

The
Letter
from
Briarton
Park



THOMAS NELSON

Since 1798

Sarah E. Ladd



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The Letter from Briarton Park

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Published in association with the Books & Such Literary Management, 52 Mission Circle, Suite 122, PMB 170, Santa Rosa, California 95409-5370, www.booksandsuch.com.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ladd, Sarah E., author.

Title: The letter from Briarton Park / Sarah E. Ladd.

Description: Nashville, Tennessee : Thomas Nelson, [2022] | Summary:

"In Regency England, one letter will alter a young woman's fate when it summons her to Briarton Park—an ancient place that holds the secrets of her past and the keys to her future"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021043227 (print) | LCCN 2021043228 (ebook) | ISBN 9780785246725 (paperback) | ISBN 9780785246770 (epub) | ISBN 9780785246787

Classification: LCC PS3612.A3565 L47 2022 (print) | LCC PS3612.A3565 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021043227>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021043228>

Printed in the United States of America

22 23 24 25 26 LSC 5 4 3 2 1

This novel is dedicated to KBR and KC—with gratitude



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Prologue

DENTON SCHOOL FOR YOUNG LADIES
LAMBY, ENGLAND
AUTUMN 1811

Harboring anger against a woman on her deathbed was wrong. Cassandra Hale knew it to be true. How could any sensible, benevolent human feel anything but compassion for the dying?

Yet as she stared down at the woman who had been like a mother to her, indignation flared within Cassandra's chest. The words spoken just minutes ago had confirmed the unthinkable.

She'd been betrayed. Lied to. *For her entire life.*

One might surmise that Mrs. Denton had been speaking from her fever or was delirious with sickness. And yet, despite her illness, she was quite lucid.

A biting wind whipped its way through the open bedchamber window, as if eager to divulge its opinion of the current situation. It fluttered the curtains and stole into the room's corners. Eager for a diversion, Cassandra stood from her chair next to the bed and moved to the window. She nudged the heavy wool curtain aside and gripped the painted sash, preparing to close it, then stopped. The black murkiness of a stormy night met her. She squeezed her eyes shut as the cool air buffeted her face, her neck, her arms.

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She shivered in spite of the fury raging within her.

This can't be true. None of it.

"Come here, Cassandra." The voice, even in its frailty, boasted an authority that would snap even the most iron-willed to attention. "I've more to tell you."

"More?" Cassandra scoffed and slammed the sash closed with more strength than she'd intended, then pivoted away from the window. "I'm not sure I want to hear it."

"Even so, it must be said. And you need to hear it before I'm gone."

Summoning fortitude, Cassandra returned to the bed and made herself gaze upon Mrs. Denton once more. The gaunt woman, a mere shadow of her former self, lay beneath thin white linens. She'd always been petite and wiry, but now those physical attributes worked against her, making her appear feeble and weak.

Life would not linger in her long.

Grief seized Cassandra in its numbing grip, forcing her anger at bay.

Oh, if only Mrs. Denton had shared this information sooner!

It had been nineteen years since Cassandra first arrived at Denton School for Young Ladies when she was but five years of age. In all the years she'd been acquainted with the headmistress, first as a student and then as a teacher, she'd known—nay, believed—Mrs. Jane Denton to be honest, loyal, worthy of every esteem. Never had Cassandra known her to misrepresent the truth or bend facts to suit her needs.

Until this moment.

A struggle raged within Cassandra—a devastating struggle between the need to respect the woman who'd raised her and the compulsion to demand the truth.

"You're furious with me. 'Tis understandable. But what have I told you time and time again? Such emotion will only cloud your

judgment and diminish your ability to react rationally. You must listen to me now.”

“I—I don’t understand,” Cassandra faltered, willing her tone to remain steady when it so earnestly insisted on brashness. “You told me you didn’t know who my parents were or if they were even living. You declared so numerous times.”

Mrs. Denton’s sparse eyebrows rose, even as her chin remained tilted proudly, defiantly. “I told you only what was necessary. To protect you. To protect . . . others. I made a vow.”

