

## Chapter One

"There must be some mistake!"

"I assure you there is no mistake, Miss Paradise."

"Are you certain?"

"Quite certain," he replied. "Everything is in order and providing you meet the conditions your uncle laid down in his will, Hawkscote Hall and the surrounding estate will be yours."

Alyssa Paradise gazed in stunned silence at Mr. Ezekiel Bartley, the only other occupant of the musty office and senior partner in the law firm Deathridge, Flyte and Bartley in Chancery Lane. She drew in a steadying breath and spoke again.

"Forgive my astonishment; when you asked me to visit your offices in London today, I certainly did not expect *this!*" She gave a sudden rueful smile. "I am not a feather-headed creature generally, but it is bewildering to discover Uncle Tom has left Hawkscote to me when there is someone with a stronger claim."

"Ah, I presume you mean Mr. Piers Kilworth?"

"Yes, my cousin. Piers was expected to inherit Uncle Tom's estate."

"Well, as to that, I cannot say who expected such a thing to happen – I was your uncle's lawyer for ten years and General Paradise never mentioned it during that time." Mr. Bartley gave a dry cough and looked over his spectacles. "I would respectfully suggest the general regarded his nephew as a spendthrift; he confided to me occasionally his frustration at the haphazard way he conducts his life. Perhaps," he concluded, raising his brows, "it is Mr. Kilworth himself who has these expectations?"

Alyssa, not in the least offended by this observation, acknowledged it by saying lightly, "True! Piers has the highest opinion of his worth and considers anything other than pleasurable pursuits an inconvenience. Little wonder Uncle Tom thought him a wastrel, but Piers will be incensed when he hears of this – he is the nearest male relative after all."

"I see," said Mr. Bartley, regarding her appreciatively and wondering why, at five and twenty, she was not married; the young men of her acquaintance must be either blind or fools!

With the prevailing fashion one for shy blonde ladies with soulful eyes, Miss Paradise could not be considered a diamond of the first water but that was not to do her justice. Luxuriant chestnut hair, a creamy complexion, almond-shaped azure eyes, captivating not only for their luminescence but for the candid way they looked out upon the world, and an enchanting mouth – all combined to present a delightful picture. Equally worthy of admiration were her trim figure and the elusive, dignified air which distinguished her. The affectations adopted by many fashionable young women were absent: she displayed no simpering artifice.

Mr. Bartley, fleetingly wishing he were thirty years younger, recollected his duties. "Your cousin should not have made that assumption," he continued, removing his spectacles to place them on the desk.

"To your knowledge, did General Paradise ever hint to Mr. Kilworth he would receive the bulk of his estate?"

Alyssa shook her head. "Uncle Tom never mentioned his will. He expressed his opinion of Piers bluntly and often repudiated him but Piers took little notice. Is he to receive anything?"

"A reasonably handsome annuity but its value will not compare."

"Oh dear!" She bit her lip, and exclaimed, "How shocking! He will be furious, but I am not to blame – I had no notion of Uncle Tom's intentions."

"I'm sure you didn't. As far as I am aware, your uncle only discussed this with me and even I was not privy to his reasoning." Replacing his spectacles, he added, "Now, let me explain the terms because you must understand exactly what is required."

"Then I would be grateful if you could do so in plain language rather than abstruse legalities," she pleaded, eyes twinkling.

Mr. Bartley smiled, nodded and placed the stiff sheets of paper in order. "Before I begin, you appreciate your uncle's estate was not entailed?"

"Yes. In essence, his property did not pass to his nearest male heir by default?"

"Quite so. Your uncle was knighted for his distinguished military service; his title was not hereditary, nor was his property entailed. As you know, his wife died some years ago and there were no children from the marriage. The general could therefore dispose of his land and property as he wished. This matter became more pressing in recent times and he desired to put his affairs in order. Could I ask when you last saw your uncle?"

"Two years ago. Until then, I spent most summers at Hawkscote. We continued to correspond in the intervening period but I could not visit Dorset because my father's sight and health were failing. When he died last year, I planned to go but was obliged to sort through my father's papers first - he had not attended to such matters for months. When I was finally able to travel, it was too late: my uncle died in December after a short illness." She sighed and sadness shadowed her features. "I bitterly regret not seeing him one last time. I was extremely fond of Uncle Tom."

"As he was of you - he spoke often of his pleasure in your company."

"We shared the same mischievous sense of humour, you see," she said, with a reflective smile. "Indeed, my character more closely resembled my uncle's than my father's. My propensity to find amusement in almost every situation brought forth displeasure from my own sire but a wink of encouragement from Uncle Tom!"

