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*In loving memory of my lovely brother-in-law, Paul Clark,  
and for Elisabeth, Jo, and sisters everywhere.*

‘may my heart always be open to little  
birds who are the secrets of living’

E. E. Cummings

Also by Ally Sherrick

*Black Powder*

*The Buried Crown*

## PROLOGUE

I sit tall in my saddle and peer into the trees, through the tangle of brambles and moss-covered branches.

*'Papa? Are you there?'*

The only reply is a rustle of dead leaves and the harsh cries of the rooks circling high above. Reluctantly, I lift the reins and urge Jongleur forwards, into the shadow-filled depths beyond.

He can't have gone far . . . He was only a little way in front. I spy a sudden movement in the shadows ahead. A hooded man is crouched behind the trunk of a fallen tree, his frozen breath hanging in white clouds above his head. He's partly hidden by a thorn bush, but I can see the bow and quiverful of arrows strapped to his back. A poacher? It's hard to tell . . .

Using the bush for cover, I slide down from the saddle and creep closer, pulling my cloak tight about me as I go.

The man's on his feet now and nocking an arrow in his bow. He swivels sideways, raises the bow and takes aim into a small, frost-covered clearing beyond the trees. I peer past him searching for the target, then start. It's not a boar or a deer his arrow is trained on – it's a man.

But he hasn't spotted the danger yet – he's too

busy tying the reins of his horse to a tree. My chest tightens. I dart my eyes back to the bowman. His bowstring's pulled taut – he's preparing to shoot. I have to stop him. I go to shout a warning, but the word sticks like a burr in my throat. And then—

Then it's too late.

I watch in horror as the man in the clearing slumps sideways and falls to the ground with a strangled cry. Panicked, his horse rears up, breaks free and gallops off into the trees.

The bowman slings his bow over his shoulder, but as he goes to step forwards, Jongleur snorts out a sudden breath behind me. The bowman starts and turns his head to listen. I drop to the ground. He hesitates, then mutters something under his breath and crunches off in the direction of the clearing. His footsteps jerk to a halt. There's a heart-stopping silence before they start up again and hurry away into the distance.

I wait for as long as I can bear, then slip out from my hiding place and race towards the clearing, stomach gripped with a growing sense of dread.

I'm halfway to where the man's lying when I spot his horse trotting back towards me from out of the trees. My heart shrinks up inside me. *No! Please!* I dash forwards, but I know already who it will be.

## • CHAPTER 1 •

England, May 1520

Cat



We are busy in the herb garden singing and getting eggs from the chooks when the horses come. You don't hear them, Meg. But I do. They start a long way off – *pit-pat, pit-pat*, like the rain when it falls on the Great Church windows.

I stop the song and strain my ears.

'What is it, Catty? Did you hear something?' You come and stand with me and put your fingers in through mine.

I frown my face then stand on my toe-tips and listen some more. The pitter-pattering turns into thrumming and drumming and then you hear it too.

'Horses?'

I nod my head. You shine me a smile. 'If only I had ears half as sharp as yours. It will be travellers passing on the road outside.' Your eyes go all far-off and dreamy. 'Don't you wish you could go with them?'

I shake my head. I like it here with you and Nonny Sweet-Bee, singing and spinning and looking after the chooks and the herbs.

But the travellers are not going past. They are coming here. Because now the noise has gone from thrumming and drumming to thundery-loud and there are men's voices coming from over the top of the wall shouting, 'This is the place!' and, 'Whoa!'

You look at me, your eyes all owly-wide. 'I wonder who it could be?'

I am going to tell you I don't know, but then the door in the wall creaks open and a nonny comes bustling in. 'Where's the Sparrow maid? The Holy Mother wants to see her – at once!'

I go all shivery and hold on to your skirts. I don't like Holy Mother Sharp-Tongue. She is always clacking and squawking at me and saying it is my fault for things when it is not.

