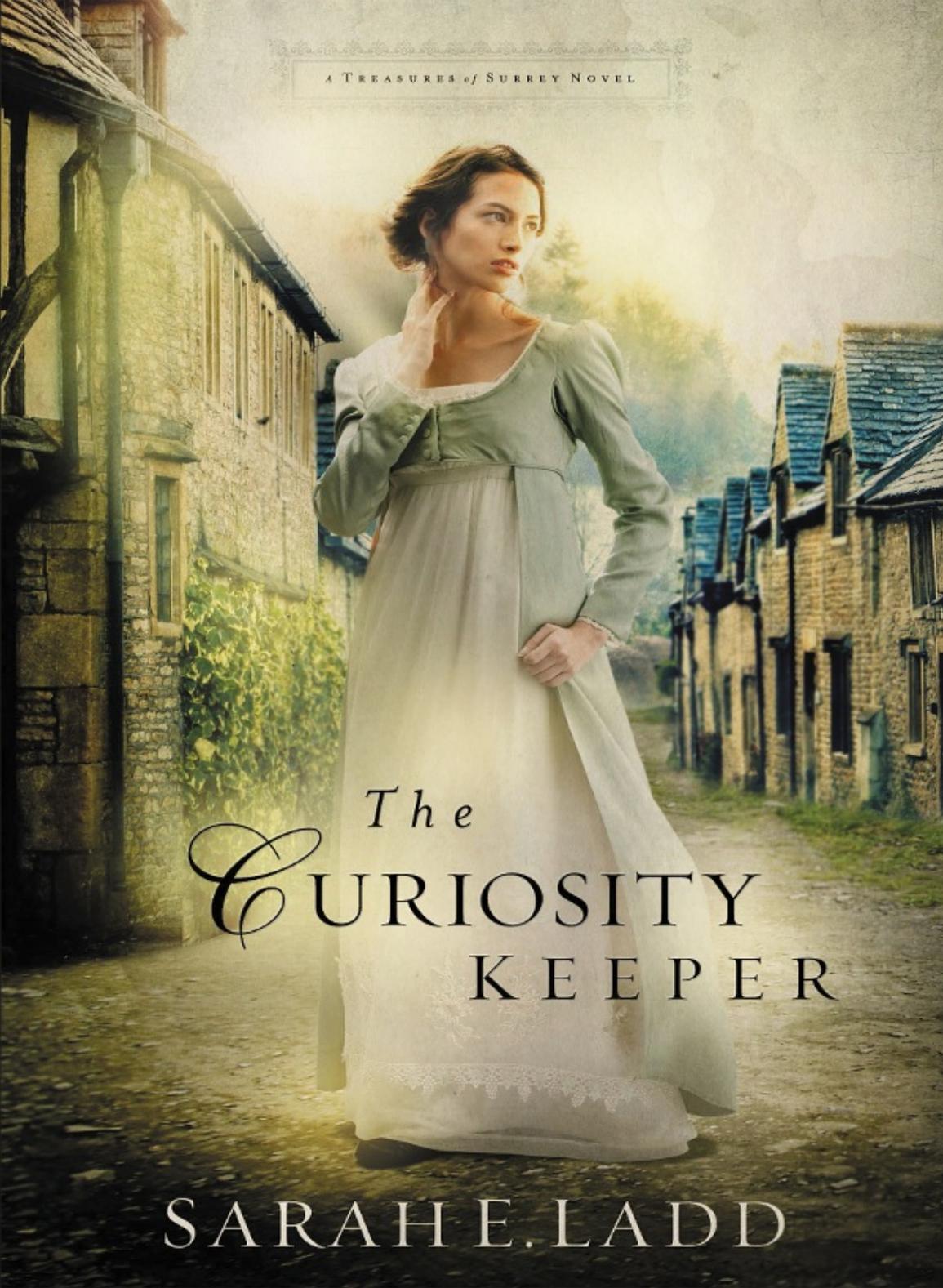


A TREASURES of SURREY NOVEL

*The*  
**CURIOSITY**  
KEEPER

SARAHE LADD



A TREASURES of SURREY NOVEL

*The*  
**CURIOUSITY**  
KEEPER

SARAHE.LADD

## ACCLAIM FOR SARAH E. LADD

“My kind of book! The premise grabbed my attention from the first lines and I eagerly returned to its pages. I think my readers will enjoy *The Heiress of Winterwood*.”

