

SERENDIPITY & SECRETS

*The* LOST  
LIEUTENANT



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*The Lost Lieutenant*

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## CHAPTER 1

*Seaton Estate*  
*Berkshire, England*  
*January 4, 1813*

“YOU’LL DO AS you’re told if you know what’s good for you. I won’t be humiliated again.”

Diana Seaton gripped the back of the chair she stood behind, grateful to have the piece of furniture between her and her father. Red suffused his face, and his eyes glittered. He paced the oriental rug in front of the fireplace in the drawing room of Seaton Manor.

She gathered her courage. “But wouldn’t it be better if I remained here this Season? I could look after Cian—”

“Do *not* mention that name here. Not his and not his trollop of a mother’s.” The Duke of Seaton halted his pacing and jabbed his beringed finger toward Diana. Her pleas wadded into a lump in her throat, and fierce tears pricked her eyes.

Her half sister, Catherine, hadn’t been a trollop. She’d been an innocent, a naïve debutante taken advantage of by a true rake and scoundrel—a mistake that, had word gotten out, would’ve cost her reputation, and in the end had cost her life. But Diana knew better than to protest aloud to her father.

“It’s bad enough to have her spawn here in the house. At least she had the decency to die and rid us of her shameful presence. I wish both of them had.” He stalked to the drinks cabinet and poured himself a whiskey,

though it was barely ten in the morning. This would be a bad day, if he was starting his drinking so early.

Diana only wished he didn't mean it when he said he was glad his daughter had died in childbirth, but she had too much evidence to the contrary to deny it. The Duke of Seaton was at once a womanizer and woman hater. He had not loved any of his three now-deceased wives, marrying them for either their fortune or the power the alliance would bring him. Each had borne him a child, and he hadn't loved any of them either. He was not capable of love. Only power. Control. And cruelty.

"You'll go to London with your brother and me, you'll be presented at court, and you'll marry the man I choose for you. Beyond that, keep your mouth shut and mind every rule. There had better not be so much as a hint of scandal attached to your name, or you'll regret it. Your sister cost me far more than she was worth, outfitting her and bringing her out last Season. She barely lasted until Easter before she was compromised. I had almost brokered a marriage. The bids were set to come in, and she ruined it. If you do the same, you'll regret the day you were born." The skin tightened along his jaw as he glared.

*Brokered a marriage.* Sold into bondage would be more accurate, and such a fate awaited her too. She would be his pawn, and she had no say in the matter.

The lump in her throat grew. How could she keep her promise to her sister to care for Cian as her own if she were in London, married off to a stranger, when the baby was here in Berkshire under the dominance of her father? Her thoughts scrambled as she tried to subdue the panic in her chest. She had to ask.

"What will happen to the child?"

"He'll stay in the nursery here until I decide what to do with him. I should've sent him to the orphanage the day he was born." It was a threat he had uttered for months before the baby's birth as a means to keep Catherine in hiding, and one he'd breathed often in the three weeks since Cian's arrival in order to quell any rebellion on Diana's part.

The worst was knowing he'd do it, either in a fit of rage or as a calculated move to bring someone under submission to his will.

“And will we stay in London the entire Season?” She infused her voice with innocent inquiry.

“Of course. It takes time to arrange a marriage and a proper society wedding. After you are presented at court, I’ll start the negotiations. Once I find a suitable husband, your sponsor will take care of the wedding details.” He waved his hand, as if what happened to her after the wedding were of little consequence.

Diana must be careful here. If he thought she was manipulating him . . . a shudder went through her. “Are you worried about news spreading in your absence that there’s a baby at Seaton Manor, if you’re not here to quell the gossip?”

He had gone so far as to forbid having a midwife or *accoucheur* in attendance at the birth for fear of word getting out, and when complications had set in, neither Diana, who was completely inexperienced, nor Mrs. Huds-worth, the housekeeper, had been able to prevent Catherine’s death.

“Perhaps bringing the child to London, where you could have more control over who might learn of his existence . . .” She hated herself for even uttering these words, but it was all she could think of to sway him. “If you turn him over to the orphanage here, everyone in the village is likely to know where he came from. But in London, there are many orphanages, and you would be assured of anonymity.”

Her father’s gaze narrowed over the cut-glass tumbler, and she held her breath. Beyond the heavily curtained windows over his shoulder, snow fell in fat flakes, two weeks too late to give them a white Christmas. Traveling to London would be arduous, even if the snow melted soon. The roads would be a muddy morass.

She should be excited about a trip to the capitol, a place she’d never been, though her entire life had been spent in preparation for the event. She should be eager to wear the elaborate gown created for her appearance before Queen Charlotte at court, about attending the social events, about meeting new people. She should be anticipating an escape from Seaton Manor—where the mullions and muntins in the windows might as well have been prison bars—and the dominance of her father. And for most of her life, she had expected this Season to be her emancipation.

But now all she wanted was to stay. To stay hidden in the Berkshire countryside with a newborn boy she loved as her own and had promised to protect.

“Hmph. You could be right. Tossing him into a London orphanage would be easier if we want to keep it a secret.” Father set the glass down hard on the rosewood table. “Very well. Tell the nurse to get ready to travel. We leave in the morning.”

Waiting until he strode out, slamming the door in his wake, Diana rounded the chair and sagged onto the brocade cushion. She felt like a rag doll with all the sawdust leaking out. Elation that Cian would be coming along warred with fear that she had only hastened his being placed in an institution, and clamminess swept over her skin. *Lord, help me find a way to keep him safe, to keep my promise to Catherine.*

It was a prayer constantly in her heart and on her lips, but did praying do any good? Was God listening? Did He care about an illegitimate child that nobody but her seemed to love? Diana had never been certain that God cared about her prayers or that she was of enough significance to arouse His interest. When Diana had been small, her nurse had prayed aloud, but only that Diana would be a good girl and not tax her nurse’s patience. The rector at the girls’ school Diana had attended had read all his prayers from a book, as if he were bored. Only the assistant matron in her dormitory had taught them that God wanted a personal relationship with them through His Son, Jesus. That it was right and proper to read Scripture and pray from the heart. How Diana wished she had Miss Bonham to talk to now. Diana prayed, but she sometimes wondered if her words reached any farther than the chandelier, since nothing she had prayed for seemed to have changed her circumstances. Before she could summon the strength to rise and head to the nursery, the drawing room door opened again. Her heart leapt to her throat. Had her father returned? Had he changed his mind about taking Cian with them? She straightened and folded her hands in her lap, lowering her chin to present the properly demure daughter her father required.

