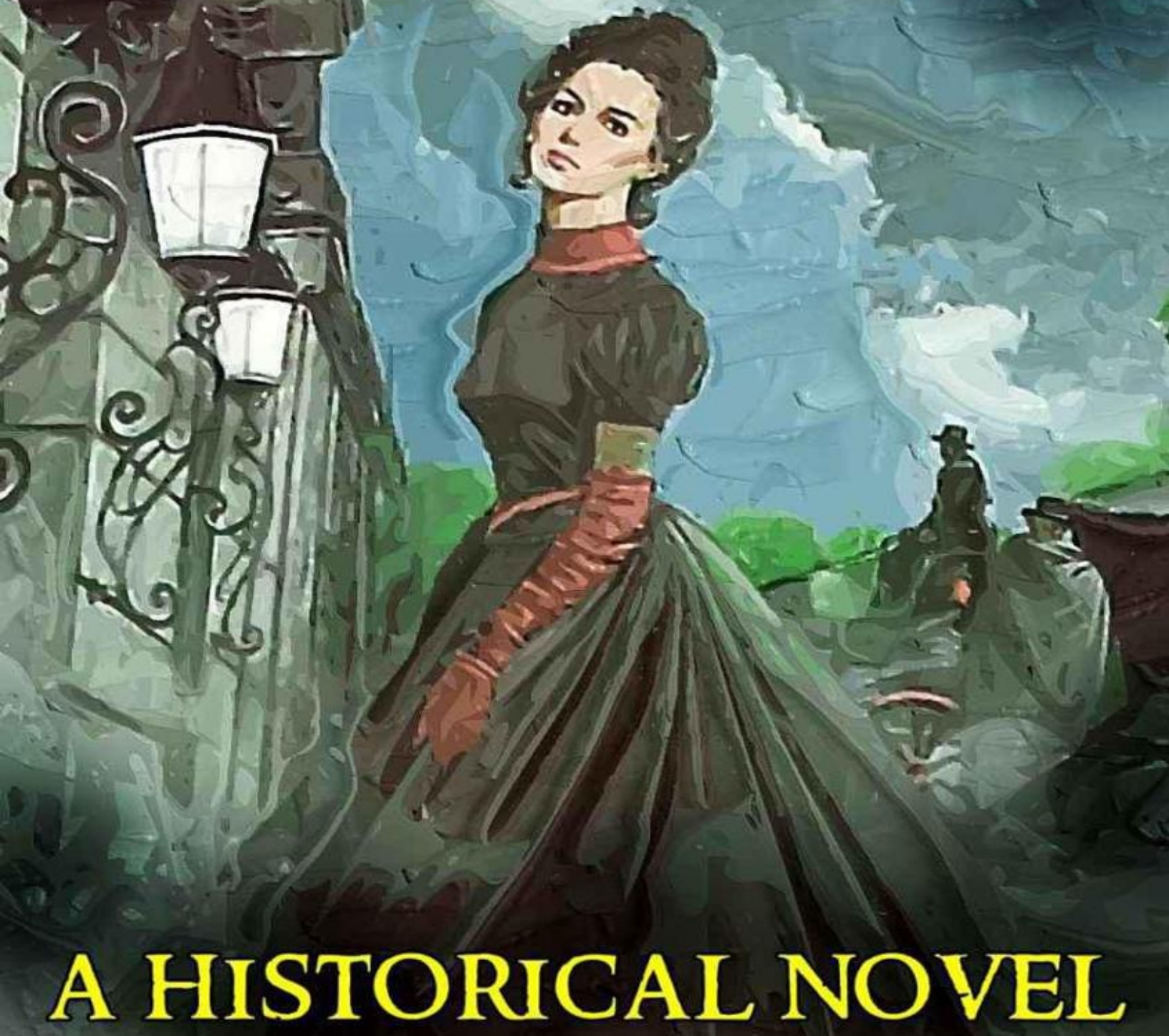


NATHANIEL BURNS

# THE SECRET OF WILLOW CASTLE



A HISTORICAL NOVEL

# The Secret of Willow Castle

A Historical Gothic Novel

Nathaniel Burns

Heiken Marketing

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*“Nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great  
and sudden change.”*

— Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

# 1 The Letter

**T**

he day the letter came I was woken by the rain. Not by the pattering of rain against my window, but by a fat droplet sneaking through a crack in our rotting roof to land with a tiny splash on my cheek. I opened my eyes to see a second drop gathering its strength above my head.

Unwillingly I threw back my counterpane and got up. Even through my thick bed socks I could feel the early winter chill of the boards under my feet, and when I wrapped my fingers around the metal bedstead it was freezing to the touch. I heaved the narrow bed as far out of the leak's path as I could, constrained by the narrowness of my tiny room, then fetched the ewer from my dressing table and set it to catch the drips. As the cold began to seep into my bones, I dressed as swiftly as possible and hurried downstairs to seek the comfort of the parlour fire.

"Come away from that fire, Rebecca!" my mother protested as I knelt on the heath, absorbing what warmth I could from the modest blaze.

"But Mama, I'm cold!" I pleaded.

"I won't have you kneeling on the floor like a peasant," she replied, implacable as always. "Ladies sit in chairs, not on dirty floors. Now come into the kitchen, breakfast is getting cold."

Reluctantly I tore myself away from the fire and followed her into the tiny, cramped scullery. The imposing cast iron range was never lit for long enough to warm the room properly, so I shivered as I broke my fast on lukewarm porridge. I wanted to wrap my hands around my teacup and enjoy its warmth, since tea was the one thing that was reliably hot in our house, but I knew Mama would scold me. She believed that only labourers and washerwomen touched teacups anywhere other than the handle.

When we were finished we returned to the parlour, where Mama set me my daily tasks. She would instruct me to write imaginary letters to fictitious duchesses, countesses and Honourable ladies, practising a delicate hand and correct forms of address. She would have me recite or copy out all the French verbs she could remember from her own education. She would hand me samplers to embroider with tiny, neat stitches. Many years earlier, when I had first become aware of our poverty, I had asked Mama why she did not sell my completed samples or at least allow me to help her with the household mending.

“No daughter of mine will be in trade!” she had barked. “Should I teach you to darn so that you can go and scrape a living as a seamstress? Do you look no higher than to marry an ironmonger? Have you forgotten who you are?” I had to reassure her that I had not forgotten that I was a daughter of the Lennox family and that my rightful place was far above our current situation.

It was because of our status as Lennox ladies that Mama had never allowed me to mix with the local children growing up or to attend the little school taught by a pair of elderly sisters along our street. I was brought up to be polite but distant, and to maintain my politeness even when our neighbours sniggered behind our backs and poked fun at Mama’s eccentricity. I would hear them talking as we stood in line at the greengrocer’s or the butcher’s shop, wondering aloud who Mama thought she was. She would never make any reply. She would wait until we got home, then as she untied my bonnet she would simply say to me “We do not belong among these people, Rebecca. Never forget that. You must never think of them as your equals. Yet you must always treat them well, better perhaps than they treat you, because to do so is a sign of good breeding.”

Mama had decided that I should not accompany her to the shops that day. While she usually believed in the value of daily exercise, she forbade me to go out on days when it was too cold for fear that I should catch a chill. I knew from reading and eavesdropping that people seemed to catch chills and recover from them all the time, but Mama was adamant that if I caught one it would kill me, so on particularly cold days she would leave me at home while she wrapped up in every scrap of clothing she possessed and went to purchase food. I was expected to practise dancing instead, getting my exercise by repeating waltz and polka steps in the arms of an imaginary partner. More often than not I would

finish those practise sessions with my shins covered in bruises as I collided with footstools and tables in the tiny parlour.

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Our usual habit was for me to spend the afternoon reading aloud to Mama while she wrote to distant relations seeking reconciliation with the family, then we would discuss the novel we were reading before I moved on to piano practise. Today, though, our routine was interrupted. I heard her latch key in the lock and rushed over to the door to help her with her basket, but the moment I saw the expression on her face I paused. I had never seen her look so grim. In her hand was a crumpled letter, crushed in a white-knuckle grip.

“Mama, whatever is the matter?” I asked in alarm. For a few long moments she said nothing. She set her basket down and collapsed into her armchair without even taking off her bonnet and overcoat. She looked weak and defeated, her mouth set in a tight line as if she was trying not to cry.

“My eldest brother is dead,” she said shortly. “Your Uncle Samuel succeeds to his title, and he writes to inform me that our annuity will cease on your eighteenth birthday. He is less forgiving than my brother Thomas.” Suddenly she lunged forward and thrust the letter into the fire, snatching up the poker and stirring the coals violently until the paper was reduced to ash. “He said some unforgivable things,” she whispered. I slipped silently from the room and set the kettle boiling for tea. I never knew what to say to comfort my mother, but I could always be certain that she would appreciate tea. She accepted the cup with a wan smile and continued to stare into the fire as she sipped at it. Afraid of upsetting her further, I decided my best course of action was to resume my usual routine. I settled myself at the piano to work on a selection of pieces that I hoped Mama would find soothing, starting with the pensive melancholy of Schubert and gradually lightening the mood until I found myself playing Chopin, a great favourite of my mother’s.

When at last I was forced to abandon my labours by the fading daylight, I lit a stump of candle and went to my room to undress. I threw on my nightgown as

rapidly as possible, before the cold could set me shivering, then returned to the parlour to sit by the cosy glow of firelight. It was my mother's custom to brush my hair, three hundred strokes each night before she plaited it for me to tuck under my nightcap. That night, as I had done every night of my life, I sat on her footstool and rested my head on her knee, closing my eyes and letting myself be lulled by the rhythmic sweeps of the brush and my mother's voice, telling the same tale she told every night. It was the story of her own life.

"Greycrags Hall, our family seat, was the most beautiful place," she would say. "No young lady could have grown up in a finer home. Your great-grandmother, Lady Elizabeth Lennox, had had the gardens remodelled in the classical style, and I spent many a happy hour strolling along the yew tree allee and across the lawns. But beyond them lay the wilderness, running all the way to the Crags themselves, which your great-grandfather demanded she leave untouched. He was a superstitious man, he never lost his Highland beliefs no matter how long he spent in more sophisticated company. He called that wilderness 'the Gudeman's share' as if he were still a farmer leaving a portion of his field for the Devil's use to ensure a fair crop! Such nonsense. He even fenced it with rowan trees, apparently meant to keep the Devil in his place. My brothers, your uncles Thomas and Samuel, used to play in that wilderness, hiding and seeking in the undergrowth. They would tunnel through the bracken all the way to the Crags and hurl pebbles into the river below.

I, on the other hand, was more often to be found indoors. I thought my schoolroom drab and dreary, though it had greater elegance and charm than this house could ever offer. The times I relished were the times I spent in the drawing room with Mama after dinner, when we would sit side by side embroidering the same tapestry or playing duets at the piano. Oh, how I wish I could have instructed you on that piano! The instrument I was able to provide for you here is barely worthy of the name. Your grandmother, my Mama, was the most elegant of ladies, and it is for her that you are named, Rebecca. She was always dressed in the latest fashions, and every three months we would travel to London to visit her modiste. Then shortly after my eighteenth birthday we removed to town for my first Season. It is among my deepest regrets that I could not give you a Season or have you presented – my presentation at court was the happiest day of my life, and every girl should know the joy of her first ball. I was the toast of London in my first season! I received proposal after proposal, though



none that I cared to accept.

It was in my third Season that I met your father. He was not one of my well-born suitors, but he was the most marvellous tenor that society had ever heard. Newly arrived from Florence, his voice was setting London ablaze. All my closest friends were flocking to his recitals, so when I was asked to make up a party to Lady Hanbury's box at Covent Garden I accepted the invitation with a glad heart.

I shall never forget the moment when your father strode out onto the platform, tall and slender as a young oak. You have seen likeness only in the miniature that I carry in my locket, but it does no justice to his looks. He was the most handsome man I had ever seen, with a Roman profile and the thick whiskers that were the height of fashion. I was half in love with him before he even began to sing. He laid a hand on the piano and gazed round at his audience, and in that moment his eyes fixed on mine and I knew I wanted nothing more than to be his. My heart soared with every note as he sang a masterful programme of Italian love songs, each one directed, I felt, to me alone. Perhaps if he had been less remarkable I should not have seen him again, but such was the beauty of his voice that he was in great demand. It seemed he appeared at every salon and soiree that Season. I saw him everywhere and thought of him constantly, but of course it would not have been proper for me to have spoken to him. I resigned myself to an unrequited passion.

Alas, before the winter was out my Papa was thrown from his horse and Mama was called home to attend him. My mother was loath to cut my Season short, so when her friend Lady March offered me an invitation my Mama accepted on my behalf. I was great friends with Lady March's daughter Amelia, and Mama believed me to be in safe hands. She could not have known, my innocent mother, of the danger in which I was to be left. A lady assumes that everyone deals as honourably as she herself, and Mama was a true lady. Believing Lady March and her daughter to be as well-bred and respectable as they appeared, she was happy to leave me in their care.

Amelia had always been a little wilder than I, so as soon as I confided my passion for Signor Rovello she insisted that I must find a way to communicate with him. I demurred, of course, but she insisted that her own Mama and Papa

had eloped and that no-one cared a bit for such things any more. When I discreetly verified this story with Lady March she concurred, filling my head with all sorts of modern notions about love matches and romance. Amelia prevailed upon her mother to engage Signor Rovello to sing at a salon of theirs and induced me to write him a note. I would never have had the nerve to deliver it, but she snatched it from my hand and placed it upon his music stand, inviting him to meet me in the rose garden. What could I do but keep my word and wait for him there? Amelia promised that she would sit nearby so that we would be properly chaperoned, so I could see little harm in it.

It was the first of many meetings. Signor Rovello – Lorenzo, as I came to call him – was as dashing and charming a suitor as any girl could have wished. Even as I spent each day in the company of London's most eligible young men, all I could think of was my secret lover, the ardent Italian who sang only for me, with whom I snatched moments in dark corners and who was swiftly seducing me into a clandestine affair. My own mother would have put a stop to it at once – nothing escaped her – but Lady March and her daughter were as caught up in the romance as I was. With their encouragement I began to surrender to the thrill of love, until at last Lorenzo proposed. I should have insisted that he speak to my father, but in my youthful folly I let myself be guided by him and agreed to an elopement. I packed my bags, including my handful of jewels, and we fled.

We boarded a coach bound for Scotland and were married as soon as we reached Gretna Green. It was never my intention to be parted from my family for long, so at once we made our way back to Greycrags. As we had journeyed to Scotland I had been convinced that any objections my family could have to my new husband would be at once removed when they saw my happiness, but as we grew closer to home my confidence began to wane. Lorenzo grew colder towards me as soon as we were married, and I began to wonder whether I had been entrapped by a fortune hunter.

Our arrival at Greycrags could not have been less auspicious. As the trap we had hired for the last stage of our journey drew up at the Hall, I noticed many of the rooms had their curtains drawn. The footman who answered the door wore a black armband. The house, I realised, was in mourning – my father had died. I ran into the house, seeking my mother, but our housekeeper intercepted me. She told me that when my father's condition had taken a turn for the worse, my

mother had sent an urgent message to London to summon me home. Lady March, unable to produce me, had no option but to tell my Mama of my flight. She had spared my Papa the news of his daughter's shame, but both Mama and my dear brothers had vowed never to see me again.

When I broke this news to Lorenzo he reacted with rage, dragging me back to London and forcing me to appeal to all my society friends for any help that they could give. None was forthcoming. I found myself an outcast. Even the Marches abandoned me, refusing to acknowledge any of the supplicating letters I sent. We took lodgings in Blackfriars, a single squalid room. It was the best that we could afford, since our marriage had cost Lorenzo his popularity in society salons. We survived as best we could on the little he earned from his occasional concerts and pupils, but his temper grew increasingly unpredictable and all my youth and liveliness was worn down by constant work and unending thrift.

It was no surprise when your father abandoned me. He had often expressed his desire to return to Italy, and in truth I was prepared to go with him, thinking that life there could scarcely be harder than that which we already endured. But he did not ask me to accompany him. He simply left. One morning I woke to find him gone, and all his belongings with him. I had not yet realised that I carried his child, and to this day I do not believe that he knows of your existence. I appealed to my family once again, informing them of my husband's desertion... but to little avail. I received a reply from my eldest brother, your Uncle Thomas, telling me that he could not readmit me to the family as it would be too distressing to our Mama, but he offered me a small annuity on condition that I did not attempt to contact our mother again. It broke my heart to accept his terms, but with a child to care for what else could I do? I removed to Lisson Grove, to this house, and gave it out that I was a widow so that you would not be born under a cloud of shame.”

I knew that Mama was approaching the end of her tale. Drowsily, I let my eyes flutter open.

“I tell you my sad history, Rebecca, in the hope that you will learn from my mistakes. I have kept you sheltered from the world so that your head will not be turned by friends and lovers who may prove treacherous. I pray that you will be guided by your Mama as I was not, and that I shall be able to spare you the

shame and pain that was my lot.” Mama laid down the hairbrush and patted me on the shoulder. “Now off to bed with you. No sense in staying up late, you’ll get lines round your eyes if you strain them to see in this light.”

I placed a kiss on her cool cheek and did as I was bid.

## 2 Willow Castle

### I

hardly saw my mother over the next week. From dawn until dusk she shut herself away in her room, wrapped up in shawls at her writing desk, furiously scribbling letter after letter to recipients unknown. I guessed that they were to her relations, family members I had never met, and prepared myself to console her when her pleas for their intervention went ungranted.

As for me, I could hardly bear to sit still and write. We were plunging deeper into winter and our little house seemed to have grown increasingly drafty with every passing year. The colder the weather grew, the harder I would concentrate on fast, vigorous tunes on the piano or on complicated dance steps, anything that kept me moving and warmed me up. With Mama so preoccupied, at least I could take over cooking – she had always insisted that a lady should never touch a stove, but someone had to ensure that we ate. For the first time in my life I visited the shops alone, purchasing ingredients on Mama’s account and relying on her battered copy of Mrs Rundell’s recipe book to guide me through the steps of preparing our meals. I found myself taking pleasure in every tiny freedom, even in burnt meat and burnt fingers, and almost began to look forward to the day when our annuity would end and Mama would have to allow me to help her, to learn to live as an adult.

I adopted Mama’s routine of visiting the post office. Day after day I would step in on my way to the butcher’s, dispatch Mama’s latest missives and ask whether any replied had arrived, and day after day the post mistress would give me a little smile and shake her head. It was such a small triumph, but for me, for a young woman who had seldom even spoken to anyone outside her home, it was a sweet-tasting victory.

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“Miss Lennox! Miss Lennox!” The postmistress pounced on me the moment I walked through the door, waving a letter at me. “This has arrived for your Mama! I know she will be waiting for it - there’s a penny to pay, then pray hurry home with it!” I fumbled in my purse for the penny and pushed it into her palm, staring in surprise at the envelope. I did not recognise the hand, nor the postmark – it was from Derbyshire, and I knew of no relations so far north. Forgetting all about my remaining duties, I rushed straight home.

“Mama!” I cried as I opened the door. “Mama, come quickly!”

“Rebecca!” She scolded as she bustled down the stairs. “What have I told you about raising your voice? Is something the matter? Are you hurt?”

“No, Mama, I’m sorry,” I gabbled. “It’s just – look! I thought you would wish to see this at once.” I held the letter out to her and watched as she broke the seal and unfolded it. Her eyes flicked back and forth across the paper and I wondered what to expect. If the letter had come from Norfolk, where my grandmother and uncles resided, I would have anticipated further disappointment for Mama and prepared myself to comfort her, but I did not know what to think of news from Derbyshire and in my heart I felt sure that this message was of greatest importance.

I realised that there had been something inside the letter, for there was a folded piece of paper which had fallen to the floor when it had been opened. I stooped to pick it up and unfolded it, ready to hand it to Mama, but something caught my attention – this was not another page of the letter, it was a five pound note! I stared at it, speechless. Suddenly Mama lurched forward and threw her arms around me.

“We’re saved!” she cried, squeezing me tight. “Rebecca, my darling child, we are saved! And it’s all thanks to you, my sweet girl!” I felt her damp tears wetting my hair as she buried her face in my neck. I paused. I had never known my Mama to cry before, at least not openly like this.

“Calm yourself, Mama,” I told her, guiding her over to her chair and settling her there. I laid the bank note in her lap and left her to read the letter over and over while I went to fetch her some tea. When I returned she immediately set the

teacup aside and took my hands.

“Rebecca, my child,” she said, and her voice was alive with a joy I had never heard before. “Sit down and let me tell you of our great good fortune. Ever since I learned of your uncle’s unkind decision I have been appealing to our relations to intercede with him, or otherwise to help us as best they can. I had hoped for a little pecuniary aid or that I might be able to find a secure position for you that would not expose you to the horrors of the world, but the offer we have had – it surpasses all my hopes! A distant cousin of mine, Sir Montague Chastain, has written to make a proposal!”

I stared blankly at her. A proposal? I tried to imagine Mama married, sitting at the foot of the dining table while an unknown man sat at the head, a man whom I must learn to call Papa. Would she be happy? Would he have children of his own who might be company for me? Yet I wondered, did Mama consider herself free to marry? Surely not, since my real Papa was not dead. Suddenly I realised that Mama was speaking and dragged my attention back to her.

“Well?” she asked, “Should you like to be Lady Chastain?”

“Me?” I exclaimed. “But Mama, I thought you meant he had made an offer of marriage to you! Sir Montague has never met me.”

Mama tutted. “That is of little importance, child! He has never met me either. This is not a romantic gesture, it is a suitable arrangement. Look at what he says here – Sir Montague’s father recently passed away, and now he requires a bride of appropriate birth and breeding in order to have access to his inheritance. His family seat is remote and he is seldom in society, so he has formed no attachments. When I asked for his father’s help I explained that it was not simply for me, but for the benefit of my innocent daughter. I wrote in detail about your upbringing and education, I even enclosed the daguerreotype we had taken on your sixteenth birthday, hoping to elicit some sympathy. But this! This is beyond my wildest expectations. Such fortunate timing! Sir Montague sees you as a suitable bride and is prepared to marry you to rescue us from penury and bring us back into the family.”

I stared dumbfounded at the letter. Sir Montague’s handwriting was a delicate,

swirling copperplate script and the paper felt heavy and expensive between my fingers. Mama had always spent as much as we could afford on the notepaper she used to write to her relations, stressing the importance of quality, but our stationery felt cheap and flimsy next to that of the Chastains. I skimmed over his formal greetings to Mama and his offer to waive the dowry, my eyes coming to rest on his final paragraph.

Should you be amenable to these arrangements, I shall expect your arrival at Willow Castle no later than the 28th of February. I should advise you to take the train to Stockport and change there for Buxton, where you will be able to engage a carriage to convey you the rest of the way. Willow Castle lies close to Mam Tor at the head of the Hope Valley, near the village of Castleton. As a gesture of my goodwill I have enclosed a five pound note for your fares. I shall also instruct my London bank to advance you a sum of money for Miss Lennox's trousseau. Arrangements for the ceremony shall be made upon your arrival.

“Well, Rebecca?” Mama asked. “Shall I advise Sir Montague that you accept?”

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Of course I accepted. It had always been Mama's fondest hope that I should marry well and live comfortably, safe from poverty. I had known from infancy that this would be my fate if only Mama could find a husband for me, and that it was a better fate by far than anything else that a girl in my position could expect. She had told me time and again of the horrors that awaited governesses and paid companions, thrust into other people's homes, cut off from their own loved ones and subject to the unwanted attention of married men, eldest sons and male servants. She had warned me that I could not go into trade, for a woman in trade could expect nothing better than to marry a tradesman who would surely turn out to be a brute. None of these options would provide a lifetime of security, nor would they allow me to take care of Mama in her old age. A husband from our own class was our only hope, and now... it appeared I had found one.

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Thus began a flurry of preparation. I scribbled furiously as Mama dictated a list of the things I would need: a wedding gown, shoes, gloves, corsets, crinolines, stockings, garters, a veil, a trousseau, hairbrushes, fragrance, creams and lotions, replacements for all the everyday items that would pass for Lisson Grove but not for Willow Castle. For the first time in my life I had new dresses that were not simply Mama's old gowns remodelled. She took me into town, where we called at Sir Montague's bank, then to Piccadilly.

"This is where my Mama brought me when we were in town for the season," Mama told me as we swept through the doors of Swan & Edgar. "Not for dresses, of course. We had the best seamstresses in the city call upon us for that. But we visited Swan & Edgar for all sort of things – ribbons, bonnets, gloves, all the things you will now need. Now that so much time has passed I no longer know which are the best seamstresses, but doubtless we shall find some in Derbyshire. In the meantime, we can outfit you here so you will be presentable when you meet Sir Montague."

I had grown used to the shop in Lisson Grove, where the shopkeepers chatted to their customers, exchanged gossip and yelled orders to the shop boys. Shops were noisy, bubbling hives of activity, but Swan & Edgar was another matter. It was serene and elegant, laid out across several storeys. Assistants glided noiselessly across the floor and conversed with customers in hushed tones. Within minutes we were seated on overstuffed couches watching a parade of young women modelling the latest fashions, while Mama indicated her choices by discreet gestures. Seamstresses whipped out measuring tapes and flung them round me, draped dresses against me, pinned hats on my head. By the time we left I felt quite ashamed of my plain cotton day dress but quite thrilled by my new wardrobe, neatly packed into long rectangular boxes.

The assistants asked if we would like our packages delivered, but Mama refused to give them our real address. "Our home is in Derbyshire," she informed them grandly. "Willow Castle, you may have heard of it? To have them delivered there would take too long, we shall simply take them with us. Pack them into our trunks and call us a cab, if you would be so good."

We had bought brand new trunks, shiny beige leather with thick brown straps, deep enough to hold all the possessions I had ever had. Seeing them being loaded into a hackney cab was exciting, but nowhere near as thrilling as seeing them being carried off by railway porters a week later.

I had been on a train before – only once, though. Mama and I had been overwhelmed by curiosity when the new underground railway had opened between Paddington and Farringdon, two years earlier. I hadn't liked that much. It was dark and crowded and the flickering gaslight cast eerie shadows on the walls of the tunnels. The train we took from London to Stockport was a different experience altogether! We travelled first class thanks to Sir Montague, sitting in a spacious compartment where I could sit opposite Mama and watch the countryside rushing past me, flowing backwards towards London. Never having been out of London, I had only ever seen the countryside in illustrations in Mama's books and the couple of cheap prints that had decorated our home.

