

# *Heiress for Hire*

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HUNTER



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# Chapter One

*Did you kill him?*

The voice spoke in his head vaguely, as if traveling through distance and fog. Not as the voice of his conscience, the way he so often heard the question. A different voice now. A female one.

*I doubt it. Help me here.*

*He looks dead to me.*

*I promise that he isn't dead. Now, take this and hold it while I . . .*

A bit clearer now. Closer. So close it made his head bang with pain. Each word created a hammer blow. The more words, the more blows, and the closer they sounded.

*I should call Jeremy to come here.*

*We do not need Jeremy. See?*

Bam. Bam.

*Bad enough already, without that.*

*We are not the ones at fault here. Hold the lamp closer, so I can make sure it is safe. Wait, give the lamp to me . . .*

*This is no ordinary thief, from the looks of him.*

*What are you doing with that?*

Bam, bam, bam.

*Bringing him around so I can find out who he is and why he is here.*

Bam—

The fog disappeared, washed away by an onslaught of liquid that forced him back to full consciousness. He tipped his tongue out to lick some drips on his lips. Not water. Wine.

He did not open his eyes right away. He spent a few moments accommodating the pain screaming on his scalp. His legs felt strange and his arms hurt. He tried to move both and could not. He realized they were both tied behind him, and together, bowing his body. Someone had trussed him like a sheep, only backward.

He opened his eyes to see the end of a pistol mere inches from his head. His gaze traveled up the arm that held it, until he looked into the furious dark eyes of a very handsome dark-haired woman. She held the pistol like she knew how to use it. Her bright gaze said she hoped he gave her a good reason to.

Hell. Tonight was not progressing at all the way he had planned.

“He looks to be coming to,” Beth said. She raised the bed warmer as if to give another blow.

“Put it down. He is tied and I have my pistol.”

“He looks big. The ropes may not hold him. He may overpower you. I should be ready just in case.”

“He will not attack me.” He had indeed come to. His long lashes moved. After a moment he strained against the bonds. Minerva waited for him to accommodate his situation.

His garments appeared very high quality. Blood now

stained a cravat once pristine and crisp. His face might be called handsome if not for the strong bones that made the angles more severe than now fashionable. Something about him made her inner sense send out warnings that prickled her spine. He appeared to be a wealthy gentleman and . . . official. Whatever his reason for entering this house, it had not been to steal a few shillings.

Various reactions assaulted her while she trained her pistol on his harshly handsome face. Fear. Vulnerability. She experienced a surge of the unsettled spirit that had plagued her for over a year once, and that she thought she had banished forever.

Finally those lashes rose. Sapphire eyes focused on her pistol, then his gaze moved up until he looked right into her eyes. He again strained at the ties that bound him.

“Minerva Hepplewhite, I presume? My name is Chase Radnor. I apologize for the lack of a proper introduction.”

Beth sucked in her breath. “Odd for a thief to be so particular about etiquette and such.”

Except he was not a thief, was he?

“You can untie me,” Radnor said. “I never take chances with pistols, and I am not a danger in any case.”

“You are an intruder. I intend to leave you like that while I swear down information against you,” Minerva said.

“If you do it will come to naught and will only delay my mission. Now, untie me. I have something important to tell you that will explain why I am here.”

She hated how that provoked her curiosity, and also her trepidation. He might tell her that the investigation into Algernon’s death had been revived. Then again, he might reveal that at long last the poacher involved in that

accident had been found. Or he might tell her that he had come to take her to gaol.

She collected herself. It was foolish to build monsters out of this stranger's presence. There had been nothing to indicate he knew about her former identity and life.

"Explain yourself first." She leveled the pistol firmly. "I am not inclined to trust a housebreaker."

He gave one furious tug on the ties behind his back. He narrowed his eyes. "I have come to inform you of something that benefits you significantly."

"What is that?"

"You have inherited some money. A large amount of it."

Chase did not like when carefully laid plans failed. Now he grimaced while the servant called Beth dabbed at his scalp to clean the wound of blood.

A good deal of blood. He knew from his time in the army that scalp wounds were notorious for bleeding, no matter how minor.

Not that his felt all that minor. The hammer still banged.

He was sitting on a stool while the stout woman did her nursing. Fifteen feet away Minerva Hepplewhite waited patiently, watching. *Lounging*, damn it. The pistol now lay on a table next to where she relaxed on a divan.

She appeared composed. At ease. Minerva Hepplewhite had a level of self-possession that unaccountably irritated him.

"Explain yourself," she said. "If you had information to give me, why didn't you show up on my doorstep and present your card?"

That was hard to explain without putting her on her

guard. "I wanted proof you were Minerva Hepplewhite. I did not want to risk speaking to the wrong woman."

She frowned over that.

The hands on his scalp lifted, then returned and pressed against his head. He almost cursed the woman, even though he knew she only applied a poultice.

The woman Beth stepped back, taking the scent of cheap rose water with her. "Done. Shouldn't bleed much now. You will want your valet to wash your hair carefully for a spell. If he soaks your shirt in salt water, it should help get the blood out." She gestured to his coats. "Not much help for those stains, though."

The two women exchanged looks. Beth left the library and closed the door behind her.

"How did you find me?" Minerva Hepplewhite asked.

"It is my profession to find people."

"Ah, you are a runner. Is this not an odd assignment? I thought it was your profession to find paramours of married individuals, then tell their spouses about their misdeeds."

He did that too. It was the least interesting work, and an assignment he did not seek. Yet it came to him too often, since so many spouses committed so many misdeeds.

"I am not a runner. I am a gentleman who on occasion conducts discreet inquiries."

"If the fine distinction gives you comfort that you are not a servant, hold to it."

He stood. His scalp gave a few good hammer blows in response, but they were not quite as bad as they had been.

"Tell me about this inheritance," she said.

She wore an undressing gown. It sported a good deal of frothy lace around her neck and at its hem, but it had seen

better days. Shapeless but soft, it revealed her form while she sat there with it billowing over the divan's faded rose toile cushion.

"A fortune was left to a woman named Minerva Hepplewhite, currently resident of London, by the late Duke of Hollinburgh."

He took satisfaction in how her eyes widened. Then she laughed. "How absurd. This must be a joke. Why would the Duke of Hollinburgh leave me a fortune?"

He shrugged. "Believe me, that is my burning question as well. You must be . . . a good friend? A retainer? . . . A lover?"

Her frown dissolved and a broad smile took its place.

