



*The* SECRET *of*  
PEMBROOKE PARK

JULIE  
KLASSEN



BETHANYHOUSE

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Julie Klassen, *The Secret of Pembroke Park*  
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 2014 by Julie Klassen

Published by Bethany House Publishers  
11400 Hampshire Avenue South  
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438  
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of  
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations identified GNV are from the Geneva Bible, 1599 Edition. Published by Tolle Lege Press. All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover photography by Mike Habermann Photography, LLC  
Cover design by Jennifer Parker


Author represented by Books & Such Literary Agency

14 15 16 17 18 19 20      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Julie Klassen, *The Secret of Pembroke Park*  
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.


(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

With love  
to my brothers,  
Bud & Dan



For nothing is secret,  
that shall not be evident:  
neither anything hid,  
that shall not be known,  
and come to light.

—Luke 8:17 GNV



# Prologue

**LONDON, ENGLAND**  
**MAY 1817**

I sat across the table from the man I most admired, feeling self-conscious. How I wished I'd taken more time with my appearance. But my meeting with the housekeeper had run long, allowing me barely enough time to wash my face and repin my hair in a simple coil. I had planned to wear a new evening dress—golden satin with red roses embroidered throughout the bodice—but instead I'd slipped into the plain ivory gown I usually wore. It had far fewer fastenings.

I glanced over at my beautiful younger sister, her hair curled and styled by Mamma's lady's maid. Louisa wore the emerald necklace I had planned to wear, declaring it looked so well with her new dress. She'd said, "*You know you don't care a fig about fashion, Abigail, so don't fuss. You can wear my coral. It will look fine with the gown you always wear.*"

I reminded myself it didn't really matter how well I looked. Gilbert Scott and I had known each other since we were children. He knew what I looked like without a hint of powder, skin clear or with eruptions, with hair up or down or in need of a good brushing. We grew up as friends and neighbors through the awkward stages

of adolescence and into adulthood. The time for first impressions had long past.

Even so, this was his going-away party. The last time I would see him for a year. And I'd wanted his final memory of me to be a good one. For I cherished a secret hope. Perhaps when Gilbert returned from studying abroad he would finally ask me to marry him.

For more than an hour, our two families enjoyed a lovely meal of several courses in the Scotts' dining room. Warm and friendly conversation flowed easily around the table. But I barely noticed what I ate.

I turned to Gilbert's sister and asked, "How goes the magazine?"

"Very well, I think." Susan smiled, then looked at her brother. "Bertie, you ought to write an account of your travels while you're away."

"Capital notion, my love," Susan's husband said, adding his approval. "Send us a few sketches to accompany the piece and we'll publish it."

Gilbert shook his head. "I shall have my hands full with my studies, Edward, but thank you just the same. Susan's the writer in the family, not I."

Gilbert's father spoke up from the head of the table. "But you will write to us, my boy, won't you? You know I . . . your Mamma will worry otherwise."

Humor shone in Mrs. Scott's eyes. "That's right, my dear. *I* shall worry. But not you?"

"Well, perhaps a bit. . . ." He gestured for the butler to refill his wine. Again.

Over my glass, I met Gilbert's gaze, and we shared a private smile.

Mr. Scott addressed my father. "I say, Foster, did you not invest in that bank mentioned in the newspaper today—the one having some sort of trouble?"

"We . . . did, yes. My brother-in-law is one of the partners. But he assures us it's only a minor setback. All will be well."

Father sent me a guarded look, and I forced a reassuring smile.

This wasn't the time or place to discuss finances. Nor did I wish to cast a pall over Gilbert's send-off.

When the meal concluded, the men remained behind to smoke and sip port, while the ladies retired to the drawing room.

Gilbert, however, did not remain with the other gentlemen. Instead, he asked me to join him in the library.

I did so, my heart tripping a little faster with each step.

Alone with Gilbert inside the candlelit room, I reminded myself to breathe normally. We stood very near each other at the high library table, necks bent to study the measured drawing of a church façade in classical style. Gilbert had won the Royal Academy's silver medal for the drawing. And a gold medal for his design of a guildhall. For his achievements, Gilbert had received a traveling scholarship from the academy to study architecture in Italy. I was so proud of him.

