

Duke of Devonwood

by

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Chapter 1

"What do you mean we don't have any money?" Miranda Foxglove pushed aside her half-eaten meal and glared at Daniel Hascombe, her father's lawyer. Now she understood why he'd insisted on meeting at a busy restaurant in the heart of Manhattan. He didn't want them to make a scene about the will. Too bad.

"My father," she snapped, "left a considerable estate."

Hascombe tapped the thick legal folder that held the will. "I told you the money was left in trust for the benefit of you two, and, of course, Mrs. Foxglove's children."

Miranda turned to look at her step-mother, Sharmie Foxglove, who was seated beside her, pretending to eat her striped bass. "Do you know anything about this, Sharmie?"

Her step-mother shook her head, her tousled blonde curls as artless as her personality.

Of course Sharmie didn't know anything about it. Although she'd been a devoted wife, she had no head for business.

Hascombe's face softened as he turned his attention to Sharmie. She had that effect on men, drawing out all their protective instincts. "Mrs. Foxglove," he said, "I think you appreciate the fact that your husband made sure the trust would last to provide for your young children."

Sharmie murmured incoherently.

Miranda grabbed her purse off the table, and pulled out a package of tissues. She was the type who was always prepared. Her father knew that. Just as he'd known she would be responsible, after his death, for Sharmie and her twin girls. That is, if they'd keep her in their lives. Miranda banished the lick of fear. First, they needed their money from the estate. Then she could figure out how she'd be so invaluable they'd never let her go.

She handed a tissue to Sharmie and then turned back to Hascombe. It would be best to agree with him as much as possible. "Exactly," she said with a forced smile. "We have young children to provide for. Therefore, since the money was left for our benefit—" she waved toward Sharmie—"we need some of it now. There's no one else with a possible claim on the estate. My father had no other family. " Which meant that she didn't either. But that fact had caused her enough heartache. She didn't need to dwell on it now.

She couldn't even be sure Hascombe was listening to her. His attention was focused on Sharmie. For some reason Miranda could never understand, men were slavishly devoted to women like Sharmie, who were soft and flirty and, well, helpless. Miranda didn't want to be those things. But she understood how those qualities appealed to the male of the species. And that her lack of those very qualities doomed her in the 'finding true love' arena.

She didn't blame Sharmie for her mannerisms. Sharmie was who she was, sweet and loving and open-hearted. Sometimes Miranda wondered if she shouldn't soften the edges of her own determined personality. But, outside the wide windows of the restaurant, Manhattan hummed with the energy of the city at rush hour. More than anything, Miranda wanted to be back out there, rushing downtown to work on the details of the hat making business she'd planned to start with the funds from her inheritance.

She sighed impatiently. Now this white-haired, Armani clad, attorney-with-a-pinky-ring was telling her no cash would be forthcoming.

"Mr. Hascombe!" She tapped her fork against her wine glass to get his attention. "What do we need to do to get our money released?"

Hascombe chewed the last bite of his steak before speaking. "You may petition your trustee to resume your allowances while the estate is tied up in probate. I will be happy to handle that for you." He tossed down a large gulp of his wine.

Trustee? Miranda forced that question aside for the moment. "What about the capital?" She had been counting on that money to use to open her business. She'd laid her plans carefully, she was starting to see her thirtieth birthday grinning evilly ahead of her, and it was time to start.

"The capital is untouchable," he said with a hint of impatience now in his voice. His hand was clenched around the wine goblet. Why was he so nervous? "The whole point of a trust," he said, in a tone implying he was speaking to the simple-minded, "is to prevent the beneficiaries from spending the capital frivolously."

"Did you say 'frivolously'?" Miranda's voice had a snarl in it now. "I hope you're not implying that *you* would be a better judge of how we should spend our money than *we* would be."

The sounds of distress from Sharmie increased in volume. Miranda turned to look at her. Poor thing. Her big blue eyes were brimming with tears. As much as she'd been married in name only for the past several years, she had truly loved her husband. Every meeting about his death brought on tears, which, of course, only made her eyes sparkle more beautifully. She looked like a forlorn fairy, one whom a prince would be delighted to rescue.

"Hush, now, Sharmie, it can't be that bad." Miranda pressed her step-mother's hand.