“A vow? To whom?”

Mrs. Denton’s icy eyes sharpened with conviction. “That, I cannot say.”

Cassandra’s heart pounded. “Then why say anything if you are unwilling to divulge the entire truth? All these years I trusted you when you said—”

Airy coughs racked the older woman’s body, silencing Cassandra with their severity. In a single instant Mrs. Denton’s vulnerability and fragility reappeared, reminding Cassandra of just how afflicted the woman was. She retrieved a fresh handkerchief, drew close to her former headmistress, and pressed the embroidered fabric into her wrinkled hand.

After the coughing fit subsided, Mrs. Denton’s head lolled back against the pillow. “There, on the bureau. That letter is for you.”

With her attention redirected, Cassandra approached the mahogany chest of drawers. The missive’s red wax seal was broken, and when she lifted the letter, money shifted from within, nearly dropping to the ground.

“That is yours,” whispered Mrs. Denton. “Take it.”

Cassandra stared at the banknotes balanced on her palm. “But I—”

“Take the money, read the letter, and I’ll say no more on the

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matter.” Violent coughs seized her body, and she pressed the cloth to her mouth. “Now I’ve nothing to regret.”

Cassandra cringed at the sight of the crimson stain on the handkerchief.

Blood.

“Mr. Duncan!”

The surgeon, who’d been waiting in the corridor, rushed in at Cassandra’s call, pushed past her, and hastened to the bed. “You must leave now, Miss Hale.”

She heard the order but could not move. Panic, even more powerful than betrayal’s sting, paralyzed her.

“Leave, now! And send the housekeeper for the vicar.”

Cassandra staggered backward, as if the earth shifted beneath her feet. She promptly located the housekeeper, sent the woman on her task, and retreated to the darkened corridor outside of the sick-room. For where else could she possibly go?

As she paced the narrow space, the uneven wooden floor groaned beneath her weight, as if commiserating in her agony. She strained to hear anything from within the chamber, but all was quiet.

Now, with nothing left to do but wait, a rare, solitary tear slid down her cheek. In the last quarter of an hour, everything Cassandra thought she knew about her life had changed, and in the coming hours, there would be no returning.

She swiped away the moisture with her long cambric sleeve, unfolded the letter, and held it up to the candlelight flickering from the sconce.

My Dear Cassandra,

You must forgive the silence these many years, but surely you understand that some situations are delicate. I have a great deal of information to share with you about your family. Circumstances have evolved, and now the time has come when we may speak

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of such things. I sincerely hope that doors that have been closed may open.

I would not presume to intrude, but I invite you to come to my home, Briarton Park, in North Yorkshire, at your earliest convenience. My health prevents me from traveling, but if the trip is agreeable to you, send word and a carriage will be sent to convey you here.

The enclosed funds are rightfully yours and for your personal needs—some of which I hope you will use for the journey. I know you must have many questions, and if you are willing, all will be shared in due time.

With optimism,
Robert Clark

Who was Robert Clark? And why would this money be rightfully hers?

She hungrily scanned the letter again in case she'd missed any information.

The date struck her: 24 June 1809. Two and a half years ago. Two and a half years! Had Mrs. Denton kept silent about the letter all this time? It clearly had been read, judging by the broken seal and wrinkled paper.

Hysterical voices and haphazard footsteps echoed from behind the closed door, snapping her back to the present.

Mrs. Denton, the woman who had raised her, taught her, cared for her, and now employed her, was going to die.

And the life that Cassandra thought she knew was going to die with her.



Chapter 1

NORTH YORKSHIRE, ENGLAND
AUTUMN 1811

James Warrington met his half sister's determined gaze. A pink flush on Rachel's high cheekbones emphasized her tightly drawn lips. Shimmery tears brightened her silver eyes but did little to dim the rage brewing within them.

He braced himself for a battle.

A battle he was not entirely sure he would win.

"You are to have no more contact with Richard Standish," James articulated. "No more secret letters or clandestine meetings. Am I clear?"

