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“Books like *Winning Miss Winthrop* remind me why Jane Austen and Georgette Heyer have been longtime favorite authors of mine. . . . While many modern-day authors are able to dress their stories in an admirable reproduction, few are able to re-create the tone and essence of the era with the authenticity Carolyn Miller displays.”

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MISS SERENA'S  
SECRET

CAROLYN MILLER

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*Miss Serena's Secret*

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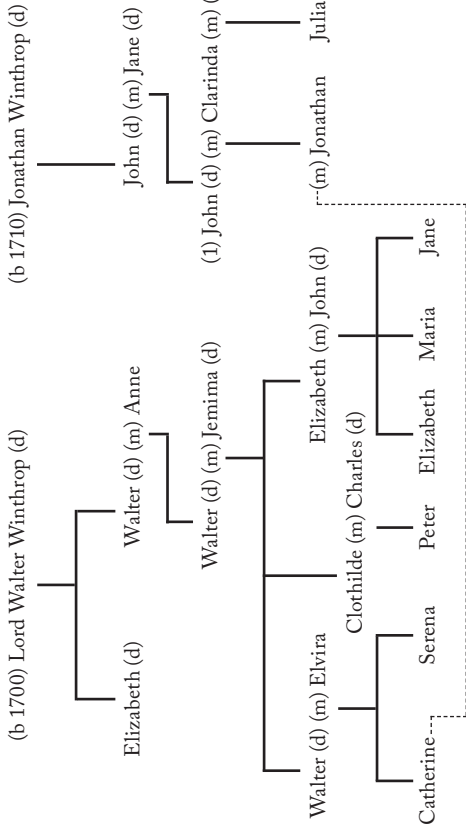
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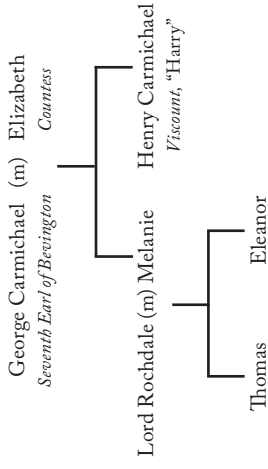
*Keep fanning the flames of creativity  
and see God's extraordinary purpose in your lives.  
I love you!*



## Winthrop Family Tree



## Carmichael Family Tree





 CHAPTER ONE

*Bath, Somerset*  
*June 1817*

WARM SUMMER SUN lit the scene before her: a golden-yellow oak table boasting a squat blue vase with an arrangement of ferns and pink roses. The tension forever lining Serena Winthrop's heart eased a fraction, as if in obedience to the florist's intention. Perhaps this lesson might prove less discomfiting than the last. She dipped her brush into the china palette, dabbed it on the thick vellum, then leaned back. Tilted her head. Wrinkled her nose. No. The precise blue of the receptacle still evaded her. Egyptian blue? No. Prussian? Definitely not. Perhaps more like . . .

A smile slanted her lips as she wiped her brush over the cake of pigment then added a few drops of water to the mixing tile. The colors swirled together, into an exact blend to precisely capture the slight glassy sheen of the vase. She leaned forward and smeared it on in tiny movements. There. Perfection!

"Ah, Miss Serena."

Her shoulders tensed again.

"I believe you are holding that brush incorrectly. Allow me to help you. Oh, and Miss Hatherleigh." The voice grew flat. "You are here, too."

Serena peeked across at the Honorable Caroline Hatherleigh, daughter of the Viscount Aynsley, whose pretty yet bored expression

had miraculously transformed into something approximating calf love as she openly gazed at their art master. Caroline did not seem to notice that he never looked back.

Her stomach tightened as Mr. Goode drew near. Art lessons, her favorite times at Miss Haverstock's Seminary for Young Ladies, had proved to be her escape from the wicked whispers of the world. When she sketched, or better, when she painted, she seemed to enter a different place, a place of possibility and freedom, yet a place she could control. Creativity seemed to ignite something within her, something so all-consuming that she could paint for hours without noticing she had missed deportment lessons, or a meal, or an engagement with a friend.

Initially, having such a handsome art master had not exactly hindered her enthusiasm, especially as he'd been quick to praise her efforts, even going so far as to declare to Miss Haverstock that Serena was a budding genius. That thought had warmed her, as had the principal's request for a watercolor for the school's foyer. Of course she had obliged, thrilled at the compliment, less thrilled by the envy the other girls had displayed. But she had striven to forget them, content to focus her energies on her next challenge. A portrait. A portrait of the art master.

She'd been working on determining the exact color of his eyes—a hazel, requiring a dab of yellow ochre mixed with Vandyke brown—when she had looked up at him one day in class. She'd noticed he liked to help her more than the other girls, and so she had avoided looking at him for too long, not wanting to draw unnecessary attention. But he did have an interesting face, with a smile other girls said made their hearts skip, so she'd been studying his features to capture something of his essence. Only she had not realized just what she had captured. Not until that look that lasted too long.

Somehow in that too-long perusal, his face had subtly altered from that of a slightly too-handsome art master to the features of a man whose eyes and lips told of an interest far deeper than that of her other teachers. Never mind that the other teachers were all females, and at least a hundred years older than he; she had seen that look before. Nausea rippled through her stomach.

“Serena,” his voice now purred in her ear, his hand brushing hers. She jerked away. “Now, now. No need to be skittish. I want you to hold it”—he caressed her fingers, causing her skin to goose-pimple, as he twisted the squirrel-tipped brush slightly—“just so.”

