

# Chapter One

*Richmond, Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> May 1806*

*My Dear Eliza*

*The great Mrs Lansdale is no more.*

*She was carried off on Tuesday night by a sudden seizure. It is a very heavy loss, for now the neighbourhood can no longer discuss the alarming symptoms of her nervous complaints, nor can it exclaim over every rumoured disagreement between the lady and her nephew.*

*However, it seems we are not done with Mrs Lansdale; she may yet provide a subject of conversation – for there is already an alarming rumour begun about her death.*

*Besides that half-pleasurable sorrow which is always felt at the death of a fine lady one hardly knows, there is a great distrust of the nephew. For it has not passed without notice that he has lost a remarkably tyrannical relation and gained a very fine inheritance.*

Miss Dido Kent lifted her pen from the page and gazed beyond the little pool of light thrown by her candle, to the open window and the warm darkness beyond. She knew that she should not continue. What she was about to write was hardly proper. A letter should contain news but never

gossip, and the great rule was to mention no person or event which could not be written about with charity.

But then, Dido mused with a smile, if the rule were adhered to *too* faithfully, letters would become so exceedingly dull that they would not be worth getting. They would scarcely justify their cost to the receiver.

And, besides, she had a very good reason for communicating this particular piece of gossip to her sister.

*It is the odious Mrs Midgely who has begun this rumour. She has 'the gravest doubts' about Mrs Lansdale's death. Mrs Midgely considers it as being altogether 'too convenient' for the nephew. In short, she believes that he took steps to hurry his poor aunt out of this world...*

There! It was said. And very shocking it seemed now that it was written down.

*Please do not blame me for repeating this slander, Eliza. If you will only keep from throwing my letter aside in disgust – and will but continue reading to the end – I hope you will understand why I must write to you upon this subject.*

*You see, it all came out yesterday during Flora's exploring party to the river.*

*And a very pleasant party it would have been, but for Mrs Midgely and her venomous conversation. Everyone was punctual, the sun shone upon us and there was an abundance of walking about, sitting down, fine views, pigeon pie and cold lamb.*

*Sir Joshua Carrisbrook was returned from town in time to join us – which pleased Flora greatly. And, by the by, it*

*seems that what we had heard of Sir Joshua is true – he is to be married again, and very soon. And you may tell all his friends at Belsfield that he seems vastly contented – and in a great hurry to get to church! For, by his own account, the lady only gave her consent a week ago, but he is determined to be married before the end of another week and has got himself a special licence for that purpose. I suppose he does not wish to wear out what youth he may suppose remains to him in waiting a full three weeks for the banns to be called.*

*It is extraordinary to see a man of his advanced years so very much in love! And I could not but pity him; for he was so wanting to tell us all of how he was soon to become ‘the very happiest of men’ and to enumerate the many virtues and talents of his lady; and he had scarcely begun to describe her musical genius and had not spoken one word about whose music she chiefly plays, when his happiness was quite hurried out of the way by Mrs Midgely who was wanting to be talking herself.*

*So I confess that I remain in ignorance upon the important issue of whether the future Lady Carrisbrook delights most in concertos or in folk airs – and I cannot even tell you what her maiden name may be...*

*But, to return to Mrs Midgely and her suspicions. By her account, Mr Vane, the apothecary, is uneasy about Mrs Lansdale’s death. He says that, ‘there was nothing in Mrs Lansdale’s general condition to make him expect such a seizure as carried her off! Which,’ says Mrs Midgely, looking about at us all, with a very red face and a satisfied manner, ‘which, I think you will all agree, seems very odd indeed, does it not?’*

*‘Oh, but I do not know that it is so very odd!’*

*This mild protest came from little Miss Prentice – Mrs Midgely’s boarder – who seems to rent from Mrs Midgely*

*not only her back parlour but also a share in her right to spy upon all the grand people of the neighbourhood.*

*'If I must give my opinion,' says Miss Prentice – though no one there had asked for her opinion – 'I do not think it is so very odd at all. It does sometimes happen that a person can be taken with a sudden attack such as they have never had before. For it happened to poor Lord...'*

