



*The Orphan's
Dream*
Dilly Court

The Sunday Times Top Ten Bestseller

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About the Book

Motherless since she was five, Mirabel Cutler was raised by her father to be a lady. But when he dies suddenly, Mirabel finds herself cast out on the street by her ruthless stepmother.

She is taken to a place of refuge by charismatic sea captain, Jack Starke. But the safe haven turns out to be house of ill-repute. Here she becomes a parlour maid and catches the eye of an elderly, retired army officer, Hubert Kettle.

Mirabel has fallen in love with Jack Starke but when she hears that his ship has foundered and all were lost, she has little choice but to accept Hubert's offer of a home and marriage. Although desperately unhappy, Mirabel is determined to make the best of her life.

Until she receives unexpected news and her life is thrown into turmoil once more.

About the Author

Dilly Court grew up in North-east London and began her career in television, writing scripts for commercials. She is married with two grown-up children and four grandchildren, and now lives in Dorset on the beautiful Jurassic Coast with her husband.

To find out more visit www.dillycourt.com

Also by Dilly Court

Mermaids Singing

The Dollmaker's Daughters

Tilly True

The Best of Sisters

The Cockney Sparrow

A Mother's Courage

The Constant Heart

A Mother's Promise

The Cockney Angel

A Mother's Wish

The Ragged Heiress

A Mother's Secret

Cinderella Sister

A Mother's Trust

The Lady's Maid

The Best of Daughters

The Workhouse Girl

A Loving Family

The Beggar Maid

A Place Called Home

The Orphan's Dream

Dilly Court



For Jonathan, Sarah and Sophie, with love

Chapter One

Catherine Court, Great Tower Hill, London, 1881

THE LOCALS CALLED the house Cutler's Castle, and it was not intended as a compliment. Mirabel was painfully aware of the fact that her father was not the most popular man in the City, having acquired his wealth by sharp trading and a ruthless desire to put his rivals out of business. Jumped-up Jacob Cutler was one of his more repeatable nicknames, and if people were polite to his face Mirabel knew that they laughed at him behind his back. Her father's cock-of-the-walk attitude and boastful nature were unlikely to endear him to his neighbours or the other city merchants, and Mirabel had realised long ago that this was why they were shunned socially.

She hitched her basket over her arm and let herself in through one of the wrought-iron gates which separated the court from Seething Lane at one end and Trinity Square at the other. Their intended purpose was to keep out thieves and vagrants, but at times Mirabel felt as though they had been designed to create a prison for the residents, herself in particular. Her weekly excursions to help at the soup kitchen were her one way of escaping from a life bounded by her father's strict rules.

She headed for the house which had been her home for almost as long as she could remember. Cutler's Castle dominated the Georgian terraces in a way befitting a man of considerable means. Double-fronted, with a porch supported

by ornate Corinthian columns, it satisfied Jacob's desire to show off. He employed a cook, a maid of all work and Septimus Wiley, a manservant who varied his duties between valet and butler and ruled his small empire with ruthless disregard for the feelings of others. But Wiley had a weakness: Mirabel had discovered that he was a secret drinker, imbibing his master's best brandy at every possible opportunity. How he managed to conceal his drunken state from her father she was at a loss to know. She had tried to warn Jacob about his employee's shortcomings, but her father's refusal to take her seriously made her wonder if the despicable Wiley held some sway over him. He seemed to get away with behaviour that would not be tolerated in any other household, and he treated her with barely concealed contempt. Wiley in his black tailcoat with his stick-thin arms and legs put her in mind of a spider, spinning his web, ready to strike at any moment.

She was about to knock on the door when she saw Harriet Humble emerge from the house opposite with her maid in tow, as well as a small boy whose duty was to carry his mistress's purchases home at the end of her frequent shopping expeditions. Mrs Humble's husband was a prosperous gun maker with premises in Thames Street, and if she chose to out-rival Jacob with her spendthrift ways he always managed to outdo her in a spectacular fashion, which was unlikely to win their friendship. The Humbles were pleasant enough and passed the time of day with Mirabel, but had little to say on the rare occasions when she was with her father.

'Good afternoon, Mrs Humble.' Mirabel nodded and smiled.

'Good afternoon, Miss Cutler.' Harriet acknowledged her with a pitying look and walked on, but then she paused and came to a halt, turning to stare at Mirabel with her head on one side and a calculating expression on her doughy

features. 'I see your father has a new companion, Miss Cutler.'

'I beg your pardon, ma'am?'

