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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Palmer, Catherine, date.

English Ivy / Catherine Palmer.

p. cm. — (HeartQuest)

ISBN 0-8423-1927-1

1. England—Fiction. I. Title. II. Series.

PS3566.A495 E54 2002

813'.54—dc21

2001005635

Printed in the United States of America

08 07 06 05 04 03 02

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

One

*Brooking House, near the village of Otley
Yorkshire, England, 1815*

“AT LAST,” IVY Bowden said to her three younger sisters as she placed the carefully penned instructions in her small beaded handbag. The printer in Otley would have plenty of time to prepare the invitations. In a few short months, she would celebrate her twenty-first birthday with a ball. By Christmas she would be wedded. Wishing for greater peace than she felt, she let out a deep breath. “And so—all is settled, and all is well.”

“I should not say such a thing if *I* were to marry Nigel Creeve.” Madeline gave a shudder. “And to have to live in Leeds in the same house with old Mr. Creeve and his wife. The pair of them give me nightmares.”

“Maddie, you must not look on the dim side of things.” Ivy tied her bonnet ribbons and wrapped a green wool shawl

around her shoulders. “Nigel Creeve is a gentleman of the first order, and I am determined to be content with the arrangement.”

“I think his eyes look like currants,” said Clementine. At eight years, she was the youngest of the four. “They are small and black, and they sit in his head like two little raisins in a hot cross bun.”

“Clemma, please!” Ivy laughed in spite of herself at the description of her intended husband. “How can you say such a thing? Nigel Creeve’s eyes are perfectly ordinary.”

“Indeed they are,” said Madeline. “He has the most ordinary eyes I have ever seen.”

“Oh, for mercy’s sake, do come along—all of you—or I shall miss the mail coach altogether.”

“But, Ivy, I cannot wear this bonnet!” Caroline, younger than Ivy by only eighteen months, had been sorting through the hat rack in the hall. “I must have my blue one. This one looks so ill on me.”

“Nothing looks ill on you, Caroline dearest, and you know it. You are by far the loveliest of us all. Indeed, you will put us to shame in the village—blue bonnet or not.”

“Oh dear!”

Caroline’s lament drifted on the breeze as the four sisters hurried out of the house and into a fine spring morning. An early rain had washed away yesterday’s gray clouds and left the sky the color of a robin’s egg. The hedgerows were laced with spiders’ webs, each tiny strand hung with a row of glistening dewdrops. Wild bluebells, yellow archangel, and white stitchwort had sprung up along the lane, and a pair of linnets were hard at work building a nest in the brambles and honey-

suckle. It was, Ivy realized, the perfect day for the two-mile walk to Otley.

An ancient marketplace that had grown slowly into a village with cobbled streets and houses built of gray stone, Otley slumbered on the banks of the river Wharfe. Villagers proudly traced their history to the mid-eighth century, when “Otta” made his lea, or clearing, in the forest. No one was quite sure who Otta was or where he had come from, but it was enough to know there had been a beginning.

Ivy had lived all her life in nearby Brooking House, the ancestral home of the Bowden family. When the weather was fine—and sometimes when it was not—she took great pleasure in roaming the dales and fells that blanketed this rural triangle between the towns of Leeds, Harrogate, and Bradford. Countless streams and secret waterfalls provided perfect settings in which to read a book or watch sheep grazing the sweet moorland grass.

Immediately to the south of the village rose Otley Chevin. The rocky mount gave magnificent views over Mid-Wharfedale, and it provided much of the delicate golden stone from which the village had been built. Of all her family, Ivy alone made certain to climb the Chevin at least once a week. From its summit she could gaze out across the bracken and heather, and sometimes imagine that she saw the sea.

“Puddles,” Madeline announced. “Our petticoats will be six inches deep in mud by the time we get back home.”

“Yes, but all the rain means the heather may bloom earlier this year,” Ivy reminded her. “I can hardly wait until the moors are covered in purple.”

“Which serves to remind me—a soft shade of lavender would look fine on me, I think.” Caroline grabbed the loose ribbons on her bonnet as a gust of chill air swept across the lane. “I mean to study every bolt of fabric in the shops this morning, for I am determined to have a new gown to wear to Ivy’s birthday ball. I do so wish we could take a coach to Leeds and purchase our fabrics there, but of course we must make do with our own wee Otley.”

“Leeds is a horrid town!” Madeline exclaimed. “I abhor it. To think that Ivy must live there simply appalls me. I fear she shall never have me as a visitor.”

“Such a great loss,” Caroline said. “How will she ever bear it?”