*But Mrs Midgely had no patience to let her go on. For once Miss Prentice is begun upon lords and sirs there is no end of it.*

*'Mr Vane,' says Mrs Midgely, speaking very loud, 'is very much puzzled by the lady's death. And, in my opinion, he ought to take the appropriate steps.' And she lowered her voice to a suitably portentous whisper. 'I have told him that he must speak to the magistrates.'*

*And then we had all to listen to a great many accounts of what I had heard many times since coming to Richmond: of how Mrs Lansdale had demanded a great deal of attention from her nephew – on account of her many illnesses – that he had often wanted to 'pursue his own pleasures' in town, but had been restrained by her poor health and nervous disposition which would not permit her to be left alone. Mrs M was very eloquent upon these subjects – and no less so upon the subject of how 'young men these days' do not like to have their pleasures curtailed.*

*Well, Eliza, what I have not told you of yet, is how very distressed poor Flora was looking all the while that this was carrying on. For, you see, Mr Henry Lansdale, the nephew – this very gentleman that Mrs M was slandering – is a great favourite with our cousin. She and her husband met the Lansdales at Ramsgate last autumn and, though I have not*

yet been introduced to the young man, I have observed that she always speaks very highly of him.

I do not think Mrs Midgely knows of Flora's connection with the Lansdales and believes them to be strangers to her, as they are to everyone else here in Richmond. At least I sincerely hope that she knows nothing of the friendship – or else she was being unpardonably rude to be talking so of her hostess's acquaintances! (Though, in truth, I do not put anything beyond the licence that woman allows her tongue!)

However, I think that, maybe, Mrs Midgely's ward, young Mary Bevan, was quick-witted enough to suspect the truth, from her gentle efforts to smooth things over. She pointed out, in her quiet precise way, that, 'Mr Vane had been attending upon Mrs Lansdale for little more than a month,' and suggested that, 'he might not have a very accurate knowledge of all the poor lady's disorders and symptoms.'

This did little to stop the abuse; but one must admire the real elegance of mind which prompted it; and one cannot help but wonder how such a pleasant, sensible girl can have been brought up by the dreadful Mrs M.

But, to return to Flora. She was close to tears by the time the carriages came, and she broke down completely in our journey home.

'I cannot understand,' she said again and again, 'why Mrs Midgely should say such things! Why should she wish to malign poor Mr Lansdale? And why should she wish to persuade the apothecary to cause trouble for him? I have never known her be so very unkind before.'

And, in all honesty, neither can I understand it, Eliza. It is a level of interference and trouble-making far beyond the usual malice of gossip.

*Poor Flora! She keeps to her room today with the headache which, I make no doubt, was brought on by yesterday's distress. Her sufferings are, I believe, all the worse for being unfixed and uncertain; for neither she nor I can judge the exact degree of danger in which Mr Lansdale might stand – I mean if Mr Vane should yield to the tiresome woman's advice and refer the matter to the magistrate. And, since Flora's husband is still absent upon business in Ireland, we have no gentleman here to whom we can turn for advice upon such a delicate matter.*

*And this, my dear sister, is the reason for my troubling you with this most unpleasant business. It occurs to me that, since you are staying at Belsfield Hall, you might seek advice on our behalf. Would you be so kind as to ask Mr William Lomax...*

Dido was forced, by the shaking in her hand, to stop writing.

There was already a blot spreading through her neat black words. And her cheeks were burning too. She laid down her pen and turned her face into the night air which was blowing in through the open window of her bedchamber, bringing with it the scents of roses and cut-grass and dew – and the high, shivering call of an owl from somewhere down beside the river.

She had thought that she had long outlived the age at which the mere writing of a gentleman's name could bring a blush to her cheeks. Yet she could not help but wonder what Mr Lomax would think – how he would look – what he would say – when Eliza mentioned her name and her request.

Dido's situation with regard to this gentleman was a particularly delicate one.