"In the end, I altered the design to create a grander façade," Gilbert explained. "With a Corinthian portico six columns wide, based on the Pantheon in Rome. And notice the steeple here? I designed its top stage to resemble a miniature temple. . . ."

He spoke with enthusiasm, but for once I wasn't really listening. My interest had strayed from the drawing to the man himself. With his eyes on his prize-winning design, I felt at liberty to study his profile, to linger on his features—his jaw more defined than I had noticed before, his cheekbone framed by long, stylish side-whiskers, his lips thin but expressive as he spoke. I thought I might try to sketch him, though doubted my ability to do him justice. And he smelled good too. Bay rum cologne, I thought. And mint.

As he reached over to point to some detail of the drawing, his broad shoulder, elegant in evening wear, pressed against mine. I felt the warmth of it through my thin muslin and closed my eyes to savor the sensation.

"What do you think?"

"Hmm?" I opened my eyes, chagrined to be caught not listening.

"About the steeple?"

Personally I thought it a bit much but held my tongue. In the

past, I had often offered my opinion or a suggestion, but as the design had already won a medal from the Royal Academy, who was I to disagree?

“Lovely,” I murmured. It was an innocuous, uninformed, feminine remark. Something Louisa might have said. But in his flush of triumph, he did not seem to notice.

I glanced over my shoulder. Through the open library door, I could see into the Scotts’ drawing room. There Susan slipped her arm through her husband’s as they stood talking to my mother. My parents lived very separate lives—Father occupied with his club and investments. Mother with her social calls, charities, and husband hunting for Louisa. No, I didn’t want a marriage like my parents’. But a life like Susan’s, working side by side with the one you loved . . . Yes, that seemed ideal.

With that hope, I glanced up at Gilbert. He had followed my gaze toward his newly married sister. He briefly met my eyes, then looked down, his Adam’s apple convulsing, his fingers distractedly rolling the corner of his plan.

Noticing his nervous hesitation, my heart beat hard. Had the moment come? Was he about to propose?

He began, “You know you mean a great deal to me, Abby. And I realize you might be expecting . . .”

His words trailed away, and he swallowed. Had he guessed my presumptuous thoughts?

“No, no. I am not expecting anything,” I reassured him, adding to myself, *Not yet*.

He nodded but did not meet my eyes. “We have been friends a long time, you and I, but you need to know that I . . . That with all the chances involved in the coming year away, I don’t think either of us should shackle ourselves with promises.”

“Oh.” I blinked, stomach plummeting. Perhaps he was merely trying to protect me, I told myself. He no doubt had my best interests at heart. I forced a smile. “Yes, you are perfectly right, Gilbert. Very practical.”

Gilbert’s mother stepped into the room. “Thought I would find



the two of you in here,” she said. “Come through. We’re serving coffee, and your father needs a great deal of it.” Mrs. Scott patted her son’s arm. “He’s terribly proud . . . but so sorry to see you go.”

*Me too*, I thought.

Later, when the evening began winding down and my parents were thanking Mr. and Mrs. Scott for dinner, I went in search of Gilbert, hoping to say my good-byes to him in private. Instead I found Gilbert and my sister ensconced in the vestibule, alone.

With sinking heart, I saw Louisa hand something to Gilbert. She said, “To remember me by.”

He slipped it into his pocketbook and tucked it away, his gaze lingering on her lovely face all the while. Then he smiled and squeezed Louisa’s hand.

Feeling light-headed, I turned away, not waiting to hear his reply.

What had Louisa given him? A miniature? A lover’s eye? A lock of hair set in a ring? I had not seen Gilbert place anything on his finger, only in his pocketbook. Surely it had been nothing of such import—nothing that indicated a courtship or engagement. Even if Louisa had developed a schoolgirl affection for our neighbor, that did not mean Gilbert returned her feelings. He was likely too polite to refuse her gift, whatever it was.

Even so, it was all I could do to smile and feign normalcy a short while later, when everyone gathered at the door to say farewell and wish Gilbert success and safe travels.