"You don't know, Miranda," Sharmie whispered. "I couldn't tell you."

"Don't know—" Miranda cut herself off. This couldn't be something they wanted to discuss in front of this hardhearted lawyer.

But, having gathered the courage to speak, Sharmie couldn't be stopped. She pressed the tissue to her eyes, straightened her back, and fixed her gaze on the lawyer. "I need more money," she whispered.

Miranda gasped. Sharmie didn't have an assertive bone in her body. What was she talking about?

Mr. Hascombe cleared his throat. "You know the estate was seriously encumbered by the extravagant spending you incurred to care for your husband?"

"Don't even think about chastising us for the care we gave him." Miranda withdrew her attention from Sharmie for a moment to address this new attack. "We would do it all over again."

Her father had spent six years dying slowly of Alzheimer's. For every minute of those six years, she and Sharmie had given him the best care they possibly could.

That money was gone now, and she didn't regret it. All they could do now was deal with the present. She took Sharmie's hand. "What do you need money for?"

Her step-mother's tormented gaze met hers. "I couldn't tell you," she repeated.

"Tell me what?" Miranda's heart started to thump painfully. She was only fifteen years younger than Sharmie and they'd always been as close as sisters. Hadn't they? What secret had Sharmie kept?

"I—I want to marry Pookie," she said, still whispering, as if she couldn't manage to actually speak out loud.

"Pookie?" Miranda felt like a parrot. "You mean the Pookie who lives in England?" A chasm was opening at her feet. An enormous black hole that would suck her in to its depths forevermore, if she couldn't get Sharmie to renounce her words.

"Of course, that Pookie!" Sharmie's tone was a little sharper. "How many Pookies could there be in the world?"

That was unanswerable, as Miranda was sure there couldn't be two men on the planet who would answer to the name.

"Why do you want to marry him all of a sudden?" Despite the panic gnawing at her, Miranda tried for a tone of reason.

"It's not sudden." Sharmie sniffed. "You know we've been friends for years. Of course, I couldn't do anything while your father was alive. Now that he's—he's—" She stopped, overcome. When she raised her head from her tissue, she said simply, "I need to move on with my life."

Move on with her life. The words echoed in Miranda's head. Her greatest fear — losing the only family she had — loomed in front of her. Her father had been an only child. Her mother, long gone, had been an only child. And Miranda herself had been an only child, until her father married Sharmie. A new horror raised its ugly head.

"The twins?" Now she was the one whispering. "Would you move to England and take the twins?"

"Of course the twins would go with me." Sharmie looked puzzled. "I'm their mother."

"Right." Miranda swallowed hard and tried to compose herself. Sharmie and the twins had each other, and now, apparently, Pookie was being added to the family unit. Only she, Miranda, would be left on the outside.

Her first wild thought — that she would move to England with them — had to be abandoned immediately. She had no way to get legal permission to live and work in England. Sharmie would be legal by marrying Pookie, an Englishman, and of course the twins, who were only six years old, would have the same legal status as their mother.

Only Miranda would be left out of the family circle. She wasn't legally related to any of them any more.

Nor to anyone else.

Mr. Hascombe cleared his throat. "We're getting off the subject here," he announced. "Your potential marriage doesn't affect the terms of your late husband's will."

Sharmie frowned delicately. "But I need money for a wedding."

"Nonsense." Hascombe waved his fingers for the check. "There can be no question of advancing money from the trusts for a—a wedding." He spat out the word as if it tasted foul. "Nor for any other reason." He turned his hard glare on Miranda.

"We'll just see about that," Miranda said, trying to speak bravely. "Wills can be challenged."

"Possibly." Hascombe pressed his napkin to his mouth and put it aside, as if signaling the meeting was finally over. "But the will itself is not your biggest problem."

Miranda's heart clattered with sudden fear. Perhaps her father hadn't left any money at all? His care *had* been expensive. Sharmie had nursed him at home, bringing in attendants, first for a day-time shift so she could care for the twins, later, for more extensive amounts of time as he became totally helpless. Miranda had been privy to replays of the arguments Sharmie had had with Hascombe over the cost.

"My biggest problem?" She clutched Sharmie's hand.

