

PROLOGUE

England, 1754

The duke sat closeted in the relative sanctuary of his library. His legs extended and lightly crossed at the ankles, he contemplated the tempered flames of the summer fire reflected in the glowing amber of his brandy. Closing his ears to the high-keening sounds that had haunted his ancestral home for the past three days, he raised the glass to his lips and took a deep swallow.

Though in dire need of a wash and shave, he remained where he was; the mere thought of climbing the stairs seemed too much effort. Besides, to do so would only put him closer to the incessant moaning and wailing, and that notion made him tremble so badly he was forced to set his glass back down.

He supposed lack of food and sleep was partially to blame for his present state, but he had little appetite and any sleep he managed was fitful at best--for if he wasn't jarred to wakefulness by a tortured cry of agony, a nightmare would awaken him to a shaking, chill-sweated reality.

He ran an unsteady hand over his damp brow and burning eyes, then reached into his waistcoat pocket to withdraw a filigreed gold watch. Pressing the small catch with his thumb, he stared at the delicate hands poised over the tiny Roman numerals. It was approaching the down side of midnight. The sudden crack and fall of a burning log brought his head up with a jerk. Then the snap of settling wood and the steady tick of the mantle clock were the only sounds he heard.

The unexpected silence was deafening.

He slipped his fingers beneath the snifter's rounded bottom to finish off the last finger of brandy when a firm but respectful knock sounded at the library door.

Downing the liquor without tasting it, he called, "Enter."

His secretary stepped in. Though the man was just a few years past his own thirty-five, his shoulders were stooped and his fatigue-lined mouth gave silent testimony to the strain the past nine months had placed on him.

Insistent upon observing formalities, the trusted bookkeeper bowed before he announced, "You have a son, your grace."

The duke drew in a sharp breath. Offering his servant a nod of acknowledgment, he said, "So the cycle begins anew. Our dear Morgana has one more victim to add to her growing list, eh, Palmer?"

The secretary briefly closed his eyes. "The duchess did not have an easy time of it, your grace. She is still bleeding most heavily."

"I have ears, Palmer. I believe everyone in the village is aware that my wife did not have an easy time of it. Dr. Wentworth has seen her through thus far, I am certain he will attend to her needs in due course."

"She is resisting the doctor's attentions, sir. She asks for you. She believes she is dying and that you are the only one who can save her. She begged me to fetch you."

"I am hardly fit company for the duchess at this moment, Mr. Stanton, nor do I care to attend to her female complaints. Tell Wentworth to see to her. If you feel compelled to offer ease, you may inform her grace that when the doctor is through I will pay her a visit--but not before. That will be all."

"But, your grace . . ."

"I said, that will be all!"

Clamping his lips into a tight line, Palmer Stanton bowed and made his exit without another

word.

The duke stared at the richly burnished portal for a moment, then gazed out the window at the hazy, oppressively humid, July night.

Two hours later, the duke felt the sweltering darkness close in on him as he stood at his wife's bedside.

Since the good doctor deemed a well-warmed room essential to the continued welfare of both mother and newly born infant, the fire had been stoked to a blazing inferno, and all the windows, doorways and keyholes had been stuffed with rags to keep out the unhealthy night air. Despite the suffocating heat, the duchess uttered no complaint when yet another quilt was laid upon the mound already burying her.

But it wasn't the thick air, or his wife's stoicism, that plagued the duke's comfort when he bent forward to place a congratulatory kiss upon her moist forehead. Rather it was the bruised crescents suspended beneath bloodshot eyes that were mutely pleading for his love and approval.

Desirous of avoiding a scene filled with recriminations and tears, the duke drew back, but the red-rimmed orbs, still bleary with fatigue and pain, grew near to overflowing when the lady attempted to offer him a tremulous smile.

Her plea ate at his conscience. Unable to offer solace, he averted his gaze to her diligent maid busying herself with some trifle to avoid leaving her mistress alone.

"I saw our son," he said absently. "Though he is smaller than I had expected, he appears to have a most healthy set of lungs. You did well, I am pleased." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a diamond and sapphire necklace and pressed it into her hand.

"I requested the jeweler set it to match your betrothal ring. Consider it a token of my appreciation."

She flinched at his coldly spoken words even as she held up his gift to admire the workmanship. "Our son's head crowned at the stroke of midnight," she stated with false cheeriness. "The midwife assisting Dr. Wentworth said it meant he would be blessed with good luck and the power to see ghosts."

"I am not certain that ability is a blessing, madam."

