

A Pair of Sharp Eyes

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Chapter One

Wiltshire

Tuesday 23rd October, 1703

At dusk the wind rises, and rain beats against the leaking stagecoach windows. I give thanks to God that the driver let me sit inside. Yet the air is fuggy from so many cramped and sweating passengers, and I am in the most uncomfortable place of any, a quarrelsome gentleman on each side of me, and the floor so full of cloak-bags and bundles of clothing there is scarcely room to squeeze my feet.

Two raw country misses whisper opposite and do not meet my eye. At midday their father delivered them to the turnpike in Chippenham, determined his daughters should ride inside, though I heard him grumble to the coachman about the cost of their fares, and he never stopped for his girls to kiss him good-bye, but returned to his waggon without a word. My own father would not have been so lacking in tenderness to his children. In the corner next to these maids is a slight, bearded man I would put at one-and-twenty. He scribbles calculations in his notebook and takes no part in the chit-chat around him, nor is offered any.

A stout gentleman in a blue velvet frock-coat and tight white breeches continues to speak.

‘As you would see if you were to visit my plantations in Spanish Town, Mr Cheatley, negroes are not worth your concern.’ He has been wrangling with the other gentleman since I took my place at Calne. ‘You would never wring your hands over the plight of an ass or a carthorse. A working animal is just that.’

Mr Cheatley, as pale-faced and meagre as the other is swarthy and fat, shifts irritably and chews his lip before indignation spurs him into speech.

‘Mr Osmund, I could not enjoy my wealth if I knew it derived from the subjugation of my fellow man. My business is manufacture, and for the sake of my conscience and my eternal soul, every one of those I employ are true-born Englishmen, and fairly paid for their labours.’

I am forced to swallow back a ‘Bravo, Sir.’ Neither would welcome an interruption from a girl of fourteen.

‘Ah ha.’ Mr Osmund smiles pleasantly. ‘Remind me, what do you manufacture, Mr Cheatley? Brass, is it?’

‘I own an iron-works. Our foundries produce sundry goods. Nails, beads, chains.’

‘Chains, you say. For what purpose?’

‘Chiefly aboard ship.’ Mr Cheatley shakes out his handkerchief as if to dismiss his interrogator, and makes a small performance of blowing his nose.

‘And the beads?’ A crafty look comes over Mr Osmund’s jowly face. His stubble is so black it looks like ingrained dirt. ‘What be their destination?’

‘Africa’s West Coast. The tribesmen prize our pipe beads very high.’ Mr Cheatley coughs. ‘I have just been up to town, at the invitation of a business

associate. You may have heard of him: Master Ralph Fowler, Renter Warden of the Worshipful Company of Ironmongers.'

'Indeed. But let me see ... your profits are bound up with the negro trade just as mine, d'you not concede? For how do the African princelings pay for their barrels of beads and nails?'

Mr Cheatley frowns and blinks, and if a certain friend had not told me how a ship is fitted out for carrying human cargo, I might pity him his probing by Mr Osmund.

'I cannot be held to account for the destination of my goods. I sell to the highest bidder,' he says plaintively. 'If others export my manufactures to purchase captive labour, why, I lament but cannot prevent it.' The curls of his grey wig quiver, and he fixes his gaze on the other as if to implore his assent.

The burly gentleman considers the point, an amused gleam in his eye, before slapping his broad thigh and pronouncing: 'No cause for self-examination, Mr Cheatley, as I have said already. The Africa trade is a lawful and moral one which, if it does anything, lifts the negro out of darkness into the light of rational Christian understanding.' He grins and throws up his hands. 'We are to be congratulated for the enlightenment we propagate. Excuse me, ladies.'

By this address he refers to me and the other maids. One is about my age, fourteen or so, the other a year or two older. Both peep from beneath their bonnets and blush. Mr Osmund pulls out a flask and draws from it greedily before smacking his lips and replacing the stopper. Then he bethinks himself and offers the flask to Mr Cheatley who shakes his head with a twitch of the nose and says, 'Thank you, Sir, I am replete.'

'As you wish.' Mr Osmund lifts an eyebrow and tucks the flask away.

'How long since you arrived from Jamaica, Sir?' Mr Cheatley asks.

'Three months. I sail back to Spanish Town a week today, after I've met with my fellow shareholders in Bristol. We own a substantial company underwriting ships and enterprises relating to the export-import trade. I was detained in London longer than expected.' Mr Osmund shifts complacently in his seat, his belly overflowing his lap. 'By a lady who was kind enough to accept my hand.'

Mr Cheatley inclines his head. 'Congratulations, Sir. May I enquire where is the lady?'

'Ordering her wedding clothes. Her dressmaker in St James is working night and day to prepare her trousseau. We're to be married in St Mary's Redcliffe on Tuesday next.' Examining his fingernails, he smiles at the thought.

'Redcliffe? Forgive me, Sir, the name is inauspicious. You have heard the latest news from Bristol? Perhaps not? The coachman told it to me when we last changed horses.'

'Not another loss at sea? Damn it, we should have crossed to Spanish Town before the winter storms. Eliza is fearful already; a wreck will hardly calm her nerves.'

'I hear no tell of shipwrecks. This is closer to home. A murder—a series of murders round Bristol and Somerset, the latest in Redcliffe. All were youngsters asleep in hay-lofts, stables and other outdoor places. Bristol folk are up in arms, hunting a pedlar named Red John. He left two brothers for dead in an old quarry. It's said they'd been horribly abused.'

The country girls' eyes are as round as buttons, and the younger steals her hand into her sister's.

Mr Osmund shakes his head. 'The children of the idle poor have always been preyed on and always will. I daresay the parish won't miss them.'

His words recall the day we were 'consoled' with a similar suggestion when my brother's fatal injuries left my mother and father with one less mouth to feed. My heart pounds and I cannot let such a cruel remark pass. 'The boys' families will miss them, Sir, don't you think?'

