

# THE AMBER KEEPER

FREDA LIGHTFOOT



THE  
AMBER  
KEEPER

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# THE AMBER KEEPER

Freda Lightfoot

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*To David and my family, who are always there for me.*

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# PROLOGUE

1919

My snow-boots were worn through so that I walked on the ice that coated the rough mountain path, the soles of my feet numb with cold. Gasps of breath formed frozen crystals on those parts of my nose and cheeks not protected by scarf and fur hat. I had long since lost my small pony, the poor animal having bolted home in terror when the guns started, although whether she'd ever arrived is doubtful.

Home, if that is what you can call the house in which I had resided for so many years, no longer existed. It was but a shell of its former glory. I remembered how the darkness of the night seemed to press in upon me, almost as if I were back within those prison walls. I had closed my mind to the horrors I'd left behind, attempted to set aside my fears about those loved ones dear to my heart who had vanished from my life. Instead, I'd fixed my weary gaze on the heels of my guide trudging ahead of me, knowing that if I was to survive, I must stay focused. This was my last chance to get out of Russia.

We walked for days, through ice, snow and blizzard, sustaining ourselves with hunks of none-too-clean stale bread, and with nothing to wet our palette but sucking on icicles. When, hours later, we staggered into a cave, my knees gave way and I fell to the ground, weak with gratitude. I remember feeling a huge relief that at least I could rest for a while, thankful to be out of the bitter wind. The last two nights – or was it three? – we'd slept in the open, not even daring to light a fire in case the Bolsheviks should spot it and come searching. Curling myself thankfully into a corner, rubbing my hands and feet in an effort to stave off frostbite, I pulled up my collar, tucked my knapsack beside me and told myself firmly that I must not fall asleep. I was afraid I might never wake again, due to the fierce cold.

But despite my best efforts I must have fallen asleep instantly out of sheer exhaustion, for I knew nothing more till I was woken by a shaft of daylight filtering into the cave at dawn, and some strange sound that had alerted me. I sat up abruptly, looking around for my guide. He was nowhere to be seen. The man to whom I'd paid an exorbitant sum, every last kopek I possessed, had deserted me. I was quite alone. But as the sound of horses' hooves clattering over rocks penetrated my befuddled brain, I realised I was about to experience some unwelcome company.

# ONE

## 1963

**I**t wasn't until the crowds on the station platform began to clear that she saw him, a gaunt figure in a dark suit emerging like a ghost out of the steam. She stood frozen with grief and resentment as the Windermere train disgorged its passengers, heard the long hoot from its whistle and the slow grind of gears as it began to chug slowly out of the station again. Battling against the urge to jump back on board and return to Paris, anything rather than face the inevitable recriminations, Abigail felt as if this were very much the end of the line for herself as well as the train. She looked about her at the familiar scenery where pockets of snow still lingered on the mountain tops, the spring sunshine lending the frosted peaks a brilliant clarity, while the coolness of the breeze entirely suited her mood. She breathed in the clear air, as sharp and heady as champagne, and reminded herself that this was home. This was where her heart lay.

He came towards her not exactly with arms outstretched, as she had hoped, but with one hand raised in greeting and what might be evidence of a slight smile on his stiff lips.

'Abigail, there you are, at last.'

'Pops, it's good to be home.' A bleakness opened up inside her, giving the lie to her words. She hoped he might gather her into his arms as he'd used to do when she was a small child, but he made no move to do so. For years she'd dreamed of a reunion, but not for one moment had Abbie imagined it would be under such circumstances. She'd had ample time since the day she'd left home to reflect on how she could perhaps have handled things better. How wise we all are in retrospect. Unfortunately it was not possible to go back and change the past: one could only move on into a new future.

Grasping hold of her child's hand she took a tentative step forward, as if echoing the thought. All too aware of the awkwardness between them she planted a kiss on each cool cheek in typical French fashion, but as he made no response, she stepped quickly back. It was almost as if they were strangers.

'We rather expected you yesterday.' His stilted tone sounded very like a reprimand.

'I'm sorry, I missed the train.' Deliberately. But she didn't tell him that.

'We'd almost given up hope.'

'Oh, you should never give up hope, Dad. Sometimes it's the only currency we have left.' The quip was meant to lessen the tension between them. It failed miserably,

although she hadn't risked using her pet name for him this time.

