



C. S. HARRIS

AUTHOR OF *WHO BURIES THE DEAD*

WHEN
FALCONS
FALL

A
SEBASTIAN ST. CYR
Mystery

The Sebastian St. Cyr Series

*What Angels Fear
When Gods Die
Why Mermaids Sing
Where Serpents Sleep
What Remains of Heaven
Where Shadows Dance
When Maidens Mourn
What Darkness Brings
Why Kings Confess
Who Buries the Dead*

WHEN FALCONS FALL

A Sebastian St. Cyr Mystery



C. S. HARRIS



AN OBSIDIAN MYSTERY



OBSIDIAN

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[*Author's Note*](#)

In memory of Banjo, Scout, and Indie, my three forever-kittens

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*Say, will the falcon, stooping from above,
Smit with her varying plumage, spare the dove?*

...

*Admires the jay the insect's gilded wings?
Or hears the hawk when Philomela sings?*

—ALEXANDER POPE

Chapter 1

Ayleswick-on-Teme, Shropshire
Tuesday, 3 August 1813

It was the fly that got to him.

In the misty light of early morning, the dead woman looked as if she might be sleeping, her dusky lashes resting against cheeks of pale eggshell, her lips faintly parted. She lay at the edge of a clover-strewn meadow near the river, the back of her head nestled against a mossy log, her slim hand folded at the high waist of her fashionable dove gray mourning gown.

Then that fly came crawling out of her mouth.

Archie barely made it behind the nearest furze bush before losing the bread and cheese he'd grabbed for breakfast.

"There, there, now, lad," said Constable Webster Nash, the beefy middle-aged man who also served as the village's sexton and bell ringer. "No need to be feeling queasy. Ain't like there's a mes o' blood."

"I'm all right." Archie's guts heaved again and his thin body shuddered, but he swallowed hard and forced himself to straighten. "I'm all right." Not that it made any difference, of course; he could say it a hundred times, and word would still be all around the village by noon, about how the young Squire had cast up his accounts at the mere sight of the dead woman.

Archie swiped the back of one trembling hand across his lips. Archibald Rawlins had been Squire of Ayleswick for just five months. It was an honor accorded his father, and his father before him, on back through the ages to that battle-hardened esquire who'd built the Grange near the banks of the River Teme and successfully defended it against all comers. One of the acknowledged duties of the squire was to serve as his village's justice of the peace or magistrate, which was how Archie came to be standing in the river meadow on that misty morning and staring at the dead body of a beautiful young widow who had arrived in the village less than a week before.

"'Tis a sinful thing," said Nash, tsking through the gap left by a missing incisor. "Sinful, for a woman to take her own life like this. The Good Book says, 'If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.' And I reckon that's as true for a woman as for any man."

Archie cleared his throat. "I don't think we can say that yet—that she took her own life, I mean."

Constable Nash let out a sound somewhere between a grunt and a derisive laugh as he bent to pick up the brown glass bottle that nestled in the grass at her side. "Laudanum," he said, turning the bottle so that the POISON label faced Archie. "Emptied it, she did."

"Yes, I noticed it."

Archie stared down at the woman's neatly folded spencer. It lay to one side with her broad-brimmed, velvet-trimmed straw hat, as if she had taken them off and carefully set them aside before stretching out to—what? Drink a massive dose of an opium tincture that in small measures could eas

pain but in excess brought death?

It was the obvious conclusion. And yet . . .

Archie let his gaze drift around the clearing. The meadow was eerily hushed and still, as if the mist drifting up from the river had deadened all sound. The young lad who had stumbled upon the dead woman's body at dawn and led them here was now gone; the creatures of forest and field had all fled or hidden themselves. Even the unseen birds in the tree canopy above seemed loath to break the silence with their usual chorus of cheerful morning song. Archie felt a chill dance up his spine, as if he could somehow sense a lingering malevolence in this place, an evil, a disturbance in the way things ought to be that was no less real for being inexplicable.

But he had no intention of uttering such fanciful sentiments to the gruff, no-nonsense constable beside him. So he simply said, "I think you should put the bottle back where it was, Nash."

"What?" The constable's jaw sagged, his full, ruddy cheeks darkening.

Archie tried hard to infuse his voice with a note of authority. "Put it back exactly as you found it, Constable. Until we know for certain otherwise, I think we should consider this a murder."

Constable Nash's face crimped. His small, dark eyes had a way of disappearing into the flesh of his face when he was amused or angry, and they disappeared now. But he didn't say anything.

"There's a viscount staying in the village," said Archie. "Arrived just yesterday evening. I've heard of him; his name is Devlin, and he works with Bow Street sometimes, solving murders. I'm going to ask for his advice in this."

