

 CHAPTER ONE

London
November 1818

SURELY A PROSPECTIVE husband must elicit greater feeling than the comfort experienced when wearing one's favorite slippers? Caroline Hatherleigh adjusted her skirts as the Berkeley Square door knocker tapped three times, and then glanced at the gentleman beside her. With his high shirt points and carefully sculpted sandy hair, the Honorable Edward Amherst looked the very picture of respectability. But then he should, being the second son of the Earl of Rovingham, and destined to enjoy the same social standing of which she also partook.

Really, she thought, eyeing him, if Ned wasn't a second son, and someone she considered as a brother, he would almost do as a husband. He was so generally well-disposed to be pleased, and inclined to obey her smallest summon, as his accompanying her on this afternoon's outing demonstrated. In fact, if it wasn't for a faint suspicion that a certain other young lady might never forgive her, she would almost dare to lift a finger and see if the approval she always met in his eyes could warm to something sweeter.

Before she could pursue these thoughts further, the door opened and a servant enquired of them. All thought of matrimony was abandoned as she announced herself and her companion. "I am sure Lady Carmichael will see me, seeing as we are old school chums and all."

“If you’d be good enough to wait here.” The elderly retainer gestured to a small room, filled with art sure to please the recent bride—Serena had always been inclined to artistic endeavor, while Caroline had always possessed more appreciation for artwork than skill.

She smiled as memories of their former art master grew large. Mr. Goode had proved to be quite a good teacher, as his help in developing her sketching ability from mediocre to passable had shown. Of course, his efforts in other affairs had shown him to be anything but good. His later attentions to Serena had led to a scandal of no small size earlier this year when he’d been seen dragging her away at the Summer Exhibition, or so Lord Burford Snowstrem had said, a man whose proclivity for gossip even eclipsed Caroline’s own. But such a situation had somehow resulted in Serena securing the attention of Lord Henry Carmichael, the very-soon future Earl of Bevington, or so society whispered, due to his father’s poor health. Perhaps a bit of scandal did not hurt a young lady’s prospects to the degree that Mother believed after all.

“What are you smiling about?” Ned whispered. “I always mistrust that look.”

“Something which says far more about your sad, suspicious nature than it does about me,” Caroline countered, her lips tilting higher. “I am simply glad to finally be able to visit my friend after her recent, most advantageous marriage.”

“Won’t she think it strange that I accompany you, rather than your mother or sister?”

“Perhaps. But Serena is too well bred to ever exhibit curiosity about such things. Besides, Mother made it clear that I was to fulfill my obligations and pay a visit today.” Though she probably did not expect Caroline to be so fortunate as to encounter Ned on her way to Berkeley Square and demand he serve as her escort, rather than Mary, Caroline’s maid. Not that it mattered. Mother thought of him as a son.

She shrugged, aiming for nonchalance. “Mother is too busy seeing to Cecilia these days, preparing her for next year’s come out.”

Tension knotted her chest. Would her younger sister be more suc-

cessful in her first season than Caroline had been in hers? Mother had not been cross. Not exactly. But she had made no secret of her desire to see her eldest daughter secure a husband as soon as possible. How to explain to Mother that no young man had ever elicited more than a general warmth in the vicinity of her heart? Not that she expected to marry for love—such feelings were common, and far beneath the daughters of Aynsley, so Mama always said. But if one were to marry, Caroline would much rather feel there to be a degree of mutual respect and esteem for herself as a person, rather than mere respect and esteem for her dowry.

“Forgive me, Caro, but your frown suggests I might be considered an intrusion.”

She tossed her chestnut curls impatiently. “They will not think that, seeing as you are with me.”

He chuckled. “Always so self-assured, aren’t you?”

“Of course. Why ever would I not be?”

