

the
**CURIOS
INHERITANCE**
of
**BLAKELY
HOUSE**

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POLITANO**



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To the two sweet friends
who have been my cheerleaders
for eight books and counting,
and who asked to be in a book.
Rachel and Angie, you're now
officially written into a story.



chapter ONE

They call you odd, and perhaps you are. Or perhaps . . . perhaps the scope of normal is wider than any of us believed.

~Sophie's letters to Emmett

GRAFTON, SHROPSHIRE, ENGLAND, 1901

It was a strangely calm morning in March, with no wind off the dales, when the woman I assumed to be my mother slipped into the shop. She hovered in the back like a wraith, peering at me through the dangling pendulums, gears, and clock springs, her veiled face wide-eyed and lovely.

She pretended to peruse the merchandise, gaze slipping my direction from time to time, observing me. Appraising. Looking for the maker's mark she'd left on my soul.

I steeled myself. *Yes, I received your letters.*

No, I haven't money to lend you.

Her requests over the years had come with different forwarding addresses, from Australia to the United States, and

now after nearly two years without a letter, she'd come in person.

I was of a mind to begin the conversation with a refusal, but then I spotted the little wooden box tucked beneath her arm, and I couldn't get my mind off what it might contain. My imagination fixated on it. And once fixed, my foolish mind would not be moved.

The bell above the door jingled, and a man in cheap gray serge glanced quickly around before approaching the counter and doffing his derby hat. I pressed my lips together in polite welcome, still eyeing the woman in black. And her box.

I forced my attention to the only paying customer in the shop.

“Is Mr. Lane available?” He slid a midsized clock loosely wrapped in soft linen onto the countertop.

“What a beautiful clock. A Vienna Regulator with the most lovely enamel dials.” I peeled back the linen, turning the clock over and springing open the back. “Looks to be a standard two-train movement with—”

He pulled it back and smoothed it shut. “Mr. Lane. He’s in, I hope? The sign on the door. It says Mr. Daniel Lane, proprietor.”

“So it does.” I offered a warm smile. He must have traveled from another hamlet to see us. This was a curiosity shop, filled with all manner of trinkets and wonders, but word had spread of our repair work too. In this part of the country, there were few skilled in clock repair. “I can assist you, though.”

“I’d rather see Mr. Lane.”

I pressed my lips together. People take one glance at a book’s cover, half a glance at the title, and decide in that instant if the words inside are worth reading. I was a book whose library card stood nearly empty. “Of course you would.”

If the man had been a local, he'd realize I was far better equipped to repair his Vienna Regulator than Daniel Lane. Mostly because Daniel Lane was dead. Had been for many years.

I held out my hands. "I'll take it right back for assessment. Mr. . . . ?"

"Morgan. Henry Morgan." He hesitated but passed the swaddled clock to me. It had a surprising weight to it—the clock's movement must be solid metal, in the way of older pieces. I carried it behind the curtain, into the back room filled with the scent of lathe oil and lavender. "Mr. Lane, are you in?"

Aunt Lottie crossed the space in three quick pecks of her boot heels, fists on her pert little waist, and flashed that dimpled smile. "Another one?"

"He insisted. Mr. Lane only."

She rolled her eyes as she retrieved a metal file and turned back to the lever escapement she had taken apart. Her file and polisher whipped over the tiny teeth with precision. "Well then, shall you be Mr. Lane today, or shall I?"

Mr. Lane, Aunt Lottie's late husband, had owned the curiosity shop for a mere two years before succumbing to apoplexy. It had been in Lottie's capable hands for twenty-three years and our joined hands for nearly ten.

"You have a project already. I'll take this one." Popping off the back again, my fingers immediately searched for the maker's mark, and found no less than four. Each were carved subtly into the movement, three outside and one within, a quiet claim to this exquisite workmanship and all its modifications.

