

Chapter 1

The candle guttered, and Ambrose looked up at it with a frown, the long blond hair falling away from the sides of his face. The scratching of his pen halted briefly. The wick was strong, and the candle had a long way to burn down. He decided that he would write on for another ten minutes, then retire. His sisters were probably lying awake, waiting to hear his footstep on the stairs, and he had promised them both that he would not stay up past ten tonight. He set his pen down and rubbed some life into his cramped fingers, which were long, pale, and elegant. Then, running his fingers through his hair, he took up the quill again, dipped it into the inkwell, and continued to write in a spidery hand.

Since his last bout of ague, he had been sickly and weak. The doctor said it was a bout of brain fever brought on by intensive study, not only during the day but far too often reaching into the lateness of the night. After this diagnosis, his sisters had insisted on his reducing the duration and frequency of his late night sessions. He'd rebelled slightly at this, his study being his driving obsession, but a compromise of sorts had been reached. Maria and Sophy allowed him to continue a lighter regime of study, and he agreed to limit the number of hours he spent closeted alone in the small library.

The clock in the hall began its mournful chime, and reluctantly Ambrose closed the notebook, placed the pen in its holder and shut the roll top desk, running his hands over the silken ridges of the tambour shutter as he had done since he was old enough to sit there on his father's knee. It was almost a superstition with him now; he could no more have left the desk without caressing it than he could interrupt the vicar's sermon on Sunday.

His wise amber eyes expectant, Aries looked up as his master stretched, yawned and absent-mindedly put a hand down and scratched one wiry, floppy ear. The wolfhound groaned in pleasure, pushing his head into his master's hand. Ambrose's eyes were unfocussed in thought, and he found himself staring at the picture of the house on the wall: Standish. His great-grandfather's house. This small box house, the White House, as it was simply called, was merely a satellite of the main building. As they did most nights, Ambrose's thoughts ran to the house, and he allowed himself to imagine the difference in his life, in all of their lives, if they still owned it. If Standish were still theirs, his sisters would be feted and courted, instead of one already an old maid and the other on her way toward a bitter spinsterhood. He himself would... He had no idea what his life would be like; he had nothing to use as a guide. There were no other gentry in the vicinity, and Ambrose had never been to London. The life of the eldest son and heir to a landed estate was completely beyond his experience.

All of his life, Ambrose had been fascinated by the house, which sat in the centre of the parkland like a beautiful Grecian temple. His father had often taken him past it, setting his son in front of his saddle on his daily rides to the village; they would stop at the nearest vantage point and gaze at Standish. His father would tell and re-tell the story of how it was lost — how his grandfather had wagered his fortune on the turn of a card, and then lost his life in a duel as the result of accusing his opponent of cheating. Ambrose never tired of hearing the tale. "Should have been mine, lad," his father always said, sometimes adding "and yours, of course."

For as long as anyone could remember, a skeleton staff had maintained the property and the grounds. Since it had been won all those years ago, Standish had never been lived in by the

owners. It had been let, but not to anyone who stayed very long. Despite its virtual abandonment, Ambrose and his father had never entered the grounds, and Ambrose had kept to that proud tradition, never once walking through the huge iron gates and up the neglected drive. His only view of it was still the one he had shared with his father.

He knew every room intimately, though. His father had described it all to him in great detail: the cavernous entrance hall with the double staircase, the floor paved in stone resplendent with paintings of fabulous beasts; the magnificent ballroom with large arched windows down one side; the withdrawing rooms, the bedrooms, the yew walk, the magnificent conservatory. All were indelibly etched in Ambrose's mind. He often told himself he would go, but he never had.

The clock chimed the quarter hour, and the door opened softly. Maria's mobcapped head appeared.

"Ambrose, you promised!" she said in a hurt and disapproving tone.

Ambrose stood up. "Sorry," he said, "I stopped at ten. I was...thinking." His eyes returned to the portrait of the house above the desk.

"Daydreaming," she snapped. "About Standish again, I dare say."

Ambrose smiled ruefully, his face suddenly alight and irresistibly charming. He kissed her and moved into the hall. "I know, I know. The house is gone, and we are ruined, and daydreaming won't pay the baker."

