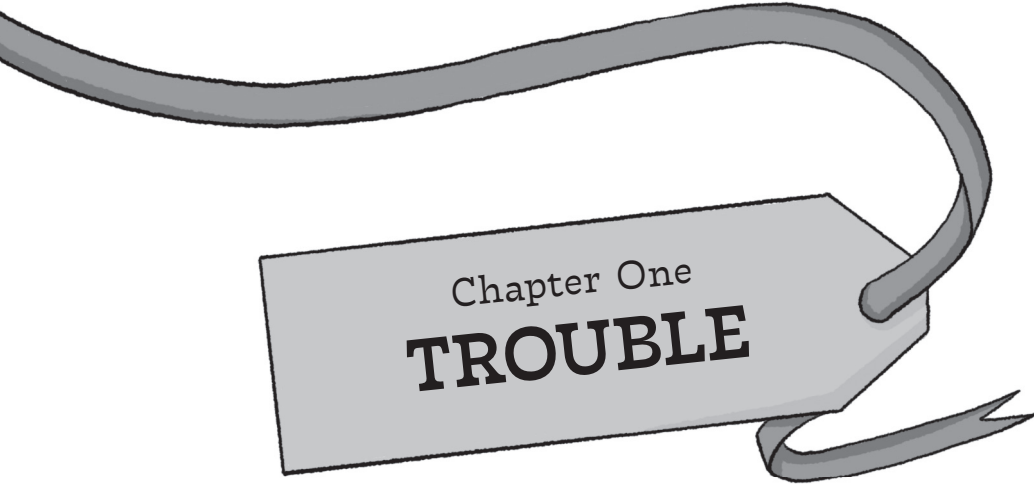


Cariad Lloyd

THE
CHRISTMAS
WISH-
TASTROPHE



A grey ribbon with a tag that says "Chapter One TROUBLE". The ribbon is tied in a loop, and the tag is a simple rectangular shape with a pointed end. The text "Chapter One" is in a smaller font, and "TROUBLE" is in a larger, bold, sans-serif font.

Chapter One **TROUBLE**

Lydia Marmalade was a very clever girl. She didn't know it yet, but she was. She did know that she liked to daydream, sing loudly to herself ... *and* she **believed** in wishes. She knew sometimes they came true, if you wished really, *really* as hard as you possibly could.

But right now, Lydia's heart was heavy and she had stopped believing in wishes. She had too many other things to worry about.

So far in her life, she had managed to stay out of trouble, big trouble. Of course, she had been in lots of *little* trouble, like most interesting people – **scrapes**, **japes** and **hullabaloo**s, but no Big T Trouble.

Now she was in a trouble she couldn't get out of.

Lydia wriggled in her seat, watching the empty fields pass by and snuggling into her many shawls to keep warm, but her feet were still **freezing**. Oh, you may think you've been cold before, but you haven't. Yes, you've seen snow, or you've been outside without your coat, but you have never been as cold as Lydia Marmalade was then. Because Lydia lived in olden times.

Lydia didn't know she was living in *olden times*, she thought she was just living in *times*. But she was, in fact, living in **1814**. So there was no heating you could turn on and she wasn't even in a car, she was in a carriage, pulled by horses (because it was 1814). Lydia had no fridge, no scooter, no bedside lamps, no television or even ... **internet**. But before you put the book down in shock and need a strong cup of tea to revive you, you must remember that if you have never had these things, you don't miss them.

Lydia knew how to miss things though. That's not something only modern nowadays people feel.

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Illustrations
to come

Lydia was **missing** something very greatly – her home. Her bedroom, her creaky stairs, her two chickens that had survived the local fox's many attempts to eat them – and, most of all, her mum. Lydia's mother had died, just two months ago. So, with every mile she travelled **further** away from home, it felt like she was losing her mum all over again.

Her father had died when she was small and Lydia couldn't really remember him, so she didn't miss him exactly – but she missed the idea of a dad, having someone who puts you on their shoulders or tickles you till you scream. She couldn't recall his face or voice, and now she was worried one day she would feel the same about her mum. She didn't have a photo of them (in case you forgot the olden times bit) but she could remember being hugged a lot and laughing. The laughter sounded as if it was coming from down a long corridor that she could only just hear the echo of.

