



# Greystone's Legacy (To All The Earls I've Loved Before #5)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** When Hester Wynstanley discovers an injured gentleman on her Welsh mountain property, she has no idea she's rescuing the heir to an earldom. Practical, capable, and more concerned with managing her family estate than mastering social graces, Hester nurses the handsome stranger back to health while he struggles to remember who he is.

Lord Frederick Grey remembers only fragments of his past, but he's increasingly certain someone wants him dead. As his memory returns, so does the danger. His uncle's treachery runs deeper than he ever imagined, and Freddie finds himself torn between reclaiming his birthright and protecting the remarkable woman who saved his life.

Drawn together by circumstances, Hester and Freddie forge a connection that transcends their different worlds. But when they travel to London to expose a deadly conspiracy, Society makes it clear: a Welsh country squire's daughter has no place beside the future Earl of Greystone.

Can love triumph over class differences and family betrayal? Or will Hester and Freddie be forced to choose between duty and the deepest desires of their hearts?

A tale of romance, intrigue, and the true meaning of nobility in Regency England.

**Total Pages (Source):** 23

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## Chapter One

On a late September afternoon, Hester Wynstanley reached between thorny branches for the last of the season's blackberries, her basket already half full of the dark fruit.

The mountains of her Welsh home loomed above her, peaks obscured by writhing tendrils of mist, while the narrow path below her feet wound treacherously along the edge of a cold stream running down through the rugged valley.

The scratches on her wrists above her gloves were worth the trouble, she decided, thinking of Aunt Cecilia's blackberry preserves that would see them through the winter months ahead.

Such practical considerations always occupied Hester's thoughts during her foraging expeditions.

She could ill afford to purchase what nature provided freely.

A cool breeze stirred the hem of her serviceable brown dress, carrying with it the sharp scent of heather and approaching rain.

Hester straightened, pressing one hand to her lower back as she surveyed the stark beauty of her ancestral lands.

The Wynstanley estate might be reduced in circumstances, but these mountains had been her family's home for generations, and she found a quiet pride in that fact.

The sound reached her first: a horse's nervous whicker, unusual enough in these remote parts to draw her attention immediately.

Hester turned, her keen eyes scanning the narrow track that curved around the mountain's shoulder.

There, perhaps fifty yards distant, stood a magnificent bay gelding, its coat gleaming even in the sullen afternoon light.

Her heart quickened as she spotted the crumpled form beside the horse.

A man lay motionless on the rocky ground, one boot still caught in the stirrup.

The horse shifted restlessly, and Hester's breath caught in her throat as she realized how easily the animal could drag its master over the edge of the path and into a fall which would surely prove fatal, if it hadn't already.

Letting her basket fall forgotten among the brambles, Hester gathered her skirts and picked her way carefully along the steeply treacherous ground.

Years of experience navigating these paths steadied her steps, but she could see how a stranger might have come to grief here.

The loose shale could shift without warning, and the deceptive slope of the ground could easily catch out the unwary.

As she drew closer, the quality of the man's clothing became apparent.

His coat was of the finest wool, the cut unmistakably London fashion, though now liberally dusted with Welsh dirt.

A gentleman then, and one unused to these mountains, judging by his presence on this particular path.

Any local would have known better than to risk it on horseback, especially with the recent rains making the ground more treacherous than usual.

The horse stamped impatiently, and Hester reached out to gentle it, speaking in the soft Welsh-accented murmur she used with nervous animals and moving slowly.

"There now, bach, be still. We'll sort this out, you'll see.

" The gelding's ears flicked toward her voice, and she was able to grasp its bridle, keeping it from any sudden movements that might harm its master further.

After a moment the horse seemed to relax, and she dared to reach out to free the man's foot from the stirrup, thinking that at least this should prevent further calamity.

Hester knelt beside the man once the horse had calmed, taking in his condition.

Blood trickled from a cut at his temple, but his breathing was steady.

When she stripped off a glove and pressed careful fingers to his throat, his pulse beat strong and regular beneath her touch.

His features were aristocratic: a straight nose, firmly set mouth, and a jaw that spoke of determination.

Young too, she thought, not much older than her own four and twenty years.

Standing there contemplating the unconscious stranger, Hester felt the weight of responsibility settle upon her shoulders.

She could not leave him here, that much was certain.

The mountain weather was too unpredictable, the dangers too numerous.

Already she could feel the temperature dropping as evening approached, and the gathering clouds promised rain before nightfall.

If she left him, he might perish of exposure before she was able to get back with help.

Yet the practical difficulties of rescue seemed almost insurmountable.

Wynstanley House lay nearly two miles distant, and while she was strong from years of manual work, she could hardly carry him such a distance, nor was there any possibility of her lifting him onto the horse.

She knew her own limitations. The horse complicated matters; she dared not leave such a valuable animal to wander the mountains, yet managing both beast and rider would require all her ingenuity.

Hester squared her shoulders, her mind already turning to possible solutions.

The Wynstanley women had survived far worse challenges than this, she told herself firmly.

Between the three of them, they had kept the old house standing and food on the table through years of genteel poverty.

Surely she could devise some way to transport one unconscious gentleman to safety.

A distant rumble of thunder spurred her to action.

Whatever she meant to do, it would have to be done quickly.

The mountain storms were not to be trifled with, and she had no intention of becoming another victim of their fury.

As she began to examine the surrounding area for anything that might prove useful, Hester spared a rueful thought for her abandoned blackberries.

Aunt Felicity would be disappointed, but surely even she would agree that rescuing a stranger took precedence over preserves.

A small grove of trees nearby offered plenty of sturdy branches, and Hester concluded that her own garments might serve where rope was lacking. The task ahead seemed daunting, but she had no choice but to succeed.

The first order of business was to secure the horse.

She looped its reins around a sturdy rowan tree, speaking softly all the while.

"Just a moment more, bach. We'll have this sorted directly.

" The gelding's dark eyes watched her intelligently as she began gathering fallen branches from the surrounding area.

Years of collecting firewood had taught her what to look for. She needed strong, straight pieces, not too thick to manage but sturdy enough to bear a man's weight. The recent storms had provided an abundance of fallen wood, and soon she had assembled a promising collection.

Thunder growled again, closer now, and Hester quickened her pace. She laid out two of the longest branches parallel to each other, then began the painstaking work of

weaving shorter pieces between them to form a platform.

The next part would be more challenging.

Hester glanced down at her dress, considering.

The outer wool was too thick and sturdy for her purposes, but beneath it.

.. She felt her cheeks warm slightly as she reached for the hem of her petticoat.

It was one of her better ones, fine linen that had been part of her mother's trousseau.

Aunt Cecilia had modified it herself to fit Hester's taller frame, adding a length at the hem.

"Needs must," Hester murmured, steeling herself before grasping the fabric firmly and tearing.

The sound of ripping linen seemed unnaturally loud in the mountain silence.

Strip after strip came away in her hands until her petticoat was significantly shorter.

She tried not to think about what her aunts would say when they saw the damage.

Working quickly now, she began binding the branches together with the strips of linen. Her fingers moved surely, creating knots that would hold fast. The construction began to take shape: a rough triangle that would drag behind the horse while keeping its burden safely above the ground.

The unconscious gentleman hadn't stirred during her labours, though his chest still rose and fell steadily.

Hester paused in her work to check his pulse again, finding it unchanged.

His skin felt cool beneath her fingers, prompting her to work faster.

The air had grown notably colder, and the first spatters of rain began to fall as she completed the final knots.

Now came the truly difficult part. Hester studied the man's position, planning her approach. He was considerably larger than her, though thankfully not enormously so. Still, moving him without causing further injury would require both strength and care.

She positioned the travois as close as possible, then knelt beside him. "I do beg your pardon, sir," she murmured, though he couldn't hear her, "but this may be somewhat uncomfortable." Sliding her arms beneath his shoulders, she began to shift him carefully onto the waiting branches.

It took all her strength, and she was grateful for the years of physical work that had built her capability.

Even so, by the time she had him properly arranged on the travois, she was breathing heavily and her arms trembled slightly.

She paused only long enough to ensure he was secure, using the last strips of her sacrificed petticoat to prevent him from sliding off.



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The horse had remained remarkably patient throughout the proceedings, but now it shifted nervously as another crack of thunder split the air.

Hester worked quickly to attach the travois to the saddle, detaching the reins from the bridle to give the length she needed behind and using the stirrup leathers to create secure anchor points.

She tested each connection, knowing that a failure could prove disastrous on the treacherous path ahead.

She just hoped the horse would prove sensible and not kick out backwards when he sensed something dragging behind him, or all her hard work to save the injured man's life might prove useless after all.

Finally satisfied with her work, she reached up to take hold of the bridle and took a deep breath.

The journey home would be slow and dangerous, requiring all her attention to guide both horse and burden safely through the gathering storm.

Already the rain was falling, and the wind had picked up, carrying with it the sharp scent of lightning.

"Well then," she said to the horse, who flicked an ear in her direction, "shall we begin?"

" Without waiting for a response, she started down the path, choosing each step with

care.

The travois dragged behind them, and she found herself grateful for her family's long history in these mountains.

Every childhood lesson about safe paths and dangerous ground would be put to good use before they reached Wynstanley House.

As Hester guided horse and burden carefully along the mountain path, she found her gaze drawn repeatedly to her unconscious charge. The rain had plastered his fair hair to his forehead, highlighting the aristocratic planes of his face in a way that invited closer study.

The practical part of her mind insisted that she should focus entirely on the treacherous ground beneath her feet, but something about the stranger commanded her attention.

Perhaps it was the contrast between his evident refinement and their current circumstances.

His clothing alone spoke volumes: the perfectly tailored coat, now liberally splashed with mud, would have cost more than Wynstanley House saw in several months' income.

Each time she glanced back to check the travois was holding together, she noticed some new detail.

His hands, though currently slack in unconsciousness, bore no callouses or signs of manual labour.

The signet ring on his right hand gleamed dully in the fading light, though she

couldn't make out its device without stopping to look closely.

His features, which she had initially registered only as generally aristocratic, revealed themselves to be quite striking upon closer inspection.

A particularly loud crack of thunder made the horse start, and Hester had to pause to calm it.

As she stood there, murmuring soothing nonsense to the nervous animal, she found herself wondering about the man's story.

What business could have brought someone of his obvious status to this remote corner of Wales?

She could not think of a house of sufficient consequence within ten miles at least, that a gentleman like this would visit.

As she encouraged the horse to move off again, they stalled, and Hester realised the travois had become snagged on a protruding sharp rock.

"Easy there." She halted the horse and moved back to free the travois, taking the opportunity to check on her passenger.

The wind whipped her skirts around her legs, and she shivered, suddenly aware of how the rain had soaked through her wool dress.

Her mysterious gentleman would be even worse off, she realized, lying insensible and exposed to the elements.

The cut on his temple had stopped bleeding, but the rain had washed away the dried blood, leaving a stark reminder of his vulnerability.

There was something profoundly unsettling about seeing someone so obviously accustomed to elegance and privilege rendered helpless by circumstance.

The fine linen of his cravat had come partially undone, and without thinking, Hester reached to straighten it.

Her fingers brushed against his skin, finding it cooler than she would have liked.

The contact sent an unexpected shiver through her that had nothing to do with the chill air.

She withdrew her hand quickly, chiding herself for the liberty.

Whatever his circumstances, he remained a gentleman, and she had no business touching him beyond what was necessary for his safety.

Still, she couldn't quite suppress her curiosity about what colour his eyes might be, or what his voice would sound like when he finally regained consciousness.

The gathering gloom reminded her that they still had nearly a mile to go before reaching Wynstanley House.

The path here was wider and better maintained, but the failing light would soon make navigation treacherous.

Hester lifted her face to the weeping sky, trying to judge how much daylight remained.

The heavy clouds made it difficult to be certain, but she suspected they had less than an hour before true darkness fell.

Best make haste. Grabbing at the sharp rock, she threw it aside and returned to the horse's head.

As she urged the horse carefully forward, Hester found her thoughts returning to the strange turns of fate that had brought them to this moment.

This morning, her greatest concern had been gathering enough blackberries for Aunt Felicity's preserves.

Now she was responsible for the life of a mysterious gentleman who had literally fallen into her path.

Would he be grateful when he awoke, she wondered, or mortified to find himself at the mercy of a rural Welsh family of reduced circumstances?

The latter seemed more likely, given what she knew of the nobility.

Still, there was something about the set of his mouth, a certain sensitivity in his features, that made her hope he might prove different.

The steadily increasing whistle of the wind provided a counterpoint to her thoughts, while the steady pattering of rain created a rhythm that matched their slow progress down the path.

These familiar sounds of her homeland seemed to emphasize the stranger's presence, as though the very landscape recognized him as foreign to its ancient permanence.

Hester straightened her shoulders, pushing away such fanciful thoughts.

Whatever mysteries surrounded him would presumably be solved when he regained consciousness.

For now, her duty was clear: to see him safely to Wynstanley House, where Aunt Cecilia's practical nursing skills and Aunt Felicity's more esoteric remedies would surely set him to rights.

Yet as she guided horse and travois around a particularly treacherous bend, Hester couldn't quite suppress a flutter of anticipation at the prospect of unravelling his story.

The Wynstanley ladies' quiet life rarely saw such intrigue, and she found herself rather looking forward to discovering exactly what sort of mystery she had rescued from the mountain's harsh embrace.

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### Chapter Two

#### Awakenings

Hester's arms ached from coaxing the reluctant horse, but at last the end of her journey lay in sight. The ancient stone manor house lay just beyond the next rise, and with it, the help of her aunts.

"Just a little further, sir," she murmured to her unconscious passenger, though he could not hear her. Her own voice, touched with the lilt of her Welsh homeland despite years of careful education, seemed to fade into the vast emptiness of the mountains surrounding them.

What brought a gentleman of his obvious quality to this remote corner of Wales?

The question nagged at her as she struggled up the last rise in the path.

The quality of his horse and clothing spoke of wealth, bringing to mind the travellers' tales she had read in her father's library, stories of grand adventures and dramatic rescues in exotic locales.

How often had she dreamed of seeing those places herself, of breaking free from the comfortable prison of Plas Wyn?

Yet here she was, twenty-four years old and still bound by duty to this remote mountain home, to the aunts who had raised her, and to the tenants who depended upon her family name.

At last the manor's weathered stone walls rose before her, unchanged since a painting done in her great-grandfather's time that hung in the study, and for who knew how many years before that.