"Perhaps the general's sense of mischief was one reason he decided on this unusual will," he remarked. "Of course, I merely speculate - he did not confide his motives to me – but it is fair to say no logical explanations are apparent from the text. I should add when land and property are being willed to a woman, it is usual for it to be left in trust and a trustee appointed. The General did not arrange his will in this way because you are already of age. Also, the trustee is commonly a family member and following the death of his brother and his sister, General Paradise felt there was no suitable person to appoint. Now, let me

begin." He cleared his throat ready for the task ahead. "You must take up residence at Hawkscote for a period of six months from an agreed date."

"Oh! But that will be extremely awkward because—"

"There will no doubt be difficulties involved," interjected Mr. Bartley, "but I advise you to hear all the conditions first." He paused briefly and then continued, "You must dine alone once every week with Sir Giles Maxton."

Alyssa gasped. "W-Who is Sir Giles Maxton?" she asked in a faint voice.

"The owner of the nearest estate to Hawkscote. He purchased the property that runs parallel eighteen months ago and became a trusted friend of General Paradise."

"But what is that to me and why must I dine alone with him? Surely that cannot be proper?"

"It may be thought odd, but the General was insistent on that aspect," he said. "I will return later to how Sir Giles will benefit from agreeing."

Alyssa shook her head in disbelief, a frown creasing her brow as she murmured, "Good God – this is astonishing! Please tell me the rest."

Mr. Bartley squirmed in his leather chair. Discharging his duty was proving uncomfortable now the young woman most affected by this extraordinary will was before him. "You may run the house as you wish, but you are required to seek advice and guidance from Sir Giles on any matters pertaining to the management of the estate, labourers and farmland." He glanced down at the document again, acutely aware of her sharp intake of breath. "If you can meet these terms, after six months you may either retain Hawkscote or choose to sell at full-market value, with first option to purchase offered to Sir Giles."

"And if I cannot agree, or choose not to take up residence?" she asked.

"You may sell the property, but only at one third of market price. Again, first option to purchase must be offered to Sir Giles Maxton."

"Infamous!" she exclaimed, her eyes glinting with indignation. "Sir Giles Maxton must have helped my uncle write this will!"

"I can see why you might think so, but the document was drawn up by General Paradise. It was signed in my presence and independently witnessed, whereupon it passed immediately into my keeping. There was no involvement or coercion from Sir Giles. Indeed, I understand he twice offered to purchase Hawkscote from your uncle for a very generous sum, should he care to sell."

"My apologies, Mr. Bartley-I did not mean to question your integrity - I am simply astounded my uncle chose to place me *and* Sir Giles in this situation! My next question is no reflection upon your abilities but I have to ask it all the same: can the will be contested, either by myself or my cousin?"

"Yes, but it is unlikely you would succeed. The terms are whimsical, eccentric even, but it is valid." He hesitated before adding, "This news has come as a shock but consider the implications carefully. Hawkscote is a valuable estate and if you can comply, you would benefit greatly."

"You are right, of course," she said, sighing. "Piers may wish to contest but from what you say, there is little point."

"Mr. Kilworth will receive the same advice from any lawyer; the fees would be substantial with no guarantee of a positive outcome. Your uncle ensured every aspect was covered under the law."

"Uncle Tom must have known how Piers would react! I wonder what possessed him to create this mischief after his death."

"I have no idea. However, in addition to the will, I have in my possession two sealed letters - both are addressed to you. One is to be opened in the event that you are unable or unwilling to meet the conditions and the other when the terms have been fulfilled."

"Two letters ... how extraordinary!" she mused. "Do you know what they say?"

Mr. Bartley shook his head. "General Paradise did not inform me of the contents, but perhaps they will answer some of your questions when the time arises."

"Uncle Tom has placed me in an awkward situation with my cousin," said Alyssa. "Naturally that concerns me but it is the notion of dining alone with Sir Giles Maxton I find particularly irksome. And I cannot believe Sir Giles will be happy about it either."

"His feelings will shortly be revealed, Miss Paradise; I anticipate his arrival at any moment."

"*What?*" cried Alyssa, stunned at the prospect of meeting him so soon.

"He is entitled to be present, being inextricably linked with the terms and a potential beneficiary," replied the lawyer, "but I set his appointment half an hour later than your own so you had time to adjust to the news. Mr. Kilworth's presence was also requested, but he is out of town and cannot be reached. I will therefore write regarding his annuity."

"It is fortunate Piers is away," she said candidly, "he would not have remained temperate. Your letter will strike him like a thunderbolt but at least we shall not be obliged to witness his reaction." She glanced across the desk, colour rising to her cheeks. "Mr. Bartley, thank you for giving me this brief respite. Will Sir Giles keep the appointment, do you think?"

