

Elizabeth stopped outside the door of her father's study to gather her courage. She was certain his summons was about her refusal to accept Reginald Burton-Smythe's offer of marriage, and equally certain he would be very angry. There was simply no help for it. She couldn't abide Mr. Burton-Smythe. His mere presence made her skin crawl. And no one, not even her father, could force her to speak words of acceptance to him.

Elizabeth pressed her hands to her abdomen, drew a slow, deep breath to ease the sudden, painful spasm in her stomach and opened the door—delay would only increase her father's ire. She stepped inside, closing the door quietly behind her. The room smelled of smoke, after-dinner port, and cigars. The combination did little to help the state of her stomach. "You wished to see me, Father?"

Ezra Frazier looked up, placed the paper he was reading on his desk and motioned her forward. "I understand from Burton-Smythe you refused his hand. Is that the right of it?"

His tone of voice did not bode well for her. Fear moistened her palms. Elizabeth pressed them to the soft velvet fabric of her long skirt. "Yes, Father, it is."

His features tightened. "Tomorrow when he comes calling, you will ask his forgiveness and tell him you accept." He lifted the paper from his desk and resumed reading.

She was dismissed. As easily as that her life was ruined—any hope for future happiness destroyed. Anger overrode the fear clamped around Elizabeth's chest. She squared her shoulders and forced words out of her constricted throat. "I'm sorry, Father, I cannot . . . I will not . . . accept Mr. Burton-Smythe's offer of marriage."

Shock spread across her father's face. The vein at his right temple pulsed. He rose to his feet. "You dare to defy me?"

The soft, icy tone of his voice made Elizabeth shiver in spite of the anger heating her blood. She searched for words to turn away his wrath. "It is not out of defiance I speak, Father. Rather, it is revulsion and fear of Mr. Burton-Smythe that gives me voice."

"Make me no puling excuses, Elizabeth!" The flames of the fire glittered in her father's cold, steel-gray eyes as he looked at her. "The betrothal agreement has been signed. When you wed Burton-Smythe the warehouse property he owns on South Street comes to me. My fortune will double—and more yet. I'll not lose my gain because of your mewling fear."

"But, Father, I—"

"Silence! I'll hear no more excuses. I've long sought that property and it will be mine. Now go to your room and prepare yourself to accept Mr. Burton-Smythe tomorrow. The banns will be read on Sunday."

Elizabeth's stomach churned. She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry to cause you distress, Father—but I will not wed Mr. Burton-Smythe."

The vein at her father's temple swelled. He placed his hands on his desk and leaned toward her. "Do not stand stubborn in this matter, Elizabeth—there are ways to ensure your compliance. It would be well if you yield gracefully—but yield you will."

Elizabeth stared into her father's eyes and knew further protest was useless. He would not listen to her. Greed was his master, and she nothing more than chattel to him. It had always been thus. She swallowed back the bile rising into her throat, lifted her long skirts and walked to the door.

"Elizabeth."

She paused. Took a breath. "Yes, Father?"

"I'll hear no complaints from Burton-Smythe. When you are wed—be as other wives and suffer your fate in silence."

Elizabeth shuddered and shook off the memory. She would not think of that meeting with her father two nights ago, or of the events that followed. Yesterday was a horror that must be forgotten. It robbed her of strength. She would think only of today. What would happen today?

Moisture filmed her eyes. Elizabeth blinked it away and stared at the carriage waiting on the cobblestone street below. He was going to do it. Oh, God, help me. Please help me!

The front door of the house opened and her father stepped out onto the stoop. Elizabeth yanked open the double sashes of her bedroom window. "Father, stop! I beg you— please don't do this to me!"

Ezra Frazier halted.

Hope, born of desperation, trapped the breath in Elizabeth's lungs. She braced herself on the sill and leaned forward, willing her father to heed her plea. He removed his top hat and tilted his head back. Their gazes met. "Close the window, Elizabeth."