"You remain under the financial control of your trustee until you reach the age of thirty-five."

"My trustee?"

"The Duke of Devonwood, one of the most powerful nobles in England. He controls your finances. Completely."

Chapter 2

One week later, Miranda still seethed as she slammed the brakes to halt the mini-Cooper she'd rented. The car almost fishtailed on the broad curve of pebbled driveway in front of the Devonwood castle.

"Perhaps this isn't the best idea," Sharmie said, her blue eyes agog at the magnificence spread before them. The enormous palace gleamed in late afternoon sunlight, its faceted windows reflecting diamonds of light into their eyes. Miranda turned to look at the smooth sweep of emerald green lawn stretching as far as her eye could see. For some reason, the Devonwoods hadn't planted many trees close to the house, as if they expected an enemy horde any minute, and they didn't want to provide cover. She snorted at her fancy.

Well, the Duke of Devonwood had an enemy at his gates today.

"The duke did refuse to see you," Sharmie added.

"The old fart didn't know who he was dealing with." Miranda unclipped her seatbelt and grabbed her purse and laptop. "Hascombe said our trustee was one of Dad's Oxford classmates. I'm sure he's got one foot in the grave and the other propped on a footstool to nurse his—his gout." Didn't the aged English nobility always suffer from gout? She shoved open the car door. "He won't have the energy to fight me. I intend to make his life so miserable that he'll give in and let us have the money we need."

"I wish you'd reconsider." Sharmie folded her hands over her purse, as if she had no intention of exiting the car. "It's not like you to be so—hostile."

"Do you want to have that fancy wedding you've been planning?" Miranda had to lean down to speak into the car. "You deserve that wedding and I intend to see that you get it. No meddling duke is going to stop me. You can wait here if you like."

She straightened up as a man in a dark suit paced slowly down the broad, shallow steps that led from the enormous double doors.

"Good afternoon, miss." He didn't speak with the clipped accents of the upper class, though he definitely had a British accent. The butler, no doubt.

"Good afternoon," Miranda answered stiffly. She'd decided she'd have to brazen this part out. The duke had refused her phone calls, an overnight letter, and a plea to his business manager, whom she'd tracked down with a great deal of effort. "I have an appointment with the Duke of Devonwood."

Without moving any of his features, the butler managed to look down his nose at her. "I am not aware that his grace has any personal appointments this afternoon."

"He must have forgotten to mention it. Please tell him his ward—" The word choked her, but it might impress the butler—"his ward, Miranda Foxglove is here to see him." Technically, she didn't think she was his ward – he simply held all control of her finances – but she needed to convince the butler to bring in a message.

"Very good, miss." Inclining his head slightly, the butler turned and retreated up the steps. "Please come with me."

Scurrying after him, Miranda heard the car door close. Sharmie had decided to join the fray, but her delicate face was anxious. Miranda's ire increased. They shouldn't have to be here begging. As a legal widow, and a grown adult, Sharmie was entitled to at least half of her husband's estate, free and clear.

Of course, from what Hascombe had said, she had been granted half of the estate. But it was tied up in a trust that effectively made it untouchable. Miranda knew that Alzheimer's must have had her father in its grip when he signed the will. He had loved Sharmie and never would have placed her in such a difficult situation intentionally.

Now all she had to do was persuade this duke of that fact.

Her heels clacked sharply on the stone steps, expressing her anger as if she was shooting bullets out of her feet. Which she wished she could do. How dare this duke refuse to give them their own money?

"Don't be nervous, Sharmie," she said in a low voice. "I'll do all the talking." Her step-mother hated confrontation, but was determined to be as supportive as possible. Despite her fragile air, highlighted by her pale blonde curls and big blue eyes, Sharmie was a protective lioness with a lot more steel in her spine than people gave her credit for. She wouldn't say much, but she'd gather her courage and follow anyone she loved into the lion's den.

The butler closed the tall mahogany doors behind them. "Please wait here." He moved to the opposite side of the marble-floored foyer, rudely leaving them standing there. Miranda knew he didn't believe a word she'd said about having an appointment.