"A lover?" She swept her hand—an exceedingly lovely hand, he noticed—gesturing at the chamber. "Do I look like I have enjoyed the favor of a duke? Did you see a footman in the entryway? A fine carriage in the yard?"

Like that undressing gown, only serviceable furniture populated the library, and none of it was new. This certainly supported what she was saying, for this modest house on Rupert Street would hardly satisfy a duke's mistress . . . at least, so it seemed.

Still smiling, she caught his gaze with her own. She had a talent for captivating one's attention with that compelling focus. She appeared to invite him to look into her soul, to learn whether she spoke the truth or not. To discover—everything. He was not immune to the lure. She was a damned attractive woman. Distinctive. Unusual. Her disconcerting self-confidence made her interesting.

"Mr. Radnor, not only was I not this duke's lover or mistress, but I never even met him."

And with those words, Chase's current assignment suddenly became much more difficult.



A fortune. A duke. Minerva tried to absorb the astonishing revelation.

"There must be some error," she murmured.

Radnor shook his head. "'Minerva Hepplewhite' is not a common name. I found you by putting a notice in *The Times*. One of your neighbors came forward and pointed me to you."

She stood and paced while she accommodated the shock. She all but forgot Radnor stood by the fireplace until she turned to retrace her steps and saw him there. Tall. Dark. Formidable. A strict posture. Perhaps he had been in the military. His somewhat craggy features would look good in uniform and giving commands on the field. His blue eyes alternated between deep pools and icy barriers.

He exuded power and authority. He was the kind of man that tempted a woman to depend on him for protection and care. And, perhaps, much more. Oh, yes, Mr. Radnor's presence contained that kind of power too. She experienced an urge to believe anything he said merely to obtain his good favor.

"How much is this inheritance?"

"There is a direct legacy of ten thousand."

She gasped, her eyes wide, then turned away as she absorbed her shock.

"There is also a partnership in an enterprise in which the duke had invested," he said to her back. "That holds the promise of much, much more."

For the very first time in her life she worried she would swoon. To learn such a thing, and in such a bizarre manner—

That sobered her. Her mind cleared and her thoughts lined up the events of this night. She turned and eyed him. "Who are you? Why were you the one sent to find me?"

He crooked his elbow on the edge of the mantel and relaxed into a pose of aristocratic nonchalance. "The duke was my uncle. His heir, my cousin, asked me to help the

solicitor find the unfamiliar legatees so the estate can be disbursed in a timely way.”

His cousin was the new duke. That made him the grandson of a previous one. She tried to picture him at a society ball, but instead kept seeing him in a Roman centurion’s uniform. From the evidence revealed by his snug trousers, he had the legs to look good in one.

“How did the duke die?”

He did not respond right away, which only heightened her interest.

“His country manor house has a parapet at the roofline behind which one can walk. He often went there at night to take some air. Unfortunately, one night he . . . fell.”

The slight hesitation and the subtle shift in tone sent a shiver up her spine. She conquered the alarm and held her composure. “An accident, then.”

“Most likely.”

“You are not sure?”

“It will probably be investigated. Dukes have their privileges, even in death.”

She advanced on him until she stood only five feet away. She gazed right into his eyes. “I think you believe it was no accident. You believe he was pushed.” She stepped closer yet. “Perhaps you believe that I was the one who pushed him.”

The ice with which he met her gaze melted and for an instant she saw enough in his eyes to know she was correct.

“Not at all,” he lied. “Now, to claim this inheritance, you will need to present yourself to the solicitor who is serving as executor of the estate.” He reached into his frockcoat and removed a card. “Here is his name and the location of his chambers.”

He made it sound so simple. Only it wasn't. This legacy would complicate everything, and reopen a perilous door.

She took the card.

"I will show myself out."

As he walked toward the door, she stared down at the solicitor's card.

"Oh, there is one other thing," he said, turning back. "The solicitor may ask you about your history, to ensure you are the right woman. The will referred to you as Minerva Hepplewhite, previously known as Margaret Finley of Dorset, widow of Algernon Finley."

Then he was gone, leaving her utterly stunned.

She would have sworn that no one in London knew about her history, except Beth and Beth's son Jeremy. *No one.*

Yet apparently this duke—the Duke of Hollinburgh—knew exactly who she was.

Now that she thought about it, she was sure Mr. Radnor had not entered her home to make sure he had her identity correct, as he had claimed. There were better ways to do that. He had done so because he had suspicions about her.

Perhaps because he already knew about the murder accusation she had run from back in Dorset.

The next morning, Chase left his apartment and walked across St. James's Square. He approached a warren of buildings on the western edge of Whitehall.

Robert Peel had written, asking him to meet at nine o'clock. No one else was about yet. Chase wondered if that had been the plan, or if as an industrialist's son the home secretary always started the day at this hour.

Had the request come from the last home secretary, Chase would have declined. He did not like Sidmouth, or

approve of how he had used the power of the office. There had been too many poorly supervised agents making too much trouble throughout the land for his taste. Peel, however, had proven adept at finding other ways to hold down unrest, and had already shepherded a reform of the criminal laws through Parliament.

A good man, from the evidence so far. His father had accumulated tremendous wealth in his textile factories and other ventures, and the son had been raised and educated to have a place in government and society. The next Pitt the Younger, it was said. Home secretary already, and a protégé of Wellington's, eventually he would probably be a prime minister, and inherit not only that wealth but also the title of baronet his father had received.

As he turned into the Treasury passage and walked beneath its stone vaults, he spied a figure at the end. Of middling height and size, the man had fashionably cropped hair and a face with regular features except for a prominent aquiline nose. Peel was meeting him halfway, and wore his greatcoat. It seemed they would not talk in the office. Chase decided the early hour had been to avoid witnesses after all.

After greeting him, Peel eyed the poultice on his head. "I trust the other fellow fared worse."

*No, the woman who did this is both unharmed and unrepentant.* He had considered Minerva Hepplewhite long into the night, wrestling with the way she both annoyed him and . . . fascinated him. If he was correct about his uncle's death, however, she remained the most likely culprit. Not only her sudden good fortune said as much, but also the very self-possession that impressed him. She was not one to be underestimated.

"It is a small wound—it looks worse than it is."

"Walk with me," Peel said.

They fell into step together and began slowly retracing Chase's path.

"It is my hope that you can solve a conundrum for me," Peel said. "It has to do with your uncle's death."

Peel had been among the many at the funeral. As had Peel's father, with whom the late duke had some business dealings.

"Had things progressed as they usually do, if his heir received everything, everyone would say what a shame he fell, and that would be that," Peel said. "That will of his has got tongues wagging, I'm afraid. So much money, and yet so little to the family."

