

Chapter One

The day that Harriet had dreaded was here; her last day at Willoway, the only home that she had ever known. When she had learned four months ago that she and her mother were to be forced out, Harriet had been overwhelmed. Where were they to go, what possessions could they take, what would happen to the servants? Father should have dealt with this, but Father was gone and Mother was prostrate with grief. So, Harriet had buried her emotions and grappled with practicalities. She had worked like a slave to make all of the arrangements, and now she was exhausted. Looking for a moment's respite, she ducked into the sitting room and sank onto a sheet-draped chair. Gazing about the room, she thought how cold and unfamiliar it looked with the furniture pushed up against the walls and everything packed away in crates. She should have had the leisure to tour about the house and grounds to make a proper goodbye, but Mother was keeping her too busy for such an indulgence. Mrs. Walters was frantic that she and her daughter should depart before her nephew arrived to take possession of the estate.

Her mother was calling her again. "Harriet! Harriet! Where are you?"

"Tarnation," Harriet muttered under her breath as Mrs. Walters hurried into the room, her face flushed and agitated.

"There you are. Did you find my mourning brooch? And what about the silver? Has Jenkins loaded it onto the wagon? Don't be dilly-dallying when there is still so much to be done."

Harriet rose from the chair and took her mother's arm. "Mother, calm yourself. Yes, I found the brooch yesterday and put it in your jewellery chest. As for the silver, Jenkins has taken care of it. Everyone is following my packing list, and we will be leaving as soon as John has finished loading the wagon. Now, why not sit down and rest for a moment? I don't want you getting another one of your headaches." She whisked the sheet off the chair she had just vacated and helped her mother to sit. Mrs. Walters shook her head and reached for her daughter's hand.

“Forgive me, my dear, I am sure that you are managing everything beautifully. It’s just that I cannot bear the thought of seeing that man take possession of our home. Your dear father has been gone but three months, God rest his soul. I had hoped never to see this terrible day.” Mrs. Walters’ shoulders began to shake, and Harriet sighed and rubbed her mother’s back. Jenkins, the housekeeper, entered the room carrying a tea tray.

“Here you are. I thought you might enjoy a cup before I put these things away. John says that everything is loaded onto the wagon, and that the carriage is waiting for you.” Jenkins placed the tray upon a side table, and Mrs. Walters reached for the housekeeper’s hand.

“Oh, Jenkins, what would we have done without you? I only hope that your new employers will treat you well, and that you will be happy in your new home.”

Jenkins patted Mrs. Walters’ hand. “Thank you, ma’am. I’ve heard good things about the Mercer family from my Elsie, and it will be a treat to have her only half a mile away. Not that I won’t miss you and Miss Harriet and Willoway. It’s been a real home to me these past sixteen years. Never mind, here’s a good strong cup of tea and one for Miss Harriet. Drink that. You’ll feel better for having something hot.” Harriet and her mother sipped their tea, keeping their eyes resolutely on the floor to avoid the view of the disfigured room.

Finally, Harriet straightened from where she had leaned against the wall and handed her cup to Jenkins. “Time to go, Mother,” she said. “Helen will be wondering what’s happened to us if we don’t leave soon.” She turned to Jenkins, who held out her arms to the young woman. Harriet walked into the embrace and clung to the servant.

“Goodbye, Jenkins, I’ll miss you very much,” she whispered in a gruff voice. She brushed away a hot tear that trailed down her cheek, struggling to keep her emotions in check. Giving way now would set a bad example for her mother.

The housekeeper stepped back, holding Harriet at arms’ length. “I’ll miss you, Miss Harriet. You’ve always been a good girl, steady and dependable. I know that you’ll see your mother settled in comfortably at your sister’s. God bless you, and good luck in your new life, Miss.”

Harriet nodded and backed away, allowing her mother time to say goodbye. Then, taking a deep breath and one last look around the room, Harriet laid a supportive arm around her mother’s shoulders and gave her a small squeeze.

Mrs. Walters gazed up at her daughter, pressing her trembling lips together. “I’m ready Harriet,” she whispered. Together, mother and daughter walked through the front door and down the stairs to the waiting carriage, leaving Willoway behind forever.

Chapter Two

Mr. Walters had contracted a blood infection the previous spring that had quickly claimed his life. His unexpected death had left his wife and younger daughter homeless. Willoway had been entailed to a male heir, and Mrs. Walters had produced only two living children. Philip Walters, Mr. Walters' estranged nephew, was now the legal master of Willoway even though he had not set foot on the estate for six years. Philip had not attended his uncle's funeral, but had written to his aunt to express his condolences and to inform her of his intention to take possession of the estate at the beginning of September.

