



Chapter 1

Love is fragile, my mother once said. It can break.

Maybe that is true, for some people. Not for me. My love is a grasping thing. A vine I cannot extricate myself from, pulling me down, down.

It is dragging me all the way to Cornwall, a county I have never set foot in before. Had I felt this chilling mist, perhaps I would have thought twice about answering the advertisement for a nurse and personal maid. But what choice do I truly have? I can never return to London. I must take the Mail coach somewhere, and it seems appropriate to flee to the end of the country, a place teetering on the edge of the map.

This is the bitterest winter I can recall. Too cold, even for snow. A world washed innocent and white might bring me some comfort, but no – this is the season of sleet and gunmetal skies. Everything is grey and cold. It is like purgatory, like my heart.

Frosted branches scrape their fingers across the roof as we dash along, our wheels skating on the road. Not

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HESTER WHY

even the sour breath and body odour of my fellow passengers serve to warm the air inside the coach. An elderly woman who smells of chamber pots squashes in close to me; on the other side, a brute beast of a man is spreading his legs. Officially, the Mail coach boasts room for but four interior passengers; however, this driver has squeezed in six of us. My arms are pinioned to my sides, numb. And we are the fortunate ones, riding inside instead of on the roof.

The windows rattle in their frames without intermission; the sleet persists in its sullen patter. Shadows creep over the faces of the passengers opposite me, spreading like a stain. Only their eyes remain bright, gleaming now and then with a rodent cunning.

It seems an age since last we baited the poor horses. My dry lips begin to twitch. All day I have been travelling with scarcely any relief.

Dressed as I am in her discarded clothes, my appearance is one of respectability. It would not do to produce my hip flask now and draw attention to myself. It would be indecorous. Reckless. And yet ...

My lips are very dry.

I might risk it.

I *must* risk it.

Struggling against my companions, I manoeuvre my reticule from where it hangs on my wrist to the lap of my gown. The pewter flask inside bangs against my thigh. With practiced hands I line the neck up with the

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HESTER WHY

drawstring opening of my reticule and pull the stopper. The other passengers will see me raise the bag to my mouth, but not what it contains.

Only a sip – swift and fleeting as the touch of a lover’s lips. It is sufficient. Medicinal.

I lower the reticule, refasten the stopper. Not one person marks it.

Even without their scrutiny, I experience a flush of shame. Some inner consciousness that I have come to rely rather too heavily upon spirits of late. But alcohol cleanses a wound, does it not?

Water races across the windows. Drear mist creeps through the cracks in the doors, an uninvited guest. Just now it seems to me that this must be hell: not a fiery pit after all but leaching cold, and a yearning for rest never to be granted. Dead flesh, the marble statues overlooking graves: both of these are cold.

Finally, there is a shout from the roof. ‘New London Inn, Exeter!’

Our destination, yet there is no check to our wild pace. Instead, there is an awful high-pitched shriek.

All at once, the carriage spins. We are hurled against one another. The old woman beside me screams. For the first time, I am glad to be wedged between her and the large man. Their mass holds me in my seat.

Others are not so fortunate.

As we jerk to a halt, I hear a crack, feel it tingle in my back teeth. The silence that follows is deafening.

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HESTER WHY

The man next to me clears his throat. ‘Most likely a sack of mail,’ he says unconvincingly.

I know it is not that.

Shouts outside. The other five passengers stare at one another. I alone lean forward and listen to the guard cursing up on the box.

His words ring like a summons, stirring something I presumed long dead.

The old feeling of purpose.

‘Let me out,’ I cry. ‘Move. For heaven’s sake, move!’

The hulking man barely shifts; I am obliged to climb over his legs and tug the door open. Cold air rushes in, burning my cheeks with its touch. I leap from the coach.

I land heavily on my knees, grazing them, narrowly avoiding a pile of dung. The tight knot of my reticule rubs against my wrist. Although it is only late afternoon, the yard is fearfully dark. Everything is flavoured with smoke and straw.