"That is common knowledge already, is it?"

"Your aunts and a few cousins have not been quiet about their disappointment."

"It was his personal fortune, to bequeath as he chose."

"Of course. Of course. And yet, so many angry relatives. Ambiguous circumstances. Mystery legatees. It begs explanation."

The mystery legatees certainly did. Three names. Three women. No one in the family had ever heard of any of them, and Chase had only tracked down one in the past week. In the fury that greeted the reading of the will, a variety of characterizations of these women had been cast down by family members, none of them flattering.

What were these women to Uncle Frederick? Minerva claimed she was not a mistress; perhaps the others weren't either. They may have never met the duke, just as she said she had not. They could be dead, for all anyone knew. Some relatives rather counted on that.

Would Uncle Frederick be so eccentric, so perverse, as to give a sizeable portion of his personal estate to three women he had nothing to do with? Chase did not reject

the notion out of hand, but if that had happened, how had his uncle come up with these particular women?

"If you say it all begs explanation, I am not going to disagree with you."

"It is not I who says so. My inclination is to leave it all be. The king, however, says so. The prime minister agrees. Other ministers and several other dukes have called on me. My own father, heaven preserve us—I have been getting many earfuls all week. 'No way in hell he fell.' That sort of thing."

They continued their slow stroll out onto the street.

"I assume you went up there and took a look at that walkway and parapet. What is your view of things?"

*No way in hell he fell.* "I have not investigated sufficiently to have a view. I assumed if anyone pursued the matter, it would be your office."

"Ah, yes. Yet to do so would only feed the storm. It would be very public. Everyone would know that suspicions existed. It would be a scandal for your whole family, no matter what was learned. Hence the conundrum."

"Surely you have someone who can be discreet."

"It is sure to get out if we launch an official inquiry. Nor are the best agents at my disposal known for being delicate. The insult to your family will be sharp. The destruction of their privacy unthinkable." Peel stopped walking and faced him. "You have experience in such things, I believe. From your time in the army, and now in society. You are a man to contact if one needs discreet inquiries, I've been told."

"If you are suggesting that I conduct this investigation for you, let me point out that I am hardly disinterested."

"I am counting on your being most interested. He was like a father to you. You were a favored nephew. I'm sure you want to know what happened. In fact, I assume you

intended to conduct an inquiry of your own, no matter what we did.”

Hell, yes, he planned to find out what happened. That was different from acting as an agent of the Home Office, however. “My position will compromise whatever report I give.”

“You mean that if the information points to someone close to you, or to a conclusion that casts aspersions on your uncle’s good name, you will be tempted to turn a blind eye, or handle it the way gentlemen often do.” Peel vaguely smiled. “Well, yes.”

*Did you kill him?* That knowing smile made the question echo quietly in his head.

“However, your integrity in the matter will never be questioned,” Peel continued. “You are known as a man of character even if your methods are at times unconventional.”

Peel had been talking to people, that was clear. He probably had received more information than Chase wanted to think about. “No matter what I find, there will be those who will think the worst.”

“Let us not worry about all the *those*. My only concern is with very specific people who want this laid to rest. You would not be in our employ, of course. You would not be one of our agents. Your report would be to me alone, and would be private. I in turn can then respond to those specific people, privately.”

“What if action less private is required? We are talking about a possible murder.” Using the word bluntly sounded stark within all this polite chatting.

Peel gave him a quick, deep scrutiny. “If you conclude justice requires formal and official action, it will have to be taken.” They began walking back to the passage.

“Can I start my day knowing this has been settled?”

Peel asked. "I would like to send a few notes indicating an unofficial inquiry is underway."

Chase weighed the offer. Peel had shifted the conundrum onto him. Yet he had fully intended to use his skills to determine just what had happened up on that roof. If he accepted this private mission, at least there would not be some Home Office agent getting in his way. On the other hand, even in an unofficial capacity, his option to turn that blind eye would be seriously compromised. Finding the truth would become a matter of duty, not just one of personal curiosity.

Perhaps that would be for the best.

"You can write your notes to the king and prime minister. I will do the inquiry and see it through to wherever it ends."



## Chapter Two

Two mornings after hitting Chase Radnor on the head, Minerva poured coffee into three cups sitting on the worn wooden table in the kitchen. Beth spooned porridge into bowls, then laid down a loaf of bread along with butter and some cheese. Jeremy, ever polite in his table manners, waited for both of them to sit with him beneath the ceiling beams in the warm chamber. Then he ate with the appetite of the young man he was.

Minerva still saw the boy Jeremy had recently been when she looked at him. She at times had to remind herself that he was one and twenty now.

She broke some bread and spooned at her own porridge and watched him devour the cheese. He was probably still growing. She remembered when he was a lanky blond youth of fifteen. Now he was a lanky blond man, filling out but still thin by nature. His hair hung long because he said his mother always made him look like a serf when she cut it.

He finally slowed down enough to talk. “You should have called me, that’s all I’m saying.”

He picked up a conversation from yesterday, when he had learned about Mr. Radnor’s unusual appearance.

"If you hadn't moved into the old carriage house, you'd of already been here," Beth muttered.

"Not that again, Mum."

"I'm just saying that with you out back we could be butchered in our sleep and you wouldn't even know."

"At least he would not be butchered too," Minerva said. "We did just fine on our own, Jeremy. He didn't know what hit him until he came to. Now, I want to talk about the legacy."

Jeremy grinned. "I do too. That's a lot of money. I was dreaming of a fine pair and a carriage most of last night."

"I'm glad you were dreaming. I didn't sleep the last two nights at all. I've been too shocked," Beth said. "Ten thousand is a fortune. And there's more you said. Even a hundred would be riches I'd never dare pray for. You'll be wealthier than some fine ladies."

"We'll *all* be rich," Minerva said. "I am still as stunned as you are. It is too astonishing. All the more so since I never met this duke. I'm sure of it."

"You must of at some time and just don't remember," Jeremy said.

"I'd remember meeting a *duke*."

"Maybe he is one of those peculiar sorts who likes to do odd things like give money to strangers," Jeremy said. "You were just lucky."

"I have no explanation except that. Yet he knew about me, so it wasn't entirely random."

"Knew too much, to my mind," Beth muttered.

Minerva chose to ignore that. "Someday we will learn how this happened, but I intend to take advantage of the miracle it is. While you dreamed of horses, Jeremy, I was thinking of how we could use some of that money. I have some plans I want to tell you both about."