But it was only Percival who sauntered into the room, giving his gold-topped cane a twirl. She hated that cane. He pretended to need it whenever he wanted to elicit sympathy, but his ankle was well healed by now. Her

half brother might like to act as if he had suffered a “great war injury,” and that somehow it made him a romantic figure, but Diana knew the truth. There was nothing romantic about her brother beyond his good looks, and even those were tainted by the character she knew lay behind the facade.

Was there such a thing as an honorable man in all of England? A man without a cruel streak, an uncontrolled temper, a need to dominate every woman in his life?

Not in Diana’s experience, admittedly limited as that might be. All men were alike—forceful, controlling, and unpredictable of temperament.

“Fetch me a drink.” Percival dropped to the sofa, swinging his legs up and propping his dirty boots on a satin pillow, clearly not caring about the servant who would be tasked with removing the stains he caused. “I’m worn out.”

She straightened, ready to flee if he started toward her, fed up with his sneering demands. “No one broke your legs on the way downstairs. Get your own drink.”

“Aren’t you feeling saucy this morning?” He tapped his cane on the rug. “If I weren’t so tired, I’d give you a smack to remind you of your manners. Has the trip to London got you all in a lather? I might be too, if I were silly enough to think that getting married would solve any of my problems. Father’s already got a list of prospects. All old, fat, and in need of an heir. I don’t envy you.”

Saying nothing was often the best defense when Percival baited her, so with an effort, Diana bit her tongue.

Percival dropped the cane to the carpet, raising his chin and staring at the plaster filigree work on the ceiling. “You don’t think he’s going to give *you* that inheritance money, do you? The minute you marry, it won’t belong to you. It will go to your husband . . . and only as much as Father has to shell out to get somebody to take you off his hands. The rest he will pocket. It’s been his plan all along.” Percival pinched the bridge of his nose, as if bored with dealing with such an inferior intellect. “It’s galled him right along that he couldn’t get his hands on your trust, but if you think he’s going to turn over thousands of pounds sterling without a fight, you don’t know our dear father.”

Frustration boiled under Diana’s breastbone. Her hands fisted on her

thighs. Her grandmother had left that money to Diana to be inherited upon her marriage. The old woman had done it to spite the Duke of Seaton, revenge for the way he had treated her daughter, his third wife and Diana's mother.

"Still, having a debutante sister will fit nicely into my plans for the Season. It's a good excuse to show up at parties you're invited to, and I'm sure there will be a few swains willing to do whatever I want them to in order to secure a formal introduction. Your looks are passable, and you are a duke's daughter, which should be enough to have them swarming around. I shall have to see how I can leverage things to my advantage." He rubbed his fingertips against his thumb and grinned. "Sheep to the slaughter. I hope you last longer than Catherine did in town. I missed out on several opportunities to fleece the young bucks at the tables when she scuttled home. Whoever ruined her better hope neither Father nor I catch up to him, since he cost us so much money." He stacked his fists and twisted them in a neck-wrenching pantomime.

Before she said something she might regret—or that would earn her the aforementioned slap—she stood. There was plenty to do in preparation for tomorrow's leave-taking. She'd waste no more time on Percival or his hateful words. The notion of him making suitors pay for an introduction to her, of having him show up at every social function she attended, and of luring unsuspecting prey into gambling with him in order to get on his good side made her want to break something, preferably over his head. She slipped out of the drawing room and through the hall to the staircase.

Upstairs, the servants went about their packing duties quietly and quickly, trunks and boxes open and spilling their contents, maids hurrying to Mrs. Hudsworth's directions, and everyone tense. The servants at Seaton Manor were always tense, it seemed. Like Diana herself. What would it be like to live in a peaceful, happy home, where people were kind and treated one another with respect? Did such a household even exist?

From the sounds of her father's plans to marry her to the highest bidder, she would never know.

"I don't see how you're going to make sense of all this by tomorrow. Have the lists I made helped?" Diana touched the gowns lying across her bed, letting her fingers trail over ostrich feathers, tulle, satin, and silk.



Several of the dresses were leftovers of her sister's, never worn after she'd fled London last spring.

But the rest had been sewn for Diana's debut by a seamstress imported from the city for the purpose. Diana had enjoyed the process of collaboration with the *modiste*, selecting fabrics and trims, adding her own special touches. Though Diana had been sequestered at a girls' school for the past several years, she had always had a flair for design, and she took pleasure in the tiny sense of freedom making her own dress choices had afforded. She'd been popular amongst the girls at school for her taste and creativity. Then her father had summoned her home. Ostensibly to be with Catherine in her confinement, but Diana surmised it was more that her father feared he was losing control of his daughters and wanted her where he could watch her.

"Don't you worry, dear. We'll get it all sorted. And your lists have been most helpful. No, not that trunk. That's for the court dress." Mrs. Hudsworth shook her head. "Do you want any of your books and art supplies packed?"

Diana didn't hesitate. "I want everything. If things go according to Father's plan, I won't be returning to Seaton Manor. I don't want to leave anything behind."

Not that she had much beyond the clothes she would need for her debut—and she could argue that those did not really belong to her. Her father had been reluctant to spend money on daughters, even for necessities. Leisure items were rare indeed. Diana had her schoolbooks and a few sketchpads and pencils, but little else to call her own. Even her mother's jewelry, which should have passed to her, had been confiscated by her father.

Mrs. Hudsworth's lips trembled, but she took a deep breath. "I'll miss you, lass."

Diana squeezed the older woman's fingers, something her father would be shocked to see. One didn't treat servants with familiarity. She left the packing in the capable hands of the housekeeper and climbed the stairs to the nursery.

A fire blazed behind a protective screen, and the nurse her father had reluctantly hired sat before it, her toe slowly rocking the cradle on the

floor. The girl couldn't be more than fifteen, but she had the necessary skills to care for the baby, being the eldest of nine, the daughter of one of the crofters on the Seaton property. Father had refused to hire a wet nurse, but thankfully, Cian seemed to be thriving on thinned cow's milk.

"Beth, you and the baby will be accompanying us to London, so I need you to pack Cian's things and have them ready to go before first light tomorrow." Diana bent to the cradle and lifted the warm sleeping bundle. She inhaled the newborn scent that still clung to him, closing her eyes for a moment, her heart torn with love and worry.

The girl's eyes grew round, and a flush suffused her pale cheeks. "London, miss?"

