



**THE PURLOINED PAPERS**  
**Seabrook Trilogy, part 3**

**Allison Lane**

**PROLOGUE**

Sir Nigel Fields snapped the book shut and returned it to its shelf. What the devil was he doing here? This visit served no purpose. Oh, he'd claimed to be seeking investment advice from a wealthy friend, but that was pretense. He had nothing to invest, which half of Exeter must know by now.

He ground his teeth.

This visit had only increased his blue-devils. The library's opulence put his own crumbling manor to shame. Books packed the shelves, many of them rare, all of them richly bound with leather and gilt. Enormous globes flanked an elaborate marble fireplace. Italian stuccatori framed a pair of ceiling frescoes. Paintings by renowned artists dotted the walls.

In contrast, his own library was a converted bedroom with cracked paneling and unadorned ceiling. Half-empty shelves and dilapidated furniture completed a picture of genteel poverty.

It wasn't fair.

His honors dated from the reign of Henry VII, a proud ancestral line. His forebears had survived wars, reformation, and revolution with their land and fortune intact.

Until now.

Their ghosts tormented his nights, chastising him for each new disaster, though they ought to know that none were his fault. Lady Luck had deserted him with a vengeance. Failed crops. Diseased flocks. Dishonest steward.

He cursed the man yet again. Forsythe had fled just ahead of the magistrate, taking his spoils with him. He'd planned his escape well. Not a whisper of his actual whereabouts had turned up in eight years, though rumor was rife. Some swore he'd taken a smuggler's boat to France. Others thought he'd disguised himself as a woman and escaped to America ... Italy ... Scotland ... Ireland.

In the end, it didn't matter. Forsythe was gone, and Sir Nigel was ruined. The death of his heir a year later had added the *coup de grâce* to his plight.

He'd tried to rebuild. The late war had offered opportunities for remaking fortunes. Yet Lady Luck never relented. The infallible canal venture had collapsed without a single ditch dug, its promoters doing a flit in the dark of night. They hadn't purchased a foot of their supposed right-of-way.

He'd made sure his next investment was legitimate. The company had a War Office contract to produce rifles with interchangeable parts – a system reportedly successful in America. But when several of the weapons blew up in use, the War Office returned to its trusty Brown Bess flintlocks. Sir Nigel's investment disappeared.

Then his surviving son had embarked on deep gaming, draining the family coffers at an alarming rate. Peter never passed up a game, and he rarely won. Now that he was the heir, he seemed bent on squandering his patrimony.

Had any man ever been so accursed?

Sir Nigel shook his head. Because of Peter, his estate was mortgaged, his accounts empty. If he didn't make a profit soon, he would lose everything – the curse of owning unentailed land. His ancestors must be turning in their graves.

His living relatives' displeasure was more immediate. They insulted him at every turn, calling him credulous, incompetent, and stubborn to a fault. His uncles cursed him for refusing to accept responsibility, when anyone of sense must know that his problems weren't his fault. His brother even

blamed him for Forsythe's thievery, swearing that *he* would have detected the man's dishonesty immediately. Leo's demands that Sir Nigel hire a man of business to oversee his estate and investments – as if he'd trust another stranger after Forsythe – had forced Sir Nigel to send him away and forbid his return. Even his daughter had blamed him, her departure telling the world that she expected his imminent ruin.

Shoving his unproductive thoughts aside, he headed for the door. There was no reason to stay. Half an hour earlier an emergency had claimed his host's attention. It must be serious to have kept him this long without a word.

His own time would be better spent searching his attics. Maybe he'd missed something saleable – not that a single item, or even a dozen, could cover Peter's latest loss. Two hundred guineas. The boy had no sense.

Damn the bankers for refusing him a loan! And damn Peter for disobeying orders. How many times had he told the boy to stay away from the Golden Bull? It catered to smugglers, highwaymen, and cheats.

His coattails brushed his host's desk as he passed, knocking a paper to the floor. He bent to retrieve it.

Fool! The salutation leaped from the page. Have you no regard for our necks? How can you commit such admissions to paper?

Shocked, he skimmed the rest, then unfolded the letter to which it responded.

"Cad! Fiend!" The curses burst out before he could stop them. No wonder the man was so rich. He was a thief, a swindler, and possibly a traitor.

Tucking both pages into his coat, he collected his hat and cane from the butler. "I can no longer wait. Please convey my sympathy for whatever misfortune has befallen." With what he hoped was dignity, he hurried away to find a magistrate.

The nerve of the man, flaunting a fortune he'd acquired by fraud. He deserved to be hanged. How could he hold up his head in the company of worthier men?

Like you? asked Temptation. He is worse than Forsythe, stealing from those who trust him. And how does he differ from the sharps who fleeced Peter? Or the swindlers behind that canal scheme?

“He doesn’t,” Sir Nigel growled. “He is a cad and a scoundrel.”

So why not exact retribution before you turn him in? Recover some of your losses.

“Impossible.” But his snort wasn’t as firm as it should have been.

Was it truly impossible? He was at his wit’s end. He’d sold the last painting for half its value to meet a mortgage payment. Peter’s latest disaster would put him in the poorhouse. Perhaps Lady Luck had finally relented, offering him a chance to recoup.

He wouldn’t let the culprits escape punishment, of course. But convicting them would require more than these letters. He could investigate – find other evidence, learn the extent of this conspiracy, prepare the proof for the court. No one would object to paying him for such effort – a small sum that would cover Peter’s debts and buy shares in Weston Square. Building ventures were guaranteed winners; with so many men returning from war, housing was in short supply.

Smiling, he headed for his carriage, already composing the letter he would dispatch. He wasn’t greedy. Six hundred guineas was a reasonable amount. Two hundred to replace Chloe’s dowry – he would establish a trust this time so Peter couldn’t touch it. Two hundred to redeem Peter’s markers. Two hundred for Weston Square. Confining Peter to the estate until harvest would eliminate new trouble.

And by harvest, he could send the results of his investigation to the magistrate. Six hundred guineas was a reasonable fee for such work. But he must collect it anonymously lest the culprits learn of their peril and flee.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Saturday*

Chloe Fields closed the door behind the vicar’s wife, then braced for Miss Laura Seabrook’s inevitable tirade – her employer would be furious that Mrs. Tubbs had accosted her without warning.

Mrs. Tubbs had all the finesse of a battleship under full sail. Once she made up her mind, there was no stopping her. So she’d shoved her way into the hall, then refused to wait while Chloe discovered whether

Laura was receiving. She hadn't even allowed Chloe to announce her.

"Stop dawdling!" snapped Laura.

Taking a deep breath, Chloe locked the front door. She'd known from the beginning that Laura would be a difficult employer – Laura had been willful since birth, her natural arrogance encouraged by an overindulgent father. The scandal that had sent her fleeing to Moorside Cottage had made her even worse.

Laura had spent the intervening years brooding because she was no longer the belle of Devonshire and the toast of London – though in truth, she had never been as perfect as she claimed. While she'd been blessed with golden hair, porcelain skin, sapphire eyes, and angelic features, she was a harridan who considered herself superior to everyone else. Men might have clustered around her, flirting and writing odes to her beauty, but few seriously considered wedding her.

Drawing in a deep breath, Chloe returned to the sitting room. It was elegantly furnished and would have been quite cheerful if Laura ever opened the velvet draperies. But she insisted on shutting out the world.

Laura's displeasure crackled through the gloom as Chloe picked up her needlework.

"How many times must I remind you that no one is to enter this house without my permission?" Laura demanded. As usual, she kept her face turned toward the fireplace so only her right profile showed. On those rare occasions when she accepted callers, she caked the left side of her face with cosmetics to further hide her scars. "If you cannot follow simple instructions, I will find a new companion. I cannot tolerate incompetence."

"I tried." Chloe forced her voice into subservience – two years of abuse made respect impossible. "I could hardly ignore the knocker; the fishmonger's boy is already an hour late. But you know Mrs. Tubbs as well as I do. She shoved me aside and refused to let me announce her. Why don't you contribute some paltry sum to her altar fund and be done with it?"

"Never. It would encourage her to call more often, demanding even more money. Besides, where would I find even a paltry sum? You've wasted so much on the housekeeping that I've nothing left. This gown is two

years old!”

“And still beautiful.” The jacconet muslin walking dress had been created by London’s finest modiste. “It is newer than Mrs. Tubbs’s, better made than Lady Tyburn’s, and admired by everyone who sees it. The embroidery is exquisite. But if you need a new gown, then order one. You can manage the cost by switching to tallow candles, eating barley bread at meals, and drinking coffee instead of expensive tea.”

“Never!” Laura hurled her book across the room. “No one of my breeding can consider such vulgarities.”

“Then spend your days in the garden instead of drawing the draperies and burning candles at high noon,” snapped Chloe, glaring at the seven candles Laura had lit after breakfast. It was an extravagance she could ill afford.

Unfortunately, Laura would never risk being seen. The sitting room windows overlooked the lane, and the garden walls were only six feet high. Anyone on horseback could look over them.

The budget had been a sore point even before the price of flour had risen. Now Laura’s purse truly pinched. And it could only get worse. The farmers expected a poor harvest this year, which would raise prices yet again. Laura’s income would stretch no further, but she refused to economize. As the daughter of a baron, she demanded the finest bread and cake, abundant wax candles – except when she had guests – and both meat and fish every day. The next rise in costs would surpass her income.

Chloe dreaded the day she would have to confront Laura’s guardian to request additional funds or ask permission to spend part of the trust’s principal. At best, William would be furious. At worst, he would move Laura back to Seabrook Manor, which would cause no end of trouble.

It was William, Lord Seabrook, who had hired Chloe to be his sister’s companion. Chloe knew him well, for they had been childhood playmates. Thus he trusted her to run the household. Laura had no head for figures and no concept of economy. Chloe hadn’t realized until later that he also expected her to calm Laura’s frequent megrims, teach her responsibility, and help her accept her changed fortune. So far, she’d managed only the first.

“Perhaps we should reduce your exorbitant salary,”

Laura said now, turning so both eyes glared at Chloe. The scar slashed white across a pitted cheek.

"I have a contract," Chloe reminded her, suppressing a sigh. Laura threatened to turn her off a dozen times a week. "And since I'm performing the duties of housekeeper and lady's maid, as well as companion, I am probably underpaid."

"Since William is the one who hired you, he should pay you." Laura glowered.

Chloe bit her tongue. This argument was an old one and served no purpose. Laura neither listened nor cared about truth. Today's petulance expressed her irritation that Mrs. Tubbs had seen her scars. It wasn't the first time, nor would it be the last – there wasn't a soul in the village who hadn't seen them, despite the heavy veils she wore in public – but Laura considered each incident a fresh insult. She could not forget her reign as a London diamond or her dreams of traveling the world so that people from all nations could admire her beauty and worship at her feet.

"Why don't you sit in the garden for an hour?" Chloe suggested. Since the lane ended at Moorside, it was rare for anyone to use it. Their nearest neighbor, Mr. Rose, was harvesting wheat this week so would not ride in this direction. "It's a beautiful day. The fish boy always walks, so you needn't see him. I'll bring you a tea tray."

Laura grumbled, but finally agreed to take the air.

Chloe heaved a sigh of relief as she snuffed the candles. Handling Laura was more enervating than teaching fractious children or placating grumpy old ladies.

Laura's fury over her accident remained hot, for retiring from the world gave her too much time to brood. She blamed her predicament on everyone but herself, railing at her sisters, cursing her brothers, and heaping vitriol on anyone who came near her. Even Chloe, who was paid to care for her, found it difficult to remain at her post.

After two years on the job, Chloe questioned her own sanity. Granted, she had welcomed William's offer, for she'd been desperate to escape Fields House. Without a dowry or powerful relations, and lacking the beauty that might have overcome those faults, marriage would be impossible, so she had to support herself. Fifty guineas a year had seemed a godsend, for

she could save most of it. Eventually she would be free.

In truth, freedom was nearer than she'd originally planned. Laura's two brothers-in-law augmented her savings whenever they visited Devonshire. Both despised Laura. Both were grateful that Chloe kept her under control. Chloe had initially balked at accepting their gifts, but in the end, practicality won. Without the vails, her patience would expire long before she could quit, for Laura had proved to be far more exasperating than expected.

Laura knew nothing about this extra income. She hated both Grayson<sup>1</sup> and Rockhurst<sup>2</sup> and was so incensed with her sister, Lady Grayson, that she refused to utter her name. Thus none of them had visited Moorside. Chloe met them in the market town of Ashburton twice a year to report on Laura's condition. Laura never accompanied her. She had traveled beyond the nearest village only once in two years – a trip to Seabrook Manor that had not been a success.

Thanks to Lords Rockhurst and Grayson, Chloe now had a hundred and fifty guineas invested in Consols – enough to rent rooms if her situation grew desperate. But she wanted a cottage with a garden. Caring for Laura's garden was the only part of this job she enjoyed. And a kitchen garden would reduce her expenses.

Chloe set the tea tray at Laura's side, then snipped faded flowers from the perennial border.

Laura was netting a reticule, following the instructions in a year-old copy of *Ackermann's Repository*, but the project wasn't going well. She was too furious to concentrate – and not just over Mrs. Tubbs. She had been cursing the fish boy since his last delivery – he'd been singing a ditty about the two-faced witch of Moorside Cottage when he reached the door. Chloe had heard it several times in the village, but that had been Laura's first exposure.

Laura's sensitivity made taunting her a popular sport, especially among the children, but Laura refused to admit that it was her manner that drew comments, not her appearance. No one cared that the blacksmith was missing two fingers or that the baker's forehead bore scars from setting fire to his hair. But Laura lost her temper at the first hint of ridicule, and



sometimes even earlier. Her imagination could find mockery in the most innocuous statements.

Chloe dropped the last faded bloom into her basket, stirring delicious scents that promised a lovely potpourri for her room.

“Damn! Damn! Damn!” Laura snarled. “These instructions are worthless.” She threw the reticule on the ground, dashing the teapot after it.

“What happened?”

“Whoever wrote this article is an idiot.”

“Let’s see.” Chloe retrieved the reticule, scanned the instructions, then untwisted the last two rows. Her deft fingers quickly restored the proper design.

“Instructions are often confusing,” she said placatingly. “But I think they intend you to continue for another four rows before changing the pattern.”

Laura batted the reticule away. “What is the point? I won’t use it anyway. We never go anywhere.”

“We will be at Seabrook Manor next week.” Chloe scooped up the shattered teapot, irritated at the waste. That made three porcelain teapots since she’d come to Moorside. This time she would replace it with pottery, no matter what Laura said.

“I’m not going.” Laura turned away, again offering her beautiful profile.

“Lord Seabrook will send his carriage on Wednesday,” Chloe continued as if Laura hadn’t spoken. “He wants the entire family at his betrothal ball.”

“No.” Surging to her feet, Laura stomped into the house.

Chloe sighed. Pandering to Laura’s conceit usually kept the girl under control, but this time it wasn’t possible. If Laura balked, William would send several sturdy footmen to drag her home. The Seabrooks were all stubborn to a fault, and William was no exception. Having decided to invite Laura, he would ignore her tantrums. Nothing deterred him from his chosen course.

So she had to elicit Laura’s cooperation. Unfortunately, the usual enticements wouldn’t work. Laura despised her family, and while Chloe might look forward to seeing friends and neighbors again, Laura would not. So what might convince her?

Revealing her own excitement would only make matters worse, for Laura might dig in her heels simply

to punish her companion. And Chloe had no reason to anticipate the gathering, she reminded herself. She wasn't attending as a guest and could no longer expect deference as a baronet's daughter. Companions remained on the fringes.

But anything was better than weeks and months of Laura's megrims.

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Sir Nigel bolted upright in bed, staring in horror at the figure cloaked in black. Light from a single candle glinted from a pistol.

"Return the letters. Now!" snapped the man, teeth flashing white in the gloom.

"What? Who are you?" But he knew. Sir Nigel's heart lurched into a full gallop. How had they identified him?

His third request for a small payment had been a mistake. In the two months since finding the letters, he had amassed enough evidence to convict these men several times over. He should have been content. But he had forgotten the third mortgage when making his original calculations. Then Peter had again—

"Now!" His caller cocked the pistol.

Mind racing, Sir Nigel slid from the bed. Producing the letters would cost him his life. So would refusing. Thus he must stall and pray for escape. The first step was to dress. He would feel less vulnerable when properly clad. Removing his nightshirt, he headed for his dressing room.

He'd hidden the letters where no one would ever find them and kept the other evidence in the priest's hole so he could study it in private. If he failed to escape, Peter would find it. Pray God the boy would turn it over to the authorities.

*Don't think about that.* Stepping into breeches, he pulled on a shirt, then reached for a fresh cravat.

"We aren't making morning calls," snapped his visitor. "Stop dawdling and return the letters."

"They are in the library." His voice shook so badly that he clamped his jaw shut. The library offered his best hope. It was a logical hiding place and contained at least one weapon.

Heart in his throat, he paced the length of the hall, exuding a confidence he did not feel.

In the library, he moved to the fireplace and tugged on the loose brick he'd noticed last week. It stuck.

Cursing, he wiggled it until his fingers were raw, then used the poker to pry at it. Curiosity lured his visitor a step closer.

Sir Nigel whirled to strike.

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Captain Andrew Seabrook grimaced at the voices emanating from the billiard room. His brothers were arguing again. With Oxford's fall term due to start, it was becoming a daily ritual.

"Absolutely not!" swore William, slamming balls together hard enough to be heard through the heavy door. "You will return to school and forget about the navy. Only a madman wants to be flogged every day of his life."

"I wouldn't—"

"You would. You are too stubborn to follow orders and too rigid to accept advice."

"I'm not!" insisted eighteen-year-old Thomas. "Just because you enjoy herding sheep and grubbing about in fields doesn't mean everyone does. I love the sea. I need to travel. I can't tolerate another quarter of Greek and idiotic tutors."

"You are too old," snapped William. "The navy starts their officers as midshipmen – fourteen at most."

"Not always." Thomas's voice grew eager. "I spoke with Captain Marshal in Exeter last week. Piracy has grown so bold in every sea that they need more ships than ever. He would welcome me as—"

"No." William remained implacable. "It's bad enough that Andrew nearly died serving the Crown. I won't put another Seabrook in jeo—"

Andrew ducked into the library, closed the door against the noise, and poured himself a drink. Why did William keep dragging his name into the fight? This wasn't his battle.

William was right to insist that Thomas finish school, for the boy needed a career that would support him. He couldn't rely on the navy. One injury could disable him forever. Few could survive long on half-pay.

Yet William's edicts were heavy-handed at best and might prod Thomas down a path he would regret. William was a simple man with a limited sense of humor, puritanical views, and no imagination. His goals were to build Seabrook Manor into a prosperous estate and produce an heir who would care as deeply

for the land as he did. He wanted Thomas to complete a gentleman's education, then come home to help with the estate.

What William refused to acknowledge was that Thomas hated farming. He wanted to travel and seek adventure. Yet Thomas's dreams could never be achieved in the navy. Shipboard life was hard and battle painful. Death was easy. Survival wasn't – especially if one lost a limb or an eye. Even emerging physically whole left inner scars that Andrew would wish on no one, especially a brother. And once Thomas joined the navy, he would never escape.

Like him. Eleven years of war dragged at his spirits. Deep inside, he wanted nothing more than to sell his army commission, but that was impossible. His only skill was fighting. His only income was his military pay. Without it, he would starve to death.

He wouldn't be the first to face that fate. For years London had been littered with soldiers who could no longer fight. Their condition deteriorated steadily. Now it was worse, for Napoleon's defeat meant that the military no longer needed as many men. Thousands were being released. Few could find jobs. Many had no families. Competition for employment was keen, so those without skills could only beg – or worse. The newspapers already decried an increase in thievery.

He shuddered, forcing despair back into its hole. Succumbing to fear would make the next battle harder and could cost him his life – assuming his regiment took him back. It would leave for India soon. If his leg was not recovered, he would lose his commission. Only the fit would survive the regimental purge.

Draining his glass, he poured another.

All he knew was warfare. Estate management held no interest. Farmers seemed as alien as those black Africans he'd seen or the Chinese he'd heard about. Nor did he know anything about sheep. He'd known since birth that his life lay with the army – duty demanded that second sons serve the king – so he'd paid little attention to alternatives. Buying colors at sixteen meant he lacked the schooling to serve the church. Eleven years of following orders and castigating subordinates had destroyed any potential diplomatic skills. And he doubted anyone would hire a cynical warrior as a secretary.

So he had to recover from these damnable wounds.

The military was the only life he knew.

He stared at the empty fireplace wishing for heat to loosen his thigh, but no one built fires in August – September now, he corrected himself. The coal scuttle was empty, and the servants long abed.

That was where he ought to be, but he couldn't sleep. The worst part of recuperation was the restlessness caused by inactivity.

In the two weeks since he'd removed the splints, he'd worked the leg as much as possible. The limp was fading, but he couldn't walk above a mile, and riding was worse. He'd barely managed an hour in the saddle that morning.

The pain was so bad he feared he would never be whole again. Fear raised anxiety for the future. Anxiety kept him awake. Sleeplessness left too many hours in which to fall into despair. The resulting lack of energy made the next day's exercise even more painful. It was a never-ending cycle that might cost him his commission.

"Stop complaining," he muttered, reaching for the decanter. "At least the damned thing is still there. And it's healing. Harvey will have to eat his words."

Only his vehement protests, backed by Major Barnfield's pleas, had saved the leg from amputation. Harvey had sworn that even if Andrew survived the inevitable infection, he would never walk again. Andrew had remained adamant. And Harvey had been wrong. The wound had not turned putrid, and the bone had healed. But unless he recovered his strength, it would do no good.

Stop thinking about it!

He shoved the decanter aside. Wine made him maudlin, and he was already blue-deviled enough. It was better to think about Harvey's misjudgment.

To be fair, Harvey had worked for thirty hours without rest before reaching Andrew. Amputation was faster than the lengthy process of removing debris deeply embedded in flesh. With the battlefield's perpetual lack of remedies and shortage of surgeons, damaged limbs usually developed gangrene anyway, so removing them saved lives. But Andrew could still feel the shock of that initial pronouncement. It had blocked his pain, muffled the screams of his fellow victims, and banished lingering images of the battlefield.

Don't think about that day!

But how could he not? Waterloo had been the worst battle he'd fought in eleven years with the 95<sup>th</sup>. Worse than Albuera. Worse than Badajoz. Worse than the bloody defeat at New Orleans. Mud. Smoke. Screams as the French cavalry drove again and again against his ever-diminishing square. Piles of dead and wounded. Rivers of blood.

Think about the future, not the past.

Right. The future. His leg was improving. Though it remained stiff, with a tendency to buckle without warning, time and exercise would restore its vigor. The flesh wasn't pretty, but appearance didn't matter. He would be in India soon.

*You don't want—*

Of course he wanted to see India. It was full of strange animals and new customs. Lester, one of the army engineers, had served there for several years and described exotic buildings with amazingly intricate towers and carved spires. Wellington had also served there, as had others he knew. Many men had amassed fortunes.

India was also hot – far worse than Spain. And it harbored bad air, causing fatal fevers in many visitors. Strife was common, and he wasn't sure he could stomach another war, especially under a brainless general instead of Wellington. Returning could lead to a court-martial for insubordination.

Which was why he couldn't sleep. Desire was gaining ground on duty. The cynicism that had lurked since the Buenos Aires campaign had burst into bloom in North America. Now it rose up to proclaim loud and clear that he was sick of war, sick of deprivation, horror, pain, and death. He wanted to build, to heal, to live in peace to a ripe old age.

Impossible, of course. Without skills or funds, he was helpless. So duty must carry the day. Maybe Lady Luck would see him through another campaign. But if she was to help him, he needed to set his unproductive maunderings aside and strengthen his leg.

His fingers dug into the muscle, kneading and smoothing to release the tension. It was too late to change course. All he could do was persevere.

"Still up?" asked William, poking his head into the library.

Andrew shrugged. "Couldn't sleep."

"Then come with me. I can use your sharp eyes. You see details I don't even notice."

"What happened?" It was nearly three.

"A fatal accident at Fields House. Or so their groom claims. His tale sounds odd."

## CHAPTER TWO

It was half past three by the time William's carriage reached the Fields House gates. It felt odd to be back after so many years, mused Andrew. He and William had once run tame here – just as Kevin and Chloe Fields had run tame at Seabrook Manor. The four had been inseparable in childhood.

But those days were long gone. School had caused the first rift, giving the boys a venue for adventure that didn't include Chloe. She rejoined them during term breaks, but it hadn't been the same.

He should have accepted the inevitable and left her to prepare for her come-out instead of encouraging her to play hoyden with the boys, he admitted now. Yet she had always been the most adventurous of the group. In his selfish quest to prolong childhood, he'd tried to keep summers the same. But they'd no longer been children, especially that last year.

He cursed as he'd done for eleven years. Chloe had blossomed into womanhood during his last school term. Lust had ripped through him the moment he'd spotted her soft curves. He'd tried to suppress it. God knew he'd tried. But he'd failed, ruining one friendship and damaging another.

Memories slipped out of hiding, bursting with warmth and laughter – and guilt. How could he have been so stupid?

He'd suppressed his infatuation, knowing it seemed bright and shiny and real only because the army would claim him any day and he was scared out of his wits that he'd fail or turn coward or die.

Then he'd spotted her while riding one morning – had looked for her, he admitted later. Why else had he ridden across Fields House land? She was beautiful, with sunlight glistening on her hair, her gown stretched enticingly across breasts he knew would fit perfectly in his palm. His mouth had dried as every drop of moisture sank to swell his shaft.

They'd talked and laughed, walking through the orchard. Up close, her cheeks glowed like ripe apricots and her eyes gleamed bright as new leaves. Blood pulsed through his veins, driving away coherent thought – and setting aside honor. So he'd touched her and drawn her close, kissing her wildly, deeply. The next thing he knew, he had her bodice open and was suckling those perfect breasts, drawing moans and cries of passion.

He blinked away his lingering shame – and not just because he'd abused a friend. Only three days later he'd joined his regiment. They had always known that he would leave on his sixteenth birthday and might never return. He'd had no business dallying with an innocent, especially one whose birth was every bit as good as his own.

Yet despite friendship, and in the face of honor, he'd nearly taken her in the open, where anyone might have seen.

So they'd parted in anger – which had strained his friendship with Kevin as well.

For months Chloe's voice had echoed in his mind – swearing her love; naïvely assuming he would wed her; weeping over his callous reminder that he faced a nomadic life in foreign lands, for his regiment served entirely abroad. Her father would never let her marry at the tender age of fifteen. And he would never wed at all. He had no way to support a wife.

He could have revealed those truths less brutally, but he'd been so angry at his own dishonor that he'd lashed out, choosing words he knew would slice deep. That, even more than his advances, had blanketed him in shame. His guilt had grown until hardship and injury had seemed well-deserved punishments for his crimes.

But not the only ones. He'd not seen her since that day, so she remained in memory with tear-streaked face and pain-stricken eyes. And there was no way to forget. Kevin and William mentioned her in every letter. Thus Andrew knew about her failed Season, knew about her quarrels with Sir Nigel, knew she'd never told a soul about his attack. As the years passed and her situation worsened, his guilt grew. He'd ruined her life, for her failure to wed had to be his fault. Somehow he'd marked her, sullyng her enough that other men avoided her. Thus he had condemned her to



Laura.

He stifled a shudder. Kevin's death had stripped her of her last champion. His fault. His responsibility. He would take the pain to his grave.

Andrew forced his mind back to business. It was too late to atone for an eleven-year-old insult or a seven-year-old death. All he could do was protect her from new pain. He had successfully avoided her for eleven years and would continue to do so. Seeing him at William's house party would remind her of his crimes, so he must leave for London on Monday and pray that Major Barnfield would believe him well enough to resume his command. William knew he'd been recalled, so he would accept an early departure. Duty always came first. Only Andrew would know that he was hiding behind duty to avoid Chloe. He couldn't reopen those old wounds for either of them.

The grounds around Fields House had fared badly since he'd left. Light from the coachman's lantern glinted from crumbling gateposts and overgrown shrubbery as the carriage bucked along a rutted drive.

The house wasn't much better. Crumbling mortar and cracks in the hall paneling denoted poor maintenance. The portrait of Kevin's great-grandfather was gone, as was the gate-leg table that had always stood near the drawing room. It looked as though rumor had not exaggerated Sir Nigel's financial woes.

Three night candles and the night lamp burned atop a stand near the stairs, their feeble light emphasizing the stygian gloom of the hall. Five servants huddled in a corner as the butler welcomed William.

Gramling seemed ancient, though he couldn't be much past sixty. Since Andrew's last visit, his hair had gone completely gray, and grooves now broke his face into a poor-fitting mosaic.

"Thank God you're here, my lord," Gramling told William, voice quavering with shock. He had never mastered the impassive demeanor expected of butlers, and tonight he wasn't even trying. Tremors rattled his hands. "We didn't know what to do."

"So you summoned the magistrate. That was exactly right."

Andrew glanced at the mortal remains of Sir Nigel Fields. Arms crossed and legs straight, the corpse lay several feet from a dark spot at the foot of the stairs. The sharp scent of blood permeated the air, nearly

blocking the odor of death.

“What happened?” asked William.

“We don’t rightly know,” admitted Gramling. “A shout awakened me in time to hear a bumping sound. When I reached the hallway, Sir Nigel was crumpled at the foot of the stairs. But I’ve no idea why. He retired at ten, as usual. I’ve never known him to leave his room at night. Nor has he ever dressed himself – not even the night the stable caught fire. He always rings for Simms.” He nodded toward the valet, who stood beside the housekeeper, cook, and two maids. They apparently comprised the entire indoor staff – which explained the derelict appearance of the house.

“You heard nothing?” William addressed Simms.

Andrew ignored the ensuing discussion of Sir Nigel’s habits. The man had always been as fussy as an old maid, passing his days in a series of petty rituals. He’d believed that an ordered mind guaranteed success. Failure had made him even more fastidious.

Since William wanted him to observe, Andrew collected a candle and examined the body. It had been rolled to its present position, judging from the blotches on the marble floor. Why Gramling had moved it remained a mystery. It couldn’t have been for identification. The wound position showed that Sir Nigel had landed face up. And since the impact had split the skull, there was no question that he was dead.

Sir Nigel’s costume was odd, though – a shirt pulled loosely over breeches. No cravat. No coat. No stockings. No shoes. Only a man in a tearing hurry would leave his room in such disarray, especially a man as fastidious as Sir Nigel. It would seem that his errand had been even more urgent than a stable fire.

Yet Gramling knew nothing about it. Very curious.

The other injuries were equally odd. Close examination showed abrasions on every fingertip. One side of his neck was bruised. The largest toenail on his right foot was torn. And blood flecked his right sleeve. From the fall? The fingers? The toe? Or was there another source?

Andrew circled the body, his eyes straining for clues – the dark paneling swallowed most of the candlelight. Nothing on the body explained why Sir Nigel had risen after midnight and tumbled to his death. If he had wished to raid the larder, he would have donned a

dressing gown. If he had fallen ill, he would have summoned Simms. Sir Nigel had never shown the least regard for staff, so it would never cross his mind to let a servant sleep if he wanted service. He would have dressed himself only if he'd received a message so urgent that he could not wait for Simms to attend him.

Andrew could think of no emergency that would prompt Sir Nigel to abandon his rituals. And who could have brought such a message without the staff's knowledge?

Fields House had only three exits. The butler's suite was adjacent to the hall, so anyone seeking admittance at the front door would awaken him. The housekeeper's rooms adjoined the kitchen, making it difficult to enter that way undetected. Mrs. Harper's keen hearing was legendary. Woe betide a maid who planned an assignation. The only other door was in the conservatory, but Gramling always checked the locks before retiring – as Andrew knew from experience. He'd once convinced Kevin to sneak out for a late-night adventure. The door had been locked when Kevin returned. Instead of waking Gramling, Kevin had climbed the ivy to his open window, fallen, and broken a leg.

Andrew shook off the memory. Gramling was as set in his ways as Sir Nigel, so the conservatory door would be securely locked. Unless one of the servants had heard something, they might never know why Sir Nigel had risen. William would have to question each one in private. None of them would contradict Gramling before the others – or even clarify his statements.

One of the maids swayed – Sally, who had cleaned the nursery floor when Kevin was a lad. Her face was stark white.

"Perhaps the staff should retire to the kitchen," he murmured to William. "They needn't stay with the body. You can question them when you finish here."

William glanced at Sally and nodded. "Good idea." A word won Gramling's agreement.

Opening the servants' door set the candles flickering, drawing Andrew's eyes to something white on the stairs. He climbed up to investigate, leaving William and Gramling deep in conversation. Four steps from the top, the right banister had snagged a white thread. Three steps higher, the left banister clutched

another.

Andrew bit his lip, frowning. Unlike the divided stair at Seabrook Manor, the main stair at Fields House was straight and six feet wide. The upper hallway stretched from Sir Nigel's bedchamber on the left to his private office-cum-library on the right. No light glowed in either direction. But the right end of the hall table was askew.

Andrew tested its weight, estimating angles as he paced off distances. Nodding, he returned to the body. Confirmation took only a glance.

"Did you find something?" asked William. His voice shook.

This was the real reason William had asked him to come. William was so squeamish that he rarely hunted and never tolerated sickrooms. Death was worse. Violent death worse yet.

Andrew covered Sir Nigel's head with his handkerchief, hiding the gaping wound. With the worst damage out of sight, William stepped closer.

"Look at his shirt." Andrew pointed to Sir Nigel's right waist. "See this tear?"

"Of course."

"There is another snag on the left shoulder. Simms would never allow a shirt in this condition into Sir Nigel's wardrobe."

"True," confirmed Gramling. "He is very particular."

"So the damage occurred this evening. Now look at this." He led William up the stairs and pointed to the threads. "Who cleans this part of the house?"

"Sally."

"She is also particular, unless she's changed in the years I've been gone."

Gramling frowned. "She's a good worker."

Andrew nodded. "So these must also have occurred this evening." He pointed to the table. "I suspect that Sir Nigel tripped over the table, staggered onto the stairs, bounced from this banister to the other, then tumbled down."

"But how could he trip?" demanded Gramling. "His bedroom is that way." He pointed left.

"But his library is to the right," said Andrew.

"Why would he stagger to the stairs?" asked William. "There is plenty of space in which to catch his balance."

"That is true if he were walking, but not if he were

running. Only running provides enough speed to bounce off both railings of a six-foot-wide stair. And only running would rip his toenail so badly. The pain from a smashed toe would throw him further off balance.”

William stared at the scene – the table, the stairs, the threads on the banisters. “What would possess a man to rise in the middle of the night, dress, go to his library, then race back toward his room?”

“Without a candle. No one carrying illumination would run into a familiar table. And he would have dropped a candle when he tripped or when he hit the first railing. Yet there is no sign of one. Did someone remove it?” Andrew looked at Gramling.

“We moved Sir Nigel so we could examine him without stepping in blood, but we did nothing else.”

Andrew shook his head. “So he was wandering the house after midnight without a light. Odd.”

Gramling said nothing.

William let out a long sigh. “Definitely odd. Perhaps one of the servants heard something that may help.”

“I doubt it.” Gramling was firm.

“Nevertheless, I must ask,” said William. “Where is Peter?”

“Out. He was gone when I went to wake him.”

Everyone in the neighborhood knew that Sir Nigel had confined Peter to the estate, turned away all callers, and ordered nearby innkeepers to bar him from the premises. Andrew thought it a cow-handed way to discipline a gentleman of two-and-twenty, but he didn’t know Peter well enough to judge. Kevin and William had been of an age, with Chloe and Andrew a year younger. Peter was five years younger yet and had remained in the nursery until after the older boys left for school.

William sighed. “Perhaps something in the library or bedchamber will explain Sir Nigel’s behavior. As long as we’re up here, we should look.” He headed down the hall.

The library was a mess.

“Nothing seems disturbed,” said Gramling. “Sir Nigel allowed no one to touch his papers. The piles have become rather untidy this past year – indicative of his growing agitation.”

Andrew nodded. He’d heard most of the area gossip in the two months he’d been home, either directly or

from Jinks, his batman. Between Sir Nigel's incompetent investments and Peter's gaming, the family fortune was gone. But that should have made Sir Nigel cling to his rituals even more closely.

So the library raised new questions. Two of the piles on the desk were untidy. One of the neat pyramids of books dotting the floor had fallen over. The poker leaned drunkenly against an andiron, and a partially burned night candle sat on the mantel.

"No answers here," decided William. "Let's have a look at his bedchamber."

Sir Nigel's room was also disheveled. Sheets trailed onto the floor, as if he had leaped from his bed. In the dressing room, a nightshirt dangled from the corner of a chair, the wardrobe door sagged open, and two bureau drawers hung out, all indicative of frantic speed. But if he had been so rushed, why change at all? The dressing gown would have been faster. The nightshirt faster yet. There was no evidence that he'd meant to go outside.

"I cannot understand it." Gramling shook his head. "He never dressed himself. Nor did he wake in the night. If he was ill, he surely would have summoned Simms."

"Illness would not have driven him to the library," said Andrew. "And certainly not without a candle." Sir Nigel's night candle sat on the bedside table. The one in the library had not come from here.

"Unless he feared he'd swallowed poison and hoped to find an antidote." William shook his head.

Andrew swallowed a snort. "Unlikely. If he'd consulted an herbal, it should have been on the desk. Even Sir Nigel would not put it neatly away, then race down the hall in the dark. And who would poison him, anyway?"

"No one here." Gramling stiffened. "The servants' hall eats the same food as the master."

"How many night candles—"

A shout from downstairs halted Andrew's question. The sounds of retching followed.

"Master Peter," said Gramling with a sigh. "Or Sir Peter, I should say now." His hands shook, making him seem even older.

They returned to the hall.

Peter was on his knees, much the worse for wine, though he had spewed his most recent intake across

the floor. The handkerchief lay crumpled beside Sir Nigel's body.

"I should have locked the door," moaned Gramling.

Andrew remained in the shadows as Gramling and William helped Peter to his feet.

If not for Gramling's identification, Andrew would not have recognized the boy, for he looked nothing like Kevin – or Chloe, for that matter. Kevin had stood six feet tall, with powerful shoulders thoroughly wasted on the sensitive scholar. Peter was half a foot shorter and very slender. Granted, he might yet fill out, but dissipation already ravaged his face.

"Who knocked him on the head?" demanded Peter, flinching away from the corpse.

"He fell down the stairs."

"Thank God!"

Shock twisted Gramling's face.

"You rejoice at your father's demise?" asked William quietly.

"Should have killed him myself. The bashtard was sho closed-fisted, he didn't deserve to live. I couldn't visit London. Couldn't shee friendsh." His sluggish tongue proved that Peter was very drunk indeed.

"Did you awaken Sir Nigel this evening?" asked Andrew.

Peter jumped. "I wasn't here."

"What time did you leave?" William's voice hardened as he caught the implication.

"Half pash eleven. He was shnoring loud enough to wake the dead." Hearing his own words, he grimaced. "Always loud. Shnore. Talk. Order about. Hated the bashtard."

"He was a champion snorer," agreed Gramling as Peter sank into reflection. "Like to bring the roof down."

"Where did you go this evening?" When Peter didn't answer, William tapped him on the shoulder and repeated the question.

Peter flinched, lost his balance, and fell down. "Go? Game at the Golden Bull. Won a monkey." He giggled. "Monkey. Monkey. Won tonight. Firsht time in weeksh. Too bad Jacob out of town. Won't believe..." Laughter changed to hiccups and vomiting, and he passed out.

"You won't learn anything tonight," said Andrew, shaking his head.

"Just as well Sir Nigel is gone," muttered Gramling.

"There'd be a row at breakfast over this. *Won a monkey*. 'Twon't atone for last week's losses. Nothing can." Shaking his head, he rolled Peter onto his back.

"I'll carry him up," offered Andrew.

William nodded, then headed for the kitchen.

But when Andrew hoisted Peter to his shoulder, his leg buckled. Cursing, he had to accept Gramling's help on the stairs. Would the damned leg never heal?

A night candle sat on Peter's shaving stand. He'd bunched rugs under the coverlet to simulate a sleeper. Having gone to such lengths to hide his trip to the Golden Bull, he would have avoided waking Sir Nigel.

Leaving Gramling to put Peter to bed, Andrew joined William in the servants' hall.

Even speaking in private, the servants added nothing useful to Gramling's account. Mrs. Harper had heard Sir Nigel snoring when she retired at eleven. Cook had not awakened until Gramling sounded the alarm. Simms swore that Sir Nigel had not summoned him. No one slept near enough to his room to contradict him, for Peter's valet and the last footman had been dismissed a week earlier, victims of Peter's gaming losses.

Andrew wondered about Simms, for the man seemed surly. But that may have been from the realization that he must find a new position.

In the end, Gramling's account stood. Sir Nigel had risen, dressed himself, shouted, then fallen to his death – an easy thing to do when racing about in the dark.

"Accident, without a doubt," decided William when the interviews were complete. "We may never know what woke him, but he obviously tripped over the table. Lay him out and clean the hall. There will be visitors in the morning."

"Visitors?" Gramling's voice quavered.

"The curious, at the very least. Don't forget to hang the hatchment and notify the vicar. Sir Peter is in no condition to see to the formalities. And send a note to Sir Nigel's solicitor."

When Gramling nodded, William and Andrew left.

They said little on the drive home. William was clearly relieved that the matter was finished. Andrew agreed with the verdict, but he hated unanswered questions. And he was convinced that he'd missed something important.



## CHAPTER THREE

### *Sunday*

Andrew drove William's curricule between the Fields House gateposts and headed across the park.

Questions about Sir Nigel's death continued to plague him. Maybe it was because war had taught him to distrust the unknown where danger so often lurked. So he tried to tie up loose ends lest they cause trouble.

Waterloo had abounded with examples of such trouble. A messenger had lost his way for a time, delaying Blücher's arrival and nearly costing them the victory. On the other side, Marshal Ney had failed to spike the British guns after a morning charge overran them – his troops had forgotten to bring nails. Those same guns had ultimately defeated the French.

So Andrew hated loose ends. Until he knew why Sir Nigel had gone to the library in the middle of the night, he couldn't let the matter rest.