“Clemma, why do you dawdle so?” Ivy called to her youngest sister. “You must stay with us, for you know we are just at the edge of the forest.”

“But, Ivy, look! The chimneys at Longley are smoking!”

“Come, Clemma, it must be the morning mist.”

“It is not mist, for it is quite gray, and it is wafting straight up out of the chimneys. One, two, three . . . five chimneys are smoking at Longley.”

“But that is impossible.” Curious now, Ivy hurried back down the lane toward her little sister. “Mr. Richmond went to India ever so many years ago, and . . . upon my word, the chimneys at Longley are indeed smoking!”

“The house must be afire,” said Madeline, who was peering around a tree trunk at the edge of the woods that surrounded Longley Park. “Indeed, it is in blazes and will burn down altogether before anyone can put it out. Such a shame, for I understood the furnishings were quite magnificent.”

“But the house is not afire,” Ivy said. “I feel certain someone has lit the hearths. Someone is staying at Longley!”

“I should imagine a band of forest gypsies has broken in. They will burn up the portraits for firewood and make bedding of the draperies. Longley Park is said to be full of gypsies, you know, and I understand the deer have been completely poached out.”

“But what if it is the ghost of old Mrs. Richmond?” Caroline whispered. “Did she not die in India? Perhaps she has come back to haunt the house.”

“Oh, do not say such things, I beg you!” Clementine grabbed Ivy’s hand and huddled close to her sister. “Ghosts are horrid!”

“Ghosts are nonexistent,” Madeline announced.

“Indeed,” Ivy said, “they are altogether quite transparent, I am told.”

“Oh, Ivy!” Clementine cried.

“Nonsense, Clemma, I am only teasing. There is no such thing as a ghost . . . while that smoke is very real indeed. I wonder if Mr. Richmond has come back from India.”

“Perhaps it is his son,” Madeline said. “The pirate.”

“A pirate!” Clemma gasped.

“Colin Richmond is not a pirate.” Despite the damp soil, Ivy knelt and cupped her little sister’s face. “Pirates and ghosts are only in stories, dearest. The scion of the Richmond family sails about in his papa’s ship, that is all.”

“That is *not* all.” Caroline folded her arms and lifted her chin. “I am pleased to tell you a great deal more than that, for I have it on good authority that ownership of Longley Park was transferred to Colin Richmond upon his coming of age.

He writes to his gardener, you see, who is married to our housekeeper's sister. Our very own Mrs. Bignell told me that the young Mr. Richmond was given letters of marque from the king of England himself, and he goes about attacking and looting ships—and if that is not a pirate, I do not know what is.”

“It is not very gentlemanlike behavior, at any rate.”

“Oh, Colin Richmond is far from a gentleman. They say he has a lady in every port—”

“Caroline!” Ivy stood. “It is not Christian to gossip.”

“I am only telling you what I heard from our housekeeper.”

“And that is—”

“He is said to be very rich, and a real rake!” Caroline rushed on. “He owns properties in India and America and Africa, and who can tell where else? How can he make such diverse holdings profitable unless he owns slaves—”

“Slaves!” Clemma cried. “Oh, he is very bad indeed!”

“And I should imagine he trades in opium, for how does a man become wealthy at sea these days unless he carries such a cargo? Opium and slaves and piracy and—”

“Caroline, please.” Ivy pinched her sister's ear and dragged her back onto the lane. “You are every bit as wicked as you have made out Mr. Richmond to be if you choose to speak of such things without the assurance of them.”

“Ow! But I have heard it from our own Mrs. Bignell, who is the sister of—”

“Do you suppose that a man of such vast fortune and such wide wanderings and such treacherous occupations would bother himself to write to his gardener? Really, Caroline.” Ivy released her sister and beckoned the others to follow. “No,

indeed. If Mr. Colin Richmond is the sort of person who would take the time to correspond with a gardener, then it follows that he must be a gentleman of leisure. But if he is a pirate and a rake, then he certainly would have neither the time nor the inclination to write letters to anyone, least of all a lowly gardener. The information you have given us is all speculation and gossip, and it serves no worthier purpose than to fill your silly head with nonsense.”

“I imagine he has killed people,” Clemma said with a shiver. “Lots of them.”

“Pirates are said to be dashing,” Caroline murmured. “I should very much like to meet him . . . unless he wears an earring, for that I could not abide.”

“It will not be young Mr. Richmond lighting the hearths at Longley,” Madeline said with conviction. “I suspect it is old Mr. Richmond feeling very much colder than he did in India. He is the one who has all the chimneys smoking on a spring morning.”