Helen, Mrs. Walters' elder daughter, was happily married and settled some eleven miles distant in a house already bursting with her copious family. There was not enough room to accommodate both Harriet and her mother, so Mrs. Walters had prevailed upon her sister, Mrs. Edna Slater, to provide a home for her youngest. Aunt Edna has taken a fortnight to consider the request before consenting. After all, Harriet was twenty-six years of age with no marriage prospects in sight, so her stay was likely to be indefinite. After leaving Willoway, Harriet was to deliver her mother to Helen's home and enjoy a short visit before journeying to her aunt's house in the village of Rexton.

As the carriage and wagon drove up the drive to her sister's home, Harriet saw the front door open and Helen emerged, babe in arms, to greet them. Helen was like her mother: pretty, petite, and fair. Harriet, who took after her father's side of the family, was tall and thin with a ruddy complexion and wiry hair that resisted her attempts to control it. Helen waved, and stepped up to the carriage as it rolled to a stop.

"Mother, Harriet, how are you? You poor dears, you must be tired." Jumping down from his seat, John helped Mrs. Walters to alight. Helen handed him the baby and embraced her mother, while Harriet climbed down without assistance.

"Welcome to your new home, Mother," Helen said. "I hope that you will be as comfortable here as you were at Willoway. The children are so excited to have their grandmother living with them. Sinclair is away at the moment, but he will be home very soon to welcome you himself."

“Oh Helen,” was all an overwhelmed Mrs. Walters could say.

Helen had left the front door open, and a collection of young Watts erupted onto the front lawn. One of them came to stand by her mother’s skirts, thumb in mouth, while the twins shepherded the other children away from the horses’ hooves. The eldest boy picked up a handful of stones and hurtled them, one by one, at the nearest window. Fortunately, he did not possess the necessary skill or strength to reach his target.

“Harriet,” Helen said, turning to her sister, “I’m so glad that you can visit with us for a few days. You must be worn out from arranging the move. You are to do nothing while you are here. Rest. I will take care of everything.” Knowing better, Harriet smiled and pecked a light kiss on her sister’s cheek.

“Helen, how lovely you look. Just like a painted madonna.”

Her sister dimpled with pleasure. “Thank you, dear, you are always so kind. But let’s not stand about in the drive. Come into the house and have some refreshments. Stay away from the horses, my darlings, and don’t make any trouble for John.” Smiling, Helen led her mother and sister into the house as the eldest boy turned to target the carriage.

Harriet spent the afternoon helping her mother to unpack. There was no spare bedchamber for Harriet, so mother and daughter were forced to share until her departure. It was crowded, especially with a steady stream of children dashing in and out to see what their grandmother and Auntie Harriet were doing. After rescuing some of her mother’s delicate trinkets from their grubby little fingers, Harriet was relieved when Nanny came to collect the children for dinner. By the end of the afternoon, Mrs. Walters was reclining on the bed with a cool cloth draped over her eyes while Harriet rested on a chair beside her, her stockinged feet propped upon the mattress.

“I had forgotten how exhausting Helen’s brood can be,” Harriet muttered.

“It will take some time to get used to them myself,” her mother replied. “Willoway was very quiet compared to Helen’s house.”

“Yes, it was definitely livelier when Helen was still at home. There was always a crowd of young gentlemen waiting on her.”

Mrs. Walters rolled onto her side to peer up at her daughter. “Did you mind very much, Harriet?”

Harriet considered her response for a moment. What could she say; that it had hurt like blazes when she was a young girl with dreams of romantic love and no suitors? That she had cried herself to sleep after balls where Helen had danced every dance with a different young man while she had sat with her mother and the other matrons?

“No, Mother, not so very much. I may have been a little jealous of Helen’s popularity when I was a girl, but I am resigned to my spinsterhood now.”

“To your credit, your father and I never observed any jealousy in your behaviour.”

Harriet smiled. “How could anyone abuse Helen, Mother? She is always so well-intentioned.”

“Even so, it is good that she has Sinclair to watch over her and the children. She does not have your good sense or your strength of will, my dear.”

Harriet did not respond; this was her mother’s favourite refrain. “Don’t worry, Harriet. God may not have blessed you with beauty, but He has more than recompensed you with other gifts, such as intelligence and fortitude.” She would have preferred the scales tipped a little more heavily on the side of attractiveness, but God had not consulted her wishes.

Harriet gripped the arms of her chair and pushed herself to her feet. “It’s time we dressed for dinner. Let me help you find something to wear, and then I will dress.”

“Thank you, my dear. I cannot seem to find anything in this room.”

An hour later, Mrs. Walters, Harriet, Helen, and her husband, Sinclair, were seated around the massive dining room table enjoying a little quiet conversation with their meal. Sinclair had welcomed his mother-in-law with a kiss on the cheek, and Harriet with a brotherly embrace. Harriet had once harboured a passion for Sinclair when he had been one of Helen’s more dashing suitors, but now that they were both older and his waist had grown while his hairline had receded, her feelings for this kind man had subsided into a sisterly affection.

