



## *Chapter 1*

*July 27, 1816  
Hatchard's Bookshop  
London, England*

FINALLY, PHILIPPA FELT LIKE A member of the team. An invitation to the sanctum sanctorum? To meet with Marcus and Sir Bertrand? She hoped a mission lay before them. As much as she loved Eleos and ministering to the women at the school, if she were honest, she craved more excitement.

Philippa stepped from the bustling Piccadilly street into the calm of Hatchard's, her movement accompanied by the tinkle of a tiny bell over the door. She inhaled the scent of paper and leather. The only place she had seen with more books than Hatchard's was the library at Haverly House.

Mary Rush, Philippa's maid, followed her into the bookseller's. Mary reached out to touch one of the beautiful tomes, then withdrew her hand. A guilty expression crossed her face, and Philippa hid a smile. She felt that way sometimes too, as if the finer things in life were beyond her reach.

But this was one fine gift she could offer the girl, who had so little to cherish in life.

"Mary, would you like to go into the reading room?" She dug in her

## A SCHEMING IN PARLIAMENT

reticule and withdrew a pasteboard card. "This will grant you entrance to read whatever you like."

The maid took the card as if Philippa had handed her the key to the city. "Where will you be?" Her position as maid meant she was to accompany her mistress everywhere in order to preserve her mistress's reputation. She took the assignment seriously, though there was little need in Philippa's case.

"Don't you worry. I will find you when I'm ready to go. Until then, enjoy the books."

"Is it another mission?"

Philippa blinked, her mind racing. What should she say? What did Mary know about the agency and Philippa's part in it?

"To rescue another woman or to procure more donations for Eleos?" Mary asked.

A wee sigh of relief escaped Philippa's lips. "I will be speaking with someone regarding Eleos, but they wish to remain anonymous." She'd be sure to mention the school to Marcus and Sir Bertrand so as to be truthful.

"You won't be in danger, will you?" Mary's eyes narrowed at the corners, worry darkening them. "You're not far removed from that terrible kidnapping attempt."

Philippa patted Mary's arm. "Have no fear. I shall be perfectly safe." Who could be safer than her brother-in-law Marcus, the Duke of Haverly, and a knight of the realm, Sir Bertrand Thorndike, who had each saved her life in the past?

Mary disappeared into the reading room, and Philippa wandered the aisles, admiring the beautifully bound books. Sir Bertrand's note had said to wait for him so he could show her the path to a secret office Marcus kept in the bookstore.

"Right on time. I like that." Sir Bertrand stepped around the end of a bookshelf.

She had seen little of him over the past month, and to her eye, he looked thinner, with lines of strain etching his face.

Standing for Parliament was not for the faint of heart, not even with

the backing of the Duke of Haverly, evidently. And the vote would occur soon.

Sir Bertrand pulled a book off the shelf and placed it flat atop the bookcase.

Philippa sent him a puzzled look.

He leaned close. "This is the signal that someone is with the duke and they should not be disturbed. If you're ever called to meet him here alone, move the book, and no other agent will enter." He motioned toward a door that blended in with the paneling. A small sign indicated it was for Hatchard's staff only. "This way. It's quite dark in the stairwell. Allow me to help you."

Her hand fit in his like a bird in a nest. Strong fingers, warm skin. A ripple shot up her arm and into her chest. She rolled her eyes. Such contact, after the life she had lived, should not have any effect upon her. It must be that their recent encounters had caused her to consider him a friend.

He had not been quizzing her that the stairwell was dark. Once the door closed behind them, she could hardly see her hand before her face.

"There are eleven stairs." His voice came out of the stygian space.

She counted silently and on the tenth, bumped her nose into his back. "My apologies." So clumsy. Of course he would have to stop near the top to open another door.

The small room behind that door was scarcely bigger than a closet. Brick walls, a small fireplace, and just enough room for a desk, two chairs, and some cabinets suitable for files.

A closed-in, smoky, dusty smell surrounded her. Definitely a man's lair.

Marcus sat behind the desk, and when she entered, he rose. Ever the gentleman.

"Welcome. Do take a seat." Candlelight shone in his eyes and gave a warm glow to his countenance. "How are things at Eleos, Philippa?"

"Coming along well. Word is spreading, and we're receiving new students regularly. And we had a decent-sized donation of clothing

## A SCHEMING IN PARLIAMENT

and bedding that has been most welcome.” There, she had fulfilled her word to Mary Rush to mention the school.

