

SARAH E. LADD

his coat earlier, and now dirt and dust darkened the once-fine fabric, and his shirtsleeves clung to his arms, dampened with perspiration.

Refocusing his attention, he rubbed the back of his neck and stared down the orchard row. The scent of apple blossoms intermingled with that of the sea—an intoxicating blend, one that felt like the past and future colliding. He lifted his gaze to the sapphire sky, searching its wispy clouds as if the answer to his problem were hidden within.

Oh yes, his plans were grand: Orchards. Much-needed repairs to Penwythe Hall. Expansion to the south. Impatience for it all to fall into place surged within him.

He knelt and dragged his fingers over a section of damp, freshly turned soil where a new tree replaced one that had died. He lifted a handful and sifted it through his fingers before he stood to his full height once again. The stones had already been cast, and every last farthing he possessed had been committed to these orchards.

With renewed determination he returned to the road. There was work to be done, and plenty of it. Now there was even less margin for error. There could be no turning back.



CHAPTER 3



A steady rain pattered against the tall leaded windows in the study, and Delia tightened the black mourning shawl about her shoulders to ward off the bitter chill. A headache throbbed, and she pressed the back of her hand to her lips to stifle a yawn.

Neither she, nor anyone else at Easten Park, had slept in the time since Mr. Twethewey's death two days prior, but even as exhaustion threatened to take hold, she deliberately straightened her shoulders. Her distraught charges deserved to know what would happen in the coming days. Mr. Steerhead had been quiet on the matter, and she needed answers.

Next to her, Mr. Simon occupied the wingback chair. His foot tapped an even beat against the chair's leg, and he leaned heavily with his elbow on the chair's arm, staring at an indeterminate point on the wall. His clean-shaven jaw twitched. The twinkle that normally glimmered in his dark-brown eyes was absent.

The sudden jerking of the door snapped them both to attention.

Mr. Steerhead stormed in, accompanied by the sharp scents of brandy and tobacco. His wrinkled white cravat hung loose, and his hair, the color of which blurred somewhere between brown and gray, escaped his queue in frizzed locks. As a frequent guest at Easten House, he easily made himself at home in the room, and he dropped to the late Mr. Twethewey's chair behind the desk with a huff.

"That undertaker is a greedy snake." Mr. Steerhead pointed at

them as he spoke through gritted teeth, jabbing his finger forward with every syllable. "If he thinks he is going to play on our grief to get one more farthing over our agreed-upon amount, he's got another thing coming."

Muttering, Mr. Steerhead forced his focus to the desktop and shuffled through the stack of papers, his motions frantic, as if searching for something of great import. "If there had been any other undertaker within a reasonable distance, I should throw this one from the premises. That's what I'd do."

Delia and Mr. Simon exchanged glances.

With no other family members in the vicinity, the arrangements for Mr. Twethewey's funeral had been assumed by Mr. Steerhead—a task the man clearly loathed.

Delia, ignoring his boisterous bluster, leaned forward, determined to address the job at hand. "Have the burial arrangements been made?"

"The burial?" Mr. Steerhead jerked his head up and stilled his hands, almost as if he had forgotten her presence. "The funeral will be the day after tomorrow. Of course I'd prefer to wait until Sunday, but the coffin has been purchased, the hearse and horses have been arranged, and the bearers have all been notified. I see no cause for delay, especially with the distress the children are under. Mr. Twethewey had very few relations in the area, and his business associates won't want to make the journey north from London, especially with the dreadful weather. This insufferable rain has made the roads nigh impassable."

After the onslaught of words, an abrupt silence prevailed. Mr. Steerhead removed his wire spectacles from the bridge of his hawkish nose and rubbed his forehead with his bony fingers for several moments. "It's dreadful business to arrange a funeral for a friend in such a manner."

Delia smoothed the black muslin of her skirt, ignoring the pinch

in her stomach. She could relate to the emotion—the oppressive sensation of loss and dread, of sorrow and numbness. She forced the unwanted thoughts away. “Will Mr. Jac Twethewey be attending?”

