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WINNING  
MISS WINTHROP

CAROLYN MILLER

 Kregel  
Publications

*Winning Miss Winthrop*

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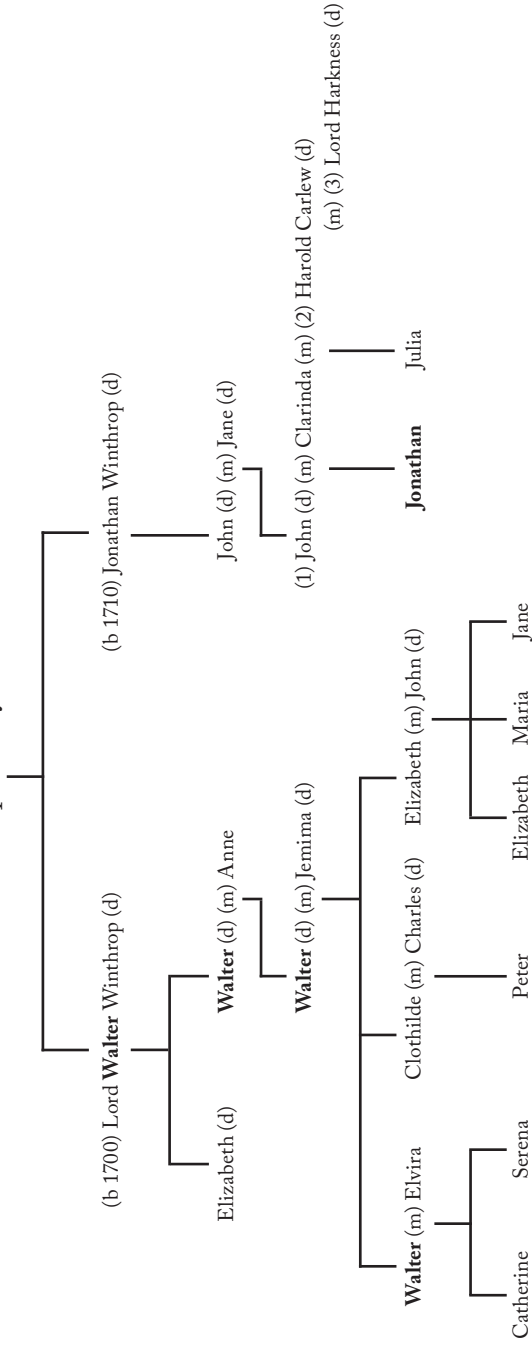
*For my friend Jacqueline*



*Sister in Christ, encourager, &  
beta reader extraordinaire*



# Winthrop Family Tree





 CHAPTER ONE

*Gloucestershire*  
*May 1816*

THE DEEPLY BLUE Gloucestershire sky brought comfort as Catherine Winthrop emerged from the tenant farmhouse. She drew in a deep breath of clover-scented air then turned to the farmer. “I am sure the doctor will be able to relieve poor Anne more than I. I’ll have word sent as soon as I return.”

“Thank ye, miss.”

Catherine placed her basket on the seat of the gig then deftly climbed past the large spoked wheels. “I hope to be back in a few days to check on her. In the meantime, be sure that she does no unnecessary work as we both know she is wont to do.”

Farmer Hassop touched his forehead in farewell.

Catherine snapped the reins and the gig jerked into motion. Soon Ginger had brought her to a fresh-mown meadow, the scent of which tickled her nose, and brought further ease to her heart. Over the brook, whose burble and swish recalled summer days of dipping her toes—when Mama was not looking, of course—willows arched gracefully, their twisting branches gilded in the late afternoon sun, contrasting beautifully with the green fields and the rich browns of furrowed earth.

The bright colors were a salve to the turbulence of the past hour. Poor Anne. Her cough had not improved any, despite Nurse’s tonics,

and she could not help suspect Farmer Hassop would not let his hardworking wife rest as much as she needed. Poor lady, married to a man who, while not a brute, was said to be one of the most selfish men in the neighborhood. Poor, misled Anne.

But then, Catherine knew only too well how easily a man could fool a woman.

The old ache in her heart panged again. But no good came of thinking like that. She shook her head at herself, and chose instead to fix her attention on the perfect patch of bluebells dancing in the light breeze. Early May was the perfect time to view the countryside in all its glory, and Nelly's Wood was the most spectacular locale. Bluebells, the delicate whites and pinks of wood anemones and yellow cowslips, even the last gold of daffodils could be appreciated anew amongst such a froth of color.

"Is it not lovely, Ginger?"

The chestnut mare tossed her head, as if in reply.

"Wait here."

Within a minute she had secured the reins, slipped from the gig, and was collecting great armfuls of the spring blossoms. She trekked back to the cart and placed the flowers on the seat next to her before climbing in and recommencing her journey.

"I'm sure Nelly, whoever she is, could never have appreciated such a fine sight as we. Do you not agree?"

Ginger nickered her concurrence and Catherine smiled.

The next farm was over a ridge. The Jeffcoat family had farmed this section of land for hundreds of years, their hard work evident in everything from the carefully maintained outbuildings to the precise capping atop the stonewalls. What a shame such heritage would be lost with the eventual demise of the current farmer, for without a capable son . . .

A tall form lumbered into view, broad face splitting into a smile. "Hello, Miss Cathy."

"Hello, Jack." She pulled to a stop outside the stone farmhouse. "How are you today?"

"Verra well, Miss Cathy. Is this your horse?"

“Yes, this is Ginger. You’ve met Ginger before, remember?”

Wide blue eyes stared at her, uncomprehendingly.

Catherine’s heart panged. “Tell me, Jack, is your mother within?”

“Yes, Miss Cathy.”

A somewhat squat form bustled from the farmhouse, wiping her hands on a floury apron. “Ah, Miss Winthrop. I thought it might be you. I hope Jack is behaving himself?”

“He always does, Mrs. Jeffcoat.”

“Well, that be a relief to hear.” She shot a narrow look at her son, towering over them both, before her gaze returned to Catherine. “And how be your mother and father?”

“Very well, thank you.”

Although perhaps Papa was not *quite* as well as he could be. Since their recent return from London he’d seemed somewhat tense, closing himself in his study these past days, snapping at whoever dared speak to him, barely acknowledging Mama, although Catherine could not really blame him for that. Any chance to escape her mother’s zealous desire to know everything was something both Papa and Catherine eagerly seized upon, hence her longer than usual trip to the tenant farms today.