Plas Wyn had stood sentinel over this valley for generations, its grey walls a testament to the family's stubborn persistence in the face of declining fortunes. Like the house itself, Hester endured.

"Aunt Cece! Aunt Fliss!" she called out as they finally approached the house. Her voice echoed off the ancient stones, and almost immediately, the front door flew open.

"Good heavens!" Aunt Cecilia's normally composed features registered shock as she took in the scene before her. The tiny woman hurried forward. "Hester, what on earth?"

"Found him up the mountain," Hester managed, her breath coming in gasps now that help was at hand.

"He's hurt, came off his horse. He's been unconscious since I found him, and has been soaked through in the rain.

"As had she, but it was hardly a new circumstance.

She was far more concerned about their unexpected guest.

Aunt Felicity appeared behind her sister, her round face creased with concern.

"Oh! Oh my! Bring him in at once. No, wait!

"She disappeared back into the house, then returned moments later waving a sprig of



rowan.

"For protection, you know. One can never be too careful with strange men, even unconscious ones. "

Despite her exhaustion, Hester couldn't suppress a fond smile at her aunt's familiar superstitions.

Their housekeeper-cook Mrs Jones came scurrying out to help too, and somehow between the four of them, they managed to manoeuvre the stranger into the house and up the stairs to the best guest chamber, though the effort left them all breathless.

Mrs Jones scurried off again, saying she'd find someone to take care of the horse.

She'd have to go down to the village of Rhayader to do so, another half-mile further down the valley.

They couldn't afford to keep a permanent man-of-work at Plas Wyn; the few men who worked for the Wynstanley family were shepherds, out on the mountain with the sheep.

As her aunts bustled about preparing hot water and bandages, Hester stood for a moment at the bedroom window, looking out over the wild landscape.

The sun had come out as the storm blew over, and now the sunset painted the mountains in shades of purple and gold, a sight that usually brought her peace.

Tonight, however, her thoughts were with the elegant stranger lying in their guest bed, and to the world beyond their isolated valley that he represented.

She had never travelled further than Shrewsbury, yet she knew there must be more to

life than this endless cycle of managing tenants and maintaining appearances on a dwindling income.

The leather-bound volumes in her father's study spoke of London ballrooms, of Paris salons, of Roman ruins beneath Italian skies.

Sometimes, in the quiet hours when her aunts were abed, she would trace the routes in his old atlas, imagining herself following in the footsteps of those intrepid lady travellers whose journals she treasured.

"Hester?" Aunt Cecilia's calm voice drew her back to the present. "We need fresh water to wash these scrapes, dear."

"Of course." Hester straightened her shoulders and turned away from the window.

Dreams of travel would have to wait. For now, there was work to be done, and she had never been one to shirk her duties.

It didn't take her long to hurry down to the kitchen, boil the kettle and carry the jug of hot water back upstairs.

By the time she got there, her aunts had stripped the gentleman of his fine clothes and put him in one of her father's old nightshirts.

Amused, Hester put the water jug down beside the bed, shaking her head.

She could have helped! Neither Cecilia or Felicity had ever married; their undressing of a man was no less scandalous than her doing it, at least in her opinion.

"We must clean the wound properly before anything else," Aunt Cecilia declared, examining the gash on their patient's temple with careful fingers. "Hester, dear, hold

the lamp closer, if you would."

Hester complied, watching as her aunt's tiny, capable hands worked with practiced precision. Despite their reduced circumstances, Aunt Cecilia had never lost the genteel manners of her upbringing, nor the practical skills that had seen them through many a crisis.

"Wait!" Aunt Felicity bustled forward, clutching a handful of dried herbs. "Grandmother always said that yarrow prevents infection. And we must put rowan berries under his pillow, for protection against evil spirits."

"I rather think clean hot water and proper bandages might be more useful at present, Fliss." Aunt Cecilia's tone held the patient affection of long familiarity with her sister's ways. "Though perhaps you might brew us some of your excellent chamomile tea? We could all use a cup, I think."

"Oh! Yes, of course." Aunt Felicity brightened at having a useful task to perform. "And I shall add a pinch of rosemary, for healing. Or was it sage? No, no, definitely rosemary. Unless..."

"Any herb you choose will be perfectly lovely," Hester assured her, hiding a smile as her aunt hurried from the room, still muttering to herself about the relative merits of different healing plants.

In the quiet that followed, Hester studied their unexpected guest's face. Even unconscious, there was something noble in his features, a refinement that spoke of gentle breeding. His fair hair had been carefully cleaned of blood, revealing a natural wave that even now tried to assert itself.

"He's young," Aunt Cecilia observed, applying a clean bandage to the gash on the gentleman's head and securing it neatly. "No more than five and twenty, I should

think. About your age, Hester."

"Perhaps a bit older," Hester replied, though in truth she had already noted their similar ages. "His clothes are London made." And would need washing and mending, she thought as she looked at the untidy pile on the floor near the fireplace. She'd take them downstairs later.

"Mmm." Aunt Cecilia's noncommittal noise spoke volumes. "Well, whoever he is, he's in no state to tell us at present. We shall simply have to wait until he wakes."

The door burst open as Aunt Felicity returned, bearing not only a tea tray but also what appeared to be half the contents of her herb cabinet.

"I brought everything that might be useful," she announced proudly.

"Feverfew in case he develops a fever, willow bark for the pain when he wakes, and comfrey for the bruising.

Oh, and lavender, because everything's better with lavender. "

"Thank you, Fliss." Aunt Cecilia accepted a cup of tea with grave courtesy. "Though perhaps we might save some of those remedies until we see how he progresses?"

"But we must be prepared!" Aunt Felicity protested, arranging her collection of dried plants on the bedside table. "What if he wakes in the night and needs immediate attention? What if spirits have addled his brain? What if..."

"What if we take turns sitting with him?" Hester suggested, heading off what promised to be a lengthy catalogue of possibilities. "I can take the first watch."

"An excellent plan," Aunt Cecilia agreed quickly. "Though perhaps you've had quite

enough exertion for one day, Hester! I'll take the first watch, then Fliss, then you can return in the morning."

The next few hours passed in a quiet routine of checking bandages, administering sips of water, and watching for any sign of consciousness.

Their patient remained still, though his breathing was steady and his colour good.

As midnight neared, Hester found herself alone with Aunt Cecilia, Aunt Felicity having finally been persuaded to seek her bed after leaving strict instructions about the proper use of her herbs.

"She means well," Aunt Cecilia said softly, adjusting the blanket over their patient's chest. "And some of her remedies do work, even if not quite in the way she believes."

"I know." Hester smiled, remembering countless childhood illnesses soothed by Aunt Felicity's special tea blends and whispered charms. "I wouldn't have her any other way."

"Nor would I." Aunt Cecilia's hazel-green eyes, so like Hester's own, held a mixture of affection and concern as she looked at her niece. "Though I do sometimes wish we could offer you more than two aging aunts and their peculiarities."

"You've given me everything I need," Hester protested, though even as she spoke, she felt the familiar pull of her dreams of travel and adventure.

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"Perhaps." Aunt Cecilia's tone suggested she wasn't entirely convinced. "But a young woman needs more than duty and responsibility. Your father understood that, even if he never had the means to provide it."

Before Hester could respond, their patient stirred slightly, drawing their attention back to more immediate concerns. The movement proved to be nothing more than a shift in his sleep, but it served to remind them of the strange circumstances that had brought him to their care.

"We'll need to go down to Builth Wells and notify the local magistrate," Aunt Cecilia mused. "Though I suppose our guest might wake and solve the mystery of his identity himself."

"Do you think he was robbed?" Hester asked, noting again the quality of his clothing.

She went to search the pockets of his coat, but found nothing that might identify their guest; only a purse jingling with coin.

She placed it, unopened, on the table beside the bed. "Or perhaps not, if he still has this."

"Nothing about his appearance suggests violence beyond the fall itself." Aunt Cecilia's practical nature asserted itself. "We shall simply have to wait and see. Now, off to bed with you. I'll sit with him until Felicity's watch."

Hester opened her mouth to protest but was betrayed by a yawn.

Her aunt's raised eyebrow brooked no argument, and truth be told, the day's exertions had left her exhausted.

Still, as she prepared for bed in her own chamber, she couldn't help but wonder about their mysterious guest and the circumstances that had brought him to their remote corner of Wales.

Sleep came quickly, but her dreams were filled with London ballrooms and elegant strangers, while Aunt Felicity's voice whispered charms in the background, keeping watch over them all.

On the third morning after finding the injured stranger on the mountain, Hester was sitting alone with their patient when his eyes finally opened.

Clear blue and confused, they fixed upon her face with an intensity that made her breath catch, before darting around the unfamiliar room in obvious bewilderment.

"Where..." His voice emerged as a croak, and Hester quickly reached for the water glass on the bedside table.

"Please, don't try to speak just yet," she said, helping him raise his head enough to take a few sips. "You've had quite a nasty bump to the head."

He submitted to her ministrations with grace, despite his obvious confusion. When she withdrew the glass, he cleared his throat and tried again. "Thank you. I find myself at something of a disadvantage, Miss...?"

"Wynstanley," she supplied. "Hester Wynstanley. You're at Plas Wyn, in Radnorshire, mid-Wales. I found you unconscious, fallen off your horse, three days ago."

"Three days?" His hand rose to the bandage at his temple, fingers exploring the wrapping with careful touches. "I don't remember... that is, I seem to be having some difficulty recalling..."

"That's not uncommon with head injuries," Hester assured him, though in truth she was merely repeating what Aunt Cecilia had said. "Perhaps you might tell me your name? We've been quite curious about our mysterious guest."

A small frown creased his forehead. "Freddie," he said after a moment. "I'm quite certain about that much. But beyond that..." He trailed off, looking frustrated.

"Freddie will do perfectly well for now," Hester said with more confidence than she felt. "I should fetch my aunts. They'll be glad to see you awake."

Before she could move, however, the door burst open and Aunt Felicity hurried in, arms full of fresh herbs. "I had a feeling!" she announced triumphantly. "The rosemary in my tea leaves was pointing directly north this morning, and I said to Cecilia, I said, 'He'll wake today, mark my words.'"

Freddie blinked at this pronouncement, clearly unsure how to respond. Hester noticed his lips twitching slightly, as though trying not to smile.

"Fliss, dear, perhaps we might give our guest a moment to orient himself?" Aunt Cecilia appeared in the doorway, ever practical. "Good morning, sir. We're very pleased to see you awake. I'm Cecilia Wynstanley, and this is my sister, Felicity. We've been quite concerned about you."

"You're very kind," Freddie replied, his manner suggesting that courtesy came naturally to him, even in such unusual circumstances. "I find myself quite at a loss as to how to thank you for your care."



"Nonsense," Aunt Felicity declared, bustling forward to press a sprig of something fragrant into his hand. "Though you really must hold onto this thyme. Excellent for restoring memories, you know. My grandmother always said..."

"Fliss," Aunt Cecilia interrupted gently, "perhaps our guest might like a moment to refresh himself? And some breakfast?"

"Oh! Yes, of course. I'll fetch something at once." Aunt Felicity hurried out, leaving a trail of herb fragments in her wake.

"You must forgive my sister," Aunt Cecilia said, moving to efficiently straighten the bedclothes. "She means well, though her enthusiasm can be somewhat overwhelming."

"Not at all," Freddie assured her, though Hester noticed he was still holding the sprig of thyme somewhat gingerly. "I find I rather appreciate enthusiasm at present. Everything else seems rather... unclear."

A shadow passed over his features, and Hester felt a surge of sympathy. How frightening it must be to wake in a strange place with no memory of how one came to be there.

"Rest is the best medicine," she offered. "Though perhaps not quite so much as you've had already."

That earned her a smile, transforming his face from merely handsome to quite striking. "I believe I've imposed upon your hospitality quite long enough..."

He made as if to rise, but fell back against the pillows, clearly dizzy. Aunt Cecilia clicked her tongue disapprovingly.

"You'll do nothing of the sort until you're properly recovered," she said firmly. "Plas Wyn has welcomed unexpected guests before, and I dare say it will again. You're welcome to stay until you're well enough to travel, or until your memory returns."

"You're very generous," Freddie murmured, though whether from gratitude or exhaustion was unclear. His eyes had begun to drift closed again.

"Rest now," Aunt Cecilia advised, gesturing for Hester to follow her from the room. "We can speak more later."

In the corridor outside, Hester's aunt fixed her with a penetrating look. "Well?"

"He seems a gentleman," Hester replied carefully. "Though obviously confused."

"Quite." Aunt Cecilia's tone was neutral. "We shall have to notify the magistrate, of course. But I think we might wait a day or two, until he's stronger. No point in overwhelming him with officials when he can barely keep his eyes open."

Before Hester could respond, Aunt Felicity reappeared, this time carrying what appeared to be every blanket in the house.

"Mrs Jones is preparing a strengthening broth," she announced.

"And I've brought extra blankets, in case the thyme doesn't work."

Grandmother always said warm feet were essential for memory recovery. "

Hester caught her aunt Cecilia's eye and had to look away quickly to hide her smile. Whatever else their mysterious guest might remember, he was certainly getting a thorough introduction to the particular charms of the Wynstanley household.

### Chapter Three

The following morning dawned clear and mild, perfect weather for Freddie's first venture into the garden. Hester found him already seated on the stone bench beneath the ancient oak tree, his fair hair catching the morning light as he studied the wild Welsh landscape spread before him.

"I hope you haven't overtaxed yourself," she said by way of greeting, noting how he still held himself carefully, as though his head pained him.

"Not at all." He shifted to make room for her on the bench, a gesture so naturally courteous it made her wonder again about his background. "Your aunt Cecilia gave me permission for this little expedition, though I noticed she's watching me from the kitchen window."

Hester smiled, unsurprised by her aunt's careful oversight. "We've grown rather protective of you, I'm afraid. Three days of watching over an unconscious patient will do that."

"I cannot thank you enough." His blue eyes met hers with genuine warmth. "Most families would have sent me straight to the parish house, or called for the magistrate immediately."

"We're not most families," Hester replied, thinking of Aunt Felicity's morning ritual of checking her tea leaves for portents, and Aunt Cecilia's quiet strength.

"No," he agreed softly. "You're rather extraordinary, actually. All of you."

Something in his tone made her cheeks warm, and she looked away, focusing on the distant mountains. "How much do you remember now?"

"Bits and pieces. Nothing useful." He sounded frustrated.

