



Chapter 1

In reading my story, you'll decide whether I'm the hero of my own life or someone else is. I was born at Blunderstone in Suffolk. My father, David, had died six months before, at the age of thirty-nine. His aunt, Betsey Trotwood, was the head of the family. Aunt Betsey had been married to a younger man who had been very handsome and was said to have abused her. They had separated. Aunt Betsey had taken back her birth name, bought a seaside house in Dover, established herself there as a single woman with one servant, and lived in near-seclusion. It was believed that her husband had gone to India and died there ten years later. My father had been a favorite of Aunt Betsey until his marriage, which had deeply offended her. She never had met my mother, Clara. However, because my mother had been only nineteen when she married my father, then thirty-eight, Aunt Betsey had taken offense and referred to my mother as a "wax doll." My father and Aunt Betsey had never seen each other again.

The day before I was born was a bright, windy March day. My mother was in poor health and in low spirits. Dressed in mourning because of my father's

recent death, she sat in the parlor by the fire shortly before sunset. When she lifted her sad eyes to the window opposite her, she saw an unfamiliar lady coming up the walk. The lady was Aunt Betsey. Her posture was rigidly upright and her face composed. Instead of ringing the doorbell, she looked in at the window, pressing her nose against the glass. Startled, my timid mother got up and stood behind her chair. Aunt Betsey scanned the room until her eyes reached my mother. Then she frowned and gestured to my mother to open the door. My mother did.

“Clara Copperfield?” Aunt Betsey said.

“Yes,” my mother replied faintly.

“Betsey Trotwood. You’ve heard of me?”

“Yes,” my mother answered. “Please come in.”

They went into the parlor. When they both were seated, my mother, after vainly trying to restrain herself, started to cry.

“Oh, tut, tut!” Aunt Betsey said. “Don’t do that.”

But my mother cried until she was cried out.

“Take off your cap, child, and let me see you,” Aunt Betsey said.

My mother did so, and her luxuriant hair fell around her face.

“Why, bless my heart!” Aunt Betsey exclaimed.

“You’re just a baby.”

Sobbing, my mother said, “I’m afraid I’m a childish widow and will be a childish mother.”

“What’s the name of your servant girl?”

“Peggotty,” my mother answered.

“Peggotty!” Aunt Betsey repeated with some indignation. “What kind of name is that?”

“It’s her last name,” my mother said softly. “David called her Peggotty because her first name is Clara, the same as mine.”

Opening the parlor door, Aunt Betsey called, “Peggotty! Come here! Bring tea. Your mistress is a little unwell. Don’t dawdle.” Having thus spoken to the amazed Peggotty, who was coming along the passage with a candle at the sound of a strange voice, Aunt Betsey shut the door again. She sat down with her feet on the fender of the fireplace, the skirt of her dress tucked up, and her hands folded on one knee. “I have no doubt that your baby will be a girl,” she said to my mother with satisfaction.

“It might be a boy,” my mother responded.

“I’m sure it will be a girl,” Aunt Betsey insisted. “Don’t contradict me. From the moment of her birth I intend to be her friend. I intend to be her godmother. She must be well brought up and taught not to trust people who shouldn’t be trusted. Please name her Betsey Trotwood Copperfield.”

My mother didn’t say anything.

“Was David good to you, child? Were you happy together?” Aunt Betsey asked.

“We were very happy. David was very good to me,” my mother answered.

“He spoiled you, I suppose. You were an orphan, weren’t you?” Aunt Betsey asked.

“Yes.”

“And a governess?”

“I was a governess to young children in a family where David came to visit. He was very kind to me and paid me lots of attention. Then he proposed to

me,” my mother said.

Aunt Betsey frowned. “Do you know anything about keeping house?”

“Not much, I’m afraid,” my mother answered.

“Did David leave you well provided for?”

“I have a hundred and five pounds a year.”

When Peggotty came in with the tea things and candles, she glanced at my mother and saw that she was ill. Peggotty brought my mother upstairs to her bedroom and immediately sent her nephew, Ham Peggotty, to fetch a doctor. Ham had been staying in the house for the past few days for just this purpose.