His need for answers fueled his growing disenchantment with the army. Wellington had avidly sought intelligence, even employing his own survey officers to verify and augment the information supplied by official sources. As a result, he had rarely been surprised. But the duke would no longer be in charge on the field, and other generals were less particular, too often ignoring facts that didn't fit their own assessments, then dismissing the resulting setbacks as inevitable.

The American campaign was a case in point. Old-timers recalled some of the reasons England had lost the first American war. But many of the leaders in that earlier clash had refused to admit fault, blaming the surrender on other things. By relying on those earlier reports, the current leaders had made the same mistakes. The result was another defeat for England's finest, culminating in the bloody massacre at New Orleans.

Don't think about it, he reminded himself. You will be back in uniform soon. It does no good to curse shortsighted men.

He concentrated on finding the smoothest path through the holes and ruts that constituted the Fields House drive. In the cold light of day, the grounds

looked abandoned. Two trees had toppled in some forgotten storm – long enough ago that the bark was peeling off the trunks. Bindweed encroached on the drive. In spots, its roots were all that held the drive together. Fallen stone left gaping holes in walls, some large enough to allow a carriage through. Overgrown tangles had once been Lady Fields's roses, now massive enough that she must have ceased caring for them long before her death.

Kevin would have wept to see his birthright now. Perhaps his death had been a blessing. Or perhaps it had precipitated this neglect. If Peter had remained a younger son, Sir Nigel could have refused to cover his debts.

*Stop this*, he ordered his mind. Recuperation allowed too much time for thought. The past was over, so wishing for change did no good.

But he could not expunge Kevin from his memory. It had been seven years, but his death remained clear. Returning to Fields House made it worse, for he could see Kevin everywhere – fishing in the stream, riding across the hills, directing his playmates in scenes from Shakespeare or Greek mythology.

"Stop haunting me!" he shouted, startling the horses.

But Kevin remained, turning accusatory eyes on him.

It was time to leave Devonshire. As soon as this last formality was over, he would collect Jinks and head for London. It didn't matter that he could ride for only an hour or two. He could occupy himself during each rest by drawing. And even if he managed only two or three stages a day, he would reach London on time. A fortnight of easy travel would strengthen his leg.

His purpose today was to offer condolences to Peter, then conclude the investigation. Perhaps Sir Nigel had said something at dinner that would explain his later behavior. And maybe Gramling would remember more now that shock had receded. He would also have been in the dining room last night.

Tethering the team at the foot of the steps, Andrew plied the knocker.

Gramling led him straight to the library, having long accepted William and Andrew as unofficial family members. Fitch treated Kevin and Chloe the same way at Seabrook.

"I thought I said *no visitors*," snapped Peter the moment he spotted Andrew. He was rifling the desk.

"This isn't a visit." Andrew changed tactics in the face of Peter's antagonism. Years in the 95<sup>th</sup> had taught him to adapt to any situation.

"Why?" Slamming a drawer shut, Peter dropped his head into his hands as if it threatened to fall off. His bloodshot eyes and gravelly voice confirmed that he was suffering from last night's debaucheries.

"Lord Seabrook was unable to conclude his interview last evening," said Andrew. "A formality, of course, but necessary for his report on Sir Nigel's accident. Since he has other commitments this morning, I offered to handle the matter."

"What's to report? A clutch-fisted tyrant took a header down the stairs. And long past time, if you ask me. He'd run the place into the ground and was near to losing what was left." He gestured at the room. "Do you know what I found this morning? Three – three, damn him – mortgages. Shares in two more worthless ventures. And a house stripped of everything of value. Even the silver is gone. The man should have been shot years ago. I doubt a more worthless creature has ever lived."

Andrew ignored the outburst, taking the seat Peter hadn't offered. How interesting that Peter blamed the family poverty on investment losses. Sir Nigel had long blamed Peter's gaming. Neither of them seemed capable of accepting responsibility.

Peter's lack of remorse over Sir Nigel's death was equally interesting. Most people at least pretended grief. It was a shocking breach of propriety to rejoice at a parent's demise.

"No one has explained why Sir Nigel was up at that hour. The servants swear it is out of character. Simms reports that Sir Nigel never dressed himself in his life. So what was he doing on the stairs?"

"How should I know? I wasn't here."

"Did he say anything at dinner?"

"The usual complaints."

"Such as?"

"I no longer listen."

"Then how do you know what he said?"

Peter let out a long-suffering sigh that reminded Andrew sharply of his sister Laura. "He usually started the first course with a vow to cut off my paltry

allowance unless I stayed home like a bedamned schoolboy. As if anyone could tolerate his company for long. He does little beyond rail at fate. If he'd had any sense, he would have admitted he had no head for business. The idiot believed every fool who promised him an instant fortune."

*And you don't?* But Andrew remained silent. Gamesters believed in their skill, so they always expected to win the next game. Apparently Sir Nigel had gambled in a different arena. "Did he have a specific complaint yesterday?" he asked.

"No. He moaned solely to justify locking me away." He frowned. "Though now that I think of it, last night's lecture lacked his usual fire, almost as if it sought to hide euphoria. He must have made a new investment. They always follow the same pattern – euphoria, then grandiose plans, followed by fury and despair when his money disappears. He's been up and down that road several times recently. I no longer listen. There's never any point." Peter shook his head.

"What was the scheme?"

"I've no idea. The only papers I've found are shares in a housing square in Exeter that will probably never be built and shares in something called the *Gray Gull* – sounds like a tavern. But both are several months old – well past the euphoric stage."

"Where are they?"

Peter pointed to a stack of papers.

Andrew skimmed them and smiled. Even idiots were occasionally lucky. "Your doubts about the square are well placed – if I'm reading the particulars correctly, it would impinge on the cathedral grounds. But the *Gray Gull* is a legitimate trading ship out of London. She always pays well. Barring storms, she should reach port next month."

"Really?" Peter's face lit up.

"Really. She's owned by Lord Grayson – my sister's husband." If he'd had any money, he'd have bought shares himself, but his pay barely covered expenses and was always in arrears. "Maybe it was the *Gray Gull* he was referring to at dinner."

"Not if it is still at sea. My impression is that he expected an immediate fortune. With his luck, he'll probably lose more than the *Gull* pays." He swept the investment papers onto the floor.

"You've no idea where the money was to come from?" asked Andrew calmly.

"I already told you I didn't!" Another stack of paper hit the floor. "What difference does it make?"

"It might explain why he was up."

"I don't see how – not that it matters. He's dead, thank God. Maybe I can salvage something from the wreckage. Or maybe not. Either way, I'm glad to be rid of him. If I had to guess what woke him, I'd say he was bilious. The fish tasted odd, though he stuffed himself as usual." He shrugged. "The funeral will be in the morning."

"You aren't waiting for your family?"

"Why bother? Nobody liked him. His brother is in Yorkshire and couldn't arrive for weeks."

"What about Chloe?" The question popped out without thought.

"She hated him as much as I did. They had a vicious row just before she abandoned us. She's been home only once since and hasn't written in more than a year. I'll notify her, but I'm planting the bastard in the morning."

Andrew wondered what argument stood between Chloe and Peter. Was she another who had criticized his habits? It seemed likely. Chloe wasn't one to pull her punches. And she hated irresponsibility.

The urge to fetch her battled his decision to avoid her. It was stupid – he was the last person she would ever want to see – yet she deserved a chance to attend the funeral, and no one else would give it to her.

Besides, he should say good-bye to Laura. She was his least favorite sibling, but India was a long way away. Even if he survived duty there, it would be years before he returned to England.

He'd last seen her two years before when both had been recovering from wounds. She'd had a rough time of it, meeting her first real competition in London's drawing rooms. Beauty too often led to selfish arrogance, which had been doubly true for Laura. So she'd handled her Season badly. William swore she'd matured since then, learning humility from her injuries and responsibility from running her own household.

Andrew was glad. He'd been appalled to discover her problems, first because he hadn't been home to help, and then because it tarnished the family image that

had sustained him through so many horrors. Laura had been sweet as a child.

So William's report was a relief. And now he would have a chance to see for himself.

He did wonder how Chloe managed to live with her. Chloe had never been subservient. As often as not, she'd been the leader in their childhood escapades. He ought to make sure she was all right – a duty he had ignored too long. Such cowardice was unworthy of a captain in His Majesty's army.

"Write your note," he ordered. "I'll deliver it this afternoon. If she wants to pay her respects, I'll drive her back. I've not seen my sister in years."

"No loss."

Andrew frowned, but Peter probably knew about Laura's Season.

Peter straightened. "Do what you will. The burial will be at eight. I want that bastard out of my life as quickly as possible." He pulled out a piece of stationery, his expression clearly dismissing the trip as a waste of time.

And maybe it was. But unless Chloe had changed beyond recognition, she would like to decide for herself.

Suppressing further memories, Andrew examined Sir Nigel's library. Except for the desk, the room appeared the same as last night. The shelf that had once held valuable editions stood empty. Two twigs lay in the fireplace, fallen from a nest in the chimney. The night candle remained on the mantel. Wax—

Rising, he strolled toward the fireplace. Wax spattered the carpet near the hearth, as though someone had dropped a candle. A close look at the night candle revealed an indentation on one side. Was this why Sir Nigel had fled?

Yet dropping a candle that snuffed out on impact hardly constituted an emergency. And why would he set the candle on the mantel, then flee into the dark? A tinderbox sat only inches away.

It was more likely that Sir Nigel had dropped the candle before retiring. Sally would have removed the spilled wax if it had happened earlier. So it had nothing to do with his midnight foray.

But as he straightened, a drop of blood caught his eye. Then another, and another. The poker was smeared along one side. What had it struck, and

when?

His list of questions was growing.

A brick protruded from the fireplace. Blood stained one corner. From Sir Nigel's scraped fingertips?

Andrew pulled it out, but there was nothing behind it. Yet if Sir Nigel had used the poker to pry it loose, that might explain the bloodstains. Cut fingers bled freely.

"You have a loose brick here," he said, watching Peter closely.

The boy shrugged. "There are probably dozens. The house is falling to bits."

So either the brick meant nothing, or Peter knew nothing.

Abandoning the fireplace, Andrew prodded the pyramids of books, skimming the titles now that he had light to see. One pile dealt with mining. Had Sir Nigel thought that reopening the Cornish tin mines was feasible? He would have to ask William if rumors had recently suggested such a scheme. A second stack contained books on trade. Perhaps the *Gray Gull* venture had raised interest in the subject. The third included pamphlets on successful building developments and a book on Bath's Royal Crescent.

Either the piles had been here for months – Sally would know – or Sir Nigel had bought shares before researching the feasibility of the operations – very much a cart-before-the-horse approach. Risky.

"Here," said Peter, interrupting his thoughts. "I doubt she'll come, but if you want to waste a day driving to Moorside, be my guest."

"Thank you. See that her room is made up. I expect she'll be here this evening."

Unless she'd changed. Two years in service might have broken her. Companions were usually colorless creatures without a mind or will of their own. Was that what Chloe had come to?

He shivered as Kevin's face scowled at him, appalled that his sister worked for his worst enemy.

\* \* \* \*

"Why should I go to Seabrook?" demanded Laura, stalking furiously from window to fireplace and back. Her stride lengthened until the narrow skirt of her morning gown threatened to split. "William only invited me so he could humiliate me in front of half the county."

"You know that's not true," murmured Chloe. Laura's petulance was becoming tedious. But provoking it was one way to control her. A good argument usually wore her out, leaving her docile for days.

She stifled a sigh, wishing that William had consulted her before issuing this invitation. A house party offered too many opportunities for disaster. While visiting Seabrook a year earlier, Laura had attacked Miss Truitt's reputation, nearly destroying it. This time Miss Truitt would be back, along with the Rockhursts and Graysons.

But William was a simple man who did not understand deliberate cruelty. So he had convinced himself that Laura's heedless words had arisen from pique fueled by misinformation. After coercing an apology from her, he considered the matter closed.

Chloe knew better. The attack on Martha Truitt had been deliberate. Laura lacked a conscience, and her thoughts were utterly selfish.

So Chloe must thwart any new plots. First she would argue Laura into exhaustion. After arriving, judicious compliments, a sympathetic ear, and constant vigilance should carry them through the five days of the house party.

And perhaps the other guests could convince Laura that her life was not over. Once Laura discovered that no one cared about her scars, she would relax and enjoy herself.

But first Chloe had to provoke that argument. "Lord Seabrook cares deeply for you," she said firmly. "He wants you to share his happiness when he announces his betrothal."

"Then he is mad. I refuse to welcome that mealymouthed—"

The knocker interrupted.

"I am not at home to callers," Laura snapped, choosing a chair in the darkest corner of the sitting room. "Send them away."

Chloe sighed, but headed for the door. At least it wouldn't be Mrs. Tubbs on a Sunday morning.

"Mr. Rose!" Their neighbor stood outside. "Is something wrong?"

"Not at all, Miss Fields," he assured her. "But I promised Mrs. Monroe a cheese when my son next had business in Cheddar." He hefted a package.



"Of course. She's in the kitchen." Mr. Rose could have sent it with a servant, but Chloe suspected the widower was sweet on Mrs. Monroe. This was the third errand he'd found to Moorside in the past month.

She escorted him to the door, then returned to the sitting room. "It was only Mr. Rose looking for Mrs. Monroe. He shan't bother you."

"Why would he want Mrs. Monroe?" demanded Laura, resuming her pacing.

"His son just returned from Cheddar. We will have cheese with dinner." Chloe picked up her needlework. "Forget him. Mrs. Monroe will see him out."

"I know that!" snapped Laura. "Don't treat me like a fool. It's William I'm concerned about. How can he invite the rag-mannered offspring of a merchant into the family? Father must be turning in his grave to see the title sink so low."

"Miss Truitt's manners are faultless."

"She is a vulgar nobody!" Laura glared.

"While it's true that her father is a grain merchant, she has connections to a dozen great houses."

"None of whom recognize her. The nearest must be three generations removed."

"Untrue. Lord Ware is Mrs. Truitt's first cousin, and he approves."

"Then why did he decline to participate in the house party?"

"Last year's carriage accident confined him to bed." Chloe changed threads. "Don't you recall the story? It happened a month before we visited Seabrook."

Laura ignored the explanation, as expected. She cared nothing about Martha Truitt's breeding. Nor did she care about William's use or abuse of his title. Her real complaint was that the merchant's daughter had made a love match with a lord while Laura had not managed even an arranged marriage.

"William ought to wed a viscount's daughter, or an earl's," said Laura, ducking into the corner as Mrs. Monroe led Mr. Rose to the door. "He is sadly lacking in consequence, but should at least respect his title."

"He doesn't know any earl's daughters and cannot afford a London Season. Besides, he loves Miss Truitt."

"Loves her dowry, you mean."

"No, I don't, though I'm sure her dowry is welcome." Chloe again changed threads. "And even if the dowry is his primary goal, one cannot fault him. The world has

changed since our grandparents' day. Estates no longer support lords in style, so they need other sources of income. Lady Jersey's fortune comes from her grandfather's banking interests, and she is one of the Marriage Mart's leaders. Lord Grayson's fortune derives from shipping. He is heir to an earldom as well as wed to your sister."

"Don't mention her again," snapped Laura. "How can I share a roof with her after she betrayed me? Stealing my fiancé! Destroying my beauty!" She touched her scars. "And then she had the audacity to gloat about my misfortune to everyone in town."

"Don't exaggerate," murmured Chloe. "Lord Grayson was not your fiancé. You had not even been introduced."

Laura ignored her. "William plans to humiliate me. He hates me. Why else did he banish me to this godforsaken place? Keeping me out of sight lets him fawn over Grayson. He prefers wealth to his own flesh and blood!"

"That's not true." Chloe set aside her needlework, delighted that Laura was bent on self-pity and heavy dramatics today. That would make provoking the necessary argument easier. "Stop imagining trouble, and stop twisting the truth. You told me yourself that you had to beg for months before William would let you leave Seabrook."

"Why do I bother talking when you never listen?" Laura wailed, throwing herself fully into the role of innocent victim. "I begged him to let me stay home, calling on family feeling and propriety and even duty. But he refused. He couldn't stand the sight of me, staring at the carpet whenever I came near. It was infuriating to watch him stumble over introductions. He stopped allowing his friends in the house so they wouldn't see me. He even kept my own callers away. Does he think my wits were damaged as well as my face?"

"Of course not. Your wits are as fine as ever. People still love you."

"You lie!" Laura broke into noisy sobs, interspersed with a long list of slights suffered and insults endured. In her mind, everyone was so jealous of her beauty that they schemed against her. And now that her beauty was marred, they schemed even harder.

Chloe let her rant. Laura had always defined herself

by her beauty, setting herself so high that she ignored the rules that governed lesser beings, demanding adulation and expecting instant fulfillment of her wishes. Since accident and scandal had cut her off from society, she didn't know how to live. One of William's fears was that Laura would fall prey to a scoundrel, for she was susceptible to anyone pretending adoration, and she had no male protection at Moorside.

Fortunately, callers were rare. Aside from Mr. Rose and the vicar, Laura's only male visitor in two years had been a solicitor representing Mr. Turner, the man who had shot her. After taking a position as secretary to a government official, Turner had pledged half his income for ten years to a trust he had established for Laura.

Chloe thought his action surprisingly honorable, though Laura disagreed. The moment the solicitor had left, she'd exploded in rage. How could anyone expect a few paltry guineas to atone for destroying her life? She had been the toast of London, the Season's diamond, the most courted lady in history. Dukes, marquesses, and even princes had flocked to demand her hand in marriage. Now she was a pariah, shunned by friends and family alike.

More exaggeration.

Chloe resumed her needlework. Laura's rant demonstrated her three worst problems – she had never been content with what she had, never saw the world as it was, and always blamed her problems on others.

The invitation to Seabrook had ignited a war with herself. Leaving Moorside removed her control of the lighting and angles that could hide or reveal her scars. She also despised any gathering in which she was not the center of attention.

Yet she was bored. She had demanded her own establishment, expecting freedom to be a grand adventure. It wasn't. So she passed the long days looking for scapegoats.

"Lord Seabrook will send his carriage on Wednesday," Chloe said when Laura's tirade began to wane. She hadn't yet fallen into the hysteria that would tire her. "His footmen will see that we come. We have no choice. He owns this cottage, so can turn you off at any time. Your income isn't large enough to

afford another.”

“How dare you pry into my finances?” snapped Laura.

“Since you expect me to pay the bills, I know to the last farthing how much you have and where it comes from,” Chloe reminded her. “The only way to escape Lord Seabrook’s authority is to save enough to buy your own house. That would require rigid economy.”

She succeeded in provoking a new outburst, but the knocker again interrupted.

“Don’t answer it,” snapped Laura.

“That would be unpardonably rude.” Chloe stalked to the hall and opened the door. “Andrew! I mean, C-Captain Seabrook,” she stammered as eleven years whirled away in an instant. She was fifteen again, standing in the orchard as her closest friend dismounted beside her.

She stifled the painful memory.

She’d known he was home, of course. William’s monthly letter always contained family news. So Chloe knew that Andrew had been wounded at Waterloo and was recovering at Seabrook. She hadn’t expected him to call, though. He’d not sent her a word – not even a friendly greeting – on either of his previous trips home to recuperate.

It was no surprise. When he’d arrived in the orchard that day, she’d been so upset over his imminent departure that she’d tried to seduce him into staying. It had been a despicable act every bit as dishonorable as Laura at her worst. Thus she’d destroyed the most important bond in her life. In the eleven years since, she’d heard from him exactly once – a brief letter of condolence after Kevin died. And for seven long years she had feared that Kevin had learned about the day in the orchard, blamed Andrew, and tried to avenge her. Was his blood on her hands?

Only now could she admit that her excitement over William’s invitation arose from the chance to see Andrew again. Even knowing that he hated her, she had longed for a glimpse of him.

Forcing her attention back to the man on the doorstep, she gestured him inside. He didn’t look ill, or even injured. Nor did he look much like the boy she’d loved. It was a wonder she’d recognized him.

Maturity had broadened his shoulders and deepened his chest. It had also added at least five

inches, putting him over six feet. Soldiering had weathered his face and lightened his hair to a golden brown, making his green eyes seem even clearer. Fine lines clustered around their corners. But beyond the physical changes, war had hardened him, banishing the laughing boy who had raced across the hills and wrestled on the moors.

Some things remained the same, though. His nearness still stole her breath. Her heart tumbled into a gallop, making her head spin.

"Chloe." He grasped her hand between his own. "More beautiful than ever."

"Hardly." She forced control over her voice and body. He might ignore her dishonor long enough to call on his sister, but that didn't mean he had forgotten. So she must banish any lingering dreams. Never again would she leave herself vulnerable. "You are recovered, it seems. Have you come to bid farewell to Laura?"

He shook his head. "I came to see you." His eyes darkened. "I've bad news, Chloe. Your father died last night."

The blood drained from her head. When she reached for the doorjamb, he pulled her against his side. She hardly noticed as she fought free of the shock. "How?"

"He fell down the stairs. It was very quick."

A quick death was more than he deserved. Anger rushed in, stiffening her knees so she could stand without support. "So he's gone. It's just as well."

He gasped.

"I'll not pretend we were close. He never forgave my failure to attach a fortune or my refusal to lie about our circumstances. When I tried to earn enough to escape his roof, he locked me in my room and forbade all callers. The only reason he let me accept this post was that Moorside is isolated, so he could pretend I was visiting relatives. But if anyone but William had offered, he would have refused this, too." She clamped her jaw shut to choke off the bitterness. Her father had made her life hell with his false façades and accusations, though living with him made it easier to understand Laura. They had much in common, starting with their stubborn refusal to accept facts.

Andrew still knew her too well, for understanding blossomed in his eyes. "Are you all right?"

"Of course. It is a shock – even estrangement cannot change that he was my father. But I've not heard from

him since Mother's funeral, so his passing will make no difference."

Not quite true, she realized as a weight slid from her shoulders. Seeing her in service had dented his pride. If he'd discovered her plans to buy a cottage, his ranting would have burned her ears to ashes. And he might have stopped her. Now that unpleasantness was averted. She was free to live on her own terms.

Andrew produced a note from Peter. "The funeral is tomorrow morning. I can drive you to Fields House. I'll wait here while you pack."

She opened her mouth to refuse.

"Absolutely not!" screamed Laura, bursting into the hall. "You already took this month's half day. You cannot leave again. I won't have it."

"Laura!" Andrew's tone struck Laura dumb. The army had turned him formidable. "How can you be so insensitive? Sir Nigel lies dead. William claims you were inconsolable after our father died."

"That was different. We were very close. Besides, servants have no feelings."

Despite two years of service, Chloe felt the blow. Maybe attending the funeral was a good idea after all. A full day without Laura would be sheer bliss, even if it meant pretending grief.

Andrew dragged Laura into the sitting room. "Pack," he ordered over his shoulder. "I will settle matters with my sister." The door slammed behind him.

Chloe hurried upstairs, grateful for a few moments alone – packing would not take long. She would wear her one black gown, dyed for her mother's funeral last year. Aside from that, she needed only her night things.

Silence stretched until she reached her bedroom. Only then did Andrew address Laura. Accustomed to the thick walls of Seabrook, he obviously didn't realize that his voice reached every corner of the cottage. Ignoring it was impossible.

"I know this is a shock, and you have never enjoyed upheaval, but that doesn't mean you can speak without thought. Have you forgotten that Chloe's breeding is every bit as good as yours? Better, really. Mother was a baronet's daughter who married a baron. But Lady Fields's father was a viscount. By rights it should be you looking after her."

"Nonsense. She hasn't a penny to her name. But

that isn't the point. I cannot do without her. Who will oversee that wretched cook and fetch my threads from the village? And if I'm to go to Seabrook, she must mend my best gown."

"Feeling peevish, I see. You'd best set that aside before the house party. William is in no mood for confrontation. In the meantime, I am sure you can manage without Miss Fields."

"You understand nothing!" Laura's voice grew shrill. "Who will dress me and arrange my hair? Who will bring my morning chocolate and make up my bed? Mrs. Monroe is worthless outside the kitchen. And she delights in parading people through my drawing room so they can admire the freak."

"It is only for one day," Andrew said soothingly. "You will manage just fine."

"You are hateful!" she cried, bursting into tears.

"Control yourself. This is not a Cheltenham tragedy, and I am not one of your beaux. Tears do not move me. Now enough of this. Miss Fields will attend Sir Nigel's funeral. You will learn how to fend for yourself. It's a useful skill, for fate often throws out unexpected challenges. You will also review your manners. William won't tolerate megrims, so pull yourself together and remember that you are a lady. I will ignore today's tantrum, but if it happens again, I must report it to William."

Laura fell silent.

Chloe closed her bandbox.

Andrew had grown masterful, though she should not be surprised. An officer who couldn't command would not have survived eleven years of war.

Perhaps Laura needed a firmer hand. Chloe had used a combination of placation and argument to control her, but that had increased Laura's arrogance. And the lack of social concourse meant that Laura had no incentive to maintain her manners. They had grown quite lax.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Chloe exhaled in relief as Andrew's curricule pulled away from Moorside. Laura had thrown another fit as they left. Even Andrew had been unable to quiet her.

Perhaps it was time to resign. Her savings wouldn't buy a cottage, but escaping Laura might be worth

putting herself at the mercy of a landlord. And there was always her emergency fu—

The curricule bounced across a rut, brushing Andrew's leg against her own. Heat speared her from head to toe. Eleven years had not banished that childish infatuation.

Her fault, of course, she admitted, suppressing her reaction through force of will. She'd escaped into fantasies of Andrew whenever life became a burden – the day her father had lost her already-inadequate dowry, her unsuccessful attempt to escape Fields House, the abuse she endured from Laura....

Reliving childhood escapades and imagining what life might have been like if he'd stayed in Devonshire had kept her rational.

Don't, she admonished herself. This is no time for fantasy.

And he was no fantasy knight. Already she saw differences between the real and imaginary Andrews that proved she knew little of the man he had become.

His looks still demanded attention, and he exuded a blatant masculinity she'd never encountered before, even from him. But war and hardship had encased him in armor. His once expressive face had frozen into a harsh mask. His eyes had gone flat and haunted, offering only an occasional glimpse of a soul tormented by ghosts, pain, and horror. The teasing twinkle she'd loved so much was gone.

His eyes had formerly revealed his every thought, though she'd sometimes missed the message. Like the day he'd informed her, quite solemnly, that Kevin had found a new playmate and no longer welcomed their company. In truth, Kevin had acquired a tutor who kept him in the schoolroom instead of letting him run wild from dawn to dusk. Andrew's teasing had been prescient, though. Kevin had fallen in love with books, becoming so enamored of study that the tutor had to force him outside. In the end, it had been Chloe and Andrew who kept his life balanced.

She stifled the reminder of her dead brother. This was no time to visit old griefs. The purpose of this journey was to relax for a few hours.

The lane finally curved, blocking Laura's fury. It had been burning into her back since Andrew had set the team in motion. But she would face that problem tomorrow. For now she must prepare for her family.



Which meant only Peter. An immediate funeral guaranteed that no other relatives could attend. They would probably have refused anyway. The uncles and cousins had avoided Sir Nigel for years, condemning him for his profligacy and his stubborn refusal to hire a competent man of business. In response, he'd refused to acknowledge their existence, even barring Uncle Leo from the estate.

*Poor Papa*, she thought, swallowing tears. He had never accepted responsibility for his losses. So when the family descended with their criticism and advice, he had dug in his heels and clung to his ways. If they had left him alone, he might have learned from his mistakes – and the family fortune might have survived.

The uncles had also tried to groom Peter for a life of fiscal responsibility. But Peter shared their father's determination to build his own fortune, though his methods were no more effective. While Sir Nigel gambled on investments, Peter had just gambled. What had started as an attempt to supplement an inadequate allowance had quickly become an obsession.

Better men than Peter had lost fortunes at the tables, but Peter's temper worsened with each new loss, making him argumentative. The year before Chloe had left Fields House, the two men had fought often over money – which was another reason she'd welcomed this post.

Nothing fazed Peter. Not debt. Not threats. Not even a beating he'd taken after reneging on a payment to a moneylender. No matter how badly he lost, he still believed that he would win the next time – and win big. Then he could escape their father's heavy hand.

Well, he had managed that last. But she knew as sure as the sun rose in the east that he would squander his entire inheritance within the year. She did not want to be nearby when he found his back against the wall.

"Are you all right?" asked Andrew, covering her hand with his own.

"Fine." She blushed as his heat burned through her gloves. "Father's death was unexpected, for he was neither old nor sick. But years of antagonism destroyed any family feeling."

"My condolences anyway. He was your father, and I recall your family as close. I still remember the picnics

he arranged for all of us.”

“Things change.” She sighed. They had started changing even before Andrew had bought his commission, though she had said nothing lest she cast a pall over their summers. Now she felt an overwhelming urge to share. “You rarely saw Father after you started school. Even Kevin did not recognize the truth for several years. His nose was always in a book.”

“What happened?”

“After Grandfather died, Father set out to prove that he was a cannier investor. But he wasn’t. At first Mother was able to soothe him when he lost, but her influence soon waned. By the time Kevin started at Oxford, Father’s temper was so chancy that we avoided him.”

His hand squeezed hers, offering comfort.

“Then the steward absconded with several years of estate profits, Kevin died, and everything fell apart. Mother took to her bed, Father’s schemes grew wilder, and Peter started gaming heavily. I went into service, which exposed his empty coffers to the world. We spoke only once after that – a biting exchange over Mother’s coffin.” She shrugged, already berating herself for revealing so much. He couldn’t care about any of it. His life had moved to a larger arena, making the events of this corner of Devonshire insignificant.

She had to remember that he was no longer an honorary brother. She could not even count him a friend.

Had Kevin heard about that day in the orchard? They’d been in the open where anyone might have seen. Had he challenged Andrew? Had Andrew killed him?

\* \* \* \*

Andrew drove in silence for several minutes. Chloe would already regret confiding in him, though it was clear that she’d needed to talk. But he was no longer her playmate. It was amazing that she’d spoken to him at all after his cruelty.

He was still reeling from the reaction that had slammed through his gut the moment she’d opened the door. Awareness. Desire. Need. His heart had jerked from relaxed to racing in an instant, knocking him so far off balance that he’d overreacted to Laura’s pique.

Why did he never feel this kick for other women? Not that he'd remained celibate, especially after a battle, when he would try anything that might shove the horror aside. But even the headiest experiences paled beside the rush of excitement Chloe could raise. And always had.

She was a lifelong friend, he reminded himself. And part of his reaction was due to the changes since he'd last seen her. The curves that had blossomed at age fifteen had matured into a woman's softness. Time had turned her coltish awkwardness to grace. Her sable hair gleamed in the sunlight, and her mossy eyes seemed almost mystic today. She was more sober than he remembered, but that was hardly a surprise: Her father lay dead.

Both the Fields and Seabrook households had been odd, though he'd not realized how odd until he started school. Lady Fields had decided to run the nursery herself, so Chloe had had no governess and Kevin no tutor until his tenth year. But Lady Fields had demanded only sporadic study, often leaving her children to their own devices.

The Seabrook household hadn't been much better. After Lady Seabrook's death when Andrew was nine, his oldest sister Catherine had taken charge of the household. But money was tight, and the tutor lazy. So William and Andrew often slipped away to meet Kevin and Chloe. They'd formed bonds even closer than blood ties.

Not that they always stayed together. Stodgy William and bookish Kevin often pursued sedate activities, leaving Andrew and Chloe to climb trees, track animals, and ride neck-or-nothing across the hills. Even as a child, she'd been independent, intelligent, and just as curious about the world as he. Which had led to that disastrous last meeting.

How she must hate him for that cruel parting – as shown by the cold *Captain Seabrook* she had uttered the moment her shock had faded at Moorside.

Pain sliced his chest. There was no doubt his attraction remained, stronger than ever. But this time he would keep it well buried. Never again would he tread where he could not stay. Tomorrow he would be gone, back to the kill-or-be-killed reality of battle.

Could she ever forgive him? Granted, she had willingly climbed into a curricule beside him, then

shared her family problems. But that meant nothing. He'd seen the refusal hovering on her lips. Only fierce will had held it back – without his escort, she would miss her father's funeral. And sharing was a habit. Neither denoted friendship. He had no right to her regard anyway. Not after he'd killed Kev—

He cut off the thought. Nothing could change the past. Instead, he must look to the present. Recalling Kevin revived other memories – like his dying plea: *Take care of Chloe.*

Yet you did nothing, his conscience growled. You made no effort to discover her circumstances. You let her go into service without a word. You—

He finally broke the silence.

"It pains me to see you in service, Chloe. Especially with Laura." Realizing that he was clutching her hand, he released it. "How can you stand living with her after the way she abused Kevin?"

"What had Laura to do with Kevin?"

Pulling the team to a halt, he stared. "He never told you?"

"Told me what?"

He cursed. "Damn my loose tongue! I was sure you knew. Kev was never one to hide grievances."

"What grievance?" When he remained silent, she grasped his arm. "You can't stop now, Andrew. What did Laura do to Kevin? I've tried for years to understand why he bought colors. It can't have been to emulate you."

"No."

"Did he—" Her voice broke, but she tried again. "Did he challenge you?"

"Whatever for?" he gasped in shock.

"When he left so suddenly, I feared that he had discovered how I threw myself at you that day, trying to seduce you away from duty. Kevin turned rather sanctimonious that last year, often grumbling about forward girls who expected men to throw over their plans on a whim. It fit so perfectly that I was sure he meant me. I tried to distract him with riding and fishing, the way you always did when he sank too deeply into study, but it didn't work. So when he left, I feared that he'd decided it was your fault rather than mine and meant to punish you." She kept her eyes averted during her recital.

Andrew finally found his voice. "Dear God. I was

crueler than I thought.” He let out a shuddering breath, then drew in another. “You did nothing wrong that day, Chloe. I lost my head and all but raped you, then turned my temper against you using the most cutting words I could devise. The memory haunted me for years. I was sure you hated me.”

“No.”

His heart leaped at the word, but he ignored it. “Thank you. Set your fears at rest. Kevin said nothing. Not at the time. Not in letters. Not when he joined the regiment.”

“Then why did he buy colors? He hated fighting.”

The memory of Kevin bouncing into regimental headquarters in London made Andrew shudder. *I’m your new ensign, Drew.* His eyes had burned with fury, fear, and hatred. “He never should have done it. Anything would have been preferable. God knows I tried to keep him safe,” he murmured. “But Kev was no soldier.” His voice broke.

“I know that, Andrew. And if anyone could have saved him, it was you. But why was he there?”

He bit his lip.

“I’m no longer a child, Andrew. Don’t treat me like one. And if this concerns Laura, I have a right to know.”

He berated himself for starting this, but she was right. If nothing else, he could save her from Laura. After this morning, he had to wonder if William was wrong. Laura didn’t act like a mature, settled lady. She seemed more arrogant than ever.

He set the team in motion so he needn’t watch Chloe. It was bad enough that he’d seduced her without honorable intent. Now he had to bare even more failings.

“You know what Laura was like that last year I was home – flirting with every man she met, expecting them all to fall at her feet. And she was only thirteen.”

“Even then she drew men’s eyes. They found her combination of beauty and sweetness mesmerizing.”

“The sweetness didn’t last, or so Kevin claimed. He said that by seventeen she’d become arrogant and greedy, always wanting more than anyone could provide. She cared little for those who fawned on her, yet expected anyone who ignored her to hold the key to paradise.”

“You can’t mean—”

“Kevin despised Laura. He knew her better than anyone, for he often called on William. Thus he’d seen her throw herself at grooms and footmen and stalk disinterested gentlemen – which doubtless spawned his grumbling. He was always careful to avoid her, but she ambushed him one day, cornering him in the stable. When he spurned her, she vowed to tell Father that he’d forced her. Father believed every word she said. Rather than face a scandal, Kevin fled. Sir Nigel agreed to buy his commission.”

“No wonder Father let me accept this post. It was another way to punish me. My God, how can I face her again?”

“You needn’t. I can find her a new companion.”

“No. I’ve nowhere else to go. Returning to Fields House would be worse than serving Laura.”

A glance convinced him she was serious. “How can you prefer someone who treats you like a slave?”

“She’s not a person I can like – especially now – but I can handle her. Peter is another matter. I would never have a moment of peace at Fields House.”

“Why?” He held the team to a walk, for they’d already covered twenty miles today. “His gaming?”

She nodded. “Fields House is unentailed. At least at Moorside I have a roof over my head. But you needn’t worry about Laura. I will be leaving next year.”

“To do what?”

“Teach. By then I will have saved enough to buy a cottage. I can live with her that long. It will take William time to find a good replacement anyway, for the job involves more than providing companionship.”

“Surely Peter would welcome you for a year.”

“You are not thinking. Without the post, I’ve no way to increase my savings. Peter will never part with a farthing on my account. He needs it for his next game.”

“Is that why you never visit home?”

“Not entirely. I’ve no transport. And when I returned for Mother’s funeral, the welcome was so chilly, I removed my few remaining possessions and vowed never to set foot in the place again. I wouldn’t be here today if Laura hadn’t cut up stiff,” she admitted, blushing. “Perhaps a day alone will settle her.”

Andrew shook his head. “I wish I’d known. Kevin would have hated to see you in such straits.”

“It is the one reason I’m glad he is gone.” She

brushed a piece of lint from her sleeve, then inhaled deeply. “How did he die?”

“I told—”

“I know what you wrote at the time, Andrew. Your letter meant more to me than you’ll ever know. But once the initial grief passed, I realized that it actually said very little. You skirted the truth by a wide margin, which is why I feared he had died in a duel. There comes a time when one needs details.”

“There isn’t much I can add.” He pursed his lips, cursing that she knew him so well. He’d written many letters to families over the years, but only Chloe recognized the platitudes. If she thought he’d shot Kevin in a duel, it was a wonder she hadn’t castrated him on the doorstep.

“Try.”

“I blocked that day from my mind for years.” He’d tried to, anyway. But one of fate’s cruelest jokes was that the things he most wanted to forget remained the clearest in his mind – Chloe’s tears, Kevin’s death, the bloodiest battles.... “I should have protected him.”

“Protecting Kevin was not your job.”

“But it was. As his lieutenant, his safety was my responsibility. I knew he was as green as they came and hadn’t had time to learn even basic duties. Men of his sensitivity do not belong on a battlefield.”

“Hush, Andrew.” Her hand soothed his arm. “Guilt is pointless. You had nothing to do with Laura. You weren’t even here.”

“That doesn’t matter. Why the devil didn’t he go back to Oxford? Why buy colors?”

“Andrew!” Her tone could have called a company of raw recruits to attention. “If Laura threatened to cry rape, he had no choice. I know her well after two years in her employ. Even if your father had questioned her story, she would have written the school. They would have sent him down.”

“Damn her!” His fists clenched around the ribbons. Why the hell hadn’t Turner’s bullet landed a foot lower? Death would have been a fitting retribution for her crimes against Kevin.

And if that thought didn’t condemn him to hell, nothing would.

“Enough. Tell me about Kevin. Everything. Good and bad. And no more of this dying gloriously for king and country. A noble death wouldn’t wrack you with

guilt.”

He’d forgotten that her backbone was as strong as his. “Very well. We sailed for Portugal only two days after he joined us. Two damned days. If only he’d been a week later.”

“Stop it,” she ordered. “Stick to facts.”

A breath restored his composure. “Kevin was a scholar, not a soldier, too willing to consider alternatives, listen to objections, and question orders. I worked with him every day we were at sea, reminding him that his life and the lives of his men depended on instant obedience, but I failed to instill the right instincts. When the French attacked, I positioned his unit in the back of the square and told him to follow my lead. He had good sergeants under him. They knew what to do.” He swallowed. “But as the first wave attacked, Kevin broke from the square. We never figured out why. Maybe he spotted a problem in the next square. Or maybe his nerve collapsed. It doesn’t matter. I ordered him back, but he was down before he could respond. I should have expected it, should have remembered how disorienting the first battle can be, should have watched him more closely.”

“How? By ignoring your own job? It wasn’t your fault, Andrew.”

“I know that here.” He tapped his head. “It doesn’t help. He was one of the best men I knew.”

“On that we can agree.” She sighed.

He couldn’t talk about it anymore. His chest had tightened until he could hardly breathe. To give himself time to settle, he changed the subject. “Do you know anything about Sir Nigel’s recent investments?”

“No. He never wrote, and discouraged me from corresponding with anyone. Why?”

“I’m trying to reconcile some oddities in his behavior last night – strictly for my own satisfaction. The fall was straightforward – he tripped over that table in the upper hall and tumbled down the stairs. But no one knows why he rose after midnight, dressed himself, then went to the library. He was rushing back to bed when he fell.”

“Was Peter there?”

“No. He was at the Golden Bull and didn’t return until several hours later. William had already been summoned by then – he’s the nearest magistrate – and we’d examined the house. Peter was too drunk to



really take in what had happened. I spoke with him this morning, but he had no idea why Sir Nigel was up."

"You talked to the servants?"

"What few remain. They are also baffled. Sir Nigel didn't even summon Simms to help him dress. Peter claims that he'd just made a new investment. But he didn't know what. All he said was that Sir Nigel was euphoric at dinner."

"That sounds right. Every investment starts with euphoria. Most end in fury and despair."

He hadn't fully believed Peter. But this confirmed the habit.

"What other questions do you have?" she continued, seeming to read his mind.

He bit his tongue. Asking her to discover when Peter had left the house was impossible, for it implied suspicion of Peter. No matter what quarrel she had with him, Peter was family. Nor could he mention the blood in the library. Chloe was a lady.

"Night candles," he said. "There were too many night candles, and none of them were in the expected places."

"Gramling always sets out six each evening," she said. "Five for the family plus an extra. I doubt that has changed. He kept six out when Kevin was at school. And he kept six out after Kevin died and Mother shut herself away in her rooms."

"There were six last night – three in the hall and one each in Sir Nigel's room, Peter's room, and the library. What I'm curious about is where the library candle originated – it had been dropped on the carpet – and why Sir Nigel left his in his room. Peter's is easy. He slipped out late, against orders."

"I'll talk to Sally."

"Do that. The staff is too small to clean each room daily, so perhaps the library candle had been there a day or two. And she will also know how long the piles of books have been on the floor."

