

Excerpt from Chapter 2 of *Lady Chandler's Sister*

“Seen worse.”

Dalhauser pronounced Miss Pottinger's wound only a deep scrape. The physician cleaned the lady's arm and bandaged it. He provided Mrs. Steele with specific instruction on how to change the dressing before he excused himself for his evening's entertainments.

While his mother chose to speak to Cook regarding the additional settings for supper, Alexander seized the opportunity to question the women further. “If you will provide me the name of the inn holding your bags, I will send Mr. Clarence to retrieve them.”

“It be the Hickory Hunter,” Miss Pottinger explained.

“You understand I hold obligations this evening. I will not be in attendance at Chance Hall, but my mother and my staff will be pleased to be of service,” he explained.

“In other words, you still hold fears regarding our being under your roof,” she corrected. “You think we hoodwinked you.”

He knew more frustration than he cared to admit. The lady read him with an uncomfortable familiarity. “I hold an esteemed position in the King's service. I cannot afford to trust another completely. You are a stranger,” he said with a shrug of resignation. “I pray you do not play foully with my household.”

“I would never...” she began, but before she could finish her protest, a squeak and then a yelp came from the wrapped bundle upon the floor.

As Alexander turned toward the sound, a small fist punched its way through the opening of the overlap, to be followed by a chubby leg. Miss Pottinger darted around him before he could react. She dropped to her knees to separate the folds of the blanket. “I am here,” she cooed. “Hush. All is well.”

“What in the world?” his mother declared from the still open door.

Alexander was as stunned as his relation, but he managed to respond, “To the best of my knowledge, I would say the sound comes from the babe in Miss Pottinger's arms.”

Lady Chandler pointedly closed the door. “Why does *Miss Pottinger* have a baby in tow?” his mother demanded.

The young lady stood to face them. The babe still fussed, but not so profoundly. “I can explain.” A small frown drew her brows closer together. She stared at him with an uncustomary longing that shook Alexander to his core.

“Then I suggest you do,” he instructed, but he held the suspicion he did not want to know the lady's tale.

“This is Greer,” she said through trembling lips. Unshed tears filled her eyes. “Actually, he is Alexander Greer Chandler.”

It took Alexander an extra heartbeat to respond. “To Hell you say!”

“Alexander!” his mother chastised.

“Did you hear her, Mother?” He pointed an accusing finger at Miss Pottinger. “I have had many who wanted to claim a piece of the baronetage, but never have they thought to produce an heir without my participation. And to think I offered you shelter in my home!”

The tears glistened in Miss Pottinger’s eyes, and she caught the child in a more protective grasp. “You may think of me as you will, sir, but Greer is your son.”

“Who in bloody hell are you?” he growled in controlled tones so as not to frighten the whimpering child.

“I speak the truth.” Her chin notched higher, but she instinctively took a half step back.

“Do you mean to convince me that you and I were lovers? Or perhaps you think to imitate the blessed Mary with a divine conception? You should well understand I am not cut from Joseph’s cloth.”

“That is enough, Alexander!” his mother ordered. “There is no reason to speak so crudely.”

“What would you have me do, Mother?” he barked. “This woman,” he pointed to Miss Pottinger again, “makes a mockery of the kindness we extended to her.”

“Even so,” his mother declared, “you will act the role of gentleman.”

Alexander returned his gaze to the woman holding the child, and her eyes fixed steadily upon him. Silence filled the room with unspoken questions. What frustrated him the most was that even now his body would enjoy being Miss Pottinger’s lover. For some reason he could not name, he remained attracted to her physically.

The lady’s eyes closed as she sighed heavily. “What must I do to convince you?”

“More than stand before me with a child in your arms. I am not easily moved by the Madonna image. If this is your scheme to earn funds from me, you have erred. Did you think me an easy mark when you approached me upon the street?”

To his dismay, Miss Pottinger’s eyes softened in what appeared to be compassion. “I waited for you upon the street. Only you. The men stationed inside the building would not permit me entrance to the floor where your office is located, so I could call upon you privately.” She instinctively rocked the child in her arms and kissed the tuft of sandy brown locks upon the child’s head. “If I held the means to raise Greer without you, we would still be in Scotland. When you did not return as you promised, Aunt Maude and I possessed few choices to see to Greer’s future.”

“Scotland again,” his mother said as her hand came to rest upon his back.