—JULIE KLASSEN, BESTSELLING, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

“Ladd proves yet again she’s a superior novelist, creating unforgettable characters and sympathetically portraying their merits, flaws and all-too-human struggles with doubt, hope and faith.”

—*RT Book Reviews*, 4 STARS, ON *A Lady at Willowgrove Hall*

“[E]ngaging scenes of the times keep the pages turning as this historical romance . . . swirls energetically through angst and disclosure.”

—*Publishers Weekly* ON *The Headmistress of Rosemere*

“This book has it all: shining prose, heart-wrenching emotion, vivid and engaging characters, a well-paced plot and a sigh-worthy happy ending that might cause some readers to reach for the tissue box. In only her second novel, Ladd has established herself as Regency writing royalty.”

—*RT Book Reviews*, 4 1/2 STARS, TOP PICK! ON *The Headmistress of Rosemere*

“If you are a fan of Jane Austen and *Jane Eyre*, you will love Sarah E. Ladd’s debut.”

—USATODAY.COM ON *The Heiress of Winterwood*

“This debut novel hits all the right notes with a skillful and delicate touch, breathing fresh new life into standard romance tropes.”

—*RT Book Reviews*, 4 STARS, ON *The Heiress of Winterwood*

“Ladd’s charming Regency debut is enhanced with rich detail and well-defined characters. It should be enjoyed by fans of Gilbert Morris.”

—*Library Journal* ON *The Heiress of Winterwood*

“This adventure is fashioned to encourage love, trust, and faith especially in the Lord and to pray continually, especially in times of strife.”

—*CBA Retailers + Resources* ON *The Heiress of Winterwood*

THE CURIOSITY  
KEEPER

OTHER BOOKS BY SARAH E. LADD

THE WHISPERS ON THE MOORS

*The Heiress of Winterwood*

*The Headmistress of Rosemere*

*A Lady at Willowgrove Hall*

THE CURIOSITY  
KEEPER

A TREASURES OF SURREY NOVEL

SARAH E. LADD



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

NASHVILLE MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

© 2015 by Sarah Ladd

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by Thomas Nelson. Thomas Nelson is a registered trademark of HarperCollins Christian Publishing, Inc.

Thomas Nelson, Inc., titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fund-raising, or sales promotional use. For information, please email [SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com](mailto:SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com).

Scripture quotation used as inscription on brooch (Romans 8:28) is from the King James Version of the Bible.

Publisher's Note: This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. All characters are fictional, and any similarity to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

ISBN 978-0-7180-1180-2 (eBook)

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ladd, Sarah E.

The curiosity keeper / Sarah E. Ladd.  
pages ; cm. -- (A treasures of Surrey novel ; 1)

Summary: "Born into two different classes, James and Camille shouldn't even know each other. But when the pursuit of a missing ruby brings them together, much more than a mere acquaintance is ignited. The daughter of a curiosity shop owner, Camille would never be considered a lady. Nor does she want to be. With a fiery personality, she dreams of adventures far beyond the walls of her family's modest business. But when her father thrusts a mysterious box into her hands and disappears, her whole world -- dreams and all -- shifts. James is an apothecary, tending to the health needs of the town of Bentworth. His father, a well-known explorer and collector, is quite wealthy from the spoils of his adventures until one risky gamble and a stolen gem leave him on the edge of ruin. Seeking his father's approval, James picks up the hunt for the stolen ruby, leading him to the door of Camille's curiosity shop. With both of their lives in danger as the ruby remains at large, James squires Camille away to the Bentworth School, believing that would be the last place her pursuers would look for her. They both find their hearts and dreams heading in a new direction, but before they are free to embrace their future they must solve the mystery looming around them. The more they uncover, however, the harder it becomes to know whom to trust. And they begin to realize that recovering the ruby may require a great sacrifice: their newfound love and maybe even their lives. "-- Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-7180-1178-9 (softcover)