"I know I can ride, for instance, though I can't recall learning how.

I know I prefer coffee to tea, though I couldn't tell you when I first tasted either.

And I know my name is Freddie, though everything else about myself seems shrouded in mist."

"It will come back," Hester assured him, though she had no real basis for such confidence. "Aunt Fliss is quite certain the thyme will help."

That drew a chuckle from him. "Your Aunt Felicity is quite something. This morning she insisted on hanging rowan berries over my door to 'ward off mischievous spirits who might be hiding my memories for sport.'"

"She means well," Hester said, feeling defensive of her aunt's eccentricities.

"Oh, I know she does. It's rather touching, actually." He shifted on the bench, wincing slightly. "I have a feeling such genuine kindness isn't something I encounter often in my normal life, whatever that might be."

Before Hester could respond to this intriguing statement, Aunt Cecilia's voice called from the house. "Breakfast is served! And Fliss has made her special restorative tea, though I wouldn't ask too closely about the ingredients if I were you."

The morning meal proved to be a cheerful affair, with Aunt Felicity expounding at length about the protective properties of various herbs while Aunt Cecilia quietly

ensured everyone's plates remained full.

Freddie handled it all with remarkable grace, accepting both Aunt Felicity's charms and Aunt Cecilia's practical care with equal gratitude.

"You seem comfortable with books," Hester observed later, finding him in her father's library. "Perhaps that might tell us something about your background?"

"Only that I'm well-educated," he replied, running his fingers along the leather spines. "Though I suppose that's not surprising, given my accent and manners." He paused at a volume of Shakespeare. "I know these plays. I can quote whole passages, yet I can't remember ever seeing them performed."

"Which is your favourite?" Hester asked, curious.

"'Much Ado About Nothing,' I think. Though I couldn't tell you why." He smiled ruefully. "It's maddening, having all these fragments of knowledge without context."

"Perhaps you enjoyed the wit of it," she suggested. "The way Beatrice and Benedick trade clever insults while falling in love?"

"Perhaps." His eyes held hers for a moment longer than strictly proper. "Though I think I prefer direct honesty to wit, these days at least."

The evening found them all in the drawing room, where Aunt Cecilia worked on her eternal mending while Aunt Felicity arranged and rearranged her herbs by moonlight properties.

Hester tried to focus on her book, but found her attention drawn again and again to Freddie, who sat by the fire looking more at ease than she'd yet seen him.

"I know this is temporary," he said suddenly, breaking the comfortable silence. "That soon enough my memory will return, or someone will come looking for me. But I want you all to know how grateful I am for your kindness to a stranger."

"Nonsense," Aunt Felicity declared, not looking up from her herbs. "The tea leaves told me you would come, though I will admit they were a bit vague about the timing."

"What my sister means," Aunt Cecilia interpreted, "is that you're welcome here for as long as necessary."

Later, preparing for bed, Hester found herself thinking about the way Freddie's eyes crinkled when he smiled, and how his obvious appreciation for her family's peculiarities revealed a genuinely kind nature beneath his aristocratic manner.

It was dangerous to let her thoughts wander in that direction, she knew.

Soon enough his memory would return, and with it, no doubt, a life far removed from their quiet Welsh valley.

Still, as she drifted off to sleep, she couldn't help but remember the way he had looked at her in the library, as though she were something precious and unexpected. Perhaps Aunt Felicity wasn't the only one who could read signs and portents in ordinary things.

Freddie found himself increasingly drawn to watching Miss Wynstanley as she went about her daily tasks at the house.

Though his memories remained frustratingly clouded, his instincts told him a lady of her bearing ought to have an army of servants at her disposal, yet here she was, tending to matters herself with both grace and evident capability.

From his favourite seat by the morning room window, Freddie observed Miss Wynstanley in the kitchen garden, her tall figure moving with purpose between the neat rows of vegetables.

The early autumn sun caught the rich dark tones in her hair, drawn back simply but elegantly from her interesting face.

Her nose might be considered a touch too sharp by London standards, but Freddie found himself captivated by the way it lent character to her countenance.

She wore a plain muslin dress, protected by a serviceable apron, yet carried herself with the natural dignity of a duchess. Even as she set a rabbit snare to keep the pests out of her vegetables. He couldn't look away.

"More tea?" The smaller of Miss Wynstanley's two aunts appeared at his elbow with the pot.

"Thank you, Miss Cecilia." He held out his cup, noting how the elderly lady's hands trembled slightly as she poured.

The family's reduced circumstances were evident in a thousand small ways, from the carefully mended curtains to the absence of a proper butler, yet they maintained an air of genteel determination that he found oddly comforting.

His own circumstances remained a muddle of half-formed recollections and inexplicable certainties. He knew he was of noble birth, could feel it in his bearing and speech, yet the specifics eluded him entirely.

Miss Wynstanley straightened, basket now full of fresh vegetables, and caught his eye through the window.

She offered a small smile that transformed her entire face, warming her hazel-green eyes and softening the determined set of her jaw.

Freddie found himself returning the smile before he quite meant to, an unconscious response to her natural charm.

"Our Hester has quite the talent for coaxing things to grow," Miss Cecilia remarked proudly. "Even in this Welsh mountain soil, she manages to keep us well supplied with fresh produce."

"Indeed." Freddie sipped his tea, considering. "Though surely such labour is unnecessary for a lady of her station?"

Miss Cecilia's expression grew slightly fixed. "We manage very well as we are, my lord. Hester takes great pride in maintaining Plas Wyn, as generations of our family have done."

There was a gentle rebuke in her tone that made Freddie wonder if he had betrayed some ingrained prejudice.

He watched as Miss Wynstanley made her way back to the house, noting how she paused to exchange words with an elderly tenant farmer, her manner perfectly balanced between friendly and appropriately reserved.

When she entered the morning room a few minutes later, cheeks slightly flushed from her exertions, Freddie found himself standing automatically. Some muscle memory of proper behaviour remained intact, even if he couldn't recall where he had learned such courtesies.

"I trust you're feeling stronger today?" she enquired, setting her basket down. "Some gentle walking might be beneficial, if you feel up to it."



"I believe I would welcome some fresh air," Freddie replied, surprised to find it true. His head injury had left him wary of excessive movement, but something about Miss Wynstanley's steady presence made him feel more secure.

She smiled again, that transformative expression that seemed to brighten the whole room. "Excellent. I shall change my apron and show you the kitchen garden properly. You might find it interesting to see how we've adapted formal French patterns to suit our more practical needs."

As she left to make herself presentable, Freddie realised he was genuinely looking forward to learning more about this unusual young woman who combined such refined manners with practical capability.

There was something refreshing about her lack of artifice, so different from the hazy social memories that occasionally surfaced in his dreams.

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The garden tour proved surprisingly engaging.

Miss Wynstanley's knowledge was both extensive and charmingly conveyed, her occasional touch of Welsh lilt becoming more pronounced when she grew enthusiastic about a particular topic.

Freddie found himself asking questions simply to hear her speak more, watching the play of expressions across her face as she explained their methods of cultivation.

"You must think me terribly provincial," she said at last, pausing beside a flowering herb bed. "Nattering on about vegetables when you're used to grander conversation."

"Not at all," Freddie assured her honestly. "I find your passion for the practical quite fascinating. Though I confess, I'm having some difficulty reconciling your evident education with..."

He trailed off, suddenly aware he might be about to give offense, but she merely raised an eyebrow, her mouth quirking slightly.

"With my calloused hands and my knowledge of crop rotation?" she suggested. "Life has taught me that true gentility lies in making the best of one's circumstances, sir. We may not be wealthy, but we maintain our dignity through honest work rather than false pretence."

The words struck some chord in Freddie's confused memories, stirring a sense of respect he couldn't quite place.

He found himself studying her profile as she bent to pick a sprig of lavender, noting how the sharp line of her nose was balanced by the gentle curve of her cheek.

Not a conventional beauty perhaps, but there was something increasingly appealing about her direct gaze and quiet confidence.

"I believe you may be teaching me several valuable lessons, Miss Wynstanley," he said softly.

She met his eyes then, and for a moment something passed between them that transcended their different backgrounds and current circumstances.

Then she smiled, and led him back toward the house with completely proper decorum before leaving him at the door with a remark that she needed to go and check on some sheep.

Freddie wanted to ask her more, never having known a lady who wanted to know anything more of sheep than whether there would be lamb cutlets on the dinner table, but she was already gone, striding briskly off up the mountain into the mist and leaving Freddie staring after her.

The night closed in around Plas Wyn like a velvet curtain, bringing with it the peculiar silence of the Welsh mountains.

Freddie lay in his borrowed bed, listening to the unfamiliar creaks and settling sounds of the old house, his mind drifting between consciousness and the darker waters of memory that threatened to pull him under.

Sleep came slowly, reluctantly, as though some part of him knew what awaited in the realm of dreams. The first images were innocuous enough: a grand house, far larger than Wynstanley, with sweeping lawns and formal gardens.

He walked through elegant rooms that felt achingly familiar, trailing his fingers along rich brocade wallpaper, breathing in the scent of beeswax and leather that spoke of generations of wealth and privilege.

But then the quality of the dream changed. The rooms grew darker, shadows lengthening unnaturally in the corners. Footsteps echoed behind him, too close, too purposeful. He turned down corridor after corridor, each one exactly like the last, trying to escape something he couldn't quite identify.

A man's voice called his name, familiar yet wrong somehow. "Frederick? Where are you hiding, nephew?"

The word 'nephew' sent a chill through him that had nothing to do with temperature. He tried to run but his legs felt leaden, his movements slowed as though moving through treacle. The footsteps grew closer.

"You can't hide forever," the voice continued, silky with false concern. "The estate needs proper management. Your father would have wanted..."

Freddie jerked awake, heart pounding, sheets tangled around his legs.

The quiet of the Welsh night pressed in around him, broken only by the soft hooting of an owl somewhere in the darkness.

He lay still, trying to capture the details of the dream before they slipped away, but they dissolved like morning mist, leaving only an unsettling sense of danger.

His head ached, a dull throbbing at the base of his skull. Miss Cecilia had warned him that recovery might bring disturbing dreams as his memories tried to reassert themselves, but this felt different. More immediate. More threatening.

Sleep crept up on him again despite his resistance, drawing him back into the darkness of dream.

This time he was on a horse, riding towards a grand manor of golden stone.

Happy expectation welled in his breast – he knew this place, had joyous memories here, though he couldn't quite grasp them.

He urged his horse onwards, eager to arrive.

Suddenly, the sky above the manor darkened, the wind picking up.

Horses appeared from seemingly nowhere, riders spurring them towards him.

They should have been smiling in welcome, but instead, one of them raised a gun in his direction.

A shot cracked out, and terror welled in Freddie's breast. Wheeling his horse, he fled what should have been a sanctuary.

Hooves drummed as his pursuers kept coming, another shot whistling past his ear.

Freddie woke with a strangled gasp, sweat cold on his skin despite the mild night. The pain in his head was worse now, pulsing in time with his racing heart. He sat up carefully, pressing his palms against his eyes until bright spots danced in the darkness.

These weren't just dreams, he realised with growing certainty. They were fragments of memory, pieces of a puzzle he couldn't quite assemble. Someone had wanted to harm him, had perhaps succeeded to some extent. His presence here at Plas Wyn wasn't merely the result of an unfortunate accident.

The first grey light of dawn was beginning to seep through the curtains.

Freddie rose and went to the window, drawing them back to look out over the peaceful Welsh landscape.

In the kitchen garden below, he could see Hester's tall figure moving among the morning mist, already beginning her day's work.

The sight of her steady, purposeful movement helped to settle his troubled thoughts.

Whatever danger lurked in his past, whatever memories were trying to surface, he was safe here for now.

Hester and her aunts had taken him in without question, offering refuge though it was apparent they could ill afford another mouth to feed.

He owed it to them to be careful, to understand the full situation before taking any action that might bring trouble to their door.

Still, as he dressed for breakfast, the echo of that silky, threatening voice lingered in his mind. 'Nephew,' it had called him, with an undertone that spoke more of predator than family. The word carried weight, significance he couldn't yet grasp but that sent warning shivers down his spine.

The library at Plas Wyn, though modest in size, possessed the comfortable air of a room well-loved and well-used. Freddie found Hester there late that afternoon, sorting through account books with the same quiet competence she brought to all her tasks.

She looked up at his entrance, and something in her expression made him pause. The usual calm efficiency had slipped slightly, revealing a weariness she typically kept

well hidden.

"I beg your pardon," he said, beginning to withdraw. "I didn't mean to disturb your work."

"Not at all, sir." She closed the ledger with a slight sigh. "In truth, I welcome the interruption. Numbers have a way of becoming rather oppressive after too long in their company."

Freddie moved further into the room, noting how the late afternoon sun caught golden highlights in her dark hair. "I cannot help but observe that you shoulder a great many responsibilities for one so young."

A small smile touched her lips. "Would you say the same if I were a man of four and twenty?"

"Touché." He settled into the chair opposite her desk. "Though I suspect even a man would find the management of an estate challenging without proper support."

"We manage well enough." The automatic response held a note of defensiveness that made him hasten to explain.

"I meant no criticism. Indeed, I find your capability rather remarkable." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "But capability doesn't preclude feeling the weight of one's duties."

Hester was silent for a long moment, studying him with those clear hazel-green eyes. Then she set aside the ledger entirely and leaned back in her chair.

"It was easier when Father was alive," she said quietly. "He understood both the practical necessities and the social expectations. Finding the balance between them..."

well, that proves rather more difficult on one's own."

"Your aunts seem supportive," Freddie offered.

"Oh, they are, bless them. But they're not really equipped for the harsher realities of estate management.

They remember when Plas Wyn had a full complement of servants, when we could afford to maintain appearances properly.

" She smiled slightly. "Sometimes I think it pains them more to see me in the kitchen garden than it does me to work there. "

"And does it pain you?" The question slipped out before he could consider its propriety.

She looked at him thoughtfully. "Not in the way you might imagine.

I find honest work rather satisfying, truth be told.

It's the constant awareness of falling short of expectations that weighs heavily.

The knowledge that no matter how hard I work, society will see only the ways in which we fail to maintain proper gentry standards. "

The quiet dignity in her voice stirred something in Freddie's chest. "You speak of society's judgment as though you've faced it directly."

"We did try a short come-out in Shrewsbury, the year after Father died, staying with a distant cousin who was kind enough to host us there.