Gilbert took my hand, the old brotherly tenderness coming back into his expression. “Abby. You won’t forget me, I know. And I shall never forget you. Your father has given me permission to correspond with you and your sister. Will you write to me?”

“If you like.”

He pressed my hand warmly and then turned to shake Father’s hand and made Mother blush by kissing her cheek. He hesitated when he came to Louisa, her head demurely bowed. He made do with a bow and a murmured, “Miss Louisa.”

She looked up at him from beneath long lashes, and I saw the telltale sparkle in her eye even if no one else did.

*When did things change between them?* I wondered. Louisa had always been the pesky little sister, someone to tease or avoid. Someone with a plait of hair to be tugged—not presented as a lover’s gift.

I had wanted Gilbert’s year away to fly quickly past. Now I wasn’t so sure.

I had looked forward to life after his return—a life in which he played a significant role.

Suddenly the future seemed far less certain.



# Chapter 1

**10 MONTHS LATER**  
**MARCH 1818**

The jewel case lay open on the desk between them, the evergreen emeralds glittering against the black velvet lining. The necklace and matching bracelet had been passed down through the Foster side of the family. Her mother's family had no precious gems to pass down. And soon neither side would.

Her father snapped the case shut, and Abigail winced as though she'd been slapped.

"Say good-bye to the family jewels," he said. "I suppose I shall have to sell these along with the house."

Standing before her father's desk, Abigail gripped her hands. "No, Papa, not the jewels. There must be another way. . . ."

Nearly a year had passed since Gilbert left England, and with it Abigail's twenty-third birthday. When she had predicted an uncertain future on the eve of his departure, she'd been more accurate than she would have guessed.

What had she been thinking? Just because she could run a large home and staff did not mean she knew anything about investments. She was the type of person who usually considered things carefully, investigated thoroughly before acting—whether it was selecting a

new dressmaker or hiring a new housemaid. Abigail was the practical, behind-the-scenes daughter and had long prided herself on making sound, rational decisions. That was why her mother left much of the household management to her. Even her father had come to depend on her opinion.

Now they were facing financial ruin—and it was her fault. Little more than a year ago, she had encouraged her father to invest in Uncle Vincent's new bank. Her mother's brother was her only uncle, and Abigail had always been fond of him. He was charming, enthusiastic, and eternally optimistic. He and his partners, Mr. Austen and Mr. Gray, owned two country banks and had wished to open a third. Uncle Vincent had asked her father to post a large bond of guarantee, and under Abigail's influence, he agreed.

The banks were at first successful. However, the partners made excessive, unwise loans, sometimes lending to each other. They sold one bank but struggled to keep the others afloat. The new bank had stopped business in November, and a week ago the original bank failed and the partners declared bankruptcy.

Abigail could still hardly believe it. Her uncle had been so sure the banks would thrive and had made Abigail believe it as well.

Seated at his desk, her father set aside the jewelry case and ran his finger down the accounts ledger.

Abigail awaited his verdict, palms damp, heart beating dully.

"How bad is it?" she asked, twisting her hands.

"Bad. We are not destitute, and you and Louisa still have your dowries. But the lion's share of my capital is gone and with it the interest."

Abigail's stomach cramped. "Again, I am sorry, Papa. Truly," she said. "I honestly thought Uncle Vincent and his partners would be successful."

He ran a weary hand over his thin, handsome face. "I should not have allowed myself to be swayed by the two of you. I have seen his other ventures fail in the past. But you have always had a good head on your shoulders, Abigail. I thought I could trust your

judgment. No, now, I don't say this is entirely your fault. I blame myself as well. And Vincent, of course."

Seeing her father so deeply disappointed and disillusioned—with her and with life—left her feeling sick with guilt and regret. Uncle Vincent blamed his partners and their risky loans. But in the end, regardless of who was to blame, the fact was that Charles Foster had agreed to act as guarantor. He was not the only person who lost money when the banks failed, but he lost the most.

Her father shook his head, a bitter twist to his lips. "I don't know how I shall break it to Louisa that she is not to have her season after all. She and her mother have their hearts set on it."

