

## Chapter One

### *The Beginning of it All*

**W**hy, oh why, hadn't she been born a boy? So mused Kate as she wandered disconsolately round the gardens of St. Martha's Hospital for the Poor situated on the outskirts of an unattractive provincial English city. She had seized the opportunity presented by a brief break from her nursing duties to breathe in some fresh air to relieve her nostrils. The ever-present odour of sickness seemed to pervade the grim-looking building behind her until it permeated into the very fabric of her clothes. Even her hair, severely restrained beneath an unbecoming starched bonnet, wasn't immune from those nauseous vapours. In fact, they had become so much part and parcel of existence in this place as to be unremarkable, even to someone whose entire life had previously been spent in the country surrounded by nothing more offensive than the reek of manure. The unmistakable noxious smell of gangrene, emanating from an ulcerated leg which was beyond all hope of saving, was a very different matter, however.

The reluctant sun cast its intermittent rays over the forlorn figure, rendered even more pathetic as a result of the drab, ill-fitting grey dress which covered her slightly ample form from neck to ankle. The rough texture irritated her skin and the black buttoned boots did nothing to ease her aching feet. How she longed to cast them off for a few minutes and feel the fresh blades of grass underfoot. Prudence forbade such an indulgence, and not merely because time was short and the Lady Superintendent would chastise her for such decadence should she happen that way. Kate was by no means certain that, once released from

the restricting footwear, her feet would ever be persuaded back into those leather confines. Not for the first time she asked herself what she was doing here, but was all too aware of the answer.

Her father, George Oliphant, was a gentleman farmer and landowner who had been imprudent enough to marry his wife for her looks and her money rather than her child-bearing capacity. Kate made her appearance, loudly protesting, on a dreary, wet day in 1829. On being appraised of her gender he managed to hide his disappointment at the lack of a male heir to follow in his footsteps, confident that there would be ample time and opportunity in which to correct the matter. However, he had not allowed for the lack of cooperation on the part of his beautiful but stubborn spouse. Early in their marriage Emily had discovered a growing distaste for the bedroom activities such an alliance occasioned. A long and tedious pregnancy, followed by an equally protracted and difficult delivery, made her quite determined that there would be no repeat performances.

After gentle persuasion failed and the ensuing arguments only led to tears, feminine fits of the vapours requiring wafts of smelling salts, and episodes of outright mutiny, George finally gave up. Virtually ignoring his wife unless in polite company, he threw himself into the business of supervising his modest but profitable estate, seeking solace in the willing arms of more tractable women across the county. Emily found this behavior somewhat tiresome but decidedly less repugnant than submitting herself to the demands of his healthy sexual appetite. Meanwhile, they continued to entertain and be entertained, which allowed her to perfect the subtle art of flirtatious dalliance, promising much yet having to deliver nothing, all the while satisfying her own selfish vanity.

Not surprisingly, the real person to suffer as a result of this state of affairs was the only offspring of such a union. George largely ignored his daughter and appeased any conscience he might have by providing lavishly for her needs. Her nursery was delightful and only the best clothes filled the drawers and cupboards. He didn't quibble at any financial demands made on her behalf but actual physical contact and emotional rapport between them was quite minimal.

This would have been bad enough in any event but was compounded by the aversion Emily had shown toward the baby. From the moment Kate was first placed in her arms she never ceased to wonder how she could possibly have given birth to such a plain, uninspiring child. A resident nursemaid solved the initial problem, thereafter supplemented by a succession of nursery helpers, until the time came to appoint a governess. Contact with other children was virtually non-existent, therefore, Kate's greatest friends and allies proved to be the domestic staff, farm employees and their families plus, of course, the animals. That was always providing she could escape from the clutches of her zealous tutor for long enough to enjoy their company.

It was extremely fortunate, therefore, that she had inherited two parental traits which would prove to be a great asset. From the outset she had shown a tendency towards stubbornness and considerable determination, which often sorely tried the patience of those forced to deal with her. She could little envisage to what good purpose her tenacity, and inability to admit defeat, would later stand her. Similarly, both George and Emily had been well educated and they spared no effort to make sure that their daughter was afforded every opportunity to acquire the same accomplishments. What the young Kate may have lacked in physical allure, she more than made up for with brightness and intelligence. Book learning was not only enjoyable but came easily to her and this, coupled with a natural aptitude for the piano and a love of music and reading, ensured that she was never bored or lonely.

One attribute which was innately her own was an early evidence of caring and compassion towards all living things. Her concerns were divided equally between humans and the animals and creatures of field and hedgerow. Despite the lack of affection in her own life she had a natural knack of conveying care and sensitivity towards others.

It was not surprising, therefore, that when matters at home finally came to a head and she decided to seek some meaningful employment, the possibility of nursing was the first thing that came to mind.

St. Martha's Hospital, built some 80 years previously by a local philanthropic clergyman, was administered by a board of governors

drawn from the great and the good in the county of Morfordshire. Just over 80 inpatients could be accommodated in a far from luxurious environment and the outpatient area was considered insufficient and objectionable. Wards which had seemed adequate in the 1770s were no longer viable and the installation of gas-lighting in 1849 only served to illuminate the dark corners and reveal the deficiencies. There were complaints about rats and bugs from the Lady Superintendent, and continuous disputes between the medical staff and the Board indicated to those worthy gentlemen that it could only be a matter of time before they would be forced to act. Action, however, would prove costly and something to be deferred for as long as possible.

The Chairman, Sir William Kirk, who happened to be a friend and neighbour of George Oliphant's, had known Kate from her childhood. Being rather fond of children he had, over the years, developed a liking for the rather isolated girl and was not completely unaware of the general tenor prevailing in the outwardly gracious home at Painters Court. Nevertheless, he was both surprised to receive a visit from her and more than a little dismayed by her request.

At Granby Hall, in the comfort of the panelled study with its book-lined walls, he had seated his unexpected visitor in front of a cheerful log fire, casting around in his mind what her business could possibly be. Neither did he have long to wait. Failing to see the need for time wasting niceties and always a believer in coming straight to the point, she earnestly appealed to him for help to attain her ambition.

"I want to procure a post as a nurse and wondered whether you would use your good auspices and recommend me to the Lady Superintendent at St. Martha's?"

There was an astounded pause as Sir William absorbed this bombshell. All the while gazing at her with a considerable degree of concern, he finally found the words with which to express his discomfiture at such a prospect.

"Upon my word Kate, whatever has put that thought into your head? I really don't think such a position is suitable to your status and upbringing. Does your father know of your plans, for I cannot believe for one moment that he would sanction them?"