Somewhere she could hear a tinny transistor radio playing *Please, Please Me*, and squeals of happiness at more joyous reunions taking place around them, which made Abigail feel even worse. At one time they would have engaged in jokey banter, perhaps about her Beatnik-style stripy jumper, or the fact she still couldn't control her long, unruly dark hair despite the black beret she'd pulled down over it. 'Get your hair cut, girl,' he'd used to say in his sergeant major's voice, and she would laugh and remind him she wasn't one of his army recruits, and the war was long over. There were no such jokes today.

Taking a breath and drawing the child to her side, she said, 'This is Aimée, my daughter. She's been longing to meet you.'

'And I you,' Tom Myers politely remarked, bending a little to take a small hand in his and give it a little shake. But even the child recognised the insincerity of his words, saying nothing as she leaned shyly against her mother. Abbie smoothed her daughter's soft curls in a comforting gesture.

What had she expected? Forgiveness, or that they could take up as if nothing had happened? In all these long years of separation, communication between her and her parents had been almost nil since the letter she'd sent when first she'd arrived in Paris, announcing she had no intention of returning to finish her studies. The few she'd written since had rarely been acknowledged. Had she dreamed that one day Kate would turn into the loving, caring mother she'd always longed for? That would never happen now. The opportunity for reconciliation between them was gone forever.



The drive to Carreckwater took longer than Abbie remembered, which was a pity as she and Aimée were both desperate for their beds, having spent a night sleeping rough at the Gare du Nord when they'd missed the train, or rather allowed it to leave without them. Fortunately they were able to close their eyes and nod off a little in the back seat of the car, the child's head resting on her breast, warm and comforting, smelling sweetly of flowers and the doughnut she'd eaten earlier. Beyond a few polite comments about the weather, the journey was almost entirely silent, which was something of a relief.

Later, with Aimée asleep even before she was tucked into the small bed next to her mother's old room up in the eaves, Abbie couldn't resist the luxury of a long bath. The hot water and lavender oil were deliciously refreshing after the long journey and the tepid showers she was used to in the Paris apartment. Unfortunately, it proved to be a bad mistake to lie soaking too long, as her mind conjured up the hopes and dreams she'd indulged in the last time she'd used this bathroom, the night before she and Eduard had run off together. And of their parting row just a few days ago when her whole life seemed to collapse. Tears filled her eyes at the prospect of never seeing him again, just when she needed him most.

Why had he let her down so badly? Didn't he love her? Had she failed to make him happy? Briskly rubbing herself dry, Abbie closed her mind to such hurtful

memories. Her decision was made. Now she must learn to live with it and move forward, her first task being to attempt some sort of reconciliation with her father.

She chose a sensible knee-length dress in a soft caramel wool. Her father was a conservative man who still clung to old traditions and etiquette, so her black stirrup trousers and fake leopard-skin top would not meet with his approval. She did, however, daringly dab on a little green eye shadow which suited the brown eyes she'd inherited from her mother, a touch of mascara and pale pink lipstick. She even dutifully pinned up her hair into a French pleat. Then, pinching her cheeks to restore some colour to her somewhat pallid complexion, she proceeded down the wide staircase to the dining room.

The feel of the highly polished banister rail beneath her hand, the creak of the old floorboards, the very smell of the oak-panelled walls and ancient furniture somehow warmed her heart. She'd forgotten quite how much she missed this old house. From the outside Carreck Place appeared rather bland and square, fronting a wide lawn, but inside was quite a different story. There was an ageless charm to the house that Abbie had always loved. She half expected to see a Christmas tree standing in the hall and a huge fire blazing in the drawing room, and hear the sound of merry chatter from the many guests her mother had loved to gather about her.

The dining table this evening was set for only two, the meal taken largely in silence. Not that she managed to eat much of the freshly caught trout prepared by Mrs Brixton, the housekeeper. Abbie's appetite seemed non-existent, despite the fact that she had barely eaten a thing on the long journey. Finally pushing away her untouched dessert, she accompanied her father to the library for coffee. Reality could no longer be ignored.

Abbie cleared her throat. 'Tell me how it happened. Who found her?'

There was a long pause in which her father stared into the empty grate. Abbie shivered. It was cold in the library, a brisk March wind rattling the shutters, yet it hadn't crossed his mind to order a welcoming fire to be lit for her return. Even so, the chill came not from the room itself but from the shock and anger that still reverberated within him.

