

Lord Mellebourne

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CHAPTER ONE

JULY 1800

Katherine Garrett stood near her father's grave, watching as the men threw the first shovelfuls of dirt on top of the coffin. The thought that her archaeologist father, who had spent nearly his whole life digging things from the earth, would now be buried beneath it nearly brought her to her knees. Only the knowledge that the vicar waited for such a sign of weakness, thus bolstering his oft-stated disapproval of her presence at the funeral, kept her standing straight and tall, her chin raised.

When the grave diggers put down their shovels, Katherine turned away and began walking back to her parents' cottage.

"Miss Garrett," said a voice that made her skin crawl.

Katherine acknowledged the speaker with a brief nod. "Mr Blake."

The sun glinted on his sleek, blond head. "Your father's death is a loss to us all. Archaeology will not be the same without him."

Katherine managed a slight smile. "Thank you for your kind words."

"May I offer you a ride to your parents' cottage?"

"So kind, but I must confess, I prefer to walk."

For a moment, it appeared that Mr Blake was about to bare his sharp teeth, but turned the expression into a smile that left his pale blue eyes cold. "Of course. May I say again how saddened I

am by the death of your father?"

"Thank you." Katherine watched him go, releasing a breath she did not know she was holding. She continued on the path, promising herself a good cry once she reached the safety of the cottage.

When she reached the cottage, her breath caught. The front door was ajar. Katherine knew she had fastened the door behind her as she had been the last one leave the cottage that morning. Mr and Mrs Griggs had departed first as they wished to accompany their niece and nephew to the funeral service. She did not expect them to be home yet. Besides, never in their long service to the Garrett family had the Griggs ever been careless enough to leave the cottage unsecured.

Katherine quickly entered, closing the door behind her, and stood for a moment, listening. A *thud* came from the parlour, so she rushed down the hall and entered the room.

Her temper rose. Mr Blake stood before a window, holding a Roman bronze pan up to the light. The door of the corner cabinet stood open behind him. He was so engrossed in his examination that he did not notice her until she walked over to him and took the pan from his hands. She went over to the cabinet, carefully set the pan back in its place, and locked the door. After dropping the key of the cabinet in the drawer below, she turned round and immediately stepped back.

Blake stood only inches away. Her nostrils filled with the cloyingly sweet smell of his *eau de toilette*. She could not breathe.

"Miss Garrett," he said, taking one of her hands. His thin mouth curved into a smile, exposing sharp incisors. "May I again say how saddened I am by your father's death?"

"Thank you." Katherine tried to slip her hand from his grasp, but he held it tightly.

Blake moved closer, his pale blue eyes gleaming. "I think you know why I am here."

Katherine took a step back, and grew more alarmed when Blake stepped forward. "In truth, I do not."

"Come now, Miss Garrett. Much has been made of your intelligence." He stepped forward again, and reached out a narrow finger to touch her hair.

Even though she was tall, Blake was taller, his blond head rising above her. He pressed closer, forcing her back into the corner. “Sweet Miss Garrett. Katherine. There’s nothing to keep you from me now.”

“Mr Blake!”

“Such appealing modesty. It serves to fan the flames.” His arms snaked around as he pressed his body against her and kissed her greedily, his tongue flicking against her closed lips.

She tried to pull from his grasp, but he proved stronger, his kisses moving to her ear, her neck. His hands crept up to her breasts as the moulding of the cabinet doors pressed against her back. She gasped and struggled, afraid that at any moment he might discover the medallion that hung from a long chain round her neck. Out of desperation, she drove the heel of her half boot into the toe of his shoe and then drove her knee into the apex of his thighs.

“Hell! Vixen!” His hold loosened as he doubled over, and she ran from the parlour. She slammed the door behind her and turned the key that someone had left in the lock. She pressed her ear against the door.

