

IN THE
SHELTER
of
HOLLYTHORNE
HOUSE

Sarah E. Ladd



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

In the Shelter of Hollythorne House

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Prologue

BLIGHT MOOR, YORKSHIRE, ENGLAND

SUMMER 1813

Charlotte Grey should have been more careful with her heart.

She tightened her grip on the letter and traversed the uneven, rocky path toward Even Tor, refusing to acknowledge the pangs of remorse over her uncharacteristic lack of restraint.

She'd always pitied silly young ladies who freely gave their hearts, who would flirt and open themselves to unnecessary censure and dejection. What was more, she'd never really believed in romantic love—the sort of attachment that intertwined one's mind and soul irrevocably with another's.

Not until she'd first encountered Mr. Anthony Welbourne exactly three months prior.

Charlotte paused in her steps to look once again at Anthony's hastily written note.

Even Tor. Sunset.

She quickened her pace and rounded the bend, and Even Tor crept into view—a gnarled, weathered rock formation towering above the surrounding grassland. Imposing limestone boulders and stones stood as sentinels at the base of the majestic structure, adding to its isolation.

No one would happen upon them here.

All around her, as far as her eyes could see, the vast, waving moor grass emphasized the seclusion. The blooming heather danced in the summer's golden light, and the ever-present wind carried perfumed scents of earth and blooms and mewled a mournful song, as if in melancholic commiseration. This location had been their haven, the private place where they would pass the evening hours away from unapproving eyes. But in mere minutes the amber sun would dip down behind the jagged landscape, taking with it any semblance of warmth and comfort. The day would end, the morrow would dawn, and Anthony would leave for war.

She shaded her eyes with her free hand and squinted at the brilliant setting sun. Anthony was there, just as his note had indicated, clad in the brilliant crimson wool coat and white linen trousers of a regimental soldier.

Anthony Welbourne, with his confident nature and even-tempered disposition, was the physical manifestation of all her girlhood dreams—of all her womanly hopes for romantic love, like her parents had shared, and fantasies of a family and security. She wanted to run to him. Fling her arms around his neck and kiss his familiar lips, as she had so many times since their first meeting, and laugh as if time were limitless and the future was free.

But she refrained.

Tomorrow their worlds would shift. Life would propel them down different paths, and the likelihood that those paths would once again converge was implausible.

He straightened as she approached and lifted a hand in greeting. The sun behind him highlighted the wild curl of his dark hair and the strong cut of his broad shoulders. She'd been planning for this—their final conversation—for days, if not weeks. All along she'd determined to show no emotion. What good could come from tears? After all, it was her own fault her heart was breaking. She'd known the risk all along.

She lifted her pale-violet chintz skirt to step over the stones at the tor's base. As she drew nearer, he extended his bare hand to assist her over the crumbling rocks. She accepted it and joined him under the tor's cool shadow, hidden from the outside world.

He smiled his casual, easy grin—the very one that had entranced her during their first encounter on the path near this very spot, when they had happened upon each other and he assisted her when her pony threw a shoe. “I was beginning to fear you wouldn't come.”

She pulled her hand from his and reestablished a respectable distance, finding it difficult, almost impossible, to meet his gaze. “How could I not?”

They'd never been uncomfortable in each other's presence before, but in this instance, an awkward silence hovered that dared each one to speak first.

A dozen sentiments simmered on the end of her tongue, but every word, every notion, brimmed with danger. If spoken aloud, they might reveal a glimpse into the deepest part of her heart—and

that she could not allow. She knew well her own hopes and feelings, but she knew not his. In all their time together, he never once made her a vow. He'd rarely spoken of the future or of the dreams that would come next—after the war.

He broke the silence, his alluring voice raspy and low. "I don't know how to bid you farewell."

She forced her practiced smile, almost grateful for how the incessant wind blew long wisps of her hair in front of her face, disguising her features. "We both knew this was coming. That you were leaving. It was expected."

As silence once again fell, the sickening twinge of panic took hold. How, in such a short span of time, had he become the person who understood her better than anyone else in the world? In all her eighteen years she'd never encountered someone who accepted her and her opinions without judgment and whose attention and mere presence emboldened her. He boasted tenacity where she lacked it, encouraged humor where she needed to develop it, and offered companionship when she craved it most. The time they shared had become her sole focus and inspired every dream and ambition. But the attachment would be ending. A thousand thoughts battled for dominance, yet she could only mutter, "I will think of you often, you know."