“You intend to visit that solicitor and claim it then?” Beth said. “I’m not saying it isn’t tempting. I’ve done some dreaming too the last day. I could use some new pots, for one thing, and a few new caps. But it seems dangerous to me. What if—” She jabbed her spoon into her porridge. “Five years you’ve been safe here. Five years no one knew about your marriage, or about—the rest of it. Now, this could be opening up a door we’d closed and bolted.” She gave Minerva a sharp glance.

Minerva considered Beth her best friend, so she took that glance seriously. Beth had worked for half wages as a servant in Algernon’s home, in order to be allowed to have her young son with her. She had become a mother to the young bride Algernon brought home too. Long before Minerva had found a way to escape that house, these two had become her true family.

“Beth, rejecting the legacy will not change the truth that my past is now tied to my new name. Both names were used in that will.”

“Stop trying to spoil the fun, Mum. Minerva is going to be rich.” Jeremy held up his arms and shook his hands while he laughed. “*Rich! RICH!*”

“You better tell him the rest, Minerva, before he calls me a crazy old woman for worrying so much.”

“The rest? What are you talking about?”

“Jeremy,” Minerva said. “Yesterday when I told you about Radnor’s visit, I left out a few small details.”

“How small?”

“Not small at all,” Beth said. “Big. Huge.”

“Why not let me decide which it is.” Jeremy had now turned serious.

“The circumstances of the duke’s death were peculiar enough to encourage inquiries.”

"You said he fell off a roof. An accident."

"That is the most likely way it happened."

"You mean maybe it wasn't an accident?" His face tightened. "You should have told me right off. This explains why Radnor snuck in and why he was in your study. He was looking for something."

"I can't be certain, but my inner sense says so. If there was a question about how the duke died, it would be natural to wonder about *me*. I am unknown to the family and I am benefiting from his death. Under those circumstances, it should be expected that Mr. Radnor would be curious. If I were in his place, I would be too."

"How reasonable you make it sound," Beth said. "It's like you're making excuses for the rogue."

Maybe she was. If so, it probably had to do with dreaming about Chase Radnor last night. She blamed her parched femininity for that. Naughty dreams had plagued her for several months now, ones in which her late husband, Algernon, mercifully did not put in an appearance. Rather, men who caught her eye did, even if she only glimpsed them. Passing footmen. Handsome shopkeepers. Gentlemen who walked by on the street. They would invade her head until she woke hot and frustrated.

She had assumed that after her experiences with Algernon she would never again have any interest in such things. Apparently, human nature will have its way eventually, even with such as she. Despite the restlessness of those dreams, she welcomed the indication that a dead part of her might be rejuvenating, even if only while she slept.

Last night, with Mr. Radnor, things had progressed further than normal. She still had not purged the dream's images from her head. In particular she kept seeing his

naked legs. Her dream had blessed him with very fine ones indeed.

"Now do you see why I am worried?" Beth said to Jeremy.

Minerva could see Jeremy working it out in his head, and imagined every step his logic took. Her own thinking had followed that same path, after all.

If the duke had been pushed off that roof walk, someone did the pushing. If Radnor or a magistrate started looking for the culprit, those who benefited from the death would be investigated. If deep inquiries were made about Minerva Hepplewhite, someone would learn that when she was Margaret Finley she had been suspected of murdering her husband. Not only would she become an important suspect in the duke's death, but also Algernon's death might get another look.

"I say we leave London," Jeremy said. "It will be hell to give up a fortune, but it will be safer for you this way."

Not only for her, she knew. For her family too. For Beth and Jeremy.

She reached out both arms, and took Jeremy's and Beth's hands in hers, gripping them tightly. "Where would we go? How would we live? We have managed thus far here because I had some jewels to sell, but they are gone now." It had been a blessing that in the early days of their marriage Algernon had given her his mother's jewels, and that his creditors could not claim them after his death.

"I'll find work," Jeremy said.

"I can too," Beth added.

"No," Minerva said. "We are not packing our trunks and disappearing into the night. I promise you, if it ever looks like any of us are in danger, then we will leave England. Hopefully, I will have received some of the funds from this legacy by then, so we will not be doing it

with only the clothes on our backs.” She squeezed their hands. “I swear that I will not be swayed by any fortune to remain, if I believe any of us are at risk. But I’ll not run until I have good reason to, and I intend to do what I can to ensure we never have to take that step.”

Beth’s brow puckered. “Ensure how?”

Minerva released their hands and stood. “Come with me and I will show you.”

They went above and entered the little study on the street level, the one where Minerva had hit Radnor with a warming pan. Jeremy and Beth kept exchanging perplexed looks.

Minerva went behind the writing desk and opened a drawer. She slid out a large sheet of paper. Yesterday, while she laid her plans, she had worked out the wording now on it, and the layout of the cartouche surrounding them.

She raised it up with a ceremonial flourish.

Beth’s eyes widened. Jeremy smiled.

“Hepplewhite’s Office of Discreet Inquiries,” Jeremy read. “It’s a good name. Memorable.”

“Do you think to actually do this?” Beth asked. “We’ve talked about it, but not seriously. It was just a dream we played with.”

“It was never only a dream to me. I have been planning it for over a year,” Minerva said. “We are good at inquiries. Very good. It is my one true talent. We proved that with Algernon. We just did that good turn for Mrs. Drable and even I was impressed by our skill in uncovering the identity of that thief. We delayed starting this service in a formal way because there are costs, but now I will have the money to pay them. This legacy will enable us to do

this up proper, with calling cards and correct wardrobes and transportation when we need it.”

“Not likely you’ll leave that solicitor’s chambers with ten thousand in your reticule,” Beth said. “Could still be a long while before we can start.”

“We will use credit at the shops, based on my expectations. That is commonplace enough.”

“It is easy work, the way I see it,” Jeremy said with a big smile.

His mother frowned at him. “It isn’t a game.”

“It is if you’ve a knack for it.”

He did have a knack for it. They all did. They had practiced during a time when having a knack meant the difference between life and death. A person learns fast then.

“I have it all thought out,” Minerva said. “I will bring this and have a tasteful sign made to put by our door. A small brass one. Then I’ll order cards for all of us. I’m going to call on Mrs. Drable and ask her to recommend us to others who might have need of our services. However, we already have our first client.”

“Who might that be?” Beth asked.

“Me.”

“The door to the past has been opened, as you said, Beth. There is some risk to me now, I know. I spent the night after Radnor was here in panic, remembering how it felt to live with a noose hanging over one’s life.” Even now, as she spoke of it, the chill of dread wanted to conquer her once more. “However, I have decided I am not going to hide my whole life. I will meet the risk with action, not running away. Not fear.”