Catherine smiled. “They send their best.” Well, they would if they thought to.

“I’m sure.” Mrs. Jeffcoat smiled thinly. “Now, what can we be helping you with today?”

“Well, I told Cook that I thought a gooseberry fool would be just the thing for Father, and she said our gooseberries hadn’t come on yet and, knowing yours are always early, I was hoping you might have some that you were willing to sell.”

“Ah. Well, I had hoped to use them for my own man, but I suppose—”

“No, no, Mrs. Jeffcoat! I wouldn’t dream of taking supplies destined for your husband. It was only if you had extra.”

The older woman sighed. “Yes, but feeding my husband won’t pay so good as selling to you, so I s’pose we can reach an arrangement.”

“Oh, but—”

"No, let me not hear another word. I'm sure 'is lordship will get as much pleasure from them as my John would've." She shot Catherine a keen glance then waddled back inside the farmhouse.

Catherine shifted on the gig's leather seat, fighting the pangs of guilt her request had ignited. Yet Mrs. Jeffcoat *had* agreed, and she would be paid a fair price . . .

"Hello, Miss Cathy."

She turned to the gangling farmer's son and forced up her lips. "Hello, Jack."

"Is this your horse?"

"Yes." Her eyes blurred for a moment. Poor Mrs. Jeffcoat. How hard it must be, that the longed-for son be unable to carry the weight of their hopes and dreams. But Jack wasn't the moonling so many people thought. She'd often thought he'd make an excellent groom. He was very capable of caring for animals, and she'd seen his strength out in the fields. "Strong as an ox," Farmer Jeffcoat would say, desperate pride in his eyes . . .

But as Lavinia said, Mrs. Jeffcoat couldn't have known she would catch measles during her confinement. Jack's condition wasn't his fault, just as being sonless wasn't Papa's.

Her nose twitched as the scents of cows and dung grew with the lengthening shadows. When Jack wasn't murmuring to her horse he would stare at Catherine so steadily her skin would prickle. It was all she could do not to tell him to look away. She glanced elsewhere instead, thinking of her earlier visit to Lizzie, once a maid at Winthrop, whose excitement at her recent marriage was augmented with the news she was already increasing, and Jem, her farmer husband hopeful of a healthy boy by autumn. She knew she should be as shocked as Mama about the speed at which such things had occurred, but instead, could not help but feel a tad wistful, her envy mixed with a measure of anxiety. *Please, God, help Lizzie's babe be healthy . . .* And not as the boy-man who stood staring at her.

Relief unfurled within when Mrs. Jeffcoat finally reappeared. She placed a wooden pail half filled with the bright green fruit onto the seat next to the flowers.

“Oh, thank you, Mrs. Jeffcoat.”

“They be a bit early, likely to be quite tart.”

“I’m sure Papa will be very pleased.”

The farmer’s wife nodded. They worked out fair recompense then Catherine picked up the reins again.

“I’ll be sure to fix you up tomorrow. Thank you again, Mrs. Jeffcoat, Jack.”

“Goodbye, Miss Cathy.”

And flashing a final guilt-laden smile, she encouraged Ginger to head for home.

She had no need for self-reproach, she thought, as the gig bumped over muddy tracks. Just as Mrs. Jeffcoat was not responsible for her son’s mental culpability, neither was Catherine responsible for her family’s wealth and status. Papa couldn’t help inheriting Grandfather’s great fortune along with his title and lands, just as Cousin Peter would one day, too. Inheritance and good fortune were situations to thank God for, not feel guilt about, especially when she did whatever she could to help those less fortunate.

The road curved to the Winthrop gates. She lifted a hand as the gatehouse keeper’s children waved, and encouraged Ginger to quicken her pace. As the trees met overhead across the drive, a chill passed over her. Evening was drawing near, and she wasn’t used to being out quite so late. But still, her time had proved worthwhile. Papa was sure to love the berries, and the flowers *might* appease Mama . . .

Ahead, she caught a glimpse of lighted second-story windows, the curtains not yet drawn, despite the approaching dark. She frowned. Why hadn’t the maids closed them? Why hadn’t Mama scolded them into fulfilling their duties?

She passed the stone pillars marking entry to the Manor garden proper. At the *porte cochère* stood the doctor’s carriage.

Her heart cantered with unease. Why was the doctor here? She pulled hard at the reins, the wheels skidding to a stop.

“Oh, Miss Winthrop! Everyone has been looking for you!” Geoffrey hurried toward her, his extreme fastidiousness not evident for

once, as he condescended to hold the reins. "They're waiting for you inside."

"Who is waiting?" She climbed down, picked up her flowers, the fruit for her father.

"Your mother, and the doctor, and—" The butler swallowed.

Her neck prickled. Why did he refuse to look her in the eyes? She hurried inside. "Mama?"

She handed her spoils to William, who waited as she stripped off her hat and gloves before murmuring, "They're upstairs, miss."

She nodded and hastened up the enormous oak staircase that had cost her father thousands when he had remodeled five years ago. "Mama?"

A wail sounded. Heart racing, Catherine hurried past Serena's vacant room and entered her mother's bedchamber. Christie glanced up from where she was waving smelling salts under Mama's nose, her knit brow and nod to the adjoining room suggesting that whatever was amiss was very serious indeed.

"His Lordship's in there, miss," she murmured. "The doctor's in with him, but . . ."

Catherine hurried into her father's room, the huge four-poster bed dominating the domain, its very size seeming to shrink her father as he lay, shrouded in the middle.

"Oh, Papa!"

Her father turned, gray-faced, gasping.

The doctor glanced up. "I'm sorry, Miss Winthrop, but there is nothing more I can do."

"No, no!" She hurried to the bed. "Father, Papa, please . . ." She glanced at Carrick, who had served Papa for years. "What can be done?"

He lifted his hands in a helpless gesture. "I am sorry, Miss Catherine, but he has been this way since clutching his arm nearly two hours ago now."

While she'd been off picking flowers! "No, no, Papa, I need you. Please don't—" She swallowed the word, as if hearing it aloud would bring it to fruition. "Lord God, have mercy!"

But it seemed God had none, as her father stiffened, then, with a final broken sigh, died.



*White's Gentlemen's Club, London*

"I lay you ten guineas the next lady who walks past is a complete fright."