Mr Osmund's eyes widen with surprise. 'Well, well.' His lips twitch as he decides to take my question in good humour. 'A tender-hearted young person we have before us, Mr Cheatley. Your compassion does you credit, Miss. Ah ha, you blush now. Most becoming.' He winks at the sisters opposite.

The memory of Tom gives me strength. 'Please don't mistake me, Sir. I lost my brother lately. It taught me the truth of Scripture when it tells us God is no respecter of persons. My brother was much loved and is much grieved for.'

I speak steadily, and no one would guess there are tears trapped in my throat. The coachman who killed our Tom hoped to salve his conscience by giving me my seat today for nothing, but as my mother told him, a place in the Bristol stagecoach is scant recompense for a life. Mr Osmund seems at a loss. He folds his handkerchief and takes another long drink from his flask before subsiding in his seat, wordless.

The coach clatters on, lurching and bucking along the miry road. The sisters close their eyes as daylight fades. Soothed by his brandy, and wrapped in a travelling-cloak, Mr Osmund begins to snore. Next Mr Cheatley joins him, a fact I much regret since his nodding head finds its way to my shoulder, requiring me to shake him off at intervals.

I can't help being aware of the only passenger still alert, the quiet, foreign-looking man in the corner opposite, who wears his own hair in dark locks that reach beyond his chin. When portly Mr Osmund hiccups in his sleep the foreigner catches my eye, and thereafter, when one or other of our companions produces an extravagant snore or mutters a word or two of nonsense, he sends me a look as if to say, 'These people are not like you and me.'

At last, when the rain becomes so heavy it rattles the shutters, the young man rises, pulls down the blinds, and makes this an excuse to begin a murmured conversation.

'I know you alighted at Calne, Mistress. Have you come far?'

'I took the carrier's cart from Erlestoke, Sir. My sister is wed to a farmer there.'

'Erlestoke?' He hesitates over the word; pronounces it with a faint hiss. 'A village?'

'Near Westbury.'

He nods, though I do not think he has heard of either place.

'And you are travelling to a situation in Bristol, Miss—?' Again, there is something particular in his way of speaking. It has a rhythm I have not heard before.

'Amesbury. Miss Coronation Amesbury.'

'Honoured to make your acquaintance, Miss Amesbury. Mr Aaron Espinosa.' Since he is seated, he makes a show of bowing from the waist. 'You must be sorry we're obliged to break our journey in Bath tonight. The roads this winter ...' He shakes his head.

'I'd hoped to reach my sister's house without the trouble of a night in Bath.'

Mr Espinosa's expression is as sympathetic, his tone as delicate, as Mr Osmund's was coarse and careless. 'The Westgate Inn is very comfortable, Miss Amesbury. And the fees not excessive.'

I wish my blushes did not give me away quite so readily. After a pause he says hesitantly: 'Your mother and father will miss you now you have left to make your way in the world. Or are they deceased, begging your pardon?'

What a strange, stiff way of speaking he has. From his sallowness I hazard he must be an alien—Spanish or Portuguese, though in honesty I do not know what either race is like. I try to quell the feelings produced by his question but I know my cheeks redden.

'My dear father died last year,' I say quietly. 'My mother lives in Salisbury, as I did for a time. Our cousin lives there, her late husband was a clergyman.' I could add that I gained what little learning and worldly knowledge I have in my own village, not Salisbury, but no one will draw me on that subject.

He clears his throat.

'My condolences, Miss Amesbury. The loss of a parent is hard to bear.'

I detect he has known sorrow himself from the way he plays with his thumbs. This may be why I run on and say more than I intend.

'We was dealt another blow, Mother and I. A month ago our cottage was burned down and all our belongings were lost.' I nearly add, 'Even the little nightgown we kept when my brother died, and the wooden ship and sailor Father carved and painted for him', but my mouth is too dry to let out the words.

Mr Espinosa clears his throat. 'A fire is a great misfortune,' he says. 'One of the most terrifying ordeals a person might endure.'

He seems to speak with particular feeling.

'Have you experienced a fire yourself, Sir?'

He nods reluctantly. 'Yes, Miss. When I lodged in Whitechapel.'

'Was it the same as happened with us? A chimney blaze?'

He rearranges his jacket collar. 'It is painful to admit that some malevolent person thrust a lighted paper under the door when I and a fellow lodger, also a Jew, were abed. Only the good offices of a neighbour saved us.'

'Someone sought to burn you alive?' My skin prickles at the thought. 'Because you are a Jew?' Having only a hazy idea of what a Jew is, I want to ask, *Because you wear your hair a certain way?*

Mr Espinosa's eyes are fathomless. Eventually he says: 'People mistrust those different from themselves, Miss Amesbury. It can make them desperate.'

Wicked, I want to say. 'I never heard of anything so barbarous. Did they catch them?'

He drops his gaze and his silence says all. In my mind I see the event unfold: the two young men fast asleep, unsuspecting, while down in the street a hooded creature creeps forwards with a burning roll of paper, only to melt back into the darkness as the fire takes hold.

'Mr Espinosa, your story makes me question the wisdom of going to Bristol in hopes of a new life. They are sure to consider me foreign, coming from thirty miles away.'

'No, no. Do not perturb yourself, Miss Amesbury. Bristol teems with young people seeking their fortune. They come in from every place within a hundred miles.'

'Is that what you did, Sir? Went to Bristol to seek your fortune?'

He looks startled. 'After a fashion. I came with my master, Mr Sampson the banker, when he moved to Bristol to establish a business. There are many opportunities for those with enterprise and means. I've just returned from London on his behalf and ...' He stands up and re-draws the blind in an attempt to staunch the flow of rain-water into the carriage from the ill-fitting leather. '... I shall be glad to find myself back in Bristol and only wish it weren't necessary to stay in Bath tonight. For all its popularity I confess I've never relished Bath and its crowds of visitors.'

Just then my stomach lets out a betraying growl; it is more than sixteen hours since I ate breakfast with my Wiltshire sister and her husband.