"This duke must be incredibly rich," Sharmie whispered, turning and twisting to take in the luxuriously appointed hall. A chandelier dripped sparkling crystals overhead, while antique credenzas gleamed with satin finishes and expensive bibelots. This duke was not a member of the genteel, but poor, nobility. Perhaps no dukes were.

"Yes, he's obviously wealthy." Miranda gripped her laptop. "Our money couldn't possibly amount to anything at all given the scope of what he's got."

"Oh, dear." Sharmie made a small moue of distress. "I'm sure he doesn't intend to rob us."

"The end result is the same."

The butler reappeared with a liveried man in tow. "Baker will escort you ladies to the business quarters of the estate."

Miranda's heart leapt. Her gamble had paid off! They were going to meet with the duke. A slight sense of defeat tainted her pleasure, though, as they exited the palace. The symbolism of being shown to a side door could not be ignored.

A gleaming white golf cart stood now at the foot of the front steps. Baker indicated the cart with one spread hand, leaving them to choose their seats. Miranda frowned at Sharmie. Was this a trick? Surely the duke lived and worked in the main house. He wasn't some poor relation.

"The business quarters are a short distance away," Baker said, as if he'd interpreted her frown. Business quarters? Did this duke actually work?

Baker reversed the cart and soon they were tooling sedately along the pebbled sweep of the driveway, and around the right side of the castle. They pulled up at a black-painted door set in the side of a towering stone wall.

They followed Baker into a small office decorated comfortably with leather chairs and a glass-topped coffee table, which held a few neatly stacked magazines. The room was empty and they passed through it and into a long, stone-paved corridor lined with hunting prints. The castle atmosphere was strong, with even the faint scent hinting of centuries of dusty history. Miranda had no problem picturing the ancient relic of a duke who'd be waiting at the end of their trek.

The door at the end of the corridor stood ajar, as if welcoming them, and Miranda decided to view it as a positive sign. But nothing could have prepared her for what waited on the other side. They stepped into what was clearly a modern room, humming with the sound of machinery at work. A large desk faced the door. A credenza wrapped around two walls was covered with

computer monitors and other technological equipment. Bright lights and humming machines brought the ambiance of the 21st century to the ducal estate.

A middle-aged man rose from behind the desk. He was nattily dressed in a blue business shirt with white cuffs, a yellow bow tie dotted with polka dots, and trim suspenders. His light brown hair was short and neat.

Disappointment flooded Miranda. This man couldn't be the duke. Though he gave off vibes of competence, he was too mild, and of course, way too young. The duke was a contemporary of her father's, which would put him well into his sixties. This man couldn't be more than forty-five.

He held out his hand to Sharmie. "David Highgrove," he said with a pleasant smile.

"How do you do," Sharmie said breathlessly, extending her hand. "I'm Sharmie Foxglove, and this is my step-daughter, Miranda."

The man turned his pleasant gaze from Sharmie to Miranda. "Two lovely ladies to brighten up my day." Gesturing to the chairs facing his desk, he sat down. "What can I do for you?"

"We've come to meet with the Duke of Devonwood," Miranda said firmly. She ignored the offer to sit down. "I don't think you can be him."

"No." He smiled again. "But I handle his business affairs."

"Our business is private." Miranda knew instinctively that a go-between could never be the person who could set aside the terms of a will. "We can only discuss it with the duke himself."

"I'm sorry." He managed to even look apologetic. "The duke has no appointments on his schedule today and therefore—" He waved an arm to avoid having to state the obvious. They did not have an appointment and could not meet with him.

"We're prepared to schedule an appointment." Miranda lifted her chin. "Can you suggest an appropriate time?"

"Ms. Foxglove." Folding his hands, Highgrove leaned over the desk. "May I be frank?"

"No," she said coolly. "There is nothing you can say that will reduce my determination to speak with the man who controls my inheritance."

Highgrove stared at her for a long minute. Then he stood up. "In that case, let me get Baker to show you out."

Miranda clutched the back of the chair. "I'm not going anywhere."

Sharmie was making small sounds of distress.

"The Duke of Devonwood," Highgrove said, "is a very busy man. He simply doesn't have time to meet with everyone who wishes to see him." He glanced at Sharmie, clearly indicating that she was the reasonable person. "I'm sure you can understand."

