

Aurora's Secret

by Kathy Matthes

A clap of thunder broke the silence, followed by a sudden, fierce rain. The mass of black-clad mourners scattered and scurried off toward their carriages like gutter rats. They had paid their respects. They had done their duty. They left, swiftly and silently, down the now-muddy road, concerned only for their own comfort. But one woman stood riveted by the graveside, fist clenched and full of dirt, staring at the ornate casket in the shallow grave. She took no notice of the rain nor did she notice that the others had gone. Their presence or absence made no difference; she was alone. She stood there—cold, still and silent—her life and hope buried in the casket below her.

Thoroughly drenched, yet overcome with pity, I hesitated. I had come unbidden to this place of sorrow and stood watching uninvited. I slogged down the grassy knoll and stood across from her on the other side of the grave—uncertain . . . wavering—wanting to go, yet willing myself to stay. A slow dread crept into my mind—a portent of things to come. I shivered and moved cautiously around the edge of the grave to her side. Her stricken, tear-stained face looked white with cold and shock through her black lace veil. As I gently took her hand, her face—mute with disbelief and relief—turned slowly toward me. The tortured gaze of her extraordinary blue eyes, full of fear and grief, did not leave mine as I opened her fingers to release the dirt. It landed with a thud on the casket.

“Come,” I said softly, “it is done.”

I slipped my arm through hers and guided her through the graveyard, up the grassy path and into her awaiting carriage. She did not think to offer me a ride; I did not think to ask. As I

closed the carriage door, she pressed something into my hand through the window and said in a soft, far-away voice, "He said my brother lives!" As the carriage jolted forward and moved off, I opened my hand and found that she had given me an ornate brass key. To what and to whom it belonged, I did not know. I only knew that I was cold and wet, and surely lost, as I stood alone in a graveyard in the middle of a fitful rainstorm. There could not be a more odious or ominous beginning to my new life in England than death, rain and a long walk home.

Home is where I found myself an hour later—tired, wet and hungry. So here I sat, wrapped, safe and warm, in a cozy blanket, before a crackling fire staring at an old key. There was a mystery to be solved, but it could wait until morning.