"Ain't no need to go troublin' no grand London lord. I tell ye, she killed herself."

"Perhaps. But I'd like to be certain."

Archie readjusted the tilt of his hat and smoothed the front of his simple brown corduroy coat. Standing up to the village's loud, bullying constable was one thing; Archie had only to call upon some six hundred years of Rawlins tradition and heritage.

But approaching the son and heir of the mighty Earl of Hendon and asking him to help a simple village squire investigate the death of a stranger was considerably more daunting.

Chapter 2

A picturesque cluster of half-timbered and stone cottages huddled in the shadow of a squat, timeworn Norman church, the Shropshire village of Ayleswick lay just to the southwest of Ludlow, near the banks of the River Teme. Once, it had been the site of the Benedictine priory of St. Hilary, famous along the Welsh Marches as a pilgrimage destination thanks to its possession of an ancient wooden statue of the Virgin, said to work miracles.

But the priory was long gone, its famous statue consigned to the flames and many of the stones from its sprawling monastic complex sold or hauled up the hill to build a grand Tudor estate known as Northcott Abbey. The once-bustling village had sunk into obscurity and now boasted only one decent inn, the Blue Boar, a rambling, half-timbered relic that fronted both the village green and the narrow, winding high street.

Sebastian St. Cyr, Viscount Devlin, stood at the window of his chamber at the inn, his view of the misty green below rippled by the casement's ancient leaded glass. The impression was one of bucolic peace, of innocence and harmony and timeless grace. But Sebastian knew that all is often not as it seems, just as he knew that those who probe the secrets of the past risk hearing truths they might wish they'd never learned.

He dropped his gaze to the mechanical nightingale he held in his hands. It had been purchased for an old woman Sebastian had never met, by a man who was now dead. And so Sebastian had come here to the old woman's village, to deliver her dead grandson's gift.

He heard the soft whisper of fine muslin skirts as Hero came to slide her arms around his waist and rest her dark head against his. Tall, statuesque, and striking, she'd been his wife for a year now. Their infant son slept peacefully in his nearby cradle, and Sebastian loved both mother and child with a passionate tenderness that awed, humbled, and terrified him.

She shifted to take the nightingale from his hands, wound the key cleverly concealed in its tail feathers, and set the bird on the deep windowsill before them. The nightingale's gilded wings beat slowly up and down, the jewels in its collar sparkling in the early-morning sunlight as a cascade of melodious notes filled the air.

She said, "Shall I come with you?"

He hesitated, his attention caught by a young country gentleman in an unfashionable corduroy coat who was striding toward the inn's door. "You don't think a simple, aged countrywoman might find a visit from the two of us a bit overwhelming?"

"Probably," she said, although he saw the faint frown that pinched her forehead. She knew that the nightingale was only part of what had brought him to this small Shropshire village, just as she knew that what quickened his pulse and tore at his gut was the possibility that the unknown elderly woman might possess the answer to a question that had shattered his world and forever altered his understanding of who—and what—he was.

An unexpected knock at the chamber door brought his head around. "Yes?"

A spry middle-aged chambermaid with a leprechaun's face and wild iron gray hair imperfectly contained by a mobcap opened the door and bobbed a quick curtsy. "It's young Squire Rawlins,

milord. He says t' beg yer lordship's pardon, but he's most anxious to meet with you, he is." She dropped her voice and leaned forward as she added, "I'm thinkin' it's on account of the lady, milord. Heard Constable Nash tellin' Cook about it, I did."

"What lady?"

"Why, the one they done found down in the water meadows, just this mornin'. Dead, she is!"

He and Hero exchanged silent glances.

On the windowsill, the mechanical nightingale wound down and stopped.



"The young Squire's a tad new to being justice of the peace, I'm afraid," confided the chambermaid as she escorted Sebastian down the stairs. "Took over from his father just a few months back, he did. A real tragedy, that; the old Squire died on the lad's twenty-first birthday."

"Tragic indeed," said Sebastian.

The chambermaid nodded. "Drank three bottles of port and then tried to jump his best hunter over the stone wall by the pond. The horse made it, but not the old Squire. Broke his neck."

"At least the horse survived."

"Aye. Would've been a shame to lose Black Jack. He's a grand hunter, that Black Jack. Best in the Squire's stables." She tut-tutted and shook her head as they reached the inn's old flagged entrance hall and turned toward the small parlor to the left of the stairs. "Here ye go, milord."

He found the new Squire Rawlins standing before the parlor's empty hearth, his hat twisting in his hands. He had a smooth, boyish face reddened across the tops of his cheeks and the bridge of his nose by the summer sun, and looked more like sixteen than twenty-one. Of medium height only, he was thin and bony, with a jerky way of moving, as if he'd yet to grow accustomed to the length of his own arms and legs.