'We'll be there soon,' Mr Espinosa says. 'In the meantime, won't you take one of these?' He takes out a handkerchief which he unrolls to reveal a couple of hard, flat cakes the colour of oatmeal. 'Not exactly delicious, but sustaining, and a good repast for one bound for Bristol. Ship's biscuits, sailors swear by them.' He taps one with a knuckle to demonstrate its toughness.

However light-headed, I am not foolish enough to indebt myself to a man I do not know.

'Thank you, Mr Espinosa, but I'm not in the least hungry.'

He tilts his head, accepting the rebuff, and I try to shut my ears as he munches.

In a short while the coach descends a steep hill, the road twisting this way and that, and not long after the mud and potholes beneath the wheels give way to gravelled road, and at last the postillion sounds his horn, the coachman hauls on the reins, and we come to a creaking, rattling halt, horses stamping with eagerness for their oats, the outside passengers clambering down with thumps and exclamations of relief. Up fly the window blinds, released with a tug by tun-bellied Mr Osmund, and I peer out to glimpse lamps on either side of an inn door, a flurry of grooms running out for the horses, and the landlord standing in a canvas apron with a tally in his hand.

We inside are last to leave the coach, and I am thankful on alighting to find my box still lying in the basket behind the wheels. It looks small among many four times its size. The inn master's wife, a tall, stooping woman in a yellow gown, listens to a soldier who cares nothing for the number of folk kept waiting while he harries her for coach times to Exeter in the morning. I am standing patiently in line when Mr Osmund seizes my hand.

'Excuse me, Madam,' he says to the landlady. 'This young person would like to dine in my rooms if you would be good enough to send up supper.'

I try to break free, but his grip is strong. 'Please, Sir, let me go,' I say, and at that moment Mr Espinosa steps from the shadows.

'The young lady is a close friend of my late mother's, Ma'am, and I am her chaperon until she reaches her sister's house. Forgive me, Sir.' He bows to Mr Osmund. 'I fancy you must be mistaken as to the young lady's identity. It's dark, and we've been half-asleep this past hour.' Taking my other hand, he indicates the sisters, who stare but lack the wit to voice surprise. 'Miss Amesbury wishes to share accommodation with these ladies.'

He looks directly at Mr Osmund, who purses his lips before letting go of me. My relief is tempered by his growling 'damned little Israel' in a voice the rest of us hear clearly. I feel a prickle of shame that anyone, most of all a gentleman, could speak so, and stiffen in case Mr Espinosa is stung to retaliate and the two should stoop to blows.

But Mr Espinosa turns aside with a shrug, and as we move inside I cannot help thinking that his dignified silence is more of a rebuke.

Even so, I should insult him myself, were I a man.

Chapter Two

Bath

The landlady smooths over the awkwardness of Mr Osmund's defeat.

'Dear me, we're full to the rafters,' she says, looking over the tally and ushering us inside. 'You three maids will have to share. Your names, if you please, ladies, and where you're from?'

'Miss Amesbury. From Erlestoke, near Westbury.'

The elder sister draws herself up as tall as she can, which is not very. 'Miss Bridget Lamborne, and my sister Miss Jane Lamborne,' she announces. 'Both of Manor Farm, Chippenham.'

'Chippenham, eh? We don't have many from there as a rule.'

Miss Lamborne looks a trifle put out, and when the landlady exclaims that she knows Erlestoke well, and has a brother living close to it whom she is mighty fond of, Miss Bridget shoots me a sour glance and pulls Miss Jane's fingers out of her mouth as if to say it may be late but this is not yet bedtime. In the light of the hallway I note that both have hair the colour of rust, and ghost-white skin to go with it, but Miss Bridget is plainer and heavier than the other, and her face is marred by angry spots.

'The lad will carry up your boxes. Meanwhile you can take yourselves into dinner.' The landlady turns to greet another guest.

The rich, fatty smell of roast meat hangs in the air and I recall how long I have been hungry.

'You must take the floor tonight,' Miss Bridget informs me, as we hand our boxes to the boy. 'My sister and I will share the bed, naturally.'

'Don't trouble yourself, Miss,' says the lad. 'There's three paillasses laid out in the garret you be in.'

'Then I'll go next the window,' I say, before Miss Bridget can claim the one furthest from the door. 'Some grumble about draughts,' I add cheerfully, 'not I.' The elder sister bites her lip but can think of no rejoinder.

'Still here, ladies? Dinner's that way,' the landlady says, indicating, and Miss Bridget forgets her needling at last and follows me to the dining-room. I open the door to find a dozen or more guests seated round the table, while a huge log glows in the hearth and a side of pork burnishes on the turn-spit, along with a shoulder of beef and three or four plump chickens.

A table runs the length of the room, and a small, round-shouldered woman waits upon the company, her face shining from the heat of the fire as she scurries to serve the noisy diners. Adding to the hubbub of voices and clanking tankards are the strains of a fiddle played in a corner by a musician who grimaces, eyes screwed shut, as he saws with his bow, and a piper whose piercing tune has some of the diners tapping their feet and one or two wincing when he hits a high note.

I am curious to see what kind of people call at a coaching-inn, and glad to find I am by no means the humblest customer at the famous West-gate. Seated at the table is a mix of travellers, some well-dressed; one or two in working-clothes; and a family who may be poorer even than me, for the woman nurses a baby while her husband feeds a tribe of little boys with morsels cut from his own plain supper of bread and cheese.

I gaze at the pork with its bronzed and savoury crackling, and my mouth waters.

'I believe I could eat a whole leg of pork by myself,' Miss Jane says, as we clamber into our places on the bench. 'Though I hope supper ain't too dear,' she adds, turning her watery blue eyes on her sister in case the harmless remark provokes her.

Fortunately, Miss Bridget is absorbed in looking over the bill of fare, and from her frown and moving lips I suspect she may not be such an able reader as she pretends.

More guests enter, and to my dismay I see Mr Osmund choose a place a short distance from us on the other side of the table where Mr Espinosa is seated.