He chuckled, but wistfulness tempered his usually cheery tone, and an atypical shadow darkened his cobalt eyes. He reached out and tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear, letting his fingers linger against her cheek. "Ah, Charlotte. You will think of me for a bit. Maybe even miss me. But then, your life will go on. You will

marry, have a family, and live a long and healthy life. Just as you should.”

At the mention of marrying another, she jerked her head down and away from his touch. “Stop. Please.”

Did he know how agonizing this was for her? She loved him. She did, and the idea of it was intoxicating—of a love that would challenge time and endure war itself.

But it was not to be. For he’d never declared his love for her.

The sun sunk farther, and with every second, the vibrant glow dissolved into the misty dusk of twilight. The back of her throat tightened. Her nose twitched. Her confidence in her ability to conceal emotion was wavering. Every passing second prolonged the inevitable and intensified her anguish.

In that moment if he but asked her to, she’d pledge to wait for him. Her heart longed to hear the words that would validate the feelings that domineered every thought.

She hesitated, giving him the space to declare himself.

But he did not.

After a length of silence, she reached to smooth the golden tassels on the epaulet of his crimson coat. “You should go. Your uncle will be expecting you, and everyone will be gathering to say their farewells. If you do not hurry, you’ll be missed.” She managed a weak smile. “I’m certain mine is not the only feminine heart to break at your departure.”

But he did not join her smile. His blue eyes narrowed. His scent of outdoors and leather encircled her as he drew closer. “Yours is the only one that concerns me.”

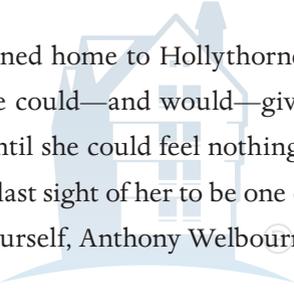
The touch of his hand on her upper arm burned like fire, perilous and wild.

This had to stop.

Every touch, even every word, heaped torment on an already-tender heart. As it was now, they lived in different worlds. Even if he was not leaving, it did not matter what they wanted. Given the nature of the strained relationship between their families, any true union would be impossible. Her father and his uncle were bitter enemies. Both families would vehemently oppose a match between them.

When she returned home to Hollythorne House, she could indulge in tears. She could—and would—give voice to her broken heart and cry until she could feel nothing else. But now, she refused to allow his last sight of her to be one of her weeping.

“Take care of yourself, Anthony Welbourne.”



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Anthony allowed his gaze to linger first on the dark-chestnut hue of Charlotte’s windblown hair, then the gentle slope of her petite nose. Then the full curve of her lips that he knew so well.

She was right. He should return to his uncle’s.

Prolonging this farewell would not lessen the torment.

But his boots were fixed to the stone beneath him, heavy and weighted, as if the very moors were holding him captive, demanding that he speak.

The words—the declaration of his adoration—wrestled within him, begging to be uttered.

How could he depart without communicating to her the depth of his affection? If he'd had any inclination that a woman would have such a powerful impact on him, he never would have considered the officer's commission. He might have even been content to work all his days at his uncle's gristmill. But the commission had been purchased, and he was committed to an unalterable path.

And another truth, equally as valid and forceful, refused to be ignored. Even if he were free and had no commitments, Charlotte's father would forbid a connection with a man bearing the surname Welbourne, let alone the fact that his social standing was far inferior to hers.

Despite their differences, she'd been an anchor to him in a time of transition. After nineteen years, his role was changing from dutiful nephew and mill worker to that of a soldier. He knew from the first moment he'd witnessed her struggling with a pony—with her flushed cheeks, wild hair, and dogged determination—that she'd laid claim to the concealed, sentimental parts of his heart. As of yet, she had not released it.

Her father's travels had kept him away for the past several months. Throughout that time she'd easily escaped her ineffective chaperone's lackluster supervision to spend the evening hours with him. During those precious times, she'd challenged him. Encouraged him. Allowed him to truly express himself in an environment that didn't contest his plans for his future.