"He is usually punctual and businesslike, I believe."

"I feel slightly nervous meeting him under these circumstances."

Mr. Bartley threw her a sympathetic look. "I understand, my dear, but take comfort from the fact he will be as shocked as you have been." The murmur of voices drifted in from the outer office and he rose to his feet. "Ah, that will be Sir Giles now – please excuse me for a moment."

Mr. Bartley went out, leaving Alyssa alone. The clock on the wall behind the desk marked time in a loud unerring rhythm but she barely noticed. She felt staggered by what the lawyer had told her. With this unexpected bequest, she could soon own a valuable estate and be independently wealthy. The prospect was appealing, not least because of what she might achieve by using even a tiny proportion for the cause dearest to her heart. All that stood between her and the Hawkscote inheritance was meeting Uncle Tom's astonishing terms. Why had he done it? Alyssa knew he would have considered the matter carefully. Uncle Tom never acted on mere whim; he planned in depth and looked at a problem from every angle – a skill honed during his military service.

Even if she were willing to meet the arrangements, there was no guarantee Sir Giles would do the same. How would he react? By the sound of the approaching voices, she did not have to wait long to find out. Alyssa turned her

chair slightly to face the door, thinking she might feel at less of a disadvantage if she saw him immediately he came in.

However, when Sir Giles entered her overriding emotion was one of incredulity. Expecting to see the rotund figure and ruddy jovial features of the elderly figure in her mind's eye, she was confronted instead by its antithesis in the form of a tall unsmiling gentleman of thirty to thirty-five years. Non-plussed, Alyssa blinked in surprise, eventually remembering to rise to her feet to feel the cool hard brilliance of his gaze sweep over her as Mr. Bartley made the obligatory introductions. Her cheeks grew warm under his critical, faintly sardonic scrutiny. Sir Giles seemed to be assessing her appearance and drawing conclusions from her neat but unfashionable gown.

Alyssa felt summarily dismissed as unworthy of consideration and indignation rose in her breast. She blushed and put up her chin in a gesture of contumacy. She might not be wealthy or move in London society but her family and background were impeccable - she had no need of his good opinion, notwithstanding Uncle Tom's Will!

Then, her indignation began to slowly mingle with amusement. She regarded his features, her lip quivering with the effort of suppressing the laughter that bubbled up in her throat. With black brows drawn together and a menacing glitter in his eyes, Sir Giles looked extremely forbidding. Well, she was no young miss to be easily cowed; his stern expression would not provoke a submissive response but one of amused defiance. Alyssa held out her hand and flashed a look of challenge into the grey-blue eyes which lay under those sweeping brows.

Sir Giles had already stripped off his driving coat and gloves and, as his fingers clung briefly to hers, Alyssa felt a shiver of intangible emotion. He was unarguably an imposing figure: his angular features were strongly drawn, if not conventionally handsome; his broad shoulders and deep chest were the result of excellent physique rather than strategically placed padding; his breeches could not hide the well-defined muscles of his thighs and his swarthy complexion was in marked contrast to the gelid coolness of his eyes. His physical presence was particularly daunting; Alyssa was of average height but she was forced to tilt her head to look into his face and the dusty office seemed half its previous size since he had entered.

When Mr. Bartley indicated the second chair, Sir Giles abruptly wrenched his gaze from hers and sat down. Alyssa did likewise but continued to observe him surreptitiously, noting his dress was carelessly elegant with none of the extravagances of the dandy set. Modest shirt points, an impeccable neck cloth and only a single fob was worn at his waist but Alyssa recognized the subtle touches of sartorial excellence. His boots, too, were of fine quality, the gleaming sheen on his top boots visible as he stretched one long leg forward.

"I would be grateful if we can bring this matter to a conclusion quickly, Mr. Bartley," he began, in a rich deep voice, "I have another appointment in an hour and Miss Paradise is no doubt as eager as I am to address the issues in the most efficient manner."

"I will do my best, Sir Giles, but there are more than minor details to cover."

"Very well. You will be succinct as you are able, I'm sure."

"Quite," he said, nodding. "General Paradise has left Hawkscote to his niece if she fulfills conditions which require your involvement."

Alyssa watched from under her lashes as Sir Giles gave an involuntary start of surprise. He quickly regained his composure, outwardly at least, only the rigid set of his shoulders indicating tension.

"So I am not to be offered the option to purchase?" he asked, after a long pause, a sliver of annoyance in his voice. "That is disappointing - I tendered an extremely generous price."