Abigail nodded in silent agreement. The London season was well-known hunting grounds for wealthy husbands. She hoped Louisa's eagerness to participate meant she was not waiting for Gilbert Scott. If Louisa and Gilbert *did* have an understanding, Louisa had clearly kept it a secret from her mother, who was determined to give her youngest a spectacular season. At nineteen Louisa was at the peak of her beauty—or so their mother declared, insisting it was the perfect time to find her an advantageous match.

Her father leaned back in his chair with a defeated sigh. "If only we could avoid selling the house, but as much as we all love it, it is too large and too expensive. The price of being fashionable, I suppose."

Not to mention the cost of maintaining a Grosvenor Square—style of living—behaving like nobility, though in reality they were only genteel, with no title or land. As a gentleman, her father had never in his life had to work. The family had lived on the interest from his inheritance. Money he had invested wisely—until now.

Once again, Gilbert's suggestion that they not "*shackle ourselves with promises*" echoed through Abigail's mind, and she straightened her shoulders in resolve. "Yes, Papa. We shall have to sell the house, but not the family jewels. Not while there is another option. . . ."

A short while later, Father asked Mamma and Louisa to join them in the study, and attempted to explain the situation. He did not assign

any blame to her, Abigail noticed, but knowing he held her partially responsible for their predicament was enough to make her miserable.

When he had finished, Anne Foster protested, "Sell our house?"

"You know, Mamma, that might not be so bad," Louisa said. Grosvenor Square isn't as fashionable as it once was. I saw some lovely houses in Curzon Street that would do us very well."

"Curzon Street?" Father echoed. "That will not be possible, my dear."

"I think it would be wisest to retrench elsewhere," Abigail said. "In a smaller city or even in the country, where the pressure to have an army of servants, large dinners, and the latest gowns would be far less."

"The country?" Louisa's pretty face puckered as though she'd found a mouse in her soup. "Unless you are talking about a great country estate, with house parties, and fox hunting, and hedge mazes . . ."

"No, Louisa, I am afraid not. Something smaller."

"Oh, why did this have to happen?" Mamma moaned. "What about Louisa's season? Her dowry? Is it all gone? Is our youngest daughter not to have her chance, after all?"

"I didn't say that. No. Louisa is to have her season." Father sent an uneasy glance toward Abigail, then quickly looked away. "We will muster enough for Louisa's gowns and things. I trust your aunt Bess will allow us to stay with her for a few months?"

"Of course she will. But . . . I don't understand. I thought you said there would not be enough money."

With another glance at Abigail, Father began, "Abigail has kindly—"

But she interrupted him. "I have helped Papa find a few ways to economize. Some funds we had set aside for a . . . rainy day. And a few things we can sell—"

"Not your father's emeralds!"

Abigail shook her head. "No, not the emeralds."

Her mother firmly nodded. "Good. Louisa must have her chance to wear them, as you did."

Abigail noticed with relief that her mother refrained from adding, “*for as much good as it did you,*” or something of that sort.

Abigail forced a smile. “We shall scrape together enough to give Louisa a wonderful season. The season she deserves.”

For a moment her mother stared at her as if she spoke a foreign language. Abigail feared she would probe further into the source of the money—perhaps even suggest Abigail’s dowry could be used for additional funds, since *she* no longer needed one. It was one thing to offer it up quietly, willingly—as Abigail had done privately to her father—but quite a different, humiliating thing to be told a dowry was wasted on her.

Mollified, her mother only nodded. “As it should be.” She pressed Louisa’s hand. “You see, my dear, you are to have your season after all. What did I tell you? You shall meet the most handsome, best connected, and wealthiest young man this year. I just know it!”

And so, while Mrs. Foster and Louisa attended dress fittings, Abigail began helping her disillusioned and disappointed father find a more affordable place to live.

---

Abigail contacted a property agent and made inquiries for a suitable dwelling. But she heard of no situation that answered her mother’s notions of spacious comfort *and* suited Abigail’s prudence. She had rejected several houses as too large for their income.