'What a difference twenty-four hours can make,' Miss Bridget says suddenly, putting down the bill with a loud, affected sigh. 'To think this time tomorrow Jane and I will be dining in the servants' hall at No. 3, Queen-square, Bristol. I doubt you've heard of Queen-square, Miss Amesbury. It is a very fine address—best in all of Bristol. Our master and mistress have a great household with more than two dozen domestics, and a coach and horses besides. I am to be chamber-maid, Jane kitchen-maid. And you, where are you expecting to be this time tomorrow, if I may ask?'

'I have no situation quite yet,' I say. 'I shall be looking for work when I arrive.'

'Ha, good luck with that.' She says it as if work is nigh impossible to find. 'I daresay you know about the hiring-man?'

'Of course,' I say airily, though Miss Bridget seems to see through my pretence and continues.

'He charges a high fee, naturally. But if you are unlucky and have no friend to help you find a good position, it is what you must pay.'

'Did you have a friend then, Miss Lamborne?'

'Yes, indeed. My aunt, Mrs Gibbons, put in a word for each of us, and when her mistress heard of all our qualities she said, "Mrs Gibbons, my dear, please send for those nieces of yours before any other lady in Bristol snaps them up." At the finish of this speech Miss Bridget gives a little peal of laughter, and God forgive me I should like to snap her up and spit her out too, the stuck-up baggage.

Just then the serving-woman comes to take our orders, and while Miss Bridget makes a lordly show of querying the price of every item Miss Jane asks me in a whisper: 'Will dinner be more than a shilling each, do you suppose?'

'I think I will just ask for one slice of meat and a dish of bread and butter.' I reach under my skirts to feel my purse, reassured by finding it still half-full.

The serving-woman reaches us at last, and when I give my order Miss Bridget nods and says: 'The same will do for my sister and I, if you please,' her tone as proud as if her customary fare is venison and sweet sack.

We wait a weary time to be served, but when the woman finally plants down the serving-dishes in front of us, Miss Jane brightens.

'Shall I say Grace?' she asks her sister, who glances at the throng and says drily: 'I believe we could do without Grace this once.'

Unbidden, I hear my little brother Tom lisping: *By God's hand we must be fed, Give us Lord, our daily bread, Amen*, but with an effort I push the thought away, and reach for the first victuals I have taken since dawn, saving a cup of beer at dinnertime in Devizes.

None of us wants to chat until our bellies are filled, and I cannot help but be conscious of Mr Osmund, who presently rolls his glass in his hand and fixes his gaze on me.

‘Pay no heed, my dear,’ says the landlady, who has just come into the dining-room and sits down smiling as warmly as if I am her long-lost cousin. She has noticed my discomfort. ‘A gentleman is sure to admire a pretty girl. Do you three ladies mind my joining you?’

‘No, certainly,’ Miss Bridget says, shuffling up quickly as she takes in the landlady’s appearance.

She has changed into a low-cut, pink silk gown with contrasting sleeves of a dull red like faded rose petals, and a cap of crimson satin with lace frills and white ribbons trailing down the back. Her hair is black and done in long, shining curls, and her complexion has not the least brownness but is creamy pale as though she never stood uncovered out of doors.

‘So, ladies, she smiles, ‘you must be vexed to have to break your journey, and yet we in Bath are happy to extend hospitality to those who would otherwise lose the chance to visit our fair city.’

Miss Bridget cuts across me to introduce herself and explain that I have no situation to go to in Bristol. ‘Whereas my sister, Miss Jane Lamborne, and I were lucky enough to be appointed chamber-maid and kitchen-maid to a wealthy merchant in Queen-square. I daresay you have heard of the houses new-built in Queen-square, Ma’am? It was arranged by letter—our aunt who is housekeeper there spoke to her mistress, listing our merits and willingness to work, and it was fixed in no time. Queen-square is the best address in all of Bristol, and our master and mistress have a coach and horses and a country mansion besides.’

I think Miss Bridget fancies herself lady of the house instead of the wench who will be emptying the piss-pots, but I hide this thought under lowered eyelashes. The pink-gowned lady gives my arm a kindly pat, and I notice her hands are smooth and ivory-pale as her face, with well-shaped nails and a gemstone on the middle finger of each: a brilliant for the left, on the right a garnet. And her ears are decked too, with pearl drop earrings, a cluster of tiny garnets set above the pearls.

‘Don’t you fret, Miss—?’

‘Amesbury.’

‘How d’ye do, Miss Amesbury. Mrs Buckley, Ma Buckley to my friends.’ The landlord glides over, bowing low and winking as he sets a dish in front of her. ‘Thank you, Jack.’ She spreads her napkin on her lap and contemplates her dinner with satisfaction before picking up her knife. Popping a morsel in her mouth she continues. ‘Miss Amesbury, be reassured. Bristol is thriving; every week young people travel in from the countryside, and few go home unless for a holiday once in a while. Act obliging, smile nicely when spoken to; in no time you will be on your way to earning three or four pounds *per annum*. Many a kind mistress gives her maids petticoats and stockings, and you will be all found, two meals a day and a weekly allowance of tea and sugar if your master trades with the Indies.’ She leans towards Miss Bridget. ‘Are those your terms?’

Miss Bridget blinks. ‘Thereabouts.’

‘See?’ Mrs Buckley turns and looks at me confidingly, one be-ringed finger stroking the side of her nose. I catch a scent of rosewater, and a less welcome hint of gravy on her breath. ‘Now then, ladies. I daresay you won’t have heard of the amazing bath-house that lies a stone’s throw from where we sit?’

'I've heard of the bath, ma'am,' I say eagerly, 'my mother's cousin spoke of it when I lived with her in Salisbury last year. I believe it's very fine.'

I also believe it to be a place where ladies bathe and men go to ogle, but my companion looks too respectable to speak of a place where lewdness is order of the day, and my answer pleases her for she beams and beckons the tapster to refill our mugs with beer, pressing a crown into his hand before any of us can protest. I remind myself to make sure she does not insist on treating us to dinner when the time comes for the reckoning.

