



Chapter 1

*April 1816
London, England*

“HOW CAN YOU BE LATE for what might be the most important meeting of your life?” Daniel Swann muttered under his breath, weaving his way through the pedestrians clogging the sidewalk on Drury Lane just around the corner from the Bow Street Magistrate’s Court. Sir Michael had kept him for ages, wanting a firsthand accounting of the investigation he had sent Daniel and his partner, Ed Beck, on to a county in the north. Daniel’s frustration had grown as he reiterated the information contained in the written report in Sir Michael’s hand.

The superintendent of the Bow Street investigators took perverse delight in ruling his domain, particularly when it came to showing his disdain for Daniel. He had questioned their every action, parried any explanation, and generally fuffed about until Daniel feared he would be seriously tardy for his evening appointment.

Half a block up, Daniel spotted a familiar carriage. Cadogan’s hackney sat at the curb. The driver, a friend to whom Daniel owed his life, always seemed to be around when Daniel needed a ride. Cadogan’s knife flashed through an apple, cutting off wedges and splitting them between the carriage horses, Sprite and Lola. A mismatched pair—

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chestnut and dark bay, one lean, one well-fleshed—they weren't the most elegant team, but according to Cadogan you wouldn't find a better brace in all of London. The driver affectionately rubbed each horse's nose, then returned the knife to a sheath at his waist.

"Evening, guv." He touched his hat brim. "Need a ride?"

"I do." Daniel reached for the carriage door.

"I been meaning to have a word. Have you heard anything about some street children going missing lately?" Cadogan's brow furrowed. "I've heard some rumbles, a few children not showing up on their street corners. Not hereabouts exactly, but over in Spitalfields maybe? I dropped a fare there earlier today and caught a whiff of a rumor that a chimney sweep's boy had gone missing."

Daniel shook his head. "No, I've not heard anything, but I don't know that we would unless they found a body or someone made a formal report."

Cadogan grimaced and glanced down at his lapel, straightening the white flower slotted through his buttonhole.

"You look smart." Daniel indicated the blossom. He'd never seen the jarvey so tidy. Polished boots, brushed coat, clean breeches. The coach appeared freshly washed, the brightwork gleaming. And a new brass plate fixed to the side—Mr. H. Cadogan. "Putting on airs, are we?" He smiled to indicate he was teasing.

Cadogan's teeth flashed. "Thought I'd groom more than just the horses. See if I can get a higher-tone client. I came into a bit of money recently and thought I'd polish up the old girl." He swung open the door and held it for Daniel. "Thought the flowers might be a nice touch. I know a little flower seller who needs to empty her tray before she returns home each day, and I helped her out."

In a bud vase between the windows on the opposite side of the carriage, a trio of the same white flowers as in the driver's lapel brightened the space. The benches and squabs had been brushed, and the floor swept clean.

"Looks nice. Sorry I'm not quite the caliber client you're looking for, but at least my destination is. I need to get to Westminster."

“Are you in a hurry?” A frown touched Cadogan’s eyes.

“A bit, yes. Sir Michael kept me longer than I intended. Is there somewhere you need to stop first?” Cadogan had never asked Daniel for such a concession before.

“No, it’s not that. It’s Sprite. She’s showing her age, and I don’t like to push her. She’s let me know today that she’s not up to trotting on the cobbles for miles. A bit stiff in the joints, she is. I suppose I’ll have to look for another horse soon, though it pains me. She was my first carriage horse, and she wasn’t young when I got her.” He dug a rag from his pocket and swiped a smudge of grease off the side of the carriage. “My worry is, I can’t afford to keep her if she’s not earning. I rent space in a livery near my house, and what with feeding and shoeing and the like, a horse is a powerful expense. Still, I can’t see parting with the old girl. No telling what would happen to her. ’Tis a quandary, for sure.” He shook himself. “But that’s no bother of yours, is it? We’ll get there if we go steady.”

“You can let me off at the abbey.” Daniel climbed aboard, sat on the bench, and leaned back as Cadogan shut the door. The potential change in Daniel’s circumstances and his true parentage were hardly common knowledge, and the Duke of Haverly’s message calling him to the home of a barrister had been quite cryptic. Daniel felt it wise not to draw attention to his destination, hence why he asked Cadogan to drop him off a few blocks away.