"Only ten? I wager five-and-twenty. What say you, Carlew?"

Jonathan Carlew looked up from his newspaper at his two companions. "I say a fool and his money are quickly parted."

"Well, nobody shall ever accuse you of being a fool, you stingy old man," Viscount Henry Carmichael said, tease in his eyes.

Jon hid his smile. Who would have thought one day's difference in their birth dates would lead to years of such jests? "What some call stingy others call wise."

"Your modesty overwhelms." Major Thomas Hale, the third member of the party, snorted. "Now, Carmichael, here comes our next contender. What say you, ugly or divine?"

"Must it be one or the other?" Jon asked.

"My dear fellow, a woman is either decidedly pretty or decidedly not."

"One simply has to decide which of the two?" Jon suggested.

"Exactly." The heir to the Earl of Bevington nodded.

"But surely that implies a degree of subjectivity, if, as the poets say, beauty does lie in the eye of the beholder."

The major lifted his glass to peer through the bow window. "Well, I behold a fright. Carmichael, you owe me a pony."

The viscount handed over twenty-five pounds, muttering about the audacity of such ladies to walk without consideration for the eyes of men.

"Can you imagine what the ladies must think of such ogling?"

"Ogling! Carlew, I resent the implication."

"My apologies, Hale, but I meant no implication."

Carmichael laughed. "You are a sly dog, Carlew. Next you will be saying a woman's appearance ought count for nothing."

Jon merely smiled.

"Well may it be for some to be fastidious about such things, but good heavens, if a man means to be leg-shackled then let it be to a lady whom he finds pleasing to gaze upon."

"Does that hold true for the lady in question also? Indeed, if this line of reasoning is so, there would be many of us destined to singlehood on account of our less than perfect looks."

The major gave a loud harrumph as Carmichael said, "You seem to forget the numbers of ladies at the ball last week who seemed very willing to overlook *your* ill-favored face."

The tips of Jon's ears grew hot. "I confess it had slipped my mind."

That evening in question had been one of the more excruciating of his life. Perhaps if he'd learned to flirt like Carmichael or Hale he might be more successful in ensuring the women who flocked to him knew not to expect anything more than a deftly turned compliment. But as Hale had commented that evening, Jon's more serious demeanor and deep voice lent a gravity to his words that only seemed to encourage the clinging young ladies with whom he had no desire to further his acquaintance.

"Next you'll be saying a woman should not be judged on her face."

"Should a man?"

His companions both stared at him before Hale gave another loud harrumph.

"Carlew, your observations are both unnecessary and unkind. Go back to your paper if you don't mind."

Jon chuckled, shook his head at his friends' antics, and retired once more behind the screen of *The Times*. His smile faded, the printed words before him meaningless. While he didn't begrudge them—they were his friends, who had helped keep him sane these past years when India had a way of hardening even the kindest of men—he couldn't help but wonder how these gentlemen would rate the woman who had once caught his eye. Not strictly pretty, let alone divine, he couldn't help but think she'd rate rather poorly on Hale's scale of attractiveness.



His fingers clenched. Relaxed. Not that he should care. These were foolish thoughts. He was unlikely to see her, and even if he did, she had long ago made her feelings abundantly clear.

No. Perhaps he was a fool after all. Surely two years of adventure and business should have been enough to rid him of these feelings.

Perhaps it was time to think on a lady who might not mind his connections to trade, at least until that far away day when he might assume the title. His earnings from his time on the Indian subcontinent should, correctly invested, hold out for quite a few more years, and the interest on his shares in his father's companies was steadily improving, so Trelling said. Perhaps there was a lady who might not mind being married to such a man. He could offer constancy, and quite a tidy fortune, if little else.

His spirits dipped.

Perhaps one day there might even be one prepared to overlook the haze concerning the legitimacy of his birth.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Winthrop Manor, Gloucestershire*

“THE LORD GIVETH, and the Lord taketh away.”

The words circled Catherine’s mind endlessly as she sat in her favorite chair, in her favorite room at Winthrop. She breathed in. Out. Hungrily soaked in rare stillness. She inhaled again, then exhaled, as if these simple actions might dim today’s truth. The minister. The funeral. The mourners. The whispers and speculation-laden glances that shifted whenever her gaze met theirs. Most of all she was aware of a heavy numbness, a weight upon her spirit that no amount of assurances from the minister or her friend Lavinia could lift.

Her world had changed. Everything would be different. Everything would be . . . worse.

She drew further into the high-backed wingchair, placed her feet securely on the rich jeweled tones of the Axminster carpet, clasped the red-striped fabric arms more firmly. She was not a fainting miss, no matter what example her mother might have set over the past week, barely moving from her bed. Someone had to comfort poor Serena, receive the visitors, attend to the grief-stricken staff, help make decisions about the words spoken at the funeral and what would be served afterwards. Someone had to be aware and take responsibility for whatever life might throw at them, now that Papa’s anchoring presence was gone.

Rawness clogged her throat. Her eyes filled. She blinked. Blinked again.

“The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away.”

She lifted her head, studying the cream wallpaper patterned with pale yellow roses. How pretty, how soothing this room had always been, with its lovely outlook to the rose gardens and the blue hills beyond. She breathed in, out, pushing past fresh pain. Soon Cousin Peter would live here, doubtless marry, and his wife would make decorating choices, placing their own stamp on Winthrop Manor. She and Mama would be forced to move to the Dower House, a grand title for a not-so-grand cottage tucked away on the far side of the estate.

Her lips twisted. She suspected it would prove to be another of the projects Papa had not attended to in recent times. The discovery of several others—such as the unopened bills accumulating dust on his desk—had fueled further unease these past days. Her chest tightened. Breathe in. Breathe out. At least the Dower House was closer to Hampton Hall and Lavinia—whenever she and her husband, the Earl of Hawkesbury, were in—which was something. Even if it were farther away from the stables, and her gig, and the gardens, and . . .

Her eyes pricked again.

The door opened, admitting a cool draft as well as the hubbub she'd managed to avoid this past hour.

“Ah, here she is.” Aunt Drusilla Villiers—tall, thin, her snapping black eyes and long Ashton nose reminiscent of a haughty witch—walked toward Catherine. “We were all wondering why the daughter of the house had made no appearance.”

Catherine swallowed. Swallowed again. When could she put off this façade of hospitality and instead receive the comfort of others?