Everything in her went still. The chill of displeasure in her father's eyes was colder than the March air blowing in around her. A shiver slithered down her spine. Cold knots formed in her stomach. That was it then. He was going to meet with Reginald Burton-Smythe to complete the wedding arrangements, and nothing she could say or do would change his mind. He had coveted that waterfront property for too long to let it slip through his grasping fingers now.

Elizabeth straightened, clenching her hands into fists at her sides as she watched her father walk down the marble steps, cross the sidewalk, and climb into the waiting carriage. Money was her father's god. His business properties all he cared about. He ruled over them and his household with an iron hand, showing no one love or mercy—and always he had his way. But not this time. No, not this time. This was about the rest of her life. And she would die before she would give herself to the man who had attacked her last night.

The driver cracked his whip.

Elizabeth flinched as if the lash had been laid against her own flesh. A sick emptiness replaced her vestige of last hope. She closed and latched the window sashes, then lifted her chin and strode to her wardrobe. The sharp beat of the horse's hoofs against the cobblestone street rang in her ears as she fastened her cloak around her shoulders. The rumble of the carriage wheels spurred her resolve. She dragged the large drawstring bag she had made during her sleepless night from its hiding place, put the possessions she had chosen to take with her inside, then pulled from her pocket the note she had written.

Father and Mother,

I cannot marry Mr. Burton-Smythe. I

could not endure it. As you intend to force that

union upon me, you leave me no choice. I must go.

Elizabeth

Her stomach churned. She swallowed hard, drew another steadying breath, and placed the note on her bed. It was done. She was ready to go. All she needed now was her money, and the key.

Elizabeth snatched up the few coins hidden in her sewing box, dropped them into her reticule, then stepped to her dresser. Her hands trembled as she unscrewed the base of the pewter candlestick and dumped the key hidden there onto her upturned palm. She curled her fingers tightly around the small, cold metal shaft. Thank God for Miss Essie. Oh, thank God her governess had hidden the key all those years ago!

A rush of tears stung her swollen, burning eyes. She blinked them away, pulled on her kid gloves, then hurried to her bedroom door and pressed her ear against the flat center panel, listening for any sound of movement in the hallway beyond. She heard nothing.

Heartened by the silence, Elizabeth leaned down and fitted the key into the lock. The click of the bolt sliding back was loud in the silence. For a long moment she waited, then, grasping the knob firmly she turned it ever so slowly and eased the door open a crack.

There was no one in sight.

The air trapped in her lungs expelled in a burst of relief. She stepped into the hallway, locked her door, then tiptoed along the corridor to the top of the staircase. Footsteps sounded in the entrance hall below.

Elizabeth jolted to a stop. She whirled about and darted to the side of the stairs, pressing her body back against the wall where she would be hidden from view. Whoever it is, don't let them come upstairs! Please God, don't let them come upstairs! Her heart hammered wildly against her ribs as the footsteps began to climb.

"Alice!"

Elizabeth gasped and squeezed more tightly against the wall at the sound of her mother's voice.

"I want no one upstairs until Mr. Frazier returns! Go tidy the drawing room."

The maid's footsteps retreated. Doors closed.

Elizabeth sagged against the wall, then immediately righted herself and moved to the banister to peek down into the room below. It was empty. Thank heaven! If her mother should discover her— She jerked her mind from the debilitating thought, took a firm grip on the handrail, and started down the stairs.

There was a loud creak.

Elizabeth's heart leaped into her throat. She froze in place— waited. No one came to investigate. After a few moments, she tightened her grip on the railing and crept forward, her mouth dry as she tested each step, her long skirts sliding from tread to tread with a sibilant whisper that to her ears sounded like a roar. When she reached the solid floor of the entrance hall her heart was pounding so violently she felt giddy. She inched her way to the front door, eased it open and slid outside. The frigid air stung her face.

Elizabeth pulled her fur-lined hood in place, rushed down the marble steps to the sidewalk and hurried away.