"But perhaps . . ." She faltered at the intense look in his eyes. Drawing the necklace across her fingers, she watched the diamonds twinkle in the firelight. "It is very beautiful, but I hesitate to accept such expensive regard. I fear I did not comport myself with much dignity. Dr. Wentworth found it necessary to restrain me." She extended her wrists to show him the purple welts. He immediately turned away, murmuring excuses as to why he had to leave when she clutched his arm.

"I called for you. I pleaded with them to bring you to me. I needed you beside me, yet you refused to come. Why didn't you help me?" Her voice became an hysterical whisper and she started to cry. "You had the power to make the pains bearable at least, why did you refuse me even that much? Why did you leave me to suffer through this alone?"

"You were hardly alone, my dear," he answered, jerking his wrist free from her grasp. "You must have had at least ten people ready to leap at your slightest whim. Surely you did not require one extraneous husband to attend you as well?"

She buried her face in her hands. "You were the only one I wanted. You wouldn't even come when it was over. You forced me to suffer the added humiliation of needle and thread when you could have . . ."

He bent towards her. "I could have done what, my love? Caused you even more pain and suffering with the touch of my hand?"

She struggled to speak through her sobs. "But Palmer said that--"

"Palmer said that I could spare you the indignity and degradation of the doctor's mending with my touch, but did he also mention that the pain I would bring would be worse than a thousand hot needles piercing your tender womanly flesh? Is that what you desired, my love?" He reached for the layers of goose down. "If so, it is still not too late. I could undo the good doctor's handiwork and see it done myself."

When she clutched at her coverings and shook her head, he dropped his hand. "I suspected you might reconsider once you gave it some thought." Turning his back to her, he strode over to the windows. The air was no cooler there, but the distance enabled him to think more clearly.

"It was a mistake, madam. The marriage, your pregnancy, our child--all of it. I had thought I was perpetuating a gift, instead I have merely set another link in a long chain of cursed individuals. I have done a great disservice, I believe, especially to you. Now I think it's best I remove myself to London for awhile."

"No!" She sat up in bed. He faced her, noting, to his consternation, that her nightdress had plastered itself to her sweating body, outlining her breasts.

Though his wife was not a particularly handsome woman, her chin was too sharp and her nose a little too long for his taste, Clairemonte did admire certain aspects of her. Her hair was a glorious sable brown that he enjoyed wrapping his hands in, and her other notable attractions were presently straining against the confines of her dampened nightgown. They, and her unquestioning desire to please him, had made doing his duty not an altogether unpleasant experience. He knew he could not say the same for her, but then he'd never sought to make their couplings pleasurable. If anything he'd discharged his obligation with perfunctory preciseness to discourage her from falling in love with him.

Determined not to fulfill the curse that had tainted his family for nearly two hundred years, he'd made a vow in the library never to bed his wife again. His son would be faced with a more difficult dilemma when he came of age, but the sixth Duke of Clairemonte would not burden the world, or his conscience, by fathering two barren girls off this woman--and he knew his seed would find fertile purchase no place else.

Cursing the heated leap in his loins at the sight of her firm breasts beckoning his touch, Charles Beauforte was resolved to make his departure before he lost what little nobility remained him.

"Please, Charles, I beg you, don't leave me--not like this. I will die if you--"

"You won't die, Beatrice. You will live a long and healthy, though not a particularly happy, life. Remember?"

Her head lowered in defeat, Beatrice nodded and Charles knew she recalled the astrologer's predictions as well as he. It was foretold that he would bring her much pain and heartache, but she would never want for material comforts. By his reckoning, he'd already brought the first part of the prophecy to pass, and he would make certain the second part came true as well. As for himself, the future would be less optimistic. His end would be *sine virtus et sine amicus*--without grace and without friends.

"You will be well looked after, Beatrice, I give you my word," he promised softly. Intending to walk away without a second glance, he stood transfixed when her full lower lip trembled, and found himself extending a hand to ease her distress.

She caught it up in both of hers and placed kisses over his fingers before she pressed her cheek against his ducal ring. The seal shined brightly in the firelight, offering a glimmer of hope where none was meant to exist.

"Just until the christening, Beatrice, no longer," he announced with quiet determination.

She did not demur, so he said nothing more, allowing her to gather comfort from the artifact that had offered him little but misery and despair. Adorned by a priceless ruby, the Clairemonte ring had been stamped into eternity with the Tudor rose of Elizabeth, symbolically protected and supported by the Pendrake unicorn and dragon.

The motto, which circled the trio, he knew by heart. *Exitus Acta Probat*--the end justifies the means. And in his case, he feared the end would be most fitting indeed.