Abbie had almost given up hope of receiving an answer to her question when finally her father began to speak, his tone carefully controlled, almost matter-of-fact. 'I'd spent the afternoon walking over Loughrigg, since it was a Saturday, then called at the shop on the way home. Linda, the assistant, was unpacking a delivery of cabochons from the wholesalers and told me that Kate hadn't been in. She'd taken quite a few days off recently as trade is often quiet at this time of year, so I wasn't too concerned. Not till I arrived home at almost seven o'clock and found the house in complete darkness . . .' Tom Myers paused to glance at his daughter. 'You know how she loved to have all the lights blazing.'

Abbie nodded, feeling the tears start to blur her vision. 'And Rachmaninoff blaring away. Where was Mrs Brixton?'

'She'd been given the day off, apparently, or so I learned later.'

Heavy silence fell again and this time Abbie did nothing to encourage him to break it, suddenly unwilling to hear the conclusion to this story, even though she knew the ending, having been bluntly informed over the phone by her brother. It came anyway.

‘I found her hanging from the top banister rail. She must have been there some time.’

The horror of it all was suddenly too much and Abbie ran from the room to throw up what little she’d managed to eat at dinner down the cloakroom lavatory. She felt hot and cold all at the same time and couldn’t seem to stop shaking. Ever since she’d received the news of her mother’s suicide, Abbie had felt beset by a strange numbness, as if she were somehow detached from events. She’d gone about the business of packing her bags, booking a seat on the train, making the necessary arrangements to leave as if watching herself through frosted glass. Now, having rinsed the foul taste from her mouth and bathed her face in cold water, she finally allowed the flood of tears to come.

What on earth would make her mother take her own life? What terrible depths of despair had she sunk to, and, more to the point – why? Was living here in beautiful Lakeland so impossibly awful? She’d run a successful business, had a loving husband, and her precious son and grandchildren lived not too far away, so what could possibly have made life so unbearable?

Returning to the library she found a small glass of brandy standing waiting for her on the coffee table. Casting her father a glance of gratitude, she took a sip, welcoming the spread of its warmth within. After a moment she said, ‘I still can’t quite believe this has happened. Why would she do such a thing?’

He looked at her, his glance chilling. ‘Need you ask?’

Something inside Abbie began to shrivel up. It had taken months to reclaim her self-esteem following the trauma of running away from home all those years ago, and within a few hours of returning she could feel it rapidly diminishing yet again. She strived to hang on to it, for she was no longer a rebellious teenager, but a woman of twenty-five with a child of her own. ‘Are you implying that this is in some way my fault?’

‘You were ever obstinate, completely oblivious to whatever your mother asked of you.’

‘Perhaps because she asked too much, expecting me to behave in a way that would put her in a good light, with no consideration for what I might want. She wasn’t an easy woman to please.’

Her father’s face tightened with a mixture of anguish and fury. ‘You know full well that she wanted only the best for you. It wasn’t easy for her, being adopted.’

Emotion blocked her throat and tears again threatened. ‘I’m sorry, Dad, but I don’t understand. Why did she have all those hang-ups when Gran absolutely adored her? And what did *I* do that was so terrible?’

‘You broke your mother’s heart, Abigail, by taking off into the unknown with that ne’er-do-well.’

Abbie’s heart contracted at these words. She really had no wish to discuss her failed love life with her father at this stage. Maybe she’d talk to Gran later. Lifting her chin, she held fast to her pride. ‘Actually, Eduard was the love of my life.’ Or so it had seemed at the age of barely eighteen. The fact that he was well into his thirties at the time, and married, hadn’t troubled her in the slightest.

It occurred to Abbie that perhaps she really wasn’t any good at relationships. It was certainly true that there’d been no closeness with her mother during her

adolescent and teenage years, nor had they seen eye-to-eye on the future Kate had planned for her. There'd been no easy mother–daughter rapport between them at that time. Now there never would be. Was this where foolish rebellion had taken her – to be forever scarred by guilt?

Even so, Abbie longed to challenge her father's accusation by asking why, if it were true that she was the cause of her mother's alleged broken heart, it had taken Kate seven years for her to act upon it. Yet how could she do that when he was so desperately upset and grieving?

'When is the funeral?' she asked instead, tactfully changing the subject.

'Tomorrow. I was beginning to think you'd miss it. Robert and Fay will be here first thing with the children, although of course the little ones will not attend. You'd never believe how Carrie has grown, no longer a baby but a lively toddler of eighteen months, and young Jonathon starts school soon.'

Abbie quickly bent her head to rummage in her tote-bag for a hanky, unwilling for her father to witness the pain she felt at hearing the pride in his voice, and the way he smiled as he mentioned his grandchildren. It was an emotion he'd never expressed over her own daughter, and there'd been no smile for her lovely Aimée.