"Lord Devlin," he said, surging forward as the chambermaid dropped a curtsy and withdrew. "I'm Archie—Archie—Rawlins, Ayleswick's justice of the peace. I beg your pardon for intruding on you without a proper introduction, but there's been a rather peculiar death in the village, and since I know you have experience dealing with these matters I was hoping you might be willing to advise me on how best to go about things. My constable thinks it's suicide, but I . . . I . . ."

The young man's rushing tumble of words suddenly dried up.

"You find the death suspicious?" suggested Sebastian.

Archie Rawlins swallowed hard enough to bob his Adam's apple up and down, and nodded. But Sebastian noticed he didn't say *why* he thought it suspicious.

Sebastian knew the urge to tell Squire Rawlins that what he asked was impossible, that Sebastian was in town for a few days only and would soon be gone. The last thing he wanted was to get involved in some village murder.

But then he saw the mingled uncertainty and earnestness in the young man's eyes and remembered the good-humored derision in the chambermaid's assessment of the village's new justice of the peace. Which was how he found himself saying, "Hang on while I fetch my hat and gloves."

Chapter 3

“**H**er name is—or I suppose I should say *was*—Emma Chance,” explained the Squire as they followed a shady path that led from the far end of the high street, down through a thick wood of oak and beech, to the river. “She’s a young widow—only arrived in the village last Friday.”

“She has family here?” asked Sebastian, treading carefully along a slippery stretch of the footpath deep in the shadow of the trees and still muddy from a recent rain.

Rawlins shook his head. “She was on a sketching expedition through Shropshire. You should see her drawings and watercolors; they’re quite out of the common.”

“How old did you say she was?”

“She told me she met Captain Chance when she was twenty, and was married seven years. So I suppose that would make her twenty-seven or twenty-eight. He died of fever in an American prison just six months ago.”

“Tragic. Who is traveling with her?”

“Well, she had her maid with her.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes.”

It was highly unusual for a gentlewoman—even a widow—to travel without a male relative. Sebastian said, “I take it you spoke with her?”

“Several times. She asked if she could sketch the Grange and I said yes. The original part of the house dates back to the thirteenth century, you know.”

“And did she sketch it?”

“She did, yes. On Saturday.”

“When was the last time anyone saw her?”

Rawlins drew up at the edge of the water meadow and turned to give him a blank look. “I don’t rightly know. I suppose that’s one of the first things I should find out, isn’t it?”

Sebastian narrowed his eyes against the strengthening morning sun as he studied the clump of trees on the far side of the meadow. “It would help.”

A broad, flat area of grassland that lay beside the river, the water meadow was kept irrigated when necessary by a carefully controlled series of sluice gates, channels, and field ridges. The latest crop of hay had recently been harvested, leaving the grass shorn close and the air smelling sweetly of new growth and the cool waters of the slow-moving river. Only a loud buzzing of flies near a far stand of alders hinted at the presence of death.

They crossed the clearing to where a belligerent-looking middle-aged man introduced by Rawlins as Constable Nash stood beside the young widow’s body, his massive arms crossed at his chest. Sebastian remembered what Rawlins had said, that the constable was convinced the woman had killed herself. Constable Nash obviously did not appreciate having his judgment questioned by the new justice of the peace.

What was left of Emma Chance lay at his feet, her head propped against a low log, her bare hand folded at her heart as if she were already in her tomb. Even in death, she was beautiful, her features

dainty, her skin flawless, her neck long and graceful, her hair a rich dark brown. A fashionable spencer and hat rested nearby, the fingers of one fine gray glove peeking out from beneath its brim. An empty bottle of laudanum, its cork stopper carefully replaced, was at her side.

“It’s suicide, I tell ye,” said the constable. “Plain as plain can be. She done took off her hat and that fancy little coat thing, laid down, drank the laudanum, and killed herself.”

Rather than answer, Sebastian hunkered down beside the woman’s small, delicate body. Her gown was plain but of good quality and fashionable, its soft, subdued gray appropriate for a widow who’d been in mourning for more than six months. He could see no signs of violence of any kind, although that didn’t mean there were none.

Yanking off one of his gloves, he touched the back of his hand to her cheek. She was utterly cold. “When was she found?” he asked.

The young Squire cast one quick look at the dead woman, then stared pointedly away, toward the slowly moving waters of the river. “Just after dawn. One of the lads staying at Northcott Abbey was out early looking for birds and happened upon her.”

