

Miss Alexandra Barlow, daughter to Lord Henley, liked children. She truly did. But the woman in the woods, Margaret, had a way of turning up with them and expecting Miss Barlow to deal with the resulting problem. Today she had something else in mind as well.

Alex stared at the older woman before her and frowned. “M-my m-m-mother gave you something for me?” she stammered. “Why did you never say so before?”

The woman shrugged. “There was no point to it. She gave me this for you and said that I should hold it until I felt you had need of it.”

“Need?”

Margaret didn’t answer. Instead, she handed the younger woman a locket. It was old and intricately engraved. On the back was a tiny inscription. Alex read it aloud.

“ ‘Wish Always with Love.’ What does that mean?”

“It is all foolishness,” Margaret replied brusquely. “But you are supposed to wish for what you want most in your life, and then open the locket. It’s all nonsense, but I suppose you may as well do it.”

Alex closed her eyes and thought about the dreams she’d always had. When she opened her eyes, she opened the locket as well, and, for a brief moment, a man’s face appeared. It was not precisely a handsome face, but there was something in his eyes that seemed to reach into her soul.

And then, abruptly, the image disappeared. Alex blinked. She looked again. Nothing. The locket was empty. She closed the locket and opened it again. Still nothing.

“What was that?” she murmured and looked to Margaret for answers.

But the older woman merely turned away and pretended to be studying one of the containers of herbs on her shelf. “Nonsense,” she muttered to herself. “It’s all nonsense.”

“What is nonsense?” Alex persisted.

Margaret hesitated, then turned to face her. With more than a little exasperation in her voice she said, “When you hold the locket for the first time, you are supposed to wish for your heart’s desire and then, when you open it, you are supposed to see the face of the man you ought to marry. It is a ridiculous legend, that’s all. There must be some trick of how it’s made that makes one think one sees a face.”

That made sense. But another thought occurred to Alex and she asked, “If this was my mother’s locket, why didn’t she give it to me before she died? And what do you mean that you felt I had need of it?”

But Margaret merely shook her head. “Did I say need? I meant that she trusted me to give it to you when you were grown up, and at five-and-twenty I should think you are ready to take care of it properly. And now no more foolish questions. You must return home.” The older woman paused and inclined her head toward the basket Alex had brought. “I thank you for your kindness.”

“And I thank you for yours,” Alex countered, looking toward the child who played so happily in the dirt at their feet. “I will take him to the village with me. The blacksmith and his wife have long been wishing for a child.”

Impulsively, Margaret reached out and took Alexandra’s hand in hers. “You will have children of your own, someday!” she said fiercely.

Alex shook her head. “No. Despite the face I thought I saw in the locket, I will never marry. I know that, have known that, for some time now. Sometimes I wish, yes, I

wish with all my heart that I could. But it does not matter. I have grown accustomed to my fate.”

Was it only her imagination that the locket in her hand seemed to grow warm? It must be, Alex told herself. Such things didn’t happen. And it had been, it must have been, only her imagination that made her think she saw a face.

But Margaret was speaking again. “It matters,” she said dryly. “And you will marry. You must not become a foolish old spinster like me!”

Alex only shook her head again. She gathered up her cloak and the child, saying soothingly, “Come, it is time to find you a new home. I know just the one for you. You will like the blacksmith and his wife. I promise you will.”

The child made no protest, and Alex wondered where he had come from, what his life had been like. But these were questions she had promised Margaret not to ask. All she needed to know was that he needed a new home. And then his shirt slipped free of the ragged pants and she could see the bruises up and down his back. Alex drew in her breath. There was no need to ask anything now for she had all the answer she could have wanted. Once more the older woman had rescued a child, and once more she had turned to Alex to help her find that child a new home.

Neither of them feared angry parents would come looking for the child. They never did. Not here, anyway. Not the children who came to Margaret.

As they walked to the village, Alex kept expecting the child to tell her he was tired, but not a word of complaint passed his lips. Indeed, no words did so. He was utterly silent, and if she had not heard him speak to the older woman, Alexandra would have wondered if he were mute.

When they reached the village, more than one friendly smile greeted them, but no one came toward Alex. They knew her too well, she thought grimly. They knew that she would be looking for someone to take in the child. And none of them wished to offer him a home. Well, it did not matter. The new blacksmith and his wife would surely be happy to see her. It was all the woman could talk about, her desire for a child and her sorrow over her barren circumstance.

