Chapter Two

Robert rubbed his face with his hand, as if he could chase away the tiredness caused by not having slept the night before. After ten days on the road, he should have been exhausted to the point of collapse, but his thoughts wouldn’t let him rest.

Robert couldn’t stop thinking about Anne Smithfield. Every time he closed his eyes, she glared at him as her things were hauled off to pay her brother’s debt. She had cried, accused. Robert had enough guilt weighing on him while awake; he didn’t need it while he was sleeping.

 He was now in hell. Robert sat at his father’s desk, in the very spot where his father had put a gun to his head and started the nightmare that had ended Robert’s childhood. He reached over and dragged the curtains open. Anything to brighten the room up and lessen the taint it held for him. Weak sunlight filtered through the windows.

 The household accounts for the Lodge lay open in front of him. Robert flipped through the pages, noting the precise hand with which Miss Smithfield had detailed each entry. Precise and controlled, much like the woman herself.

He hated to admit it, but Anne Smithfield was good. She took prodigious care of his house and estate. Hell, she even made a profit. It was the first time in a long time the old estate had actually made money. Robert paged through the ledger, hoping she’d make a mistake somewhere.

He rubbed at the pain in his stomach. He wasn’t cut out for this revenge business. When he’d set out to ruin Sir John Smithfield, Robert had no idea that Sir John had sisters. Nor did he expect to like any member of the Smithfield family.

A shadow fell in the doorway and a feminine voice said, “I’m sorry, Mr. Matthews. I didn’t know anyone would be in here.”

As if his thoughts had caused her to materialize, Anne Smithfield entered the room and stood before the desk with her hands folded serenely in front of her. The dark green of her dress accentuated the creaminess of her skin, and lace clung to the dress’s bodice and sleeves. A tight bun attempted, with mixed success, to control her dark hair. She was the picture of innocent womanhood. Robert hoped her looks were deceiving or, by God, he’d be in trouble.

Robert stood and cleared his throat. “Miss Smithfield. Grandmother said you’d be expected this morning.”

Anne moved into the room, leaving the door open as proper propriety demanded.

“I was just going over the ledgers,” Robert said as Anne approached. He motioned to one of the big leather chairs in front of the desk.

She shook her head at his offer of a chair, choosing instead to lean over the desk to look at the ledger. “Is there a problem?”

The scent of lemon filled Robert’s nostrils as she leaned forward. He could see the fragile bones of Anne’s hand as it rested on the desk for support. He cleared his throat. “I usually check the ledgers for Grandmother. Just want to make sure things are in order.”

Anne jumped back as if he had slapped her, but then her expression grew more serene. Her face returned to her usual placid mask: it was irritating as hell.

“You’ve not examined the ledgers once since I’ve been here.”

Robert fought the urge to squirm. “I had the ledgers sent to London quarterly.”

“Then you should be aware of any issues prior to reviewing these. Am I right?”

Robert realized that he needed a different tack. “How long have you been handling the accounts?”

Anne glared down her nose at him, with her green eyes as hard and cold as stone. “About two years,” she replied stiffly.

Robert set down his quill. “How is it you understand how to run an estate such as this, Miss Smithfield?”

Robert eyed her carefully as she rubbed her hands together, as if she were anxious. So she wasn’t so calm after all.

“I took care of the estate while my father was alive.”

Robert flipped through the pages of the ledger again. “The property made money this year. I’m surprised your brother doesn’t take advantage of your skills for his own estate.”

“My half-brother neither wants nor needs my assistance,” Anne replied sharply.

Robert watched as she closed her eyes and calmed herself with a deep breath; Anne’s serene mask again resurfaced immediately. “Does your brother spend all of his time in London?” he asked.

She shrugged. “He prefers it to his estate.”

“I saw him the last time I was in London. At the club.” He watched her face closely, waiting for a reaction. He felt the desire to squelch Anne’s carefully maintained facade rise within him. He wanted to pique her anger, to see that serene mask again slip. She had to be hiding something. She was a Smithfield.

She frowned back at him. “You’re aquatinted with my brother?”