A relationship that started as curious infatuation had developed into the most important and influential of his being, and yet even when all seemed ideal, he held his true feelings back. At this late point, revealing his love for her would be a selfish act. He

might never return from the war in America, and even if he did, asking her to wait for him would cause discord within her family. Just because he longed to say the words didn't mean they were prudent.

The silent moments slipped by, and her chin began to tremble. Her high cheekbones flushed pink.

Every muscle in his body ached to reach out and comfort her, but he refrained. It would not be fair, perhaps even cruel, to give false hope to a situation that must end.

Instead, he leaned forward, indulged in a breath of her scent of lavender, and pressed his lips against her forehead. "Farewell, dearest Charlotte."

Without looking at her, he turned.

He forced one step.

And then took another.

She did not call out to him.

She did not stop him.

And in time, his own heart might heal. Then again, it might harden.

Regardless, her life would go on.

Chapter 1

WOLDEN HOUSE, LEEDS, YORKSHIRE
OCTOBER 1817

Roland Prior had gone too far this time. This was not to be borne.

Charlotte's racing blood boiled and fueled each step down the first floor's opulent corridor to Wolden House's broad main staircase. With each inch traversed she formed her argument. Anticipated Roland's retorts. Sharpened her rationale.

Normally, arguing with Roland would only make a matter worse. When it came to their infant son, Roland demanded complete control. But mere minutes ago she'd been informed of his intention to send Henry to live with his brother for the next six months while Roland traveled to the Continent. The suggestion that Henry would be better off with his uncle enraged her. How dare Roland keep her son away from her, for any length of time! She knew well the possible ramifications of questioning Roland Prior. But for Henry's sake, she would fight.

The soles of her soft kid-leather slippers clipped the wooden

steps as she descended the staircase. She ignored the sideways glance from the liveried footman and focused her attention on the heavy oak door to her husband's study at the corridor's end. She lifted her hand and rapped her knuckles against the door.

No answer ensued.

Annoyance flared. She knocked harder. Sharper.

When a response still did not come, she gripped the brass handle and turned it, steeling herself for a battle.

But when she opened the door and stepped inside, the chamber was empty.

She frowned. A freshly built fire roared in the grate, and papers and letters, along with a half-empty glass of brandy, littered his desk. The heavy, aubergine velvet curtains were drawn in the chamber's two windows, and the fire's saffron glow reflected off the glass decanters on the side table and the gilded mirror on the opposite wall.

She huffed, disappointed not to be able to give voice that very moment to her frustration. She pivoted to leave, but the toe of a polished black boot on the floor captured her attention.

The sight of it, prostrate and positioned at an odd angle, slowed her blood that just moments ago was racing.

Gooseflesh rose on her arms.

She inched closer, one step at a time, until she could see around the desk's edge. There, on the Persian rug beneath the window, lay Roland in an unnatural position on his back. Unmoving. One arm was tucked awkwardly behind him. Papers were strewn around him. His icy-blue eyes stared, unblinking.

Nausea seized her, and her hand flew to her throat.

She screamed.

The footman she'd encountered just moments prior rushed in and pushed past her.

The next events simultaneously slowed and sped up.

Servants streamed in.

Voices and shapes blurred into a mess of noise and chatter.

The butler brushed past her and dropped to his master's side.

Someone opened the curtains, flooding the chamber with morning's harsh, colorless light. An arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her backward. A feminine voice whispered for her to come away, but her feet refused to move.

Roland Prior—formidable, imposing, and polarizing—was dead.

Every element from their three-year marriage flashed before her. The fear. The mistrust. His cold words and violent displays of anger.

She should feel sadness at the loss of life. She should feel grief.

But she perceived only numbness—blinding, debilitating numbness.

Perspiration beaded cold on her brow, and every breath burned, as if the very air she was inhaling had died with Roland. In this single slice of time, it mattered not that no love had existed between husband and wife. The fact that arguments and disagreements had ruled their interactions evaporated into a meaningless void.

What mattered now was their son. At only seven months of age, Henry was now heir to his father's fortune and business holdings—a significant designation for anyone, let alone a baby. She might be free from Roland now, but Henry—dear, innocent

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Henry—would be further embroiled in the complicated tangle that was the Prior family.

She'd done her very best since the day he was born to protect him. Now that Roland was dead, her mission began afresh. She would sooner die than see her sweet son become a cruel man like his father. It was now her purpose to make sure that did not happen.