1. Precious stones--Fiction. 2. Man-woman relationships--Fiction. I. Title.

PS3612.A3565C87 2015

813'.6--dc23

2015001997

15 16 17 18 19 20 RRD 6 5 4 3 2 1

*I lovingly dedicate this novel  
to my sister, Sally—  
my first and best friend.*

# *Contents*

Chapter One  
Chapter Two  
Chapter Three  
Chapter Four  
Chapter Five  
Chapter Six  
Chapter Seven  
Chapter Eight  
Chapter Nine  
Chapter Ten  
Chapter Eleven  
Chapter Twelve  
Chapter Thirteen  
Chapter Fourteen  
Chapter Fifteen  
Chapter Sixteen  
Chapter Seventeen  
Chapter Eighteen  
Chapter Nineteen  
Chapter Twenty  
Chapter Twenty-One  
Chapter Twenty-Two  
Chapter Twenty-Three  
Chapter Twenty-Four  
Chapter Twenty-Five  
Chapter Twenty-Six  
Chapter Twenty-Seven  
Chapter Twenty-Eight  
Chapter Twenty-Nine  
Chapter Thirty  
Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Thirty-Two  
Chapter Thirty-Three  
Chapter Thirty-Four  
Chapter Thirty-Five  
Chapter Thirty-Six  
Chapter Thirty-Seven  
Chapter Thirty-Eight  
Chapter Thirty-Nine  
Chapter Forty  
Chapter Forty-One  
Chapter Forty-Two  
Acknowledgments  
Discussion Questions  
About the Author

## Chapter One

IVERNESS CURIOSITY SHOP, LONDON, ENGLAND, 1812

Camille Iverness met the big man's gaze.

Bravely.

Boldly.

She would not be bullied or manipulated. Not in her own shop.

Camille recognized the expression in the man's eye. He did not want to speak with her, a mere woman. Not when the owner of the shop was James Iverness.

But James Iverness—her father—was not present.

She was.

She jutted her chin out in a show of confidence, refusing to even blink as he pinned her with a steely stare.

"As I already told you, Mr. Turner, I have no money to give you," she repeated, louder this time. "Any dealings you made with my father you will need to take up with him. I've no knowledge of the transaction you described. You had best return at another time."

"I've seen you here, day in, day out." His voice rose in both volume and gruffness. "How do you expect me to believe you know nothing about it?" The wooden planks beneath his feet groaned as he shifted his considerable weight, making little attempt to mask his effort to look around her into the store's back room. "Is he in there? So help me, if he is and—"

"Sir, no one besides myself is present, with the exception of my father's dog."

It was in moments like this that she wished she were taller, for even as she stood on the platform behind the counter, the top of her head barely reached his shoulder. "If you would like, I will wake the animal, but if you have seen me here often, as you claim, then no doubt you have also seen Tevy and know he does not take kindly to strangers. You decide. Shall I go fetch him?"

Mr. Turner's gaze snapped back to her. No doubt he knew of the dog. Everyone on Blinkett Street knew about James Iverness's dog.

His whiskered lip twitched.

A warm sense of satisfaction spread through her, for finally she had said something to sway the determined man.

Mr. Turner's face deepened to crimson, and he pointed a thick finger in Camille's direction, his voice matching the intensity of his eyes. "Tell your father I've a mind to speak with him. And tell him I want my money and won't take kindly to his antics. Next time I am here I will not be so willing to leave."

He muttered beneath his breath and stomped from the store, slamming the door behind him with such force that the glass canisters on the near shelf trembled.

A shudder rushed through her as she watched him lumber away, and she did not let her posture relax until the back flap of his gray coat passed the window and was out of sight. How she despised such interactions. As of late, Papa seemed to be angering more patrons than he obliged, and he always managed to be conveniently absent when they came to confront him.

She needed to speak with Papa, and soon. Awkward conversations like the one with Mr. Turner needed to stop.

Camille tucked a long, wayward lock of hair behind her ear and drew a deep breath. Once again her father's dog had come to her rescue, and he was not even in the room.

"Come, Tevy," she called. In a matter of moments the massive brown animal was through the door and at her side, tail wagging enthusiastically.