Their own relationship had been warm and loving once, full of jokes and camaraderie, even if he'd often expressed a resigned despair at her determination to speak her own mind and do her own thing. Everything had been fine between them until that final split with her mother.

Of course, there'd been much more to that than a disagreement over a boyfriend. The fact that Kate wouldn't consider taking her into the business, holding up Robert as a prime example of success as if Abbie weren't capable of such a thing, had hurt badly. Why hadn't her mother trusted and respected her enough to want to work with her? Nothing Abbie did, no matter how hard she tried, would make Kate change her mind. Then to also lose the respect and consideration of her father had been a pain too great to bear.

Now she dreaded the reunion with her brother. How he'd preened himself, making out he was the favourite, and the clever one as well, as he always came top of the class. Meeting his wife for the first time when Abbie hadn't even been invited to their wedding, or been told about his children, was going to be difficult. Worse, Abbie would have to look Robert in the face knowing that all her family's dire predictions had been proved correct. She had indeed made a complete mess of her life. Not that any of this should matter now, as there were more important things to worry about, and other people grieving besides herself. Yet somehow it did.

Dabbing at her tears, she tucked the hanky away again. 'How's Gran?' Kate's relationship with her adoptive mother hadn't always been close. At seventy-one Millie was still a feisty, lively lady who believed in living life to the full. Losing her only daughter, however, could easily destroy that wonderful spirit in her.

'As well as one might expect,' Tom said, with a resigned sigh. 'You'll see her tomorrow.'

Abbie could hardly wait, for in the circumstances her homecoming was going to be far more problematic than her worst fears.

## TWO

Clouds hung heavy over the crags and fells as rain drizzled down on a miserably cold March day, as it generally does at funerals. It had taken over two weeks to reach this stage, with a post-mortem and inquest to be dealt with before the coroner was able to release the body for burial. Now Abbie stood holding her grandmother's arm at the graveside, marvelling at how composed she was, but then she'd always been a strong woman, a no-nonsense sort of person who never made a fuss. What she must be suffering inside was no doubt a different story.

The vicar gave a long address about how much Kate Myers had generously contributed to the church and community in her role as secretary of the Mothers' Union and Treasurer of the Women's Institute, and by serving on the committee of the local Dr. Barnardo's Home.

Abbie knew nothing of this part of her mother's life, and despite herself was deeply impressed. It was astonishing that Kate could manage to be so involved in such matters on top of running the family hand-made jewellery business. How sad, though, that it should take her death to reveal this charitable side of her nature.

Yet if she'd cared for children so much, why had she never shown any interest in meeting her own granddaughter?

The presence of the children in fact brought a welcome blast of fresh air and gentle laughter into the sombre household as people gathered for the usual wake. Ignorant of the circumstances that had brought the family together, young Jonathon chattered away twenty to the dozen, telling anyone prepared to listen how excited he was to be starting school after Easter. Eighteen-month-old Carrie didn't sit still for a second, happily poking into corners, emptying ladies' handbags and pulling open every drawer and cupboard door she could get her small chubby fists on. When her mother took her upstairs to put her down for her afternoon nap, she happily scattered Johnson's baby powder all over the bathroom floor. Abbie laughingly cleaned it up while Fay attempted to put a nappy on the toddler, now indulging in a screaming tantrum.

'Oh, she's coming up to the terrible twos. I remember it well. Aimée was just the same. Fortunately at six she's now an absolute treasure.'

Skilfully folding and pinning the terry-towel nappy in place, Fay said, 'But something of an embarrassment still, I should imagine.'

'Why would she be? She's the joy of my life.'

'I mean since your daughter is – well – what she is . . .'

Abbie instantly sobered. 'You mean illegitimate?'

Robert chose that moment to appear at the bedroom door. ‘Don’t attempt to deny it. I see no wedding ring in evidence. Admit it, Abbie, you’ve screwed up big time, and Ma has paid the price.’

His words stunned her into silence for a whole half minute. Abbie had been mildly startled by the sight of her brother after all this time, looking much older than his twenty-eight years. There was already the odd fleck of grey in his brown hair, and he’d developed quite a paunch and signs of a double chin. Clearly, all those smart lunches he must attend as a successful accountant were beginning to have an effect. But his sense of self-importance was as evident as ever.

Fay hastily pulled a pair of frilly plastic panties over the nappy, then shoed brother and sister out of the room so that she could settle Carrie for her nap. Robert and Abbie stood facing each other out on the landing with expressions as dark as thunder.