She wasn't sure how long she had been riding in the bumpy carriage, but it was long enough for her bottom

to have gone numb. As dusk fell, she began to wonder if she'd make it to her new home before nightfall.

She **wriggled** again (Lydia was a great wriggler) and a small bundle on her lap gave a little yip. It was Colin, her dog. He yipped again, poking his nose out of the many layers of blankets she had tried to hide him in, sniffing the new air.

'Colin!' she hissed, 'Get back in!' Colin gave a snort through his nose to show he thoroughly disapproved of being ordered around, before reluctantly snuggling back into his layered nest.

'Everything all right down there, miss?' the coach driver called to her.

'Oh yes! Very good thanks!' said Lydia in what she hoped was a jolly tone.

Colin was Lydia's best friend in the whole world. Colin was a sausage dog, but Colin didn't know that so it's best never to refer to him as such. Colin was simply a Colin. Lydia had found him when he was a pup, stuck in a bed of reeds by the pond in her

village, and her mother had named him. She had thought he was trying to escape the water, but as she rescued him she realised he had been trying to get in. Even now, if he saw a pond or lake, his favourite thing in the world was to jump straight in. But his **bestest** thing to do was to curl up to Lydia at night, like a hot little bean.

Lydia had been given strict instructions not to bring Colin with her to her new house. And yet, here he was, on her lap. This was how Lydia often got into trouble – she didn't mean to break rules, but if she disagreed with the rule, she was sure she could show the person how wrong it was, and then they'd agree with her and change the rule. (This wasn't always successful ...)

The wind began to howl, and the bare trees swayed, spiky branches grasping at each other. A robin flew out of a tree and past the carriage. Something caught Lydia's eye on the branch the bird had flown from. The branch itself seemed to be **shimmering**, reflecting a light that wasn't there. She blinked again and it was gone.

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Illustrations
to come

A small red squirrel scampered down and stopped to pile acorns into a hole in the tree.

Lydia remembered her mum talking about the **magic** you could find in a forest, the creatures that lived amongst the branches and leaves, and hid from the real world. Her mind drifted back to looking for wood sprites with her mum last winter, but she pushed the memory away.

Lydia longed to arrive, yet was afraid of what she would find when they did. She reached into her reticule (that's what they called your handbag in ye olden times) and found some biscuits she had been saving. She broke one in half and Colin's black, wet nose reappeared from between the blankets, sniffing to find the delicious treat, and then quickly **gobbling** it up.

She was so tired, her head started to bob as the cold night drew in around them. She couldn't remember how long they had been riding for by now, but she knew she was moving far away, far away from the people she

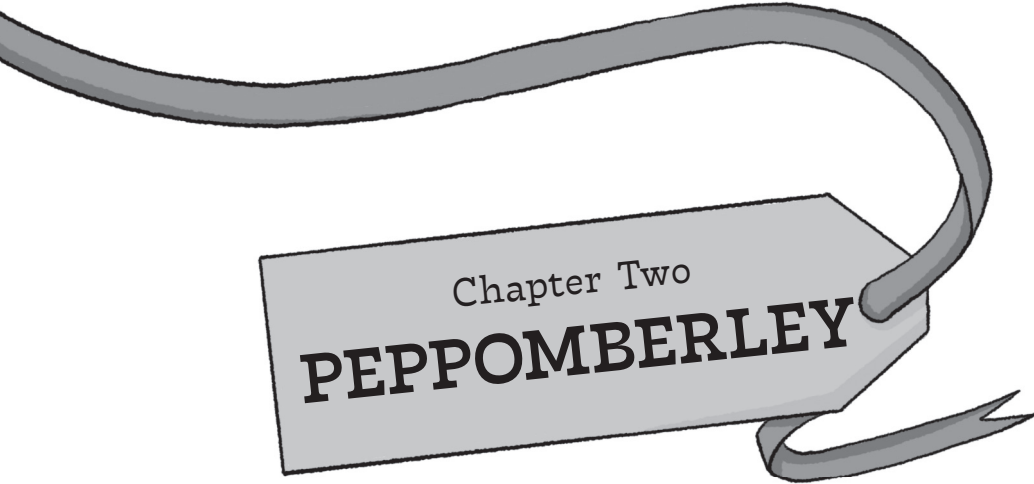
had known and who had known her mother. There was Annie who ran the wool shop, who Colin loved almost as much as Lydia, and Fred the baker, who always told her when the buns would be done so she be first in line to get a warm one. Her friends. Beech Cottage, her home.