Mr William Lomax was the man of business who overlooked the running of her niece's husband's estate at Belsfield Hall. Last autumn, when she had been at Belsfield, Dido had come to esteem him very highly indeed and, before she was called away, she had been certain – almost certain – as certain as a lady can ever allow herself to be – that he returned her regard: that he was, in fact, only prevented from making a declaration by a want of wealth and independence.

Then she had been full of hope; sure that they could not be separated for ever; sure that the particular circumstances which kept him poor just then, could be removed. But now, after six months of hearing almost nothing of him, it was all but impossible not to be desponding: not to believe that her influence over him was weakening; not to calculate very exactly her five and thirty years, or to disregard the opinion of all her friends who had long reckoned her a settled old maid.

As she had once overheard her sister-in-law, Margaret, remarking: 'An heiress may fairly look for a husband at any age. But a portionless woman had better give up all such thoughts when she is thirty, and spare her family the expense of going much into company. For it will all be wasted. Nothing will come of it.'

Until she had come to know Mr Lomax, Dido had been, if not quite content to be a spinster, then at least reconciled to it because she had never found in the usual round of dinners and balls and visits much temptation to change her state. But a remarkable set of circumstances

had brought her together with Mr Lomax and authorised a kind of communication far beyond the usual littleness of social intercourse. She had learnt the pleasure of sharing ideas and confiding in a way which she had never known before. And now...

And now, as she sat beside the window of her bedchamber in Flora's pleasant summer villa, she was beginning to suspect her own motives.

For, oddly enough, it had been a murder and the mystery associated with it which had first brought her together with Mr Lomax. So, was she now only taking an interest in this affair of Mrs Lansdale's death because it was a means of bringing herself once more to the gentleman's attention?

She smiled. Hers must be a very singular affection if it could only thrive upon infamy and mystery! But she would not allow one half of her to suspect the other. There could be nothing wrong in only asking a gentleman's advice and, besides, she really did wish to discover the exact degree of danger in which Mr Lansdale stood.

*Would you be so kind as to ask Mr William Lomax – for I know that he has a very thorough understanding of the law – whether, in his opinion, Mr Lansdale is in any danger? Might Mr Vane's information lead the magistrates to bring a prosecution? And, if it should go so far, how heavily would the testimony of such a man as this apothecary tell against him? It cannot be denied that the young man has gained a great deal from his aunt's death: if there was a suspicion of murder, would not that suspicion fall immediately upon him?*

*Flora is most anxious that we should somehow find a way*

*of putting an end to these dreadful rumours, before they have any serious consequences.*

*I agree that it ought to be attempted; but I cannot conceive how such a woman as Mrs Midgely is to be worked upon. I doubt she has ever, in the whole course of her life, held her tongue at someone else's request. And she seemed to take such an inordinate pleasure in spreading her poison that I could not help but wonder whether she has some grudge or cause against the young man. Something which might make her particularly venomous in this case.*

*And I do not think we can silence her without first discovering her motive.*

## Chapter Two

Richmond, mused Dido as she walked to the post office with her letter next day, was a remarkably *proper* place. There was something particularly elegant and refined about the pretty little villas clustering around the river and up onto the hill, with their verandas and their French windows and their shady gardens. Maybe, she thought, it was this air of prosperity and tranquillity; the scent of syringa and lime trees; the sight of comfortable barouches and fashionable little landaulets driving by, which made the rumours Mrs Midgely was spreading so very shocking.

It certainly was a very strange, distressing business. This morning poor Flora was still suffering from nervousness and headache, and Dido's resolve to silence Mrs Midgely and save Mr Lansdale from a dangerous slander was compounded as much of compassion as a strong desire for justice.

But, as she walked, she had to confess to herself that there might be another, secondary motive which was rather less virtuous. She could not help but feel it would be very pleasant indeed to have something to *think* about! For the unaccustomed leisure of the past week had left her mind quite remarkably empty.

It was, she acknowledged, extremely kind of her cousin to invite her to Richmond. For, although Flora had been considerate enough to solicit her company as a favour and to represent herself as in need of a companion while her husband was absent on business, Dido knew that the visit was intended to be a holiday. And never had she been more in need of a holiday; for the past winter had been spent attending upon a very young, very nervous sister-in-law and her new and sickly child.