“So, Mother Walters, how is Aunt Edna these days? I do not recall seeing her for years now – really not since our wedding day,” Sinclair said, passing the cheese.

“It has been a long time since she visited Willoway. She became something of a recluse after Mr. Slater’s death. Her recent letters have been full of ailments.”

“I have always thought that Aunt Edna’s health was tied to her spirits,” Harriet murmured.

Mrs. Walters shrugged. “You may be right, dear.”

Sinclair turned to his sister-in-law. "I hope that you'll feel free to visit us whenever you please, Harriet. I only wish that we could offer you a permanent home."

"You are very kind, Sinclair, but I am sure that I will soon think of my aunt's house as a second home."

"I am sure that your presence will result in an improvement to Edna's health and spirits," her mother said. Sinclair and Helen exchanged a doubtful glance that did not escape Harriet's notice.

Chapter Three

The remainder of Harriet's visit passed in a whirlwind of activity. While her sister sat tranquilly nearby doing needlework or writing letters, Harriet read stories to her nieces and nephews, tossed balls, ran races, searched for toads, and gave needlework lessons to the twins. Although Helen seemed insensible of the demands her children placed upon Harriet, Sinclair was more observant, and invited his sister-in-law for solitary country walks whenever his schedule permitted. Harriet treasured these outings. She had hidden her grief over the twin losses of both father and home from her mother, but Sinclair was a sympathetic audience to whom she could pour out her heart. She did not go so far as to share her misgivings over her new home, however. Despite what she had told the others, Harriet was too well-acquainted with her aunt's disposition to be optimistic of their living contentedly together, but she thought it unfair to burden her brother-in-law with concerns that he could not remedy.

On the morning of Harriet's departure, Mrs. Walters did not come down to breakfast. Instead, mother and daughter said their goodbyes privately before Harriet took her leave of Helen and the children.

"I am so glad that you were able to enjoy a little respite with us before taking up your duties with Aunt Edna," Helen said. "Give my love to Aunty, and do not worry about Mother. I will do my best to see that she is cheerful and comfortable."

"Thank you, Helen. I know that you will."

"Come along, Harriet, we must take advantage of the fine weather while it lasts," Sinclair said, both driver and escort on this expedition. Sinclair handed her into the carriage, and soon they were on their way.

It was a beautiful, early autumn day. The morning air held a hint of coolness, but the landscape was still lush and green with wild flowers blooming in patches along the road. The pair of horses seemed glad of the exercise, their shoes beating a jaunty rhythm. The journey was some thirty miles. With frequent stops to rest the horses, Sinclair planned to be in Rexton by late

afternoon. Harriet tried to prevent her apprehension over her new life from spoiling her enjoyment of the day. It was a treat just to be free of all responsibility for a few hours.

As the afternoon shadows began to lengthen, Sinclair guided the carriage into Rexton's main street. Harriet had visited Rexton for her uncle's funeral four years earlier and was able to direct him to the house. They passed shops and a little green before finally stopping before a handsome brick building. Two windows framed the front door, while five more adorned the second storey. An iron fence encompassed the lawn, with large, leafy oak trees standing on either side of a walkway bordered by curving flower beds. Neither a stray leaf nor a dead blossom disturbed the neatness and precision of the yard.

They studied the house in silence for a moment. Turning to her, Sinclair said, "Well, Harriet, are you ready?"

Harriet nodded, and together they stepped through the well-oiled gate and proceeded to the front door. A young maid wearing a ribboned cap and an apron over a plain grey dress responded to Sinclair's knock.

"Good afternoon. I am Sinclair Watts and this is my sister-in-law, Miss Walters. I believe that Mrs. Slater is expecting us?"

"Yes, sir," said the maid, bobbing a curtsy. "Come right this way." She led them down a carpeted hallway to the sitting room, announcing them to the room's single occupant.

Plush velvet drapes were drawn against the late afternoon sun, so it took a moment for Harriet's eyes to accustom themselves to the gloomy interior. The room was furnished with heavy wooden furniture belonging to an earlier age. A bronze eagle held pride of place on a side table beside a sofa. In the middle of that sofa sat a diminutive lady in dull black bombazine, a silver mourning brooch her sole ornament. Her small black eyes flitted from visitor to visitor.

"Good afternoon, Aunt Edna. I hope that you are well?" Harriet said, curtsying. "You remember my sister's husband, Mr. Sinclair Watts?"

"Yes, I remember you, sir. How d'you do?"

"Very well, Aunt Edna," he replied, stepping forward to bow. "I'm pleased to see you again. It has been some time since last we met. Perhaps it was at my wedding?"