“I’m surprised that you choose to live so far away from him. Most young ladies would prefer London to Beetham.”

Anne’s eyes shifted to the ledgers and then back to him. She was silent for a few seconds before replying. “Is there a problem with the accounts, sir? If not, then I need to see Lady Danfield.”

“Why aren’t you living under the protection of your brother?” Robert demanded. “Three young women, alone and vulnerable, can lead to all sorts of problems.”

Anne’s eyes flared and her voice became sharp. “I don’t see how that’s any concern of yours.” Temper shot bright splashes of pink across her cheeks.

Robert toyed with the letter opener on the desk. “Forgive me, Miss Smithfield. It just seems strange that you’d choose to live so far away from your own brother.” He was pleased with himself for arousing her anger.

Anne’s green eyes became hard again.

“When did you last see your brother?” Robert prodded.

Anne looked away toward the window. Robert wasn’t sure that she would answer his question, but she then turned back and met his eyes.

“His business doesn’t allow him to be so far from London. I do write regularly.”

“Does he reply?” He kept his voice soft. Robert wanted to gain her trust, to trick her into revealing something.

She looked down at her feet. “He sends the girls treats now and then, although it has been a while since we last heard from him.”

She was holding something back. He knew it. Robert resolved to push her just a bit further. “Miss Smithfield, how long has it been since Sir John contacted you?”

She dropped her arms to her sides and looked into his eyes again. “If there’s nothing else, Mr. Matthews, I should see to Lady Danfield.”

She refused to tell him, damn her. Robert studied her for a long moment. “You take special care of my grandmother, don’t you?”

Anne genuinely smiled for the first time during their conversation; it transformed her face from almost plain to beautiful. Guilt bubbled up in Robert’s stomach.

“Lady Danfield has been very kind to us. It’s my pleasure to see to her comfort,” Anne said.

Robert snorted. “Only if you don’t cross her. She can be quite acerbic.”

“If you will excuse me, sir.”

Robert watched Anne leave the room; she closed the door behind her. She was lying about her brother, he was sure of that. His plan for revenge had just become much more complicated.

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Anne paused on the other side of door, deep in thought over the strange conversation she’d just had with Mr. Matthews. He knew her brother fairly well, if his comments were any indication. And she was almost sure that Mr. Matthews didn’t like Sir John any more than she did.

Mr. Matthews also knew she was lying about the gifts and letters. Anne had lied to avoid the pity that usually came when she told the truth about her relationship with her brother; she loathed being pitied more than anything else. Anne gathered herself together and made her way to the kitchen for a much-needed cup of tea.

“Now, what’s put that frown on your pretty face, Miss Smithfield?” Mrs. Fellows, the cook, asked as she waddled in from the pantry.

“Nothing,” Anne said simply.

“She just came from the library with Mr. Matthews,” the maid offered, following Anne into the kitchen.

“I’ll not have you gossiping, Mabel,” Mrs. Fellows said sharply.

“But the door was open, ma’am,” the girl complained.

Mrs. Fellowes shoved a tea tray into Mabel’s hands. “Enough. Go and take Master Robert his tea.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The girl scrambled to obey.

Mrs. Fellows poured a cup of tea and placed some biscuits on a plate. “Come sit down Miss Smithfield, and rest yourself. Her Ladyship will be needing you shortly, and you look a bit peaked.”

Anne took her seat at the table and helped herself to a biscuit. She bit into it and smiled. “Ginger biscuits, my favorite.”

“They’re Mr. Matthews’s favorite as well. I thought I’d bake them for him since he’s finally come home.” Mrs. Fellows added a biscuit to her own plate.

Anne finished her biscuit and eyed another. “I don’t remember his ever visiting in the last five years.”

“He hates it here. So many bad memories of his father. The man died in the library. Quite a violent death, I’m told. They say Master Robert was the one to discover him.” Mrs. Fellows poured another cup of tea and pushed it toward Anne.

Anne added sugar to the fresh cup and stirred. “Good God, I had no idea! What happened?”