Chloe nodded.

Silence descended – a welcome silence, for he was still battling seven-year-old memories of Kevin's dying plea.

After the way Andrew had ignored his vow, Kevin must be turning in his grave. Andrew had known even as he gave his oath that he would not follow through.

Cowardice reared up whenever he'd considered facing her, for he'd been unable to forget his dishonor. And deep inside, he'd known that his regard still burned hot.

Yet cowardice had resulted in new insults, for she'd been mired in guilt instead of hatred – guilt he could have alleviated years ago with a word. Even after he'd hurt her unpardonably, she'd taken the blame.

*Damnation*, he cursed silently. Why had she grown so beautiful? It would have been hard enough to remain aloof from that fifteen-year-old dreamer. Now it was next to impossible.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Monday*

Chloe shut her bedroom door, glad for a few minutes alone. Not that she could rest for long. She must return to the drawing room for the final formalities.

The interment had been brief – a few words from Peter, even fewer from the vicar. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Sir Nigel would return to the ground from whence he'd sprung.

Testament to Peter's haste and Sir Nigel's penchant for irritating everyone he met, few mourners had attended – Andrew; the family solicitor, Mr. Barry; four gentlemen from Sir Nigel's club, who had come solely from duty; and the staff and tenants. Sad, in a way. A baronet should have commanded more respect.

She shook her head as she folded her nightgown into her bandbox. Everything about this visit was sad.

The estate had deteriorated badly in the last year. Even small things were now gone – the porcelain shepherdess that had once been her grandmother's, the Italian urn her grandfather had acquired on his Grand Tour, a parquet tea table that had graced the drawing room for twenty years. The house seemed stark without paintings and sculpture. Rooms echoed, many devoid of furniture. The stable held only two horses instead of the twenty it usually sheltered. The staff was down to two maids and no footmen.

Kevin had laughingly bequeathed her a folio of animal prints before leaving that last time. She wondered if it remained. Now that she knew the truth,

she recognized his laughter as a defense against tears. That verbal will had cloaked fear. She had no legal claim to the folio, but would like a tangible memento of his life – especially now that her guilt was gone. She had not sent him on that mad journey, so her grief was now pure.

But this wasn't the time to think about Kevin. She should concentrate on her father. That grief was a surprise. She'd expected to feel only relief, but the moment Andrew had driven through the gates, she'd been awash in memory. And not just of those summer picnics. In the early years, Sir Nigel had doted on his children, teaching them to ride, joining them in treasure hunts and blind man's buff, and telling them fantastic tales about ogres and witches and sleeping princesses. He'd been a kind and loving man before everything went bad.

Guilt washed over her, for it was too late to repair the gulf that had opened between them. They had parted in anger and could never again find peace. Her family was gone now, for Peter had no intention of accepting their connection. He was too young to remember the good times and too selfish to want a sister hanging on his sleeve. Last night's welcome had been cold, and he'd barely spoken two words to her since. So she was alone.

And that was good, she decided, closing the bandbox. Once she returned to Moorside, she need never face his temper again.

Setting the box by the door, she headed for the drawing room. It was the only room in the house that retained a reasonable selection of furniture, though that wasn't saying much. The chairs dated to her grandmother's time. Even the best were now frayed.

Mr. Barry and Peter were already there. Gramling followed her inside, closing the door behind him. He would represent the staff at this formal reading of the will.

Chloe chose a chair in the corner, wishing that she were on her way back to Moorside – or at least that Andrew were beside her. But he had declined to intrude, waiting instead in the library.

He's right, swore her conscience. This is not his affair. The only reason he fetched you was guilt over Kevin.

Kevin was one of the ghosts she'd seen in his eyes,

which explained why he'd held himself aloof for the remainder of the drive. His lingering guilt made it impossible to revive their friendship. Relying on his support, even for an hour, was a bad idea. She could not risk deepening her infatuation. He was a soldier who would soon return to duty. It might be another eleven years before she next saw him.

Infatuation had been understandable at fifteen. She'd been naïve enough to believe in fairy tales. He might think his words had been cruel, but only his harshness had brought her to her senses.

She'd tried to get on with her life. Despite refusing to lie about her circumstances, she had worked hard to make a match in Bath. It wasn't her fault that the eligible gentlemen compared so unfavorably with Andrew. Nor was it her fault that even today, her most precious possession was the letter Andrew had written after Kevin died.

But that didn't matter. Never again would she throw herself at a gentleman or let her heart stray in the wrong direction.

Peter poured a large glass of brandy for himself, then a smaller one for Mr. Barry.

Chloe watched in resignation. She had expected to be gone by now. When she'd first left for Moorside, her father had made it clear that she could expect nothing further from him. Going into service repudiated her class, forcing him to banish her from the family.

While Peter gulped brandy and Mr. Barry shuffled papers, Chloe recalled last night's reunion with Sally – the one bright spot of this visit.

Sally had started as a nursery maid when Kevin was born. Now she was second only to the housekeeper. But Chloe considered Sally more than a servant. Lady Fields's frequent inattention meant that it had been Sally who listened to Chloe's hopes and dreams, Sally who bandaged hurts and soothed fears, Sally who kept confidences secret – even the day Chloe had goaded Kevin into a foolhardy climb up a cliff that had broken his arm. By the time it healed, Kevin had adopted sedate activities with William, leaving Andrew and Chloe to seek adventure on their own.

Sally was making up the bed when Chloe reached her room. "My sympathies, Miss Chloe," she said – meaning it as Peter had not. "But 'tis a shame it takes tragedy to bring you home."

"I've a job to do, as you should understand," replied Chloe. "But thank you. I'm glad to see you."

"As am I." Sally plumped the pillow, then checked the washstand.

Chloe hesitated, but she'd promised to investigate Andrew's questions. Nothing happened at Fields House without Sally's knowledge. "Captain Seabrook explained how Father died, but I don't understand why he was up in the middle of the night. It wasn't like him. He's never had trouble sleeping."

Sally pursed her lips. "That was true when you lived here, but he changed after Lady Fields died – gradual at first; worse the last few weeks. Master Peter's been muttering about insanity this month and more, though I never believed it. But there's no denying Sir Nigel was growing odd."

"How odd?"

"Secretive. He talked to himself all the time – under his breath, like. And he'd jump without warning, looking over his shoulder like somebody might be watching him. He'd smile one minute, then lash out the next, all for no reason. Myself, I think her death broke something inside. He hasn't been the same since."

"But it should have changed nothing," Chloe protested. "Mother paid him no more heed than she did any of us. She hadn't left her room in years."

"But he expected her to recover," said Sally simply.

"Oh." Perhaps that was true. People deluded themselves every day. She had once expected Andrew to abandon duty and marry her. And a neighbor, Jasper Rankin, had thought that his social position placed him above the law – until he was exiled to the Caribbean after one of his petty revenges killed two men.

There had been a bond between her mother and father that transcended duty, though she doubted it was strong enough to call it love. But it was true that Sir Nigel had changed after his wife retired into her own world.

Chloe nodded. "So it was no surprise that Father was up so late."

Sally frowned. "I wouldn't go that far, though he was very unsettled lately. He and Master Peter argued last week."

"Hardly unusual."

"Perhaps not, but their confrontations were growing vicious. And after Sir Nigel turned off the last footman, no one would know if he'd taken to wandering. I only heard him on Saturday because he shouted for help."

"Gramling mentioned a grunt of surprise."

"Men!" Sally shook her head. "Mr. Gramling's old as Noah and deaf as a post. I'm amazed he heard anything. But my room's above the main stairs. Sir Nigel was screeching loud enough to wake the dead before he fell – two long yells, then a shout for help. He repeated the cry for help twice before I heard the bump."

"Why didn't you tell Lord Seabrook?"

Sally bit her lip. "Mr. Gramling said the noise woke him. I didn't realize he'd missed most of it until later. Is it important?"

"Perhaps. Captain Seabrook is not satisfied. He wants to know why the accident happened. You know how he is with puzzles."

"Lord, yes." Sally smiled. "Like a cat with a mouse over anything mysterious – poking and prying and batting facts around until they all line up."

"That hasn't changed. Talk to him after the interment. If Father discovered a problem, Peter might have to take action."

Sally's mutter sounded like, "He won't."

Chloe ignored her, unwilling to criticize her brother to the staff, though his irresponsibility hurt. His vices had worsened since he'd come of age, and she doubted the title would settle him. But there was nothing she could do about it. "Will you stay on here?" she asked instead.

"No. I'll be at next month's hiring fair."

"If you need a reference, let me know. Since I ran the house after Mother's collapse, my name would carry more weight than Peter's."

"Thank you, Miss Chloe."

Sally had left. At the burial she'd remained with the servants, respectfully apart.

Now Chloe realized that returning to Fields House offered more than a quiet coze with Sally. Absence gave her a new perspective on her job. Laura demanded more each day, adding degrading duties until Chloe was little more than a slave. Deliberately, of course. Perhaps Laura considered her a substitute for Kevin. She would have convinced herself that he

had wronged her.

Maybe it was time to resign. She had enough saved to support herself for two or three years if she rented, which would give her plenty of time to find students. And she still had her emergency stake – the pearls her mother had given her when she came out in Bath. Despite her father's profligacy, she had managed to keep them, though she'd never dared wear them. If he had recalled their existence, he would have sold them.

Peter would be worse. She bit her lip as she recalled that he would become her guardian. As such, he could confiscate anything she owned, for women had no property rights. They *were* property and thus must belong to someone. It didn't matter that she was seven-and-twenty, for she remained single.

Mr. Barry cleared his throat.

Chloe pulled her thoughts back to the drawing room, wondering if Peter would let her choose a memento of their mother. And Kevin's folio. Everything of value was long gone, so he wouldn't be giving up anything he could use.

"Ahem," the solicitor said again. "This is the last will and testament of Sir Nigel Fields, revised on August the twentieth of this year."

Only a fortnight ago. Chloe shivered, though the revision meant nothing. Her father had changed his will whenever his luck changed. Sometimes he rewrote everything. Other times he modified bequests to the servants or cut someone out – like her. Mr. Barry probably supported himself quite comfortably from drawing up Fields wills.

Chloe paid scant attention to the will – until she heard her own name. "I appoint my solicitor, Thomas Barry, as guardian to my daughter, Chloe, until such time as she is duly wed."

Peter scowled, even as Chloe's spirits soared. She would not be under her brother's thumb after all. She need no longer fear that he would discover her savings and confiscate them. That hadn't been her father's intent, of course – he had doubtless added this provision to annoy Peter – but she was grateful. And this explained why Mr. Barry had insisted she stay for the reading.

She listened with half an ear to her father's bequests. A clock to Gramling. A walking stick to Simms. China birds to Mrs. Harper. An inlaid box to

Cook. Handkerchiefs. A cloak. It all seemed rather odd. Of course, he'd sold everything of value, so all that remained was gesture.

"And to my daughter, Chloe, I bequeath my wife's jewelry casket, including contents."

Again Peter scowled, though he must know, as she did, that the most valuable piece left would bring only a shilling or two. But she was pleased with the gift – and surprised. Perhaps her father's anger had cooled. Pride would have prevented an apology, so he'd made it via his will. It increased her guilt for clinging to her grievances.

The casket was a lovely memento of her mother. It wasn't fancy, which made it suitable for someone in her position. And the enameled brooch depicting willows along a stream would look nice on her best gown.

Everything else went to Peter, of course, for he was the heir. But he did not look happy.

"There is one more matter," said Mr. Barry, laying down the will. "Shortly before his death, Sir Nigel established two trusts. Now that he is gone, the assets go to the beneficiaries, without condition. The first is for Gramling, to honor forty years of service. Sir Nigel had intended to augment the amount from time to time, but had no chance to do so. It is yours – one hundred guineas." He produced a bank draft.

Gramling's eyes gleamed.

"The second is for Miss Chloe, to replace the dowry he borrowed," continued her new guardian. "Again, he had no time to increase the initial two hundred guineas. But it is yours outright."

She stared at the draft. Two hundred? Enough to buy that cottage. Her other savings would support her for a time, so she needn't panic if students did not immediately appear. Her head swirled. She was free. Every dream she'd cherished since her failed Season was finally within her grasp. And it was all her father's doing.

She should have made peace with him. Even if he'd set up this trust solely out of pride, it was more than she'd expected or deserved. The very existence of the trust admitted that he knew his weakness, knew he couldn't trust himself to—

"He can't do that!" shouted Peter, slamming his fists onto a table. His face turned purple. "He can't



dissipate my inheritance.”

“Of course he could,” said the solicitor coldly. “You are lucky to receive a farthing. The only thing that is yours by right is the title. He could have cut you off entirely, for Fields House is not entailed. Frankly, he considered it. He was so furious the last time we spoke, I was amazed that he left you in the will at all. He swore your gaming had already squandered everything of value. Only his feud with his brother kept him from placing the estate there. The trusts were intended to protect Gramling and Miss Chloe from your next loss.”

“Out!” Peter pointed to the door. “Leave this house at once. You will never work for me again.”

“I never *have* worked for you,” said Mr. Barry calmly. “Nor would I. Any solicitor you employ will find himself dealing with the most unsavory characters in the land.” Gathering his papers, he murmured, “Stay in touch, my dear,” to Chloe, then left.

Gramling escorted him to the door.

“You will return my money immediately, Chloe,” ordered Peter, preventing her from following. “It is ridiculous to put that much cash at the disposal of an ignorant girl. It proves that Father had lost his reason. No court will let you keep it. So give it back.”

“It was never yours.” Her voice shook, but that was inevitable. As usual, Peter’s reaction was utterly selfish. Thank heavens he had no legal claim to her possessions.

“It is mine by right of inheritance.” He held out his hand.

“No. It was placed in trust before Father’s death and ceased being part of the estate at that time. And don’t blather on about reason. Father was as sane as you. So leave it be. You have everything else.”

“Everything? I have nothing!” He released her to grab the brandy decanter, draining a glass and refilling it before turning back to her. “Do you know what he left me? Three mortgages totaling more than this ruin is worth. A house stripped of everything valuable. Animals worth less than the cost of transporting them to market.” Again he drained the glass. “I’ve nothing. Nothing!”

Concerned about the rate at which he was drinking, she softened her tone and inched toward the door. “It cannot be that bad, Peter. Surely his investments are

worth something. I know his luck was rarely good, but even the bad shares returned part of his money.”

“Hah! The only one that might return a shilling is a shipping venture, but it’s not due for weeks. And with his luck, the damned boat will sink. At least he won’t be around to blame that one on me.”

“How could—”

“Don’t you start.” His eyes narrowed. “I’m tired of taking the blame for his stupidity. And I’m doubly tired of paying for it. You heard Barry. Father told everyone that his financial woes were my fault. Granted, I lost a few hundred guineas, but what about that mining venture last spring? Or the thousands he lost on that canal scheme? I won’t pay for this latest insult. I’ll starve unless you see reason. So give back the money.”

“No. It’s mine, Peter,” she added as his fist clenched. “I need it more than you do. At least you have a roof over your head. I live at the mercy of others. But even were I wealthy beyond my wildest dreams, I would not allow my meager inheritance to finance your next game of hazard.” Whirling, she left the room.

Amazingly, he didn’t follow, though something crashed against the wall. Probably the empty decanter.

It was time to leave. Peter was so desperate, he might resort to dishonor. Had he pushed their father down the stairs to obtain his expected inheritance?

Impossible, she assured herself, though the thought remained. Perhaps Andrew could debunk it. In the meantime, she had to leave – and take the jewelry casket with her. In Peter’s current mood, even a few shillings for her mother’s brooches could be enticing.

She collected her bandbox, then retrieved the casket. The brooches remained inside. As an afterthought, she ducked into Kevin’s room for the folio of animal prints. Then she headed for the library.

\* \* \* \*

Andrew glanced up when the library door opened. Had Sally recalled some further fact and returned? She’d revealed that the piles of books had been accumulating for nearly a year. Sir Nigel had been increasingly secretive, refusing to allow anyone to touch the burgeoning stacks of paper on his desk or move a single book.

But the newcomer was Chloe.

His heart surged. It was annoying to realize that his reaction was growing stronger. He needed to leave

Devonshire before he did something he would regret.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

She nodded.

"What is that?" She had a carved box under one arm.

"Mother's jewelry case. Father left it to me."

"A nice gesture."

"Peter does not think so – which is why we must leave. His temper is high, and he's drinking hard."

Andrew frowned. Every new fact he unearthed about Peter showed him in a worse light. "A retreat seems prudent, then. I'll take those." He tucked her bundles under one arm and offered her the other.

As they descended the stairs, Peter lurched from the drawing room. "You are not leaving until you sign over the draft," he snapped, blocking the front door.

"What is he talking about?" Andrew frowned at Chloe.

"My dowry. Father left it in trust for me. Mr. Barry brought a draft for the total, since Father's death terminated the trust. It is mine to use as I please."

"I mean it," swore Peter. "That last mortgage is a killer. I'll lose everything if I don't have funds."

"You should have thought of that before gaming away a dozen fortunes." Chloe shook her head.

"Enough, Peter. I wish you well, but I'll not give my inheritance to a gamester. I have my own future to think of." She headed for the door.

"I'll have the cash, even if I have to lock you up," he swore, jerking her around to face him.

"Don't touch her," Andrew barked, freezing Peter in his tracks.

Peter backed several paces, freeing Chloe to rub her throbbing arm.

Andrew studied Peter, from disheveled hair to boots muddled in the graveyard. "You are understandably upset, Sir Peter," he continued in a milder tone. "But that does not excuse your manners. No gentleman expects his sister to support him. Sleep until your head is clear, then confront your problems like a man."

Peter blinked.

Before he could recover, Andrew pulled the front door open and shoved Chloe outside. His temper flared at her obvious relief. She was afraid of her own brother.

He frowned at the empty drive. His curricule was at the stable, and there was no footman to summon it.

"Let's walk around," she suggested. "I don't trust him."

"Good idea. How much is the dowry?" he added as he led her down the steps.

"Two hundred guineas. Not enough to help him if things are as bad as he claims. All he could do would be to stake it in a card game. I doubt he would win. But I can now buy my own cottage."

He opened his mouth, then whirled as footsteps raced from behind. But it was only Sally.

"Miss Chloe," she sobbed. "He's mad. He told us never to allow you inside again."

"That doesn't surprise me," she said soothingly. "But you needn't fear having to carry out his edict. I've no intention of returning. Why are you crying?"

Andrew wanted the same answer, but he obeyed Chloe's gesture to continue to the stable alone. Sally would speak more freely if he were gone.

\* \* \* \*

Chloe drew in a deep breath. The morning had already been too emotional. Without Andrew, she would never have escaped Fields House intact. He had dominated the hall, towering over Peter, his air of command snapping everyone else to attention. He was very much the captain, while Peter had seemed a dissolute child.

"Why are you crying?" she repeated, fearful that Peter had turned his fury on those who couldn't fight back.

"I won't never see you again. I can't stay on here. Master Pe— Sir Peter, now. Sir Peter never liked me. He'll turn me off, like as not. So I'll be needing that reference we spoke of."

"Of course. I can post it to Mr. Barry. See him if Peter dismisses you. Or there is another option. With the money Father left me, I can afford a cottage of my own. I will need a housekeeper. Would you like the job?"

"Gladly."

"It won't be what you're used to," she warned.

"I'd rather work for you than for someone I cannot like, no matter how grand the house."

"Excellent. I don't know the details yet, so please say nothing. I will send word when I need you. In the

meantime, let me know if anything happens. One of the Parker boys would fetch me," she added, naming a tenant.

Sally nodded.

Pleased with the solution, Chloe sent her inside and headed for the stable.

"I cannot believe that Peter demanded your dowry," Andrew said once they left Fields House behind.

"He wouldn't have under normal circumstances."

"What changed?"

She sighed. "It is a long story."

"We have time. After last night's rain, it will take two hours to reach Moorside. I doubt that you have learned two hours of news since we last spoke."

She hesitated, but she'd already revealed so much, a little more wouldn't matter. And talking might clarify her thoughts.

"Did Kevin tell you about my Season?" she asked.

He nodded. "Sir Nigel provided an insultingly small dowry, so you couldn't find a match."

"That sums it up quite nicely," she said, grateful that Kevin hadn't realized how unenthusiastic she'd been – stupid, but she'd been eighteen and still pining for Andrew. And she'd expected a second Season. Her father had even mentioned taking her to London, though she'd known better than to count on that one. "Father was furious. He'd expected me to attach a wealthy husband who could cover his losses if another investment failed – this was shortly after the steward ran off, so he was desperate to recover. I have nothing against wealth, but I refused to lie about our circumstances. It didn't take long before everyone in Bath knew we were fortune hunters."

"That sounds harsh."

"You didn't see Father that year. His antics mortified me. He became so obnoxious that Mother finally insisted we return home." She drew in a deep breath. "Two months later, Father lost yet another investment and had to use my dowry to pay the bills. He and Mother argued bitterly about it. He promised to replace the funds, but Kevin died before he managed it. After that, Mother no longer cared."

His hand pressed hers in comfort.

"I knew I couldn't count on Father, and I had no desire to spend my life at Fields House. Once Peter started gaming, Father's temper grew even worse."

Peter has no head for games – especially when it is fuzzed with wine, which happens often, for he has no head for wine, either. With two of them losing, money disappeared like water through sand. Neither of them was happy about it.” Both had started relieving their tempers against her. It had never moved beyond verbal assaults, but it was another reason she’d needed to leave.

Andrew nodded, but said nothing.

“With no dowry, marriage was impossible. But to leave on my own, I needed funds,” she continued. “I started teaching music and manners to Squire Porter’s daughters.”

“Have they improved any with age?” he asked. “I always thought they resembled butter balls.”

“They slimmed for their come-outs, but it didn’t last. Both have regained their youthful figures and then some. Perhaps I could have tempered their love of sweets, but they were not with me for long. Within the month, Father discovered what I was doing and forbade it.”

“Why?”

“Pride. He feared that people would learn that he couldn’t keep his family in style – as if they didn’t already know. His penchant for bad judgment and worse investments had titillated the neighborhood for years.”

“Yet he allowed you to work for Laura, knowing what she is.”

“Exactly, though he had little choice by then. All the valuables were gone – Mother’s jewelry, the silver, paintings, the Somerset property. So he let me accept. For me, it was the answer to a prayer. Not only could I escape Fields House, but the salary William offered was large enough that I could save more than half.”

“That still doesn’t explain Peter’s anger.”

“Part of it is rooted in my job. By betraying my birth – which is how he sees service – I forfeited any claim on the family. He was already upset about the jewelry casket, for Father had sworn to cut me off when I left. The trust was too much. And when Mr. Barry mentioned that it had been set up very recently, Peter lost his temper. He must think that Father slipped funds out of his grasp to spite him. Which might well be true, though Mr. Barry explained it differently.”

“Where did Sir Nigel find the money?”

"Something must have paid at a time when he was feeling guilty, for he also set money aside for Gramling."

"So why am I driving you to Moorside?" asked Andrew, relaxing. "You can stay at Seabrook until you find a cottage. A footman will collect your belongings."

"No." She shook her head. "I cannot leave without warning. It would be unfair to Laura, unfair to William, and set a bad example for my future students."

"She can manage for two days. Or William can send for her today."

"No. Laura is already upset because I left her alone. Learning from someone else that I am quitting would make her furious. She would refuse to leave Moorside and would probably turn off Mrs. Monroe during the inevitable argument. Can you leave your sister alone and defenseless, no matter what she did to Kevin?"

He opened his mouth, then stopped. "No, I cannot justify leaving her alone. But I will find her a new companion as soon as possible. I don't like you working for her, either."

"I won't stay above a week – two days at Moorside, then five at Seabrook. I will resign after the house party. That way Laura can stay at the manor until William replaces me. If I quit now, she is sure to cause trouble. I know her well. When she feels ill-used, she finds someone to blame, then makes their lives a misery."

"I'd hoped she'd outgrown that."

"She hasn't. I doubt she ever will. First she would have to admit that she is subject to the same rules that govern others. William doesn't deserve the tumult she would cause. But if I could ask a favor—"

"Anything."

"Could you see if there is a suitable cottage near Exeter? I cannot afford to live in town, but I would like to be close enough to attract students from the merchant class."

"I ca—" He bit off his refusal as Kevin's accusing eyes glared at him. Leaving in the morning was no longer possible. "I will see the house agent tomorrow, though I wish you were not reduced to this. You deserve better, Chloe."

"So did Kevin. But we must play the hand we are dealt. For me, that means taking charge of my destiny rather than sitting around hoping that some man will

wed me or a distant relation might invite me to look after his children. My nearer relatives hated Father so much, they've likely forgotten I exist." She felt her face heat, for it sounded as though she were whining.

They rode in silence for a time, then conversed lightly about the day, the scenery, and innocuous childhood memories. She was grateful for the reprieve. It kept her mind away from troubling topics. Not until they approached Moorside did she again grow serious.

"I have one other favor," she said.

"Finding you a companion?"

"I don't need one."

"But you do." He halted the team on a rise overlooking Moorside. "No respectable family will put its daughter in your care if you are living alone."

She smothered one of Kevin's favorite curses. "I had not considered that."

"Exactly. So before you move into a cottage, you had best find a companion. She must be old enough to maintain propriety and have sufficient breeding to command respect."

"That will stretch my budget."

"A tarnished reputation would prevent you from attracting students. What would that do to your budget?"

She nodded as he again set the team in motion.

"Very well. But that was not the favor I sought. I wish you to keep Mother's jewelry casket for me. Laura will be peeved enough over my absence. One of those brooches is quite lovely. She would resent that I own it."

"I'll hold it until the house party. And we can discuss any progress on cottages when you arrive at Seabrook."

"I am deeply in your debt, Andrew. Thank you."

Without waiting for a reply, she hurried into the cottage. Laura started scolding before the door even shut, drawing curses from Andrew as he pulled away.

## CHAPTER SIX

Andrew frowned as he left Moorside behind. It was obvious that William was wrong about Laura – which boded ill for this house party. A vengeful Laura could wreak havoc.

But there was little he could do about it. Even if



William accepted his assessment, he wouldn't rescind the invitation. Once he made a decision he never looked back. Besides, such an insult would send Laura into a worse tirade, this one directed at Chloe. And unless Laura came to Seabrook, Chloe would remain at her post until they found a new companion. Loyalty was integral to her character.

He mentally kicked himself for agreeing to find her a cottage. It was bad enough that he must share a roof with her for the next week, but helping her would keep them close – stupid, considering the lust she raised. Remaining in her vicinity was dangerous. Yet he couldn't turn her down, and she would need his help to control Laura.

By the time Andrew reached Seabrook, his leg was throbbing from bouncing along muddy, rutted lanes. He wanted nothing more than to lie down while Jinks loosened the knotted muscles with hot compresses.

That plan lasted no longer than his previous one.

Most of the guests had arrived while he was gone. He could ignore Martha and her mother and the Sullivans – Miss Sullivan was Martha's closest friend. But the Rockhursts and Graysons were another matter. They were family. As soon as he talked to William, he must greet his sisters.

Catherine had married Lord Rockhurst four years earlier. They now had two boys in addition to Catherine's daughter from her first marriage. Mary had wed Lord Grayson during Andrew's last injury leave. They also had a son. He'd seen all of them after Waterloo, but he'd been out of his head with fever at the time, so it hardly qualified as a visit. The only reason he'd stopped in London had been to muster energy for the trip to Devonshire.

As he entered the hall, his eleven-year-old niece burst from the drawing room.

"Sarah!" He called, grinning – she always packed more activity into a day than most people managed in two, so keeping up with her was a challenge. "Slow down and say hello."

"Uncle Drew!" She leaped into his arms so he could swing her around. When he finally set her down, she cocked her head, examining him from head to toe. "Much better," she decided with a laugh. "You looked at death's door the last time we met."

"I felt it. But the leg is now recovered." He flinched

as a new cramp put the lie to his claim, but diverted her attention by asking about her governess. "Is Miss Griswold with you?"

"Of course. You know Blake never lets me go anywhere without Grissy. He's afraid I'll get into mischief."

"He knows you well. I heard you dragged him into a host of adventures on his first visit to Seabrook. I'm amazed he found time to court your mother."

She stiffened her back, thrusting her chin up in a parody of society's most disapproving dowagers. Despite blonde hair, china blue eyes, and a classically beautiful face, she managed to look fierce. "You must know, my dear uncle, that I was executing a hostess's duty by protecting him from Aunt Laura. You know how she was."

He grimaced as Kevin's face floated before his eyes. Rockhurst was another man Laura had wanted for herself. Another subject change was in order. "How is everyone?" Sarah always knew everything about the family. Keen ears and sharp eyes let nothing past her.

"Uncle Grayson's father is finally dying. Uncle Grayson will be Earl of Rothmoor before the year is out, and glad of it, I'm sure."

"Don't suggest that, Sarah," he admonished gently. She might be precocious, but the complexities of adult emotions still eluded her.

"Why? Uncle Grayson hates him, and vice versa."

"Life isn't that simple, sweetheart. While it is true that they have been estranged most of Gray's life, the earl is still Gray's father. A man who doesn't feel the loss of a parent is stone cold – which doesn't describe Gray at all."

Her eyes narrowed, then lightened. "Aunt Mary will make him feel better."

"Some. But only time can heal some wounds. The problem with death is that it ends any hope of rapprochement. The living will always wonder if there might have been some way to mend the breach." As Chloe had done through much of the ride back to Moorside. Even when she'd remained silent, he'd seen regret in her eyes.

Sarah frowned. "That would explain Mrs. Harold."

"Who is Mrs. Harold?"

"The Rockburn vicar's wife. She hadn't spoken to her sister in ten years when the lady suddenly called

on her. They patched up their quarrel and parted the best of friends. Three days later, the sister was struck dead by apoplexy. The squire's wife insisted that it was a shame the two had mended their fences, since it made the death so much harder. But Mrs. Harold disagreed. She thanked God for the week they'd had together."

"Exactly."

Sarah nodded. "I've always laughed about Uncle Grayson's couriers, but I suppose concern for his father is why he is expecting them daily this time."

Or he had an important business deal brewing. Gray kept in touch with his office wherever he went. It probably frustrated him to be two hard days from London instead of his usual four hours. But he said only, "I suspect you're right."

She lowered her voice. "I think Aunt Mary is increasing again."

"Did she tell you that?" He backed into the corner so their voices wouldn't carry upstairs.

"Of course not. Even Uncle Grayson doesn't know, but she was yawning prodigiously when they arrived, and she turned positively green when Mama offered her some coffee."

"It sounds more like carriage sickness. You know Mary has never been a traveler. She probably slept poorly at last night's inn."

"Well, maybe..." she grudgingly admitted. "But Mama was just like that with both Max and Richard."

"Speaking of your brothers, how are the imps?"

Sarah giggled. "Richard still sleeps most of the time, though he's past his first birthday. He reminds me of Lord Higgins, who moves always at a snail's pace and cannot summon the energy even to smile."

Andrew covered his mouth and coughed. The description was apt, though laughing would only encourage her. He'd known Higgins at school, where the lad had been christened Slug, as much for his rotundity as for his languid habits.

"Max is the opposite, and far too smart for his own good," she added primly.

"Very like a certain young lady," he murmured.

"I was never that energetic," she insisted with a grin. "Max is always in motion and drives poor Haines to distraction." Haines was the nurse.

"As I said, just like you. You ran me more ragged

than Napoleon's finest."

"But how rude of you to say so." She tried to pout, but laughed instead. "Do you know that Max managed to smuggle a hedgehog into the nursery last week? Three years old, yet he escaped Haines's eye, captured a hedgehog, and slipped it into his bed. Haines was shocked."

"Doubtful. Unhappy, perhaps, but she knows you are scapegraces. Yes, even you," he added when she tried to object. "Who left that charming toad in the pocket of my dress uniform two years ago? It took Jinks the better part of a day to remove the stains."

"I wasn't thinking." She lowered her head, lower lip thrust out, but spoiled the effect by peeking upward through her lashes. God help society when she staged her come-out.

He adopted the expression that could make hardened soldiers quail. "You should pass that lesson to young Max. Pranks that cause damage are not funny. Nor are they fair to the servants who must clean up the mess."

"You sound like Papa."

"And a very good man he was." Her father had died when she was six. "Remember his wisdom always. It will stand you in good stead."

The shadow slipped from her face, letting her natural smile out. "Cousin Nick is here, too. He isn't much older than Richard, but is quite industrious and can spend hours building block castles or playing with his cloth dog."

"Another precocious imp like Max?" he asked, leading her toward the stairs.

"Perhaps, though his concentration seems deeper. Much like Uncle Grayson, now that I think on it. Both are determined to succeed."

"I must meet him. Alas, I know Nick only through Mary's letters." He'd been too ill to visit the nursery in London and barely recalled talking to Mary.

"They only called once while you were with us because you were so fevered."

He nodded. "So I've not really seen Mary and Gray since their wedding day."

"Which I missed." Sarah scowled. "I hope Uncle William will be as happy as Mama and Aunt Mary are. Miss Truitt seems awfully sober."

"True, but William has always been staid. He has

little interest in travel or parties or any sort of frivolity.”

She jumped onto the first step so she could look him in the eye. “But that’s what bothers me, Uncle Drew. Miss Truitt seems to be all that Uncle William could want, but Mrs. Truitt longs to move into higher circles. You should see the way her eyes appraise the house and everything in it. Very mushroomy. Worse even than Miss Wyath,” she added, naming the squire’s daughter who had nearly enticed William into marriage before running off with a wealthy viscount thirty years her senior.

“It’s true that Mrs. Truitt will make demands,” he conceded. She hated her status as a merchant’s wife, regretting that her grandmother had married down and her mother down even further. “But William understands her very well. And neither of us believes that Miss Truitt will become like her mother. Not only is she old enough at two-and-twenty to know her own mind, but her family has long decried her disinterest in balls and even town living. Some people avoid becoming copies of their parents – like Gray and his father.”

“That’s all right, then.” Sarah’s smile returned. “Blake says I may dine downstairs this evening – accompanied by Grissy, of course. Uncle William wants a family meal, so I need not remain in the nursery.”

“That is a fine compliment to your manners, to be sure.”

“And Mama says I may watch part of Saturday’s ball from the minstrel’s gallery. But I must remain quiet as a mouse so as not to disturb anyone.”

“You will enjoy it. I watched balls from the gallery myself at your age.” And had made faces at the posturing. Flirtation games had seemed a huge joke in those days. He’d laughed himself silly over the Exquisite whose dramatic gesture with a quizzing glass had snagged its jeweled handle on the lace framing a young lady’s bosom, forcing him to carefully pick it free. Both had been beet red by the time he succeeded. “Perhaps I will join you for a set. We can try the wicked waltz.”

“Would you really?” Her blue eyes widened, confirming that she would be a London diamond before long. A true diamond, for her character was as

beautiful as her face.

"Really. Let's say the third set. I doubt Miss Griswold will let you stay up much later."

"Thank you, Uncle Drew. You are the best." She hugged him fiercely, then raced away, undoubtedly to tell Catherine the news.

He grinned after her. Sarah had been precocious from birth, but her sweet temper, delight in the world around her, and genuine caring for others made her beloved by all who knew her.

Pulling his mind from his niece, he went in search of William. Sally's recollection of Saturday night shone a different light on Sir Nigel's accident, one that fit the blood, the extra candle, and the wax in the library. So much shouting. Had Sir Nigel interrupted a burglary?

William was in the old wing, but not alone. Miss Truitt and Gray were with him.

"My grandfather abandoned this wing when his finances began to slide," William was saying apologetically. "Which is why most of the ball guests cannot attend the house party. I don't have the staff to make these rooms even marginally habitable."

Or the money, Andrew added silently. The wing needed more than turning out. Even tattered wallpaper and shattered draperies weren't the real problem. Plaster on more than one wall was crumbling, and the chimneys all needed repair.

"But we will need this space in the future," said Miss Truitt. "Despite assigning two and even three people to each room, Seabrook can barely accommodate your current guests. How will we manage even family gatherings in the future? My brother will wed one day, as will yours. And Sarah is nearly old enough to leave the nursery. Others will follow. It will be impossible to entertain in comfort without this wing."

"But the estate also needs attention." William was clearly embarrassed – repairs could only be made using her money.

When William and Miss Truitt moved off to examine a damaged wall, Andrew joined Gray. "Is there a problem?" he murmured.

"The same what-shall-we-do-with-this-wing question we've discussed before," replied Gray softly.

The subject had not seriously arisen until Catherine's marriage to Rockhurst, for the Seabrooks

had never been wealthy, and Catherine's first husband had been a country vicar. But though Andrew had been in Spain at the time, he'd followed the argument via letters.

Seabrook Manor was a modest country house, but only if one counted all three wings. The west wing was small, containing only the ballroom and a pair of retiring rooms. The north wing was adequate for the immediate family, but strained at the seams with a few guests. Yet the old east wing was too derelict even for temporary use.

Rockhurst had offered to repair it, as had Gray after he wed Mary. William had refused. He'd sacrificed his pride only once – accepting Rockhurst's loan to modernize portions of the estate and repair the tenant farms. And he was repaying every shilling, despite Rockhurst's insistence that the money had been a gift.

Under normal circumstances, Andrew would have slipped away, for the discussion was rapidly becoming an argument. William wanted to patch the worst spots so the rooms could be used. Miss Truitt insisted that the only sensible approach was to tear the wing down and replace it.

But there was a third possibility they hadn't considered – hardly a surprise. William ignored any problem he couldn't fix, and Miss Truitt's family replaced anything irritating, without considering cost. But Andrew had thought about this wing for years. He'd even studied it two years earlier while his shoulder was healing.

"There is nothing wrong with the outer walls or the floors," he said, joining William and Martha. "They are sturdy and blend with the rest of the house. It would be a simple matter to remove these inner walls and divide the space in a more pleasing fashion. They have already been moved at least once, which is why the plaster cracked so badly. The seventeenth-century baron who installed them used unskilled workers. And if you want even more room—" he nodded to Martha "—you could extend the wing another sixty feet or so. The job would be both faster and cheaper than replacing everything. Do you plan to redecorate the main block?"

She nodded, her eyes conveying distaste for its shabby furniture. Some rooms hadn't been redone in a century.

"Then here's another possibility." He pulled a scrap

of paper from his pocket and sketched the current house. "This wing was the original manor house. If you are going to put money into it, you might as well use it as your primary quarters. Restore the old curve in the drive and add a portico to make the entrance more elegant. Recessing the extension would maintain the symmetry of the façade. You can divide the space into well-proportioned rooms without moving any of the fireplaces. And you might want to consider some modern conveniences – a lift in the butler's pantry for bringing food up from the kitchen, for example. Or you could build a bathing room in the master suite. I saw such a room two years ago. A cistern collected rainwater from the roof, supplying a tank in the bathing room. A fire keeps the tank hot – very like the boiling tub in the laundry. Thus it is possible to bathe whenever you wish without waiting while servants carry can after can up from the kitchen."

"Really?" Miss Truitt's eyes gleamed. "I'd not heard of such a thing. Where did you see it?"

"A friend in Kent just rebuilt his house, but he is far from the first. Several dozen estates have added bathing rooms, and some London town houses are now adopting the idea, thanks to Brummell's insistence on cleanliness."

"Imagine. Hot water in one's rooms." Awe filled her voice. "Even Father doesn't have that."

"You will have to think about the size and variety of rooms you want, but one possibility is this." He turned the paper over to sketch on the back. "For the first floor, you could have two or three rooms for formal and informal gatherings, a larger library than in the current wing, dining spaces, both intimate and formal, and a divided staircase leading upstairs."

"Rather like Rankin Park," murmured William, referring to a nearby estate.

"But better. In addition to preserving the symmetry of the façade, recessing the extension would partially close the fourth side of the courtyard, sheltering the terrace and trapping enough sunlight to keep it pleasant much of the year. Its plantings would flower a good month earlier."

"Roses in May," said Martha.

"And asters lasting into November. Below-stairs, the ground floor would provide space for a better kitchen and all the offices necessary to run the house. I'm sure



the staff would appreciate a larger coal room, for example, and a more convenient laundry. And increasing the staff – which will be necessary if you enlarge the house – requires a larger brewery. The current one can barely keep up with the demand for ale. My friend installed a roasting range in his kitchen and claims that even middling cooks can turn out exquisite meals on it.”

“My, but that was fast.” Martha stared at his sketch.

“I know the house well.” He added a rough elevation showing an elegant portico instead of the unadorned façade of the current wing, then handed her the paper. “Just some ideas. It would be less expensive than tearing down the wing, yet give you more functionality than merely patching damaged walls.” He nodded toward the hole she and William had been examining. “Later you can spruce up the current family block for guests.”

William was staring at the sketch. “You surprise me, Andrew.”

“And me,” added Gray. “I’d no idea you were so talented.”

“It’s nothing.” Praise embarrassed him. “Drawing keeps my mind off battle.”

“I had wondered how you tolerated so much death and destruction,” murmured Gray as William and Martha moved to the window to study the sketch. “You did not strike me as the sort who could block off horror.”

Andrew shuddered. Gray was too perceptive. There had been days when only making painstaking measurements of architectural details had kept him sane. And talking to the army engineers. Picking their brains allowed him to construct fantasy buildings on paper. A cathedral. A palace. A town house. A church. Even being billeted in peasant huts had given him ideas for tenant cottages that were both convenient and inexpensive.

“One does what one must,” he said with a shrug. Adjusting to the army had been necessary.

“You could sell out.”

“And do what? I’ve no money, no training, and no contacts. I cannot ask William to support me, for I would be of no use here. Fighting is all I know.”

“You have the eye of an artist and a design sense

better than half the architects in England – as I know very well, for I’ve interviewed most of them. I will be replacing Rothmoor Park once it comes to me. Would you help me?”

Andrew ignored a burst of excitement. He didn’t have the training to do more than dash off an extemporaneous drawing or two. And he was too old to learn. Apprenticeships started by age twelve. “It wouldn’t work,” he said firmly. “I’ll rejoin my regiment next week. And why would you want an amateur? You can afford someone like Soane.” One of England’s most respected architects, Soane had a huge office in London, with a wide and varied practice. He had recently been appointed to the Board of Works.