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Chapter 2

WAREHOUSE DISTRICT, LEEDS, YORKSHIRE

OCTOBER 1817

Anthony Welbourne locked his gaze on the shadowy figure of man at the end of the alley. He dare not look away, lest he lose sight of his target in the night's murky darkness.

Apprehending this man—this criminal—was his singular task.

And he would not fail.

In an abrupt jerk, the man, as if suddenly alerted to Anthony's presence, bolted in the opposite direction.

Like a shot from a cannon, Anthony sprinted after him down the dimly lit, uneven road. Blood surged through his limbs and air whipped through his lungs. In this moment his mind was void of all thoughts except one—his ironclad determination to subdue this perpetrator.

Rain stung his face. His felt wide-brimmed hat flew from his head. His boots smacked the wet cobbled street with each staccato step. The few men lingering on the rain-drenched street inched

backward as they approached, melding back into the alleys and ramshackle buildings, not wanting to be seen or involved.

But this sort of chase was what Anthony lived for.

In a subtle motion the perpetrator made his fatal error—he glanced over his shoulder. The action slowed his pace just enough for Anthony to gain ground.

The bulkier man broke to the left and ducked around the corner.

Anthony harnessed every bit of energy, lunged forward, and seized the man's coat in his fist. He spun him up against a rough stone wall.

The man whirled out from the hold and slammed his fist against Anthony's jaw.

Refusing to be bested, Anthony pushed him back against the wall with his forearm and then, once certain he had control, shoved him to the ground and pinned him with his own weight.

Within moments the hectic footsteps of the other watchman echoed behind them. Together, Anthony and his partner overpowered the now-winded man, and then with Anthony gripping one arm, and the other watchman gripping the criminal's other arm, they escorted him to the constable's office.

By the time he'd seen the perpetrator secured in the gaol and stopped in at the office of Walstead's Watchmen to log his time and activities, dawn was breaking in familiar streaks of smoky gray and mist. Energy and life were still surging through him, as they did after every successful conquest.

Anthony ran a hand down his jaw and opened and closed his mouth, gauging the damage from the blow, then shook it off. If

anything, the injury fanned the fire within him. It was impossible to rid the underbelly of Leeds of all the ne'er-do-wells, but tonight, he'd apprehended one. And if it made the woman the scum had accosted sleep better, then it was worth it.

If he was prudent, he'd return to his rented chamber at the boardinghouse to sleep, for the next night would, no doubt, call for equal exertion. But he was far too impassioned for rest. He was due to meet Timmons, his friend and colleague, at the Elk Pub, just as he did most mornings after a shift.

As he walked down the awakening street, he adjusted the brilliant Walstead's Watchmen's blue band around his arm, ignoring how a group of men to the side of the pub door straightened as he approached.

It was not his presence that caused them to adjust their posture and lower their voices.

It was the armband.

The swath of sapphire wool secured about his upper arm was always the first thing anyone noticed about him. It was the outward mark of his profession—a symbol that he was a member of Walstead's Watchmen, one of the most renowned groups of thief-takers in all England. Some respected it. Some feared it. But everyone understood it.

Anthony paused outside the public house door to shake the night's lingering moisture from his greatcoat and his Wellington boots. Overhead, dull morning light filtered through ashen clouds, casting a melancholy hue on Leeds's hectic Warehouse District. The ever-present black smoke that puffed from the stacks lingered in the air, despite the rain attempting to douse it.

He shoved his fingers through his wet hair to dislodge any remaining drops and cast a cautionary glance to the right, then the left. At present the shift at the Prior textile mill had changed, and drably clad men, women, and children bustled to and fro, their muted voices mingling with the sound of rickety wooden carts and the shouts of the boatmen on the nearby river. One had to always be on guard on this street—a lesson he'd learned all too well in the two and a half years since he returned from the war.

The squeak of the public house's ancient hinges announced his arrival. Patrons, some of whom also bore the armband, glanced his direction before continuing with their hushed conversations. Scents of stale woodsmoke and ale wafted toward him as he crossed the threshold, and he blinked, allowing his eyes to adjust to both the shifting shadows and the thick smoke seeping from the fire in the broad hearth. Jonathan Timmons was seated at a corner table, as expected. His wide-brimmed hat was pulled low over his eyes, a pewter tankard was clenched tightly in his fist.