'Such a handsome woman,' Harriet continued slyly. 'I'm sure you must have met her on many occasions. They seem quite a devoted couple, and I've been told that it's some time since your mother passed away.'

'My mother died when I was five,' Mirabel said coldly. 'I think you're mistaken, Mrs Humble. My father comes in contact with many people in his business capacity.'

Harriet shrugged her plump shoulders. 'I daresay you're right, Miss Cutler. But she is a very handsome woman and I should think she's quite a lot younger than your father, and if she's in trade, well . . .'

She allowed the sentence to hang like a cobweb, floating in the air.

'I'm sure I don't know what you mean.' Mirabel raised her hand to knock on the door.

'I imagine that you'll find out soon enough, Miss Cutler. Come, Mary, don't dawdle or we'll be late.'

Harriet seemed determined to have the last word, and she marched off with her entourage trotting along at her heels like well-trained puppies. Mary looked back and stuck her tongue out at Mirabel and the boy copied her, cocking a snook.

Mirabel raised her hand once more and rapped on the lion's head doorknocker. She waited for a moment but no one came. She knocked again, and finally she heard footsteps and the door was wrenched open. Wiley peered at her, bleary-eyed. 'Oh, it's you.' He turned on his heel and staggered off along the narrow hallway, leaving the door swinging on its hinges. He headed for the stairs which led down to the basement kitchen and the tiny room he had commandeered for himself, styling it as the butler's pantry when in truth it was little more than a glorified store cupboard.

Mirabel said nothing. She closed the front door and made her way up the winding staircase to her bedroom on the second floor. For all its width the house was relatively narrow in depth. There were only two rooms on each floor, although these were large and well-proportioned with front aspects and uninspiring views of the houses opposite. The exception to this was the top floor which was divided into much smaller rooms, one for Cook and another for Flossie, the maid of all work, a boxroom, and finally, and most important to Mirabel, was her own special room, her dreaming place. Spending hours in solitary confinement had been a punishment meted out by her ill-tempered governess, but the attic room had become a place of sanctuary. Here she would sit on the window seat and look out over the rooftops to the spire of All Hallows Church and the vast expanse of sky. It was here that she would escape into a world inhabited by handsome princes who fought fiery dragons in order to win the hand of a princess, who coincidentally bore a strong resemblance to her. Then as she grew older her dreams altered and she imagined herself travelling the world, visiting foreign countries where the sun shone every day and there were no peasouper fogs, drenching rain or the bone-chilling cold of an English winter.

She smiled as she took off her bonnet and shawl and laid them on a boudoir chair placed between the two tall windows. Her room, like every other part of the house was decorated lavishly. The rose-patterned wallpaper and curtains matched the coverlet on her bed. The delicate pink of the flowers was repeated in the upholstery on the chairs and the dressing-table stool, and in the rugs which were scattered about on the polished wooden floorboards. It was unashamed luxury, but Mirabel could remember the time before her father fought his way out of poverty, using whatever means came to hand.

She had been born in a room at the top of a warehouse in Shad Thames overlooking Butler's Wharf on the south bank

of the mighty river, and that was where she had spent the first five years of her life. The scent of roasting coffee beans and spices had the power to take her back to those days when her father had been a humble clerk, working for the rich merchant who owned the building and several ships which traded with the Americas. The small family had scraped by on his meagre wages, frequently going hungry, and more often than not she had gone barefoot even in the coldest weather. Then, as if by a miracle, everything had changed. The merchant had died, some said in suspicious circumstances, leaving the warehouse and his entire business to his clerk, Jacob Cutler. They had risen in the world, but too late to save her mother from the dreaded consumptive disease that claimed so many lives. It was then that Jacob had purchased the house in Catherine Court, and Mirabel's life had changed, seemingly for the better. Acting on a whim, her father had decided that she should be educated as befitted a young lady of means, and Miss Barton had been employed to act as governess. Mirabel's days of freedom had ended abruptly.

Miss Barton was a termagant who inhabited the schoolroom, sleeping on a truckle bed concealed behind a curtain, and she ruled every aspect of her charge's life from the moment Mirabel awoke in the morning until she retired to bed at night. She ordered her meals, chose her clothes, organised her lessons and never let her out of doors unaccompanied. Any hint of rebellion was quickly and thoroughly crushed, and if Mirabel did not mend her ways immediately her rebellious conduct was reported to her father. Jacob was not a patient man, and he gave Miss Barton leave to deal with his daughter as she saw fit. Going without supper was the least of the punishments meted out, and caning was used for more serious offences, such as not having a handkerchief or falling asleep during lessons. But Miss Barton's favourite form of correction was to lock Mirabel in the attic for hours on end. Poor Betty Barton,

Mirabel thought with a wry grin, if only she knew that her efforts to terrorise and subdue her charge had all been in vain. The attic had become her friend, the spiders her companions, and the mice might at any time be turned into horses to pull a carriage provided by a good fairy, who transformed her into a beautiful princess with a wave of her wand. It was a quiet place away from the hurly-burly of the city streets and the sounds of the river that continued day and night. It was a place to dream. It was Mirabel's own private place.