"Yes. His Grace has relented, and he wants the baby where he can keep an eye on him. But the same rules apply. The less you're seen, the better. Keep Cian as quiet as possible, because if His Grace feels like he's being inconvenienced, he might ship our darling to the nearest orphanage."

Diana's arms tightened around the baby, fear wriggling its chilly way up her spine. She had to do whatever it took to protect Cian.



*"Tiens! Attrape bandit!"*

Evan Eldridge bolted upright in his bed, his arm sweeping wide to fend off the advancing enemy, only to make contact with the bedside table and send a porcelain pitcher flying across the floor. The blankets wound around his legs, trapping him, and he kicked free, pain piercing his thigh like a bayonet. He lashed out again at the French soldier, shouting, "Get back!"

Sweat prickling his chest, his ribs pumped like bellows. Blinking, swallowing, he shook his head, trying to clear the panic and cobwebs. An orderly rushed down the ward, scowling. "What's going on here? This is a hospital, not a melee." He didn't wait for an answer, bending to pick up shards of pottery and mopping up spilled water.

No French soldier, no cannon fire, no smoke or broken, bleeding bodies. He wasn't on the battlefield of Salamanca. He wasn't fighting for his life.

He was in the hospital. Still.

“Sorry, bad dream,” he muttered. It was as good an explanation as any, and partially true, though he didn’t remember falling asleep. His heart hammered against his breastbone, and he forced himself to take slow breaths, willing the panic to recede. The dream had seemed so real, he could almost smell the burning gunpowder and hear the shriek of the cannonballs as they whistled through the air.

A bad dream that seemed to repeat every time he relaxed his guard and fell asleep.

Evan dragged his hands down his face. He couldn’t admit what was really bothering him. He couldn’t talk about the cold sweats, the panic, the nightmares, the memory loss, the flashes of anger, the sense of impending disaster that he carried constantly. If he breathed a word, he’d find himself on a one-way trip to Bedlam. He had hopes of getting out of St. Bartholomew’s soon. If he landed in Bethlehem Hospital for the Insane, where others with his malady had been taken, he’d never get out.

He held his hands out flat, palms down. Tremors shook his fingers, and he had no power to stop them. Every sudden noise had him jumping out of his skin. Pulling a handkerchief from his dressing gown pocket, he wiped his temples. One would think, after enduring the sweltering heat of Spain, he’d be suffering from the cold of January in England, but the ward resembled a furnace today, though no one else seemed bothered. The soldier in the cot next to him lay under several blankets, and one of the orderlies stumped by, a coal hod banging against his leg as he went to feed the fire.

Evan rolled his neck, trying to ease the knots that had taken up permanent residence between his shoulder blades. Perhaps, if he could only get a decent night’s sleep, this internal jangling might cease, but at the moment he felt like a box of musket balls that had been dropped from a height. Bouncing, rolling, scattering.

The French had a term for it. *Vent du boulet*. The wind of the bullet. A term for a soldier who heard bullets even when he wasn’t under fire, someone who was losing his grip on reality. Evan had seen such men, vacant expressions, quaking muscles, jerking movements, unable to eat or sleep or cope with the world around them.

Evan feared that was happening to him. If he couldn't bring himself under control, he'd be thought unfit to rejoin his regiment, unfit for command—or worse, insane and in need of incarceration.

A familiar squeak drew his attention. The cart with the protesting wheel. Why didn't someone fix that? Every meal, the same thing, *squeak, squawk, squeak, squawk*, hailing the arrival of pathetic food grown cold in its journey from the basement kitchens to the ward.

“Morning.” The porter removed the cover on the kettle and ladled out a bowl of pasty-looking slop.

“Gruel again?” Stuffing the handkerchief back into his pocket, Evan accepted the thick porcelain bowl and heavy spoon. What he wouldn't give for a slice of bacon or a piece of toast with butter.

“Doctor's orders.” With a shrug, the porter moved on, *squeak, squawk, squeak, squawk*.

Evan lifted a spoonful of porridge to his lips, but at the monotonous taste of bland nothing, he let the utensil drop. It was ridiculous, him even still being in the hospital. His leg wound had nearly healed. He should be convalescing at his father's parsonage in Oxfordshire, where his mother could fuss over him, or at the company barracks, preparing to rejoin the Ninety-Fifth on the Peninsula. Six months since the battle and being shipped back to England was long enough to linger in a sick bed. In fact, compared to the others on the ward, those with amputations, blindness, burns, bullet wounds, Evan felt like a fraud. A few headaches and a nearly healed shrapnel wound in his left thigh were nothing.

Setting aside the bowl, he levered himself upright, tightened the belt on the dressing gown—a luxury his father had brought to him when Evan arrived at the London hospital—and began his slow, determined walk to the far end of the ward and back. The sooner he regained the strength in his leg, the sooner he could get back to his men.

“On the march again, sir?”

He stopped at the bed of Freddie Cuff, an infantryman with a cheeky grin. Freddie always had a quick word for everyone on the ward even though he had lost his right leg. The young man struggled to pull himself up in the bed, and Evan hurried to adjust pillows.

“How're you feeling?”

“Like I’ll be joining you on your walks soon. Maybe we can have a race.” Freddie’s eyes twinkled. “Doc said he’s going to fit me with a wooden leg as soon as this thing heals up enough.” Waving at his abbreviated limb, he sighed. “Not much use for an infantryman with one leg though. Soon’s I’m healthy enough, they’ll discharge me. Then what am I going to do? I can’t go home to my folks. They barely have enough to live on themselves. That’s why I joined the army in the first place. No job, no training, no money.” It was a question he posed daily, it seemed.

With a twinge of guilt, Evan patted Freddie’s shoulder. “Something will come up. You just work on getting better so we can have that race.” Freddie’s condition, one shared by many veterans, made Evan more grateful than ever to have survived his wounds relatively unscathed and that he would be back in uniform soon. He, too, had joined the military because it was one of the few options open to him, and he’d found a home with his fellow soldier brothers, one to which he was anxious to return. Not to mention, there was still work to be done on the Continent that wouldn’t be finished until old Boney was dead or behind bars.

After six laps of the ward, up from yesterday’s five, Evan’s legs trembled, especially the left. The fresh scar burned and ached where a battlefield doctor had dug out shrapnel and splinters, and later had reopened it to drain infection.

Evan didn’t remember receiving the wound. He didn’t remember anything about that day. And yet something drifted at the edge of recall, something important. Something urgent. Or was it just his addled brain playing tricks on him? He couldn’t trust anything his mind conjured up at the moment.