“Sir, I—”

“Yes, I know it’s a little difficult to get used to a new technique.” He moved closer, his arm stretching along hers so she could feel his body heat seeping through the thin muslin of her sleeve. “But you have such talent. You could be even better if you trust my direction.”

She’d sooner trust a ferret with a baby bird. She angled her head away, but he moved behind her so all she could see was his dark coat sleeve. He continued to hold her hand prisoner. His breath tickled her ear, setting her hair’s tiny curls to quiver against her nape.

Suddenly she wished for a fichu to cover up her neckline. Whilst not immoderately low, the round-necked bodice still revealed far too much skin for her liking—especially when he stood above her, looking down, and she could tell from his breathing the view was to his liking.

Again, she tried to remove her hand from his grasp; again, he held on more firmly.

“Please let me go,” she said, just loud enough for him to hear, but not Caroline. The Aynsley girls had never been known for their discretion, and after the scandal surrounding her sister earlier this year, Serena had no wish to invite more speculation about the Winthrop family.

“I would . . . if I could.” He uttered a tiny chuckle that suggested he was enjoying this game. “I am sorry, but it seems as though fair Diana has stolen all reason away.”

“Diana?”

“Pardon me. Serena.”

His words left her with the now-familiar uncertainty, shifting her emotions like the sea might toss a sailboat, his words sometimes innocent, sometimes not. But apart from a too-long hand-holding—even now his hand guided hers in the long, fluid movements the watercolors required—he had not done anything obviously wrong.

"Mr. Goode?" called Caroline. "Would you please come and look at my painting? I fear the shape of the urn is a little out of proportion."

"Of course. I will be with you in just a moment."

His other hand snaked around Serena's body, touching her waist.

She froze. "Sir—"

"Shh. Everything will be all right, you'll see. Trust me."

She shook her head, moving vainly to twist her body away. "I will speak to Miss Haverstock. She will—"

"Do nothing," he finished in a silky voice. "Just like last time. Remember?"

Something cold gripped her chest, pooling bile in her mouth. A previous complaint to the headmistress about Mr. Goode's overt attention had fallen on ears seemingly as beguiled as the other young ladies. Helpless, his actions concealed from the room's other occupant, she tried not to flinch as he stroked her waist.

"You want to become a better artist, do you not?"

She swallowed. "Y-yes."

"Then let me help you."

"I do not like your way of helping," she muttered.

He laughed again. "Alas, we do not always get what we want."

"Mr. Goode?" Caroline's voice sounded petulant. "Have you finished with Serena yet?"

"Not by any means," he murmured for her ears only, before finally releasing her and moving to the other side of the room.

Serena heaved out a shaky breath. Forced her attention back to the still life. Forced her whirling senses to concentrate, to narrow down, to fixate on the swirl of light gilding the vase's rounded base. Gradually her galloping pulse reduced to something more of a canter as the methodical practice continued and she worked to overcome the soiled feeling in her soul.

Dip brush into water, then dab the cake of pigment. Apply to paper. Clean brush. Repeat.

The composition was nearly complete when she grew aware of his presence again. Her neck tingled, raising the hairs, as if every particle of her being was conscious of his perusal.

“I will miss you when you leave,” he said, in a louder voice than before.

She glanced behind her. Caroline had gone. Her heart began a rapid tattoo.

“I do hope your dear mama will be agreeable to private tutorials.”

Serena tried to ignore him, to concentrate on the canvas, but trying to ignore him for the past few months had resulted in this situation. If only she had not looked into his eyes! Mr. Goode might have been the most handsome man the seminary had ever employed, but there was something oily and unclean about him. If only the other girls knew, they would not envy his attentions to Serena one jot.

He was as far removed from the upright bearing and nature of her sister’s new husband as could be imagined. Jonathan Carlew Winthrop was everything decent and kind, his generosity as remarked upon as his wealth. It did not matter that he had come from a background less titled than hers, or that some people sneered at his connections in trade; the man he was now embodied everything she hoped to find one day for herself. Mr. Goode was the opposite of all that.

“Miss Serena? You are very quiet. Perhaps you would prefer to finish this later.”

“I’d prefer to complete it now.”

“Really? You would not prefer to do other things now?” A finger traced down her cheek.

She could not move, frozen, mouselike, before a cat. What could she do? If she spoke to Miss Haverstock again, she would not be believed. But if she did not, how far would his attentions go? Mama would dismiss her claims as fanciful. Papa was gone. Catherine and her new brother-in-law were still away on the Continent on an extended honeymoon. Who could she turn to? Who could protect her?

She had no one. Nothing.

A tear tracked down her cheek as his fingers went lower, under her chin, down her throat. Her heart pounded frantically against the cage of her ribs as a silent scream ballooned inside. *Lord, help me!*

*Grosvenor Square, London*

A kaleidoscope of noise and color filled the ballroom, mirrors and diamonds flashing, conversation thrumming under the tinkle of laughter.

Viscount Henry Carmichael smoothed his neckcloth and moved to the young brunette beside the pillar, standing with her mother, a rather formidable-looking creature of heavy dark brows and downturned mouth. "Good evening, fair ladies."

"Ah, Lord Carmichael. How lovely to see you again." The elder held out her hand and received the peck he bestowed there.

"And you, madam." Though Harry had forgotten her name. Never mind. He was always rather impressed with how far he could sustain conversation without using names. "I wonder, does your sister dance?"

"My sister?" Her frown smoothed as the young lady smothered a giggle. "I suppose you mean dear Eliza here."

"I suppose I do," he said with an easy smile.

"Naughty man."