"Oh, yes," Sharmie murmured. "Miranda, perhaps we—"

"Absolutely not!" Miranda thumped her purse and laptop down on the desk. "Mr. Highgrove, I warn you that I will not tolerate you trying to intimidate my step-mother. Let me remind you that she has recently been widowed, has been left with two young children to raise, and is completely without funds due to the high-handedness of the Duke of Devonwood."

Highgrove's eyes narrowed. "So you're here for money."

"For *our* money," she corrected.

"Which you seem to believe the duke is withholding from you."

"Which he *is* withholding from us."

Highgrove stuck his hands in his pockets and regarded them silently.

"Perhaps you should tell me your story," he finally said. "You mentioned an inheritance?"

His raised brows invited her to continue.

Miranda remained silent, weighing her options. Highgrove seemed perfectly confident in his ability to refuse them an audience with the duke. But she had one more card to play.

"My father," she said, "was close personal friends with the duke. Very close." She watched him carefully, but he seemed unmoved by the news. "That's why he made the duke the trustee of our trust funds. So I don't think the duke would be pleased to discover we were here at his home and were prevented from seeing him."

"Whatever your father's relationship with the duke was, I can see that *you* don't know him at all."

"Is he that difficult?" Miranda clapped her hand to her mouth. She hadn't meant to say that.

"Not at all," Highgrove said calmly. "But he can't be manipulated or guilted into doing anything he doesn't wish to do."

"Difficult," she muttered under her breath to Sharmie, "and highhanded as well."

Highgrove chose to ignore that. "Ms. Foxglove, you say that the duke is a trustee of yours. Why is this suddenly an urgent matter?"

"My father died recently." Unexpectedly, her lip quivered. Her father never would have intended to put her, let alone Sharmie, through all this. She couldn't imagine what he had been thinking. Mentally, she reviewed the explanation Hascombe had given them after dropping the bombshell that their trustee was a landed duke in England. Hascombe had said her mother had been English, a fact of which she was only vaguely aware, and her father had been determined to introduce her, Miranda, to her English heritage when she became an adult.

His mind had failed him before he accomplished his goal, so he'd hit upon the idea of putting her affairs into the hands of his old college friend and classmate, hoping the man would—well, Miranda didn't know what her father had hoped. But it seemed clear that the duke didn't feel much of an obligation to his old friend's daughter and wife.

"Please accept my condolences on your loss," Highgrove said, recalling her to the present. He even managed to sound sincere. She had to give him points for that.

"Thank you." She accepted the tissue Sharmie pressed into her hand. "When the will was read, we discovered that the duke was the executor of the will, our assets had all been left in trust, and he was the trustee."

She stopped, suddenly realizing that she was telling Highgrove a lot more than she'd intended. The man did have an ability to inspire confidences with his quiet attentiveness.

"You are Americans?"

Miranda nodded. "It seems unusual to us as well that my father would complicate his will with an international connection. But, as I said, he was a long-standing friend of the duke's. So, perhaps to him it didn't seem odd."

"Hmmm." Highgrove frowned. "I do see a few inconsistencies in your story. Not the least of which is the fact that the duke, though trained as a barrister, does not actually practice law any more."

Of course not, Miranda scoffed to herself. The man must be well into retirement.

"Perhaps he'd be happy to be relieved of this responsibility," Sharmie said, her voice wavering a bit. "We don't wish to be a bother."

"Exactly." Miranda smiled. She appreciated the support from Sharmie, especially when she knew that Sharmie disliked conflict.

"It is an unusual situation," Highgrove said, his brow still knit in thought. "Perhaps we can sort it most easily by speaking with the duke."

He inclined his head toward a door at the back of the room. "Please come with me."

Miranda grabbed Sharmie's hand on the way out. "I think it's going to work," she whispered. "We'll have your money by dinnertime."

Sharmie sighed. "I hope it can be so easy."

They followed Highgrove down another hall, still in the modern addition to the castle. Miranda tried not to let hope bloom too intensely. Even if she actually met with the duke, she had no guarantee he'd agree to her plan.

Highgrove knocked on a closed door. A deep voice calling out an order to come in sent shivers over Miranda. That was a virile voice for an old man. Maybe he wouldn't be the pushover she'd been hoping for.