Sebastian shifted his gaze to the surrounding grass. The close-cropped stalks were visibly crushed in places, but the ground was slightly elevated here and too hard and dry to show the footprints of those who had trod it. And he found himself staring at the dead woman’s feet, just visible beneath the hem of her gown. She wore half boots made of fine soft kid, relatively clean except for some dust on the toes.

He rested one forearm on his thigh as he felt a slow, familiar anger begin to build within him. For a beautiful young widow to be so overcome by a vortex of grief, desperation, or guilt as to take her own life was tragic. But for someone to steal that life away without her consent was an abomination.

He said, “Is there another path she could have taken to get here besides the one we followed?”

“Well . . . I suppose she could have come along the riverbank. But it’s awfully muddy at the moment.”

“Then you were right,” said Sebastian. “She was murdered.”

“What?” bellowed the constable, his features twisting with outraged incredulity. “What’re ye talkin’ about? Why, the laudanum she took is right there.”

Sebastian shook his head. “Easy enough to kill a woman and leave an empty bottle of laudanum at her side.”

Rawlins swatted at a fly crawling across his eyes. “But how can you tell she was murdered?”

“Look at her feet.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Look at your own feet.”

The Squire stared down at his serviceable brown-topped boots, their soles heavily caked with muck from the path through the woods. “There’s no mud on her shoes! That means she couldn’t have walked down here by herself. Is that what you’re saying?”

Sebastian nodded. Judging from the stiffness of the body, he suspected she’d been dead a good twelve hours or more, but he was no expert. If they’d been in London, he’d have asked to have her remains sent to Paul Gibson, a former regimental surgeon who was a genius at teasing out the secrets of the dead.

But they weren’t in London.

“Do you have a doctor capable of performing an autopsy?” he asked.

The Squire swiped at the fly again. “Dr. Higginbottom’s done them in the past. I’ll get one of the men from the village to help Nash carry her there.”

“Is he any good?”

“I suppose so. Although I don’t actually know for certain.” The younger man’s lips parted, his

eyes widening as a new thought seemed to hit him. “Oh, Lord, I can’t believe this. Why would anyone from around here want to kill a stranger?”

“Where was she from?”

Rawlins shook his head. “I don’t believe I ever heard her say.”

“I take it she was staying at the Blue Boar?”

Rawlins nodded. “It’s the only place hereabouts suitable for a woman of quality.”

Sebastian rose to his feet. “Perhaps the innkeeper will be able to tell us more about her.”



The keeper of the Blue Boar was a gnarled little man named Martin McBroom. He had bushy side-whiskers and a full head of ginger hair that curled exuberantly and was slowly fading to white. Peering over the top rim of a pair of thick spectacles perched on the end of a bulbous nose, he shifted his watery gaze from Sebastian to the young Squire and back again.

“You’re saying it was Mrs. Chance they found down by the river?” His voice rose to a high-pitched squeak. “Oh, bless us. The poor lady. The poor, poor lady.”

“Where was she from, Mr. McBroom?” asked Rawlins, resting both forearms on the carefully polished counter between them. “Do you know?”

The innkeeper scratched his side-whiskers. “Said she was from London, though I don’t think she came from there direct. You’ll need to be asking that girl she brought with her—Peg is her name. An a sly, worthless thing she is, if you ask me.”

“Is Peg here now?” asked Sebastian.

“Haven’t seen her about, although I suppose she could be in the lady’s chamber.”

“We’ll need to take a look at it, Mr. McBroom,” said Rawlins. “Her room, I mean.”

“Oh, I don’t think I can let you do that.” The innkeeper drew his chin back against his neck and shook his head. “Wouldn’t be proper, it wouldn’t.”

Rawlins leaned into his forearms. “Mr. McBroom, she’s dead. Not only that, but we don’t know anything about her. Unless we find something in her room to tell us, we won’t even know whom to notify about what’s happened.”

“Well . . .” The innkeeper pursed his lips and made a sucking sound. “I suppose you are justice of the peace now.”

The red in Archie Rawlins’s cheeks deepened considerably. “I am, yes.”

“Still don’t seem right, to be letting strange men go through her room. Put their hands on her things.”

The Squire straightened with a jerk. “Mr. McBroom!”

“If it would make you feel better,” said Sebastian, volunteering his absent wife without a second thought, “we could ask Lady Devlin for her assistance.”

The young justice of the peace looked horrified at the thought of involving a real viscountess in a murder investigation. But the innkeeper peeled off his glasses to rub his eyes and said, “That would be better—her being a gentlewoman herself and all. But it still don’t seem right, us poking about in her things.”

“It’s not right,” said Sebastian. “But the fault for that lies with whoever murdered her.”