Mr. Steerhead shrugged an angular shoulder. “I wrote to him, but I doubt he’s received the missive. At any rate, the brothers weren’t on the best of terms. I doubt he’ll be pleased with Mr. Twethewey’s decision to send the children to Penwythe Hall.”

Delia’s posture slackened. She’d hoped the children would be able to see their uncle prior to traveling to Cornwall, if for no other reason than to ease their minds.

But it was not to be.

Mr. Steerhead cleared his throat. “Of course, the young ladies will not attend the burial, but the undertaker has arranged for new black coats and gloves for the boys. At least that is one thing that mouse of a man has done efficiently. Mr. Simon, you will speak with him and see the boys are adequately prepared.”

Mr. Simon nodded.

“In the meantime, you both must prepare the children to depart for Penwythe the morning following the funeral.”

“The morning after?” Delia’s posture straightened once again. “So quickly? It seems almost cruel to uproot them so soon.”

“On the contrary.” Mr. Steerhead absently retrieved his pocket watch from his waistcoat, popped it open, squinted as he lifted the face to the light, then snapped it shut. “The sooner they settle in a new environment, the better. Besides, I’ve had the good fortune to find a tenant to lease Easten Park, but they require immediate occupancy. Such an arrangement will provide income during this time, which is always desirable in circumstances such as these. You only need pack what the children will require for the next several weeks. The staff will remain behind and can pack the remaining items and send them forthwith.”

Delia’s head swam with the details she’d just received.

Income? He was really concerned about income at a time like this?

She opened her mouth to speak, but Mr. Steerhead retrieved a portfolio from the top drawer of the desk, pulled two large packets from it, and extended one toward her and the other toward Mr. Simon.

Without awaiting instruction Mr. Simon accepted and opened his missive. Curious, Delia lifted her head to see over his arm and spied bank notes folded inside the paper. Mr. Simon's eyes widened. "What's this?"

"Mr. Twethewey instructed me to give these to you. He intended it as incentive that you'd make good on your word to accompany the children to Penwythe. He feared you'd not be willing to travel so far."

Mr. Simon cleared his throat and glanced toward Delia.

She did not open her letter but lowered it to her lap and leaned forward, eager for as much information as she could glean. "What can you tell us about Penwythe Hall, Mr. Steerhead?"

He rested his elbows on the arms of his chair and folded his hands over his midsection. "Penwythe Hall is the seat of an estate on the north coast of Cornwall, quite close to the sea and north of the moors. It's an ancient place—been there for hundreds of years, I'd guess—but sadly it's fallen into disrepair over the last couple of decades."

"So you've been there?" she clarified.

"Ah, yes." He lifted his pointed chin. "A number of times. At one point our Mr. Twethewey was set to inherit the place, so I accompanied him there on many visits in anticipation of that."

"I remember that." Mr. Simon brushed a wayward piece of lint from his trousers, as if only paying half attention to the details. "Caused quite a stir, if I recall correctly."

"You do." Mr. Steerhead turned his full attention to Delia.

"This all happened before you arrived, but Mr. Simon was here. Mr. Twethewey and his brother, Jac, were raised by their uncle, William Angrove, at Penwythe Hall after the death of their parents. When their uncle died, it was expected that he would will the estate and all the associated holdings to Randall. When the will was read, however, Mr. Angrove left the estate in its entirety to Jac, the younger brother. It caused quite a rift between the two."

Delia frowned. "But if the property was not entailed, would Mr. Angrove not be free to leave the property to whomever he chose?"

"Indeed, but for years Mr. Angrove assured Randall that the property would come to him. Randall, in turn, endeavored to establish his business to ensure a financial future for the property. But in the end, it was not to be. Randall believed Jac influenced the uncle in his last days to change the will. Of course, his brother denied such accusations. To my knowledge, after the will was read they never again spoke."

