

HAVEN MANOR • 1

A
DEFENSE
of HONOR



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To the Ultimate Owner of Justice
Romans 12:17–19

And to Jacob,
for always making me feel like
I have a place to belong.



CHAPTER ONE

LONDON
1816

Graham, the Viscount Wharton, heir to the earldom of Grableton, pride of the Cambridge fencing team, coveted party guest, and generally well-liked member of both Brooke's and White's, was bored.

While the ball swirling around him held as much sparkle and elegance as ever, a dullness had taken the sheen off everything lately. The years he'd spent traveling the world after school had shown him the brilliance and variety of life, but since he'd been back in England, there'd been nothing but routine.

How long since he'd seen something new? Someone new? Three years? Four?

It wasn't so much that he wanted to chase adventure as he had in his youth—at a year past thirty he was more than ready to stay home—but was it too much to ask that his days have a little variety to them?

Everything and everyone simply looked the same.

"This year's young ladies seem to be lovelier than past years," Mr. Crispin Sherrington said, drawing Graham's thoughts away from his maudlin wanderings and back to the conversation he was having with two old acquaintances from school.

Lord Maddingly jabbed Mr. Sherrington with his elbow and chuckled. “The lighter your pockets, the prettier the partridges.”

Even the conversations were the same, and they weren’t any more interesting on their forty-second iteration than they were on their first. Different players and occasionally different motives, but Graham could say his lines by rote. “Are you looking to marry this year, Sherrington?”

Sherrington, a second son with limited prospects, slid a finger beneath his cravat and stretched his neck. “I don’t have a choice. Pa’s been ill, and when he’s in the ground I’ll have nothing. My brother Seymour is a little too thrilled at the idea of cutting me off when he inherits.”

Maddingly grimaced. “At least your father didn’t gamble it all away. You should see the mess I’m left with. I’ve got to build up the coffers if I hope to keep the roof over my head.”

Graham resisted the urge to sigh. There were better ways for a man to further his fortune, but that opinion wasn’t very popular among his peers. Instead of suggesting either man learn how to invest what funds they had or possibly even endeavor to save a bit, he continued on the conversation’s normal course. “Who has the deepest dowry?”

Past experience told him that question was all that was required for him to seem like he cared. The others could hold a passionate debate about it without Graham’s participation. Which was good, because he simply couldn’t get excited about discussing how much money a man was willing to pay to get another man to marry his daughter.

It was all well and good to have a bit of support when starting a life together, but shouldn’t the lady herself be a bit more of the enticement? She was, after all, the one a man was actually going to have to see for the rest of his life.

How had he ended up in a conversation with these two anyway? Graham’s gaze wandered across the ballroom once more. Where were his friends? Granted, Mr. Aaron Whitworth probably wasn’t in attendance, as he found socializing endlessly awkward, but Oliver, Lord Farnsworth, should be around somewhere.

The room fell into an unfocused blur until a flash of green near the terrace doors caught Graham's attention, making him blink furiously to bring everything into focus.

When he finally got the terrace doors to settle into their crisp lines of windowpanes and heavy drapery, no one was there. At least, no one wearing the shade of green he knew he'd seen a moment earlier.

The doors were closed, keeping the revelers sheltered from the unseasonably cold night, so where had the person come from? Had she gone outside? Was she coming back in?

"What is your opinion of her, Wharton?"

Graham pulled his gaze from the windowed doors lining the far wall and glanced at Sherrington's raised eyebrows. With a tilt of his head, Graham tried to appear deep in thought. And he was. Only he was trying to come up with a statement that wouldn't reveal he'd been ignoring the other two men, not considering the merits of any particular girl.

"Her family is good enough," he finally said. That should apply to every girl in the room. "She isn't likely to cause you much grief."

Unfortunately, there weren't many girls that second sentence didn't apply to either. Most of the gently bred women had been raised to smile and simper and act like nothing was ever wrong. It was part of what made them remarkably interchangeable. Which was probably why Graham was no closer to marriage at thirty-one than he'd been at twenty-one. He didn't want to lose track of his wife in the melee because he couldn't distinguish her from someone else.

Maddingly nodded in agreement with Graham's vague statement. "She might even be willing to live in the country while you stay in the city."

Sherrington scoffed. "Can't afford that nonsense." He frowned. "Think she'll expect such a thing, Wharton?"

How should he know? His parents enjoyed eating breakfast together every morning and talking in their private parlor into the night. He wasn't exactly the person to ask about distant marriages.

Still, he didn't want his companions to know that he couldn't hold up his end of the conversation even if they'd given him a bucket to put it in. "Many matrons find a quiet life within the city, so she'll have no problem being more settled and less sociable."

Unless, of course, the woman was a harridan or bluestocking, but by the time Sherrington discovered that, he'd have bigger problems than Graham's poor advice. Of course, the chances of Sherrington considering such a woman were nonexistent. He wasn't looking for distinct and memorable.

Unlike Graham. Who had apparently imagined a splash of bright green in the shape of a dress because he was that desperate to meet someone who didn't bore him. A woman he could even begin to consider making a life with.