He bowed his head to acquiesce and turned to the brunette. "Tell me, Miss Eliza, do you dance, or do you prefer to stand by pillars and show them up by your beauty?"

Another giggle. "I like to dance, sir."

"Shall I see if I can find a partner for you?"

"Oh, but—"

"Come." He held out his hand, her crestfallen face lighting once more. "I do not see anyone worthy enough for you to dance with."

"Save yourself?" she suggested.

"Oh, I'm not terribly worthy." He led her into the set that was just forming.

"But you are a viscount."

Her innocent comment soured the champagne lining his stomach. He forced his smile to remain fixed as they completed the maneuvers.

She was not the first young lady, nor would she be the last, to focus on his title and someday ascension to the earldom. He had known it all his life, had seen the wheedling and cajolery given to members of his family as people he once thought friends had tried to use him for their own purposes. And while he liked to help, he did not like the feeling of being manipulated, nor friendships that seemed based on undercurrents he was yet to ascertain.

He twirled Miss Eliza to the end of the row, his thoughts whirling in time to the music. Perhaps that was why he enjoyed Jon Carlew's—no, he grinned, the new Lord Winthrop's—company so much. Since meeting early in their Oxford days, the man's principled honesty had appealed as much as his refusal to engage in the social-climbing practices common among Harry's friends, Jon's merchant background less important than his proving to be one of the few people Harry knew he could trust. Which meant the newly married baron was one of the few friends who knew Harry's deepest secret.

“Lord Carmichael?”

He almost stumbled, suddenly conscious the music had drawn to a close and his partner was gazing up at him anxiously. “Shall we find your dear *mater*?”

After escorting her back to her mother—and pillar—Harry ambled off to the card room. He had done the pretty, done what was expected and asked a wallflower to dance, and now he could spend time doing what he preferred. As he moved beneath the glittering chandelier, a hand accosted him. “Dear boy.”

“Lady Harkness!” He bowed to the redheaded woman draped in green and flashing emeralds. “The night has suddenly improved.”

“Tell me, have you heard from Jon?”

“I'm afraid not. Which leads me to suspect he is enjoying his new bride very much.”

She laughed. “And so he should. They have waited long enough, don't you agree?”

He nodded, as a thin spear of envy prodded within. Once he had wondered about pursuing Miss Catherine Winthrop, before realizing her heart had long been secured by his best friend. But to find another

like her, someone whose patience and sweetness meant she truly deserved a man of Jon's caliber, why, that would be nigh impossible.

"Have you seen Hawkesbury? He's here somewhere, with that pretty wife of his. I do like her. She's quite a refreshing thing." The green eyes danced around the room. "Especially when one meets so many bores."

"Something of which you can never be accused, madam." He bowed. "If your son deigns to call, I shall send him your regards."

"And when Jon contacts me, I'll be sure to let him know you'd like to visit Winthrop again."

He laughed. "You know me well. Good evening, madam."

And with a final bow, he escaped his best friend's mother and strode to the card room. Now to play—

"Lord Carmichael?"

He turned, his impatience dissipating as he recognized the copper-blonde lady before him. "Lady Hawkesbury." He executed a bow. "A complete pleasure."

Her smile seemed tinged with amusement at his antics, which made his grin all the more genuine. "I wonder, have you seen that husband of mine? He was here moments ago, offering to procure me some water, but I rather suspect he got waylaid by one of those parliamentarians who share a rather less liberal view of the world."

"Shall I send out a search party?"

"If you would." She fanned herself.

"And I shall find you some water, also. Come." He led her to a vacant space on a settee. "I shall return directly."

"I shall await you." Her sweet, ingenuous smile filled her face. "Thank you."

He threaded through the crowd, found a footman, and secured a tall glass of iced water. Delivering it to the countess, he realized she was another like the new Lady Winthrop, a woman of character and passion. His father had given him to understand that many of Hawkesbury's schemes to help the underprivileged had originated with his wife, the daughter of a clergyman. Father had even sounded impressed, urging Harry to foster that connection. "For I believe that man will hold office one day."



A brief search found the earl himself—as his wife had suspected—holding court in the blue salon, half a dozen men crowding in, asking questions, spouting opinions. Harry stood on the fringes, waiting until sufficient pause could allow him to catch the earl’s attention, working to tamp down his frustration. Why he was here as a messenger when he’d much rather be winning at cards—

“Carmichael! How are you? Come and tell us”—the earl gestured him nearer—“what are your thoughts on the Corn Laws? Do you not agree they do the working man a grave injustice?”

Harry glanced at the men standing nearby, some of whom he knew, all of whom knew his father, and knew that his father, while widely considered a somewhat benevolent earl, would also be opposed to anything that reduced his personal income. “I do not have a ready opinion, I’m afraid,” he hedged.

“Ah.” Hawkesbury’s face, voice, conveyed disappointment. “I trust time will change that?”

“Time has a way of changing most things.”

“True.”

“If I might interrupt your political musings, your wife is asking after you, my lord.”

“Then I must take my leave of you, gentlemen.” Hawkesbury inclined his head. “Until next time.” He clapped Harry on the shoulder as they exited. “Thank you, Carmichael. I trust Lavinia is well?”

“Of course.”

“Good.” Hawkesbury glanced at Harry. “Tell me, what do you see for yourself in the future?”

The memory of desires from long ago stirred faintly, lifting then falling like the scent of rain on the wind. “I would hope to marry, run the estate as my father and grandfather have done.”

“Good ambitions, those. But in that far-off, distant day when you assume the title, do you see yourself joining the parliamentary debates or merely leaving that to others?”

