow orphan at the mercy of a hard world. Despite our differences, we were sisters.

Rosa was still singing when Neville and Mr. Crisparkle returned. It was yet another sad song about two lovers parting. Did she know no other kind? Her eyes shone with tears and her voice trembled. Mr. Crisparkle sat down beside his mother, and Neville came to lean against the piano and gaze adoringly at Rosa. He had hardly taken up this vantage point when her voice faltered and she burst into tears.

“I can’t,” she said. “I can’t go on.”

The room erupted in a murmur of concern. Rosa swayed slightly, as if she were about to swoon. In a flash I was at her side. I took her arm and half led, half carried her to a small divan.

“Lie down,” I said. “You’ll feel better in a minute.”

Neville and Edwin were beside us now.

“I guess it was too much excitement,” said Edwin.

Neville tucked a small embroidered pillow under her head.

“Oh, dear,” said Miss Twinkleton. “I knew I should have brought my smelling salts.”

“Perhaps a glass of wine?” suggested Mr. Crisparkle.

“I don’t think it’s necessary,” I said.

I rubbed the backs of Rosa’s hands while she lay there with her eyes closed looking deathly pale.

“Jack, you expect too much,” Edwin admonished his uncle. “You’re such a taskmaster.”

I looked over my shoulder. Jasper still sat at the piano, his hands poised above the keys, as if a magic spell had been cast over him that froze him at that moment in time when Rosa’s voice had broken. Then he did something strange. His eyes closed and his hands moved silently over the keys, as if he were continuing the piece in his mind. It was a strange pantomime, but with everyone’s attention directed to Rosa, no one seemed to notice except me.

“You wouldn’t let Jack bully you like that, would you, Miss Landless?” Edwin said.

“Indeed I would not,” I said.

Neville and I exchanged quick looks. Perhaps because we were twins, we often experienced a kind of telepathic communication. That was true now. He knew exactly what I was thinking. We had both endured our stepfather’s temper. I had vowed early on that he would not break me. After the first time he beat me, I had refused ever to let him see me cry again. If I could stand up against him, why then I could stand up against anyone.

“I think she’s coming around now,” Edwin said, and indeed she was.

The next time I looked toward the piano, Mr. Jasper was gone. He had quietly slipped away during the commotion over Rosa.

“I don’t know what came over me,” Rosa said, sitting up. “What happened?”

“You fainted,” Edwin said.

“Well, I told you I didn’t want to sing.”

“I bet you fainted on purpose,” Edwin said.

“I did not,” said Rosa. “That’s a mean thing to say.”

“Then I apologize,” said Edwin. “I didn’t mean to be mean.”

Now that Rosa had recovered, Miss Twinkleton declared that it was time to leave. I would go with her and Rosa and begin a new chapter of my life as a student at the seminary. I had dreaded this moment of parting from Neville, who had been my closest companion, but I could comfort myself that he would be close at hand and I could see him often. I worried about how he would fare without me, for he had a hot and rebellious nature, and it was often only through my influence that he held himself in check. The moment of parting, however, was to be postponed a bit longer. Neville and Edwin would walk us to the seminary.

The night was crisp and cold. There was a full moon in the sky and many stars. Edwin gallantly offered Miss Twinkleton his arm. Neville followed with me on one arm and Rosa on the other. I watched Edwin as he walked ahead of us. At the corner he glanced back and smiled at me. Rosa was telling Neville about a play they had done at school, and he was completely absorbed in her story.

“Is Pussy boring you?” Edwin asked.

“Pussy?” Neville said. I could feel his arm stiffen. “If you mean Miss Bud, no, she’s not boring me in the least. As a matter of fact, I find her conversation quite fascinating.”

“There, Eddy,” Rosa said with a small pout. “If you don’t appreciate me, there are others that do.”