'You were a silly child,' she said out loud, taking a seat at the dressing table. Her reflection smiled back at her as she shook the pins from her long dark hair, so that it cascaded around her shoulders in a shining cape, blue-black as the coal brought upriver by the Thames barges. Her smile faded and she frowned. What right had she to be discontented with her lot when there were people barely a stone's throw away who were literally starving to death? The gaunt faces and wasted limbs of those who queued for food in the soup kitchen would haunt her dreams tonight. The bowls of thin broth provided just enough nourishment to keep them from starvation, but some of the unfortunates Mirabel had seen earlier that day must surely be hovering on the edge of disaster, especially the children. She could still smell the stench of unwashed bodies which were tortured by parasites and scarred by skin diseases. She shuddered, twisting her hair into a chignon at the back of her neck and securing it in a net. Compared to the standards of the poor, who lived and died on the streets, she had no cause to complain.

She was about to get up when someone tapped on the door. 'Yes, who is it?'

Flossie burst into the room, her round face flushed and her pale blue eyes shining with excitement. 'You're to come downstairs immediately, miss. The master says so.'

'I'll be down in a minute.' Mirabel was used to Flossie's wild flights of fancy and over-dramatic behaviour.

‘No, miss. Please come now. I’ll be in for it if you don’t.’

Mirabel shot her a curious glance. ‘What’s the matter? Why so urgent? I didn’t even know that my father was at home.’

‘He just arrived, miss. He brought . . .’ Flossie hesitated, biting her lip. ‘He brought a guest. You’re to come now, please.’

‘Very well.’ Mirabel rose from her seat and followed the girl down the stairs to the first floor. She was taken by surprise when Flossie stopped outside the drawing room, which was only used on special occasions, and was about to point out her mistake when the maid’s timid knock was answered by Jacob Cutler’s curt instruction to enter. Flossie opened the door and stood aside to allow Mirabel to pass, but instead of bowing out like a well-trained servant she hovered in the doorway, gawping at the occupants, open-mouthed.

‘Thank you, Flossie,’ Mirabel murmured. ‘That will be all.’

Reluctantly Flossie withdrew, and Jacob jumped up from his seat, greeting his daughter with a beaming smile. ‘My dear, I want you to meet a very special lady.’ He held his hand out to the woman who was reclining on the sofa. ‘This is my fiancée, Ernestine Mutton, and these are her two delightful daughters, Charity and Prudence.’

‘It’s Moo-ton,’ Ernestine said, emphasising the syllables. ‘Moo-ton, Jacob. How many times do I have to tell you?’ She tempered the words with a coquettish smile. ‘What are men like? Aren’t they all just little boys at heart, needing a good woman to take care of them?’ She extended a plump white hand. ‘I hope to be your stepmama very shortly, Mirabel my dear.’

Mirabel stared at her dumbstruck. Harriet Humble’s words came back to her with a force that took her breath away. Ernestine Mutton, or however she chose to pronounce her name, was a good twenty years Jacob’s junior, plump and

brassy, and her lips were suspiciously red, as were her round cheeks.

‘Say something,’ Jacob hissed, poking Mirabel in the ribs.

‘Cat got your tongue, dearie?’ Ernestine prompted. ‘I daresay she’s too overcome with joy to speak, Jake my love.’

Jake! Mirabel turned to her father and was astonished to see that he had not taken offence. In fact he was grinning like an idiot, and it seemed in that instant that a stranger had inhabited her father’s body. ‘You are a one, Ernestine my precious,’ he said, chuckling.

‘Ma, can we go now?’ The elder of the two children, a girl of about fourteen who would undoubtedly grow up to be the image of her mother, spoke in a nasal whining voice that set Mirabel’s nerves on edge but seemed to have the reverse effect on Ernestine, who put her arm around her daughter and gave her a hug.

‘I’m sorry, lambkin. I should introduce you to your new sister.’

‘And me, Ma. You’re always forgetting me.’ The younger child, whom Mirabel judged to be about twelve, nudged her sister in the ribs.