He sank onto his cot and swung his weak limb up with the help of his hand. Breathing heavily, he shook his head. If his mates could see him now, weak as a half-drowned kitten, they’d laugh and tease the life out of him. Where had all his strength gone? The strength that had enabled him to march, ride, or climb, whatever the terrain and situation called for, carrying a heavy pack of supplies and ammunition?

Evan was the best sharpshooter in a regiment of sharpshooters—or at least he had been. Again he held up his hands, noting the tremors. How could he shoot straight if he couldn’t even hold his hands still? What if he

never regained his ability? *God, You wouldn't do that to me, would You?* Evan had only ever had one real talent, a talent revealed when his father scraped together the money to purchase Evan's commission six years ago. A talent for shooting far and straight and hitting what he aimed at. If he lost that, what use was he?

He eased back and closed his eyes, trying to lock up his anxiety and shove it into a dark corner. Right now the men of his regiment were in winter quarters, preparing for the next campaigning season, and he should be with them, leading, strategizing, gathering intelligence for the encounters to come. Instead he was stuck in a dreary London hospital, fighting boredom and doubt in equal measure.

"Morning, sir."

Evan cracked his eye open and beheld a familiar face.

"Sergeant Shand." He wanted to leap from his bed and shake the man's hand, thanking him for alleviating the mind-numbing monotony of his days, but his sergeant hated any display of emotion. "Good to see you."

"Not sergeant anymore, sir." Shand patted his breast pocket, where papers crinkled. "Got my discharge today."

Evan mulled the idea of a military life without David Shand in it. The gray-haired, weathered sergeant had been with him since his first days in the army, keeping him on track, showing him how to lead, making up for all his novice shortcomings. And along the way, becoming a friend.

"Your discharge? Already? What are you going to do now?" Evan scooted up in his bed, his leg and his head protesting. The room spun, but then his equilibrium caught up and things steadied. He couldn't wait for that side effect to subside completely. The doctor had warned him he had been severely concussed and it would take time to get over the symptoms. Six months should have been long enough, shouldn't it? It was just a knock to the head, after all.

"Look for work, I suppose." Unlike many of his fellow soldiers, Shand's discharge hadn't come through being wounded, but because of age. "I've got a bit laid by, but that won't stretch too far." He scrubbed his chin, a gesture that meant Shand was thinking hard. "Don't know what else I'm qualified to do, but surely there's something. You wouldn't have any ideas, would you, sir?"

Weight settled in Evan's chest. He had no ideas for Shand, seeing that unless or until Evan could pass the physical himself and rejoin his regiment, he was in the same situation. England must be full of out-of-work former soldiers, with more coming all the time. What would happen to them all?

"I'll give it some thought. What will you do in the meantime?"

"Stay with my brother across the river until I can find a place. Bit crowded though. There are four daughters still living at home." Shand shook his head. "Sure is different from what I'm used to, sir. Females are a talkative lot, aren't they? They laugh most of the time, but it's the crying that's the worst. They can cry over the slightest thing, even things that make them happy." Again he shook his head. "I don't believe I will ever understand them."

Evan chuckled. "I think better men than us have tried since Adam himself." He didn't envy Shand. Encounters with women had been scarce on the Peninsula—Evan had shied away from the camp followers and laundresses of questionable reputation. He'd seen too many of his fellow soldiers choose that path, to their sorrow. Being a sharpshooter called for clarity of mind and focus, and women were a distraction that Evan couldn't afford.

"How much longer will you be here, sir?"

Sighing, Evan shook his head—gently, so as not to start up the swirling again. "I'm going to break out if the doctor doesn't let me go soon."

"Would you like me to hold the ladder, sir? It's only three stories to the ground." Shand grinned and motioned to the window beside Evan's bed.

"The idea has merit, Sergeant. I'll let you know. The sawbones should be doing rounds soon. If he gives me the 'not just yet' litany again, you and I will need to hatch a plan."

"We're good at those, sir. Many's the time we've concocted a scheme to foil the enemy." Shand grinned. "It would be like old times, sir."

"Now that you're out of the army, you don't have to call me sir. You could call me Evan."

Shand's eyebrows rose. "I don't think so, sir. Some habits shouldn't be broken."

"Well, get used to civilian life for a while, and see how you feel about

it then.” Evan smoothed the cotton sheet over his legs. Would he have to get used to being a civilian himself soon?

Evan shook his hand as he took his leave. “Thanks for visiting. Keep in touch, and let me know how you’re doing.”

“I will, sir. And you let me know if you need me to help you escape. I’ll come running.”

Before the sergeant made it to the ward door, there was a stir in the hall, followed by many footsteps. Evan’s doctor all but sprinted into the room and straight toward Evan’s bed. “Lieutenant, you’ve got visitors.” His face was pale, and his side-whiskers bristled. “Sit up, comb your hair, and look presentable.”

“What is it?” Evan, used to taking orders as well as issuing them, reached for the comb on his bedside table and dragged it through his hair as the doctor twitched the covers and tucked them in tight.

“The Home Secretary, Henry Addington, Viscount Sidmouth, just showed up downstairs asking for you.”

The comb clattered to the floor. “What? Me? Why?”

“I’ve no idea, but . . .” hissed the doctor, “he’s here.” With form that would thrill a drill sergeant, the doctor snapped to attention and stared at the door.

A ripple went through the ward as heads turned. Using his foot, the doctor nudged the comb out of sight under the bed.

Five men entered, four clearly underlings surrounding the principal personage. One carried a rolled paper, the others appeared to be . . . guards? What danger did the Home Secretary expect to find lurking in a hospital ward?

They stopped at the foot of Evan’s bed, and embarrassment swept over him. Clad in a nightshirt and dressing gown, hair half-combed, propped up in bed, he made a sorry sight next to their court dress, fancy waistcoats, and buckled shoes. He reached for the edge of the blankets in order to stand, but the Home Secretary stopped him.

“Don’t rise, my good man.” He looked around, and one of the guards supplied him with a chair from somewhere in the ward. Perching on the edge of the seat, he adjusted the tails on his coat, shot his lace cuffs, and touched the intricately tied neckcloth at his throat.



“It’s an honor to meet you”—Evan cast about his mind for how one addressed a Home Secretary and fell back on the military safe zone of—“sir.”

“The honor is mine. It isn’t every day I get to meet a hero like yourself, Lieutenant.”

