

CHAPTER 57

In the privacy of the drawing room, Will confirmed what John already knew,

'I've known for months,' he said. His mouth drooped and he shook his head. 'But I didn't want to believe it. And I couldn't tell you 'til I was certain.' He took a deep breath as if to prepare for what was to come. 'Even before the baby was born there were whispers and after your wife died there was talk. I thought it was just gossip and shut those up who were spreading it. But they still talked to Jenny.'

'How did you find out for certain?' John muttered.

'Remember Matt, the lad that went to work in a pit up the coast.'

John nodded.

'Well, he was visiting his mother last week and he called into the shop and talked to Jenny. He knew Mrs Herrington had died and was sorry. But he told Jenny that after your wife's mother died Blandford was a regular visitor at your house.'

'Hardly regular, Will. I think he came once, shortly after the funeral. I was busy in the shop and I sent him upstairs to see Sarah. I don't think he stayed long.'

'Matt said your wife went to church a lot. She always left him to mind the shop on a Tuesday morning when you were out. He said she went to church then.'

'She'd have had to take the children with her.'

'I thought the same thing. But Jenny said except for Sally they'd be at school in the mornings.'

'Sarah didn't like church,' John said. 'She always said she didn't fit in.' He longed to go to his bedroom to be left alone with his misery but Will wasn't finished.

'I'm sorry, Mr Herrington, that's not all Matt had to say.' He wiped a hand over his forehead.

'When you were in France, Blandford was seen more than once visiting of an evening. Matt told Jenny that he arrived for work one morning to find the shop still locked. Mrs Herrington came down in her nightgown to open up and later he saw Blandford sneaking out through the stock room.'

John sat down on the nearest chair and leaned forward, his head in his hands. Common sense told him that something of the sort must have happened but to hear it spoken of was almost too much to bear.

'My God, Will. You should have let me kill the devil.'

'You gave him the shock of his life, Mr Herrington. I don't think he's worth hanging for.'

Charles came in with a bottle of whisky and three glasses and John asked him if the others had returned from church.

'They're in the dining room,' Charles said. 'I've asked them not to disturb you.' He poured out

three generous measures of whisky.

John drank deeply then asked Will to tell Charles what he knew.

'I guessed as much,' Charles said when he had the facts. He turned to John. 'I saw the way you looked from Blandford to Emily and I knew what you were thinking. Of course, the knave gave himself away by taking off, didn't he? I don't know why he came. No one invited him. He was asking for trouble to show his face at all.'

'The idiot has made a fool of me,' John muttered. He covered his face with his hands. 'I never dreamt Sarah could deceive me so—under my own roof—in my own bed. Perhaps my children were witness to their mother's shameless conduct. What about that, Charles? What sort of a man does that make me?'

Charles refilled John's empty glass. 'Don't torment yourself, John. It's Blandford who's in the wrong.'

'I expect they're all discussing this over the dining table.' John gulped the whisky down.

'No one has mentioned it as far as I know,' Charles replied. 'But I think Elvira suspects something of the truth and maybe Maggie has an inkling. Mother is convinced you took action against Blandford because of his association with Jack.'

'Of course, they'll all get to know, won't they?' John was on his feet, walking unsteadily about the room. 'And my mother will have to be told. It wouldn't be fair to let her go on thinking that Emily is her granddaughter.'

Charles nodded. 'We'll worry about that tomorrow.'

Will emptied his glass and got up to go. 'I'll be off, Mr Herrington. You've got your family with you now and there's really nothing more I can do.'

'You're a good friend.' John held out a hand and Will took it. 'I didn't expect to see you in church this morning, or Miss Ridley. What made you come, Will?'

Will didn't answer at once. He seemed to be flustered by John's question but at last he said, 'Miss Ridley asked me. When she was at the shop yesterday, she said I should pay my respects at the church.'

'What was Miss Ridley doing in the shop?'

'Well er—shopping.' Will, obviously uncomfortable, rubbed his chin.