“I apologize, Aunt, but I was not hungry, and I feel a little tired—”

“Be that as it may, you still have an obligation, especially when your Mama is prostrate upstairs. That Lady Milton was at the tea table acting for all intents and purposes like *she* was the lady of the house. I ask you! She was rabbiting on about some Sally chit none of us had the slightest interest in.”

She smiled faintly, imagining the scene. “Do you mean Sophy,

ma'am?" Sophia Thornton, once a playmate of hers, had written a very pretty letter expressing her sorrow and regret that her latest confinement made travel impossible. It was kindly meant, but Catherine couldn't help feel the sting experienced with most of Sophy's correspondence, that her life was progressing nicely, while Catherine's life had felt stuck for years.

Her aunt shrugged. "Sophy, Sally, why should I care what her silly daughter is named?" Aunt Drusilla moved to sit on the gold and white striped settee near the marble fireplace. The door opened again, admitting Serena and their cousins.

Catherine eyed her sister objectively. Well she could understand those who accused the younger Winthrop girl of coldheartedness, with a countenance forever as calm as her name. Only Catherine knew the extent of Serena's grief, her sobbed regret at being away at school in Bath and missing a final goodbye had kept Catherine awake for much of the night, attempting to soothe away her sister's sorrow. Not that anyone could tell now. With her golden curls and ethereal complexion, Serena looked as unconcerned as though toddling off to a picnic with her cousins rather than mourning the loss of a father who adored her.

Her mouth pulled to one side. Perhaps Serena wore sadness better than Catherine ever could—oh, to be innocent seventeen again!—or perhaps she and her sister, in addition to inheriting Mama's Ashton nose, had also both inherited their father's unfortunate propensity for keeping trouble too close to their chests. She sighed. At least Serena could return to Bath and Miss Haverstock's seminary soon.

"Catherine!" A blur of copper-gold and concern rushed through the door, encasing Catherine in a warm hug. "Oh, my dear friend, I'm so glad to see you."

Lavinia Hawkesbury drew back, her slightly reddened eyes speaking of her distress. "I could not speak with you earlier as there was such a crush wishing to pay their respects."

Catherine nodded. The crush had made it easy for her to avoid both sympathetic comments and eyes, as she kept her own down. Simple nods, simply expressed thanks, had been all she could man-

age. Members of both sides of Papa's and Mama's prodigious families, a few good neighbors, like Lavinia and the earl; others she either did not know or could scarcely recall. For a moment her heart beat faster. Would *he* have dared appear?

Lavinia's expensive black silk rustled as she dropped into the seat next to Catherine, the room filling with other guests awaiting the outcome of the reading of the will. Lavinia's middle was a little thicker these days.

Catherine cleared her throat. "I trust you are feeling well."

Lavinia smiled. "Better than last month, it is true. Nicholas seems determined to treat me as though I should be wrapped in cotton wool, but when we heard your sad news there was nothing that could stop me from being here as quickly as possible."

Catherine smiled for the first time in what felt like months. Lavinia's passion and care for her friends, coupled with a sometimes startling frankness, had appealed since they'd first met as young girls. Doubtless such unconventional behavior had been instrumental in winning the heart of the war hero earl who had moved to St. Hampton Heath upon assuming the title three years ago. Yet Catherine knew Lavinia was not immune to challenge. The Lord giveth, and even for someone as good as Lavinia, the Lord had taken away.

Lady Milton, the squire's plump wife, now entered, her eager gaze running around the room until fixing upon Catherine. "You *poor* dear! How are you holding up? I notice you seem quite pale, and—you won't mind my saying, I'm sure, as our families have been acquainted for *so* long—perhaps a little sickly? But that may be simply the effect of that dress." Blue eyes flicked Catherine up and down. "Not everyone can wear black as well as my Sophy can. But then, she is one of us fortunate few who will appear to advantage regardless of what we wear." Her gaze slid to Lavinia's attire, hardening, before her attention returned to Catherine. "I'm *so* glad you are well, my dear, although I must say, I could not help but observe earlier that your Mama did not look at *all* well."

Breathe in. Breathe out. Perhaps the Lord might take Lady Milton away from their presence soon . . .

Lavinia met Catherine's gaze, nodded slightly, and turned to Lady Milton with a sweet smile. "Well, that is hardly to be expected, is it, Lady Milton? It would seem to me that a woman who looks well following the death of her husband displays a great lack of sensibility."

Lady Milton sniffed. "Far be it from me to disagree with *you*, Lady Hawkesbury—"

"If only that were true," murmured Lavinia.

"—I was only trying to express my condolences to poor Catherine here."

"Is that what it was?" said the irrepressible young countess.

Lady Milton glared, lifted her many chins, and moved to talk to another acquaintance, her nasal-inflected voice piercing enough for Catherine to catch something about the airs and graces a certain minister's daughter had assumed since hooking an earl.

Lavinia shrugged and rolled her eyes, eliciting another wry twist of lips from Catherine.

The room swelled with extended family, friends, forcing Catherine to adopt a more appropriate expression as the ladies of her acquaintance murmured sympathy and regret. Soon her mood slipped back to pain, as over and over their comments and questions reinforced the concern that had nibbled for days. This *was* a very sad time. What *would* she do now? How would her dear mother cope? How would Serena?

These questions, she knew, were subtle echoes of the more pressing inquisition: How would they afford to live? Some reduction in their circumstances must be expected, for even she had heard the whispers, of both servants and gentry alike, concerning Papa's profligate spending—and subsequent bills. But surely they would not be so terribly badly off?

Outside, through the tall French doors, she could see the wind tossing the leaves of the pines, their movement constant, yet uncertain, as the branches bent and swayed this way then that against unseen forces. Coldness seeped into her heart. Invisible, unknown forces, much like those in her life . . .

A stir through the room brought her attention to the door.

Catherine blinked. No. Surely not.

“Lady Harkness! Well, we certainly did not expect to see *you*.” This, from Aunt Drusilla, whose blunt ways of speaking almost rivaled Lavinia’s.

“Ah, Drusilla.” The gloriously arrayed arrival gave a glittering smile. “Yes, we would have been here sooner but unfortunately we were held up at Swindon.”

“By highwaymen?” asked Lady Milton, protuberant eyes goggling.

“No, no. The horse had merely thrown a shoe.” Lady Harkness glanced around. “Now, where is poor Elvira? I confess it’s been such an age I do not know I should recognize her, but I did want to pay my respects.”