Evan flushed. People had been bandying that word about since he’d arrived here at St. Bart’s, and he didn’t think he’d ever be comfortable with it. Especially since he couldn’t remember what he’d done to earn the accolade.

“It was nothing.” He waved the compliment away, aware that everyone in the ward was listening.

“Saving the Prince Regent’s godson from certain death is more than ‘nothing.’ If the story reported in the papers is anywhere near accurate, you will go down in the annals of British history as one of the bravest men in His Majesty’s army.”

Evan couldn’t deny the account in the paper, since he could remember nothing of that day, but the way he’d been portrayed made him out to be so noble and self-sacrificing. According to the article, he’d rushed onto the battlefield, cut a horse away from its dead teammate, and leapt aboard the horse to drag an artillery wagon behind British lines, rescuing one Percival Seaton, the Prince Regent’s godson, who had been hunkered down in the wagon, in the process.

His hands fisted on the sheets, and the familiar prickle of sweat broke out on his skin. Images of battle seared through his head—the concussive explosions of cannon, the whistle of musket balls, the clash and rattle of sabers, the screams of men and horses. In flashes he saw himself skidding down a slope, rifle in hand, racing over open terrain. The horse, rearing, plunging, white showing around his eyes. A few slashes of his sword cut the dead horse’s harness loose, and Evan swung aboard the remaining animal, still hitched to the wagon, and kicked him in the ribs, praying his comrades would give him enough cover fire for him to reach safety. Was his memory returning, or was he merely reconstructing what he had read in the paper?

The doctor laid his hand on Evan’s shoulder, and he realized he was panting and swallowing hard. He forced himself to take a slow breath

through his nose and exhale through his mouth, repeating this several times, smothering his panic lest the doctor become aware.

“My dear man, I’ve come with an invitation.” The Home Secretary held out his hand, and one of his attendants placed the rolled paper in it. Slowly, he opened the page. “The Prince Regent wishes to convey his gratitude in a ceremony at court one week hence. He requests your presence at that time.” The viscount let the paper roll up again. “I trust you will be fit and able to attend?”

The doctor nodded. “He will be there. He’s making a splendid recovery.”

Which was news to Evan, since the doctor had been elusive about the subject every time Evan asked.

“Very good. I am looking forward to the occasion, and I know His Highness is as well.” Putting his hands on his knees, the Home Secretary levered himself up. With a nod, he laid the paper on Evan’s bedside table. “Good day.”

Evan sagged against his pillows, and the doctor dropped into the chair the viscount had used, his eyes on the departing figures.

A meeting with the Prince Regent. Old Prinny, the butt of many a joke in the Ninety-Fifth Rifles, scorned as a hedonist, dilettante, and philanderer. Evan’s regiment mates would never let him hear the end of it.

Still, he’d lived through worse. It would be a few minutes of his life, a bow, a few words, and then Evan could focus on getting fit once more and back to his men and his mission of stopping Napoleon from taking over Europe. All while hiding his lack of memory and the attacks of sheer panic that struck far too often.

He couldn’t let anything distract him from getting back to his regiment.



## CHAPTER 2

DIANA COULD HARDLY breathe against the pressure of the stomacher laced against her middle. Or was her breathlessness because, in a few moments, she would be presented to the Queen? Every deportment lesson her schoolmistresses had drilled into her tumbled over in her mind, and she couldn't concentrate on anything for long. Her hands trembled as she smoothed the silver-shot white satin draped over her panniers.

It was a costume that had been in fashion in her grandmother's time, but the elderly Queen Charlotte's requirements for court dress were firm. One wore the style she deemed proper, or one did not appear in her presence.

Four other debutantes waited in the anteroom, each grappling with her own state of nervous panic, if they were anything like her. Diana turned her head carefully so as not to dislodge the ostrich feathers in her hair. Round eyes, tense lips, and fluttering hands met her gaze.

Gowns in pastels and whites, proper colors for a debutante, and no jewelry. Elaborate hairstyles and many, many ostrich feathers. They must look like some exotic strange birds indeed.

Mentally, Diana rehearsed her curtsy, wishing she could work some moisture into her mouth.

A liveried footman opened the ornate doors into the drawing room at St. James's Palace and stood back. Father had hired someone, a Lady Cathcart, to sponsor Diana. Before a few moments ago, Diana had never met the woman, but all debutantes must have a female sponsor—one who had herself been presented at court before. The sponsor was supposed to

be able to vouch for the girl's character and chaperone her through various social events.

Lady Cathcart had looked Diana over, peering through her lorgnette, sniffed, and said, "I suppose you'll do."

Which made them quits, because that was how Diana felt about Lady Cathcart.

One of the footmen beckoned to them.

"Come." Lady Cathcart raised her hem and headed for the doorway, turning sideways slightly to fit her wide skirts through the opening. Diana followed in her wake, her heart pounding so loudly, she could barely hear her own shallow breaths.

Gawping probably wouldn't endear her to the Queen, so Diana forced herself to keep her eyes forward, fixed on the stair-rod-straight back of her sponsor. Members of the peerage lined the perimeter of the room, and Diana kept her chin parallel to the floor, taking careful steps on the thick carpet that led to the small dais where the Queen waited.

*Don't speak until spoken to. Curtsy without falling on your face. Keep your voice steady. Never turn your back on the Queen. Oh, my mercy, is that the Prince Regent with her?*

She almost stopped. The Prince Regent at a presentation of debutantes? Was that normal? Her schoolmistresses hadn't mentioned his possible presence. What was the proper protocol? Did she acknowledge him first? Or the Queen?

"Lady Diana, daughter of the Duke of Seaton, presented by Lady Cathcart." Her name echoed in the silent room as the Lord Chamberlain announced her. Lady Cathcart curtsied and stepped to the side, and Diana faced her Queen.

Queen Charlotte, resplendent in ice blue, her white wig piled high and her throat draped with jewels, looked down at Diana. The Prince Regent fussed with his lace cuff, his considerable girth encased in a brocaded silk waistcoat and his calves bulging in white stockings. Diamonds winked from the buckles of his red-heeled shoes. He sighed, looking out over the room with disinterest.

With knees made of water, she dropped into a low curtsy, bowing her head, but not so far as to tip her headdress onto her nose. Because she

didn't know who had precedence, she directed the gesture somewhere between the royal pair.

"You look lovely, my dear. Please step forward." The Queen had a pleasant voice, husky and precise with the thickened vowels of her Germanic heritage.

Diana kept hold of her skirt, lifting the hem and moving to the base of the two steps.

