

1964: Leaving the manor September, Bakewell, England

The autumn sunshine filtered through the red gold canopy of the ancient lime trees. The dry autumn leaves drifted down on the bay gelding hunter and added to the thick brown carpet on the ground under the horse's hooves.

Anthony rode with his fingers soft on the reins. The muscles in his leg rippled as he nudged his mount. The horse neighed and tossed his head. The thick almost-black tail twitched. "Whoa! Pegasus," Anthony ran his hand over the shining brown mane. The horse grew quiet under his master's touch. He trotted along the avenue. Rider and horse had been together for the four years that Pegasus had been part of the manor stables. He was Anthony's personal horse. Anthony continued to fondle the strong neck. "I'm sorry old friend. I'll be gone tomorrow." He felt the firm muscles tense under his fingers. "You'll be well looked after. I've asked Janet to take you out. You know her."

The horse tossed his head. "I know boy, I don't want to go either. But, it's time. We have to take charge of the plantations."

Between the lime trees, he had glimpses of the formal garden with stone pathways leading away from the house to the river. The manicured high yew hedge was a tribute to the manor gardeners' skills. Beyond the garden were the green patchwork fields of the Ashley-Cooper estate. Further away the picturesque hills and dales of Derbyshire faded away in a purple haze.

This was where he and William had played as children; brothers, just eighteen months apart but alike as peas in a pod his father announced to all who would listen. They had grown up here in the manor with their mother while their father ran the plantations. His father had moved

back to England when Anthony was eleven to run the London offices of Oriental Produce. Their uncle Irvine had run the Sri Lankan plantations since then, but now, it was time for Anthony and William to take over.

They had been close as children, William and Anthony. When had things had changed? Was it their time in Cambridge that did it? Or were they just different in nature? Even their father treated them differently. Anthony hardly knew the man William was now.

Horse and rider heard the pounding hooves behind them. Instinctively, without breaking stride, Pegasus whinnied and moved to the side of the avenue.

The black stallion pounded down the avenue. Dry leaves flew in clouds around rider and mount. The horse reared. Powerful forelegs pawed the air and then thudded down. The horse stood quivering, just behind Anthony and Pegasus.

‘What are you trying to do, William? Kill the horse before you leave?’ The sarcasm was lost in the loud whoop of laughter from the rider on the coal black horse. Dressed for effect in tight black breeches and black polo neck cashmere shirt; rider and mount could have just escaped from hell.

William pressed his knees into the stallion’s side. He pulled tight on the reins. ‘Zeus and I’ll race you to house, little brother.’ The stallion recognised his master’s excitement and confidence and hurtled towards the manor. Anthony gave Pegasus his head and raced after. Neck to neck, they dashed past the pillared entrance with the double wrought iron gates, along the driveway and up to the front of the building. The horses reached the front door of the manor house with Zeus a nose ahead.

William bounded out of the saddle. The horse stood trembling, frothing at the mouth. Throwing the reins to the groom William bounded up the stone steps into the manor without a backward glance at the horse.

Anthony looked up to the second floor. Their mother stood at the window of the upstairs sitting room. Catching his eye, she raised her hand.

Anthony dismounted. This would be the last time he would ride Pegasus for at least two years. He stood for a moment as the horse nuzzled his shoulder. He ran his fingers over the horse's neck, his touch soothing the skittish animal, and then handed the reins to the groom.

The groom, busy trying to quieten the nervous Zeus, looked with affection at Anthony and Pegasus. "You'll be missed, sir, and not just by the horse."

Anthony nodded and smiled. "Thank you Bernard. I know Pegasus will be well cared for by you. Janet will come by weekly to take him for a ride." He stood for a while stroking the horse, saying goodbye to life in the manor, to childhood and youth.

Turning away, Anthony walked up the steps to the front door. Once in the manor, he took the stairs to the upstairs sitting room two at a time. He paused just inside the door watching his mother. She stood at the large stained glass window of the queen's room – so called because of the beautiful moulded ceiling bearing carvings of the Tudor rose and thistle.

He knew some part of her story. His grandmother had told him before she died. Told him and begged him to look after her, to protect her from his father's temper and callous behaviour. He had tried – but now he had to go away. His mother Elise had been a beauty at nineteen his grandmother had said. It was at her debutante ball that the debonair tanned tea plantation owner had swept her off her feet. James Ashley-Cooper just returned from setting up

the Oriental Produce tea company in Sri Lanka, only son and heir to the tea plantations in Sri Lanka and Africa owned by the Ashley-Cooper family. He had romanced Elise with tales of tea bushes and life among the fragrant green mountains. In a whirlwind of emotion, she had loved him and followed him to Sri Lanka. She had come back when she was pregnant with William, never to go back to the plantations. He, Anthony, had been conceived on his father's next visit. Or furlough as it was called. His grandmother had sighed and said that Elise never confided in her what happened in Sri Lanka, but it had to be something terrible to make her the woman she was now.