In spite of herself, she found herself smiling, too. "I suppose I do repeat myself." She walked ahead of him up the stairs, carrying the candles.

"Just a little," he said. "I know how you worry about money. I will see about getting employment this week." He smiled again at his elder sister as they paused outside his bedroom door.

"You aren't strong enough yet," she said quickly, but Ambrose could see the lines of worry on her face. *It's not fair*, he thought to himself. *She's had to carry the family for too many years. It's about time I started to help.*

"What can you do anyway? Thanks to father, you've trained for nothing. You should have gone into the Church or the army, but I do believe he thought somehow he'd get the wretched house back for you, and in the end — all it did was kill him."

"I'll find something," he said simply. "As you always say, God will provide." Not that he believed that himself; Ambrose didn't believe in God. His studies had taught him there was no heaven in the firmament, nothing but planets and stars. If he needed help, he needed to help himself. He dutifully kissed Maria, went into his room, and shut the door. Aries lay across the doorway and put his head on his paws.

The next morning, Ambrose breakfasted lightly while his sisters opened the post. It was his wont to be taciturn in the morning, silent through breakfast and retiring to his library to read directly afterwards. The women, who adored their little brother, indulged him in his routine, and would not normally have disturbed his peace for the world. This morning, however, Sophy's hand flew to her mouth with a shriek that pierced Ambrose's ears like a knife. His headache, never far away since his debilitating illness, suddenly returned, and he looked up with annoyance.

"Forgive me, brother," whispered Sophy, as Maria glared at her. "We have a letter from Elspeth Whitney. She's in town, as you know. She's met...oh Ambrose, she met Goshawk." She held the letter out for him to take and pointed to the relevant paragraph.

Ambrose took the letter eagerly and read:

"...and we spent two weeks there. Upon our return, however, we were invited to the Chalmers' once again, this time for Alice's coming out. I wore the gown I had made in Paris,

and all eyes were upon me, I am sure. There was one surprise guest, whose identity will interest you greatly, I do believe. Goshawk himself. His arrival caused much furore. As you know, he has been on the Continent for many years, although you would never have guessed it to see him. He was sophistication itself. Mamma confided in me that he had lost his wife whilst abroad, and there was indeed a certain sadness to him, but I was most pleased by his looks. Tall, very dark, but much too serious. He was introduced to all, but he did not smile or dance, which I am certain made all the mammas furious!

"Now comes the hardest part to tell, and your dear brother will take this worst of all, I fear. Goshawk told my father that he is now returned to England for good, and sees no reason why he and his son should not move into Standish by the end of the month. He was most interested to discover that we were acquaintances, and says he will call on you as soon as convenient. He gave no indication as to whether he knew your family history, although I assume he does. I can hardly believe that Standish will be a home at last."

The letter continued with tales of other dances, and Ambrose handed the letter back to Maria; his pale hands shook slightly, and the blood had left his face. He stood up and, neglecting to take his newspaper with him, excused himself and left the room. Reaching the relative safety of his library, he threw himself into a wing-backed chair, and his head fell into his hands. He was being foolish, he knew. Standish was not his, would never be his, but somehow the very fact that it sat empty had given him hope all of his twenty-three years, as it had his father before him. In his very maddest moments, he had allowed himself to believe that maybe his studies would prove fruitful, that he would publish his papers, become recognised, sponsored, and somehow, somehow, he would be able to obtain the money to buy back the house. A boyish dream, one he had clung to all of his life, and one he now realised was worthless.

Rafe Goshawk. The very name summed up the family: venal, predatory raptors. The stories that were told about them were legend. Houses in London, Paris and estates in the Americas, a fleet of ships, factories all won, stolen, or plundered. A name of such wealth and built entirely on sand, forged from the loss and misery of others.

The Standish pride rose in Ambrose, and he sat up. *Well, I will not receive him*, he thought. Then he thought of his sisters, and the poverty under which they struggled. It was beyond hope to think that the widowed Goshawk might look favourably on one of them, but Ambrose was not so ingenuous that he did not realise that their lot might be improved in many ways with the arrival of the fabulously wealthy heir of the Goshawk fortune.