"You will be offered first option on its purchase under certain circumstances," said Mr. Bartley, and proceeded to explain.

Sir Giles did not speak but his countenance grew steadily more incredulous until details of the weekly dinners were reached and he broke his silence.

"By God, this passes the bounds of belief!" he exclaimed. "What on earth was Tom- General Paradise thinking? It is nonsensical to expect us to agree!" He turned to Alyssa, his eyes cold and unfriendly. "Surely you do not wish for this, Miss Paradise?"

"Of course not – it is abominable - but I cannot afford to be too proud to consider it," she retorted.

"Can you contest? There must be grounds to overturn such a capricious document." His glance flickered from Alyssa to the lawyer then back again; Mr. Bartley shook his head and maintained a discouraging silence.

With a tiny shrug, Alyssa said, "Mr. Bartley informs me it will be a waste of money and effort and I have to take his advice. I cannot speak for my cousin Piers - he may choose to although I believe, after consideration, he too will decide not to outlay funds when there is little hope of success."

There was another pause before Sir Giles said through gritted teeth, "Intolerable!" Suddenly, he thrust back his chair and strode to the window. After studying the scene outside for a few moments, he turned, scanning Alyssa's features as he said curtly, "This places me in a deplorable position. If I do not agree, I shall be thought firstly a fool; secondly, ungentlemanly for refusing to assist you and finally, when it is discovered Hawkscote has been offered to me at reduced value, I shall be considered a knave for taking advantage of your situation!"

"Why, I am sure you do not care for other people's opinions, Sir Giles," she said, in a dry voice. "Pray, do not let such considerations sway your decision."

He regarded her steadily, eyes blazing but his temper well in check. "You are partially correct; I would not care in the least if I am thought a fool, but I balk at being considered ungentlemanly, or guilty of taking pecuniary advantage of a young woman who is, moreover, the niece of a good friend. I have my family name and reputation to consider!" He stopped and gave her a quizzical look. "It is obviously in your interests to meet the terms yet I am surprised you do not show more anger," he said, his voice faintly mocking. "Perhaps you had prior knowledge of your uncle's plans?"

She gasped. "No, I did not! You suggest I persuaded Tom to cut my cousin, and perhaps yourself, out of his will. How *dare* you! This has come as a great shock to me and any implication it is otherwise is offensive!"

Sir Giles looked discomfited at the bitter resentment in her voice. He flushed darkly and executed a small bow. His reply, when it came, was rueful, his tone softer. "Miss Paradise, accept my apologies – what I said a moment ago was unwarranted and maladroit."

"Miss Paradise knew nothing of her uncle's will," interjected Mr. Bartley.

Returning to his seat, Giles nodded. "I appreciate that now."

Alyssa regarded him coolly. "I had not seen my uncle for some time but you were his neighbour for eighteen months. You knew him well, so answer me this: have you any notion why he added these conditions?"

"None." His lips compressed tightly before he added, "And if you think I coerced the General, you are mistaken."

"I merely wondered if my uncle mentioned anything."

"Not regarding his will. We talked mostly of estate business and various local issues – he seemed to value my advice. On occasion, he spoke of his military career and his family - your father and yourself he described with affection but he spoke less warmly of his nephew. He did not confide his reasons to me. However, we are now at this point. It is obvious why it is advantageous for you but there is nothing to induce me to agree!" He shrugged. "Why should I be part of this, other than to protect my reputation as an honourable man? The difficulties concomitant with meeting the terms might be worth some damage to my good name."

Alyssa threw him a baleful glance but, before she could speak, he continued, "It is true I wanted Hawkscote for a fair price, but not only for the property or the land – I have land enough of my own and other means of increasing my acreage if I choose. No, Hawkscote has another attribute that interests me and the General knew I was prepared to purchase the whole estate to acquire it."

"Ah," observed Mr. Bartley, "that must be the item in the additional clause. I have not yet had the opportunity to tell you of it, Sir Giles." He shuffled the papers on his desk until he found what he was looking for then read from the document. "If you meet the terms, General Paradise stipulated that even if his niece retains Hawkscote, you are to receive the deeds to the land between Winterborn Wood and the River Frome, thus giving you the associated water rights in perpetuity."

"You old devil, Tom!" muttered Sir Giles, amusement flashing over his features.

"I presume this alters your view?" she asked, rather too sweetly.

He gave her a brooding look. "Now I have reason to meet the terms, but it does not make the prospect more palatable."

"I find it equally undesirable. Not only does this will place me in conflict with my cousin, my life will be ruled in a particular way for six months which is anathema to me."

"That I can well believe," he murmured, studying her with new respect.