Chapter 4

Hero Devlin sat on a rustic stone bench at the edge of the broad village green, an open notebook balanced on one knee, her six-month-old son, Simon, on a rug spread on the grass at her feet.

The strengthening sun had burned off the morning mist, and she was grateful for the dappled shade cast by the spreading chestnut tree beside them. The air was sweet and clean and filled with cheerful birdsong, and she found herself smiling. For the moment, Simon was content to play with his toes and chatter happily at these fascinating appendages, which left his mother free to draw up the outline for a new article she was planning.

She'd been born Miss Hero Jarvis, daughter of Charles, Lord Jarvis, the ruthlessly brilliant King's cousin who loomed as the acknowledged power behind the Hanovers' wobbly dynasty. Standing near six feet tall and possessing an education typically given only to sons, Hero was in her own way as ruthless as her father. But her radical philosophies were of the kind that gave Jarvis fits.

There'd been a time not so long ago when she'd been determined never to become any man's wife, determined to dedicate her life to challenging the brutal social injustices that characterized their society. A chance encounter with a certain handsome, dangerous viscount had altered her attitudes toward marriage. But her passionate dedication to her cause had never wavered.

For the past year she had made the study of London's poor her special project. Now, a summer spent traveling between Devlin's manor down in Hampshire and several of Jarvis's estates had stimulated an interest in the effects of the enclosure movement on England's poor. She was focused on scribbling a series of questions to investigate when she became aware of Devlin walking toward her, the morning sun glazing his fine-boned face with a rich golden light.

"That didn't take long," she said as he drew nearer.

He shook his head. "It's only just begun, I'm afraid."

She felt the earlier surge of carefree joy seeping out of the day. "So the young Squire was right? . . . was murder?"

"Yes."

"Dear God."

He bent to pick up their son, the somber lines of his face relaxing into a smile as Simon squealed with delight. For a moment, he held the child close. Then he looked over at her. "You're working?"

It was one of the things she loved about him, that he respected the work she did. That he respected *her*—her mind, her talents, her opinions. "Just jotting down ideas." She closed her notebook. "Why?"

"I need your help."



Emma Chance had occupied a corner chamber overlooking both the village green and the high street. Low ceilinged, with walls papered in a cheery floral pattern, it was furnished with a heavy, old-fashioned oak-framed bed hung with blue linen; a single chair; a washstand and nightstool behind a

carved screen; and a clothespress so ancient it looked as if it might be original to the inn. At the foot of the bed rested a new-looking trunk and a pair of tapestry slippers; a lightweight hooded cloak and sprigged dressing gown hung from hooks near the door.

Although he knew it was something that had to be done, Sebastian still found himself hesitating at the chamber door. The sense of intruding on a private space was strong, and he couldn't help thinking that just yesterday, Emma Chance had left this room expecting to return to it in a few minutes or at most a few hours. She could never have imagined strangers coming here after her death to inspect her most private possessions, to analyze everything in a desperate search for clues as to exactly who she was and who could have wanted to kill her. And he found himself grateful that Hero had been able to leave Simon with his nurse, Claire, and come here with them. McBroom was right; her presence did, somehow, make what they were doing feel like less of a violation . . . although he acknowledged that could simply be a sop to his own conscience.

"How long was she planning to stay?" Hero asked the glowering innkeeper as she went to throw open the doors of the clothespress.

Rather than come into the room, Mr. McBroom stayed in the hall, his hands tucked up under his armpits. "Said she wanted the room for a week—maybe a bit more."

"She wasn't traveling with much," said Hero, studying the two spare dresses in the clothespress: sturdy gray carriage dress trimmed with black piping, and a simple black morning gown. The drawer below held two nightdresses, a pair of soft leather shoes, clean undergarments, and several pairs of black stockings.

"And?" asked Sebastian. This was the other reason he was glad to have Hero with them: As a woman, she could evaluate Emma Chance's possessions in a way he never could.

"The carriage dress is nicely made and looks quite new—as if it's only been worn once or twice. The other things are also nice, but with the exception of the black stockings they're not new. The morning gown is an older muslin dress she probably dyed black when her husband died. How long did you say she'd been widowed?"

"Six months," said Rawlins. He'd positioned himself just inside the door, his hands thrust into the pockets of his coat and his shoulders hunched. He was obviously feeling as awkward and out of place as Sebastian.

"How sad," said Hero. She moved to study the array of objects spread across the top of the bedside table and washstand: a small embroidered silk sewing kit that opened to reveal dainty scissors, a thimble, thread, and buttons; a simple wood-and-silk fan painted with blowsy pink roses; a silver hairbrush and comb; a toothbrush and tooth powder; a half-empty bottle of rose water; a bar of rose-scented soap. . . .