Ned shook his head, his smile stretching, but she knew he meant no harm. For she only spoke the truth. As Lord Aynsley’s daughter, her position in life had been assured since birth. She would marry well—how could she not when she was guaranteed a dowry of fifty thousand pounds?—and she would live in a large estate not too far from her parents, and she would fulfill the role her parents had been training her for since she was a small girl: the doyenne of her community, wife to a peer, and one-day mother to his children. Such was the role mapped out for her. She smiled, not without complacency.

“Caroline!”

She glanced up at the door, quickly pushing to her feet. “Serena.” She held out her hands. “I knew you would not wish to deny me. How are you?”

As she spoke she quickly scanned her former school friend. A tinge of dissatisfaction stole through her. If Caroline was to be completely honest, it would appear that Serena did not look absolutely delighted to see her, indeed seemed to almost hold a vague look of impatience in her expression. Her chest knotted. Surely Serena had not misunderstood their last encounter at Somerset House six months ago?

"I am well," said Serena. "What are you doing in London?"

"Oh, we're here preparing for Cecilia's come out." Noticing her friend's glance at Mr. Amherst, she performed the introductions. "I don't believe you have met before."

"No." There was no look of speculation in Serena's eyes, nothing to indicate any degree of interest in the young man at all. But Caroline supposed that was nothing much to wonder at, seeing as Serena had always been more interested in her art than anything—or anyone—else.

After a polite exchange of shared reminiscences, Caroline finally managed to convince Serena as to the benefits of a longer visit, and they were invited into a blue drawing room. There she was surprised to encounter, not Lord Carmichael as she had hoped—for it would be quite something if she could boast to Mama and Cecilia that she had spoken with the dashing young lord whom Serena had secured—but a young lady she had never met before, a very pale blonde whose features seemed strained, and whose comical expression of surprise suggested that she had been waiting for someone else.

"Forgive me for intruding," Serena said. "A former school friend of mine has called, and I thought I might introduce you. Caroline, this is Mrs. Julia Hale. Julia, this is Lord Aynsley's daughter, Miss Caroline Hatherleigh."

Mrs. Hale? Now why did that name ring a faint bell? Schooling her expression to hide her curiosity, she dipped a small curtsy. "Pleased to meet you."

She glanced at Ned as Serena continued the introductions, disconcerted by the look of keen interest in his eyes. He had certainly never gazed at Caroline like that.

"How do you do?" he offered with a bow.

Caroline glanced at Julia before returning her attention to Serena. "You must forgive me, but when I learned you were in town I could not pass up the opportunity to see you again. It has been so many months since Miss Haverstock's, and I cannot but wish we had stayed in closer contact this past year." She chattered about some *on-dit* of town, before saying, "Oh, it is good to see you again, Serena."

It did not take long before her friend's initial frost thawed, and they were engaged in swapping recollections of shared confidences from their times at Haverstock's, and other occasions when Serena had visited Aynsley Manor.

She eyed her friend, trying to peer beneath the inscrutable mask that led to an expression so like her name, but Serena remained calm, indeed seemed to own a new, somewhat disconcerting sense of peace. Unlike the other young lady, whom Ned had taken to most unexpectedly. Had he not heard her introduced as a married woman?

As if sensing her displeasure, he caught her eye and gave a tiny nod before returning his attention to the young lady and offering a small bow. "Caroline, I believe it is time for us to depart. Thank you, Lady Carmichael, for the chance to meet you, and your lovely friend."

Serena inclined her head in a gesture befitting a countess, and murmured something of her pleasure at the unexpected visit, but made no mention of hopes for a return call.

Hmm. Caroline lifted her chin. Well, if Serena chose the likes of the nondescript Hale woman—where *had* she heard that name before?—then so be it. Serena should know not to expect an invitation to Aynsley again.

"And after all we did for her," she muttered, as they descended the steps to the waiting carriage.

"I beg your pardon, my dear?"

She shook her head, waiting until they were inside the carriage and the servants could not hear. "I am simply surprised, that is all. After all, we condescended to invite her to Aynsley not a few times, and did so, despite her father proving himself to be a most debased man, gambling his family into decrepitude. And this is the thanks we are to receive!"

