**Chapter One**

“You are absolutely not selling William Dobson, Rupert!” The dowager countess, Lady Edith Honeychurch, was furious. Even Mr. Chips, her tan and white Jack Russell, seemed to bristle with indignation.

Edith’s son looked pained. “Do we have to go through this again, Mother?”

For emphasis, Edith slapped her riding crop against the side of her leather boot. “As long as I am alive, this is still my house!”

“Mother,” Rupert hissed and gestured to where Mum and I were standing in the doorway. “Not in front of—”

“The servants?” Mum chimed in cheerfully. “Don’t mind us. We’re always arguing—aren’t we Kat?”

I gave a polite smile, but Rupert looked even more uncomfortable.

“Why don’t we come back later?” I said and grabbed Mum’s arm but she stood her ground and pulled her second-hand mink coat even closer. It really was freezing cold.

“Who is William Dobson?” Mum asked. “Is he for hire? Maybe he can help Kat hang her bathroom cabinet?”

“I think Edith is referring to the seventeenth century artist, William Dobson—”

“An artist who painted one of our ancestors who saved the Hall from being razed to the ground in the English Civil War,” Edith said angrily. “And now Rupert wants to sell it and he’s asked *you*, Katherine, to take it off for auction, so I hear!”

“No,” Rupert lied. “I just wanted to show Katherine and Iris the damaged ceiling.”

“Nonsense. You thought you could sneak them in through the Tudor courtyard without my knowing but you seem to forget that Cropper never misses a trick.”

Cropper, of course, was the old butler. Although he rarely spoke he seemed to have an uncanny gift of being everywhere at once.

The truth was, I’d also thought it odd that Rupert had arranged to meet us at the end of the half-mile long pergola walk on the far southwest corner of the Hall. Covered in ancient wisteria with roots as big as my arm, I’d never noticed the old wooden gate that led to a narrow passageway. At the end, a pretty archway opened into a small cobbled courtyard. Mullioned casement windows took up three sides and on the fourth, were two doors. It was there that Edith had been waiting.

Edith raised a quizzical eyebrow at me. “Why are you holding those padded blankets, Katherine? And what is in that canvas bag?”

I’d brought the padded blankets to wrap up the painting and my canvas bag was full of my tools.

Mum and I both looked to Rupert for the answer.

“*Did* he ask you to value the Dobson, Katherine?” Edith demanded.

Of course he had! Rupert had phoned that morning to say that something “catastrophic” had happened in the Tudor wing and that they needed to sell a painting.

I was only too happy to oblige. I was still trying to get my antique business going. Despite having moved all my stock into the two gatehouses that flanked the main entrance, *Kat’s Collectibles & Valuation Services* was slow in getting off the ground.

“You’re right,” said Rupert defiantly. “I did. Katherine told me that the last Dobson sold for around three hundred and fifty thousand pounds. Luxton’s of Newton Abbot have a sale of Old Master & British paintings coming up—”

“I knew it!” Edith exclaimed.

“Mother!” Rupert ran his fingers through his thinning hair, clearly exasperated. “We have to do something and unless you can think of a way to raise thousands and thousands of pounds at the drop of a hat, I’m all ears.”

“But surely it can’t be that bad,” said Mum.

“The plasterwork ceiling is Elizabethan and very rare,” Edith said. “There is only one other like it in Devon at Holcombe Rogus.”

“Presumably you’re going to apply for a grant?” I said to Rupert. “The Historic House Association runs all kinds of maintenance and restoration programs. I have a contact there.”

“Alfred is very good at decorating,” Mum said suddenly.

It was true. Mum’s stepbrother had helped paint the Carriage House.

“Repairing a plasterwork ceiling needs specific materials that can only be applied by skilled craftsmen,” I said gently.

“That wouldn’t faze my Alfred. He’s got a real gift for making a copy look like the real thing.” And of course, she was right. This so-called gift of Alfred’s had sent him to prison more times than I could count.

Edith smiled. “Very kind of you to offer, Iris. But I’m sure that Alfred is far too busy overseeing the horses.”

“Perhaps there is something else that might be worth selling?” I said anxious to change the subject.

“I’m not sure if you remember, your ladyship,” said Mum. “But if there’s one person who knows what sells well it’s my Katherine. She was the TV host of *Fakes & Treasures*.”

“And I can assure you that there is nothing *fake* in this house,” Edith said frostily.

“Perhaps you could sell your snuff box collection?” said Rupert with a hint of malice. To be honest, the thought had crossed my mind as well. Edith had more snuff boxes than I could shake a stick at and many were extremely valuable.

“Never!” Edith declared. “I will decide what needs to be sold. And may I remind you, Rupert, you are not the one who makes the decisions around here.”

“I *know*!” said Rupert.