Highgrove opened the door and sunlight poured out of the room. Miranda's eyes widened to take in the wall of windows on the far side of the large office. Her breath was knocked out of her at the sight of the beauty spread before her. The design was unstudied, but not wild, with rolling green lawns, overarching shade trees and a profusion of flowers, which looked like a tapestry of jewels in her quick glance. But the oddest thing in the entire garden was the bubble-gum pink child-sized house standing in its own spot of sunshine. What in the world was that?

Once her eyes adjusted to the brilliant light, something more forceful even than the garden or the pink house caught her attention. A dark-haired man had risen to his feet. His gray eyes were fastened in surprise on Highgrove.

Two lean, tan dogs rose alongside him.

"I believe I asked to be undisturbed this afternoon," the dark-haired man said.

Yum. Miranda shivered. That plummy British accent combined with the deep baritone voice buzzed her skin as if he'd physically caressed her.

She could see this man as an eighteenth century nobleman, with a crisp bowler on his head, and a long-tailed formal jacket outlining his delectable form as he surveyed his domain with a smug certainty that he deserved it all.

Of course, she could also see him as a pirate with a bandana tied around his head, and a white grin daring anyone to defy him as he plundered.

There was a certain look in his eyes that said he'd take what he wanted and leave the rule-following for those in his wake.

But, most of all she could see him bareheaded, wearing nothing at all, naked in bed.

She shivered, telling herself it was anger, not pleasure that caused such a strong reaction to this man.

Because, clearly, they'd been conned again. This man was not the duke. His black hair held no hint of gray. His bold features were strong and firm, marked only by small wrinkles fanning from his eyes.

She could see the outline of his body beneath a white oxford-cloth shirt and dark wool trousers. There was no hint of the soft slide toward middle-age, let alone old age. The white shirt was folded up onto his forearms, showing the taut muscles of a well-exercised man. She pegged his age as somewhere between thirty and thirty-five.

Highgrove cleared his throat. "Pardon me—"

"There is no need to make excuses," Miranda snapped. "I will not be put off by this game you all seem to be playing."

"Game?" The dark-haired man raised his eyebrows.

Miranda scowled at him. "I came all the way from New York to see the Duke of Devonwood. I keep getting passed off to other men. I suppose you all hope I'll give up and go away. But, if you think so, then you don't know me."

"Part of your logic is irrefutable." Mr. Yummy glanced over her. "I don't know you."

He nodded to the man at the door. "I'll handle this, Highgrove."

Then he walked around the desk toward Sharmie. "Ma'am?" He held out his hand. "May I ask your name and your business here?"

"Sh...Sharmie Foxglove," she squeaked, casting a speaking look of distress at Miranda.

"Foxglove..." The man's voice trailed off as his gaze became thoughtful. "I seem to have heard that name before..."

"You've never heard our name," Miranda said crossly, "because we don't know you. There's no need to be sarcastic about it."

He turned his cool gaze on her. "Are you another Foxglove?"

"Yes," she said, trying to ignore the spike of pain in her chest. They all shared the same Foxglove name. But she was the only one not related by blood. If the rest of the Foxgloves chose to move on with their lives and not include her, there would be nothing she could do about it.

She jerked up her head and stiffened her spine. Yes, she could do something. She could make sure that they knew she was capable of taking care of all of them. She could be so indispensable that they'd never consider drifting away from her.

"I suppose we're making progress," the man said drily. "Perhaps someone could tell me why you're here."

"As I mentioned, I am here to see the Duke of Devonwood," she said, "and no one else."

He gave her a slight bow. "At your service."

She almost cheered. "You'll take us to him?"

"Ms. Foxglove." Mr. Yummy inhaled a sharp sigh. "I am the Duke of Devonwood. You may choose to believe that, or not." Turning on his heel, he strode back around his desk. "However, since you have forced yourself on me, may we get on with the reason for your visit?"

But she'd lost the power of speech. He was the duke? Impossible. Dukes were ancient, and riddled with gout, and imperious. Well, he had the imperious part down. She couldn't deny that.

She had to force her mouth closed, and then it wouldn't open again to speak because she couldn't think of anything to say.