They had moved to the library. Beth and Jeremy sat on the divan. She stood near the fireplace.

"Brave words, for whatever they mean," Beth said.

"They mean that the best way to get rid of the risk is to prove I had nothing to do with the duke's death. And the best way to do that is to prove that someone else did it. However, I would make this inquiry even if the legacy held no danger to me. This duke was a great benefactor to me. If someone pushed him off that roof, I want to know who. I also want to know why he chose to give me this money." She paced while she explained her thinking and decision. "Don't you want to know all of that too?"

"Of course," Beth said.

"Then, as of today, Hepplewhite's Office of Discreet Inquiries is a real enterprise, and finding those answers is our first endeavor. As to establishing ourselves—we will need to find others to help us. On occasion as we get started, but hopefully on regular wages soon. We will require a young woman, for example. Younger than me. More a girl. They can be very useful to inquiries."

"A fellow who can look like a gentleman would be helpful too," Jeremy said. "When we were setting things up to catch Mr. Finley the way we did, the lack of such a man caused some delays."

Minerva nodded her agreement. "You will have to wait on the carriage and a pair until I have money in hand, Jeremy. Until then we will use hired coaches. And new garments need to be ordered soon." She eyed Jeremy's long hair. "A visit to a hairdresser for you, as well. Soon. Although not for your first assignment."

"Do you plan to stay in this house, or let a better one?" Beth asked. "Not that I'm complaining, but my chamber is drafty."

"For now we will stay here." Minerva glanced around



the library's shabby furnishings. "The study is presentable at least, and that will do for now. Eventually, however . . ." She pictured a fine townhome on a better street, one with space for a servant or two.

"Before you spend every shilling of that ten thousand, maybe we should decide how we are going to learn about the duke's death," Beth said.

"I have considered that too. Such deaths normally are caused by family members. That is why the authorities looked to me when Algernon was shot."

"Hard to get near the family of a duke. Not as if you can call with one of those new cards and announce you want to conduct an inquiry."

"No, but one can glean much from a short distance." She paced again, while her mind traversed the path she had laid already. "Jeremy, you have your first assignment. Learn where this duke lived, and try to loiter around the stables among the grooms. Learn what you can."

"I'll offer my services for spots of work if they have it. Most stables need extra at times, and the ones near here will give me references if I need them."

And with that, Hepplewhite's Office of Discreet Inquiries launched its first investigation.

Three days after meeting with Peel, Chase dismounted outside Whiteford House while a groom took the horse's reins.

"You are new here," he said, watching how the young man handled the animal.

"I started two days ago, sir." Tall and blond, the fellow flushed from the attention. "I'll brush him down if you like."

"I won't be here long enough." It impressed him that

the offer had been made. His cousin Nicholas had hired well, it seemed. There must be a host of new servants, now that the old retainers had taken their legacies as pensions.

Chase approached the door of Whiteford House. One of the oldest houses on Park Lane, it nestled amidst trees at the northern end of the street. Built as a country villa when this area was still mostly rural, and the nearby western section of Oxford Street was still called Tyburn, it sported extensive gardens. The last duke had bought the property on a whim, mostly to keep a rival from tearing it down and developing the land.

He looked up the old façade, said to have been designed by Inigo Jones. It bore the stamp of classicism that the architect had imported to England, and showed similarities to the Banqueting House in its exterior decoration. The interior had not fared as well. The last duke had a strong eccentric streak, and it manifested itself as soon as Chase walked in the reception hall.

No classical restraint here, at least not in the furnishings. The accumulation of a lifetime cluttered the walls and corners. Exotic skins and weapons mixed with gilded metal. Jewel-toned upholstery contrasted with pastel walls. He wondered what Nicholas planned to do with all of this now that he had inherited the property.

Since Nicholas was now a duke, Chase had to suffer the formalities of having his card taken away, then being escorted up to the duke's apartment. A mere month ago, in Nicholas's last home, there would have been no footman to do the duties, or even many chambers to traverse. The eldest son of the last duke's eldest brother, Nicholas's fortunes had existed only in expectations until recently. As it happened, those expectations had not been realized quite like Nicholas had anticipated.

Chase found his cousin in the dressing room, lounging

on a fine chair set near a window that overlooked the park. A ledger laid open on his lap and he frowned down at the page he perused. Whatever he read occupied him enough that he did not hear Chase enter.

Sons ran in the Radnor family, in the last generation as well as this one. The result was the last duke had five brothers, and those brothers in turn had six sons. Of all the cousins, Chase and Nicholas had formed the strongest friendship, one devoid of the bickering and arguments that marked so many of the other relationships.

The only Radnor not to sire a son had been the last duke. Uncle Frederick had never been one to conform.

“Bad news?” Chase asked.

Nicholas’s dark eyes peered up. He smiled ruefully while he closed the ledger and set it on the floor. “Terrible news.” He looked around the expansive dressing room, with its mahogany wardrobes and raw silk drapes and Chinese carpet. “Hell of a thing. By year’s end, I’ll be selling furniture to pay the bills. The rents barely bring in enough to keep up the country houses.”

“Perhaps a good land steward can change that.”

“Not fast enough.” Nicholas gestured to the ledger. “He didn’t enclose, of course. Nor did his father. A good-hearted decision, but inefficient. Now I have to decide if I will do it, and the displacement of families—” He shrugged.

“His interests were not with the lands.” Chase spoke the obvious, but it was the root of the problem.

“The other investments are doing well. Fabulously. The money pours in. Of course, he did not bequeath any of that to me, did he?” He laughed. “Or you. Or any of us. He was always a little strange, but his will was his most eccentric act yet. What a joke on all of us.”

No one had laughed at the joke when the will was read.

Rather the opposite. An explosion of emotions greeted the bulk of it. Nicholas received the entailed lands, of course, and even one or two properties that were not entailed. But the duke's real wealth had been in all those investments he made. Land development, canals, shipping, factories—he had a Midas touch and had increased his personal wealth twentyfold before he died.

None of that, not one shilling, had been left to a relative.

Chase had expected nothing, so his disappointment had been muted. But other of the cousins had assumed a fat inheritance was coming. And the wives . . .

“Have you learned anything?” Nicholas asked. “I know it has been just over a week since the funeral, but what little will be left when the bequests are disbursed will be divided among us and I am not the only one who is anxious to know what amount will come to me.”