Charity yelped with pain. ‘You little beast.’

Ernestine continued to smile benignly. ‘Now now, my darlings don’t be naughty.’ She looked up at Mirabel with a steely glint in her grey eyes. ‘Charity is my eldest and Prudence is my baby.’

‘Oh, Ma!’ Prudence pouted ominously. ‘Don’t say such things. I ain’t a baby.’

‘Yes you are,’ Charity said spitefully. ‘You are a big baby. Just look at you. Your eyes are full of tears. You’re going to cry. You’ll do anything to get your own way.’ She turned to her mother. ‘Tell her off, Ma. Don’t let her make a fuss.’

Jacob cleared his throat. ‘Now now, my dears. Let your mama have a bit of peace, or I’ll . . .’

Ernestine released Charity and hauled herself to her feet, her plump bosom heaving above her tight stays. 'Or you'll what, Jacob? Do you dare to threaten my girls?'

Mirabel waited for her father to explode with rage and tell the awful woman and her equally awful daughters to leave, but he seemed to shrink beneath the force of his fiancée's wrath, and he positively cowered before her. 'I'm sorry, my love. I didn't mean it to sound that way.' He shot a sideways glance at Mirabel. 'Ring the bell for Flossie. We'll have some refreshments. Whatever my ladies wish for will be granted.'

Mirabel made a move towards the door. 'I'll go to the kitchen and make sure Cook understands, Pa.' She hurried from the room, unable to stand it any longer.

Cook was hacking at a loaf of bread, cutting it into thick slices that were more suitable for a navy's dinner than afternoon tea. She glared at Mirabel as if daring her to criticise her efforts. 'Whatever next?'

'Have you any jam, Mrs James? I'm sure Pa's guests would appreciate something sweet.'

'Flossie, take a look in the larder. See if there's any jam left in the pot, and fetch the fruit cake. I put a meat cover over it to keep it away from the blooming mice.' Cook tossed a cloth at Flossie who was staring into space, having gone off in one of her trance-like states. 'Do you hear me, you stupid girl?'

She came back to reality with a start. 'Yes, Cook.'

'That Mutton woman's been here before, Miss Mirabel,' Cook said gloomily. 'She only comes when you're at the soup kitchen, or if you've gone to market. Seems to me that something ain't right, if you know what I mean.'

'I'm sure she's a very nice person when you get to know her.' Mirabel tried to sound convincing, but her first impression of Ernestine had not been favourable.

Flossie bounded out of the cupboard like a jack-in-the-box. 'The cake's gone. Not a crumb left and only one pot of jam.'

Mirabel caught Cook's eye and had the grace to blush. 'I'm sorry. I forgot to mention that I took the cake for the poor children at the soup kitchen.'

'Really, Miss Mirabel, whatever next?' Mrs James puffed out her cheeks. 'You'd see us all starve in order to feed those who ought to do an honest day's work to pay for their vittles like the rest of us.'

'Not even a crumb left,' Flossie said sadly. 'I'm partial to a slice of fruit cake.' She handed the jam pot to Cook, receiving a stinging blow round the ear for her pains.

'If I thought you'd pinched it you'd be in for trouble, my girl.'

'No, Cook, it weren't me,' Flossie howled. 'It was her, she said so.'

'It was indeed, Mrs James. Flossie isn't to blame.'

'It wouldn't be the first time. That useless creature loves anything sweet.' Cook peered into the jam pot. 'If you've had your finger round the rim I'll give you what for, Flossie my girl.'

'Let me help you,' Mirabel said, stepping in quickly. 'I'll butter the bread if you'll make the tea. Bread and jam will have to do; after all, we weren't prepared for guests.'

'Guests?' Mrs James dropped the bread knife with a derisive snort. 'That one will have her feet beneath the table before you can say Jack Robinson. I've met her sort before.'

Cook's words proved to be prophetic. Within a fortnight Jacob and Ernestine were married by special licence in All Hallows Church, which was only a short walk from Catherine Court. The small party arrived back at the house to dine off the cold collation which Cook had laid out in the dining room. Jacob presided over the meal, seated as usual at the head, and Ernestine took Mirabel's former place at the far end of the table. Mirabel was reduced to sitting next to Charity, with Prudence on the opposite side of the table, pulling faces at them both. Wiley had greeted Ernestine with

an obsequious bow, bending so low that Mirabel thought he might topple over or snap in two. However, he managed to right himself and offered his congratulations to the happy couple. At the table he hovered between Jacob and Ernestine, pouring the wine and making sure that their glasses were topped up. Jacob's cheeks flushed dark red and Mirabel was alarmed. She was used to her father's variable moods, but she had never seen him in such high spirits, and she was afraid that at any moment he might burst a blood vessel. He kept raising his glass to his bride and the more he drank the more lewd his suggestions became, until Ernestine shot him a warning glance. 'Remember the children, Jake my dear.'