Ivy shook her head as she bustled her sisters down the lane toward Otley. Their sole pursuit in life was the accumulation of trivial news. Who had worn that appalling violet bonnet to church? Which friend had been slighted by all the gentlemen at the recent dance at the assembly hall? Did everyone see the lace on Miss Bingham’s gown? How can Mr. Desmond hope to marry when he has such teeth! Oh, it went on and on, and though Ivy loved her sisters dearly, she did enjoy the hours she spent away from them each day, tending to the sick and hungry in the village, or walking the moorlands, or reading in the family library.

Did the Creeves have a good library at their house in

Leeds? she wondered as the party passed the massive iron gates of Longley Park. She sincerely hoped so, for reading and writing were among her greatest pleasures. The thought of Nigel Creeve gave her stomach a small twist, and she tugged her shawl more tightly around her shoulders. She had no reason to be uncomfortable with the arrangement her father had made to connect the two families, and she wished she could find greater joy in the coming nuptials.

Perhaps if she knew Mr. Creeve better, the matter would be resolved. As it was, they had spoken only a few times, and then he always seemed so stiffly reserved. But she had heard from more than one source that her future husband was upstanding and clever and very well respected. She hoped she would find him to be so once they were married.

“Papa has promised to give me a ball on my twenty-first birthday, too,” Caroline was saying. “I am thinking of wearing red.”

“Red!” Clementine gave a little skip. “I should never be as daring as that, Caroline! I shall wear pink when I am twenty-one.”

“You and I are not likely to be given balls,” Madeline intoned. “Papa will no doubt spend all his money on Ivy and Caroline. We shall have to content ourselves with nothing more memorable than a dance at the assembly hall in Otley. Or perhaps a tea in the garden at home.”

“No, indeed! Do you really think so?”

“Papa is comfortable, Clemma, but he is not by any means wealthy. You know the Creeve family would not have taken Ivy for a pittance, and though Caroline is beautiful, she will

require a good dowry, too. And that leaves only the crumbs for you and me.”

“Crumbs?” Clemma frowned. “Well, then, I am determined to marry a very rich man who will allow me a ball whenever I wish.”

“I am thinking of not marrying at all,” Madeline said. “None of the men of our acquaintance can please me.”

“Once Ivy has married into the Creeve family, we shall meet eligible bachelors of all sorts,” Caroline said. “We shall go to visit her in Leeds and—”

At that moment, three ragged men leapt from the shrubbery beside the lane, cutting short her words. Their leader—a man with a gray beard and missing front teeth—raised a large, knobbed club as they approached the four young ladies.

Ivy grabbed Clementine. Madeline gasped, and Caroline let out a shriek.

“Yer bags,” the leader demanded. “All of ’em, and we won’t hurt ye.”

“Do as he says,” Ivy ordered her sisters.

“But I—” Caroline clutched her handbag. “I want to buy cloth for my ball gown.”

“Give it o’er!” the man snarled.

“At once!” Ivy shouted at her sisters.

Madeline cast her little purse onto the lane. Clemma, who did not have a bag, threw off her bonnet and shawl instead. Ivy tossed down her bag with the painstakingly transcribed instructions for the invitations to her birthday ball. As the men began to circle the four sisters, she could see they meant the worst.

“Caroline, give them your bag,” she said. “I beg you!”

“No, they shall not have it. It is my money.”

“Give it ’ere!” The leader lunged at Caroline, grasped her arm, and forced her down to her knees.

“Caroline!” Ivy screamed and leapt to her sister’s aid. The man raised his club as Ivy wrestled the handbag from Caroline’s arm. “Do us no harm, I beg you!”

“It is mine!” Caroline screeched.

“Lemme ’ave it!”

“Caroline, no!”

“Let go!”

As the bag flew out of Caroline’s grasp, the robber brought his club down hard on the back of Ivy’s head. She caught her breath, stunned and unable to focus, as the sound of running feet, shouts, and weeping filled the air. Fearing she might become ill, Ivy crumpled.

“You should have let him have your bag!” Madeline was crying. “Look, now he has tried to kill poor Ivy!”

“But it was *my* money! They had no right to it.”

“Papa! I want my Papa!”

“Do stop wailing, Clemma.” Madeline’s voice rose above the others. “You and Caroline must stay here with Ivy while I run back to the house and fetch help.”

“Do not go, Maddie! The gypsies will come again and murder us all!”

“Of course not, silly girl! They have what they wanted. Now stay here.”