The prince gave a small flick of his hand. "This is one of my goddaughters." His voice reeked of *ennui*, but he remembered that much about her, at least, though he'd never laid eyes on her, to her knowledge.

"One of many. Too many, if you ask me," the Queen said with a touch of asperity. She brought her attention back to Diana. "I believe I met your sister last Season? And did she find a suitable match?"

Heat prickled across Diana's skin. What should she say? If she breathed a word of the scandal, her future in the *ton* was finished. Not to mention that her father had forbidden her to even whisper her sister's name, much less her illegitimate child and her death. But she couldn't lie to the Queen, could she?

A small stir behind her had the Queen looking up. Diana dared not look over her shoulder, but whoever had caused the distraction had her gratitude, for the Prince Regent rose laboriously from his ornate chair, a smile splitting his face. The pleasant expression made him look almost handsome in a florid way—at any rate, better than he looked when he was bored.

"Ah, there he is." The prince motioned to several of the courtiers, who seemed to have nothing more to do than wait to fulfill his wishes. The group of men stirred and separated, as if to some prearranged task.

The Queen nodded to Diana. "Perhaps we will have a moment to speak again later."

Lady Cathcart gave a small jerk of her head to Diana and bobbed a quick curtsy. Diana followed her lead, dipping her knees and bowing her head again. "Thank you, Your Majesty." Now the tricky part—backing away from the Queen gracefully without tripping on her train. In a maneuver she'd practiced at least twenty times, Diana took an infinitesimal step to her right and began to retreat. Lady Cathcart did the same, and halfway

down the aisle of onlookers, she took Diana's elbow and drew her to the side to stand amongst the peers.

Diana took a deep breath, or at least she tried to, but the boned panel of the stomacher thwarted her. She had survived her presentation without any major *faux pas* and without having to speak of Catherine. A sigh rose as far as her throat before she stifled it. Already her feet pinched in her satin shoes, and she had possibly hours to go before she could sit. One did not sit in the presence of the Queen unless invited to do so, after all.

"You did fine." Lady Cathcart spoke behind the edge of her folded fan. "And the Queen spoke to you, so you have that in your favor. Now, just stand there and look decorative."

Across the room, her eyes met her father's. He wore a shrewd, calculating look, and he nodded once at her, sharp and short, which she took to mean do as Lady Cathcart had said. Stand still and look decorative. Beside him stood a portly man, balding, with his hair brushed forward on the sides and red cheeks that denoted either great excitement or a fondness for drink, she couldn't decide which. The duke bent and whispered in his ear, motioning with his chin in Diana's direction, and the man's gaze sharpened on her, sweeping her from feathers to feet. Was this the man to whom her father intended to marry her off? Her stomach flipped. Surely not. The man had to be thrice her age. But if not him, then who?

A bitter wave swept through Diana. She had no power, no say, no rights in her father's eyes. She was under his command, and he loved to remind her of that fact. Without being overt, without turning her head, she looked from one male face to the next in the room. Chances were excellent that her future husband stood amongst those watching. Having been isolated at a less-than-fashionable all-girls' school for most of her life, she didn't know a single face in the crowd other than her father and brother. Was there anyone whom she could trust? Anyone who might see her for herself and not as a means to an end?

Percival stood near their father, sneering, standing with his weight on one leg, his obnoxious cane in his hand. Beside him, another young man leaned in to whisper, though he stared at Diana the entire time, leering, actually. She tore her gaze away, flushing uncomfortably. Insolent man. Who was he?

The Prince Regent beckoned toward the doorway, and a man in a green military uniform came forward. His triple row of buttons winked in the light, silvery rather than brass, and Diana thought she might well be able to see her reflection in his tall black Hessians. He looked pale and thin, as if he hadn't been well, but his bearing was erect, his black square-cut shako under his arm. The slight clanking of his sword echoed with each step.

Something in his face drew her. Dark hair, worn longer than current fashion dictated, the indication of a dark full beard if he weren't clean-shaven, a straight nose, and heavily lashed eyes. But drawn skin, a tenseness about his mouth, and a hint of panic—or was it just wariness?—in the way that he held his head. Was he, too, nearly overwhelmed by the occasion?

When he reached the foot of the dais, he bowed low from the waist.

A movement across the way caught her attention. Percival had stopped slouching, his gimlet eyes trained on the soldier's back. Perhaps they were acquainted? Percival had gotten the opportunity to join a delegation of members of Parliament to Spain six months ago as an aide. Father had ordered him to go because it was advantageous to Father at the time to have his son as part of the envoy, and somehow Percival had wound up embroiled in the Battle of Salamanca and had come home slightly wounded, looking for accolades and sympathy in equal measure. Whatever he had done there, her father had been furious, but neither had shared anything about the experience with Diana.

"Lieutenant Eldridge." The prince spoke only to the soldier, but his voice carried to every corner of the room. "I trust you've recovered from your injuries?"

Ah, so he *had* been ill.

"Yes, Your Highness. Thank you."

Diana wished she could see the soldier's face again. He wasn't a titled gentleman, for the prince had addressed him by his rank. Lieutenant. An officer, but barely.

"I am pleased to hear it. I imagine you're wondering why you are here? Your actions on the battlefield deserve a reward. Some would say your deeds deserve a knighthood."

A murmur went through the crowd.

The prince narrowed his eyes, scanning the room. "I, however, think such bravery on the battlefield, and doing such a service for your regent, deserves more. Kneel, young man."

A collective intake of air happened amongst the onlookers.

"Oh my," Lady Cathcart whispered. "He wouldn't. Not again."

Diana wanted so badly to ask what was happening, but she bit her lip, not wanting to be reprimanded or to miss anything.

The soldier knelt, slowly, as if it pained him, tucking his sword out of the way, his hat clamped against his side.

The Prince Regent accepted a sword resplendent with a jeweled hilt from a courtier and stepped down to place the blade on the kneeling officer's shoulder.

"For bravery in the face of the enemy, and for saving the life of my godson, Percival Seaton . . ."

Diana's eyes shot to her brother. This soldier had saved his life? What had happened to her brother in Spain, and why hadn't anyone mentioned it before?



Evan knelt at the foot of the dais, wishing he were anywhere else. His thigh throbbed at the pressure of being on one knee. Every eye in the room seemed to be on him. What was he doing here? He never thought he might long to be back in the hospital, but that feeling teased the corner of his mind. The prince took a ceremonial sword and rested the steel against Evan's shoulder. Was it really heavy, or was that his imagination? He'd never expected anything like this . . . whatever *this* was.