At the smithy, however, Alex received a severe setback. She was not greeted with the open arms she expected. “What do you be wanting?” the smith demanded, not even looking up from his work.

“I-I brought a child. I know your wife has been wanting one, and this child needs a home.”

She gently pushed the child forward, but still the smith did not look at him. From the doorway, a voice said, “I-I’ve changed my mind.”

Alexandra turned and froze as she saw the bruise on the woman’s face. Immediately, Alex grasped the child and pulled him back to her. “I, that is, never mind. I have another home for the child anyway.”

“Good,” the smith said.

The woman merely turned her face away, a streak of tears on her bruised cheek.

And that was how Alex came to have the first child in her care. She had wished for children, it was true, but this was not quite what she had had in mind. How on earth was she going to hide him when Papa came home again?

In London, two men, David Thornsby and Sir Robert Stamford, stared at each other across a desk.

“Children are disappearing,” Thornsby said bluntly. “We’ve had a dozen complaints in the last six months alone. All in the same region of the country. We want you to find out what’s going on.”

“Whose children?” Stamford asked, his voice and face as serious as the other man’s.

Thornsby waved a hand carelessly. “Apprentices. Children from the mills and the mines. A parent or two has reported a child missing as well. We managed to find out that they were all being taken or sent to this village.”

He pointed to a spot on a map. Stamford peered at it. “By whom were they being taken or sent there and why?”

“We don’t know. Our source of information abruptly disappeared. But the last time such a thing happened, the children were being sold to a ring of men and ended up, after they were done with them, in brothels in London. The ones who survived, that is.”

“And you think that is happening again?”

“That or worse,” Thornsby agreed. “And I want you to find the men doing this and stop them.”

“Shall I go directly to this village?” Stamford asked.

“First I’d like you to cultivate Lord Henley,” Thornsby said slowly. “I don’t much like the man myself. He is far too fond of gambling. But he may have seen or heard something. In any event, an invitation to stay at his home there would be invaluable. You’d provoke far less suspicion, be far less likely to frighten off our quarry, if you

appear to be merely one more of Henley's foolish friends from London. And if he is involved, he may betray himself to you while you are there."

Stamford nodded. He rose to his feet and replied, "I am already somewhat acquainted with Henley. I dislike the man, but I shall do what I can to make him think me a friend. It shouldn't be difficult. As you say, he likes to gamble. All I need do is engage him in a game or two."

The three Barlow sisters made a pretty picture as they sat in the sunny parlor at the front of their house. The eldest, Alexandra, was engaged in mending sheets and shirts and socks and such. Theresa, second eldest, was writing a long letter to their father. And the youngest, Elizabeth, was reading. All very typical for this household. Placed as they were so far from any town, there was not a great deal to do, and they had long since learned the art of entertaining themselves and one another.

Their greatest outside excitement came from the occasional visit from the vicar or a tenant—or the even more occasional visit from their father, when he could tear himself away from the delights of London. That, however, had come to be their greatest dread. So now, when the knocking sounded at the front door below them, they looked at one another with alarm.

"The children are napping," Tessa said.

"And Betsy will know to keep them quiet," Alex added. "I wonder how long Papa means to stay this time."

"Far too long if he's gambled away this quarter's rents again," Lisbeth asserted bitterly.

“More likely he is simply running from some woman’s husband,” Tessa countered. “One must hope that this time the fellow doesn’t follow him here! I shall never forget the sight of Father crouched on the stair telling us to deny to the man that he was here.”

“Don’t even jest about such things!” Alex scolded.

Even as her sisters muttered that jesting was the furthest thing from their minds, the parlor door opened and Potter announced that Mr. James was here.

A small man with pinched features entered the room. He stared at the sisters with what could only be called a disapproving air, and his eyes took in the shabby state of the furnishings.

His inspection roused Alexandra’s ire. Her chin came up in unconscious defiance. “May we help you, sir?” she asked, a decided chill in her voice. “Unfortunately my father is not much at home these days. And if you are a creditor, you had best apply to him in London for payment. We have no funds to do so.”

He blinked at her. “Do you not know who I am?” he asked, patently taken aback.

“Ought we to know you?” Alex countered, though her tone softened just a trifle.

A thin smile crossed his lips, then quickly vanished. “No, how should you?” he admitted. “I merely thought that perhaps your father might, upon some occasion, have mentioned the name of his solicitor.”

“His solicitor!”

The man turned to bow toward Tessa, who was the one who had echoed his words. “Yes, your father’s solicitor,” he repeated. “I presume I have the honor of addressing Miss Barlow and her two sisters.”