Thinking of the house in Lisson Grove made me sad for a moment. I had not expected to experience sorrow upon leaving it, but when we locked the door for the last time I had felt a strange wave of melancholy wash over me. Mama dropped the keys through the letterbox for the landlord to find, and as I heard the snap of metal on metal and knew that the door would never open to us again, I suddenly felt that I would miss the place, the only home I had ever known. Gazing out at the rural beauty beyond the window and comparing it to the industrial sprawls that we passed through every time the train reached a city, I set my sorrow aside. Willow Castle, I thought. I am certain that it will be a beautiful place.

We changed at Stockport and arrived at Buxton, where the station still had the gloss of newness upon it. As I stepped off the train I took a deep breath of air so fresh and sweet that I wished I had been breathing it all my life. What awaited us beyond the station was a smart little spa town full of steep hills and elegant people. I had assumed that we would proceed directly to Willow Castle as per Sir Montague's instructions, but Mama had other plans.

"We shall go to a hotel tonight," she informed me. "It is getting late, and I would not wish for us to arrive in the middle of dinner and begin our acquaintance with Sir Montague by inconveniencing him. Besides, we are dusty from the train. We shall take a room somewhere and you can bathe and then tomorrow we shall engage a carriage to complete our journey."

We found rooms in a magnificent building, the Old Hall Hotel. Mama ordered

dinner to be brought to our suite and arranged for a bath to be drawn before a blazing fire. Stepping into the hot water, cloudy with mineral salts, felt like washing off a lifetime of London grime. Emerging from the water to wrap myself in warmed linen and sit snug before the fire, watching the flickering flames as I let my hair dry, was luxury itself. Silently I blessed Sir Montague for coming to my rescue. That night, when I curled up beneath the down coverlet in the soft hotel bed, I gave myself over to ecstatic thoughts of my husband-to-be. He had saved me from poverty and I promised myself that I would repay him by becoming as perfect a wife as any man could wish for.

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My thoughts the following morning were less joyful. As Mama dressed my hair and fastened the long row of hooks and eyes at the back of my gown, I tried to stay focused on last night's fantasies of wedded bliss. But a rogue thought had entered my mind and was putting down roots there. What if Sir Montague did not like me when he saw me? What if I failed to satisfy him and he sent us back to Lisson Grove in disgrace? What if Mama were to be carried off by an illness and I found myself left all alone with a husband I did not know?

I felt myself growing pale as these thoughts tormented me, but there was no turning back now. When I was turned out to Mama's satisfaction she summoned the carriage and we began the final leg of our journey, wending our way along narrow, treacherous-looking paths through the peaks of Derbyshire. On several occasions I glanced out of the window only to see a sheer drop outside, sending me shuffling across to the opposite side of the carriage so that we should not overbalance and be sent plunging down the steep, rocky valley. The landscape was more beautiful than any I had seen, but it was a dangerous kind of beauty.

Mam Tor lay at the far end of the Hope Valley and the entire journey involved creeping along these narrow hillside pathways, so although we had set out in the morning it was early afternoon before I caught my first glimpse of my new home. It sat on the crest of the hill, surrounded by dark evergreens. The flinty grey rock of the castle was almost entirely covered by the ivy slithering up its walls. I scanned the landscape for a sight of a river surrounded by the willow trees that must surely give the building its name, but I could see nothing but rolling fields and woods and the distant village of Castleton.

The park gates, when we reached them, were half off their hinges, and the gatehouse stood empty. There was no-one we could alert to our presence until

we reached the castle itself. The coachman handed me down from the carriage and I stood upon the gravel, staring up at my betrothed's home. Mama had told me that it was a small castle, little more than a fortified house, nothing compared to the building Greycrags had been before her grandmother ordered it to be torn down and rebuilt in the new elegant, Classical style. Yet I could not bring myself to consider this place small. It was imposing, square, not like the castles I had seen in illustrations, but tall and dominant with turreted battlements at each corner.

Mama bade the coachman knock upon the door. He banged his whip up on the wood and then we stood and waited in the freezing February air for what felt like hours. At length the heavy wooden door creaked open just enough to reveal a scrawny woman in a long black dress peering suspiciously at us.

"Yes?" she rasped.

"Lady Mariah Lennox and Miss Lennox to see Sir Montague, my good woman." Mama rattled off the words with a practised air, her days of giving orders to servants flooding back to her. The woman glanced over at me and frankly looked me up and down, then she opened the door fully and admitted us.

"Wait here," she instructed us, showing us into a splendid but forbidding hallway. "I'll let the master know you're here." She took herself off and I stared at our surroundings. The hall was long and lined with faded portraits, with a great staircase at one end carpeted in deep green. Heavy furniture in dark wood was positioned at intervals along the walls. Mama sat neatly on an ornately carved chair, but I was too nervous now to sit. I paced a little, feeling my feet sinking into the thick carpet with every step I took.

"Lady Lennox," I heard a voice ring out from the stairs. "Miss Lennox. Welcome to my home."

It was him. Sir Montague Chastain, the man who would be my husband before long. He was not a young man, I could tell that from the hints of silver hair at his temples, but nor was he an old one. I guessed that he was around thirty-five. He was tall and thin, a little round-shouldered, and he wore a dark blue coat. His hair, where it was not succumbing to silver, was ash blond, receding slightly. His face was long, closely resembling all the portraits, and his eyes were dark blue. I stood dumbstruck as he descended the stairs and glided towards me, my mind full of nothing but the words This man shall be my husband. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Mama gesticulating at me to offer my hand for him to kiss. I raised it as if I were an automaton, my gaze fixed on his face. He wrapped his fingers around mine and placed a cool kiss on the back of my hand. I bowed my head

and made a curtsy, whispering my compliments.

“You must be exhausted after your journey,” he said, once he had greeted my mother. “No doubt you are in need of some refreshment. We were just about to take tea in the library, would you care to join us?”

Us? I thought that Sir Montague lived here alone, I thought. Whoever could he mean? I tried to catch Mama’s eye but she was several steps ahead of me, hanging on Sir Montague’s every word as he led us through the dim passageways towards the library. Eventually he opened a heavy carved door and ushered us through.

“Rebecca!” Mama hissed, giving me a vicious nudge. I realised that I was staring at the room, my head tipped back and my mouth slightly open. I couldn’t help myself – this was a library beyond my wildest imaginings! Shelf upon shelf of books, stretching up to the ceiling, accessible only by long ladders on rails! I breathed deeply, inhaling the scent of dusty paper and luxurious leather bindings, warmed by the fire that crackled beneath a dark marble mantelpiece. It was only after I had noticed the glorious collection of books that I realised there was another gentleman in the room, slowly hauling himself out of an armchair by the fire to rise politely to his feet.

“Your arrival is most opportunely timed,” said Sir Montague, “for it just so happens that the vicar is here, visiting from Castleton. Lady Mariah, may I present Doctor Bagshawe? And Doctor Bagshawe, this young lady is Miss Rebecca Lennox, my intended.”

The portly cleric mumbled his greetings and welcomed us to Willow Castle while Sir Montague showed Mama and me to a chaise longue near the fire and rang for Mrs Chapman. We were soon furnished with a sumptuous afternoon tea. I was famished after our journey and it required great restraint (and years of Mama’s training) to refrain from snatching up handfuls of the dainty finger sandwiches and tiny cakes. Dr Bagshawe made polite conversation, enquiring about our travels and the nature of our life in London.

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Once we were suitably refreshed Mama and I withdrew, leaving the men to talk while Mrs Chapman showed us to our rooms. As we followed her through the corridors I wondered how I should ever get to know this place. It seemed so

vast, full of identical doors and narrow window slits. I imagined that it must be dingy even in the height of summer and tried not to think about how forbidding it must seem at night. Already it felt as if there were more than three sets of footsteps echoing through the hallway.

We had been put in adjoining rooms, larger than those we had had in the hotel, but with furnishings that had lost their grandeur over time. The velvet seat covers were worn and threadbare, the tapestry curtains moth-eaten and the bedposts in need of a good polishing. Yet I could not help but be impressed. A little care would soon set this place to rights, and I would make it my concern to see that it got it. My husband and I – how strange it seemed to think those words – would turn this place into our very own home. The corridors would seem less ominous when they echoed with children’s voices rather than lonely footsteps, and perhaps we would have guests. Perhaps there would be cousins for our children who would visit during holidays and Mama and I should have a proper family at long last. I knew nothing about Sir Montague’s relationship to the rest of the family, but suddenly I was consumed with curiosity and longed to learn.

I passed a few quiet hours in that room, flicking idly through the pages of a novel and gazing out of the little arched window at the dramatic countryside. At length Mrs Chapman tapped on my door and offered to help me dress for dinner, informing me that she would continue to dress me until a suitable maid could be engaged.

“The heliotrope, perhaps, Miss Lennox?” she asked, whisking one of my new gowns out of the wardrobe. I nodded. Mama and I had selected that dress to set off the deep blue of my eyes. The pinky-purple brocade sat snugly over my new corsets, severely laced by Mrs Chapman, and the skirts flared out over a wide-hooped crinoline. I slipped my feet into a pair of velvet evening shoes and my hands into long white gloves. I was just letting Mrs Chapman drape a shawl round my bare shoulders when Mama came in, dressed in a sombre navy blue evening gown. She gave me an appraising glance up and down.

“Jewellery,” she said. “You need jewellery.” Of course I had no jewellery of my own, so she whipped the string of pearls from around her own neck and fastened them around mine. “Much better,” she stated, standing back to look at me. “I always think that a young women with no adornment at all looks like a young woman whom no suitor cares for enough to buy her jewellery and who has no family to pass any on to her.”

I couldn’t help but think that this was an entirely accurate assessment of my

situation, but I did not say so. I merely thanked Mama for the loan of her pearls, which I knew to be an heirloom that she had had from her own mother and never parted with, not even when times were particularly hard.

I understood that under normal circumstances we would have waited for Mrs Chapman to sound the gong to summon us to dinner, but since we were depending on her to show us the way to the dining room we followed her out of my room and down the stairs.

“Lady Mariah, Miss Lennox,” Sir Montague greeted us, rising as we entered. “I trust you will forgive me for not entertaining you formally in the Withy Chamber, but I thought something more intimate was in order. In all honesty I prefer this room for such a small, select gathering. Miss Lennox, since you are mistress presumptive of Willow Castle, perhaps you would be so good as to take the foot of the table?”

I glanced at Mama for reassurance and she gave me a small nod. Sir Montague drew my chair back and seated me. As he pushed the chair back in and I leaned back I felt his fingers come into contact with my shoulder for a moment. I suppressed a shudder.

He seems quite charming, I told myself. That was just... unexpected. I have never had a dress that showed my shoulders before. No-one has ever touched me there before.

As Mrs Chapman served beef consommé followed by fillet of sole and roast capon, our little group made conversation on the subject of the weather, then moved on to a discussion of Mr Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* which Dr Bagshawe had recently read, then finally we arrived on the topic of my impending marriage.

“A quiet ceremony in the chapel here, Sir Montague?” Dr Bagshawe enquired, “Or perhaps your lovely bride is looking forward to the arrival of many guests and a lavish celebration in Buxton, or even Derby?”

“Oh, a quiet affair, certainly,” Sir Montague replied, casting a brief smile down the table at me. I returned it, wondering whether it was just the flickering candlelight that gave his eyes a slightly reptilian look. “I was thinking, my dear, that we should be married here if you are amenable. The castle has a private chapel, a very pleasant place, where the Chastains traditionally wed.”

“That will do very well, Sir Montague,” Mama answered for me. “We are strangers in this area and it is too far for the rest of the family to travel at such notice.” I saw a flicker of a grin cross Sir Montague’s face, but he indulged my mother’s fantasy that our own branch of the family had not abandoned us.

“Then we can be married as soon as you please, Miss Lennox,” Sir Montague said, while Mrs Chapman served syllabub for dessert. “I hope you won’t think me precipitate, but considering the circumstances I would prefer that we have the ceremony shortly. We need not wait to have the banns posted, I can obtain a marriage license allowing us to be wed within the week.”

Within the week! I had not realised that it could be so soon. I thought it would be at least a month – a few days to make the arrangements, three weeks of the banns being read in the local church – but I admonished myself that perhaps I was basing my assumptions on the lot of ordinary girls, girls who were not disinherited members of highborn families. I had never met anyone in my situation, therefore I did not know what to expect. As always, I looked to Mama for guidance. She seemed composed and not in the least concerned about Sir Montague’s suggestions, so I reasoned that they must seem acceptable to her.

“Within the week would suit me very well, Sir Montague,” I replied. “I thank you.”

“Then we shall proceed,” he said. “Let us agree that we shall be married in a week’s time. My cousin, Mr Mervyn Chastain, shall stand witness along with your mother and we’ll have you, Dr Bagshawe, to perform the service. It strikes me that it’s not quite the done thing to have two betrothed people residing under the same roof prior to their marriage, so with your permission, ladies, I shall remove to Castleton and give you the run of this place until after the ceremony. Mrs Chapman will look after you admirably and you must order things to your own satisfaction, get to know the place. I shall depart along with Dr Bagshawe after dinner.”

Our negotiations, such as they were, had concluded and we finished dessert in silence. Mama led me out of the dining room so that we could leave the men to their port and cigars while we were shown to a faded, dusty drawing room to take coffee. A short while later I heard carriage wheels on the gravel outside, moving away from the Castle, and I knew that we were alone and that the plans for my marriage were in swift, unstoppable motion.



# 3 The Night of Horror

## I

had not imagined, upon seeing the imposing shape of Willow Castle for the first time, that I should ever feel at home there. Indeed, as the days crept by I did not settle in entirely, but I found a few places where I could see myself becoming truly comfortable. The library was my favourite place. It had suffered less than the other rooms from the passage of time and want of maintenance, and I spent many happy hours working my way through the Chastains' immense collection of hefty leather-bound tomes.

Amongst those books I found several hand-written volumes of the Chastain family history, evidently assembled by one generation after another. They were hard going, requiring me to decipher the hand in which they were written, so although I made a valiant attempt to learn what I could about the family and the castle, I frequently abandoned these books in favour of novels. However, I learned that Willow Castle was of Norman origin and had once been surrounded by a small village named Osier. While the Chastains had been resident in the castle since shortly after the Conquest, the village had apparently been abandoned by all who lived there some time during the 16th century and was eventually demolished. The reason for the villagers' desertion was unknown.

I longed to wander all over the castle and roam the surrounding countryside, but Mama insisted that I stay indoors and keep to particular rooms.

"Once you have lived here for a while," she informed me, "you'll find that you enter very few rooms in a home like this. At Greycrags we had an entire wing that my brothers and I never set foot in, and for all I know no-one had set foot in since the house was built. The ballroom was opened up once, perhaps twice a year and there were many bedrooms which were all but forgotten. I have warned you before that a surfeit of curiosity is unseemly in a young lady. You had much better channel it into learning how to read the household books and plan menus."

"But Mama, you have trained me in these matters all my life!" I replied, biting back my exasperation as best I could.

"I have given you a general training," she said implacably. "Now you must

learn the particular pleasures and displeasures of your husband. Mrs Chapman and the cook will be able to tell you everything you need to know.”

“Since they already know how Sir Montague likes the house to be run, should I not just allow them to continue as they are? Surely no-one will want me to be meddling?”

“It is an absolute necessity that you make some small changes as soon as possible. A lady should be guided by her housekeeper, not ruled by her.”

So I spent my mornings conferring with Mrs Chapman, learning about the routine of the castle. Or at the very least, I tried. I asked every question I could think of about Sir Montague’s habits, pursuits and dietary preferences, but she had little information to share. I wondered whether I had made a mistake and she was in fact new to the castle, but when I asked how long she had been there she informed me that she had been in service there from the age of twelve. However, Sir Montague had seldom been at the castle, ever since he had departed for school as a small boy. He had spent a good deal of time travelling in Europe until his father had died, prompting his return. Mrs Chapman, it seemed, was as much a stranger to his tastes as I was – or if she was not, she was determined not to impart any of the information she had to her new mistress. The longer we spent with our heads bent over menus, the more convinced I became that she was not lacking in knowledge, she simply did not want to assist me. She had dominated this house for longer than I had been alive. I promised myself that I would persevere until I finally won her round and could learn about my husband through her. A tedious process, but all part of the price of security.

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Before I knew it, six days had passed and it was the eve of my wedding. As the sun set I rang for Mrs Chapman to draw a bath for me and while I bathed, Mama came to my room and laid out my wedding clothes. The white lace dress was draped over the back of a chair like an exhausted ghost. The moment I saw it, my stomach began to churn. I stared at it as I dried my hair, almost expecting it to rise up and pursue me all the way back to London. Trying to banish the image from my head, I half-listened to Mama’s attempts at conversation and tried my best to reply until at last I was too preoccupied with nerves to continue.

“I am sorry, Mama,” I said. “I am no company for you this evening. It’s just...”

“My child, I quite understand,” she smiled at me. “It is natural for a bride to

feel nervous. If you prefer I can simply keep you company in silence?”

“Would you mind, Mama, if I spent this evening on my own?”

“If that is what you want, Rebecca. Will you come down to dinner, or shall I ask Mrs Chapman to bring you a tray?”

We agreed that I should have a tray, provided I agreed to keep it well away from my splendid white dress. Mama departed, and I tried to read. It was useless. My mind was a whirl of hopes and fears, so much so that I could not concentrate on the page in front of me. Instead I sat before the little arched window and gazed out at the dark valley, trying to make out the shapes of the hills on the other side. It was a vain endeavour. The night was too dark, the sky moody and pitch black as if preparing for a storm, and the neighbouring peaks were completely obscured. I hardly noticed Mrs Chapman slipping in to turn down my bed and light the lamp. I sat and stared into the void until the oil in the lamp had burned low and its light began to dim, forcing me at last to go to bed. I stretched out across the mattress, trying not to think about the fact that I would be sharing my bed the following night, but unable to resist. At length I succumbed to exhaustion and let sleep claim me, the deep and dreamless sleep of the truly terrified.

I was awoken by Mama gently shaking my shoulder.

“Rebecca!” she cried. “Wake up, child! This is the day we have waited for! Wake up, my daughter, your wedding day has arrived.”

Dutifully I rose and allowed myself to be dressed and fussed over. Mrs Chapman brought me a pot of chocolate and I tried a few sips. Usually I loved the sweetness, the luxurious thickness, the warmth and taste and comfort of it after so many years of the cheapest of tea. Today, though, I could not bear it. I sent the pot back almost untouched.

“You are a most beautiful bride, Miss Lennox,” Mrs Chapman complimented me as I stood before the mirror. Her tone was grudging, but the look on her face told me that she was telling the truth. I admitted even to myself that I was a credit to my Mama. I looked pale but composed, my slim figure neatly corseted and encased in lace, my thick dark hair piled on top of my head. I looked straight into my own blue eyes as Mama pinned the veil into place. I looked like a stranger to myself.

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Mama and Mrs Chapman led me down to the parlour as if I were a

sleepwalker. I saw nothing, heard nothing, merely walked where I was bid until I entered the room and an unknown voice caused me to snap back to attention. My eyes flickered in its direction and I caught sight of a gentleman, a stranger – a very handsome stranger. He was tall and dark, his hair slightly curled and his face suffused with a permanent expression of sardonic amusement. I liked him at once, before we had even exchanged a word. I liked him a great deal.

“Ladies,” he acknowledged us with a bow. “Pray forgive the lack of proper introduction. I am Mr Mervyn Chastain, cousin to Sir Montague. I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Mrs Lennox, Miss Lennox – or Lady Rebecca, as you shall shortly be known.”

Mervyn Chastain kissed Mama’s hand then mine. My heart skipped a beat as he took hold of my fingers. The touch of his hand was warm and welcoming compared to that of his cousin. Our eyes met and I felt the rest of the world fall away. Was I imagining it, or did smile he bestowed on me speak of more than simple politeness? I murmured some courteous nonsense about being charmed.

“My cousin has asked me to act as witness, as I believe you know,” Mervyn said as we sat down to await the appointed hour of the ceremony. “However, he has also made me aware that you have no male relation to give you away. I know it’s a little unusual, Miss Lennox, but perhaps you would allow me to escort you down the aisle? I do not presume to take a place to which I am not entitled, but people tell me that brides are often a little faint and feel the benefit of a gentleman’s arm to lean on. If I can be of service to you there...?”

He left the question hanging. Nerves had tied my tongue in knots, I could do nothing but nod mutely and give him a trembling smile. Then we sat in silence but for the ticking of the carriage clock on the mantelpiece. Presently it struck noon. I jumped as it chimed.

I had never been in the chapel before. It was a tumbledown affair that had once been a magnificent miniature of a full-sized church. My journey to the altar was a short one, past only three rows of pews. An hour before I would have considered that a blessing since it would have left me less time to be nervous, but now, as I clung to Mervyn’s arm, I could not help but wish the aisle a little longer, for it would have given me more time to be close to him.

What a treacherous mind you have, I chided myself. Today of all days your thoughts should be of nothing but your husband and the joy of being a good wife to him. And yet here you are dreaming of his cousin after ten minutes’ acquaintance!

I directed my gaze at my groom and pinned a bright smile on my face. Sir

Montague returned it politely, but I thought I detected a hint of boredom, as if he had somewhere else he would rather be. I dismissed the thought as I arrived at his side and Dr Bagshawe began to rumble his way through the ceremony.

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Without a congregation of guests to sing hymns and recite prayers together, the service was over swiftly. In what felt like a mere few moments, Sir Montague and I had repeated our vows, my finger had a chilly band of gold upon it and my new husband was raising my veil for our first kiss. His slender fingers pinched at the lace as he pulled it up and over my head, and for a fleeting moment I was reminded of childhood terrors, the monster that I had been convinced lived under my bed, my absolute certainty that only the valance stood between me and the creature underneath and that I must never, never allow that thin piece of cloth to be raised...

His hands were on my arms, gripping them tight, pulling me towards him, then his lips were on mine, hard, cold, then he released me and I reeled back. He supported me, a hand on my back, offered me his arm and walked me out of the chapel to the scant sound of applause from Mama and Mervyn.

Our wedding breakfast followed in the castle's room of state, which I had not seen before. It was known as the Withy Chamber, and when I set foot in it I learned at last why Willow Castle was so named. The Withy Chamber was an immense, pentagonal room, right in the centre of the castle, with a high, arching ceiling. The walls were covered in an intricate pattern of willow branches, not reaching down as if to find water the way a willow tree should but snaking and curling up towards the roof as if they would burst their way out through the dark rock and devour the whole building. It was oppressive one moment, fascinating the next.

We seated ourselves around a long table in the middle of the room and I smiled mechanically as Dr Bagshawe said grace. Mervyn, acting by default as Sir Montague's best man, stood and said a few words of congratulation to my new husband, wished me joy and proposed a toast. He was seated at my right hand side, and as he resumed his seat I had a fleeting vision of the rest of the party fading away, leaving only Mervyn and me at the table, taking our first breakfast alone together as man and wife.

I shook my head, dismissing the image, and hoped that my face was not flushed. My mouth was dry, so as soon as the toasts were done I reached for my

glass of water.

“Water, Lady Rebecca?” Mervyn asked in teasing tones. “Not champagne? I should have thought you would be in the mood for a more celebratory beverage, now that you’re blissfully allied to my dear cousin.”

He shot a glance at my new husband, who was exchanging pleasantries with Mama. The look Mervyn gave him did not speak of cousinly affection.

“In truth, Mr Chastain,” I replied, “I would much rather drink tea. I tried champagne for the first time on my first evening here and I cannot say I cared for it. Champagne at this time of day... I think I would much prefer tea.”

“Then tea you shall have, my dear cousin!” Mervyn exclaimed. I raised a feeble hand in an attempt to prevent his making a fuss, but before I could dissuade him he was calling out “Montague!”

My husband turned, a flicker of annoyance crossing his face.

“What’s the matter with you, man?” Mervyn teased. “Can’t you see your wife is almost faint for tea? Says she can’t drink this filthy stuff.” He drained his own flute of champagne.

“My dear wife,” Sir Montague said. “You should have said. Mrs Chapman!” He summoned the housekeeper over and within minutes I had a fresh pot of tea in front of me and a raging crimson blush across my face. My husband turned away from me and resumed his conversation with my mother. Her face was calm, but I could tell by the expression of her eyes that she was furious at the solecism I had committed.

“Thank you, Mr Chastain,” I whispered to Mervyn, my head bowed to conceal my feelings of shame. A lady may feel embarrassed, but Mervyn was my guest therefore I shouldn’t allow him to see it in case he felt embarrassed too.

“I apologise if I caused you any discomfort,” he whispered back. “My cousin would benefit from a little livening up, I feel, and occasionally I simply can’t resist rattling his cage. As you may have learned already, it doesn’t take much.”

“I have learned very little about him,” I said. “This is only the second time we have met. All I know of him I have learned from Mrs Chapman, so I suppose I shall have to learn his ways as I go along.”

“Really?” Mervyn raised an eyebrow. “How interesting. I could have sworn that Montague told me he had become acquainted with you during his time in London and that you knew one another quite well. Perhaps I’m just confused – we don’t enjoy the closest of relationships, Montague and I. He could have had any number of wives that I haven’t heard of.” I must have been staring at him in alarm, for he laughed a little and reassured me that he was teasing.

Our strange little group passed the rest of the day in stilted conversation and quiet games of cards. Dr Bagshawe stayed to tea, then to dinner. I understood that it would have been traditional to set off on honeymoon following the wedding breakfast, but since we had no trip planned and nowhere to go we were simply passing time until night. It seemed that everywhere I went there was a ticking clock, counting down the seconds until darkness, until the moment when Sir Montague would extend his hand to me and suggest that we retire.

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As my husband led me into the darkly-draped gloom of the master bedroom, I wished with all my heart that I was returning to my solitary room. The door closed behind us, and I found myself alone with a man for the first time in my life, alone in the flickering candlelight with a man I did not know.

“Come here, Rebecca,” he instructed, beckoning me over towards the bed. I approached him, my heart pounding. “I suppose we ought to do this properly.”