“I . . . I had not thought of it.”

The earl’s eyes glinted. “Neither did I until a few years ago. But life moved drastically and then I found myself in a situation where I had

little desire to be, and even less understanding of what to do. Might I encourage you to think ahead? It is never too early to make decisions that help mold you into the man you are destined to be.”

The words ate into Harry's contentment, and he forced himself to murmur something inconsequential. He didn't want to think ahead. Life was for living, for enjoying oneself. It was far too soon for thoughts of settling down.

The lights and noise suddenly faded as his earlier musings rose to the fore. Perhaps it was not simple luck that Jon and Lord Hawkesbury had gained wives of such charm and integrity. They had proved themselves men worthy of such ladies.

He made his bows to the earl and countess, and finally made good his escape to the card room, where he was soon engaged in a game of whist that quickly intensified into a high-stakes game of hazard. Harry had to work to maintain his well-known air of insouciance even as the earl's words continued to challenge, a seam of discontent in his soul.

What kind of man did he wish to be? Honest, like Carlew. Sincere and assured, like Hawkesbury. Someone others could trust and could rely on for more than just a prettily turned compliment. His spirits dipped.

Could he ever become such a man?

 CHAPTER TWO

*Bath*  
*July*

THE MISS HAVERSTOCK Select Seminary for Young Ladies was, by all accounts, an excellent institution for the education of young ladies of good breeding and excellent resources. Such select young ladies held all the accomplishments—their French and Italian as proficient as their manners were polished, their dispositions honed to that mild meekness society deemed appropriate in a young lady about to enter the marriage mart.

The rigid strictures employed at the seminary were thus very effective for daughters of lesser peers and higher gentry, training them to become effective companions and helpmeets for the sons of lesser peers and higher gentry in later life. Indeed, to mamas of prospective sons, being a “selectee” (as the girls referred to themselves) was almost as high cachet as the news she was worth twenty thousand. “Oh, one of Haverstock’s!” was the comfortable assurance. “She’s sure to be a good gel,” with the implication that she was sure to bring an additional degree of civility and polish to the family. Such was the distinction of attending Haverstock’s, the waiting list extended to dozens of families, all anxious to see their “gel” attend with the decided aim of becoming ever more eligible and hence more marriageable.

Except, thought Serena, as she listened to Miss Haverstock’s closing address, even before the indecent attentions of Mr. Evil-not-Goode,

Serena knew herself to be scarcely eligible, let alone marriageable anymore.

She glanced sidelong at her sister, who held hands with Jon as though still on their honeymoon, careless of the wide-eyed looks of Mama and other matrons. Catherine was lucky, having found someone who could take her away from Mama's disapprobation, even if the dower cottage was less than a mile away from Winthrop Manor. Not that Serena wished to be married. She had no use for any man—her hands clenched—would *never* have any use for any man, because, apart from Jon, all men were scoundrels and had evil designs—

"Dearest," Catherine whispered, "forget him." She reached across and gently squeezed Serena's hand.

Serena forced herself to relax, to breathe. This would be the last time she need be here, then they could put the whole sorry mess behind them.

Catherine's recent unexpected visit had proved the catalyst, whereupon Serena's refusal to even talk about her artwork surprised her sister so much she had quickly worried the answer from her. Her horror at Serena's predicament had resulted in her telling Jon, much to Serena's embarrassment. But her deep-voiced brother-in-law had quickly turned her shame into renewed respect through his effecting Mr. Goode's immediate dismissal, and Miss Haverstock's tremulous apologies. The only reason Serena had remained was for the chance to be with her friends for the final fortnight of lessons—and the fact Jon had been so successful at hushing things over. So efficiently had the deed been done that the girls had woken on the Monday to learn that Art Studies was being replaced by German language lessons, effective immediately. There had been some speculation, and though some had wondered aloud why the headmistress had not looked Serena in the eye since, nobody ever asked Serena directly. Yes, it was a relief for Serena to finally be leaving.

But she would *never* pick up a paintbrush again.

A hollow, cold feeling swept through her. She schooled her features to indifference, listened to the rest of the speech without interest, and then went through the motions of afternoon tea—eating,

drinking, introductions—the chief lesson Haverstock’s seemed to have taught being the social importance of maintaining polite fiction. Thus, she pretended interest in Caroline’s talk of her London come out next April, an event society deemed necessary for daughters of the aristocracy, but one Serena could scarcely think of with anything less than loathing.

“Serena, are you ready to leave?”

“Yes, Mama.” Relief filled her, and she curtsied her farewell to Lady Aynsley and her daughters.

Within the hour, they were in the Winthrop coach on their return home, the fast team Jon preferred lending an element of dash and style to their usual transport. Mama was dozing beside her, whilst on the seat opposite Catherine slept as Jon looked over reports.

He peered across the top of some papers, smiled. “Are you quite comfortable?”

“Thank you, yes.”

“Is there anything you require?” He motioned to the basket on the floor. “Food, a pillow?”

“I ate sufficiently earlier, and the coach is very smooth.”

“I apologize for not being particularly sociable, but these reports—”

“You are a man of business. I understand. I am content with my own thoughts.” She forced a smile to cover her lie, relieved when he merely eyed her thoughtfully and nodded.