“You do,” Alex agreed.

He turned back to her, opened his mouth, and hesitated. “May I sit down?” he asked.

Alex flushed. “Yes. Yes, of course, sir. My apologies for keeping you standing!”

“Oh, I quite understand, if you thought I was a creditor!”

The stranger’s eyes twinkled as he spoke, and Alex found herself feeling much more kindly toward him. “Would you care for tea? Or some other refreshment?” she asked. “I must presume you have come a long way, perhaps even from London if you are my father’s solicitor.”

He hesitated. “Perhaps later,” he said. “For now, well, this is not a pleasant business, and I should dislike to put it off any longer.”

“Of course.”

Still he hesitated. Still he fiddled with his spectacles. But finally he looked at each of the sisters in turn and then looked at the eldest.

“There is no easy way to say this. Your father is dead.”

He waited for their cries of surprise and was surprised himself when there were none. It was the youngest, Lisbeth, who answered his unspoken question.

“I suppose some angry husband shot Father in a duel?”

“No, no, nothing of the sort!” he hastened to assure her. And then he found himself at a loss for words again. But the sisters were waiting, so after a moment he forced himself to go on. “Your father shot himself.”



That did evoke cries of surprise. It was the middle sister, Tessa, who spoke this time. "I don't believe it," she said. "Papa had far too good an opinion of himself to take his own life. Unless, of course, you mean it was some sort of accident?"

"It was no accident," Mr. James said grimly. "Lord Henley shot himself because he faced ruin. Indeed, he was ruined. Lost every last penny in a card game, including this house, this estate. He had nothing left and decided to take the coward's way out. Forgive me for speaking so bluntly, but he left a letter for me, asking me to inform you three of that fact."

The three sisters sat silent, stunned by the news. Finally, it was Alex who said, "I see. So we are penniless and without a home. Who inherits—? Never mind. It does not matter who inherits the title. It cannot affect us. The more important question, perhaps, is who won the estate and how soon must we leave?"

Mr. James sighed. "As to that, I believe the title dies with your father. There are, so far as I know, no male heirs to inherit. A Sir Robert Stamford won this estate. Before I left London, I did attempt to discover how soon he would wish to take possession, and he said he had not yet decided. Nor did he seem to know what his plans for this estate might be. I have brought the address of his London town house if you should wish to write to him yourself. Unless, of course, you anticipated such a circumstance and already know where you will go and what you will do?"

Alex rose to her feet and began to pace about the room. "Anticipated such a circumstance? How could we? Though I will allow, in hindsight, that we ought to have done so. Do we know where we will go? No, sir. For as you have so aptly perceived, there is no male left to inherit and no female relatives who would welcome us, either. We

shall have to find some course of employment, I suppose. And that will take time.

Perhaps you can advise us on how to go about finding work as governesses or companions or housekeepers, sir?"

Mr. James looked from one sister to another to the third and silently cursed the late Lord Henley. How could he have been so irresponsible when he had three daughters at home? And how could he tell them that he had grave doubts of any mother hiring such lovely young women in the first place?

Perhaps it was these thoughts that caused Mr. James to concoct his scheme. Or perhaps it was the fatigue of the journey. But in the end he opened his mouth to say one thing and ended up saying instead, "Let us not be hasty. Perhaps there is an alternative. Housekeeper, you say, Miss Barlow? Perhaps you could write to Sir Robert and offer to stay on as housekeeper here. At least until he chooses to come and take up residence and install a housekeeper more to his liking."

"And how much time will that gain us?" Alex asked, not troubling to hide the bitterness in her voice.

"Perhaps more than you think," Mr. James answered slowly. "Sir Robert has another estate. One close to London that he likes very much. I understand that he has more than once been heard to say he would never bury himself in the countryside when there is so much amusement to be had in London. He is, you see, something of a rake."

"But then won't he wish to sell this place?" Tessa asked with pardonable anxiety.

Mr. James coughed. "Perhaps. But it would take some time to find a buyer. And meanwhile I've no doubt he would be grateful for someone to hold house for him here

and keep it maintained until he does find such a buyer. And as I said, that could take some time, with the state of disrepair here and such.”

Mr. James eyed Miss Barlow in a meaningful way, and after a startled moment, she nodded her understanding. “Of course,” she said slowly. “And what a pity it is the chimneys smoke and the dust lies so thick everywhere and such. But is it fair to play such a trick on this Sir Robert Stamford? Perhaps he needs the funds the sale of this estate would bring?”