Rachel met his stare with unmasked defiance, yet she remained silent.

He steadied his resolve. "Tell me you understand and that you'll obey me."

For the briefest flicker of a moment, he thought she might soften and perhaps even comply, but then in a sudden whirl of patterned saffron chintz, she spun away and stormed to the broad window. "You are cruel, James! How dare you behave so meanly!"

It would be simple to be drawn further into an argument, but where would such a response take them?



The gray morning light slid in through the front parlor's tall windows, highlighting the tremble of her thin shoulders. He was not sure when this metamorphosis from content child to morose sixteen-year-old had occurred. Regardless, he hated to see her cry.

He tempered his voice. "'Tis for your own good, Rachel."

"How do you know that?" she challenged.

"Because I know his sort."

"His sort? How would you even know what *sort* he is?" Her voice shrilled. "You've refused to even speak with him! You're the most prejudiced, condescending, ridiculous—"

"Enough, Rachel."

"But you know nothing about him!" She hurled her words like shots from a cannon. "Richard is kind. Considerate. You'd do well to emulate him, and I—"

"I said, enough!" His words reverberated from the plaster moldings on the ceiling, silencing her. He cleared his throat and straightened his neckcloth, buying himself time to soothe his mounting frustration and select his words with care. "I'm your guardian. You will abide by my instructions, and nothing else need be said on the matter."

Rachel's nostrils flared as she pivoted to face him. "Very well then, Brother. What do you suggest I do? You and you alone forced us to sever ties with everything and everyone that is familiar in Plymouth. Then you bring us out to some godforsaken place where there is no polite society whatsoever. So, what now? You decide whom I speak with? Whom I love?"

Love? He jerked at the word. He didn't know whether to laugh or cringe. What could this green girl possibly know about romantic love?

He sniffed. "When you are old enough to make decisions *responsibly*, then you may decide such things. Until then, I must intervene. As for Standish, the boy is penniless, with no respectable

connections. He's undoubtedly learned of your inheritance. How he even managed to speak with you in the first place is beyond me."

"So my only attractive quality is my inheritance?" Her left eyebrow arched. "You are quite right. He could not possibly love me for any other reason."

"That's not what I said."

"Need I remind you that you were penniless once too?"

"Yes, I was. Very poor indeed. But I did not acquire my wealth through marriage."

She tipped her chin upward, color flooding her cheeks and certainty curving the corners of her mouth. "You could not be more wrong. My inheritance is not why Richard loves me."

James hesitated. How could he make her understand? Men like Richard Standish were after one thing—money. It did not matter if he was eighteen or eighty. His intentions would not change. When Rachel came of age, she'd have plenty of money at her disposal, thanks to their father's shrewd business practices late in his life. How would Standish be then, once he owned every farthing she brought to the union? James would wager not the charming, considerate man she believed him to be.

He heaved a sigh and crossed the room before he dropped onto the wingback chair flanking the fire grate. He allowed several seconds of silence to settle, hoping it would calm them both, and then leaned forward and propped his elbows on his knees. "Rachel, you've much more to offer a suitor than an inheritance. Much more. But as a woman of fortune, you must be certain that the man you choose truly loves *you* and not your pocketbook."

"And what about what I want?" she snapped back in offense before his last words left his lips. "What about whose company I choose?"

"You should choose someone who is stable and steady, proven and established. Standish is reckless. Consider, he risks your reputation by sneaking onto our property at night. By sending you letters

under an assumed name. You can't think for a single moment that his behavior is in any way appropriate. And his surreptitious actions—the underhandedness and the furtive nature of it all—are precisely why I forbid it.”

“You won't permit him to call any other way. Of course he must resort to ploys! You have created an impossible situation for us.”

“For us?” James stood once more. “Rachel, for all intents and purposes, you are still a child. There is no *us*. Not with him. Not with anyone.”

Tears now flowed unrestrained down her round, ruddy cheeks. “Are you so miserable that you must destroy not only your own life but also the lives of everyone around you? This is your fault. All of it. If Elizabeth were alive, she would understand. She always did.”