'The bath is splendid,' Mrs Buckley declares. 'It offers many benefits both for bathers and those who prefer to drink the waters. It's highly efficacious for those with pimples and other blemishes: you, Miss Lamborne, with your prodigious *freckles* would find the waters astonishing useful.' Miss Bridget flushes, and Mrs Buckley sweeps on. 'Patients suffering from gout and dropsy have been known to leave Bath with their health restored. As for the poor creatures undergoing the mercury treatment ...' The Lamborne sisters are wide-eyed, and Mrs Buckley shakes her head. 'Enough of such talk. Bristol may be a famous port, but Bath outdoes it for elegant amenities. The Roman Emperor Augustus was the first to extol Bath in his writings, you know. He brought Queen Cleopatra here to cure her of the green-sickness. And our own noble Queen Anne visited this year, and was treated to a musical extravaganza finer than any London might provide. Since her highness, more and more persons of wealth and importance flock to the waters. Look around you.'

She glances down the table where more diners have arrived. A lady in a blue embroidered gown sits next to Mr Osmund, hanging on his word. Just as I look across, he leans over and makes some remark to Mr Espinosa that causes the lady in blue to rock with laughter and deliver a feigning blow to Mr Osmund's sleeve.

Unhappiness and indignation are written on Mr Espinosa's face, but the table is crowded and he is unable to escape his persecutor. Instead he turns to face the other way, folding and unfolding his napkin by way of distraction. I am conscious I am the original cause of bad feeling between these gentlemen, though when Mr Espinosa catches my eye he gives a nod as if to say he bears me no ill will.

'Your friend from the stagecoach, Miss Amesbury,' Miss Bridget says slyly, 'you must be sorry to have him seated so far away.'

I ignore this sally, and help myself to more bread and butter. A moment later the serving-maid brings out a large steaming platter of roast pork and places it in front of Mr Osmund and his pretty companion. The meat is neatly carved and appetising, and I am surprised to see Mr Espinosa veer away in disgust as Mr Osmund seizes the dish and thrusts it in front of him with a yelp of laughter. Mr Espinosa's face turns scarlet while with a roar the fat fellow heaps his own plate with meat, and proceeds to tuck in.

'Did you see that?' I ask Mrs Buckley. 'What's the joke?'

'Bless you, you innocent.' She pinches my cheek. 'Jews do not eat pork. They consider it unclean, you know.'

Looking at Mr Espinosa I see she is right, for though he has turned to look the other way he holds a handkerchief over his mouth.

'Do they eat beef, Jews?'

'Of course. I expect the maid will bring him supper presently.'

But some time later Mr Espinosa is still waiting, and from the careless way the maid splashes his jacket with gravy as she serves another guest, I see she is content to let him go hungry while the rest of us eat. I know I may be noticed

by my fellow diners, but after helping Miss Lamborne and Miss Jane to another slice of bread and butter I rise and carry the dish to the other side of the table and, wordless, present what is left to Mr Espinosa. The startled faces around me are easy to ignore, and the gentleman smiles gratefully and helps himself to bread.

‘You’re most considerate, Miss Amesbury.’

‘Not in the least, Sir. Short commons if one diner waits while the rest are nearly done.’ Overhearing my remark, the serving-maid tosses her head, but I care not. I have eaten my fill, and though this is said to be the best inn in Bath, I did not find the pork as tasty as it looked, nor the butter as fresh as it should be. The serving-maid may think herself better than I, but on my return to my place I see Mr Osmund pinch her backside as she takes his empty plate, and she forces a smile when she would plainly like to spit in his drink.

Mrs Buckley has been nodding and smiling as Miss Bridget runs on, talking of fourteen bedrooms and marble floors. She will enjoy scrubbing those floors on bended knees, and scraping out fourteen grates each winter’s morning.

‘Yes, granted you will find Bristol very prosperous,’ Mrs Buckley says, tapping her fingers to the melody from the corner of the room. ‘Sugar, they say, is sweeter than gold. Yet you know, my dears, Bath trumps all for pleasure: titled folk and gentry come here to enjoy every manner of entertainments. Opportunities for advancement spring up each week—why, if I were a young lady intent on service, I might choose Bath over Bristol, you know.’

While she speaks, Mr Osmund kisses and fondles the hand of the lady in blue, and I wish I could drag my eyes away from them.

‘Why don’t she chide him? He’s so ugly,’ I whisper.

Mrs Buckley nudges me with her elbow. ‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, dear. But perhaps you would rather escape such sights now dinner is over? Don’t be shy, I’m known for taking young visitors under my wing. I make it my business to provide every ease and comfort during their stay. What if I were to chaperone you three ladies to see the famous baths when I have paid our good host?’

Miss Bridget shifts uneasily. ‘We promised Father we’d be abed by nine o’clock.’

‘Well now, I expect your good father is a little out-dated in his understanding of town hours. In Bath we have scarcely begun by nine. Don’t deny me the pleasure of treating three such mannerly young people.’ She pats the purse hanging from her waist. ‘As for the baths, you’ll relish telling friends at home that you have seen with your own eyes the place that makes our city famous far and wide. I should be honoured to pay the small admission fee on your behalf. Nothing delights Ma Buckley quite so much as seeing the excitement on a young girl’s face as she makes her first entrance to our grand attraction.’

Mrs Buckley is hard on herself, for no one would consider her old. I thought we were about to set off but the tapster hurries to her, beckoning once more, and she has him fill our mugs to the brim a third time, with the remark, ‘My treat, dears. Chance to be merry before you take up your employ tomorrow. Your good health.’

She takes only a sip of her own drink before setting it down, perhaps regarding herself as too ‘old’ to risk a sore head come morning. But Miss Bridget lifts her mug and downs the contents in a couple of swallows, and there is a wobble in her step when she stands up. The lady waves us back

while she pays the landlord, and none of us has courage to protest. How could we, when she is so kind and cheerful, even picking up a napkin and dabbing the corners of Miss Jane's mouth?

'There now,' she says, surveying her charge. 'Can't have you seen outside with grease stains on your chin.'

