

HAVEN MANOR • 2

A
RETURN *of*
DEVOTION



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To the Giver of New Beginnings
2 Corinthians 5:7

And to Jacob,
who always reminds me
that every day is a fresh chance
to try again.



CHAPTER ONE

MARLBOROUGH, ENGLAND
1816

She should have been prepared. After all, she'd had two months to imagine this moment, to brace herself for someone new to enter her life. In truth, she'd done little else besides imagine all the possible scenarios, each one worse than the last.

But she hadn't imagined this.

Daphne Blakemoor stared at the man in front of her and blinked. Repeatedly. Quick, slow, one eyelid at a time, every variation she could think of because it was simply not possible that the man in front of her existed. At least, not for another twenty years or so.

The dark blond hair, straight nose, angled jawline, and deep-set blue eyes in an almost overly symmetrical face were all too familiar. She'd seen the younger version every day for the past thirteen years in the face of a boy on the cusp of becoming a man. At that moment, he was three rooms away, replacing the final section of chipped and scarred dado rail in the saloon.

Discreetly, she pinched her leg through her skirt. She tried to picture a pony standing next to the man, just to see if she was lost in her imagination.

Nothing changed the scene on the porch just outside the front

door. The man was still there, his mouth pressed into a stern line while a pucker formed between drawn eyebrows.

She'd seen a similar look on Benedict's face whenever something confused him. It wasn't as direct as this man's—or as disconcerting. In twenty years, though, who could say? The boy was going to look just like this. Well, without the expensively tailored clothing and probably boasting a few more muscles. He was going to be a laborer, after all, not an aristocratic gentleman. The similarity was enough, though, that anyone would think this man was the boy's father.

He wasn't, though. Daphne knew. She'd been there.

And while there was a lot she'd forgotten—whether by accident or on purpose—the face of the man who'd fathered her son wasn't one of those things.

All Daphne's carefully thought-out plans, all her encouraging talks in the mirror—silent, of course, so her friend Jess didn't tease her for it—all the practice she'd done getting a speech ready for this moment, all of those things were worthless because in that instant, Daphne couldn't recall a single word.

What she wanted to do was shut the door solidly in this man's face and scamper away to hide in the quietest, darkest corner she could find.

What she did was stand there. In the doorway. Doing nothing. Because if this man was the new owner of her home, she had no idea what the proper course of action was.

The man's head tilted to the side and the pucker between his brows grew deeper.

Daphne gulped. No one stumbled across Haven Manor. That's what had made it such a wonderful place to hide for the past twelve years.

This man had to be in possession of explicit directions on how to get here. Since those would have been given to only one person, there was no *if* about it. This man was the new owner and she was blocking the entrance to the house, staring at him like a goose.

But what else was she to do? Benedict, the brightest spot in her life and the boy who wore a younger version of this man's face,

was inside, and she simply couldn't let them see each other. Not until she'd come up with a plan and a well-rehearsed speech.

Speech or no speech, she should probably introduce herself. Minutes of silent gawking didn't do much to recommend her as an employee. The man was about to speak first and he was starting to look like he was seriously considering having those first words be her dismissal.



The woman was a simpleton.

She looked normal enough for a country lass, with brown hair swept up into a loose knot, brown eyes, and a touch of color to her skin from living in a place where people could actually feel the sun on occasion.

However, she'd yet to say a word. She'd yet to do anything besides stare at him and blink a lot.

Who was she? Obviously a part of the basic caretaking staff that had supposedly been here for years. William hoped she wasn't the cook he'd asked the solicitor to hire in preparation for William's arrival. The process of answering the door usually included some form of greeting, but she was taking so long to perform that portion he rather thought anything she tried to cook would end up burned.

A maid, then? Her dress was a nicer quality than he expected for a maid, though it certainly looked like it had been around for years. Was it possible she was the housekeeper?

He couldn't imagine a housekeeper without any wits, but then again, the house was in the middle of nowhere. His coachman had barely found it even with precise directions. A house such as this would be the perfect place for someone competent but unable to communicate.

Tension eased from his shoulders and face. The woman must be mute. As long as she wasn't deaf as well, they should be able to muddle along, though he would mention to the housekeeper that perhaps someone who couldn't speak shouldn't be answering the door.

He took in a breath and opened his mouth to speak, but she beat him to it, breaking the silence and sending all his calming conclusions crashing to the stone porch.

“I’m afraid there’s no one home just now, sir. You’ll have to come visit later.”

William forgot to shut his mouth. Not mute. He was going to have to return to the idea that she was a bit light in the head, then.

“I’m not here for a visit,” he said slowly and with particular care for his enunciation. “I am Lord Chemsford.”

The title still felt strange on his tongue. After spending thirty-three years introducing himself as Lord Kettlewell and his father as the Marquis of Chemsford, now he was Lord Chemsford and there was no Viscount Kettlewell. It was enough to leave a man feeling a bit like he didn’t know himself.