Timmons looked up as Anthony approached. "What took so long? Was 'bout to give up on ye."

Anthony pulled out the wooden chair opposite Timmons and sat. "Had to deliver a man to the constable's office and then stop by Walstead's."

"Where's your 'at?"

"Lost it. Again." He scooted the chair in closer to the table.

Timmons pushed a second tankard in Anthony's direction.

He gripped the worn tankard handle, eager for his friend's update. "And what of you? How did you find Bretton?"

Timmons scoffed and propped his elbow on the rough table

and held up his disfigured left hand, displaying the misshapen thumb and only remaining finger. “Constable Bretton said ‘e admired my selfless service t’ our country, but unfortunately my injuries render me unable to administer t’ necessary duties of a constable. As such, they do not require my services.”

Anthony’s gaze drifted to the scarred, purple skin where Timmons’s other fingers once had been. Anthony had seen the injury so often he barely noticed it anymore, but as he refocused on the wound, the memory of the battle that caused it—not to mention the battle that inflicted Anthony’s own injuries—blazed brightly.

Timmons grunted. “Looks like I’m destined to remain a Walstead’s Watchmen, eh?”

“It’s not so dire, is it?” Anthony grinned in an uncomfortable attempt to cheer his friend. “Steady work. Excellent colleagues. Never a shortage of excitement. Ideal employment, I reckon.”

Timmons snorted. “You’re one t’ talk. You’ll jump ship as soon as you’re able.”

The statement, and the truth in it, sobered him.

Yes, Anthony did have a sharp eye to the future. A man, especially a man who’d endured injuries such as his own, could not chase after criminals his whole life. But at the moment, the goals Anthony had for his future seemed as far off and unattainable as Timmons’s did.

The vision of his deceased uncle’s dilapidated, charred mill flashed in his mind. Anthony had visited the site in the days after returning from the United States, and the devastating tragedy that met him there had heaped burning coals atop the traumas he’d

experienced at war. One day he'd return to the site, repair the fire damage, and see that the gristmill was once again functional, but many things had to occur for him to do so.

"Aye, that might be true, but the mill's in a grim state. No roof. No waterwheel. Mill's not much use without them. 'Twill take capital, and that I don't have. Not yet, anyway. No sense in dwelling on that now—not when there is naught to be done for it except to keep working and earning money."

Anthony swigged the last of his ale. "Come on. Finish that up. Mulligan told me there's a transport convoy taking a load to Scarborough that requires an escort. With any luck we'll be assigned to it. Good money in that."

"I suppose." Timmons indulged in a drink and wiped his wool sleeve across his mouth. "Did ye hear 'bout the thefts on Lowburn Street? Bricks through t' windows of three houses. Probably more. Rumor is t' residents intend to 'ire Walstead to set things right."

Yes, there was no shortage of crimes for men like Anthony to investigate, and the assignments were far from predictable. The wealthy would pay for all sorts of tasks they could not—or would not—do for themselves. The adventure and challenge of never knowing what obstacle he'd face next was a beacon to Anthony. He craved it. Needed it to feel alive. He was a thief-taker, after all. Victims of all sorts hired him or, rather, William Walstead, to bring about justice or for protection.

After emptying their tankards, Anthony and Timmons stood and exited the dark pub into the budding, misty morning. In the short amount of time he'd been inside, the busy street had flared

even more to life with more people, more carts, more noise. Anthony took several steps, when a man clipped his shoulder.

“Have a care,” Anthony mumbled, continuing forward.

Then a second man, directly behind the first, clipped his shoulder too.

Once was an accident. Two times was not.

Anthony muttered in annoyance and turned to the two men, who were both as dirty and shabby as one would expect a worker from this corner of Leeds to be. There was a hardness, a directness, in the workmen’s stares that set Anthony on his defenses.

“Walstead’s Watchmen, are ye?” The taller one motioned toward Anthony’s armband and spat on the ground next to the toe of Timmons’s boots.

Anthony gave no reaction for several moments as he continued to assess the men. “Something you’d like to say?”