“You will forgive my cynical nature,” he said with a snarl. “Consider it a necessity in my chosen occupation. Perhaps you should share with me when and where the child was conceived, and do not omit the name of the child’s true father.”

She stiffened in what appeared to be ire. An odd tightness swept across her face. Her vestige of control had faded. “Your most recent journey into Scotland was in September; you arrived, once again, in Kelso. We knew great joy at your return.”

He wondered how she knew of that disastrous journey. Certainly, both he and his mother had mentioned his time across the border, but neither he nor Lady Chandler had disclosed the particulars of his stay in Scotland.

For a moment, he thought Miss Pottinger would not continue. She looked pointedly to her aunt before she spoke her response, and the elder woman nodded what appeared to be her encouragement. “Greer’s mother’s name is Sorcha Pottinger. Do you not recall Greer’s mother? Do you not recall? I am a twin. Another held the same countenance as I.”

Fear filled his chest. Fear that what the woman would disclose next would turn his well-ordered life upon its head. “And why has the child’s mother not accompanied you on this journey?” he asked in cautious skepticism.

A long silence held, and he suspected the lady organized her response in her head, before speaking it. At length, Mrs. Steele spoke, “Greer’s mother is never far from my heart. We were certain you knew that our dearest girl, Alana’s twin, has passed. You were always so kind to her, we believed, in our soul, that you would grieve as we do for our family’s loss. Her leave-taking coming within a month of her delivering a child.”

He could feel the pair of them anticipating his response, watching him with matched intensity. He should have swallowed his words, but they slipped out just the same. “How convenient!”

“It is never convenient to lose a loved one,” Miss Pottinger chastised in disapproving tones. “You, of all people, should know that. You spoke tenderly of Sir Loren’s passing, and how often you wished to ask your father a question regarding the estate. Like you with your father, I yearn to ask my sister’s advice on so many things. The void I experience each day will never be filled.”

He stared at her in growing confusion, struggling to make sense of a situation he knew he would have difficulty rebuking, for he held no memory of what occurred while he was in Scotland, and that fact put him at a distinct disadvantage, a place he rarely found himself. His chest tightened, constricting his breathing. Attempting to take control of the panic rushing to his heart, he made himself present her a rueful smile. Alexander ignored her rebuke; instead, he took a deep breath to steady his composure. “And when did Miss Sorcha and I create this child?”

Miss Pottinger blushed thoroughly. “One would assume shortly after your marriage.”

“Oh, bloody hell, no,” he sputtered. “Although I hold no knowledge of a Miss Sorcha Pottinger, you might have convinced me that on a drunken night I laid with your sister, but even deeply drunk, I would recall a marriage ceremony. I know my duty to the baronetage.”

“You often spoke of your obligations,” Miss Pottinger declared without candor.

“Name the church where the ceremony occurred,” he demanded.

“No church,” she admitted with a half-smile.

“Not over the anvil,” he countered.

“No.” Her gaze fixed upon him. “Not exactly.” The jade green of her eyes had faded to a murky obsidian. “It was not as you think. At a celebration for my cousin’s wedding, you stood with Sorcha before the gathering, joined hands, and pronounced your pledge to each other.”

“That cannot be legal!” his mother gasped.

“Call it what you wish: handfasting or marrying over the anvil or a clandestine marriage. It still be as legal in Scotland as a vicar pronouncing the vows in the Church of England. Such is very much what happens at Gretna Green or a dozen more villages along the border,” Mrs. Steele countered.

“It does not matter whether such a marriage is legal or not, for *my marriage* never occurred,” he hissed.

The lady stiffened. His words had found a target. Her mouth set in a straight line. Her eyes flashed in resolve, and the earlier sympathy he noted on her features quickly faded. She turned on him, and her expression was grim. She challenged him, “Our baggage holds a letter from our local clergyman testifying to viewing your declaration and to the recording of said joining that occurred between Sir Alexander Chandler and Miss Sorcha Pottinger and subsequently of Greer’s recorded baptism. You signed the record for Greer when you joined us in Kelso. By all that is holy, Greer is your child.”

“I want you out!” he ordered. “I want you removed from my house this very minute!” He gestured emphatically toward the door.

Yet before anyone could move, his mother caught his arm and tugged downward upon it. “No. We cannot send Miss Pottinger away until we know the truth.”