I froze as he slipped his arms around me and pressed his lips against mine. It lasted longer than the brief kiss we had exchanged during the wedding, long enough for me to wonder when it would end. His cool fingers brushed the nape of my neck and I felt him fiddling with the hooks on my dress, trying unsuccessfully to undo them.

“Wretched things,” he muttered, pulling back from me. “Turn around.” I did as I was told. The chilly air rushed in to bring up the gooseflesh on my newly-exposed skin. I gasped.

Is this permitted? I wondered as he pulled the dress over my head and began to unpick my knotted crinoline laces. Mama has told me that a lady submits to her husband in all things, so I suppose it must be, yet she has also told me that it is improper to be seen in a state of dishabille by a gentleman. I wish I had known to ask her. Can he still send us away if I displease him? I do not want to risk getting things wrong.

My head spun as my corsets fell away from me and I filled my lungs. Sir Montague turned me back towards him, drew my chemise over my head and slid my stockings off one by one. I fought the impulse to cover myself. Perhaps it would have been the modest thing to do, but perhaps it would have looked too childish and unsophisticated. I stood frozen as he moved around me, examined me, made small noises of what I hoped was approval. He commanded me to unpin my hair and it fell in a cascade over my body, dark waves over my

alabaster flesh.

Then he kissed me again, not the formal, gentlemanly kiss he had given me before but a rough, urgent kiss. With savage strength he snatched me up and threw me onto the bed, bearing down on top of me. I tried to wriggle out from beneath him, but he was too strong, even as he struggled to pull off his fine grey jacket and unfasten his breeches. I felt his hand on my face, not a caress, but a firm grip round my chin as he pressed his lips on mine. As I tried to draw breath I felt his tongue invade my mouth, and after that I felt nothing distinct.

As Sir Montague's actions became too much for me I felt my mind plunging into darkness. I stared fixedly at the dancing flames of the three candles, pinpricks of glowing light on a background of velvet black. I felt as though I were falling through endless emptiness, borne unsteadily on a cushion of air, my progress a series of downward jolts rather than a smooth descent. With every jolt there was pain, such pain that I was certain the final impact would surely kill me. The air around me grew hotter with every passing moment and I was seized with a strange fancy that I was on a journey to Hell, that my destiny was to be consumed by fire. I thought I heard myself cry out in fear and agony, but the voice was not like mine. It was more than one voice, perhaps several, too many sounds for me to distinguish – ragged gasps of torment, low, guttural moans of enduring anguish, piercing shrieks of acute suffering, occasional soft ripples of an inhuman chuckle, the last more disturbing to me than all the rest put together.

How long that night of misery lasted I did not know. I must have slept, for I was aware of waking several times into pitch darkness and feeling the hellish process begin again. Finally my fitful slumber was broken by the first gentle rays of the dawn creeping across my pillow. Sir Montague was sound asleep with his back to me, and I felt an urgent need to quit our shared bed before he woke and turned his attention to me again. I slipped out from under the sheets and carefully removed the counterpane, wrapping it around myself as I curled up in the chair by the window and watched as the blessed sun began its merciful ascent. My night of horror was at an end.



## 4 The Devil

A

After breakfast the following morning Sir Montague vanished into his study and Mervyn left the castle on some unknown errand. Mama and I were left to each other's company. I found myself torn, longing to tell her of Sir Montague's actions the night before but fearing that she might think me guilty of some impropriety. I decided it would be best if she did not ask me about my wedding night, so I concentrated on my book, feigning absorption though in truth I was too exhausted to take in a word I read.

I need not have worried. When Mama finally broke the silence it was only to say "My child, you are a wife now. We are secure, and I hope you will be happy. There are many things that Sir Montague will require of you. Do all that he asks, and never forget that what passes between a lady and her husband is no other person's business. Not even mine."

I breathed a sigh of relief, yet at the same time I suddenly felt alone in a way I never had before.

It had been my understanding that after their wedding, a married couple would spend their honeymoon getting to know one another. I had not expected Sir Montague to lavish time and attention on me, but I had thought that he would care to know with whom he was sharing his home. His lack of curiosity was astonishing.

We met at mealtimes and nighttime only, and though I searched and searched for a topic of conversation that would interest him, I failed every time. Music, literature, his travels, his home – nothing elicited more than a brief response followed by a return to a somewhat inhospitable silence. Then I would be left to make small talk with Mama and Mervyn. Most nights he slept in the small bed in his dressing room and did not trouble me.

Indeed, after only a couple of weeks my husband began to take off on business trips, each of a few days' duration. I came to the conclusion that he had only wanted to marry me so he could access his inheritance, but I bore him no ill-will for that. I had known it was not a love match, and it seemed to me that there were worse fates than a convenient, comfortable marriage to a disinterested

man. My life at Willow Castle was remarkably similar to my life in Lisson Grove, albeit luxurious by comparison. Now that Sir Montague had come into his fortune we had extra servants besides our housekeeper and cook. I made a few futile attempts to order them, mostly to occupy my time, but in reality we all knew they answered to Mrs Chapman.

Mama got into the habit of taking an afternoon nap before tea, leaving me with a precious hour each day to spend with Mervyn. I had got my blushes under control but still found that my heart beat a little faster whenever we were together, so I had promised myself that I would not seek his company. However, we shared a passion for reading and would meet each day in the library – not by design, or at least not my design. I considered abandoning my daily visits to the library, wondering whether I should take my books to my room or sit in the parlour instead. But I loved that high-ceilinged, book-lined room with its dusty fragrance. Besides, changing my routine would have meant admitting to myself that I was increasingly fascinated with my husband’s cousin. As long as I refused to acknowledge it, I could remain convinced of my own innocence.

I also refused to consider the possibility that Mervyn was deliberately choosing to spend time with me. His arrival in the library seemed to coincide exactly with the sound of Mama’s footsteps retreating down the passageway on her way to her room, but I understood that some men were creatures of habit.

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One afternoon in late March the weather took a turn for the worse. Sir Montague had been called away to Matlock by some business or other, but now the roads were covered in a thick blanket of late snow. Willow Castle, a quiet enough place at the best of times, was silent as a tomb when muffled under snowdrifts, and the stone walls may as well have been made of ice. The chill in the air was so bitter that Mervyn was forced to abandon his usual place at the bureau and join me by the fire. Sitting in such close proximity, it would have seemed strange to have said nothing to each other.

“Enjoying your book, Lady Rebecca?” he asked cordially. “That particular volume is rather dry, as I recall.”

I glanced down at the volume in my hands. It was a slim book, one of the more recent histories of the castle, covering the period to the beginning of the century. “I am not enjoying the style, it’s true,” I agreed. “But I am trying to learn as much about this place as I can.”

“No point in reading that, then,” Mervyn grinned. “It doesn’t contain any of the interesting bits. My uncle, your husband’s father, prided himself on his attachment to reason and rationalism, so he got rid of all the more entertaining books about Willow Castle. There used to be an excellent summary of all the myths associated with it and with the Chastain family in general, but that was probably among the first to go. Unfortunately he had his purge while I was away at school, otherwise I’d have saved that book. It was a favourite of mine, growing up.”

“You grew up at Willow Castle?”

“I did. Hasn’t Montague told you? I had the misfortune to lose my parents at a young age, so I was sent to live with my mother’s brother. Apart from a brief sojourn at school, I’ve been here ever since.”

I had no idea. Sir Montague had told me nothing about Mervyn other than occasionally referring to him as ‘my wishful cousin’, and I had not thought it polite to pry into his background during our dinner table conversations.

“Then you and Sir Montague were close as boys?” I asked.

“Ha, certainly not!” Mervyn laughed. “I think he resented having another boy on his territory, especially one who got on better with Montague’s father than he did. Montague never liked it here and was quite happy to be off at school, but he wasn’t pleased to learn that I, who hated school with a passion and was miserable there, was being kept at home to provide company for my uncle. He should be grateful to me, though – if it weren’t for me, he would have had to come back here after university and take over running the estate. Instead, I stayed here and took care of things when my uncle no longer could, and Montague was free to go gallivanting round the Continent. I don’t think he’s very happy to be here now that the castle is his, but he would rather stay here and make himself miserable than simply leave and allow me to get on with things.”

“So does that mean you will be staying indefinitely?” The words were out of my mouth before I could check them, laced with greater enthusiasm than I should have allowed.

“I hope so,” he said, with a smirk that made me wonder whether he had noticed my tone. “I should like to stay here forever. But Montague has indicated that he would prefer it if I weren’t here. I am concerned that left to his own devices he won’t maintain the place well – he’s his father’s son, and you can see how poor a state of repair the place is in, despite my best attempts to keep it up. However, it’s his estate and if he doesn’t want me here, I can’t insist. I am

looking for another situation, but I'll be loath to leave Willow Castle."

Hearing him talk about his home with such fondness brought a smile to my face. I began to wonder whether I could persuade my husband to allow his cousin to stay, since it was evident that the castle meant a great deal to him.

"However, before I go," Mervyn continued, "I'll make sure to tell you all the best stories about the Castle. Have you figured out how it got its name yet?"

"From the Wither Chamber, presumably," I guessed. "I haven't seen a single willow tree nearby, so I can only assume the name comes from the décor there. What I haven't figured out is why the chamber is painted that way."

"Ah, that's our Norman ancestors for you," he said, stretching out his legs so his feet were practically in the fire. "I beg your pardon, you don't mind my being so informal? No? Very well then, I thank you. You've probably read that the Chastains came to England with William the Conqueror and made our way north until we settled here. The first was Peregrine de Chastain. According to the stories, he only set off with the Conqueror because he had lost his love – she went mad and committed suicide. He took the willow branch as his standard in battle, it was supposed to be a sign of his eternal mourning for her. When he arrived in Derbyshire and built the castle, he commissioned the Wither Chamber as her monument. Even the village that he founded, the one that no longer exists

—

"Osier?"

"That's right. It's an old French word for willow."

"I see," I allowed myself a small smile. "How thorough."

"Quite," said Mervyn. "But he's not the really interesting ancestor. The best of the bunch lived a couple of centuries later. If you'll excuse me for a moment I'll find you a picture of him."

He crossed the library swiftly and returned with an oversized book that I had not yet read, containing images of his forebears. I recognised the long face and thin nose that both Sir Montague and Mervyn shared in many of the faces that I saw as he flipped backward through the pages.

"That's Sir Carvell Chastain," Mervyn informed me. "He held the Castle during the War of the Roses and married this lady here." He turned the page to show me a portrait of a stunningly beautiful woman. "Angela Syvall. Her origins are a bit of a mystery, but legend has it that she was a low-born local beauty whom Sir Carvell met when she was on her way to a convent to begin life as a nun. They fell in love so madly that they eloped at once, kidnapping the local priest and bringing him back to the Castle to marry them straight away. You see?"

By the standards of Chastain brides, you actually had quite a long engagement. Anyway, the people of Osier and Castleton were outraged and surrounded the Castle, demanding Angela's return, but she came out and told them that she had married the man of her choice and the only way they would get her to leave was in her coffin. Presumably the mob just shrugged its collective shoulders and went home, because she stayed."

"How romantic!" I breathed. "And were they happy together?"

"Presumably they were, as they quickly produced two sons. Carvell had a reputation for being a gambler, but there's nothing on record to say what Lady Angela thought of that. He was quite a successful gambler, by all accounts, so perhaps she didn't mind. However, it was his gambling habit that gave rise to the best of the Castle's legends – he is said to have grown so tired of his easy victories and so obsessed with playing for higher and higher stakes that he challenged the Devil himself to cards."

"Really?" I found myself sitting forward, rapt as a little girl. Mervyn leaned closer, obviously enjoying his role as the teller of ghostly tales by the library fire.

"Why, yes. They say that on Midsummer Eve, the shortest night of the year, he locked himself in the Withy Chamber. Alone and in perfect silence, he set up the gaming table, just as a young girl might prepare a dumb supper to learn the identity of her future husband. On the first stroke of midnight he took his place at the table, poured the wine, picked up the pack of cards and began to shuffle. On the last stroke, he looked up and saw the Devil appear in the seat opposite him. They bowed to each other and the challenge began.

For the first game the stakes were long life against Carvell's soul. Carvell won, but it was too easy and at once he felt disappointed by an anticlimactic victory. The Devil, seeing an opportunity, offered to play again. This time Carvell bet the family jewels – a handful of finely wrought rings and bracelets encrusted with jewels, a few medallions and a spectacular gold pendant containing an emerald the size of a goose egg – against the promise of equally long life for Angela. This time, for the first time in years, he lost. As he pushed the velvet bag containing the jewels across the table and saw the Devil's clawed hand close around it, he suddenly lost his nerve. Faced with the prospect of explaining to his wife and children that he had gambled away the gems that were his sons' birthright, he knew he had to win them back.

At first the Devil seemed reluctant, claiming that he had answered Carvell's summons and won the jewels fair and square. But Carvell persisted, and

eventually the Devil suggested that since Lady Angela and her good opinion meant so much to Sir Carvell, they should play for her. Carvell refused, so the Devil amended his offer – he would stake the newly-won jewels against a single night with Angela. This made Carvell nervous, but he was a confident man and believed himself a good enough card player that it was worth the risk.

They played their final round. They were well-matched, and for a long time they were locked in stalemate, taking and losing hands at an equal rate. The wine was drunk, the night was coming to an end and they both knew that the game must end with the first rays of the dawn. Here the various versions of the story differ. Some say that Carvell uttered a prayer in his wife's name, begging for her to be spared and not shamed as a result of his folly, and that's what gave him the moment's luck he needed to win the game. Others say that in his desperation he cheated his way to victory, but the Devil could not tell how. Either way, Carvell won at last.

The Devil was enraged. Bound by their agreement to return the jewels, he swore that he would not place them in Carvell's hand but would conceal them somewhere within the Castle. That way he would not have taken them, but nor would Carvell simply have them back. He also vowed that since he had not won Lady Angela, he would wait until she came to Hell of her own accord.

Carvell laughed and told him that would never happen, for Angela was the most virtuous woman he knew. Yet within six months, Lady Angela had gone mad and one stormy night, she threw herself from the ramparts to her death. Carvell was left to live out a very long life, blaming himself for his wife's death."

His story concluded, we sat in silence for a long moment. I traced a finger over the image of poor Lady Angela, wondering how one who looked so serene could lose her mind and take her own life.

"Did they ever find the jewels?" I asked.

"No," Mervyn said. "They never reappeared. My uncle thought the whole story was some drunken fantasy that Carvell concocted to cover up the fact that he had either lost the jewels or sold them. We have a few pieces that belong the family, but they're kept in a vault in our bank in London. You should ask Montague about them, they should be yours now. Nothing so resplendent as a huge emerald, but there's a nice little opal pendant that I remember my aunt wearing."

"Were you close to her too?"

"Not especially. She died before I came to live here, so I only saw her on

visits. Sadly she fell victim to the same carriage accident that claimed my parents, they were all travelling together.” His slight smile never wavered, but for a moment I thought it was tinged with sadness.

“I am sorry,” I said softly. “I did not mean to bring up painful memories.”

“Nothing to be sorry for,” he said bracingly. “You weren’t to know, and it was a perfectly reasonable question. I suppose it’s all part of the curse.”

“Curse?”

“Ha, yes – ever since Lady Angela’s death, there’s supposedly been a curse on Chastain brides. They don’t enjoy particularly long lives, and the beautiful ones die by their own hand so the Devil can claim them for his own in revenge for being cheated of Angela in that card game. You’d best hope it’s not true, my dear cousin – with a face like yours, he’ll be after you in a heartbeat!”

He laughed, and I attempted to join in, but a slow shiver was creeping its way up my spine. I tried to keep my voice as light and amused as possible as I asked “You don’t think it’s true, do you?”

“What? No. Certainly not. It’s true that there have been some members of the family who have died young and that some of them have been attractive women, but there has always been an explanation. Illness, childbed, unfortunate accidents – all the same things that afflict all normal, uncursed families. As far as I know there were a couple of ladies who were suicides, but whether they were particularly attractive, I don’t know. It’s always easy to remember people as more beautiful than they were, especially when it fits in with a dramatic story.”

At that moment the door creaked open, cutting our conversation short. Mervyn leapt to his feet and in a moment was on the other side of the room, idly browsing the shelves, and I immediately concentrated on the book in my lap. As Mama entered, having risen from her nap, I took a moment to wonder why Mervyn and I had reacted as if we had been caught out in some clandestine activity when all we had been doing was talking. Then I saw Mama sweep the room with her disapproving gaze, unhappy to see that I was unchaperoned in the same room as a man, and I knew. I realised how little my life had changed, even though I was now married. I wondered for a second whether I would ever be free to do as I pleased and talk with whoever I wished, but I dismissed the thought. We had a home and security. That was more important than anything else, and I knew I must not allow myself to get caught up in romantic notions as if I were a fictional heroine in a modern novel. I gazed down at the face of Lady Angela and promised myself that whatever happened, my fate would at least be happier

than hers.



## 5 Mervyn

### O

ver the following weeks, as the Castle was deluged with almost incessant thundery rain, I found my head full of strange fancies inspired by Mervyn's story. As I roamed the halls I jumped at every shadow, wondering whether I had perhaps caught a glimpse of the shade of poor Lady Angela. Every time I heard my solitary footsteps echoing in the flagstoned passageways, I thought I heard her delicate gait pattering beside me, behind me, disappearing round corners ahead of me. And every time I heard a rumble of distant thunder my heart leapt into my mouth, half-expecting the Devil himself to appear and demand a new opponent for his games.

Sir Montague's routine continued as before. He kept to his study, sat taciturn at mealtimes, frequently disappeared on business for days at a time, and occasionally he came to my bed at night. I continued to read voraciously, delighting in my unrestricted access to unlimited supplies of books, and I took my sketchbook to one window after another to draw the stormy landscapes. I was even able to resume my piano practise. The castle had rather a fine instrument, which Mervyn had made a brave attempt at tuning for me. Sitting in the music room with Beethoven for my companion, I could lose myself for hours.

The only unfortunate circumstance was Mama's health. She seemed to be

suffering increasingly from headaches – something to which she had always been prone, but which had become more and more frequent. As much as I felt sympathy for her and did not wish her to be in pain, I could not help but enjoy her absence. Whenever she retreated to her darkened room, I got to spend time alone with my husband’s cousin. We spent many afternoons together, our heads bent over that book about his ancestors while he told me all the tales he had grown up with. Had it not been for the fact that he never came to my bed, I could have believed that it was in fact Mervyn rather than Sir Montague who had married me that day. In the privacy of my own mind I allowed myself to imagine such a thing. When Mervyn’s fingers accidentally brushed mine as we turned a page, I imagined how his touch might feel. His hand upon my waist, caressing my cheek, stroking my hair... It was only when he addressed me as “Lady Rebecca” that I found myself mercilessly thrust back into reality.

Yet this gentle, enjoyable state of affairs was not to last. Mervyn had warned me that he would have to leave as soon as a suitable position came up, and when I slipped into the library one day to be greeted by a morose expression rather than his customary smirk, I feared the worst.

“Well, Lady Rebecca,” he said, giving me a rueful grin. “Aren’t you going to congratulate me?”

“On what?”

He held up a folded letter. “On my great good fortune,” he said. “I have a position. You may or may not know it, but the Chastain family has a number of business interests in Liverpool. I shall be involved in the running of our shipping

line. Not a major strand of the family's income, and not even a particularly senior position, but what's a poor relation to do?"

"What indeed?" I replied, feeling my cheeks grow pale. "Shall you like it?"

"I hope so. I shall try."

I glided across the floor and took my place in the seat adjacent to his by the fire, ready to continue our reading, controlling my emotions with every ounce of restraint that Mama had ever drilled into me. I wanted to tell him I would miss him, implore him to stay, fling my arms around him and forbid him to leave me. I was tormented by visions of Mervyn beginning a life in Liverpool while I languished forgotten at Willow Castle. He would meet new people, share his stories with other friends, and eventually he would meet some other girl who would capture his heart and sooner or later Sir Montague and I would be invited to dance at his wedding. I could not bear the thought, but nor could I escape it.

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For the next two days I wracked my brains, but I could think of no way of keeping Mervyn close to me. I did not know enough about the family's business interests to have any idea where else he might be useful. Instead I concentrated my efforts on finding a way to spend as much time with him as possible before his departure at the end of the week. At last I hit upon a way of winning an extra day, even if it would be under less than ideal circumstances. That was how I found myself standing outside the door to my husband's study, taking deep breaths as I prepared to knock.

“Enter.”

Composing myself, I made my way in. I had never set foot in the stud before. It was a small, dark room, piled to the ceiling with papers and unshelved books. A large bureau and captain’s chair took pride of place, and the air was dank, musty and laden with cigar smoke. Going against all the rules of etiquette I had ever learned, Sir Montague did not rise as I entered.

“Is there something you require, wife?”

I faltered as I met his cold blue gaze.

“I hope,” Sir Montague said, “that you are not planning to make a habit of disturbing me in my study. I have important work to do. If you have nothing to say, perhaps you would be so good as to leave me in peace.”

“I do have something to say,” I blurted out, recovering myself. “I am sorry to have disturbed you, but there is something I wished to discuss.”

He said nothing, neither giving me permission to stay nor bidding me leave, so I blundered on.

“It is about your cousin,” I said. “He is leaving.”

“At the end of the week, yes. Have you come here to tell me things I already know?”

“No, no, it’s just – I thought we might... see him off, perhaps? That we could set him as far as Buxton.”

He said nothing.

“It seemed such a lovely place when Mama and I passed through it on our way here, and I should like to see it again.”

He said nothing.

“Perhaps if you are too busy, Mama and I might be permitted to go? Mr Chastain has been so very welcoming, and I have no family of my own so I should like to...” I trailed off as he continued to stare inscrutably at me.

“So my cousin has worked his magic on you, has he?” Sir Montague murmured. “I did wonder.”

My blood froze in my veins. My husband suspected me of impropriety, he would tell Mama, we would be sent away –

“Well, no matter,” he continued. “He will be gone soon enough, taking his charms with him. If you want to go to Buxton, now is as good a time as any. We’ll have to make the occasional public appearance in local society, I suppose, however tedious it may be. Very well.” He drew his chair back in towards the bureau and took up his pen. “We shall go to the Old Hall for a couple of days.”

I breathed my thanks and waited for him to speak again, either to plan further or simply to acknowledge my gratitude. He said nothing. Eventually I decided that I had had all the speech I was going to get out of him, so I excused myself and slipped out of the room, my heart a little lighter.

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Although I still dreaded Mervyn’s departure, I was excited to escape the castle for a little while and return to Buxton. It was my first journey in Sir Montague’s carriage, a sombre-looking vehicle but considerably more comfortable than the one Mama and I had hired for our arrival. We made a strange little party as we

trundled across the Hope Valley, Mervyn's box securely strapped to the roof and the three of us inside. Mervyn chatted inconsequentially and I tried hard to strike a balance between my desire to make the most of my time with him, my wish to be polite and the necessity of behaving properly in front of my husband.

I need not have bothered with the latter consideration, for Sir Montague refused all attempts to engage him in the conversation and behaved as if he were travelling alone. He spent the entire journey staring fixedly out of the window, his eyes glazed in spite of the beauty of the dramatic landscape newly touched by spring. He was so completely wrapped up in his own thoughts that I doubt he would have noticed had I climbed into Mervyn's lap and kissed him. I did not, of course. In fact I flushed with shame at the very thought, then flushed even deeper as I noticed a quizzical expression on Mervyn's face and knew he had noticed.

We had only one evening to spend with Mervyn before his departure for Liverpool in the morning, and I had expected that we would spend it together, all three of us dining at the hotel. However, I had reckoned without the strangeness of my husband's behaviour. He came to our room as I finished dressing for dinner and looked me up and down indifferently.

"Hmm. Pretty." he said. "I'm sure my cousin will appreciate it."

I knew Mama would have wanted me to bow my head and say nothing, but I found I could not. I met Sir Montague's gaze. "I had hoped that my dress would please you, sir," I told him. "Mr Chastain's reaction was the furthest thing from my mind."

He gave me a look of utter disbelief. “Why should I care what you wear? I’m not going to be there, so it’s only Mervyn who’ll get the benefit.”

“You are not coming to dinner, husband?”

“No, my little mouse of a wife, I am not. It has been some time since I was last in town and I have other matters to attend to. Besides which, I can think of nothing so tedious as spending the evening listening to my cousin flirting with my wife and you pretending not to notice. I had quite enough of that in the carriage today.”

I struggled to figure out what I should do next. Hearing my husband accuse me of being engaged in a flirtation with Mervyn made me furious – I wanted to scream with frustration and tell him how I was resisting that flirtation with every fibre of my being. I wanted to throw myself on my knees and weep and beg him not to be displeased with me, not to tell Mama, not to send us away or worse, forbid me from contact with Mervyn. I wanted to shrug my shoulders and tell him that I did not care what he thought, since he was obviously as supremely indifferent to me as I was to him. I did none of these things.

“If you prefer, I can dine alone,” I offered. “I would never wish you to suspect me of anything. Believe me, I am as true a wife as you could wish. If you prefer me not to dine with your cousin I will ask for a tray to be brought for me.”

“How very touching,” he laughed. “No, you’re quite safe with Mervyn. He might look at you with undisguised lust, he might talk to you as if you were childhood sweethearts, but I know my cousin. He knows better than to lay a finger on anything that’s mine.” He came up behind me as I sat at the dressing

table and laid a hand on my bare shoulder. Our eyes met in the mirror. “I can see that you are obsessed with him, little Rebecca,” he whispered, slithering his hand over my skin and under my dress to cup my breast. “You think I should be angry. But no. You see, I rather like watching you and him squirming with all that pure, pent-up passion, knowing that you can’t do a thing about it because you are both dependent on me. I like seeing the way he looks at you and knowing that I may use your body as I see fit while he may never lay a hand on you. You shall dine alone with him this evening and he shall wish that you were his wife, not mine. Then tonight I shall take you to bed and he will lie on the other side of the wall from us, knowing that while he burns with passion for you I am at that very moment using you as I please.”

There was a rap on the door. Sir Montague let me go and went to open it. Mervyn stood upon the threshold, ready to join us in venturing down to the dining room.