"Pay heed!" she laughed as he nudged her hand, forcing her to pet him. "That tail of yours is likely to knock every vase off that shelf if you're not careful, and then Papa will blame—"

The door to the shop pushed open, jingling the bell hung just above it. She drew a sharp breath, preparing to deal with yet another customer, but it was her father who appeared in the doorway.

He was a short man, not much taller than she herself, but that was where their physical similarities ended. His green eyes made up in intensity what he lacked in stature. His hair, which in her youth had been the color of sand, was now the color of stone, and years spent on a ship's deck had left his complexion ruddy. His threadbare frock coat, dingy neckcloth, and whiskered cheeks made him appear more like a vagabond than a shopkeeper, and despite his privileged upbringing, he often acted and spoke like an inhabitant of the docks where he did much of his trading.

"Good day, Papa."

He ignored her welcome and bent to scratch Tevy's ears. After pulling out a bit of dried meat and handing it to the dog, he reached back into his coat. "This came for you."

He stretched out his hand, rough and worn. Between his thick fingers he pinched a letter.

Camille stared at it for several moments, shocked. Clearly she could make out her name—in her mother's handwriting. The edge of the paper was torn. She could not recall the last letter she had received from Mama.

He thrust the letter toward her. "Don't just stand there gawking, girl. Take it."

Camille fumbled with the missive to keep it from falling to the planked floor below, but for once, she found herself unable to find words. Unprepared—and unwilling—to deal with the onset of emotions incited by the letter, she blinked back moisture and shoved it into the front pocket of her work apron.

"Are you not going to read it?" Her father nodded toward her apron.

Of course he expected her to read it, for he himself devoured every one of his wife's scarce communications the moment they arrived. Though they both felt her absence keenly, they reacted to it very differently—and they never, ever discussed it. Over time, Camille had made the topic off-limits in her own mind, and a letter crafted by the very person who was the source of the pain was unwelcome.

“I’ll read it later. There is far too much to do at the moment.” She sniffed and gestured toward the curtain that separated the shop from the back room. “There was a crate delivered to you by cart in the alley, but it was too heavy for me to lift.”

She was a little surprised at the quickness with which her father let the topic of the letter drop. “Why did you not have the men delivering it bring it in?”

“I tried, but they refused—said it was not their duty. They left it in the courtyard out back.”

“When are you going to learn that such things are your responsibility? You should have persuaded them to bring it in.” Her father shifted through the papers on the counter, not pausing to look up. “Had you been a boy, this would not be an issue.”

Camille folded her arms across her chest. “Well, I was not born a boy, and there is precious little I can do about that. So if you will fetch the delivery in for me, I shall tend to it. Or it can spend the night hours where it sits. But the sky looks like it holds rain, so whatever is inside that box will just sit there and soak.”

After much grumbling, Papa disappeared through the back and returned dragging a large, awkward crate. Camille helped him bring it close to the counter, then pried the lid off and reached for one of the linen-wrapped items inside. Laying it on the counter, she carefully pulled back the fabric and revealed a canvas. Strokes of emerald and moss depicted a countryside set below a brilliant sapphire sky. She flipped through the next canvas, then the next. All boasted lush pastoral landscapes.

She clicked her tongue as she assessed the cargo. “They are all paintings. Why did you buy these?”

“I didn’t buy them,” he muttered. “I traded for them.”

“That is the same thing, Father. Paintings do not sell well. You know that. They will sit on the shelves for months, I fear. And we haven’t the space as it is.”

“When will you learn not to question my ways? Sometimes such deals must be made to clinch future arrangements. You mind the counter and leave the dealings to me.”

She ignored him and lifted another canvas out of the crate. “Speaking of dealings, Mr. Turner was just in looking for you.”

At this he raised his head. “Did he make a purchase?”

“No, quite the opposite. He said you owe him money.”

“You didn’t give him any, did you?”

“Of course not.”

Her father returned to his stack of papers. “Turner is a fool.”

“Do you owe him money?” She leaned her hip against the counter. When her father did not respond, she continued. “If you insist upon doing these business dealings on the side, that is fine, but you must understand that you have put me in some very awkward situations. Mr. Turner was quite angry.”