Miss Lamborne is prompted to say: 'My sister always was a careless eater.'

'But a very pretty one,' the lady responds gallantly, and Miss Jane simpers, not in the least offended.

Chapter Three

A stagecoach arrives as we leave the inn, its passengers disembarking with gasps and groans as they straighten their limbs, and I am grateful I did not have to journey as they did, by the uncertain light of a lantern, wearied by the lurching and jolting of the carriage and listening out with dread for highwaymen.

The roads may be dark, but the rain has passed and in town all is gay and bright despite the late hour, the shops lit up and hawkers and stallholders crying their wares.

'I suppose 'tis market-day,' Miss Bridget Lamborne says, surprised as I am by the crowded scene.

'Gracious, Miss Lamborne, this is not Chippenham, you know.' Mrs Buckley chuckles. 'Bath is a resort for gentlefolk, we do not depend on Master Barley-seed and Mistress Butter-churn to provide our shopkeepers with customers. Come, ladies, let us cross over the street to admire those window-counters, for I daresay you never saw their like in Wiltshire.'

Mrs Buckley leads the way, pausing to let us dawdle at a draper's shop, where the counter is laden with bolts of patterned cloth and baskets of silk ribbons. Miss Jane is in raptures.

'Look, Bridget,' she cries. 'See this red check? Would it not look handsome with my best green gown?' She sucks in her breath. 'And taffeta, beautiful taffeta. How it catches the candlelight.' Miss Jane holds up the cloth, heedless of the draper who shifts and frowns behind the counter to see her making free with his goods. 'See, Miss Amesbury? One way crimson, the other gold.'

The man clears his throat warningly, and I look to Mrs Buckley, expecting her to remind him who she is, but when he meets her eyes his expression is unfriendlier still.

'Why does he scowl?' I ask in an undertone. 'Does he not welcome customers?'

'Some shopkeepers in Bath are ridiculous high and mighty,' she says. 'Pay no heed to the ill-natured fellow. I expect he took me for some duchess who failed to pay her bill last season. Now then, ladies, we're almost there, you know. The West-gate is marvellous convenient for the baths. A mere hop and a step divides the two.' As Miss Jane trips on a loose cobble, Mrs Buckley grasps her elbow and guides us into a square overlooked by a large building made of soft yellow stone, the entrance flanked by torches. 'Prepare to be astonished,' declares our hostess. 'We're about to enter the bath-house. Do you sense the heat?'

The evening is chilly, but my nostrils fill with something like rotten eggs, strong enough to make me wonder at those who drink the water if it tastes as foul as it smells. Miss Bridget covers her nose, then remembers her manners and takes her hand away.

'See?' Mrs Buckley says, nudging the girl's arm. 'They say those who need the waters find them pungent.' She runs a finger down Miss Bridget's inflamed cheek. 'What did I say about those freckles? Such a shame you ladies cannot sample the hot bath, it being so late. I expect you would be shy at the prospect, would you not? And yet here it is usual and proper for all and sundry to bathe in scanty dress, and some little fellows and their sisters frolic in the suits God was pleased to have them wear on their birthdays, and why not? The benefits to health outweigh considerations of propriety and custom.'

Contact with the water on as great an area of the body as may be achieved is the thing.' She throws back her head and I cannot help noticing that her neck resembles nothing so much as an old turkey-hen's, and I wonder if Mrs Buckley can be quite the buxom young matron I took her for. Then she adjusts her neckerchief as if conscious of my judging eye, and I am ashamed at my unkindness.

At her invitation we join a line of visitors waiting to buy tickets in the entrance to the bath-house. Few are the invalids I expected to see; most are well-dressed, and from their lively chatter appear in rude good health. A lady in a low-cut satin gown and bright pink petticoat fans herself as a gentleman offers a stream of compliments. When he turns I am shocked to recognise Mr Cheatley, whose nose is redder than it was this afternoon. He even staggers a little as though the worse for drink.

'Are all these people here for the waters, Mrs Buckley?' I hear the doubt in my voice. Indeed, one or two of the ladies have so much flesh exposed I wonder to see them among people of quality. 'Surely they aren't invalids?'

'To take the waters, yes, and also to spectate, and saunter, and be amused. Some of the fair sex will be dressing after their immersion, and readying themselves for supper. You will soon see how popular the place is.' As proof of her words Mrs Buckley curtsies to three young men in velvet coats who turn at the sound of her voice and salute her familiarly, one kissing her hand before letting go with lingering regret and following his friends inside.

'Admirers of mine, though I see you smile, Miss Amesbury. You think me vain.'

'No indeed, Madam.' I want to say that she is handsome for a woman her age, and that her gown is as fine as any I can see, but we have reached the ticket-master at last and before I have time to deliver my compliment she unties her purse.

'Good evening to you. Yes indeed, four tickets to spectate. I thank you, Sir.' She transfers the monies without my seeing coins change hands, and the official gives her four printed slips which she folds and tucks into her purse in a few swift movements. 'There now, ladies, a treat awaits you. The Romans would be astonished at the enlargement of the pools since their time. There's room in the greatest for five dozen bathers, you know.'

'I can't believe there will be much to see at this time of night,' I murmur to Miss Bridget as we move through. And yet the hubbub of voices implies the opposite.

'I suppose Mrs Buckley knows the customs here a little better than you do, Miss Amesbury. There are plenty of folk about at least.'

We arrive on a long, low balcony or covered terrace surrounding a sunken bathing-place. No one is in the water but people of all ages throng the balcony: women of fashion, ladies in bathing-dresses and frilled caps, as well as one or two scantily clad children with deformities such as bandy legs and sway-backs; but by far and away the largest group is that of young men in laced frock-coats and curled wigs, and most bow to Mrs Buckley and eye us girls with cheerful curiosity. I am not very comfortable under such scrutiny, and wish our hostess would let them know we gain no pleasure from the men's smiles and lifted eyebrows. But when one tall gentleman with a monocle has the impudence to turn that device upon us, Mrs Buckley merely smiles and pokes my rib as if to say she shares our triumph over the male sex.