Amid the ensuing cries and pleadings as Madeline left, Ivy tugged apart the bow at her neck. Slipping her fingers inside her bonnet, she gingerly touched the back of her head. A large knot was forming, and she felt an odd sense of

confusion. In fact, the smallest movement sent the world spinning.

“Madeline has gone home.” Clemma’s tear-filled blue eyes came into Ivy’s line of vision as the child laid her head on the muddy lane and gazed at her sister. “Ivy, are you quite dead, indeed?”

“I am not dead, dearest,” Ivy whispered. “Calm yourself.”

“Can you walk?” Caroline asked.

“I fear I cannot even sit up.” She glanced at her fingers and noted that bright red blood stained the tips of her gloves. “I shall need a doctor, Caroline.”

“Then I am resolved to go at once into Otley. I shall send the doctor to you directly, and I shall tell the constable the terrible thing that has happened to us all.”

“But you cannot leave Ivy and me here alone,” Clemma wailed. “Maddie told you to wait.”

“Maddie will not tell me what to do, for I am a full two years older than she. It can do us no good to sit here with Ivy ill and the woods full of robbers—”

“Oh, dear me!”

“I shall run, though I am covered in mud and out of breath as it is. Stay with Ivy!”

As Caroline jogged down the lane, Clementine’s small hand patted her sister’s back. “There, there,” she said. “Do not fear, Ivy, for Papa is coming, and so is the doctor and the constable. I wish our brothers were not away at school. Hugh and James would have accompanied us to the village, and then the gypsies would have been too afraid to attack. Ivy, you must rest until someone comes, and then you will be as right as rain before you know it. You will have

your birthday ball and marry Nigel Creeve, and all will be well.”

Ivy lay in the lane, wishing her head would stop throbbing and trying to find hope in the prospect of a birthday ball and a wedding to Nigel Creeve. When that did not help, she did what she realized she should have done in the first place—which was to pray.

God knew she was lying here, and her head was pounding, and her bag was stolen, and the thought of marrying a total stranger was making her more ill than ever. In fact, she felt almost desperate at this moment, and very close to tears. But her heavenly Father was more kind and loving than even her dearest papa, and surely he would not allow her to bleed to death here in the midst of the forest with none but poor little Clemma beside her.

“I shall tell you a riddle,” the child said. “Elspeth, Elizabeth, Betsy, and Bess, each took an egg from a bird’s nest. How many eggs were taken?”

Ivy smiled at the familiar rhyme. “Ooh, that is difficult indeed. What were their names again?”

“Elspeth, Elizabeth, Betsy, and Bess. That is four.”

“Well, then they must have taken four eggs.”

“No, only one! It was the same girl, you see, but four different ways of saying her name.”

“How very clever, Clemma. Do tell me another.”

Clementine was silent for a moment. “I do not know any more riddles. I cannot think . . . oh, Ivy, I am so frightened. Did you see how wicked those men looked? It is all Caroline’s fault, for she should have given them her bag at once.”

“We must not blame Caroline. I think they meant to do us harm all along.”

“But if Caroline had not been so stubborn!”

Ivy reached out and laid her hand on Clemma’s arm. “Do not be upset—”

“Oh, Ivy! Your glove is all bloodied! Did they cut your fingers?”

“I have touched the wound on my head, but do not fear—”

“You are bleeding, and you are going to die!” Clemma got to her feet. “Ivy, I must run down the road to Longley and see who has lit the chimneys, for it is the nearest help, and you are very ill indeed.”

“No, please stay here with me.”

“But, Ivy, if I do not go, and if you keep on bleeding, matters will be even worse than they are now.”

“Papa will come soon.”

“Not soon, for we were nearly a mile from home, and more than that from the village. It is a great distance, while Longley is just here. Truly, I must go, Ivy.”

Though she meant to protest, Ivy found that she could not bring herself to utter any words. Somehow the entire scope of her vocabulary had deserted her, and she felt sure her tongue had turned to jelly.

“I am not afraid of pirates or ghosts,” Clemma said. “And if it is gypsies who lit the fires, I shall tell them they have nearly killed my dearest sister, and they must give me bandages, or their evil deeds shall haunt them throughout all eternity!”

Ivy closed her eyes as her sister’s footsteps sounded down the lane. As always when sleep came upon her, she sensed a swirling of silk around her face, golden silk, and the smell of

spices. And coconut. And then words . . . words she had heard so many times before . . . gentle, comforting words . . . words that had no meaning at all . . . *so, jao . . . so, jao . . .*



“I beg your pardon, sir.” The butler stepped into the large drawing room and coughed discreetly. “There is someone to see you. A lady. A very young lady.”