'Does she often do her shopping at the Lowcarr shop?'

'Not often.'

Charles butted in. 'Let him go, John. His wife will be wondering where he is.'

Will moved to the door.

'And does Miss Ridley know about Blandford?' John called after him.

Will turned but didn't speak His mouth was half open, his blue eyes staring. Charles grabbed the man by the arm and pulled him out of the room. There was a thud as the front door closed and then Charles was back asking his brother if he was coming in to eat with the family.

John declined.

'Well then, I'd better go in. They'll complain if I don't. Shall I say you are not hungry?'

'Tell them I've gone to bed,' John said.

Awakening hours later with a splitting headache he got up and splashed his face with water before going downstairs.

Elvira was in the drawing room with Charles. 'Have you recovered?' she said.

'No,' John said, 'is my mother still here?'

'She's gone home and taken Maggie and Emily with her. Are you going to tell us what was going on this morning?'

From the depths of his armchair, Charles said, 'Mary Ann is making tea for you, John.' Then to Elvira, 'I think, my dear, the explanations should wait until she's gone. It is, after all a family matter.'

John said, 'I think Mary Ann knows already, Charles. Why else was she visiting the Lowcarr shop? I'd have thought it was out of her way for shopping—and did you see Will's reaction when I questioned him?'

'Are you saying that Mary Ann went there to gossip?' Elvira spoke sharply. 'She's not the sort of woman to gossip. Besides, if this is to do with Jack, then I think she should hear it.'

Mary Ann came in with a tray of tea and sandwiches.

'This has nothing to do with Jack,' John said. He looked at the food and then at Mary Ann. 'I'm sorry, but I have no appetite.' He closed his eyes.

'At least drink your tea,' she suggested. 'It might make you feel better.' She set the tray down on a table at his side.

'Sit down, Mary Ann. You may as well hear what I have to say but I expect you've heard it from Will.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'I know that there is something between you and Will. He has said as much. Why else did you come to church together this morning?'

'Will said I should pay my respects to your late wife.'

'Why should he want you to do that?'

'Why all these questions? Have I done something wrong?'

'Just tell me why you came to church with Will.'

'Well, I'll tell you what I know.' Her voice trembled. 'Will said he needed to see you urgently, that

there was something you ought to know and—'

Charles interrupted. 'That's enough, John. Can't you see she's upset by your questioning?'

'You'd better sit down, Mary Ann,' John said, 'and listen to my story.'

He began in a measured, detached way but gradually as the facts were unfolded he became less restrained. He spoke of Sarah's infidelity and betrayal, of Blandford's sly deception and of his own failure and humiliation. His mouth was dry and bitter but he kept on talking, holding nothing back until he felt utterly exhausted and empty.

When he was done his listeners were silent. Charles picked up the whisky bottle but put it down again when he saw Elvira shake her head.

Mary Ann left her chair and came to kneel at John's side. She covered his hand with her own and soon after that Charles and Elvira left them alone.

It was almost midnight when John and Mary Ann went upstairs. At John's bedroom door they kissed. She put her arms around him and for a moment they held each other close. But it was he who disentangled himself and moved away.

Alone in his cold bed, he sighed and stretched. Tomorrow his mother and Maggie would have to be told the truth. In the warmth of the bed his body relaxed a little, but sleep didn't come easily and the revelations of the day continued to occupy his thoughts. Now he knew the truth about Sarah but Mary Ann's recent alliance with Will Henderson left him completely mystified.

On Monday morning John found his mother in her kitchen, cooking breakfast in large black frying pan. Maggie was at the table with Emily on her knee.

'Will you have something to eat, son?' Hannah said.

'No, thanks, Mother. I've eaten. I expect you know why I'm here.'

He explained the reason for yesterday's skirmish, watching his mother closely as her outrage became apparent. Maggie, as still as a statue, stopped eating and Emily, as if she sensed trouble, pressed herself against her aunt and stared at John with round, expressionless eyes. Repeatedly Hannah tried to interrupt, but John would have none of it and when he'd finished and she had her chance to speak, she erupted like a volcano.