Her father disappeared through the doorway, signaling he was finished with the conversation. She sighed and lifted another canvas, assessing the delicate brushstrokes with a practiced eye. A lovely piece, expertly done. In another shop it might fetch a pretty penny. But not here. Their patrons wanted the unusual, the wildly exotic—unique treasures from far beyond England’s shore, not calm renditions of their own

British countryside.

But Camille's practical side could not quiet the beating of her heart as she took in the tranquil meadow and vivid flora depicted by the artist's strokes. Memories of her time in such a setting rushed her. She remembered running through the waving grasses, wading in the trickling streams, breathing air so fresh and clean it practically sparkled.

So long ago . . .

When she was small, Camille and her mother had lived on her paternal grandfather's country estate. At that time her father had been endlessly absent, either away on business or incessantly traveling the world to quench his thirst for the rare and mysterious. But after her grandfather's death, the lavish estate had been sold. Her father, the sole heir, had invested the proceeds into this shop. And life as Camille knew it had changed forever.

She longed to flee from the dirty confines of Blinkett Street and return to the countryside, to once more breathe fresh air and to bask in the golden sunshine that bathed the meadows. But Grandfather was dead, and Mama was far away, and Papa begrudged even her necessary outings to the greengrocer and the butcher.

She sighed as the door's bell signaled another customer.

Camille had not left London since she first came to the city eleven years earlier.

She was beginning to wonder if she would ever leave London again.

## Chapter Two

FELLSWORTH, SURREY, ENGLAND, 1812

Mr. Edward Langsby, superintendent at Fellsworth School, tapped with his knuckles on the sickroom door, which stood slightly ajar. “Mr. Gilchrist, you have a visitor.”

Jonathan Gilchrist looked up from the bedside of his young patient. Despite the fever, the boy was sleeping soundly. Jonathan pressed a hand to the child’s forehead before turning back to the superintendent. “Who is calling?”

“A footman from Kettering Hall. He claims it is urgent.”

Jonathan drew a deep breath and adjusted his waistcoat. A footman from Kettering Hall. Again. “Did he say what brought him here?”

“No. Just that he needed to speak with you directly.”

Jonathan looked toward the uncovered window. Rain pounded against the paned glass, and a howling wind rattled it in its casings. What could have so upset his father that he would send one of his footmen out at such a late hour and in such inclement weather?

Jonathan turned to Mr. Langsby. The older man was in a haphazard state of dress, and his disheveled hair and the circles beneath his eyes suggested that he had been roused from slumber.

“I will go down and see what he needs. It is a shame he had to wake you, but I am finished here. There is a powder on the table there. See that it is mixed with warm water and that he drinks it twice daily. I would prefer it if one of the teachers sat with him through the night, just in case there are any changes.”

The superintendent nodded in agreement. “I shall ask Mr. Vingate to sit up with him.”

“Thank you. And do not hesitate to contact me should he worsen. From the sound of it, I shall be at Kettering Hall this night instead of the cottage, so if you require my services I would start there.”

Jonathan followed the superintendent down the narrow staircase separating the sick room from the rest of the building and through the kitchen to the front foyer. There stood a young footman, soaked from head to toe. “What is it, Thaddeus?”

The footman cleared his throat and blinked the water from his eyes. “Mr. Gilchrist says you are needed at Kettering Hall. There’s been a robbery.”

“A robbery?” Jonathan repeated, not certain if he had heard the young man correctly.

He had grown quite accustomed to being woken from sleep in the midnight hours. Sickness was hardly confined to daylight. At least once a week a patient would pound on his door seeking assistance with the onset of illness or a fever spike. And his father had few qualms about sending for him at any hour.

But never had he been summoned with news of a robbery. “Are you certain?”

Jonathan rubbed his hand across his face.

“Your father is certain.” The young man wiped the rain from his face with his sleeve. “He says someone has broken into his study.”

Jonathan refused to become alarmed at yet another of his father’s assumptions. “If it is indeed a robbery, perhaps you should ride for the constable. His services would be of more use to Father than mine at this moment.”