“Some small progress has been made.” Chase chose not to tell Nicholas about Peel recruiting him to make an unofficial inquiry into Uncle Frederick's death. Being in such an awkward situation was one thing. If the family knew, his position would be impossible.

“I have found one of them. Minerva Hepplewhite.” He offered Nicholas less than half a loaf with the announcement. There were two other mystery legacies, and he had not begun to unravel them. He had hoped to make a quick report of success on all counts. He had predicted that Minerva would know about the other two bequests, and lead him to those people. He no longer believed she could do that.

“Was she his mistress?”

“I don't know. She says not.”

“She's probably lying,” Nicholas said. “To avoid gossip and such. Is she beautiful?”

Chase did not think Minerva Hepplewhite worried overmuch about gossip. "She is attractive."

"What a worthless word. That tells me nothing."

He pictured her sitting on the divan, that soft undressing gown billowing over her curves, while she captured his attention with her compelling gaze. "Very attractive. Is that better? Handsome more than pretty. Strikingly so. Whether she was his lover or not . . . Does it matter? The legacy is hers in any case. I can now move on to the next one."

Only not right away. That was the devil of it. In agreeing to look into the duke's death, he would be left with little time to track down these other legatees. He would need to go down to Melton Park in Sussex in order to examine closely where that fall had happened, and talk to the servants there. If he concluded the fall was not accidental, he would need to look into the people with whom Uncle had formed those business partnerships, and discover if anything was amiss.

It would take weeks, maybe months, to do a thorough inquiry.

Nicholas rose and walked to the window. He looked down at the park across the street. The recent replacement of the park's wall with an iron fence had improved the prospect. "I thought I would have heard from someone by now about how he died. The high chancellor, or the Home Office. Do you think they are being delicate, or ignorant? I can't be the only one who thinks that fall is suspicious."

"I expect that if there is an inquiry it will be very discreet. You may not ever be told it is taking place."

"I don't care for remaining in the dark. If an inquiry is taking place, I want to be kept informed. If no inquiry is taking place, I want to know why. Once matters are settled with the will, perhaps you will go down to Melton

Park to see what if anything can be learned there. If no one else thinks it a serious matter, I will do it myself. With your help, that is."

Chase said nothing to discourage his cousin's thinking. Nicholas's decision to act would be useful. He would not have to hide his inquiry from at least one member of the family. "I'll do that. I'll see what else I can find, if you want."

Nicholas emerged from his distraction. "How fortunate that my cousin is talented in such things. I would never trust a hired man for matters this delicate." He stretched his arms up, like a big cat expanding his spine. "I will go riding, and pretend my life is still carefree. Will you join me?"

"I have a client who grows impatient, and must finish the day as I began it."

"I hope this client is not going to divert you from my problem."

"You are the client."

They walked down together. "Aunt Agnes is insisting on a family meeting," Nicholas said. "She wants it held here. She said it is because I am head of the family, but I suspect it is so the costs of the meals are on me."

"I hope she doesn't expect dinners with eighteen courses."

"I'd like you here when they all descend. You can back me up when I explain it will probably be months before anyone sees anything. I don't think most of them comprehend how little is likely to be split up, and how small their portions will be."

"It is a simple matter of sums and subtractions. Have the solicitor attend, to explain it."

Nicholas sent word to the stables to prepare his horse

and to bring Chase's, then they walked out together. "You will attend?"

"I will come for the theater if nothing else." He would not have Nicholas face them alone, even though he could picture the exact moment when Nicholas, bombarded with complaints and a rising crescendo of accusations, dragged him into the thick of it.

None of them would believe that the simplest explanation was the only one. The duke had written that will that way because he wanted to.

His uncle had been a very unusual man. Mercurial in his emotions. Radical in his politics, not that he did much in that area. Generous at times, and miserly at others. Very smart, too. On a whim he had learned several foreign languages. Not German or Russian. Chinese and the tongue of indigenous Brazil.

The duke was not mad, but very much an original. He might well have given away fortunes to strangers, in which case finding those other two women would be nigh impossible.

Chase's horse came around the house, guided by that blond groom. He slipped the fellow a shilling before mounting. As he peered over the horse's back, something across the street caught his eye. He stopped, one boot in a stirrup, and watched.

A woman strolled along the fence that enclosed the park. Her bonnet's brim obscured her face and her garments appeared presentable but unremarkable. None of that garnered his attention. The edge of a memory did. He was almost sure that she had been there when he arrived, walking in the same direction.

"Sir?" The groom called for his attention.

"Keep him here. I will return shortly." With the groom

and Nicholas exchanging perplexed looks, Chase strode toward the street.

Minerva made it a point not to look at Whiteford House when she walked past it. While many probably did gawk at its façade, she did not want to draw attention to herself. There were only so many times one could pass a home before one did that, and she was well on her way to the limit.

On her way down the lane she had seen two men outside. One had looked to be Chase Radnor. All the more reason to remain inconspicuous. She wished she could take one good look, however. Perhaps the other man was the new duke. Jeremy, who had managed to be hired as a groom here, said the duke remained in the house most days, but that he often left around three o'clock. It was now quarter past three.

None other than Jeremy himself brought a horse around the house while she passed. From the corner of her eye she could see that attract both men's attention. She took the opportunity to turn her head and give the unknown man a good examination.

He stood as tall as Chase, and they shared other qualities such as dark hair. Her quick glance took in his boots and coats, which were of superior quality. The two of them had much in common.

She continued her walk with more purpose. After three to and fro's, her time was up.

Warmth at her side. A presence hovering. The boots that fell into step with her arrived unexpectedly. She reared back and looked up. Chase Radnor was looking down at her.



She had not heard him approach. Normally she knew someone followed her as soon as they came within twenty-five feet.

“Out taking a turn?” he asked. “You are far afield from your home.”

She stopped and faced him. That conveniently gave her an excellent view of the house over his shoulder. “I often come to Hyde Park, and today decided to admire the large homes on this lane.”

“I would say you decided to do a close study, since you walked by at least twice. Four times, since I only saw you retracing your steps. Some would consider that suspicious activity. It is the sort of thing thieves do before they enter unannounced.”

“You would know about sneaking into homes in ways I don’t.”

“Do you have a particular interest in Whiteford House, Mrs. Hepplewhite?”

She made a point of raising her chin and looking past him so she might appear vexed he delayed her. It also allowed her to watch that other man leave on his horse.

“Not at all, other than it being impressive.” She returned her gaze to him. “And it is *Miss* Hepplewhite.”

His blue eyes sparkled with humor, transforming his stern face into one much more alluring. Little stomach flutters almost distracted her from the house.