Glass broke and the cabinet door slammed against the wall. Her pulse raced. It was plain that Mr Blake had no intention of leaving before he found the medallion. Why had her father chosen to share the news of his priceless find to a man who wantonly broke the glass of a cabinet when he knew where the key was kept?

Katherine looked round and saw Mr and Mrs Griggs standing in the corridor, expressions of shock on their faces. She hurried over, and gestured for them to remain silent. “You must go. Now. Do not come back until later tonight or perhaps tomorrow.”

“What is it? Mr Blake—” began Mr Griggs.

“He must not see either of you. Please go, Mrs and Mr Griggs.”

“But what will you do?” Mrs Griggs asked.

“I will get help. Please, go. I fear what Mr Blake might do if he does not find what he is looking

for.” To her relief, the elderly butler and his wife left her.

Katherine rushed down the corridor on tiptoe. At the back door she snatched her cloak and bonnet from their hooks. She flung the cloak about her shoulders and ran down to the stables, thanking providence that they were separated from view of the house by a tall stone wall.

The animals greeted her with wickers, and she shushed them. When she entered the tack room, she found the ancient groom, Dobbin, polishing her side saddle, a rag grasped in his gnarled hands.

“Do you need help, Miss?”

“Yes, please. I need this saddle.” Katherine collected a bridle, and rushed to her horse’s stall. When she opened the door, the horse stepped into the middle of the bay, as docile as a sixteen hand hound. She bridled and saddled him, her fingers trembling, then turned to Dobbin. “Dobbin, you must go. It is not safe to stay. I am afraid Mr Blake may harm you. He is looking for something of my father’s I do not want him to find.”

“Leave? I’m not leaving the horses. I’m not leaving, Miss.”

“But you must, Dobbin.”

Dobbin stuck out his jaw. “I’m not going, Miss, why should I? Besides, with my legs being what they are, I can’t get very far. No, my duty’s here, with the horses. I’ll bar the doors, if you insist”

Katherine touched his arm. “Thank you. Either I or Griggs will let you know when it is safe.”

The elderly groom nodded.

She led the horse out of the stable, sprang into the saddle and arranged her skirts over her bent knee, then galloped off toward the magistrate’s house. Mr Abbott lived three miles from her father’s cottage, less if she went through the fields instead of the road. A storm was coming. If she were lucky, she would arrive before the rain. She urged her mount toward the gate and he cleared it smoothly, landing on the other side and racing across the uncut field, the tops of the grass brushing against her feet.

Soon the horse’s hooves clattered on the stones of Abbott’s drive. Katherine halted her horse in

front of the steps, leapt down, and ran to the door. She pounded four times before the butler opened it. He betrayed no sign of remembrance, though Katherine had seen him many times before.

“I need to see Mr Abbott, please. It is very important.” The butler raised his brow. “Please, I must see him.”

He finally relented and led her through the entry to the parlour where Mr Abbott appeared to be napping by the fire, the *London Times* spread across his lap.

“Miss Garrett,” the butler announced lubriciously, and Mr Abbott started awake, the paper spilling to the floor.

He looked annoyed to have been found asleep, then smoothed his features into a supercilious smile as he rose and walked toward her. “I am so sorrowed by your loss, Miss Garrett. It is a loss that will be felt by many who knew your father.”

“Thank you. But I need your service as magistrate. It is a matter of some urgency.”

“Urgency? Whatever could cause any urgency for you, my dear Miss Garrett?”

“Mr Blake, sir. He is presently in my father’s cottage. He broke into a cabinet and means to rob us—”

“Mr Blake? Do you mean the learned Mr Frederick Blake, one of your father’s colleagues?”

“Yes, Mr Abbott. I ask that you come back with me now.”

Mr Abbott reached for her hand and she moved back instinctually. He looked annoyed and moved forward, taking her hand with strength that surprised her. “You must be mistaken in your sense of urgency, my dear Miss Garrett. You have nothing to fear from such a well-respected man.”