James winced at the sound of his deceased wife's name. Two years since her death and he still tensed when he heard it, especially when it was hurled at him as Rachel just did. But she was right in one aspect: Elizabeth would have known what to say to soothe his sister's anger.

“I hate you. I hate this house!” Rachel choked out the words between fresh sobs. “I hate this sad, despicable village. I hate everything about it!” She bolted past him out of the parlor, the soft soles of her slippers echoing on the stone floor.

He stared at the empty spot until the footsteps subsided, trying to make sense of the words they had just flung at one another.

No, he had not won that battle. He'd not even come close. He might have even made it worse. But how was one to handle such a situation?

After being alone with his thoughts for several minutes, he heard light footsteps approaching. He turned to see his mother-in-law, Mrs. Margaret Towler. An air of condescension accompanied her every movement, and she smoothed a rare wayward silver curl from her brow with a long, bony finger.

“That young woman has a dangerous attitude about her.” Her voice was calm. Dignified. Measured. “And thanks to her unconscionable clamoring, every last maid in the house knows of it. Best to tame that audaciousness while there is still time to do so.”

This woman’s similarity to her late daughter was evident. They both had tall frames, narrow faces, and straight noses. But their similarities ended with their physical attributes.

Mrs. Towler clicked her tongue with assumed authority. “If not controlled, she’ll bring about her own ruin, not to mention that of the rest of the family.”

James knew she spoke the truth, but he’d not speak critically of Rachel to another—especially to a woman who was already disposed to dislike her.

The layered ebony bombazine of her mourning gown rustled as she stepped closer to the fire in the broad hearth, her thin hands clasped firmly before her. “You must be strong and firm, James. It’s the only way to handle such a child.”

He stifled a huff. What could Margaret Towler possibly know about handling a girl like Rachel? Elizabeth, Mrs. Towler’s only child, had been reserved to a fault and eager to please those around her. Nothing like his spirited sister.

Mrs. Towler reached to straighten a porcelain figurine on the stone mantel, and only once it was angled properly did she resume speaking. “You’re right to forbid contact with that rogue. These past years have been difficult on Rachel—first Elizabeth’s passing, then the relocation, and now this. He’s playing to her vulnerabilities. I would speak with her, but you know her nature. She would only heed Elizabeth’s word.”

James did not look away from the fire. He and his mother-in-law disagreed on so much, but where Elizabeth was concerned, they’d both sing her praises. Elizabeth had been the one to navigate their family through every situation.

But her unexpected death upended everything.

In one single night a fever swooped in, as diabolic as any incubus, and claimed her. He'd found himself the widowed father of two small daughters, sole guardian to a feisty adolescent, and honor bound to provide for his mother-in-law without a clue as to how to proceed on any front.

He crossed to look out over the pristine grounds through the parlor window. A glittery morning frost settled over the gardens that formed the front lawn of Briarton Park, capping the ash trees and the manicured hedges. A small bit of blue sky fought its way through the rolling pewter clouds, and bare branches in the nearby copse of trees swayed in the menacing wind.

But something caught his eye—a willowy figure in a pelisse of dusky plum traversed the neatly paved path approaching the house. He retrieved his watch fob and popped it open, then frowned. It was too early for callers. “Who’s that woman?”

Mrs. Towler joined him at the window, bringing with her a heavy scent of rosewater and hyacinth. “No doubt one of the parish women collecting for the poor again. According to Mrs. Helock, they’ve been here twice already this week.” She shook her graying head and scowled. “I do wish that vicar would monitor such actions more closely. I’ll tell Mrs. Helock to send her on her way.”

His mother-in-law’s footsteps padded in retreat, but James did not move.

He’d never seen the woman before. Surely he would have remembered. She wore no bonnet, leaving her chestnut locks free to flutter about her face. Her movements suggested a measure of demureness and grace—the sort that resulted from a gentle upbringing. No, she could not be a village woman.

