

 CHAPTER ONE

Aynsley Manor, Somerset
June 1819

IT WAS, PERHAPS, the greatest torment to love someone who barely seemed to notice one's existence. Cecilia Hatherleigh glanced across the ballroom as Edward Amherst, second son of the Earl of Rovingham, danced with her sister. Her newly married sister. Her newly married sister who even now was laughing with him in that way that suggested friendly understanding of the sort Cecy could never hope to share.

She swallowed, studying the sparkly embellishments trimming her pale green satin slippers, wishing, not for the first time, that she had been born with but a tenth of the confidence her elder sister possessed. It was not as if Caroline was that much more attractive; they shared the same fair skin, blue eyes, and chestnut curls, though Caro's curls be a shade darker. It was not as if Caro was kinder or more thoughtful. Indeed, up until recently, Cecy was fairly sure most people would have given such plaudits to herself, not the eldest daughter of Lord Aynsley, whose confidence tended to brusque abrasiveness. But Caro's newfound happiness seemed to have led to a contentment that infused her previously hard features with softness, her words and actions indicative of a kindly consideration Cecy welcomed. Gone was the flinty-eyed sister whose pronouncements used to make her squirm. Was that the effect of love, or some deeper change?

Love. She gulped. Peeked up. Watched the fair head of Ned Amherst whirl away. How could he remain blind to her? Was she that unappealing? Granted, she rarely knew what to say to gentlemen, but at least she did not complain or gossip about others like some young ladies were wont to do. Why couldn't young gentlemen assign greater importance to things like that rather than the shape of one's face or form?

Sophia Heathcote whirled by—much too young to be out, Mama had said—and cast Cecy a look that could be construed as pitying. She writhed internally again. Sophia was but Verity's age, but one would hardly think so, judging from the way Verity carried on with her hoydenish behavior, as indifferent to balls and her future as if she were a changeling child, and not—as the third daughter of the Viscount Aynsley—destined for great things on the marriage mart. Such actions had led to an accident this morning that had nearly caused the wedding to be postponed; an accident Verity still refused to speak on, but which had damaged her leg and caused her to miss tonight's proceedings. Not that Verity seemed to mind, save for the disappointment of missing out on the food.

Cecy glanced across at her mother who sat with the other older ladies with an air of benevolent complacency. Benevolent to her guests, perhaps, but her words this morning to her youngest daughter seemed strained of any kindness. "How could you? On your sister's wedding day, no less?"

Verity had lifted her chin. "It was not as if I *planned* to fall."

"Because you never take heed for anyone's interests but your own, you thoughtless, thoughtless child!"

Cecy had intervened at this point, calling her mother's attention to a matter concerning her gown, a distraction for which Verity had given a small but grateful smile as Cecy hurried Mama away. Verity could appear heedless, but her impetuous nature flowed from a generosity of heart that had seen her fall into more than a few scrapes over the years, and Cecy had long known her role to be one of peacemaker between the two personalities who held such divergent opinions on the value and worth of ladylike activities.

Mama took Verity's decided disinterest in all things deemed necessary for young ladies as a personal affront; fortunately, she could not lay the same charges against Cecy. "Such a well-behaved gel," had always been the report of her teachers at Miss Haverstock's Seminary, a moniker she had overheard not a few times from elderly relatives and those neighbors of a kindly disposition. And Cecilia had tried to do all that Mama had asked—practicing her music, her needlepoint, her conversation with said neighbors. She had even held her tongue when forced to succumb to Mama's embarrassing steely-eyed focus after Cecy's unfortunate unguarded reaction to learning the news about Ned's accident late last year.

So, whilst Caro had been staying at Grandmama's having a marvellous time meeting the man she would marry, Cecy had been enduring Mama's concentrated efforts to assure the world her second daughter was most definitely *not* enamored of a certain neighboring earl's second son. It had proved a relief to have Mama's energies turn from Cecy's presentation in London to Caro's wedding, events Mama seemed hopeful would throw Cecy in the path of far more eligible gentlemen.