William joined them, preventing a response. “This is wonderful,” he said, tapping the paper. “We will talk further once Martha and I have a chance to think. I must admit a fondness for these old walls.”

Martha smiled. “They are, indeed, solid. But I’ve not seen such a warren of rooms in many a day. What else have you seen on your travels, Captain?”

“Much, but we can discuss that later. Fitch will have rung the dressing bell by now.”

\* \* \* \*

Chloe shut her bedroom door and exhaled in relief. Laura had been more obnoxious tonight than any other time in the two years Chloe had held this post.

It had started the moment she’d opened the front door. Laura’s barrage of complaints had made Chloe long to race after Andrew and leave. She hadn’t, of course. The only way Laura would go to Seabrook was if Chloe took her there. She could last two more days.

But by the time they finished dinner, Chloe doubted her stamina. Laura’s self-pity had reached record levels, and her tirades bordered on madness.

“How could Sir Nigel do this to me?” she had demanded over the soup. “Dying when I needed you is beyond enough. He should be shot.”

“What happened?” Chloe asked, biting back the observation that shooting a corpse was an exercise in futility.

“Mrs. Tubbs, of course! The woman is a fool. You’d hardly left before she pounded on the door. I swear she stood there for hours, though she should have known I wasn’t receiving. Why would she expect otherwise? She is so far beneath me that I demean myself by even

speaking of her.”

Chloe kept her attention on the soup. The real complaint was that Chloe had been gallivanting about the countryside while Laura sat home alone.

“Then she had the gall to tell the fish boy not to come out here because no one was home. Dinner was positively vulgar. Mrs. Monroe served ham instead of fish. Has she no propriety?”

“There is nothing wrong with ham,” Chloe had murmured.

“For country bumpkins like you, perhaps,” snapped Laura. “But the polite world always begins dinner with fish.”

Now Chloe shook her head as she pulled her trunk from beneath her bed. Laura’s complaints had continued throughout the meal, with barely a pause to chew. They had run the gamut from the petty to the ridiculous – Mrs. Monroe had twice jabbed pins into her shoulder while fastening her gown and should be turned off for clumsiness; the carrots were hard and the comfits sour; Mrs. Monroe was even worse than Chloe at dressing Laura’s hair; Mr. Rose was spying on her, gloating over her misfortune; Mrs. Tubbs was also plotting against her.

Chloe hadn’t worked out why or in what way – not that she cared. Laura’s thought processes were convoluted at best.

Thrusting the memories aside, Chloe opened her wardrobe. Whether Andrew found a cottage or not, she would not return to Moorside. So she must pack her personal possessions tonight. Tomorrow she would be busy packing for Laura.

Yet she was immediately sidetracked by Kevin’s folio. So many strange creatures – the African giraffe, whose long neck allowed it to pluck leaves from the tops of trees; the South American sloth that spent its entire life hanging upside down; the Australian beast that could leap the length of a ballroom and carried its young in a pocket attached to its stomach....

Stop wasting time, her conscience ordered. You can look at the pictures later.

Sighing, she laid the folio in her trunk, adding her pearls, Andrew’s condolence letter, a pressed flower he’d plucked for her during a childhood game, the lace gloves she’d saved to wear at her wedding—

Blinking back tears, she cursed her maudlin

memories. As a girl, she'd been blinded by dreams – just as Laura was to this day. Despite knowing that he had to leave, she'd entertained fantasies of a home, marriage, family....

What a selfish fool she'd been, hugging her fantasies, ignoring reality, certain that if she dreamed hard enough, her wishes would come true. Her fantasy had destroyed any chance of finding happiness, first by giving Andrew a disgust of her, then by making her find fault with every other man she met. Her dreams had also deprived her of her father's love. He'd been furious when she spurned every man he suggested. She'd lashed back, criticizing her inadequate dowry. Deep inside, she'd believed that a large dowry would have kept Andrew in Devonshire.

Unfair. Andrew had bought colors out of duty.

Little had changed, she admitted, staring at the mementos of a childish love. He could still send her heart racing with a glance. But reality was also the same. Despite forgiving her for her perfidy in the orchard, he would again follow duty. Continuing to moon over him would mark her as a hen-wit.

Straightening her spine, she folded her winter cloak and better gowns into the trunk, adding the figurine she'd bought in Bath and her few books. It was time to embark on the life that would sustain her from now on.

\* \* \* \*

Andrew glanced around the table after the ladies retired to the drawing room for coffee. Dinner had made the need for enlarging Seabrook even more obvious. The dining room already seemed cramped, yet each meal for the next week would include more guests than the night before. The pre-ball dinner on Saturday would seat forty.

Martha might prefer Seabrook to Exeter, but she was no hermit. He suspected that Seabrook would become a center of local society in the years ahead, no matter what William thought now. She would need a large formal dining room as well as an intimate room for dining *en famille*.

He was passing the port to Mr. Sullivan when Fitch returned to murmur into William's ear. Frowning, William set down his glass.

"Excuse me, gentlemen. There is a small problem I must address."

Amid murmurs of assent, he signaled Rockhurst to take over as host and Andrew to accompany him.

"What happened?" Andrew asked when they reached the hall.

"Another summons from Fields House. Burglary, from the sound of it."

"Odd."

"Very." William said no more until he set his curricule in motion. "Someone ransacked several rooms."

Andrew frowned. "When?"

"The groom didn't know, but the house was empty during Sir Nigel's interment."

"I saw no disturbance afterward. Nor did Chloe."

"How do you know?"

Andrew scowled at William's idiocy. "She would have mentioned it. With Sunday night's rain, it took two hours to reach Moorside. And Peter would certainly have complained."

"How much of the house did you see?"

"The hall, the drawing room, and the library. I glanced into the dining room in passing. After the burial, Chloe was in her room, her mother's room, and Kevin's – she mentioned that they hadn't changed since her last visit."

"Perhaps the culprit slipped in during the interment, but waited until later to strike."

"Why would he do that?"

"I don't know. Nor can I explain why someone would burgle the place while Peter and the staff were awake. I don't like it."

"Nor do I," conceded Andrew. "Is it possible that this summons is a mistake? Who would rob Fields House? Everyone knows Sir Nigel sold everything of value."

"Which would point toward a vagrant unfamiliar with the area – perhaps a former soldier."

"Or Peter. He has been searching high and low for something to sell, and he does not strike me as the tidy sort. Perhaps the servants mistook one of his messes."

"Anything is possible," said William with a sigh.

"Or this may connect to Sir Nigel's death. We haven't had a chance to talk today. Sally sought me out this morning."

"I hate house parties," grumbled William. "No time for business."

“Quite. Anyway, Sally’s room lies above the main staircase. She swears that Sir Nigel shouted for help several times before she heard the bumps that marked his fall.”

“Why did she not say so before?”

“She didn’t realize that Gramling heard only one shout. By the time she did, it was too late to contradict him. You know how servants’ halls work. Precedence is more rigid than in society. No one would dare contradict someone above them.”

“Was he lying, then?”

“I doubt it. Sally claims he is nearly deaf and sleeps like the dead, though he won’t admit it. She was surprised he heard anything at all.”

William swore.

“We spoke for a quarter hour. Sir Nigel’s temper was very erratic in recent months. She does not think it odd that he was up after midnight. Apparently he’d fallen into the habit of checking on Peter – or so she implied. Sally has always been astute.”

William exhaled in frustration. “This becomes more puzzling by the hour. Why would Sir Nigel need help? I saw no sign of intruders.”

“Not when we arrived, but suppose Sir Nigel found Peter’s room empty and noted a light in the library. He might have assumed that Peter was searching for money. Instead he saw a stranger – that would account for the night candle on the mantel. So he shouts for help and rushes off to fetch Gramling. Unfortunately, he ran into the table.”

“But where is his own candle, then? He would hardly look for Peter in the dark.”

“If he was secretly checking up on the boy, he would hardly advertise his presence by carrying a candle. Or maybe a servant moved his candle out of the way when Gramling was examining the body – it was Gramling who claimed there was no candle; the other servants didn’t hear the question.”

“Why was there no sign of this supposed burglar, then?” William sounded disgusted.

“But there was. I noted several drops of blood in the library yesterday morning, and one of the fireplace bricks had been pried loose. Perhaps they grappled before Sir Nigel raced out. Or maybe Sir Nigel’s shout alerted the intruder – people often injure themselves when startled. After Sir Nigel fell to his death, the staff

rushed to the hall and stayed there. An intruder would have had two hours to hide signs of his presence and slip away.”

“And then return today, leaving a disturbance the servants spotted? It doesn’t make sense. He must have realized on Saturday that the house was bare.”

William was right. An intruder could have searched nearly every room while Sir Nigel lay dead. “Maybe the two incidents have no connection. Or maybe he searched the upstairs on Saturday, cleaning up after himself so no one would realize he’d been there, then returned today to search the main rooms.”

“Don’t rush your fences. We don’t know which rooms are disturbed. Nor do we know that anyone was there on Saturday.”

Andrew stifled frustration. Every instinct swore that Sir Nigel had interrupted a burglary. Why else had the library contained blood? “Ask Gramling if any doors were unlocked Sunday morning. A burglar must have left a door open behind him. And ask every servant privately about candles. They didn’t hear Gramling’s answer, so they would have no reason to parrot it.”

“Excellent idea.” But William shook his head. “Not that it changes my verdict about Sir Nigel. His death was clearly an accident.”

“True. But if he surprised an intruder who returned to Fields House today, then everyone at Fields House remains in danger until the culprit finds what he seeks.”

The carriage halted at the foot of the steps. Again the servants huddled in the hallway, though this time Peter was with them.

“I can’t explain it,” he slurred. “Someone vandalized the place – holes in the walls, broken fireplace surrounds, ripped mattresses.... Can’t be the dunnos. Nothing is overdue.”

“Where?” asked William.

Gramling looked ten years older. “Sir Nigel’s bedchamber, Master Kevin’s bedchamber, the library, and the billiard room, my lord. Also, the drawing room seems disturbed, and I’m convinced that someone moved chairs in the dining room. After Sir Peter discovered the destruction in the library, we searched the house.”

“And that was when?” William looked at Peter.

“About half past seven. I spent the afternoon in

Exeter, then went upstairs to study the estate records.”

Andrew shook his head. Had the boy been gaming again?

Peter bristled. “I wasn’t gaming,” he swore. “I had hoped a barrister could overturn that damnable trust. But the bastard claims the courts can do nothing.” He drank deeply from the glass clutched in his hand.

William turned to Gramling. “Where was everyone today?”

“After the funeral guests left, Sir Peter went upstairs. The staff met in the servants’ hall for an hour – a bit of the funeral meats, you understand. Once Sir Peter left for Exeter, Sally made up his room and Miss Chloe’s. I started the monthly inventory of the wine cellar. Simms was packing – he left before dinner. Molly cleaned Mrs. Harper’s apartment, under Mrs. Harper’s supervision – she is not fully trained yet. Cook remained in the kitchen.”

So an intruder had needed to avoid only Sally. Once the servants sat down to dinner, even breaking holes in walls would have gone undetected. But only a man familiar with the household would know that. Was Simms the culprit? If the two incidents were unrelated, Simms might have damaged the house before leaving, either in pique over his paltry inheritance or because he’d had words with Peter.

William nodded. “We will examine the damage in a moment, but while the staff is assembled, did anyone find unlocked doors or windows since Sir Nigel’s death?”

“The conservatory was unlocked yesterday morning, though I’d checked it before retiring,” reported Gramling.

“And the kitchen,” added Mrs. Harper. “Molly steps out with the groom and has slipped out at night more than once.” She glared at the girl.

“I trust she remembered to lock the kitchen door last night.” William stared at Molly, who blushed scarlet. “Does anyone know how the conservatory door came to be open?”

Guilt flashed across Peter’s face. “That was me. Father refused to give me a key. Unlocking the conservatory door let me return without waking Gramling.”

Andrew nearly choked. Peter would never consider a



servant's convenience. He left through the conservatory so Sir Nigel would not hear him – the conservatory was under the library. Kevin had done the same as a boy.

But that meant that anyone could have walked into Fields House Saturday night. He could have left the same way or through the kitchen. Either would have offered easy egress once the staff reached the hall.

That did not explain today's intrusion, however. Either the man had stolen a key on Saturday, or he had entered through the front door. With the interment and general upheaval, Gramling might have forgotten to lock it during the will reading. It had definitely been unlocked when he and Chloe had left.

But they could address today's entry point later. He could not embarrass Gramling by asking further questions in front of the staff.

As he followed William upstairs, Andrew considered possibilities. The first was simple – Sir Nigel had fallen in a house empty of all save servants. Today's trouble was a separate problem.

The second was equally straightforward. A chance burglar had found the door open on Saturday. Sir Nigel's shouts and his subsequent death had frightened the culprit away. Someone else had caused today's destruction, possibly Simms. Unfortunate, and they would have to find the culprit, but it posed no continuing danger.

The other possibilities were troubling. If the same person had entered twice, then he was either deranged – anyone of sense could see that nothing of value remained – or he was seeking something specific.

Or the culprit was Peter. In which case the fall might not be so accidental. Had Sir Nigel run into the table, or had someone moved it to explain his fall? The toe could just as easily have smashed on the floor or balusters.

Sir Nigel's room was a mess. Clothing and bedding littered the floor. The marble fireplace surround was cracked. In the dressing room, the bottom of the wardrobe was torn up. Empty drawers leaned drunkenly against the wall.

Kevin's room and the library were worse. Every book was on the floor – as if each had been searched, then stacked out of the way. Bricks had been pried from the fireplace. Two walls sported holes.

The billiard room had met a similar fate. Cabinets sat askew. The felt was ripped from the table.

While William interviewed the servants, Andrew returned to the library. The extent of the damage proved that this was no ordinary burglary. Either it was deliberate destruction, such as a disgruntled employee might inflict, or the intruder was seeking something specific. Something hidden. Something small. A paper, perhaps, that could be slipped between the pages of a book. Had Sir Nigel hidden evidence against Simms for some secret misdeed?

It seemed ludicrous.

Finding Peter's room intact was equally suggestive. Either the man knew Peter did not have the prize, or Peter was the searcher.

Andrew pushed speculation aside. It was too early to assign blame. Instead he skimmed the papers atop the desk. The shares in the *Gray Gull* remained. The burglar must not know their value.

The top drawer yielded the estate ledger. A quick glance confirmed that Fields House was on the verge of bankruptcy. Half the farm workers had been turned off. Crops like timber had been sold years early to cover gaming and investment losses – it would be a decade before another harvest was possible. A hefty mortgage payment was due next week. Had desperation driven Peter to a rapid, destructive search for valuables?

The loss of timber wasn't the estate's only problem. Without workers, many fields lay fallow. Rising prices might improve profits from the rest, but the money would disappear several times over in higher costs for products the estate had to buy. Poor weather wasn't helping. And with three mortgages...

The ledger's last entry had been made two weeks ago, before Sir Nigel had turned off John Rivers, the last footman – another man who might have a grievance. But Sir Nigel's journal should explain.

He opened the second drawer and gasped. The journal was gone.

Kevin had often laughed about Sir Nigel's fanaticism over his journal. The man could not retire for the night until the day's entry was complete. Boxing Day meant gifts for the tenants and a new journal for Sir Nigel, with the old one being enshrined with its predecessors in a special section of the library.

Andrew glanced at the journals, now stacked on the floor. More than fifty of them, recording every petty detail of Sir Nigel's life.

He should have checked the journal Saturday night or while waiting for Chloe this morning. It might have told him why Sir Nigel had been up, why he'd let various servants go, or whether he was watching Peter at night. And Sir Nigel would have recorded anything he'd hidden.

Had the intruder taken it?

With new questions crowding his mind, Andrew joined William in the servants' hall. But again the staff was no help. They had seen nothing, heard nothing, suspected nothing until Sir Peter summoned Gramling to explain the damage in the library.

And no one had seen the missing journal.

It was time to investigate Peter's activities – and Sir Nigel's. Jinks could ask questions around the neighborhood.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Tuesday*

Andrew parted company with Gray's courier in Exeter, cursing his throbbing leg as he turned his horse over to the ostler at the White Hart. The courier set a more brutal pace than Wellington's worst marches. Only pride had kept Andrew going – and the knowledge that he need cover only five miles.

The leg had a long way to go to regain its former strength – which raised new concerns about his future. By leaving for London now, he could have taken two weeks to make the 175-mile journey, arriving sufficiently rested to hide any lingering weakness. Several months at sea would have given him ample time to recover before reaching India.

Now he would arrive in pain and probably limping. Could he convince Major Barnfield that the leg would improve? The major had heard Harvey's prognosis.

Half an hour in the taproom helped. When he could walk without limping, he sought out Exeter's house agent.

Two hours later, he stood outside Rose Cottage while Mr. Weedell wiggled a key in a vain attempt to unlock the door. This was the fourth cottage they had

visited. So far none had been acceptable. How could Chloe consider living in places like this? Kevin would have been appalled.

But at least Chloe needn't deal with Weedell. If Andrew had had a choice, he would have fled rather than endure the man's ingratiating voice and insatiable thirst for gossip.

"I was saddened to learn about Sir Nigel," Weedell had said the moment Andrew identified himself. "We were close friends. I hear you were there when he died."

"Hardly. He was alone."

Weedell's eyes gleamed. "How do you know?"

Andrew had made a vague comment about servants and tried to ask about cottages, but a quarter hour had passed before he'd succeeded. Weedell had demanded particulars of the death and subsequent burglary, his questions sharpening whenever Andrew grew vague – which was often, for he refused to divulge his suspicions. Weedell seemed particularly curious about what might be missing from Fields House. Was he merely a gossipmonger, or did he have another motive? It seemed odd that a man claiming to be a close friend had missed the burial. Where had Weedell been during the burglary?

But he couldn't ask without inspiring a new burst of curiosity, so he concentrated on cottages. Jinks could discover the answer.

On paper, Rose Cottage seemed Chloe's best choice. It looked charming, was only a quarter mile from town, and appeared sound despite its age – which he estimated at two hundred years.

The roses that gave the cottage its name were overgrown from neglect, but not badly. A large kitchen garden on the south side soaked up sunlight, sheltered from wind by the cottage itself. The thatched roof had been replaced five years earlier.

The previous owner had died in June. Since her only child lived in Plymouth, Rose Cottage was up for sale. Despite several offers to lease the place, the owner demanded a buyer – or so Weedell claimed. Andrew wasn't sure if he could trust the man's word. Weedell was the sort who would say anything to further his goals – goals that clearly surpassed selling one small cottage.

"Lord Seabrook will wed soon," said Weedell as the

lock finally gave way. "You will need a place of your own, and I know the perfect estate."

"I won't—"

"Fields House," Weedell said over his objection. "A bit run down at the moment, but sound land. There is another interested party, but Sir Peter would rather it went to a local."

"I didn't know it was for sale," said Andrew, scanning a sitting room best described as cozy. His hair brushed the ceiling beams, but Chloe was several inches shorter.

"Not officially. Sir Nigel refused every offer I brought him, though everyone knew he'd have to sell in the end. Sir Peter will see reason the moment he studies the books. I'll call tomorrow and help him decide. He will leap at a chance to realize some cash from his inheritance." Weedell's tone raised images of hands rubbing together in anticipation. But he was doomed to failure this time. Andrew had seen the books. Fields House was mortgaged for more than its value. Selling would leave Peter in worse shape than ever.

Perhaps he should mention that to Peter. Weedell seemed determined to wrest an agreement from the lad. Had Weedell helped Sir Nigel to his death so he could sell the estate?

The question jerked his attention from Rose Cottage. How much would the agent make from such a transaction? Perhaps he had financial difficulties of his own.

"Fields House would require a huge investment to restore the land," he commented.

"Not as much as you might think." Weedell's smile grew crafty. "And you have two wealthy lords in the family. Either of them would extend you credit. It would be an ideal situation for you – land you know well, adjacent to Lord Seabrook's holdings, tenants who would welcome the change—"

"I'm not in the market for an estate," Andrew said firmly, interrupting what promised to be a lengthy sales pitch – and for a property that wasn't even for sale. "I will rejoin my regiment in a fortnight."

"Ah. That's why you need a cottage for your young lady," he replied knowingly.

"Not at all." His glare sent Weedell back a pace. "My sister's companion is retiring from service. Since I had business in town today, I offered to see what was

available. But if you intend to insult her—”

Weedell paled. “No, no. Of course not. I misunderstood entirely.” He inhaled deeply. “As you can see, the cottage is fully furnished and—”

Andrew ignored his patter, too busy castigating himself to care about details. He’d done Chloe a disservice by agreeing to help. Weedell suspected that he sought lodging for his mistress. When he discovered Chloe’s age and her relationship to the impoverished Sir Nigel, he would be sure of it. How would that affect her plans to teach?

He wondered if she realized how precarious her position would be once she left the protection of her own class. Any man who helped her would be suspect, yet buying a cottage on her own would leave her open to insult, if not fraud. He could perhaps shield her from the worst of it, but her age and appearance would hamper her for years.

At seven-and-twenty, Chloe was too young to set up her own household, even with a companion. Doing so would tarnish her reputation, making it difficult to find students. And her looks would compound the problem. Even merchant-class mothers would think twice before inviting a pretty girl into the house, no matter how menial her position.

But he had promised to help, so he would do his best.

Rose Cottage was smaller than it appeared from the road. Besides the tiny sitting room, it contained only an equally tiny dining room, with two cramped bedrooms upstairs. Cooking facilities and space for one servant filled a shed addition on the back. The only outbuilding was a hen house.

Weedell wanted an immediate answer on Rose Cottage and was again pressing for an offer on Fields House, certain that he could convince Peter to sell on the morrow. An hour passed before he finally accepted defeat and returned to his office.

Andrew shook his head. The cottage met Chloe’s requirements for price and location, but his gut didn’t like it.

Had she thought clearly about her plans? Teaching the squire’s daughters while she lived at Fields House was one thing, but he doubted anyone from the gentry would hire her once she moved into her own establishment. Some would openly brand her a harlot.

Weedell might be an obsequious coxcomb, but his reaction was typical. Even with a companion, the situation would appear scandalous. And if she failed to attract students, she might well become a harlot. Her savings could not support her for long.

He stopped at the apothecary for a tin of tooth powder while his mind fretted over the problem. He hated to see her reduced to servitude. She had always been so full of life.

Yet he could see no alternative. She could not return to Fields House, for Peter might yet lose the estate. Moving in with her guardian was likewise impossible, for Mr. Barry was a widower who lived in a small cottage in Exeter. And staying in service would break her spirit. Too many employers abused their companions. At least teaching would afford her a modicum of control over her life. If only she had enough money to live quietly without relying on the good will of others.

Of course, amassing as much as she had was a minor miracle. If not for her inheritance—

New questions lashed through his mind. The estate ledger had mentioned neither trusts nor any income since Sir Nigel had sold some hay in early August, so how had he replaced Chloe's dowry? And why had a man obsessed with details made no ledger entries for two weeks? Could he have changed that much?

Andrew doubted it, which meant Sir Nigel had deliberately kept the transactions secret. Having blamed his financial woes on Peter's gaming, perhaps he'd begun hiding money. Did he keep a second ledger – the real ledger – hidden? Was that what Peter was seeking?

Another possibility was that Sir Nigel had quit keeping a ledger at all and stopped using a bank. Hiding cash in the house would prevent Peter from learning about a windfall. But the least hint of such a hoard would invite intruders, putting Sally and the other servants in danger.

Chloe might know if Sir Nigel had any secret hiding places. They needed to talk anyway. Laura's casually cruel sniping made it vital that she quit immediately. If William had misjudged the situation, then Laura might be worse than even Kevin had claimed.

George Truitt nearly ran him down as he left the apothecary.

"Behind schedule?" Andrew asked. The male Truitts should have reached Seabrook by now.

"Badly." George shook his head. "Father just dispatched a footman to Seabrook. If I'd known you were in town, I could have saved him the trouble."

"Problems?" Andrew stepped aside to let a formidable dowager pass.

"A business emergency. Ashley took a fall while hunting last week," he explained, naming his father's partner. "He'll be all right, but his head is still fuzzy, so Father must see to anything important. But we should be at Seabrook by Thursday." He frowned.

"Miss Truitt will be disappointed, though I'm sure she'll understand."

"Perhaps, though I wanted to join her before Miss Seabrook arrives." His face darkened in embarrassment. "Pardon me. That came out badly."

"It matters not. Why should Miss Truitt need protecting? Even Laura can't object to her brother's choosing a wife."

George relaxed. "Perhaps you don't know about last year."

"Obviously not." But Andrew's heart sank. What had Laura done now?

"Miss Seabrook spread lies accusing Martha of secret liaisons with Jasper Rankin before he was banished to the Caribbean. Martha protested, but everyone turned against her. Even Lord Seabrook stopped calling. It was weeks before he resumed his courtship. Martha was heartbroken."

"You have proof that Laura was behind the tales?" he asked, though he recognized the tactic. She'd done the same thing in London during her Season.

"Yes. Mrs. Telcor discovered the truth in the end."

Andrew let out a wretched sigh. "Despicable, but I doubt that William heard the tales." William often became so immersed in estate matters that he spoke to no one. And he was rather slow at times. But whether William had snubbed Martha or not, Andrew could at least ease George's anger. "You should understand that William is very methodical when making decisions. And he was badly burned by a scheming chit several years ago. It sounds as though he considered this commitment quite thoroughly before passing the point of no return. He has never mentioned Laura's machinations, so I suspect he



knows nothing about them. But I will watch her when she arrives. I'll not tolerate scheming."

"Thank you." George bade him farewell, then hurried toward his office.

Andrew shook his head. Why the devil had William invited Laura to this house party? It made as much sense as inviting a fox into the hen house. Two years at Moorside had failed to instill humility or family loyalty or any other virtue. William must accept the truth.

He headed for the White Hart, only to be stopped by Mrs. Telcor, Exeter's chief gossip. He nearly groaned aloud.

"I heard you called at Fields House just after poor Sir Nigel died," she began, giving him no time to respond to her greeting. "What a horrible accident." But her eyes gleamed.

"Yes. It is dangerous to wander about at night without a candle."

"Most of us can manage the feat. But surely he did not die of a simple fall. I heard that his wife's ghost was chasing him."

"I'm sure you would never believe anything so silly." She might, though. She sought scandal everywhere, always repeating her tales in the most sensational manner possible.

"Then maybe young Peter pushed him."

"That is a very serious charge, Mrs. Telcor. Have you any reason to believe it?"

"You can hardly deny he is a cad," she snapped. "His gaming ruined Sir Nigel."

"That may be, but it is a long way from reckless gaming to pushing a man down the stairs. Nor does the evidence support it. Sir Nigel clearly tripped over a table. Peter was at the Golden Bull at the time."

"So he says. But what was to stop him from slipping away long enough to do the deed? The men who frequent the Bull would slit their own throats before crossing a friend. Peter has no honor, and everyone knows he is desperate for money – and doesn't care how he acquires it. He stole my pearls last week. And I'm not his only victim. Scheming for his inheritance is no worse."

"Sir Nigel's estate is too small to tempt anyone," said Andrew stiffly, despising her lurid speculations even as he had to consider them. "It consists mostly of debts."

But what is this about stolen pearls? Why have I heard nothing of your loss?"

"I should never have allowed him in the house." She shook her head. "And there is no chance to recover anything. He likely sold them the same day. I reported the theft to Lord Rankin when he returned from Bath last Saturday, but he bade me to remain silent. Claimed I'd no proof young Peter took the necklace, as I'd had a dozen callers that day. He even accused me of mislaying the thing myself, if you can believe it."

"He has doubtless seen others make that mistake," Andrew said soothingly, grateful she hadn't called on William with her problem. "As magistrate, he has seen many oddities, so it was a reasonable question despite your long acquaintance. And I'm sure he questioned anyone who might have purchased such a necklace. If it hasn't turned up, there is little else he can do."

"Hmph! I should have consulted Lord Seabrook instead. It would have made him more aware of Peter's character."

"I will mention it to him, but it won't change his findings. The death was clearly an accident."

She dropped the subject. "You seem recovered from your injury."

"As good as new. I'll return to duty soon."

"Will you join the duke in Paris or go elsewhere?" she asked, curiosity and a thirst for the latest news again brightening her voice.

He was debating whether to mention India and thus trigger a lengthy discussion, when two ladies emerged from the confectioner's shop.

"Will you look at that?" Mrs. Telcor exclaimed. "Miss Collier has risen from her sickbed! And without even telling me!"

"You'd best congratulate her before she has a relapse," he suggested quickly, eager to escape. "I must return home."

"Yes. Of course. Give my regards to your family." And she was off.

Andrew ducked into a side street and hurried to the White Hart. How did his new information fit the incidents at Fields House? Was Peter really a thief? And why was Weedell so determined to sell the estate? Was there a fortune tucked away inside its walls?

He needed to talk to William.

\* \* \* \*

Lord Grayson poked his head into Andrew's room, hoping the captain had returned from his errands. But the room was empty.

Accustomed to achieving all goals, Gray had been frustrated ever since Andrew had turned down his request to design the new Rothmoor Park. Granted, he had spent little time with this brother-in-law, but Mary had confirmed his initial impressions, adding new information gleaned from Andrew's letters.

Andrew did not belong in the army. There was no denying that he did his job well – both promotions had been for merit, for he'd never had the funds to purchase higher rank – but Andrew's temperament was unsuited to war. It was a miracle he'd retained his sanity through the bloodiest battles of the Peninsular conflict. His regiment always seemed to be involved in the heaviest fighting.

Mary's most interesting revelation was that Andrew often wrote about buildings. He rarely mentioned battles or even people, but his descriptions of buildings were almost poetic. He'd obviously studied them, looking beneath the surface decoration to find the buildings' souls. The idea had intrigued Gray even before the incident in the old wing.

After watching Andrew dash off a sketch and elevation nearly as detailed as an architect's final drawing, Gray was convinced that he had the skill and vision to become a renowned designer. Andrew might dismiss that sketch as a trifle, but Gray recognized the understanding that produced both elegant rooms above-stairs and efficient offices below. Yes, Andrew knew this house well, but few in his position would catalog its shortcomings. And fewer would consider solutions. Andrew had done both.

A sketchbook on the washstand caught his eye. Stifling any guilt at prying, he opened it, then nodded in satisfaction. Validating his instincts was always rewarding.

A lump blocked his throat as he skimmed detailed elevations of Spanish villas, French chateaux, and a dozen cathedrals. There were rapid sketches of English manors done from memory or imagination. He suspected the latter. They were brilliant. Notes indicated stress calculations, construction techniques, and embellishments.

Tucking the book under his arm, he headed for his

room and summoned his secretary.

\* \* \* \*

Peter Fields closed the last drawer in his mother's wardrobe and cursed. He'd turned the house upside down without luck.

His mother's suite always made his skin crawl. All her clothes remained. Her sewing bag spilled its contents across a chair. The place had become a shrine to an image that had never existed.

He stifled anger at his father's obsession. Not once had the man admitted that his wife's sweet innocence had been pretense. In truth, she had ignored her children and manipulated her husband. The only argument she'd lost in her life had been over Kevin's commission. In revenge, she'd snubbed her husband, refusing to speak to him again. Chloe was wrong to attribute her withdrawal to grief. It was pique, pure and simple. And a determination to make her husband pay for ignoring her. Not that it mattered.

Where was the bastard's hiding place?

Stomping back to his room, he pulled the journal from beneath the mattress and again read that tantalizing July entry. *Shocked ... blatant fraud ... must pay ... demand recompense for my trouble...*

Blackmail. That explained those despicable trusts as well as the odd sums of money he'd produced recently. It even explained his expectation of an imminent windfall. But the man had been a fool. Multiple demands invited retribution. If he hadn't tumbled down the stairs, they would have killed him.

Damn it! Where had he hidden them?

He cursed himself for not reading the journal sooner. But he hadn't thought to check it until learning about the trusts. Then the burglary had prevented him from reading it until this morning.

Now he knew why the intruder had been so destructive. Had the man recovered the letters?

"They have to be here," he murmured groggily. If they'd found the damnable things, they would have left immediately. Yet every room had been thoroughly searched.

He shivered. The letters constituted his only inheritance. With a mortgage payment due on Monday, he was desperate.

But perhaps the actual letters didn't matter. He had a name and a general idea of the letters' contents, so

he could bluff. He needed money too badly to quibble about the source.

Jacob held two thousand of his vowels, and Woods held another three hundred. Never had his luck been so bad. The bank wouldn't accept shares in the *Gray Gull* in lieu of the mortgage. Nor would they extend the due date.

So the letters were the only commodity he had left. But he wouldn't make the same mistake as his father. One request. No more. Ten thousand would pay his debts, cover this year's mortgage payments, and buy time to rebuild. And maybe that ship would come in after all.

\* \* \* \*

Andrew returned to Seabrook, his head spinning with duties. He had to talk to William. Tomorrow he would arrange time alone with Chloe to make sure she understood the consequences of buying a cottage. Once that was done, he must keep Laura from embarrassing the family and insulting their guests.

The drive had given him time to consider his sister. Laura had probably meddled in William's courtship to make him miserable. She hated seeing others happier than she. Or perhaps it was one of her petty revenges. By the time William had begun courting Martha, Laura had been at Moorside long enough to become bored and lonely. She would have convinced herself it was William's fault. But whatever her reasons, her failure would make her more determined to succeed the next time.

If William weren't so stubborn, he would have left Laura at Moorside this week. Now Andrew must figure out how to prevent her from marring the occasion. And he had to protect Chloe from her spite if he succeeded.

It was enough to make Waterloo seem like a romp in the park.

William met him at the door. "There you are. I've been looking all over for you."

"I had business in Exeter. Did Fields House send for you again?"

"No, thank God. I am truly tired of questioning that pitiful staff. I doubt anyone will stay if there is new trouble."

"Sally and Gramling already plan to leave."

When they reached the library, William poured drinks, then produced Andrew's sketch of the old

wing. "Martha loves this, and I must admit that it sounds interesting. To sleep without drafts..." He laughed. "We tried to arrange the rooms in a convenient way, but neither of us can manage. Would you help?"

"Gladly, though you will need a builder to do the final design."

"Understood."

Andrew also understood. William would save money if Andrew did the preliminary design, assuaging his guilt over the cost. "Let her do this, Will," he murmured. "She doesn't care a fig that her father is wealthier than you, and she would live in a hovel if that were all you had to offer. But don't make her live poorly because you are too stubborn to make her comfortable."

"I know." He pulled out a sketchpad. "This is what we came up with, but it doesn't look right."

"Let's draw it to scale and see how it works. Are these the rooms you want?"

William nodded.

"You've left out the servants' stairs and the butler's pantry. And you should add a morning room to catch the early sunlight. Putting the drawing room on the west side means it won't seem welcoming until afternoon." Grabbing a pencil, he set to work.

Excitement built as he sketched plans. Creating something that would outlast him almost made up for the death and destruction of battle. And since this would be his only chance to design, he would make it elegant and strong, with enough innovation to make William the envy of all who visited.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Wednesday*

Chloe set the last trunk by the front door, relieved that Laura had not questioned why she was packing her entire wardrobe for a five-day visit.

"Are you ready?" she asked Laura, who was listlessly turning pages in a book. Chloe had dressed her in a carriage gown that morning, but Laura never went out without half an hour of debate over gloves, fans, reticules, and bonnets.

"I've told you a hundred times, I'm not going," Laura

snapped. "I will not bless a union with that disgusting merchant. Nor will I watch William drag the family name into the mud."

"You have no choice. Lord Seabrook's carriage will be here shortly," Chloe responded, battling exasperation. Her plan to wear down Laura's objections had died along with her father. Laura had used her absence to fortify her determination and hone her complaints. "How long can you stay at Moorside without his support? He controls both of your trusts and can reduce your income anytime he chooses."

"You're lying!" Laura whipped around to face her. "The money is mine. Mine!"

"That is true, but it is in trust, so you can't touch it without your guardian's permission. Dress the truth however you like to nosy Parkers like Mrs. Tubbs, but don't twist facts with me. Lord Seabrook was very frank when he hired me. So far he is turning over all the trust income for your use. But he can change his mind whenever he chooses."

"He lied. I can do whatever I want. No one can ever force me to follow silly rules again."

"Wrong." Andrew was right: Pandering to Laura's conceit merely encouraged her. "No one can act with impunity, Miss Seabrook. Not me. Not you. Not even the Regent. When Napoleon broke the rules, the world rose *en masse* to punish him. In your case, Lord Seabrook controls where and how you live. He could place bounds on your behavior that are even stricter than society's rules, and no one would stop him. So far he has been more lenient than most guardians, but he will take you in hand if you flout his orders. So you'd best prepare to leave. The carriage—"

Knocking interrupted her.

"—is here," she concluded, heading for the door. She hoped William had sent sturdy footmen, for they might have to bundle Laura inside by force.

As she pulled the door open, her knees turned to water. "Andrew! We didn't expect you to fetch us."

"I thought you might need help persuading her," he murmured.

She felt her face redden.

"As I suspected. Has she been giving you trouble?"

"No more than usual."

"I'll handle her. You help West." He nodded toward the coachman. "Tell him how to load the luggage." He

strode into the sitting room.

Knowing West needed no help, she pointed to the pile of trunks, then followed Andrew. But angry voices stopped her short of the doorway.

"I won't, I tell you," shouted Laura. "I won't endure pity from that jumped-up mushroom. You are hateful to even suggest it."

"This isn't your party," snapped Andrew in return. "No one will pay you the slightest heed unless you force them to notice you."

"Liar. Everyone stares at me and whispers behind their fans. It's bad enough for an hour in the village, but I can't endure it day and night for a week."

Andrew's fist slammed into the fireplace surround. "Do you honestly believe anyone cares a fig for a few scars? You should be grateful to be alive."

"Alive? This isn't living," Laura cried. "Locked away in this godforsaken place, with nothing to do day after day, week after week. Laughed at and ridiculed wherever I go. Cut by fools who—"

"You live here by choice. As for the scars, people notice them only because your veils and your behavior draw attention to them. Plenty of people are marked by misfortune, yet most live normal lives."

"But they were unimportant to begin with, so nobody cares. My scars are a great tragedy, and everyone knows it. *Poor Laura. She used to be so beautiful.*" Her voice cracked.

"I can't imagine anyone saying that," said Andrew stoutly.

"How would you know?" she demanded. "You disappear for years, reveling in glamour and adventure without sparing a thought for those you left behind. How can you possibly understand the pain I've suffered?"

Andrew's voice grew dangerous. "Glamour? Adventure? You are missing more than a few bricks if you believe that. War is sordid at best and a nightmare the rest of the time."

"But you can travel and seek excitement. I am imprisoned."

"It is true that following the drum offers a host of new experiences. Like being packed so tightly into a ship's hold that the smell of unwashed bodies makes it impossible to keep food down. Or being billeted in peasant huts for months on end."



“Huts!”

“I don’t mean to brag, but officers enjoy the best accommodations. My men sleep in tents and sometimes in the open. Then there is the adventure of being shot. Of course, you managed that without leaving England.”

“That’s not adventure. It ruined my life.”

“Ruined your life? What ruined you is your own stubborn arrogance. If you’d listened to the doctor instead of fleeing only two days after your injury, you would have sustained only a mild blemish. It’s your own fault the wound festered. I’m sorry for it, but that was two years ago.”

“Right!” choked Laura. “Two years of stares and pity. Two years without society, without parties, without seeing anyone but servants and merchants and that annoying Mrs. Tubbs. The pain is worse every day.”

“That’s not pain. That is cowardice and self-pity. Pain is watching friends torn to pieces by cannonballs. Pain is marching three days through blinding heat without food or water. Pain is the agony Kevin suffered because you drove him to a life that killed him. There is nothing adventurous about the military, Laura – long marches in stifling heat or biting cold, setting up camp in pouring rain and a foot of mud, sharing space with a dozen others.”

“Quit exaggerating. You’ve traveled the world.”

“The world is a dirty place, Laura. And the parts of it I’ve seen have all been at war. You would have hated it – mean accommodations, wearing the same clothes day and night for months on end, constant irritation from boils and insects and festering cuts. Dinner is usually a mess of pottage, with a few shreds of meat if we are lucky. Kevin would have gone mad having to face that for years on end. He nearly went mad as it was, for he wasn’t lucky enough to expire poetically.” His voice rolled over her protest. “He endured three days of agony before it was over. The surgeons tried to save him, removing an arm and a leg. That inflicted more pain, for they didn’t have brandy to dull the feel of knives slicing into flesh and saws cutting through bone. It was his only chance of survival, so he endured it. But in the end, it was hopeless.”

“Why should I care?” demanded Laura. “He chose to leave, then chose to mutilate himself. He’s better off dead. Who wants to live as a cripple?”

Chloe gripped a table to keep from clawing at Laura's throat. Thank God she could leave soon. Laura's callousness turned her stomach.

"Heartless as ever," said Andrew with a sigh. "How I wish you had been at Waterloo. Seeing men insane from pain, delirious from fever, or black from blood poisoning might have knocked some sense into you. Or perhaps not. You care only for your own aggrieved self. It means nothing to you that I nearly lost my leg only ten weeks ago. If I'd been unconscious when the doctor reached me, it would be gone."

Chloe swallowed tears, both for Kevin and for Andrew. She'd had no idea war was so cruel. Death she understood, but she'd never considered the many awful ways one could achieve it.

Laura threw herself onto a chair, sending it screeching across the flagstone floor. "What difference does it make now?" she demanded. "You recovered and can go your merry way. I'm marred for life."

"As am I and many others," he snapped. "My leg still hurts, and will likely do so forever. But unlike you, I don't waste time wallowing in self-pity."

"Wallowing! Why, you pigheaded, arrogant—"

"Wallowing," he confirmed, ignoring her outburst. "What else have you been doing for the past two years? Even worse, you use your self-inflicted misery to justify hurting others. Does that really make you feel better?"

"You have no idea what I've endured!" she screamed.

"Nor do you."

"How dare you lecture me after ignoring us for years? You know nothing about society. Only the perfect are acceptable. Now that I'm scarred, people hate me. Even the family tries to make me miserable."

"No one is plotting against you," snapped Andrew. "And you are the only person I know who dismisses people for imperfect appearance."

"Hah!"