When he snapped from his momentary trance, he could almost laugh at noticing such details. Had he not spent the bulk of the morning discouraging his sister from entangling herself in infatuation and



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fancy? He'd be wise to take the same advice and avoid such thoughts altogether. His responsibilities were with his family and his business, and he had no reason to contemplate implausible associations.

But even as he considered this, the inexplicable sense stole over him that this woman, with her wild hair and delicate movements, was not here by accident.

And whether he was avoiding the task at hand or merely seeking a diversion, he was determined to unearth what would bring such a creature to Briarton Park.



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Chapter 2

Be brave, Cassandra.

She pinned her attention on the iron gate just before her—the last physical barrier separating her from Briarton Park. It had been nearly five days of arduous travel since she departed the tiny village of Lamby, and now that she'd almost arrived at her destination, her resolve wavered.

“*What have I told you?*” The late Mrs. Denton’s words haunted her as Cassandra placed a gloved hand on the gate. “*Emotions will cloud your judgment and weaken your ability to react rationally.*”

She paused long enough to rub her thumb over the small bit of rust bleeding through the intricately formed, beautiful black iron-work. If the gate alone boasted such elegance, she could only imagine the magnificence of the country house waiting beyond the road’s bend. Cassandra leaned into the gate and it swung open, creaking in the morning stillness, giving a bleak voice to the noisy qualms and foreboding misgivings that had been her constant traveling companions.

Once inside the grounds, she ran her other hand down the front of the worn violet wool traveling pelisse one of the teachers had gifted her prior to the journey. The deeply set wrinkles and the mud spattered on the hem bore testament to the long days of travel.

She'd departed Lamby with all her earthly possessions—her money, both her earnings from teaching and the remaining amount from the letter; the letter of recommendation Mrs. Denton had written on her behalf before she died; a small dagger the school's manservant had given her for protection; and her few items of clothing.

And, of course, the letter from Mr. Clark.

With the exception of the money and letters, which had been safely stowed in her reticule, and the dagger, which was carefully tucked in her boot, she'd left the other items at the Green Ox Inn in the village of Anston, where she'd spent an uncomfortable, sleepless night.

A chilly gust swept down from the fading ancient ash trees lining the walk, bringing with it a shower of russet-colored leaves and the whisper that this place might hold the key to her past.

And, more importantly, her future.

Forcing her hesitance to remain at bay, she placed one foot in front of the other. For what choice did she have? Mrs. Denton was dead. The school had been sold to the master of a boys' school, and female teachers were no longer required. She had nothing, no connections, save for the hope that Mr. Clark's letter might uncover information about her family and ultimately a situation where she might belong.

She'd responded to the letter the day after she received it, when the sting of Mrs. Denton's betrayal still pricked her heart and grief dominated her emotions. Nearly a fortnight had passed since then, and she'd received no response. Had she been more prudent, she'd have waited for a reply before embarking on such a grueling journey, but with circumstances as they were, she had no time to waste, and every passing day was a day lost.

Armed with more questions than answers, she tightened her grip on her reticule and continued down the path, noting the deep ruts and hoofprints that suggested the road had recently been traveled.

She rounded yet another bend, and the sight that met her stopped her completely.

Briarton Park.

She'd expected it to be large, stately, but this . . . this might be a castle.

The stately home rose three stories above the polished grounds, with symmetrical gables at each end and pale gray sandstone chimneys randomly dispersed over the slate roof. Even the fading ivy clinging to the facade added to the home's imposing grandeur. Not even the vicar's house at the end of the lane in Lamby could compare in scope.

Summoning courage, she followed the graveled path to another iron gate in a sturdy stone wall that separated the formal grounds from the more wooded area. She stepped through, noting how the road continued parallel to the house before it split into two on the other side at an orchard's edge.

It was there she noticed a flash of indigo amid the orchard's subdued grays and beiges. A girl of seven, or perhaps eight, perched in the branches of one of the apple trees. Ebony hair lashed about her small, pale face, and she appeared to be watching her.

They were too far apart to speak, so Cassandra lifted her hand in greeting.