“Ah, Mervyn,” my husband said jovially. “I’m afraid I shan’t be joining you for dinner tonight. Perhaps you would take care of my lovely wife for me this evening.”

I rose to leave with Mervyn, but as I passed Sir Montague he caught me round the waist and kissed me hard, one hand on the back of my head to ensure that I could not pull away. My cheeks burned scarlet with shame and I could not look Mervyn in the eye as I took arm to go downstairs.

Despite knowing what awaited me that night, I was determined to enjoy my unexpectedly intimate dinner with Mervyn. We spoke of books and music, of the



stories he had told me, of my previous life in Lisson Grove, studiously avoiding the topic of his impending departure. The minutes flew by all too rapidly, and although I took as long as I possibly could over every course, I could not prevent the candles from burning down and the meal from coming to an end.

“Rebecca,” Mervyn whispered as we drank the last of the wine. My head jerked up and our eyes locked. He had never used my Christian name without my title before. “I know we shouldn’t, but please... let’s take a turn in the gardens.” Seeing my hesitation, he ploughed on. “We won’t be alone, we’ll need a linkboy to light our way for us.”

I could not say yes, but I allowed him to lead me out of the dining room, out of the hotel. I felt him wrapping my shawl around my shoulders and guiding me across the road towards the Pavilion Gardens. Mervyn flipped a coin to a small boy carrying a lantern on a pole and bade him walk ahead of us to supplement the glow of gaslight from the streetlamps.

We walked in silence. What was there to say? The night air was chilly, but I did not care. I wanted nothing more than to steal these final moments with Mervyn.

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The next day, after a sleepless night, Sir Montague and I saw Mervyn off at the station. I longed to weep for him, but of course I could not. Fortunately Sir Montague was as good as his word and kept me busy. First we visited the Crescent, a building so elegant and beautiful that it took my breath away when I

entered. It was a light, airy space filled with exquisitely dressed people and the sound of harps playing in the background.

Sir Montague, though still aloof, appeared to thaw a little and troubled himself to be affable towards the people who approached us to greet him. He introduced me to one person after another – gentlemen, ladies, baronets, peers, even an earl. I did my best to commit their names to memory as we were introduced, then stood back and allowed them to offer their condolences on his father’s death and congratulations on his accession to the title. I gathered from this that whatever my husband did when he was away from the castle, he did not mix with these people.

Amongst our new acquaintance was Lady Cynthia Talbot, a bubbly, enthusiastic young lady perhaps three years older than me. She was married to an elderly whiskered gentleman, apparently a viscount, and she seemed determined to strike up some kind of hasty, effervescent friendship with me.

“My dear, you are simply delicious!” she cried, hanging on my arm and toying with one of the loose curls framing my face. “Sir Montague, wherever did you find this delightful young lady! You must bring her to town terribly often, I can tell we shall be great friends.”

I looked to Sir Montague in the hope that he might save me, but it was a forlorn hope. He was standing several feet away, allowing a young man to make small talk. All I could do was stand and smile politely as Lady Cynthia went into paroxysms of joy over me.

“Darling Lady Rebecca!” she rambled on, without ever seeming to stop for

breath, “You shall join us for the concert this afternoon, shall you not? I haven’t the faintest idea what’s being played, but the chamber orchestra is terribly smart and you must see the Master of Ceremonies – a most handsome man! Not that you’ll notice anything about that, I’m sure, being a new bride... You are a new bride, aren’t you? You can’t have been married long, I know I would have heard. Of course when I was a new bride I was already more than ready to notice handsome men, but Sir Montague is so much more attractive than my Toby. Oh, don’t tell anyone I said that, will you? It’s true, though, you’ve been terribly lucky by the looks of it.”

I wondered whether all feminine friendships were like this. The stream of inconsequential babbling seemed overwhelming. Nevertheless, I did my best to go along with it. She did not seem to want conversation, merely a receptive ear and an arm to cling to. She dragged us along to that afternoon’s concert – a light programme of Haydn, beautifully played – and extorted from Sir Montague a promise that we would attend that evening’s ball. I breathed a sigh of relief that Mama had insisted on my having that forest green silk gown that set off my eyes so, and when I appeared in the ballroom Lady Cynthia and her friends cooed over my fashionable attire.

I was much in demand that evening. Apparently the Chastains were known for their reclusive ways, tending to stay shut up in Willow Castle much of the time, seldom venturing further than Castleton, so an opportunity to dance with the new Lady Chastain was one to be seized while it presented itself. Soon my feet ached and the faces of my many dance partners blurred into one. I did not have a single

dance with my husband. Sir Montague preferred the company of the other gentlemen in the smoking room, so he was not there for me to consult when Lady Cynthia declared that I should join a party making an expedition to a local landmark named Poole's Cavern the following day. Giddy with too much dancing, perhaps a little too much punch and with my social success, I gave my word that I would attend and that I would let Lady Cynthia give me the name of her dressmaker and arrange all manner of further introductions next time Sir Montague and I were in town.

## 6 Poole's Cavern

“Yoo-hoo! Lady Rebecca!”

Lady Cynthia’s trilling voice sliced through the hubbub of the Old Hall Hotel’s lobby. I glanced round to see her waving furiously from an open-topped landau outside, her pink frills and blonde ringlets bouncing as she flailed her arm. I hurried out to join her, allowing her footman to help me up the steps into the carriage. There were two other ladies whom I had met the previous day, clad in equally frou-frou gowns and wielding pastel parasols to guard them from the feeble April sun. I reached into the depths of my memory for their names.

“Lady Frith, Miss Fairfax,” I greeted them.

“Have you not brought your charming husband with you?” Cynthia pouted. I admitted that I had not. Sir Montague had refused to attend, saying that he could imagine nothing more excruciating than traipsing round some dripping cave with a gaggle of silly women. He had, however, congratulated me on finding a way to amuse myself and ingratiate myself with the local ladies while he did as he pleased elsewhere. Of course I did not tell Lady Cynthia this, saying instead that he had business to attend to and sent his most sincere apologies.

“Ah well, no matter,” she said, in a tone of voice which made it clear that it mattered very much indeed. Then she replaced the pout with her usual bright smile and chattered on. “Well, we shall be a merry party anyway. Lady Frith and Miss Fairfax you already know, and when we arrive at Poole’s Cavern I shall introduce you to Mr and Mrs Marsden, who are travelling in their own Tilbury

and will meet us there. You simply must know them. They are the most delightful people, Lady Rebecca!”

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Fortunately it was only a short ride to Poole’s Cavern, which lay just beyond the outskirts of the small town. I hardly realised that we were there – when the carriage pulled up I wondered why we were stopping when there was nothing to be seen but hillside. Then as I looked a little harder, I saw what looked like a small, dark crack in the lush green grass and a stooped gentleman emerging. Lady Cynthia squealed as she caught sight of him walking towards the landau.

“Welcome, my ladies!” The old gentleman bowed to us as we all climbed out. “Pray allow me to introduce myself. I am Marshall Naismith and I have been engaged as your guide to this mysterious place.”

I gazed at him in curiosity. He was a sweet-faced gentleman with eyes that sparked with mischief set deep in his wrinkled face. They reminded me a little of Mervyn’s. His beard was long and well-combed, and he leaned heavily on a study stick to help him walk. I found myself wondering what secrets might be kept by this intriguing old man who could appear from gaps in nature itself. .

The rest of our party arrived and I submitted to Lady Cynthia’s gushing introductions, all the while watching Naismith out of the corner of my eye. He withdrew for a moment to a little shack, so thoroughly concealed by the shrubs and plants that I had not noticed it at first, and when he emerged he held two large candelabra.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he called, drawing us in round the crevasse from which he had appeared. “Welcome to Poole’s Cavern. The place you are about to enter is very dark and the path is narrow. I would ask you to stay close to me, where you may see by the light of these candles. Sir,” he referred himself to Mr Marsden, “I would ask you to be so kind as to take the other candelabra and bring up the rear of the party.”

The candles lit, we were ready to venture into the Cavern. My heart began to pound as I felt ducked my head to pass through the narrow rock archway and plunged into the darkness.

The first thing I noticed was the sound. I had expected silence apart from our echoing footsteps, but instead I could hear a distant roar. I drew a deep breath of dank, cold cave air. Little by little, my eyes began to adjust and I found that I could make out the faint glow of the pale rocks around me. We followed Naismith with tiny shuffling steps, afraid of coming off the narrow path that he had mentioned. I was aware of the mass of the hill around me, bearing down oppressively until suddenly the atmosphere changed, the roaring sound filled my ears and despite the blackness I could tell that we were out of the entrance tunnel and into a vast, majestic palace of whitish stone. The candlelight bounced off the rough walls, casting dim light throughout the cave, and I gasped at the ethereal beauty of it. To one side was a sheer rock face, to the other a steep slope that plunged down towards a surging underground river.

“One of the sources of the Wye, that river is, Madam,” Naismith informed me, seeing me gaze at it. “It’s that water, landing on the hillside and working its way

through the rock drip by drip, that gives these stones their peculiar shape. All that you see around you, the water has hollowed out over countless years. And it has built rocks anew, for you'll see the stalagmites rising up from the ground as we move further in."

I listened spellbound, overawed by this place. The air was so still. The sound of rushing water reverberated and surrounded me in such a way that I felt like it was lifting me off my feet and carrying me along in its current. If I closed my eyes, I could easily believe that nothing beyond this cavern existed or ever would. Despite the dangers of which I had been warned, I felt an inexplicable sense of safety.

Then Lady Cynthia screamed as a drop of water fell from the damp stone and landed on the back of her neck. The moment was shattered. Once the entire party had dedicated its efforts towards calming her down, we moved on. We headed deeper into the cave, reaching a twisting, winding stretch of the path where we were surrounded by stalagmites, their pale stone shot through with tinges of red and orange as if they burned inside. They ranged from tiny stumps, barely the size of molehills, all the way up to thin towering pillars that came up to my shoulder. I looked up, fascinated by the way each one had its partner stalactite overhead, never to touch, neither able to exist without the other, reaching towards one another like God Creating Adam.

The crowning glory of the Cavern lay in its deepest chamber. At the centre of a spectacular tower of water-hewn rock sat a monolith, a standing stone that glowed an eerie white in the candlelight. I stepped towards it, drawn by the



strongest fascination, and laid a hand upon it. It was like no stone I had ever touched before. It was as smooth as polished metal beneath my fingers, cold and inviting. I felt as if it might come to life beneath my touch.

“The legends of Poole’s Cavern are many,” Naismith told us, his voice echoing uncannily in the cathedral-like space. “Hundreds of years ago it was home to the robber Poole, after whom it is named. This fascinating place was his base of operations, used to rob travellers who passed on the nearby road. One can only imagine what dark deeds took place in these chambers when they played home to a gang of thieves.”

“Yet long before Poole set foot here, the Romans used the Cavern for metalworking. They knew the magic of this place, shaped by very water that bubbles up warm from the ground. They believed the water to be warmed by the goddess Arnemetia, after whom they named the town – Aquae Arnemetiae, you see? – and here they made the coins and jewellery that they would give as offerings to their goddess.”

“But legends change. The goddess Arnemetia was eventually forgotten, and after the memory of her had faded it was replaced by a darker, more sinister tale. Stories are told of the robber Poole setting up home here and calling upon the Devil himself to grant him protection from justice for as long as he remained here. Time and again, he escaped the law by retreating into these chambers where, it is said, the atmosphere was so demonic that no good man dared follow. Perhaps they perceived the flickering glow of cooking fires against the stone as they hovered in the entrance, afraid to venture further lest those flames proved to

be the entrance to the underworld. Perhaps their spines were chilled as they felt the drop in temperature, for the cave remains cold in both summer and winter, unaffected by the weather. Perhaps they heard the roar of the river and fancied they heard the bellow of the Beast himself. Standing here today, I am sure you can imagine how terrifying this place could be if you were planning to enter alone, unaided and in pursuit of a gang of desperate men who might be waiting with cudgels and knives just around the bend.”

“In later years a few intrepid souls plucked up the courage to explore the cave, discovering the source of the roaring, the strange light and the constancy of the climate. Having established that there was nothing to fear save the occasional bat, they spread the word of this hidden wonder of the Peaks. Sure enough, people came to see for themselves, but further dark deeds were waiting to be done. Their guides, who had become familiar with this place, would lead them to the very place where you find yourselves now... then they would extinguish their candles. The visitors would be left in darkness to find their own way out, risking a deadly plunge into the river, unless they handed over all their possessions to their erstwhile guides. This, ladies and gentlemen, is why I give another candelabra to one of you as a gesture of good faith.”

A nervous titter ran through the group. All through Naismith’s tales I had kept my hands on the white standing stone, enjoying my connection to it for as long as I could. Now Naismith announced that it was time to retrace our steps, so we followed him back along the path, following the route of the river.

“May I ask a question, Mr Naismith?” I piped up. He stopped and turned to

me, nodding his assent. “Where does the river go?”

“Towards the Wye eventually, My Lady,” he said. “No-one knows its exact route, for it flows into chambers that we cannot access.”

“Other chambers? How far does the Cavern do?”

“Who knows, My Lady? We can only speculate. There are some who believe that this system of caves runs all the way to the end of the Hope Valley and that this tributary river does not meet the Wye until after Castleton. It is said to run all the way under another place where the Devil has been summoned – Willow Castle, with its infamous Withy Chamber.”

Lady Cynthia let out an excited squeak. “Oh, Mr Naismith!” she exclaimed. “What an extraordinary coincidence! You are speaking to the lady of Willow Castle at this very moment, for this is Lady Rebecca Chastain!”

Mr Naismith looked closely at me for a moment, then cheerfully congratulated me on my marriage into the Chastain family. “It is probable that your home sits above an unknown collection of caves, my Lady,” he said, “although they would be hard pressed to rival the magnificence of Poole’s Cavern. Perhaps someday we shall discover a route through the chambers as far as Willow Castle.”

“Then we shall be neighbours,” I smiled, “and we can meet halfway and take tea beneath the stalactites.”

One by one we bobbed under the low lintel of the entrance and stepped back into daylight. The sky was the same dingy grey as it had been when we went in, but it seemed both painfully bright and distressingly mundane after the compelling weirdness of the cavern. I stepped aside and watched the others

emerge, squinting at the brightness. My heart began to beat faster, my breath grew short and all of a sudden I felt tears pricking the backs of my eyes. I could not be back outside. I could not leave yet. I needed to be back in the cavern. I felt it dragging me back as strongly as if the underground river had risen in a great wave to sweep me off my feet and haul me away. As Mr Naismith appeared at the rear of the group I tore open my reticule and began searching frantically through it.

“Oh dear,” I muttered as if to myself. “Oh no, where is it? I simply must find it!” I pulled its contents out one by one, trying to decide what item I would claim to have lost.

Within moments I had Lady Cynthia fluttering round me. “Whatever is the matter, Lady Rebecca?” she twittered.

“It’s my... comb!” I flannelled. “Sir Montague gave me the most beautiful little tortoiseshell comb, I had it in my reticule when we were on our way here and now I can’t find it! Oh, I hope I haven’t lost it – I think it used to belong to his Mama, he will be so angry with me... I’ve had it such a short time, he only gave it to me before we came here...” I gave the rest of the group a glance of despair.

“Oh my dear!” Lady Cynthia responded at once to the threat of marital discord. “Of course we must find it. Where did you last have it?”

“Just before we went into the caves,” I groaned. “Mr Naismith, I am terribly sorry to impose, but would you mind lighting my way for a moment while I look for it?” I smiled apologetically at the rest of our party. “I’m so sorry.”

Mr Marsden suggested that he should go in and look on my behalf, or that we should all go back and look together. I quickly dismissed both suggestions. “I’m sure I shall find it easily,” I said, “since I know what I am looking for. If we all go back in then we shall be searching amongst shoes and skirts and it will be easy to miss – perhaps it shall be swept off the path and never found at all! No, I am sure that it will turn up within a few minutes. If not, I promise I shall not spend too long looking for it. I shan’t delay our departure too long.”

I ducked back under the lintel and shuffled into the darkness, sticking close to Mr Naismith as he followed me with the candles. I turned around, all set to continue my pretence of searching for a fictitious comb, but the old man was grinning at me, his eyes alight with mischief.

“Lady Chastain,” he enquired, “would I be right in thinking that we might have some difficulty finding this lost item of yours?”

I smiled sheepishly. “Perhaps a little,” I admitted. “I am sorry.”

“I understand,” he smiled. “The Cavern called you back, did it not? It does that to many people. They visit here once and become fascinated. I was one of them – my eldest brother brought me to see this place when I was only up to his knee and I never could resist an opportunity to return.”

“Will you keep my secret and let me have another look round?” I asked.

“Of course I will.” He held up the candelabra and we made our way back to the stone bridge over the underground river. I reached into my reticule and pulled out two half crowns.

“Mr Naismith,” I said, pressing the coins into his palm, “These are for you if

you will be so kind as to give me a few moments here alone. Would you?"

"Be careful, My Lady," he replied, but he did not say no. He set the candelabra on the ground and plucked a single candle from it to light his way as he vanished into the next chamber. "Call if you need me," his voice drifted back over his shoulder. "I shan't go far."

As darkness spilled into the space where Mr Naismith had been, I felt gloriously alone. I closed my eyes and let the roar of the river surround me. The urge to let myself fall, to plunge into the icy water and let it carry me wherever it would, rose up in me. I came close, so close... I fought it down with the greatest of difficulty, forcing my eyes open.

The rock glowed where the candlelight hit it and receded into unending darkness where it did not. I longed to know what lay beyond these walls, where the river went and what might be found in the chambers beneath. I plucked a petal from the corsage on my dress and held it out over the dark river, then let it go, following it until I could no longer make it out. I wondered how long it would take to be carried underneath Willow Castle. Fancy took hold of me and I wondered whether sound made in Poole's Cavern would travel all the way to the castle. I threw back my head and sang a wild cadenza. Each note rang out clear and pure in the blackness. Perhaps Mama would hear it all the way back at the castle, a faint vibration on the quiet air!

The longer I stood upon the bridge, at one with the darkness, the deeper I felt the chill of the cavern sinking into my bones. I could not bear the thought of ever leaving this place, yet it felt as if an icy hand was taking me in its grasp,

reaching into my lungs and robbing me of breath. I gasped for air, short, panting breaths, but all I could feel was my chest tightening and my vision fading. I felt as though I was being absorbed into the cave, never to emerge, and as I sank to my knees upon the cold stone I was overwhelmed with a sensation of serene acceptance. I would become part of the cavern's history, my ghost would wander here. I heard the cavern itself reassuring me that I could succumb, it would take care of me. Nothingness closed in around me.

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When I opened my eyes I was back in the dingy daylight, laid out upon the seat of Lady Cynthia's conveyance while she fluttered a fan in my face and Miss Fairfax pressed my hand limply between hers. I sat up with a start.

"Lady Rebecca, you're awake!" Lady Cynthia exclaimed. "You gave us all the most terrible fright. Mr Naismith said you simply passed out in the cavern – we heard him calling and Mr Marsden went in to help bring you out, even though all the candles out here had gone out! Can you imagine? How brave of him! You were so pale and you would not come round, even when Lady Frith dabbed your temples with eau de cologne. I was so worried! Whatever would I have said to Sir Montague if I had had to tell him that you had been taken ill? He would never let you join any of my excursions again! Tell me, are you quite well? Do you still feel faint?"

I did not, and I reassured her that I felt perfectly well while I glanced around

for Mr Naismith. He was hovering near the carriage, watching me anxiously. When he saw that I was sitting up he approached and held out a little silver flask to me.

“Lady Chastain, forgive me,” he said. “I am sorry that you were taken ill within the cavern. It happens sometimes, particularly to ladies – they find it difficult to breathe and are prone to fainting. I should never have let you go back in if I had realised that you were susceptible, but since you had no trouble earlier...”

“It’s no fault of yours, Mr Naismith,” I said, accepting his flask. I took a tiny nip of brandy, screwing up my face at the harsh, burning sensation. “I shall be well directly. I was a little dizzy, that is all.”

“The stories that I grew up with would say that you belong to the cavern now, My Lady,” Mr Naismith said in a jocular tone, but with a look of strange sincerity in his eyes. “It has always been said that there are those to whom these caves choose to reveal their secrets. Members of the Chastain family, particularly new brides, are believed to be unusually privileged in this respect. The caverns have a liking for you, one might almost say.”



## 7 Death

**I**

arrived back at the hotel to find our bags packed and carriage summoned. Sir Montague was waiting in our room.

“Ah, Rebecca,” he said, “I was beginning to wonder whether to come and find you. We must return to Willow Castle at once. We’ve had a message, your mother is unwell.”

I felt the colour drain from my face. Mama unwell! And I had left her all alone!

“When do we leave?” I asked.

“Immediately,” he replied. “The carriage should be waiting outside.”

I had not even had time to remove my hat and gloves. I turned on my heel and marched straight back down the stairs. Sir Montague caught up with me and laid a hand on my back, guiding me towards the carriage that was waiting for us.

The journey that had seemed so short on the way there seemed interminable on our return. There had been heavy rain on the hills the night before and the roads were muddy. We crawled along in silence. I could hardly believe that just a short while earlier I had been in the company of new acquaintances, visiting a more spectacular place than I could ever have imagined. I hardly noticed Sir Montague’s taciturn disposition, so caught up was I in my own thoughts and prayers that Mama would be well by the time we got back.

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“My Lord, My Lady!” Mrs Chapman called out as she ran out to meet the carriage. “Oh, I’m so glad you’re here. Your mother has been asking for you, My Lady.”

“Where is she?” I asked as I climbed out of the carriage. “Is she in her room? I shall go and see her at once.”

“I should wait if I were you, My Lady,” Mrs Chapman counselled. “She’s quite worn herself out this morning and fell asleep not long ago. I believe you should let her rest just now. I’ll wake her for tea and you can see her then.”

“What is the matter with her, Mrs Chapman? Has a doctor been called?”

“No, My Lady, there’s been no doctor. Under the circumstances I thought it best to consult the Master before sending for one...”

I saw a strange glance pass between Mrs Chapman and Sir Montague and my temper flared.

“No doctor?” I demanded. “My mother is sufficiently unwell that you call us home from Buxton but you do not think to call for medical attention?”

“Calm yourself, Rebecca,” Sir Montague’s steely voice warned me. “If Mrs Chapman thought it best not to call anyone, I am sure she knew what she was doing. Let us go inside. Standing out here with you shrieking like a banshee is downright uncivilised.”

We went indoors and habit dictated that I went to my room to remove my hat, coat and gloves. My new maid, Sarah, a girl so quiet she might have been mute, whisked them away and asked me if there was anything I required. I asked if she

had any intelligence regarding my mother's condition, but she merely shook her head and lowered her gaze to the floor. With a sigh of vexation I swept out of the room and headed for the library.

To my surprise, Sir Montague was there when I arrived, pouring himself a whisky and soda and talking to Mrs Chapman in an irritable tone.

"And you say there is nothing to be done about it until Monday fortnight?" he snapped at her.

"Quite so, My Lord," she replied imperturbably. "I can find no-one to do the work sooner. The ceiling has been propped up to prevent any further collapse and I have locked the room above to prevent anyone from entering and having an accident, but that's the earliest that any repair will be possible."

"Damnation!"

I closed the door behind me, the noise causing my husband to turn and see me.

"Ah, Rebecca," he muttered. "Mrs Chapman has bad news." Sir Montague stalked over to the easy chair by the fire and threw himself down in it, leaving Mrs Chapman to fill me in.

"It's the Blue Dining Room, My Lady," she said, referring to the room where we usually took our meals. "There's been an accident. The ceiling collapsed. There's a hole all the way through to the guest room above."

"Oh," I replied mechanically. "How dreadful. And it cannot be fixed for some time?"

"Not for more than two weeks, My Lady. It happened the night before last, just hours after you had left. I heard the crash and ran to investigate, and when I

got there I found the hole and the room in disarray and your mother..." Mrs Chapman trailed off. I could have grabbed her shoulders and shaken her.

"What about my mother?"

"Well, your mother... I think she saw it happen. It was coming up for dinner time and she had said she would take dinner in the dining room even though she was alone, so she would just have arrived as it happened. When I found her she was staring at the hole and shrieking like an express train. I couldn't get her calmed down by myself, I had to call Sarah and between the two of us we got her back to her room and put her to bed. She was fighting and flailing all the way, but by the time we got her upstairs she had stopped screaming, at least. She hasn't said a word since other than to ask for you, My Lady. She won't be left in the dark, though. We had to keep the lamps in her room burning all through the night. When the oil ran out she started screaming again and wouldn't stop until it was refilled and lit. I don't know what it is that's given her such a fright, My Lady, but she's acting very strangely. When I went into her room this morning she had torn down the curtains – not just pulled them back but ripped them off the rail, hooks and all. She wanted us to keep the window open, too, she keeps leaning out of it and pointing but she won't say what she wants us to see."

I listened with an increasing sense of dread. On the one hand I was glad that Mama had not been hurt by the collapse, but on the other I could not imagine what would possess her to act in such a bizarre manner. I thanked Mrs Chapman for her information and counted the minutes until teatime when I would be permitted to go up and check on Mama for myself.

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At 4pm I heard the clock on the library mantelpiece chime. At once I closed my book, discarding all pretence of reading, and went straight upstairs. As I rounded the corner into the corridor leading to Mama's room I heard a commotion, Mama's familiar voice raised in an unfamiliar sound of distress. I ran to her door and threw it open.

Mama was in her nightgown, her bedsheets strewn across the floor and lamps burning in the afternoon gloom. She was leaning precariously out of the window, reaching for something, sobbing as she called out to it. I tried to make out what she was saying but it was no use. As swiftly as I dared, I edged my way across the floor, trying not to make any noise lest I startle her.

"Mama?" I whispered softly. She spun round. I breathed a sigh of relief as I saw both her feet on the floor. I held out my arms, but she recoiled from me. "Mama..." I said, shocked by the expression on her face. "What on earth is the matter?"

Her face crumpled. "Everything is ruined, Rebecca," she wailed. "Everything."

"Sssssh, Mama," I soothed. "You have had a terrible shock. You mustn't think about it. Please."

"When it collapsed, when everything fell... I saw his face, Rebecca," Mama felt her way along the wall and climbed onto her bed, huddling in the corner. I reached out to her again, but she shrunk away from me.