A spark of indignation reared its head. “You cannot be serious, Mother! Less than a minute ago you declared clandestine marriage illegal.”

“But what if...” she began her protest.

“I would remember such a momentous occasion,” he insisted, all his focus on the face of the woman who had been his anchor since his father had passed. “I would never marry without your knowledge of the lady.” Yet, even as he made his denials, Alexander knew if the fictional Sorcha resembled the vibrant Miss Pottinger, he would have been tempted by the lady.

“Please, Alexander,” his mother pleaded. “If the boy is yours and legitimate, he would be your heir. You cannot deny the child, even if he were conceived upon the wrong side of the blanket. I insist you assume responsibility for the child if he is yours.”

“Do you not understand?” he attempted to reason with her. “How do I suddenly declare myself a father when Society knows nothing of a wife? You ask the impossible.”

“I have heard it said among the *ton* that nothing is impossible for Sir Alexander Chandler,” his mother countered. “I have heard more than one aristocrat sing your praises. Surely if you can serve others so well, you have the power to discover an answer to this question.”

He adored his mother, but he knew her request rested in her desire for him to claim a wife and children. What she did not realize was he held no knowledge of what occurred prior to the carriage accident. He possessed some secondhand accounts of how villagers had found him wandering many miles from where the carriage had overturned, of the death of his driver and footman, of men transporting him to the nearest surgeon, and of the extensive care he had received in the hospital. Much of that he had learned from Remington when the earl came looking for him when Alexander had not reported in to his superiors for several weeks. His mother had never asked for specifics of what he had been doing in Scotland. She was well aware of some of the dangers he encountered

in his position with the government, but she never admitted he could have been a target for a criminal element operating in England. She protected herself by not asking questions, and he had never disclosed how frightened he was to learn what had truly occurred in those few short weeks in Scotland. He had earnestly attempted to determine whether the overturned coach was an “accident” or whether someone meant his death, but with few clues upon which to pursue the investigation, little could be done.

Silently, he again attempted to convince himself he had never taken up with Miss Sorcha Pottinger, but he well knew his weaknesses. If Miss Sorcha closely resembled Miss Pottinger, the woman’s face would not be one he could easily forget.

“I would not know where to begin,” he confessed.

“Perhaps with the letter Miss Pottinger offered,” she suggested.

“And how do we explain the presence of Mrs. Steele and Miss Pottinger under my roof?” he scoffed. “Several of the neighbors noted their arrival.”

“If any ask, the ladies are distant cousins,” she replied with a half smile.

“And the child?”

She turned to Miss Pottinger and Mrs. Steele. “I pray the ladies will agree to tending the boy until we possess definitive answers to the child’s paternity. Please understand that Greer is not to be discussed with others, most assuredly not with the servants, who cannot all be counted upon to keep secrets, especially those of such a salacious nature.”

Miss Pottinger glanced to her aunt, who nodded her agreement. “Your generosity be greatly appreciated, ma’am.”

Alexander stilled. He did not say anything for several elongated seconds. “I do not like this situation,” he declared without much hope his objection would matter. “This spells disaster.”

“Your doubts are duly noted,” his mother said in dismissal. “Now, go. You will be late for the duchess’s entertainment if you do not hurry.”

In truth, his obligation to Devilfoard and Malvern had been long forgotten. “I could send a note of...” he began.

“You will not act without honor,” his mother corrected. “Sir Loren and I taught you better. Devilfoard would know offense, and you require the duke’s support for Parliamentary funding for your division of the Home Office. Mrs. Steele, Miss Pottinger, and I will get along well this evening. More importantly, you must maintain your customary schedule. Nothing from the ordinary should occur.”

Nothing from the ordinary? he thought. *Since when was a baby and a delectable woman living under his roof ordinary?* He was not prepared to leave his mother alone with the two women he had foolishly invited into his home. He would set his valet on guard this evening. Withal, he required time to initiate an investigation. Despite the doubts he had openly voiced, he thought it possible he had encountered Miss Pottinger during those “missing” days leading up to his accident, and when she learned of his removal to Edinburgh, she concocted a means to provide her child with an English father. Moreover, he held no doubt if she had offered a flirtation, he would have succumbed to the woman’s finer qualities, but even thinking so went against what his gut told him:

Alexander strongly suspected Miss Pottinger was not the type to lose her innocence so casually. She had mettle, and, furthermore, there was something disturbingly familiar about her.