Daniel touched the flowers in the carriage’s vase, and a pair of white petals fluttered to the floor. Chagrined, he picked them up and dropped them out the open window, not wanting to leave a mess in the pristine vehicle.

With a lurch, they were off, joining the evening traffic heading across the river. Daniel had never met with a barrister before. At least not on his own behalf. He’d been called to the Old Bailey to testify when one of his cases was tried, but this was vastly different.

Was he, with the help of this unknown barrister, about to change his entire future?

Half an hour later, and dangerously near the time of his meeting,

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Daniel wrapped his cloak tighter against the wind and alighted from the carriage. This prosperous area of London near Westminster boasted gaslights, and the lamplighters were out now with their long brass rods, hooking open the glass doors and turning the keys to start the gas flowing.

Daniel kept to the shadows, head down but walking purposefully, as if he had a right to be there.

Cadogan hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said the ride from Vauxhall would take longer than normal. The sun had set, bringing chill dampness to the air. A fresh breeze whipped his lapels, and he anchored his hat atop his head. This had been the latest spring Daniel could remember. The latest anyone could remember, if the old tars who chewed their clay pipe stems and commented on the weather while toasting themselves around the pub fireplaces of London were to be believed.

Turning onto Cowley Street, Daniel quickened his pace along the pathway in front of identical brick townhouses. At the end of Cowley, where it turned right and became Barton Street, a five-story, many-windowed residence marked his destination. No carriage waited at the curb. Had the duke not yet arrived?

Squaring his shoulders and wiping his palms on his breeches, Daniel inhaled the cold evening air to fortify himself. He clacked the brass knocker against the strike plate twice, and before he dropped his hand, the glossy black door opened.

He offered his card to the rotund butler, who held out a small, silver tray to accept the bit of pasteboard. "Daniel Swann to see Sir James."

"This way." The portly servant turned, carrying the tray before him as if it held the Crown Jewels, and Daniel followed. A footman in full livery closed the front door behind them.

Parquet floors, curving balustrade, heavily framed portraits . . . all the accoutrements of London prosperity. The place reeked of money and respectability.

Though dressed impeccably, Daniel felt out of place. A simple Bow Street investigator had no right calling on a respected barrister, and a

knighted barrister at that. Yet Daniel's potential membership in the peerage was the subject of this very meeting.

The butler mounted the stairs, his footsteps heavy and his breath coming in puffs. Daniel followed and, at the top of the tall flight, waited while the servant opened the double doors.

As Daniel entered, a surge of pleasure went through his chest. What a library. Books from floor to ceiling on three walls, tall windows that would let in light during the day, rich dark wood everywhere, and a carpet so plush, it felt as if his boots were sinking.

Carriage or not out front, the Duke of Haverly had arrived first. He rose as Daniel approached, as did the man seated behind a Brobdingnagian desk.

"Good evening, Your Grace." Daniel bowed slightly.

"Sir James, may I introduce your client, Mr. Daniel Swann. Daniel, Sir James Durridge."

"Sir James." Daniel made a quick assessment. The barrister appeared to be about fifty, with impressive side whiskers and a full head of graying hair. Impeccably tailored, though a bit ostentatious for Daniel's taste with a green waistcoat and bright-blue coat. His eyes were piercing and his face longish. It was a learned countenance, with intelligence emanating from his heavily browed eyes.

"Sit." He indicated a chair. "You're behind your time. I hope tardiness isn't a habit with you."

Daniel glanced at the case clock. Two minutes past eight. Hardly late, as he'd knocked on the door at precisely eight o'clock, but he wouldn't quibble.

The door behind the barrister opened as they all sat, and a slight man of perhaps thirty-five with dark hair and eyes slipped into the library. Smartly dressed, but much less flamboyantly than his employer, the man's gaze moved from one to another quickly, as if assessing the occupants for their suitability.

"Ah, Henry. Thank you." Sir James took the meerschaum pipe and leather pouch the man handed over. "I shall need you to take notes, of course. Your Grace, my clerk, Henry Childers."