“Whose face, Mama?”

“His face! He was responsible for it all – for the fall! For us being in this awful place, where things like this can happen... If it weren’t for him... I wish we were at Greycrags, Rebecca. Things like this would never have happened at Greycrags.” Mama crawled to the foot of the bed and for the first time I saw her face clearly in the sunlight. She was ashen, her eyes sunken as if she had not slept in days, and one eyeball was bloodshot, all its whiteness turned to a gruesome red. Suddenly she lunged forward and pulled me into a tight, choking embrace. I felt her body shake, wracked with sobs, until she pushed me away with equal suddenness and stared intensely at me. “I am so sorry, my darling girl,” she whispered. “I should never... I am sorry.”

Then she lunged for the window. I was almost beside her when she fell. I was close enough to feel the linen of her nightgown brush my fingertips as I sprang forward to catch her, but my fingers closed round empty air. I was never sure which horrific scream was hers and which was mine.

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Mama did not survive the fall. I remember little of what happened afterwards, but I recall that I nearly fell myself as I leaned out after her. I recall the shape of her body on the distant ground, battered and mangled, the lush spring grass tinged with her blood. I could not see her face. I felt arms around me, pulling me back from the window, and then I remember nothing but blackness.

I lost two whole days to the horror of my grief, drifting in and out of a fitful sleep. Cold, unfamiliar hands prodded at me and an unknown voice spoke softly to me, presumably that of the doctor. After that there was laudanum. My mind dissolved into a drowsy haze of opiates as my dreams carried me down a terrible black river that rushed endlessly away from Mama into the daunting prospect of a world without her.

On the third day I was aware of someone, presumably my maid, applying a cold, cologne-scented compress to my temples. As the cooling sensation washed over me, I felt my dreams beginning to change. The dark, enclosed river of fear opened out, giving way to a vast landscape of craggy mountains, plunging valleys and incredible monoliths of pale rock that glowed beneath the moonlight that lit my dreamscape. I was no longer the frightened girl pining for her Mama. Now I saw myself striding proudly through a world that was mine for the taking, unconstrained by Mama's ideas, no longer responsible for her security and happiness. I flung my arms wide, drinking in the moonlight, swallowing deep lungfuls of pure, cold air. My dream-self began to gather speed, breaking into a furious, uncontrolled run. I shook my hair loose from its pins and let it cascade madly down my back, a wild peal of laughter spilling forth from my lips.

I jolted awake, realising that the laugh had been genuine, had been mine. At once I was consumed by guilt. Mama had been dead no more than a few days and I was able to laugh? That seemed so wrong, so painful. I buried my head under a pillow and let the tears flow until I had fallen asleep again, and this time I was back in the comforting pain of the black river.

By the time I felt able to venture downstairs, Mama had been dead for five days. I had no mourning garments of my own, but Mrs Chapman had made alterations to a dress that had belonged to my husband's mother. It was a little outmoded, but I hardly cared. Indeed, I hardly cared if I wore black at all. Surely my grief was written on my face? It required no special clothes to trumpet it to the world. Still, I put them on. It was what Mama would have wanted. As I let Sarah fasten the black crape, that thought was some small comfort.

The library had always been my favourite room in the castle, and now it felt like even more of a refuge as it was a place I did not associate with Mama. She was everywhere in my mind, but it was a relief to step into a room where I did not see her ghost in every corner. I rang the bell for tea then settled myself in my favourite place by the fire.

I had not expected Sir Montague to join me. I was too tired and upset to conceal the look of surprise that must have crossed my face as he appeared in the doorway. Perhaps this grief of mine will change things between us, I thought. I have read about such things, men whose hearts are softened by the sight of a woman's tears. Perhaps he is here to comfort me.

He seated himself opposite me. Seeing him where Mervyn had so often sat during happier times made me want to sob all over again. I stifled it, but I could not suppress the tears trickling down my face.

"If you're going to keep making this much of a fuss," he said, fixing me with a cold gaze, "perhaps you should continue having trays sent to your room for a while."



I stared at him blankly. It took me a moment to believe that he had really said those words. When at last I did, I was too wounded to speak. Making a fuss? My Mama, the only person I had known and cared for throughout most of my life, was dead!

“I can’t abide snivelling,” he continued. “Especially when it’s so unwarranted. My dear, you know as well as I do that your mother was a controlling harridan. You wouldn’t have had her here much longer anyway. I had planned to set her up in some little place, one of our more distant properties, where she could not interfere with the way I want to run things here. Although I am not sure she’d have objected – she was quick enough to sell you into marriage at the first opportunity! You should have seen the letter she wrote to me, my little dove. A proper hard sell. Fortunately for her, she wrote at just the right moment. Fortunately for me, she was so desperate to get out of whatever slum you were living in that she didn’t care what I did with you as long as I restored her to her supposedly rightful place by making a lady of you. And this is the mother you weep for?”

“You don’t understand,” I said, choking back my tears, “It wasn’t like that. She did the best she could for me.”

“I’m sure there’s many a bawd would say they did the best they could for their charges!” Sir Montague laughed.

“May I be excused?” I asked, rising to my feet.

“Well, if all you’re going to do is mope around the place, you might as well be.” He leaned back and stretched out in his chair as I made my way to the door.

Then just as I was about to turn the handle he called “But there’s one thing that should bring a smile to your face, little wife. My cousin is coming back for the funeral. You can resume your little assignments much sooner than planned.”

I did not dignify his remark with a response. I merely slipped out of the library and ran all the way back to my room, determined not to leave it again until the funeral.

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Mervyn did indeed return to Willow Castle for the funeral. I heard the carriage draw up and went straight down to meet it, heedless of the chilly April downpour. As soon as he descended the steps he threw his arms around me.

“Oh, Rebecca,” he breathed. “I am so sorry for your loss. I could see how much your Mama meant to you.”

He ushered me inside before I could get completely soaked. We only had a little time before the funeral was due to begin, but we made the most of it. As we took a hasty cup of chocolate together I learned that he had travelled non-stop, day and night to get back from Liverpool in time. I thanked him profusely.

“I would not have missed it,” he said. “I couldn’t bear to think of you standing at the graveside without a friendly face nearby. Comfort was never a strong point of Montague’s.”

At once I could hear Mama’s voice in my head, counselling me not to say anything disloyal about my husband. I did not need to, not to Mervyn. He knew me, he knew his cousin and my demeanour said all that needed to be said.

“How did it happen?” Mervyn asked gently. “Montague’s telegram said only that she had died, but it made no mention of the circumstances. I’ll understand if you do not wish to talk about it, I’m just surprised. She seemed to be in fine form when I saw her last.” I saw him trying hard not to smile slightly as he added “Apart from the occasional headache.”

I could not quite smile, but I felt my heart lighten for a moment. “It was very sudden,” I told him. “There was an accident in the Blue Dining Room, the ceiling fell in. Mama saw it and it seems to have given her such a shock that she went quite out of her wits. By the time I got to her she was reaching out of her bedroom window for something unseen, and before I could-” I broke off, stifling a sob. Mervyn pulled me to him and kept me close until he felt me relax and allow my tears to flow.

“Sssshh,” he soothed. “No need to say if you don’t want to. I can guess the rest. You poor girl.”

So we sat together, Mervyn holding me as I cried, until it was time to go down to the chapel where Mama’s coffin was waiting, wanting only the service and interment for her to be gone from my life forever.

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The funeral tea was a small affair - smaller by one than my wedding had been since Mama was not there. Dr Bagshawe joined us, of course, having performed the service and committed Mama’s body to the sodden ground in the castle’s little churchyard. It seemed as if the usual positions were reversed, for where

Mervyn and I had usually conversed and let Sir Montague sit aloof, now it was my husband and Dr Bagshawe who chatted of the roads, of Castleton, of the need for a new roof for the parish church. Mervyn and I sat in silence. For the most part I was lost in my thoughts, but now and then I would raise my eyes and he would meet my gaze and I would feel comforted to know that at least there was still someone in this world who cared for me.

Just like our wedding breakfast, the funeral tea had been laid out in the Withy Chamber. The side table was heaped with cold meats and pickles, slices of cake and bread and butter. With a malicious smile, Sir Montague fetched me a plate piled high with more food than I had eaten in the past week put together. He set it in front of me and urged solicitously that I should keep my strength up, suggesting that he would not let me leave until I had finished everything he had put before me. The look I gave him in return was one of undisguised hatred. I wished with all my heart that the Devil would return to the Withy Chamber that very moment and devour my husband in a single bite.

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I could barely sleep that night, even with the aid of laudanum. Sir Montague had attempted to come to my bed, no doubt relishing the prospect of flaunting his ownership of me in front of Mervyn, or of enjoying my sorrow, or both. I could not submit as a good wife should. Before I knew what I was doing I was screaming, warning him not to lay a finger on me, not to come near me. I had hurled my pair of silver-backed hairbrushes at him, sending him dashing from

the room. As one of them glanced off his shoulder, he shouted for Mrs Chapman to come and help restrain me.

“She seems somewhat overwrought,” he informed the housekeeper as she bustled in to pin me down and keep me in place until I stopped shrieking and writhing. “We must only hope that it’s not the seed of her mother’s madness.” With that he vanished, apparently content to slake his evil humour rather than his lust.

I lay in the darkness, tossing and turning, listening to the wind whistling across the valley outside. I could not help but be tormented by the thought of Mama, deep in the earth, cold and confined and dead. I thought of all the times I had hated her and all the times I had loved her. I thought of all the times I had wondered what life would be like without her then dismissed the thought because I simply couldn’t imagine it.

When at last I could stand it no longer, I got up and lit the lamp by my bedside. I guessed that it was well past midnight, into the small hours. I threw on my wrapper, took the lamp in one hand and set off through the darkened corridors. My fears of Lady Angela’s ghost or devilish apparitions were gone. There was too much pain in my mind and my soul to allow any room for such fantastical imaginings. I wended my way through the passageways until I came to the room where I knew Mervyn slept. Screwing up my courage, I rapped upon the door. My heart pounded as I waited for it to open.

When it did, I saw Mervyn’s tired, handsome face staring out in confusion, his eyes dazzled by the dim light of my lamp so that he could not see who it was.

“Mervyn!” I whispered. “It’s me. I’m sorry to wake you, but -”

“Rebecca? Good God, come in at once!” He opened the door fully and hustled me inside, glancing up and down the dark corridor to see if I was being pursued. “Are you alright? Is something the matter? Is it my cousin?”

I hesitated. I had not thought this far ahead, I did not know how to put my thoughts into words. “I’m sorry,” I began. “I should not have disturbed you. It’s just... I couldn’t sleep, and I can’t be alone, and you will leave in the morning and I shall have to stand there beside Sir Montague waving you off and then I’ll be alone again and I can’t bear it, I can’t bear it, I need you to be here!” I felt the tears start again and the knot of anxiety and pain in my stomach pulled tighter as I finally gave voice to my fears. Mervyn pulled me close and held me tight, stroking my hair and making gentle shushing noises as my words abandoned me and I cried.

He led me across the small room, the same one he had occupied growing up, and sat me down on the bed while he drew up a chair for himself. We sat with our heads together, my hands in his, while I calmed myself enough to tell him everything. I poured out all the things I had never told anyone before – the monotonous routine of life with Mama and the great pressure to live up to her standards and expectations, the hopes I had cherished when I learned I was to be married, the indignities and neglect I had had from Sir Montague. Through gulping sobs I told Mervyn what my husband had said about Mama selling me to him and how I knew that could not be true but feared that it was. I told him how Sir Montague had seen the attraction between Mervyn and myself and had

mocked me for it. I told him how Sir Montague had tried to come to my room that night but I had driven him out and he had called me mad.

“Darling Rebecca,” he sighed. “I wish that coming to Willow Castle had brought you a little more joy. I wish that there was something I could do to make your life here more bearable.”

“I shall manage, I suppose,” I said. “Mama always said that if I dedicated myself to behaving well, I should find that I could face anything in life with grace and equanimity. But it would help if I knew I would see you from time to time. I know I have no right to ask it of you-”

“No right?” Mervyn broke in. “Rebecca, don’t say that! You have every right! I love you. You have a perfect right to ask anything you want of me.”

“I am married to your cousin,” I groaned. “It is not right for me to talk to you this way. I shouldn’t even be here, if I were to be caught-”

“Rebecca, listen to me. I love you. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the situation, I love you. I have no desire to make your life more difficult and I understand that you are married to Montague and dependent on him. At present, I have nothing to offer you. I am nowhere near financially secure enough to support the two of us, and I would not put you in any danger by incurring my cousin’s wrath. All I can give you is the certainty that you are loved, deeply and truly loved, and that I will do all I can to visit you as often as I may.” Mervyn gently took my face in his hands and gazed intently into my eyes. “And if your husband ever hurts you, get a message to me by any means and I will return immediately and shoot him dead.”

Then he bent his head and leaned in towards me and I felt the soft touch of his lips upon mine, a warm caress that was utterly unlike anything I had ever experienced. His arms were around me, I leaned back upon the bed and felt him follow. Through his thin nightshirt I could feel the strong muscles of his arms and back, his chest pressing against mine. He buried his face in my long dark hair and I breathed in the scent of his cologne, an earthy musk cut through with a clean, bracing dash of lemon. Then he kissed me again and my lips parted under his, welcoming the tip of his tongue to explore my own. My blood was shot through with fire, I clung to him like a wanton and pushed my body hard against him. I felt him respond then check himself.

“Rebecca,” he panted, breaking away from me, “we must stop. I am sorry. I should not have kissed you. You have suffered a great loss and people often act strangely at times like this. It is not right that I should encourage you to compromise yourself, especially as you might regret it later. And as much as I dislike him, I would think less of myself were I to play a part in cuckolding Montague. I am sorry. It won’t happen again.”

I nodded, sitting up on the edge of the bed and setting my nightdress to rights. I got to my feet, preparing to leave, but Mervyn caught my hand.

“I do love you, though,” he said earnestly. “Never forget that.”

“I know,” I replied. “And I love you. Thank you.” With that I bent down and kissed him briefly, pulling away before we could be enticed into resuming the passionate embrace that we had struggled to break. I stole out of Mervyn’s room and was safely back in my own bed long before Sarah arrived at daybreak to



light the fire.

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By the time I awoke, having finally managed to sleep for a few hours, Mervyn was already gone – but so, to my surprise, was Sir Montague.

“The Master said not to wake you, My Lady, it being so early when they left” Sarah mumbled respectfully as she brought me a pot of chocolate in bed. “He has urgent business in town and will be back in two days.”

“Thank you, Sarah,” I replied. I sat back on my pillows, sipping my chocolate, and considered my situation. For the first time I was alone in Willow Castle. No mother, no husband, just a handful of servants who barely noticed my comings and goings. I was finally at liberty, if only for a couple of days, to do exactly as I pleased.

## 8 Secrets

“I am going out, Mrs Chapman. I shall be back in time for dinner.”

I did not break my stride as I glided down the stairs, walking straight past Mrs Chapman and throwing the words back over my shoulder as I fastened my cape and made my exit. Her acknowledgement of my words was drowned out by the dull thud of the heavy oak door as it thudded shut behind me. I crossed the driveway, the gravel crunching beneath my thick boots, and heaved the wrought iron gate open just enough to squeeze through.

The moment I was beyond the gates, I felt as though a weight had been lifted from me. I flung my arms wide and drew a deep, deep breath of clean, cold Peak air. Mam Tor lay before me in all its bleak beauty, the road to Castleton in one direction and a footpath leading up over the crest of the hill in the other. I had planned to walk towards Castleton and turn back a safe distance away from the town, since I was in deep mourning and should not be seen walking alone. Instead I found my steps turning away from the road, leading me onto the muddy footpath. I felt my feet sink in slightly with every step, the mud sucking on my boots as I lifted my feet again. My petticoats grew a little heavier as they gathered a layer of dirt at the bottom.

I thought of Mama and how horrified she would have been, seeing me tramping doggedly through the muck like this. Then I remembered that she would never see the state of my boots and that I would never need to clean them myself again. Upon my return I would simply have Sarah unlace them and they

would disappear to the boot room, and I would not see them again until they were clean and polished. If I climbed dykes and stiles and tore my dress, it would be mended. If I climbed a tree and then leapt out of it straight into a muddy puddle, or chose to drag myself through a hedge backwards, I could still go home and have my garments cleaned and repaired and no-one would care enough about me to judge my behaviour. Even if one of the servants chose to inform Sir Montague, I doubted he would be in the least bit interested in my eccentricities as long as they remained as innocent as a little rambling. It was a strange sort of freedom, the kind that was born out of my Mama's absence and my husband's antipathy, yet it was the first freedom I had ever known.

Rambling alone over the Tor, I had my first chance to take stock of the events of the past few days. Mama's burial, Sir Montague's harsh words, my thrilling, guilt-laden moment with Mervyn... It all seemed as improbable and disorienting as a dream, yet at the same time it felt more real than anything I had ever experienced before.

Invigorated by the chilly air and the weak April sun I cast off my sedate, ladylike pace. I began to gallop along the muddy path, my heart pounding as my feet thundered on the ground. When the track came to an end, I kept on running. I picked up my skirts and hurtled across the grass, my heart lurching whenever I skidded on a patch of loose shale and nearly took a tumble. My bonnet blew backwards as the wind roared in my face, and nothing but the ribbon under my chin prevented it from being carried away entirely.

At last I ran out of breath and collapsed in a heap on the ground. The grass

was cold and clammy, too early in the year for such exploits, but as I lay on my back and stared up at the vast emptiness of the white sky, I could not regret it. To be here, abandoning myself to nature for the first time, was worth a little discomfort. How long I lay there I do not know, but I watched as dark grey clouds began to gather in the distance and advance inexorably upon the Hope Valley. Suddenly the sky growled with far-off thunder and I realised that I had only a little time to get back to the Castle before the latest rainstorm began.

I did not quite make it. I was within sight of the gates when the fat, silvery raindrops began to fall, and by the time I had dashed across the drive my clothes were damp and little rivulets were running down my face. I hauled on the doorbell. When Mrs Chapman answered I strolled in serenely. As I had anticipated, she said nothing about the state of me other than telling me that she would send Sarah to help me change.

“Will you be wanting dinner in your room, My Lady?” she enquired.

I checked my immediate response. Emboldened by my new sense of freedom, I decided that until my husband came home Willow Castle would be truly mine. I would dine as the mistress of this place should dine.

“Not tonight, Mrs Chapman,” I informed her. “Tonight I shall dine in the Withy Chamber.”

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That night, despite the laudanum, I found myself wakeful again. My supplies were limited and I did not want to increase the amount I took, but the current

dose seemed to have little effect on me now. I lay staring into the darkness for a while, listening to the usual soundscape of the Valley – hooting owls, the occasional flutter of wings from a passing bat, distant vixens’ screeches. As I did so I became increasingly convinced that I could hear something out of the ordinary... music. I was certain that it was there, just on the edge of my hearing, a sombre, stately gavotte. But where on earth could it be coming from?

I got up and crossed the room to the fireplace, where I fumbled for a match to light my bedside candle. I threw on a shawl and my slippers and once again I eased my door open and pattered down the silent stone corridors, following the sound of this unseen orchestra.

The sound guided me towards the centre of the castle, straight to the door to the Withy Chamber. As I stood at the closed door I knew that the music was not simply imagination on my part, for it was clearly audible and had grown louder as I approached the room from whence it came. Has Sir Montague returned during the night? I wondered. Did I somehow fail to hear him return, and now he is hosting some strange nocturnal revel? But for whom?

I had expected to be greeted by the sight of dancers and musicians when I opened the door, perhaps even blinded by the blaze of a multitude of candles befitting a party. Instead, I squinted into the darkness. The only light in the Chamber was from a single candelabra on the table at which I had dined earlier, in the centre of the room. The music filled the air. A tall, slender man stood silhouetted in the candlelight, his fingers flying over the stem of a violin, but there was no sign of his fellow musicians. As he caught sight of me he stopped

playing, bringing the sound of the unseen chamber orchestra to an end, and laid his instrument down.

“Lady Rebecca,” he cried, covering the floor with long strides to take seize my hand. I let him take it, expecting him to lay his lips on my fingers, but instead he turned it over and placed a burning kiss in my palm. “I have longed to meet you.”

I was dumbstruck for a moment, unable to do anything but stare. He was an odd-looking man, handsome in an unnerving way. His features were regular and his hair was thick, dark, a little long. It was his eyes that unsettled me. His gaze bored deep into me, inscrutable, like the eyes of a goat.

“I am delighted to meet you, Sir,” I replied, formally courteous, and gave him a polite curtsy. “I am sorry we are unable to be properly introduced, but won’t you tell me who you are? Are you a friend of my husband’s?”

He had not yet released my fingers from his cold grasp. He fixed me with his strange eyes and replied “Not of your husband’s, My Lady, no. But I have been acquainted with many other gentlemen of this illustrious family, all the way back to Sir Carvell.” The stranger laughed at my confused face. “Pretty little fool,” he chuckled. “Weren’t you listening to all those stories? Haven’t you spent the past month fantasising about the ill-fated Chastain brides driven mad by the cursed Withy Chamber?”

At last I realised what he was telling me. I did not know whether this was a joke, a nightmare or some genuine loathsome visitation. All I knew was that I wished to be back upstairs in the safety of my bed. I pulled my hand back but his

grip was tight and he would not let me go.

“You have figured it out,” the Devil grinned. “I congratulate you.”

“Am I dead?” I asked in hushed tones. “Or about to die?”

“The former, certainly not,” he replied. “The latter is beyond my control at this point. Your soul is not currently mine to take, therefore you may content yourself. This visit is an overdue social call to make the acquaintance of the new Lady Chastain. Nothing more. Nothing less. Might I persuade you to take a glass of wine with me?”

Apprehension gripped me. Can it be a good idea to drink with the Devil? I wondered. Would I not be taking a great risk? I knew that I was still a little unused to wine, since we had never been able to afford it in the house in Lisson Grove. It still went to my head easily, and I recalled an old saying of Mama’s about taking a long spoon to sup with the Devil. While her saying was figurative, I was convinced that had she realised I would one day find myself in this situation in reality, she would have advised me against partaking of anything he had to offer.

After a moment’s indecision I made up my mind. Mama had not always been correct, and she was no longer here. I allowed the Devil to lead me over to the table and fill my glass with a deep red vintage. Candlelight glimmered through the crystal as I lifted the glass to my lips. The wine spread smoothly across my tongue, rich and bitter as a ripe pomegranate. The sharp tang of alcohol caught my throat.

“My condolences upon your marriage, Lady Rebecca,” he said, draining and

refilling his own glass.

“You mean congratulations, surely?” The warmth of the wine flowed through my veins.

“Do you think congratulations are in order?” he smirked at me, reminding me for a moment of my beloved Mervyn. “From what I know of your husband, I would stand by my original offer of condolences.”

I smirked back. “Hmm. You may be right. Thank you.”

“Such a pity that a marriage made for its pecuniary advantages did not yield a decent set of jewels for you.”

I shrugged. “There are other things in life,” I said.

“What, such as love, happiness, a home of one’s own?” The Devil chuckled. “I can offer you the Chastain family jewels, you know. All you need do is play me for them.”

With courage I did not know I possessed, I looked the Devil straight in the eye. “They’re not yours to gamble with,” I remarked. “You lost them to Sir Carvell. I am hardly likely to play against you for something this family already owns.”

We exchanged a smile and he raised his glass to me. “Touché, Lady Rebecca, touché. Yet while the Chastains own the jewels, they do not currently know where they are to be found. I do, since I was the one who left them there. Would you like them back?”

With a wave of his slim hand he conjured an apparition before my eyes, a translucent vision of a dazzling emerald pendant.



“Can’t you just see this around your neck, My Lady?” The vision changed, becoming an ornately-wrought hand mirror. I could see my pale face, my thick braid of dark hair, the ivory linen of my nightgown. As I continued to look, I saw the pendant materialise at my throat. “Look at the way the gold warms your skin,” the Devil whispered, his voice as soft as a lover’s. “See how the emerald itself glows upon you, the way it brings out the sparkle of your eyes.”

I was tempted, I admit, by the image of such a beautiful object. Yet it was not the thought of the pendant’s glamour or value that made me accept his challenge. It was the fact that the pendant was only mine by rights because I was a Chastain bride, and in that moment I knew with an overwhelming clarity that I was married to the wrong Chastain. I saw my life with Sir Montague stretching out in front of me, my life as an unwanted, ignored wife. The best I could hope was that I would have children and that they would be more like me than like their father. Even then, I could see abandonment waiting in my future as they departed for school and later for their own lives. I thought of Mervyn, who had admitted his love for me but who could not be my lover, who must surely give up on this hopeless love someday and find a woman who was free to be his. The spectacular stone at the heart of the pendant seemed to shine with the venomous green of my envy; envy of Sir Montague’s freedom to treat me as he pleased, of Mervyn’s freedom to move on and find a life on an equal, reciprocal love, of the freedom Mama had once had to make her own mistakes rather than the mistakes she had been pushed into by a sense of responsibility and obligation. In truth, I did not care whether I retrieved the pendant or not. Whether it ever lay

round my neck was of no import. All I knew was that I could not stand to be the modest, dutiful woman I had been raised to be for one minute longer.

“Since you challenged me, I name the game,” I said, my voice clear and steady in the stillness of the night. “Not cards. Chess.”

“Very well,” the Devil replied. “And what shall you stake against the location of the jewels.”

“If I win, you shall return the jewels to me. That means you must ensure that I have them in my hand, here in this very room, and that I am free to own them and wear them hereafter. If I lose, the jewels shall be yours.”

He shook his head. “I fear the jewels mean less to me than they would to you, Lady Rebecca,” he said. “You must offer me something of equal value.”

“Such as?”

“Traditionally you would stake your soul,” he mused nonchalantly. “Though I would be willing to accept a lesser stake. A night in your bed, for instance.”

I hesitated for a moment. Then I thought of the strange usage I already endured at Sir Montague’s hands. The Devil himself could scarcely be less appealing. Besides, I reasoned, if all Sir Montague cares about it being able to use me at will, this is surely the best revenge I could have upon him.

“Very well,” I said. “But it shall be no other night than Midsummer’s Night, the shortest of the year.”

He raised his glass to me. “You drive a hard bargain, Lady Rebecca. But it shall be as you wish.”