“Not appreciate you?” Edwin said, stopping in the middle of the street we were crossing. “Of course I appreciate you. Aren’t we engaged to be married? Aren’t you my future wife?” Rosa sighed. I watched Edwin walk on, hopelessly out of my reach.

A few minutes later Rosa, who had been glancing back over her shoulder, let out a small cry.

“What’s the matter?” Neville asked, also looking back.

“I thought I saw something move.”

Behind us the deserted street stretched away in the moonlight and the houses loomed darkly with lit windows. The trees threw long shadows. Somewhere a dog barked.

“I don’t see anything,” Edwin said. “You’re just imagining things again.”

“Perhaps it was a cat,” said Miss Twinkleton. “There are a lot of cats about lately.”

“Yes,” said Rosa, “you’re right. It was probably just a cat.”

We walked on, but Rosa talked less now, and from time to time glanced anxiously over her shoulder. Soon we reached the wrought-iron gate of the Nuns’ House, an old brick building which housed the seminary. A brass plate mounted on the gate announced ‘Seminary for Young Ladies, Miss Twinkleton.’ We all said goodnight and then Rosa and I accompanied Miss Twinkleton to the door. I took one last look at Neville and Edwin Drood standing at the gate. I wished that I could go with them instead of entering this crumbling old building where I knew no one, except of course Miss Twinkleton herself and Rosa. I imagined how Neville and Edwin would walk back through the streets, talking about the things that young men talk about and getting to know each other. I hoped they would become friends, but I wished that I could be part of that friendship too. It seemed unfair that I had to be excluded. Well, I would have to get used to it, I supposed. I would have to satisfy myself with seeing Neville occasionally, and I would never have the opportunity of walking alone with Edwin through the dark and deserted streets of Cloisterham. Sighing for all that could not be, I waved a last good-bye.

Miss Twinkleton immediately sent us off to bed. I was relieved to discover that I would be sleeping in a small room adjoining Rosa’s. The other young women had all retired for the night so I was spared having to meet them until the following day. For this I was grateful. I felt a little overwhelmed by all the new people I had already met that day.

“I’m glad that Miss Twinkleton arranged for me to be near you,” I told Rosa after we had put on our nightgowns. “This way I won’t feel so alone.”

“Of course you won’t,” Rosa said.

Impulsively I reached for her hand. “I hope we’ll be great friends,” I said.

“I should think so,” said Rosa.

“And you must help me.”

“Help you?” said Rosa. “I can’t imagine you needing much help—at least not from me. You’re ever so capable, but as for me—well, I’ve always had people taking care of me, like dear Miss Twinkleton and funny old Mrs. Tisher, and as a result I’m afraid I don’t know how to take care of myself.”

“There’s so much I don’t know,” I told her, “so much no one ever taught me. I’m terribly ignorant of how I should behave. You must keep me from making mistakes.”

She looked at me in astonishment. “A silly little goose like me?”

“Oh, you aren’t,” I said. “Why do you say such a thing?”

“That’s what Eddy says about me.”

“He must have been teasing,” I said. “I’m sure he loves you very much.”

She sighed. "Yes, I suppose he does. It's naughty of me to suggest otherwise. And I'm sure I'm quite as much to blame as he is if we sometimes get on each other's nerves. Only you see Eddy and I have known each other most of our lives. He's like a brother. We never had the opportunity to fall in love properly. Do you know what I mean?"

I wasn't sure I did, but I encouraged her to explain.

She sighed again. "It's so hard for both of us, you know—this arrangement our fathers made. Everybody knows about it. The girls here at the school tease me something awful. They make a fuss over Eddy every time he comes."

"What's so bad about that?" I asked. I didn't dare tell her how much I envied her engagement to Edwin Drood.

"We quarrel," she said. "We're never together ten minutes at a time without one of us starting a quarrel. I promise myself ahead of time not to annoy him, but I just can't seem to help myself."

I reached for her hands. She was so very young. I would be the older sister she had never had. We would help each other.