“Good to hear. And you, Sir Bertrand? Did you meet with the merchants on St. Olave’s Street?”

“I did. They seem amenable to my standing for Southwark. They pledged to speak with the men who can vote in the district. There were several grumbles about the qualifications to be a voter—men who are residents who also own the freeholds to property and have the required income. To be sure, I had to prove my income exceeded three hundred pounds a year to be qualified to stand for the open seat and that I owned a house in the borough. But the merchants of Southwark, as residents themselves, believe they should have a say in who governs them, wealth requirements aside.”

Philippa realized she was nodding, and held still. Women were not supposed to show an interest in politics, but she wholeheartedly agreed with allowing the people a say in their own government. Perhaps in some distant future day, even women would be allowed to cast a ballot.

“The men of Southwark are not wrong. The growing middle class will make their voices heard, if I read the signs correctly. Someday every man in the realm will be allowed to vote. However, until then, we will put our efforts into the handful who can currently vote in your borough.” Marcus leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers. “Sir Bertrand, when I first proposed this venture, I told you I was uneasy about rumors swirling in the House of Commons.”

“Yes.”

Philippa’s muscles tensed. Marcus had been behind Sir Bertrand standing for Parliament? Did that mean his entire campaign was a sham? Or not a sham but a mission?

“Those rumors are taking substance. I believe one man is gathering a coalition to make a move on the prime minister’s seat.” Marcus moved his hands to the arms of his chair. “While that in and of itself is neither unusual nor illegal, I am concerned that the manner in which he is gathering support is suspicious. There have been some surprising moves that have made for some strange bedfellows,

where those across the chamber are capitulating . . . or at least remaining quiet where opposition would be expected. I want to make certain that they are making those moves of their own free will and not through coercion.”

Sir Bertrand leaned forward. “Who is this person? And what do you know of him?”

“His name is Mr. Eustace Nicholls. He is the other MP from Southwark, though you would hardly know it, as he spends little time in the borough. He’s a businessman of some means. His private life is very private. I have met him, and like many a politician, he is accomplished at talking a lot while saying almost nothing. You will have your work cut out for you learning his secrets.”

Philippa had closed her eyes at the mention of the name, drawing a quick breath as her chest tightened.

“Philippa? Do you know something of this man?”

Her lids opened, and she met Marcus’s eyes. “He was a patron of the house on King’s Place when I worked there.” Her past was like a peat bog, dragging at her, pulling her down. She might escape it for a while, but it was always there, ready to suck her back.

His brows rose. “Was he . . .” His voice trailed off. Too polite to ask what he wanted in front of another.

“No. He was never my client. But he was a business connection of Lord Ratcliffe’s. He met with Ratcliffe often at the house.” And after those meetings, Nicholls had often availed himself of one of the girls who worked in the “house of negotiable affection.”

Sir Bertrand stared at his hands, and Philippa sensed the tension in his body. Shame washed over her again at the life she had lived, at the sins she had committed. Once more she reminded herself that she was forgiven and that her past did not define her.

It was one thing to say those things to herself. Another altogether to know that she had no control over what others thought of her. Sir Bertrand had never indicated that he held her past against her, but how could he not at least be disappointed in her life choices?

“Too bad Ratcliffe was executed for his attempt to kill the Prince

Regent. He might have brought useful intelligence to this investigation. Sir Bertrand, your mission, once you are elected, is to befriend those in Nicholls's circle of influence and, if possible, determine whether he's exerting undue influence over them to back his move to be the prime minister."

Sir Bertrand nodded. "The special election will be over in three days. Then I will begin."

"Very good. Philippa, I would like you to assist Sir Bertrand in any way he requires. The fact that you are familiar with our quarry is an unexpected boon. Will he know you on sight?"

"I don't know. My appearance has changed quite a bit, and I no longer use the name Pippa. I had little to do with him when he came to King's Place. However, it is my experience that even if a gentleman does recognize me, he pretends not to when he encounters me in company."

"I see. You and Sir Bertrand put your heads together and share what information you gather. I will be in London for another week, then I must return to Oxfordshire. Charlotte would never forgive me if I missed the arrival of our next child."

Sir Bertrand rose, as did Philippa.

"Oh, one more thing. I will be hosting a congratulatory reception for you at Haverly House when the results are in. Philippa, I would be grateful if you would act as hostess in Charlotte's absence. Nicholls will be invited, and you can get your first look at him then."

When they reached the bookstore aisle, Sir Bertrand moved the book from the top of the bookcase to its original shelf. He rubbed his hands together, a determined glint to his eyes. "A mission to sink our teeth into at last."