"She obviously liked roses," said Hero, studying the rose-encircled initials on the back of the hairbrush: EC. "This is new too."

"So is the trunk," said Sebastian. He watched his wife walk to the center of the room, then frown and turn in a slow circle. "What is it?"

"You said you found a spencer, a hat, and gloves lying beside her. What about her reticule?"

Sebastian looked at Archie Rawlins.

Both men shook their heads.

"So where is it?" said Hero.

"Perhaps it's in the trunk," suggested the Squire, going to throw open the lid. But the trunk was empty except for an assortment of pencils and charcoals, a small paint box, and a sketchbook.

"Ah," said Rawlins. "I wondered where that was."

He laid the sketchbook on the counterpane and opened it to reveal a pencil sketch of Mr. Martin McBroom hunched behind his counter, his spectacles perched on the end of his nose, his chin pulled

back in a heavy scowl.

~~“Why, it’s me!” said the innkeeper, venturing closer. “It’s good. Don’t you think it’s good?” he asked, glancing around at the others.~~

“It is. Very.” Sebastian flipped the page. The next portrait was of Archie Rawlins, looking wide-eyed and eager but a touch unsure of himself. Emma Chance had been more than simply adept at capturing her subjects’ likenesses; she’d also possessed a rare gift for discerning and conveying the subtle nuances of personality and character.

“And that’s me,” said Rawlins with a soft, breathy laugh. “When did she do it?” He began turning the pages. “Look; there’s the vicar. And that’s Reuben Dickie and . . .” He broke off, his hand stilling at the sight of a full-length drawing of a man.

Most of the other portraits had been sketches only, usually showing a head and shoulders or, at most, the upper torso. But this was a full-length, careful rendering in charcoal of a man turned as if to look back at the artist, his wavy dark hair cut low across his forehead, his nose long and slightly arched, his gently molded lips and cleft chin painfully familiar.

“Good heavens,” said Hero. “It’s Napoléon.”

Chapter 5

Archie Rawlins shook his head. “No. But it is his younger brother Lucien—Lucien Bonaparte. He’s here, you know; he and his family are staying out at Northcott Abbey.”

Hero stared at him. “Napoléon’s brother is *here*?”

Rawlins nodded. “Has been for more than two years now. Well, not in Ayleswick-on-Teme all the time, but in the area.”

Sebastian studied the Corsican’s swarthy, handsome features, so much like those of his more famous brother in his prime. Lucien Bonaparte had been captured with his entire family off the coast of Italy in late 1810. He claimed to have been fleeing from his brother’s wrath, although there were those in London who suspected that Lucien’s planned voyage to America had less to do with fraternal rivalries and more to do with the Emperor’s desire to fan the flames of war between Britain and the fledgling United States. They could never quite get over the fact that, as president of the Council of Five Hundred, Lucien had played a vital role in elevating Napoléon to power.

“They were in Ludlow at first,” Rawlins was saying. “Then Bonaparte bought an estate just to the east of here, near Worcester. I’ve heard they’re having some repairs done on the house this summer, which is why they’re staying with Lady Seaton.” The Squire hesitated. “It was Bonaparte’s son Charles who found Emma Chance’s body this morning.”

“How old is he?”

“Ten, I believe.” Rawlins turned the page to reveal another sketch, this one of an open-faced, half-grown boy, his expression rapt as he watched an oriole take flight from a nearby tree branch. “That’s him. Crazy about birds, he is. That’s what he was doing down at the river this morning—looking for birds.”

“Poor lad. Must have been a shock,” said Hero.

Martin McBroom crinkled his nose and let out his breath in a harsh expulsion of air. “*Pssssh*. He’s a Bonaparte—nephew to the Beast himself. Ain’t no cause to go feeling sorry for him, my lady. Save your pity for the millions who’ve died because of that lot.”

Sebastian flipped quickly through the remaining pages. The book contained nothing except portraits, followed by blank pages.

He looked up. “You said Emma Chance was on a sketching trip through Shropshire?”

Rawlins nodded. “That’s right. She was drawing all the historic buildings around here—the church, the priory ruins, old houses—everything.”

“So why are there only portraits in this book?”

“I can’t imagine. I know for a fact she drew the Grange—she showed me. She must have had another sketchbook.”

Sebastian’s gaze met Hero’s. “Where is it?”



They searched the room again, so thoroughly this time that Martin McBroom finally wandered off muttering beneath his breath. After a while, Hero heard Simon howling and went to see what he was fussing about. And still Sebastian and the young justice of the peace searched.

But neither the dead woman's second sketchbook nor her reticule was anywhere to be found.