" Her fingers traced abstract patterns on the desk's worn leather surface.

"It was... not entirely successful. Even country gentry has little patience for genteel poverty, however ancient the family name might be. "

"Their loss," Freddie said firmly, surprising himself with the heat in his voice. "Any society that values mere wealth over true worth is hardly worth courting."

She looked up quickly, colour touching her cheeks. "That's... rather revolutionary thinking for a nobleman."

"Perhaps my accident knocked some sense into me along with my memories." He offered a self-deprecating smile that faded as he continued. "Though I must admit, the fragments that are returning suggest I may have been rather too concerned with social position myself, once upon a time."

"And now?"

"Now I find myself reassessing many things." He met her eyes directly. "These past days at Plas Wyn have taught me much about the difference between seeming and being."

Hester's colour deepened slightly, but she held his gaze. "Your circumstances are hardly usual, sir When your memory returns fully..."

"I find myself less and less certain I wish to reclaim whatever life I led before," he admitted quietly.

"My dreams are... troubling. They suggest danger, betrayal.

Here, despite the reduced circumstances you speak of, I have found something that

feels more genuine than all my hazy recollections of grander places. "

"You cannot mean that," she protested, though her voice was soft. "You have responsibilities, a position to reclaim..."

"Do I?" He leaned forward slightly. "The more I remember, the more convinced I become that someone wished to prevent me from claiming whatever position was mine by right. Perhaps fate had a hand in bringing me here, where I might learn what truly matters."

She drew a slightly uneven breath. "You should not say such things. Not when you cannot be certain of your own circumstances."

"I am certain of some things," he said quietly. "I am certain that you are one of the finest people I have ever known, with or without my memories. I am certain that the strength and grace with which you bear your responsibilities is worth more than any number of fashionable accomplishments."

"Sir..." She stood abruptly, moving to the window. "You must not... we cannot..."

He remained seated, respecting her need for distance while pressing his point gently. "Cannot what? Acknowledge truth? Share confidences as friends?"

"Friends." She gave a small laugh. "Is that what we are?"

"At the very least," he said softly. "Though I begin to hope..."

"Hope is dangerous," she interrupted, still facing the window. "Particularly when built on uncertain foundations."

Freddie rose then, moving to stand behind her, close but not touching. "Some things

require no foundation beyond themselves, Miss Wynstanley. Some truths are evident regardless of circumstance."

She turned to face him, and for a moment he thought she might say more. But then one of her aunts called from the hallway, and the moment shattered like fine glass.

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### Chapter Four

The following morning dawned clear and bright over Plas Wyn, bringing with it a surge of anticipation Freddie could hardly contain.

His strength had returned enough that he no longer needed to lean on furniture as he walked, and though his memories remained frustratingly clouded, the prospect of discovering his identity made his heart beat faster with nervous energy.

He dressed with particular care in the clothes Hester and her aunts had washed and repaired for him, noting how the fabric hung a bit loose on his frame.

He must have lost weight during his convalescence.

The mirror showed him a face that seemed both familiar and strange: fair hair falling across his forehead, blue eyes that held shadows of uncertainty.

Something about his reflection nagged at him, as though the answer to who he was lay just beyond his grasp.

"Are you quite ready?" Hester's voice called from the hallway. "Mr. Bethel will be here with his cart shortly."

"Nearly," Freddie replied, straightening his cravat one final time.

The simple act felt natural to his fingers, muscle memory surviving where actual memories failed.

He stepped into the corridor to find Hester waiting, her practical travelling dress and pelisse marking her as a gentlewoman of modest means, yet there was an innate grace to her bearing that transcended the simplicity of her attire.

"You look much improved," she said, studying his face with those clear hazel-green eyes that seemed to miss nothing. "Though I daresay the journey will tire you. We must be careful not to overtax your strength."

"I assure you, I am quite recovered enough for a simple cart ride," Freddie said, though he appreciated her concern. "And your company will make the journey pass all the more pleasantly."

A becoming blush touched Hester's cheeks, but before she could reply, the rattle of wheels announced Mr. Bethel's arrival.

They made their way downstairs where Hester's aunts fussed over their preparations, pressing a basket of food into Hester's hands and wrapping an extra shawl around her shoulders despite the mild spring weather.

The farmer's cart stood waiting in the drive, Mr. Bethel himself a ruddy-faced man whose weathered countenance spoke of long days working in the Welsh hills. He touched his cap to them both before speaking to Hester in rapid Welsh.

"What did he say?" Freddie asked, realising that one language he certainly did not comprehend was Welsh. He hadn't understood a single word.

"Beautiful day for market," she translated. "Though the roads might be busy. Half the county will be heading to Builth Wells today."

"Well, perhaps one of them will know who I am!"

" Freddie settled himself beside Hester, acutely aware of the proper distance he should maintain between them on the narrow seat.

The cart lurched forward, as Mr. Bethel encouraged the horse to lean into the traces.

Behind them, Plas Wyn grew smaller, its grey stone walls catching the morning sun.

The countryside opened before them in a patchwork of green fields and rugged hills.

Sheep dotted the slopes like scattered clouds, their bleating carried on the fresh spring breeze.

Freddie found himself studying everything with keen interest, hoping each new sight might spark a memory, provide some clue to his past.

"Tell me about Builth Wells," he said to Hester, partly to distract himself from the discomfort of the jolting cart. "I take it market day is quite an event?"

"Oh yes," Hester replied, warming to the subject. "People come from all the surrounding villages and farms. There will be livestock sales, of course, but also vendors selling everything from ribbons to root vegetables. The entire High Street becomes quite transformed."

As they talked, Freddie noticed how Hester's quiet reserve gave way to animation when discussing her beloved Wales. Her slight accent became more pronounced when she grew enthusiastic, lending a musical quality to her words that he found utterly charming.

The journey passed more quickly than expected, marked by the rhythm of the horse's hooves and the gentle swaying of the cart.

They shared the basket of food with the farmer, Mr. Bethel regaling them with local tales that had Hester hiding smiles behind her handkerchief and Freddie laughing outright when she translated them, though he suspected she might be editing them slightly to avoid offending his aristocratic sensibilities.

It was about two hours later when they crested a hill and saw Bulth Wells spread out before them in the valley.

The market town was already bustling with activity, streams of people and carts converging on the centre like tributaries flowing to a river.

The sound of livestock and human voices carried up to them on the breeze.

"Are you certain you're ready for this?" Hester's voice was soft, her brow furrowed with concern as she looked at him.

Freddie met her concerned gaze steadily. "More than ready. Whatever we discover today, I am grateful for your help... and your friendship."

The simple words seemed inadequate to express his deeper gratitude, but Hester's gentle smile told him she understood.

They continued their descent into the town, the cart now part of a steady procession of market-day traffic.

Freddie found himself torn between excitement and apprehension, knowing that shortly, he might finally have answers to the questions that haunted his dreams.

The magistrate's housekeeper led them into a formal waiting room, its leather-bound volumes and heavy furniture speaking of authority and tradition. Freddie's fingers drummed an anxious rhythm on his knee as they waited, the morning's confidence

giving way to nervous anticipation.

"Sir James is concluding some business," the housekeeper informed them. "He will see you shortly. Please make yourselves comfortable."

Hester settled gracefully into one of the wing chairs, while Freddie found himself too restless to sit.

He paced the room instead, pausing occasionally to examine the paintings on the walls or the titles of books lining the shelves.

Everything felt simultaneously familiar and foreign, like a half-remembered dream.

"There are some newspapers here," Hester suggested, indicating a neat stack on a side table. "Perhaps we might find something useful while we wait?"

Freddie nodded, grateful for the occupation. He selected the topmost paper, noting it was a Bristol publication from just three days prior. The pages rustled as he began to scan the columns, most filled with the usual society notices and political commentary that seemed to occupy such publications.

His eyes moved mechanically over the text until a particular paragraph caught his attention. The words seemed to swim before his vision before snapping into sharp focus:

" Lord Frederick Grey, heir to the Earldom of Greystone, remains missing after departing London two weeks hence. His uncle, Lord Edmund Grey, expresses grave concern for his nephew's wellbeing, citing recent erratic behaviour ..."

The newspaper slipped from Freddie's suddenly nerveless fingers, falling to the floor with a soft thump. His head began to pound, memories flooding back in a dizzying



rush.

"Freddie?" Hester's voice seemed to come from very far away. "What is it? What's wrong?"

He gripped the back of a chair, his knuckles white with the effort to remain standing as images cascaded through his mind. A grand house in London. His uncle Edmund's shrewd face across a card table. Sebastian, his cousin, watching him with calculating eyes that held no familial warmth.

"I remember," he whispered, his voice hoarse.

"I'm Frederick Grey. Freddie. My uncle is Edmund Grey, and my cousin is Sebastian.

" He swallowed hard, fighting down a wave of nausea as more details clicked into place.

"My father was the elder son, but he died.

.. in a carriage accident with my mother. Three years ago."

Hester had risen and now stood beside him, her presence steady and reassuring. "Are you quite certain?"

"Yes." Freddie sank into the chair, his legs no longer able to support him. "It's as though a veil has been lifted. I remember everything about who I am, though the events immediately before my injury remain... unclear."

He looked up at Hester, seeing concern etched across her features.

"My grandfather still lives, though his health has been poor since my parents' deaths.

" Another memory surfaced, bringing with it a fresh wave of anxiety.

"My uncle... he wants control of the estate.

He's been trying to persuade my grandfather that I'm reckless, a waste of space who'd fritter away my inheritance.

I think... he might have resorted to more direct measures. "

"Good heavens," Hester murmured, sinking back into her own chair. "Then the injury to your head..."

"May not have been an accident at all," Freddie finished grimly. He rubbed his temples, trying to sort through the jumble of returned memories.

The door opened, making them both start. The housekeeper reappeared, her expression properly neutral. "Sir James will see you now."

Freddie exchanged a quick glance with Hester, seeing his own uncertainty reflected in her eyes. How much should they reveal? His instincts, newly awakened with his memories, warned him to be cautious. There was danger here, though its exact nature remained frustratingly out of reach.

"Shall we?" he asked Hester, offering his arm with automatic courtesy. As she laid her hand upon his sleeve, he felt a surge of protectiveness. Whatever trouble he was in, he must be careful not to draw her too deeply into it.

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Sir James Pembroke proved to be a man of careful observation, his shrewd grey eyes taking in every detail of Freddie's appearance as they were shown into his private study.

The magistrate's bearing spoke of both authority and discretion, qualities that suddenly seemed far more crucial than Freddie had initially supposed.

"Please, be seated," Sir James gestured to the chairs before his desk. "Miss Wynstanley, I understand from my housekeeper that you have brought this gentleman to make inquiries regarding his identity?"

"Yes, Sir James." Hester's voice held its usual quiet composure. "Mr... Frederick here was injured a week ago near my home. He was unconscious for three days and has been recovering since, is only now fit enough to come here in person to make these inquiries."

The magistrate's expression sharpened with interest. "Indeed? And what circumstances brought you to our region, sir?"

Freddie opened his mouth to respond, but Sir James held up a hand. "Before you answer, I should inform you that we have had other inquiries about a gentleman matching your general description. A matter of some delicacy, you understand."

Something in the magistrate's tone made Freddie's spine stiffen. "What sort of inquiries?"

"A gentleman called here five days ago, claiming to be searching for a disturbed

relative who had wandered away from his family's care." Sir James's gaze never wavered from Freddie's face. "Tall, fair-haired fellow like yourself. Rather elegantly dressed. Called himself Mr. Grey."

The name struck Freddie like a physical blow. His temples began to throb as fragments of memory crystallised into horrifying clarity. Sebastian. His cousin's face swam before his mind's eye, no longer the carefully cultivated mask of familial concern but twisted with murderous intent.

"Sir James." Freddie's voice emerged hoarse. "Did this Mr. Grey give his Christian name?"

"Sebastian, I believe." The magistrate glanced down at a leather-bound notebook. "Yes, Sebastian Grey. He left directions to contact him at the White Swan Inn in Leominster should anyone have information about his... troubled relative."

Freddie's hands clenched on the arms of his chair as the final barriers in his mind crumbled.

The nightmare that had plagued his recovery suddenly blazed into vivid reality: hoofbeats thundering through darkness, branches whipping past his face as he urged his horse through treacherous country, frantic to escape his pursuers.

The crack of gunfire, Sebastian's voice calling out with false concern: "Cousin! Stop this madness! Let us help you!"

Help him into an early grave, more like.

He remembered now: the desperate ride into the Welsh hills, finally losing his pursuers but then realising he was utterly lost himself.

Not only that, but he had nowhere safe to go.

Exhausted, he dropped his reins, letting his horse pick a path.

Finally, the world tilting sideways as the horse slipped on the rocky path and Freddie lost his seat. Then darkness.

"Mr. Frederick?" Hester's worried voice penetrated his remembrance. "You've gone quite pale."

Freddie forced himself to breathe slowly, though his heart still raced. "I apologise. The information has... triggered certain memories."

Sir James leaned forward, his expression grave. "Might I suggest, sir, that you share those memories? If there is some matter requiring the attention of the law..."

"No!" The word came out sharper than Freddie intended.

He moderated his tone with effort. "That is, I appreciate your concern, Sir James, but I believe I now understand the.

.. confusion regarding my identity. The gentleman you mentioned is indeed known to me, but I assure you, I am quite sound of mind. "

Hester's hand touched his arm briefly, a gesture of silent support that nearly undid his composure. How could he protect her if he revealed the true danger? Sebastian would think nothing of eliminating any witnesses to his attempted crime.

"You've remembered something more substantial regarding your identity, I take it?" Sir James' eyes were very sharp, and Freddie thought fast.

"Yes, sir." Freddie said slowly, trying to piece together some explanation the magistrate might accept without revealing the truth. "I feel I owe you a more complete explanation, though I must ask for your discretion in the matter."

"Naturally." Sir James steeped his fingers, waiting.

"My name is Frederick Ashworth," Freddie began, the false surname coming smoothly to his lips.

"I am a private tutor by profession, recently employed by a family in Herefordshire.

The gentleman who inquired after me, Mr. Grey, is indeed known to me, though not he has falsely represented me in his description. "

He paused, constructing each sentence with meticulous care.

"There was a... disagreement regarding certain documents in my employer's household.

Nothing of great consequence, but Mr. Grey seemed to think otherwise.

When he made threats of a personal nature, I thought it prudent to remove myself from the situation. "

"I see." Sir James's tone suggested he saw rather more than Freddie was telling. "And the injury to your head?"