"I'm not certain how much help I can be. I will tell you what I know of Nicholls, but it is not much."

"It is more than I know about the man. And I trust your instincts. If I prevail in this election, which seems a sure thing at the moment, you can meet him at this reception and take his measure."

It warmed her that he trusted her judgment.



Ever since the election results had been announced, Bertie felt as if he had been handed one too many items to carry, and he grappled not to drop them all. These days he wasn't quite certain whether he was coming or going.

"Congratulations, Sir Bertrand. You've put your foot on the first rung of the ladder." Clifford Fuller inclined his leonine head. Even at his advanced age, he still possessed a pate of thick white hair. "Great things await you. I feel sure of it." He patted Bertie on the shoulder, paternal and not a little patronizing. Clifford Fuller had served in Parliament for so long he was almost synonymous with the institution. Some joked that he had greeted William the Conqueror when the Norman first stepped on England's shores.

"Thank you, Mr. Fuller. I shall rely upon experienced members such as yourself as I navigate this new landscape." Bertie held his still-full wineglass, aware of the many eyes upon him. His former reputation as a lush had been bandied about by his opponent in the recent election but in the end hadn't thwarted Bertie's bid for the seat. Throughout the campaign, Bertie had been self-deprecating, admitting to faults in his past but pointing to his current sober status.

The Duke of Haverly caught Bertie's eye across the room and inclined his head. Bertie raised his chin slightly to indicate that he understood and would make his way over as soon as politely possible. He must mingle with as many guests as he could. They were there to celebrate the results, but also to see and be seen.

Haverly had compiled the guest list, and Bertie knew every attendee was there for a purpose. Marcus never did anything by accident.

The drawing room was the epitome of understated elegance—unlike Bertie's new townhouse, with its few functional pieces of furniture. It was in no way ready to host guests. He had moved in to establish his residency in Southwark, but he had no idea how to make the place more habitable. That would wait until his sister-in-law and niece returned to London in a few months.

## A SCHEMING IN PARLIAMENT

Perhaps Haverly's suggestion that Bertie consider courting a woman wasn't as outlandish as it had first appeared. Bertie's house could certainly use a woman's touch, and it would not go amiss to have someone to talk to after a long day of playing politics.

Bertie let his gaze wander until it lit upon Miss Philippa Cashel. She handled her hostess duties with skill, as if she had always entertained influential and wealthy guests. Though she was baseborn, she had the bearing of an aristocrat.

Philippa's eyes met his and then flicked to the man she chatted with.

Bertie's neck tightened. Mr. Nicholls, the other burgess for the "rotten borough" of Southwark, had kept his distance during the campaign, probably awaiting the results before he declared any allegiance. The borough was considered rotten because, like a handful of other chartered boroughs in England, it had so few qualified voters that the burgess seats were susceptible to corruption and control by a very few.

Hence Bertie's selection at the by-election held just two days before. He had earned twelve of the sixteen votes in Southwark.

And he hadn't *purchased* a single one, unlike many members of Parliament. Haverly had campaigned on Bertie's behalf, making it clear that they would not be using pounds sterling to draw votes. Events had gone so quickly—only a few weeks between the duke's initial suggestion that Bertie stand for Parliament and the results being posted—that Bertie had scarcely had time to come to terms with the radical changes in his life.

He wanted to barge into Nicholls's conversation with Philippa, but he must be subtle. She was in no danger in a civilized London mansion, and she might be more adept at drawing information from a gentleman than he.

Bertie's gaze lingered on her. Stunningly beautiful as always, she held herself well, as if she had trained at the most prestigious ladies' academy in the nation instead of the school of London survival. One would never suspect her former occupation, and in fact, Bertie hardly thought of it any longer. They had been through too much

during the case at Carlton House for him not to admire her bravery and intelligence and courage, even above her considerable beauty and poise.

Perhaps their past adventures had caused the odd feelings of protectiveness he now experienced when he thought of her.

From the pinch-mouthed expression of Mrs. Nicholls and the way she only glanced at Philippa from the corner of her eye, she must not be able to overlook Philippa's past as one of the most sought-after courtesans in the kingdom to see her amazing qualities. Or perhaps she was discomfited by her husband's animated conversation with a comely woman, be she countess or charlady?

Bertie eventually excused himself from Mr. Fuller. He chatted with other guests along the way, making a point of seeming to fetch up at Philippa's side as if by accident. He inclined his head. "Miss Cashel."