However, Dido was beginning to suspect that unmarried women who were past their youth were not constitutionally suited to holidays and that the usual system of employing them to their families' advantage as temporary, unsalaried nurses, governesses and nursery maids had more kindness in it than she had previously supposed.

While she had been in Hampshire, though Henrietta had been a no more rational companion than Flora, Dido had had little time to spare from the demands of colic and red-gum and the leaking of melting snow into the pantry, to notice the deficiency.

Here, in the luxury of Flora's summer villa, she was nearer to suffering from ennui than she had ever been in her life before – and had, furthermore, too much time in which to remember the many perfections of Mr Lomax.

She stopped. She was come now to the substantial, red-brick bulk of the Lansdale's house, and its closed shutters, its weedless gravel sweep and its sombre cedar tree seemed to throw an air of mourning across the hot afternoon. The gateposts were topped with imposing urns of stone and, on the left-hand post, there was a very fine, very new sign

with the name of *Knaresborough House* carved in thick black letters. It looked remarkably respectable, and to imagine a murder taking place in such a house was all but impossible.

She stepped away, and, as she did so, she noticed that upon the opposite side of the road was Mrs Midgely's villa – with little Miss Prentice watching from the back parlour window.

Dido paused, looking thoughtfully from one house to the other – and at the three or four yards of dusty road which was all that divided them. And she wondered... Perhaps the very proximity in which Mrs Midgely and Mr Lansdale lived had some bearing upon the case...

The post office was crowded: so very full of ladies and bonnets and gossip and little yelping lap-dogs that there was no one free to attend to Dido at the counter and she was obliged to wait. The room was confined and stuffy. Its small, dusty window and its dark panelled walls made it so very gloomy after the brilliance outside that at first she could recognise no one in the little crowd.

Then, after a moment or two, when her eyes had grown accustomed to the poor light, she saw that the young woman standing before her at the high counter was Mrs Midgely's ward, Mary Bevan, enquiring after letters. A narrow ray of dusty sunlight falling through the office's single high window was just catching the side of her fresh, delicate cheek, displaying the lovely long dark eyelashes to great advantage. And, as Mary turned away from the counter, putting a letter into her pocket, Dido could not help but wonder anew that so very elegant a

creature should be the ward of such a vulgar woman as Mrs Midgely.

Miss Bevan smiled and began upon a gentle greeting, but her words were immediately lost in the loud throwing open of the door behind them and the bustling entrance of her guardian. Nearly everyone in the room turned to see who it was.

‘There you are Mary! I wondered where you were got to! And Miss Kent too, I believe,’ peering through the gloom. ‘Very pleased to see you, I’m sure Miss Kent.’

Mrs Midgely was a large woman of about fifty years old, dressed in yellow patterned muslin with a great many curls on her head and a great deal of colour in her broad cheeks. ‘Such a delightful exploring party yesterday,’ she continued. ‘I am sure we are all very much obliged to dear Mrs Beaumont for inviting us. You may tell her that she will soon receive a letter of particular thanks from me.’

Dido began upon a civil reply, but was not suffered to continue long. Mrs Midgely was just come from the haberdasher’s and so was full of news and delighted to have chanced so soon upon someone to whom she could tell it.

‘Well, Miss Kent,’ she burst out, ‘it seems it was the Black Drop that did the damage. Mrs Pickthorne says that Mr Vane says it was the Black Drop for sure.’

‘The Black Drop?’ repeated Dido.

Mrs Midgely smiled broadly and comfortably: sure of having her attention. ‘It was,’ she said loudly, ‘the Black Drop which killed Mrs Lansdale.’

There seemed to be a little quietness around them in the post office: a sense of listening. Dido noticed that poor

Mary Bevan's eyes were turned upon the floor and a blush of shame was creeping up her cheek. It seemed that years of experience had not inured the girl to the behaviour of her guardian.

'And what,' asked Dido, as quietly as she might, 'what is the Black Drop?'