Mr. Simon shifted in his chair, as if finally taking interest. "If there was such bad blood between them, why did Mr. Twethewey name him as guardian?"

Mr. Steerhead stood, moved to the side table, and lifted the brandy decanter. "Mrs. Twethewey's sister, Mrs. Lambourne, is an exemplary woman, but her husband has made questionable investments, especially as of late. Randall was a wealthy man, and now his children are wealthy. At least Liam is. The world would love nothing more than to take advantage of young people in such a state."

"And he thought Mrs. Lambourne would do that?"

"Not so much Mrs. Lambourne, but her husband. Randall said he believed Jac to be the lesser of two evils. He went so far as to revise the trust so Jac could not access the children's funds. He'll receive an annuity to see to the children's necessities and comforts, but the girls' dowry and Liam's fortune cannot be touched without my approval and consent."

Commotion out in the corridor drew their attention, and Delia turned. The undertaker, a tall, sinewy man with wan, sunken cheeks, stood in the doorway.

Mr. Steerhead's face reddened, but his eyes didn't leave the newcomer. "I must go. You two ready the children as discussed." Within moments he fled the space, the undertaker on his heels, leaving Delia alone with Mr. Simon.

She stood and prepared to leave the chamber, but the curious expression on Mr. Simon's face made her pause. "You look satisfied."

He tilted his dark head to the side and tapped the papers against his hand. "I'd be lying if I said this didn't ease the burden of relocating to Cornwall. It's a godforsaken part of the country. I can't say I have the least desire to travel there."

She looked to the seal on her letter but did not open it. The meaning and intention behind it settled on her like a heavy cloak. "Poor Mr. Twethewey. He was desperate to make sure his children are cared for and comfortable."

"There was nothing poor about Mr. Twethewey." Mr. Simon's lips curved in what could only be interpreted as amusement. He tucked the packet inside his coat and stood, the whites of his eyes flashing bright in the room darkened by the clouds outside the window. "He wanted us to do what he wanted us to do. Nothing more. At the end of the day, we are all just trying to protect our own future and that of those we love. Are we not?"

His words struck her as odd.

Under normal circumstances, Mr. Simon was a man ruled by emotion and empathy, but in this moment, indifference tinged his words. She gathered her black skirts and preceded Mr. Simon to the cool paneled corridor. "My goodness. You sound like an opportunist."

A throaty chuckle emanated. "I've never claimed to be a saint, Mrs. Greythorne, but neither am I an opportunist, merely practical." Mr. Simon fell into step with her, and they traversed the wide

corridor. He angled his head toward her, as if taking her into his confidence. "None of us could have prevented this unfortunate occurrence. It's sad but a reality. I know you worry for them, but they're not the first children to lose their parents. I lost my father when I was no older than Johnny, and both of your parents are dead. We survived, and I daresay the experience has shaped both of us. The children must continue to live life, to thrive, and we will do what we can to assist them."

They continued in silence for several paces before they made their way through a narrow doorway toward the main foyer. "I've no doubt you'll do exceptionally well in Cornwall. After all, you'll be able to see your family."

She forced a smile and nodded as a thread of discomfort tightened within her at the mention of family. Yes, her sister and brother still lived in a small village not terribly far from Penwythe Hall, but her mother-in-law's image—and the echo of her stark warning—burned brightest in her mind.

"And how long has it been since you have seen your family?"

"Three years."

"See there, that should give you some comfort. Besides, we'll still work side by side, and as far as I'm concerned, that is the best incentive for staying on."

Delia warmed at his words of solidarity and his affectionate smile. Her relationship with Mr. Simon was a complicated one—one she did not fully understand. At times his manner was cool and aloof; at others she imagined that their relationship could blossom beyond mere friendship. After years of working by his side, she had learned to adjust to his swinging moods and varied sentiments, but in this moment, under these circumstances, she was grateful for his companionship.