He choked on a mouthful of cold chicken, gulped and swallowed, washing it down with yet more wine. 'Of course, my pet. Wiley, fetch another bottle from the cellar.' He stared at Mirabel, frowning. 'There's no need to look so disapproving, daughter. You should be happy for me. You're acting as if you're at a funeral and not a wedding breakfast. What's the matter with you, girl?'

'I'm sorry, Pa. I have a headache. May I be excused?'

'No, you may not.' Ernestine's voice rose to a shriek. 'It's obvious that you're jealous and your pretty little nose has been put out of joint, but you'd better get over it because that's the way things are from now on.'

Stung by the unfairness of this remark, Mirabel shook her head. 'I'm not jealous, ma'am. If I thought my pa would be happy with you I'd be overjoyed.'

Ernestine's mouth worked soundlessly and her bosom heaved. 'You little bitch,' she said angrily. 'Jake, are you going to allow your daughter to speak to me in such a manner?'

'You'd slap me for being so cheeky, and I'd deserve it, Ma,' Charity said piously.

'We wouldn't get away with it so why does she?' Prudence added, smirking.

Wiley hovered over Ernestine with the wine bottle clasped in his hand. 'More wine, ma'am?'

Ernestine brushed his offer aside, rising angrily to her feet. 'Are you going to speak to her, Jake, or will you leave it up to me to discipline your daughter?'

He signalled to Wiley. 'I'll have some more wine.'

'Don't you think you've had enough, Pa?' Mirabel asked anxiously. She could see the whole matter getting out of hand, fuelled by Wiley's unsubtle attempts to get both his master and his new mistress the worse for drink, although what he hoped to gain by it was anybody's guess. Wiley shot her a menacing glance as he moved swiftly to refill Jacob's glass, but she chose to ignore him.

'Mind your own business, girl,' Ernestine snapped. 'If you can't keep a civil tongue in your head, I suggest you leave the table.'

Mirabel pushed her chair back and stood up. 'I'm going to my room.'

'No,' Ernestine said sharply. 'Things are going to be different from now on.' She turned to her husband, eyes narrowed. 'Tell her, Jacob.'

He downed the wine in his glass in one greedy gulp. 'This was supposed to be a celebration, my love.'

'It might have been had you sorted things out with your daughter before we wed. I see I'll have to do it instead.'

'What haven't you told me?' Mirabel looked from one to the other. Her father lowered his head, staring into his empty glass.

Ernestine leaned back in her chair, a triumphant smile hovering on her painted lips. 'There have of necessity been changes. You have two younger sisters now, and each of them must have a room of her own. Charity has been given your bedchamber and the schoolroom will be made comfortable for Prudence.'

'You can't do that,' Mirabel cried angrily. 'Pa, tell her that it's my room.'

Wiley stood behind his master, folding his hands behind his back. He stood stiffly to attention but his eyes glittered with malice as they rested on Mirabel. She knew that she had made an enemy of him by reporting his drinking habit to her father, even though he had chosen not to discipline his employee.

‘Ernestine is right, my pet.’ Jacob slurred the words, and he seemed to have difficulty fixing his gaze on his daughter’s face. ‘Quite right. The girls should have rooms of their own.’

‘But what about me?’ Mirabel demanded. ‘You can’t expect me to sleep with the servants. I won’t allow it.’

Ernestine rose to her feet. ‘Won’t allow it? Just who do you think you are, miss? I’m the lady of the house now and you’ll do as I say. Your things have been moved to the attic, where I’m told you spent many hours as a child, so you’ll feel quite at home. That is so, isn’t it, Jake, my love?’

Chapter Two

DESPITE THE FIERCE exchange of words that followed, there was nothing Mirabel could do to alter the situation. She slammed out of the dining room and raced upstairs, but Wiley followed her, catching up with her as she tried to gain access to her bedroom. 'It's locked, miss, and I have the only other key.'s

She spun round to face him, recoiling as she caught a whiff of his sour breath. 'This has nothing to do with you, Wiley. Give it to me.'