"A genuine accident during my hasty departure." This much, at least, contained a grain of truth. "I have no wish to cause trouble for anyone, Sir James. I merely want to ensure that if Mr. Grey makes further inquiries, he receives information that will... discourage him from pursuing the matter."

The magistrate's shrewd eyes moved between Freddie and Hester. "Miss Wynstanley, are you are satisfied with this explanation?"

"I am satisfied that Mr... Ashworth has good reasons for his actions," Hester replied carefully. Something in her measured tone told Freddie she had perhaps discerned more of the truth than he had intended to reveal.

"Very well." Sir James made a brief notation in his ledger.

"Should Mr. Grey return, I shall inform him that no one matching his description of a disturbed relative has been seen in the area.

Though I would suggest, sir, that you might wish to seek employment somewhat further from Herefordshire in the future. "

"Thank you, Sir James. Your discretion is most appreciated." Freddie rose, anxious to conclude the interview before any inconsistencies in his hastily constructed story might become apparent, and to get out of town before Sir James happened to read his newspaper more thoroughly.

Outside, Freddie started walking quickly towards the market square, hoping Mr. Bethel had concluded his intended business of purchasing a new ram. The quicker they got out of Builth Wells, the better; fear for Hester's safety was a weight in his stomach.

"A tutor?" Hester's voice held a hint of amusement despite the gravity of their situation. "You invented that rather quickly."

"It seemed a reasonable occupation for someone of my... apparent education." Freddie tried to ignore the guilt gnawing at his conscience. Every instinct urged him to tell her everything, yet the memory of Sebastian's ruthlessness held him back. "I

hope you can forgive the deception."

"I understand more than you might think." Hester's hand brushed his arm, the touch light but somehow anchoring. "Though I wish you felt able to trust me with the whole truth."

Freddie stopped walking, turning to face her fully. "My trust in you is absolute," he said quietly. "But please believe me that for your safety, I cannot... must not... tell you everything. At least not yet."

Something passed between them in that moment, an understanding deeper than words could express. Hester nodded slowly, accepting both his need for secrecy and his reasons for it. "We should find Mr. Bethel," she said at last. "The road home will be darker than this morning."

Home . The word caught at Freddie's heart, reminding him that Plas Wyn was not truly his refuge, merely a temporary shelter from the storm gathering around him.

Yet as they made their way through the thinning crowd, Hester's presence beside him felt more real, more right, than all the grand houses and noble titles he had left behind.

The lies he had told Sir James might protect them for now, but Freddie knew with growing certainty that he could not hide for long.

Sebastian would not stop searching, and sooner or later, the truth would emerge.

He only prayed that when it did, he would find the strength to protect not only himself but also the remarkable woman who had saved his life in more ways than one.



### Chapter Five

The cart lurched over another rut in the rough track, making Hester grip the wooden side more tightly. Beside her, Freddie, still pale from his recent injuries but looking stronger with each passing day, glanced at their silent Welsh driver before leaning closer to speak in hushed tones.

Mr. Bethel's cart creaked its steady way along the mountain path, the elderly farmer occasionally muttering to his horse in Welsh when the beast showed signs of slowing.

The ram tethered behind the farmer lay quietly, apparently sleeping.

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across the valley below, painting the slopes in shades of green and gold.

Hester had made this journey countless times before, but never with such peculiar company nor such mounting tension in her breast.

"Miss Wynstanley," Freddie began, his voice barely above a whisper, "I must tell you what I've remembered." He paused, checking once more that Mr. Bethel remained absorbed in his own thoughts and the careful guidance of his horse. "About why I was travelling when you found me."

Hester turned slightly toward him, careful to maintain a proper distance despite the cart's determined efforts to jostle them together.

The bruising around the cut on Freddie's temple had faded to a yellowish shadow, but

the haunted look in his eyes spoke of wounds that went far deeper than mere physical hurts.

"My uncle Edmund," he continued, the words seeming to catch in his throat, "has been planning my death."

The bluntness of his statement nearly caused Hester to gasp aloud. She pressed her lips together, forcing herself to appear outwardly calm even as her heart began to race. Mr. Bethel clicked his tongue at the horse, completely oblivious to the grave conversation taking place behind him.

"You see," Freddie went on, his cultured voice carrying an edge of bitterness, "my grandfather is dying. The doctors say he hasn't long, perhaps a few months, a year at most. And I am his heir."

"Not your uncle?" Hester asked softly, though she already knew the answer.

"No. My father was the elder son, and I am his only child; the estate is structured such that I will receive the bulk of it. Uncle Edmund has always resented that, I think. But it wasn't until recently that I understood just how deeply that resentment ran."

The cart swayed as they rounded a bend in the track, bringing Plas Wyn into view in the distance.

Its weathered grey stone walls seemed to grow out of the very mountain itself, a refuge that had always represented safety to Hester.

Now, watching Freddie's face as he struggled with his revelation, she wondered if even those ancient walls could offer protection against the dangers he faced.

"The inheritance is substantial," Freddie explained, his fingers worrying at a loose

thread on his borrowed coat.

"Several profitable estates, investments that have been carefully managed for generations.

Uncle Edmund has always lived beyond his means, gambling and.

.." He trailed off, clearly uncomfortable discussing such matters with a lady.

"And he wants control of it all," Hester finished for him, understanding dawning with horrible clarity.

Freddie nodded. "If something were to happen to me before Grandfather passes, everything would go to Edmund. He'd have everything he's always wanted: the money, the power, the respect that comes with it."

The cart jolted again, and Mr. Bethel began singing softly in Welsh, a melancholy tune that seemed eerily appropriate to their conversation. Hester watched a hawk circling overhead, its graceful flight at odds with the growing knot of anxiety in her stomach.

"But surely your grandfather wouldn't allow..."

"Grandfather is barely conscious most days now," Freddie interrupted, his voice tight with suppressed emotion. "And Uncle Edmund has been very careful to maintain an appearance of familial devotion. No one suspects him of anything untoward. No one except me, and now you."

They passed through the gate that marked the beginning of Wynstanley land, the familiar creak of its hinges sounding somehow ominous in the gathering dusk.

Hester found herself studying Freddie's profile, noting how the aristocratic features she'd admired while tending his injuries now seemed carved from stone with worry.

"There's more," he said quietly. "Much more. But we're nearly at your house, and I don't want your aunts to overhear what I have to say next."

Hester nodded, her mind already racing ahead to what other revelations might be forthcoming.

The cart continued its slow progress up the drive, and she found herself grateful for Mr. Bethel's steady presence and his complete inability to understand their English conversation.

Some secrets, she was beginning to realize, were better shared in careful measures, like strong medicine administered drop by careful drop.

The library at Plas Wyn had always been Hester's favourite room, with its worn leather chairs and the comforting smell of old books. Now, it felt more like a confessional as Freddie paced before the hearth, his shoulders tense with remembered fear.

Aunt Cecilia and Aunt Felicity had left Hester and Freddie alone after supper with the pretence of him wanting to examine her father's old maps. The excuse wasn't entirely false; they would need those maps soon enough, but first there were darker matters to discuss.

"I was at my club in London," Freddie began, his voice low despite their privacy.

"The sort of establishment where gentlemen gather to drink port and discuss business.

I'd stepped into an alcove to read a letter when I heard my uncle's voice in the next

room.

He was speaking with my cousin Sebastian.

At first, I thought nothing of it; family matters, estate business, the usual topics.

But then I heard my name, and something in Uncle Edmund's tone made me pause. "

He stopped his pacing, turning to face Hester with an intensity that made her breath catch.

"They were discussing how unfortunate it would be if I met with an accident before Grandfather's death.

Sebastian suggested several possibilities: a fall while hunting, a carriage overturning on a dangerous road, even a mysterious illness.

They spoke of my death as casually as one might discuss the weather. "

A chill ran through Hester despite the relative warmth of the evening. "How could they be so cold-blooded about their own flesh and blood?"

"Money changes people," Freddie replied bitterly. "Or perhaps it merely reveals what was always there, hidden beneath a veneer of civility. Uncle Edmund has gambling debts, you see. Substantial ones. The inheritance would solve all his problems, but only if I were out of the way."

He resumed his pacing, the floorboards creaking softly beneath his feet.

"I left London that night, thinking to reach Greystone Court and speak with Grandfather.

I knew he was ill, but I hoped he might still be lucid enough to understand the danger, to make some provision that would protect the inheritance from Edmund's schemes. "

Hester leaned forward in her chair. "But you never reached Greystone Court."

"Actually, I did." He smiled wryly. "Only to discover my grandfather had just been removed from it, taken up to London to consult with more doctors.

My cousin Monty – Montague – was there, Edmund's younger son.

I didn't trust him not to smother me in my sleep after what I'd heard, so I headed on for the house where I grew up, where my father and mother lived, near Ludlow.

"Freddie's hand went to his temple, where the bruising had nearly faded.

"I was approaching the estate when I spotted riders on the road ahead.

There were four of them, waiting where the road passes through a copse of trees.

I might not have thought anything of it, except I recognized one of the men: Sebastian. "

The library had grown quite dark as the fire burned low, but neither of them moved to light a lamp. Somehow, the gathering shadows seemed appropriate for such a tale.

"I knew then that my uncle's plans had already been set in motion. My grandfather had been removed from my reach, and Sebastian and his hired men were waiting to kill me. I turned my horse and galloped away, but they gave chase immediately."

Freddie's voice grew rough with remembered fear.

"My horse was faster, thank God, and I knew something of the countryside thereabouts.

I'd spent my childhood there, after all.

But in my panic to escape, I took unfamiliar paths, rode through rivers to throw them off my trail.

It was growing dark, and I had no clear idea where I was heading except away from my pursuers. "

He paused by the window, staring out into the darkness.

"I rode through the night, taking whatever tracks seemed least likely to be followed.

By morning, I was hopelessly lost in country I didn't know, my horse was exhausted, and I was nearly delirious with fatigue.

When the poor beast stumbled, I was thrown. .."

"And that's how you came to be lying senseless on the mountain," Hester finished softly, remembering the morning she'd found him, blood matting his fair hair.

"Yes. The rest you know. Though I didn't remember it clearly until now." He turned from the window, his expression grave.

Hester rose from her chair, moving to stand beside him at the window.

In the gathering darkness, she could just make out the line of hills where she'd discovered him, lying so still she'd initially feared him dead.

"Your memories returning isn't entirely fortunate," she observed.

"It would have been easier if you could have simply disappeared, let them think their plan had succeeded. "



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"Easier, perhaps," Freddie agreed, "but not right. How can I allow Uncle Edmund to profit from his treachery?"

Together they stood in silence, watching the moon rise slowly over the Welsh hills. Hester was acutely aware of Freddie's presence beside her, of the gravity of his situation, and of how their quiet life at Plas Wyn had been irrevocably altered by his arrival.

"They'll be searching for you still," she said at last. "Sebastian and his men."

"Yes." Freddie's voice was firm despite its quietness. "And sooner or later, Sir James is going to realise who I really am, and that I fed him a pack of lies."

Hester winced, knowing he was right. "And your grandfather..." she murmured.

"He is constantly on my mind. I can't leave him worrying about me. I must leave at first light and try to get to him," Freddie declared.

"Agreed," she said, taking up a candle and lighting it from the fire before moving to her father's old desk and pulling out several sheets of paper. "I'll need to leave instructions for my aunts, of course. And there are arrangements to be made for the estate while I'm away."

Freddie turned sharply from the window. "While you're away? Miss Wynstanley, surely you don't imagine..."

"I do imagine, and I have imagined quite thoroughly," Hester interrupted, dipping her

pen in ink. "You're not yet fully recovered from your injuries, Mr. Grey. You'll need somebody with you who knows your situation and can be trusted implicitly."

"But it's dangerous," he protested. "My uncle's men..."

"Are looking for a man travelling alone," Hester pointed out, not looking up from her writing. "A couple journeying together will attract far less attention. We can pose as brother and sister if necessary, though perhaps cousins would be more believable given our differing looks."

Freddie ran a hand through his fair hair in frustration. "Miss Wynstanley... Hester... I cannot allow you to put yourself at risk for my sake. These men are killers."

Now Hester did look up, fixing him with a steady gaze. "You cannot allow or disallow anything, sir. I am mistress of Plas Wyn and answerable only to myself in matters of choice. And I choose to help you."

A clock ticked somewhere in the darkness of the library, marking off seconds as they regarded each other. Finally, Freddie spoke again, his voice softer. "You've already helped me more than I could ever repay. Your care when I was injured, your discretion, your hospitality..."

"Which makes me all the more invested in seeing you safely to London," Hester replied practically. "I should hate to have wasted all that nursing only to have you collapse in a ditch somewhere between here and the English border."

Despite the gravity of their situation, Freddie's lips twitched in what might have been the beginning of a smile. "You are remarkably stubborn."

"I prefer to think of it as practical," Hester said, returning to her letter. "Now then, we'll need to plan our route carefully. The main roads will be faster but more

exposed. Secondary roads might be safer but will add days to our journey."

Freddie lit another candle and moved to study the maps spread across another table. "We can't afford too much delay. My grandfather..."

"Quite right," Hester agreed. "We'll take the main roads where we must, but vary our route unpredictably. We should avoid major inns where possible; inns on the back roads have the advantage of being cheaper, too. I did observe that you weren't carrying much money."

"You seem to have given this considerable thought," Freddie observed, something like admiration creeping into his voice.

She finished her letter and began another, this one containing detailed instructions for the running of the estate.

"We'll need to travel light, of course. One small bag each.

I can wear my riding habit; it's practical for travel and respectably plain.

You'll need different clothes; your current ones mark you too clearly as a gentleman.  
"

"I suppose I should be grateful you've thought of everything," Freddie said, studying the map with greater attention. "Though I still wish you would reconsider accompanying me."

"Then you shall have to remain disappointed," Hester replied crisply, signing her second letter with a flourish. "I've never yet begun a task I didn't mean to see through to its end."

She stood, moving to join him at the map table. "Look here," she said, tracing a route with her finger. "This would be the main route to London, but if we take this road to start, then cut across country here, we can avoid the larger coaching stops where news might travel quickly."

Freddie leaned closer to see where she was pointing, and Hester caught the faint scent of the soap her aunts had provided him with. It was a homely smell that seemed at odds with his aristocratic bearing, yet somehow perfectly suited to this strange situation they found themselves in.