Our carriage is turned almost completely the wrong way, facing back towards the entrance of the yard. Thick black lines on the frosted cobbles show the pattern the wheels took as they hit the ice too fast. It is the guard’s fault – he did not apply the chains in time. The carriage lamps illuminate wisps of steam rising from the horses and beyond, inky spots of blood on the cobbles.

‘A surgeon!’ someone calls.

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HESTER WHY

As I suspected, a passenger has toppled from the roof.

He retains consciousness; his eyelids flick and his lips splutter their pain. Yet no one approaches. A few ostlers stand in a semicircle, regarding him as if he is contagious.

I should mimic them. Leave all be until a surgeon arrives to assist the injured man. But I have already broken my resolution to stay inconspicuous by jumping out of the coach.

He releases a heartbreaking moan, and I know I cannot delay any longer.

Pushing past the ostlers, I drop to my knees beside the patient. The aspect is not a pretty one. His head is cracked at the hairline and hints of a meaty coral-coloured substance frill the wound. If I do not intervene, he will die for certain. Clamping a gloved hand either side of the break, I push it shut, speaking the words of comfort I have learned by rote. Coppery blood hums beneath the stench of horses and woodsmoke.

‘Hush, now. I will help you.’

He groans.

Nothing but a break can explain the angle of his right leg. I pray it is not an open one, for then he will lose the limb altogether. If, indeed, he survives the amputation.

Glancing up, I see that the guard and the coachman have dismounted. Three of the coach passengers have

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HESTER WHY

also ventured out to gape, but those travelling on the roof sit petrified. I cannot blame them. If I had seen this man tumble, I should be terrified of falling myself and sharing his fate.

I recognise the portly man who took up so much space next to me in the coach.

‘You there!’ My voice booms out full of authority. ‘Come here. Lend me your cane.’

He stumbles forward, drops his amber-headed walking stick and makes to retreat but I – impelled perhaps, by an unworthy sentiment of revenge – bark, ‘Now, the ties from the luggage. String, cord, anything strong. Bring it to me. Make haste!’

The other two passengers hurry to assist him, their shapes moving back and forth against the shadowy hulk of the coach. Despite everything, I experience a thrill of elation. I have not felt this alive for many weeks.

The muscles in my hands are not so sanguine; they begin to complain. The patient’s blood pulses beneath my fingers, in time with my own heartbeat.

I turn to the guard beside me. ‘Sir, please place your hands here, where mine are.’

He stares at me as if I have lost my mind. ‘Put them ...?’

‘Either side of the wound and press, hard. You possess the strength, do you not?’ It is a needless question: I have seen dray horses with less muscle about them.

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HESTER WHY

His face puckers. ‘Really, miss, that’s not what I’m paid for.’

‘Good God! What manner of man are you?’ I cry. ‘A pretty tale this will make in the coaching inns: how you bungled the chains and then left a woman screaming for aid, because you hadn’t the stomach for blood!’

This touches home. He obeys, although not without resentment, eyeing me as a dog that has turned on him. I expect that before now he mistook me for a lady. It is an illusion I can no longer support.

Retrieving the hip flask from my reticule, I slosh gin into the patient’s gaping mouth. There is no chance of my companions mistaking it for water this time; the perfume rises like a blush to condemn me. Eyebrows are raised, but I cannot regret my actions. With this poor man’s injuries, I am only sorry that I do not have something stronger to administer.

He stirs. All vestige of colour has fled his face. His eyes stare but they are glassy and I doubt they discern me, or anything except the pain.

Tentatively, I touch his leg. His breeches and woolen stockings are torn, revealing brutal grazes, but my prayer has been answered: there are no punctures, no sickening flashes of bone poking through the skin. The break is clean.

I gulp at the gin myself, gaining courage for what I must do next. It is like drinking splinters of ice. A few

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HESTER WHY

sharp mouthfuls give a spur to my senses, and clarity to my vision.