“My lord.” The woman bobbed a perfect curtsy but didn’t move out of the way or introduce herself.

She did know who he was, didn’t she? Yes, his instructions to the managing solicitor had been brief, but surely she knew who she worked for. Then again, this woman might not know what to do with that information even if she knew it.

He cleared his throat and set his mind on giving her a chance. It wasn’t as if he planned on spending his evenings sitting about the drawing room, chatting with his servants. If they could get past this moment, he could reserve judgment until he saw how she did the rest of her job.

Whatever that might happen to be.

“I own this estate,” he said slowly.

She blinked at him again but still nothing happened. She didn’t step aside, didn’t introduce herself, didn’t so much as say *welcome*.

Wind rustled the limbs of the trees surrounding the property, birds twittered amongst themselves, and a thick blanket of peace seemed to surround the entire neglected estate. Behind him, at the foot of the stairs leading up to the porch, the horses shifted their weight, causing the carriage harness to creak, but even that didn’t break the calm feel of the place. He’d have to make sure

that peace remained as he renovated the house and restored the grounds.

Peace was something his life had been lacking for a rather long while.

He had been right to select this property as his home out of the many he'd inherited from his father—along with a title, a reputation, and a slew of relatives of varying closeness who wanted to live off the marquissette.

They'd never look for him in the middle of the fields of Wiltshire at a run-down property his father had won in a card game.

It was the perfect place to live.

If he could ever get in the door.

"Perhaps we, or you, could . . ." William faltered on his sentence. What was the correct request in this instance? Step aside? Go into the house? He was already regretting his decision of mere seconds ago not to send her to pack her bags.

He slowly tensed and then relaxed the muscles in his body, starting with his shoulders and working down to his toes. He wasn't a man given to rash decisions, and dismissing a woman from his employ while he was still on the porch seemed rash no matter how odd the circumstances, but he was at a complete loss as to what to do next. He could push past her easily, given that she was an average-sized woman and he was, well, a rather average-sized man.

Finding a different door might be a more prudent choice at the moment, though. The thud of one of those other distant doors closing broke the awkward but peaceful silence, followed by the jangle of harness and the rattle of wagon wheels. Entering his house for the first time via the service entrance was hardly ideal, but he did want to gain access to his new home before nightfall without having to bodily move a woman.

Then she moved herself.

A wide smile split her round face and she stepped backward into the house, sweeping the front door open with a flourish. "Welcome home, my lord."

Well.

That was unexpected.

Or rather, that was what he'd initially expected but then she'd blocked the door and . . . Honestly, it wasn't worth puzzling out. He should simply take the opportunity before she changed her mind again.

William took a large step into the front hall, his gaze narrowing on the smiling woman. It was a forced smile, tight and unnatural. She had the presence of mind to put on a bit of a façade now but not to actually let him in the door earlier?

"I'm allowed entrance now?" he couldn't resist asking.

She blinked, and the smile grew wider and tighter. "But of course, my lord. It is your home, after all."

"I was beginning to wonder," he murmured. He cleared his throat. "And you are?"

"The housekeeper." She clenched her hands together in front of her and executed a smooth curtsy. "Mrs., er, Brightmoor at your service."

She curtsied like a gentlewoman and stumbled over her name like a street urchin. And she was in charge of his house? That might have done well enough when the only thing she had to do was keep the roof from caving in, but she might be rather difficult to live with.

Yet she was here so he'd have to make do, at least for a few days. As long as she didn't poison his tea she was better than no housekeeper at all. He sighed. "Have we a footman to bring in my bags and show my man where to bed down the horses?"

The woman poked her head out the door and looked to the graveled drive where his coach was sitting. Pasley, William's driver and head groom, was standing by the two horses' heads while his valet, Morris, was standing by the door of the carriage. If either of them found the farce that had played out on the porch of the house to be strange or even entertaining, they weren't showing it. Like proper servants.

"No," the housekeeper said, dragging the word out a good bit longer than necessary as she buried her hands in her apron. "But

we've a boy who lives . . . nearby . . . who helps with the garden, goats, and chickens.”

He shook away a sudden burst of dizziness as he attempted to wrap his mind around what the woman had said. His abandoned estate had a garden? And livestock? “We've goats and chickens? But not footmen?”

“We haven't had need for a footman, but food is something else entirely.” Her tone—considerably more cultured than he would have expected for a woman living in what was essentially the middle of nowhere—was chiding enough that he had to swallow an instinctive apology.

She did have a point, though. He hadn't seen many nearby farms on his drive in, just a lot of trees. If they were to have daily food or items such as eggs or milk, a small plot and a handful of animals were probably necessary to provide for herself and whoever else was part of the *we*.