But Mama's efforts were insufficient to drive this cruel fascination away.

Ned's features lit as he appeared to laugh at something Caro said, and Cecy pressed her lips together as the terrible envy roared again. Why did he have to dance with her sister? Why couldn't he—for once!—notice Cecy instead? How unfair that her sister should get all the attention and Cecy none.

"Cecilia," her mother's voice hissed.

She dredged up a smile and affixed it to her face, willing herself not to give any reason for the speculation so many people here were eager to engage in. She might feel despair, but there was no reason to let anyone titter over her suffering.

The music finished, leaving Cecy to look about and wonder whether any young gentlemen would be so bold as to approach her. It was strange her mother had not ensured that more young gentlemen would be present here tonight. She had felt certain Mama

would want the extra numbers in order to distract Cecy from thinking about a certain ineligible young gentleman, though he be an earl's son. Her lips twisted. Perhaps Mama had been too busy hastening arrangements for the future of her favored eldest daughter to give much thought to the futures of her less-loved, younger daughters.

"Miss Cecilia."

The voice of that particular earl's son caused her to quickly turn, his smile eliciting a painful throb in her heart and her cheeks to heat. "Hello, Ned."

His features might not be to every girl's taste, but, oh, how handsome he seemed to her. Green eyes that held golden glints; fair hair that needed no tongs to curl; a smile that dug twin dimples in his cheeks and tugged delicious warmth within her chest. And then there was his scent, oh, so delectable, with its spicy mix of bergamot, sandalwood, and musk, a scent she dreamed about, the slightest whiff quickening a powerful yearning inside.

But more than this was his kindness, his good humor, the way he was so quick to oblige—save in offering her the attention she longed for. And as she was a praying woman, and knew him to be a praying man, she had the oddest sense that God had destined him to be hers. The thought made his ignorance of her so much the harder. For as long as she had known him, Ned Amherst had pulled at her heartstrings.

"Would you do me the honor of this dance?" He held out a hand.

Her heart began a rapid tattoo. Oh! Finally—finally!—she would dance with him. He wanted her to dance with him—he wanted *her*—not her sister, not some prettier young lady, not someone *else*. She accepted his hand, the touch shivering all the way to her spine, the glow in her heart sure to be suffusing her features as they moved to join the dance formations. Not that she cared what others might think. It was enough that he had noticed her, and wanted her, and perhaps she could finally persuade him to consider her as a potential love—

"Caro once told me I should dance with you."

Cecy blinked. Stumbled. Felt the heat in her cheeks flame to a

scorching fire as she scurried to keep up the movements of the dance. "I beg your pardon?"

She barely heard his words repeat, wincing as the movements of the dance drew him away. What kind of idiot was she? Did she really want to hear his rejection again? That he only danced with her because her *sister* told him to? Emotion tightened her chest, touched the back of her eyes, as the couples around them smiled and spun with laughter, oblivious to her mortification.

He returned, eyes serious, lips pulled up into wryness. ". . . said as my good deed I should dance with you."

The shame curdling within waned under the weight of her anger. She stopped, heedless of the couples twirling about her, heedless of those who would gape and stare, the heat within pushing words into her mouth. "You . . . you are dancing with me as some sort of good deed?"

He flushed. "I suppose when you put it like that it doesn't sound so good."

Her bottom lip wobbled. She bit it savagely. Flinched at the pain, pain which wove with the strands of her hurt and frustration, binding tightness around her heart and felling the guard around her mouth. "Oh, you *suppose* that, do you?" She pulled her hands from his, blinking away the moisture gathering in her eyes. "Forgive me, but I'm not interested in being the recipient of your charity, Ned."

"Miss Cecilia, I didn't mean—"

"To belittle me? To sound so patronizing?" Oh my! Where was this coming from? She almost sounded like Verity—or at least the heroine of one of her Minerva Press novels.

"Cecilia, I am sorry. Please, people are watching." He held out his hand.