I tightened the coil spring and felt about for anything loose. I gently urged a few bolts and pinions off the movement and felt the problem immediately—oil coated every inch of the

verge escapement as if someone had drenched the poor thing every time the mechanics slowed. Now it had thickened and nothing moved.

Foolish people.

Fine flakes of rust had gathered along the pins, and the delicate fusee chain had snapped. I worked out the rust and glanced through the slit in the curtain.

Speaking of foolish people. What did that woman want? Why not simply write again? Her letters had always been sent along from my address in Compton because she'd believed I still resided there with Father—that's how little she knew of my life. Yet now she'd gone to the trouble of connecting the post office box from that foolish ad with our shop, and she'd come to see me directly.

But why?

Clocks made sense. People seldom did. Perhaps if I could pry off the backs of them—people, that is—and peer into their gears, everything would become clear.

I reassembled the movement, secured the back, and threw a passing wink at Aunt Lottie as I carried it back out to the waiting customer. "A simple repair, Mr. Morgan. You'll need to leave it with us for the night."

"Did Mr. Lane say that?"

"Just a bit of oil stopping up the pinions, and a broken chain."

He frowned. "My clock doesn't have pinions."

A tight smile. "It'll be ready for you tomorrow morning, if that is acceptable."

He eyed me suspiciously but took his leave after placing his card on the glass countertop. Exhaling, I peered below the hanging pendulums and weights. My heart thrummed a rapid beat. Had she gone?

There—a swish of fabric, and a veil. And that box. She was still here. “Might I help you, ma’am?”

She lifted her gaze, clutching that box.

But then the door banged open again, bell whipping against the wood frame, my heart hitting my ribs. In strode a bull of a man in a finely tailored suit. A bull who had the right of way on whatever path he trod. He charged up to the counter and planted both palms on the glass, gaze roving over my face. “You’re the one.” Low and quiet, his voice set off warning bells. “The chit who placed the advert in the personals.”

I watched him, eyebrows raised, gaze roving to the rear of the store. The guest had turned her back on the new customer, veil down, blending expertly into the shadows.

Not so very missing, this woman. Not just now.

“Answer me, girl. You’re the one looking for Lady Gwendolyn Forrester of Manchester, are you not?”

I looked him up and down. “Sorry. You couldn’t pass for her.” I slid an open clock toward me—the two-hundred-year-old, gilt-metal-mounted Joseph Antram table clock in ebony veneer that I actually wasn’t meant to touch—and threaded out the tiny screws.

Two other men marched in and took up posts behind him, arms folded over their chests.

I couldn’t have known that Aunt Lottie’s reasons for forbidding me to find my mother were decent ones. My mother, the shooting starlet, as we called her, was actually quite famous—or infamous, rather, posing as a lady and driving up debts, blackmailing married lovers, and leaving a wake of destruction in her path. I had learned all that from placing that advert during a moment of weakness less than a fortnight ago.

The letters that had trickled into my hired post office box

offered a rather sorry picture of the woman who was not here to tell the story herself. And now she had brought that infamous life directly to our shop. Along with a passel of wronged men, it would seem.

Aunt Lottie would be hopping mad. If this man didn't strike me dead with his glare first.

His eyes narrowed. "I have a certain interest in her whereabouts, as it happens."

"So you've come to me, the one who *advertised* she doesn't know where she is." I jammed the pliers into my finger and winced, putting the injury to my mouth to keep the blood from the fine ebony veneer.

He leaned over the counter. "Lady Gwendolyn. Has she been here?"

My gaze flicked to the back of the shop . . . which now lay dark and still.

Cowardly woman.

"If she has, she has not announced herself." I picked up my tools, feeling an odd sense of loss. Over the mysterious box and the woman.

He dug about in his pocket. "When she happens to show her face," he said, striking a match and watching me through the flame, "you'll kindly notify me. You won't forget, will you?" He dropped the burning match into the open clock.

With a cry I slapped a cloth over it, smothering the flame with shaking hands and fanning away wisps of smoke. I grasped the counter with shaking hands. "Leave now, before I take this clock over your head!"