His mother turned. Dressed in a knee length black wool skirt, cream silk blouse and white wool jacket, she looked every bit the chatelaine of the manor. But her eyes were sad. They had been sad for as long as Anthony could remember.

"You could have beaten him."

"And have to put up with his sulks for this our last evening together?"

"You give in to him. Let him have his way too much. He is...is..."

"So like father?" Anthony moved closer and took her hands. "Is that what you are worried about mother?"

She shrugged. "Like his father." She paused. "Yes, he is what James has made him – an Ashley-Cooper through and through." She shook her head. "William is charming, brilliant..."

"And ruthless." Anthony finished for her.

"William doesn't understand the people in the tea plantation. I doubt if he will even see them as people."

“But, mother,” Anthony’s voice reflected the bitterness in his soul. “That’s what father taught us isn’t it? It’s us and them. And in them, there’s the staff and the Indian coolies – the absolute dregs of humanity.”

Elise clung to his hands. “It’s more than that, son. I worry about you too. The tea plantation is seductive. The plantations captured your father’s imagination, his drive and spirit and finally his heart.”

“And broke yours, mother?”

Her laugh was bitter. “I was naive, innocent and so in love with him. I thought I could compete. I was... was too needy... weak.” She shook her head. Her eyes clouded with memories. “He covers up the pain with brashness and ugly jokes about the plantation.” Her fingers curled around his. “Promise me you will not be like that. Care for the staff and coolies, but protect your heart.”

“Mother what is it? What happened there to you? And to father?”

Elise shook her head. “There are people on the tea plantation who know. You’ll find out. Don’t let it affect you, or make you...”

“Ah, there you are my dear.” James and William entered. William’s loud laughter suggested that the whisky in his hand was not his first. “Still trying to teach *your* boy how to behave with the natives?”

Anthony took a step towards his father. His mother clung to his arm. Keeping him by her side. “Let it go, Anthony.”

“My God mother, how can you put up with it?” Anthony whispered to her in an undertone.

His father was totally oblivious of the exchange. William watched with a sneer.

James walked to the window. “Good, the Irvine’s are here. I asked them over to discuss some issues of your takeover there.” He slapped Anthony on his shoulder. “Last minute words of wisdom my boy – on how to behave in the colonies. If you take advice from your mother here you’ll be the weakest periaadorai ever.”

*

The family and their guests sat at the large square mahogany table. It was a traditional three course roast dinner – cooked to perfection and eaten off monogrammed Ashley-Cooper crockery and cutlery; a farewell to the heirs of the Ashley-Cooper plantations. Off to the colonies to claim their inheritance.

Sir James raised his glass of whisky to William. “You’ll have fun in Udatänná boy. It was to that bungalow that I took your mother.” He turned amused eyes his wife. “Remember those days Elise? You sure had fun. The wonderful parties and the servants always ready to do your every bidding. The friends you had coming to call on you.” He reached over and patted her knee. “What memories we have heh? And now it’s the boy’s turn.”

Anthony watched the flash of pain in his mother’s eyes.

William raised his glass. “I’ll drink to that father.”

Janet Irvine his cousin and long term friend sat at Anthony’s right. She touched his knee under the table. “I’ll miss you, Anthony.” Her pale blue eyes carried an unspoken invitation.

Anthony smiled. “You liked Watakälé didn’t you?”

Her eyes shone up at him. “It was lovely but lonely. We would have died of boredom if not for our visits to the tea-maker’s house. You came once. Remember Shiro and the dead cat?”

“Remember! How can anyone forget that little firebrand?” Anthony laughed.

Janet’s fingers tightened on his knee. “... I wouldn’t mind going back to Watakälé, Anthony.”

Oh dear, she’s actually suggesting I propose marriage to her! He glanced across the table at his mother. She was watching his father, her eyes laced with sadness and deep regret. No – he wouldn’t take that risk with any woman.

“I’ll remember that my dear.” Anthony moved his leg away from her hand.

Janet blushed and picked up her knife and fork.

The cooks special desert of crepes with lemon cream and raspberry coulis signalled the end of the meal. The ladies left the dining table for coffee in the sitting room with Elise. The men settled in with port and cigars.

Anthony excused himself soon after. Lying in his bed, Anthony listened to the voices raised in merriment from the dining room downstairs. He tossed and turned, trying to think himself into the role of the plantation superintendent, the periadorai. Did he dare do what he planned to? Could he?

Opening his bedside drawer he drew out the pack of small black and white photos he had taken of Watakälé in 1956. Mountains covered in bushes, Streams of water with dark sentinel rocks, the superintendents large sprawling bungalow, crowded little line rooms and the tea-maker’s quarters.

Somewhere in there was a black haired girl with flashing black eyes and an entrancing smile.

Soon, he would be responsible for all this. He fell asleep clutching the photos.