"Sir Bertrand, have you met Mr. and Mrs. Nicholls?" She gave Bertie the full power of her brown eyes.

"Ah, Thorndike. Congratulations." Mr. Nicholls raised his glass. "Well done. It is a shame we have to toss you into the cauldron right away. Any other year you would have several months to ease into your new position. A bit of trial by fire."

A small shrug, a self-deprecating smile. "Perhaps this is the best way. With the special session of Parliament and everyone focused on this one matter, I can learn the process quickly and be all the more prepared when the Prince Regent calls Parliament together again in the new year."

"That's the spirit. And as the most junior of members, you are allowed to bide your time. Listen, learn, and follow the party lead."

Did Bertie imagine a warning note in Mr. Nicholls's tone? *Sit in the back and keep your mouth shut?* Or was it merely friendly advice and observation?

As an agent for the Crown, Bertie was well-used to searching for nuance and subtext in conversations and expressions, but as a politician, he had an inkling his skills would be put to the test in new and intense ways.

## A SCHEMING IN PARLIAMENT

Haverly beckoned again, and Bertie excused himself with a bow. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Nicholls. And Mr. Nicholls, I am certain I will rely upon your experience and guidance in the coming days. I must join our host, but I would like a word with you later, Miss Cashel, if I may?”

She met his eyes, cool and possessed as always. Her dark-blue dress whispered silkily, and light raced along the delicate golden chain lying against her collarbone. A garnet cross hung from the chain, lustrous against her creamy skin.

“Of course, Sir Bertrand. If you will excuse me as well, Mr. Nicholls, Mrs. Nicholls. I must see about the refreshments.” She inclined her head, lifted her hem, and with her back straight as a stair rod, glided across the room.

Bertie’s eyes followed her until he caught himself. Her touch-me-not bearing intrigued him, as always. That reserve challenged him, rousing his curiosity to know the real her inside the persona she adopted in social situations. He’d glimpsed it in unguarded moments before and wanted more.

Haverly stood before the empty fireplace, his shoulders resting against the mantel. He, too, held a full champagne flute. “You’re a popular man this evening. Not a single invitee failed to attend. They’re all eager to take your measure.”

“More like solicit my vote. I haven’t even darkened the halls at Westminster, and I’ve already been asked several times what my stance on the tax bill is.” Bertie set his glass on the tray of a passing footman. If he wasn’t going to drink it, holding it was an annoyance.

“I saw you talking with Nicholls. I would advise you to study him and the other members. Learn what is normal behavior for them so you can spot any variations.”

Sound guidance, and the reasoning behind it was why Marcus Haverly was the best operative the agency had ever had.

A light breeze stirred the gossamer curtains at the open windows, and the August evening drifted in, dispelling some of the stuffiness the heat of the day had built in the house. Bertie wished he could shrug

out of his tight formal coat and waistcoat, roll up his sleeves, and put his feet up.

“Ah, there he is.” Haverly looked toward the door.

Bertie followed his gaze, taking in a dapperly dressed young man. Thin and small, like a terrier, he wore round spectacles and made quick movements.

“Someone important?” Bertie asked.

“He will be important to you.”

The young man presented himself before the duke, bowing low. “Your Grace.”

“Bertie, this is your new aide, Martin Fox. He is a veteran of British politics, will keep you informed, and will help avert missteps.”

Not a terrier but aptly named Fox. The young man, perhaps twenty-five, even had russet hair. He dipped his head and stuck out his hand.

“Sir Bertrand, it’s an honor. I look forward to working with you during your tenure.” He blinked blue eyes behind his spectacle frames.

Bertie slanted a glance at Haverly, who had a suspiciously humorous quiver about his lips.

“I chose Mr. Fox as he has a network in Whitehall that would make the rope master of the HMS *Victory* proud. Not much occurs in the building of which Mr. Fox is unaware.”

Fox grinned. “It pays to be a good listener and to cultivate relationships. I’ve always said it’s the aides who do the real work of politics. A bit of controlling the dancing marionettes.”

*Humph.* If this youngster thought he would be pulling Bertie’s strings, he had another think coming. Bertie would use the aide’s expertise, but he would not be manipulated. Was this pup really the best choice?

*Trust Haverly.* He was not only the power behind Bertie getting elected but the master spy, the leader of the agency commissioned by the Crown, and Bertie’s boss. He would not ever knowingly steer Bertie wrong. If he thought Fox a good match as Bertie’s aide, Bertie would trust the duke . . . even if he wasn’t prepared to fully trust Fox quite yet.