"Finally speechless?" The duke gave her a sardonic smile. "I should have announced my title when you walked in the room."

"There's no need to be nasty," she snapped. Thank god she'd gotten her brain and power of speech back. "Not that I believe you."

"Why would I lie about who I am?"

"To get rid of me."

"Would it be so easy?" The little lines around his eyes crinkled.

Was he laughing at her?

"Only in your dreams could you get rid of me so easily." She slammed her hands on his desk and leaned over. "In your nightmares, I'll be suing you for impersonating the real duke."

His lips twitched. "I can hardly misrepresent myself. I am the Duke of Devonwood."

She took a deep breath, grabbing for her patience. Obviously, the real duke was well protected with a retinue of retainers. But she hadn't come all this way to be fobbed off.

"Miranda." Sharmie pulled at her sleeve. "I think there is some mistake."

"You're right, Sharmie." Miranda tilted her head at Mr. Yummy. "He can't possibly be one of dad's contemporaries." She leveled her gaze at the imposter. "My father told our lawyer in New York that he'd left our affairs in the hands of his classmate from Oxford. When my father died two weeks ago, he was sixty five years old. Clearly, you could not be his contemporary."

Counter that, she dared him with her eyes. "I think you would agree that my step-mother and I have every right to meet the man who has the complete control of our financial affairs."

She tried to smile sweetly, just to annoy him, but she was too frustrated to pull it off.

His eyes narrowed suddenly. "Control of your financial affairs? I have more dependents? Impossible."

His words stung. It hurt to feel unwanted, even by a man she didn't know. But she wouldn't let him see her distress.

"If the duke doesn't want more dependents, that problem can be fixed immediately. As we told Mr. Highgrove, we will be happy to manage our own finances." She glared at him. "Which is all the more reason why you should take us to the duke right now so we can straighten this out."

"Ms. Foxglove." He pointed to the empty leather chair next to Sharmie's. "Please sit down so we can discuss this."

She wanted to refuse, merely on principle, but his cold gaze unnerved her.

She sat. "Will you promise to take us to the duke once we've explained our errand?"

He dropped into his own chair. "I promise you that you'll meet the duke." He met her gaze, his own mocking. "Do I need to pinkie swear?"

Pinkie swear? The man must have a daughter. That would also explain the pink house in the garden. Her eyes flew to the fourth finger on his left hand. No ring. But that didn't rule out either a wife or a daughter. For some reason, the thought was unsettling.

"There is no need for any childish nonsense," she said. "I am willing to take your word for it, Mr.—?" She raised her brows. It was quite rude of him not to have introduced himself.

"Call me Devon," he said.

Devon, huh. He must be one of the family. Possibly even the heir? Her gaze returned to him again. He leaned back a little in his chair, and rested one hand on the sleek head of the dog to his right, as if trying to appear relaxed. But his back was straight and his eyes vivid with energy and charisma.

This was a man who looked like he didn't know the meaning of the word "relaxation". So he probably wasn't a member of the nobility. Her vague impression of such people was that they not only didn't need to work, but they also disdained it.

"Fine." She drew in a breath, trying to settle her annoyance. "Mr. Devon, my step-mother and I are here to discuss the terms of a will my father signed, which leaves complete power over our financial affairs to the Duke of Devonwood. As my father suffered from Alzheimer's, he clearly was not in his right mind when he wrote the will. We've been persuaded by our lawyer that litigation will be lengthy and costly. Therefore, we would like to meet with the duke to reach a reasonable settlement."

"You're here about a will?" He leaned forward suddenly and pressed a button on a console on his desk.

She recognized Highgrove's voice when he answered. "Yes?"

"Have I recently been named executor of a will in the name of Foxglove?" He pressed a button which turned off the speaker.

But Miranda could guess what was being said.

When Mr. Yummy ended the call, he was frowning. "Apparently," he said, "I have recently been named executor of your estate. Highgrove has been handling the details."

"Wait." Miranda held up a hand. "It's your father who is the executor. Maybe you handle your father's affairs now, but I insist on dealing directly with him."

Mr. Yummy stood abruptly, and the two dogs rose beside him, their heads tilted up in inquiry. "Let me take you to the cemetery then," he said. "Since you insist."