He snapped his thin fingers and an elaborate chess board appeared upon the

table between us, its squares constructed of fine black and white marble, each of the pieces a miniature work of art. I looked closer at the white king and queen and nearly leapt from my seat in surprise as I saw that they were made in the images of me – and Mervyn!

“Your move, My Lady,” the Devil pointed out. I lifted a pawn, almost at random, and moved it forward two squares. Our game had begun.

I had always been an enthusiastic player rather than a skilful one, which made my acceptance of this satanic challenge all the more insane. I could beat Mama easily, but I was well aware that she had not been a formidable opponent. As the Devil claimed my first pawn within a few moves, swiftly followed by one of my knights, I began to realise the magnitude of the bet I had made. Still, I could not regret the risk – I felt alive, thrilled in a way I had never been before. To blazes with it, I thought. If I lose, I lose. I don't care. I shall play exactly as I please. Snatching up one of my bishops, I sent the piece on a death or glory mission to the opposite side of the board.

I who had lived my life according to a strategy, even if it had been Mama's rather than mine, now found myself playing wildly, planning no further than the next move. When an opportunity arose I seized it with both hands, picking the Devil's pieces off the board with glee. When a piece of mine fell, I shrugged to myself and reasoned that I hardly cared how the game turned out for I felt that I had nothing to lose. When I took the Devil's queen I clapped my hands and laughed in delight. Throwing caution to the winds, I sent my own queen chasing round the board, checking his king over and over again. I was so caught up in the

pursuit that I paid no attention to the overall shape of the game until the Devil reached across the table, laid a hand on mine and whispered “checkmate.” I felt a flash of ice-cold lightning down my spine at the thought of the Devil in my bed.

“What?” I cried. I stared down at the pieces, trying to work out which of his pieces had checkmated me. “But how? I-”

“Not you, my dear,” he murmured. “Me. Look at the position I am in. You have won.”

I looked again, and sure enough, there was nowhere for his king to go without being taken. I had won! I had bested the Devil! I stared up at him in astonishment. I could not find a single word.

“My dear Lady Rebecca,” the Devil laughed, “how quickly you go from the reckless gamestress back to the quivering ingénue! You are exquisite. Well, you have won your right to know where the jewels are, to have them safely in your possession, yours to own in freedom hereafter. If you like I can deliver them into your hand this moment, but yours is an inquisitive mind, for all the training you’ve had to repress it. Wouldn’t you like to know where the Chastain treasures have been all these years?”

I considered for a moment. It was true that I had a lifetime’s experience of leaving questions unasked, ignoring my thirst for any knowledge that my Mama did not consider proper, longing to know more than my life would allow. Now, though...

“Damn it all,” I smiled, tasting the unfamiliar profanity upon my tongue. “Yes. Let me be the one to know the secret!”

“This way, then,” the Devil said, getting to his feet and holding out a hand to me. I rose to accompany him. “There are more doors in the Wither Chamber than any living member of the Chastain family knows. Indeed, there is much more to Willow Castle than meets the eye.” He led me round the strange pentagonal room until we came to the uppermost point, which I had learned from Mervyn’s stories was the westernmost point.

“No-one knows when this Chamber was first painted this way,” the Devil informed me amicably. “Well, no-one except me. It is as old as the Castle itself, give or take a certain amount of refreshing. However, for all the many times that the paint has been refreshed, one thing has remained unchanged. Look here.” He pointed a long, sharp-nailed finger at a word picked out in black across the base of one of the willow trees that adorned the wall. In the dim light I could barely make it out, but slowly I deciphered the letters: VIMINIA.

“The thing about a noun on a painted wall is that everyone assumes it’s the signature of the artist who painted the fresco. In fact it is nothing of the kind, this is simply the Latin word for willow. It is here as a reminder of what willow trees are and what they are reputed to be. For examples, when a willow tree reaches down with its branches, what do you expect to find?”

“Water,” I replied, unsure of how this related to the jewels.

“Indeed. So in order to find water, you must follow the branches downwards. Do you know anything else about willow trees?”

I thought hard. “Very little,” I frowned. “They are associated with sorrow and mourning when they appear in literature, they are used to make cricket bats and

charcoal, but I am afraid that is all I know. Botany is not a subject it has been my good fortune to study.”

The Devil drew closer to me, so close that I could feel his hot breath on my skin. “It is not your botanical knowledge that is required, Lady Rebecca,” he whispered. “I speak of legends. The willow tree is said to have the ability to drag itself from the earth, wrenching itself up by the roots, to reposition itself in more favourable ground.”

“But why?” I breathed.

“Opinions vary,” he said. “Perhaps to snatch unwary travellers from the roads and devour them, or to deliver them to the goddess Hecate to whom all willow trees are dedicated. Or perhaps it is simply something they do when they find themselves in a situation they do not care for – they tear themselves away from that situation by any means possible. They also, as you observe, make excellent charcoal. Now, if you look to the word VIMINIA, you will see beneath it a knothole in the floor. Place your finger in it.”

I did as I was bid, then leapt back as a section of the floor fell away beneath me. A trapdoor! Peering into the darkness I saw a flight of stone steps leading down.

“Where do they lead?” I asked.

“Follow me and you shall find out,” the Devil invited me. He flitted back to the table to retrieve the candelabra, then led the way down into the subterranean passageway. I picked up the skirts of my nightgown and stepped down into the blackness.

The flight of stairs was long and steep, penned in by rough-hewn limestone walls on either side. My breath came faster as we went deeper, for the deeper we went the more the walls felt like they were closing in on either side. At length we came to a corridor, every bit as narrow but flat, at least, so there was no longer that sensation of plunging down into the depths of the earth. How far we walked along that corridor I do not know, but eventually it opened out into a vast, cathedral-like cavern.

I gazed in wonder at the beauty of the place. The walls had the same pale, ethereal glow as those I had seen in Poole's Cavern, but the ceiling was even higher and patterned with long, treacherous-looking stalactites. I feared that they might drop at any second and plunge into the river that flowed fast and winding through the cave. By the side of the river was a large formation of smooth white rock, shaped almost like a chaise longue. The Devil led me over to it. It was a perfect size for two to sit and admire the rushing water.

"Long ago, before Willow Castle was built and this cavern considered to be part of it, the people who lived in the Hope Valley knew this as the Devil's Chamber," the Devil told me, his voice soft and spellbinding. "And this particular stone was known as the Devil's Seat. It was said that if you sat upon this stone and left the remaining place free for me, you could ask a boon of me and if I had a mind to grant it, I would do so without exacting my usual punishing price."

I laughed as the final pieces of the mystery fell into place. "So all Sir Carvell ever had to do was come down here, sit upon this rock and ask, and you would

have shown him the location of the jewels?”

“Not even that!” The Devil joined his mirth to mine. “Rest your arm upon the side, Lady Rebecca.”

I did so, adopting a more relaxed posture. Beneath the weight of my arm, the top layer of rock began to move. I pushed it aside. It was heavy, but it was hinged and polished to allow it to move easily to reveal a hidden compartment carved into the rock. Within that secret hiding place lay a large pouch of deep green velvet. I lifted it out and spilled its contents into my lap.

“The jewels!” I cried, seeing a tangle of gold, silver and precious stones tumbling onto the soft linen of my nightgown. One by one I picked out each item; a rope of pearls, several fine rings, a diamond circlet, earrings and bracelets and all sorts of beautiful things. Last of all I examined the famous emerald pendant. I gazed through it at the cavern, seeing the room change colour as if it were consumed by green flame.

“To match your eyes, lovely Lady Rebecca,” the Devil took the pendant and moved behind me, slipping the chain over my head so the emerald lay heavy on my bosom. “And now I wish I could say that you are mine... but you are another’s.”

“Indeed,” I stared meaningfully at the gold band on the ring finger of my left hand.

The Devil laughed. “Not him! No, your husband might have a legal claim on you, but you belong to someone else entirely. Not him. Not me. I could sense that you were another’s the moment you set foot in my domain.”



“Your domain?” I asked, casting my mind back through the places I had visited both in reality and in my dreams. “When was I in your domain before tonight?”

“All of these caverns are mine,” he told me, following the flow of the river in an expansive gesture. “I first sensed your presence not far from here, a mere few miles along this river, when you visited Poole’s Cavern. Wherever this river flows, from its source near Arnemetia’s Well to its mouth by Castleton, less than half a mile from here, is my territory and I shall always know who wanders there.” He extended a hand to me. “May I show you around?”

“If you like,” I said, rising and following him into the tunnel of glowing white rock, the river rushing alongside.

## 9 Threats

### I

did not remember how I got back from the Devil's Chamber. I had no memory of climbing back up those narrow stairs or of closing the trapdoor behind me. My memory ended with the blaze of fine jewellery. My next memory was of being back in my bed, waking up to the gentle clatter of china as Sarah brought in my tray of chocolate.

My hand flew to my neck, half-expecting to find the heavy emerald pendant there. My neck was bare.

It was a dream, then, I thought, my heart sinking slightly. Nothing but a strange, laudanum-induced fantasy, brought on by being overwrought and missing Mervyn's tales of Willow Castle's history. Ah well.

\*

It seemed a little excessive to breakfast alone in the Withy Chamber. I was still a little appalled by the waste there must have been, for the dishes on the sideboard were filled as full as they had been when there had been four of us there. I still ate but little. My appetite had never been great, and I had not yet recovered it after the loss of Mama. I usually picked at the bacon and eggs and hoped that all the food I did not eat would at least be fed to the staff, rather than simply discarded. I remembered how Mama had always cautioned against waste

when we had lived at Lisson Grove, how we had used up every scrap of food by transforming it into one dish after another. Her attitude had changed overnight when we had arrived at the Castle. I supposed it was simply a resumption of the ways she had learned during her girlhood at Greycrags.

My mind was still full of the opulent trinkets I had seen in my dream as I took my place at the table, in the same seat that I had occupied for my chess game with the Devil. I sipped tea and relived the dream within my head, then at length I picked up my plate and went to serve myself from the sideboard. I took my usual bacon and eggs, then on impulse I decided to accompany it with a slice of fried bread. I reached for the lid of the server.

Beneath the lid I found no fried bread. Instead, I found a mass of dark green velvet – the very pouch that I had seen in my dream! I dropped the lid with a heavy clatter and snatched it up. I rushed back over to the table and poured the jewels across the tablecloth. They fell out exactly as I remembered them, down to the last gold ring. I left them there as I retrieved my forgotten breakfast and stared transfixed as I broke my fast.

When I had finished I scooped my treasures back into their pouch and carried them carefully to my favourite room, a room where the contents were not owned by me and therefore by my husband, but by the Castle itself – the library. I went to the shelf where Mervyn had once fetched the volume containing Sir Carvell and Lady Angela's likenesses. There I found a small volume, set further back upon the shelf than its fellows. I pulled it out, glancing at its title. A Short History of Osier. I laughed, then I pushed the pouch to the back of the shelf and

slid the book back in, lining its spine up with the other volumes, so that the precious bag of jewels was entirely concealed.

\*

I remained in the library the whole day, not curled up with a book by the fire this time, but settled at the bureau with pen and paper. Furiously, I scribbled down every detail that I could remember from my dream, making a list of the things I had learned from the Devil who, it now appeared, had been as real as the jewels I had found and concealed. Willow trees, I scrawled. Uprooting, walking, replanting. Viminia. Hecate (goddess?). Devil's Chamber. Devil's Seat. Secret passageways. Route of underground river?

When I had done with my list I prowled the shelves, pulling down one thick tome after another and piling them high on the fireside table. It was my intention to find more information about everything I had seen in my dream, to go further than I had been able to during my brief time with Mervyn and learn all I could about Willow Castle. Even Mervyn had not known of VIMINIA and the secret trapdoor, of that I was sure. If he had, he would certainly have explored it during his adventurous boyhood. I was certain it would have been among the first things he told me. I looked forward to telling him of my amazing discoveries as soon as I saw him again. I had already been impatient for his next visit, but now my impatience had assumed an even greater level of urgency.

I was disturbed some time in the afternoon by Mrs Chapman entering the room.

“Begging your pardon, My Lady,” she said, bobbing a disinterested curtsy. “The Master is returned and requests your presence in the parlour at once.”

I was surprised that I had not heard the carriage, nor the slam of the main door, nor the increase in activity that accompanied an arrival. All at once I realised how caught up I had been in my task. My heart was gripped by the icy realisation that I no longer had the Castle to myself and worse, that my husband wanted to see me. I could think of no reason for it that I would care for. Nevertheless, out of habit after all Mama’s training, I glanced into the mirror above the fireplace and quickly patted my hair into place and smoothed down my dress. Then, having composed myself, I set off for the parlour.

\*

I had not expected my husband to be in company when I opened the parlour door, much less to have a lady with him. Although when I glanced at the female sitting by his side, I wondered whether ‘lady’ was indeed the correct term. She looked a little too artful, her hair a suspiciously brassy shade of blonde, her taffeta skirts arranged to show a tantalising hint of ankle. Mrs Chapman bustled in behind me with the tea tray as I took my seat opposite my husband and this rouged stranger.

“Ah, Rebecca,” Sir Montague greeted me. “How good to see you again, little wife. Do sit down, for there is someone I should like you to meet. Mrs Chapman, would you be so kind as to bring a pot of coffee as well? Our companion here prefers it to tea. Rebecca, it has been suggested to me that it is not good for a

lady to be so much on her own as you will be now that your mother is no longer with us. You should have a companion, some respectable lady who will keep you company and prevent you from becoming lonely when I am busy or away from home. I have found such a lady. Allow me to introduce Mademoiselle Celine Palomer.”

“Enchante,” Mlle Palomer simpered, not waiting for me to address her first. She held out her hand for me to shake as if she were the lady of the house and I the paid companion. Between us, Mrs Chapman finished setting out the tea things and left the room to fetch the coffee. The moment the door closed behind her my husband’s face changed.

“It’s no use looking like that, Rebecca,” he said, with that irritating look of slight amusement. “I can see that you are not enamoured of the idea – honestly, dear wife, you can conceal nothing. Your every thought is written upon your face.”

“Without meaning any disrespect to Mlle Palomer,” I replied, “I do not require a companion. I have been perfectly happy on my own these past few days, and I am sure I will be again.”

“Oh, how very worthy,” he mocked me. “Your Mama raised you to be absolutely perfect, didn’t she? My books and music shall be my sole companions, on them to look and practise by myself. Very sweet, very maidenly. But as it happens, your opinion on the matter is not required. It is of great importance to me that this lady shall join our household. The most suitable position for her is that of your companion, therefore you shall have a

companion.”

Mlle Palomer leaned forward and reached for my hand. “Please, Lady Rebecca,” she pouted in her lightly accented French, “let there be only friendship between us. Sir Montague and I have only your best interests at heart, and I shall perhaps be able to relieve you of certain... duties that you find disagreeable.”

Mrs Chapman reappeared bearing a silver coffee pot. I glared silently at Sir Montague as we waited for her to leave again. The moment she was gone I dragged my hand away from Celine’s and leapt to my feet.

“This is your mistress?” I cried. “You have brought your mistress into this house and you expect me not only to receive her and take tea with her, but actually to accept her as my supposed companion? You must be mad, Sir Montague!”

He did not flinch. “Keep your voice down, Rebecca,” he hissed. “There’s no need to make a spectacle of yourself.”

“My dear,” Celine’s habit of addressing me as if we were old friends was starting to make my skin crawl. “Please try to understand. Montague and I have waited such a long time to be together. When his father finally passed on, we thought we should have our chance. But no, for then the terms of the will would not allow us to marry, and now this is the only way we can manage.”

“More to the point,” Sir Montague said, “this is my home and you, Rebecca, are my wife. I expect you to do your duty by doing as I say. Since I am the one who pays our staff, I shall decide how many we have and in what positions. If I

say that you shall have a companion, you shall have one. If I say that it is to be Celine, it shall be Celine. If she happens to be my mistress, that is no concern of yours. Or didn't that prudish Mama of yours ever teach you that men may have mistresses and that this is the way of the world?"

I gritted my teeth, fighting the urge to tell him never to mention my Mama again, that I did not appreciate his criticism of her and would not tolerate it. I forced myself to remain calm. "I am not unaware of the fact that some men find it hard to remain faithful, Sir Montague" I said. "However, I was not aware that ladies are expected to take their husbands' doxies under their own roofs and welcome them as honoured guests and valued companions. Perhaps something was wanting in my education after all."

"She also neglected to inform you that sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, Rebecca. Anyway, let us hear no more about it. The matter is settled. Mlle Palomer is here to stay, and she shall be your companion. In front of the servants and in company, I expect you to remember this. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

I gave him a curt nod. "Now may I be excused?" I asked. "My head is troubling me."

"Oh, my dear, not the same trouble as your poor dear Mama had with hers, I trust?" Sir Montague enquired with feigned solicitude. "Of course you must go and rest. Run along now."

As I left the room he leaned in towards Celine, reaching a lustful hand down towards her exposed ankle and beginning to slide it up beneath her skirts. I



overheard him muttering “Don’t worry about her, my sweet. She’ll get used to it. Rebecca is very adaptable.”

\*

I returned to my room, making a swift detour via the library to retrieve the list I had written earlier. I tucked it into my Bible for safekeeping, pausing to appreciate the irony of secreting my memories of my encounter with the Devil there. Then I lay upon my bed and thought about my options.

Sir Montague’s proposition that I should simply accept his attempt to place his whore at the heart of our household was ridiculous. I may not love my husband, I thought, but that does not mean I will tolerate his flaunting his infidelity in my face. This is a calculated insult, we both know it, otherwise he would not have waited until Mama was dead to bring her in.

Mama... I wished that I could have asked her advice. I feared that she would have told me to stay, no matter what the circumstances, and honour the duty that I owed to my husband. I was sure she would have told me that security mattered more than anything else, and that I would learn to turn a blind eye to it in time. Perhaps I would have done, if he had simply kept a mistress in town. If he had continued to disappear on his supposed business trips I would never have asked questions, I would simply have left him to his own devices and hoped that his mistress, whoever she was, was sufficiently captivating that she would keep him out of my way for as long as possible, leaving me to enjoy the Castle alone.

Yet I wondered – my Mama was also the young woman who had run away

with her lover. Perhaps she would have advised me to take the jewels and run, to slip out of Willow Castle at first light. Surely I would find someone in Castleton who would take me to Buxton, then I could get on the first train to Liverpool, seek out Mervyn and... I sighed. Mervyn had already made it clear that he did not want any part in deceiving his cousin, and I did not know how he would react if I appeared on his doorstep with a bag of jewels and the sworn intention to leave my husband.

Perhaps it would be wrong of me to approach him, I considered. Perhaps the best thing I can do for Mervyn, as much as it would hurt me, is to set him free to love someone properly, to love a woman who is not married to another man. Perhaps I should return to London and in time he would forget me. I might –

The door opened. Sir Montague strode in, closing it firmly behind him, and without waiting for an invitation he seated himself on the edge of my bed.

“Your display in the parlour was most offensive towards Mademoiselle Palomer,” he said, his voice icy cold.

I scrambled into a sitting position, pulling my knees up towards my body to keep as much of myself away from him as possible. “Your behaviour in bringing her here is most offensive towards me,” I retorted. “I want that woman out of my house.”

“It’s not your house.”

“I am your wife!” I snapped. “You spoke earlier of my duties as your wife. Very well, let us speak of your duties as my husband. You promised me fidelity. By your own admission you have broken that promise. You promised to love

me. That you have not done. You promised to comfort me, yet when I needed comfort most all you did was make the most offensive remarks about my mother. You vowed that you would honour and protect me, yet I can think of nothing less honourable than foisting your mistress on me. If you were to ask Dr Bagshawe I am sure he would not consider that to be protecting me, either. You have done none of the things you promised in your wedding vows, Sir Montague. I can hardly consider our vows to be valid if you entered into them intending to treat me in this way.” I felt hot tears beginning to stream down my face. “And I have done nothing to you! I knew from the start that I was nothing more than a convenience to you, simply a means to an end, but could you not have offered me simple indifference instead of this malice? And if malice is all you have to offer me, why keep me here to suffer? Why not simply let me go?”

I had not meant to say so much. I scrutinised his face, watching for a sign of any kind of emotion, any hint of pity. There was none.

“Let me explain the situation to you, wife,” he said, slowly and clearly, as if talking to an idiot. “Your usefulness to me did not end on our wedding day. It is true that I had to marry in order to gain access to my inheritance, and more to the point, I had to marry someone the trustees would consider suitable. Despite your mother’s youthful indiscretion, they were satisfied with the fact that you were a Lennox and had been quietly reared in a poor but respectable area. My father stipulated a respectable marriage for me precisely because he knew about Celine. I met her on my travels in Europe five years ago and brought her back to England with me. We planned to marry, but my father would not have a dancer

from a Lyonnaise corps de ballet for a daughter in law. He informed me that he had altered his will so that if I did not marry a suitable woman, I should never lay a finger on a single penny of my inheritance. Unfortunately my marriage only entitled me to one half of my fortune. The rest remains in trust until our fifth anniversary, at which point we must still be married and both residing here, or I must be a widower. My father believed that if he could force me to remain married to another woman for such a length of time, I would forget Celine. If you want to accuse someone of malice, accuse my father, for it is his infernal meddling that got you into this mess. Left to my own devices I should have ignored your mother's letter and left you to rot in Lambeth or whatever godforsaken suburb you crawled out of."

He leaned in closer to me and stroked a stray strand of hair off my face, tucking it behind my ear. It was a gesture of such tenderness that anyone watching us would surely have thought that they were seeing a touching moment in which a concerned husband was comforting a distraught wife.

"You might very well be thinking that five years of this will be unbearable," he whispered in my ear. "I can understand that. I am sure that I would be if, god forbid, I were you. So let me make one thing perfectly clear. I know that you have feelings for my cousin, feelings which are not entirely consistent with your promise of wifely fidelity. If you bolt, I shall ruin him. I will have him out of his current situation in a heartbeat and rendered friendless and unemployable. I may even have him jailed, or worse. You may doubt that I can do this, but will you stake Mervyn's life and prospects on it? I think not, little mouse of a wife. Just

remember – anything you do will have consequences for him. As long as you behave well, and fall in with my plans, your lover shall prosper. And if you do not, I shall not take my anger out on you but upon him. Though if you make too much of a fuss, I shall not hesitate to have you declared mad and locked up. I wouldn't even have to contravene the terms of my father's will, my dear. There's a perfectly serviceable room in the tower, that's where we have stored insane Chastain women in the past. Perhaps I shall show you it if you ever need to be reminded to behave well. There are stout chains upon the walls and a bed with sturdy leather straps. If you do not want to find yourself dragging out your days in solitude up there, I suggest you make sure your conduct does not displease me.”

# 10 Celine

**T**

hus began our new routine. I no longer broke my fast in the Withy Chamber, preferring to keep to my room and allow my husband to enjoy his mistress' company in peace. If I was lucky, I could spend the day in the library or the music room undisturbed, taking tea on my own, and would not have to trouble myself with the happy couple until I joined them for dinner. Sir Montague insisted on this, for appearances' sake, and I could only claim that I was unwell every so often. Too many headaches would give my husband all the more reason to have me declared mad and locked away.

If I was not so lucky, Sir Montague would have business to attend to and when Celine got bored of being on her own she would come in search of me. She would insist that she had been brought to Willow Castle as my companion and that although we had reason to be enemies, she would prefer that we were friends. She would sit and chatter to me while I was trying to read, quizzing me about my life in London and attempting to tell me about her years in Lyon. I would answer her, admittedly not with the best grace I had promised that I would not actively give her offence, but I saw no reason to indulge her fantasy that we were destined to become genuine friends.

One afternoon I was at the piano, picking my way through the fingering of a complicated Beethoven sonata. I ran through the phrase a few times, working the

music into my hands, then returned to the start of the piece and played it through, letting the melancholy music soothe my prickly nerves. I stopped when I heard the door click gently open behind me and Celine's light footsteps pattering into the room.

"Rebecca?" she cooed. I bristled as I always did at the way she addressed me, as if we were equals. She glided over to the piano and laid a delicate hand upon it. "I am sorry to disturb you," she said. "May I listen? You play so beautifully."

"If you like," I replied, and started again from the beginning of the piece. I got the fingering on the tricky section wrong and repeated it over and over, stealing a sidelong glance at Celine to see whether she had grown bored yet. I hoped that once she realised that I was doing technical work on the piece, not giving a performance for her benefit, she would lose interest and find some other way to occupy her time. She did not. She pulled up a stool and watched intently, listening with apparent pleasure every time I ran through the piece again.

When I reached the point of being unable to do any more useful practise on the Beethoven, I went to close the lid on the piano.

"Oh, please don't stop!" Celine cried. "I would like to hear you play something else. Do you play anything by Chopin?"

A little reluctantly I admitted that I knew several of Chopin's waltzes by heart.

"Oh, play one, please," she wheedled. "Any of them. I should love to hear some Chopin. He is my favourite composer of all."

I played the first that came to mind, E flat major, the Grande valse brillante. Celine gasped with joy and said something in rapid French, too quick for my ear

to catch apart from the words 'Les Sylphides'. She rose from the stool and began to dance, floating lightly round the room, her arms sweeping gracefully as she improved the choreography. Much to my surprise I found myself smiling, infected by her zest.

"Thank you," Celine beamed, dropping back down onto the stool with the last beat of the music. "It has been so long! I yearn to dance more, but there is so seldom the opportunity. Montague is only rarely available to take me, and he has not permitted me to dance on stage since he brought me to England." I saw an expression of mild horror flit across her face as she realised what she was saying. "But I am sorry, dear Rebecca. I should not be speaking of him to you."

"I suppose not," I replied. In truth, it was hard to associate the man Celine spoke of with the man I had married. Somehow I could not see Sir Montague as the great romantic, risking his father's wrath for an unsuitable love and willing to ride roughshod over me to have his paramour near him. I had seen how he could be motivated by possessiveness, but not yet by love.

"Do you play duets?" Celine asked, leafing through the stack of sheet music lying on top of the piano.

"I used to play them -" I broke off, unwilling to recall the image of myself playing alongside Mama. "I think there is one in that pile. May I?" I took the music from her and found the piece I was looking for. "Ah, yes. It is also by Chopin – the Florence duet, do you know it?"