“It was suggested, and Mr. Gilchrist says there is nothing a constable can do.” The footman swiped his soaking hair from his forehead. “He said you need to be there.”

Jonathan drew a sharp breath. There was little room for doubt in his mind that his father had indeed requested—no, ordered—his presence. The man was no stranger to overreacting and had been sending for him more and more since the death of Jonathan’s older brother, Thomas, two years prior. As of late Jonathan was being summoned for tasks that could easily be handled by one of the servants. The last thing he wanted to do was to venture out in the rain, only to learn that his father had misplaced a trinket. Again.

A clap of thunder shook the school. Jonathan reached for his caped greatcoat, hanging on a hook next to the door, and leaned to the left to peer out the flanking window. Streams of raindrops streaked the wavy glass and veiled his view of the black night.

“I-I brought a mount for you,” the footman stammered. “Thought it would be faster than walking.”

Jonathan looked past the youth out the door. Sure enough, two horses stood pitifully hunched against the rain.

He pushed his arm through the coat’s sleeve. “Tell me more about what has happened.”

Thaddeus stepped next to Jonathan, water still dripping from his coat and plopping to the stone floor below. “Just before midnight there was a crash from the north of the house. Sounded like breaking glass. I heard the noise myself. When I got there Mr. Gilchrist was in his study, and he would not allow anyone in except for his valet. He was angry, shouting and such. He just kept saying, ‘It’s gone.’”

Jonathan frowned. “What is gone?”

“Don’t know.”

Jonathan groaned and reached for his hat—the wide-brimmed one he often used in weather—and stepped out into the night.

The rain hit Jonathan’s face like icy pellets as he rode, and the late-spring wind pierced the wet fabric of his clothes. Fortunately, the ride to Kettering Hall was a short one—down the main lane through the village of Fellsworth and over the Leaflet Bridge. The road ran alongside Kettering’s south orchard and then past a walled rose garden. At present all was masked in darkness, but he had made the journey so frequently that he did not doubt he could make it blindfolded.

Normally this time of night Kettering Hall would be as still and quiet as the grasslands and meadows that surrounded it. But not tonight. As always the ancient redbrick structure stood steadfast in the weather, a black silhouette against the midnight sky. But yellow candles now blinked from the windows. A dog barked, low and sharp, from somewhere in the east. Male voices battled to be heard against the

wind and rain slamming to the ground below.

As his horse pranced to a stop in front of Kettering Hall's entrance, Jonathan slid to the ground. He handed the reins to another footman, who stood waiting, and climbed the steps toward the open front door.

The main hall was alive with servants dressed in nightclothes and robes. Candlelight cast odd shadows on their sleepy faces. How strange it was to see them in this stage of undress instead of the clean, stark uniforms they usually wore.

Such confused disorganization was uncommon at Kettering Hall. The atmosphere reminded him of another somber night, four years prior, when he had been summoned to his mother's deathbed. The servants had been awake and in nightclothes then as well, but instead of usual silence, the air had been full of soft crying and hushed voices.

He removed his hat and handed it to Abbott, the butler.

"I'm glad to see you, sir."

Abbott's familiar hoarse whisper was a welcome sound. He had known the man ever since he was a boy, and of all the staff at Kettering Hall, he placed the most trust in the aging butler.

Jonathan pulled his arm from the sleeve of his coat. "What has happened?"

Abbott took the coat. "According to your father, there has been a robbery in the study. But you know how he is. He will not allow anyone else—"

"Jonathan!" Ian Gilchrist's unmistakable voice rose above the hall's activity. "Is he here?"

Abbott cut his eyes toward Jonathan before responding. "Yes, sir, he has just arrived."

"Enter."

The study door, which remained locked most of the time, truly was a gateway to the mysterious unknown. Within those walls his father kept the bulk of his "collection"—an assemblage of all things strange and unusual, ancient and fanciful, gathered from every corner of the globe.

Jonathan's hand hovered over the handle. His father bellowed his name again, demanding that he enter. Yet Jonathan hesitated, for he was rarely invited into this room. But apparently tonight was different. Something had happened—an event significant enough to warrant an invitation into the inner sanctum. He found himself half dreading the impending conversation and half curious about what could have riled his father to such a state.