"From my conversation with her rather lovely friend, I gather it was not meant to be a slight but rather an expectation that family would soon arrive."

"Oh. Well, that is different then." Somewhat appeased, she smoothed her skirt then peered at him. "You certainly seemed to enjoy your time."

“Mrs. Hale is a very lovely young lady.”

“A very lovely young lady who is *married*.”

“Yes, well, that is a tad unfortunate.”

She blinked. This was a side to her neighbor that she had not seen before. “Surely you would not wish to pursue a married woman?”

“No.” He sighed. “I confess, though, that spending time with a pretty creature like that would be more amusing than . . .” His brow creased.

“Than what?”

“Oh, you know, than trying to fend off the young ladies so often casting lures my way.”

“It must be *so* trying.”

“Well, you would know. I have seen more than a few young gentlemen interested in you for your fortune.”

Offense heated her chest. “And my good name and connections,” she reminded him sharply.

“And that, too, of course,” he soothed. “That goes without saying.”

But when she had returned to her family’s town house in Hanover Square, his words continued to steal through her earlier complacency. Was it true that the gentlemen she preferred to mildly flirt with were more enamored of her fortune than her face? Granted, she was not as fair as either Serena or Mrs. Hale, but she had received many a pretty compliment on her fine looks. No, she thought, looking at herself in the looking glass. She might not be *quite* so fair, but she was certainly not a hag. Besides, why should any of that matter? She was destined to marry someone who held the same values, who cared about family connections as much as the amount she might bring to the marriage. Such an alliance would bring assurance, would bring satisfaction, would bring contentment, just as it had for her parents. She peered more closely at her reflection, noting the shiny red beginnings of a spot next to her nose, and frowned.

So why did something deep inside whisper for something more?



Sidmouth, Devon

If he could but reach that one rock more . . .

Wind whistled, whipping his collar, the spraying sea salt dampening his hair. Erasmus Gideon Kirby Carstairs felt his grip on the rocks slip. His fingers tightened. Breath hastened. Legs dangled. His pulse scampered like the furious pounding of waves far below. Skin scraped against stone, yet he would not fall, could not fall, not when duty, not when love, demanded he live.

He gritted his teeth, hugging the layers of shale and rock as misty rain grew more insistent, driving into his skin, drenching his clothes, the drops stinging like pellets from a shotgun. How could he have known the weather would turn so quickly? How could he have known the tide would surge so fast that escape was only possible through a cliffside ascent?

Muttering a prayer for strength, he hauled himself—inch by blessed inch—to the cliff top and pushed over the edge and onto the slippery grass. He heaved a deep breath. Dragged the sack and satchel from his shoulders. Waited as his frantic pulse slowed.

When his breathing steadied, he rolled to his back, staring up at the dripping sky. That had been close. Perhaps he should have heeded Emma’s warning, for today’s expedition had come perilously close to being his last. But how was he to know the cliff would start to crumble so dramatically?

His lips twisted. Well, he should have known, should have listened to Belcher’s warnings that the cliffs surrounding Sidmouth were none too safe this time of year. Gideon had thought Belcher had referred to something more clandestine than a mere search for fossils; this stretch of coastline held a number of interesting crags and coves less scrupulous men might like to use. Regardless—he glanced at the sack lying limply on the sodden grass—he should have paid attention to those locals who had looked at him askance as they answered his questions about Sidmouth’s surrounds.

Pushing to his feet, stumbling upright, he gazed down at the treacherous froth of white below. Guilt soared within. Was his quest

so very necessary? What if the unthinkable had happened, leaving Emma all alone? How would she cope? What would become of her?

“God, protect her,” he muttered into the wind.

Was it so very reckless to have left all they knew for his search of the as-yet unknown? He suspected their brother believed so, but he’d prayed and felt reassurance that hiding in plain sight could still work. And surely this yearning inside was not completely self-centered, was about more than wanting to derive personal attention and acclaim?

“God,” he addressed the heavens, “You know I do this to understand You more.”