"I do!" Celine cried, clapping her hands. She ran lightly round to join me on the piano stool, taking the left hand while I took the right. She waited obediently



for me to count her in, and we began.

She was a good pianist, I had to admit. Her touch was delicate and sensitive. She followed my lead perfectly, neither of us thrown by the other's occasional errors as we sight-read the complex score. By the time we neared the end, I found I was rather enjoying having a partner for duets.

“Oh, I enjoyed that!” Celine said. “Do you sing, Rebecca? May I hear you?”

I shook my head. “I used to sing,” I told her, “and I am sure that I will again in time. But at present I find that grief has robbed me of my singing voice. I could accompany you, though, if you care to sing.”

She took me up on the offer with great enthusiasm, handing me a score and positioning herself in the curve of the piano.

“Beautiful dreamer, wake unto me!”

Her voice was sweet, a little tremulous and affected perhaps, but her enjoyment of the activity was obvious.

“List while I woo thee with soft melody!”

Encouraged by Celine's exaggerated style of performance, I yielded to the temptation to ornament the accompaniment a little, throwing in odd flourishes here and there.

“Sounds of the rude world, heard in the day, lulled by the moonlight have all passed away...”

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Celine and I continued at the piano until it came time to dress for dinner. I

returned to my room, expecting to find Sarah waiting to help me, but instead I found her and Mrs Chapman packing my belongings into tea chests.

“What on earth?” I gasped. “What is going on here? Mrs Chapman, what are you doing?”

The two servants turned and dropped perfunctory curtseys. “Begging your pardon, My Lady,” said Mrs Chapman, “ but the Master instructed us that you are to be moved to the tower room. He said that you had requested it.”

“He said that I...” I trailed off. Sir Montague is moving me to the tower room? I thought. But why? What have I done?

“Yes indeed, My Lady. He said that you had been experiencing more headaches than usual of late, and that you wished to exchange this room for one with smaller, narrower windows because, if you’ll excuse my saying so My Lady, you are still haunted by what happened to your Mama.”

Then it is true, I thought. It has begun. My husband is trying to pass me off as a madwoman.

Mrs Chapman continued. “He said that we were to move your things now so that we are done before dinner, that way you can have your tray brought to you up there instead of in here.”

I said nothing but noted that for today at least, I was not required to dine in company. I wondered whether this was to be my lot from now on. Seeing no point in delaying the inevitable, I decided to go directly to my new room. I paused only to thank Mrs Chapman for her information and collect my Bible from its place on the bedside table, then I made my way up the narrow spiral

staircase the room which could be either my refuge or my prison.

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In truth, I found that I rather liked my new room. There were ominous hoops on the walls, obviously designed to anchor chains, but I pushed the dresser and chairs around until I had adequately concealed them. My bed did indeed have thick leather straps, giant belts that could stretch across the chest and legs of a distressed lunatic in need of restraint. However, I only found these with a little searching. At present they were safely tucked under my mattress and no particular threat to me.

The tower room was the highest in the whole Castle, meaning that from the narrow slit windows I could see the whole Hope Valley stretching out into the distance. The views were spectacular, and although the windows were not glazed, May had arrived and the air was cool, not cold. I loved waking up with the taste of crisp, fresh air in my house, and as the days grew warmer I would lie upon the rug and bathe in the sliver of sunshine that spilled in.

It was over a week before I saw anyone other than the servants again. My meals were all brought to my room now, but I while continued my usual visits to the library and music room, I saw no sign of Celine. Occasionally I would hear her rippling laughter echoing through the corridors as my path nearly crossed hers and Sir Montague's, but she did not seek me out. Considering how strongly I had objected (and indeed still objected) to our enforced companionship, I was surprised at how keenly I felt the lack of her.

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After more than a week of solitude, I was stunned to hear someone tapping on my bedroom door one evening. It was not the quick, functional tap of Mrs Chapman or the slow multiple knock of Sarah, but something altogether more tentative. I opened the door.

“Rebecca, my dear!” Celine was on the other side, her tone hushed and furtive. “May I come in?”

I stepped aside to admit her. I expected her to walk past me, but instead she leapt on me, flinging her arms around me in a crushing hug.

“I am so sorry!” She cried. “It is my fault that you are trapped in here. Please believe me, this was never my intention.”

She obviously wanted to talk, so I detached myself before she could accidentally choke the life out of me. The evening shadows were starting to lengthen, so I busied myself lighting candles while Celine sat upon my bed and prepared to explain.

“Sir Montague has gone to town for tonight,” she informed me. “There is some important event at his club. The servants will not tell that I am here?”

“I honestly do not know,” I said. “I am not sure how far they can be trusted, but I find it safest to assume that they are loyal to my husband, not to me. But why should they not know? Sir Montague told me that we were to make this charade of his convincing.”

“Ah, Rebecca,” she sighed. “That afternoon that we spent at the piano – Montague heard us playing, and chatting, and he did not take it well. He was so

angry at dinner that night, so pale and furious! He told me that I seemed to be mistaking illusion for reality, and that I must remember where my loyalties lie. He has always been a jealous man, but this – I thought he was going to kill me! I had bruises all down my arms where he gripped them too tightly... He said that he would not share my attention with you, that I was not to make the mistake of trying to be a true friend to you and that I should be nothing more than an actress playing a part. I will not have her trying to curry favour with you, he said, or trying to turn you against me. You and she must only see each other when I am present to prevent my wife from attempting to practice any kind of manipulation upon you.”

“I told him that this was ridiculous, of course,” she ploughed on, throwing her hands up in a dramatic gesture, “and that there was nothing untoward in our little music session. That sent him into an even greater fury, and he slapped me across the face – I have always known him to be a passionate man, Rebecca, but he has never hit me before! I cried, and he soothed me and told me not to weep but simply to stay away from you unless he was there too. Oh, he cannot bear to think of anyone being loved but himself! Don’t think I do not know that, my dear. I know of Montague’s failings. Perhaps you do not know the feeling of love, but let me assure you, it is not blind. It is just not sensible. Anyway, Montague told me he was having you moved to the tower and that I must stay away from you in future, but I had to come and ask your forgiveness. Say you forgive me, my dear? Please?”

Of course I did. While Celine had played a part in bringing me to this

unfortunate moment in my life, it was through no scheme of hers. Besides, as much as I tried to hate her, there was something so genuine lurking beneath her affected, theatrical mannerisms that I could not help but like her. Her response to the music had been so pure and unsullied. Her voice truly warmed when she spoke Sir Montague's name, the way I imagined mine must when I spoke of Mervyn. Even her complete informality, which had infuriated me so much at first, was beginning to grow upon me as part of Celine's charm.

With the air of a child about to revel in a forbidden treat, she produced a box of chocolates that Sir Montague had given her the day after she was told of my banishment to the tower. She had, she told me, kept them specially for us to share, determined to bring them to me by way of an apology the very next time Sir Montague was away from home. For the first time in my life, I perched like a schoolgirl on the end of my bed, Celine sitting opposite me, tucking into the sweets and chatting without a thought for decorum or etiquette.

She told me how she and Sir Montague had met in Lyon, where she had been dancing, and how she had fallen head over heels in love with him. He had promised her marriage, so they travelled as man and wife as he brought her back to England. It was only when they arrived at Buxton that she realised it would not be such plain sailing after all, for he left her in rented accommodation while he returned to the Castle to break the news to his father. When his father refused his permission and blessing, Celine had urged him to marry her anyway, insisting that they would find a way to reconcile him to their union later. Sir Montague refused and Celine, hundreds of miles from home and with no way of

getting back, found herself in the position of long-term kept mistress, entirely dependent on her benefactor.

When it became clear that they could never be married, she had reconciled herself to her fate. She would remain the mistress, but Sir Montague assured her that his heart would always be hers. That much, at least, appeared to be true. Her initial reaction, when he suggested moving her into the Castle, had been one of horror. As much as she longed to be close to her lover, she had anticipated my reaction – indeed, she had imagined that it would be much worse. She had refused, stating that her position would be miserable and mine more so, but Sir Montague had brooked no refusal. He had informed her that he had given notice on the little suite of rooms in which she lived, and that come the end of the month she would be moving out one way or another; either to join him at Willow Castle or to beg her way back to France.

All through her story Celine kept staring intently at me, scanning my face as if looking for reassurance that I believed her. She need not have worried. I had now been on the receiving end of enough of Sir Montague's manipulations to recognise his style.

“And now,” Celine reached the climax of her story, her blue eyes round and wide with indignation, “Montague declares that he does not wish to have you wandering the Castle all the time. He claims that your music can be heard from his study and it wearies him, and that you are overtaxing your imagination with your visits to the library and that is why you suffer from so many headaches.”

“But I don't!” I cried. “Those headaches are a fiction of his to make you and

the servants think I am going mad.”

Celine nodded her head vigorously, her golden ringlets bobbing. “Yes, yes! But there is nothing to be done. Mrs Chapman has orders that when she takes away your breakfast tray tomorrow morning, she is to lock the door behind her. If you cause a scene, he says he will have you restrained.”

My head reeled at the prospect. I liked this little room, but to be trapped in here all day, every day, all alone – it would be unbearable! Even the Lady of Shalott had been granted a mirror and a loom to occupy her.

“Then I shan’t make a fuss,” I promised. “I shall give him no reason to do anything worse. But Celine – can you do something for me?”

“Anything! You have only to name it.”

“On the table in the library there is a stack of books. I have been using them to learn about the history of Willow Castle. If I am to be confined up here, I should be grateful to have them. Could you bring them to me, please, and perhaps pen and paper as well? I shall find somewhere to conceal them.”

“I shall fetch them at once,” Celine said, leaping to her feet. She was out of the door in a moment and I heard her pattering off down the staircase. She must have had a clear run, avoiding encounters with any of the servants, for she returned swiftly bearing the requested books, writing equipment and a little bundle of delicacies filched from the kitchen and wrapped up in a napkin.

“Thank you, Celine,” I hugged her with heartfelt gratitude.

“It is nothing, dear Rebecca,” she said. “I must go now, but I shall miss your company. Perhaps some time when Montague next stays at his club, you and I



shall be able to repeat this. For I wish more than anything that I had someone to talk to. It has been lonely, these last years, waiting for Montague and having to keep my existence a secret, unable to form anything beyond casual acquaintance. And now, when I am beginning to see a side of him that I never imagined existed... I do not like to think of either of us being on our own with these dilemmas. Let us hope that his next trip is soon, and that one or both of us has thought of a way to improve our lot by then.”

With a final emphatic hug, she slipped out of the room and was gone.

# 11 The Secret Note

## I

cannot deny that I found my captivity a torment. Although I was accustomed to being cooped up indoors, I had never before been deprived of the liberty to move from one room to another. I made a determined effort to bear it with grace and fortitude, but with each day that passed I became increasingly aware that it would eventually drive me mad – which, no doubt, was exactly what Sir Montague intended.

At least I had the secret stash of books that Celine had so helpfully purloined for me. I took care to hide them each individually, behind the dresser, beneath and on top of the wardrobe, in the slats on the underside of my bed, beneath a floorboard that I had worked loose with my buttonhook. That way, I reasoned, if Sarah or Mrs Chapman found a single book and took it away, I would still have the others. I could not bear the idea of being stuck in here without reading material. As beautiful as the view from my window was and as much as I loved to watch the light change and the day pass, I could not do that every day. I desperately needed to feel that I had some form of contact with the world beyond.

I also had pen, paper and a small bottle of ink, which I kept carefully concealed in the pockets of my heavy winter garments. I would not need those clothes for months yet, so there was little danger of the servants stumbling across

my secrets. I wracked my brains, trying to think of a way to get a message to Mervyn. He was my only friend in the outside world and, I was sure, my only way of escaping this place. First, I reasoned, the letter must be written and ready to be sent at the first opportunity.

*My dearest Mervyn,*

*I am in urgent need of help, and I believe you are the only person who can come to my aid. My husband has imprisoned me in the tower room and threatens to have me declared mad. I am not mad, it is vital that you know this. I am desperately unhappy, I am frightened and alone, but I have not lost my wits. I fear, though, that this is my husband's object in keeping me so confined.*

*I implore you, by the love I have for you, by the love you have declared for me, come back to Willow Castle. You are my only hope of escape. I am sorry to make this demand of you, but I believe you are the only one who can reason with your cousin or, should it prove necessary, overpower him.*

*I am lost, Mervyn. I do not know what to do. I wish I knew how to fight back, but I do not. I did not believe that my husband would go this far, I did not see it coming. I found him strange but I did not see the viciousness in him until the night before you left. By then it was too late. Events overtook me, and now I must be extremely cautious in everything I say and do, for he has not only imprisoned me, he has threatened that if I displease him he will cause you to suffer. He would attack you simply because I care for you. It seems that nothing will content him save the misery of those around him.*

*You must not give him any clue that I have summoned you, but find some*

*pretext for a visit – that pretext I must leave to you to decide. My ingenuity is already overtaxed as I try to figure out a means of escape. Should I find one, I shall somehow make my way to you and hope that you are willing to give me shelter. You are the only friend I have in the world, my love. I pray that you will forgive me for bringing such bad fortune into your life and for the disjointed nature of this letter, which I cannot redraft in case I exhaust my limited supply of notepaper.*

*I am, now and always, most devoted and unswervingly*

*Yours,*

*Rebecca*

I considered my options for dispatching my message. Since I had no regular correspondents, there was no-one I could write to and enclose the letter addressed to Mervyn with a plea that it be sent on. I wondered whether I could entreat Celine to do it for me, to write to some acquaintance of hers. Then I recalled what she had said about how Sir Montague had guarded her jealously, keeping her to himself, and I wondered whether she might have been just as isolated as me. I ruled out the possibility of asking Mrs Chapman to help me, since she seemed to be unalterably in my husband's pocket. Sarah might have been persuaded, I thought, but I was not certain. If I had had anything to bribe her with I might have risked it, but I had nothing of value in my little room. My treasure trove was still in the library, and although I knew that no-one else made great use of that room, my heart still raced when I considered the possibility of anyone finding the pouch of jewels.

I folded the letter and sealed it, then I unfastened the buttons at the front of my blouse. I tucked the paper into the top of my chemise, held in place by my stiff corset, feeling it lie safely against my flesh. Even if my room were turned upside down, no-one would find the note.

My next priority, I decided, must be exercise. It would be too easy to succumb to lethargy and idleness, trapped up here, and if the opportunity for flight came I must be ready for it. I paced the length of the small room again and again, counting as I went, continuing until I had crossed the floor fifty times. I summoned up music in my head and danced with an invisible partner, trying to avoid collisions with the furniture just as I had done in the tiny parlour in Lisson Grove. I must look a madwoman indeed, I thought as I laid my hand upon an imaginary shoulder and began a waltz to an unheard tune. If I am forced to do this for long enough, I certainly shall be.

Once I had taken my exercise I lay upon my bed and read. I trawled through my books, seeking out any references I could find to hidden passageways within the Castle. Even if they were just stories, perhaps some of them might prove to be real just like the trapdoor in the Withy Chamber. There might, I hoped, be something I could access from here in the tower. If I could find a way out, I would not hesitate to take it. I would rather risk being lost in a maze of subterranean tunnels and never find my way out than be trapped in here until five years pass and it pleases my husband to find a way to be rid of me, I promised myself.

I had no clock, but I learned to judge the time by the position of the sun, the

quality of the light and the changing sounds of the Hope Valley. I grew adept at hiding my books before I even heard the servants' footsteps on the stairs as they brought me my meals. They never appeared individually, it was always Sarah and Mrs Chapman together. In theory, Mrs Chapman was the one who delivered my food and Sarah came to see whether there was anything I needed – hot water, a fresh chamber pot, help with dressing (for I still insisted upon changing my clothes at the appropriate times of day, so determined was I to act as if I was still a free woman). In reality, I suspected that it had crossed my husband's mind that I might dare to attack a lone servant in the hope of escaping, so he sent two to make me put that thought out of my mind.

The final part of my plan to retain my sanity was to keep track of the days. I knew that I could not afford to let myself be swallowed up by time so that I did not know how long I had been imprisoned. In the back of my Bible I kept a tally, adding a new notch first thing in the morning. When I felt my grasp on the passage of time slipping I would check that page. The date of my incarceration was written at the top, April 22nd, and I would count the marks to work out what the current date must be.

That was how I knew that it was the 13th of May when Mrs Chapman made an unexpected appearance in my room one afternoon. Her footsteps on the stairs startled me; I slammed my book shut, shoved it under my pillow and leapt off the bed so that I was standing idly by the window when she opened the door. Sarah was waiting on the stair behind her.

“Good afternoon, My Lady,” she said, bobbing her usual curtsey. “The Master

sends his compliments. He hopes that you are doing a little better today after so much rest, and bids me take you to him at once. If you would be so good as to follow me, My Lady.”

She spun on her heel, not waiting for a response, and I followed her out. While there was a part of me that longed to resist, to send a message to my husband informing him that I would never obey his wishes again... I knew that I could not. I would never forgive myself if a moment's petulance on my part caused ruin for Mervyn.

When we got to the bottom of the staircase I expected to turn right, towards Sir Montague's study. Instead Mrs Chapman led me to the left, along the passageway that led to the master bedroom. My blood began to chill in my veins. Surely it is not possible, I thought. That is for night-time only, no respectable man would ask it of his wife in broad daylight! He cannot be planning to... I could not let myself complete the thought, but as the bedroom door swung open and I saw the expression of callous amusement on my husband's face, I knew my fears to be justified. Like a lamb to the slaughter, I stepped into the room and heard the door slam shut behind me.

\*

Once it was over, Sir Montague dressed and left. He had hardly spoken a word to me throughout the whole unpleasant procedure, but as he departed he flung a few words back over his shoulder, ordering me to join him at dinner. I rang for Sarah and asked her to fetch my evening clothes, but first to draw a bath for me.

If I had to do as he demanded, at least I would do it well scrubbed of his scent.

\*

The clash of the dinner gong resounded through the corridors of the Castle. Sarah had just finished smoothing down the ruffles of my slate silk skirt over my crinoline. My hair was newly washed and dressed, and my skin smelled of lemon-scented soap rather than my husband's lust. I threw my lace shawl around my shoulders and made my way to the Withy Chamber.

As soon as I set foot in the room, it felt like it was welcoming me back. The atmosphere was as strange as ever and the light still made dingy by the relentless grey-green hues of the mural, but it felt like home. This room and I had a secret, and at present my secrets were all I had.

Celine was already seated at the foot of the table in what should have been my place. I saw her eyes light up as she caught sight of me and her hand twitched as she checked the desire to raise it in greeting. I took care not to smile at her, since Sir Montague was at the sideboard pouring himself a glass of amontillado. The last thing we needed was for him to turn round and catch us behaving warmly towards each other.

Honestly, I was surprised to see her there. During my sojourn in the master bedroom earlier I had been speculating as to the cause of my husband's renewed interest, and I could only assume that he had tired of his mistress and possibly rid himself of her. Either that or she had displeased him in some way and he was lashing out at her by turning his attention to me, in which case I would have



expected her to be banished from the dinner table.

The three of us sat in awkward silence as we waited for dinner to be served. Sir Montague paid no more attention to either of us than if we had not been there at all. Celine dared not say a word for fear of saying the wrong thing and bringing down some further undeserved punishment upon me, and after more than a fortnight's isolation I found that I had nothing to say. At least, nothing I cared to share – while Sir Montague might well have been interested in my attempts to formulate an escape plan and my research into the Castle's hidden tunnels and passages, I knew better than to give him the slightest hint of my clandestine reading.

I saw Celine's face turn pale as Mrs Chapman ladled White soup into her bowl. She picked up the spoon and submerged it in the thick liquid, but as the scent of veal and blanched almonds hit her nose she could not bring herself to put it to her lips. She pushed the dish away untasted. Since White soup had always been one of my least favourite dishes on the Willow Castle menu, I took a few polite spoonfuls then left the rest. Sir Montague, whose partiality to the dish had kept it part of Mrs Chapman's meal plans even when I had suggested its removal, ate with relish.

When the fish course, skate in liver sauce, arrived, Celine's complexion moved from pale to slightly green. I did not see her eat a thing until the main course arrived. The plain chicken with croquettes of rice appeared to be more to her liking, as did the simple blancmange that followed it.

It was not until we had picked at a little of the cheese and fruit that Sir

Montague finally made his intention known. I had decided that we had been sitting for long enough and that it was time for us to retire and leave him to his port, so I rose. Celine followed my lead.

“Stay here, if you please,” Sir Montague said smoothly.

“I had thought you would wish to be left to enjoy your port and cigars, husband,” I replied, as if we were a perfectly normal couple where neither was holding the other a prisoner in their own home.

“Not this evening, wife.” He got to his feet, fetching the port decanter and bringing over a bottle of sweet ratafia. He served me then went to pour some of the dessert wine into Celine’s glass. She put a hand over it and shook her head. With a firm grip on her wrist, he pulled her hand out of the way. “I insist”, he said. Celine watched in dismay as her glass brimmed with the deep yellow liquid.

“Now, Rebecca,” Sir Montague began, resuming his seat. “You are probably wondering why, after all this time, I have sought out your company again. You were probably quite happy shut away up there in your tower, weren’t you, little mouse? But now I have some news for you, and some instructions which I expect you to follow. Listen well.

Mademoiselle Palomer is expecting a child. My child. An heir for Willow Castle if it’s a boy, or a useless occupant of an orphanage bed if it is a girl. We anticipate that it will be born some time in December.

Obviously, in order to be accepted as part of the Chastain line, my son must be seen to be legitimate. It will be necessary for the world to believe that you

have done your duty and borne me a child. I have already been putting it about amongst the servants that the reason for your confinement is that you were having a difficult time in the first months of pregnancy. You shall remain up there, seen by no-one but Mrs Chapman and myself, until Celine is delivered of the child. As far as the world knows, the boy shall be our legitimate son. Unless it's a girl, in which case it will be a tragic loss for the young mother."

"Do you not think that the servants will notice that my supposed companion, whom I am never permitted to see, is coincidentally expecting at the same time as me?" I asked. I knew I should have held my tongue, but the stupidity and presumption of his plans enraged me. "They know she is not married. There will certainly be gossip. Someone is bound to piece everything together."

He shot me a glare that could have frozen fire. "How right you are," he hissed. "That is why your companion will shortly announce that she has been summoned home to France by an urgent family emergency. A sick mother, perhaps, prone to headaches and hallucinations? Celine will disappear, and she will not return to her position as companion until after the child is born and enough time has passed to allay suspicion. In reality, she will be residing in the old gamekeeper's cottage in the grounds, so she can remain close by and the baby can be brought to us as soon as it has been born."

Adjacent to me, Celine's head was bent and I could see fat tears dripping onto the napkin in her lap. I longed to reach out and take her hand, to reassure her that it was not her fault that the man she loved had transformed into a monster.

"His name shall be Godfrey, after my grandfather," Sir Montague announced.

“Now, Rebecca, I trust that you can be relied upon to cause no difficulty in this scheme? You will accept the child as your own and do all that is required to render that version of events convincing?”

I nodded. What choice did I have? I could see that Sir Montague was becoming ever more dangerous and increasingly drunk, and I did not wish to risk him hurting me, Celine or Mervyn.

“Very good.” He got up from the table and walked round it to where Celine was sitting. He pulled her to her feet and kissed her, a kiss that looked soft but somehow threatening. I saw her body tighten slightly as she perceived the threat, then relax as she recalled the familiarity of her lover. I saw the complexity in their relationship and did not envy it.

I had hoped that Sir Montague might allow us to retire then and that I might use the occasion to pass my note to Celine and beg her to send it on. However, my luck was out. Sir Montague continued his lustful advances towards her, pushing her backward so she was sitting on the table. He placed a hand on her shoulder, trying to force her down into a lying position.

“Montague!” she cried, resisting him. “In company, really?”

He silenced her, trailing kisses down her throat and onto her breasts. I cleared my throat, but he paid no attention. Celine threw me a glance, half pleading and half apologetic, then allowed him to push her down. She flung her arm above her head in an attitude of abandonment. Her hand landed inches from me, a tightly-folded note between her fingers. Snatching it up, I pushed my chair back and got to my feet.

That stopped him.

“Where are you going?” he barked at me.

I gave him a withering glare. “Sir Montague, I am obliged to go along with your strange schemes in many respects. You keep me a prisoner, you deny me friends, you plan to force another woman’s child on me. These things I must bear. But you will not force me to watch you commit your infidelities right in front of me. You are already trying to take my liberty and my honesty. I will not give you my dignity.”

He watched in silence as I stalked out of the room, where Mrs Chapman waited in the corridor to escort me back to my prison where, ironically, I would have the freedom to read Celine’s note.

*Ma chere Rebecca,*

*If you are reading this, then I thank God and all his saints for furnishing me with a way to give this letter to you. I know what Montague intends tonight and now I must beg your forgiveness again. I would not injure you, my dear friend, for the world.*

*Please be assured, I do not intend to allow Montague to carry out his scheme. I will not have my child taken from me and be forced to spend my life denying that I am its mother. I will not have it brought up as another woman’s child, even if that woman is you. As much as I love Montague I cannot allow him to treat you, me, or my infant this way.*

*I do not yet know how I shall achieve it, but at the first opportunity I intend to leave. As soon as I can think of a place to go and a means of supporting my*

*child, I shall be gone. Perhaps I shall not have the chance to say farewell to you properly, my dear, but I shall try to let you know where I have gone and hope that you too will find a way to escape. If my child is a girl I shall name her after you in the hope that she will share your fortitude.*

*Celine*

## 12 The Child

“Darling Lady Rebecca!”

I forced myself not to wince as Lady Cynthia Talbot made a beeline towards me, trilling my name. She and her husband were the first of our guests to arrive, and as soon as she set foot in the Withy Chamber she flung out her hands and dashed towards me.

“Oh, it is so delightful to see you again!” Lady Cynthia chirruped. “Sir Montague, my dear, how kind of you to have us! And what a charming room! Quite original. I have never seen anything like it. One hears stories about the wonders of Willow Castle, of course, but it has been so long since anyone kept company here.”

“Indeed,” Sir Montague said. “We Chastains tend to keep ourselves to ourselves, here in our remote seat. It was good of you to travel so far, Lady Cynthia.”