The first man’s dingy hair clung in greasy strings to his weathered skin, and he inched closer, slow and determined, in the midst of the street’s bustling commotion. “Yea, I do. Ye tell ol’ Walstead I got a message for ’im. Tell ’im that ol’ Rodden remembers. Tell ’im the only thing that’ll make me forget what ’appened at Swendel Bay is t’ money ’e owes me, and t’ longer ’e keeps me waitin’, t’ looser me tongue’s gonna get.”

It was a common occurrence—one that used to be unsettling until Anthony had been on enough jobs to see that many men apprehended by one of Walstead’s men held grudges.

“If the message is so important, tell him yourself.” Anthony continued walking.

“Listen to you, takin’ a tone just like ’im,” called the man after

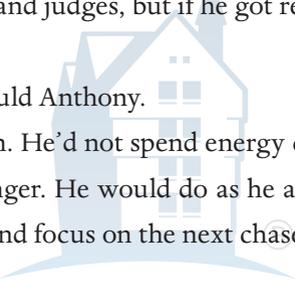
him. “Sooner or later, someone’ll take ye all down a notch or two and put ye in t’ gallows where ye belong.”

Anthony slowed his steps, pausing only a moment for Timmons to join him in walking. It was one thing to stand his ground. It was another thing entirely to engage with a man intent on a fight. But as Anthony strode away, the truth of what had been said smacked.

As respected as Walstead was, his methods were, at times, questionable. He was just as comfortable dealing with criminals as with magistrates and judges, but if he got results, no one questioned him.

And neither should Anthony.

He continued on. He’d not spend energy concerning himself with a random stranger. He would do as he always did—put the events behind him and focus on the next chase.



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Chapter 3

Charlotte squeezed her eyes shut and drew several deep breaths. Her chest tightened and her head throbbed with each intake of the morning's stifling air.

Three hours.

Three hours since she had discovered Roland's body.

In that time, her entire life had shifted, a tremulous pivot that still seemed impossible.

She opened her eyes slowly, taking a fresh account of the men gathered in the study to assess the infamous Roland Prior's body. Men from every discipline had converged on the morbid event—magistrates, physicians, the coroner, the vicar, Roland's private secretary. Every single one of these people had something to gain by assisting in the investigation into his death. Roland's influence and power, which at one time had impressed her, seemed to continue even posthumously.

She should not be here, in this chamber. She was a woman and, as such, she was supposed to be too weak-minded and delicate for such talk. She should retire to her private quarters and leave the men to deal with the gruesome logistics of death.

Yet she did not move.

Their deep, low voices rolled on in a continuous, monotonous hum, adding to her general sense of numbness. She was neither hot nor cold. Neither tired nor alert. Even her movements, her voice, were like that from a sluggish dream, when everything was slightly off-balance and peculiar.

Another man entered the study, drawing her attention from her detached reverie. If it had been anyone else, she probably would not have noticed.

But she noticed Silas Prior.

Everyone did.

Silas was Roland's older brother, and he was the only person in Leeds who was more influential than her husband.

Immediately Silas's austere gaze latched on to her.

Silas was ten years Roland's senior and taller by almost a head, and yet their likeness was uncanny. Same icy, pale-blue eyes and oddly pale lashes. Same broad forehead, fair complexion, and white-blond hair. She stiffened as he approached. He gripped her elbow and angled her away from the men. "You should not be here."

Defiance already mounting, she readied herself. Every conversation with this man swelled with potential conflict. Roland's death would not change that. In fact, it might make it worse. "This is my home, Silas. Where else should I be?"

"This *was* your home," he snapped. "Everything will be different now that Roland is dead."

A shiver traversed her, snapping her from her contemplations, like a freezing gust of wind chilling damp skin. She pressed her

lips shut as the statement's significance dripped over her. Yes, she *did* know that. Roland had been transparent about his will. She'd be left with very little—certainly nothing to which she'd become accustomed. The fact had been hurled at her as a threat often, as if to make her grateful for the life she led.

“Where's Henry?” he demanded suddenly.

Charlotte hesitated.

Silas had a vested interest in Henry—one that went deeper than the expected relationship between uncle and nephew. The Prior brothers had no other relatives, and Silas never had any children of his own. As a result Henry was heir to it all—not only Roland's fortune, properties, and businesses but Silas's as well.

She needed to be cautious. “He's with his nurse.”

“Pack his things. He will come and stay at Gatham House until this is sorted.”