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Mr. Childers removed a portable writing desk from the bookshelf and set it upon a small side table. He adjusted the wick in the wall lamp above him and tilted the reflector to direct the light downward. But rather than take his place, he went to the fireplace, removed a taper from a box on the mantel, and lit it from the flames.

Sir James had busied himself with stuffing tobacco into the meerschau, which had griffins carved into the bowl. The clerk brought the taper and held it to the bowl as the barrister puffed on the pipe. The pair must have worked in tandem for some time to be so well rehearsed.

When the tobacco glowed sufficiently and smoke billowed from Sir James's nostrils, the clerk stepped back, inserted the taper into a holder, and placed it beside the writing desk.

"Now, Your Grace," Sir James said, "I have been retained by the solicitors Coles, Franks & Moody to represent a claim of inheritance. I have read the relevant documents Mr. Coles supplied." He clamped his teeth on the pipe stem and leaned back, his brows lowering. Before him on the broad expanse of leather blotter, he had spread several pages into orderly rows. "An interesting and challenging case. Don't you agree?"

Daniel wondered why he had bothered to attend the meeting. The barrister had addressed his comments only to the duke. Shouldn't Daniel be the one to whom the inquiry was made? Was there some protocol he didn't know at play here?

"And what is your opinion of our chances of proving the claim?" Haverly asked. The duke appeared casual, as if the answer wouldn't change every facet of Daniel's life.

I'd be casual too if I was only a bystander in this affair. If I had my title sewn up tight with no need to fight for it.

"The precedence for such a case is narrow, thankfully. Though previously unknown offspring will occasionally pop up, it is rare that they have a strong case for being named heir. I will tell you now, cases like this are difficult to win, which is not a bad thing. Otherwise, the aristocracy would be chaos." For the first time since they'd sat

down, Sir James looked at Daniel. A look of mistrust and doubt. "Even the thought of admitting hitherto unknown heirs to the peerage, of having them stroll out of the woods, as it were, terrifies the establishment."

Wasn't this man supposed to represent him to the attorney general and possibly to the regent himself? To put forth his case for the title of Earl of Rotherhide? If Sir James was so pessimistic at the outset, would he be wholehearted in his work on Daniel's behalf?

"Traditionally the House of Lords, should the petition get that far, tends to side with the heir presumptive, making our job an uphill battle. However . . ." Sir James leaned forward and scrutinized a page. "You do have strong evidence, not least of which is the declaration of the late earl himself. Often the petitioner is fighting against the wishes of the previous holder of the title, but in this instance, the old earl declared you his legal heir in a witnessed document before his death."

"So our chances are better than average?" Haverly asked.

"I do not like to give percentages. If there is anything I have learned in my long career, it is that anything can happen when it comes to the law. Juries are unpredictable, and lords even more so. The gentlemen who will be deciding this case come from well-established families, holding titles that date back centuries. They will not be eager to discard Viscount Coatsworth's claim to the title, no matter how strong the evidence. To do so would open the door to other such claims, and no one wants the proceedings of the House to be clogged with by-blow children screaming for their rights."

Heat trickled under Daniel's skin. Though he had recently learned that he was not the illegitimate child of a domestic servant as he had always thought, he had worn that label a long time. It would not come off easily, though he now knew his mother had been rightfully married to the Earl of Rotherhide's son and Daniel's birth had been within the bounds of a legal union.

What a tangle. What should have been his by birth was now something for which he would have to fight in a public battle that pitted him against his half brother, Alonzo Darby. If he won, it would be

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Alonzo wearing the brand of illegitimate and who would have no title and standing.

If he did not prevail, it would be himself who was ostracized. Would he even be able to stay in London? And what would that mean to his budding relationship with Lady Juliette?

Daniel did not look forward to Alonzo's return to London. Alonzo had fled to the West Indies upon learning from his grandfather the truth of his birth—but Alonzo's mother, the current Viscountess of Coatsworth, had sent a fast ship after him and was determined to contest Daniel's claims on her son's title.

Brother against brother, where one would win everything and the other be left with nothing.