He felt assurance wash within, and released a breath, but soon sensed the familiar discouragement lap his soul. Perhaps God wanted Gideon to know He could not be brought down to the level of a man, that His ways would forever remain incomprehensible to those formed from the earth’s dust. Was that why Gideon remained find-less still?

The rain eased, the fog shifting to permit study of the shoreline, the white cliffs of Beer Head shining in the distance. Intense examination of William Smith’s map *A Delineation of the Strata of England and Wales* had convinced him this section of coastline could hold the same mysteries as those farther east. The geology was not so very different, after all. Indeed, William Buckland’s recently published table of strata suggested these cliffs held similarities with certain sections of the Continent, sections which the French naturalist Georges Cuvier believed held species entirely lost to the modern world.

So why had his expeditions proved fruitless? Yes, he had found the odd specimen here or there, but nothing yet wondrous. Logic suggested that this stretch of coast would hold treasure similar to that found in Lyme Regis just seven years ago. His heart burned. If only he could be the one to unearth it.

After wiping the worst of the mud from his hands and sleeves and straightening his apparel, he collected his belongings and turned toward home, following the grassed path that led from the cliff edge to the tamer village surrounds. He knew his appearance might come as something of a surprise.

He strode up the last of the rough-hewn steps to the cottage atop

the hill. A smile quickened to his lips at the sight of the well-wrapped young woman sitting in a chair in the garden of their new abode.

She looked up. “Gideon!” The lines of suffering marring her face smoothed as her eyes lit. “You finished far sooner than I expected.”

“And far sooner than I had anticipated.” Or wanted. He hid the disappointment with a grin. “But such things permitted my seeing you the sooner.”

“You are sweet.”

“Although I must confess I did not expect to find you sitting out of doors.”

“I have been here but a minute,” she assured him. “I simply needed some fresh air.”

Gideon glanced at the middle-aged woman standing behind Emma. She gave an almost imperceptible nod. His heart eased, and he nodded dismissal.

“So, what exciting discoveries did you make today?”

He sighed, sinking into the chair beside her. “Nothing too dramatic, I’m afraid. A few fish bones, I believe, but nothing to warrant the term *exciting*.”

“New discoveries still await you.” She patted his hand.

He smiled at her. “And this is why I love you. You are always so quick to see the positive, eager to encourage. You are a true blessing.”

“Now you are being silly. How can I not be enthused when we are so fortunate as to enjoy such a situation?” Emma motioned toward the sea, now tinted with silver, reflecting the leaden clouds above.

“Still, you should not be outside—”

“Oh, pooh!” she said, waving off his concern with a surprising energy. “I had no desire to remain indoors, despite what Mrs. Ballard might say.”

“She’s only looking out for you.”

“I know, but I am stronger than I appear.”

“It is just that I am worried about you.”

“I know. But really, you know you should not.” Her smile grew a little crooked. “Do you not remember what Father used to say? Are we not supposed to present our worries to the Lord?”

"I try."

"I know you do," she said, green eyes gleaming. "And I also know you are very trying."

A chuckle pushed past the tension, his heart gladdened by her return to the air of mischief he remembered from long ago. "But that will not stop me from doing all I can to preserve your health for as long as possible."

A trace of pensiveness crossed her features. "Just escaping to come here has done that." Her gaze grazed his upper cheek, marred by the raised, red scar inflicted two weeks ago.

He shook his head at her, willing her to banish the guilt he knew hovered on her tongue.

"Every day I have to pinch myself that this is real. Oh, Gideon, you cannot know how glad I am that you brought me here."

"I have some idea," he said, forcing up his lips, even as a strain of sadness stole within. He would do all in his power to ensure Emma's days were filled with as much brightness as possible. For a world without her in it—

"Please don't," she murmured, as if sensing his spiraling thoughts.

"I cannot help it," he muttered. "I wish there were more I could do, more that the doctors could do."