She eyed it, then him, her spurt of temper dying as quickly as it had risen. Truly, he did appear a little ashamed. Her gaze lifted, encountering her mother's hard stare, which forced her to accede to his request and place her hand in his again.

"Thank you," he murmured.

Embarrassment washed across her again, and she ducked her head,

conscious he was speaking but barely able to make out his words. She shouldn't have been so quick to get cross, she should remember to control her tongue, and to take the moment to enjoy this dance with him. Her shrewish manners had doubtless given him such a disgust of her that she would never have this opportunity again.

A lump formed in her throat, and she did her best to focus, to answer his questions and pretend all was well between them, but her earlier words caused a cloud to darken any enjoyment she might have previously entertained. She stared at his neckcloth, disappointment and frustration spinning around her. Why was it when she finally received the opportunity to dance with him she had to spoil it so thoroughly? Why couldn't she be content with the scraps he gave her—the occasional smile, the brief greeting—why was she so hungry for more? Oh, *why*, when he only overlooked her, seeing her as Caro's little sister if he saw her at all, did her heart demand she still care? Why couldn't she rid her emotions of him, as Mama had begged, after the scandal of last year? But no. Her foolish heart still demanded she care, still dreamed of his smile, still hoped for his notice. She must be a fool. A very stupid, very silly fool.

“. . . seem extremely happy.”

She peeked up, noticed he was looking at Caro, as her sister danced with her new husband. The envy tugged again. What would it take for him to look at her with such intensity?

Tears burned; she blinked them away. Perhaps this trial was yet another way God was trying to gain her attention, so she would focus more on Him, and not let the distractions of this world steal her thoughts and emotions. Perhaps Mama was right, and Ned Amherst held the rakish tendencies she so deplored, even if social obligations—and the fact the earl was one of their nearest neighbors—meant the connection could never be severed entirely.

She gritted her teeth, forced her lips upward, and answered his questions as politely as she could. Perhaps one day her heart could fix instead on a man who sought her—who loved her—rather than desperately declare herself satisfied with the scraps of attention given her from a man who would never truly notice her anyway.

The music stopped. She curtsied, applauded, her gaze lifting no higher than his chin. If she was forced to look into his green-gold eyes those tears might spill and she would embarrass herself even more than she had so far.

Perhaps it was finally time to walk away.



Ned bowed, his gaze lifting as Cecilia Hatherleigh moved stiffly away, the crystal beads decorating her pale green gown twinkling under the candlelight. Such a strange girl, normally so shy he could barely get a word from her, yet tonight she certainly seemed to have found her tongue. Well, she had for a surprising few minutes, before relapsing into that awkward shyness he knew her for. How unlike her sisters. Not open like Caro at all. He glanced across at today's bride. He supposed Carstairs would prove a suitable husband, and it wasn't as if her parents would have entertained his own suit. His lips twisted. After last year's scandal, it was unlikely that any parents would entertain his suit. He drew in a deep breath, forced himself to relax. Forgiven. He was forgiven. If nothing else, God's saving grace had shown him that.

He moved to where his parents sat, his father wearing an expression that held the slightest tinge of boredom, his mother's graciousness screening any dissatisfaction she might feel with the company they kept. His brother intercepted him, glass of wine in hand, before steering him to a chamber adjoining the ballroom, a hall filled with marble statuary and shadows.

"Did someone upset the middle Hatherleigh chit?"

"What?"

"Cecilia walked off looking woebegone." He drained his glass. "I don't know why she holds a candle for you."

"She doesn't."

His brother laughed, fueling uncertainty.

"She doesn't! I've never given her any reason to suppose I care for her."

“I’ve never understood what it is about you that makes ladies willing to cast propriety to the wind and engage in behavior that would cause most parents to shudder.”

Ned bit his tongue. He couldn’t blame his brother for expressing such sentiments; he didn’t understand it himself. Although perhaps it helped that he didn’t have John’s propensity for bitterness, a bitterness past months had only seemed to exacerbate. But still . . . “You’re wrong about Cecilia.”