“Reuben is rather capable with horses,” Mrs. Brightmoor continued, still rolling her hands in her apron. “But your bags look quite large. Can your man carry them? Or perhaps you could help him and carry in your own?”

It wasn't that William had never carried anything in his life. There had been a time or two he'd had to carry his own bag or even help lift a trunk, but that she would suggest such a thing was a bit shocking. Despite his capability, he rather thought that if he were going to hire people to do a job, he ought to let them do it.

And he tended to hire a lot of people.

It was ironic the number of people he employed when all he really wanted was to be left alone. Still, hiring an extra servant or two was a far better use of his money than two more finely tailored suits of clothing that he had no need of.

Yet here he was with a staff of what appeared to be three, assuming the cook he had requested was around somewhere. He should have asked what the solicitor meant by a basic staff. Their definitions were obviously not aligned, and until they were, it looked like William would have to do a bit for himself.

His heart pounded a bit harder as he stepped one foot back over the threshold. His gaze flickered back and forth from the carriage to the housekeeper. Would she let him back in when he returned, or would there once more be a human blockade in his way?

Since there was no way to cross a ten-foot porch and go down a dozen stone steps without actually departing, William left the house and returned to the carriage, where he pulled out the leather bag he'd kept inside the carriage with him.

"My lord!" Morris protested, stepping closer to the remaining baggage strapped to the back of the carriage.

William shook his head and adjusted his grip on the bag. "Go with Pasley. Once the horses are unhitched, the two of you can carry the trunks in."

Morris looked back and forth. "Go with him where?"

William glanced around as well. Not a single outbuilding was visible. The house had been carefully placed on a slight rise to look like the only thing around. Trees extended out to the sides, presumably blocking the view of whatever was down the other side of the hill.

There was a rutted path, however, and a set of tracks leading around one side of the house. William was about to suggest they try that direction when a boy came loping around the corner. He looked to be mostly arms and legs—thin ones that Mrs. Brightmoor had accurately assumed wouldn't be much help with carrying trunks, and the neck extending out of his once-white work shirt barely looked big enough around to hold up his head.

There was a brief glimpse of something that might have been spectacles before the head dropped and the boy watched his toes as he walked, leaving William looking at a mop of auburn curls that would require half a tin of hair wax to tame.

Morris's thinned lips indicated he didn't particularly care for the idea of following a boy who looked at his toes, but he didn't say anything so William left him to it. It wasn't like they had much choice.

William slid the smallest of the bags from beneath the strap

holding the baggage onto the carriage and turned back toward the stairs before Morris could protest again.

The door to the house stood open, with the enigmatic Mrs. Brightmoor nowhere in sight. He crossed into the front hall once more and nudged the door closed with his foot.

Then he stared.

He'd been too focused on his housekeeper to look at the room earlier, and if asked, he wasn't sure he could have said what he expected it to look like.

But whatever it was, it hadn't been this.

The large room, nearly devoid of furniture, was still impressive, especially when one considered how long the house had been empty. A scattering of intricate tables so small they couldn't hold anything and equally useless delicately carved chairs lined the tall walls. Bright red wall coverings that had clearly seen a better day made a stark contrast to the white trim and wainscoting.

But the part that most took his breath away was the art. Painting upon painting covered the walls. Statues stood like sentinels in the corners. A glance through the open doors on all three walls revealed that the abundance of art was not confined to the front hall.

And every last bit of it, even under closer inspection, appeared clean and meticulously cared for. His housekeeper might not be able to speak well, but she—or someone else lurking around the house—could certainly wield a cleaning cloth.

As if his thoughts had conjured her, the woman appeared in the large open archway across from the front door. The smile had returned, though it seemed more natural now, changing the shape of her round, sun-kissed face into a charming combination of hills and valleys. She looked entirely too young to be the housekeeper of anything. Perhaps she merely felt intimidated by him? It was understandable. He might be the only nobleman she'd ever encountered.

"There you are," she said in her quiet, cultured, and entirely non-subservient tone.

So, she'd gotten prettier while he went to get his bags, but not

much else had changed. He sighed. “Yes. I’m here. Perhaps you could direct me to my rooms?”

She blinked. “Of course. The stairs are right this way.”

Of course. Because everything else had gone as expected in this encounter.

He strode after her, entering a room equally as large as the hall he’d just left but with two grand staircases climbing up the side walls and framed by even more artwork.

She was already halfway up the stairs, impressing him with the pace she seemed to achieve despite her shorter stature. It was a pleasure to walk somewhere with someone without having to alter his normally brisk pace. Not that he walked places with servants, except occasionally Morris.

He caught up with her on the first-story landing as she approached a door and flung it open with a wave of her hand that was disconcertingly different from the discreet easing open of doors he was accustomed to servants doing.

It might be worth keeping Mrs. Brightmoor around simply for the plethora of surprises that came along with her.