

CHAPTER 1



Flora Taylor played the piano in her father's drawing room. It was *Für Elise*, a piece she knew well but her mind was wandering. Her fingers slipped and hit the wrong key. A discordant jarring note sounded before Flora resumed playing.

Her father, the Bishop of Hammersmith looked up sharply from his armchair. "Sorry, Papa," said Flora quietly.

The bishop tutted disapprovingly then returned to the papers he was reading.

Flora felt a little disappointed in herself. She was usually, she thought, a pretty competent piano player. Not that her father had ever said as much. He wasn't a man to freely give out compliments. Believing as he did that praise would lead to false pride and boastfulness.

Flora's thoughts turned to her piano teacher, Mr. Stoke who had been responsible for her piano instruction. She did not require any formal instruction these days but remembered Mr. Stoke's teaching methods clearly. He would carry a short thin cane, which he used to point to the music that Flora was following. It wasn't the cane's only use; if she made a mistake—like the one she had just done—he would bring the cane crashing down on the backs of her hands in punishment.

Flora imagined Stoke administering such a punishment right now. She could almost feel the sting of the cane hitting the backs of her hands. She had disliked Mr. Stoke. He was a short-tempered irascible bully, so why did the thought of his cane bring a blush to her cheeks?

It worried her how often she thought of the canings that Stoke had given her. That she would replay them in her mind. That she would think of being struck with the stinging cane in places other than the back of her hands...

That couldn't be normal, could it? She felt a blush rise to her cheeks at her thoughts and stole a look over to where her father was sitting, worried he might somehow be able to detect her unsuitable thoughts as she sat at the piano and continued playing.

He could not, of course. Her stern, dictatorial father might have complete control of many aspects of her life, but his powers did not yet extend to being able to read her mind.

Thank goodness, thought Flora. She was sure he would be shocked by what he found there.

Meanwhile she would continue to fulfil her role as a meek, dutiful daughter who would do everything to support her father in his ecclesiastical duties.

Flora's mother had died when she was a child and since the age of fifteen, Flora had taken over the responsibilities of running her father's house. Her primary aim was to ensure that nothing upset the status quo. Her father was a stickler for order, punctuality and routine. Flora was careful to ensure that the whole household ran as efficiently and as quietly as a well-oiled machine.

She finished the piece of music and turned to her father. "Do you wish me to continue playing, Father?" she asked. He gave a barely perceptible nod of his head. Flora selected the sheet music for *Clair de Lune* and began to play.

The doorbell rang. Flora's heart quickened. She glanced anxiously over at her father and then over to the clock on the mantelpiece. It was past nine o'clock. They never entertained visi-

tors so late in the day. She wondered who could possibly be calling at this hour. She knew that her father would not be best pleased.

The bishop set down his papers and stared at the drawing room door, clearly waiting for the meaning of this intrusion to be explained to him. There was a deeper frown than usual etched across his features.

The butler, Stephens, entered the room and spoke to the bishop in tones too low for Flora to overhear over the sounds of her piano playing. She heard her father's response clear enough, however. "No," he said. His face looked like thunder.

The butler nodded and exited the room. Flora continued to play affecting unawareness of the proceedings. However, the next thing that happened surprised her so much that she stopped playing altogether.

A voice rang out from the hallway: "No, Stephens, I will not be denied access. I need to speak to my father."

It was Edward! It had been many years since Flora had heard her brother's voice and the familiar sound of it had her leaping from her stool without a second thought. She ran to the drawing room door and flung it open.

There, in the hallway, his passage being blocked by the butler's best efforts, stood Flora's older brother, Edward. Thinner, gaunter looking, somewhat older than she had last seen him—there were lines round his eyes and across his forehead that hadn't been there six years ago—but there was no mistaking her beloved older sibling.

"Edward!" she cried, hurling herself into his arms.

Edward barely had time to acknowledge let alone respond to his sister's embrace before she was forcefully pulled from him by the bishop who had followed Flora into the hallway and who stood glowering, his face the colour of an over-ripened plum in his fury. "Get away from that invert!" he shouted at her. He pushed Flora back into the drawing room and closed the door. "Stay in there!" he bellowed before turning his attention back to Edward. "How dare you return here? How dare you upset your sister like this?"

"Father, give me ten minutes of your time and I will never

disturb you again.” Flora could hear Edward’s measured tones through the drawing room door. She pressed her ear against the wood the better to overhear their conversation.

“I told you never to come back here, you devil!” the bishop’s voice was full of fury.

“It is a legal matter, Father. If you do not wish to speak to me, perhaps you would speak to my solicitor, William Beech. Here is his card.”

“And what kind of corrupt solicitor would offer his services to someone like you?” The bishop almost spat out the words. “I will give you five minutes that is all. Come through to my study.”

Flora heard the two men walk towards her father’s study at the end of the passageway. As soon as she heard the study door click shut behind them, she opened the drawing room door and slipped quietly up to the study. She didn’t want to be the sort of person who listened at keyholes—in truth she had never done anything like it in her life—but she knew that if she did not, she would never know what her brother had come to say. She knew her father would never tell her. He had refused to acknowledge the very existence of Edward since that awful, terrible night six years ago when he’d thrown Edward from the house and told him that he no longer recognised him as his son.