"Your knowledge of the country roads is remarkable," he commented.

"I've been studying this map all my life," she reminded him. "And a lady with limited means learns to know every path and shortcut available to her. Now, about funds for the journey..."

"You said Mr. Bethel has been looking after my horse?"

"Freddie queried her. "He's a valuable animal.

Selling him will raise the funds we need.

And no, I'm not particularly attached to him.

"He grinned as she cast him a sideways look.

"He did save my life, for which I'm grateful, but I've only owned him a month. "

Hester nodded approvingly. "Good. Though we should still be prudent with our spending to avoid drawing attention. Now, about weapons..."

"Absolutely not," Freddie said firmly. "I won't have you arming yourself on my account."

"Don't be ridiculous," Hester retorted. "My father's pistol has been in my possession since his death, and I know perfectly well how to use it. Unless you're carrying a weapon yourself?"

Freddie's silence was answer enough.

"Then that's settled," she said with satisfaction. "We'll leave before dawn. I'll speak to my aunts before I go to bed. They'll understand, or at least Aunt Cecilia will, and she'll help Aunt Felicity accept it."

She turned to face him fully, her expression serious. "I give you my word, that I won't be a burden to you on this journey. But I am coming with you, and that is final."

In the darkness of the library, with only moonlight filtering through the windows, Freddie's face was difficult to read.

But when he spoke, his voice carried a warmth that suggested he might be smiling.

"I begin to think, Miss Wynstanley, that far from being a burden, you may prove to be my salvation. "

Although she should go, should speak to her aunts and pack her bag, Hester found herself lingering in the library, reluctant to end this strange, intense evening.

"I should retire," she said softly, though she made no move toward the door. "We have an early start tomorrow."

Freddie had settled into one of the leather chairs, his long legs stretched toward the

dying fire. "Something's troubling you," he observed. "Beyond the obvious dangers ahead."

Hester smiled faintly at his perception. "Is it so apparent?" She moved away from the window when he nodded, taking the chair opposite his. In the darkness, it felt easier to speak of things she'd kept close to her heart for so many years.

"Do you know, I've never been further from Plas Wyn than Shrewsbury?" she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "All my life has been contained within these mountains, these valleys. I've read about London, about Bath and Brighton and all the great cities, but I've never seen them."

"And now you're about to," Freddie replied, his tone encouraging.

"Yes. Though hardly in the way I'd imagined." Hester laughed softly. "In my girlhood dreams, I was never fleeing from murderous relatives. I rather thought I'd make my debut in London society, attend balls, perhaps make an advantageous marriage."

"Those dreams weren't unreasonable for a gentleman's daughter."

"No, but they became impossible when Father died and left us with nothing but the house and barely enough income to maintain it.

" Hester's fingers drummed lightly on the chair's arm.

"Don't mistake me; I love Plas Wyn. I love my life here, my aunts, even the endless responsibilities of keeping everything from falling into complete ruin. But sometimes..."

She trailed off, and Freddie finished for her: "Sometimes you want more."

"Is that terribly selfish of me?"

"I think it's perfectly natural," he said gently. "You're young, intelligent, capable of so much more than managing a remote Welsh estate."

Hester felt warmth rise in her cheeks at his praise. "When you were brought here, hurt and mysterious, I thought perhaps God was finally answering my prayers for adventure. Though I doubt this is quite what the vicar meant when he advised careful prayer."

That drew a quiet laugh from Freddie. "I suspect not. But you've risen to the challenge admirably."

"Have I?" She leaned forward slightly, her voice earnest. "Because I'm terrified. Terrified and exhilarated all at once. Tomorrow we ride out into a world I barely know, facing dangers I can scarcely imagine, and part of me wants to hide under my bed like a child."

"Yet you're still determined to come with me."

"Oh yes." Hester's voice grew stronger. "Because the part of me that isn't terrified is finally, finally alive. Does that make any sense at all?"

In the darkness, she could just make out Freddie's nod. "Perfect sense. Fear and excitement often walk hand in hand. I felt much the same when I first went up to Oxford."

"Tell me about Oxford," Hester requested impulsively. "Tell me about all the places I've only read about. If we're to be travelling companions, I should like to know what to expect."

And so, in the quiet of the library, Freddie began to describe the gleaming spires and ancient stones of Oxford, the busy streets and glittering shops of London, the elegant promenades of Bath. Hester listened, enraptured, as the places she'd only imagined came to life in his words.

When he finally finished, she sat in silence for a moment before speaking. "It won't be like that for us, will it? We'll be running, hiding, watching always for your uncle's men."

"No," Freddie agreed quietly. "It won't be quite like that. But perhaps, when this is all over..."

He left the sentence unfinished, but Hester understood. First they had to survive the journey, had to reach London and somehow prove Edmund's treachery before Freddie's grandfather died. Only then could she think about seeing those wonderful places properly.

"We should rest," she said at last, rising from her chair. "Dawn will come soon enough."

At the library door, she paused, looking back at Freddie's shadowy figure. "Thank you for understanding about my dreams. Silly as they might seem given our circumstances."

"Not silly at all," he replied softly. "Dreams give us courage when we need it most. And I suspect we'll need all the courage we can muster in the days ahead."

Hester nodded, then slipped out into the darkened hallway, leaving Freddie alone. Tomorrow would bring whatever it would bring, but for now, she had this moment of understanding, this perfect blend of terror and anticipation, this first step toward a wider world than she had ever known.



### Chapter Six

Freddie Grey had not anticipated travelling to London in the company of three ladies, particularly when stealth was of paramount importance.

Yet as he watched Hester's tiny aunts bustle about gathering their necessities, he could not help but admire their determination.

They had absolutely vetoed Hester's plans and gone about making their own, unconcerned with any arguments he or Hester put forth.

"We simply cannot allow you and Hester to travel unchaperoned," Aunt Cecilia had declared. "It would be most improper."

"And dangerous," added Aunt Felicity. "You never know what sort of ruffians one might encounter on the road to London. Even rowan might not be enough to ward them off!"

Freddie caught Hester's eye and noted the slight quirk of her lips. They both knew the real ruffians they needed to watch for were his own relations, but there seemed little point in mentioning this to the aunts.

"I appreciate your concern, ladies," he said carefully, "but I would not wish to put you to any inconvenience."

"Nonsense," both aunts chorused, causing Freddie to blink at their synchronicity.

"Besides," Hester added practically as her aunts scuttled off to carry on their packing, "they're quite right about the advantages of travelling as a family group. Those looking for you will be watching for a single gentleman, not a party of four with two middle-aged aunts."

The logic was sound, Freddie had to admit.

His horse had recovered well enough for travel, thanks to Mr. Bethel's careful ministrations, but they would need to sell the gelding in Hereford.

A coach would be far more suitable for a lengthy journey with ladies, and he would need the money to purchase one.

The risks of using public conveyances where his uncle's men might be watching was simply too great.

The morning dawned crisp and clear as they set out.

Freddie rode alongside the small borrowed cart containing the ladies and their luggage, keeping a watchful eye on the road ahead.

The aunts maintained a steady stream of conversation, punctuated by frequent concerns about the state of their bonnets and whether they had packed sufficient handkerchiefs.

"I do hope we remembered to bring enough tea," fretted the elder Miss Wynstanley. "One never knows what sort of establishments one might encounter between here and London."

"I packed three canisters, sister dear," replied her sister. "Though I fear we may run short if the journey takes longer than expected."

Hester caught Freddie's eye again and smiled, a private gesture that warmed him more than the weak spring sunshine. She was driving the cart, hands as competent on the quiet pony's reins as they seemed to be at any other activity she undertook. Her very presence steeled his resolve.

They reached Hereford by early afternoon, the busy town bustling with activity.

Freddie led his horse to a reputable dealer, trying not to betray his aristocratic bearing as he negotiated a price.

While he might have received more money if he had played the lordling, he might also have been more memorable, something he did not want.

He'd borrowed a hat which covered his hair, and wore Hester's father's old coat instead of his own, so hopefully the horse dealer would not recall him too well.

The horse was a fine animal, worth considerably more than he received, but beggars could not be choosers and the coins would purchase them suitable transportation and accommodations along their route, hopefully without having to dip into whatever funds Hester had brought with her.

Michaelmas having just passed, she would have been paid whatever rents she was due from her tenant farmers who ran their sheep on her land, but he could not imagine it was much.

"A shame to sell such a lovely creature," Hester murmured as she joined him, watching the horse being led away.

"Needs must," Freddie replied quietly. "Though I confess, I shall miss him.

Without his fleetness of foot, I should not have escaped my cousin and his men...

and I should never have found you." It was a painful thought, he discovered with some surprise, but he was coming to realise that Hester was increasingly important to him in ways he dared not examine too closely, not while his very life was in peril.

They found a decent if somewhat worn coach for sale at a reasonable price, along with a pair of mismatched geldings that looked sturdy enough for the journey. The vehicle's blue paint was faded and its springs had seen better days, but it would serve their purpose well enough.

"Quite charming," declared Aunt Cecilia, examining the coach's interior with evident approval. "Snug enough, if the weather turns cold. Though the cushions could do with new stuffing."

"And the curtains are rather shabby," added Aunt Felicity. "But I suppose one cannot expect the height of fashion in these circumstances." She sniffed a little dubiously. "A good thing I brought plenty of lavender. That will take care of any lingering mustiness."

Freddie arranged for the coach to be prepared while the ladies refreshed themselves at a nearby inn.

An hour later, they were ready to depart, their luggage secured and the horses harnessed.

He had hired a local man to drive, having decided that taking the reins himself might draw unwanted attention.

"Well then," said Aunt Cecilia, settling herself into the coach with assistance from both Freddie and the driver, "I suppose we are off on our grand adventure."

"Indeed we are, sister," agreed Aunt Felicity, accepting Freddie's hand to climb

aboard. "Though I do hope we remembered to pack enough handkerchiefs."

Hester was the last to enter, pausing briefly beside Freddie. "Are you certain about this?" she asked softly. "There's still time to change your mind about the aunts and send them home with the cart."

"Oddly enough, I find I'm quite reconciled to the idea," he replied, surprised to discover it was true. "Your aunts may prove to be our best disguise."

With a final check of the horses and luggage, Freddie climbed into the coach himself, taking the rearward-facing seat beside Hester. As they rolled out of Hereford, he found himself studying her profile, wondering how this remarkable young woman had come to be so integral to his plans for survival.

The journey to London proved far more pleasant than Freddie had anticipated, despite the constant threat of discovery hanging over them.

He found himself watching Hester more often than was strictly proper, admiring the way she managed her aunts with gentle efficiency and maintained her composure through the various trials of travel.

Their progress was necessarily slow, the horses only able to make around thirty miles each day without becoming over-weary.

The aunts seemed content to while away the hours with endless rounds of speculation about London society and frequent stops for refreshment.

Freddie might have found their constant chatter tiresome, but Hester's occasional glances of amused understanding made it all quite bearable.

"I do hope we shall be able to take in some of the sights," Aunt Cecilia mused as they

approached their second day of travel. "It has been an age since we visited the British Museum."

"Or Vauxhall Gardens," her sister added wistfully. "Though I suppose that would be quite impossible in our current circumstances."

"Perhaps another time," Hester suggested diplomatically, though Freddie noted the slight tension in her shoulders at the mention of public entertainments.

They both knew the danger was far too significant to risk him, at least, appearing in public, though he supposed the women could go without him.

A pang went through him at the thought of Hester seeing the sights of London for the first time without him.

He wanted to be the one to show her the capital's wonders; wanted to see the expressions of delight on her face.

Firmly, he pushed the thoughts aside. Survival needed to be his priority, not mooning over Hester!

Though it was difficult not to moon over her, when she sat beside him hour after hour, bearing up under the rigors of the journey with unfailing good humour. Her face was far more fascinating a study than the autumnal countryside passing by outside the carriage windows.

As evening approached on the third day of their journey, they stopped at a coaching inn, the horses requiring rest and the aunts insisting upon a proper meal.

Freddie surveyed the establishment with careful attention as their driver brought the coach to a halt.

It seemed respectable enough, though busy with travellers.

"I shall go in first and secure rooms," he told the ladies, helping each of them down from the coach in turn. "Wait here a moment, if you please."

The common room was crowded with travellers, filled with the smell of roasting meat and wood smoke. Freddie had just located the innkeeper across the room when a familiar voice caused his blood to run cold.

"Another bottle of your best claret," demanded Sebastian Grey from a corner table, his commanding tone carrying clearly across the room.

Freddie withdrew quickly into the shadows, his heart pounding. His cousin sat with his back to the door, but it would take only one chance glance for him to be spotted. He needed to warn the others before they entered.

Slipping back outside, he found Hester supervising the removal of a small trunk from the coach.

"We cannot stay here," he murmured urgently, taking her elbow. "Sebastian is inside."

Hester's eyes widened, but she maintained her composure admirably. "Aunts," she said calmly, "I fear this establishment is not quite suitable. The rooms appear to be full."

"But surely there must be something available," Aunt Felicity protested. "I am quite desperate for a cup of chamomile tea."

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"The next inn is only a few miles further," Freddie assured them, though he had no idea if this was true. "Much more suitable, I should think."

"Oh, very well, very well," Aunt Cecilia said grumpily. "Driver, hand me back up."

A burst of laughter from inside the inn made him start.

Sebastian's voice carried clearly through the open door, and he sounded as though he was approaching.

Without thinking, Freddie grabbed Hester's hand and pulled her around the corner of the building, into a narrow passage between the inn and its stable block.

They pressed themselves against the rough stone wall, barely breathing as Sebastian's voice grew closer. Freddie was acutely aware of Hester's proximity, of the warmth of her body next to his in the gathering dusk. Her hand remained clasped in his, trembling slightly.

"The old man can't last much longer," Sebastian was saying to someone. "Once he's gone, we'll soon sort out this mess with Freddie."

Hester's fingers tightened on Freddie's, and he found himself drawing her closer, as much for his own comfort as hers. They stood in tense silence until Sebastian's voice faded, heading back inside the inn.

"He's gone," Hester whispered, but neither of them moved. In the dim light, Freddie could see her face turned up to his, her eyes wide with concern and something else,



something that made his heart beat faster for entirely different reasons than fear.

Later, he would never be quite certain who moved first. Perhaps they both did, drawn together by the peculiar intimacy of shared danger and close quarters.

His lips found hers in the gathering darkness, and for a moment the world narrowed to nothing but the softness of her mouth and the warmth of her body against his.