Colin Richmond looked up from the ledger he had been perusing for the better part of the morning. “A young lady? And what is her name?”

“‘Clemma’ is all she can say. Sir, she does seem very troubled. I understand there has been some misfortune near our gate.”

Colin raked a hand through his hair and stood. “Very well, then. Send her to me.”

He moved to the fire, took up a poker, and stirred the coals. Though it was early May and sunshine filtered through the long windows onto the carpet, the air held a chill he could hardly abide. It was no wonder his father had abandoned Longley for India so many years ago. The house was dank and dreary, a musty scent hung in every room, and the ceilings leaked.

“Miss Clemma, sir,” the butler announced.

A small girl with bright blue eyes, pink cheeks, and tumbling waves of golden hair burst into the room and started toward the fire. But at the sight of the man standing before it, she stopped, breathing hard.

“You *are* a pirate,” she said in a hushed voice. “Oh, dear me.”

“I beg your pardon. I am certainly—”

“Never mind,” she cried suddenly. “You must help us! My sisters and I were attacked on the lane. Gypsies took our bags, and knocked my sister down, and hit my eldest sister on the head, and she is bleeding, and she will die unless you come to save her at once!”

“Upon my word.”

“Make haste, sir! There is no time to lose!”

Hardly able to reconcile the sight of so small a creature making such imperious demands, Colin motioned the butler for his greatcoat and hat. “Your horse, sir?” the servant asked. “Shall I have it saddled? Or perhaps you would prefer a carriage?”

“Is the scene of this calamity far, child?”

“Near your gate. The gypsies came out of the forest, and there were three of them, very wicked looking indeed! And one had a club, and he hit my sister, and now she is dying. My other sisters have gone for help, one back home and one to the village. I might have stayed in the lane, but I resolved I should come to you even though you might be a ghost!”

“Hmm,” Colin said, setting his hat on his head and shrugging into his coat. “A moment ago, I was a pirate, was I not? Well, come along, Miss Clemma.”

To his surprise, the little girl took his hand and began to pull him as they left the foyer of the great house. In moments, the two of them were sprinting down the drive toward the gate. It occurred to Colin that despite the urgency of the moment, he was rather enjoying the run.

“And then Caroline refused to give up her bag,” the child was gasping out, “because she means to buy a length of cloth

to make a new dress for the ball, but you see, that is why the man pushed her down. She should have given it up!”

“And then he hit her in the head?”

“Not her, my other sister. She went to rescue her, and then he hit her, and then Maddie hurried home, but Caroline went to the village!”

There were enough *shes* and *hers* in this tale to confuse any man. As they approached the gate, Colin spotted the figure of a slender woman lying at some distance down the lane. A bright green shawl had slipped away from her shoulders, and her muddied gown outlined the feminine curve of her form. Noting the crimson stain that had spread across the back of her bonnet, he left the little girl and raced on ahead.

“Madam!” Coming to her side, he knelt in the dirt and laid a hand on her arm. Unsheltered by the shawl, the woman’s skin was delicate and pale, so velvety he could hardly sense its substance against his callused fingers. But when he touched her, something inside his chest clenched tight in a knot of deepest dismay, and he knew without a doubt he would do anything in his power to protect this fragile creature.

“Fear not,” he said, drawing her shawl over her shoulder. “I am here for you.”

A pair of large brown eyes flecked with gold fluttered open and gazed at him a moment. “Thank you,” she mouthed.

His instinct to scoop her up and rush her away was quelled by the certainty that before him lay a true English lady, a woman so unlike the brazen doxies who plied their trade on the wharves of countless ports. She would never have felt the rough touch of male hands or known the intimacy of a man’s close embrace.

“May I . . .” He paused, trying to construct the niceties of speech that had never been his manner. “May I have permission to carry you to my house?”

“Yes.” The word was no more than a breath.

Before she could speak again, he slipped his arms around her and lifted her against his chest. She weighed no more than a sparrow, and he knew he must be careful.

“Go back again, Miss Clemma,” he ordered the child as she arrived and took her sister’s hand. “Run to the house, and tell my man to prepare a room. One with a fire already lit. Take my chamber, if necessary!”

“Yes, sir!”

As he set off up the drive, he could see the little blonde girl darting ahead on her mission. With all the running she had done, she would sleep well this night—if only she could be assured of her sister’s health.

He looked down at the woman in his arms. Her lashes, long and black, lay on ashen cheeks, and her lower lip trembled a little with each breath. She was beautiful. And well loved. He sincerely hoped she would live to see the morrow.