Instead of responding, the girl dropped from the tree and disappeared behind the wall. Almost simultaneously, the tortured cry of a poorly played pianoforte wailed from somewhere within the house.

With her curiosity growing, Cassandra made her way to the paneled door, richly ornate with delicately carved vines and leaves. She lifted the round metal knocker and tapped it against the wood. It echoed, deep and hollow, in the morning's quiet.

The music from inside did not stop, nor did she hear any other movement. She knocked again, eased away from the door, and waited.

At length a stout-looking footman opened the door, dressed neatly in emerald-green and tan livery.

She tightened her grip on her reticule and forced confidence to her voice. "I'd like to speak with Mr. Robert Clark, please."

The footman, with a shock of black hair and a deeply clefted chin, only stared. Had he not heard her?

Before she could repeat herself, a portly woman, clad in crisp black with a severe, disapproving expression, stepped in front of the servant. "I'll see to this, John."

Cassandra squared her shoulders. "I wish to speak with Mr. Clark, please."

The older lady raked her sharp gaze over Cassandra's traveling clothes, landing on the mud streaking the gown at her ankles. "Mr. Clark is dead."

Cassandra winced at the words. She did not have time to contemplate them further, for the woman began to close the door.

"Wait." Cassandra reached her hand forward to prevent the latch from catching. "Please, a moment."

With a huff of annoyance the woman gripped the edge of the door and nodded to the footman, dismissing him.

Determined to keep the woman's attention, Cassandra blurted, "My name is Cassandra Hale. I've come a very long way. May I speak with the master? It's very important."

The woman shook her head. "Mr. Warrington is very busy and will not be able to take callers today."

Mr. Warrington. She had the name of the current owner at least.

Sensing her time was limited, Cassandra spouted the first question that came to mind. "And are you the mistress of the house?"

"I should say not!" The woman's scoff denoted superiority. "I'm the housekeeper, Mrs. Helock. And if you are here to seek employment, I suggest you come around to the servants' entrance."

“No, no, you misunderstand,” Cassandra hastened to correct her. “I’m not here about employment.”

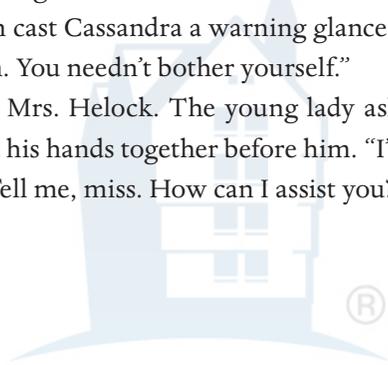
“Even so, you should not be using this entrance at all. You should—”

“May I be of help?”

The masculine voice startled them both. A tall man with sandy hair and broad shoulders approached from the corridor. He did not appear annoyed. Indeed, his presence and affable tone immediately put her at ease in light of Mrs. Helock’s brashness.

The woman cast Cassandra a warning glance. “I can see to this, Mr. Warrington. You needn’t bother yourself.”

“Nonsense, Mrs. Helock. The young lady asked to speak with me.” He rubbed his hands together before him. “I’ve a few moments before I leave. Tell me, miss. How can I assist you?”



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Chapter 3

Cassandra's stomach fluttered as she followed Mr. Warrington from the entrance hall to the much larger great hall. After all that had transpired over the past few weeks, she'd finally arrived at the place where her questions could possibly be answered.

Even as fresh optimism soared, a stinging prick of inadequacy enveloped her as she lifted her gaze to the stately oak beams running the length of the high plaster ceiling. Her gaze fell to the chamber's two paned windows that framed the scenic grounds. Ample gray morning light flooded through, illuminating the long, narrow table centered in the hall with the serving pieces atop it, the presence of which suggested this space was one used for receiving and entertaining guests on formal occasions. The absence of the pianoforte music upon her arrival had only intensified the stillness—and magnificence—of the room. All around her paintings and portraits in gilded frames adorned the paneled walls, bringing the chamber alive with rich history.