You put down the egg basket and squeeze hold of my other hand. 'It is all right, Cat. I will go.' You pull me close and hug me tight, then you pick up your kirtle-skirts and follow off after the nonny.

My heart jumps and pangs. I don't want Holy Mother Sharp-Tongue to clack and squawk at you too.

'I want to come with you.' I stumble-run behind.

'No, Cat. Stay here. I'll be back soon, I promise.' You flutter me another smile and do the criss-cross sign on your heart.

I hang down my head and scuff the dirt with my shoes. The door creaks shut, and then you are gone.

But you don't come back soon, even though I wait and wait. I plop down in the dust and listen for your feet, but the only sounds are from the chooks rootling and scratching in their pen and the birds in the 'H is for Hollybush' chit-chattering fit-to-burst.

The sun beats on my bonnet hot-as-hot and my head is going all in a spin. I reach in my apron for my birdy-flute, but then there's a click-clack of shoes. The door opens and Nonny Sweet-Bee is coming through it with her face all pink and flustered.

I jump up and stumble-run to her. 'Where is Meggy?'

She closes the door shut and puts her hand over my shoulder. 'Your sister is speaking with Holy Mother Agnes.'

'Is she telling her about the horses?'

Her face frowns. 'The horses? No, not them, but about our visitors, yes.'

'You mean the men doing the shouting?'

She bites on her lip and nods, then she pulls me close. 'Come now, Cat. Let us do some more letter learning.' She takes me to sit on the bench by the wall and picks a stalk from the pile in her basket. She holds it out. 'What is this one?'

But I don't want to do my letters. I want to go and be with you, Meg.



'Cat?'

I stare at the blue flowers and puff a sigh. 'L is for Lavender.'

'Very good.' She gets a stick and traces an 'L' shape on the ground.

'And this?' She holds out a white-and-yellow flower.

'D is for Daisy.'

'Excellent. Now, you.' She gives me the stick and watches me wobble the shape of a 'D'. She pulls out a piece of 'T is for Thyme', but then a voice calls out. It is faint and faraway, but it sounds like you. I put the stick down and strain to hear.

Nonny Sweet-Bee scrunches her face. 'What is it, Catkin?'

I am going to tell her, but then there's a hee-hawing like the noise Stewer Boneyface's horse makes when he whips it and it isn't happy, and a man's voice, all hard and gratey, shouts a curse-word.

I poke my fingers in my ears to stop it, but then your voice swoops over the wall again, all scared and high:

'No, please. You're hurting me!'

'Meg!' I jump from the bench and fly myself out through the door. Big puffy dust-clouds prick at my face. I wipe them off and blink my eyes shut and open.

And then I see you.

You are on top of a big, brown horse with your eyes wide and scared and your face all paley-white. But you aren't on your own. There's a man too and he's holding you tightly-fast. The horse gallops past and you see me and call my name. But the man puts his hand on your mouth and makes the horse keep on going along the track that leads to the Outside World.

'Wait for me, Meggy!' I snatch my skirts and run after, but then my ears fill with a new sound.

*Kerthump! Kerthump! Kerthump!*

The ground shakes and bounces against my feet. I look round behind and see another man on the back of a thundery-black horse riding towards me.

I wave at him to stop, but he keeps on coming. Coming and coming and coming. Then the horse gives a high laughing noise and goes up on its back legs.

'Gah!' The man drags the horse down and turns it round and round. His black cloak swooshes and swirls out and more dust flies up so all I can see is the glittery sparkle thing on his hat. The dust goes back down to show his face and I give out a gasp. One eye flashes back green and gold, but the other is covered over with a black patch. There's a snaky red line poking out from it and joining up with the black beard on his chin.

'What are you doing, fool? Get away!' He jabs his horse-stick at me.

My ears are paining me from all the noise and my heart is bumping hard-as-hard, but I stay standing where I am. 'I am going to be with Meggy-Peg.'

'What?'