"Truth, Laura. I've met most of the members of society at one time or another, for I was often in London before the Peninsular campaign. They turned their backs on your behavior, not your appearance. This entire situation is of your own making. You spread scurrilous tales about your rivals. You arranged an assignation with the worst scoundrel in England. You fled London without even a maid, then

didn't turn up in Devonshire for two full weeks – that scandal alone banished you from polite drawing rooms. Then you begged and pleaded and threatened until William finally let you leave Seabrook. If you are unhappy, you've no one to blame but yourself."

"Liar. Even peasants ridicule me. I cannot go outside without being spit upon."

"I doubt it. Wake up, Laura. If others seem uncomfortable, it is because you make them so. Not your looks, but your irascible temper and spiteful tongue. People are sick of your megrims. They are tired of your criticism and endless complaints. Your appearance doesn't matter."

"If they are so tired of me, then leave me alone."

"No. William wants everyone at Seabrook, and I promised to fetch you. You have five minutes to collect your bonnet and whatever else you need. Then we are leaving. And don't make the mistake of thinking I can't carry you. I've toted larger bundles than you, even with this leg."

"You hate me, too."

"No, though you may drive me to it if you keep this up. It's time to take a good look at yourself. If you don't like your present life, then change it. Find something useful to do. Make friends. Help others. If you show a pleasant face, the world will welcome you."

"You don't understand!"

Chloe cringed against the wall as Laura stormed from the sitting room and stomped up the stairs. Andrew followed.

"You will regret this," she murmured, conscious of the thin walls. "Laura cannot tolerate being wrong, so she will lash out at anyone who forces her to look at the truth. And she hates rules. If you want her to behave at Seabrook, you have to convince her that cooperation is in her own best interests."

He snorted. "Laura loves power, so she revels in making people grovel. Placating her feeds her arrogance by confirming her power. Papa spoiled her rotten. It's time somebody put a foot down and made her behave. Rockhurst managed it when she lived with them, but William let her revert."

"Laura wanted a London Season. Since Rockhurst was the only one who could provide it, she did everything possible to turn him up sweet. But the moment she arrived in town, her true nature emerged.

She hates Rockhurst for forcing obedience. If she hadn't left London so suddenly, she would have sought revenge. She might do so yet. After two years of her company, I can guarantee that she has not forgotten a single slight."

"But that's mad."

"Exactly. Laura is not right and never was."

"No. She's just spoiled and willing to play whatever role will win her way. But I'm glad you will soon be out of her household. Have you given notice yet?"

"Not until William's guests leave. She will cause even worse trouble if I mention it now. And I need to find a cottage."

He nodded. "I looked at several yesterday. The best is Rose Cottage, just outside Exeter."

She remembered passing it. Charming, with roses climbing the façade and crossing the thatched roof.

"Perhaps I can visit it tomorrow morning. Laura won't rise before noon."

"We'll plan on it." He glanced up the stairs as something crashed above.

"Thin walls." Chloe hesitated, but Laura would remain in her room for several times the five minutes Andrew had specified. "Why did you never tell me Kevin died in pain?"

His shoulders sagged. "I'd hoped you wouldn't hear that."

"I don't need protection."

"Not now, perhaps, but when he died, I hadn't seen you in years. Death is shocking enough. There seemed little purpose in hurting you worse."

"But three days of agony?"

"I exaggerated. It wasn't quite that bad." He frowned. "Once the fighting stopped, I sought him out, then stayed with him until the end, making sure he had water and what little laudanum I could find. He was comatose much of the time, surfacing only occasionally. That is typical of amputation patients, by the way. The mind protects against too much pain. Even when he was awake, fever kept him delirious, so he wasn't aware of his condition. His voice would ramble, recalling childhood incidents, but he didn't know what he was saying or who was with him. He was lucid only once, quite briefly, on the last day. He knew he was dying. I convinced him that God was not punishing him for fleeing Laura's plots, but peace of

mind was all I could give him. He begged me to break the news to you gently, as he did not want you to grieve more than necessary – he knew Sir Nigel would not return his body to England, so there was no need to divulge the extent of his injuries.”

“That was so like him.” She shook her head.

“Perhaps that’s why I suspected there was more to his death than anyone had said.”

“Put it behind you, Chloe. He is at peace – far more than he would have been had he lived. He was my closest friend, and his death tore a hole in my heart that remains to this day. But he was too sensitive. The horrors of war would have overthrown his reason. Perhaps God was merciful in taking him so quickly.”

“I have tried to believe that. Hearing how bad war can be will make it easier. I’m amazed you survived intact.”

A sad smile twisted his mouth, but Laura’s return prevented a reply.

Andrew grimaced at Laura’s scowl. “Feel free to indulge your temper on me,” he said as he helped her into the carriage. “Yell as much as you want. But the moment we pass Seabrook’s gates, you will be on your best behavior. This is William’s party. If you disrupt it, no matter how mildly, I will personally humiliate you in front of every guest.”

\* \* \* \*

Andrew’s ears rang by the time they reached Seabrook. Laura’s megrims meant he couldn’t leave Chloe alone with her, so he’d tied his horse to the back and ridden inside. And just as well. Laura had complained every step of the way, her grievances running from ridiculous to spiteful. She definitely needed discipline. If only he could set her on a battlefield for a few days. She would learn what was important – and it wasn’t her whims.

But he let her rant, hoping that the exercise would satisfy her.

“Smile,” he reminded her as they climbed the steps to Seabrook’s front door. “Remember that you are a guest. Mrs. Moulding has assigned you the rose room.”

“But I—”

“You moved away, so can no longer call this home.” His glare shut her mouth. “Miss Fields will join you in a moment. You gave me no opportunity to tell her about her brother.”

Laura tensed, but finally headed for the house.

"What about Peter?" asked Chloe.

He led her to a corner of the portico to assure privacy. "Someone broke into Fields House after we left on Monday." He described the damage. "Either the intruder believes that Sir Nigel hid money from Peter, or he is searching for something. Do you know of any secret niches or safes he might have used?"

She frowned. "There's a priest's hole behind the wardrobe in Father's dressing room."

"How does it open?" Perhaps that was the key. While its bottom had been torn up, the wardrobe had not been moved.

"Peter might know. I only know about it because it was open when I entered Grandfather's room without knocking one day. But that was at least twenty years ago. It was empty."

He nodded. But the existence of an unsearched priest's hole meant the household remained in danger. If Sir Nigel had indeed hidden money, that was the most likely spot. William must warn Peter.

"Have you any idea who the intruder might be?" asked Chloe.

"There is no way to tell until we know what the man seeks." Jinks had learned that Sir Nigel had spent freely in recent weeks, but no one knew where the money had come from – which might explain the missing journal.

Changing the subject, he led Chloe inside. "The house is so crowded, we had to put you on the nursery floor. I hope you won't mind."

"Never." She smiled. "It is entirely appropriate for a companion. And I can manage anything except sharing Laura's room."

"I'm not that cruel. Let me know if she threatens to cause trouble."

She nodded, then followed a footman upstairs.

\* \* \* \*

Laura slammed the door behind her and glared at the rose room. It was insufferable to lodge the daughter of the house in such squalor. The size alone made it suitable only for servants.

Red mist clouded her eyes as she recalled Andrew's lies. *Show a pleasant face*, indeed. Why was he trying to humiliate her?

Oh, she'd tried, running a gauntlet of servants and

family on her way upstairs. But her smiles hadn't deflected their sly insults. And pleasant greetings did not prevent their glee at her predicament.

"Welcome home, Miss Laura," Fitch had said – but his eyes had slid past her ugly face, and he'd taken obscene delight in directing her to this hovel.

"Lovely gown. That one was always my favorite," Catherine had purred after inquiring about her journey. But Laura had heard the sarcasm that derided the outdated dress and drew attention to her own stylish creation.

"Hello, Aunt Laura," Sarah had chirped as Laura had turned toward her room. "You look pretty today." Laura had nearly slapped her. That lazy governess had let her escape from the nursery again. And knowing that even Sarah felt obligated to draw attention from her scars made her furious.

They had insulted her intelligence in other ways, too. Every one of them had smirked because a scheming mushroom would soon take her place as mistress of Seabrook Manor.

It had to stop.

Mrs. Truitt's ties to great houses meant nothing. Her ancestress had severed all connection to the polite world the day she had wed a nobody. And Mr. Truitt's eyes were firmly fixed above his station. Welcoming the offspring of such a pair was unthinkable. Since William was lost to propriety, it was up to her to drive Martha away.

She had nearly succeeded in bringing William to his senses last year, but he was stubborn as well as stupid. Expecting him to do his duty would not work, so she must take matters into her own hands – though it would be easier to make Martha cry off if her own credit wasn't suffering unjust persecution.

Hatred churned in her breast as she reviewed her many enemies. Mary had stolen her beau. Grayson had hired Turner to destroy her face – if only she commanded his wealth, she could return the favor. Rockhurst had spread poisonous tales about her. William had banished her to Moorside. Andrew treated her like a recalcitrant child despite having no authority over her. Chloe considered herself superior to her employer.

They had driven off her beaux, turned society against her, then locked her away in the most boring

prison possible. It was time they paid. Only then would she be free to pursue the life she deserved. Never again would anyone dictate her behavior.

\* \* \* \*

“Did you learn anything new while I was out?” asked Andrew as Jinks brushed the dust from his riding jacket.

“That footman, John Rivers, is working for Squire Hawkins now,” Jinks answered. “He loves his new position and was heard to say that Sir Nigel did him a favor by turning him off.”

Andrew nodded, but it sounded as though John harbored ill will toward Sir Nigel – if not for letting him go, then for earlier problems. The only question was whether he would jeopardize his current position by seeking revenge. “What about Simms?”

“No one knows where he is. The consensus is that he left the area, but no one saw him board either the mail or the stage. He may be hiding somewhere.”

Andrew sighed.

“Rumor is rife about the others on your list, too, sir,” continued Jinks.

“How?”

“Sir Peter has been gaming very heavily lately, and losing consistently. Estimates of his debts run as high as three thousand guineas, though that number comes from Mrs. Telcor. She never passes up an opportunity to complain about him.”

“Hardly a surprise. She blames him for the loss of her pearls.”

“Nothing new is known about that incident.” Jinks stored the jacket in the wardrobe and turned his ministrations to Andrew’s dress uniform. “But you were right about Mr. Weedell. His man of business panicked over those rumors that we’d lost Waterloo. Sold everything at a huge loss. Weedell is scrambling to recoup.”

That explained his determination to turn over as much property as possible, decided Andrew as Jinks held out his pelisse. But it raised other questions. How far would Weedell go to rebuild his fortune? Was he behind the housing square swindle – those shares were dated two weeks after Waterloo. And if so, had Sir Nigel found proof that it was a fraud?

Still frowning, he headed for the drawing room. Only when he reached the stairs did he remember that he’d



meant to ask where Jinks had put his sketchbook. He could have sworn he'd left it on the washstand yesterday, but it had been missing when he'd looked for it last night. He'd wanted to try some new ideas for the old wing.

\* \* \* \*

Chloe paused in the drawing room doorway, undecided whether to enter or follow Laura back upstairs. Laura had told her to go ahead, but her excuse for returning to her room was flimsy at best. Was the prospect of facing the assembly so terrifying that she'd fled?

It shouldn't be. Most of those gathered tonight were family, eager to believe that she had adjusted to her scars and was ready to move on. Manners would prevent the others from noticing Laura's face.

Lady Rockhurst spotted Chloe and hurried across the drawing room, the diagonal slash of embroidery that decorated her gown glinting in the light of several dozen candles. "My condolences, Miss Fields," she murmured. "Losing a father is painful."

"Thank you," said Chloe absently, distracted by the sudden realization of Laura's problem. With no way to remedy it, she could only warn the family. "Your gown is lovely, my lady. Miss Seabrook will turn positively green when she sees it."

Lady Rockhurst's eyes darkened. "Oh, dear. She always made sure her gowns were more stylish than ours. I hadn't realized—"

"She has bought nothing new since leaving London."

A glance at the assembly increased Chloe's fears. Every gown in the room had a very high waistline and a hem that revealed the ankle. Clocked stockings were rife. Lady Grayson wore a square-necked gown in willow green stripes with a pleated flounce. Miss Truitt glowed in pale yellow trimmed in emerald, while her mother seemed imposing in purple and diamonds. Miss Sullivan's white lace over rose satin would fit into any London drawing room. Laura's gown was lovely – pink set off by wine ribbons, with a lace apron and delicate flowers around the bodice – but its lower waistline and floor-brushing hem marked it as out-of-date.

Before she could decide what to do, Lady Grayson joined them. "Welcome, Miss Fields. My condolences on the death of your father. No matter what differences

divided you, it must still hurt.”

Chloe nodded. Needing time to consider solutions to Laura’s latest problem, she turned the subject. “I peeked in the nursery before coming down and cannot believe how much the boys have grown since I saw them last year.”

That set the proud mothers to bragging shamelessly.

Chloe listened with half an ear while debating whether to fetch Laura or let her remain upstairs. Missing dinner would make appearing tomorrow even more difficult, but it might give Chloe a chance to remake one of Laura’s gowns. Raising the waistline would also raise the hem, and removing the aprons that had been so popular two years earlier was simple. Before she could decide, Lady Rockhurst’s daughter Sarah joined them, accompanied by her governess. Ladies Rockhurst and Grayson moved on.

Sarah glanced over her shoulder to make sure no one else stood nearby. “How do you tolerate Aunt Laura?” she murmured. “I heard her shouting at you upstairs. Her demands must make you furious.”

“Manners, Sarah,” warned Miss Griswold.

“She’s right, Sarah. But it was an honest question, and one I don’t mind answering.” Though not in detail. Laura had been unhappy because cosmetics and dangling ringlets did not completely hide her scars. Heavy veils were impossible indoors. “Miss Seabrook remains self-conscious, so a gathering like this intimidates her. People who feel insecure often lash out. The trick is to never take her megrims personally.”

“And to remember that it is not your fault that Laura is missing a brick or two,” added Andrew, joining them.

Chloe’s heart quickened. He was amazingly handsome in full dress uniform. Medals gleamed against a green tunic – a reminder that he’d often been cited for bravery. His green pelisse stretched across broad shoulders, a scarlet sash traced his trim waist, and the green pantaloons sculpted powerful thighs, though the injured one remained thinner. His eyes seemed calmer tonight – or perhaps that was a trick of the light, for the reflections from his uniform darkened their color.

Sarah almost stifled her giggle.

“That was not funny, Sarah,” murmured Miss

Griswold.

"I know, Grissy. But it sounded funny the way he said it."

"Said what?" asked Laura.

Chloe tensed. She hadn't seen Laura arrive. Worse, Laura's tone revealed pique, not trepidation. She was up to something.

"That the rain in Spain fell only during battles. I don't think we fought a single engagement dry," said Andrew lightly. "Aren't you going to greet Sarah and Miss Griswold?"

"A child and a servant? William demeans himself by allowing such creatures in the drawing room." Her dismissal included Chloe.

"An odd assertion from someone who took charge of the household at Sarah's age," drawled Andrew. But fury turned his eyes to green ice.

Laura turned to Chloe. "Fetch my fan, Fields. It is far too warm in here."

"There is no time," said Andrew.

"She must make the time. Her job is to see me coiffed and accoutered. If she'd done it properly, I would have my fan."

Chloe wanted to protest – Laura had refused to carry a fan this evening – but she knew Laura was waiting to pounce. Before she could nod and leave the room, Lady Rockhurst returned.

"Heavens, Laura," she said with a laugh. "Since when do you carry a fan to dinner? You've always complained that it interferes with eating. Come along and meet the Sullivans."

"Later. I must deal with a small domestic matter first."

"Enough, Laura." Andrew's voice could cut glass, though it didn't carry beyond their group. "Miss Fields is a companion, not a maid. If you need the fan, fetch it yourself, but I would advise against it. Fitch is announcing dinner. Miss Fields?" He extended his arm to escort her.

Laura glared at him.

Chloe wanted to flee, but she accepted his arm. Protesting his interference would only make matters worse. But she would have to treat him to some plain speaking.

Laura didn't want to be here, and when Laura was unhappy, someone always paid. To spare the other

guests, Chloe was willing to be the target. But Andrew had foiled the attempt to humiliate her – the address more suited to a maid, the public disclosure of her supposed inadequacies, the plan to make her miss dinner. Thus he had given Laura a new grievance.

Laura was collecting grievances and would exact retribution for every one.

The next five days stretched interminably ahead. It was easy to tell Sarah to ignore Laura's megrims, but she couldn't. It was her job to keep Laura from embarrassing William.

## CHAPTER NINE

Dinner had been a disaster, admitted Chloe as she slipped into the empty music room. William had made a huge mistake by inviting Laura. Even Chloe hadn't realized how much worse it would be than last year. Not only did Laura believe that William had banished her so he could install Martha in her place, but she apparently thought Andrew was enforcing the plot.

The drawing room confrontation had signaled Laura's determination to find fault with everything, but even Chloe hadn't expected her outburst at dinner. Lady Rockhurst, as the oldest Seabrook sister, was acting as hostess. Martha Truitt occupied the seat of honor to William's right. Laura sat midway down the table, with Chloe across from her, too far away to influence her, yet near enough to sense her stretching control.

To Laura, the position was an insult. And it didn't help that she received the same deference from her dinner partners as Chloe did from hers. Laura had gone on the attack during the first course.

"We are so relieved that Miss Truitt accepted William's hand," she'd responded to Mr. Sullivan. "We'd given up finding someone blind enough to overlook the brutality he tries to hide. Most girls run in the other direction the moment they become acquainted." She'd laughed gaily while Mr. Sullivan reddened and Chloe gritted her teeth.

That had been only the beginning. By the second course, she had insinuated – under the guise of sparkling flirtation – that Lady Grayson had played her husband false since wedding him, that Andrew had sold battle plans to the French, and that Lord

Rockhurst owned two London brothels.

Then she revived her old stories against Miss Truitt, adding details unsuited for mixed company or a formal dinner. With each new statement, her voice grew louder until it dominated the room. Miss Truitt blanched. William turned purple, making him look as vicious as Laura had suggested.

The breach of propriety was so blatant that no one knew what to do. As the guests sat in stunned silence, Chloe barely restrained Lord Grayson from leaping for Laura's throat. She was wracking her brain for a way to whisk Laura away when Andrew spoke up from three seats to her left.

"Save the lies for a more appropriate time, Laura," he drawled. "Perhaps you should consider writing gothic novels. You obviously have the imagination for it."

"I— I—" she stammered, but Andrew's glare stopped her cold.

"You are a guest in this house, not its master," he said frigidly. "Don't forget your place again."

With the spell broken, everyone resumed dining. Mr. Sullivan cut Laura before beginning an animated conversation with Lady Grayson. On Laura's other side, Mr. Wyath developed a keen interest in his beef, removing her last audience.

Laura remained silent for the remainder of the meal, but Chloe knew her well. People were not reacting to her revelations the way she had expected. Most had cut her instead of shunning her victims. Not only would their disapproval support her claim that society was conspiring against her, but she was primed to explode, and Chloe would make an excellent target.

Chloe refused to take more abuse in public, so she slipped away when the ladies moved to the drawing room for charades. It wasn't difficult. She followed the older guests, who were headed for a sitting room to play cards. Lady Rockhurst was staying at Laura's elbow, her expression promising punishment if Laura caused new trouble.

So Chloe had ducked into the music room. She needed to practice. After two years as Laura's companion, she found that her fingers were rusty – bad news if she hoped to teach. It was the largest drawback of Moorside – even worse than Laura herself. Laura had no interest in music, so the cottage lacked

an instrument.

Buying a pianoforte would be Chloe's first act after resigning.

There was so much she needed to do immediately, she admitted as her fingers moved into Mozart's *Sonata in C*. Find a companion. Find a cook – Sally had never cooked in her life. Let people know that she was accepting students. And brace for Peter's censure. His pride was as strong as their father's. He would be furious to find her at Rose Cottage. And despite his having no legal control over her, his antagonism could drive away potential students.

Setting up her own establishment had already become more complicated than she'd expected. She had planned this step for six years, yet she hadn't considered the details. Now a new problem occurred to her several times a day. But she would manage.

She repeated the first movement of the Mozart, her fingers moving with more confidence this time. The music lightened her heart. She hadn't realized how badly she'd missed it.

Living near Exeter meant that her neighbors would know her as an honorable lady forced to make her own way because of poverty. That would make it easier to attract students. And if some of those students initially came out of pity, she could bear it. They would stay because of her talent.

The upper classes would react differently, of course. In their world – her former world – ladies did not live alone. Breaking those rules would make her a pariah. Never again could she attend a gathering such as this. Her social status would fall below that of a governess – on a par with shopkeepers.

Peter will do more than rant, warned a voice in her head.

Her fingers stumbled. Once she'd regained the flow of notes, she considered her brother.

She had assumed that abandoning her class to live alone and teach would end his interest. But that might not be true. He might drive away students so she wouldn't humiliate him. Or he might sell her into marriage without disclosing her situation – her breeding remained. And she would have little recourse. Her guardian, Mr. Barry, was straitlaced. If one of Peter's friends compromised her, Mr. Barry would demand marriage.

Perhaps she should move away. She would lose the advantage of knowing her potential students, but severing all ties to Devonshire would prevent Peter from using her. It was such an obvious solution that she cursed herself for not seeing it sooner. It would have saved Andrew the bother of visiting the house agent.

Regret that she would never see Andrew again made her fingers stumble. His voice echoed: *How can you live with her?*

Only now did she admit that working for Laura meant that she heard news about Andrew.

Pathetic.

The dreams hadn't died. Instead they lurked in her heart, sabotaging any chance of happiness. She was no better than Laura, unwilling to accept that childish fantasies could never be real.

Andrew had spoken the truth even before that day in the orchard, though she had not listened. She'd been so sure that she could convince him to wed her. But a boy of sixteen had no interest in marriage, no matter what his feelings. His duty had lain with the army. Her duty lay at home. Thus they'd had no future together. She should have set aside her infatuation and found a real suitor.

His morning description of the army's hardships convinced her that she could not have endured such a life. While she was prepared to live in a cottage, she could not tolerate mud, dirt, and discomfort. Andrew rarely stayed in one spot for long. He owned few possessions. His life contained no music, no beauty, and very little pleasure.

And it never would. His next post might offer worse conditions.

So she had to forget the air dreams of childhood. They had already cost her any chance of marriage. It was time to concentrate on the future – which would be easier away from Devonshire. If she remained, she would hear news of him, keeping the dream alive even if he were gone for another eleven years. It was better to sever all connections.

Moving would make it harder to attract students, so she must conserve money. The easiest way would be to forgo a companion – possible if she were a widow. And changing her name would prevent Peter from finding her. If anyone asked about her husband, she could

describe Kevin's death.

Her fingers sped into the sonata's third movement as her mind raced. Retaining her background as the daughter of a baronet would enhance her position as a teacher. Sally could be an old family retainer pressed into duty as a companion and maid of all work. They could find someone to cook and help with the cleaning.

Excitement swelled along with the coda.

\* \* \* \*

"What the devil happened to Laura?" demanded William, dragging Andrew into the library after dinner. They had endured half an hour of tension before releasing the gentlemen to join the ladies.

"What do you mean?"

William ran his fingers through his hair in a gesture he hadn't used in years. "I can't believe that outburst at dinner. She's always been gracious, except ... well ... there was that unpleasantness in London two years ago, but devil it, what happened tonight? I thought she'd mellowed."

Andrew had been bracing for this discussion from the moment he'd realized that William knew nothing of substance about Laura. "When did you last see her?"

"A year ago. She spent a very pleasant week here ... well ... there was a bit of a tiff with Martha, but it was all a misunderstanding. They settled their differences easily enough."

Andrew clenched his fists to keep from pounding his brother. "Don't you pay attention to anything but estate matters?" he demanded. "That tiff, as you call it, occurred because Laura told everyone in Exeter that Martha had had a flaming affair with Jasper Rankin before he left for the Caribbean. Martha was nearly drummed out of town. Only the fact that Mrs. Telcor recognized Laura's tactics – she knew that Laura had concocted a similar story to destroy a rival in London – saved Martha from ostracism."

"What?"

"Ostracism. Pay attention. If I had realized how oblivious you were to what happens around you, I would have argued against inviting her. Instead I believed you, which meant I didn't realize the full danger until I'd dragged her here."

"Nonsense. She has always been sweet – helping the tenants, caring for the villagers, working beside Catherine in the parish."



“That was ten years ago, and you should know that Laura uses smiles and flattery to manipulate people. I can’t recall a single favor that wasn’t motivated by self-interest. Now that she lives on her own, she has discarded the false smiles that kept Father in line and honed her grievances – and believe me, she’s found someone to blame for every setback she’s suffered in the last ten years. Now she’s out for revenge. Tonight was just a sample. Chloe thinks she can control her, but I doubt anyone can. Laura cooperates only when it will gain her something. I told her that I’ll smear her name from one end of the kingdom to the other if she embarrasses you, but tonight proves that my threats won’t work. If she no longer cares what people think of her, her need for revenge will take precedence.”

“Dear Lord.” William wrung his hands. “What can we do? She’ll drive Martha away. She has to leave.”

“It’s a little late for that. Chloe is quitting on Sunday, so you can’t send Laura back to Moorside until you find a new companion. In the meantime, we must minimize the damage. Warn Martha to ignore Laura’s diatribes. I’ll ask Gray and Rockhurst to help watch her so we can nip the next attempt in the bud. And it might be a good idea to confine her to her room for a day. That might shock her into behaving once she again joins the company.”

William shook his head like a dog ridding itself of water. “Don’t exaggerate, Andrew. Laura is probably just irritated from her journey – you know she hates bouncing over rutted roads – but she always recovers from these starts.” He stiffened his spine, pouring a glass of brandy as he spoke. “I should not have panicked. This is the first time in a year Laura has been out in society, so of course she is nervous. I’ll talk to her. When she realizes that we still admire her beauty, she will settle down.”

“I doubt it.” Andrew paced to the window and back. “Face it, William. You have seen her only twice in four years. Last year she entertained herself by destroying Martha’s reputation. The year before, she was recuperating from her wounds. I was here at the same time, and I know very well she spent most of that period ranting and swearing revenge. From what I’ve witnessed this past week, she is rapidly losing her grip on reality.”

“What are you talking about?”

Andrew accepted brandy, then described Laura's reaction to Sir Nigel's death and her tirade in the carriage. By the end, even William admitted that she would likely cause trouble. But he still refused to punish her.

\* \* \* \*

"So this is where you went," said Andrew from the music room doorway. "Why aren't you in the drawing room?"

Chloe's fingers crashed to a dissonant halt. She opened her mouth to order him away, but brought her tongue under control before she made a fool of herself. "The moment Laura sees me, she'll explode in rage. It is best if she does it in private." She shrugged.

"Don't let her treat you like a slave." His face darkened.

"That is part of my job. And ranting at me diverts her antagonism from others. You should not have thwarted her this evening, for even tiny setbacks make her worse. Don't give her a complaint against you."

"I can take it."

"Don't, Andrew. It would embarrass William to have you publicly brawling with your sister. Besides, she will probably blame me, not you, anyway."

"What can she possibly blame on you?" He sounded incredulous.

She shook her head, dropping her hands into her lap. "You foiled her plot to make me miss dinner, which encourages me to look above my station – that is something she must nip in the bud. My seat at the table bestowed the same consequence as hers – more proof that I am plotting to upstage her. Several people looked closely at her face. She will think they are gloating over her misfortune – again my fault because I advocated attending this gathering, and my application of rice powder failed to conceal the damage. You criticized her at dinner, drawing censure upon her head. Since you also championed me, I must have asked you to mortify her."

"She acts more like a four-year-old than four-and-twenty. At this rate, she could end up in an asylum."

"It may come to that, though she's not truly delusional."

"Explain."

"If she actually believed that black was white, she would not need to manipulate people into following her

lead. She clings to her complaints, though. And she cannot accept that she is no longer perfect.”

“She never was.” He joined her on the bench. “It makes me sick to think of you waiting on her.”

He was so near, she could feel the heat from his body. Flustered, she changed the subject, reminding herself of her future – and his. “I’ve done some serious thinking since we last spoke. Buying a cottage in this area is a bad idea. I should move farther away, where Peter can’t find me.”

He stiffened. “Why?”

She folded her hands in her lap. “His pride will push him into interfering with my business. He has enough credit to drive away students.”

He nodded. “I never really knew Peter. How did he become so different from you and Kevin?”

“Peter inherited Father’s poor judgment and need for instant success. But he missed the pride in family and consideration for future generations that Kevin learned from birth – by the time Peter left the nursery, Father no longer cared about his children. Once Kevin died, it was too late to groom him to be the heir. The wild gaming started immediately. He and Father never met after that without conflict.” When he touched her hand, she moved to the window. His heat raised awareness of everything she couldn’t have. “Not that they’d gotten along earlier. Peter frequently demanded money. His allowance was smaller than Kevin’s had been.”

“That is no surprise. He was a younger son. Mine was smaller than William’s.”

“But Peter wanted a fortune of his own, and he shared Father’s impatience. Even before Kevin died, he was bent on making money. Afterward, it became an obsession. By the time he left Eton two years later, Father had covered massive gaming debts at least three times. He could no longer afford Oxford, so Peter came home – which made him worse.”

“So Peter inherited Sir Nigel’s weaknesses, while Kevin received your mother’s – the sensitivity and indecisiveness. You are lucky to have inherited your parents’ strengths.”

She stifled warmth from the compliment. “That’s why Kevin’s death killed her. Oh, her body lived another six years, but she died the day we heard the news. When I accepted this post with Laura, I hadn’t

spoken to her in more than a year. Nor had Peter.”

“How sad.”

“True, though it made her death easier to bear. The grief had abated long before.”

Andrew moved behind her, sliding his arms around her waist in a gesture of comfort. He’d known that Chloe would feel Kevin’s death deeply, but he’d never considered how it would affect the rest of the family.

His elbow brushed a breast, snapping his libido to attention. Lust scalded every nerve, shocking him into silence. Again he had acted without thinking.

He released her, praying that she had noticed nothing wrong. He could not remind her of that meeting in the orchard. If he seduced her again, she would hate him forever. And if he rekindled her infatuation, he would hate himself.

Wishing he’d left for London before Sir Nigel’s death, he groped in vain for something to say.

She beat him to it. “In the end, Peter and Father were exactly alike. Both wanted money but lacked the patience to earn it by improving the estate or investing wisely. Both were gamblers. Father convinced himself that wild investments were more honorable than cards or dice, but the result was the same.”

“Many people make fortunes from investments,” he reminded her.

“And many win fortunes at cards. But Peter and Father never did, and I doubt Peter will change. They shared an arrogant belief that their abilities were superior, when in fact, both were credulous and inept. They always believed that their next venture would succeed. Father died before he lost his last stake, but Peter still believes. I don’t want to be nearby when his money runs out.”

His heart broke for her, for she was truly alone, without even family to fall back on. But there was little he could do beyond see her settled before he reported to his regiment, and it was possible he couldn’t manage even that. By the time he found a cottage elsewhere, there might be no time to reach London sufficiently intact to convince Major Barnfield that he was well. But he’d promised...

“Tomorrow we will visit Rose Cottage,” he said briskly. “Decide what is good and bad about it and where you want to move. I will find you a cottage.”

“Thank you, Andrew. You are a true friend.”

"We will leave at nine. If Laura objects, I'll deal with her."

He left her. If he stayed any longer, he would kiss her. And that was impossible. Never again would he risk her friendship. It was a miracle that she'd forgiven his last lapse. But he had to keep a tight rein on his libido. She was far more tempting than eleven years ago.

*Stop thinking about her*, he scolded himself. She was a friend, nothing more. Kevin's sister and a childhood playmate. He should not be imagining that sable hair spread across a pillow or those tapered fingers sliding across his chest.

His temperature soared, making him swear. Not wanting to face the drawing room while wearing pantaloons that revealed every bulge, he headed for the library. He should stick to the loose canvas overalls he'd worn on the Peninsula.

The library was occupied.

"Join us," invited Gray when Andrew hesitated in the doorway.

Thomas stood before the fireplace, sipping wine. A broad smile stretched his face. "Congratulate me, Drew," he demanded.

"Why? Did you earn a first in Latin and not mention it?"

Thomas snorted. "Of course not. You know I hate school. I've tried a thousand times to convince William that Oxford is a waste of money."

"William does not think so."

"We will see," said Gray, gesturing with a glass of wine. "I've suggested a compromise."

Andrew poured brandy. "A compromise." He wasn't going to like this. Like Laura, this brother-in-law was a manipulator. Unlike Laura, Gray's schemes sought to better the victim's life, but he sometimes acted before learning all the facts – which was why he'd spent three years under society's censure before Mary rescued his reputation.

Gray crossed his ankles. "Thomas wants to join the navy."

"He would hate it. I've traveled on enough naval vessels to know how brutal they can be. I wouldn't wish that life on a dog."

Thomas gasped.

"Ships can be unpleasant," agreed Gray, gesturing

Thomas to silence. "But conditions vary widely. I think he should decide for himself."

"Easier said than done. The navy might have dropped press gangs now that the war is over, but they are still too short of men to let one go if he decides he doesn't like the life. Officers are in even higher demand than sailors."

"True. Which is why I'm offering him a berth on the *Gray Gull* – fourth mate, which on my ships is a learning position. It is due back in October. Its next voyage will be to China, so he would be gone a year. If he's still interested when he returns, we can discuss permanent employment. If not, he will return to Oxford without protest."

It was a dream offer, Andrew had to admit. A chance for Thomas to prove his mettle with no strings attached. Gray's ships had a reputation for humane conditions and good health as well as profitability. Yet he couldn't like it. Humane or not, life at sea was tedious, uncomfortable, and dangerous.

"Is that truly what you want?" he asked Thomas, staring into his brother's eyes.

"It is."

"Why? If school stifles you, ships will be worse. Gray's vessels may be more spacious than most, but not by much. Have you ever been aboard a ship? Cramped quarters. Monotonous food. No escape for weeks on end, and when you do anchor, you have no more than a few hours ashore in a place where you don't even speak the language."

"But I need to see such places, Andrew. I know everyone laughs at Laura's quest for adventure, but I always understood. I'm the same way." Passion heated his voice. "I need to cross oceans, see other lands, discover different ways of life. And I need to do it myself, not read about other people's exploits."

The words struck a chord. Andrew had felt the same as a young man, which was why he'd not protested the assumption that he would be a soldier.

Wanderlust, he'd called the urge in the secret recesses of his mind. The need to see what was around the corner or beyond the next hill. As a soldier he'd indulged wanderlust to its fullest, visiting South America, North America, most of Europe, and parts of Africa. He'd seen mountains that put England's hills to shame, oceans both hot and cold, impenetrable

jungles, fetid swamps, miles-wide rivers, deserts that lacked a single blade of grass.

After eleven years, the wanderlust was dead. Maybe it had succumbed to the horror of battle, for he'd faced war at the end of every journey. Or maybe it was the discovery that people were the same, no matter how exotic they appeared at first glance. Remove the odd clothes and strange voices and they were no different from his neighbors: goals, fears, squabbles, joys – all the same. In the end, the need to explore had succumbed to hardship, cynicism, and pain.

The admission explained that buried voice that hoped his leg would remain weak. He had no interest in India – not in its sights, its people, or even the chance to amass a fortune. He wanted to stay in England – surely there was some job he was qualified to do. Maybe in a few years, he and Chloe could—

He stifled the thought, forcing his mind back to Thomas. His course was set, with no way to turn back. But he couldn't let Thomas end like him – trapped, impoverished, unable to support a family.

"I know it won't be easy," Thomas was saying. "But I love the sea, and I need to try."

"I understand the temptation, Thomas. And you will probably enjoy your first voyage. The unknown casts powerful lures. But that thrill doesn't last. You need to consider the future. I've known many men who bought colors or went to sea and later came to regret it. But by then they had no alternative – no other skills, no means of support, no possibility of apprenticing for another job. Finish school so you will always have choices."

Thomas shuddered. "I cannot manage another term, Andrew. Not now. My mind cannot stay focused on books. But you needn't fear. I could find a post as a secretary today if need be. Not that I want to. Working for a government official or lord would be as confining as school. I have to try this. Perhaps I'm following a fantasy, as Laura is wont to do, in which case I will meekly return to school and work harder. But if I don't try, I will hate myself forever."

Andrew nodded, recognizing Thomas's determination – and also his sense. The boy had grown so much since his last visit home. It was hard to admit that he was no longer a child or even a stripling. Eighteen made him a man. "Then I'll back you when

you approach William. But he won't be happy about it."

"He forgets that I am not like him. I own no estate, so I'm free to leave. I don't enjoy farming and don't wish to be dependent on him. I've no interest in the church or in government. One soldier in the family is quite enough. But I've been fascinated by the sea for as long as I can remember. I used to ride to the cliffs just to gaze at the water."

"As I said, I'll back your decision. But there's more to being a sailor than gazing at the ocean. It is a dangerous life. Whether you are navy or merchant, you will see battle before long. Piracy is on the rise in many seas."

"That's true," said Gray, shaking his head. "I've lost two ships to pirates in as many years. Others have lost more. My vessels now carry heavier armaments, and every man aboard must know how to use them. I demand regular drills."

Andrew nodded. He didn't like to think of his baby brother in such danger, but by eighteen Andrew had been a seasoned warrior, with the South American campaign behind him.

As he congratulated Thomas on his good fortune, envy dulled his fears. Thomas was lucky – or perhaps he was more aware of his dreams than Andrew had been. If someone had offered an apprenticeship eleven years ago, would he have had the sense to take it? Or would duty have held sway?

He finally escaped the library and headed upstairs to think. It had been a nerve-wracking day – Laura's scheming, Chloe's new plans, Thomas....

So many problems and so little he could do to address any of them. His head spun.

William stopped him at the top of the stairs. "There you are." He sounded relieved. "Fields House has a new crisis."

"What now?" He retraced his steps to the hall.

"Fire."

"How bad?"

"Gramling and the staff extinguished it before sending the groom to fetch me. But Sir Peter is injured. It started in his room."

Andrew cursed as they climbed into William's carriage. Would this day never end? "What happened? Or don't you know?"



"According to the groom, Sir Peter was in an odd humor all day, alternating between fury and euphoria, and drinking heavily. He left at four, returning at five so angry that he refused dinner. He shut himself in the library until retiring at eight. Within an hour Gramling smelled smoke. A lamp had tipped over, setting Peter's room ablaze."

"Why summon you instead of the doctor?"

"Gramling sent for both. The groom stopped here, then left to find Dr. Murphy, who is supposedly attending Mrs. Berger's lying-in."

"In which case, he may not arrive until morning. Mrs. Berger pays well. Peter does not." He grimaced. "Did you tell Chloe?"

"No. Peter is not at death's door, according to the groom. I want to learn more before informing her. Settling Laura will keep her fully occupied this evening."

They fell silent as the carriage raced through the night, but Andrew couldn't relax. Two accidents separated by a reckless break-in. Something was very wrong at Fields House.

\* \* \* \*

Peter was asleep under the influence of laudanum. Gramling and Mrs. Harper hovered in the hall.

"Tell me about the fire," William ordered.

Gramling's hands were singed, but the house was safe. The damage was confined to Peter's bedroom.

"It started when an oil lamp overturned, soaking the bedcurtains," Gramling croaked, his voice roughened by smoke. "It's a miracle Sir Peter survived. The flames had spread to the wall and floor."

"How much wine had he consumed?"

"I can't rightly say, for he often rides out. He's put away several bottles since the funeral – though one cannot blame a man for drowning his grief."

Andrew nearly snorted. Any grief arose from poverty, which was why Andrew couldn't acquit him of the burglary. His desperate search for valuables could have caused damage he had to explain.

"How much today?" asked William, pressing for specifics.

"Three bottles. Possibly more. I haven't checked the brandy decanter in the library. And he was out for an hour."

"How badly was he hurt?"

“He will recover, but the burns on his hands and face will leave scars. We moved him into the master’s bed and left Sally to watch him.”

William nodded.

As Andrew followed them into Peter’s room, acrid smoke thrust him back into the stinging hell of Waterloo. He fought down the memories, chaining them in the corner where they belonged. It took only a moment to realize what had unleashed them. What was black powder doing in a bedchamber?

Gramling had shoved the windows open to admit sweeter air, but the stench was still strong enough to make William cough. Flames had reduced one bedpost to cinders.

“He knocked the lamp over,” said Gramling, pointing to the marble-topped table beside the bed. His tone suggested that an inebriated Peter often blundered through the house, leaving destruction in his wake.

Andrew studied the room. Water soaked the carpet. One wall was charred. Only the frame remained from the bed – the linens, mattress, and hangings must have been tossed out the window.

Atop the table, an oil lamp lay on its side. Next to it sat a full glass of wine, a plate of biscuits, and a dueling pistol.

But if Peter expected the burglar to return, why had he drunk so much wine? Anyone with intelligence knew that being three sheets to the wind made shooting impossible.

There were other oddities. Only the lamp was disturbed, though the other items lay between it and the bed. The biscuits were sooty but unburned, so no oil had splashed on them. Nor had it spilled on the table.

He leaned closer, squinting in the dim candlelight. No burn marks marred the marble, though oil should have left traces. And while the table legs nearest the bed were blackened, their wood wasn’t cracked, though the bedpost half a foot away had burned to cinders.

He examined the pistol. Its powder was intact, so it was not the source of the stench.

“Peter didn’t start this fire,” he said softly to William, pointing out his observations. “After he passed out – if he’d been conscious, he would have finished the wine – someone poured oil over the bed, added black powder

to make the flames hotter, set the lamp on its side, then struck a spark and left.”

“Who would do such a thing?”

“The same man who ransacked the house on Monday.” Which would drop Peter from his list of suspects.

William cursed.

“You talk to Gramling,” Andrew murmured. “I’ll see Sally. Her ears are sharper.”

\* \* \* \*

Andrew drew Sally away from the bed. Peter was sleeping fitfully, groaning as the laudanum wore off. “Did you hear anything before the fire started?” he murmured.

“Just Sir Peter staggering up the stairs. We was in the servants’ hall, eating dinner, when he returned.”

“You heard no other footsteps before or after he went up?”