Catherine rose. “Mama is indisposed.”

“Ah.” The ostrich feathers—far more appropriate for a London ballroom—trembled like the trees outside as the redhead nodded. “Miss Winthrop. Please accept my deepest sympathies.”

But her green eyes were cold and hard, skimming over Catherine’s dull garb as if searching for something—and finding her wanting. “I must confess to not recognizing you, either. You seem so much . . . older than the last time.”

Catherine bit the inside of her bottom lip. If she understood Lady Milton’s resentment to Lavinia, how much more did she understand this woman’s antagonism toward herself. And it could not be denied, the past two years had not been kind.

A slender blonde, whom the previous arrival’s flamboyant style had all but hidden, now moved into view. Lady Harkness glanced at her then waved a hand. “My daughter, Julia.”

So this was the half sister she’d wondered over. Elegantly pretty, with blue eyes and even features, she seemed modest, unassuming. Catherine searched for a trace of his features—

But wait! Her heart thumped. If Lady Harkness and Julia were here, then surely *he* would be also.

The room tilted slightly as, for a moment, she really did feel faint. Breathe in. Breathe out.

“Lady Harkness, is it? Please, allow me to offer you a seat here.”

Lady Milton, obviously impressed by the gleaming diamonds at the new arrival's throat, and oblivious to the hostility in the room, persuaded her to share her settee before launching into a series of questions about London that anyone with half an eye could see the newcomer was loath to answer.

Lavinia touched Catherine's hand and guided her to a quieter corner of the room. "Dear Catherine, you do not look at all well. What is it?"

How could she admit to her misgivings, or expose the secrets that had caused such pain? She could not. She drew in a deep breath. Attempted a smile. "I wish Mama were here."

"Of course you do. Shall I send someone to see if she is feeling more the thing?"

"No, thank you, that is quite all right. I can do so."

But before she could ring for a servant, the door opened once more and Mama glided in. Her face was wan, her features strained, but the weariness of past days had not dulled her keen sense of drama. She glanced around the room, nodding to the expressions of sympathy, and then halted wide-eyed at the occupants of the settee. Her face blanched, before two red spots formed on her cheeks.

"*Dear* Lady Winthrop, we were just saying, weren't we, Lady Harkness, how we hoped to see you before much longer . . ."

Lady Milton prattled on, heedless of Mama's inattention, her gaze fixed on the woman seated beside her.

"Ah, Elvira. How are you?"

Catherine's fingers formed fists. Asking such a question as if this were a ball!

"As well as can be expected," Mama said stiffly. "I must admit to a certain degree of surprise at seeing *you* here, Clarinda."

"I do not see why. Surely as a concerned family member you might expect to see me here. Certainly I have more right to be here than some of these others." She cast a less-than-surreptitious glance at some of the neighbors, including Lady Milton, who seemed agog to see her friendly overtures so summarily dismissed.

"More right?"



“Certainly.” The red head lifted proudly. “As the mother of the new baron, I believe I have more right to be here than anyone else.”

“Surely you jest!”

This from Aunt Clothilde, whose son Peter was all but assured of the title.

Lady Harkness lifted an expensively draped shoulder. “I am only communicating what dear Mr. Whittington wrote in his letter to Jonathan.”

Jonathan . . .

The world swam again.

Lavinia touched her shoulder, motioned her to a squat velvet chair. She sank into it gratefully as the raised voices from the older women continued.

“But my Peter is next in line. Mr. Whittington has confused matters.”

“I do not believe so.”

“But Peter has visited the estate for some time now, learning everything necessary from Lord Winthrop—”

“Has he really?”

Lady Harkness’s catlike green eyes suddenly looked as sly as her words seemed. Was she casting aspersions on Papa’s training of Peter?

“Papa *has* taught Peter all about estate m-matters,” Catherine disputed, wincing at the stammer whose appearance in front of intimidating individuals always made her feel even more foolish.

“I’m sure he has, but unless he is to become the next baron then it will all be for nothing. Surely it’s time to let someone with a fresh eye come in for a change. The state of these carpets!”

Hot indignation burned in her soul, echoing the gasps of outrage filling the room. She opened her mouth but before she could speak Aunt Drusilla’s voice came again.

“It seems a terrible thing for the title to go to someone with so few claims to it.”

Lady Harkness’s eyes flashed, her color rising. “How dare—?”

“Ah, ladies.”

The men, led by the Earl of Hawkesbury, poured through the open

door. Catherine's insides clenched; her skin heated. *He* was here; would be in here any moment. She half rose, then resumed her seat, wishing she could edge back into the shadowed recesses of the room.

She studied the faces as they entered. Mr. Whittington looked rather tired and old, as if his efforts of the past hour had drained him. The earl moved straight to Lavinia's side, murmuring softly to her, which she replied to with a smile and a shake of her head. Catherine studied the door again. Peter entered, a sour expression on his face as he strode to his mother and whispered urgently to her.

Then *he* entered.

The world stopped. Her breath stilled.

She caught a glimpse of his tanned countenance and dark blond hair as he glanced around the room. She lowered her face quickly, anxious to avoid his notice, though a tiny part of her longed for his attention, craved to hear him say—

"Son, come sit here with me."

"Thank you, ma'am, but I prefer to stand."

The deep, deep voice drew her attention, just as it always had. As if unwilling to be there, he moved to the windows where he gazed outside, hands behind his back, his broad shoulders encased in black mourning clothes, the superior quality and fit showing him to advantage.

Not that she cared.

She breathed in. Out. *Lord God, help me . . .*

"What is this about? Whittington?"

The elderly man cleared his throat, apologized, then launched into a tangle of legal terminology. Eventually, after much mopping of brow, he said, "Now I know this will come as something of a surprise, but it appears that the estate is entailed to"—he swallowed—"Mr. Jonathan Carlew . . . er, I mean, Winthrop."

No.

The walls tilted.

"But Peter is dear Walter's nephew!" cried Aunt Clothilde. "Surely he stands a greater right than some illegitimate cousin—"

"How dare you?" Lady Harkness snapped.

Catherine glanced toward the window. Mr. Carlew's attention remained fixed outside. The only sign he'd noticed the slur and his mother's outrage was a lifting, a tensing of his shoulders, as though he'd suddenly drawn in air.

"While it is true that Mr. Carlew is a third cousin once removed, he still holds a greater claim as he is descended from Lord Winthrop's great-grandfather's younger brother—"

"If indeed he is," muttered Aunt Clothilde.