'Are you saying that, except for me, the whole of the neighbourhood knows of this disgraceful affair?' She was incandescent with rage.

'I think there's been a lot of gossip, mother. But probably not more than a few know the truth.'

'Who told you? How did you find out? How long have you known?' Her questions seared the air.

'I knew nothing until yesterday and then no one needed to tell me.' He looked at Emily. 'See for yourself, mother. She's Blandford's child, she has his colouring.'

'I can hardly bear the shame,' she said. 'I warned you about marrying that woman and now look

what she's done. She's cast a slur on our good name.' She looked around for someone on whom to vent her anger, and turned to Maggie. 'So now, Mrs Ritchie, what do you think of your sister. I hope you are proud of her.'

Maggie, uncomprehending and terrified said, 'I'm sorry.'

'Don't speak to Maggie so.' John said to his mother. 'She can't be held responsible for her sister.'

Hannah glared at him and pushed up her sleeves defiantly. She went over to the fire and stabbed at the spluttering coals with the poker sending showers of sparks flying up the chimney.

Maggie's pale lips trembled. 'John, I need to know where I stand with Emily.'

'What do you mean, Maggie?' he said.

Her arms were wrapped protectively around the child. 'I mean, if Blandford is Emily's father he might want to take her away from me.'

John stared at her. He'd been so intent on the dishonour brought upon him by Sarah, it hadn't occurred to him to think about a problem such as this.

Hannah flung the poker down in the hearth and stumped back across the room. Her mouth was a hard line and she stood in front of Maggie and John, her feet apart, her hands on her hips.

'Over my dead body,' she said with vehemence. 'That little girl might not be my grandchild but she has brothers and sisters who are.' She glared at John. 'For that matter, who's to say that you're not her father? Blue eyes run in this family. Your father had blue eyes. She might have inherited her colouring from James. His eyes were as blue as a summer sky.' She dabbed her wet cheeks with the hem of her apron.

John pulled her close to him and gently tipped her chin to look into her faded brown eyes. He felt tears pricking his own as he hugged her. Then, leaving his mother he turned towards Maggie and Emily and held out his arms. For a moment the child stared at him and then, seeing his smile she chuckled and held out her own

Holding the child, he turned to Hannah. 'As you say, mother, who can tell. She's as likely to be mine as his.' Carefully he placed Emily in Maggie's lap. 'He'll not take her from you, Maggie, and neither will I. Take her back to Liverpool with you when you go. Only, don't forget, she'll want to see her brothers and sisters from time to time.'

The colour was returning to Maggie's face but she was still apprehensive. 'What if he wants to see her?' she whispered.

'Leave Mr Blandford to me,' John said. 'He won't want to see her or show his face anywhere within miles of this place when I've done with him.'

When he was leaving, Hannah followed him to the door. 'I don't think the children knew,' she said. 'They did mention his visits but I thought nothing of it and as far as I know, neither did they. Once,

when you were in France, Sarah asked if the three eldest could stay with me. She complained about the extra work she had to do when you weren't there. They stayed here from Monday to Friday.' She paused to think. 'The two little ones stayed with her but they'd have been fast asleep in their bed when she was entertaining her fancy man.'

John winced at the euphemism 'Thank God for his mercy,' he said.

CHAPTER 58

The Reverend A.C. Taylor, vicar of Lowcarr Parish church did not seem at all surprised to have a visit from John and Charles Herrington on Monday evening. He faced them across the table in the parsonage dining room, his fingertips touching in a prayer like stance. He explained that he'd had a message from the vicar of Sandwell church, telling him of yesterday's disturbance.

That disturbance, still fresh in John's mind, left him almost devoid of rational thought and he decided that it was best to let Charles to outline their allegations against Blandford.