One afternoon, among the correspondence about properties, Abigail received a letter from Gilbert Scott, postmarked *Roma*. Her heart gave a little foolish leap, as it always did when seeing her name in his neat hand. Over the preceding months, Gilbert had sent letters to both her and Louisa. Abigail always read his descriptions of his studies and the architecture of Italy—sometimes with sketches in the margins—with absorption and dutifully wrote back. She did not know what sort of letters Gilbert wrote to Louisa. Abigail feared they might be of a more romantic nature than those she received but hoped she was wrong.

She retreated to her bedchamber to read Gilbert's letter in private.

*My dear Abby,*

*Hello, old friend. How is life in London? I imagine you are bored without me there to tease you and drag you about the city to see St. Paul's, or the construction at Bethlehem Hospital, or to hear some lecture or other. Italy is amazing, and you would love it. But I shan't overwhelm you with details in this letter, for fear of making you jealous and risk your not writing back.*

*You have been very good about answering my letters, Abby. I appreciate it more than you know. As much as I enjoy Italy and my studies, I don't mind confessing to you—since you know me so well—that I do feel lonely now and again. How I would love to walk with you along the Piazza Venezia and show you the Roman Forum!*

*I have not heard from Louisa in some time. Like you, she was prompt in writing back when I first began my travels. But her letters have trickled off of late. I hope she is in good health—as well as you and your parents, of course. Perhaps I have done something to vex her. If I have, it was unintentional. Please tell her I said so. If only all women were as easygoing and forgiving as you, Abby.*

*You asked in your last letter which building I most admired here. I seem to find a new favorite every day. Which reminds me, I had better sign off for now. We're soon to leave to visit the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence. Perhaps I shall find a new favorite.*

*Fondly,  
Gilbert*

Abigail folded the letter and for a moment held it to her chest, imagining Gilbert's handsome, earnest face as he wrote it, the ink on his fingers, and the tip of his tongue protruding as it always did



when he concentrated on a task. Then she imagined walking arm in arm with him through Rome. . . .

“What has you smiling?” Louisa asked, pausing in her bed-chamber doorway.

“Only a letter from Gilbert.”

“And what has he to say this time? More lengthy descriptions of columns and cupolas, I suppose?”

“You may read it if you like,” Abigail held it forth to show she had nothing to hide, hoping Louisa might return the favor. Not that Louisa ever exhibited any sign of being jealous of her older sister.

Louisa waved away the offer. “Maybe later.”

“He asks why you have not written to him lately,” Abigail said. “He’s afraid he has vexed you.”

Louisa lifted a delicate shrug. “Oh, nothing of that sort. I’ve just been so busy answering invitations and attending fittings and the like. And now that Easter is over and the season has begun . . . Well, you remember how it is. Up late every night, sleeping in every morning, and every afternoon given to calls. . . .”

Abigail had never told Louisa that she had witnessed her private tête-à-tête with Gilbert, nor asked what she had given him as a parting gift. Perhaps it was time she did.

“Louisa, I know you gave Gilbert something before he left. Is it a secret, or . . . ?”

Louisa blinked at her in surprise. “Did Gilbert tell you that, in his letter? I . . . gave him a lock of my hair. You don’t mind, do you? For you’ve always insisted you and Gilbert were just friends.”

Had she? Abigail swallowed. “Well, yes. Good friends.”

Had Gilbert *asked* for a lock of Louisa’s hair? Did he even now wear it in a ring? Her stomach cramped at the thought, and she couldn’t bring herself to ask. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

Instead, she made do with a sisterly “It’s impolite not to answer letters promptly, Louisa. Surely you might manage a few lines at least? To assure him all is well and you are still . . . friends?”

Louisa flopped into an armchair, her usual concern for posture and poise neglected in only her sister’s presence. “Oh, very well.”

Then she grinned sweetly at Abigail, a teasing light in her fair eyes. “Or might you not tell him so for me when you write back? For I know your reply shall be in tomorrow’s post.”

---

Soon they began receiving offers on their house—the best price contingent on keeping the majority of furnishings in place. They were relieved to receive such a good offer, but even so, once her father finished paying off the bond, there would be little left to spend on new lodgings. Although tireless in her efforts, Abigail began to despair of ever finding a house that would suit them all.