Fire lit beneath her at Silas's finite tone, especially as the news of Roland's intention to send Henry to live with Silas reverberated so fresh in her mind. She'd not allow it. Not under any circumstance. “That's not necessary. He'll remain with me.”

Silas scoffed, haughty and cold. “This house will be no place for a child in the coming days. There will be an investigation.”

“An investigation?” Alarm pricked. “I thought the coroner said he believed it to be apoplexy.”

“Of course, it appears to be, but we all know Roland had enemies, and there's no shortage of poisons whose effects appear to be natural. None of us should rest easily until we have more details of exactly what has transpired.”

The thought of such activity sickened her. No, this would be

no place for Henry in the coming days. But neither was Gotham House.

She glanced around at the men, perceiving anew the importance of measuring her reactions and behavior with the utmost discernment. Even her facial expressions would be scrutinized by those searching for signs of weakness. The very last thing she needed was a roomful of influential men thinking her hysterical.

Shrewdness was essential.

Silas had always been able to control Roland.

He would not control her.

Since the day they married, Roland had overseen and dictated every aspect of her life. His death, however unexpected and shocking, revived Charlotte's autonomy. Never again would she allow any man such domination over her. And thanks to the specifics of her dowry, she was now a woman of property—her childhood home of Hollythorne House was to return to her in the event of her husband's death. She might not have a great deal of money, but now she had a small opportunity to stand her ground.

Silas continued. "I've arranged for guards to patrol outside—Walstead's Watchmen."

Charlotte frowned. "Whatever for?"

"Word of Roland's death had spread, and there's already chatter that the workers of Prior Mill will riot or attempt some sort of unrest during this transition. I don't know details yet, but these things can get out of hand quickly. It's but another reason Henry will be safer at Gotham, so get him ready."

Silas did not wait for a response before he stepped away, leaving her alone with his words' menacing echo.

Now, as she watched the men meander around her, she knew what she needed to do. For herself. For Henry. For both of their futures.

Hollythorne House.

Feeling oddly—and cautiously—motivated, she raised to her toes to see the room. She'd glimpsed Mr. Sires, Roland's solicitor, a while ago, and now he was the only man who could answer her questions.

Of all the men who had worked with Roland, Mr. Sires was the only one with whom she'd experienced any solidarity. He'd been among the first people she'd met when arriving in Leeds. What was more, he'd borne witness to one of Roland's violent episodes, and as a result, he'd always taken care to inquire after her. There was nothing he could do about Roland's behavior toward her, of course, but just the fact that someone noticed bound them in an implicit way.

She left Roland's study in search of Mr. Sires, then found him in the corridor, engaged in conversation. When she drew nearer, the group of men turned, and their conversation fell quiet. They bowed in her direction.

She would not be timid. "Mr. Sires. A moment, please."

He dismissed himself from the others before extending his gloved hand toward her.

She gave him her hand, and he bowed over it.

Mr. Timothy Sires was a tall, sinewy man, whose wire-rimmed glasses seemed too large for his narrow face and whose graying hair made him appear much older than she suspected he was.

"My dear Mrs. Prior, may I convey my deepest sympathies.

How horrible it must have been for you to make such an appalling discovery.”

Her tension eased at the directness of his attention. There were very few people she could trust. Roland permitted her no female friendships, and no man would dare speak with her for fear of angering her husband, but as a trusted adviser, Mr. Sires was different.

She lowered her voice to barely above a whisper. “It was horrifying, to be sure. I do not wish to be indelicate, but in light of the circumstances, I feel it is in Henry’s and my best interest to fully understand the state of my situation as soon as possible.”

He nodded his agreement, then matched his tone to her somber one. “I daresay there will be no surprises for you. Henry will inherit Roland’s entire estate when he comes of age—from his properties to his holdings in the business. Current assets, such as this house, will be sold on a case-by-case basis, and the money placed in a trust for Henry. But as for you, things are murkier. As Henry’s mother you are now his sole guardian. Roland provided you an annual sum of one thousand pounds until such time that you marry again. Based on his worth and the life you are accustomed to, it is a small sum, but you’ll not be a pauper. I will distribute your annual stipend personally and be involved in the administration of the estate and the trust, but Roland specified that Silas Prior should be the executor of his estate and, as such, be involved in all instances and oversee the distribution of Henry’s inheritance.”