'Meggy-Peg. I have to go with her, she's my—'

The man's red lips curl into his beard and his eye goes pointy-sharp as a knife. 'Stop wasting my time or I'll give you a beating you won't forget!' He lifts the stick above his head.

'No!' Nonny Sweet-Bee rushes over with her arms in the air and her skirts flapping. 'Please, sir! She is only a child.' She grabs my hand and drags me back so the man can't reach.

'And an idiot one at that!' The man makes a growling noise and kicks the sides of the horse with his boots. It gives another high laugh then pounds off and away, its hooves all thunderly-loud on the stones.

I pull on Nonny Sweet-Bee's sleeve. 'They are taking Meg. I want to go too.' I point to the gate-arch, but you have gone. Then the man on the thunderly-black horse clatters through it and goes away too.

I try to run after again, but a hand holds me fast. 'Be still, girl!'

I turn round. Holy Mother Sharp-Tongue is there with two more nonnies, her face all frowning and angry.

'But I want to be with Meg.' I try to wriggle free, but the other two nonnies catch me and pull me tight.

Nonny Sweet-Bee squeezes her hands together. 'Please, Holy Mother. Cat has done nothing wrong. She—'

'Silence.' Holy Mother Sharp-Tongue spits out the word like a hissy-cross cat. 'Take the girl inside and lock her in the Infirmary cell. She may come out tomorrow when she has calmed down. As for you, Sister Beatrice.' She snaps her eyes on Nonny Sweet-Bee. 'I am sure you have plenty of weeding to do.'

Nonny Sweet-Bee bows her head. 'Yes, Holy Mother.' She gives me a soft, sad look then click-clacks away.

'But when is Meg coming back?'

Holy Mother Sharp-Tongue's eyes go black and pointy and her mouth pulls pinchy-tight. 'Understand this, Cat Sparrow. Your sister has gone for good. Now stop asking about her or it will go the worse for you.'

My heart bumps and pangs even harder. Whatever 'going the worse' means, it does not sound like a good thing. I wish Holy Mother Hildy was still here. She would try and help. But she is dead and gone and Holy Mother Sharp-Tongue is the one in charge now.

She clicks her fingers at the other two nonnies. They heave me up and drag me away but my heart is so full of aches and pains I don't do anything to stop them.

And now I am here all alone in the pitchy-black. I have tried to go to sleep, but my head is brimmy-full of sounds. The skitty-skak of rats' claws on the stony-cold floor. The snuffles and snores of the night-nony and the other orphlings in the Infirmy beds outside. And over it all, the bumpety-thud of my own heart which is squeezing and panging fit-to-burst.

I pull the scratchy blanket over my head and grip my birdy-flute tight-as-tight. I want to blow it and sing you back, Meg, but Holy Mother Sharp-Tongue will get in a fury, so I speak your name instead.

Mouse-quiet at first.

'Meg. Meggy. Meggy-Peg.'

Then loud.

'Meg!'

And more loud.

'Meggy!'

And louder even than that.

'MEHHHG!'

The walls bang and bounce the sound all around. One of the orphlings outside screeches and wails and the night-nony rackets her stick against the door and tells me the same thing as Holy Mother Sharp-Tongue. That you have gone and I will never see you again and the best thing I can do is to say my prayers-to-God and ask him to watch over you in your new life.

‘What new life?’ I say. She makes a puffing noise through the peephole and tells me in a warmer voice to ‘hush-and-go-to-sleep.’

I want to tell her that I can’t do that without you being here, but she shuffles off, so I hug my own arms round me instead. Then I curl myself small in the straw bed and sing our sleeping song, soft-as-soft.

*‘Hush! Hush! Little Catty Sparrow  
Sleep your sleep until the morrow  
Still and quiet, in my arms  
I will keep you safe from harm.’*

But it is no good. I can’t make it work on my own. Those men need to bring you back so you can sing it with me. Then we can hug each other tight and make everything like it used to be.