Mum started humming to herself. It was a peculiar habit she’d picked up when she was feeling embarrassed. I gave her a discreet nudge and she stopped.

“Really, we can come back another day,” I said.

“Repairs need to be started right away,” said Rupert. “Katherine says that this sale is one of the best in the country. But naturally, whatever you feel is best, Mother.”

“Very well.” Edith turned to me. “Rupert, take Katherine to the King’s Parlor. Show her the Hollar drawings of Honeychurch Hall. They might do—oh!” Suddenly, Edith switched her gaze onto my mother. “What on earth are you wearing, Iris?”

Mum reddened. “It’s a mink coat, m’lady.”

“I can see that.”

Ever since Mum had bought the old coat at the Chillingford Court sale, she’d worn it everywhere regardless of the occasion or whether we were inside or out. Apparently, it had been one of her dreams to own one and she hated to let it out of her sight. I teased her and called it Truly Scrumptious in honor of my mother’s fictional Pekinese dog that was splashed over her website. I still found it hard to believe that my mother was the international best-selling romance writer, Krystalle Storm.

Edith stepped closer. I got a whiff of horse and lavender water that always surrounded her like an atmosphere. “Turn around,” she commanded.

After a moment’s hesitation, Mum gave a twirl. Although I detested fur coats of any description, I had to admit this was quite magnificent despite the all-pervasive smell of mothballs.

“I thought so,” said Edith. “That coat belonged to my friend, Alice.”

Mum’s face lit up. “Yes! That’s right. Princess Alice, the Countess of Athlone. How did you know?”

“I recognized the red paint on the back of the collar,” said Edith.

“Oh,” Mum seemed annoyed. “I didn’t think anyone could see it.” Needless to say, I had pointed the stain out to her before the coat went under the hammer but Mum’s mind was made up. She had to have it.

“Activists, no doubt,” said Edith. “Rabbit fur is much safer. So extraordinary to want to wear someone’s cast-offs.”

“It’s not that obvious,” I whispered to Mum who looked utterly crestfallen.

“But speaking of paint Katherine, how are you getting on at Jane’s Cottage? I would have thought you would have moved in by now.”

“The painting is all done, curtains and blinds are up,” I said. “I just need a few mirrors hung and new shelves in the kitchen pantry—”

“She put an ad in the Post Office for someone to do a spot of D-I-Y,” Mum put in.

“The wood burner stove goes in next week.”

“Central heating? Whatever for?” Edith exclaimed. “Well, I’m sure that’s all very interesting, Rupert, show Katherine the Hollar drawings but I repeat, do *not* do anything without talking to me first.” And, with a snap of her fingers, she called Mr. Chips to heel and the pair headed off.

For a moment, Rupert just stood there. The 15th Earl of Grenville appeared years older than his fifty-two. Dark smudges lay beneath red-rimmed eyes and even his neat, military mustache had lost its crispness. Rupert wasn’t even wearing his customary tie, choosing a pair of uncharacteristically scruffy jeans and an old moth-eaten sweater. For the first time, I realized just how much pressure he was under to keep the Hall afloat. Edith may rule the roost but it fell to him to manage the day-to-day running of the estate and handle all the bills.

A blast of cold air and the slam of an outside door brought Rupert to his senses. Mum shivered and pulled her mink coat closer. “It’s like the arctic in here,” she said. “I’m so happy I’m wearing my mink.”

“As you gathered, Mother doesn’t believe in central heating. If she had, perhaps the pipes wouldn’t have burst and brought down the ceiling and we wouldn’t be having this problem. Please, after you.” Rupert ushered us ahead. “Down the passage and through the door at the end.”

“I remember when the whole house was open,” Mum said. “How many rooms are there, m’lord? One hundred? Two, perhaps?”

“I’ve never counted,” said Rupert.

“How did you find out about the burst pipes?” Mum asked.

“Fortunately Harry’s room shares a wall with the original house.” Rupert cracked his first smile. “He was convinced the Germans had dropped a bomb.”

Knowing Harry’s obsession with Squadron Leader James Bigglesworth, the famous World War 1 flying ace, it was just the sort of thing he’d say. “And I bet he told you which kind.”

“Yes,” Rupert grinned. “Harry said it was a *minenwerfer*.”

“A what?” Mum frowned.

“A high power trench mortar shell that apparently makes no noise coming through the air.”

“So if Harry had been away at boarding school,” Mum said pointedly. “You would never have known.”

Rupert scowled. “I’d rather have burst pipes.”

“Thanks Mum,” I muttered. It was common knowledge that none of the Honeychurch’s had been happy about Harry breaking the family tradition and going to the local school—and it had been my idea.

Rupert threw open the end door and ushered us into a screens passage. We passed through the first of two archways and into the Great Hall.

“Oh!” Mum gasped. “I know exactly where we are. Good heavens! I haven’t been here for years!”