He shook his head, a sly grin creasing his thin face into a mocking mask. 'You've no authority in this house now, miss. I'd advise you to do as your stepmother says.' He moved closer, pinning her to the door without actually touching her body. 'Perhaps this will teach you not to cross Septimus Wiley.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.' She faced him squarely even though she was quaking inwardly.

'I'd advise you to watch your tongue in the future, miss. Telling your father that I helped myself to his cognac was not a friendly action, and I take exception to being branded a thief.'

'But you are a thief, and now you're trying to intimidate me. I'll have you sacked, Wiley. My father won't allow such behaviour in a servant.'

He moved a fraction closer so that she could feel the heat from his body. 'He won't sack me, Miss Cutler. I know too much.'

‘What do you mean by that?’ Her heart was thudding against her tightly laced stays, but she managed to keep her voice level and she faced him unblinking. The man was a liar as well as a bully and he must be stopped, but she needed to know the reason for his outrageous behaviour.

‘Wouldn’t you like to know? But I’m not going to tell you – not yet, anyway. We’ll keep that for another time, but let’s say I saw what went on in the warehouse, and I know what happened to old man Pendleton.’ His mirthless laughter echoed off the high ceiling, coming back to mock them both as they stood locked in silent combat.

Mirabel felt the hackles rise on the back of her neck and a shiver ran down her spine. Fear turned to anger and she gave him a mighty shove, catching him unawares, and he staggered backwards, righting himself against the curve of the balustrade. ‘You little bitch.’

She tossed her head. ‘I’ll tell my father what you just said. You won’t be laughing then.’

‘Now you listen to me, Miss Cutler.’ He righted himself, his eyes narrowed to dark slits and his lips drawn into a tight line. ‘One word out of place and your father will swing from a hangman’s noose.’

‘You’re lying.’

Wiley opened his mouth to reply, but at the sound of footsteps on the stairs his whole demeanour changed. He bowed and backed away. ‘I think you’ll find everything to your liking in your new bedchamber, miss.’

Charity and Prudence came bounding up the stairs with their skirts bunched up above their knees. Charity came to a sudden halt. ‘That’s my room, not yours. Ma said so and your pa agreed. You’re not to let her in, Wiley.’

‘And the other room is mine.’ Prudence ran to the door, extending her arms in a dramatic gesture to block the entrance. ‘You can’t come in here. I won’t let you.’

‘You two are spoilt brats,’ Mirabel said coldly. ‘Make the most of your room, Charity, because you won’t have it for

long. I'll sort this out later.' Ignoring Wiley she left them and made her way up the next flight of stairs, although she had no intention of letting the matter rest. She would wait until her father had sobered up and choose a moment when she could catch him on his own. He must have been blinded by passion for his bride to have agreed to such a thing, but he would soon see the woman he had married for what she really was.

The top landing, in contrast to the lower floors, was uncarpeted and shabby. When Jacob had sent in the workmen to renovate the old building no one had thought to redecorate the servants' quarters. It was clean, Mrs James had seen to that, or rather Flossie had been set to sweep down the cobwebs and scrub the floors, but the paintwork was the original blue-grey, and the once pristine whitewashed ceilings had dulled to ochre with the passing of time.

Mirabel let herself into her dreaming place. If she had hoped it might have been transformed into a boudoir fit for the eldest daughter of the house she would have been disappointed. As it was she was barely surprised to see a truckle bed abandoned in the middle of the floor, with the entire contents of the clothes press in her old room piled upon it, together with some threadbare blankets, a patched coverlet and a couple of pillows. The only other furniture was the wooden rocking chair which had always been there, and the trunk where she kept the few treasures she possessed away from the prying eyes of Miss Barton. These included a painted paper fan, a string of blue glass beads and several hair combs, which were the only things she had to remind her of her mother. There was Sukey, her rag doll with an embroidered face and yellow woollen hair, and there were books purchased from second-hand stalls in the market. None of them were in very good condition, but all were loved and well read, especially those on foreign travel.

Mirabel was about to investigate in case anyone had tampered with her belongings when Charity and Prudence burst into the room. They stopped, staring around wide-eyed. 'Ma put you in your place all right,' Charity said with a spiteful twist of her lips. 'This is where you belong.'

'Yes,' Prudence added, giggling. 'There'll be spiders and rats, and it's probably haunted too.'

'Get out.' Mirabel made a move towards them, holding on to her temper but only just. 'Go away and don't come up here again.'

'You can't tell us what to do.' Charity shuffled a step closer. 'This is our home now and Ma makes the rules.'

'Yes,' echoed Prudence, following her sister's example. 'Ma does.'