"Which is a form of worry, is it not?" Her hand squeezed gently, too gently. "Believe me, I know of your concern. And I am simply thankful that you cared enough to bring me here, and we can spend more time together."

His throat tightened, and he shook his head, willing the emotion away, willing the tease and banter to return. "You are good to say so, especially when I leave you for hours on end every day just to explore cliffs and coves."

"I am so very understanding, aren't I?" She sighed. "I suspect that if I did not allow such things, then you would pace the house like that caged lion we saw years ago at the Royal Menagerie, and I would be forced to suffer the pain of listening to you espouse for the hundredth time the importance of scientific discovery, all the while pretending interest in something I dare not admit bores me silly."

A chuckle pushed past his earlier melancholy. "Yes, I've seen exactly how bored you are, asking me question after question. You, my dear, might profess to all the world to be a pious young lady, but I know just what a liar and a schemer you can be."

"Me? Scheme?"

"You. Scheme. No, don't go widening your eyes at me like I might not actually know you. I know you wrote letters to potential benefactors and sought funding for an expedition to France. I can never forgive you, you know."

"Never?" A smile tilted her lips.

"Never!"

She laughed. "Yes, well, I have seen just how much you have hated being here, being beholden to me."

He drew closer and gave her an affectionate hug, kissing her brow. How good it was to see the return of her spirits.

"Oh! Before I forget: a letter arrived for you."

"Do you know from whom it is?"

"Well, seeing it was addressed to E. Carstairs, I might have just happened to examine the return direction, especially as it had a seal and all."

Interest flickered. "A seal, you say?"

"A seal, I say." She nodded solemnly. "And naturally, I could not let such a piece of correspondence pass into your hands without first assuring myself it did not belong in my hands—"

"Naturally."

"—so I felt myself obliged to open it, whence I discovered it most properly did belong in your hands, so here it is."

He received the letter stretched towards him and flicked it open, scanning through the closely written pages. "It is from Lord Kenmore."

"Yes." Something about the way she said that made him look at her closely, but her dark green eyes only stared back benignly. "Well? What does he say?"

He should have known, despite her teasing words, she would adhere to the code of honor they both had clung to since they were small. He quickly scanned the contents, releasing a low whistle. "Well."

“Well what?” She eyed him avidly.

“It appears our Irish friend wants to visit in the spring.”

“Really?”

He narrowed his eyes at her, but her gaze remained composed. “This is not more of your doing, is it?”

“Why, Gideon. How can you ask such a thing? Surely you cannot think me so underhanded as to invite your closest friend to a short stay on the beautiful Devon coast?”

“I don’t know what could have given me such an idea.”

“And surely you cannot think I have lost all propriety as to write to an unmarried man?”

“You are certainly not the poor innocent you like people to think.”

“Again, you make me sound like I’m a schemer, when I am anything but. Now don’t look at me like that! If you must know, I *might* have mentioned the potential for an invitation in my letter to Lady Cardross, and if she happened to mention it to her brother, well, I cannot be held responsible for that. Nor for any inclination of his to want to see you. Nor for the fact Aidan might find your work here of great interest.”

“Aidan, is it?”

“That *is* his name. Really, I do think you are most unkind to your poor Emma.”

“Poor Emma indeed,” he said, flicking the letter back and forth.

“Well, if you don’t like the idea, then write and tell him no. It makes no difference to me.”

“Does it not?”

A trace of color filled her cheeks. “It does not, and casting aspersions to the contrary does you no favors.”

“Well then, there is only one thing for it.” Gideon held out his hand and helped her to her feet. “We best return inside before those clouds resume delivering the rain they appear to promise, so I can write my reply.”

Her hand grasped his forearm a little tighter. “And that reply would be?”

“That I prefer he arrive at his earliest convenience.”

The hand clutching his arm relaxed. “Truly?”

“Truly,” he said, escorting her inside just as spits of rain recommenced.

For why shouldn’t he want his fellow scientist and closest friend to assist him as they sought to unravel one of the greatest mysteries in the natural world?