"And thus preserves the male lineage as required by law. It is true that Peter inherits the extra holdings, including the Avebury estate, but the title, the Manor, and tenant farms go to Mr. Carlew."

"But—"

"We shall see about that!" Aunt Clothilde snapped. "We shall have a *proper* solicitor look into this."

"As you wish." Mr. Whittington bowed his head.

"What *I* wish to know is how much the estate is worth," Lady Harkness said.

Mr. Carlew turned, frowning at his mother.

"Don't look at me like that, Jonathan. We all want to know. Well? What has he left you?"

He shook his head. "Mother, this is neither the time nor place."

"You mean because of these unknown persons?" The green gaze scanned the room. "I agree, it would be better if this could be kept in the family for the moment."

"Family?" Aunt Drusilla hissed. "That woman has a nerve—"

"I have a nerve and excellent hearing, also, Drusilla dear. Now, do wipe that expression off your face. I fear you'll start curdling the milk for my tea."

Someone tittered. Catherine's jaw sagged. Was there anything this woman wouldn't say?

Catherine glanced across at Lavinia, whose arched brows no doubt matched her own. Next to her, the earl's expression mingled horror and amusement.

Lavinia shot her a sympathetic look and pushed to her feet. "I hope, Lady Winthrop, that you will be feeling better soon." She then

murmured something to Serena before clasping Catherine lightly. "Send a message when you would like company. And remember, if there is anything we can do, please do not hesitate."

The earl reiterated his condolences from earlier and offered a grave smile. "I trust you will not hesitate?"

"Of c-course, my lord."

"Good." He nodded, as if satisfied, before moving to Mr. Carlew and extending his hand. Catherine watched the two men exchange a few words while the other ladies farewelled Lavinia. Other neighbors soon followed the Hawkesbury lead and made their departures as well, apart from Lady Milton, who sat complacently nibbling a small biscuit and studying the large Reynolds portrait hanging over the fireplace, as if hoping a lack of eye contact would render her invisible.

"Lady . . . Milton, is it?"

Mr. Carlew's deep voice drew the attention of everyone who remained in the room, including the avid appreciator of art, who swallowed her biscuit hurriedly. "Yes?"

"Pardon my ignorance, but are you so intimately connected with Lady Winthrop that you feel it your duty to stay?"

The squire's wife blinked rapidly. Catherine suppressed a smile. Never had she seen Lady Milton so disconcerted—save at the wedding of Lavinia to the earl. "I have known Elvira for years, so of *course* I consider it my duty—"

"Oh, take her away," Aunt Clothilde snapped. "Nobody wants her here."

Lady Milton drew herself up, chins in the air. "Well, I never!"

"About time you were," muttered Aunt Drusilla, as the nosy neighbor waddled from the room.

Catherine coughed to hide her snicker, the sound drawing Mr. Carlew's attention.

His blue-gray eyes widened, his cheeks paling under his healthy tan, like he saw a ghost. Her breakfast curdled within. She lowered her gaze to his dark waistcoat.

"Mr. Carlew, allow me to introduce Miss Winthrop."

He nodded to Mr. Whittington. "Thank you, we are acquainted."

Mr. Carlew offered a small bow which she could only, politely, acknowledge with a nod.

He shifted away, leaving her feeling raw and hollowed. She exhaled with a shaky breath and forced her gloved fingers to relax. The worst was done. But oh . . . Her eyes burned.

“Now, shall we resume?” The lawyer glanced around the room.

Mama sat with Aunt Drusilla; Aunt Elizabeth, Papa’s quiet sister who had raised three most unquiet girls, sat on the next settee, her red-rimmed eyes testifying to *her* sorrow at least. Churning emotion mingled with frustration. Did Mama’s grief stem more from the loss of her position and house than any real sorrow at Papa’s passing? Catherine stifled the uncharitable thought and moved from her position to sit beside her grieving aunt. Aunt Elizabeth clasped her hand.

Catherine glanced over at Aunt Clothilde and Peter, still wearing matching disgruntled expressions. On the other side of the fireplace sat Lady Harkness and her daughter, both wearing looks that could only be counted as expectant. Behind them, Mr. Carlew stood motionless, his expression as grave as she remembered. Truly, the man did not look like he took pleasure in any of this.

Mr. Whittington began to speak, his dry voice and drier legal circumlocutions dulling her senses until she could hardly focus. Finally he turned to her mother. “Lady Winthrop, as you might be aware, your husband had quite large debts, and had heavily mortgaged the assets he did have. I deeply regret to inform you that you will have to live on a substantially smaller allowance than you have been accustomed to.”

“What?”

“H-how much smaller?” Catherine ventured.

Mr. Whittington turned to her. “I’m very sorry, Miss Winthrop, but apart from the settlement monies put aside for you and your sister upon your eventual marriages, nearly everything else is gone.”

She stilled. “How c-can they be almost gone?” She refused to look at Mr. Carlew, her cheeks burning in humiliation at his being privy to both her loss and her stammer.

“Do you mean to say we have no money?” Mama asked. “That . . . that is impossible! Walter would never have left me without funds.”

Mr. Whittington coughed. “I am afraid he did, madam.”

“No. No, I simply refuse to believe it. Walter would never—”

“Mama,” Catherine murmured.

Lady Harkness glanced complacently at her offspring. “A lack of funds does not concern us, I’m relieved to say. *My* husband was an excellent provider.”

“Her husbands,” Aunt Drusilla muttered. “How many has she had? And all now dead. The Black Widow they say—”

“Aunt!” Mortification warmed Catherine’s cheeks anew. How had Papa’s death descended into such a sideshow of incivility?

“Lady Winthrop, you will have a small income, not more than eight or nine hundred a year—”

Mama groaned.

“And your daughters will receive a similar sum when they do eventually marry—”

Catherine wished she could groan as well. Why, why, why had *he* to be here to hear the doubt in the lawyer’s voice? Like a spinster of twenty-five could hope to marry. Like anyone would want her. Hadn’t his rejection proved it?

“And Peter? What about him?”

Mr. Whittington studied Aunt Clothilde with an expression bordering on dislike. “Madam, while Peter is specifically mentioned in the will to receive the Avebury estate, I’m afraid there is nothing more provided for its running costs.” He turned to Peter, whose mien had deflated at that last comment. “I trust you have other assets to assist?”