'Out.' Mirabel advanced on them with her hands fisted and they fled, screaming for their mother as they hurtled down the stairs. Mirabel slammed the door and turned the key in the lock.

She had to wait for two days to snatch a moment alone with her father, but Jacob was not in a talkative mood. 'But Pa,' she cried in desperation. 'You can't mean me to live like this. Why am I relegated to the attic? Couldn't the girls share the schoolroom?'

He looked away, staring at the windowpanes as if the raindrops sliding down the glass were the most interesting sight ever. 'You'll have to take it up with your stepmother, Mirabel.'

'She's the one who put me there in the first place. You're the head of the house, Pa. Tell her, please.'

Jacob rose from his seat at the dining table where he had been taking a late breakfast. 'I have to get to the counting house before nine. If I allow Williams to handle things on his own he'll be giving credit to people who can well afford to pay on the nail for their purchases.'

‘Please, Pa,’ Mirabel said, following him to the door. ‘It’s not much to ask to have my old room back.’

His answer was lost as the door opened and Ernestine swept into the room, but her smile was banished by a frown when she saw Mirabel. ‘What has she said to you, Jacob?’

He kissed her on the cheek. ‘I’m in a rush, my love. We’ll speak about it when I return from business this evening.’ He hurried across the hall to where Wiley stood, holding his master’s hat and cane. ‘Good man, Wiley. Is the carriage outside?’

‘It’s waiting in Seething Lane, sir.’ He moved to open the front door, an obsequious smile pasted on his thin features.

‘Good man. Look after the ladies while I’m away.’ Jacob hurried outside with Wiley hurrying after him clutching an umbrella.

Ernestine pinched Mirabel’s arm. ‘Your father will do as I say, so don’t think you can go behind my back to get what you want.’

‘Why are you doing this?’ Mirabel turned to face her, ignoring the pain where Ernestine’s fingers had bruised her tender flesh. ‘What have I done to make you hate me?’

‘You may think that you come first in your father’s affections, but you don’t. You’re nothing now, and the sooner you’re out of my house the better.’

‘This is my home. You can’t simply throw me out.’

‘Why aren’t you married? You’re twenty-one, so I’m told, practically an old maid, and I don’t want a spinster daughter interfering with my life.’

Mirabel stared at her aghast. ‘What a nasty mind you have, stepmother. I can’t see what my father ever saw in you.’

‘That just shows how little you know about men. They’re like putty in a clever woman’s hands. You just have to know how to handle them.’

‘I pity you, ma’am. He’ll see through you one day and then it will be you and your horrible daughters who are out

on the street.' Mirabel was about to walk away when Ernestine caught her by the sleeve.

'I haven't finished with you yet.'

'What do you want now? Haven't you done enough already?'

'I've decided that your expensive education shouldn't go to waste. I want you to teach my girls how to be ladies. You'll pass on everything your governess taught you.' Ernestine's lips curved into a smile, but her eyes glittered like chips of green glass. 'They have the looks and I want them to have the polish that will catch them rich husbands. You might not know how to please men, but you can leave that part of their education up to me.'

'I won't do it.'

Charity was sullen and Prudence struggled with her lessons, spending more time moping and complaining than she did paying attention to the work Mirabel had set for her. Without the authority to discipline them in any way, Mirabel knew from the start that any effort on her part would be wasted. She had begged her father to intercede on her behalf, but he seemed unable or unwilling to argue with his wife, and Ernestine appeared to revel in her newly acquired position of power.

The saving grace for Mirabel was that lessons were conducted in the morning and she was able to escape from the house after luncheon each day. Volunteers were always needed at the soup kitchen in Crispin Street, and it was the one place where she felt welcome. With a white mobcap covering her hair and a clean pinafore to protect her plainest gown, she was an anonymous helper and part of a cheerful group of women who gave their time willingly in order to help the poor and needy. Most of her efforts involved peeling potatoes, carrots and turnips or chopping onions, which made her eyes sting painfully and caused tears to pour down her cheeks. She had been doing this one

afternoon, alone in the scullery attached to the larger kitchen, when the door leading to the back yard opened and a stranger sauntered into the room. He stared at her, eyebrows raised. 'What's the matter? Why are you crying?'

'It's the onions,' she murmured, sniffing as she wiped her eyes on the back of her hand, taking in his appearance with a puzzled frown. He was not the usual type of vagabond who turned up in search of a free meal. His clothes might not be those of a city gentleman or a respectable clerk, but they were reasonably clean, and although casual his waxed jacket with its leather collar and cuffs was of good quality, as were his oddly dandyish waistcoat and check trousers. Even so, there was something louche in his attitude, with an underlying hint of danger which was both frightening and strangely exciting.