But she was not content. She gazed out the window; the countryside blurred. What would she do now? What *could* she do now? Her education had finished. How would she fill her days? Catherine had always seemed satisfied to live quietly at home, happy with her sewing or the occasional horse-riding expedition. But Serena loathed such things. The only talent she’d ever known was now gone. The loss of her art felt like another death in her family, only Papa’s death last year was something others understood, could express sympathy for. Nobody seemed to realize how it felt to be unable to create—worse, to have lost the will to *want* to create. Inside she felt numb, half dead. The dreams she’d once believed had proved but vain imaginings now she was forced to live in the cold harsh light of day.

So she had nothing. Nothing to look forward to. Nothing to aspire to. No man would wish her as his bride. She had no money of her own, although she suspected Jon's magnanimity might lend itself to some form of dowry. And if a man were so foolishly inclined as to make her his choice, he would quickly learn the error of his ways. She shuddered. To grow an old maid was her only alternative, caring for Mama . . .

Serena glanced at Mama, softly snoring beside her, the lines of discontent marking her face more relaxed in repose. A twinge of pity crossed her heart. Poor Mama. The past year had not been easy, with Papa's sudden death and all the changes that ensued. Of course, Mama had not made things any easier, with her strident opposition to Jonathan and his family, although she seemed well pleased with the connection now. Serena's attention moved to her sister, smiling in her sleep. Catherine deserved to be happy, deserved such a good man as Jon. Even now he was conscious of her, gently readjusting a light blanket around her shoulders to keep her warm. He was so considerate, such a good, *good* man . . .

Unlike Papa.

A queasy feeling filled her stomach. She tried to force away disloyal thoughts but they resurfaced anyway. After her initial shock and grief at her father's death had come the revelations of his vices, which had caused no end of gossip in Bath. His gambling had decimated their income, reducing her dowry to virtually nil, forcing Mama and Catherine to live a near-penury existence for several months, and forcing Serena to reevaluate everything she had thought she'd known about the father she once adored. How could he be so selfish, how could he pretend to care about them when his actions destroyed their world? How could their trust in him be so misplaced?

Really, apart from Jon, what man could be trusted? They were liars, cheats, and scoundrels, who stole money—and worse.

Her hands clenched. No. Of all that she had learned in recent years, only two things signified.

She would never meet a man's gaze again.

And if, by some miracle, a gentleman wished to overlook the stain of her past and seek to court her, she might be able to overcome the revulsion their nearness elicited, but . . .

She would *never* have anything to do with someone who gambled.



*Whites Gentlemen's Club, London*  
*One week later*

Satisfied with his afternoon winnings, Harry had just been served his plate of braised salmon when Jonathan Carlew entered the dining room. *Lord Winthrop*, he corrected himself as he waved Jon over. The habit was too ingrained, his friend would never be anything but Carlew to him; good thing Jon seemed to understand.

Pleasantries properly exchanged, his friend was soon settled and awaiting his own meal, eyeing Harry with a half smile.

"I gather you've been visiting Old Bond Street again?"

Harry touched the fading bruise on his cheek. "Jackson was not quite the gentleman on this occasion."

"I've never understood the attraction of the boxing ring."

"And I've never understood why you don't. It is an excellent form of exercise."

"Says the man with Corinthian aspirations."

"Aspirations, indeed. I have always maintained that it does not hurt to take care of oneself, whether it be by maintenance of one's health through exercise or one's form by way of fresh and elegant apparel."

"Hmm." Jon nodded as a soup bowl was placed before him. "Another new coat?"

"You like this?" Harry fingered the collar. "But of course you do. One of Weston's better attempts. I could put in a word for you."

"Thank you, no. I'm content with my attire."

"Very sober-sides businessman. I trust the meeting went well today?"

"Well enough," Jon said. "Some of the board are wondering about branching into tobacco, but I'm not convinced."

Harry nodded, spearing another piece of fish. The salmon melted in his mouth, creamy and delicious. "And how is sweet Catherine?"

"Sweet. And beautiful. And *very* happy to be married to me," Jon added with a self-satisfied smirk.

"I don't want to imagine."

"No, please don't. But you've put me in mind of something. Knowing you are forever angling for an invitation to stay at Winthrop—"

"Now that is a harsh statement. I never angle. I ask directly."

"A quality I've always admired."

"As you ought," Harry murmured, forking in another piece of velvety fish.

"Catherine said she would be very happy for you to visit, for as long as necessary, at your convenience."

"I knew her as a sensible woman."

"Sensible as well as tenderhearted. She has a thing for strays."

"I'm hardly a stray. I simply enjoy other people's company more than my own."

"Why is that, I wonder?" The blue-gray gaze, so quick to turn serious, eyed him thoughtfully. Harry maintained a smiling demeanor, but the words rankled.

Truth be told, time alone meant too much time for personal recriminations. Other people's expectations, his own expectations (to which he fell far short), and regrets chewed into any pleasure he might derive from walking around the estate or going riding by himself. It was far easier to preserve his reputation as an amusing fribble or a capable sportsman than be taken less than seriously for aspiring to be more. Heaven knew how many times those attempts at his heart's aspirations had been scorned.

"You *are* welcome, Carmichael."

The words, softly spoken, bored into the recesses of his heart, revealing as they did something of the generous steadiness of character Carlew had always shown him. He cleared his throat. Sipped his wine.



“You are sure Catherine won’t mind?” He tilted the glass. “I know your wife is a remarkably good woman—has to be to put up with you—but an unexpected visitor might not be quite to her liking.”

Carlew grinned. “Catherine is remarkably good, and what I find even more remarkable is that she seems to find your company agreeable.”

“I don’t know why you’d find that so odd. I *am* extremely personable, and witty, and I suppose most women would find me a more interesting companion than a dull dog such as yourself, old man.”

“You do remember I am only one day older than you?”