“It is you who is mistaken, Mr Abbott! Mr Blake made a threatening advance toward me and is now destroying my father’s belongings! Please help me stop him.”

The magistrate’s face turned red with anger. “I do not like your tone, Miss Garrett, nor do I think that the free manner in which your parents brought you up has done you any good. You are headstrong, too familiar in your manner, and without respect. You even refuse to follow the advice of

those who possess more authority than you, as your behaviour at your father's graveside clearly demonstrated. I intend to keep you with me until my carriage is ready. You shall return to your father's cottage under my escort."

"No!" Katherine broke free and ran past the startled butler to the front door into the rain where a groom waited, holding the reins of her horse. She snatched the reins from him, scrambled into the saddle, and galloped away.

She pulled her horse to a halt when they reached the peak of the small hill which overlooked the magistrate's house, and wondered what to do next. The kindly vicar of the village church was away, but even he could not be counted on defending her against the magistrate. He was a man whose gout and nature made him much prefer the comfort of his fireside to his congregation.

There was her grandmother, but she was in Scotland. Yet, if she were closer, Katherine did not think she would go to her. As a child, she had sensed no warmth from her, and endured the fortnights that she and her mother would spend each summer in her grandmother's Oban cottage. When Katherine turned fifteen, these yearly visits ceased, following a strained conversation between her parents. No, her grandmother would be no refuge either.

Katherine shivered, her bonnet soaked through, as well as her gloves. Her hands and feet grew cold. She had to get out of the rain.

There was one possibility—a remote one at best—but at this point she had no other choice. The estate of Lord Wellesbourne was within twenty miles of this hill. The earl had gained her father's notice by claiming to possess some Roman artefacts which he had been eager to sell. Her father died before he had a chance to view them. She remembered her father doubting whether the artefacts had been genuine or even existed. "Anyone who seems to have lived by the motto, 'board up a window each day to keep the tax man at bay' is someone who might claim to possess the Philosopher's Stone in an effort to keep from Newgate Prison's doors."

Whether that particular earl was still alive, Katherine was not sure. Her father had mentioned

the earl had two sons, the youngest of whom, in her father's opinion, showed promise as a man of sense. With any luck, the younger son was the earl now.

She gathered the reins, and urged her horse into a canter, aiming for the far section of the field. One small portion of the hedge had been damaged by frost. It was low enough to jump safely onto a lane beyond. She wiped the rain out of her eyes, and carefully lined her horse up for the approach, aiming a little to the north so that when her mount landed, he would be pointing in the direction they would be travelling.

Normally, jumping this portion of the hedge was only moderately challenging. Now, the persistent rain obscured her vision and soaked her gloves, making the reins slippery and difficult to hold tightly.

She spurred her horse on, and he responded smoothly, his ears pricking forward as they neared the jump. As he sprang into the air, Katherine focused in keeping her weight centred over his withers and her body still. Momentarily, they were aloft, then down, hard, on the packed surface of the lane.

Katherine gasped as her foot slipped from the stirrup, and she gripped tightly with her crossed leg and grabbed handfuls of her horse's sodden mane. Her horse slowed, perhaps sensing her panic, and she was able to collect herself. Gratefully, she patted his neck and they headed on.

As if the rain and wind were not enough, thunder boomed and lightning flashed, making Katherine fear they might have to seek shelter before reaching the earl's estate. She lost track of the number of hedges and gates they jumped in the relentless wind and rain.

A flash of lightning suddenly illuminated an old oak, informing her that they reached the last barrier that separated them from the Great North Road. At that point, the Earl of Wellesbourne's estate was only ten miles away. She spurred her horse from a trot into a canter, unable to keep her teeth from chattering, and prayed that they would be able to clear the oncoming gate smoothly.

Just as her horse leapt, lightning struck the oak, splitting the trunk in two and sending its halves crashing down behind them. Her horse panicked, rearing and bucking, and threw Katherine from the

saddle. Her head struck hard on the road and she knew no more.