

She couldn't stand it! Not for another minute! She had to go someplace where there were people, laughter, life. Laina Brighton swept her gaze around her beautiful, richly furnished drawing room, and the despair she now lived with on a daily basis gripped her anew. It was so elegant, so perfect, so empty. She missed Stanford. Oh, how she missed him! If only they could have had children, perhaps—

Laina wrenched her mind from her heartrending thoughts, blinked away the tears that sprang so readily to her eyes these days and walked swiftly to the doorway. Her reflection flashed in the gilt-framed mirror as she hurried past. Her steps faltered. She turned and went back to stare into the mirror. The sorrow was still there, but so was a look of determination she hadn't seen on her face since Stanford had died so unexpectedly nine months ago. She whirled and yanked open the door.

"Beaumont?"

The impeccably garbed butler materialized as if from thin air.

Laina frowned. And that was another thing—the servants hovered. They were so solicitous it was smothering her!

"Yes, madam?"

"I'm going to Philadelphia, Beaumont." She ignored the quickly stifled look of shocked disapproval in his eyes—Beaumont was a stickler for convention. "Tell Carlson to prepare the carriage immediately. I wish to leave within the hour."

"Within the hour? But madam, that's imposs—" He stopped short as Laina stiffened her spine. He gave her a small bow. "

Yes, madam—within the hour. Will there be anything else?"

"Yes. Send Tilly to my room to help Annette with the packing." With a swish of her long black skirts, Laina spun about and headed for the ornately carved stairway that spiraled upward to the third floor. She glanced back over her shoulder at her butler as she began to climb. "And tell Hannah to prepare a food basket—enough for two days. And—" She cleared the sudden thickness from her throat. "And send Billy ahead to arrange for a change of horses. I'm not stopping until I reach Randolph Court!"

Philadelphia

"Laina! What a wonderful surprise. I'm so pleased you—" Elizabeth gasped and stopped her headlong rush into the drawing room.

"Do I look that disreputable?" Laina forced a smile and rose to her feet. The room spun. She put her hand on the arm of the chair to steady herself.

"Laina, dear, what's wrong?" Her sister-in-law rushed forward and clasped her arms around her. "You're so pale—and trembling enough to shake apart. Are you ill?"

"No. I'm simply incredibly weary." Laina bit down on her lip to stop the laughter that was pushing upward in her throat. She must be hysterical. There was certainly nothing amusing—Bother! She blinked the sudden film of moisture from her eyes and stepped back from Elizabeth's arms. It was too easy to give in to self-pity when others were sympathetic. "I came from home without stopping."

"Without stopping? Are you mad?"

Laina jerked at the roar of words from the doorway. "No, dearheart—only desperate." Her lower lip quivered as she watched her younger brother hurry across the room toward her. The tears she'd been fighting welled into her eyes as his strong arms pulled her into a bone-crushing hug. Oh, how wonderful it felt to be held again! She rested her head against his hard chest. "Don't scold, Justin. I simply could not stay in that dreary, lonely house any longer. I had to come."

"I'm not scolding you for coming, Laina. Only for doing so in such a foolhardy manner." Justin slid his hands to the top of her arms and held her a short distance away, frowning down at her. "Why didn't you send word? I would have come for you. There was no need for you to make the journey alone, without care or rest. Look at you! You're all but done in from fatigue."

"I know." Laina lifted her watery gaze to her brother's handsome, scowling face. "I know it was foolish of me, Justin, but it would have meant days of waiting if— Oh!" She began to sway as the full force of her exhaustion swept over her. "I think I'd better sit down."

"You don't need to sit down, Laina. You need to sleep. Bring her along, Justin." Elizabeth spun about and started across the room.

Laina was too weary to protest as her brother scooped her into his arms and followed.

"I don't believe we need send for Doctor Allen, Justin. Laina isn't fevered." Elizabeth glanced up at her worried husband. "I think sleep is the only medicine she needs."

Laina sagged with relief as Elizabeth lifted her hand from her forehead, then gathered the last of her strength and pushed herself into a sitting position against the headboard. The bed felt too good after her long journey. She fought the desire to close her eyes and smiled at Justin. "Elizabeth is right, dearheart. All I need is sleep. Please don't make a fuss."