“So Silas will determine how Henry’s money is utilized until Henry comes of age?”

“Precisely. I know that sounds dire, but consider yourself fortunate, for he’d spoken of naming Silas Henry’s guardian in the event of his death. Fortunately I was able to convince him otherwise, but no doubt that is the arrangement Silas will be expecting.”

The meaning of the words sunk in, like teeth clamping into a bite. Freedom from the Prior grip would have been difficult to obtain even under the best of scenarios, but this stipulation made it impossible.

With his rheumy eyes fixed on her, Mr. Sires continued. “As the man who holds the purse strings, Silas Prior will have an active voice in young Henry’s rearing. As guardian you will receive a specified sum for his general upbringing, but any purchases beyond that, including fees associated with his education, will require Mr. Prior’s explicit approval. You, however, will of course retain possession of your belongings, clothing, and other personal items and the sort, but any items you possess that were part of the estate before your marriage must remain within Wolden House.”

Charlotte swallowed hard, determined to display no emotion. “And Hollythorne House?”

“Ah yes. Hollythorne House and its holdings belong to you, per the stipulations your father included in your dowry. As you know, it states that if your husband precedes you in death, the rights revert to you unless you have a child who has reached the age of majority. Since that has not happened, the ownership of it remains in your hands. Furthermore, Hollythorne House cannot be sold for two generations, unless in a bankruptcy situation.”

The vision of the antiquated stone home on the rough, open

moorland flashed in her mind, both sharp with familiarity and fuzzy from years of absence.

He leaned forward, removed his glasses, and cast a glance around to ensure privacy before he pinned his close-set eyes on her. “You’ve not asked for my advice, but I’m compelled to give it to you. I anticipate that the next several weeks will be difficult. A sudden death like this is bound to stir anxiety and sow seeds of doubt, even in the most general sense, let alone when a man of your husband’s standing is involved. Many will attempt to take advantage. I’ve already heard reports that several men have left their positions in the mill. That being said, my advice to you, my dear Mrs. Prior, is to leave Leeds. Take Henry. Go to Hollythorne House and establish your household immediately, before Mr. Prior can interfere.”

Charlotte frowned at the unexpected recommendation. “But do you think it odd to leave so quickly? I do not wish to draw censure, and I fear all eyes are now on us.”

“In the end, what you do is of little consequence. Your husband had a certain reputation about the city, especially with regards to debts, and death and money bring out the worst in people. There will always be interest in the heir to a fortune. And at a time like this, all concern should be only for Henry. Fortunately he is quite young. If his mother were to relocate with him before others can get involved, no one could question it.”

The decisions to be made overwhelmed her. How would she even implement such a massive undertaking? Hollythorne House had been empty since her father died more than two years prior. There were no servants. She had no carriage of her own. No

actual money other than what Mr. Sires would give her. Obstacles assailed her, one right after the other, and the realization of how little power she actually possessed threatened to undo her. For being the wife of one of the most prominent men in the entire city, her hands seemed tied.

“I can put you in touch with Mr. Ernest Greenwood, Hollythorne House’s current steward, and I can also provide you with the money that Roland has allotted you. As for transportation, I can offer you the use of my private carriage.”

She eyed him skeptically. She trusted him, but no one offered help so freely, especially in such a volatile landscape. “That is very generous, Mr. Sires.”

He narrowed his gaze and lowered his voice to a whisper. “One last word of caution. If you do decide to make a move, do not be secretive about it. You do not want to appear to be making a fool of Silas Prior. That would not bode well . . . for anyone.”

“I understand.” She swallowed hard at the warning, and her mind leapt to life with the details of what needed to be done. “If you are in earnest, I will gladly accept your kind offer for the use of your carriage. I see no reason to delay the departure.”

“Good. Just send word and my carriage and the money will be here for you at your bidding.”

“Is it possible to depart in the morning?”

His brows jumped, then he nodded. “Yes. I agree, the sooner you can leave, the better it will be for the both of you. Have courage, my dear.”

She bid him farewell, and after he walked away, her gaze once again fell to Silas, who even now was speaking with the other men

Sarah E. Ladd

in the room. Planning. Working. She would never have him out of her life—not while Henry was under her care. Silas would always be a threat to her, and she dare not let herself think anything else.



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