“Nothing. We only heard Peter because he cursed when he tripped.” She wrung her hands together. “You think someone else was here?”

“Maybe. There are too many odd incidents lately.”

She shivered. “I can’t stay in this house another day, Master Andrew. This is too much. I’m giving Gramling my notice. I don’t care if I lose the quarter’s wages.”

“I think that is wise,” he agreed, relaxing. If he knew Gramling, the butler would pay her for the quarter anyway. Only a fortnight remained. “Chloe would fret if you stayed after this.”

“She offered me a post.”

“I know. And she meant it, though not for a week or so.” He could see the fears teeming in her eyes, such as where to find food and shelter. She had no family, and a quarter’s wages wouldn’t last a week at an inn. At least he could help with that. “Mrs. Moulding needs help with Seabrook’s house party. You can work there until Chloe is settled.”

“Thank you.” Her hands quit twisting.

Peter groaned.

“I’ll stay here until Peter awakens. I need to talk to him,” said Andrew. “You speak to Gramling, then pack. And perhaps you could check the doors and windows. Let me know if any are unlocked.”

She nodded and left.

Peter subsided into sleep, so Andrew slipped into

the dressing room where Chloe had seen the priest's hole. Even knowing where it was, it took a quarter hour to find the release. When the door finally opened, the shriek nearly deafened him.

Peter bolted upright. "What?" His fist clutched his chest.

"Priest's hole." Andrew returned to the bedroom. "Lie down."

"Priest's ho— I didn't know— Is anything there?"

"Two silver trays and a dead mouse. Sir Nigel's emergency stake, I imagine." But the discovery added new questions, starting with how long the trays had been there. Both were black with tarnish, and Sir Nigel could hardly have accessed the priest's hole without alerting the entire household. "Do you recall anything about this evening?" he asked Peter.

"Flames. Thought I would die."

"You nearly did."

Peter shuddered. "Woke up hot. Fires of hell. Rolled off the bed. Then nothing."

Andrew nodded. "Rolling to the floor saved your life. The burns would have been much worse had you stayed in bed. The air is better on the floor, too." He paused. "Why keep a pistol on the table?"

"Scared," Peter admitted groggily, pulling the blanket closer as if cold. "The burglary—"

It was a reasonable explanation, though it sounded false. On the other hand, Peter was still half asleep from laudanum.

William arrived to check Peter's condition.

Gramling's assessment had been correct. Though Peter would remain ill and in pain for some time, he would recover and might even be able to rise in a day or two.

But the incident had been deliberate. The conservatory door was again unlocked, though Gramling swore he had locked it before dinner. The culprit must have a key.

By the time Andrew returned to Seabrook, he was convinced that Sir Nigel had hidden something at Fields House. Having failed to find it in three attempts, an intruder had decided to destroy it – and Peter with it. Even if Peter knew nothing about the prize, the intruder was desperate enough to take no chances.

It was a sobering thought, for the destruction had failed. Peter lived and the house still stood. So the intruder would be back – which was why he had

brought Sally to Seabrook. He didn't want her on the premises if the man decided to act again.

The next step was to identify what was hidden. Tonight's escapade proved it wasn't money. Had Sir Nigel floated a fraudulent scheme of his own? If so, Peter was in danger. Serious danger. Sir Nigel had lacked the intelligence to carry off a fraud.

## CHAPTER TEN

### *Thursday*

Andrew gave up on sleep and headed downstairs, hoping a brisk ride would clear his head – and perhaps help his leg.

The hours since returning from Fields House had been long and frustrating. Every time he closed his eyes, Kevin appeared, furious that Chloe was headed for certain destruction. It had been bad enough when she'd planned to live near her brother's estate, where Peter could have provided some countenance. Now she wanted to leave friends and family behind. If she failed to attract enough students – a distinct possibility, for rumor was bound to question her virtue – what would she do?

Rumor was unavoidable. Too many men considered a woman alone to be fair game for a little slap and tickle. Some weren't overly fussy about willingness, either. With only a companion to protect her, Chloe might easily fall prey. She had no husband, no family, no social position. Whether she rebuffed advances or not, the gossips would draw damaging conclusions. She might weather one furor, but never two. Stripped of reputation, she would lose students, leaving her no way to support herself short of prostitution.

He grimaced. She simply didn't understand her peril. Rakes and rogues were a far greater threat than Peter.

So he had to protect her. Kevin would expect it.

Which brought him to the other reason he couldn't sleep. Last night's discussion with Thomas had forced him to admit that he did not want to rejoin his regiment. Napoleon was gone for good this time. India offered no lure. It might be too late to follow his dreams, but he could surely find something to do besides killing and maiming.

He would mail his resignation today, terminating the mental battle that had cost him so much sleep lately. Then he could help Chloe settle without the pressure of an imminent departure hanging over his head.

Fear twisted his gut at the challenges he would face. The only job that might work was draftsman for a builder. He could draw well enough. The study he'd done of Lisbon's Sé Cathedral was as good as any he'd seen, and the one of Madrid's Royal Palace was even better. Unfortunately, the pay would not be high, even if he found a position.

But that was a problem for later. First he must see Chloe settled. Then he could find work nearby so he could keep an eye on her. If he was at hand to prevent trouble, perhaps Kevin would leave him in peace.

He turned toward the side door nearest the stable and nearly ran down another early riser.

"Sarah! What are you doing up at this hour?"

"I couldn't sleep, so I went out to see Beulah's puppies."

"How are they?" The litter was four weeks old.

"Frisky." She smiled, but her usual sparkle was missing.

He led her into the morning room and shut the door. "What is it, Sarah?" he asked quietly. "I've never seen you this subdued." Granted, they rarely met, but Mary and Catherine wrote of her so often, he felt he knew her well. "Are you sickening for something?"

She shook her head.

"Nightmares?"

"No." She inhaled deeply. "It's Aunt Laura. I know I shouldn't carry tales, but she has changed so much since her accident that I hardly recognize her. When she lived with us at Rockburn, she was polite and always followed the rules, taking special care to defer to Mama and Blake. Now her manners are deplorable. She treats the servants like slaves, and last evening she ordered Miss Sullivan to lower her hems so people needn't look at her big feet. Miss Sullivan turned bright red – I think she is mortified when people notice that her feet are larger than most. I fear Aunt Laura will do something vulgar. You know Uncle William hates every hint of embarrassment."

And always had. Which sometimes prompted him to ignore trouble. He'd already made excuses for Laura's

latest insult. "What did Laura do that bothers you?" he asked as he lit a pair of lamps so he could see her face. "It cannot be only an unkind word to Miss Sullivan." A word that had doubtless sought to remind the girl that she was also imperfect.

"I heard she attacked everyone at dinner." Sarah had returned upstairs when dinner was called. "And after you left the drawing room, she was even worse – or so Mama told Blake."

"There is little we can do about her tongue. If we argue every word, she will throw a fit that would shame William for years."

"I know. Blake said the same thing. He told Mama to ignore Aunt Laura, but to make it clear that we don't believe her lies. Every family has a black sheep. If we allow her to annoy us, we give her more power than she deserves."

"Good advice. People will judge you on your behavior, not hers."

"But it's not her words that bother me, Uncle Drew. I saw her last night when I slipped down to the kitchen for biscuits." She blushed.

"My favorite activity at your age," he agreed.

"She was flirting with Ned."

Andrew raised his brows.

"You know. Just like she does with every man she meets – smiles, batting her lashes, running her fingers up his arm." She clenched her fists. "Ned looked like a panicked horse, all white eyes and flared nostrils. Before he could bolt, she grabbed him and ordered him into her room – something about the wardrobe door. I didn't hear what he said, but she changed from coquette to harridan in an instant, cursing and screaming and calling him the most horrid names. Her eyes looked crazed. She even threatened to see him turned off. How can he escape any lies she tells? He is only a footman."

"I'll see that William knows the truth." Another confrontation William would hate, though he should not be surprised. Laura had cornered footmen before so she could practice her wiles. It put the footmen in untenable positions, for she wasn't averse to moving beyond simple flirtation. There had been a particularly nasty scene the year he bought colors, though she'd been but thirteen. He'd returned from the orchard to find her tormenting a groom. Reading her the riot act

had reduced her to tears, but it had made him even more aware of his own shame, for his attack on Chloe had been far worse.

"Are you sure he will believe you? Laura can sound awfully convincing."

"Ned will be fine, Sarah. I can guarantee that no one will take Laura's word for anything. You had best return to bed before Miss Griswold discovers you gone. And if anything else bothers you, come to me. You need your sleep."

"Thanks, Uncle Drew." She skipped away, her natural exuberance restored.

The relief raised by his decision to resign faded. William should have brought Laura to Seabrook a month ago so he could judge for himself whether to include her in the house party. It would have revealed her growing problem.

Now they had to accept that her manners had disappeared, and she no longer cared what the family thought of her. Apparently she was ready to abandon morals as well. Having left society, she no longer felt constrained by its strictures.

Laura had long used her beauty to dazzle, though few gentlemen wanted to live with her petty demands. She needed constant attention, but because she was neither sweet-tempered nor conformable, her court had always consisted of young men who were not yet ready to consider marriage. He wondered if any of those who had proposed over the years had expected her to accept.

An hour of hard riding did little to settle his mind. William remained abed when he returned, so he could not discuss Laura. But if Chloe was up, they could leave immediately for Exeter. It would make the journey less noticeable. The fewer questions he had to answer, the better it would be for both of them.

He was mounting the steps to the nursery floor when Laura's voice erupted from the rose room. Chloe was undoubtedly her opponent.

\* \* \* \*

Chloe choked down exasperation. It was bad enough that Laura had sent for her at the crack of dawn. But her reasons were ridiculous.

A wave of guilt reminded her that part of Laura's anger was justified. A companion should obey her employer, and usually she did. But this time it was



impossible.

Inhaling deeply, Chloe steadied her voice. "You cannot return to Moorside. All other considerations aside, Lord Seabrook won't provide transportation until after the ball."

"Then I'll walk," Laura declared.

Chloe glanced at Laura's feet. As usual, they were clad in stylish slippers unsuited for more than a short stroll in the garden. Despite two years of isolation, she clung to her London wardrobe. "You wouldn't reach the gates without laming yourself. And if you leave, Lord Seabrook will bar you from Moorside."

"I won't stay here. I won't! The Sullivans stare as though I were a freak. Andrew is spreading lies about me. Lady Grayson had the gall to flaunt her husband before my face – a husband she stole from me!" Tears trailed down her cheeks. "But to endure abuse from the servants is beyond enough."

Chloe stifled a sigh. They had been circling the reason for Laura's outburst since dawn, but she knew little more than when she'd arrived. "What happened? I cannot imagine a servant alive who would insult you, and certainly not in your brother's house."

"Of course they didn't speak to me. But Ned refused to repair my wardrobe last night. I had to do it myself. Of all the ungrateful, disrespectful..."

Chloe glanced at the wardrobe. The door did not quite close, unlike yesterday, when it had operated smoothly. If something had happened to it, Laura must be responsible.

"And not five minutes later, I heard Rob and Bill laughing at me," Laura finished.

"I doubt it."

"That shows what you know! I heard them." Laura snapped her mouth shut in a stubborn line.

Chloe shook her head.

"I did," Laura insisted. "Rob called me a two-faced bitch."

"All right. Perhaps he mentioned you. But after the way you treated him before dinner, you should not be surprised."

"I did nothing."

"Not true," said Chloe firmly. "I was here when he gashed his hand on your trunk. As was William. You were very solicitous, even promising to send him a salve that would deaden his pain. But not only did you

forget that promise the moment William left, you actually re-injured the hand when you struck him an hour later because he did not respond instantly to your summons.”

“You forget your place,” she snapped regally.

“How could I with you reminding me of it so often?” Since she was quitting, she no longer cared what Laura thought. “There are twenty people at Seabrook Manor just now, to say nothing of their assorted staffs. Everyone needs service – messages carried, clothes cleaned, boots blacked, chamber pots emptied, and on and on. No servant has time for idle chatter. If you act like a gracious lady during this visit, you will have no further trouble.”

“You don’t understand.” Laura slammed her fist on her dressing table. “They laughed at me. Both of them. William must turn them off. And I am leaving. Pack my trunks.”

“No.” She glared into Laura’s startled eyes. “If you insult your brother by leaving, it will be without my help. Pack your own trunks. But you will be going alone. I will quit rather than embarrass Lord Seabrook.”

“You can’t.”

Chloe ignored the assertion. “You claim Ned refused to repair the wardrobe and Rob laughed. Lord Seabrook will investigate the matter, but he will demand details. And he will closely question each man. No one of sense dismisses a longtime employee without hearing both sides. And frankly, I doubt he will do anything in the end. Your temper is well known, as is your penchant for misinterpreting people’s intentions.”

“I never make mistakes!”

“Believe what you will.” She shrugged. “Either tell me the story, or talk to Lord Seabrook yourself.”

“Who do you think you are?” Laura slapped Chloe’s cheek, snapping her head back. “I told you to pack. Do you want to be turned off without a reference?”

“Don’t you ever strike me again,” snapped Chloe without thinking. Then she drew in a deep breath to steady her nerves. This was not the time to rile Laura.

“No servant gets away with speaking like that,” spat Laura. “It’s time you remembered your place. Don’t let last night’s welcome go to your head. You may have played with my brother as a child, but he also played

with tenants and gypsies. You should kiss my feet for allowing such a failure under my roof. Yes, a failure,” she repeated when Chloe held up a hand. “A penniless antidote whose father is a laughingstock and whose brother is a drunkard. A sniveling nobody who couldn’t attract a single offer. And if you expect to seduce William into finding you a new post, forget it. No one would accept his word on anything. He’s a disgrace to his breeding.”

Chloe’s heart hit the floor – not from the insults, which were common enough, but because she’d been deluding herself to think she could exert any control over Laura. The only reason it had seemed to work was that Moorside’s isolation kept callers to a minimum. Now she had to face the devastating truth that she had brought a madwoman to a gathering of her presumed enemies.

Laura continued to rant.

Andrew had been right. She should have quit the moment she inherited the money. Now it was too late. She could not walk out in the middle of this house party without prompting a tirade worse than anything that had come before. The thought shook her so thoroughly that she barely heard the door open behind her.

“Ranting again, Laura?” drawled Andrew, leaning against the wall. “This sounds like the same tirade you delivered to your maid at age twelve. I’m ashamed to claim kinship with you. Perhaps I should entertain our guests with your exploits in London.”

“What would you know about London?” demanded Laura.

“I arrived the day you left. Believe me, I heard the whole, sordid tale.”

“Mary lies!”

“No.” His glare silenced her. “Mary is an angel who rarely says an unkind word about anyone, including you. I had most of the tale from Rockhurst and the rest from Lady Beatrice,” he added, naming London’s chief gossip.

“They hate me.”

“That may be true, but neither would tell a lie. It’s time you grew up, Laura. The world does not exist to cater to your whims. Nor does beauty excuse you from following the rules that govern society. You have a duty to your family, your ancestors, and your class to

behave like a lady. Until you do, no one owes you any favors.” Turning away in a direct cut, he took Chloe’s arm. “Come along, Miss Fields. We have business to discuss. Laura will excuse you.” He led her toward the hall.

“How dare—”

The door cut off Laura’s screech. Something thudded against it. The sound of breaking glass followed.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” said Chloe with a sigh.

“Stop coddling her. The only way to teach her responsibility is to make her accept it. For example, having deliberately broken that vase, she can clean up the mess. That is not the staff’s duty.”

“That won’t—”

He halted her protest. “I will speak to Mrs. Moulding. Now tell me what happened.” He escorted her into a sitting room.

“She overheard Rob talking about the two-faced bitch. She is unreasonably sensitive about her face.”

“He probably meant her character. And I can’t blame him. Rob and Ned are friends. She tried to seduce Ned last night. Sarah saw her.”

Chloe swore. “I was afraid of that, and it explains why she wants to leave. She lost her temper when I refused to pack her things.”

“And hit you.” His voice was grim.

“I goaded her. Knowing I am resigning unlocked my tongue. It won’t happen again.”

“Poor Chloe.” His arm slipped around her shoulders, pulling her close.

Her heart raced, though she tried to control it. He was merely offering comfort to a friend who had suffered a disturbing confrontation. But the old dreams rose up to insist that this was a real embrace. Exciting. Loving. Sensual.

*Stop this*, she ordered herself. She had to break free before she did something stupid, like kissing him or begging him to stay.

“Why not resign today?” he asked, rubbing her back.

“Nothing has changed since you last asked. She would ruin William’s party. But I will be more careful from now on.” Realizing that her head was resting against his shoulder, she pulled away, stifling her

infatuation so it couldn't cause trouble. "Are you ready to leave for Exeter?"

"In a moment. First we need to talk."

Chloe's blood ran cold, for his expression seemed hesitant – quite unlike Captain Andrew Seabrook.

"What happened?"

"Fields House summoned William again last night." He paced to the window and back. "The intruder returned – or so we think. But this time he tried to burn the house down, starting with Peter's bed. Peter was in it."

"Oh, no! Is he hurt?"

"Not as badly as we first feared, for he instinctively rolled away from the flames. His face will undoubtedly remain scarred. But aside from the pain, he is well and should recover without difficulty. I suspect he is up today."

"But who would do such a thing?"

"That is the question of the hour. Whoever he is, he is searching for something specific. At first I thought it was money – rumors claim that Sir Nigel hid a cache of cash from Peter. Now I don't know. The logical place to keep cash would be the priest's hole, but it is empty. Besides, no one would risk destroying money."

"Unless he found it and was covering his tracks."

"True, so we cannot discount the possibility. But it is more likely that the quest involves something else."

"Then why burn the house down? That destroys the prize."

"I know, so the prize has no value in itself."

Chloe stared. "Are you suggesting that he is seeking something worthless?"

"No monetary value," he said, frowning. "I cannot infer much more, for I'm still reconsidering suspects."

"You have suspects? Who?"

"Weedell, the estate agent, might have sought information that would convince Peter to sell Fields House, but damaging the house reduces its value."

"So we eliminate Mr. Weedell."

"On those grounds. Mrs. Telcor might have hired someone to recover the pearls she claims Peter stole. An opportunist might be seeking Sir Nigel's alleged hoard. But again, fire would destroy the prize in those cases. Another theory was retaliation – the burglary might have been a destructive rampage – but I can't accept a second visit to burn the place." He moved to

the window.

“Retaliation?”

“Simms or John Rivers might have a grievance. But neither should hate Peter. And John has already found a new position.”

Chloe’s legs gave out, dropping her into a chair. “My God.”

“Exactly. So it is likely that the culprit seeks something different. After three searches, the risk of exposure is growing too great, so he decided to destroy everything – which might mean that the prize implicates him in some dishonor.”

Chloe nodded. “But that doesn’t explain why he would involve Peter. The first two incidents involved Father.”

“Last night’s attack may have sought only to make the fire seem accidental. Peter has a long history of stumbling off to bed in his cups. Thus knocking a lamp into the bed hangings would seem natural. He no longer has a valet to look after him.”

“If Father had evidence that would implicate someone of villainy, why not turn it over to the authorities?”

“Evidence is only one possibility, Chloe. He might have devised some way to recover funds from a swindler. Or he may have arranged a scheme of his own. I’ve no way to know. His journal is missing.”

Chloe stared at her hands. That was the oddest fact yet.

“Only time will prove which theory is correct,” said Andrew, breaking into her thoughts. “The servants are understandably upset about the fire. I offered Sally a temporary post here – Mrs. Moulding needs help during this house party.”

“Thank you. I would hate it if she were injured. Whatever his reasons, he is bound to return now that his latest attempt failed.”

“Are you sure that the servants know nothing?”

Chloe bit her lip. “I can ask Sally. She might know where Father kept his cash. And perhaps she knows something about the journal.”

“Do that when we return from Exeter. In the meantime, let’s see about breakfast.”

She nodded.

“I still think you should resign today. Laura will cut up stiff regardless of what you do. She has the bit

between her teeth and is running hard.”

“I can’t disappear and leave you to handle her.”

“You needn’t leave. As a longstanding family friend, you are a welcome guest.”

\* \* \* \*

Andrew cursed himself all the way to Rose Cottage. Why the devil had he tried to soothe her, knowing the effect she had on his body?

Soothe?

Hah!

He’d wanted to touch her so badly that he’d leaped at the first excuse. It had been even better than expected. He still burned. Which only proved how unsettling his problems had become. He had never been a passionate man, relieving himself from time to time, but never becoming obsessed with sex the way many of his acquaintances were. So why were visions of Chloe in bed suddenly haunting him day and night? Granted, his leg had been the worst injury yet, but recovery should not drive him mad with lust. Especially for Chloe. She was not a light-skirt, and he was in no position to seek more.

His letter of resignation dragged heavily on his pocket. Once he posted it, his finances would be worse than ever. It would be weeks or even months before he received the proceeds, and he doubted if his back pay would arrive any sooner. What little cash he had would disappear in short order, for he couldn’t stay at Seabrook if he hoped to protect Chloe.

Nor could he let her or anyone else think he was courting her. Though he must live nearby if he was to protect her, raising expectations would dishonor both of them.

One step at a time, he reminded himself. And the first step was to examine Rose Cottage.

At least he’d saved her from Weedell’s insinuations by leaving her in the curricule while he collected the key. Weedell had been as obnoxious as ever.

“How bad was the Fields House fire, Captain?” he’d demanded the moment Andrew walked through the door. “We heard half the house burned.”

“Gossip exaggerates, as usual,” said Andrew stiffly. “I need the key to Rose Cottage.”

Weedell produced it, but refused to be deterred. “Will Sir Peter live?”

“Of course.” Andrew twisted his face to reflect

surprise. "It was nothing, really. He knocked over a lamp, but the staff quickly doused the flames."

"Don't make light of the matter," said Weedell.

"Everyone knows that Lord Seabrook was summoned to investigate."

"That's true enough. The servants panicked – understandable, considering recent events. But both Sir Peter and the house are fine."

Another five minutes had passed before he escaped Weedell's questions. The man's curiosity refused to die despite Peter's refusal to sell Fields House. Weedell had no hope of a sales commission, but he might have other motives. Fury at being thwarted, for one. Or maybe he really was behind that housing swindle.

Andrew also managed to escape Weedell's escort. Chloe wasn't going to buy Rose Cottage, so it was better that no one in Exeter know she was looking at it. It was risky taking her to the cottage, but he must know what she liked and disliked about the place. He might have to buy her new home before she saw it. Traveling together was impossible, and he could not allow her to stay at inns, where she might be annoyed by lechers – or worse.

He tethered the horses, then helped her down, being careful to touch only her hand.

"The front is as charming as I remembered," she said, studying the cottage. Roses climbed diagonally up the façade, framing the door. Others mounded beneath the two front windows.

"If you like roses, you can add them to your own place. Your mother's rose garden was always beautiful."

"Until Kevin died. She let it go to ruin after that, like everything else."

There wasn't much he could say. Unlocking the door, he led her into the tiny hall.

"A trifle small," said Chloe, pausing in the sitting room doorway. "I need space for a pianoforte. Even if I teach in students' homes, I must maintain my own skill."

"Quite." But he doubted he could find a larger place within her budget. "As you can see, this cottage comes fully furnished. Is that a requirement?"

"It would be convenient, for I have nothing. But it would depend on cost and on the condition of the furnishings. It also depends on where I go. It would be



difficult to find furniture quickly unless I settled near a large town.”

“I’m glad you understand that.”

He grunted as his leg gave way on the stairs. Only Chloe’s hands on his buttocks prevented a fall. The cottage had no handrail. “Steep stairs,” he murmured as heat flashed to his groin.

She said nothing, for which he was grateful. But he hated revealing how weak he remained – or how her touch affected him.

Chloe grimaced as she glanced into the larger bedroom. It was hardly bigger than its bed, with no space for a wardrobe. Pegs held two gowns. Rolls of stockings rested on a shelf overhead. The previous owner had probably been buried in the rest of her wardrobe.

The second bedroom was worse.

“Goodness!” exclaimed Chloe. “This floor looked larger from outside.”

“I thought the same, but the sloping roof leaves only this center space usable. That is typical of this sort of cottage. Moorside is larger, but you could not afford it.”

She returned downstairs without a word, but her face showed strain. The lines on her forehead deepened when she saw the tiny servant’s room. “I was right. Sally must act as my companion.”

“That wouldn’t work.” He turned her to face him. “Think, Chloe. Sally is a lovely woman, and I love her as much as you do. But a companion would accompany you into drawing rooms. Sally would not be accepted. Manners, voice, even the way she moves, proclaim her a servant. Those habits are too ingrained to change.”

Chloe nearly revealed her full plan, but stopped in time. Andrew would be appalled if he knew that she intended to claim widowhood. He hated deceit. “Then I need room for two servants,” she said instead. “Sally is skilled at cleaning and can deal with tradesmen. She will make an excellent housekeeper. But she cannot cook. She started in service at age eight and has never worked in a kitchen.”

“Considering your price constraints, that won’t be easy to find,” he warned.

“Is this really the best Exeter has to offer?”

“It is the best you can afford. Exeter has a

population above thirty thousand souls, so there are several places available right now. One is twice this size, located a mile east of town. But it is also twice the price. There are two houses in Exeter itself that you could afford, but neither has a garden.”

“So I would have to buy all my food.”

“Exactly, which would increase your living expenses. And they have other defects. The larger house is falling to bits and would need considerable repair. The smaller is sound, but the neighborhood is mean. No one would hire a teacher from there.”

She bit her lip. “What do you mean by *falling to bits*?”

“It needs a new roof before you could even move in. I did not look closely at the rest, but I suspect the foundation is crumbling. And there isn’t a room that doesn’t have problems – a damaged wall, a ruined floor.... It is also unfurnished.”

Her heart sank. “That would not work. Perhaps I should consider smaller towns than Exeter. They might be less expensive.”

“That is possible.” He hid a frown, for he would never find work in a village. If he had the funds, he could contribute a little under the table so she would have a comfortable cottage, but he would never receive enough in time. “Plymouth might work. With so many naval ships based there, people move in and out quite often.”

“That sounds good.”

“Come along, then. I’ll drive to Plymouth on Monday.” And his first job would be to seek employment. He had sailed aboard too many ships to harbor illusions about how sailors behaved ashore. He wouldn’t allow Chloe to live there unless he was close at hand.

\* \* \* \*

Andrew and Chloe arrived at Seabrook just behind the male Truitts. Martha was flying down the stairs when they reached the door. Her father caught her in his arms.

Mr. Truitt was the hearty sort – almost uncomfortably so. But he clearly doted on Martha. She, in turn, seemed more relaxed with him than with her mother, perhaps because he wanted only her happiness, whereas Mrs. Truitt was already seeking ways to take advantage of Martha’s increased

consequence.

George appeared colorless in the best of times. Despite being taller than his father by several inches, he shrank to insignificance beside him, his slender frame contrasting with the elder's solidity.

"I was beginning to think you would never come," Martha said with a laugh. "I swear you think none of your employees can work unless you are looking over their shoulders."

"Not at all, Rosebud." He patted her back. "But some problems require the owner's eye."

"Everything is fine now?"

He nodded.

Andrew hoped to slip upstairs unnoticed – he badly needed sleep, which was possible now that he'd mailed his resignation – but Martha spotted them.

"Captain, I don't believe you've met my father." She ran through the introductions. "And this is Miss Seabrook's companion, Miss Fields," she finished, gesturing to Chloe.

Chloe curtsied.

"Any connection to Sir Nigel Fields?" he asked, noting her black gown.

"His daughter."

"My condolences. His passing must have been quite a blow." He grasped her hand between his. "We belonged to the same club. Though I did not know him well, he seemed a good man."

"Thank you, sir."

Andrew knew that Chloe was uncomfortable, and not just from Truitt's attention. She wanted to question Sally, and Laura would be feeling neglected by now. So he interrupted as Truitt inhaled. "Please tender my apologies to my sister, Miss Fields. I would not have pulled you from your duties if we hadn't needed your help."

"She will understand, but I should return. If you will excuse me?"

"Of course," said Andrew.

The others agreed.

Andrew relaxed as she escaped upstairs. Martha followed, leading her father to his room. George stayed behind, so Andrew drew him toward the library.

"I trust no new problems arose at the office," Andrew said when they'd settled into chairs.

"No. And the emergency turned out to be a

misunderstanding rather than a problem.” He shrugged. “It could have been straightened out in an hour if Father had listened to me instead of traipsing off to visit the customer.” He was clearly unhappy.

“A common complaint of children, I believe.”

Andrew sipped wine. Away from Truitt, George’s face acquired more color. Andrew suspected the two had argued most of the way from town. Truitt probably clung to his own power, refusing to turn over part of his empire to his heir. It happened in the aristocracy as well, resulting in instances of men acceding to titles with no understanding of the properties that went with them.

George drained his glass in an apparent attempt to control his temper. But it exploded anyway. “Damn the man,” he muttered. “He is so set in his ways that he won’t listen to anyone. You wouldn’t believe the confusion I found in his office. I don’t know how anyone can run a business surrounded by such chaos. And he demands the final say in any decision – which worked when the company was a struggling concern with half a dozen employees, but it interferes with business now that it is so large.”

“I presume he does not agree.”

“He won’t listen. He even ignored my evidence that a few minor changes could improve efficiency, lower costs, and increase profits by at least ten percent.”

“Impressive. Are you sure?” Half of Martha’s dowry was shares in Truitt and Company, so mismanagement could cause trouble. William was counting on the income those shares should bring.

“Of course I’m sure. I’ve studied how our competitors operate. But he won’t listen. He doesn’t understand that times have changed since he founded the business. Nor does he consider what might happen when he dies. Too much information remains locked in his head.”

Andrew let him talk, pressing for details and sifting his words. In the end, he had to agree with George’s assessment. Not that there was a thing either of them could do about it. But it was good to know that Martha’s brother was intelligent.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Friday*

Chloe headed for the breakfast room, more lighthearted than she'd been in years. Perhaps the feeling grew from a solid night's sleep. Or maybe last night's unexpected freedom was responsible.

The evening had started innocuously enough. Andrew's morning scold had seemingly worked. When Laura joined the company before dinner, she'd set her megrims aside. After a gracious greeting for Martha, she'd joined Miss Sullivan, listening to the girl's chatter as if they were bosom bows.

At first Chloe had feared that Laura was trying to damage Miss Sullivan's friendship with Martha, but she'd soon decided that Laura was trying to make friends in her own heavy-handed fashion. Miss Sullivan was a poor choice, though. Laura's previous attacks left her suspicious, and the two had nothing in common. So Miss Sullivan had remained aloof.

Laura had not been pleased. By the time Miss Sullivan escaped, she was ready to explode. Chloe had been frantically seeking the words that might calm her, when Andrew had stepped in to compliment her appearance and praise her effort to set Miss Sullivan at ease.

Chloe sighed at the memory. Andrew had meant well, but he was as heavy-handed as Laura. He had no idea how to handle a self-centered child, for his own experience ran to raw recruits who could choose only between following orders and being flogged.

But Laura had said nothing. That in itself was ominous, for it hinted that she was seeking a more dramatic reprisal than a sharp retort in the drawing room.

Thus it was no surprise that her dinner behavior had made Wednesday night seem tame. Again Andrew had stepped in, this time backed by Grayson, Rockhurst, and William, who had made it clear that the family would not tolerate her megrims.

Laura had retired to her room and stayed there.

The rest of the evening had been delightful. Lady Grayson had produced a forfeit ball in the drawing room. It was well used, its one hundred dimples so badly faded that it was hard to read the numbers. Instead of drawing up a new list of forfeits, they'd used one the Seabrook sisters had made in childhood. Its entries included such nonadult penalties as *hop across*

*the room on your left foot and slide down the banister without getting caught by Fitch.* Fortunately, no one had rolled that last number. Everyone had been laughing by the time the gentlemen joined them.

While the other guests played crambo, Chloe had helped Lady Rockhurst write clues for Sunday's treasure hunt, then joined the singing in the music room. With Laura gone, all the guests had enjoyed themselves.

The evening had ended with the almost-forgotten luxury of Sally brushing her hair, stroke after sensuous stroke as she sat dreamily at the dressing table.

"The servants don't like Miss Laura by half," Sally reported. "I warned you not to accept that post."

"I needed it," said Chloe. "And my savings will buy my own cottage."

"You could have bought a cottage two years ago by selling those pearls your mama gave you."

"No. It may come to that one day, but until I exhaust all other income, I won't consider it. Besides, Miss Seabrook wasn't that difficult until recently."

"Don't you pretend with me." Sally set down the brush so she could braid the hair for the night. "Mr. West told us what she said to you. Never have I seen one of the quality so uncaring of propriety. Even Master Peter doesn't use language like that."

Chloe blushed to recall Laura's outburst in the carriage. It was bad enough that Andrew had overheard it, but knowing that the Seabrook staff knew...

"Bedlam is where she belongs, and where she'll be one day," grumbled Sally.

Chloe stopped her tongue before she could claim the incident had been an aberration. There was no reason to defend Laura. "Miss Seabrook will not be my concern much longer," she'd said instead.

"And a good thing, too. Why, the tales in the servants' hall about that girl—"

"I'm sure they are unpleasant," agreed Chloe quickly. "Miss Seabrook rarely shows consideration for others."

"The staff would love to send her back to the army in place of the captain. Preferably tonight."

"Is he leaving?" Ice suddenly formed in her stomach.

“Now that he’s recovered. His regiment recalled him two weeks ago – or so Mr. Jinks says. If not for this party, he would be gone by now. He’s headed for India, or some such place.”

But he wasn’t recovered, thought Chloe in panic. His leg was unreliable. If she hadn’t caught him, he would have tumbled down the steep steps at Rose Cottage only yesterday. What if it collapsed during a battle?

No wonder Andrew had stiffened when she’d changed her mind about living near Exeter. He’d promised to help her, and now that promise was interfering with his duty.

She suppressed a stab of pain, for she’d known he wouldn’t stay. Nor could she continue expecting him to help. Duty always came first, so she must execute her plans herself.

“...fixing up the old wing,” Sally was saying as she tied off the braid. “Everyone is excited at the prospect.”

“What was that?”

“Lord Seabrook is rebuilding the old wing. When the captain drew up the plans, he included a larger servants’ hall, more convenient offices, and a modern kitchen with one of those fancy stoves. Cook is near to bursting with excitement.”

“I didn’t know the captain had studied building design.”

“He didn’t – Lord Seabrook has to find a builder to adapt the plans, but his ideas are very good. Or so Mr. Fitch says, and he should know. He’s seen them.”

Chloe nodded. There was so much she didn’t know about Andrew. That alone should keep her dreamer under control.

Sally continued chattering brightly as she turned down the bed and sponged a smudge off Chloe’s one mourning gown. The Seabrook staff was grumbling about the airs adopted by Lord Grayson’s couriers, who considered themselves even higher than Lord Seabrook’s valet; they chuckled over Lady Rockhurst’s daughter Sarah, who often slipped into the kitchen for snacks; and they approved of Martha Truitt. It felt like old times, when Sally had kept Chloe informed of everything that happened at Fields House.

Falling into old habits was dangerous, she reminded herself now, for that life was gone. While she’d enjoyed the evening of genteel graciousness, she was better off

alone.

Like now. The guests remained abed, except for a few gentlemen who had gone shooting with Lord Rankin. William didn't shoot, so had asked his neighbor to lead that particular expedition.

After cleaning the public rooms, the servants had retired to break their fast. So she had the house to herself. The empty rooms felt huge, their ornate ceilings soaring high overhead. She could run or dance across the carpet without discovery or any fear of tripping over furniture. Such spaciousness offered a heady freedom—

She cursed, her good humor vanishing in an instant. Did her pleasure arise from a few hours without Laura or from having this lovely house to herself? If the latter, a small cottage would be oppressive. But how could she tell? Moorside often seemed cramped, but Laura could make a castle feel crowded.

Maybe she should seek out the breakfast room. It was an intimate space, about the same size as Moorside's sitting room. If she could relax there, she could assume that her euphoria arose from Laura's absence.

As she crossed the hall, someone rapped on the front door. Ned hurried to open it, revealing Mr. Rose. Chloe's heart stopped.

"I will speak with him, Ned," she said, leading the farmer to the end of the portico so they would not be overheard – just as Andrew had done with her.

"What is wrong?" she asked. Only bad news would bring him the ten miles to Seabrook. He didn't like Laura.

"I must speak with Miss Seabrook."

"She is not yet up." And wouldn't be until noon. Laura refused to take breakfast with the other guests, believing that the meal's informality would draw taunts or cuts. Or maybe she enjoyed demanding the personal service of a tray in her room at an hour when the servants were supposed to be doing other things.

Mr. Rose fisted his hands. Chloe could see the thoughts parading across his face. Protocol demanded that he give bad news to Laura, yet he knew that Chloe was the one who dealt with problems and that Laura could be cuttngly rude to anyone she considered her inferior. He was involved in the harvest, so he wanted



to deliver this message quickly and return home.

"Someone ransacked Moorside Cottage last night," he said at last.

"Good heavens! Is Mrs. Monroe all right?"

"She didn't hear him and only discovered the damage when she arose this morning. He smashed a window pane in the sitting room, then broke the lock on the shutters to get in. Several drawers were emptied onto the floor, but Mrs. Monroe does not know what might be missing."

Chloe swallowed a curse. Mrs. Monroe would have heard nothing. The woman was heavy sleeper. They should not have left her alone in so isolated a place – if she'd been alone. Mr. Rose's appearance at this early hour meant he'd left Moorside at dawn. Had he spent the night there?

A flock of sheep spread across the lawn, cropping the grass. Chloe watched them while her mind turned over the information. "How much damage did he cause?"

"The desk in the sitting room was marred where he pried open locked drawers. And the floorboards in every wardrobe were pulled up. That is all I saw. I knew Miss Seabrook would wish to be informed immediately." His face tightened with trepidation.

"I will tell her. You've been through enough today. Is there anything else?"

"Nothing, Miss Fields." He seemed relieved.

"Thank you for informing us. You will wish a bite to eat before heading home." William would insist on it, as would Fitch. "Tell Mrs. Monroe to have the window and shutters repaired. Miss Seabrook will decide what to do about the other damage when she returns."

Thanking him for delivering the news so quickly, she turned him over to Fitch, then sent word to William. He would insist on speaking to Mr. Rose himself and repaying his time and expenses.

Her own task was more difficult. Laura would throw a tantrum at being awakened so early, but withholding this news would produce worse.

Was this connected to the Fields House trouble?

She stifled a shudder, for a connection implied that she was the intended victim. Perhaps he sought information on her father's hiding places. Or someone really desperate might want the mementos she had removed from Fields House. If that were true, his next

target would be Seabrook – not that it would help him. She had been estranged from her father and knew nothing of his recent activities, as everyone from the area must know. The jewelry casket contained only worthless brooches and her mother's mementos of Kevin – letters home, a poem he'd written, a rock he'd given her at age seven. The folio held only animal prints—

Or so she'd assumed. Once she finished with Laura, she and Andrew should examine that folio. If they could identify the prize, perhaps they could identify the villain.

\* \* \* \*

Taking a deep breath, Chloe shook Laura's shoulder.

"Who— What!" Laura abruptly sat up, eyes swiveling frantically to take in her surroundings. She slapped Chloe's hand aside. "How dare you come in here before I summon you?"

Chloe stepped out of reach. "Someone broke into Moorside last night and ransacked the house."

"Ransacked? Someone touched my things?"

"I'm afraid so." She repeated Mr. Rose's information and her own orders. "If you have more specific instructions, he will still be in the kitchen – which is why I woke you."

"But what could a burglar want?" Laura seemed puzzled – as well she should. There was little of value in the cottage. Laura's jewelry chest traveled with her.

Chloe shrugged.

"Curse the man! I'll never forgive William for this." Laura's eyes blazed. "If he hadn't exiled me to Moorside, this wouldn't have happened. He should at least have given me a footman for protection. Everyone knows ugly people are fair game for assault."

"Don't exaggerate. I doubt the culprit has ever seen you. Now that the war is over, former soldiers roam the land looking for work. Some resort to crime." All true, though it hardly applied to this case. But she wasn't about to admit that her family might be the cause of this attack.

"Don't try to hide your own culpability," said Laura, ignoring her. "Yes, yours. If you hadn't insisted on coming here, no one would have broken in. Even desperate men think twice about entering an occupied house."

"The house *was* occupied," protested Chloe. "Mrs. Monroe was there. If we'd been home, he might have assaulted us. There was a case just like that near Taunton last month."

It was the wrong thing to say. Laura burst into her worst tirade yet. She needed to blame someone, and Chloe was convenient.

"Don't ever forget your place again," Laura finally shouted, fisting both hands. "How dare you contradict me? Nobody cares a whit for your opinion – something I should have remembered earlier. William wishes I had stayed at Moorside. The Truitts think me a freak. Everyone treats me like a pariah. It is *you* who wanted to be here so you could play at being a lady. You are trying to take my place in the family."

"No."

"Liar! You deliberately make me miserable. Are you jealous that I am prettier than you even after Mary ruined me?"

"For pity's sake, Miss Seabrook. Quit blaming your face for your problems. Everyone's surface changes with time and misfortune, but few people care. It is what's inside that matters. Kevin knew that, which is why he turned you down."

"Don't remind me of that fool." Laura's face turned purple. "He was the most dishonorable wretch to walk the earth – declaring his undying love, then laughing in my face when I believed him. The blackguard should have been hanged."

"I no longer care about your lies."

"He's the liar! He asked me to wed him, yet when I accepted, he ripped my clothes off and assaulted me. Then he had the audacity to jilt me. Father would have called him out if he'd had the chance."

Hearing Kevin maligned snapped Chloe's temper. "Only because your father was too stupid to see what a vicious witch you are. You will burn in the hottest corner of hell for what you did to Kevin. At least people recognize the truth about you by now, so his reputation is safe. But I can't work for his murderess another minute. I'm leaving." She headed for the door.

"Your contract doesn't expire until Michaelmas."

"My contract ends when I can no longer tolerate your abuse," Chloe snapped. "And that moment is now. Find yourself a new companion – if you can." She slammed the door behind her.

Tears threatened as she stumbled toward her room. This was not the way to sever her ties to Laura, but it was too late to go back.