Philippa found Mr. Ffoulkes in the butler's pantry instructing the footmen to hand around the canapés. Behind him were two young ladies, students at the Princess Charlotte Eleos School for Women in Need. They gave Philippa hurried looks but did not stop their work, placing the petit fours, shortbreads, and savory morsels on trays.

She should not be so anxious, but after what had happened to Lydia and Nell at Carlton House, she found herself checking on all her charges constantly.

Haverly House, under the command of her brother-in-law and his capable and kind butler Mr. Ffoulkes, was a far cry from Carlton House and the Prince Regent's dubious leadership. These girls were safe and would be guided well to learn their assigned tasks. She turned her attention to the butler. "I trust you have more champagne on ice? The guests seem particularly fond of it this evening."

Ffoulkes nodded. "I also have some raspberry cordial to bring out with the food."

"Excellent. I knew you would have everything under control. All the guests have arrived, I believe." She caught the strains of music. "Ah, the harpist has begun her entertainment."

"Another successful evening at Haverly House." The butler spoke with great pride. "You have stood in admirably in Her Grace's absence. If it is not a temerity to say so, I believe she would be proud of you."

Philippa grinned. "I assume we are speaking of my sister and not her mother-in-law. The dowager might not be as pleased to know I was hostess for the event."

Ffoulkes had been in service too long to let his feelings show. "Even Her Grace the dowager could not have done better. And she is coming around to you. You can rest easy and mingle with the guests. Everything is under control here."

Philippa thanked him and returned to the drawing room. Her friend and fellow worker at the school, Dorothy Stokes, sat on a couch beside a rather officious-looking man, nodding as she listened. Philippa

took their measure, deciding whether Dorothy—Aunt Dolly to her friends—needed rescuing.

Aunt Dolly spied her and beckoned. “Dear, this is Mr. Wainwright. He is asking about the work at Eleos.” Dorothy patted the upholstery beside her.

The man, in his fifties, with ruddy cheeks and small eyes, nodded. “What a cachet to have Princess Charlotte herself as a patron. When someone of such eminence takes an interest, it can certainly be a boon for a charity.”

The Princess Charlotte Eleos School for Women in Need. An unexpected turn of events when Sir Bertrand had done a particular favor for the Prince Regent, and when asked what his compensation should be, had requested that the school property be purchased from their landlord, Mr. Asbury, and gifted to the school. The prince had obliged, with the stipulation that the school be named after his daughter and heir.

Philippa nodded. “We’re most grateful for her sponsorship. It is always a blessing when someone of prominence has a heart for helping others.”

“Mr. Wainwright has asked what needs the school might have. In addition to being a member of Parliament, he owns a furniture-making establishment.”

The man puffed up. “Yes, we specialize in bureaus and cabinets, though we also make beds and tables, and we’ve recently begun making chairs. Chairs are a specialty. My father never wanted to make them, but now that I’ve taken over as chairman . . .” He coughed a little laugh. “Forgive the pun. But I believe that businesses must expand or perish. Beautifully turned chairs, made in a factory setting, will allow the growing middle class to afford pretty things previously only available to the wealthy.” He eyed, with suspicion, the Hepplewhites flanking the fireplace. “We don’t aim to be Chippendale, but the Wainwright brand will soon be in most homes in the kingdom. I’m sure of it.”

“What an honorable aim, to make furnishings more affordable to a wider class. At Eleos, we’re getting by with cast-off furniture and items

we can procure at the local markets. The manor is so large that it will take us some time to furnish it.”

“I’m sure you’re doing your best.” Mr. Wainwright patted her hand.

She resisted the urge to cringe. She did not enjoy being touched, especially by someone she had only just met. It reminded her too much of her past life.

“Wainwright Furniture would be pleased to donate some furniture. Beds? Tables? Benches?” His brows rose. “And you will mention our generosity to Princess Charlotte, won’t you? That we’re helping out?”

Always the ulterior motive. But if it meant some donated furniture that wasn’t on its beam ends, she would play the game. “Of course. I have yet to meet Her Highness, but when I do, I will be sure to inform her of your benevolence. Perhaps you and Mrs. Stokes can discuss the details? I’m afraid I’m being beckoned by His Grace.” She rose, letting her eyes glint at Aunt Dolly, who would be bold in asking for exactly what they needed.

And Philippa would add Wainwright Furniture Company to the growing list of patrons who had requested special mention to the princess.