Early in April, while Abigail met with the housekeeper about more modest menus and other economizing measures, a footman came to find her.

“Your father asks that you join him in the study, miss,” he said.

“Oh? I thought he had a caller.”

“Indeed he does.” The servant bowed and backed away without further explanation.

Abigail thanked the housekeeper, made her way to the study, and let herself in.

Her father sat at his desk. A man in black stood to one side, framed by one of the windows.

With an uncertain glance at the man, Abigail began, “You asked for me, Father?”

“Actually, this gentleman requested you join us.” Mr. Foster gestured to the visitor—a man of about sixty years, she guessed. Not tall, but a distinguished figure in his black frock coat and charcoal-grey waistcoat. His high white shirt collar framed an arresting face—deep hooded eyes under heavy arched eyebrows as black as a bat’s wings. Deep grooves ran from either side of a straight nose to the corners of his mouth. He wore a small mustache and beard trimmed in the Van Dyke style—his cheeks cleanly shaven. His hair and beard were black edged with silver. But it was his eyes that drew her back. Keen and calculating. Knowing and judging.

She was quite certain she had never seen him before. She would surely have remembered him. Why then had he requested her presence?

“Have we met before, sir?” she asked.

“No, miss. I have not had that pleasure,” he replied, displaying no pleasure in meeting her even now.

Her father made belated introductions. “My elder daughter, Miss Abigail Foster. Abigail, this is Mr. Arbeau. A solicitor.”

Abigail’s stomach tightened. Was her father in more trouble because of Uncle Vincent’s failed bank? Was he there to announce they were responsible for yet more money? Abigail fisted her hand. They had lost too much already.

Mr. Arbeau cut a crisp bow, then straightened, folding his arms behind his back. He was an intimidating presence with all his dour elegance.

He looked somewhere over her father’s head, then began, “Mr. Foster, I gather that you are facing a financial crisis, and the offer of a commodious abode at a low rate would not be unwelcome at this time?”

Her father’s face darkened. “I do not appreciate my private affairs being bandied about by strangers, Mr. Arbeau.”

“Then I advise you not read the papers, sir.” The man waved a graceful hand, and Abigail noticed the gold ring on his little finger. “Yes, yes. You are a proud man, I understand. But not too proud, I hope, to at least consider the offer I am prepared to make.”

Her father’s eyes narrowed. “What offer? I suppose you have a *commodious abode* to let?”

“Not I, no. But a client of mine possesses an old manor house, and has instructed me to offer it to you on very easy terms.”

“And who is your client?” Father asked.

The man pursed his lips. “A distant relation of yours, from a family of consequence and property in western Berkshire. That is all I am at liberty to say.”

“If he is a relative, why the secrecy?”

The man held his gaze but offered no reply.

Her father looked up in thought. “I do have antecedents in Berkshire, now that I think of it. May I know the name or location of this property?”

“Pembroke Park. Spelt with two o’s.”

“Ah.” Father’s eyes lit. “My maternal grandmother was a Pembroke.”

The man continued to regard him evenly but neither confirmed nor denied the connection.

Instead Mr. Arbeau said, “Please understand that you are not *inheriting* said property, as closer heirs still live and the will is held up in probate over some question of ownership. However, the current executor of the estate lives elsewhere and wishes the property to be inhabited—and by deserving relatives if at all possible.”

“I see . . .” Her father tented his fingers, and Abigail saw his mind working, considering whether to be flattered or further insulted to be considered a *deserving* relation.

Mr. Arbeau went on, “The house has two main levels and five bedchambers. As well as attic servants’ quarters, and kitchens and workrooms belowstairs. Church, stables, and outbuildings. Nine acres of parkland, ponds, orchards, and gardens, though uncultivated for years.”

“But an estate so large,” Abigail interjected. “I am afraid it would be beyond our . . . needs.”

The man withdrew a card from an inner pocket upon which was written a figure. He handed it to Mr. Foster, who in turn handed it to Abigail. Glancing at it, Abigail felt her brows rise in astonishment. Curious, she flipped it over. The other side was a simple calling card printed with only *Henri Arbeau, Solicitor*.

