

It all started with a white feather. It came, as they always did, in a plain, unmarked envelope. No explanation was needed. Everyone knew what the small, innocuous white feather meant. And Duncan McNab didn't deny it.

He was a coward.

It wasn't the first one he had received. It wasn't even the first one this week. It was, however, the first one his father had seen.

Picking up the mail on his way home was a task Duncan had performed since he was a young school boy. A long-seated reluctance to let his stepmother read any of his infrequent correspondence had led him into the habit of reading the addresses on the envelopes and tucking any with his name into his coat pocket before he reached the house.

Thus, when his stepmother Muriel mentioned that there was a letter on the mantelpiece, he was quite surprised to learn she was speaking to him. Deciding that a letter was by no means a reason to interrupt his meal, he didn't bother to turn and look at it.

“It was left on the doorstep this morning.”

Something about the way she said it made him look up from his plate of stew. Both of his parents were giving him disapproving looks, albeit for different reasons, he was sure. He ladled another forkful into his mouth and turn to see what was causing all the fuss.

He choked.

After a moment of coughing, he managed to swallow the chunk of turnip, and snuck a second glance at the envelope, hoping he had been wrong last time. No, it was still there. An innocent white envelope with his full name, Duncan E. McNab scrawled across it in a heavy black hand.