"Of course I'll be your friend," she said. "And you must be mine. We must tell each other everything. I'll tell you all my secrets and you must tell me all of yours."

I knew I could never tell her how I felt about Edwin Drood. "Are you sure you want to tell me all your secrets?" I asked.

"My secrets are so ordinary," she said. "I'm sure yours are more interesting. You must tell me what it was like to grow up in Ceylon. And you must tell me what it's like to have a brother. I've only had Eddy, and while he's like a brother, he isn't really a brother. And you must tell me if you've ever been in love."

"I haven't," I said quickly. Then I added: "I may be older than you, but I've never been engaged."

Rosa sighed. "Oh, it's not as exciting as everyone seems to think. It's really rather tiresome."

"Edwin is very handsome," I suggested.

"I suppose he is." Another sigh.

I thought about how she had fainted that evening. "Can I ask something personal?" I said hesitantly.

"Of course."

"Mr. Jasper—"

She tensed. "What of him?"

"What happened tonight?"

"What do you mean?" She looked away and bit her lip.

"Why did you faint?"

"I got nervous, I suppose."

"I think it was more than that."

"What more could it be?"

"Mr. Jasper," I said.

A shudder ran through her.

"He's in love with you, isn't he?"

"Don't say that!" She snatched up her pillow and clutched it to her. "Some nights I'm afraid to go to sleep for fear I'll dream of him."

"Is he so frightening?" I asked.

She nodded vigorously. "I can't bear the way he looks at me! I hate his eyes. I hate the way he watches my hands when I play, and my lips when I sing. I hate the way he strikes the chords of the piano, as if he's speaking to me, whispering to me, dreadful things . . ."

"Has he told you he loves you?"

"Not in words. He never says anything. That's the awful part. He doesn't have to say anything. I know what he's thinking."

"Like tonight?"

"Yes, except it was even worse tonight. It was as if he touched me." She shuddered again. "You won't tell anyone, will you? Eddy adores him. It would kill him to know. If it weren't for Eddy, I'd stop taking lessons from him, but I don't know how to tell Eddy, so I keep on going. Oh, you can't imagine how afraid of him I am. I dread going to music lessons and use every excuse I can think of to avoid them. I don't even like to leave the Nuns' House because sometimes he's lurking about."

I remembered how she had been frightened on the way back to the Nuns' House from Minor Canon Corner. "That's what frightened you as we were walking back tonight, wasn't it?"

"Yes, I thought he was there."

"Well, he isn't going to hurt you now that I'm here."

"You will help me, won't you?" Rosa said. "But Eddy mustn't know. Promise me that."

"All right," I said. "I promise."

"Oh, you're so strong," she said. "I wish I could be like you."

"You can," I said. "You just have to believe you can."

"Oh, I couldn't," she said. "I'm ever so. . . . Eddy's right. I am a silly little goose."

She opened her mouth and yawned then the way a child yawns and stretched her arms.

"We ought to go to bed now," I said.

"Poor Helena. You're probably all tired after your journey from London, and here I am keeping you awake."

"I don't mind," I said.

"Then will you sit with me while I'm falling asleep? If you don't, I'm afraid I shall dream about Jasper."

"All right," I said. "I'll wait until you've fallen asleep."

She snuggled down among her blankets and wrapped her arms around her pillow. Within five minutes she was soundly asleep. I looked at her lying there so innocently. She looked far too young to be a bride so soon, but at least marriage would put her safely beyond the clutches of her music teacher. In the meantime I would find a way to protect her from his attentions.

I blew out the candle, slipped back to my own room, and lay down in my narrow bed. I was tired from the long ride and the excitement of the evening, but sleep came slowly. When at last it did, I dreamed of walking through the streets of Cloisterham on the arm of Edwin Drood. He pointed out the houses as we passed. In the distance I could see the cathedral tower. From time to time he turned his head and smiled at me, and I smiled back at him.