You should have waited, her conscience whispered. Until you find a cottage, you can't afford to quit. After that scene, you can hardly stay here.

It was true. Nor could she return to Fields House. Peter would find a way to confiscate her savings.

Yet she couldn't seek shelter elsewhere, either. Andrew was right. Staying at an inn without a companion or maid would mark her as wanton. Fleeing with Sally would deplete her meager funds very quickly. But William would be so furious over this day's work that he would never let her stay.

Perhaps she could return to Moorside to help Mrs. Monroe set the place to rights. That would give her time to arrange for a cottage. She would make sure she was gone before Laura returned.

Pulling her trunk from the wardrobe, she quickly packed, but no matter how she arranged her possessions, the jewelry casket didn't fit. She was debating whether to leave it at Seabrook until she found a home, when Laura slammed the door into the wall.

She had dressed herself in a morning gown of pale yellow, but her lack of expertise showed. Fastening the ties askew made the bodice pinch on one side and gape on the other.

"Nobody walks out on me," Laura snarled, blue eyes drilling holes into Chloe's face. "Never insult your betters again, girl. You will not leave without my permission."

Chloe straitened, letting her eyes move disdainfully over Laura's gown. "I am not a slave, and you are not a monarch, so stop pretending you run the world." She glared. "Nothing will induce me to continue in your employ. I was planning to leave next week anyway. Your tantrum merely moved up my departure."

"Impossible. No one else will hire you."

"Where I go is my business. Our ties are severed, and there's nothing you can do about it."

Shock speared through Laura's eyes. "No!" Her arm swept across the dressing table, knocking everything to the floor. The jewelry casket shattered into pieces. "I'll see you flogged for such insolence."

"Return to your room," suggested Chloe, determined

to hold her temper in check. "You've made a big enough spectacle of yourself this morning. William will lock you in an asylum if you aren't careful."

"I will be sure to suggest it to him," said Andrew from the doorway. Laura's shouts had awakened him. By the time he'd dressed, she was dashing upstairs. Now his eyes took in her furious face, the shattered jewelry casket, and Chloe's white cheeks. "You've gone too far this time, Laura."

"It is you who goes too far. What are you doing here, anyway? Looking for your mistress? You have no legitimate business on this floor. I will tell Fitch to throw you out of Seabrook if you don't leave."

He sighed. "Grow up, Laura. This isn't your house, and you don't make the rules. Nor can you force your quarrels on others. So go back to your room. If you have any sense at all, you will remain on your best behavior for a few days. William will be furious enough when he hears about this. Have you lost all reason?"

"Of course not," snapped Laura. "I am chastising my companion for dereliction of duty and aspirations above her station."

"Not your companion," said Chloe firmly. "I quit."

"You can't."

"I can and I did. Shall I summon a footman to remove you from my room?" She moved to the bell.

"That won't be necessary," said Andrew, taking Laura's arm. "She is leaving."

Laura screamed.

He slapped her cheek. "Silence! I will not tolerate hysterics."

His tone closed her mouth. Shock flared behind her eyes.

"Your manners are appalling," he continued. "You have been without supervision far too long. One would think you a fishwife – or an infant, though most children show more restraint. I am appalled that one of your breeding could forget herself so badly. Even the lowest servant knows better."

"Who cares?"

"Beware of arrogance, Laura. Your breeding does not give you the right to be cruel. Either behave like a lady, or William will, indeed, lock you away. Now go. You will stay in your room until you can control yourself. Since I know that will take time, if I hear one more word from you today, I will personally escort you

to St. Joseph's insane asylum in Exeter. I hear they use restraints on anyone who misbehaves." He made his voice as hard as possible, adding the look that never failed to intimidate green soldiers.

It worked. She nodded, then fled silently for the stairs.

Chloe turned away to pick up the scattered contents of the jewelry casket, but Andrew spotted the sheen in her eyes. She was fighting tears.

He sighed. He needed particulars of this crisis if he was to discuss it with William, but Chloe was in no shape for questions. Forcing her to talk would break the rigid control she was exerting over herself. She wouldn't forgive him.

Yet his hand touched her shoulder before he could stop it. "It's all right now, Chloe. She won't hurt you again."

"I can't— She broke—"

He jerked his hand away, cursing himself. "Laura can be hateful without the least effort."

"Don't you think I know that?" She whirled to face him, clutching the contents of her jewelry case. "I've lived with her for two years. Nothing she does can surprise me."

"Relax, Chloe." He gently relieved her of her treasures – three brooches, a bead necklace, a rock, and a bundle of Kevin's letters tied in a faded red ribbon. He piled them on the dressing table, smoothing the crumpled corners as he sought the words that might help.

"I could strangle her for this." Her voice cracked.

Andrew pulled her close, despite knowing he shouldn't. But he'd lost control of his arms. His hands roamed her back, soothing and stroking. She fit against him perfectly, her warmth inciting thoughts he had no business entertaining.

Even worse, her arms curled around his waist, stroking his back in return. He raised her head for a kiss before recalling all the reasons he could not.

Curses screamed through his skull as he backed away. "I take it Laura objects to your leaving."

She also backed a pace, shaking her head as if trying to steady her thoughts. "*Objects* is a rather insipid description. She cannot accept that anyone might reject her."

"What changed your mind about staying?"

"Someone ransacked Moorside last night." She repeated the tale. "It has to be connected to the trouble at Fields House, though why anyone would think I had the prize, I cannot understand."

"Obviously he is desperate. It must be more important than I thought." Which was a troubling idea. He turned the facts over in his mind, but they made no better sense the second time. "So Laura's tirade started because her things were disturbed?"

"In part. She blames me for the break-in. If I hadn't insisted she accept this invitation, we would have been home to deter the intruder."

He swore. "Has she no sense? If you'd been there, you might have been burned in your bed like Peter."

"I know. But I didn't tell her about Fields House, so she doesn't understand the danger. Her reaction was unreasonable enough that I resigned. This was the result." She stooped to retrieve the pieces of the jewelry casket.

Andrew cursed himself for letting her return to Moorside after Sir Nigel's funeral. From the moment he'd first seen Laura, his instincts had told him that she was dangerously unstable, but he hadn't wanted to believe it.

He'd been wrong. Something wasn't right in Laura's head, something that went beyond selfishness and self-pity, beyond a yen for adventure and a need for admiration. To put it bluntly, she was mad and might pose a danger to herself and to others.

To distract his mind, he accepted the shards of the casket. It hadn't actually broken. Age had loosened the pegs joining the corners, which had separated when the box hit the floor. So it could be reassembled.

"The estate carpenter can repair this quite easily," he said, fitting the pieces together, then restoring the contents.

"Don't bother. I must leave today."

"Why?" He moved to the fireplace so he was out of reach. His fingers were itching to remove her gown so he could explore every inch of her body.

"Now that I've resigned, I've no reason to stay."

"Certainly you do. You are a neighbor and a longtime family friend. William will be unhappy if you miss his betrothal ball. And I will be devastated. I'd hoped we could share a waltz."

Where had those words come from? He hadn't

intended any such thing, for it would play havoc with his libido. But she could not leave yet. She had nowhere to go.

"It would be scandalous if I danced so soon after Father's death," she reminded him.

Disappointment swept over him, so profound that he nearly staggered. "I'll have my sets anyway. How about the fourth and the sixth? I've already promised the third to Sarah."

She smiled. "You will have too many other obligations."

"Never. And don't tell me I must dance every set," he added, forestalling further protest. "My leg is too weak. We will talk."

"Very well. If you are sure William won't object..."

"He won't. Henshaw can repair your jewelry box so it doesn't come apart again."

"Thank you."

"You are welcome." He paused. "Did Sally know anything helpful?"

"Not much." The change of subject seemed to settle her. "Last month Father paid the arrears in staff salaries and brought local merchant accounts up-to-date. Gramling was relieved, for the chandler had threatened to cut Fields House off. Sally has no idea where the money came from. She saw Father's journal in the library on Saturday afternoon. Either he hid it, or someone took it afterward."

Peter or the intruder, he decided.

"After Father's funeral I collected a folio of animal prints Kevin had bequeathed me," she continued. "I can't imagine what anyone would want with them, but we'd better check. Attacking Moorside may have been an effort to retrieve something taken from Fields House." She rummaged in her trunk until she found the folio.

Andrew took half the prints to the window. Chloe worked at the dressing table. It took them half an hour to examine every page. The prints were beautifully tinted. But the folio contained nothing else, not even a margin note.

"Take care of these," he ordered when they finished. "This is a fine set and probably printed in limited quantity, making it valuable. I'm sure Kevin mentioned it once. Grayson could tell you about it. He collects such things. Some of his are quite valuable."



Ignoring her shock, he picked up the box and excused himself. He could not risk being caught in her bedchamber. The servants would be cleaning this floor soon.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*Saturday*

Chloe folded her hands and pasted an attentive expression on her face – false, of course. She had little interest in Exeter gossip or the latest London scandals. Nor did she wish to draw attention to herself by participating in the discussion. Now that she was a guest rather than a companion, she felt even more out of place. Her one black gown was frayed and several years out of date. She could not wear her pearls during deep mourning. Lacking jewelry that was more suitable, she remained unadorned. Her hair was scraped back in her usual knot, unlike the curls and waves of the other ladies. Yet she could hardly command Sally's services during the day. Sally worked for Seabrook Manor at the moment.

The drawing room was full this afternoon with the addition of two dozen neighbors. Many more would attend tonight's ball. The crowd made her uncomfortable, for it had been years since she'd shared space with so many people.

Miss Truitt laughed at something Miss Sullivan said, drawing a wide grin from her father. He clearly doted on the girl. Chloe suffered a spurt of envy, for she had never found that sort of closeness with her own father.

She already regretted yesterday's decision to stay at Seabrook. She'd been uncomfortable ever since. Adequate breeding couldn't overcome two years in service. Never mind that companions usually joined their employers in drawing rooms. Once they quit their post, that last remnant of consequence disappeared. She would never again be a carefree baronet's daughter.

Carefree?

She nearly snorted. *Carefree* did not describe Sir Nigel's unwanted daughter. The only carefree hours of her life had been those spent adventuring with Andrew, William, and Kevin. At home she had failed to

meet even the minimal expectation of attaching a husband. Then she'd abandoned her class for life as a companion. In the eyes of the world, Chloe Fields was a disgrace.

Lady Rockhurst laughed, pulling Chloe's attention back to the drawing room.

"It might seem funny now," admitted Lady Grayson. "But I was not amused to find a snake in the wardrobe, however harmless."

"You'll grow used to it," said Lady Rockhurst. "Nicholas is bound to gift you with all sorts of creatures as he grows older. And once he discovers your love of animals..."

"What was his nurse about to let him scare you so?" demanded Mrs. Truitt.

"Nurse?" Lady Grayson seemed puzzled. Then she laughed. "Oh, dear. Nicholas wasn't responsible this time. He's barely eighteen months old. The snake was a gift from my husband."

"Gift!" Martha Truitt gasped.

"Well, *gift* might be too generous. Grayson found it in the conservatory this morning. He put it in a sack, intending to release it in the woods so it wouldn't return to the house. But when he set the sack down to change his clothes, it escaped. I found it in the wardrobe while changing for tea."

Chloe smiled. Lord Grayson shared his wife's interest in natural history, so perhaps the snake incident wasn't surprising. "At least he didn't put it there on purpose, as Andrew used to do," she said, joining the conversation. "Didn't one of his pranks involve toads and a biscuit tin?"

"Heavens! I'd forgotten that," exclaimed Lady Rockhurst.

"What?" demanded Lady Grayson. "No one ever mentioned toads."

"Not surprising. You were an infant at the time," said Lady Rockhurst. "Andrew would have been about seven. We had a very strict nurse in those days, who laid down rigid rules. Anyone who broke one was denied biscuits with their afternoon chocolate."

"Did losing his treat make him angry?" asked Sarah.

"Not exactly. He rarely earned biscuits and claimed not to care. But when Nurse opened the tin one day, two huge toads leaped out, scaring her half to death."

"She deserved it," drawled Andrew. "She only found

fault with me so she could eat my share.”

His sisters laughed.

Chloe shook her head. “Don’t pretend you were perfect. I know better. Who was it who poured fish heads on Mr. Floyd’s doorstep so he tripped over a flock of gulls when he left for the market?”

“Really?” Lady Grayson’s eyes widened. “I hadn’t heard that tale, either. It is obvious that I led a very sheltered childhood.”

“At least I didn’t slip tonic into Mrs. Jessup’s tea,” said Andrew smugly. “She suffered dysentery for three days.”

Chloe blushed. “That was not well done, I admit. But she was so very stuffy.”

“Agreed.” Lady Grayson turned to Andrew. “Thomas must have inherited your love of mischief. The day after you left for the army, Laura’s ribbons turned up in the stable, fluttering from old Willow’s tail.”

“I remember Father telling me about it,” said Lady Rockhurst, who had married Sarah’s father the year before Andrew bought colors. “Thomas thought that pony was the most beautiful creature on earth, so he primped its hair just as Laura primped hers. Father laughed himself blind, though he had to punish Thomas for taking the ribbons without permission.”

Chloe gasped when she spotted Laura in the doorway. The fury blazing behind those blue eyes sent cold shivers down her back. The reminder of that ancient insult had pushed her over a precipice. And there was nothing Chloe could do about it.

Laura cut Chloe dead, then began talking quite loudly to Miss Sullivan. “It’s disgraceful when servants intrude into polite society – especially those who have been turned off without a reference.”

Chloe caught Andrew’s eye, silently pleading with him to do something.

Miss Sullivan tried to escape, but Laura held her in place.

“For heaven’s sake, Laura,” snapped Lady Grayson. “What idiot notion have you spawned now? Miss Fields has been a family friend for more than twenty years. Her breeding is every bit as good as yours.”

Laura cut her sister as well. “Ignore her,” she commanded Miss Sullivan, pulling her into the center of the room. “Lady Grayson dares put on airs only in the country. London society banished her two years

ago for the underhanded way she seduced Grayson away from his fiancée. Protecting a trollop will ruin her completely. Yes, a trollop,” she repeated loudly when Chloe choked. “After finding her lover’s letters, I had to turn her off. Liaisons cannot be tolerated. And to think that I welcomed her into my home!”

The lies left Chloe speechless. She’d known Laura could be vindictive, but she’d never expected this.

“Enough, Laura.” Andrew barked, moving forward. When Laura whirled to face him, Miss Sullivan fled. “I warned you what would happen if you spread more of your lies.”

She tried to slap him, but he caught her arm.

“Every word you’ve uttered since crossing Seabrook’s threshold has contained untruth. The only fact in this latest claim is that Miss Fields is no longer in your employ. She resigned yesterday when your abuse passed the bounds of sanity.”

“Abuse!”

“Exactly. I followed you yesterday when you raced off in the throes of a tantrum. Thus I saw you storm into her room and destroy her possessions. If I hadn’t caught up with you, I’ve no doubt you would have attacked her person as well. Knowing that your wrath had not run its course, I should have expected you to hatch some new plot against her. We all know that you blame others for your own misdeeds and abandon sense when your temper is running high.”

“How dare you insult—”

“Truth is never an insult.” He glared until she shut her mouth, then turned to Miss Truitt. “Forgive me for disclosing family scandals before so many, but I have little choice. I warned her that I would reveal the truth if she continued her selfish attacks.”

Martha nodded slightly.

Chloe braced herself. She didn’t know what Andrew intended, but it would not be pleasant. His eyes had turned to green ice.

Laura sneered. “You know nothing of truth.”

“On the contrary. I know far more than I wish about your antics. Shall we start with Kevin Fields, who had to buy colors because you accused him of rape? Falsely, of course. His only crime was ignoring you, thus pricking your conceit. Your plot killed him, for he was no soldier, but he preferred death to surrendering to blackmail. And he wasn’t your first victim. At least

two grooms sacrificed good jobs rather than endure your attempts at seduction.”

“You lie.”

“How easily that charge leaves your lips. It is your response to any fact you dislike.” He turned to Chloe. “I commend your decision to leave the employ of the person morally responsible for your brother’s death.”

Martha gasped. Mr. Truitt left the room, cutting Laura on his way out. Two ladies followed.

Chloe forced her mouth shut.

“Then there is the truth about those scars you try to hide,” continued Andrew. “You were shot while in the arms of a known scoundrel. Learning that the assignation was your idea should surprise no one, for you’ve never considered virtue a virtue. And you’ve long schemed against anyone beloved by others – which explains your attack on Miss Fields. How it must gall you that people like your former companion better than you.”

“No! She’s a whore, I tell you! I saw the letters myself.”

“As have I. Her brother wrote them to her mother while he was at school,” he snapped. “They are all she has left of him.”

“You lie!”

“See? Another fact you cannot accept. I heard someone refer to you as two-faced not long ago. And it’s true. But at least we can now see both your faces, for the accident peeled back the false façade to reveal the twisted soul within. Too bad I didn’t see it years ago. I should have carried tales to Father the day you arranged for that ladder to collapse, breaking Mary’s leg. Her only crime was to garner a kind word from him the day before. But you could never stand any man noticing another female.”

Lady Grayson turned furious eyes on Laura. “And to think I believed you when you swore the stable boy had tampered with it.”

“I thought I’d seen the worst of your schemes when you tried to trap Lord Grayson for yourself,” snapped Lady Rockhurst. “But I was wrong. You’re evil.”

Chloe said nothing, though she’d not known this particular tale. How many other crimes had Laura successfully hidden?

“It’s lies. All lies,” wailed Laura.

“Gospel,” said Andrew quietly. “If you have any pride

at all, you will retire to your room, then concentrate on finding a new companion. I haven't the authority to throw you out of Seabrook, but I doubt William will keep you here after this."

Laura turned a complete circle, staring at everyone in the room.

"She's not evil. She is mad," whispered a lady.

Mrs. Truitt cut Laura dead.

"Quite mad," confirmed another.

Martha averted her eyes.

"I heard she beds footmen."

Lady Rockhurst shook her head sadly, but said nothing. Even Sarah turned away.

Chloe could almost feel sorry for Laura, but this latest attack had been too low to forgive.

\* \* \* \*

Andrew stared at his sister, appalled at her cruelty. Thank God he'd recognized Kevin's writing on the letters. But this might yet hurt Chloe. Even a hint of wantonness would keep students away – which was why he'd decided to discredit Laura publicly. Chloe was leaving, but gossip could follow her. Faced with the choice of which lady to protect, he'd had to choose Chloe.

He should have anticipated this, but he'd expected Laura to admit that she'd gone too far in Chloe's room yesterday. To atone, she should have remained graciously civil for the remainder of the party. It was not a mistake he would make again.

But choosing this course presented its own dangers. Everyone in the room now knew that Laura Seabrook was mad. The realization would stain the family name. Most people feared madness and went to great lengths to keep it from their family trees. William now stood in danger of losing Martha.

Laura turned slowly, flinching as she reaped the rewards of her outburst. Cuts from her sisters. Cuts from the Truitts – Mr. Truitt had actually left rather than remain in the same room. Cuts from the neighbors. Only Chloe still met her eyes, but she would not forgive.

Laura fled, sobbing wildly.

A dozen ladies burst into voice. Most of them converged on Chloe. He started to follow, then realized that they were comforting her rather than demanding details. Many related previous experience with Laura's

lies, though some admitted that they'd only learned the truth much later.

Leaving Chloe in their hands, he joined the Truitts. He had to smooth this contretemps and prevent the scandal from growing.

"Are you sure you wish to join this family?" Mrs. Truitt was saying to Martha. "That woman is mad."

"Not really, Mama. While it is true that she is selfish and arrogant, she retains all her faculties. We've known for a year that she cannot be trusted. Remember the lies she told you about Lord Seabrook?"

"But were they lies?" For all her eagerness to improve her consequence, Mrs. Truitt seemed genuinely shaken. "Madness obviously runs in the family."

"No, it does not. I agree that she is unpleasant, but sly calculation underlies every word. Today's outburst was an act she staged to drive me away – her arrogance decries any connection to trade. Lord Seabrook and I discussed the possibility some days ago."

"But that means that he deliberately left you to this embarrassment."

"No, Mother. He has done everything possible to control her, but she cares nothing for society's opinion. Thus few threats carry weight with her. But that is beside the point. Lord Seabrook is nothing like his sister. Nor are his other siblings."

"A truer word was never spoken." Andrew stepped forward, grateful that William had taken his advice to warn Martha that Laura might try something. Not that he believed it was entirely an act, but at least Martha wouldn't cry off. "Forgive me for exposing the family's dirty linen so publicly, but Laura ignores private suggestions. And I cannot stand aside while she savages an innocent."

"I understand, Captain," murmured Martha. "William explained that Miss Seabrook is prone to ill-conceived outbursts. Unpleasant, but we will handle it."

What a benign way to call her selfish, arrogant, and a born liar. But Martha's equanimity proved she had the situation under control, and her eyes promised to placate her father.

He turned the subject to the betrothal ball, then glanced toward Chloe.

She was gone.

Curses exploded through his head – not that he could blame her. Despite the outcome, Laura's outburst must hurt. Embarrassment would drive her into hiding. But he needed to know that she was all right.

Excusing himself, he headed for the door.

\* \* \* \*

Chloe hurried upstairs, wanting nothing more than to lock herself in her room and cry. Her helplessness in the face of Laura's venom gave her a new perspective on Kevin's predicament. Laura would have staged a similar confrontation if he'd stayed. With Andrew away, no one could have saved him. He had literally chosen to die rather than accept Laura to wife. And who could blame him? Seven years ago, few had suspected that Laura was a liar and a selfish schemer. She'd come out in local society that year, dazzling everyone for miles. Her father had doted on her, giving her everything she demanded. He would have accepted her word against anyone else's.

But though Chloe had received the support denied to Kevin, she could not stay. Letting Andrew talk her into it had been a mistake. She'd known that, of course. But the temptation to spend one more day with him had been too much. Once she left, she would never see him again.

Shaking her head, Chloe pushed open her door, then froze. Mr. Truitt was pulling drawers from her wardrobe and dumping the contents on the floor.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, shocked into speech.

He whirled. His face flushed, then paled. "You should have remained in the drawing room, Miss Fields." He set his shoulders as if determined to finish an unpleasant chore. "At least the bitch will take the blame." He surged toward her.

Breaking her paralyzing shock, Chloe whirled. But Truitt slammed the door shut to prevent escape, then grabbed her. A hand choked off her scream. What had she walked into?

"Where are they?" he demanded.

"What?" The word was muffled against his sweaty palm, but he heard it well enough.

"The letters. Where are they?"

"What letters? Laura lied. I have no lover."



“But you have the letters. Where are they?” He shook her violently.

The motion loosened his hand. Twisting her head, she screamed.

“Damn you!” He flung her against the wall, stunning her. Before she could roll away, he grabbed her neck, his body crushing her against the floor. “The letters! Where are they?”

Chloe tried to kick, but her legs wouldn’t move. She clawed at his face and hands, but his strength was too great.

Fingers tightened around her throat. Spots danced before her eyes, thickening until they merged into solid black....

\* \* \* \*

A distant crash roused her. Another crash seemed closer. A third. A fourth. Thumps and bangs filled the room.

It took a moment to realize that she was free to move. The weight was gone. Nothing constricted her neck.

More time passed. The thumps ceased. Silence surrounded her. Had he finished ransacking the room, then left, believing her dead?

A hand touched her arm.

“What—” Her voice croaked.

“Don’t try to talk,” urged Andrew, lifting her onto the bed. He covered her with a quilt, as if he knew that she was suddenly freezing. A cup touched her lips.

“Wine would do more good, but all I have is water. I’m not leaving you alone with him even for an instant. He might escape and try again.”

She turned her head. Truitt lay unconscious by the fireplace, hands and feet tied with her stockings. Overturned furniture joined the emptied drawers on the floor. Pages from Kevin’s folio were everywhere.

She burst into tears.

“Shush, Chloe,” murmured Andrew, drawing her into his lap. He tucked the quilt tighter. “He won’t touch you again.”

“I-I know,” she sobbed. “I’m fine. I never cry.”

“Of course not. This is just reaction.” He turned her face up, wiping away tears with his thumbs.

Sensation exploded through her. Without thought, her hand fought free of the quilt to stroke his cheek. “Thank you for saving me, Andrew. Both here and

downstairs.”

He groaned, then dropped his head and kissed her.

It was better than eleven years ago. Better than her wildest fantasies. Heat burst from his lips, tingling through her body. Pleasure melted her bones. Her arms wrapped around his neck, pulling him closer, reveling in the feel of his body against hers.

He shifted to gain easier access to her mouth. His pounding heart drove hers even faster. But it wasn't enough. She needed him closer, hotter, wilder. Her fingers fumbled with his waistcoat.

He stiffened.

“We can't,” he choked, pushing her hands away. “Not now. It isn't right.”

It *is* right, she wanted to cry. But she couldn't. She loved him. Eleven years ago. Now. Forever.

But honor ruled his life. He would soon leave. If they finished what they'd started here, guilt would consume him. In time, he would come to hate her and himself.

“I know,” she managed, though her throat burned on the words. “I'll be fine. You take care of him.” She nodded toward Truitt.

\* \* \* \*

Andrew sucked in another breath, strengthening his control. He couldn't believe he'd nearly taken her, attacking when she was half dead from strangulation. How could he take advantage of her when she was so vulnerable – barely conscious, shivering from shock, unable to think? He should be flogged.

This was not the time to realize that he loved her – had always loved her. No wonder he'd had little interest in other women, seeking sex only in the aftermath of battle. Not that loving her was of any use. Nothing had changed. He still lacked the means to support her, so he could not court her.

Stop touching her, he ordered himself. Let go before you defile her completely.

“Why is he here?” He laid her on the bed, then clasped his hands behind his back and examined the room. “This can't be about Laura.”

“When I arrived he was searching the wardrobe. He demanded letters. When I couldn't produce any, he attacked.”

*Letters?* “Damnation. We had the answer all the time and didn't see it. Don't move,” he ordered when Chloe tried to sit up, then added, “I'll be right back.”

\* \* \* \*

Chloe huddled in the quilt, cold now that Andrew was gone. She ought to know why he was so excited, but she couldn't think. She ought to clean up the mess, but she couldn't move. Her arms felt like wet yarn, and she doubted her legs would support her. How had she become so weak so quickly?

Rolling over, she buried her face in a pillow to muffle a fresh bout of tears.

She should have left yesterday instead of clinging to her fantasies. It had seemed so harmless – one more day in her old world. But pretense was no way to live.

"Everything is all right now, Chloe," murmured Andrew, stroking her back.

She hadn't heard him return.

"It's not," she sobbed. "I'm no better than Laura, clinging to fantasies when I ought to be facing reality."

"What nonsense is this?" He tried to turn her to face him.

She resisted. "Staying on as a guest played out the pretense that life has not changed despite my decision to go into service. I should have known better. If I had left yesterday, that confrontation downstairs would not have happened. Now I've brought ruin to your entire family." Everyone knew Laura was mad. It would taint the Seabrooks for years.

"Nonsense. Don't let Laura play tricks with your mind. You haven't damaged any reputations. Martha is downstairs right now assuring everyone that Laura pretended madness to drive her away. People believe her, for Laura has a long history of twisting facts for her own purposes. Do you know that she cowed Mary into believing that she was clumsy, inept, and useless?"

"No."

"Yes, she did – by pointing out everything that might support such a charge. Mary was twenty before she realized that Laura had manipulated her. Laura has been doing the same to you, treating you like a lower form of servant and playing on your insecurities. But she is wrong. You had nothing to do with this week's troubles. Laura is solely responsible for that scene downstairs. And Truitt is at fault up here."

"Yes, but—"

"As for comparing yourself to Laura, you missed several important points. Dreams are not evil. We need

them to survive. Where Laura went wrong was forgetting the difference between dreams and reality, which is not a mistake you would ever make. And that is not the only difference between you. Laura deliberately hurts others, while you go out of your way to help. And Laura never accepts responsibility for her actions.”

His words sent warmth tumbling through her heart. Suppressing another sob, she sat up, ignoring the hand that would have helped her. She was too unsettled to risk his touch. But the change in position made her sway.

“Did he break something?”

“No, I’m just very weak all of a sudden.”

“I should have warned you. Danger has that effect, among others.”

“Such as?”

“Chills, so stay wrapped. Sudden movement can make you nauseous. And you will be lightheaded for an hour or two.”

His matter-of-fact tone relaxed her. He must have experienced these reactions himself – a vivid reminder of the dangers he’d faced, and would again. “Where did you go?”

“To my room. I left the contents of your jewelry casket there while Henshaw fixes it. Truitt must want Kevin’s letters.”

“Surely not!” But she could see his point. It was Laura’s mention of letters that had sent Truitt from the drawing room. “But what could he want with them?”

“I’ve no idea. But the one place we didn’t look is this packet of letters.” He removed the faded ribbon and grinned. “Aha! Two of these are not from Kevin.”

She reached for the first. “It’s addressed to Mr. Truitt! But I don’t understand...” The writing was cramped and difficult to follow. She handed it to Andrew.

“Dear God,” he murmured as he read. “That explains it.”

“What?”

“The writer is Truitt’s partner. Two months ago, Ashley was in Somerset negotiating a contract. He discovered a granary full of moldy barley that could be had for a pittance. The letter suggests that they buy it, then mix it with good barley to increase their profits. It

seems they used that scheme for several military sales. Damn his hide! No wonder provisions were so scarce." He glared at Truitt's battered body. "I should have broken a few ribs."

She read the second missive. You fool! it began. Have you no regard for our necks? How can you commit such admissions to paper? It went on to forbid buying the bad grain. The customer is too near at hand to explain any spoilage. That scheme works only for overseas deliveries.

She handed it to Andrew as Truitt moaned.

"The greedy swine," he growled, shoving Truitt onto his back.

Truitt's eyes flew open. He tried to move out of reach, but managed only to flop about like a fish.

Andrew cursed him. "The regiment had a hard enough time enduring battle, illness, and inadequate accommodations, but drawing inedible rations did more to destroy morale than all the other problems combined. I swore I'd kill the bastard who sent us rotten meat and infested grain. I knew it wasn't the government's doing." His foot pressed on Truitt's throat.

"You can't kill me," gasped Truitt. Fear glazed his eyes.

"Why?" asked Andrew idly. "You didn't care how many men died because of your treasonous greed."

"Seabrook would never forgive you. He'll protect me for Martha's sake."

"That's *Lord* Seabrook to you, Truitt. You aren't worthy of sharing his roof." His foot pressed harder.

"No!" choked Truitt.

"No? You didn't give Miss Fields that choice."

Truitt gagged.

"Don't kill him, Andrew." Chloe stumbled across the room to grasp his arm. "He's not worth the price. Let the authorities take care of him."

Andrew shuddered, but eased the pressure.

Truitt gasped for air.

"Much as I would enjoy watching you suffer, Chloe is right – though a quick death now would be easier on Martha than watching you tried, convicted, and hanged." When Truitt choked, Andrew smiled. "Yes, hanged. That is the sentence for treason. The truth will out. I'm sure close study of your private papers will prove enlightening. So I won't harm you. I'll not

swing for killing vermin. Ring for a footman, Chloe.”

She obliged.

“You’re making a mistake.” Truitt blanched.

“Hardly. No matter what we find at Truitt and Company, these letters raise serious questions. And you tried to strangle a guest in my home. I’ll not tolerate that. Nor can I let you warn Ashley.”

Truitt’s sputtering ended when a rap sounded on the door.

“Fetch Lord Rankin,” ordered Andrew when Chloe let Rob inside. “Quietly, for official business that Lord Seabrook cannot attend to. He should be in the library. And bring Ned back with you.”

“Immediately, sir.” Rob nearly saluted.

“Don’t touch anything until Rankin sees the evidence,” Andrew added when Chloe picked up a pile of handkerchiefs. Then he turned back to Truitt.

“While we wait for Rankin, why don’t you tell me how you started cheating the government?”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Sir Nigel hid the letters in his wife’s jewelry casket,” Andrew finished half an hour later. Rob and Ned stood guard over Truitt with orders to gag him if he interrupted Andrew’s explanation again.

“You are sure that Miss Fields knew nothing about the scheme?” asked Lord Rankin.

“Positive,” Andrew answered. “Sir Nigel never wrote to her, so she had no way of learning his business. She could not have found them herself. I had the casket in my keeping from the moment she inherited it until she arrived at Seabrook.”

“It was awkward carrying it to Moorside and back,” added Chloe. “I was leaving Miss Seabrook’s employ after the party, so Captain Seabrook’s offer was welcome. I noted the bundle Wednesday evening, but did not examine it. Duty kept me busy, and I wasn’t ready to read my brother’s words.”

“What of Truitt’s claim that Captain Seabrook attacked him without cause?” Lord Rankin asked, glancing toward the chair. Andrew had propped Truitt up, but he remained bound.

“I must refute it.” Chloe’s voice was hoarse but firm. “Mr. Truitt was ransacking my room when I returned from the drawing room. When I tried to flee,

he grabbed me, hurled me against the wall, then wrapped his hands around my neck and squeezed until I couldn't breathe. My bruises must prove his strength. I do not know what transpired after I lost consciousness, but I awoke to find the captain subduing Mr. Truitt. Without his intervention, I would be dead."

Andrew shuddered. "He was choking her when I arrived. I've no doubt he meant murder. His eyes had gone quite blank."

"That seems clear enough," decided Rankin. "Is Ashley here yet?"

"Not to my knowledge," said Andrew. "William invited him, but he declined dinner and was ambivalent about attending the ball."

Ashley had been irritated over Martha's betrothal – William described him as an odd duck. He had apparently made a bid for her hand three years earlier. Now Andrew wondered if Ashley had hoped to wrest control of the company using Martha's shares – or at least keep others removed from its operation. Truitt was greedy, but cautious. Ashley seemed to be merely greedy.

Rankin pulled Andrew's thoughts back to Chloe's room when he announced, "I'll send men to find Ashley. The letters support arresting him for fraud. And we also have the attempted murder charge against Truitt. Bring him along."

The footmen jerked Truitt to his feet and led him away.

Andrew remained with Chloe. The image of Truitt's hands wrapped around her throat would torment his dreams for a long time to come. Her eyes remained bloodshot from the strain. Dark bruises blotched her fragile skin. Crescents marked where fingernails had broken the surface.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded. "My throat is sore, but it will mend. What happens now?"

"Lord Rankin will examine Truitt's business records and any records in his or Ashley's homes. The pair will stand trial at the next assizes."

"Which of them killed Father?"

"Neither." He met her angry eyes. "Not in any prosecutable sense. I suspect Ashley was in the house that night. George mentioned a head injury sustained

about then. Sir Nigel may have found him in the library and bashed him with the poker before rushing to summon help.” That would explain the blood in the library. “In his haste, Sir Nigel tripped and tumbled down the stairs. No one pushed him. Ashley and Truitt wanted the letters. They might well have killed him once they recovered the evidence, but with Sir Nigel dead, they had no clue to the hiding place.”

“I suppose you’re right.” She moved to look out the window.

“I know I’m right.” He paused, but there was no way around it. “You do realize that Sir Nigel must have been blackmailing Truitt and Ashley.”

She nodded. “Why else would the letters be in the casket rather than in the hands of a magistrate? And that explains his recent infusions of cash.”

He relaxed. “It’s over, Chloe. I’ll have Sally bring you some honey for your throat. You don’t want people to ask questions at dinner.”

“I can’t—”

“You must. I don’t know what William will do about Truitt’s arrest, but for Martha’s sake, he may hide it until later. The guests last saw you squared off against Laura. If you fail to appear for dinner, Mrs. Telcor will assume that Laura’s charges have merit.”

“No smoke without fire,” she croaked.

“Hateful, but she has always loved scandal. If you let Laura’s spite take root, you will have to abandon your dreams, so you must also attend the ball.”

“You cannot be serious.” She paled, making the bruises seem harsher.

“Unless William or the Truitts reveal this arrest, no one will know about it. No one heard your altercation – the children are either outdoors or napping, and the nurses were gathered for tea in the schoolroom. Your best course is to assume that Laura’s accusations will be utmost in people’s minds. That will prepare you for anything.”

“Very well.”

She looked so uncertain that he pulled her against him, murmuring in her ear until she relaxed. Only then did he excuse himself.

\* \* \* \*

Andrew found William in the library. Alone.

“We have trouble,” he said, pouring himself a drink.

“I heard. I’ve already confined Laura to her room



and assigned a footman to make sure she stays there. I need to change for—”

“Dinner must wait. Summon George Truitt.”

William stared for a long minute, then sent a footman for George. “What happened?”

Andrew handed him a glass of brandy before speaking. “Truitt was arrested half an hour ago.”

“Arre—” William swayed, downing the brandy in one gulp. “What the devil are you talking about?”

“I caught him strangling Chloe. Since I could not ask you to arrest Martha’s father, I called on Rankin. We are fortunate that he was in the house.” He explained the letters and Truitt’s attack.

“He actually tried to kill her?” William set down his glass, then dropped his head into his hands.

“Had I arrived any later, he would have succeeded.” Andrew barely forced the words past his lingering anger. “Thank God she managed to scream and that I was near enough to hear her.” The sound had nearly stopped his heart. “That charge will keep him locked up while Rankin investigates the rest – another reason I called him; Martha couldn’t handle your involvement. The investigation could drag on for weeks. And if evidence turns up to suggest treason, it could get very nasty.”

William nodded.

“According to the letters, Truitt has been fleecing the government for years. Damn him!” His fist hit the mantel. “How could he justify leaving us out there with rotten food and short supplies?”

“Perhaps the investigation will answer that,” said William heavily. “Are you sure he was involved? Perhaps Ashley forced his cooperation by making threats against his family.”

“No. The letters are clear on that point. Truitt was in charge. Ashley asked permission and was soundly rebuked for muddled thinking.”

William flinched. “Poor Martha. She dotes on him.”

“That’s why I asked you to summon George. You have to decide what to do about the ball.”

“Hold it, of course.” William seemed surprised.

“That wasn’t what I meant. Obviously we cannot cancel it. Half the guests are here, with the rest in transit. But what about the announcement? Do you still wish to wed her? If the government confiscates his property – which will happen if his actions are

judged treasonous – Martha may lose her dowry.”

“I care not.”

“The other question is whether she can accept an alliance with the family who destroyed her father. I’ve seen how close they are. And coming atop Laura’s antics, this may be too much.” William paled, but Andrew could not consider sensibilities at this juncture. Time was too short. “Even if the betrothal stands, might it be better to postpone the announcement? How can she handle well-wishers when her father is under arrest?”

“I love her,” said William simply. “And I am convinced she loves me.”

Andrew agreed, but he had to consider all possibilities. Love was not always enough – as his own dilemma proved.

George arrived. “Is there a problem?”

“A huge one.” Andrew repeated his story as he replenished William’s brandy and poured another for George.

“There has to be a mistake.” George’s face was purple.

“No mistake. I pulled him from Miss Fields myself.” Andrew held up a hand, demanding silence. “I also read the letters. Ashley mentioned their long history of hiding rotten meat and infested grain in army shipments. Your father’s response acknowledged those shipments but claimed that the current customers were too close at hand to accept natural spoilage as an explanation. He also reminded Ashley that they must cease diverting a percentage of large shipments to other parties – in essence, selling goods twice. His files should show whether they contributed to our chronic supply shortage on the Peninsula. He can’t have kept everything in his head. But even without further evidence, the letters should be enough to convict the pair of a longstanding scheme to defraud the government.”

George moaned.

“Sir Nigel’s possession of those letters explains the rash of break-ins this past week – three at Fields House, one at Moorside. I suspect Ashley was responsible for the first and last. That head injury was probably sustained at Fields House – I found blood on the poker in the library – and your father was here during the Moorside incident. But that doesn’t explain

the other two, including the attempt to kill Sir Peter Fields. Was Ashley well enough to search Fields House, or did Truitt do it? Were they acting together? Was that the emergency that delayed him on Tuesday? And whose idea was it to set Sir Peter on fire?"

"My God." George sank into a chair, his head in his hands.

Andrew forged ahead. "Save the despair for tomorrow. You will likely need a battery of barristers to salvage your business – to say nothing of luck and customer good will to keep it running. Right now you must decide whether to make tonight's betrothal announcement."

George cursed.

"I have no intention of crying off," said William. "I love Martha. If the government cuts up rough about seizing assets, we can adjust her dowry. But how will she feel about this?"

"She loves you." George relaxed a trifle.

"She also loves your father."

George nodded. "This will hurt her badly, but she is strong. And she despises dishonesty, no matter where she finds it."

"Talk to her," suggested Andrew. "There are several ways to handle this. You can claim that Truitt was called away on business – which he was, in a manner of speaking. The ball would continue as planned, with you announcing the betrothal. Or you can skip the announcement and send it to the newspapers tomorrow. That would raise speculation about your father's absence and Martha's intentions, but people will learn the truth by morning anyway. Or you can reveal the full truth tonight, then play down the betrothal out of respect for the family."

"Which would you prefer?" George looked at William.

"Martha should be here. I won't make the decision for her. I've always believed that truth is the only honorable course, but I will claim business if she wishes. How much curiosity can she handle? At the first hint of trouble, Mrs. Telcor will descend like the vulture she is. And some of the highest sticklers will use this to decry my choice of wife."

"They will anyway," said Andrew.

George winced.

"I care nothing for their opinions," swore William.

“But we cannot deny that they exist. Martha will be under close scrutiny even without hurling her into scandal. Is it fair to apply this additional pressure? And what about your mother?”

“If we reveal the truth, she must stay in her room,” decided George. “Her hysterics would embarrass us all.”

“I will fetch Martha,” offered Andrew. “Or rather, I’ll send her to you. This is your problem. Let me know which path you choose. I will see that Rankin and the footmen honor your decision. In the meantime, I must change.”

He left.

\* \* \* \*

In the end, they announced that Truitt had left on urgent business.

When word swept the drawing room before dinner, more than one guest frowned. Truitt’s departure reminded everyone that Martha came from trade. The obvious conclusion was that Truitt cared more for money than for his family.

Andrew sighed and tried to minimize the damage. No one dared cut Martha in front of lords Seabrook, Grayson, and Rockhurst, but it added yet another burden to her shoulders. Even as she smiled to her friends and helped William greet new arrivals, Andrew could see the strain around her eyes.