“I aim to never forget.”

“Hmm.” Jon eyed him with that serious blue stare that portended Harry’s certain discomfort. “There is one thing of which you should probably be aware.”

“You have convinced dear sweet Catherine of the delights of eating curries and other subcontinent delicacies? No? Or is it that you plan another voyage overseas, to Sydney Town perhaps, and you wish for my support for such a scheme?”

Carlew ignored him, continuing in his deep voice. “My mother-and sister-in-law visit quite often, and if you remember back to the wedding . . .”

Oh, yes, he remembered. The cool-eyed blonde whose tranquil countenance might live up to her name but belied her biting tongue. His lips pushed to one side. Miss Serena Winthrop had made no bones about her dislike of him and men of his ilk, and her comments at the wedding breakfast were even more pointed than on their previous two encounters. What was it she had said? Something about him being little more than a bag of moonshine?

He pushed aside the sting. “Ah, yes. The fair Miss Winthrop. I’m sure she is dying to renew my acquaintance.”

“That’s the thing. I would appreciate it if you did not go out of your way to . . . charm her.”

“Good heavens! I’m hardly likely to snatch at a schoolroom miss!”

A strange look crossed Carlew’s features. “She has finished school, but is a little . . .”

“Shrewish? Yes, I must agree. A sad quality in one so young, but—”

"It is not that."

"What then? She's turned blue, is a tad too educated?"

"You could say so," Carlew muttered.

"What?" Harry's mood dipped as he recognized the weight shading his friend's eyes. "Old man?"

He shook his head. "I cannot fail—Julia . . ."

"You do not want her to follow Julia's path."

"No."

The word was spoken in a voice textured with pain and frustration. Harry nodded, focusing on the plate before him as he allowed Jon a moment to regain his composure. While he could understand something of the grief his friend carried about his sister's disappearance, it was nothing compared to Jon living daily with the blunt force of failure. Sometimes he'd wondered how his family would have coped should Melanie have eloped. For Carlew to have maintained such dignity in the face of yet another scandal embroiling his family was nothing short of miraculous. But perhaps that was his secret. Unlike Harry, Carlew lived like he believed miracles could still happen today.

"Are you planning on studying your salmon remains all day?"

Harry lifted his gaze, met the mockery in his friend's eyes, prompting his own ready spirits to push to the fore. "I have come to the conclusion—"

"Of your lunch?"

"That this salmon has had a hard life."

"And a harder death. Do you always mangle your fish like that, or was it simply for my benefit?"

"I was unaware you were so sensitive to my fish-carving skills."

"Or lack thereof."

"Clearly your wife would do better to teach you to overlook such matters, rather than do whatever it is she is doing."

Carlew's smile grew knowing. "I quite enjoy what she is doing . . ."

"Enough! Is it not enough to know I shall be forced to endure the lovebirds a-twittering without being reminded as to the benefits?"

"You could get married yourself, you know."

"So my dear father reminds me nearly daily. Which is why I'll be

so glad to visit you and be relieved of the burden of any such notion. Leg-shackled? Me?"

"You will fall for a young miss one day, and I will enjoy your discomfort."

Harry shook his head. "You forget I must marry to oblige my family. I cannot indulge the whims of the heart."

"Love, real love, is not a romantical whim. It is a choice—"

"You make it sound so appealing."

"A choice I gladly make every day, because I love Catherine, and wish to place her feelings and considerations ahead of my own."

"Truly commendable, old man, but not something available for all. However, I can assure you of one thing."

"Yes?"

"You need never worry about the fair Serena and my intentions."

"Promise?"

"I will only ever be as a brother to her, of that you have my word."

And he chose to ignore the faint mocking glint in the blue-gray eyes. Carlew doubt his word?

Well, this time he *would* keep it!

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Wintbrop Manor* *August*

“MAMA, I HAVE no wish to go to London next year.”

“Of course you do, my dear,” said Mama, glancing around at the room’s other occupants.

Serena bit her tongue, aware of the heavy speculation from the other guests.

Catherine, ever the peacemaker, said gently, “I am not overly fond of London myself. It always seems so dirty.”

“I agree,” said Lavinia, Countess of Hawkesbury. “I have always preferred this little patch of Gloucestershire.”

“But surely, dear Countess, you would agree that for a girl to make her mark upon the world requires spending time in Town.” Mama’s smiling countenance took on a brittle quality. “When one has the chance to engage in parties, and concerts, and dinners galore, one has the opportunity to circulate with the best people.”

“I would think that depends on what mark one wishes to make upon the world,” the countess replied before sipping her tea, her gray eyes smiling at Serena.

Serena smiled back. Lavinia Hawkesbury might have been married to a peer for nearly four years but she remained as irrepressible as ever.

“Serena!”

Her mother's sharp voice drew her attention. "Yes, Mama?"

"This is a serious matter. I do not want you wasting your life hiding away in the back hills of beyond. How do you think you are to find a husband?"

"I found my husband when I was hiding away here," Lavinia said, taking another sip.

"As did I," Catherine agreed.

"But you *first* met Jon in London," Mama said triumphantly.

Catherine lifted a shoulder, exchanging a glance with the room's other occupant.

Lady Harkness, the flame-haired, flamboyant mother of Jon, had been uncharacteristically silent through the exchange. Her green eyes now gazed thoughtfully on Serena. "May I ask why you do not wish to go to London?"

"Clarinda, it does not matter what Serena wishes—"

"Forgive me, but I think it does."