"And food." Justin scowled down at her. "Haven't you been eating? Look at yourself, Laina—you're thin as a stick!"

Her heart warmed at sight of the worried frown lines creasing her brother's forehead. "You're such a loving, caring man, Justin." She wrinkled her nose at him. "Even if not a very complimentary one." She shifted her gaze to Elizabeth and forced a tired smile. "How could you ever have thought him cold and aloof?"

Elizabeth laughed. "Because he acted that way. How was I to know it was all a sham?" She stepped to her husband's side and rested her hand on his arm. "Laina will be fine, Justin, but we need to get the travel dust off her, so she can go to bed. And that means you need to go downstairs. I'll join you as soon as Trudy and I have made her comfortable for the night."

Justin shifted his gaze to his wife, and Laina's chest tightened. Stanford had admired her, but he'd never looked at her the way Justin was looking at Elizabeth—especially after she failed to produce an heir for him. And now—

Laina broke off the depressing thought and watched as her brother cupped his wife's face in his hands, kissed her soundly, then lifted his head and grinned. "There! Now I've finally satisfied a desire I've had since the first night we spent together in this room—at least in part."

"Justin!" Elizabeth's cheeks flamed. "Your sister—"

"Knows I love you. Look, I've made her smile." Justin chuckled and kissed the tip of Elizabeth's finely formed nose. "I like it when you blush."

Laina sighed. She couldn't help it. Justin and Elizabeth were so much in love, so happy together. Justin glanced at her over his wife's soft, golden curls. "I wish there was something we could do to ease your sorrow, Laina."

"There is. We can let her know how much we love her." Elizabeth lifted her head and smiled. "We can share our happiness with her and pray for her, because the rest—the easing of her grief and the healing of her sorrow—is in God's hands."

The words were meant as comfort, but they only made her feel worse. Laina clamped her jaw together to hold back the bitter retort that sprang to her lips. She had never been on close terms with God the way Elizabeth was, and since Stanford's death she ignored Him completely. Why not? What had God ever done for her? She was barren in spite of years of prayers, and now she was widowed and without hope of ever having a child. She looked away lest they read her anger on her face.

"You speak truth. You're a very wise woman, Elizabeth."

Laina stiffened and snapped her gaze back to her brother. Surely, he didn't believe in God again? What had happened to the disbelief and bitterness he'd felt after his disastrous marriage to Margaret?

"Thank you, sir. But I am also a busy one. Now, go!" Elizabeth pushed against Justin's chest. He grinned and tightened his grip.

The door opened.

"Oh! Excuse me, mum! I didn't... I mean...you rang and...I'll come back."

Laina glanced at the awkward, blushing maid tripping all over herself as she hurriedly backed out the door and her anger dissolved. She burst into laughter at the comical sight. It felt wonderful to laugh again.

Justin winked at her, then motioned to the maid. "Come in, Trudy. I was only saying goodbye. I have been ordered from the room." He gave a mock scowl and leaned down to Elizabeth's ear. "Sometimes servants are most inconvenient!" His whisper was loud enough for all to hear.

Trudy giggled.

Laina whisked back in time to when she and Justin were small. They were in the kitchen watching the cook baking and Justin leaned over and whispered, "The smell's making my tummy hurt. I wish we could have a biscuit." His wish was granted. Cook overheard his whisper and slid them each a biscuit. They looked at the cookies, looked at each other and a conspiracy was born. From that time on they'd used the whisper ploy to manipulate servants into giving them their way.

Laina chuckled at the memory. Justin grinned at her, and she knew he was remembering too. Suddenly she didn't feel so lost and alone. The tightness in her chest eased. She reached for her brother's hand. "Bless you, Justin."

He gave her hand a squeeze, then bent and kissed her cheek just in front of her ear. "It's going to be all right, Laina—heart's promise."

This time the whisper was for her alone. It was the solemn oath they'd made to each other when one of them had been sad or unhappy after their mother's death. Laina's breath caught on a sob. Justin gave her a fierce hug, then turned abruptly and strode from the room.