He struck another match, held it close to my face. "I'd be careful who I threaten, girl. Especially in such a nice little shop." He dropped it into a pile of buffing cloths.

I sprang to smother it as the men behind him laughed.

“Out!” I lifted an empty clock case over my head, but the gent merely tipped his hat and departed with all the gravity of a bull who feared no one.

They left, sucking all the tension out of the room . . . and the steel from my spine. I wilted onto the counter and trembled. How many men had she angered? *How many?* Three long, deep breaths, then a shuffle stirred my attention. I popped my eyes open and there she was—that veiled woman, staring at me through the gears and springs hanging from the ceiling.

And the box. The unopened box was tucked beneath her arm. She approached, weaving through the cluttered aisle, and pushed the box toward me on the glass counter as if offering treasure. “For you.” Those lovely violet eyes tried to warm through my defenses.

Still shaky, I dropped my gaze to the catch on the box. Longed to spring it and peer inside.

But the aroma of singed veneer gave me pause. The image of that man’s face, the barely controlled anger . . . and the letters I’d received from her other men hidden in the back of my bureau. If they couldn’t find her, wring their vengeance from her, they’d wring it out of me. Out of Aunt Lottie. Dear Aunt Lottie, who had once swept me up as a throwaway and tucked me neatly into her life at the shop.

I had become like a viper she held close. Her ruin.

After a moment with my hands on the box, I shoved it back. “I don’t want it.” Dynamite is what it was.

She perched her black-gloved fingertips on the box, blinking at me. “You do repair clocks, do you not?”

Regret rained down upon my pent-up bitterness, dissolving it instantly. “Yes. Yes, of course. My apologies, I thought—

that is—it doesn't matter." A puff of breath. Probably not my mother. "Yes. Yes, I repair clocks. Anything with gears, actually. Here now, let us have a look." I triggered the mechanism, and the lid sprang open. Tucked in a soft cloth lay a mahogany clock whose maker I did not recognize, gold hands from the last century but a newer glass faceplate, clear of the fog that ordinarily encroached with time.

"You'll notice, Miss Forrester, that it isn't like other clocks."

My hackles rose again. I stole a glance at the woman and lifted the clock, turning it over, running a finger over its polished surface.

"You *are* Sydney Forrester, are you not?"

"I am. And you are . . . ?"

"Quite glad to speak with you." A soft smile.

"How long since it has kept time?"

She shrugged. "Five, maybe ten years."

I pulled the little piece toward me, sliding the back off and exposing a wealth of tiny gears, springs, and delicate pulleys. I gasped. It was a marvel. Hundreds of tiny pieces were all neatly packed together—more than I'd ever seen before. I dared to touch a tiny gear, its teeth barely thicker than my fingernail. "What . . . what is this?"

She merely smiled.

On the finely polished surface, an extraordinarily long-winged, graceful bird had been etched into the wood. Something about it drew me. "My little bird," Father had always said of Mother. Even years after she'd flitted away from us.

I touched the etching and ran my fingertips over the fine casing, then I wound the little key in the side. Gears sprang into motion. The mechanism whirred and spun, harder and louder until the thing grew warm.

What in heaven's name . . . ?

I dropped it on the counter, expecting an explosion, but a beam of light shot from it. An exact likeness of the clock's face shone out beside me but magnified and hazy, a large ghost clock dancing on the air, haunting the wall it lay against.

Mouth hanging open, I reached out and sliced my hand through the beam of light, the shop's grime dancing like fairy dust in it. "Magic," I whispered, touching the wall where the clock face was projected, but I felt only plaster.

"*Fifty-three degrees two*," said the clock, in a gravelly voice. I jumped back. "How—?"

The woman's solemn gaze studied me through the veil. Evaluated.

Then she touched a trigger on the back and the light vanished, the ghost clock on the wall disappearing. It shrank back into a regular mahogany clock that clicked innocently through the seconds, then died out again. My heart pounded twice that speed.