"But all your friends are going to be presented," Mama said, refocusing on Serena. "Caroline will be there. You could enjoy shopping, concerts, dancing, meeting nice gentlemen, catching up on nice gossip—"

"No!"

At Serena's outburst, Mama sat back, her face closing in affront.

"One has to wonder if gossip is ever truly nice," Lavinia asked the room.

Through the French doors the gardens beckoned. Serena placed her teacup on the small table beside her and pushed to her feet. "Please excuse me."

She caught a glimpse of Catherine's worried face as she exited the room, her feet steering to the passageway that led to the back garden. A few minutes later, she was sitting in the secret grove she had frequented as a child.

Serena closed her eyes, listening to the birdsong, the chatter of sparrows, and the loud, long notes of a faraway mistle thrush. The clean scent of pine drifted to her, and she breathed in more deeply, slowly. Her eyes opened. From this position, high up on the hill,

the rambling manor house rested quietly amongst trees planted generations ago. On sunny days like today, she could catch the merest glimpse of the silvery Severn as it wound its way from Gloucester. A landscape she had tried to capture many times, in pencils, charcoal, oils.

The tension ebbed away.

Thank God for the comfort of a garden, for vistas of beauty, for the peace they instilled.

Thank God Catherine had married Jon, and he was so amenable to their frequent visits. She would not survive living with Mama in the dower house without the means to escape. As good as the improvements were that Jon had instituted, they could never make up for the lack of space, the lack of view, the feeling she was boxed in. Trapped.

If only she could stay here at Winthrop Manor forever.

There came a crackling of branches as they were moved aside. "I thought you might be here," her sister said, moving to perch on the other wrought iron chair.

"Mama . . ." Serena shrugged helplessly.

"I know."

For a moment they sat quietly, the familiarity of the unspoken adding further ease.

Far off, the bird's melodious song continued, lifting her spirits. Was it letting its mate know its whereabouts? Marking its territory? Or simply sharing her enjoyment in respite from the earlier storm? "Shouldn't you be attending to your guests?"

"No," Catherine said mildly. "They are family, save for Lavinia, and I don't really think she requires my attentions, do you?"

Serena smiled, well able to picture the scene. The two older matrons politely jostling for the role of hostess, while the higher-ranked young mother ignored their pretensions.

"Dearest, tell me what has got you so wound up."

"Mama can be so . . ." She swallowed, fighting against bitterness.

"I understand."

"I wish *she* could understand."

"Mama wants you to be happy."

“Perhaps.” While Serena wanted to believe it was so, a cynical streak couldn’t help but remember the times Mama’s decisions seemed to chiefly benefit herself. Was it dishonoring to one’s parents to think such things?

“What is it about London that concerns you most?”

A myriad of answers flashed to mind: strangers, crowds, men.

“Since . . .” She could not speak it. Bile soured her mouth, halting further speech.

“Since the incident?” Catherine prompted gently.

“Yes. Since then, I have felt—I have realized there are so many things that can hurt me, things I never knew before.”

Her sister reached across and held her hand.

“I don’t want to go to London. I want to be here, where I’m . . .”

“Safe.”

“Yes!” She blinked away the burn. “Elsewhere has so much unknown.”

“We cannot always control our circumstances.”

“But I don’t feel ready to go someplace where I’ll be forced to dance with men I don’t know, to have them look at me like”—she swallowed again—“like *he* did.”

“Not all men will, dearest. You know Jon regards you as a sister, and the earl is only ever kind, is he not?”

“Yes.”

“Is there someone else whose attentions have made you wary?”

A face flashed into mind. A handsome, laughing man, whose manners always seemed too smooth. She shook her head, as if she could shake away the image.

“My dear, I do not want you to carry this fear forever.”

“I do not want to carry it, either.”

“But if you avoid all new experiences, are you not reinforcing the fears within?”

“Perhaps, but—”

“I know Mama can be trying, but I do believe she honestly thinks a season in London will be for your best. Just think, you could see the art at the Royal Academy exhibition.” Serena’s heart thudded. Now

*that* thought had some merit. “And a visit would provide distraction from remembering less . . . pleasant things.”

She managed a ghost of a smile. “Does Jon appreciate your gift for understatement?”

Catherine’s lips curved. “He appreciates many things, but I don’t know if that is one.”

“I just feel like I need some time before I have a season, and am forced to think about . . . marriage.”

“And that is very understandable.” Her sister nodded thoughtfully. “I suppose there is no reason why it should be next season.”

“No.” Hope lit her heart. If Catherine—and naturally Jon—were willing to support a postponement of her come out . . .

“It does mean you will live very quietly for a good part of the year.”

Her spirits sank. “At the cottage.”

Catherine’s brow wrinkled. “Perhaps Mama could be encouraged to take an extended visit to Aunt Drusilla again.”

“Or visit the aunts at Avebury.”

“Then you could live here with us.” Her sister’s smile flashed. “That would be wonderful, especially when Jon is away on business.”

“I would not be in your way when he is at home?”

“It is large enough for you to know when to be elsewhere.” Serena’s cheeks heated as her sister laughed. “Dearest, one day you will meet a man with whom you will want to share everything. Don’t let fear build a wall that will keep hope out. Now”—she rose to her feet—“I will talk with Jon as soon as he finishes his discussion with Lord Hawkesbury.”

“Oh, thank you, Catherine!”

“Don’t thank me yet. We’ve still got to persuade Mama as to the benefits of such a scheme.”

“Of course.” *Please, Lord, let Mama agree.*

Catherine’s head tilted, her dark eyes serious. “Would you still feel safe if you traveled with us? Sometimes we’re invited to stay with Jon’s friends and associates, which can feel daunting. But if you are with us, then it might prove an effective way of getting to know some of the people you will be introduced to during your presentation season. This might prove less overwhelming.”