He regarded her unsmiling, his forehead creased into frown lines. 'You're not the usual girl.'

'Who were you looking for? Maybe I know her.'

'Why is a young lady like you doing the work of a skivvy?'

She recoiled at his tone. 'What has it to do with you?'

An appreciative glint flickered in his startlingly blue eyes, but was replaced by a suspicious lowering of his brow. 'All right, hostilities over, I'll introduce myself.' He whipped off his soft felt hat with a flourish and a mocking bow. 'Jack Starke.'

'Mirabel Cutler.' She scooped up the onions and dropped them into the large iron stewpot, adding the carrots and potatoes to the small amount of chopped beef and several handfuls of oats. 'I think you'd better go. The lady who organises the soup kitchen doesn't approve of gentlemen callers.'

He threw back his head and laughed. 'I've never been called a gentleman before. You're obviously new to this area, Miss Cutler.'

She glanced anxiously at the doorway leading into the main kitchen, which had been left ajar. 'Shh,' she said,

holding her finger to her lips. 'You'll get me thrown out.'

'Considering you're doing this for nothing I don't think they'd be so stupid. Anyway, I'm well known round here.'

She lifted the pan with difficulty. 'Move out of the way, please. I need to get this onto the range or the soup won't be ready in time for supper.'

'You'll drop it,' he said, moving swiftly to take it from her. 'Let me.' He carried it through into the kitchen.

Mirabel hurried after him. 'I'm sorry, Mrs Hamilton. This person barged in before I had a chance to stop him.'

Adela Hamilton was seated at one of the trestle tables with a quill pen in her hand and an open ledger spread out before her. She looked up and to Mirabel's astonishment her severe expression melted into a smile of welcome. 'I wasn't expecting to see you again, Jack.'

'I've no quarrel with the Hamiltons, Adela. Edric and I parted company on amicable terms.'

'My brother-in-law is a weak fool, and you are a rogue.' She rose to her feet. 'Put the pan on the fire and come and sit down. Mirabel will make us a cup of tea.'

Mirabel shot a withering glance in Jack's direction as she lifted the simmering kettle from the hob, receiving a disarming smile in return. She made the tea, but she could not resist the temptation to look over her shoulder, and was surprised to see him seated at the table with the casual air of someone who regularly took tea with the wife of a City alderman. Her curiosity aroused, Mirabel served them in silence.

'Thank you, my dear,' Adela said, smiling. 'Won't you join us?'

'I think perhaps I'd better clean up the scullery,' Mirabel said hastily. 'I'll take my tea with me.'

She was about to walk away when Jack reached out to catch her by the sleeve. 'Sit down and take tea with us. This isn't slave labour.'

‘Indeed not.’ Adela nodded her head, causing her tight grey curls to bounce like springs on either side of her plump cheeks. ‘You’ve worked hard, Mirabel. I’m sure the clearing up can wait a few minutes.’

Despite her reservations Mirabel was intrigued by the stranger, who did not seem the sort of person that a lady like Mrs Hamilton would want to associate with. She pulled up a chair and sat down. ‘You were looking for someone, Mr Starke. Perhaps Mrs Hamilton could help you.’

‘It’s Captain Starke if you insist on formality.’ He regarded her with a lazy smile. ‘I doubt if Mrs Hamilton would remember Gertie.’

‘If you’re referring to Gertrude Tinker, I shall never forget her.’ Adela puckered her lips into a disapproving moue. ‘She was no better than she should be, and I sent her packing. You oughtn’t to associate with women of the street, Jack.’

He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a small package wrapped in brown paper which he pushed across the table. ‘There are many things that none of us should do, Adela, but we are human after all.’

She snatched the parcel and slipped it into her reticule. ‘You’re a rogue, and you’ll probably end up in Newgate.’

‘I expect you’re right. But you haven’t answered my question. Do you know where I can find young Gertie?’

Adela shook her head. ‘I don’t encourage gentlemen to associate with such women.’

‘I know where she lives.’ The words tumbled from Mirabel’s lips.

‘And how does a well brought up young lady like you know about such things?’ Adela demanded.

‘Never mind the sermon.’ Jack fixed Mirabel with a piercing stare. ‘I don’t care how you know; just tell me where I can find the girl.’

‘Don’t encourage him,’ Adele said angrily.

Despite her better judgement Mirabel could not tear her gaze away. There was something hypnotic in the way he