'It is,' announced Mrs Midgely, 'a barbarous medicine, made in the north country, which Mrs Lansdale had got into the habit of using. The *Kendal Black Drop* it is called.'

'Kendal?'

'Kendal,' said Miss Bevan quickly, 'is a town in Westmorland – near Mrs Lansdale's home – quite near to the Lake Country I believe. I wonder, Miss Kent, if you ever happened to read Mr West's delightful *Guide to the Lakes*?'

It was a valiant attempt to turn the conversation but the poor girl might as well have held up her hand to halt a raging bull. There was no stopping her guardian from telling her news.

'The *Kendal Black Drop*,' she reiterated with great weight – and cast a withering look at poor Mary. 'It is a stuff four times stronger than laudanum and it seems that poor Mrs Lansdale was quite addicted to its use.'

'I see.'

'And dear Mr Vane is sure that if she had but taken his advice and given it up, he could, in the end, have cured her of all her illnesses. For, you know, Miss Kent, he is a very clever man...'

'And so, Mr Vane believes that it was her use of this medicine which brought on Mrs Lansdale's seizure?' said

Dido more loudly. 'What a very unfortunate *accident*.'

She attempted to step away to deal with her business at the counter, where there was now a vacancy. But so eager was Mrs Midgely to finish her tale that she laid a hand upon her arm.

'Well,' she continued in the same inconveniently loud voice. 'It was the Black Drop killed her for sure. *But a great deal of it*. He is quite sure that she had drunk *four times* as much of the stuff as she should have done.'

'Four times?' echoed Dido. Internally she could not but admit it was a very large amount. But she only said, 'how...regrettable.'

'Well, what Mr Vane cannot understand is this: how did she come to drink so much all at once?'

'I am sure,' said Miss Bevan firmly, 'that with so powerful and dangerous a medicine, an *accident*, though very sad, is hardly to be wondered at.'

'Quite so,' said Dido, hastily putting aside her own doubts.

'Accident indeed!' cried Mrs Midgely. But she had said all she wished to say and seemed well satisfied with the looks of interest she was receiving from the people around her. She allowed Dido to escape to the counter. 'And did you get any letters?' she asked Mary.

'No, Ma'am, none at all.'

Dido turned back at the sound of the lie – and saw that it had brought another, brighter, blush to Mary's cheeks.

## Chapter Three

Next morning Dido accompanied Flora upon a visit of condolence to Henry Lansdale. She was very eager to meet him; reasoning that a man who could earn such affection from his friends and such malice from his neighbours, could not fail to be interesting.

It was another exceedingly hot day with not a cloud to be seen in the sky. Down beyond the river the hay was being cut and the scent of it carried right into the town. The two women walked slowly along the tree-shaded street.

‘I do not doubt,’ said Dido after walking for some time in silence, ‘from everything I have observed, that Mrs Midgely is a very malicious woman. But what I cannot yet quite determine is why her malice should be particularly directed against Mr Lansdale. Do you know of any reason why she should be his enemy?’

‘No, I do not!’ Flora Beaumont frowned prettily in the deep shade of her bonnet, her soft white nose wrinkling in a way which always put Dido in mind of a rabbit. ‘He is such a *very* delightful man. Why, I cannot conceive that he could have an enemy in the whole world! And besides, Mrs Midgely does not *know* him.’ Her lips puckered in a childish pout. ‘The Lansdales have been here but a month

and Mrs Midgely is not even upon visiting terms with them, you know.'

'Then perhaps she had *heard* something ill of him.'

'But I have told you, there is nothing ill to hear! Nothing at all!'

'There were, I understand, quarrels between aunt and nephew.'

'Oh, but they were nothing! It was just her way.' Flora paused in the shade of a tree, twisting one finger daintily in the long ribbon of her bonnet. 'I rather fancy she liked to quarrel sometimes, you know. There was always a great making up afterwards.'

'Perhaps,' Dido suggested, trying her best not to injure her cousin's sensitive feelings, 'perhaps it is jealousy which turns Mrs M against him. He is after all so very fortunate – a poor young man taken in by his aunt, and now inheriting a great estate in Westmorland...'