'I wish I could jump in this minute,' Miss Jane says, leaning so far over the balustrade she risks the granting of her wish. 'I love a swim.'

‘Oh, so do I,’ I tell her, suddenly remembering Well-Head Pond at home, and the long summer days we spent before and after harvest-time when we were children. ‘My sisters, Meg and Liz, and I often used to swim.’

‘Indeed, Miss Amesbury.’ Miss Bridget is scathing. ‘In our village swimming was left to the lads.’

‘In Erlestoke girls swam as much as the boys. My father used to say he was glad of it, having seen a man fall in the River Frome and drown in a yard of water. We slipped down to the pool early, before the lads were about. None saw us.’

‘Or so you thought,’ Miss Bridget sniggers.

‘Remember when you fell in the horse-pond, sister?’ Miss Jane asks, pink-faced. She laughs. ‘What a whipping Father gave you for the state of your clothes.’

‘I’m surprised you remember, Jane, since you weren’t above three years old at the time. Sure you’re not confusing it with the day our Lenny pushed you in the dung-hill? There was no fuss about spoiled clothes that day—you weren’t hardly wearing any.’

‘Ladies, ladies. You are not on the farm now.’ Mrs Buckley waggles her finger in mock-reproof. ‘See that personage over there, a little to the left? Is she not a great beauty? That gentleman there in the dark red coat, he is wildly in love with her, you know, even though the lady is betrothed already to the gentleman in the hat with the ostrich feather. Do you see him? He is very handsome and rich, and yet all believe the lady would elope with the other if she could. Her father prevents it; he is a viscount, you know. She dares not thwart him.’

I wonder at Mrs Buckley’s knowledge of these people; she seems acquainted with all of Bath. To think she is familiar with such quality at first hand, those with titles as well as money, is astonishing. The sisters Lamborne have descended to sly pinches, carrying on their quarrel by covert means, while Mrs Buckley rests her elbows on the balustrade as if content to pass another hour in contemplation of the bath and its visitors.

‘It is very busy here, Madam,’ I say, beginning a speech in which I plan to argue for an early return to our lodgings; but Mrs Buckley is distracted by the arrival of a group of gentlemen in showy coats and breeches, and seems not to hear me. She waves at one of the party, who has the sauce to blow us a kiss.

Miss Bridget, too entranced by the bath to notice, leans over the balustrade and gazes at the water.

‘Is it deep?’ she asks.

‘Amazing so,’ Mrs Buckley says, attentive to her guests again. She points at a smaller pool on the far side. ‘The Queen’s bath behind the Great Pump is preferred by the ladies. That may explain the numbers of gentlemen idling at its edges,’ she adds archly. To my dismay she makes another signal, urging the new arrivals to join us.

‘I wish they wouldn’t stare,’ I say, as one of the approaching gallants lifts his wide-brimmed hat and peers at me.

Mrs Buckley straightens up. ‘Goodness, you are nice for a girl come from the country.’ She shoves my shoulder as if she hardly credits my shyness. ‘Did you not have sweethearts among your hedge-cutters and plough-men? These are elegant men about town who clearly consider the three of you very pretty. And why should they not? Come, ladies, walk this way. It is why people come here of an evening, you know—to see and be seen. Give me your

cloaks, they are not needed while we are under cover. Let these gentlemen admire your smooth, young shoulders. Good evening to you, Sirs.'

'Good evening,' they chorus, bowing.

'Thank you, ma'am, I had rather keep mine on.' I clutch my collar as if I expect Mrs Buckley to undress me forthwith, but Miss Jane has no such fears. She undoes her ribbons and, stripped of her cloak, holds herself tall, preening as the gentlemen form a kind of loose circle around us and bite their lips at the sight of her plump figure.

'Why, Miss Jane, how elegant you are,' Mrs Buckley says, and glances round to gauge her audience's agreement. I am surely mistaken when I think one man gives her a nod, and when I check a moment later he is looking the other way quite innocently, so I think I imagined a connection between him and Mrs Buckley which does not exist. Nonetheless I am uneasy, all the more so when Miss Jane begins to rearrange her muslin neckerchief the better to display her bosom.

'Should we not return to the West-gate now?' I ask Miss Bridget under my breath. 'I don't care for being paraded like a beast at auction.'

She huffs. 'Gracious, Miss Amesbury. Like Mrs Buckley said, you are a stuck-in-the mud, ain't you? For those of us beginning work tomorrow, a little fun tonight don't come amiss.' One gentleman, who sports a dark green riding-coat faced with scarlet, lifts his hat, and Miss Bridget juts out her chest and pouts as if she would let him kiss her if he dared.

Another gentleman grins and tries to take my hand, but I whip it away.

'Mrs Buckley,' I say loudly.

She looks at me in bland surprise. 'Don't tell me you'll hold out against an evening of pleasure, Miss Amesbury. There is always one prude, is there not?' She addresses this question to another pair of gentlemen who loll close by, and who fall to sighing and tutting to indicate they share her regret at my aloofness. The elder of the two, a greybeard with deep-set cunning eyes, steps forward to offer me his arm.

'I beg your pardon, Miss,' he says to Miss Bridget. 'But you'll admit your friend is an uncommon beauty. As are you all, of course. May I ask you to walk with me a little, Madam?'

'No, Sir, thank you, Sir.' When he continues to hold out his arm I add forcefully: 'I am tired.'

The gentleman pulls down his mouth into a show of disappointment before holding his arm out to Miss Bridget. She shakes her head, but by her fluttering eyelashes lets him know she is by no means averse to the offer.

I decide to appeal to Mrs Buckley's mercy.

'Please, ma'am, I would like so much to return to the inn now.' I lower my voice. 'These gentlemen are playing with us, I don't like it.'

For the briefest moment I glimpse a flash of what might be anger in her eyes before her manner changes.