‘So you start on me the minute I arrive. Nice to see you too. Thanks for that, brother dear. Bit unfair, don’t you think, to blame me when I’ve been living away from home for *seven years!*’

‘You can’t deny you were responsible for her unhappiness.’

‘Oh, change the record, please,’ Abbie responded, keeping her voice low so as not to disturb little Carrie, or reveal how upset she was. ‘Why would Mum suddenly decide *now* that she can no longer live with the shame of my scandalous teenage behaviour, *after all this time?*’

‘Mother had become increasingly depressed recently, dwelling on the past a great deal. A visit from you might have cheered her. Even the odd letter would have helped.’

‘Shows how much you know! I did write, loads in the beginning, but as my letters were generally ignored I gave up in the end. Mum had my address, yet I can’t recall her ever using it.’ Tears were choking her throat, which Abbie desperately strived to hold in check, not wishing her brother to see how badly his words had affected her.

Robert moved a step closer, dark eyes narrowed, mouth tight with anger as he hovered almost threateningly over her. ‘Your trouble is that you never accept responsibility for anything. You’re far too wrapped up in your own wishes and desires to consider the effect your decisions might have upon anyone else.’

A flush of crimson crept up Abbie’s cheeks, although out of fury rather than guilt. ‘That is *not* true! You know I tried my hardest to please Mum. She simply wasn’t interested to hear what I wanted from life, wouldn’t even let me help in the business, although I wanted to for years. But no, my working in a shop wasn’t good enough for her. I had to go to university, then presumably marry a rich company accountant and become an obedient middle-class wife with two-point-four children.’

‘Instead you ran off with that piece of garbage and managed to break Mother’s heart by having a bastard child. No wonder she rejected you.’

Abbie very much doubted he felt the stinging slap she gave to his arrogant fat face, but it certainly made her feel better.



Later that afternoon, seeing that the strain of the day was beginning to take its toll, Abbie walked her grandmother home to the lodge house which stood at the entrance to Carreck Place.

‘Would you like me to stay for a while?’ she asked, putting on the kettle for a cup of tea, as if they hadn’t drunk enough already on this endlessly sad day.

‘That would be lovely, but then I need a little time alone, if you don’t mind.’

Abbie kissed her papery cheek. ‘Don’t blame yourself, Gran. My mother was never an easy woman.’

‘I know that only too well,’ she said, sinking into her chair with a heavy sigh. ‘Nor must you blame yourself either, my darling.’

‘Easier said than done, since everyone else seems to.’ The kettle boiled, which allowed Abbie to turn away and fuss over brewing the tea and place Gran’s favourite porcelain tea cups on to a silver tray. She had ever been a lady of high standards. ‘I know Mum didn’t have an easy start in life, being adopted and all that, but it hurts that she rejected Aimée so completely. Why was that?’

Millie Nabokov gave a sad little smile as she accepted the cup of tea Abbie offered her. ‘Once Kate had taken a stance she always found it hard to retract. Strangely, she very nearly made the same mistake herself.’

‘Really? I never knew that.’ Abbie sat down opposite her grandmother, eager to know more.

‘Except in her case it was all about rushing into a hasty marriage. It must have been about 1934. I well remember the scent of wild garlic and bluebells in the air as we sat together on an old bench beneath the copse of silver birch down by the lake, a shaft of spring sunshine warming my face. Kate was asking about my time in Russia when she suddenly announced, with great excitement in her voice, that Eric had asked her to marry him and that she’d said yes. She thought it so romantic that he’d gone down on one knee to propose. She was seventeen at the time. I, of course, was quite shocked, and not at all in favour.’

‘Oh dear. That wouldn’t go down well.’

‘No, sadly it didn’t. Eric was a fine young man, but I told her friendship is one thing, marriage quite another matter entirely. I considered her far too young to even understand the meaning of love, let alone contemplate such a commitment.’

Abbie gave a wry smile. ‘Yet you never judged me when I ran off at almost the same age, already pregnant with Aimée, nor in any of your lovely letters since.’

‘I know, my darling, but it’s a different world now.’ The old lady’s brow puckered slightly. ‘Although I have wondered about the tone of your recent letters. You are happy, aren’t you?’ she gently asked, taking a sip of tea.

Abbie took a steady breath then gave a sad shake of her head. ‘I’m afraid not.’ She’d tried so hard not to worry her grandmother with the truth, putting on a brave face, but now seemed a good time to admit to it at last, Millie being the one person in the world right now she felt comfortable with. ‘A while ago I discovered that Eduard had lied to me, that he never had divorced his wife. I kept on hoping he’d get round to it because I still loved him, and for Aimée’s sake. Then, when I found out that his wife was pregnant again, I finally had the sense to kick him out.’