“His father gambled the entire estate away, except for what was entailed to Master Robert. The father was blinded, they say, by mourning for his beloved wife. Left behind his two boys with practically nothing.”

“Until Lady Danfield came,” Anne said quietly.

Then Anne felt the blood drain from her face as a thought occurred to her. “He killed himself?” she asked in a whisper. As bad as things were in her own life, she’d never had to live through discovering a dead parent bleeding on the floor.

“No one says. No one would, now would they?” Mrs. Fellowes sipped her own tea. “Master Robert has done well for himself, though. He’s not like his father in that respect, nor his grandfather. I imagine the old man is turning in his grave watching his grandson in trade.”

“In trade? I thought Mr. Matthews was a gentleman.”

“He is, but he’s been rebuilding the family fortunes the only way he can, and that means trade. Mr. Matthew is a genius with numbers, much like his grandmother.”

Anne sipped at her tea. At least Mr. Matthew had family to go to. She didn’t have any family of means to rely on—especially not her half-brother. “That explains why Her Ladyship and Mr. Matthews are so close,” she replied.

“There’s not many people besides Her Ladyship that can pull Master Robert away from London.”

Anne corrected her. “Lady Danfield may have summoned him, but I think Mr. Matthews is also here to separate Master Tony from my Sarah. Mr. Matthews won’t allow his brother to marry into my family.”

“Could be. I’m not saying your Sarah isn’t a fine young lady, but I suspect Mr. Matthew would want Master Tony to marry a young lady of substance, if you see what I mean.” Mrs. Fellows poured another cup of tea. “He’s worked hard to rebuild the family fortunes from the ground up. He’d want to make sure Master Tony is cautious in his choices.”

Anne played with her teacup. The consequences of a failed engagement were just too scary to think about, on many levels. Sarah must have the man she wanted.

The craggy face of the old lady from the Fairy Steps popped into Anne’s head, so Anne decided to change the subject. Mrs. Fellows had been raised in the area: could it be possible that she knew of the old woman in the village? “I ran across an elderly lady by the Fairy Steps yesterday. I was wondering if you knew her.”

Mrs. Fellows leaned her double chin on her pudgy fist. “Goodness, not many of the old dears in the village walk that far away from the square. What did she look like?”

“Swarthy, no teeth, very short. She walked with a cane. She looked like a Gypsy. Are there any in the area?”

“Lord, no. They’ve been gone since the harvest.”

Anne set her teacup down with a rattle. She’d hoped the old crone would have at least been seen in the village.

Just then, a footman came into the kitchen. “Her Ladyship is settled in the parlor, Miss Smithfield.”

Anne smiled at him. “Thank you.”

“I’ll have Mabel bring you both a fresh pot. It’s a cold day and Her Ladyship will be feeling it in her bones,” said Mrs. Fellows.

Anne made her way to the cozy sitting room that Lady Danfield preferred in winter. She tried to push her concerns about Sarah and Tony to the back of her mind, but the cold winter weather kept her family’s poverty foremost in her thoughts. Sarah’s marriage would improve their circumstance.

“Good afternoon, Your Ladyship.”

“Anne, there you are. Can you fetch my wool shawl? I sent the maid but she’s not returned. I can’t abide this chill.” Lady Danfield sat before the fire, with her feet resting on a stool and her workbasket on the floor beside her.

Anne gathered the shawl from the Mabel, who had just rushed into the room. “Thank you Mabel,” she said, before dismissing the maid.

Anne wrapped the shawl around the dear lady’s shoulders. “There, that should help.”

Lady Danfield patted her hand in return. “Thank you child.”

“Your hands are like ice. What have you been doing today?” Anne scooped up Lady Danfield’s hands and held them between her own.

“I walked into the village to call on Mrs. Norris. She’s been so sick.”

“Perhaps you should’ve taken the carriage. It was too cold to walk today.” Anne picked up a poker and stirred the fire. “Is that better?”

“I also saw Mrs. Worth while in the village.”

“How is Mrs. Worth today? I can’t imagine she was happy to see you.” Mrs. Worth and Lady Danfield disliked each other intensely.