"I thought you might like to see what you're turning down . . . before you make your decision. That is, if you *are* still deciding." She clung to the counter. "You are, aren't you? I received no reply to my letter."

I gripped the clock. Secured the back in place. "Who are you? What is—"

The letter. That *letter*! It came back in a rush, an odd feeling settling over me just as it had when I'd opened the missive from the unknown "Mrs. Holligan." Me, inheriting a property. What a lark! It had seemed a silly prank, coming into the post office box with all those letters from my mother's jilted lovers. A trap, perhaps.

But now it inflamed my imagination, stark and real and

full of untold possibilities. “You’re the one who wrote to me. About that . . . that place. With the clocks.” No, this woman was *definitely* not my mother.

“There’s far more to Blakely House than clocks.” She smiled behind the veil. “And now you’ve had a taste of it. Here’s another.” She slipped a metal object from deep within the folds of her gown and set it on the counter. It was a key. A long, elaborate one that shone with fresh polish. Birds encircled its stem and formed the handle, hinting at the marvels and beauty awaiting me.

I took that key, turning it over. Surprised at its weight. I used to believe I wanted adventure, as does every girl who buries her nose in books. Except for the part about leaving home. That was what novels were for—having adventures without any of the discomfort. I clutched the counter, the same one I’d once grasped as a small, terrified orphan, and stared at that key. And all I could think about is what it might unlock.

“The master said you were to have this when he was gone.” She pressed it toward me. “That you’d know exactly what to do with it. And . . . I hope you do. I hope you’ll come.”

“I’m not certain I can get away.” Or that I wanted to. But I desperately needed to know what the key unlocked—and why the late master thought I would know. My mother’s family had always been shrouded in mystery, as had the woman herself, and I hadn’t any idea who any of them were.

She laid her black-gloved hand on my bare one. “We need you, Sydney Forrester. Please come.”

I looked at her face behind the thin veil—so lovely with rounded contours and bright eyes, inviting me into something extraordinary. Yet for one accustomed to fighting uphill battles, striving hard to eke the bare minimum out of life, I

hardly knew what to do with good fortune simply being held out to me.

She turned to go.

“Wait! Your clock.”

She smiled. “See if you can work it out. Then bring it back.”

That notice. That rotten advert in the personals that had put my insignificant name in print. Who would have thought anyone would be hunting for a throwaway orphan with no connections?

But they had come, all those letters . . . and her too. This Mrs. Holligan, who had startled me with the information she’d given in the letter, and troubled me with what she’d left out. This wasn’t a typical inheritance, this Blakely House. But she didn’t explain what that meant.

I perched on my stool, curling over the clock she’d brought and opening its back, laying bare its intricacies. No nameplate advertised the designer, but each metal surface had been black polished to perfection until the gears, which few ever saw, shone like ebony. The corners had been neatly rounded, and tucked inside the inner frame was a tiny little hummingbird, carved in relief. The finish was its own sort of maker’s mark.

Why on earth would someone decorate the inside of a clock?

I peered deeper. There was something jammed into the topmost gears. I loosened a few screws, shifted things, until orange fluff suddenly obscured my view.

“What do you think, my Micah Bear?” I whispered into my orange kitty’s fur as he shoved his face before mine with a rumbling purr, and my troubled heart calmed. I could not remain unsettled when Micah came and found me, tugging at my attention.

My heart melted as I met my cat's dignified gaze. He was one of a kind. His crooked little stub tail. His terrible howl from across the house when he decided he was lonely. The large, pitiable eyes, and the way he hovered. My annoying guardian angel. A castoff like me . . . who had found love and a home. Also like me.

I didn't need more than what I had right here in this shop. I didn't.

He paused with a look of expectation on his face, ears perked. "I suppose you'd rather I stay, selfish thing that you are." Another affectionate rub with my free hand, and he leaned in harder, tucking his head beneath my chin and vibrating with contentment. How I'd miss this boy if I left. Miss the life that had formed around me here.