“You have chosen to style yourself as never married? What happens if you decide to wed again, and have to explain the truth?”

Her laughter burst out indelicately. “Oh, my.” She caught her breath. “I think it is safe to say that I will never marry. You see, a friend I would trust with my life once confided that marriage was worse than prison.” The details

of what such a prison could entail cleared her humor in a snap, and dried her eyes just in time to see the duke ride off his property.

She squinted, trying to observe details.

Radnor looked over his shoulder. "Ah. It is not the house that interests you, but the family."

She tried an innocent expression. "I don't know what you mean."

"That is my cousin." He stepped aside. "Look to your heart's content."

Although annoyed, she did look. The horse came onto the street and headed in their direction. She managed not to stare, but still take him in. A handsome man, he resembled Chase Radnor but had more regular features. The strong bone structure made him appear dashing, not harsh.

The duke passed within ten feet of them, then all she could see was his back. She gave up her examination to find Radnor watching her intently.

"He appears a sober sort," she said.

"He is concerned about our uncle's death," he said. "He thinks it may have been a murder." He bowed. "I must take my leave. The groom who is holding my horse no doubt has other duties."

"Do *you* think it was?" she asked when he had taken a few steps away. "Murder, I mean."

He looked back at her. "I am almost certain of it."

## Chapter Three

Minerva waited while Mrs. Drable considered the request presented to her.

Mrs. Drable fingered the white fichu at her dress's neckline, her slender fingers straying on occasion to the cameo pendant that dangled below her throat. Although at least fifty years in age, Mrs. Drable appeared younger, due in part to her soft complexion and her vivid red hair. A neighbor for whom Minerva had done a good turn, they had met today for a professional reason.

"There is one young woman," Mrs. Drable finally said. "I think she would do. She currently is without a situation, and I despair of finding her a new one. She is educated enough to write and read, and she has a decent hand. She has, however, no experience in what you describe."

"Where is she now? I will visit her if you arrange it." This young woman's experience or education were secondary to her spirit. Minerva required someone with a bit of adventure in her blood. Hepplewhite's Office of Discreet Inquiries would be no ordinary situation.

"She just started on a short hire. A week at most. The new Duke of Hollinburgh is hosting a family gathering and the housekeeper asked their usual service to supply

extra servants just for that. They are woefully short of staff due to servants leaving with their pensions.”

That explained why Jeremy had found work there so easily. He had only hoped to be taken on for occasional service, but had been offered daily work once they saw he knew the labor.

Mrs. Drable sighed. “Well, it is not the sort of thing we do, is it? Nor are there many decent servants available for such a brief duty. So the word went out to all of us. Elise was available and I sent her over. That is her name. Elise Turner.”

By “us” Mrs. Drable meant those in the business of supplying servants to the better homes in London. Mrs. Drable owned one of the smaller, more discreet such offices. Minerva had come to know her as a neighbor and friend, but had stepped in when Mrs. Drable confided she needed help discerning who had pilfered money from her. The suspicion immediately fell on a housemaid recently hired, but Minerva had proven the culprit was instead Mrs. Drable’s own nephew.

It had not been information well received, but Mrs. Drable was grateful to learn the truth. She had come close to accusing the wrong person, and claimed a debt to Minerva for sparing her that.

“She has no reference from her last employer. I need to tell you that. Hollinburgh’s housekeeper only accepted her on my personal recommendation and because they are all but desperate.”

“Why has she no reference?”

Mrs. Drable’s expression turned sour. “Her last employer . . . the husband behaved badly. The poor girl was fending off the man almost every day. I had placed a cook in the household, and she came by to inform me. Tell her to leave, I said. Send her to me. She has lived here ever

since while I try to find another situation. However . . .” She turned her hands up in a gesture of futility.

“Does she come here every evening after her duties at the house?”

“They are not demanding that this little itinerant army of help stay there, although they will allow it if necessary. She prefers to return here. If you visit at nine o’clock, she should be back.”

Minerva stood. “I will return then. It was very good of you to take her in.”

“It is a story too often told. A young woman leaves home and comes up to town and finds a situation in a good house, only to discover one of the men is no gentleman. I cannot tell you how often I have had to extricate some girl from the clutches of a lothario.”

Minerva opened her reticule. “I am sure you have much to do, and I have another appointment. I will leave now. Before I do I want to give you some of my cards.” She plucked out five of her newly printed calling cards. “I am going to offer my services to others as I did to you, only in a formal and professional way. If you learn of someone in need of me, I hope you will give them one of these.”

Mrs. Drable eyed the card. “Normally men do this. A woman, however, will have appeal to other women. Some inquiries are rather delicate. I will give these out if I hear of anyone looking for your aid. You may use my name as a reference if you like.”

“I appreciate that more than you can know.”

She began to leave, but a sudden thought made her pause. She considered it quickly. It would be an outrageous thing for a woman of good birth to do, but also it would be an opportunity that the owner of Hepplewhite’s Office of Discreet Inquiries would be foolish to lose.

No one notices servants. Her best chance of learning about this family was to enter the duke's household as one.

"I have one other request," she added on impulse. "I would like you to recommend another brief hire to Hollinburgh's housekeeper."

"Who might that be?"

"Me. I assure you that I am capable of housemaid duties."

Mrs. Drable frowned at her, then peered at the card. "I expect until this new enterprise gets on its legs you can use the coin, though it is a big step down for you. However, dabbling in service is not the same as becoming a servant forever, is it?"

"That is my thinking. If you will do this, I will be grateful. And I will return to meet Miss Turner this evening."

Minerva made her way back to the street, with her excitement building. It had been a good meeting, in more ways than she had anticipated. Not only might she have new clients with Mrs. Drable's help, but she also might have a new employee. Both notions gave her optimism about her plan. What really interested her, however, was the information that Hollinburgh was hosting a family gathering.

Jeremy now observed the house, but she had just found a way inside it for herself. That meant not watching from a distance, but from a few feet away.

That afternoon, Minerva presented herself at the chambers of Mr. Sanders, solicitor. She had changed into one of her best dresses, and worn her favorite bonnet, a blue one with crimson lining. Even so, her confidence wobbled as she entered the office the solicitor used with clients.

He seemed a kind man, mild mannered and given to

measured speech. Not too young, which reassured her he might know what he was about. Not too officious, which hopefully meant he would not be looking to cause her trouble.

After greeting her he proceeded to question her about her relationship with the duke. The lack of one did not dismay him at all.