“Sir Robert Stamford,” Mr. James said, biting off each word, “has more than sufficient funds for his needs, I assure you. That is why I find it particularly reprehensible that he could win this estate from your father when he very well must have known how deep in his cups your father was. He is a reckless young man with no regard for anyone save himself, and most of London would be happy to see him receive the setdown he deserves!”

Alex paced across the room and back again once more before she answered. Guilt warred with need in her breast. The look of fear in her sisters’ eyes, however, was what, in the end, decided her.

“Very well,” she said. “I shall write to Sir Robert. I daresay he will be very glad to have someone look after this place in his absence.”

It was less than a week later that Sir Robert Stamford stared at the letter in his hand. What the devil was the meaning of this? he wondered. Lord Henley’s daughter wished to stay on as housekeeper on the estate? Stamford vaguely recalled that Henley’s solicitor had mentioned something about a daughter, or perhaps more than one. But only to ask

how soon he would expect them to leave the estate. This was something altogether different!

For a moment fury possessed the young man accounted one of the *ton*'s most heartless as well as newest members. But it was a fury directed at the late Lord Henley, not at the poor girl who had written this letter. Why the devil had the old fool wagered his entire estate, without even setting aside a small portion for his daughter, and then gone home and put a bullet through his head? Stamford had tried to deal the cards so Henley would win, but it had been impossible. They had taken turns, and the cards had fallen so badly for Henley that Sir Robert had not been able to lose, not even on purpose. And this was the appalling result.

Stamford despised the man, not least for the way he had upset all their plans. But he felt only pity for Henley's daughter. He had a very good notion of just how poor her prospects must be. He wondered if there might be some way to turn that to his advantage. Particularly as he still had to find out about those missing children. Could Henley have been involved? Could it have been one more scheme to try to raise the blunt he needed for the life he desired?

Sir Robert would still need to visit Henley's estate to find out. He could pretend he meant to sell the estate and was making an inspection of the place. But not just yet. He would give her a little more time to mourn first.

He sat down at his writing desk and composed a short but civil letter.

*I should indeed be grateful if you would stay on as housekeeper for a time.*

*I think it unlikely that I shall visit there any time soon and will be grateful*

*to know the house is being looked after properly.*

*Respectfully,*

*Sir Robert Stamford*

Sir Robert sealed the letter and grimaced. A sour-faced spinster, no doubt, with an abominable temperament, and entirely lacking in looks. How could it be otherwise, with a father like Lord Henley? The man was appallingly ill-favored in his countenance, with a temper to match. How different could the daughter be? Still, even such a creature did not deserve to be cast entirely out of the only home she had likely ever known. And when he came to visit, he would find her knowledge of the neighboring area invaluable.

With that last thought, Stamford set out the letter for a footman to post and dismissed the poor woman from his mind. Particularly as, just at that moment, his dearest friend was shown into the parlor.

“Well, Stamford? Ready for an evening at Almack’s?” Lord Ransley demanded.

Robert glared at him. “I do not see,” he said through gritted teeth, “why you must drag me there!”

But Lord Ransley only laughed. “You know very well that Lady Ransley insists I go, and if I must go, so shall you. And you know it is her dearest wish to see you wed. Especially since you are in Prinny’s black books at the moment. I told you it was a mistake to dangle after his mistress!”

“I was not dangling after his mistress!” Stamford all but shouted. “I was only being polite to the poor creature.”

“Yes, well, polite enough so that all she could talk of that evening, apparently, was the delightful Sir Robert Stamford. Prinny was not amused, and if you want to keep your title and your fortune and perhaps even your head, my lady and I had better do our best to see you wed. Or at least looking to be wed. I have it on the best authority that only weekly visits to Almack’s and your paying court to the young ladies of the *ton* can possibly keep you from immediate danger of Prinny’s wrath!”

Stamford pretended to grumble, but he called for his cloak and followed Lord Randley out to the waiting carriage where Lady Randley greeted him with every expression of delight. Stamford smiled in return. And, despite his distaste for the evening ahead, Stamford’s smile was genuine.

He liked Lady Randley. She was one of the few women with any sense. She was not afraid of him, nor did she remind him with veiled bars of his origins. Besides, if the plan he and Thornsby had devised were to work, he must be seen to be trying to avoid Prinny’s wrath. That way, when Prinny, at their behest, banished him entirely from London, no one would think to question that Stamford would go.