She wove through the guests who stood in small groups conversing and enjoying the food and drinks. Harp music provided a soft backdrop. As she approached Marcus, the duke smiled.

“You’ve done magnificently. One would never know this was your first time hosting a party for the *ton*.” He gave her a small bow. His hair was swept back into its customary queue at the nape of his neck, and every inch of his clothing was refined and *au courant*.

“Hardly for the *ton*. Most of the guests are commoners, being members of Parliament.” She flicked open her fan and stirred the air near her cheeks.

“Don’t tell them. Tonight they feel every bit as self-important as the most blue-blooded earl.” He flashed her a sardonic look.

“It’s not been bad for fundraising, however. Aunt Dolly has landed quite a few donations.” A footman stopped before her with a tray of glasses. She opted for the raspberry cordial, a pretty rose color in the sparkling flute.

“Bertie seems a bit nervous about his new role, now that the election is over and the job is his,” Marcus said.

Philippa nodded, finding Sir Bertrand across the room, bending his head to listen to a woman resplendent in diamonds, over-adorned for this informal canapé and drinks reception. Philippa fingered the garnet cross at her throat, a gift from her sister, Marcus’s wife.

“He will need help, you know. And I cannot stay in London.” A pensive look darkened Marcus’s brow. “I have thrown him into the deep, though with Mr. Fox as his clerk, he has an asset he can call upon. Might I ask you to look after him as well?”

Surprise widened her eyes. “Look after him? In what way?” Sir Bertrand had been the equal of every situation she could remember.

“Bertie thinks he doesn’t need anyone, that he can handle every situation on his own, even when he’s clearly out of his depth. If he is as intelligent as I believe him to be, he will learn that a man is only as good as the people he gathers around him. He will learn to rely on his team. I’ve urged him to begin casting about for a bride to bolster his credibility in the *ton* and in Whitehall, so perhaps he will ask you for your opinion on various young ladies. And you can keep me informed via letter as to his progress as a new parliamentarian.”

“You wish me to act as matchmaker to Sir Bertrand?” She blinked, smothering an odd chuckle. “I’m hardly the person he would turn to for such advice. And how am I to know his progress as a parliamentarian? I’m a school administrator and charity worker.”

“And a member of Bertie’s team. As such, you will look after each other. You must develop the trust needed to be effective as agents.” His voice was quite low, befitting their conversation. And his eyes never stopped moving, looking for anyone who might be eavesdropping. “Bertie esteems your opinion. He admires how you have worked to change not only your own life but the lives of so many others.”

Philippa shook her head. What she had done was not admirable enough to erase her past. Marcus was a kind man with an extraordinary ability to forgive. But that was a rare virtue. She was all too aware of what most people thought when they saw her.

## A SCHEMING IN PARLIAMENT

“Are you prepared for tomorrow?” Compassion infused his voice. “I know Charlotte is saddened that she cannot be with you at this time. I will represent your family at the church.”

“I wanted to ask you whether I could at least go to the cemetery. I will stay in the carriage.” She looked down at her blue gown, another gift from her sister. Though her father, the Earl of Tiptree, had passed away two days before, she would not wear mourning attire. Her father had never acknowledged her as his daughter—by his mistress—and she refused to play the hypocrite or pretend to emotions she did not feel. She had not wished him dead, but he had treated her as a stranger after he’d tossed her and her mother out with no means to keep themselves. She had forgiven him because God had given her the grace to do so, but she had not tried to insert herself into her father’s life.

If the group of mourners at his funeral was sparse, he had no one to blame but himself. He had been a small-minded and cruel man during his lifetime. Few would regret his passing.

But to continue her road of forgiveness, Philippa would at least go to the cemetery. She would represent her sister, who would wish she could be there. And she would pray for her father’s widow, who had already shown growth out of her husband’s shadow, having taken over the reins of their household when the Earl of Tiptree suffered the devastating apoplexy that had kept him bedridden for weeks as he’d declined.

“I shall send the carriage for you.” Marcus surveyed the room. “After the service, we have been summoned to the solicitor’s office.”

“Are you certain I am to attend? I cannot imagine why.” She bunched her brows and fingered the delicate gold chain at her neck. “Is it the countess who has requested my presence?”

Marcus shrugged. “For once I have not been informed. Mr. Moody’s instructions are clear, however. I am to attend for Charlotte, and you are to attend to represent yourself.”

A feather of unease brushed along her skin. Her father had caused her much anguish when he was alive. Surely he would not cause her trouble from beyond the grave. Could he?