“I . . . er . . .” His pimpled face flushed, then he glanced at his mother.

She seemed to draw within herself before saying stiffly, “That is no concern of yours.”

“Of course, madam.”

Aunt Clothilde rose unsteadily to her feet, grasping Peter’s arm. “This all smacks of gross incompetence! I cannot believe my Peter did

not receive what is his proper due.” She cast a venomous look at Mr. Carlew. “The title should at least go to someone with *real* Winthrop blood.”

Murmurs of discontent and accusation filled the room, plunging Catherine’s soul deeper into despair. How could they scrap over the title like stray dogs over a bone, snarling and biting at each other? Did nobody care Papa was gone?

The room eventually emptied of all save herself.

Her eyes filled with tears and she slumped into her favorite chair, burrowing deep into the cushions as though she could hide.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.

## CHAPTER THREE

JONATHAN WALKED THROUGH the paneled Oak Room, thankful to be removed from the earlier tension, thankful for a moment of distraction to clear the turbulence of his heart and head. The Oak Room was a kind of long gallery—so he was informed by Geoffreys, the overly pompous butler—and was lined with paintings of long-dead ancestors he had never known.

Save for—yes. He stopped. Stared up at the large portrait. Blue-gray eyes scowled down from under heavy brows. This face he did recognize. His lips twitched. He would not thank his mother for the compliment of suggesting he took after his grandfather in more than just a certain shrewdness in financial matters. Yet he saw enough, remembered enough, for it to be true. The angle of jaw perhaps, the shape of the ears. But Jon hoped he never looked quite so displeased with life. Even if sometimes it felt true.

“Ah, dear boy. You’re here.”

He turned, sketched a bow. “As you see.”

His mother smiled. Sparing a glance for the portraits, she shuddered theatrically. “The skeletons are as ghoulish as ever.”

“Mother . . .”

“Why I ever married into this family I do not know. Look at them, so filled with pride it practically drips from their noses.” She hooked a hand around his arm. “Your grandfather was the best of a bad lot.”

“Even better than Father?”

She glanced at him with hooded eyes, as though she had words



she dared not speak. Uncertainty rippled through him as it did every time she refused to speak of his natural father. He'd happily claimed Harold Carlew as his father for as long as he could remember, identifying so much he had taken on his name from a very young age. But had Harold been too eager to call him son? Were the Winthrops correct? Had there been a mistake after all?

"Do you remember visiting your grandfather?"

He nodded. How could he forget? It had been the start of a dream. An impossible dream.

"I was so glad you got the chance to make his acquaintance before . . ."

Her words trailed away. He placed a hand on hers, gently squeezed. She sighed. "I suppose you'll want to move in soon?"

"Mother, I could not presume—"

"Why ever not? You are the rightful heir, after all."

Was he? He studied her, but her bright gaze admitted nothing. "I would hope Lady Winthrop would invite me, rather than impose myself upon them."

Her laughter trilled. "I'm afraid you would be waiting until kingdom come. Besides, you would not be imposing. How many times must I tell you that you rely too much upon such sensibilities? You belong here, not she, not they."

He shook his head gently. "Mother . . ."

She cast him a searching glance. "I noticed you seemed a little taken aback this afternoon."

His jaw clenched.

"I declare, I would not have recognized her again in a thousand years! She seemed altered beyond belief. Like a faded little brown mouse."

Faded. He forced himself to nod. Yes, faded was an appropriate term. And appropriate justice for what she had done.

"I do hope that woman won't cause any trouble."

"Catherine?" Her name now tasted strange on his tongue.

His mother's lips pursed. "No, that ridiculous turbaned aunt of hers. Y'know, the mother of that poor child she thinks should inherit.

Can you imagine—him, a pimply, gawky boy, running all this?” She waved a hand at the courtyard, one of two, Geoffreys had informed him on their brief tour of the Manor, after matters in the drawing room had descended into ignominy.

“I cannot see how he’ll cope with running Avebury.”

“Neither can I. One of Wiltshire’s great estates? In those unproved hands? I’d sooner believe a sparrow can tame a lion. Or is it a tiger?” Her head tilted, she squeezed his arm. “It is so wonderful to have you home again, to know you are safe instead of in such a godforsaken place.”

“God was with me there, Mother.”

“Well, perhaps.” She patted his hand. “But I am glad to have you near again.”

She smiled up at him, and a burst of affection filled him, leading him to kiss her brow. They continued ambling, his mother’s chatter drowning out the uncertainty from before. Whatever the questions surrounding his mother, he had never doubted her love for him, or her total confidence in his abilities.

His smile slipped.

Unlike some.

“AND SIR, I have given you the blue bedchamber, which I trust you will find most comfortable.” Geoffreys coughed apologetically. “I know it should be the master suite, but I’m afraid it is not yet ready.”

Jon held up a hand. “Please, don’t touch anything there on my account. I would rather leave things as they are for as long as possible.”

“Oh.” Geoffreys’s hope-filled eyes dimmed a little. “Pardon my presumption, sir, but I thought you would want to change things.”

“Perhaps in the future, but in these times of sadness, I’d prefer the family, indeed the Manor, to remain undisturbed as long as possible.”

“Of course, my lord.”

My lord? Jon blinked, before remembering.

The butler looked at him questioningly, but Jon shook his head.

“If that is all, sir?”

“Thank you.”

Jon wandered slowly through a myriad of corridors back to the main entrance hall, hesitating as he heard the whine of Peter’s mother again. They had not been offered accommodation—unnecessary, Geoffreys had assured him, as their own home was only fifteen miles away. He stayed, rooted in the shadows, until their exit. His lips twisted. He might have faced a charging elephant once upon a time, but his courage faltered before the indomitable force of the Winthrop women and their sneered aspersions.

The door closed forcefully, as if the footman—William, perhaps?—was also relieved to see their departure. He stepped forward, caught the footman’s shamefaced grin, then moved back past the enormous oak staircase—how much had the previous baron spent on *that*?—before footfalls on the stairs accompanied by a hasty enquiry of a servant led him to an exit into the gardens.

He hurried along the stone path dissecting the green expanse of lawn until he reached the relative safety of screening plants before an enormous hedge of yew. He turned. No whisk of a curtain hastily closed. No face peered from a window. For a moment he could pretend he was alone.

His shoulders sagged. Finally.