She did not belong in a place as grand as this. Not with her sullied attire and wrinkled gown. She was a simple teacher with no real connections to speak of. Yet the man who had invited her here had lived within these walls.

And she was determined to unearth every detail he'd wanted to share with her.



She steadied her thoughts and tempered her expectations. Like Mrs. Denton instructed—emotions could not be permitted to interfere.

As they walked to the chamber's center, Cassandra ignored the thudding within her chest and focused instead on her host, who was likely her best source of information.

Mr. Warrington epitomized everything she imagined a country gentleman to be, not that she had ever really met one. From his tall, straight stature to his buff buckskin breeches and polished top boots, his very presence boasted confidence and authority. The cut of his dark blue coat and its defined lapels emphasized the broad expanse of his shoulders, and an easy smile added to his charm. He was handsome, with a strong jawline and thick, light hair that curled just wildly enough to make him appear approachable. But it was his own easiness in his surroundings that made her feel even more out of place in this elegant room. She'd invaded her territory uninvited. Unannounced.

A shimmer of color through the arch at the room's west end caught her eye. It was a young woman, younger than Cassandra, in a winter gown of rich, dark yellow. A mass of unruly sable curls rippled down her back, and a loosely woven shawl draped over her shoulders. She appeared pale. Sad. She paused in the doorway, staring at Cassandra, but said nothing and continued slowly on her way.

"Did I hear you say you're seeking Robert Clark?" Mr. Warrington, who apparently had not noticed the young woman, said, bringing her back to the conversation at hand.

"Yes, sir. I am."

"He is dead, I'm sorry to say." Mr. Warrington moved to the fire and stoked the waning embers.

"Yes, Mrs. Helock told me." Cassandra joined him by the fire as it roared back to life, grateful for the warmth after the chilly walk.

He returned the poker to the stand, wiped his hands together,

then nodded toward the portrait to the left of the mantel. “That’s Clark’s likeness, or so I’m told. The paintings were all here when I acquired Briarton.”

A thrill of connectedness surged through her at the bit of information, and she leaned forward to assess the man in the portrait. Sorrel hair. Obsidian eyes. The man in the painting was young, but even so, she was drawn to his soulful, somber expression. Robert Clark might be dead, but having this image to carry with her made him seem more real and heightened her enthusiasm about this search.

What secret did that man hold?

What secrets did he hold about *her*?

“Odd that you came to visit and did not know he was deceased.” Mr. Warrington turned from the painting back to her.

His voice held no cynicism, and yet Cassandra suspected if she was to be successful in her quest, she needed to develop a new tactic. And quickly.

Perceiving that it would be best to appeal to his sense of rationality, she pulled the letter from her reticule. “I’ve never met him, but you see, I received this letter from Mr. Clark. Clearly it was written years ago, but it only recently came into my possession. I did write a response a couple of weeks ago, but I am not sure it ever arrived.”

“You sent a missive here?” A frown shadowed his otherwise congenial expression. “That is likely my error then. Occasionally I receive letters addressed to the former owner, and I never open them.”

Encouraged by his interest, she extended the missive toward him. “He indicated that he has—well, *had*—news to share with me about my family.”

He accepted the letter and unfolded it.

Cassandra studied his face as he read it, hoping for some spark, some hint of familiarity, that would help her draw conclusions. But after several seconds he refolded it, tapped it against his hand as if pondering what he’d just read, and then extended it to her. “It’s definitely

intriguing, but I'm afraid I can't offer much information. I purchased this house after his death. I never met him either." His voice held a tone of finality to it, as if he was done with the conversation.

She shifted, resisting the urge to panic. So many questions lingered. She could not give up. Not yet. "Is there nothing that you know of him? Please, I've traveled a very long way. Any bit you can think of would be so helpful."

He drew a deep breath and looked upward, as if searching his memory. "In addition to this house, Mr. Clark owned two mills near here. I now own Briarton House and the Weyton Mill, but his son, Peter Clark, inherited and operates the other wool mill, Clark Mill. I suggest you speak with him."

His son! Surely, of all people, his son would be able to shed light. "Peter Clark, you said?"