"She must have had them with her when she was killed," said the young justice of the peace, slumping into the worn, ladder-backed chair and scrubbing his hands down over his face.

"Probably," agreed Sebastian. "So then the question becomes, why didn't the killer leave them to be found with her body?"

A step in the hall brought Sebastian's head around. A mousy, painfully thin woman appeared in the doorway, her hands twisting in her apron. She looked to be in her late twenties or early thirties, her face sharp boned, her pale gray gaze shifting uncertainly from Sebastian to Archie Rawlins and back again.

"Mr. McBroom says there's a justice of the peace who's wishful of speakin' to me about Mrs. Chance?"

Rawlins scrambled to his feet. "I'm the justice of the peace. You're Peg? Emma Chance's abigail?"

"Yes, sir." The abigail dropped a quick curtsy. "Peg Fletcher, sir. Only, I don't rightly know how much I can tell you about the lady. Haven't been with her above a week, I haven't. She hired me in Ludlow, right before she come here."

The young Squire glanced at Sebastian, who said, "Who recommended you to her?"

"I suppose you could say I recommended myself. I mean, I was working at the Feathers, where she was staying. Offered me a whole five pounds to come here with her and be her lady's maid, she did. Said it was only to be for a week or two, though I wasn't supposed to let on to nobody that she'd only just hired me." The abigail sucked her lower lip between her teeth. "Now that she's dead, I reckon it's all right to tell. Ain't it?"

"You must tell us everything you know about her," said Rawlins.

Peg stared at him, her eyes wide in a plain, colorless face. "But I don't know nothin' about her. Truly, I don't."

Archie Rawlins threw Sebastian a helpless glance.

Sebastian said, "Did she ever talk to you about her life? Where she came from? Her family? That sort of thing?"

Peg screwed up her face in thought for a moment, then shook her head. "No, sir. I don't recollect ever hearing her talk about nothing like that. She weren't one to chatter the way most ladies do."

"When did you see her last?"

"Yesterday afternoon, sir. She said she was going out sketching and probably wouldn't be back till near sunset."

Rawlins looked horrified. "Yet you didn't become concerned when she never reappeared?"

The abigail took an uncertain step back. "Well, I suppose I did, a bit. I mean, I thought it peculiar. But how was I to know what was usual for her and what wasn't? When it started gettin' dark and she still hadn't come back, I went to bed. I reckoned if she wanted me, she'd get me up."

"And this morning?" said Sebastian.

Peg shrugged. "I figured she must be having a bit of a lie-in. I mean, stands to reason, don't it, if she'd been out late?" Again she glanced from Sebastian to Archie, as if seeking approval or at least understanding for her behavior.

Sebastian studied the woman's pale, frightened face. "You said she went out sketching yesterday afternoon. Do you know what she did yesterday morning?"

"Well, she said she was gonna draw the church. But whether she did or not, I can't rightly say. She

was always sketching.” Peg sucked in a deep breath and set her jaw. “The thing I wants to know is, now that she’s dead, how’m I to get back to Ludlow?”

“I’m afraid you won’t be able to go anywhere for a few days,” said Rawlins. “At least not until after the inquest.”

She stared at him. “But . . . how’m I to eat? Who’s gonna pay my reckoning here at the inn?” Her voice rose to a panicked pitch. “How’m I to get the five pounds what’s owed me?”

It was obvious from the expression on Archie’s face that he had never given a moment’s thought to the predicament faced by a servant left destitute and far from home by the unexpected death of a mistress. “Well . . . I suppose we can consider your claims against Mrs. Chance’s estate after the inquest. In the meanwhile, I’ll have a talk with Mr. McBroom.”

Peg looked doubtful.

Sebastian said, “Can you tell us anything at all about Emma Chance—anything that might help make sense of what happened to her?”

Peg’s eyebrows drew together in a wary frown. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“What was she like as a mistress, for instance? Was she harsh? Demanding?”

“Oh, no, she was right kind, she was. Always saying please and thank you whenever I did anything for her. And she was never one for putting on grand airs, the way some do.”

“Yet you’ve no idea where she came from?” asked Archie.

The abigail shook her head. “She was more’n a bit secretive, if you know what I mean?”

“Secretive about—what?”

“About everything. If you ask me, there was something havey-cavey about her, for all she was so nice. There’s more’n once I’ve found myself wondering if I made a mistake, agreeing to come here with her.”

“Why’s that?” asked Sebastian.

“Well, for one thing, I wouldn’t be surprised if her real name ain’t something other than what she claimed it was.”

“Good Lord,” said Archie. “What makes you think that?”