“We wouldn’t have missed it for the world, Sir Montague, not for the world!” She turned to her portly husband. “Would we, Talbot? We wouldn’t have missed it for the world.”

He muttered his agreement and I embraced my duties as hostess by excusing myself to welcome the next arrivals.

It was a small gathering. Sir Montague had not told me how many people he had invited in my name, but I could see that the table was set for twelve. Each place was laid with enough cutlery for a dozen courses, though I had been

instructed by my husband to follow Celine's earlier example and pick at my food, in order to set up the pretence that I was with child. He need hardly have told me. I felt so nervous at being around him and so sickened by the thought of the deception that I was wondering how I was going to get through dinner without fainting.

To throw a party to announce my supposed pregnancy would have been the height of indelicacy, but Sir Montague was keen to have the trustees of his father's will know that he was living by its terms. If he could produce an heir only a year after marriage, he reasoned, they might be persuaded to override his father's wishes and release the remaining half of his inheritance without making him wait until our five years were up. This plan of his did not fill me with delight, since I could only imagine that it would hasten Sir Montague's need to be rid of me. I could imagine how he intended to accomplish that. Many women are unstable and unwell after birth, and no doubt it would occur to him that it would be an ideal time for me to succumb tragically to a bout of septicaemia or follow Mama out of an upper storey window.

So it was my husband's intention that we should not be so forthright as to tell our acquaintances of my 'condition' but that we should hint at it in such a way that they would work it out for themselves. This still struck me as somewhat gauche, especially as it was not true, but I knew that I had no choice.

I smiled serenely and exchanged pleasantries with each guest as they arrived; the cream of local society come to feast their eyes on the famous Withy Chamber while they had the chance. Apparently it had been almost a decade



since the last Chastain dinner party, so I could understand their urgent desire to take up the offer while it was there.

The last guests to whom I was introduced were two gentlemen from the Makepeace, Makepeace and Howe, the firm of solicitors responsible for executing Sir Montague's father's will. The reason for their presence was obvious. The rest were simply window dressing, bit-part players in the romantic drama of our supposedly blissful marriage.

It was not until the aperitifs were done and we had all sat down that I realised we were a guest short. I was in my rightful place at the foot of the table, but the place to my right hand side was empty. That is the place reserved for the guest of honour, I thought. So we must be expecting one more guest, someone whose presence Sir Montague considers important. I wonder who it is?

\*

Sir Montague had hired additional servants for the occasion, and by the time they had laid and cleared the first three courses I was already exhausted, replete and ready to retire. My husband had conspired with Mrs Chapman and the cook to create a particularly sumptuous feast, an ostentatious display of wealth and taste. I watched Lord Talbot, Dr Bagshawe and Messrs Makepeace and Howe salivating as they were served with chicken a la Marengo. The heavy scent of roasted herbs and tomatoes drifted down the table, offset by the sharp, crisp Riesling being poured liberally into our glasses.

I accepted only a small portion and dutifully took three bites before neatly

laying my knife and fork upon my plate. Dr Bagshawe, seated to my left, paused in his consumption of the dish.

“Forgive my asking, My Lady,” he blustered, dabbing the rich sauce from the corners of his whisker-covered lips with his napkin. “Are you quite well?”

Sir Montague had coached me in the way I was to answer this question. I paused for a moment, dipping my head ever so briefly as if permitting myself a private smile, then looked up clearly. “Perfectly, thank you Dr Bagshawe,” I smiled sweetly. “Nothing to be concerned about.” I followed this by simpering down the length of the table at my husband, exactly as he had demanded.

As I made my terrible, lying face at him, I noticed a footman appearing at Sir Montague’s shoulder and stooping to whisper a message in his ear. Sir Montague excused himself to the guests on either side and left the room. He was gone for no more than a moment, just long enough for Lady Cynthia to allow her dazzling smile to droop into a pretty pout of disappointment, then he returned to announce the late arrival of our missing guest.

Mervyn.

Fortunately all heads were turned towards Sir Montague as he introduced Mervyn, so no-one saw the look of shock and delight that illuminated my face. Well, no-one apart from my husband and my beloved, of course. I took great care to conceal the intensity of my joy as Mervyn strode across the room to sit by my side. More than anything else in the world, I wanted to leap out of my chair and fling my arms around him. Since I could not, I would settle for having an evening to spend beside him.

“My dear cousin,” he grinned, his dark eyes alight as he leaned in to kiss my cheek. I treasured the all-too-brief touch of his warm, slightly rough skin against mine. “I beg your pardon for arriving so late. My journey from Liverpool was a long and arduous one, and it took me several hours longer than I was anticipating to get this far.”

“Think nothing of it,” I told him, my eyes never leaving his face for a moment. “I am so glad that you made it eventually. Where should we have been without our guest of honour? The evening would not have been the same without you.”

If I had found it difficult to take three bites of each course before, now it was practically impossible. My whole body, my entire being, was filled with the strange flutterings of love, my heart beating fast and my soul feeling as if it was rushing along on a swift-speeding cushion of air. As the table worked its way through an obscenely large joint of roast beef, a palate-cleansing sorbet, jugged hare and green salad, I was incredibly thankful to have Mervyn to save me from the tedious small talk of the other guests. They all had common acquaintances, shared past experiences and local knowledge which I had so far been unable to obtain. Hearing about these things when I knew that what awaited me was further isolation and captivity merely frustrated me. I was genuinely interested, however, in learning about Mervyn’s life in Liverpool. I quizzed him about the shipping company, the details of his position, the new city, the quality and size of his lodgings, the people he had met. While he answered I pushed food around my plate and tried not to look like anything more than a suitably devoted in-law.

When good manners dictated that I must monopolise Mervyn no longer but allow the guests a chance to converse with him, Dr Bagshawe began droning at him about a trip he had once taken to Liverpool and how he had found it to be a more enterprising city but had been glad to escape to the comparative calm of the Peak District. Mervyn chatted amiably in response, providing the right amount of superficial flattery and wit to ensure that Dr Bagshawe finished the conversation feeling well satisfied.

By this point we had moved through Bavarian crème and charlotte russe to arrive at the cheese course. A ripe round of stilton sat surrounded by nuts and grapes. Fortunately it was part of Sir Montague's plan that I should refuse the pungent cheese, which I was glad to do as I had no great love for it. Instead I snipped off a little stalk of grapes, relishing their cool, clean taste. Although I did not enjoy the strong smell of the stilton I did not want this course to be over. As soon as the last mouthful was swallowed I would be expected to rise and lead Lady Cynthia, Mrs Makepeace and those ladies whose names escaped me into the drawing room, away from Mervyn. I would be expected to make yet more pitiful small talk over coffee while the men indulged themselves with port and brandy. I watched my guests, willing them to slow down each bite and buy me a few more precious seconds.

\*

The chatter amongst the ladies was dominated by Lady Cynthia. We covered a variety of scintillating topics, from the unseasonably warm weather to the

engagement of a new musical director at the Crescent in Buxton, to the state of the roads, to the scandalous prices set by the latest milliner to set up shop in Spring Gardens. I poured coffee and handed out petits fours with a fixed smile on my face, registering only just enough of their conversation to nod my head or tut in consternation at the right moments. If Mervyn has travelled from Liverpool, I pondered, then he must be staying overnight, at the very least. Perhaps he will spend a few days...

I waited for an appropriate moment to draw Lady Cynthia aside and put the next part of Sir Montague's plan into action. Discreetly I led her over to the fireplace and we stood, heads together.

"Dear Lady Cynthia," I began, adopting a halting tone that could have been either excitement or distress. "I must beg a favour of you..."

"Anything, my dear Lady Rebecca!"

"Well... you might very well know that I have recently lost my Mama -"

"Oh, indeed!" Lady Cynthia cried, taking my hand and squeezing it uncomfortably between her bony fingers. "I was so terribly sorry to hear about that, my darling. If there is anything that Talbot and I can do, anything at all, you have only to say the word."

"Quite," I said. "Without my Mama I have no female relative to guide me, and I find that I am now in need of guidance. I – I require a... recommendation..."

I saw the penny drop and Lady Cynthia's eyes lit up. "My dear, an *acchoucheuse*? Is that what you require?"

I dropped my head and gave a shy nod.

“Oh, you dear sweet girl!” Anticipatory delight bubbled over in Lady Cynthia and the next thing I knew I was being ushered back to the sofa. Lady Cynthia flapped at the other ladies, urging them to make room for me. “We cannot expect Lady Rebecca to stand, my dears, not in her delicate condition!”

That was all it took. Sir Montague had anticipated that a subtle word with Lady Cynthia would be the swiftest possible way of informing the whole of Derbyshire society of my ‘pregnancy’, starting with every other lady in the room.

\*

When the ladies were finally collected by their husbands to be taken to their carriages, I caught Sir Montague smiling triumphantly. He could see Lady Cynthia and the others fluttering and cooing round me, and he knew that his plan had worked. My eyes slid past him to Mervyn, willing him not to notice.

But he had. I saw his face fall, the light going out of his eyes as realisation dawned. My gaze met his and I hoped that my eyes conveyed the depth and sincerity of my sorrow.

Free from our guests, Mervyn, Sir Montague and I gathered for a nightcap. As Sir Montague poured a fine malt whisky for the gentlemen and a rich cream sherry for me, Mervyn turned to me with a pained expression.

“Forgive my indelicacy in asking, Lady Rebecca,” he said, his tone so stiff and formal that it made me want to cry, “but I could not help noticing the ladies treating you in a very particular way. Am I to understand that...

congratulations... are in order?"

My voice deserted me. I could not lie to him. Nor, with Sir Montague standing only a few feet away, could I risk a denial. My eyes filled with tears. I had to look away.

"They are indeed, Mervyn, old chap," Sir Montague swaggered over with the drinks. "To the heir to Willow Castle, eh?" He raised his whisky glass. Mervyn and I followed suit, mechanically echoing the toast. When Sir Montague saw me laying a hand to my belly he shot me a look of approval, obviously under the impression that I was beginning to embrace my role. In truth, I merely hoped to quiet the churning pain that gripped me as I felt all hope slipping away from me.

\*

There was no chance of finding a moment alone with Mervyn that night. The note was still tucked into my chemise and I wished fervently that I had outlined the details of Sir Montague's plans in it, for then I could have found some way to slip him the paper and he would have had an explanation. In its current state, the note would tell him nowhere near enough, and could be taken for the terror of a nervous young woman facing pregnancy in a lonely castle with a distant husband.

When Sir Montague declared that it was time for bed, I saw a glimmer of hope. Neither Mrs Chapman nor Sarah was waiting by the door to escort me to my room. Perhaps, in his desire to conceal the fact of my imprisonment, Sir Montague had decided that I need not be escorted and locked in that night! In

that case I should wait until he was out of earshot and then slip off my shoes and double back, barefoot and silent, towards Mervyn's room. Yes, that would work, I would –

“Come, little wife,” Sir Montague was saying, extending a hand to me. “It’s high time that you were in my bed. Goodnight, Mervyn.”

He pulled me to my feet and pushed me out of the room, one hand on the small of my back. I glanced back towards Mervyn, my face a mask of horror.

\*

The moment the door to the master bedroom closed and locked behind us, Sir Montague's arms slithered round me. I stood stock still as one hand caressed my neck, the other wrapped around my waist. He buried his face in my hair, his breath reeking of alcohol.

“You did well tonight, little wife,” he murmured. “You were very well-behaved indeed.” I felt him plant a wet kiss on my neck. “We need not be enemies, you and I,” he said, and I was surprised by his tone. I was used to his commanding coldness, but this... he was almost wheedling. “Perhaps in time you could come to love me, Rebecca, the way that Celine loves me... You think that I want you to hate me, but it’s not true. I just do not want you to love him. People always love him. Pater did, and I could see that you did from the first moment you met him.”

Releasing me suddenly, he staggered across the room and peeled off his coat, missing the chair and dropping it on the floor. He collapsed onto the bed,



shucking off his shoes with difficulty.

“That’s why I’ll never let him have this place,” he slurred. “I hate Willow Castle. Hate it. He doesn’t. He loves it. So he can’t have it. It shall go to my bastard and my damned cousin can go to hell, where he will charm the Devil himself, most likely. And he can’t have you, nor you him. Now get undressed and get into bed, for I am going to mount you with such force that my damned cousin will hear it from the other side of the Castle.”

\*

Deep in the early hours of the morning I lay wide awake, the light of the full moon streaming across my pillow. Sir Montague had been too far gone with drink to make good on his threat of rough wooing, but my body was sticky with sweat from the attempts he had made before finally giving up and falling into a drunken stupor. He lay beside me now, snoring loudly, his arm flung across me as if I were simply another pillow, present in his bed for his convenience and nothing else.

I slithered out from beneath his weight and got up. The flagstones were cool beneath my feet, a welcome contrast to the early summer warmth, and my thin shift was easily sufficient clothing. Softly I stole over to Sir Montague’s discarded coat and searched the pockets, looking for the heavy iron key that he had used to lock us in. My fingers probed into the soft cloth until at last I felt it, cold metal against my skin. I crept over to the door and slipped it into the lock. I began the turn.

“Mmm?”

I froze. The lock was old, ill-maintained, clunking noisily as metal touched metal. My husband was a light sleeper even in the depths of his drunkenness. If I unlocked the door I would not stand a chance of reaching Mervyn. I stepped away from the door lest Sir Montague should awaken fully and catch me there, and instead tiptoed over to his writing desk. The moonlight streamed across its surface, turning the embossed leather a willowy green-grey. It was more than enough light for me to write by.

*My beloved, beloved Mervyn,*

*Do not believe anything that you heard or saw tonight, everything is a lie. Everything since I came to Willow Castle has been a lie, an illusion, madness or devilry. Everything, my darling, except my love for you.*

*I am not carrying Sir Montague's child. That is a bald-faced lie which he is determined to tell so that he may pass his mistress' child off as mine, legitimising his bastard and cheating you of your inheritance. I shall never be mother to any child of his, I swear it, so unless he were to kill me – which I fear he may very well do some day – there shall be no legitimate Chastain heir from him.*

*He has forced me to participate in this deception, staging that dinner as a means of breaking the news to the executors of your uncle's will. I should have defied him to the last, even though he holds me prisoner and seeks to declare me insane, but he threatened to harm you and that I could not have borne. I could*

*not have you suffer for my stubbornness, my love.*

*I have no idea how I am to get this note to you, my darling Mervyn. I am writing in hope, not in expectation, and because I must set these thoughts down or else go mad. If I can find a way to ensure that you receive it, you must go at once to the library and find Osier: A History, which shall reveal to you a secret that no other must know. That secret may be the key to our future happiness, although at present it seems like madness simply to write those words. How can there be future happiness? I am trapped, you are gone, nothing is as it should be.*

*The happiest moments of my life were those that I spent in your arms. I would to God we could have run away together then, my beloved. Know that whatever happens, whether I get out of this situation alive and with sanity intact or not, know that above all else I love you, I love you, I love you.*

*Forever yours,*

**R**

I folded the letter with careful precision, then spotted a stick of sealing wax. I had had none to use on my last letter, but I decided that I would use it this time. At least then I would know if my letter had been found and read before I found a way to put it into Mervyn's hands. I struck a match, praying that the small scrape and hiss would not disturb Sir Montague's fragile sleep, and lit the wax stick. Globules of shiny redness dripped onto the paper, and for want of my own bronze seal I placed a kiss on my fingertip and pressed down, ignoring the

stinging heat.

As I pursed my lips to blow out the wax stick, I heard a snort from my husband behind me. I spun round, expecting him to have woken. He had not. I breathed a sigh of relief, then turned my attention back to the dancing flame in my hand.

And then I rose and glided across the floor like a dancer in a dream, and I held the little flicker of fire against the drapes on my husband's heavy canopy bed.

Flames licked up the cloth. Before I knew it the conflagration was rampaging along the bedposts and devouring the upholstery. I watched spellbound, hardly able to reconcile my own actions with the beautiful danger in front of me. Then a flaming scrap of velvet broke free and fluttered down onto the counterpane. I snatched up my shawl and slipped out of the room – then, on a moment's icy impulse, I turned the heavy iron key and locked the door from the outside.

# 13 Forgiveness

## M

My feet flew over the flagstones as I raced towards Mervyn's room. I must have looked like the ghosts I had always half-expected to see, my long white shift trailing behind me and my dark hair tumbling down round my shoulders. I knocked upon his door; no tentative tapping this time but urgent pounding with all my might.

"Mervyn!" I called. "It's me, Rebecca! Open the door!"

"Rebecca?" Mervyn appeared in the doorway, dishevelled and handsome. "What the devil -"

I could not resist. I leapt into his arms and kissed him.

"I am so sorry!" I wailed, clinging tightly to him. "None of it is true! I am not having Sir Montague's child, I hate him, there is so much I have to tell you – but it must wait. The Castle is on fire and we must make haste."

He screwed his eyes shut, shaking his head, still half asleep and trying to make sense of the last few moments.

"Mervyn!" I repeated. "I said the Castle is on fire, don't you think we had better leave?"

This time the message got through. His eyes snapped open, his posture suddenly alert.

"Fire, you say? Right." He plunged into the darkness of his room and returned

a moment later with a coat in each hand. “One for you and one for me,” he said. “We shall need them when we get outside. Come on.” He grasped my hand and we fled towards the central corridor. As Mervyn plunged on towards the exit I suddenly remembered something.

“Stop!” I cried, dragging him to a sudden halt. “Mervyn, wait. There is something -”

“Whatever it is, we must leave it,” he said, gently but urgently stroking the wayward hair out of my face. “This place is full of dried out old wood, we had best not linger.”

“It’s important! We have to go to the library!”

“The library? Rebecca, are you -”

“Come on!” I hauled him after me, and together we dashed through passageways that were suddenly coming to life as the smell of smoke drifted through the building and woke the staff. From the servants’ quarters high in the attics I heard the urgent jangling of an alarm bell. Outside, someone screamed. I flew to the nearest window slit and peered through. Celine was standing upon the gravel, half-dressed. She must have abandoned her cottage the moment she heard the bell and now she was watching in horror as the fire took the Castle in its grip. For a moment I wondered if there was any way of getting to her, but she turned and ran. I saw her changing course, clearly intending to take the road to Castleton, then Mervyn pulled me away and we plunged on until we reached our destination.

I tore across the room and flung myself on my knees in front of the low shelf

where I had stored the jewels. I ran my finger along the spines, searching for the correct book, and when I found it I hauled it out and my fingers closed around the comforting weight of the laden pouch. Mervyn, standing behind me, must have thought that I had gone mad indeed, for I did not stop to explain but simply grabbed his hand again and together we fled back along the passages.

That was when we heard the crash. Judging by its direction I guessed that the floor of the master bedroom, directly above the entrance hall, had given way. I exchanged a glance with Mervyn and saw that he was thinking the same thing.

“We won’t be able to get out via the front door,” I said.

“Nor cut across the hall to get round to the back stairs and the kitchen door,” Mervyn agreed. “The servants will be all right, but I think we are stuck. If we go back and try the library window, you should fit through -”

I turned on him, eyes blazing. “And leave without you?” I cried. “Come this way. I have a better idea.”

We may not have been able to reach the front door or the kitchen door, but there was another door to the house that only I knew about – the trapdoor.

“The Wither Chamber?” Mervyn panted as he realised where we were headed.

“Trust me,” I gasped back. We stepped into pitch darkness as we entered, for the Chamber was windowless and the candles long since extinguished. I heard Mervyn strike up a match, looking for a candelabra, and the sound sent a faint, giddy thrill through my veins as I recalled the reason for the fire now consuming the place.

Mervyn looked sceptical but said nothing as I darted over to the westernmost

point of the pentagonal space. I scanned the wall, searching for the word... there it was! VIMINIA. I followed the line of the writing, found the knothole and sent up a deep, heartfelt prayer that my dream had not been a dream after all. I slipped my finger into the hole. There was the spring. I touched it and the floor slid back.

“Well, I’ll be – well done, my love!” Mervyn seized me with his free arm and kissed me forcefully, gratefully. “How did you -?”

“Best to save the explanation until we are safely at the bottom,” I suggested. “Watch your step.”

We climbed sure-footedly down the long, narrow staircase. It should surely have been more terrifying with an inferno at our backs, but knowing that Mervyn was with me gave me courage. I tripped down the stairs, eager to reach the safety of the underground river and show Mervyn the beautiful chamber that waited below.

The claustrophobic corridor opened out exactly as I remembered it and blossomed into the stunning vaulted cavern, almost like a reproduction of the Wither Chamber carried out by nature itself. Behind me, I heard Mervyn’s sharp intake of breath as he set eyes on it. I led him over to the Devil’s Seat and at last we rested, safe in each other’s arms.

“Now,” he said, kissing my hair and holding me tight, “as much as I love you for your air of mystery, are you going to tell me what’s going on? How on earth did you know about this place?”

“Not so much how on earth,” I smiled, “but how the Devil.” I told him every



detail I could remember of my encounter that night, from the unearthly music that had lured me to the Wither Chamber to my victory on the chess board and my lesson in the Castle's history and secrets.

"I'm sure I should be jealous that you were being taught about Willow Castle by anyone other than me," Mervyn quipped, "since that was always my subject. But I must say, I am impressed. You don't do things by halves, do you?"

That gave me pause. "I've never thought of myself as the kind of person who doesn't do things by halves before," I said thoughtfully. "I suppose you are right..."

I told him about all that I had suffered at my husband's hands, from the humiliation of having him bring his mistress into the house to the torment of my imprisonment. I wanted to tell him all about the degradations of the bedchamber, but I could not. I began to speak but my voice deserted me. Mervyn simply held me close and soothed me, assuring me that I could tell him in my own time, whenever that may be, and he would be there to hear it.

"But will you?" I fretted, suddenly breaking away from him. "Will you truly? Mervyn, I have done something terrible this night, and perhaps when you hear it you will never forgive me."

"Rebecca, my darling, I doubt that there is anything you could do for which I would not forgive you. If, indeed, you need forgiveness. Come, tell me, what is it?"

Through tear-choked breaths I related the events of the evening since we had parted company in the parlour. I told him of Sir Montague's drunken lust and

threats, of how he had fallen asleep and I had got out of bed and taken the key, of the letter I had written and how I had come to find myself with a flickering candle in my hand that had somehow found its way to my husband's drapery.

"I have killed your cousin and set fire to your home," I said, my voice flat with shock as I spoke it aloud for the first time. "I shall understand if you withdraw from me, if you feel you cannot love me."

For a long time Mervyn sat in silence, staring into the torrent of the river. I felt the knots tightening in my stomach as I became convinced that the price I had paid for my freedom would be my love – and even that freedom might be short-lived. It struck me that I had taken the life of another, which could have more serious consequences altogether.

"Rebecca." Mervyn spoke at last. "I can't condemn you for what you have done. In all honesty, I am only surprised you did not do it sooner. I'm sorry for my cousin, but it sounds as if he gave you little choice. You had to escape, and I don't see how else you could have done it." He leaned back upon the Seat. "So old Montague's dead, is he? It hardly seems real. I've thought about it so many times, you know – about what I'd do if anything were to happen to him. Since I met you, it's always taken the form of rushing back to the Castle to take care of you, then after you came out of deep mourning I would ask you for your hand. Of course, all that seems pretty foolish now..."

"What? Foolish? But why?" I started upright. The idea of marrying me had become foolish?

"Because I've nothing to offer," he said. "Just as before. My situation barely

changes – in fact, if anything it becomes even less stable. My position at the shipping company is entirely dependent on the head of the Chastain family, and after Montague I am not sure who qualifies. The estate may well be entailed upon some distant relative or other, in which case I could find myself out on my ear. Even if it turns out that I am the next heir, I doubt there will be much money once we've finished rebuilding the Castle.”

“You would rebuild it, then?” I asked. “You think you could?”

“Oh yes,” he grinned. “It’s not the first time Willow Castle has been burned, it probably won’t be the last. The stone is pretty sturdy. The floors will burn, and all the wood panelling, and we shall lose a little bit of stone in places where the flames reach high enough to destroy the joists. But wood can be replaced, and enough of the Castle will live on for me to consider it the same place. The Withy Chamber has survived at least two previous fires.”

“Really?”

“It’s all stone. Even the willow mural was done in fresco. Plaster doesn’t burn, stone doesn’t burn. Whatever happens to the rest of the place, we’ll have the Withy Chamber to go back to. Or rather, I will. I wouldn’t ask you to come back and lead a life of genteel poverty with me. I believe you’ve had rather too much of that sort of thing already.”

“And if I said that I wanted to?”

“I would beg you to take your time and think about it,” he said solemnly. “Oh, Rebecca, please don’t think I say this lightly. I adore you, and I can think of nothing I want more than to ask you to be my wife. If truth be told, I cannot bear

the thought of a life without you in it. But you must think of your own wellbeing. When you were poor before, you were a young woman with her whole life ahead of her. You had prospects, ways of pulling yourself out of poverty. Even now, you are a widow. There is bound to be some sort of pension which you'll lose if you remarry. Don't you want to enjoy that freedom and independence for a while? Once married to me you would be bound to a pauper forever. I could not let you walk straight into that when you are still reeling from the shock of your Mama's death and the cataclysmic end of your first marriage. You would at least need to let the dust settle before deciding that you are happy to be poor again."

I laid a hand lightly upon his chest. "Mervyn, my love," I said softly, "you're forgetting one thing..."

I up-ended the green velvet pouch and tipped the Chastain family jewels out onto his lap. They glinted and shimmered in the candlelight. I lifted the emerald pendant out and held it up, letting it catch the light and glow against the backdrop of white rock. As my beloved Mervyn stared speechless at my treasure trove I laughed aloud. His face broke out in a beaming smile and he threw back his head and laughed with me. Then he caught me up in a jubilant embrace and kissed me, and kissed me, and kissed me.

And when at last we had sufficiently sworn and demonstrated our love, we carefully packed up the jewels, took up the candelabra and made our way hand in hand towards safety, the Hope Valley, and our new life together.

**M**

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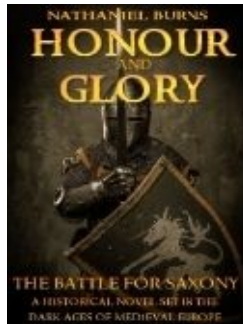
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