“She has some crazy notion that that woodcock son of hers is courting you. She wanted me to put a stop to it. I informed her that you had more sense than that.” Lady Danfield’s crabbed lips trembled as she spoke.

Anne took her seat and picked up her handwork. “Mr. Worth happened upon me on my way home from my walk yesterday. I thought his attentions rather odd. He hasn’t shown interest in me in all the years we’ve lived here.” Anne profoundly hoped that the incident had nothing to do with fairy wishes and the strange, cane-wielding woman.

“He’s an odd one for a vicar. Can’t string a sentence together in company,” Lady Danfield said. “I suspect his mother writes his sermons.”

Anne covered her mouth to stifle a giggle. “Surely he writes his own sermons.”

“If you like him, Anne, I have to question your sense. Tell me you aren’t considering him?”

“It would be an equitable match, and beggars can’t be choosers.” Anne’s tone was neutral, but she wrinkled her nose. “It’s doubtful I’ll have another offer.”

“I’d rather see you an old maid than have you subjected to his mother’s harping for the rest of her days.” Lady Danfield put down her own handwork. “I know you Anne—you wouldn’t tolerate her meddling. And that son of hers doesn’t have the backbone to stand up to her.”

Anne picked up her darning as she fought a shudder. “He’s not that bad. But please don’t worry, I have no intentions to settle as yet, especially with Mr. Worth.”

“Someone might turn up that will catch your eye, my dear.”

It was an old discussion, one which Anne had grown weary of. “Perhaps some nice farmer will want me. You know how I love the country.”

“You’re still the daughter of a baronet, Anne,” Lady Danfield said. “I’d be remiss in my duties to your mother if I allowed you to marry a farmer.”

“I’m not allowed to marry a farmer, yet the vicar is too stupid. What would you have me do?” Anne teased. Lady Danfield was determined to see her married, but was also determined that Anne not accept a suitor beneath her.

“Go climb the Fairy Steps you love so much. Maybe a fairy will have better luck than I.” Lady Danfield closed her eyes. “Lord, save me from picky spinsters.”

Anne chuckled. “You’d miss me if I married. I’d not be here to challenge you.”

Lady Danfield lifted her head and shot Anne a look. “Challenge? I thought you were being impertinent!”

Anne grinned and returned to her handwork. “I was, but only because you’d walk all over me if I didn’t.”

“Right you are, girl.”

“What’s so amusing?” Robert’s baritone voice rumbled into the room ahead of him.

Lady Danfield sat up stiffly and abruptly announced, “The vicar is courting our Miss Smithfield and I won’t allow it,”

Anne’s face heated. “It’s of little consequence. I have as little grace for his sermons as he has for us,” she said softly. “Too many rules; not enough mercy.”

“Heavens, those long sermons. The man can talk for hours about nothing,” Lady Danfield said. “He probably puts God Himself to sleep.”

Robert moved to take a seat near his grandmother’s chair. “I would think Miss Smithfield would be honored by a marriage proposal from the vicar. He doesn’t have warts does he?”

“He has invisible warts,” Lady Danfield sniffed.

“For shame, my lady, calling his mother a wart,” Anne said in a low, mischievous voice.

Lady Danfield laughed. “Anne dear, she’s not invisible—she’s glued to his side like a barnacle on a pier.”

“Then we shall pity the woman who marries Mr. Worth. She’ll have to be a saint,” said Anne.

Lady Danfield wiped tears of mirth from her eyes. “As long as it’s not you, my dear. Pour my grandson some tea, please.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Anne moved to do as requested, being careful not to rattle the china. Her hand brushed Robert’s fingers as she handed him his cup. She glanced down at him; he was watching her with an odd look in his dark eyes. She quickly returned to her handwork.

“So the vicar is calling on you?” Robert asked, returning to the topic and setting his cup down with a rattle. “Why didn’t you say something this morning?”

Anne and Lady Danfield both jumped at the abruptness of his tone. Anne quickly looked down at her handwork as Lady Danfield gave her a speculative look.