The kiss was brief but profound, ending as suddenly as it had begun. They stood looking at each other in the shadows, both slightly stunned by what had just transpired.

"We should return to the aunts," Hester said softly, though she made no move to leave.

"Yes," Freddie agreed, equally reluctant to break the moment. "They'll be wondering where we've got to."

They found the aunts exactly where they had left them, apparently oblivious to the drama that had just unfolded.

"There you are," Aunt Felicity exclaimed. "We were beginning to worry."

"No need for concern," Freddie assured them, helping the ladies back into the coach while steadfastly avoiding Hester's gaze. "But we really must press on to the next inn."

As they continued their journey through the gathering night, Freddie found his thoughts returning again and again to that stolen moment in the shadows.

Beside him in the coach, Hester sat with her hands folded primly in her lap, but he

noticed she too seemed rather more quiet than usual, keeping her face firmly turned away from him, even though there was nothing outside the window to look at now it was dark.

The aunts, blessedly, appeared to attribute their mutual distraction to concern over the 'unsuitable' inn, and filled the silence with their own conversation.

Yet whenever the coach swayed, bringing Hester's shoulder briefly against his, Freddie found himself remembering the softness of her lips and wondering if he would ever find the courage, or the opportunity, to kiss her again.

Greystone House loomed before them in the grey London morning, its imposing facade a stark reminder of everything Freddie stood to lose. He studied the familiar windows and doorways from their vantage point across the square, searching for any sign that his uncle's men might be watching.

"It seems quiet enough," he murmured to Hester, who stood beside him while her aunts waited in their hired hackney coach. After selling their travel-worn vehicle, they had decided a local conveyance would draw less attention.

"Are you certain about this plan?" Hester asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "It seems rather... elaborate."

Freddie glanced at the aunts, who were practically vibrating with excitement at their role in the scheme.

"I can't risk some, or all, of the servants in the house being my uncle's spies; we must get inside unseen, and this is the only plan we could come up with that seemed remotely possible.

I believe it may be just elaborate enough to work.

Your aunts can be rather convincing when they set their minds to it. "

Indeed, Aunt Cecilia had spent the entire morning coaching her sister in what she termed "the proper way to create a society sensation." Their enthusiasm for the task was somewhat alarming, but Freddie had to admit their plan might actually succeed. Indeed, he desperately hoped it would.

"Very well then," Hester said, squaring her shoulders. "Shall we begin?"

The aunts emerged from the hackney with remarkable dignity, considering their intended purpose. Both were dressed in their finest morning clothes, which while somewhat dated, were perfectly respectable.

"Now remember, sister," Aunt Cecilia said, adjusting her bonnet, "we are absolutely convinced that this is indeed the residence of our dear friend Lady Worthington."

"Of course, of course," Aunt Felicity replied, practically bouncing with anticipation. "And we simply cannot be persuaded otherwise, no matter what anyone says."

Freddie led Hester around to the small side gate into the back garden, the pair of them waiting behind a wall covered in wisteria vines while the aunts made their way to the front door.

Through the morning quiet, they soon heard the aunts' voices raised in genteel argument with what sounded like the butler.

"But surely Lady Worthington must be at home," Aunt Felicity was saying. "We have come all the way from Wales specifically to call upon her."

"I do assure you, madam, there is no Lady Worthington in residence here," came the butler's increasingly frustrated response.

"Nonsense," declared Aunt Cecilia. "This is certainly her house. I remember these very steps from our last visit. Though I must say, the lions look rather different. Have they been cleaned?"

Freddie had to admire their commitment to the performance.

He could hear laughter, servants being drawn to the hallway to witness the rather stuffy butler becoming increasingly annoyed as he tried to get rid of the aunts without being rude.

At last, he and Hester crept out of their hiding spot, slipped through the French doors into the study, and then through a small door at the back of the room into the servants' hallway.

The kitchen staff would be busy preparing the noonday meal and everyone else in the front hall witnessing the aunts' performance, leaving the back stairs temporarily unguarded.

"This way," he whispered, taking Hester's hand. The touch sent a jolt through him, remembering their kiss at the coaching inn, but now was not the time for such thoughts.

They ascended the stairs as quietly as possible, pausing at each landing to listen for approaching footsteps. From below, they could still hear the aunts' voices, now apparently engaged in a detailed description of Lady Worthington's supposed drawing room décor.

"I distinctly recall the Chinese wallpaper," Aunt Felicity was insisting. "With the lovely blue birds."

"Green birds, surely, sister," Aunt Cecilia corrected. "Though perhaps the colour has

faded."

Freddie led Hester through the familiar corridors, his heart pounding with each step. His grandfather's rooms were on the first floor. As they approached, Freddie was relieved to see no sign of his uncle's personal servant standing guard.

They reached the door to Lord Greystone's sitting room just as a commotion erupted below. The aunts had apparently decided to escalate their performance.

"Well, if you insist this is not Lady Worthington's residence, we shall simply have to examine every room to be certain," the elder Miss Wynstanley announced. "Come along, sister."

Freddie grinned as he heard the butler squawk with outrage. He squeezed Hester's hand once before releasing it, then knocked softly on his grandfather's door.

"Come in," called a familiar voice, slightly weaker than Freddie remembered but still carrying that note of authority he had known all his life. Thank God, it sounded as though the old man was lucid!

Freddie opened the door, his throat tight with emotion as he saw his grandfather seated in his favourite chair by the window. The old man looked up from his book, his eyes widening in recognition.

"Grandfather," Freddie said softly, crossing the room in three quick strides to kneel beside the chair.

Lord Greystone's hand trembled as he reached out to touch Freddie's face, as though ensuring he was real. "My boy," he whispered. "I feared the worst when Edmund said you had disappeared."

"I'm here now," Freddie assured him, covering his grandfather's hand with his own.  
"Why are you in London? I went to Greystone Court to find you!"

"Edmund tried to keep me there with his damn quack doctor," the old man grumbled.  
"Bleeding me and giving me far too much laudanum, ghastly stuff! Started tipping it into my potted ferns."

Freddie couldn't help but laugh, even though he felt sickened at this description of yet more of his uncle's villainy.

"When I was in my right mind again, I ordered the carriage to come to London. I wanted to see you." His grandfather gripped Freddie's hand, surprising strength in it.  
"We're in a pickle, my boy. I let Edmund take on too much, in my grief after your father passed. And now he's drunk on power!"

From the doorway, Hester kept watch, but Freddie could see her soft smile as she witnessed their reunion. The sound of the aunts' voices still carried from below, now apparently engaged in a detailed critique of the entrance hall's decoration, buying them precious time.

### Chapter Seven

Hester stood in the doorway of the sitting room, watching the reunion between grandfather and grandson with a curious mixture of joy and trepidation.

She had known Freddie was of noble birth, of course, but seeing him here, in these grand surroundings, brought home just how far above her station he truly was.

Freddie's grandfather was not what she had expected.

Despite his evident frailty, there was something compelling about his presence, a dignity that seemed to fill the elegant room.

His eyes, the same striking blue as Freddie's, were sharp and alert as he listened to his grandson's account of recent events, shaking his head in disgust. He said something quietly to Freddie that made Freddie startle back, eyes wide with horror, before they resumed their low-voiced conversation.

Eventually they seemed to come to some sort of agreement, and a brief silence fell.

"So this young lady and her family have been sheltering you?" the old man asked, his gaze shifting to where Hester stood. "Come closer, my dear. Let me look at you properly."

Hester approached with what she hoped was an appropriate curtsy, though she suspected her country manners might fall short of London standards. To her surprise, Freddie's grandfather smiled warmly at her.

"Miss Wynstanley has shown me great kindness, grandfather," Freddie said, his voice carrying a note of warmth that made Hester's heart flutter. "I owe her my life, in truth."

"Indeed? Tell me, Miss Wynstanley, what made you decide to help my grandson?"

"It seemed the right thing to do, Mr. Grey," Hester replied carefully. "He was in need, and we were in a position to offer assistance."

"Mr. Grey, is it?" The old man looked at Freddie, who blushed unaccountably.

"Yes, grandfather," Freddie said, a note of warning in his voice. "Mr. Grey."

"You helped him without knowing his full identity or circumstances?" Mr. Grey's eyes twinkled as he looked back at Hester. "That shows remarkable character, my dear. Remarkable indeed."

From below came the sound of her aunts' voices, still determinedly creating their diversion. Hester smiled despite herself, imagining their performance.

"Your aunts appear to be quite resourceful as well," Mr. Grey observed, amusement clear in his tone. "I haven't heard poor Winters so flustered in years. I should like to meet them, I believe, when circumstances allow."

"They can be quite persistent when they choose," Hester admitted, earning a chuckle from both men.

"A valuable trait in a family," Mr. Grey said, his expression growing more serious as he turned back to Freddie.

"Speaking of family, we must act quickly."



" He looked at Hester again, his expression warming.

"You know, my dear, you would make a fabulous countess.

Just the sort of practical, intelligent woman the family needs. "

Hester felt her cheeks grow warm, though confusion welled as his words sank in. Countess? What could he possibly mean?

"Grandfather," Freddie protested, though Hester noticed he wouldn't meet her eyes. "This is hardly the time."

"On the contrary, my boy, it's exactly the time.

When one finds a woman of such quality, one should not hesitate to secure her allegiance.

Particularly when she's already proved herself so capable in a crisis, and when one needs to secure the succession to the earldom.

I'm afraid Freddie hasn't been quite honest with you, my dear Miss Wynstanley.

I'm not Mr. Grey at all. I'm Lord Greystone, Earl of Greystone... and Freddie's my heir."

Hester staggered, her mind whirling. Freddie wasn't just well-born, he was the heir to an earldom . The magnitude of the difference in their stations struck her forcibly, making her previous concerns about their kiss seem almost laughably naïve.

"We should go," she said quickly, hearing a change in the tenor of voices from below. "I believe the aunts' distraction may be wearing thin."

"Yes, of course," Freddie agreed, standing up and bending to embrace his grandfather one final time. "We'll find a way to stop Edmund, I promise."

"Be careful, both of you," Lord Greystone said. "Edmund is desperate, and desperate men are dangerous." He caught Hester's hand before she could withdraw. "Thank you, my dear, for protecting Freddie. Whatever happens, know that you have my gratitude and my blessing."

Hester managed another curtsy, her thoughts in turmoil as she followed Freddie from the room.

They made their way back down the servants' stairs in silence, both lost in their own contemplations.

She found herself studying his familiar profile in the dim light, wondering how she could have missed the signs of his exalted status.

Retreating back the way they had come, Hester went around to the front door to collect her aunts, who were still enthusiastically debating the possibility that they had somehow confused Greystone House with Lady Worthington's residence, though perhaps that had been twenty years ago, or possibly in Bath.

The butler just looked utterly relieved to have them out of the house as Hester sweetly apologised to him for the inconvenience.

Hester barely heard their chatter as they made their way back to their hackney where Freddie awaited them, her mind full of the Earl's words.

The man she had nursed back to health, the man she had come to know simply as Freddie, was the heir to an earldom, rightful successor to Greystone.

Aunt Cecilia and Aunt Felicity sat staring at them in the hackney as Freddie confessed the truth, their faces full of the same shock Hester was feeling.

"I cannot apologise enough for my deception," Freddie said, his aristocratic bearing more pronounced now that he no longer attempted to hide it. "When I first regained consciousness, I truly did not remember who I was. But as my memories returned, I should have told you immediately."

"Lord Frederick Grey," Aunt Felicity breathed. "To think we've had nobility under our roof all this time, Cecilia!"

"And we fed him nothing but shepherd's pie and Welsh rarebit," Aunt Cecilia fretted. "Oh dear, oh dear."

Hester's throat felt too tight to speak. She could barely look at Freddie. Everything about him seemed sharper now, more defined. The way he held himself, the careful precision of his speech. How had she not seen it before?

"Please," he said. "I beg you not to treat me any differently. Your kindness and care saved my life. I owe you more than I can ever repay."

His blue eyes met Hester's, and she saw genuine remorse there. Something else too, something that made her heart flutter traitorously in her chest despite her hurt at his deception.

"But why keep it secret once you remembered?" Aunt Cecilia demanded.

Freddie's expression darkened. "My uncle Edmund.

Grandfather and I believe he may have been behind my parents' fatal accident, and since then he has been trying to isolate Grandfather and have me declared mentally

incompetent, so that he can take control of the earldom himself once my grandfather passes.

The accident that brought me to you was no accident at all.

I need to gather evidence, to ensure I can prove my sound mind and his treachery. "

Aunt Felicity gasped. "Your own uncle! How perfectly dreadful!"

"Indeed." Freddie's mouth set in a grim line.

"And now I must act quickly. My grandfather suggests I go to my mother's family, my grandmother Lady Burrowes.

She – and her son, Lord Burrowes, if he is in London – will help establish my sanity beyond question and assist me in exposing Edmund's schemes. "

"Your grandmother," Hester repeated faintly, looking out of the window at the passing London streets. The magnitude of the situation was beginning to sink in. This was not merely about Freddie's personal safety anymore. This was about titles and inheritance and the fate of an entire noble house.

"Miss Wynstanley." Freddie's voice was soft behind her. "Hester. I know this is a great deal to take in. If you prefer not to come..."

Their eyes met again, and Hester felt that same dangerous flutter in her chest. She looked away first.

"How long will it take to get there?" she asked.

"Not long," Freddie said, and then he added; "I truly am sorry. Not just for the

deception, but for disrupting your lives this way."

Hester managed a small smile. "We've lived quietly for so long, perhaps a little disruption will do us good." She paused, then added, "My lord."

"Please don't," he said quickly. "Not you. I'm still just Freddie."

But he wasn't, Hester thought. He never would be "just Freddie" again. And she would do well to remember that.

The elegant townhouse in Berkeley Square made Plas Wyn look like a shepherd's cottage.

Hester tried not to stare as she followed Freddie up the steps, but everything from the gleaming brass knocker to the perfectly matched windowpanes spoke of wealth beyond her imagining.

Behind her, she could hear her aunts whispering in awe.

The door opened before Freddie could knock, revealing a butler whose dignity remained unruffled even as his eyes widened at the sight of the supposedly missing young master.

"Welcome, my lord," he said, bowing deeply. "Her ladyship is in the morning room."

They were led through a hallway lined with portraits, their boots silent on thick carpets. Hester felt acutely conscious of her travel-worn appearance, but there was no time to worry about it before they entered a sun-filled room where a tall, elegant woman rose from her chair with a cry of joy.