'Miss Amesbury, forgive me. I thought to divert you and your friends for an hour or two while you were in Bath. It was foolish of me to think you would enjoy yourselves in a place esteemed by people older and so much worldlier than you are. The three of you are good, sweet country girls, and I am sure you are ready for your beds. Excuse us, gentlemen. These ladies long to retire. They thank you for your compliments and I assure you, Sirs, they will all be in bed within the hour.' Her careless reference to bed raises a snigger from her listeners, though to my great relief the men withdraw, casting back only one or two regretful glances as we move off.

Mrs Buckley leads us further down the covered walk.

'Is the exit not the same way we came in?' I say. The candles are few here, and there are scarcely any walkers. In an alcove a lady and gentleman are locked in an embrace, too engrossed to look up as we pass.

'Oh no, dear. The exit is quite other than the entrance where we bought our tickets. Now then, I have a very good proposal for you all, by way of rounding off the evening. Before we return to the West-gate we shall call on my dear old friend Mrs Charlton. She is quite elderly and frail, alas, but she is uncommonly fond of young people and would be more pleased than I can express if we was to visit her now, just for a short while, you know.'

I remember my sister Meg's insistence that I should on no account accept an invitation from any person on my journey, however friendly-seeming they might be, and feel a shiver in my insides when I consider I have already accepted hospitality from Mrs Buckley, even if, thankfully, it has been without evil consequences.

'You are very kind, Mrs Buckley,' I tell her firmly, 'but I had better say goodnight.'

'I would like to meet your friend, Mrs Buckley,' Miss Bridget says. 'Even if others can think only of their beds.'

Her spite, though I am used to it by now, is stinging, and to insist on returning to the West-gate does, I confess, seem ungracious when the sisters are so agreeable.

'Very well,' I say. 'As long as the visit is quick. I am weary, you see, having started out so early this morning.'

'You are a sapling, Miss Amesbury, with all the freshness and vigour of your tender years. See how much stronger you are than you imagine. It is almost yester morning since you left home. The abbey clock struck eleven a moment ago—did you not hear?'

My heart thumps. 'I did not. In that case ...'

'No, no, I brook no objections. Half an hour to meet my oldest friend is all I ask.' Mrs Buckley hands over the sisters' garments. 'Put on your cloaks again, dears, just for the moment's walk to Mrs Charlton's house.' She rearranges her own shawl and looks expectantly from face to face. 'I said this was the way out, did I not?'

We come to a side-gate that I cannot think is used by many visitors to the baths, being low and damp underfoot, and the passageway beyond it poorly lit, but Mrs Buckley unfastens the latch as if she uses it every day of her life.

'Mrs Charlton lives just around this corner. Take care, Miss Jane, the way is slippery.'

Looming over us is a great, dark church with soaring pinnacles.

'But this isn't West-gate street where we came in,' I say, bewildered. 'Mrs Buckley, where are we?'

'No, indeed. This is Abbey-street. And this the abbey, which used to be full of monks and nuns and now is a church where the rich and titled come to worship. Such a shame you cannot be here on Sunday to see them parading through the square in their finery. But come along, ladies. Mrs Charlton will be enchanted to meet you.'

I am glad to be away from the baths and their gawping gentlemen, but I do not like the look of the dingy street ahead.

'Mrs Buckley, we don't know Mrs Charlton. Past eleven o'clock is late to call on a lady we have never met.'

‘Mrs Charlton is my friend. She will not be happy, I assure you, until she has offered a glass of her delicious elderberry cordial to my new young acquaintances.’

‘Elderberry cordial?’ Miss Jane cries eagerly. ‘We only have that once a year. Mother makes it for Christmas, don’t she, Bridie?’

‘Ah, your dear mother. Such a clever housekeeper. And how proud she must be of her beautiful daughters.’

‘Beautiful? I should say so! I never saw such lovelies.’

We spin round to find a gentleman striding towards us. His brocade waistcoat gleams in the light from the abbey porch, and I am nearly certain he is the older gentleman with the hard, deep-set eyes who tried to give me his arm when we were in the bath-house.

‘Sir Roger,’ exclaims Mrs Buckley. ‘You are all chivalry, indeed you are. To escort us to my friend’s house, too kind, Sir.’

He bows. ‘Your servant, Madam. As ever. And yours, dear ladies.’ This time he eyes Miss Jane with particular interest, and she bobs a curtsey and lets out a nervous giggle.

‘Well, what do we wait for? Proceed,’ the gentleman says, waving us towards a narrow lane and following close behind ’til Mrs Buckley stops.

‘Here is Mrs Charlton’s house,’ she says. ‘Just as I knew, the lights are on. She’s expecting us.’

‘The other fellows will be here directly, Madam,’ the gentleman says. He has unfastened his coat already, as if he assumes he is invited in. ‘They merely wished to pay a brief call at a tavern, you understand.’

‘Ah! Like all young bucks, they seek to enjoy themselves to the utmost. You see, dear ladies, they know that Mrs Charlton abjures strong spirits, and they do not wish to embarrass her by asking for refreshments she has not the wherewithal to provide.’

The building before us is smaller and shabbier than most cottages in Erlestoke; its sole glazed window is cracked and dirty. I try to tell myself that perhaps this is usual in Bath, where the houses are crammed together and the passage of people and vehicles must throw up mud.

‘I wish we were about to climb up to our garret at the West-gate,’ I whisper to Miss Bridget.

‘Heavens, Miss Amesbury.’ She gives a sour little laugh. ‘An old lady invalid cannot be a danger to us. Speaking for myself, I shall be glad to take the weight off my feet while we take our cordial.’

So eager is she indeed that she sweeps past me to join Mrs Buckley on the doorstep, whereupon Miss Jane clutches at my arm.

‘I never thought I would find friends so quick when I left home today, did you, Miss Amesbury?’ She points back at the way we came and together we gaze up at the abbey, shadowy and vast. Miss Jane thrusts her face at mine, gasping a little at her clumsiness as she loses her footing once again. ‘Those beautiful shops, those gentlemen so handsome and admiring. I believe I shall never forget my night in Bath, shall you?’ She hiccups. ‘And it ain’t over yet, that’s the best of it.’