"I suppose so."

"Good." Her sister moved a few feet away then turned. "That reminds me. I probably should have told you we are expecting another guest tonight."

"Who?"

A sudden foreboding chilled her. *Dear God, please let it not be—*

"Lord Carmichael."

Hard-won ease drained away as the sun dipped behind a cloud.



"Ah, Lord Carmichael. What a pleasure."

"Lady Harkness, as always, the pleasure is mine." Harry bowed, skimming her knuckles with his lips before straightening to address the next lady. "And my dear Countess. Your presence here is also a delight."

"I'm so glad you think so," Lady Hawkesbury said, a twinkle in her eyes. "I would hate to think my presence displeasing."

"That could never be the case."

"Oh, you'd be surprised," she murmured.

"One would be a slowtop to not appreciate such grace, such beauty—"

"Are you quite finished flattering my wife, Carmichael?"

"Indeed, I am." Harry grinned, offering the earl a bow before glancing back at the countess. "For the moment, anyway."

"I'm glad to hear it," she said with a laugh.

Harry moved to the next personage, seated on the couch with an expression partway between bemusement and high dignity. "And Lady Winthrop. Good evening."

She inclined her head. "Lord Carmichael. I trust you have been made welcome."

"Your daughter does you credit, my lady, and has employed a veritable army to see to my needs."

He turned to the young lady seated on the far settee, her expression as cool as ever. He opened his mouth to speak—

"Do you require an army to assist you, sir?"

He blinked. "I beg your—"

"Serena!" hissed her mother.

The young blonde's chin lifted. "Are all viscounts as delicate as you?"

His host laughed, and Harry dragged his gaze from the unconventional miss to Carlew as he said, "Not all, Serena, but Carmichael here is a special case."

"I am special, it is true," Harry agreed humbly, to a titter of laughter. From all except the cool blonde with the stormy sea-blue eyes.

DINNER THAT NIGHT was delicious, his host's budget as generous as the cook's abilities. White soup for the entrée, followed by a haunch of venison, lobster, goose, quail, French beans, peas, asparagus, and an assortment of pastries. Candlelight flickered, conversation simmered, the tinkle and scrape of silver on porcelain, it was a meal of friends—save for the silent girl opposite.

Harry swallowed another piece of lobster—really, quite delectable—and eyed the serene Miss Winthrop. Yes, he remembered Jon's warning to not engage her in frivolous flirtations, and to be honest, he had no desire to do so, certain as he was that she would give him another set down. But he *did* want to see her smile.

His neighbor, the Countess of Hawkesbury, murmured a request for the quail, and Harry obliged, serving her from the platter nearby.

"Thank you, sir."

"You are most welcome. Lady Hawkesbury, my sources tell me you have lived in this area for some time."

"Your sources are correct," she replied. "I have lived here all my life apart from our stints at Hawkesbury House and the town house."

"You do not prefer such places?"

"Hawkesbury House is a little too grand for Nicholas and myself and our baby, although we do visit from time to time"—her voice lowered—"as much as to remind ourselves of its existence as to remind his mother of ours."

He chuckled. "I understand. It can be hard for one generation to make room for the next. The only way my grandmother survived my parents' assumption to the title was through her insistence that the dower house be modified to replicate Welmsley Hall. Of course, it does not have quite the same prospect, but I think she is resigned to it now."

"She sounds quite formidable."

"She is the sweetest lady imaginable," Jon said, from his position at the end of the table. "I still remember her kindnesses when I visited Harry during Oxford days."

"You should visit us there again sometime, Jon," Harry said, sipping his wine. "Bring your lovely wife, of course."

"That sounds an excellent plan."

"Especially now that the season is done." He glanced over. A shadow crossed the ever-composed face. In a voice he hoped sounded devoid of all tease, he said, "Miss Winthrop, do you look forward to making your presentation next year?"

Her eyes touched his then glanced away, her mouth one tight line, as her mother trilled, "Of course she does, Lord Carmichael. One can only hope the Queen will remain well and have no need to delay the drawing rooms like this year. Serena is looking forward to it immensely."

He caught a flicker in the blue eyes, the slight curling of her lip. Somehow he did not think the young lady agreed. "I'm sure you will find London pleasurable," he said politely.

Beside him, the countess cleared her throat. "We were talking of that earlier, weren't we, Serena? I'm afraid, Lord Carmichael, that Miss Winthrop and I are agreed that we much prefer the delights of country living to the noise and smells of the city."

He glanced between them, conscious of some strange tension around the table that Lady Hawkesbury's words seemed to have dispelled. "Then I'm sure you would enjoy my part of the world. We may not have such pretty hills as the Cotswolds in our back garden, but our peaks and valleys are considered to be amongst the finest in England." A rush of longing for his home surged through his chest. "Many artists visit my part of Derbyshire because of its vast beauty."

“You make it sound very lovely, my lord.” The countess leaned forward. “Tell me, Serena, how goes your art?” She glanced up at him. “Serena has a wonderful gift, you know. Drawing, painting, why, she can take a subject’s likeness in just a few minutes.”

He nodded, glancing across to see the young artist’s suddenly stricken look, her expression twisting the corners of his heart. As Lady Hawkesbury quickly turned the subject, he turned to Jon, noting the knit brow and slight shake of his head. His heart pulled a little more.

Clearly Miss Serena was not as tranquil as her countenance had led him to believe.