Alyssa, mistaking Sir Giles's grudging compliment for sarcasm, avowed angrily, "I want Hawkscote but not simply for wealth's sake. When he was alive, my uncle had my admiration and regard - I shall therefore do my best to adhere to his final wishes. However, I cannot force you to do the same. Perhaps

spending time alone with me is too awful to countenance, even for the valuable water rights you seek?" She wondered in amazement why some inner demon was urging her to provoke him.

"Oh, I would find no fault with the *food*; General Paradise has an excellent cook," he retorted, eyes hard as agate. "As for the company, I have sufficient fortitude to survive the experience! And I can choose not to linger over dinner-"

Mr. Bartley, who had thought it wiser to remain out of these exchanges until now, interjected quickly, "Dinner must last at least one hour. A clerk from the solicitor's office in Dorchester will attend and act as an independent adjudicator. However, General Paradise was anxious you both understood this was not because he mistrusted you; it is simply a mechanism to meet the legal requirements. There is no stipulation as to where your meetings take place – the general left that to be decided between yourselves."

Sir Giles was not mollified by this and snapped ironically, "At least there is one thing I have control over."

"I am sorry you find the notion of my company so distasteful, sir!" cried Alyssa.

An uncomfortable silence fell. The atmosphere was heavy with the antipathy that lay between the two protagonists. Sir Giles's expression was unreadable; Mr. Bartley's apprehensive gaze flicked from one to the other; Alyssa flushed and bit her lip. She was annoyed at herself for provoking him and yet unreasonably angry and indignant he had replied in the same vein. Really, the man was too vexing! He was brusque, humourless and full of self-importance.

Mr. Bartley coughed diplomatically. "Dear me! Well, well-that is ... this is not helpful. May I suggest we decide the fundamental issue? Miss Paradise, are you prepared to meet the conditions?"

"Yes." Any doubts Alyssa previously entertained had been swept away. She wanted Hawkscote, but had now determined to be a thorn in Sir Giles's flesh too.

"Excellent," said Mr. Bartley, relieved to be making progress. "Now, I ask the same question of you, Sir Giles: are you willing to meet these terms?"

"Yes," he replied. "In spite of what you may think, Miss Paradise, I liked and respected your uncle. He was a good friend and has been kind enough to offer me, albeit through strange means, access to the water rights and for that I am grateful. Let us hope we can rub along tolerably well until we both have what we desire. Of course, I state now for the record, if you decide to sell, I am willing to purchase the estate at full market price, notwithstanding my acquiring access to the water."

Alyssa merely inclined her head to acknowledge his offer and his words regarding her uncle. "Are there any other details I should be aware of, Mr. Bartley?" she enquired.

"Only that General Paradise retained his staff in anticipation you would accept." He tapped the documents with one finger. "His long-serving staff and tenants have been left small gifts. I'll not trouble you with the details but will organize these, if you are in agreement?"

She nodded. "I presume I may take my ward with me to Hawkscote?" Alyssa saw Sir Giles raise his brows, but he offered no comment.

"Of course - indeed, it would be best if you had company - but remember there must be no one else present when you dine with Sir Giles."

"How could I forget?" she said, with heavy irony. "Charles will find the situation difficult but that cannot be helped."

"Charles?" queried Mr. Bartley.

"Charles Brook. We are-er-betrothed," This was not strictly correct: Charles was still waiting for her answer to his marriage proposal but Alyssa could hardly explain that now.

"Ah, I see," he replied, pleased to have this detail clarified.

Sir Giles gave a short, humourless laugh. "It will be equally difficult to reconcile Miss Caroline Nash to these arrangements," he said. "You have my word as a gentleman I will keep to the terms, Mr. Bartley."

"I do not doubt it," replied the lawyer, with a warm smile. He then expatiated again on the main points until he concluded, "I think I have covered everything. Have either of you further questions?"

"None," said Alyssa.

"No, you have made everything perfectly clear." Sir Giles rose to take his leave, bowing punctiliously before shaking the lawyer's hand and adding, "I expect to hear from you again in due course." Collecting his gloves, hat and driving coat, he glanced at Alyssa. "Miss Paradise, I look forward to welcoming you to Dorset. When do you begin your tenancy?"

"Shortly after Easter, when I have made the necessary arrangements."

"Then I will call after your arrival." With that, he bowed once more and left.

Mr. Bartley, observing Alyssa's expression and heightened colour, said, "Do not think too badly of Sir Giles, my dear. He is considered a kind, if brusque, man, and the general's will shocked him also."

"Sir Giles may possess admirable qualities but he is the rudest man I have ever met!" she replied. "And now I am obliged to endure his company for six months."