“She didn’t answer to it natural-like—I mean, not the way a body does with their own name. And there was one time I asked her somethin’ about Captain Chance, and she acted like she didn’t know who I was talking about. Weren’t till I said, ‘I mean your late husband, ma’am,’ that she twigged who I was sayin’. Acted right peculiar, she did. Mind you, I’ve no notion what her real name was. But it’s pounds to a penny that it wasn’t Emma Chance!”



“Do you think it’s possible the abigail could be right?” Rawlins asked Sebastian some half an hour later over a pint in the Blue Boar’s public room. “That Emma Chance wasn’t actually that unfortunat woman’s real name?”

Sebastian leaned forward on his bench, one hand cradling the tankard on the table before him. “It seems rather far-fetched. Yet at the same time . . . it’s an odd thing for the woman to have imagined it weren’t true. And Peg Fletcher doesn’t strike me as particularly fanciful or imaginative.”

“No, but . . . why would anyone do that? I mean, why claim to be someone she wasn’t? The name ‘Chance’ means nothing to us here.”

“I suspect that if Peg is correct—which is still only an if, after all—then the woman’s main concern was to conceal her real name rather than to claim to be someone she was not.”

The young Squire’s cheeks darkened. “Oh, yes, of course. I should have thought of that.” He drank

long and deep from his ale, then swiped the back of one hand across his foamy lips as his eyes widened with a sudden thought. “If it is true—that her name isn’t really Emma Chance—then maybe the killer knew who she really was. Maybe that’s why he murdered her. I mean, for whatever reason she was using a false name.”

Sebastian looked at him in some amusement. “Such as?”

“I don’t know.”

They drank together in thoughtful silence for a time. Then Archie said, “So how do we go about finding out if Chance is—was—her real name?”

Sebastian drained the last of his ale. “I haven’t the slightest idea.”

Archie Rawlins looked startled for a moment, then gave a soft laugh. “So what do we do?”

“You might begin by asking around town. Try to discover who saw Emma Chance yesterday afternoon, and when. In the meanwhile, I think I’ll go have a talk with the vicar.”

“Reverend Underwood? But . . . why him?”

“Because according to Peg Fletcher, her mistress spent yesterday morning sketching the church. Which means it’s a place to start.”

The young justice of the peace chewed his lip. “What if no one saw her?”

“In a village this small? Someone will have seen her—and they’ll remember it.”

Chapter 6

The aged, golden-hued sandstone church of St. Thomas was nestled into the side of the hill overlooking the village green and high street. Reached by way of a narrow lane that climbed past the Blue Boar and a rambling vicarage, the church boasted a bulky western tower pierced by twin round-topped windows almost as small as arrow slits, and a side porch with a gabled roof and a strong nail-studded door that suggested the church had been built as much for defense as for worship.

The vicar of St. Thomas's was a tall, lanky man in his late forties, his straight black hair thinning with the passage of the years, his sky blue eyes fanned by laugh lines. He had a way of wincing when he touched upon painful subjects, and he winced as he spoke of Emma Chance, his breath easing out a long sigh.

"She was in the churchyard when I first saw her, studying one of the old family crypts near the apse. You know what she said when I went to ask if I could help her? She said, 'Oh, thank you, but I'm not looking for anyone in particular. I simply enjoy reading old tombstones. I like to imagine the lives of the people whose names are engraved there, and think about the love they must have had for each other—husbands for wives, mothers and fathers for children.'" The Reverend Benedict Underwood sighed again and shook his head. "That poor woman. The poor, poor woman."

Sebastian had come upon the vicar planting sprigs of rosemary near the lych-gate. He'd apologized for his dirty hands and pushed quickly to his feet when Sebastian introduced himself. But Sebastian found he had no need to explain the reason for his visit; news of both Emma Chance's death and the young Squire's request for Sebastian's assistance was all over town.

"What day was this?" asked Sebastian.

"Friday, I believe. She'd only just come to the village."

"Could you show me which tomb she was looking at?"

"Yes, of course. It's this way."

They turned toward the sunken path that ran along the side of the nave. The churchyard was surprisingly vast and crowded, given the small size of the village. But then Sebastian reminded himself that Ayleswick had once been a much larger place.

"Did she come here again yesterday, to sketch the church?"

The Reverend walked with his dirty hands held awkwardly out at his sides. "She did, yes. In the morning."

"You saw her?"

"I did. When I was on my way to visit old Jeff Cook. He's not well, I'm afraid."

"What time did she finish? Do you know?"

"Sorry, no. She was gone by the time I returned."

"And when was that?"

"About half past eleven, I should think."

"Did you speak to her at all?"

"Yesterday morning, you mean? Only briefly. I believe I called out, 'Lovely day now that the rain has cleared!' and she looked up and smiled." The Reverend shook his head and let loose another of his

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