Sherrington and Maddingly continued their discussion, debating whether or not the girl's father would be amenable to Sherrington's suit. Graham made sure to pay a token of attention to the conversation so as not to be caught off guard again. Most of his attention was on the women dancing by, though. One wore a blue dress, the color distinct enough to stand out in a crowd. It wasn't as bold as a bright green, but it was at least unusual. The girl was probably less inane than the rest of them.

"I'd best move into position if I want to ask her for the next set of dances." Sherrington straightened his coat and nodded to his companions. "To the gallows, gentlemen."

Graham grinned. "Rather confident, isn't he?"

Maddingly laughed and wished his friend luck.

"Charville's girl won't be enough for me, I'm afraid." Maddingly adjusted his coat. "Only the biggest catch of the season will do for me."

Maddingly's difficulties weren't as bad as he made them seem, so Graham left him to his self-sacrificing monologue. The girl in green was more intriguing, even if she were only in his imagination. He turned his attention to the more deeply colored gowns of the matrons and spinsters. Still no vibrant spring green.

When Maddingly stopped talking, Graham continued the con-

versation, more out of habit than actual curiosity. “Who have you settled on, then?”

Whatever name Maddingly responded with didn’t matter, because there, barely visible through the limbs of a cluster of potted trees along the far wall, was a patch of green. How had she gotten all the way over there without him seeing her?

“Yes,” Maddingly continued, “I think Lady Thalia will be delighted by my intention to court her.”

Graham actually knew who the mildly popular Lady Thalia was, and that far better matches than Maddingly were taking her for a turn around the floor, but he wasn’t about to contradict the man. Especially not now that he knew the woman in green wasn’t imaginary. Though why would a woman wear such an eye-catching color if she intended to plant herself behind the potted shrubbery all evening?

Plant herself behind the shrubbery.

A grin crossed Graham’s face as he chuckled at his own cleverness.

Now that he’d found the woman, he had a desperate need to meet her, but first he had to get away from Maddingly. “Why don’t you start by asking her to dance?”

The branches parted slightly, and a hand reached through and plucked a *petite duchesse* pastry off the tray of a passing servant.

Was she hiding? Well, obviously she was hiding, but was it from a persistent suitor or an overbearing mother?

With a grim but determined look, Maddingly nodded and made his way around the edge of the ballroom. Graham wished him well and meant it, but he was more interested in watching another servant carry a tray loaded with food past the grouping of trees. Again the hand reached through and grabbed a morsel as the footman passed. Why didn’t she simply go to the refreshment table and get a plate of food?

His palms began to itch with the same excitement he’d had every time he boarded a ship bound for a new part of the world. It was the itch of curiosity, of questions that needed answers. At last, here was something new and unusual.

And if she turned out to be nothing special? Well, at least he'd have filled one evening with something other than tedium.

He kept his eye on the cluster of greenery as he wound his way through the room. She was not slipping away from him again. A blond head popped out from behind the trees and glanced out the window before disappearing again. What could possibly interest her in the gardens she'd only recently left? Was she running from someone? A gentleman who had tried to take advantage of her?

An unbidden and unfathomable desire to defend the unknown woman's honor rose up in him. For all he knew, she might not have any honor to save. She was hiding behind a potted tree, after all.

Accomplished excuses tripped off his tongue without a great deal of thought as he dodged through the crowd of greetings and attempted conversations. He snagged two glasses of lemonade from the refreshment table as he passed.

If he was going to commit a major breach of etiquette, he should bring a peace offering. Besides, she must be thirsty. A tray of drinks hadn't passed by yet.

He slipped behind the trees, ducking his head a bit. He wasn't overly tall, but neither were the trees, and he'd worked too hard to slip back here and meet the mystery woman only to have someone notice him and ruin the moment.

"Good evening."

She jumped and spun toward him, clutching a bundle of dark grey fabric to her chest.

Up close, the dress was even more unusual. Bold and confident without appearing garish or tawdry. It lacked the abundance of jewels and trim other ladies were wearing. In fact, it looked nothing like what the other women in the ballroom were wearing. He'd never claimed to hold any excessive knowledge of women's fashions, but this dress looked . . . old.

That was the only word for it.

As they stood there, quietly staring at each other, he noticed that the glorious green satin had been altered, adjusted. More

than one seam showed wear, and the hem was frayed in a couple places. Where had she come from?

She recovered her composure before he did, erasing the surprise from her face and giving him a regal nod. “Good evening.”

Her voice was calm, quiet. It didn’t hold the grating, overzealous brightness that so many of the other women in the ballroom used. He liked it. His smile widened as he extended one of the glasses. “Lemonade?”

Pale blue eyes stared at the glass for a moment before rising to meet his. Not a flicker of expression crossed her features, which weren’t as young as he’d first expected them to be. Fine lines appeared at the corners of her eyes and mouth, a maturity that she wore easily. She was well past the age of the simpering beauties filling the dance floor. A widow, perhaps? An older sister of a family racked with genteel poverty? Perhaps even someone’s companion or a governess?