When Mr Taylor had heard everything he tapped his fingers together and cast his eyes up to the ceiling as if looking for inspiration. John and Charles, afraid to disturb his meditation, waited in silence for what seemed like moments before the vicar turned his attention to them again.

'I think,' he said slowly, 'that Blandford should have the opportunity to speak up for himself.' He stood up. 'I'll ask him to come down.'

It was ten minutes before he returned with the curate. Blandford closed the door carefully behind him and came to stand beside the table. The vicar began to explain the situation to him, to impress upon him the seriousness of the matter. Blandford's head was bowed; his shoulders drooping and even after all the accusations had been levelled against him he made no attempt to defend himself.

John was silent too, afraid to unleash the anger that seethed in him. Once again he left his brother to do the talking.

Charles kept his voice calm and his words clear. 'Our main concern, Mr Blandford, is the association between my brother's late wife and yourself. But before we come to that we want to ask you about your friendship with his eldest son Jack.'

John, observing the curate closely, could discern no reaction from Blandford.

Charles continued. 'We know you were still trying to befriend the boy after his mother died. Why did you do that? Did you hope to bribe him to keep your secret?'

Blandford's eyes were downcast, his head bowed. As he began to speak he raised his head far enough to stare at the table top. 'Until your family moved to Sandwell,' he said, 'Jack was a member of the congregation at this church. He shared my interest in birds. That was all.'

'That doesn't explain your continued interest in the boy after he'd left the parish.'

Blandford turned to look directly at John. 'After Mrs Herrington died you sent my daughter away and all contact was broken. I've never spoken to the boy of that matter, but being able to talk to him about other things seemed to bring me closer to those I had lost.'

John felt his hands clenching and, ignoring Charles' warning glance, began to speak. 'Hasn't it occurred to you, Blandford, that she is not your daughter? Sarah was my wife and Emily is my

daughter. Make no mistake, man—I will brook no interference on that score from you or anyone else.’ Suddenly he stood up.

‘Stay where you are, Mr Herrington.’ The vicar was on his feet.

‘Sit down, John, Charles urged. ‘He’s not worth the trouble.’

Mr Taylor took charge of the proceedings. ‘It appears, from what you have said, Blandford, that you are not denying the accusations. You must realise that your career as a priest is in jeopardy.’ He turned to John. ‘I shall, of course, put these matters into the hands of the bishop. He will advise us of what is to be done.’

John sat down again. He noticed that Blandford was standing up straight now. His shoulders were back, his eyes wide and defiant. He looked at John and began to address him in a clear voice.

‘When Sarah died I decided to leave the priesthood. After her death I had no wish to stay here or to be a member of the clergy elsewhere. Next term I shall be taking up a teaching post in Derbyshire.’

John opened his mouth to reply but Blandford held up a hand to stop him.

‘Mr Herrington, I am not ashamed of my love for Sarah. It began as a friendship that was never intended to grow. When, on my part, it changed to love, I respected her married state and was prepared to worship her from afar.’ He took out a handkerchief to wipe his brow. ‘But she was left alone in her hour of need while you followed your own pursuits. I couldn’t bear to watch her distress. You offered her no comfort in her sorrow.’

‘I can’t listen to this.’ John’s anger was welling up, spilling over. He could feel Charles hand on his shoulder, warning him to remain seated.

Blandford stood his ground. ‘Can’t you see that I’m beaten, Mr Herrington. At least allow me to have my say. When she died you played the grieving widower but it was I, not you, who tended her grave. I risked my good name— everything—to come to her graveside on the anniversary of her funeral and to set my eyes on the child that was born of our love.’ His head was bowed, his body shaking as he wept.

‘Come along, John,’ Charles whispered, ‘Mr Taylor has the matter in hand. I think we should leave now.’

John got up. ‘Before I leave this room, Blandford I want to make it absolutely clear that any attempt to contact Emily will be dealt with through the courts. Should you ignore this warning I will not hesitate to inform all and sundry of your impropriety.’