Leaving had never occurred to me. Not once. Not until today.

I stared at that brilliantly complex clock and again caught a whiff, wild and windblown, of Blakely House.

A taste. An invitation.

A leap off a cliff.

I threaded a pair of tweezers deep within the clock to retrieve that cloth and nudged the tiny bird etching by accident. It activated like a small button, and when I stood the clock up, a tiny compartment on the bottom opened and something fell out and hit the glass counter.

Tink.

I lifted the tiny golden circle to the light. An engagement ring! A stunning opal that shone like the moon was settled neatly inside a love knot on a band of gold. I turned it over in my hand, holding my breath. Inside, an inscription—*For my Sophie. Deepest love, Emmett.*

Emmett. Emmett Sinclair, the great-uncle who had supposedly left me his fortune. And the ring was here, in this clock. Not on this Sophie's finger.

The deceased had no immediate family to inherit his holdings . . . That part of the letter sprang back with the pang of loneliness I'd felt upon skimming it days ago. No family. No one to inherit, except a relation he'd never met.

Laid out before me, the clock, the key, and the ring gave a tiny glimpse of Blakely House, like three pieces to an intriguing puzzle. Even when I tried to focus on Mr. Morgan's Regulator, taking apart the pieces and laying them in perfect order on the counter, my gaze drifted to those three objects.

They called to me in a way nothing in this stale little hamlet did.

Finally, with a quick glance about, I slid open the money drawer and poked inside. Blakely House should be only a train ride away. Might as well keep the coins on me, just in case. Then I could flee in a moment, if that door opened to another of Mum's bitter lovers. But inside I found only worn felt lining the drawer.

Nothing. Truly, *nothing*? I pulled the drawer open, and it was true. The tax payment and the month's notes had taken everything.

Except . . .

I shoved a stool over to the shelves on the back wall and climbed up, reaching for a jar on the very top, just out of view. Mad money, Aunt Lottie had called it, and this was a moment of madness. A mere handful of coins jingled as I brought it down, which meant she'd dipped into these too. Quite a bit, actually. A breathless shock filled me with dread. Punctured my security.

I dumped out the meager stores. Sixpence for third-class

train travel to Northumberland, a few shillings for a hackney from the station . . . nothing for food.

And absolutely nothing to leave Aunt Lottie.

When I arrived, if the letter was true, there would be money to repay her, and extra besides. If nothing else, I could sell the seaside cottage called Blakely for a tidy sum, and the profits would more than replace the mad money.

Yet if I didn't take the risk, nothing more was likely to appear in the drawer. At least, not for quite some time. The notes we owed piled up beside the ones still owed to us.

It was only practical that I go. Wise and forward-thinking, just as Aunt Lottie always pushed me to be.

But it meant leaving. And it meant not changing my mind. There would be no scurrying back if anything was amiss. And wiring Aunt Lottie to rescue me wouldn't work, for I'd leave her with nothing with which to come fetch me.

Stay or go.

Stay . . . or go.

I must have stood there many moments, staring at that door, for when Aunt Lottie flicked aside the curtain and her little boot heels clicked out into the shop, she sighed and offered a gentle reproach. "You're drifting again, Syd." Her quick smile showed her dimples, her sparkling eyes. "Where oh where has your lovely mind gone?"

I turned back to the two clocks on the counter. "Oh, the usual places."

I'd been called a daydreamer, called lazy, people assuming I stared off into nothing, thoughts like white puffy meaningless clouds of emptiness. I missed what's happening around me at times, forgot so much and said very little, so they'd assume I was thinking nothing.

When in fact, I'd be thinking of a great many things, deeply and richly, and hadn't yet surfaced to keep up with everyday goings-on around me. My current flurry of thoughts circled around two very distinct words.

Stay or go.

Stay.

Or go.