‘Oh my darling, I’m so sorry. We all make mistakes, but it’s how we deal with the consequences that show our true worth, and you are young enough to start again.’

How pragmatic and sensible her grandmother was, but then Abbie had always felt able to talk to her. They, at least, had regularly kept in touch, and she was deeply grateful for her support over the years. Her grandmother continued with her tale, as if set on blaming herself for her daughter's death.

'Unfortunately, Kate found it difficult to forgive me for my lack of approval, and I'm afraid a distance grew between us which lingered for some time. She was stubborn in that respect, something with which you are all too familiar, Abbie. She said it was as if all the security she'd taken for granted had slipped from her grasp. Which was a great sadness to me, as it had been hard won. Yet I, too, remember being rather foolish at that age,' she conceded with a smile. 'Very much a young woman with a mind of my own. My rash decisions led me into a world quite beyond my comprehension.'

'To Russia, in fact,' Abbie put in. 'I always think it's so cool that you lived there, even if you've never talked much about it. I'd love to hear more about your life at that time, Gran. The revolution must have been utterly terrifying. How on earth did you cope?'

A sadness once again clouded her grandmother's eyes, and Abbie instantly regretted her request. She was on her feet in a second. 'But that's definitely a conversation for another time, not today. I shall leave you in peace for now. Is there anything you'd like me to do for you before I go?'

Assured that there wasn't, Abbie quietly took her leave, promising to call again the next day.

After her granddaughter had gone, Millie sat for some time swamped by grief, her mind slipping back to that far distant time in 1934, the day Kate had started asking difficult questions about her time in Russia. Their relationship had gone so terribly wrong after that, despite all her efforts to protect her beloved daughter and give her the love she deserved. Now Kate was dead. Was there something more she could have done to save her? Had she failed her in some way? The image of Kate as a young child was almost too painful to bear, the loss Millie felt far beyond tears.

But she must stay strong, as an unexpected death could tear a family apart. Tom was eaten up by anger, Robert in his usual fret about practicalities, and poor Abbie blaming herself. Perhaps the moment had come to speak of the past, and reveal all.

## THREE

It was the following morning, the breakfast dishes not yet cleared, when her father asked Abbie how long she was planning to stay. Aware of her daughter seated beside her with all the alert curiosity of her six years, instead of answering him Abbie turned to Aimée with a smile. ‘Why don’t you go and explore the garden, sweetie? You’ll find a swing in the orchard, if it’s still there. You’ll enjoy that, but stay close to the house. No going near the lake.’

‘Ooh, yes, Mummy, can I?’

‘Why don’t you go too?’ Robert said, addressing his son.

Brother and sister exchanged a quick glance, as if both remembering a time when they too had happily played together. Could they ever achieve such a relaxed state again? Abbie wondered.

It took mere seconds for the sound of scampering feet to disappear, followed by the slam of the front door, leaving eighteen-month-old Carrie screaming her frustration that she couldn’t go with them. Fay lifted the baby out of the high chair. ‘I’ll take her for a walk in her pushchair, while you talk.’

Robert nodded, and as Mrs Brixton appeared at the dining room door to clear away breakfast, it was agreed to adjourn to the library. Saying nothing, Abbie quietly followed them, watching with a flicker of curiosity as her father went straight to his desk, quickly gathered up some documents and tucked them away in a drawer. When he finally turned his enquiring gaze upon her, she asked the one question that had been turning over in her head ever since she arrived.

‘So what’s going to happen to the business? I’ve no wish to upset you, Dad, but I was wondering who was going to run it now that Mum is no longer . . .’

He glared at her sternly from behind his spectacles, as if the very mention of his late wife’s death was anathema to him. But then he seemed to push back his shoulders and steady himself. ‘I’m afraid we have some difficult decisions to make.’

‘Didn’t Mother leave a will?’ Robert enquired, a question that provoked yet a further glower of disapproval from his father, as if this too was out of bounds.

‘Indeed she did, and left everything to me, naturally.’

‘Of course, only she did once promise there would be a small legacy for me, even if Abbie was still out of favour.’

‘I think you must have misunderstood her,’ their father snapped, making it very clear this was not a subject he wished to discuss.

‘But she was very specific about that, saying she’d never neglect me. I can’t believe Mother hasn’t kept her word.’