At the door the vicar shook John’s hand. ‘I think Blandford will not trouble you again, sir. And I will let you know what decisions the bishop makes.’ He closed the door firmly but the curate’s anguish seemed to follow them as they left.

‘I could almost feel sorry for him,’ John said. ‘But he places the blame for everything at my feet.’

What about that Charles?'

'Pay no attention to his ramblings, John. The man's a hypocrite. He took advantage of Sarah and of the situation. He gave a good sermon, I'll say that for him, but it was well prepared and he'd got his own escape route ready in advance. You won't see him again. He's no threat to you or your family.'

They walked for some minutes without speaking, and then Charles glanced sideways at his brother. 'You shouldn't take all the blame, John. It's never one person's fault. There were two people who married each other on that wedding day fifteen years ago. You might have neglected her but she broke her vows. You wanted to make progress and she didn't. It takes great commitment to overcome such an impasse. Take Elvira and me—we have to share the blame for what has happened between us. It's not always about love. Elvira and I have plenty of that. But it's hard for me to accept the changes a baby brings. I did expect Elvira to play up to Corot, that night, and before we had the baby she'd have gone along with that—have trusted me to keep it under control. I was in the wrong, John. I had no understanding of the stress my wife was suffering. But then she took our baby away across the sea, and she was wrong.' He stopped walking and turned to face John. 'She's wrong about something else. I have no interest in Lucy. I love Elvira, she's all I want.'

John smiled. 'I knew it, Charles. I told Elvira so. But what happens now? What of your future?'

'Elvira is my future. She's a strong character. But I knew that when we married and I have no regrets. She's coming back to America with me, but on her own terms. I'm hoping they coincide with mine. We might have to compromise.'

They'd walked on, each of them deep in their own thoughts and after a while John said, 'Did you know I'd asked Mary Ann to marry me?'

Charles chuckled. 'Ah—well. Have you taken her character into account? It seems to me that Mary Ann is a lady with a mind of her own. I hope you know what you are doing this time?'

They both laughed and in the darkness John felt his spirits lightening.

On Wednesday, Maggie and Emily left for Liverpool on the morning train. Charles, Elvira and baby were travelling too; to stay with the Ritchie's until Saturday when they were booked aboard the S.S. Baltic bound for New York. John had hired a four-wheeled *growler* to take them all to the Central Station, and was glad that he'd done so when he saw the vast amount of luggage that was to be transported.

Hannah and the children, as well as Mary Ann and Annie, gathered on the steps to say farewell with hugs and kisses and promises to write. John squeezed into the cab to accompany the travellers as far as the station.

Before the train left the platform, Maggie held Emily up to the open carriage window so that John could kiss her. He looked at the child's features. She was indeed a pretty baby and he thought she

bore a strong resemblance to her mother. The shape of her head, the way her hair curled and the wide set of her eyes all reminded him of Sarah but he could see nothing of himself in the little girl's appearance.

Charles came to the window.

'Take care of your family, Charles.' John said.

Charles gave a wry smile. 'Elvira was only making a point, you know, when she left me.' He smiled broadly. 'With luck we'll be back here in the summer. Perhaps with two companies.'

'My new business should be up and running by then,' John said.

When the train was out of sight John left the station to make his way to the Quayside. A property there had become vacant, and this morning he had an appointment to view it. The premises in Westgate Road had proved to be unsuitable for his purposes and he'd taken a mischievous delight in telling Leuven so.

The Quayside building was quite a different matter. It was ideally placed, overlooking the river. *As near to the merchant's houses as I'll ever get*, he thought. In fact the building was located at the opposite end of the quay, far away from those magnificent houses.

For an hour or so, he wandered through the building, climbing the stairs to the upper floors, studying the potential of every room, working out what needed to be done and trying to visualise how it would look when finished. Within the hour his mind was made up. This was surely the place to set up his new firm. I shall call it *The City Packing Company* he decided and went home to Grange Terrace with more optimism than he had felt for some time.