The door squeaked on antiquated hinges as Jonathan pushed it open. Stagnant air immediately filled his mouth and lungs, feeling almost too thick with dust to actually be of use. But then a brisk breeze, carrying with it bits of rain, gusted into the room through an open window, fluttering out the curtains and snapping him to the present.

Eerie darkness surrounded him, broken by the flickering light from several sputtering lights positioned around the room.

And what the candles illuminated was a shock.

Jonathan's gaze did not go directly to his father. Instead, trinkets and trunks of every shape and size captured his attention, momentarily halting his ability to speak.

He struggled to make out the objects in the dark. Paintings and murals covered the walls, all but obscuring the dark-green paint. Mounted animals clustered in awkward groupings, their beady eyes glinting in the candlelight and faces frozen in various expressions. Trunks and tables, chairs and vases, all crowded together in dusty heaps.

Jonathan feared stepping further into the room, lest one misstep trigger an avalanche of statues and books. He inched to the right, and the movement incited a squawk from a creature in the corner.

“What in blazes?” Jonathan jumped and backed into a table, sending the contents tumbling to the wood floor. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he beheld a giant, brilliantly colored bird in a corner cage, staring at him with pale yellow eyes.

But his father paid him no heed. “They took it. Dash it all, they took it.”

Jonathan gingerly made his way toward his father. He lifted the candle from the desk and looked around him, wondering how it would be possible to notice if anything was not in its right place. “Took what?”

“Garrett, leave us.”

The aging valet, who had been standing next to his father, fixed his rheumy eyes on Jonathan before finally leaving the master’s side.

Garrett pulled the door behind him as he exited. Jonathan stepped over to close the window, then realized it was not merely open, as he had thought. Instead, the glass was shattered. A few reflective shards lay on the wooden floor beneath their feet.

His father scooted the chair away from the desk with his foot and dropped into it. The light from the candle next to him reflected on the hard lines of his face, making him appear much older than his fifty-two years. The man slumped forward, motionless save for the tapping of his fingers on the chair’s carved arm, and stared unblinking into the fire. His flinty expression was one Jonathan had not seen since his brother’s death.

Jonathan waited. Ian Gilchrist was not one to be pushed. He would divulge his thoughts in his own time—and not a moment sooner.

In the passing silence, Jonathan picked up a small box from a table and lifted the lid.

“Touch nothing,” hissed his father.

Growing annoyed with his father’s moody vagueness, Jonathan let the lid fall shut and returned the box to the cluttered table. “You called me here, Father. I assume you have some reason other than desire for my company.”

“I have been robbed, Jonathan. Make no mistake.” His father pointed to the window with a shaky finger. “That must be how the coward entered the room, for the door was locked. He must have left the same way.”

Jonathan stepped over a pile of papers and toward the window. He braced himself with his hand on the window’s frame and leaned out just enough to see the drive below. It would have been difficult to enter the house through this window. The rain had muddied any chance of finding footprints or evidence of a ladder. Jonathan turned back to the room, his back to the night’s elements, and looked around, wondering how his father could have determined so quickly what was missing. “What has been taken?”

His father’s response came as a whisper. “The Bevoy.”

“What is the Bevoy?”

Jonathan regretted the bluntness of the question as soon as it passed his lips. His father was a secretive man, private in his affairs. He trusted very few, and Jonathan was not privy to that minuscule circle.

“The Bevoy,” his father repeated, annoyance tingeing his words, “is a ruby of great worth.” He pushed back from the desk as he said it, his graying hair wild from having been woken from slumber.

“A ruby?” blurted Jonathan. “All this fuss is over a ruby? A ruby can be replaced, Father. Is anything else missing?”

His father fixed his eyes on Jonathan, pinning him with the intensity of his stare. “It is not just a ruby, as you say. It is large as a quail’s egg, still untouched and unpolished. And it is rumored to either bless or curse whoever possesses it.”

Jonathan huffed. “Gems cannot be cursed, Father.”

“Bah!” Ian Gilchrist threw back his head in a burst of sarcastic laughter. “Simpletons may think such things. But I have been collecting a long time, and I have seen things, I tell you—inexplicable events tied to various artifacts. There are mysteries in this world that cannot be easily explained. One may not be able to explain them, but that does not mean they are not real.”