While Aunt Betsey remained in the parlor, Dr. Henry Chillip attended my mother. At 12:30 a.m. he came downstairs and said to Aunt Betsey, “I’m happy to congratulate you. It’s all over now, ma’am, and well over.”

“How is she?” Aunt Betsey asked.

“I hope that she’ll soon be as comfortable as we can expect a young mother to be under these sad circumstances of widowhood,” Dr. Chillip answered.

“And *she*. How is *she*?” Aunt Betsey said sharply.

Not understanding, Dr. Chillip tilted his head a little to one side.

“The baby!” Aunt Betsey said with annoyance. “How is she?”

“Ma’am, the baby is a boy,” Dr. Chillip responded.

Outraged, Aunt Betsey put on her bonnet and, without a word, walked out.



Chapter 2

One night when I was seven years old, Peggotty and I were sitting alone by the parlor fire. I had been reading to her about crocodiles. I was dead sleepy. I'd been granted permission, as a treat, to stay up until my mother came home from an evening at a neighbor's. I looked at Peggotty as she sat sewing with a brass thimble on her finger.

"Peggotty, were you ever married?" I asked.

She stopped sewing and looked at me, with her needle drawn out to its thread's length. "Lord, Master Davy. What put marriage into your head?"

"Were you ever married, Peggotty?" I repeated.

"No, and I don't expect to be."

"You're a very handsome woman, aren't you?" Although Peggotty's skin was rough and somewhat red and she was so plump that her form was rather shapeless, I thought that she was lovely, especially her eyes, which were a very dark brown.

"Me handsome, Davy? Lord, no, my dear! But what put marriage into your head?" she asked again.

"I don't know." After a pause, I asked, "If you marry someone and the person dies, can you marry again?"

"Yes," Peggotty answered, looking at me curiously. She laid aside the sock she was sewing and

hugged my curly head. "Let me hear some more about the crorkindills." She couldn't get the word *crocodile* right.

So I read on about crocodiles and then moved to alligators.

The garden bell rang, and Peggotty and I went to the door. There was my mother, looking unusually pretty, I thought. With her was a gentleman with beautiful black hair and whiskers. He had walked home with us from church on Sunday. I later would learn that he was Edward Murdstone.

As my mother stooped at the threshold to take me into her arms and kiss me, Mr. Murdstone said that I was a more privileged little fellow than a monarch, or something to that effect.

"What does that mean?" I asked him over my mother's shoulder.

Mr. Murdstone patted me on the head, but I didn't like him or his deep voice. I also didn't like that his hand touched my mother's as he patted me on the head, so I moved her hand.

"Davy!" my mother scolded.

"Dear boy," Mr. Murdstone said. "I don't blame him for being devoted to you," he said to my mother.

My mother blushed and scolded me for being rude. She turned to thank Mr. Murdstone for bringing her home. As she spoke she put out her hand to him. She glanced at me as he met her hand with his own.

"Let's say good night, my fine boy," Mr. Murdstone said to me.

"Good night," I responded.

“Let’s be the best friends in the world,” Mr. Murdstone said, laughing. “Shake hands.”

My right hand was in my mother’s left, so I gave him my left hand.

“That’s the wrong hand, Davy,” Mr. Murdstone laughed.

My mother drew my right hand forward, but I still gave Mr. Murdstone my left hand. He shook it heartily. “You’re a brave fellow,” he said. He walked away but turned around in the garden and gave us a last look with his black eyes. My mother and I went inside.

Peggotty, who hadn’t moved or said a word, instantly bolted the door. We all went into the parlor. Contrary to her usual habit of coming to the armchair by the fire, my mother stayed at the other end of the room, where she sat singing.

“I hope you had a pleasant evening, ma’am,” Peggotty said, standing stiffly in the center of the room with a candlestick in her hand.

“Thank you, Peggotty,” my mother replied cheerfully. “I had a *very* pleasant evening.”

I briefly dozed off. When I awoke, I found Peggotty and my mother talking and both in tears. “Not a man like this one,” Peggotty was saying. “Mr. Copperfield wouldn’t have liked him. I’m sure of it.”

“How can you say such awful things, Peggotty?” my mother exclaimed.