“Am I?”

“I’m just a neighbor, and barely know her. I have always been more Caro’s friend than hers.”

“Not that you’ll get much chance of being her friend now she’s heading north with her scientist husband.”

“She’s moving north?”

“I believe that’s what Londonberry said. Apparently Carstairs has some small kind of estate up that way. Not that I imagine they’ll spend long there, as he seems to care only for rocks and fossil-type things. And Caroline now, of course.”

“Of course.” A sense of loneliness washed through him. He could count on two fingers the people he considered as friends, and now one was as good as lost to him. Not that he begrudged Caro’s marriage—Gideon Carstairs was her choice, and as heir to the Marquess of Londonberry could offer so much more than Ned ever could—but he would miss their interactions, and the trust and tease fostered by a close friendship of many years standing.

John turned to face a picture of the three Aynsley daughters, painted as they posed in white, affecting some Grecian scene. Words sprouted to remembrance.

“Utterly boring!” Caro had described the time. “My arms were aching from holding the urn, and Verity was constantly demanding to be freed to ride her horse, which of course annoyed Mama so much that she and Verity had the most severe set-to, which of course put an end to any more painting that day.”

He frowned. Had Caro mentioned Cecilia at all, or had she been overlooked, the forgotten middle child, as seemed to be her way?

Situated between two headstrong sisters he supposed it was not to be wondered at that Cecy was so meek and mild. Save for today. He turned from the painted image staring accusingly at him, to pretend interest in the next picture.

"I never would have imagined someone like Caroline Hatherleigh ending up with someone like him."

Nor had Ned. He pressed his lips together.

"I suppose it helps he's Londonberry's brother. Shame you're only the brother of a viscount, not a marquess."

"One must endeavor to make the best of one's family situation."

"Seems we get little choice," John muttered.

Again, he held his peace. Well he understood his brother's justifiable resentment, Ned's actions last year seeming to have driven a deeper wedge between them. Keeping his tongue between his teeth was surely just another part of the price he must pay for his indiscretions. Perhaps God might consider such restraint and deign to look on Ned with a drop of favor. Heaven knew he needed it.

"Families are funny things," John continued, gesturing to the walls lined with older pictures of the Hatherleigh and Aynsley connections. "It's hard to believe the Aynsleys could have produced such a strange little duck as poor Cecilia. But I guess every family has to have one simpleton."

He eyed Ned in a way that left no guessing as to which of John's family members he believed fit this category.

Ned ignored the personal insult and concentrated on the slur made about Caro's sister. "Cecilia is not a simpleton."

"Perhaps, perhaps not." John shrugged carelessly. "Regardless, she is not exactly forthcoming, except when it comes to making her concern so very plain."

"She holds no interest for me," Ned reiterated.

"Not even with the fifty thousand? Surely such a dowry would sweeten the awkward gaucherie."

"You shouldn't say such things," he said in a low voice.

His brother stared at him hard then turned as a footman entered the room.

“Excuse me, gentlemen, is there anything I can get for you?”

“Another two glasses of champagne,” John said.

“Oh, but I don’t—” Ned began.

“But I do,” John continued in an undervoice. “Although I’d probably need two bottles to come anywhere near redeeming the evening.”

“Very good, sir.” The footman gestured to the door. “If you’d care to come this way.”

John continued muttering as he strode from the room, leaving Ned—as was his wont—to follow, before a slight sound drew his attention to the dim recesses of the chamber. He strained to see past the shadows cast by the statuary. “Hello?”

No answer. Then the faintest rustle drew his attention to the far doors. He caught the merest glimpse as a pale green gown swished away, suggesting that their careless comments had not been unheeded, and had, in fact, been overheard by the very subject of their conversation.

Oh no. *Dear God, help her forgive me.* His groan echoed through the chamber as regret, hungry regret, gnawed his heart.

Again.