Jonathan tried to follow his father’s logic. “Very well, assuming you are correct and the ruby is cursed, why would someone want to steal it?”

“Because it can carry a curse *or* a blessing. Some believe it will bring wealth to whoever possesses it. Not to mention the gem itself is worth a fortune.”

Jonathan told himself he should stop asking questions—mostly because he was not certain he wanted to hear the answers. Long-held suspicions of his father’s activities and the man’s record of ill-gotten gains had caused Jonathan to hold his tongue and keep his distance for the past several years. No doubt it would be best to adopt a similar strategy now.

He moved away from the window and closer to the warmth of the fire. “If you are seeking my advice, I think you had best summon the constable and leave this with him.”

His father stood and stepped over to the sideboard, where he poured himself a dram of brandy and shot it down his throat. He grunted a sigh before slamming the glass back on the table. “The constable won’t be of any help. Not with the sorts of ne’er-do-wells that took this.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I’ve seen my fair share of the world, boy.” Ian Gilchrist poured himself another glass, pausing long enough to shake his finger toward Jonathan. “And I’ve seen my share of justice—or the lack of it. No, we do not need a constable.”

Jonathan could not help himself. “If it is cursed, why is it so important that we recover it?”

“Because it is mine, and not a single soul on this earth has the right to take what belongs to Ian Gilchrist.” The old man slapped the table, his jowls shaking, his agitation growing in volume and intensity. “Besides, I have made arrangements to sell it for a goodly sum.”

“You? Sell part of your collection?” Jonathan gave a nervous laugh. “I’ve never known you to part with any piece, regardless of the amount.”

But his father did not laugh. Instead, his lips curled downward. “I made a bad investment. I planned to sell that ruby to set things right.”

Jonathan sobered. “Set what right?”

“If you must know, I made a wager on which I could not deliver. If I fail to meet the terms of the agreement, we could lose Kettering Hall.”

Jonathan stared. Surely he had misunderstood. “What do you mean, lose Kettering Hall? There must be something else that can be sold to cover debts. Just look around here.”

“I have already parted with many of the more valuable pieces. Without the ruby, what I have now is not of sufficient value to cover the debt.” He picked up his glass and drained it. “Your sister’s dowry is tied to that sum of money.”

At this, Jonathan snapped his head up. His sister would marry within the year. “I thought her dowry could not be touched.”

“There was a loophole, and I took advantage of it. It made good sense at the time.” He looked up with a scowl. “I will not be judged, not by my own son.”

Jonathan rubbed his forehead, trying to make sense of what he was hearing. “But if the ruby was so valuable, why keep it here where you live? Why not under lock and key in London?”

“If I own something, it is mine. I will keep it with me. Your brother understood this. I do not see why it is so hard for you to do the same.” He picked up a small statue and turned it over in his unsteady hands. “Time is short. Either death or my creditors will call soon. You are the heir of Kettering Hall. It is time you acted like it.”

Jonathan felt the anger begin to boil in him. “What exactly is it that you expect me to do?”

“You must go to London. Henry Darbin is there. He works in a private capacity to solve such crimes. ’Tis his profession. No doubt he will assist us as well. Go find him.”

“I will do no such thing,” Jonathan protested. “This is a matter for the constable. I have no wish to get involved in your schemes.”

“Is my own son such a coward?” his father challenged. “You are the heir of Kettering Hall. Would you abandon your birthright?”

Jonathan forced his voice to remain steady. “It was never meant to be my birthright, as you frequently remind me.”

“And Penelope? Are you ready to seal her fate as well? We need her union with Alfred Dowden to recoup other losses. He is a fine man, but he is not a fool. He will not marry her without the dowry.”

Jonathan could not help but wince at the mention of his sister. She was the one who would likely suffer the most as a result of their father’s loss. But embarking on this fool’s errand could hardly save her.

“You are trapping me, Father. I will not be trapped.”

“You are a Gilchrist. You will not allow our family to face ruin.”

“Then tell me how this happened. What dealings went bad?”