Mrs. Truitt was clearly embarrassed by her husband’s defection and furious that his business was reducing Martha’s consequence, but she remained determined to make the most of the occasion.

Andrew had discouraged William from sharing the truth with the family – the more people who knew a secret, the less secure it became. But William had insisted on telling Grayson and Rockhurst that Truitt was under arrest for attacking Chloe. Andrew suspected that they had shared the information with their wives.

But so far it had worked. The family rallied to fend off censure for Truitt’s absence. Grayson and Rockhurst laughed with George. Catherine and Mary introduced Mrs. Truitt to high-ranking guests, using their own consequence to stifle speculation and reminding people of Mrs. Truitt’s connections. Andrew deflected conversation onto neutral topics.

When Chloe finally appeared in the doorway, he

heaved a sigh of relief. He'd been watching the door for half an hour, his heart thudding wildly whenever someone appeared. But it had never been her. He'd nearly decided to go fetch her – or at least check on her in case her injuries had worsened.

But now he could relax.

"You are lovely this evening," he said, unable to quell a broad smile as he placed her hand on his arm. Sally had twisted her hair into a knot of cascading curls more elaborate than he'd ever seen her wear. To adorn it within the bounds of deep mourning – and hide the bruises peeking out above her high neckline – Sally had woven a long gray scarf into her hair, then wrapped it loosely around her neck. The end trailed provocatively across one breast, heating his blood.

"Thank you."

"I like the scarf. It reminds me of Spanish mantillas."

"It will do for dinner. Then I will plead a headache and retire. Since Laura is not here, no one will comment."

"Nonsense. You promised me two sets."

"Don't be ridiculous, Andrew," she hissed. "I can't attend a ball in this gown. It is too plain. And close examination will reveal bruising. Anyone who approaches me is bound to guess the truth. If they connect it with Truitt's absence – which is quite likely, since my bruises and his disappearance happened at the same time – the fat will be in the fire."

"They would be more likely to suspect Laura, since she is also absent this evening. You have no connection to Truitt. You can remain in the dimmest corner and decline to dance in deference to your bereavement," he admitted. "But I need you there. I need a safe harbor where I can relax."

"Your leg can't be *that* weak!"

"No, but I am not accustomed to the sly traps of polite conversation. It will be hard to keep people from guessing that scandal is afoot. At least you will avoid distressing subjects."

"Ah."

"Sets four and six. Don't let me down."

He kept her arm when Fitch announced dinner. He'd swapped place cards so they could sit together.

\* \* \* \*

William allowed only one glass of port before rising

to lead the gentlemen to the ballroom. Andrew approved. Speculation had run rampant the moment the ladies left. Truitt's friends and associates refused to believe that any crisis could pull him away from his daughter's betrothal, though Ashley's absence supported the claim of a business emergency. But what could demand attention on a Saturday evening? His offices remained intact – or had when Mr. Garrison had driven past them on the way to Seabrook.

Others pondered why Rankin's secretary had been riding neck-or-nothing toward Exeter – several of the guests had passed the man.

Wagers covered both issues.

Andrew gritted his teeth as Lord Hunt and Mr. Wren whispered together at one end of the table. They seemed to be discussing rumors about Truitt, which could only cause trouble. It was definitely time to join the ladies. He must see that none of the men had time for private conversation tonight.

Grayson thwarted that goal when he pulled Andrew aside as they left the dining room. "A moment of your time, if you would," he said softly. The morning room door closed behind him.

"What now?" He couldn't manage another crisis tonight. "I need to be in the ballroom to deflect speculation about Truitt. As do you."

"Of course, but first I have a business proposition for you. If you are interested, I must dispatch messages immediately."

Andrew raised his brows. Had Gray discovered that he'd resigned his commission? Even Jinks didn't know yet.

"The elevations and floor plans you did for William are brilliant. I am even more impressed with the skill demonstrated in your sketchbook." A raised hand prevented protest. "An impertinence on my part, and one I would not forgive if someone invaded my privacy. But I'll not apologize. You hide your lights too well, Captain."

"Drawing passes the time," he growled, hating the heat rising in his face. "Soldiers suffer long periods of boredom between battles. Hobbies fill it. Perhaps Captain Smith's pack was a more useful pastime – he supplied many a hare when rations fell short – but coursing was never my forte."

"Understandable. I'm not much for hunting myself."

But I like your mind, and I love your ideas. My father will be dead in six months. I have always hated Rothmoor Park – dark and oppressive, with rooms so tiny they close around you, filled with furniture so massive it would overwhelm a castle. I vowed years ago to replace it. That’s where you come in.”

“No. We already had this discussion. I can play with floor plans and façade decorations. I can even build a decent cottage. But I don’t know enough about stress and foundations to manage even a town house, let alone a manor.” Yet his heart was trying to batter free of his chest. He wanted this job almost as much as he wanted Chloe. If only he had the training—

“You’ll learn,” vowed Grayson. “Here is my proposition. You resign your commission and work for me. You will spend the first six months in Soane’s London office. I sent him your sketchbook. He thinks it is brilliant and has agreed to fill any holes in your education. He also wants to see everything else you’ve done, both measured drawings and original sketches. Don’t forget copies of the plans you drew for William.” From a pocket, he pulled out a letter that must have arrived with today’s courier. “You can stay at Grayson House or find rooms closer to his offices, but plan frequent conferences to discuss Rothmoor Park. Before Rothmoor dies, I want detailed designs. You will oversee the building’s construction.”

“I’m no builder.”

“No, you’re an architect. Hire a builder. But you will be in charge of the project.” He named an outlandish fee.

Head spinning, Andrew glared. “I don’t want your charity.”

“I won’t offer any. The standard fee for an architect who supervises construction is five percent of the project cost. I don’t know the final cost on this one yet, but I expect it to exceed one hundred thousand. So that five thousand I just offered is no more than your due. Once you finish Rothmoor, you will be eligible for membership in the Royal Academy. And unless my instincts have deserted me, you will be in great demand for other projects. A gifted architect can retire a wealthy man.”

Andrew opened his mouth, but nothing emerged. Gray was offering every dream he’d ever had – Chloe, a venue to try his ideas, construction rather than

destruction as the focus of his life. He tried again. "I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll accept. My courier can handle your resignation—"

"I posted it on Thursday."

Gray's changeable eyes flared blue. "Good. I'll make sure they handle it with dispatch. A captaincy in an infantry regiment sells for eighteen hundred guineas. Right?"

Andrew nodded, dazed.

"Any back pay due?"

Another nod.

"Good. It will be waiting for you in London. You can leave on Monday."

"Make it a week. I can't walk out in the middle of this mess. William would drown." His head was whirling. Five thousand guineas when added to the sale of his commission would buy a comfortable house, or even a small estate. He needed to talk to Chloe. Did she still care? Would she modify her own dreams to include him?

"Good. I'll inform Soane that you will begin in a fortnight. Welcome aboard, Andrew. I anticipate a productive relationship. We'll talk more in the morning."

Andrew nodded, hardly aware when Gray left.

His hands shook as he read Soane's letter. Brilliant execution ... creative extension of classical themes ... exquisite attention to detail...

What if he failed? He had no idea if he had the temperament to be an architect. Soldiering had been easy. He'd followed orders and made sure his men followed theirs. If he lived until morning, he followed more orders.

This would be different. He would be the one making decisions. Failure meant discredit, not death. But that was worse. Discredit would taint him for a lifetime, burdening him with images of what might have been.

\* \* \* \*

Chloe sat in a corner of the ballroom, half behind a pillar so she needn't speak to anyone. Too many people sought confirmation that Laura was soiled, insane, or both. She refused to provide it. The Seabrooks deserved her loyalty, no matter what Laura had done.

At least Laura was not the only name on people's



tongues. Mr. Truitt's absence garnered even more attention, particularly from his friends and business associates, who recognized the explanation as odd. Ladies whispered behind fans. Gentlemen clustered in corners. Tension permeated the room. Mrs. Truitt appeared ready to shatter. So far no one suspected the truth, but one wrong word would cause instant scandal.

The receiving line finally broke up, allowing William and Martha to open the ball. Andrew led Mrs. Truitt out – another demonstration of support for William's match. He danced the second set with Martha, then disappeared again.

She frowned. When the ladies had left the dining room, Andrew had intended to go directly to the ballroom so he could deflect speculation. Yet he'd not appeared until half an hour after the other men, and now he'd left again.

Perhaps Laura was planning some new vengeance. It would be just like her to stage another confrontation. In her current humor, Laura would enjoy hurting everyone she knew. The ballroom held more than a hundred people. If she embarrassed William and Martha badly enough, they would remain tarnished for years.

Chloe was rising to check on Laura when movement behind the fretwork screen enclosing the minstrel's gallery caught her eye.

Sarah!

She nearly kicked herself for overreacting. She'd forgotten that Andrew had promised the third set to his niece. Since Sarah was too young for the ballroom, he'd gone to her.

How thoughtful he was. Few men would consider the feelings of a girl condemned to the periphery of events. Kevin had hated social events, for they interfered with his studies. He'd even taken himself off to see a friend instead of accompanying her to Bath. Peter was too selfish to consider anyone but himself. William was much like Kevin, though his obsession had always been the estate rather than books.

But Andrew was special. Even the horrors of war that had hardened too many men had left Andrew's kind heart alone. No wonder she loved him.

*Don't think about that*, her conscience ordered.

It was right. She must face facts. In a day or two she

would start a new life. Alone. Posing as a widow meant she could not ask Andrew to help her settle. He would never approve. Nor could she let him know where she lived. If he could find her, a part of her would always pray for a knock on her door. Even a faint hope would blight her future.

So she had to find her cottage herself. He wouldn't agree, so she must slip away when he wasn't looking. Tonight would be best. He would be too busy to notice her absence. Spending more time together could only increase her ultimate pain. His touch was too tempting, his lips—

The music stopped, ending the third set. He would return and seek her out. It was best that she not be here. She and Sally would head north. Her Yorkshire relatives could assist her if help became necessary.

The terrace offered the most direct route to her room. Slipping along the edge of the crowd, she headed for the door, snatches of conversation propelling her feet.

“...don't know how Seabrook can demean his title...”

“...Truitt always seemed a little too lucky.”

“Silly old bat. Imagine claiming that Sir Peter stole her pearls, when they were in her own reticule, where she'd put them after the clasp broke.”

“Mad. Quite mad. He should have kept her locked...”

“...should have seen her face...”

A sudden shout from the stairs pulled all eyes to the main door. Peter stood there, glaring at the footman barring his path. Swollen burns turned his face into a monstrous blob.

“Of course I have an invitation,” he rasped. “We both do.” Shoving the footman aside, he clattered down the stairs, a disheveled companion in tow.

Fear sliced down Chloe's back. Peter wasn't here to celebrate William's betrothal. Nor was he here for a game of cards. Everyone knew William never allowed deep gaming under his roof.

She shuddered.

“Where's my damned sister?” demanded Peter.

Chloe ducked behind a cluster of men and raced for the door. If she could reach the terrace, she could lose herself on the nursery floor, then slip away before dawn.

Voices rose behind her as Peter shoved through the crowd. A glance over one shoulder revealed Andrew,

Rockhurst, and Grayson racing toward the disturbance, but she didn't see her brother.

She dodged around a knot of ladies snorting disapproval at Peter's intrusion, then broke into a run for the door.

"Umph!" Someone collided with her.

"There you are," Peter exclaimed, grabbing her arm. "Pack your bags. I found you a husband." He turned to his companion. "See? A little long in the tooth, but hardly a hag. She'll breed well enough for you."

Chloe gasped. "Have you lost your mind?" She tried to pull free, but his hand remained firm.

"Now, now. Don't turn missish on me. You should be glad for any offer at your age." He jerked her forward, trying to join her hand with his friend's.

"No!" She struggled harder. Peter was drunk, as usual. Surely she could break free. She had to break free. Unless she escaped, she would find herself ruined by morning. "You are not my guardian."

"What?" yelped the friend.

"Ignore her," snapped Peter. "Barry will be so glad to be rid of her that he'll jump at your offer."

"Hah!" Chloe twisted until her wrist hurt. "He would never follow your lead. You fired him and threw him out of Fields House." It was bravado, though. If Peter's friend deflowered her, Mr. Barry would insist on marriage to save her reputation.

She cast pleading eyes on the nearest guests, but they sidled away. None would interfere in a family matter for such as her.

Andrew suddenly burst from the crowd. "What the devil is going on?" he demanded, doing something to Peter's arm that loosened his grip. Off balance, she would have fallen if Andrew hadn't pulled her against his side.

"Nothing that need concern you, Captain. I was just conveying the good news to Chloe that she is to be wed."

Andrew shook his head. "She obviously doesn't share your excitement."

"She will. We just caught her by surprise." He reached for her again.

"Stop embarrassing her, Sir Peter," snapped Andrew. "This is not a matter for public discussion."

"I am aware of that. As you can see, I was helping her outside where we can be private. If you will excuse

us—”

“No!” gasped Chloe. “He will force—”

“Don’t interfere in family matters,” warned Peter. A jerk on his companion’s arm kept the man silent. “I finally got the chit off my hands. Have to do the deed before he changes his mind.”

“Wrong.” Andrew’s voice hardened. “Chloe was never on your hands. Sir Nigel made sure of that.”

“This is not your affair. Come, Chloe.”

Andrew slipped her behind his back. “You have no authority over her. Besides, she is already betrothed.”

“Betrothed!” snapped Peter’s companion. “Why, you despicable—”

“He lies,” insisted Peter.

“Not at all. She is betrothed to me.”

Rockhurst arrived and helped herd Peter toward the door. When Peter tried to protest, Andrew added, “You’ve entertained my brother’s guests enough for one evening.”

Before Chloe knew what had happened, she was on the terrace with Andrew, Peter, a drunken stranger, and Lord Rockhurst. A glance showed Grayson just inside the door, his position preventing anyone from following. Andrew’s arm kept her close to his side.

“Barry will never let you get away with this,” blustered Peter. “You are nothing but a half-pay soldier. Jacob is wealthy, with an established business.”

“And you expect to take advantage of that. But Mr. Barry would never approve one of your friends.”

Jacob was trying to draw Peter aside, but Peter ignored him. Fury twisted his face.

Chloe shivered, grateful that both Andrew and Rockhurst flanked her. Peter wasn’t drunk enough to challenge both of them. But he was plenty drunk enough to attack her if she refused to cooperate.

“You can’t wish to be shackled to a military man, Chloe,” ordered Peter. “Tell the captain to return to his regiment.”

“No.” The word freed her voice. “You have no say in my future, Peter, and never will. Did you forget to tell your drunken friend that I am not conformable? Anyone who tries to subdue me will regret it. I’ll not be sold to pay your gaming debts.”

Jacob flinched, confirming her guess. Peter had indeed wagered her hand on the turn of a card. And

lost, as usual.

Panic twisted Peter's face. "You don't understand," he wailed. "I'll lose Fields House unless she agrees."

"Which is no more than you deserve. Who is he, anyway?"

Rockhurst answered. "Mr. Jacob Ashley. It took me a moment to recall the face." He glared at the man. "Weren't you booted out of a club on Jermyn Street last year for fuzzing cards?"

Peter gasped.

Chloe stiffened.

Andrew signaled Grayson with his free hand.

Ashley glared at Rockhurst. "No, I was not booted out. A cub who lost a quarter's allowance cried foul, but he was proved wrong."

"Jacob Ashley." Andrew nodded. "I smell a very large rat. When did you start losing to him, Sir Peter?"

"What difference—"

"When?" His voice cracked through the air, demanding answers.

"A- A month ago. He's carried me as long as he's willing."

"No. He carried you so he had leverage against Sir Nigel. Meet the man who tried to kill you."

"What?" Peter's face blanched.

"What?" yelled Ashley at the same time.

"Explain," ordered Rockhurst.

Andrew glanced at Chloe. "You explain." His hand again signaled as Rob and Ned reached the terrace. Peter and Ashley were too intent on Chloe to notice.

Chloe took a deep breath. "Mr. Ashley and his partner made their fortunes by defrauding the government. Father discovered their scheme, but instead of giving the evidence to the authorities, he used it to blackmail them. Ashley confronted him. A fight ensued. Father fell to his death. After several searches of the house failed to turn up the evidence, Ashley set a fire to destroy it."

Peter gasped.

"Quite an imagination," drawled Ashley.

"Hardly. How did you discover I'd taken Mother's jewelry casket to Moorside?"

Peter shrugged. "I mentioned it when he pressed me for payment. It was the last thing of value in the house."

"And thus put my life in jeopardy. Fortunately I was

at Seabrook when he ransacked Moorside.” The footmen moved behind Ashley, blocking any escape.

“Lies,” Ashley snapped. “You can’t prove any of them.”

“Can’t I?” She whipped the shawl from her neck. “You were right to look for the jewelry casket. The letters were inside. When I caught Truitt searching my room for them, he tried to kill me.”

Peter’s jaw hung open.

Rockhurst shifted closer to Ashley.

Andrew smiled grimly. “The letters are now in good hands.”

Ashley blanched.

Chloe nodded. “The game is over, Ashley. And you will pay for every crime, especially killing my father.”

“I had nothing to do with his death.”

“Do you expect me to believe that?” she demanded sharply.

“It’s the truth. If anyone has a complaint, it is me. He bashed me with a poker.”

Peter edged away even as Rockhurst stepped closer.

“I am not a violent man,” Ashley insisted. “Yes, I went to Fields House to demand that Sir Nigel return property that he stole, but that was my only visit. He tricked me by claiming he’d hidden it behind a brick. I made the mistake of stepping closer to see what was taking so long. That’s when he hit me. His attack put me in bed for days. And I had nothing to do with Peter’s misfortune.”

“Save the explanation for court,” advised Andrew.

“You and Truitt can argue the blame there. He is already under arrest. Now it is your turn.”

Before Ashley could react, the footmen grabbed him. When Ashley lashed out with a foot, Rockhurst punched him in the stomach. Ashley sagged.

“Into the library,” ordered Andrew, nodding to the adjacent wing. “Then summon Lord Rankin – quietly. He is handling the case.”

Rockhurst accompanied them, leaving Chloe, Peter, and Andrew behind.

“Go home, Peter,” said Chloe softly. “Set your house in order. But don’t bother me again.”

“How?” he demanded. His voice broke. “I haven’t a shilling to my name. I owe him more than Fields House is worth.”

“I doubt it.” Andrew herded Peter toward the

garden. "Ashley can never collect. Even if he escapes the scaffold, he will spend the rest of his life in Botany Bay. And the games were probably rigged. He wanted you in his debt and didn't care how he managed it. You were his insurance against Sir Nigel's demands, just as Chloe was going to be his insurance against yours. He didn't want to make a second attempt on your life."

Peter frowned, but didn't deny it.

"Good-bye, Peter," said Chloe. "Perhaps one day we will meet again, but I wouldn't count on it. I'll not forgive you for selling me like a painting or an old chair."

Peter opened his mouth, but Andrew stopped him. "Go home, Sir Peter. Let your wounds heal. Learn about estate management. Consult a book dealer, for some of Kevin's volumes might be valuable. Use your one decent investment to help your tenants. If you stay away from the tables, you can survive."

Peter shook his head as if surfacing from sleep. Shrugging, he headed for the stables.

Chloe watched him disappear around the corner. Loneliness suddenly overwhelmed her.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Left alone with Andrew, Chloe succumbed to tremors as the various shocks finally registered. Jacob Ashley, a man she had never heard of before today, had destroyed her family – precipitating the flight that had killed her father, draining the last of the family's resources, setting fire to Peter and the house. Had he also set up fraudulent investments that had trapped her father? He'd been flouting the law for at least a decade, always seeking to enhance his fortune. Sir Nigel would have been an easy target.

Her foot tripped over a step. Blinking, she realized that Andrew was escorting her into the family wing. His arm steered her into the morning room, where he closed the door.

"Don't bother, Andrew," she protested as he picked up the tinderbox. "I'm going upstairs. You should return to your guests." She needed time alone to regain her composure. Though she'd welcomed his appearance in the ballroom, his touch had again scrambled her senses. Unless she broke the spell,

leaving would be impossible.

Andrew shook his head. "William doesn't need me at the moment, and I've no wish to be interrogated.

Besides, we need to talk. We have matters to settle."

"What matters?" But she knew. He had always been too impetuous for his own good and too honorable to back down even when he'd talked himself into an impossible corner. "You needn't fear I'll hold you to rash statements, Andrew. You were only confounding Peter until you could draw him from the ballroom."

"Untrue. I meant every word."

"No one heard you, so it doesn't matter."

"Don't be naïve. People may have backed away from the confrontation, but every ear in the ballroom was straining to hear us. By now everyone in the house will know you accepted my hand."

"Even though I didn't."

His face darkened. "What else could I have done, Chloe?" He pressed his temples as if they hurt. "Peter ignored your protests. Would you have clawed and scratched and screamed the roof down at William's ball? Nothing less would have stopped him, and he might have dragged you off anyway. Debauching you would make Barry insist you wed the devil himself."

She opened her mouth to protest, but couldn't utter a word. He was right. She could never have fought hard enough to escape. The scandal would have ruined her, especially after Laura's accusations. And William already faced too many problems. How could she embarrass him further?

Peter must have known. Why else would he have confronted her so publicly? She had a long history of meek obedience – giving up teaching, seeking a husband though her heart belonged to Andrew, accepting her father's vow that all would be well. The only time she'd ever stood up to him had been over working for Laura, and William had done most of the persuading.

So by presenting Ashley as her betrothed in front of local society, he'd expected her to docilely accept her fate.

But that didn't excuse Andrew's lies. "I could have escaped Ashley," she declared. "The man is a criminal."

"But I didn't know who he was. Nor did you," he reminded her grimly. "His arrest would have saved



you, but neither of us could have predicted that. I won't apologize for protecting you."

"So protection means forcing me into marriage so I won't be at Peter's mercy." She barely kept her voice steady. Marrying Andrew was her fondest dream, but not unless he truly wanted it. And she could not face a hurried marriage followed by years of separation. Would he even have time to arrange it before leaving? Perhaps he thought a betrothal would be enough to keep her safe.

Or maybe he would insist on marriage. His impending departure made such a gesture easy. He could protect her with his name without facing the consequences. Guilt over Kevin's death and Laura's abuse had convinced him that he was duty-bound to protect her. But he wouldn't have to live with the result. He could park her at Seabrook and leave, turning her into an unwanted cipher in William's household.

She couldn't accept.

Peter would be regretting his actions by now. She could use his period of guilt to escape Devonshire and establish herself as a war widow where no one could find her. Never again would she allow fantasies of Andrew to intrude on her real life. She would not wind up like Laura, alone, reviled, and miserable because she clung to impossible dreams instead of making the most of her life.

Andrew paced the room. "I know he's your brother, Chloe, but he's also a gamester. I doubt you understand how unscrupulous such men can be. It is like a sickness. Even those who try to stop find that they cannot. And when the inevitable losses pile up, they will commit any dishonor to cover their vowels. Offering your hand as a wager was not an isolated event. He might be glad that this debt is settled, and he might swear he's learned his lesson. But when his back is against the wall, he will do it again. The only way to protect yourself is to wed me."

"Not the only way," she insisted. "Peter won't know where to find me. By the time he runs through the money from Lord Grayson's shipping venture, I will have disappeared."

"He could lose it all tomorrow merely by pledging the shares, Chloe."

"But he won't. His burns have to be agonizing – I

can't believe how awful he looked tonight. And marriage may have been Ashley's idea to prevent Peter from using those letters. Peter will pass at least a fortnight mired in guilt for what he tried to do. By then I will be gone."

Andrew stifled the pain that choked him with each new objection. Granted, he hadn't handled any of this with aplomb, thanks to Peter's unexpected attack. But he hadn't expected her to fight him. They were friends. She'd responded to his kisses. Marriage was the perfect answer – especially since he could finally support her in style. He'd meant to tell her about his change of fortune and begin a serious courtship. He'd hoped that she would admit that her love remained, so he could propose tonight. So why was she making it so difficult?

"Chloe—" He stopped to steady his temper. "If you refuse marriage, everyone in the that ballroom will consider you a jilt. How long would that *on-dit* stay secret? I doubt many mamas would want their daughters taking lessons from someone with a tarnished reputation."

She blanched, but her jaw thrust out as it did whenever she tried to best one of the boys. "It doesn't matter. I'll change my name and claim to be a widow. I won't force you into marriage."

Andrew cursed. Life without Chloe stretched barrenly before him. But he refused to accept defeat. They could build a comfortable partnership even if she never returned his love. But he would never know a moment's peace while she remained at Peter's mercy. "You don't understand, Chloe. Yes, widowhood would offer greater freedom, but it would also attract danger. Rakes and rogues expect a widow to be free with her favors, and often don't care whether she is willing."

"Wives have the same problem, particularly if their husbands are not in evidence," she countered.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Your leg is recovered, Andrew. Everyone knows it, including your regiment. They ordered you to India."

"Where did you hear that?"

"Sally. It is common knowledge in the servants' hall."

"Ah. I've been too busy to discuss my decision with Jinks." He shook his head. "While it's true that the regiment wants everyone back before leaving, I'm not

going. I resigned my commission last week.”

“You can’t.” She met his startled gaze. “Andrew, you cannot abandon your career just because you think Kevin wanted you to protect me.”

“I didn’t,” he protested, then snapped his mouth shut. Taking a deep breath, he softened his tone. “Sit down, Chloe. Peter’s announcement threw me off balance. I’ve made a worse hash of this than I thought. Let’s start over.”

“If it will bring you to your senses, then we should certainly start over.” She settled into a chair.

He moved a second chair so he could face her. “Resigning was not a sudden decision. Nor does it have anything to do with you or Kevin. I would have sold out last winter if Napoleon hadn’t escaped. That’s when I began seriously considering the future. With Wellington in command, I could balance the horror of war with the knowledge that our cause was just, our leaders competent, and victory certain in the end. But the American campaign was put in the hands of an inept admiral who lacked Wellington’s high purpose, allowing a personal grievance to distort his thinking.”

“How?”

“The idiot bypassed military targets in favor of retaliation, sacrificing any hope of victory. The day we received orders to burn the American capital was the day I realized I could no longer remain at the mercy of people I could not respect. Wellington would never have been so stupid.”

“But surely the capital was a legitimate target,” she protested.

“No. It was a handful of buildings constructed in a swamp and of no military value at all. It made a powerful symbol, though. In fact, our actions that night united the American people as they had not been in the entire two years of that war. The debate had become so distracting that their army – if you could call it that – was no longer effective. But after we burned Washington, all argument ceased. Their determination to throw us out, when combined with their unorthodox fighting methods, made our defeat inevitable. I knew I must resign my commission. War had sucked out my soul, leaving only an empty shell behind.” His sense of duty had prevented him from seeing so clearly at the time – he’d reacted with fury and curses rather than logical thinking – but he now

recognized that fundamental change of heart.

"Yet you stayed to fight Napoleon."

He nodded. "That fight was necessary. And it was unfinished business. We made a mistake after his abdication, offering mercy and expecting honor when he had shown neither toward any opponent. Now that he is truly gone, I can resign in good conscience. Your situation has nothing to do with the decision. I have thought deeply on this for months and mailed my resignation last week."

She couldn't stop joy from flooding her breast. Not that she could accept his offer, but at least he would no longer face danger. "What will you do now?"

"You needn't fret. I can support you well enough."

"I can support myself, sir."

He doubted it, but this wasn't the time to start a new argument. "That isn't my point, Chloe."

"Your point is that I should accept a statement you made in the heat of the moment, even though marriage would make us both miserable."

"Chloe!"

"Be quiet. I listened to you. Now you can accord me the same courtesy."

He nodded, though every instinct urged him to smother her words with kisses. *Miserable*, indeed. She melted every time he touched her. She'd clung to his side when Peter threatened her, and the welcome in her eyes had sent excitement clear to his toes.

But knowing her reasons might suggest a way to circumvent them. Wellington had often extolled the benefits of good intelligence. And Andrew was convinced she still cared.

She rose to pace the room. It was a habit dating to childhood and denoted how serious she was.

"Men seldom understand why they do things," she said calmly, "which is why they so often regret decisions after the fact. Dozens of times I've watched Father and Peter lured into disaster because their opponents played on their weaknesses."

"Not every man is as simpleminded as those two," he snapped.

"I know. But we all have blind spots. For you it is Kevin." Her raised hand prevented a response. "You cannot deny you feel guilt over his death. You admitted it last Sunday. But you didn't understand Kevin's weaknesses. He was a considerate brother and

a wonderful friend, but he was also cowardly and dangerously impetuous – as when he bought colors. Laura didn't force him into the army. Weakness did. There were no witnesses that day. You and Father were the only others who knew what happened, and you knew only what he told you. Unless the incident was far more intimate than he claimed, there was no need to flee. All he had to do was stand up to her. If he'd looked her in the eye and promised to make her a laughingstock, she would have backed down."

"You don't understand how venal she can be," said Andrew with a sigh.

"Don't I? I lived with her for two years, Andrew. Day and night, with few distractions and no one to stand as buffer between us. I know more about her misdeeds than anyone, for she often fell into tirades against those she blamed for her woes – especially in the early days. I can read the truth well enough. Frankly, if Kevin had had a backbone, he would have survived even her worst claims."

"Why? Laura held the entire county in the palm of her hand."

"No. Laura *claimed* she held the county in her hand. And it's true that some men treated her like a goddess, starting with your father. She had your family so dazzled by her beauty that you believed every word she said. But there were many, many men who saw her clearly. If she'd accused Kevin of seduction, others would have revealed how she'd thrown herself at them, then threatened them when they refused – footmen, grooms, two tenants, and at least one gentleman. And those are just the ones I can name who predate Kevin. There are certainly others. If Kevin had stood up to her, she would have been ruined. But he was weak, so he fled, placing an impossible burden on you in the process. For a supposedly brilliant man, he had no sense at all."

"He never asked anything of me," said Andrew stiffly.

"Of course not. But he told you what Laura did, knowing that you would feel responsible. Think back. How many times did you atone for your siblings' mistakes – fixing Lord Rankin's wall after William pulled out those stones, sitting up all night to nurse a barn cat after Laura made it sick, taking the blame after Thomas broke a window. Now that I know the

real story, I can see Kevin's thinking clearly enough. You had protected him from bullies at school. You'd rescued him when his horses bolted the year he was fourteen. You saved everyone harmed by your family. Is it any wonder that he expected you to keep him safe and prevent Laura from further scheming? He probably thought you could arrange a London posting for him, but he knew nothing about the military."

"He wasn't that lacking." But her words revived memories he'd shoved aside – Kevin's shock that his uniforms were plain green rather than the red encrusted with gold braid he'd seen in London, his ignorance about the duties of different regiments, his surprise when they were ordered to Portugal....

"It no longer matters," said Chloe, recalling his attention. "My point is that Kevin made mistakes and paid for them with his life. But it wasn't your fault. You owe him nothing, Andrew. If anything, he owes you for the guilt he hung around your neck."

"Friends don't keep score, Chloe," he said, moving past her to stare out the window. "Friends don't need to balance favors given and received. But we've moved far afield. I'm not as muddled as you believe. And you are not as clearheaded. In truth, Kevin is one of your blind spots, too. His precipitous departure hurt you so much that you see his ghost behind everything. But his death did not cast a spell over your family. Yes, your mother withdrew afterward, but she had never paid you much heed before. I remember her neglect well. And while your father's bad investments may have become more noticeable, Kevin had mentioned unwise business ventures often. The effect on you was due more to his decreasing fortune than his increasing recklessness. As for Peter, he was fifteen when Kevin died, the age when many young men begin pursuing what are termed gentlemen's pastimes. I suspect he would have lost his head over gaming even if he'd remained a younger son."

"You can't—"

"Kevin is gone, Chloe. Let him rest in peace. I don't care a fig for Laura, so I have no need to atone for her crimes. Once Kevin bought colors – which he did without my knowledge – he was better off dying quickly. I will always miss him, but I've accepted that his death was inevitable. He chose to disobey my orders and paid the ultimate price for it. He's not the

first to panic in battle. Nor will he be the last.”

Her face relaxed.

“Any help I’ve offered to you has been my decision, made because I care. Is that clear?”

She nodded.

“Excellent. So let’s stop this sidetracking and address business. The world believes us betrothed, which is exactly the way it should be. And since I must be in London in a fortnight, it will be easier if we are wed before we leave.”

“Easier! What on earth are you talking about?”

“I refuse to expose you to insults by traveling together unwed. And I won’t claim to be your brother. There are so many soldiers on the roads, I will likely run into someone I know. We’ll take Sally, of course.”

Chloe tried to catch her breath. Here was a side of Andrew she’d rarely seen, the officer accustomed to issuing orders. He showed none of the uncertainty and vacillation her father and brothers espoused. Nor did he discuss the situation with others. But she would not allow him to ride roughshod over her. “Stop. Why are you going to London? You said you resigned your commission.”

He turned to face her. “I’d forgotten that you wouldn’t know. Too much has happened today.”

“On that we can agree.”

“Lord Grayson was impressed with some plans I drew for William and wants me to design a new manor for Rothmoor Park. His father is not expected to live out the year.”

“He wants you to design his house?”

“I turned him down. I’ve no training beyond a knack for architectural drawing, though I’ve picked up bits and pieces from the military engineers. But their jobs mostly involve destruction.” He grinned. “I could undermine a wall or a bridge if I had to, but I can’t design a country seat for an earl.”

“I suspect you could build anything you set your mind to.”

“Thank you. I thought that was the end of it, but Gray is tenacious. Mary claims that he always gets what he wants, and so it proved this time. One of his couriers talked Soane into teaching me for six months. At the end of that time, I will design Gray’s new manor, then supervise its construction.”

“I’m happy for you,” she said, joining him at the

window. "You will enjoy it so much more than war."

"But only if you come with me, Chloe." He turned her face up so he could look into her eyes. "That's the part that went missing when Peter showed up. I'd already planned to find a job near you, so I could court you properly. But plans are changing so fast that I had to ask for your hand tonight. You will marry me, won't you?"

"But why?"

Pain flashed through his eyes. "I need you. I hadn't realized how much until I returned to England. It wasn't just war that left me empty. I've been lonely from the beginning, though until I saw you again, I couldn't admit why. The hardest thing I ever did was to cut you off at the knees and send you away in tears eleven years ago. I need you by my side, Chloe. I love you. I always have. But there was no room for you in the army. That life is not for you."

"Slow down. Do you really love me?"

"Of course. Why are you surprised?" He touched her face. "You are a beautiful woman. Kind. Intelligent. And so much more. Please marry me, sweetheart. I know it won't be the same as the life you had planned, but I'll try to make you happy."

"You already have." She smiled. "I love you, Andrew. Dreaming of you has helped me through the bad times since you went away."

"Thank God." He pulled her against him. "Does that mean you accept?"

"With all my heart."

"Good." He grinned. "Tomorrow's courier can fetch a special license."

She smiled into his green eyes, grateful that he held her, for happiness was weakening her knees. His kiss slammed heat and excitement through her system – real, immediate, and pure. No more longing for the impossible. No more wars between duty and desire. He was hers. Forever. And never again need she fear for his life.

She clung as he deepened the kiss, amazed at the range of feeling tongue and lips could engender and the changes apparent as she pressed closer against him.

"Beautiful Chloe," he murmured, slanting his lips in another direction. He was home. Chloe was his at last. Her arms triggered passion and a contentment he'd



never felt before. After years of focusing on the moment, he could finally look to the future with joy and anticipation.

A giggle in the hallway pulled them apart.

“Not here,” she murmured.

Andrew was breathing heavily, but he knew she was right. “Poor timing – again. Next time we’ll be alone. Gray’s couriers are so fast we can have the license by Thursday.”

“Excellent.”

He hugged her one last time, then glanced at the mantel clock. “We’d best return to the ballroom. We must be there when William announces his betrothal. We’ll confirm our own plans tomorrow. He’ll need good news to counter Truitt’s arrest.”

## EPILOGUE

Chloe laid her son Kevin in his cradle, smiled at Mary and Sally, then headed downstairs. Usually she waited until Mary finished feeding Katy, but today Chloe was anxious to find Andrew. It was the anniversary of their wedding, though the intervening year had been so full that she’d had little time for reflection.

But much had changed. Living at Grayson House while Andrew studied with Soane had been far from the quiet time she’d anticipated. Gray and Mary had insisted that she and Andrew take their places in society. Chloe had protested the expense, but Gray had been adamant. Their breeding made them welcome, and Andrew needed the contacts if he was to attract noble patronage.

Mary was right that Gray always got what he wanted. Chloe had been swept into a whirl of calls and parties that slowed only when morning sickness intruded.

She smiled at the reminder of Kevin. He looked exactly like Andrew and promised to be just as adventurous.

It had been a good year. Andrew’s love grew stronger every day. And watching him tackle a job he enjoyed filled her heart with happiness. Soane might declare him a genius, but Chloe cared only that he was at peace.

A screech reverberated along the hallway, making

her shiver. Today they began demolishing Rothmoor Park – which meant they must soon remove to the steward's cottage.

Replacing Rothmoor was the right decision, she acknowledged as she headed downstairs. The old rooms were small, with awkward access and twisted hallways. Damp pervaded everything. Even after four months under its roof, she couldn't like the place.

And just as well.

Gray met her at the foot of the stairs. "How are the children?"

"Mine is asleep. Yours are still awake, though Mary should be finished with Katy soon. Nick is outside with his nurse, so he won't be underfoot for at least an hour. Where is Andrew?"

"Removing the library paneling. He found a buyer for it."

"So he said." She grinned at the surprise in his voice. "Just because you hate this house doesn't mean its pieces are useless. The library paneling perfectly matches Lord Bingham's great hall – same dimensions, same patina. He is thrilled that he can replace that damaged section."

"I know. And a dozen people are bidding on the linenfold from the entrance hall. I have to admit that it's beautiful, but I still prefer marble."

Shaking her head, Chloe headed for the library.

"The mail arrived while you were upstairs," said Andrew, kissing her soundly. He wasn't shy about demonstrating his love. They had eleven years to make up. "Lord Wroxleigh wants me to design a new wing for his manor – design only, so I can do it now. He's offering two thousand."

"So much?"

"Soane convinced him I'm worth it." He grinned. "And William wrote. He finished his renovations. He swears he must watch Martha every second to keep her from arranging furniture in the new wing."

"She should know better." William's heir was due in three months. "How is Peter?" Her brother never wrote, but William kept them posted. Peter had surprised everyone by hiring a competent man of business who divided the shipping proceeds between estate improvements and sound investments. Fields House was on the road to recovery. Peter hadn't touched cards or dice since.

He had also discovered a sheaf of papers in a cupboard inside the priest's hole that had been hidden behind the open door. It was also accessible through a small panel in the dressing room. The pages had contained enough evidence against Ashley and Truitt to hang them both – interviews with customers whose orders had gone wholly or partially astray, letters from military men listing shipments containing spoiled provisions or short quantities, affidavits from merchants who had sold infested grain and spoiled meat to Truitt and Ashley. Sir Nigel had correlated the data to prove that most of the army's supply trouble could be traced to Truitt's company. His investigation had helped Chloe put his blackmail behind her.

Andrew recalled her attention. "Peter is unhappy because his fields are producing less than William's. He visits often, seeking advice on agricultural reforms."

"He finally grew up. Kevin would have been proud."

"William also reports that Mrs. Truitt returned to her family in Shropshire. George's betrothal was forcing her back into society, but she couldn't face the lingering scandal."

"Poor woman."

"Perhaps." He picked up his pry bar and attacked the next section of paneling. "Catherine is expecting again – early spring. And Laura's latest companion resigned. That makes four. William refuses to look for a fifth one. He moved to her to a private asylum near Plymouth."

"I sometimes wonder how I managed to stay with her for two years."

"You are a saint." He kissed her thoroughly.

"There's also a letter for you." He pointed to a table.

She frowned at the unfamiliar hand, then cracked the seal. "What the—"

"What's wrong?" Dropping the pry bar, he slid an arm around her shoulders.

"It's from Allison Fields's solicitor – I think she's a great-aunt. If I remember the story right, my grandfather kicked her out of the family for some scandal no one ever explained."

"Sounds interesting."

"Apparently she died last month and left everything to me."

"What?" He grabbed the letter.

"It can't be all that much if she's been on her own all these years. She never married."

"You stopped reading too soon." He pointed to the second page. "A house in Kensington and ten thousand guineas. What a piece of luck!"

"Dear Lord." She shook her head. "I didn't even know I had relatives in London. We should at least have called on her."

"If she was keeping track of you – and it sounds as though she was – then she could have called on us." Retrieving the pry bar, he popped the panel off.

"What's that?" The boards had covered a hole.

"What's what?" asked Gray from the doorway.

A small chest sat inside. "You missed this when you cleaned out the house," said Chloe, tugging it out. It was heavy.

Gray opened it to reveal a necklace and several brooches. Beneath them lay gold coins. Old coins. Chloe didn't recognize the heads.

"Buried treasure." Andrew nudged the chest.

"Probably Tudor," said Gray, "though it might date back to the War of the Roses. My ancestors were on the wrong side of more than one conflict. They managed to hold on to the land, but the place was sacked twice. Congratulations, Andrew. Quite a trophy."

"Not mine."

"Our contract stipulates that everything on the building site as of yesterday is yours to salvage at your own expense and for your own profit until demolition is complete. So the chest is yours."

"The agreement covers building materials, not family heirlooms."

"He's right," said Chloe, lifting a brooch set with emeralds. "This belonged to the lady in the green dress." It had been her favorite portrait before Gray emptied the gallery.

"The first countess."

"And thus yours," said Andrew, pressing the brooch into Gray's hand.

"Very well, but the rest is yours."

Chloe watched them argue, knowing that Gray would win in the end, but that Andrew wouldn't mind. Working together had made them good friends. She suspected that Andrew was even closer to Gray than he'd been to Kevin, for they had more in common. And

that was good. A man needed friends.

And she needed Andrew. Somehow life had turned out to be perfect.

1 Lord Grayson wed Mary Seabrook in *The Rake and the Wallflower*

2 Lord Rockhurst wed Catherine Parrish nee Seabrook in *The Notorious Widow*

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