“Anne dear, you can do so much better,” Lady Danfield continued. “Besides, I couldn’t call on you if you married Mr. Worth, not with that harpy of a mother in the household.”

Anne laughed quietly. “You have nothing to fear. I doubt it will come to anything.”

“Why is that? Surely the man is good enough for a baronet’s daughter,” Robert asserted, with a seed of accusation in his voice.

Anne glared at him. “If I loved him, I’d marry him.”

“Love has gotten too many a couple into trouble,” Robert griped. “It’s best to arrange these things based on mutual respect and money.”

“Ah, you prefer arranged marriages then.” Anne smirked. “Why am I not surprised?” She again returned to her handwork, dismissing him. Anne fought the urge to groan. She knew Lady Danfield had been watching their exchange with piqued interest—the woman could weasel secrets from the Prime Minister himself.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Robert demanded.

“Arranged marriages are so old-fashioned.” Anne looked down at her work. “They rarely make anyone happy.”

“Happiness in marriage is a matter of chance.” Robert picked up his teacup again. “I would assume someone as practical as you wouldn’t put much stock in romance.”

“I speak of respect and love,” Anne pushed on. “Where there is both, there is peace and harmony in the home. Surely that’s something a man such as yourself would want as well.”

“And you’ve seen couples united in this type of marriage?”

“Well, not yet,” Anne admitted. “But that doesn’t mean they don’t exist.”

Robert crossed his legs. Arrogance oozed from his pores like sweat. “I agree with you on respect, but love? More peace and harmony has been gained in financially sound marriages than from love. You can’t dine on love, Miss Smithfield.”

Anne glared at him as she yanked a thread through her darning with so much force that it snapped. She tossed her work aside. “Spoken like a typical male. Your sex in general seems to fear love for some reason. Why is that, do you think? Control, perhaps?”

“Common sense, mostly, Miss Smithfield,” Robert answered as he rose from his seat and began pacing. “Most men understand, as does your Mr. Worth, that being unable to support their family is the worst sort of sin.”

“Are you suggesting that Mr. Worth is merely toying with me?” Anne stood up, with her hands balled into fists. “The man is a gentleman. You do know what that is, don’t you Mr. Matthews?”

“Enough, both of you!” Lady Danfield commanded. “Robert, stop baiting the girl. You never know when to quit.”

Anne picked up her handwork, trying to hide the tremor in her hands, and returned to her sewing. “Mr. Matthews knows exactly what he’s doing, my lady.” Anne was certain of this; she would bet her last shilling on it.

Robert clutched his chest and collapsed into his chair in one exaggerated motion. “You wound me, Miss Smithfield.”

“I think you are incapable of being hurt by words.” She rethreaded her needle and attacked the fabric with it.

“Men feel pain, Miss Smithfield. They just hide it well. Unlike women who thrive on manipulations of the heart.”

“Perhaps you’ve hidden your emotions so well that you have ceased to experience them,” retorted Anne. Silence filled the room. As Anne met Mr. Matthews’s eyes, the space between them felt like a wide canyon. She returned to her work, unwilling to apologize, despite the sick lurching near her heart. She’d carried things too far. Again.

“Enough, both of you,” Lady Danfield repeated. “I won’t have my two favorite people bickering.”

“I’m sorry, Grandmother.” Robert sat himself up properly and his chair and picked up his teacup. He drank in silence.

Anne continued with her needlework. “My apologies, my lady.” She kept her voice low.

“Anne dear, will you go and see when luncheon will be ready?” asked Lady Danfield.

“Of course. Excuse me.” Anne passed Mr. Matthews on her way to the door. He avoided looking at her.

Once in the hall, Anne leaned against the closed door, hoping to hear some part of the conversation. Were they discussing Sarah and Master Tony? Given her behavior, it wouldn’t surprise Anne if Mr. Matthews grabbed his brother by the cravat and forced him back to London. She was now certain that Mr. Matthews was not going to give the marriage his blessing. No, Anne had taken care of that with her temper. And without one of them marrying well, there was no way she and her sisters could survive the winter on their own.

Too bad Mr. Worth didn’t have a fortune.