"What evidence do you still need to build your case?" Haverly asked. "The solicitors have tasked me with heading the investigative portion of the petition, and I feel strongly that this wrong must be righted, no matter how the lords might detest or fear it. If the claim is true and Daniel Swann is the heir to the earldom, it must be put right."

A different heat lit Daniel's chest. For most of his life, he had been alone, with no one to fight for him. Taken from his home by a mysterious patron, evicted by his mother—who had been only too glad to be rid of him—he had been on his own at school and at university, not fitting in with or accepted by the wealthy boys in his classes. It wasn't until he'd joined the Bow Street Magistrate's Court as an investigator that he'd found a family of sorts, a brotherhood in the investigators' room.

He'd had a powerful patron working in the background, paying school fees, paying for his tutelage at Oxford, procuring him the job of his choice. A shadowy figure who dictated the parameters and perimeters of Daniel's life. And all that time Daniel had never known it was his own grandfather, the Earl of Rotherhide, acting from a guilty conscience rather than benevolence.

But now Daniel had the Duke of Haverly working on his behalf, standing by him in this totally foreign arena.

Sir James inhaled deeply from his pipe. "I will need sworn statements from anyone still alive to make them. You will need to take a

local magistrate with you to hear and witness the statements. Because you are clearly biased toward the petitioner, you must take along someone to corroborate the gathering of the information.” He spoke as if choosing his words carefully, not wanting to give offense.

“I understand. Do you have a list of those with whom I should speak?”

At a nod from Sir James, Mr. Childers dipped the tip of his pen into the inkwell, ready to write the dictated list.

“First will be the plaintiff’s mother, a Mrs. Dunstan?”

“Excuse me.” Daniel held up his hand. He could keep quiet no longer.

Sir James looked up, his brows rising.

“Did it perhaps slip your notice that I am, in fact, sitting here before you? I have a name. I have a brain, a tongue, and the ability to use both. I would appreciate it if you would cease calling me ‘the petitioner’ and address me as the individual human person I am. Mr. Daniel. Swann.” He emphasized each word.

The barrister looked from Daniel to Haverly and back again before harrumphing and shuffling papers. “Very well. *Mr. Daniel. Swann.* Here is something important for you to remember as we make our way through this case. You are to say nothing. You are to draw no attention to yourself. In the eyes of the law and the peerage, unless or until you prevail with this petition, you have no standing. You are nothing more than a nuisance making an extraordinary claim against an accepted member of the aristocracy. This is an academic issue, not one of personalities or entities. This case must be decided upon its own merits and nothing else. You will not address the lords, you will not talk to the press, and you will do nothing to put yourself forward between now and the hearing of your petition. You will not accompany His Grace to interview or otherwise influence or intimidate the witnesses who will be giving statements. You, Mr. Daniel Swann, will be a silent bystander. The lords will be looking for any reason to dismiss your claim, so it will be best if you are seen and heard from as little as possible. We’re already straining our credibility with the earl’s codicil,

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expecting them to believe (a) your mother married the earl's son, and (b) that he never had that marriage annulled."

Haverly nodded. "We must have evidence that will hold up at this hearing, legally and credibly, for every aspect of this story. You must first convince the attorney general, who must then convince the Prince Regent. If he deems the petition to have merit, he may then put it before a select committee in the House of Lords. Every step of the proceedings will be scrutinized with the hope of being able to dismiss the case before it goes to the next step in the chain. To avoid any appearance of influence or interference, you must remain away from the collection of that evidence.

"We're asking those who will decide the merits of the case to be impartial, and we cannot be seen as having any interest in anything other than bringing them the truth of the matter. I'm sure an Oxford-educated man such as yourself is intelligent enough to see that and not get himself into a state because of the way he has been addressed in his barrister's office?"

Daniel felt properly chastened. He tried to ignore the chagrin squirming in his chest. "Am I to have no part in the proceedings at all? Will I not be called upon to address the attorney general? Should I bother to attend when the case is heard or just wait for you to inform me?" He hadn't quite managed to eradicate all sarcasm from his words.