"It is possible, of course, that an error has been made. If so, I am abjectly sorry." He flipped through the pages of the will. "Did you once live in Dorset, and were married to one Algernon Finley?"

"I was."

"Is there anyone who can support this?"

She told him about Beth and Jeremy. "They lived in my husband's house, so they knew me then."

"Do you have family in Dorset still?"

"My parents have been dead for many years. My relatives for the most part emigrated close to eight years ago. Nor did they live in Dorset, but in the county over."

"Any others who have known you under both names?"

"I don't think so. Although I visited London with my husband, I did not make friends or participate in society."

"I suppose a few more notices in the papers here will confirm there are no other Minerva Hepplewhites in London who once lived in Dorset under the name Finley. I think we can go forth on the presumption that you are indeed the woman in question." He jotted some notes. "I am curious. Is there a reason you changed your name?"

She had prepared for this. "My husband died with debts. More than his estate could pay. I chose to leave the area and change my name so creditors would not continue to hound me."

"Understandable."

He wrote again, then set his pen in its inkwell. "I can

imagine you were surprised to receive a legacy from a man you say you never met. Actually, it is more common than you think. In all likelihood it was your husband who had known the duke. His Grace, in making his will, felt some desire or obligation to leave the money to him. Since Algernon Finley was dead, it was left to his widow instead.”

It sounded almost plausible. Only she found it hard to believe Algernon had met a duke and not told her about it, repeatedly. He was the kind of man who would hang a sign on his home announcing his connection to such a title.

“How did the duke know I now live in London?”

Mr. Sanders shrugged. “No doubt he conducted an inquiry. Not himself, of course. Now, I need to describe the details of this inheritance.”

To her amazement, that was that. Mr. Sanders seemed not the least interested in her past, her present, or how the two had connected.

Sanders explained the inheritance. The part that captured her attention was when he spoke about possible challenges. “The will has been accepted by the courts as legal and binding. However, someone may still challenge the provisions the duke made to each beneficiary. If a person is named in the will, but does not think he received his due, he may be tempted to do that. If he can claim that he had good cause to think he would receive more due to being a dependent of the duke’s largesse, he may make his case.”

“Is that likely?”

“It is possible. I am confident none will be successful, however. No promises were made to the family members. None qualify as true dependents.” He leaned forward. “I wrote the will, you see. I did so in a way to make such a claim most unlikely.”



“Must I wait to see if anyone wants to challenge it?”

He shook his head. “As his executor, my role is to do as the duke requested and laid out in his will. Now, you received ten thousand, plus a partnership. The ten thousand was put into a trust almost a year prior to his death and cannot be taken. The partnership, however—it would be wise to let that lie for a while, and set aside any dividends or income it may pay. Six months at most.” He smiled. “That is not long to wait before you indulge yourself. The trust has already paid once, so a few hundred or so already is at your disposal, or will be in a few weeks once arrangements are made with the bank.”

“I think I can make do with that for now.”

He chuckled. “Can you indeed? I expect most could.”

He sent clerks to the scribes to pen documents for her to sign. After the preliminaries, Sanders advised Minerva on her new situation.

“I will contact you once the trust has been secured to your access. As for the partnership, the other partners will press to meet with you. Put them off for now. They may offer to purchase your share and you can use the time to decide if you prefer that. A partnership goes both ways when it comes to money. If it is profitable, it pays out. If the business requires funds, you pay in.”

“I may well agree to sell. Do you know what a fair price would be?”

He pulled forward a portfolio, opened it, and flipped through some pages. “I am having valuations done of all his businesses, but at the last valuation of that one, your share was just over thirty thousand. It showed an income per annum of approximately fifteen hundred. It was one of the duke’s smaller investments, but it was a good one.”

She stopped breathing. Radnor had said the business

was worth far more than the direct legacy, but such a sum never entered her mind. Even the income astonished her.

Sanders set aside the portfolio. "Miss Hepplewhite, I would be remiss if I did not mention that with your new good fortune, there will be those who seek your company for less than admirable reasons. There will be friendships offered only because you can benefit the new friend. As an unmarried woman you will be the prey of fortune hunters too."

"You are saying that men will pursue me because of my money."

"I am afraid so. Should you ever consider marriage, I urge you to consult a solicitor who can explain the implications for you and your fortune, and perhaps advise you on the character of your intended."

"Thank you for your advice. I am quite sure that I will not be welcoming such attentions. However, if I ever do, I promise that an inquiry on the man will be done."

She left the chambers in a daze. As long as no one succeeded in challenging this will's provisions, she was now a wealthy woman. Even if she only received the income from the trust, she would never again have to worry about money. Rich, as Jeremy had said. Rich! RICH! She wanted to shout it to passersby.

The only thing dampening her giddiness was her awareness that Beth was right. A door long closed and bolted was now open again.

Chase returned to his apartment on Bury Street in the afternoon. He had spent several hours fencing with an old army friend who was now a member of the Horse Guards. The exercise had cleared his head, which he had counted

on. He needed to do some clear thinking before he went out again this evening.

His manservant, Briggsby, had hot water waiting, and held large towels after Chase washed. Then he dressed for the second time this day. Finally cleansed and refreshed, he sat at a large writing table set in his bedchamber. Briggsby had already supplied it with a thick stack of good paper and a fresh ink and pen.

Chase opened a new portfolio and wrote *Hollinburgh's Death* on it. He always kept detailed notes on his inquiries. He had learned to do this in the army where such notes helped in writing the final report on any case being investigated. He also relied on written words to keep his thinking organized.

He took a sheet of paper and headed it *Facts*. He took another and wrote the heading *Paths to Pursue*. On a third he wrote *Inconsistencies*. On the next *Theories*. Finally, he pulled a clean page forward and penned *Suspects*. Not all inquiries required these pages. Some needed other, different ones. Part of starting an inquiry was considering the best way to organize the campaign, however.

Eventually most of the pages would be filled with lists of things to do and evidence amassed. With one review he could see if he had forgotten something. There had been inquiries where reading through his notes and pages had presented answers he had not yet seen.

He opened a letter and placed it in the portfolio. It had come from Sanders and included the list of the last duke's businesses and their partners. He found another list in a drawer of the bequests in the will and added that.

He spent a few minutes, jotting thoughts on the page regarding *Paths to Pursue*, and making a short list there of the most immediate actions needed. Finally, he flipped to the *Suspects* page.

He could fill this already if he listed every person with any motive at all. Instead, as was his habit, he would reserve it for those whom he believed might truly be strong possibilities.

He dipped his pen. He hesitated. Then he wrote. *Minerva Hepplewhite.*