“It won’t do!” Peggotty said with conviction. “No.” We all went to bed greatly dejected.

The next Sunday Mr. Murdstone was in church, and afterwards he walked home with my

mother, Peggotty, and me. He came into the house, supposedly to look at a geranium we had in the parlor window, but he didn't take much notice of the plant. Before he left, he asked my mother to give him a blossom. She plucked it for him and put it into his hand. He said, "I'll never, ever part with it." I thought that he must be a fool not to know that it would fall apart in a day or two.

Peggotty started spending less time with my mother and me in the evenings. My mother still deferred to her, and the three of us still were great friends, but we all were less comfortable. Gradually I got used to seeing Mr. Murdstone, but I continued to dislike him.

One autumn morning I was with my mother in the front garden when Mr. Murdstone came by on horseback. He reined up his horse to salute my mother and said that he was going to Lowestoft to see some friends who were there with a private boat. He merrily proposed to have me ride in front of him on his saddle if I'd like to. The air was clear and pleasant, and Mr. Murdstone's horse seemed to like the idea of the ride because he stood snorting and pawing at the garden gate, so I decided to go. My mother sent me upstairs to Peggotty to be made spruce. Meanwhile Mr. Murdstone dismounted. With his horse's bridle over his arm, he walked slowly up and down on the outer side of the sweetbriar fence while my mother walked slowly up and down, in parallel, on the inner side. Peggotty and I peeped out at them from my little window. Then Peggotty turned cross and brushed my hair the wrong way, too hard.

Mr. Murdstone and I soon were off, trotting on the green turf by the side of the road. I sat in front of him. He held me easily with one arm. Every now and then I turned my head and looked up into his face. I marveled at the blackness of his eyes, hair, and whiskers; the squareness of his jaw; and the dotted indication of what would have been a thick black beard if he hadn't shaved close every day. Although I disliked him, I thought he was very handsome.

We went to a hotel by the sea and entered a room where two men were by themselves, smoking cigars. Each of them was lying on at least four chairs and wore a large, rough jacket. Two overcoats were in a heap in a corner. When we entered, the two men rolled onto their feet in an untidy way. Mr. Murdstone greeted them as Quinion and Passnidge.

Mr. Passnidge said, "Hello, Murdstone. We thought you were dead."

"Not yet," Mr. Murdstone said.

"Who's the boy?" Mr. Quinion asked.

"David Copperfield," Mr. Murdstone answered.

"The encumbrance of the bewitching Mrs. Copperfield, the pretty little widow?" Mr. Quinion asked.

"Watch what you say, Quinion," Mr. Murdstone warned.

Mr. Quinion rang the bell for some sherry. When it came, he made me have a little with a biscuit.

After that we went to a private boat. The three men descended into its cabin, where they busied themselves with some papers. I saw them hard

at work when I looked down through the open skylight. They had left me with a man with thick red hair. He wore a small shiny hat and a shirt with horizontal stripes and the word *Skylark*. When I called him Mr. Skylark, he told me that Skylark was the boat's name, not his.

Mr. Murdstone seemed grave and was mostly silent, whereas Mr. Quinion and Mr. Passnidge seemed merry. Mr. Quinion and Mr. Passnidge joked with each other but not with Mr. Murdstone, who seemed smarter but also colder than they were.

Mr. Murdstone and I had dinner at the hotel with Mr. Quinion and Mr. Passnidge and went home early in the evening. It was a very fine evening. My mother and Mr. Murdstone had another stroll by the sweetbriar while I was sent in to have my tea. When Mr. Murdstone left, my mother asked me all about the day I'd had and what Mr. Murdstone had said and done. I mentioned what Mr. Quinion had said about her, and she laughed. She said that he was an impudent fellow who talked nonsense, but I saw that she was pleased.

When I went to bed, my mother came to bid me good night. She kneeled down by the side of my bed, laid her chin on her hands, and laughed. "What was it they said, Davy? Tell me again."

"'Bewitching Mrs. Copperfield' and 'Pretty little widow.'"

"What foolishness!" my mother cried, delighted.

We kissed each other over and over, and I soon fell asleep.