"I will inform you when and if your presence is required." Sir James harrumphed—a favorite mannerism, apparently. "I would not have had your attendance this evening if His Grace hadn't insisted."

Daniel glanced at Haverly and nodded, subsiding into his chair. Sir James went on to list several more people Haverly should interview. Daniel's late grandfather's physician and valet, other servants at the Rotherhide estate, and the local vicar, as well as searching for the forger who created the false annulment documents, the investigator who had located Daniel as a child, and the man who had performed the marriage ceremony in Scotland, if possible. If the man no longer lived, then a records check would be the next best thing. Haverly was to speak to Daniel's tutor at Oxford and the headmaster at the boys'

school where Daniel had been sent, in order to attest to his character while a student.

“Speak to the man who agreed to employ Mrs. Dunstan at his estate when she was exiled from Rotherhide, and barring that, anyone else who might have been there when she arrived. Find the midwife who assisted her in giving birth, so we can confirm the dates. If there are others who come to mind, get their statements. As I put together the case, there may be other individuals who crop up to whom you should speak, but for now, this list should keep you occupied. These people will not be easy to track down, some may be reluctant to speak to you, and others will have died. We’re talking about an event that took place a quarter century ago.”

The clerk’s pen scratched and scraped as he wrote his list. When he’d finished, he showed the paper to his employer, who nodded, and then handed it to Haverly. “Will this do?”

“Yes, thank you. I’ll commence my investigation at once. When I know more, I’ll contact you.”

“And I shall begin work on the presentation documents. As to when we will meet with the attorney general, that will depend upon the speed with which you can verify the claims we are making.” Sir James peered into his pipe, but the tobacco no longer glowed, and only a faint wisp of smoke drifted up. “If there is nothing else?” He looked to the duke.

“Not on my end. Swann?”

“No, Your Grace. If there is any way I may be of service, I trust you will inform me?” Though he had been relegated to the role of watcher for the time being, it didn’t mean there wouldn’t be something in the future that he may be able to contribute.

When the duke rose, the others did too. “Sir James, Mr. Childers, I bid you good evening. Daniel, walk me out.”

The stocky butler waited in the entry with their wraps. It always mystified Daniel how butlers seemed to know exactly when a meeting or gathering had ended. They never needed to be called to fetch coats or open the door.

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Once outside, Haverly headed north on Barton Street toward the abbey. Daniel matched his stride.

“My carriage is up this way. I didn’t feel it wise to advertise my presence at Sir James’s. Not that I believe anyone would be watching, since no one knows about your claim just yet. Habit, most likely. Did you arrive by hackney?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“I shall save you the difficulty of procuring another. Ride with me. I’m attending a dinner party tonight, but once I’ve been delivered, I’ll have my driver take you home.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

Once seated in the luxurious carriage, Daniel grimaced. “Something about Sir James rubs me raw. He acted as if I was invisible, and when I did speak, he gave me a setdown, didn’t he? One would think I was a street urchin coming hat in hand, begging for something to which I wasn’t entitled.”

“He was abrupt, but in essence he isn’t wrong. It’s best if you let us go about our work on your behalf and be patient. At this point he’s approaching the case as if he were one of the committee members who may be called upon to decide your fate. Extreme skepticism and prejudice against your claim until it’s proven to him plain enough that he can be confident in what he’s presenting. If we convince him, he will be much more persuasive before the committee.”

“When will you interview my mother?”

“Soon. Tomorrow evening, most likely. Why? Have you spoken with her yet?”

“No.” And he wasn’t certain he wished to. Every time he thought of her, his heart burned with abandonment and shame. “We’ve been estranged more than a dozen years. What is there to say?”

Haverly stirred in the darkness of the carriage, flashes of light crossing his face as they passed beneath the streetlamps. “What is there to say? More than a dozen years’ worth of your lives? Explanations, comparing of experiences, and what the plan will be going forward? Those might be good places to begin, I should think.”

Daniel said nothing. He would have to deal with his relationship with his mother at some point, but he was in no hurry. Until last month, he'd been forbidden by his patron, his grandfather, from having any contact with her. And she had done nothing since his grandfather died to seek him out to explain herself. For all he knew, she was as reluctant as he to dig up the past.