For years, Flora hadn’t even known if her brother was alive or dead. She was determined not to miss a word of what he had to say to their father.

From her position by the study door, she could hear everything that her father and her brother were saying.

“Father, I need to speak to you about the deeds that Uncle Samuel left to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“The deeds to the vineyard in Italy. They are in my name. Uncle Samuel left them to me in his will.”

“You’ll get nothing out of me you disgusting sinner. I told you never to come back here.”

“Give me the deeds and I’ll be gone from your life, I swear.”

“Get out! I refuse to even speak to you. I cannot believe that you have the gall to come back here. You are beyond redemption. Your sinning ways will ensure that you are damned straight to Hell.” The bishop’s voice rose to a thunderous level.

“If you won’t speak to me, Father, then please contact my solicitor. You have his card.”

“Get out! I will not tell you again!”

Flora heard footsteps heading towards the door and ran back into the living room.

She had quickly seated herself at the piano stool when the bishop returned to the room. His face was red with fury. The front door banged shut as Edward was let out of the house.

Flora knew better than to say anything of the incident. Her father’s rage could just as easily be directed towards her as it was towards Edward. She couldn’t bring herself to play. Her hands were shaking too much for her to competently play anything that would even approach a decent sound.

Instead, she just sat there, outwardly demure, her hands folded in her lap while inside her thoughts raged in a maelstrom of emotion. It had been six years since she had seen her brother. At the age of fifteen, she had not understood what it was that Edward had done that was so awful. She just knew that the sin was so large that her father had considered it unforgiveable. He had declared that Edward was committing the ‘foulest sins of Sodom and Gomorrah’ and made it clear that he wanted nothing more to do with him. And of course, that meant that Flora could have nothing more to do with him either. Her beloved older brother disappeared overnight with no explanation. Her father would not even allow his name to be mentioned in the house. Having lost her mother, the shock of now losing her brother was a heavy load for Flora to bear.

She had spent the last few years with almost no company save for her father and a succession of stern tutors. Her father believed that women needed to be educated as well as men and Flora’s education had been thorough—if entirely solitary. Having seen

Edward again—if only for the tiniest amount of time—had fired up a desire in her not to let him out of her life again.

After several minutes of furiously staring at the fire, the bishop rose and gruffly announced he would be going to bed.

“Very well, Papa,” said Flora. Her father left the room and Flora could hear the deep heavy tread of the large man as he ascended the stairs.

When she was satisfied that her father was upstairs, Flora rose from her seat. She was shaking slightly as she knew that she was about to do something very wicked. She was about to disobey her father in the most blatant fashion in order to assist her brother.

She made her way to her father’s study and pushed open the door. The bishop did not lock his study—it would never have occurred to him that he would need to.

Flora supervised the tidying and cleaning of each room in the house and knew where every single item in her father’s house belonged. She knew exactly where all the legal documents were stored and made her way quickly to them. With nimble fingers she rifled through the heavy wooden chest in which they were stored, quickly reading the headings of each document until she found what she wanted. She pulled the stiff paper from the chest and read the front page. “*Montepulciano Vigneto, Siena, Tuscany*”.

She presumed that this was the paperwork that her brother had been asking for. Her late Uncle, was, like her mother, half Italian. If Uncle Samuel had left the vineyard to Edward then he would be unable to access the property without the correct paperwork.

She sank to her knees on the carpet, her heart thudding, unsure what to do next. She knew it would be very wrong of her to take the document from her father’s study without asking. But she also knew that there was no point in her asking. Her father would say no. His treatment of Edward earlier in the evening had made it clear that his attitude towards his son had not softened in the last six years.

And would it be stealing, really? Flora asked herself. The document clearly belonged to Edward. It was his name on the paper-

work, not her father's. But even if she wanted to, how would she manage to get it to her brother? She had no idea where he lived.

His solicitor! Flora recalled that Edward had given her father his solicitor's card. Where would it be? She scanned the top of his desk briefly and not seeing it there, wondered where her father might have put it. Of course, she thought. Her father would not have *put* it anywhere. He had no intention of ever contacting his son's solicitor. She glanced towards the fireplace and saw that she was in luck. No fire had been lit in the study that evening. The bishop's habits were regular and the staff knew that he used his study in the mornings and spent his evenings in the drawing room with Flora. A stiff white card lay on top of the slightly warm ashes. The edges were slightly charred but as the fire had been cooling for several hours, she was happy to see that the name and address on the card were still entirely readable.

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FLORA KNELT on the floor in front of the fire, the calling card clutched in her trembling fingers. She knew what she needed to do and the half-formed plan in her mind terrified her.

Without giving herself time to think about what she was going to do, Flora pushed the card into her pocket and—holding the documents—exited the study. She grabbed her cloak from the hat stand in the hallway and quickly—and making as little noise as possible—unlatched the front door and let herself out into the street.