"No, sir. Before he passed – God rest his soul – my husband and I attended your first child's christening," she responded. She eyed Sinclair for a moment. "You've grown stouter since then." Gesturing to chairs on either side of the sofa, she added, "Be seated, if you please."

“Thank you, Aunt,” Harriet said as she and Sinclair took their seats. Harriet’s eyes were drawn to the faded pattern in the Persian carpet at her feet. Looking up, she found the older woman watching her.

“Mother and Helen send their love,” she said, attempting to make polite conversation.

“Yes, how is your mother, now that she has lost both house and husband? I was too unwell to attend the funeral myself. I had one of my terrible headaches. I am often plagued by them, and am forced to go to bed for days on end when I have one. Only a little chicken broth will do when I am so afflicted. I have a dull headache today, as a matter of fact. That is why the draperies are drawn.”

“I’m sorry to hear that you are unwell, Aunt,” Harriet said. “Mother misses Father very much, of course, but Helen and Sinclair have made her quite comfortable in their home.”

“What foolishness, to be turned out of one’s home at her age. Had your father provided better for you, you would not now have to rely upon the charity of your relations.”

Harriet was angered by this slur upon her father, but held her tongue and stared stonily at the floor. She had to rely upon this woman for her living now, and it wouldn’t do to begin with a fight. Sinclair coughed, and Aunt Edna turned to him.

“I trust that you are well, sir? I am too prone to respiratory infections to risk entertaining a contagion.”

“No indeed, I am quite fit, Aunt. Just a little dryness in the throat. Travelling thirty miles can be thirsty work.”

“Humph. Niece, pull the cord for the maid.”

Harriet rose and did as she was bid, and the neat little maid returned.

“Grace, where is the tea? It’s late,” her employer said.

“Cook was just adding the teapot to the tray when you rang, ma’am.”

“Well, run and fetch it, girl. Don’t keep us waiting.” Grace scurried out of the room and returned minutes later laden with a heavy silver tea service and a plate of sandwiches.

“You might as well pour, Niece – it will be your duty from now on. What are you waiting for, Grace, get back to work.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Harriet looked questioningly at her aunt. “I like my tea undiluted, but sweet. Put in three spoonfuls of sugar, if you please.”

“Yes, Aunt.” Harriet poured and stirred in the sugar before passing the cup to the lady.

“What kind of sandwiches did Cook make today?” Aunt Edna asked, eying the plate.

“They appear to be chicken.”

“Good, I can stomach a little chicken. Pass the plate, if you please.”

Harriet obliged, and then poured tea for Sinclair and for herself. The trio lapsed into silence as Aunt Edna chewed her sandwich. When the widow showed no sign of offering food to her guests, Harriet reached for the plate and offered it to Sinclair before taking a sandwich for herself.

Aunt Edna said, “Dinner is served at six o’ clock here. I do not tolerate people coming in late to meals. I have a delicate stomach and I must eat regularly. Plain food – none of your rich sauces for me. I retire early and I rise early, unless I am unwell and obliged to spend the day in bed. You will run errands for me, Niece. It will save the servants trouble, and provide you with some exercise. You can start by going to the milliner tomorrow. The hat she sent was not at all what I had ordered. She trimmed it with beads instead of feathers, and it looks shoddy. You will return the hat and have her fix it to my specifications. I also told Reverend Simons that you will be stopping by tomorrow to discuss parish visits. The reverend is a good, solid man, but he needs more support from the parish. Some of the female members are shockingly lax in their duties, and I expect you to set an example for them.

“Yes, Aunt Edna,” Harriet said, shrinking before this sudden onslaught.

“I also want you to watch for those ruffians from the boys’ grammar school. My gardener, Brown, has caught them climbing into my orchard more times than I care to remember. Climbing over the wall and stealing my apples, can you believe their impudence? I complained to the headmaster once, but he is ineffectual.” Aunt Edna scowled.

“But what can Harriet do about the boys?” Sinclair asked.

“Why, I expect her to keep her eyes open and a stout stick handy. Send those boys back over the wall with a good smack. I truly wonder at the way young people are raised these days, with no respect for other people’s property. Boys need to have respect knocked into them, in my mind. You just look sharp when you’re in the garden, Harriet.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Harriet glanced at Sinclair out of the corner of her eye. He was staring at the carpet, one corner of his mouth twitching dangerously.

“Well, that’s all I have to say about your duties for the moment. I’m sure that I will remember more when the occasion presents itself. Summon Grace, and have her show you and Mr. Watts upstairs to your rooms. The groomsman will bring up your trunks. I’m going to lie down for a little rest before dinner. I will meet you in the dining room at six o’ clock sharp.”

Sinclair and Harriet stood as Aunt Edna rose and left the room. Harriet sank back into her chair with a sigh, while Sinclair patted her shoulder.