"Yes. He lives in Ambleton. Next village over to the east."

The distant, dissonant pianoforte music she had heard earlier resumed.

Mr. Warrington cringed. Then his expression softened to an easy grin. "That would be my sister, Rachel. She's the musician of the family."

Cassandra let out a little laugh. "Yes, I—I heard it as I came up the drive."

"I think everyone's heard it from here to Bristol," he teased, as if amused at his own little joke, before he redirected their conversation back to the topic at hand. "You said you've traveled far. Where is it you are from?"

"Lamby. A small village outside of London."

"London? That's a far piece."

"Five days of travel." She nodded as some of the more treacherous legs of her journey flashed in her mind. "But if I can find some of the answers I seek, it will be worth every mile."

"I admire your optimism." He sobered, and concern momentarily

darkened his features. “Do you have lodgings? Or other family nearby?”

“No, sir, no family, but I do have lodgings. At the Green Ox Inn.”

He raised his brows. “The Green Ox Inn? I wish you luck. Perhaps you should try to meet with the vicar—a man by the name of Vincent North. He was the one to identify Mr. Clark as the man in the portrait when he called a few months back. I’ve heard only positive things about him, and I assume he’s well connected with the people who have lived in the village. I don’t know him well at all, but he’d be a better resource than anyone at Briarton Park.”

As she opened her mouth to respond, the door behind them flung open. Two men, the taller one more finely dressed than the other, sauntered in comfortably, as if they’d done so a thousand times, and then both stopped short when they noticed her.

“Apologies,” the larger man blurted, his narrow face still ruddy from the cool outside. “I wasn’t aware you had company.”

“Milton. Shepard.” Mr. Warrington waved the men in, seemingly not surprised at the intrusion. “May I present Miss— Oh, wait.” He turned his attention back to her. “I don’t believe I caught your name.”

“Cassandra Hale.”

“Ah, very good. May I present Miss Cassandra Hale from Lamby. Miss Hale, this is Mr. Isaiah Milton, my associate, and Mr. William Shepard, the local magistrate.”

“Miss Hale.” Mr. Milton bowed politely, and she curtsied. As soon as the formalities were complete, an awkward silence hovered.

Mr. Warrington had been as accommodating as he could. Kind, she might even go so far as to say. But these men were here to speak with him, and Mr. Warrington made no other comments regarding her plight.

With a jolt the sense of intrusion intensified. “Please, Mr. Warrington, do not let me keep you from your business. I can show myself out.”

“Did you walk here?” he inquired, as if an afterthought. “I can call the carriage if you’re returning to the village.”

“No, no, thank you.” How silly she must seem, chasing after a letter in her crumpled pelisse and mud-caked nankeen half boots. She bobbed a quick curtsy, let her gaze fall one last time on the portrait to fix the image in her memory, and hurried back through the vestibule and out into the fresh air before another word could be uttered.

With her face flaming and the letter still gripped in her hand, she did not slow her pace or look back until she again reached the iron gate. Once she was under the privacy of the ancient ash’s low-hanging boughs, she leaned against the sturdy tree and allowed herself the luxury of a few deep, cooling breaths. She turned her face upward to the intermittent bits of sunshine filtering through the leaves that were fighting to remain in their place as autumn strengthened its hold.

She struggled to make sense of what had just transpired.

She should be happy, she supposed. It would have been foolish to think that all her questions would be answered on her first visit to Briarton Park. At least now she knew the name of Mr. Clark’s son and where he lived. And yet, despite these advances, she felt even more forlorn and isolated than before.

Mr. Clark’s portrait, which had so entranced her in the moment, now haunted her, and she feared it would for a long time to come. Yet she forced the thought at bay. Lingering on sentiments was perilous, and like Mrs. Denton had said, emotions were of little use.

Cassandra tucked the letter in her reticule once more and trudged back over the arched stone bridge to the village.

She had to manage her expectations. She had to remember how important it was to protect her heart and her mind as she sailed through this voyage of discovery. For if she did not, no one would.