Suddenly the carriage **lurched** as it hit a hole in the dirt road. Lydia sat upright again and, as they rounded a bend, a house came into view. **Peppomberley**, her new home.

Peppomberley was not a normal house. It was *huge*. If you imagine a big house in the now times, then imagine **FOUR** of those houses next to each other. And then another four on top, that's Peppomberley. No wait, add another one on top of them all. That's it. Now you've imagined a **MASSIVE** house. That's Peppomberley.

Peppomberley looked like the sort of house your parents might drag you to on a weekend, pretending to enjoy looking at old rooms but really wanting to go to

the gift shop and the cafe. But in 1814 Peppomberley wasn't a house for buying key rings and fancy shortbread, it was a real house in which real people lived. The Partridges, Lydia's new family.

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Chapter Two **PEPPOMBERLEY**

Lydia stared at the house as they rode closer, eyes widening. It really was enormous; she couldn't imagine how many bedrooms it had. Her home in Hopperton had been a farmhouse with two bedrooms that her grandfather had lived in when he was a boy. How would she find her way round Peppomberley? She stared at the many sparkling windows and tried to imagine her own home directly in front of it, comparing how much Beech Cottage would be dwarfed by Peppomberley. What if she got lost for ever? Would they give her a map?

It had been early September when Lydia had first heard Lady Partridge's name. Her mum had been getting weaker by the day and while Lydia had insisted she would be fine to live by herself with Colin, in her heart she knew it wouldn't be possible.

So, Lydia's mum wrote to a rich family she'd known a long time ago, who Lydia had never heard of, her hand shaky but her writing as beautiful as ever – and that was the first time Lydia saw the strange word on the envelope, *Peppomberley*. Lydia's mum hadn't told her much at all about Lady Partridge. And then it had been too late to ask.

Lady Partridge's opulent carriage had arrived in Hopperton in October. Children from the village came running after it as it headed towards Lydia's house, chasing and shouting at the pale grey horses pulling it, like a **fairytale queen** had come to town. Lydia was still in Beech Cottage then, with the neighbours who loved her mother fussing and helping.

Lydia watched from the window as Lady Partridge stepped out of the carriage straight into the dirt outside the house, **wrinkling** her nose at the mud. She looked older than her mother, but also fresher, her hands covered in beautiful black lace gloves. She swept into the house without knocking and Colin began to **bark** immediately.

Lady Partridge kicked her foot in Colin's direction.
'Take that outside, child!'

Lydia was so shocked she did as she was told, even though she had never in her life put Colin outside. She gave him a whispered sorry and gently pushed him out into the garden.

'Let me look at you then.' Lady Partridge took Lydia in from the top of her frizzy brown hair to her scuffed shoes. 'I am sorry about your mother, Catherine—' She paused and appraised the room: the blackened fireplace, the piles of books, the mess. 'I am sorry to hear of her passing.' She stepped around the word *dead*, but Lydia still heard it in her head. 'She

wrote to me some time ago and informed me she required a home for her daughter, Lydia Marmalade—’

‘Yes! It was in September ...’ Lydia interrupted. Lady Partridge stared at her. ‘I beg your pardon,’ Lydia whispered.

‘She informed me you were a good and modest child who listens well and can sing brightly.’