Most governesses did not have the luxury of having an equal in the household as she did in Mr. Simon. She was no servant, but

neither was she on the same footing with the family. Mr. Simon was the only other individual of her station, and she found great comfort and camaraderie in that. And despite everything else, at least their comradeship would continue.

She slowed her steps as they passed the downstairs drawing room. The two French doors stood ajar, and she glimpsed the coffin atop a table, with Mr. Twethewey's body lying in wait within. Black baize draped the walls, furniture, and even the window, blocking out all traces of the afternoon's gray light. Gold candlelight flickered and danced in the ebony space, making the room seem alive instead of what it was. The tall professional watcher who'd been hired to sit with Mr. Twethewey's body paced behind the table, the thud of his heels striking the polished floor.

Delia shivered at the sight and hurried to rejoin Mr. Simon, who had continued on without her. Oblivious to the scene she'd just witnessed, Mr. Simon gave a little laugh. "This is turning into quite a production. Seven souls are going to descend upon Penwythe Hall in a matter of days. I can only imagine Mr. Jac Twethewey's reaction."

"Surely he will welcome us. Mr. Steerhead said Penwythe Hall is quite large. Besides, I am sure the late Mr. Twethewey has made it worth his brother's while."

"You give the dearly departed a great deal of credit. You weren't here when this rift occurred between the two brothers. True, I didn't know all the details, but it wasn't a pleasant time—that I can say with certainty."

They continued to the second floor of Easten Park, on which the nursery and schoolroom were located. As he turned to enter the schoolroom, Mr. Simon paused. "You still look upset." He nudged her arm playfully. "Don't look so glum. You always tell the children to seek out adventure. Consider this an adventure of your own."

She offered a smile and swallowed the discomfort of the fearful memory of her in-laws before she continued down the hallway.

THE GOVERNESS OF PENWYTHE HALL

Adventure would be just what the children needed, but *she* wanted nothing more than peace.

She looked down at the packet in her hand. There was money in it. She knew without even opening it. Money was always a step toward security, and did she not have dreams for the future, to one day open her own school for young ladies? After all, the children would not need a governess forever. At some point she would be alone again, searching for her place in the world.

Even so, the money within this packet seemed like blood money—a man's final, desperate attempt to care for his children—and an ominous chill raced down her spine.

Only a few years prior she'd witnessed firsthand how far a family would go to protect its own, and now she was teetering on the edge of that old world. How she wished their journey would take them north, even farther away from her past, instead of hurling her headlong toward it.

Cornwall.

It was in her blood, and she feared she'd never escape its hold.

With a sigh she tucked the letter beneath her arm and headed toward her chamber. She did not know what the future held, but at least she would not be alone.



CHAPTER 4



Are we really going to leave Easten Park?” Delia paused in packing her valise and glanced over her shoulder at the three ebony-clad young ladies—Julia, Hannah, and Sophy—sitting atop her bed.

Under normal circumstances, her charges were not permitted inside her personal chambers, but now their father was dead. Life as they knew it—and the rules that governed it—was forever altered. Nothing was normal, and nothing would be so for a very long time.

Delia forced cheer to her voice as she turned to retrieve a long-sleeved gown of charcoal linen from her wardrobe and smoothed the ivory lace lining the neckline. “Yes. We’ll leave at dawn’s light. Mr. Steerhead has hired a bigger carriage for the ride. In two days’ time we’ll be in Cornwall.”

“I’ve never been to Cornwall.” Hannah sulked as she leaned her nut-brown curls back against the pillows on Delia’s bed. “I think it’s terrible that we have to go so far away from everyone we know.”

“Cornwall is a lovely place,” Delia said, finding it increasingly difficult to keep her tone buoyant. “Do you not recall the story we read of the mermaids near the coast? Mr. Steerhead told me Penwythe Hall is a little more than a mile from the sea. Won’t you like to see the sea?”

The girls stared at her with blank expressions.

In the silence guilt descended.