'Dido! Do not talk so! I cannot *bear* it. You sound so *horribly* suspicious.'

'No, no,' Dido assured her hastily. 'I am not at all suspicious. I am only trying to understand why other people might be suspicious.'

'Well!' cried Flora, clapping her hands together. 'I can tell you why such a woman as Mrs Midgely is suspicious. It is because she is spiteful and cruel...and horrid. And we *must* find a way to silence her. *You* must find a way, Dido. You are the clever one. The whole world is forever saying how very clever you are.'

'I am sure I am very much obliged to the world for its good opinion. And I certainly intend to silence Mrs Midgely if I can. But...'

She stopped suddenly because they had come now through the gates of Knaresborough House and, as they started up the sweep, she had caught sight of something rather strange.

A young boy in a gardener's smock was digging a hole beneath the great boughs of the cedar tree which stood close by the gate. As Dido and Flora watched, he thrust his spade into the pile of excavated earth, picked up a bundle wrapped in sacking and dropped it into the hole.

'Oh dear!' cried Dido, almost without thinking, 'is that a grave you are making?' Impelled by overwhelming curiosity, she hurried towards him, leaving Flora frowning upon the gravel.

The boy looked up, pushing damp hair out of his eyes. He was about twelve years old with fair, almost white hair and a drift of freckles across his cheeks and nose. 'It is Sam, is it not?' said Dido. 'We met when you came to dig the new flower-bed in Mrs Beaumont's garden. Do you remember?'

'Oh yes, miss,' he said with a smile. 'I remember. You was very kind about that wasp sting.'

'And today you are working for Mr Lansdale?' Dido looked inquiringly towards the hole.

'Yes miss,' he said. 'I'm burying Mrs Lansdale's little dog.'

'Oh? Indeed!' said Dido with great interest.

'Been dead nearly a week, miss. I'd not come any closer if I were you.'

She took a step back, for there was indeed a very unpleasant odour mixing with the scent of lilac and the dark smell of the cedar. 'Nearly a week?' She glanced

anxiously back at Flora and calculated rapidly. 'Then the dog died about the same time as Mrs Lansdale?'

Sam nodded. 'They say he went missing the very night the old lady died. But they only found him this morning – dead and hidden in among the laurel bushes.'

'I see. How strange.' How *very* strange. She gazed thoughtfully at the gaping hole in the ground. Why should the dog die at the same time as his mistress? It seemed a remarkable coincidence – indeed it seemed a great deal more than a coincidence... 'But,' she said carefully, 'they do say, do they not, that a dog will sometimes pine away when the person to whom he has been devoted dies?'

'I don't know about that, miss,' said Sam. He too looked down at the open grave and rubbed the side of his nose, smearing dirt into the freckles. 'It may be a dog'd pine away,' he said slowly. 'But I can't see how any dog would be so heart-broke it'd crawl away into a bush and cut its own throat.'

'Oh no, no indeed,' said Dido as she turned away, 'you are quite right. Quite right.'

'I do not see,' said Flora irritably, 'why you should be so concerned about the death of a dog.'

'But my dear cousin, it is of the greatest importance. For it would seem the dog died at the hand of man, and that must mean...' She stopped herself. There was something so remarkably innocent about Flora's childlike face – the wide blue eyes gazing at her in such a puzzled, unsuspecting way...

Dido shrugged up her shoulders and merely said, 'Well it is very strange, is it not?'

But her thoughts were working rapidly. The dog had

been killed. Why? Why should the animal meet its death at the very same time as its mistress...? Unless there had been dark forces at work here at Knaresborough House.

The great question must be: had the death of the lady been as unnatural as her pet's? Dido found herself remembering the apothecary's account of the large amount of opium mixture Mrs Lansdale had drunk. She could not help it; she was beginning to wonder whether there could be some truth in the rumours. Perhaps there was some agency at work here worse than the malice of gossip.

She approached the respectable red-brick front of Knaresborough House with increased interest – and more than a little suspicion.