The past few days had proved a constant parade of people and appointments. He wandered along the weed-strewn path interspersed with urns seemingly forsaken by the gardening staff, judging by their shriveled occupants. A sigh escaped. How many other areas needed attention? The Manor’s stonework needed repointing. From this position he could see at least two tilting chimneys and a great deal of peeling paintwork, unlike the neatly finished front façade. And this was only the most cursory of inspections. Then there was the matter of Avebury.

He scuffed the path with his boot. Anyone could see young Peter was without sufficient funds to assist in that matter. Whittington had spoken plain. The baron had lived on credit these past years, his gambling forcing him to sell the odd piece of unentailed land when necessary in order to make ends meet. If the baron had not spent money

on upkeep here at the Manor, his primary residence, how much—how little—would have been spent there? Was this inheritance more noose than he'd first realized?

Tension knotted his shoulders again. What a difficult line he must walk, between appeasing the Winthrop family's concerns and doing what he could to salvage their fortunes. And this, without even taking into consideration the various personalities and expectations that would make this time so challenging.

The worries crowded in. Muscles bunched in his neck. He pressed deep into the base of his skull to massage them out. Forced himself to relax. To remember this wasn't the first time he'd faced difficult odds. India had been full of unexpected challenges. And each time, he—with God's help—had overcome.

The untrimmed yew hedge held a gate, propped open, with weathered palings. He walked through into a knot garden, its classical lines still evident despite the obvious lack of attention. The path led to an overgrown arbor, under which a stone seat was positioned, doubtless a lovely place in summer. The house loomed above the hedge, like a watchful giant, waiting for his move.

Who would have envisaged this? Six months ago, he was fending off disaster in Bombay; today, he held the keys to a future he'd never dared believe. And this house?

This house certainly possessed nothing of the modest proportions he was used to associating with manor houses. Geoffreys's tour had not included the upper floor, Jonathan not wanting to intrude any more than absolutely necessary, but he was reliably informed there were at least a dozen bedchambers, for which the suite of rooms for entertaining made sense. Clearly Winthrop Manor was the primary residence of the head of the family, its age and importance everywhere seen, such as the heralds and coats of arms inscribed above the main entrance and stained in glass in the library's bay window.

But for all its magnificence, it held a homelike feel, far more than that of the Carlew London residence where he'd grown up. Whilst large, indeed, somewhat showy—for as Harold Carlew always said, a successful businessman should be seen to be prosperous, for how else

would people trust him with their money to invest?—the Portman Square mansion was all sharp lines and angles, a little too new, a little too sterile.

The Manor, on the other hand, possessed a gracious charm, like Carmichael's paternal grandmother, whom he'd once visited during the Long Vacation whilst at Oxford. The dowager countess possessed beauty, faded perhaps, but her generosity and whimsical humor had smoothed away any awkwardness Jonathan, a merchant's son, had felt upon meeting such a lady. This house held a similar appeal, as though she had known her worth for many a generation, and did not need any of the fancy trinkets and furbelows a less beautiful version might require.

A tiny sparrow danced by, as if celebrating Jon's good fortune. His heart lifted fractionally, and he smiled at his foolishness. But one thing he could be sure. Even Carmichael, whose family's grand estate in Derbyshire Jon had visited more than once, would be impressed and pleased for him. He could imagine the viscount's words: "Well, you've certainly fallen on your feet, old man."

Yes. Or more precisely, God had placed his feet here.

Jon wandered through the hedge again, veering left, to where a stained stone fountain sat silent at the end of another rose-lined path that led to the house. He studied the three French doors facing the garden. The drawing room perhaps? He assessed his bearings, nodded, and walked back. Sweetness lifted as he brushed past a few peach-colored roses.

He peered through the glass. The room was dim, but he recognized the position of settees. And it was unoccupied. He tried the handle. It moved easily, silently. So the servants at least oiled doors—clearly his predecessor had odd notions about prioritizing the manor's maintenance. As he entered, the drawing room's gentle ambiance rose to meet him, and he stopped behind a high settee, once again feeling the deep peace permeate his soul.

He glanced around the room. The Reynolds above the fireplace was perhaps not the artist's finest work, but its tones of gold and amber suited the room's mellow feel. How long had it been in Winthrop

possession? Or was it an asset for which he could gain a return that would benefit more than just the casual visitor to this room?

*Lord, give me wisdom . . .*

His prayer, one uttered many times over the past few years, floated up, past the plaster fruits and—he squinted—angels that adorned the painted ceiling.

“Oh, Papa . . .”

He froze. Glanced around. Down. Saw the mass of black huddled on the settee directly before him. Positioned as she was, sprawled most unladylike with her hands covering her face, she had not seen him. And the high backs of the other sofas hid her from view of the door that stood ajar, through which came the murmur and bustle of servants. Amid the afternoon shadows he saw the black-edged handkerchief. A sigh fluttered, closing in a sob.

Compassion propelled him forward.

Resentment halted his step.

His fingers clenched. While part of his heart tugged at her pain, he could not help feel she would not want him to see her. Wasn't she the young lady whose actions ran counter to her claims? Her gentility but a mask . . .

Yet he could not help contrast this sad, faded picture with the young, vibrant creature he had once known. And be irrationally relieved that the man who'd destroyed his life had at least one person who mourned him.

The weeping continued, a rawness so deep his skin tingled.

Despite his misgivings, his heart twisted. He took another step toward her then paused. Would she welcome his sympathy? Sympathy born from an event that by its very nature led to his social promotion? She would not appreciate his words, however heartfelt. She had not before.

Better to leave. Better to keep from unnecessary intrusion. He had no desire to dine with the Winthrop clan tonight, though he must, for everything felt like he was stepping unwelcome into pain. Perhaps it would be best if he could prevent further distress by removing himself without her notice.

Perhaps if he found a maid, or her sister—he rather doubted her mother would be of any use—someone who could comfort her . . . Yes, that would suffice.

He stepped back. Onto a creaking floorboard.

Cursing himself inwardly, he hurried to the French doors—  
“Who’s there?”

The figure sat up, smeared hands down her face. Glanced around.

He could hide no more. He stepped forward. “Excuse me.”

And with a bow, and a glimpse of her shocked face, he exited into the garden again.

Calling himself every kind of fool. For feeling. For caring. For wishing the past could be undone again.

His jaw hardened. But that was exactly the point. The past had passed. It could never be revisited again.