"For bravery in the face of the enemy, and for saving the life of my godson, Percival Seaton . . ."

Something Evan couldn't even remember doing.

"I confer upon you the title of Earl of Whitelock, Viscount Slaugham, with the lands and holdings entailed to that title."

Evan wasn't sure if it was everyone else in the room who gasped or himself. What?



The sword lightly bounced on his left shoulder, then his right, then his left again. “Rise, Earl of Whitelock.”

This was a farce, right? Somewhere, there was a hidden joke, right?

Him?

An earl?

Hoisting himself upright, trying not to favor his wounded leg, his mind galloped like a horse loose on the battlefield. A flash went through his mind, a shudder in his soul. Why had that image—a horse loose on a battlefield—rocked him? A cold snake of anxiety coiled up around Evan’s torso, and his hand gripped his sword handle.

There must be some mistake. He wasn’t an earl. He was a soldier. He was Evan Eldridge, not Whitelock or Slaughtam or whoever else—

“Well done, my good man. Never let it be said that the Prince Regent does not reward those who serve him faithfully.”

A buzz went through the room as Evan bowed again. What did he do now? There was some rule about not turning your back on royalty, right?

He took a few steps backward, careful not to stumble. A hand reached out and touched his arm, and he glanced at a man of about his age, dressed in knee breeches and satin coat.

“This way.” The man drew him to the side to merge with the crowd.

Evan followed him, grateful for the direction, wishing they could’ve gone all the way to the door and out onto the street. People continued to stare, and many whispered to one another with shocked expressions, frowns, disdain. No one could be more astonished than he. What had just happened here? Evan wanted to escape the speculation, the bewilderment, and . . . the guilt. Guilt that rose up to smother even the shock.

He’d been rewarded for an act of bravery he couldn’t even remember, saving the life of someone he didn’t know. Rewarded with an earldom? A title and . . . lands?

What did any of this mean to his future? His mates in the regiment weren’t going to believe this. When he returned to the Peninsula, he’d never hear the end of it.

The man beside him leaned in. “Ninety-Fifth Rifles, correct?”

Evan stared straight ahead as a young woman in a wide-hooped pale-pink gown floated down the aisle in front of him. He felt out of place

in his military dress, but he'd rather that than the antiquated costumes of the rest of the assembly. He felt as if he'd stepped into a fifty-year-old painting. "That's right."

"I recognize the uniform. Marcus Haverly, late of the Fifty-Second Oxfordshire Light Division."

Some of the tightness went out of Evan's shoulders. A fellow military man, someone to whom he could relate in this alien world.

"We can talk more once the presentations are over. Stick with me when things break up."

Evan nodded, wanting to turn and shake the man's hand. He felt as if he'd been thrown a rope to pull himself up the cliff he'd been pushed over.

Three more young girls were announced, curtsied before the Queen, and were shepherded into the ranks along the walls. The audience stirred when Her Majesty rose, took the arm of the Prince Regent, and was escorted through a doorway. Those nearest to her bowed and curtsied, and she nodded right and left. Once she was out of the room, everyone seemed to relax a fraction. Voices rose, and Evan found himself the focus of much scrutiny.

Marcus steered him back toward the wall. "Best to only have to defend one front." He smiled as he said it. "Did you have any inkling? Were you given any indication in the invitation?"

"Not so much as a warning shot across the bow." And what it all meant was still a mystery. Perhaps once he got out of this crowd, which pressed in on all sides, cutting off his escape routes, he could start to make some sense of what had happened. Until then, the growing noise of the people around him sent fluttery, anxious feathers across his chest and tightened his throat. He hated crowds at the best of times.

"Well, congratulations, I guess." Marcus shrugged, his shoulders sliding under the dull bronze of his embroidered coat. "What are your plans?"

"Plans?" Evan's mind blanked at the notion. "Beyond passing my physical and getting back to my regiment?"

A quick bark of laughter from Marcus had heads turning. "Put that notion away for good. You're a peer now. A war hero. You're going to be the talk of the Season. And here's the Home Secretary. By the way"—Marcus lowered his voice even further—"you now outrank him."

Evan shot Marcus a look. What did he mean Evan couldn't return to his regiment? What else was he to do? They needed him, and he needed them. And he had unfinished business on the Peninsula, something he'd left undone. He could feel it, even if he couldn't remember it. All this fuss and frippery with the nabobs was temporary, right?

Marcus turned to Viscount Sidmouth. "Good afternoon. Quite a 'Drawing Room' session today, wasn't it? Five debutantes and a new earl."

"Indeed." The Home Secretary looked as if he'd just tasted puddle water as he turned to Evan. "I had no idea when I met you in the hospital so recently that the Prince Regent would be conferring such an honor." Pure vinegar couldn't have puckered his mouth more. "I've been sent to discuss the properties and responsibilities that come with the Whitelock title." He opened a sheepskin-wrapped bundle of papers sewn down the side with legal tape.

The Home Secretary scanned the front page, flipped to the second, and said, "There is a townhouse here in London that is currently being rented. You will have to decide if you wish to evict the current tenants or let them finish out the Season in the property. And there is an estate and manor house in Sussex south of Crawley. The earldom has been vacant for twenty years or so, and the manor has been closed up for that time. I understand there was a caretaker. The previous earl's executor wasn't up to the job, it seems, and things have gone untended for too long."

Land? A manor? A townhouse? What was he supposed to do with an estate? He felt as if shackles were closing about his wrists and ankles.

Sidmouth cleared his throat. "There's also the matter of funds. The last Earl of Whitelock was not known for his circumspection when it came to personal finances. He left behind a meager bank account that has accrued some interest, and of course there is the income from the townhouse rents." He handed the papers to Evan, his finger on a number at the bottom of the page. His lips were pinched, and his brows drawn together, as if he felt the task of educating the newest peer of the realm beneath him. He clearly didn't approve of the Prince Regent's generosity. At the moment, he looked at Evan as if he were a stray mongrel sneaking into the pedigree kennel.

Which was just how Evan felt.

Letting his gaze land on the page where the viscount pointed, Evan tried not to show his surprise at the amount. Who called a bank account of over five thousand pounds meager? He would never amass that amount as a soldier if he stayed in the army for the next fifty years.

“Those documents will allow you to take possession of the properties and accounts. Have them with you when you go to the bank and when you receive the townhouse and manor keys from the law firm of Coles, Franks, and Moody on Orchard Street, near St. James’s Park.”