They looked at each other until the moment grew awkward, but still she didn’t take the glass. Did she think he would do something to her in the middle of the ball? Very well, it wasn’t the middle. They were off to the edge, but more than a hundred people milled nearby.

“I assure you it’s harmless.” Graham took a sip of the offered drink. “See?”

A small smile tilted one side of her lips as she finally took the glass. “I see.”

He leaned one shoulder against the wall. “I know I’m being abominably rude by introducing myself, but your friend here”—he nodded to the shield of greenery—“doesn’t seem too talkative.”

“No, he isn’t.” She took a sip. “And you still haven’t introduced yourself.”

He felt like a lad just out of school, pinned by her laughing blue eyes and small, pink smile. “My mistake. Lord Wharton, at your service.”

“A pleasure, Lord Wharton. I’ve never heard of you, which I can assure you is to your credit.” She took another sip of lemonade and peered around the edge of the tree.

Was he being dismissed? The possibility was both uncomfortable and unpleasant. He'd never had to fight for a woman's attention before. "Would you care to dance?"

She looked back at him with a sly grin and patted the sculpted tree. "Sadly, I've committed the next two to our friend here."

He was being passed over for a bush? "I'm sure he won't mind if I cut in."

"I believe in honoring my commitments, Lord Wharton. I'm afraid I would have to protest such an action on your part."

This was what he'd been looking for without even knowing it. Spirit. Freshness. And all wrapped in a strikingly beautiful package. Her blond hair was piled on her head in a simple style and she wore no jewelry. Graham's brow furrowed. No jewelry? At a *ton* ball? London's elite socialized a mere five feet from their current position, and she wore no jewelry?

"I suppose I'll dance with his companion, then." He gestured to the tree on the other side of the cluster. He nodded to the two in the middle. "They can partner each other. Should be the oddest quadrille I've ever danced."

The woman sputtered a short giggle. "Particularly as there are only three couples involved."

"Indeed."

Silence stretched as Graham took the smallest sips of lemonade possible, allowing the tart liquid to rest on his tongue before swallowing it. Somehow he knew that once his drink was gone, she would expect him to leave. He closed his lips on the glass and allowed the liquid to touch his upper lip without actually drinking any.

"Why are you here, Lord Wharton?" She held out her empty glass, forcing him to take it from her in order to remain a gentleman. Apparently she felt no need to prolong the encounter with extended sipping.

"I like the company and activity. There's a bit of social expectation—"

"No, *here*, Lord Wharton. Dancing with a bush."

"I'm dancing with a bush because you declined my invitation."

She raised an eyebrow. Again he was transported back to his school days, getting reprimanded for his poor Latin conjugations. “I saw your dress,” he admitted.

Surprise lit her features as she glanced down at her skirt. “My dress?”

He shrugged. “It’s green. I like green.”

She looked skeptical but said nothing. The Mozart piece lulled to a quiet finish. By silent agreement, they waited until the music swelled once more before speaking again.

“You haven’t told me your name.” Graham looked directly into her eyes, willing them to stay on his own so he could try to guess what she was thinking and feeling. At a glance, she seemed simple and straightforward, but her eyes hid things. They were tight around the edges, as if she couldn’t quite completely relax.

Her gaze kept his but remained shuttered, granting him nothing. “No, I haven’t.”

No name, then. “Are you new to London?”

Her gaze dropped from his to the wall on his right. “No.”

She was lying. This got more interesting by the minute. She kept staring at the wall, though, tilting her head as if the blank expanse were fascinating. “Do you like green?”

“I beg your pardon?” Her gaze snapped back to his.

Graham wanted to grin at catching her by surprise but nodded to her dress instead. “Your dress. Do you like green?”

“Oh. I suppose.” She slid a section of skirt between her fingers. For the first time, a bit of hesitancy flitted across her face. “It reminds me who I am.”

Someone beyond the trees laughed loudly. The woman in green pressed herself against the wall, dropping her skirt so that she could wrap both arms around the grey bundle and hold it tightly.

Graham drained his lemonade in frustration. They were sure to be discovered at any moment. Her skirt might be easily looked over, blending in somewhat with the color of the trees. His black trousers, however, would soon be noticed in the small gap between the pot and the bottom branches of the shrub.

“May I call on you?” When was the last time he’d asked permission to call on a woman? Years, if ever. The question always raised impossible expectations.

She didn’t answer. Simply stared at him, mouth slightly agape.

“Graham, there you are!”

Graham looked over his shoulder to see a man in pristine evening black strolling around the edge of the trees. *Now* Oliver decided to make an appearance? Where was the man when Graham was drowning in boring conversation about dowries and marriage settlements? Honestly, if Oliver weren’t one of Graham’s closest friends, he’d push him into one of the potted trees.

Oliver’s brows drew together. “What are you doing back here? Didn’t you know you’re supposed to be on the other side of the trees, where you can be found by all the people who need you to inject levity and hope into their miserable lives?”

The reference to an old love letter Graham had received while attending Cambridge made him groan even as he smiled. He should never have shown that letter to Oliver. “If you must know, I’m replenishing my well of levity by talking with—”

His words trailed off as he turned to find the space beside him empty. The woman had vanished once more.