Lydia blinked. Who was her mother talking about? Lydia the chatterbox? Lydia who would chase the birds away when she shout-screamed any song she had tried to learn? Lydia stared at this burglar of her life, wondering what advice her mother would give her. She didn’t need to think twice; she could still see her in her chair by the big window. Knitting in hand, smiling at Lydia. ‘Be honest, Lydia – but not so honest you scare everyone.’

Lydia **shuffled** her feet. *Be honest, Lydia.* She had promised her mum she would try her hardest to fit in at Peppomberley and make something of her life.

‘Yes, Lady Partridge, I *try* to be very good.’

‘Excellent. And you have had some lessons? You know French?’

‘I know my letters and my numbers in English. I know some French.’ Lydia knew a song in French about a dog that **farted** so much it exploded.

‘Your mother was exquisite at French!’

Was she? Lydia thought. That was news to her. ‘Did you know my mother well, Lady Partridge?’ she asked.

‘What? No! A distant relative!’ Lady Partridge declared. She stared down at Lydia, making no attempt to hide her disappointment.

Lydia remembered the **warmth** and **love** she would feel when her mum looked at her, and she felt her eyes fill up. She swallowed hard, instinctively knowing Lady Partridge would not tolerate tears.

Lady Partridge let out a **sigh** and muttered to herself.

‘The state of the house and the child! Well, it is settled, although there will be much work to do to make you a *proper* lady. I shall send the carriage for you on the sixth of December. Then you will join me at Peppomberley.’

Lydia wanted to scream *no*, but she just nodded and looked at the floor.

‘We shall sell this,’ Lady Partridge gestured vaguely at her home, ‘*cottage* to pay for your food and board. Your mother left little in way of support for you, which was most clumsy of her. It shan’t fetch much, of course.’

Lady Partridge headed for the door, putting on a large bonnet festooned with peacock feathers. Lydia exhaled as quietly as she could, thinking it was over, then suddenly the feathers swung back around to face her—

‘Understand this, Lydia Marmalade. If you are not good, modest, quiet and everything I expect of a girl of your age, you shall be removed from my house. Where you live after that will be no concern of mine. A workhouse for poor children, no doubt.’

Lydia found herself nodding. A workhouse? She had never seen one, but she knew it was where you were sent when you had no money and no family to help you. A terrifying cellar **full of spiders**, with the door locked, flashed in her mind.

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Illustrations
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Lady Partridge hesitated and picked up Lydia's mother's shawl from her chair. It was a delicate cornflower blue. For a moment Lydia thought she saw her cheeks flush, then she straightened.

'I will give you until Christmas Day. If you can behave like a *proper* lady until then, you may become a member of my household, indeed my family. If not . . . I have made it clear what will become of you.' She placed the shawl carefully back on to the moth-eaten chair. 'Oh, and your dog is not welcome at Peppomberley. I tolerate no such useless animals. Be sure to be rid of him before the carriage calls for you.'

Lady Partridge did something with her face – Lydia realised that it was an attempt at a smile – and swooped out the door.

Lydia **slumped** on to the chair. For a second it felt as if nothing had happened, and her life was the same. She looked around the **dishevelled** cottage, and heard its silence. Then she knew it *had* changed. Everything had.

Colin ran in and curled onto her lap, licking her nose and letting out a **whimper**.

‘I know, Col.’ Lydia rubbed his head. ‘Maybe it’ll be all right in the morning.’

Lydia used her best voice, like her mum had always done for her when she had to do something she didn’t want to, but she knew she wasn’t convincing either of them.

As the carriage finally drew into Peppomberley’s stables, Lydia clutched Colin’s warm body close. Her home sold, all her possessions tied to the top of the carriage, her mother’s shawl around her shoulders.

She tried to focus on holding Colin still, but something was distracting her. How had her mother known Lady Partridge? How did Lady Partridge know her mother could speak French, when she was just a distant relative? Lydia’s brain started to whirr, heading

towards a thousand possibilities, as it did whenever something confused her – what if? But how? Why? She took a deep breath. This was a mystery indeed, and one she would have hopefully have enough time to solve.

Lydia pulled her shawl tight as she headed towards the grand house, and resolved not to let the mystery go.

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