The Home Secretary bowed to Evan, nodded to Marcus, and turned on his heel, clearly glad to be finished with his assignment.

“Poor Sidmouth. I don’t envy him his job, keeping the Prince Regent happy. He’s caught between Parliament and the prince.” Marcus grinned. “Ah, now it begins. Brace yourself.”

“For what?” Evan swiveled his head, looking for danger but seeing only overdressed noblemen and women.

With a chuckle, Marcus turned Evan toward an advancing party. “You’re about to join an exhilarating hunt, and it’s up to you to determine if you’re the hound or the hare. You have just become a very eligible bachelor, my new friend.”

Evan held up his hand. “No, not me.”

“Yes, you. The introductions to debutantes and their eager mamas will now commence. Or eager papas, as the case may be.” Marcus straightened. “Here’s one now.”

“Good afternoon, Lieutenant. Or should I say Lord Whitelock now?” A tall, thin man with a square jaw and deep-set dark eyes covered the last few feet between them. His iron-gray hair rose thick and full from his powerful brow.

“May I present the Duke of Seaton? Your Grace, the Earl of Whitelock.”

Marcus made the introductions, and though his words were deferential, something in his tone put Evan on his guard.

“I came to express my gratitude. It was my son, Percival”—he indicated the young man at his shoulder—“whom you saved in Spain.” Nudging his son, he looked away, as if his duty had been fulfilled.

Percival held out his hand, leaning on his cane. “Obliged.” He pulled

out of the brief handshake, his eyes languid. Candlelight from the mirrored sconces glinted off his golden hair. “Glad to see you suffered no lasting harm.”

*Other than the fact that I can't remember anything about you, about that day, about the battle?* Evan searched the man's face for any sign of familiarity but found none.

“And you as well, I hope?” Evan indicated the cane, sizing up the young man. He would last about three minutes in the Ninety-Fifth. Fancy fop with a weak chin, a weaker handshake, and a lazy demeanor. How had he wound up in the middle of a pitched battle?

“Oh, you know. Making progress. At least the ladies find it dashing.” He cast a rather leering eye toward a pair of the debutantes who whispered and fluttered their lashes at him from a few yards away. One debutante stood nearer, the one who had been standing before the Queen when Evan had entered the chamber, though she paid no attention to the young viscount, keeping her eyes lowered. The duke stirred, as if just remembering she was there.

He cleared his throat. “My daughter, Diana.”

Her chin came up, and Evan blinked. Light-brown eyes with a fringe of dark-brown lashes. Not limpid, doe eyes, but intelligent and perhaps . . . wary eyes? Her chin was small and pointed, and her lips the palest rose. Her waist was cinched tight, her bodice showing the barest hint of bosom, her slender neck unadorned, the hollows of her collarbones somehow making her look vulnerable. Glossy brown curls framed her face and clustered on the back of her head. He was instantly aware of her in a way that took him off guard.

A beauty to be sure, the kind of beauty his fellow soldiers had rhapsodized about on long homesick evenings around the campfire.

A flush rode her cheeks, and she dropped a small curtsy. “Lord Whitelock.”

Lord Whitelock. Evan felt like an impostor. At any moment, someone would elbow him and say it was all a prank, right?

How should he address her? Totally out of his element, he wondered what she would do if he snapped a salute and clicked his bootheels together.

Marcus took command before he did anything so silly. “Lady Diana,

congratulations on your presentation. You look lovely. Don't you agree, Whitelock?"

"Yes." Had he really just croaked out the word like an awkward school-boy? Evan cleared his throat. "Yes." He took the fingertips she presented, gave a small bow, and said, "Lady Diana." Her fingers felt petite and delicate in his, and he found himself wishing she wasn't wearing gloves so he could feel her skin.

His arm jostled, and her hand slipped from his. A man of about his height forced his way forward, putting himself partially between Evan and the young lady. "I say, Perce, I believe introductions are in order." He ignored Evan and Marcus, focusing his attention on the girl.

Percival Seaton shrugged. "My sister, Diana, Fitz. I told you she was in town."

"Fitz" reached for Diana's hand, not waiting for her to offer it, and held it between his own, bowing over it and pressing his lips to the back of her glove. "Delighted, my dear."

Her brows came together, and she had to tug twice before he relinquished her fingers. Evan had the urge to haul the fellow backward and put himself in front of Lady Diana.

"Since Percival here is too lazy to do it, I guess I'll have to introduce myself. Viscount Fitzroy, at your service." His lip curled in a sneer.

Diana's hand went to her throat, her brown eyes wide enough that Evan felt he could fall right into them. She took a step back and bumped into her father, who was speaking with a pair of men.

"Don't be clumsy, girl," he growled, his face a thundercloud.

She moved quickly away from him, and as Fitzroy reached to clasp her arm, she slid away from him too.

"My lord." She placed her hand on Evan's elbow. "I would love you to meet my sponsor. She's over this way."

Evan threw a quick look at Marcus, whose eyebrows had risen. He nodded, and Evan took this to mean he had little choice but to go with her.

When they were out of earshot of her family, she lessened the pressure on his arm. "Thank you. I apologize for taking you away from your friends. That really was most bold of me, but . . ."

“Don’t trouble yourself. They aren’t my friends. At least, I didn’t know any of them before today.” He could feel each of her fingers through her glove and the sleeve of his woolen uniform. An only child, going straight into the army at seventeen, he’d had few dealings with women, and none at all with a woman of her station.

She smelled like flowers.

He realized he was staring and tried to think of something smart to say. “Though, I suspect that Marcus might become a friend.” He glanced back to where Haverly stood in front of a tall set of draped windows. Marcus grinned at him with raised eyebrows, no doubt amused at how quickly an unmarried lady had cut him from the pack.

Eligible bachelor? Him? “You wanted me to meet your sponsor?”

“Oh, I do beg your pardon. I said that just to get away from the viscount.” She blinked and looked down at her hand on his sleeve, withdrawing it and stepping back to lace her fingers together, her fan dangling from its loop at her wrist. “I’m afraid I don’t care for the man.”

Evan frowned. “But, I thought you’d only just met.”

She shrugged, her shoulders delicate, her eyes not meeting his. “Yes, that’s right. But sometimes you just know about people.” With a small curtsy, she left him standing there staring after her.

Was this an example of “women’s intuition” he’d heard of? If so, what was her first impression of him?

Not that it mattered. He had too much on his plate to have his head turned by a woman, no matter how pretty.