I place my hands on the leg, will strength to my fingers.
Pull.

There is a terrible wet pop.

My patient roars. The horses rear in their harness. Even the guard looks as if he might swoon.

‘You will thank me, in time,’ I shout above the commotion. The injured man does not hear; he has fainted away.

Laying the cane along the length of his shin, I tie it in place with the pilfered string. A poor excuse for a splint, but it is better than nothing. I have seen the result of breaks that reset at the wrong angle: it is a lifetime of malformation and pain.

But this man’s leg looks good – straight.

How long it has been since I felt this gentle triumph, the warm tingle that spreads to the very tips of my fingers. Even gin cannot recreate such a sensation. I have fixed what is broken. Perhaps, *perhaps*, if I can continue in this path ...

A heavy hand falls upon my shoulder.

The shape of a man, dressed all in black, is articulated against the lamplight. He wears a powdered wig and a haughty expression. In his free hand he holds a portmanteau – made of ox leather, unlike the battered one belonging to Father, but it is smaller, and I doubt it contains much of use inside.

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HESTER WHY

I know a quack when I see one.

‘That will do, madam. I shall direct matters from here. Which of you fellows will carry this man to the inn?’

There is a great flurry of movement. Hooves clang; another coach approaches the yard. The onlookers who were so reluctant to follow my instructions bustle to help this stranger.

‘But I – please wait, I have not—’

My words are useless, I am invisible. They snatch up the patient who brought me purpose and bear him away from me.

‘I am sure you have assisted to the best of your ability,’ the quack sneers. ‘You must allow a genuine physician to attend him now.’

‘Could I not help you?’ I plead.

‘I have no need of it.’ He waves his hand airily, stalking away. As if I am of so little consequence that he need not look at me.

I am left alone.

Breath pants from my mouth, turns to mist.

Good God, what have I done?

They will remember me now. There is no doubt about it. No one taking the Mail from Salisbury to Exeter will be able to forget my face, my manner as I assisted the injured man. They will recall both if they are asked.

How cold it is. Colder than I had realised when about my tasks: a punishing, pinching wind. I wish I’d had time to pack my cloak before I ran away.

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HESTER WHY

I stamp my feet, try to bring feeling to my legs. Dear God, dear God. Why did I help that man? It achieved nothing. Under the care of that supercilious quack, he shall probably perish anyhow.

But the memory of my actions will remain.

This is my weakness. I act on impulse, without heed. I have not learnt. After all the terrible consequences of my folly, still I have not learned.

My frozen hands prick, as though stuck with pins. I rub them together. Gasp.

Blood soaks my kidskin gloves. There are splashes on my travelling dress too, along with wisps of straw and a stain I fear is horse muck. But the worst is the gloves.

Blood, on my hands.

I yearn to rip them from me and trample them underfoot, but I resist, knowing the stain will be there on my skin, ground into the cracks on my palms.

A pair of ostlers leads out fresh horses. The animals skitter and roll their eyes at me as if I am a threat. The windows of the inn are populated with faces. Staring. Wondering who and what I am.

How could I have been such a fool?

My small, battered trunk sits in a puddle of frosted mud. I rescue it and hug it to me. When all is said and done, this is the only home I have left. Everything I treasure can be contained within this trunk, and now I worry that it has been handled roughly; something may be broken.

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HESTER WHY

I am tempted to check, but there is no time. The Old Exeter Mail waits for no man, and it has already stopped its appointed ten minutes. Our new horses champ at the bit while the coachman resumes his seat, the many capes of his greatcoat flapping.

Another arduous journey lays ahead and I am already fit to expire. In the small amount of time between stages, I had planned to relieve my bladder, at the very least. But every moment of my leisure was devoted to the injured man. Now I must put my trunk in the basket and climb back inside the coach, next to the smelly old woman.

She does not squash close against me this time.

The passengers all keep their distance.



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