That she lived in Juliette's house would complicate his efforts to avoid her. What odds that his estranged mother would be employed as housekeeper for the woman he loved?

As always, the thought of Juliette made his heart soar. He'd sent a note asking permission to call tomorrow morning. It was time to share first with her parents and then the rest of the world their intentions. Though, as he traveled across town with this man who was his advocate and his superior in rank and employment, it occurred to Daniel that he should tell the duke as well before word got out.

"Your Grace, there has been a development regarding another relationship. You should be apprised before it travels outside a small circle, since both parties are in your employ." Daniel rubbed his palms on his thighs as heat built along his collarbones. "I have made my heart known to Lady Juliette, and she reciprocates my feelings. Tomorrow we intend to inform her parents and ask their blessing on our association. It is my objective to ask for her hand in marriage."

The duke was quiet for so long, Daniel wanted to squirm. Had Haverly not heard, or was he outraged that someone like Daniel would reach so high up the social ladder as to fall in love with an earl's daughter?

At last Haverly let out a sigh. "You have excellent taste. Lady Juliette is both kind and beautiful, and I can see how you might come to have feelings for her."

Hope sprang into Daniel's heart.

"However, I must caution you. You are embarking on delicate maneuvers as your case is presented to the attorney general. Any whiff of scandal attached to your name will give the committee reason to toss your case aside without giving you a proper hearing. Courting Lady

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Juliette at this sensitive time could be seen not as a harmless romance but as you currying favor or trying to manipulate the outcome of the case by making yourself more acceptable to the aristocracy.”

“What are you saying? That I shouldn’t . . .” He couldn’t possibly stop loving Lady Juliette. “I’ve already declared my feelings for her. That particular bell cannot be unrung.”

“I’m not asking you not to propose to the lady eventually. I’m asking you to wait. Wait until the hearing is over, the inheritance decided, your position in society made plain. If the committee rules in your favor, you will be an earl. You will be of the same social standing as Lady Juliette, and no one can cavil at your offering for her. But if you move now, before the hearing, it will not reflect well on your cause. And if you are unsuccessful in the petition, you will put Lady Juliette into a position of having to renege.”

Though there was wisdom in what Haverly said, Daniel scowled. Renege? He assumed Juliette would not marry him unless he was an earl? But she loved him, or so she claimed, and she wasn’t even aware that an earldom might be in the offing.

But the duke wasn’t finished.

“Daniel, I must also caution you. You and Lady Juliette are from vastly different social strata. The possibility of your inheritance may have emboldened you to declare your feelings for Juliette, but if things do not turn in your favor, are you prepared to still offer for her? Are you prepared for her parents to deny permission? Most would under those circumstances.”

A pang hit his heart. He probably should have waited to tell Juliette of his love for her. In truth, he hadn’t expected her to return his love when he’d blurted out his feelings. He had simply been unable to stop himself.

“Have you told Lady Juliette about your new circumstances?” Haverly asked. “About the petition for the earldom?”

“No. I plan to tell her tomorrow. Both her and her parents.”

“If I could keep the petition quiet until it was decided, I would, but word is going to come out. The moment we make our case, London

will be abuzz with speculation. I suppose it is better to inform the Thorndikes beforehand so they can prepare. However, tomorrow you will only have Juliette and Bertie to brave. The earl and countess are leaving before dawn on a diplomatic mission for the Crown. I'm having dinner at their home tonight along with my countess and sister-in-law by way of a send-off."

"Another mission for the Thorndikes? They've only just returned from France." Poor Juliette. She must be so disappointed. "They're leaving her again."

"It cannot be helped. This time it is not I who am sending them, but the regent himself." The carriage stopped in front of the Thorndike townhouse. "Keep your head down, do not draw attention to yourself, and await developments. Let Juliette and Bertie know what's happening, and then trust me and Sir James to see this through. I will keep my own counsel regarding the petition and the situation with yourself and Lady Juliette."

"Thank you, Your Grace." Disappointment warred with frustration in Daniel's gut. The duke was good at keeping secrets. Too bad Daniel wasn't good at waiting.