“That is an uncommonly reasonable and indeed generous offer,” Abigail conceded. “But I’m afraid the staff and expense to manage such a place would be beyond our means.”

The solicitor eyed her shrewdly and addressed his reply to her. “My client was right, I see, in wishing you present during this meeting, Miss Foster.” He pulled a second slip of paper from his

pocket. “I am authorized to engage and pay basic staff, though my commission does not extend to French chefs or a tribe of liveried footmen.” He glanced at the list on the paper. “You are to be provided with a cook-housekeeper, kitchen maid, manservant, and two housemaids. Personal servants—valet, lady’s maid, and the like—must be provided by yourselves. If that is agreeable.”

Abigail opened her mouth to utter some incredulous comment, but before she could fashion one, Mr. Arbeau held up his palm.

“Now, before you credit me or my client with an overly ‘generous’ offer, I must ask you to moderate your expectations and your gratitude. The house has been boarded up for eighteen years.”

Abigail gaped. She dragged her gaze away from the stranger to her father to gauge his reaction. Did his heart sink as hers did? Why would anyone abandon a house for nearly two decades? What condition would it be in?

Her father said, “May I ask why it has been allowed to sit empty for so long?”

“It is not my place to judge my client’s past decision in this regard. Suffice it to say, neither my client nor anyone else in that family has been able or willing to live there.”

“And it has not been let before?”

“No.” Mr. Arbeau drew an impatient breath. “See here. My client apprehends that your family is in need of a dwelling and wishes to fill that need. Be assured that everything shall be done to render it habitable. I will escort you there myself, and you and your daughter may judge for yourselves whether Pembroke Park might, by any alteration, be made suitable. And if you are willing to inhabit the place for at least a twelvemonth to make the investment worthwhile, my client will bear the expense of repairs, cleaning, and a staff of five to keep you reasonably comfortable.”

Abigail stared blindly as her mind struggled to tally the sizeable expense his client was willing to bear, compared to the modest rent requested. She blinked at the disparity. A pinch of disquiet, of suspicion, unsettled her stomach. Had the business with Uncle Vincent not taught her that anything that sounded too good to

be true usually was? But they could ill afford to pass up such an opportunity.

Her father seemed less aware of the astounding nature of the offer, or simply took it as his due. He said, "I assume the servants will prepare the place ahead of our arrival?"

"You assume wrong," Mr. Arbeau replied crisply. "My client is most insistent on that point. You and Miss Foster are to be present with me when the house is unlocked and opened for the first time since 1800."

It was her father's turn to gape. "But . . . why?"

"Because that is my client's wish and stipulation." His tone did not invite further inquiry.

Her father ducked his head to consider the matter, his furrowed brow indicating bewilderment.

The mantel clock ticked.

Mr. Arbeau consulted his list again, then refolded it. "There is an inn not terribly distant from the manor. If we discover that the house is uninhabitable as is, you are welcome to sleep at said inn for a period of up to a fortnight—as long as you return to the house each day to oversee the servants' preparations."

He returned the list to his pocket and said in a patronizing, nearly mocking, tone, "*If* that meets with your approval?"

Abigail stole a glance at her father and found his face growing florid. Fearing he might send the man away with a sharp setdown, she quickly spoke up. "Again, that is very generous, Mr. Arbeau. I can find no objection to at least visiting Pembroke Park. Can you, Papa?"

He hesitated, taking in her pleading expression. "I suppose not."

Abigail ventured, "Is the place furnished, or would we bring our own things?" She remembered the highest offer on their own house, contingent on leaving the furnishings behind.

"Fully furnished, yes," Mr. Arbeau said. "I have never been inside, but my client assures me you will find Pembroke Park already fitted up when you take it. Beneath the inevitable dust, that is." His eyes glittered wryly.

Might this be her chance to help improve her family's circumstances and regain her father's trust?

Abigail prayed she wasn't leading her father astray once again. She squared her shoulders and forced a smile. "Well, we are not afraid of a little dust, are we, Papa?"

When they had agreed on a date to visit Pembroke Park, Mr. Arbeau took his leave. It was a relief when the officious man and his astounding offer departed.