"Freddie!" Lady Burrowes swept forward, gathering her grandson into her arms. "My

dearest boy, we thought we'd lost you!"

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Hester hung back with her aunts, watching the reunion.

Lady Burrowes was everything aristocratic that Hester was not: perfectly groomed, exquisitely dressed, her iron-grey hair arranged in elaborate curls.

Yet there was genuine warmth in her embrace, real tears in her eyes as she held Freddie at arm's length to look at him.

"You're too thin," she declared. "But otherwise you look well, thank God!" Her gaze shifted to the other occupants of the room. "And your companions...?"

Freddie made the introductions. "Miss Hester Wynstanley and her aunts, Miss Cecilia and Miss Felicity Wynstanley. They found me after I suffered an accident and nursed me back to health."

Lady Burrowes clasped Hester's hands in her own.

"My dear girl, we can never thank you enough.

" Her eyes, a darker shade of blue than Freddie's but no less striking, studied Hester's face intently.

Whatever she saw there made her smile. "You must all stay with us, of course. I won't hear of anything else."

"You're very kind, my lady," Hester began, but Lady Burrowes was already ringing for tea and issuing instructions to servants about rooms.

"Anthony will be here shortly," she told Freddie, referring to her son, Lord Burrowes.

"He's been gathering evidence about Edmund's activities these past months.

Suspected something was amiss, though we never dreamed.

.." She broke off, composing herself. "But that's for later.

First, we must see to getting everyone settled. "

The next few hours passed in a whirl of activity.

Hester and her aunts were shown to a suite of rooms more luxurious than anything they'd ever seen.

Lady Burrowes' personal maid appeared with fresh and extremely fashionable garments for them all, explaining apologetically that her ladyship had had to guess at sizes.

"We'll remedy that tomorrow," Lady Burrowes announced at dinner. "I've already sent word to my modiste. She'll come first thing in the morning."

"Oh, but we couldn't possibly..." Hester protested.

"Nonsense. You'll need proper clothes for society. I won't have anyone saying my grandson's rescuers aren't appropriately dressed." Lady Burrowes' tone brooked no argument.

Freddie caught Hester's eye across the table and gave her an apologetic half-smile. He looked completely at home in these luxurious surroundings, Hester thought, as though the days at Plas Wyn had been merely an interlude in his real life.



The next morning brought Madame Celeste, who clucked and measured and draped fabrics around Hester while Lady Burrowes made decisive pronouncements about colours and styles. The aunts were similarly attended to, though they insisted they required less extensive wardrobes.

"You have excellent bones," Madame declared, circling Hester. "And such a lovely figure. We shall make you the toast of the town."

"I don't need to be the toast of anything," Hester protested. "Just something suitable for giving evidence about Lord Freddie's recovery, if it's required."

Lady Burrowes and Madame exchanged knowing looks. "My dear," Lady Burrowes said gently, "you'll be doing much more than giving evidence. You'll be entering society. We must do it properly."

Through an open door, Hester caught glimpses of Freddie conferring with Lord Burrowes in the library. Lord Burrowes was a serious-looking man with kind brown eyes, who treated his nephew with obvious affection. They pored over papers together, speaking in low voices.

"Edmund's been gambling heavily," Hester overheard Lord Burrowes say. "And there are witnesses who overheard a conversation between him and Montague, an argument really, in which Edmund insisted you must be dead and didn't sound in the least regretful."

"As he wouldn't be," Freddie answered. "Sebastian did his level best to ensure it."

Their voices faded as they moved deeper into the library. Hester turned her attention back to Madame Celeste, who was holding up lengths of blue silk and green muslin for Lady Burrowes' approval.

"Both," her ladyship decided. "The blue will look delightful on her. And the green will bring out the gold flecks in those pretty hazel eyes."

Later that afternoon, as Hester sat with Lady Burrowes while the aunts napped, the older woman studied her over her teacup.

"You know," she said casually, "I haven't seen Freddie look at anyone the way he looks at you since he was a little boy watching his mother play the pianoforte."

Hester nearly dropped her cup. "My lady, I assure you..."

"Oh, I don't think he knows it yet himself," Lady Burrowes continued serenely. "Men can be remarkably blind about their own hearts. But I know my grandson, and I see how his eyes follow you."

"He is the heir to an earldom," Hester said firmly. "And I am a country squire's daughter with barely enough income to maintain my home."

"I think you'll find neither of those things matter when it comes to the heart," Lady Burrowes replied. "Rank isn't everything, my dear."

But it was something, Hester thought as she stood before the mirror in her chamber a few days later.

The new blue silk gown, just delivered that evening, transformed her.

The modiste's skill had turned her height from awkward to elegant, had somehow made her sharp features look distinguished rather than plain.

Yet no amount of fine clothing could change who she was: a practical Welsh country girl who knew more about sheep farming than society small talk. Even if Lady

Burrowes was right about Freddie's feelings, which she couldn't be, nothing could come of it.

Could it?

Hester pushed the dangerous thought away, took off the elegant gown and began plaiting her hair for bed. Tomorrow would bring new challenges, and she needed her wits about her. She couldn't afford to dream impossible dreams.

### Chapter Eight

Hester had never felt more out of place than she did crossing the threshold of Lady Arabella Grey's morning room.

The gilt-edged mirrors lining the walls reflected back a young woman who, despite her new London-made gown, looked every inch the country mouse she truly was.

She clasped her hands tightly together, willing herself to maintain the composure expected of a guest in such refined company.

She hadn't wanted to attend this gathering, but Lady Burrowes had insisted it would look odd if they refused the invitation.

"One must maintain appearances," her ladyship had said firmly. "Besides, we must show Edmund we have nothing to hide."

So here they were, Hester in her new green muslin, her aunts in lavender and grey respectively, while Lady Burrowes made serene conversation with their hostess.

Freddie moved through the crowd with easy grace, though Hester noticed he kept himself positioned where he could see both his uncle and the door.

He'd already cautioned them that none of their party should eat or drink anything in this house.

Lady Arabella Grey was everything Hester had imagined a doyenne of Society to be:

thin as a rake, with a permanent sneer of superiority on her round face. She held court from a gilt chair like a queen on her throne, dispensing frigid smiles and cutting remarks with equal precision.

"Miss Wynstanley," Lady Arabella called suddenly. "Do come here, my dear. I've been positively dying to hear all about your little establishment in Wales."

Hester approached with caution, feeling rather like a mouse being summoned by a cat. She was uncomfortably aware of the attention of the entire room.

"Whatever does one do to keep busy, in... Wales? I cannot imagine anything more dull." Lady Arabella smirked.

A titter ran through the assembled ladies. Hester felt colour rising in her cheeks but kept her voice steady as she replied, "We find plenty to occupy our time, my lady. The countryside has its own particular charms."

"Oh yes, I'm sure. Do tell us about these... charms. I understand you keep sheep?"

"The tenants keep sheep," Hester corrected gently. "I merely manage the estate."

"How fascinating." Lady Arabella's tone suggested it was anything but. "And you do this... management... yourself? Without a steward?"

"We cannot afford such luxuries," Hester admitted. There was no point in pretending otherwise; her circumstances were what they were.

"Indeed." Lady Arabella turned to address the room at large. "Ladies, is it not remarkable? Miss Wynstanley here performs the duties of a common steward. Such industry is quite unprecedented among young ladies of gentle birth."

The implications hung heavy in the air. Hester fought to maintain her composure as whispers and meaningful glances passed between the assembled women. A young lady seated near her actually shifted away slightly, as though Hester's reduced circumstances might be catching.

"I understand you even assist with the actual shepherding sometimes," Lady Arabella continued relentlessly. "How... novel. Do tell us, Miss Wynstanley, does one require special attire for such activities? I cannot imagine anything in my modiste's collection would be suitable."

"Old clothes suffice well enough," Hester said, striving for brevity. Words were weapons to this woman. She would not give any more than she must.

"How fascinating it must be," Lady Arabella continued, "to live so... rustically. Do tell us, what does one do for entertainment in such a remote location? Besides nursing mysterious strangers back to health, of course." Her thin lips curved in what might technically be called a smile.

"We find plenty to occupy ourselves," Hester replied evenly. "Books, music, conversation with neighbours."

"Neighbours? Oh, how delightful. And are they all farmers, or are there some people of... quality ... in the area?"

The implied insult hung in the air. Hester lifted her chin slightly. "We're fortunate in our neighbours. Quality, my lady, takes many forms."

A titter ran through the watching crowd and Hester felt briefly triumphant. Lady Arabella's eyes narrowed.

"How democratic of you," she said sweetly. "Perhaps you'd favour us with a

demonstration of Welsh country entertainment? Do you play the pianoforte?"

"A little," Hester admitted cautiously. She could see Freddie starting to move toward them, but he was trapped behind a cluster of elderly ladies.

"Oh, you must play for us!" Lady Arabella clapped her hands. "Sebastian, do escort Miss Wynstanley to the instrument."

Sebastian Grey appeared at Hester's elbow, his resemblance to Freddie marred by the malicious glint in his eyes. "It would be my pleasure."

Hester had no choice but to allow herself to be led to the pianoforte. She knew the instrument was far superior to her old one at home, knew equally well that she wasn't nearly accomplished or well-practiced enough to do it justice. Her fingers trembled slightly as she settled on the bench.

"What shall it be?" Sebastian asked loudly. "A Welsh folk song, perhaps? Something... rustic?"

Hester's cheeks burned. She began to play a simple country air, one she knew well enough to manage despite her nervousness.

But the unfamiliar touch of the keys, the watching eyes, the knowledge of the trap she'd walked into, all conspired against her.

Her fingers stumbled, producing a jarring discord.

"Oh dear," Lady Arabella's voice cut through the silence. "Perhaps music isn't quite the same priority in the country as it is in town."

"I believe Miss Wynstanley's talents lie in more practical directions," Sebastian

added. "Sheep-farming, perhaps?"

Hester's hands fell still on the keys. She could feel tears threatening and blinked them back fiercely. She would not give them the satisfaction.

Before Hester could formulate a response that wouldn't further damage her dignity, the door opened and Freddie entered.

He looked particularly handsome in a well-cut morning coat, his fair hair catching the sunlight streaming through the tall windows.

His presence caused an immediate stir among the young ladies present.

"Ah, Frederick." Lady Arabella's tone warmed considerably. "How fortunate. Miss Wynstanley was just enlightening us about her unique approach to estate management."

Freddie's blue eyes met Hester's across the room, and she saw in them a flash of understanding and anger. "Indeed? Then I'm sure you're all thoroughly impressed by her capabilities. Miss Wynstanley's management of her estate is exemplary."

"Quite." Sebastian Grey's cultured voice held a note of mockery. "Though perhaps not quite what one expects from a young lady of quality."

Hester watched as several of the young ladies present preened, clearly hoping to present themselves as more suitable alternatives to a shepherd-girl from Wales. The contrast between their immaculate appearances and her own simpler presentation had never felt more stark.

"I find capability extremely attractive in a woman," Freddie said firmly, making his way to Hester's side. "Far more so than idle accomplishments practiced solely to



attract a husband."

Several of the preening young ladies wilted visibly. Lady Arabella's expression soured, though she maintained her social smile. "How progressive of you, Frederick. Though surely you must agree that certain standards of behaviour are expected in our circles?"

The emphasis on 'our' was subtle but unmistakable.

Hester felt the full weight of what she was up against: not just Lady Arabella's disapproval, but generations of ingrained social expectations and class distinctions.

Even with Freddie standing supportively beside her, the gulf between their worlds seemed vast and unbridgeable.

"I believe I can judge for myself what standards matter," Freddie replied coolly. "Miss Wynstanley, might I escort you to view the conservatory? I believe you mentioned an interest in exotic blooms."

Hester gratefully accepted his arm, though she could feel Lady Arabella's disapproving gaze boring into her back as they withdrew. In the relative privacy of the conservatory, surrounded by verdant foliage, she finally allowed herself to tremble slightly.

"I apologise for my aunt's behaviour," Freddie said quietly. "She can be quite..."

"There's no need to apologise," Hester interrupted. "She only spoke the truth, after all. I am not of your world, Freddie."

He turned to face her, his expression serious. "My world could use more people like you in it. People who understand the value of honest work and genuine capability."

Hester's heart squeezed painfully in her chest. His kindness only made things harder, for it allowed hope to flutter where she knew it should not. "Nevertheless," she said softly, "your aunt is not wrong about the differences between us."

"The only differences that matter are the ones we allow to matter," Freddie insisted, but Hester could hear the slight uncertainty in his voice. He might wish to ignore society's strictures, but they both knew it wasn't that simple.

The rest of the morning passed in a blur of subtle snubs and pointed comments, each one a small cut to Hester's dignity.

By the time she finally took her leave, her composure felt as fragile as the fine china they'd drunk from.

The carriage ride home gave her time to reflect on the vast social gulf between herself and Freddie, and the near-impossibility of bridging it.

Yet when she closed her eyes, she could still feel the warmth of his presence beside her in the conservatory, still see the earnest conviction in his expression when he'd defended her. Perhaps that made it all worse, for it gave her heart permission to hope when her head knew better.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

The ballroom of Lady Burrowes' London townhouse glowed with the light of hundreds of beeswax candles, their flames reflected endlessly in the gilt-framed mirrors lining the walls.

Hester paused in the doorway, her new blue silk gown rustling softly as she gathered her courage.

The grand room before her represented everything she had never expected to experience in her quiet life at Plas Wyn.

Her aunts had outdone themselves helping her prepare for this evening.

The blue silk gown was an elegant ensemble that made the most of Hester's height and straight-backed carriage.

Her dark hair had been arranged by Lady Burrowes' personal maid, and though she wore no jewels save a simple pearl pendant that had belonged to her mother, Hester knew she looked as well as she ever had in her life.

"Miss Wynstanley." Lady Burrowes' warm voice drew her attention. The older woman approached with genuine pleasure lighting her aristocratic features. "You look absolutely charming in that shade of blue."

"You are too kind, my lady," Hester murmured, executing a graceful curtsy.

"Nonsense." Lady Burrowes took her arm firmly. "I am merely truthful. Come, you must allow me to introduce you to some dear friends of mine. They are most eager to

meet the young lady who showed such resource and kindness to my grandson."

As Lady Burrowes guided her through the crowd, Hester caught sight of Edmund and Arabella Grey standing with their sons. The look Lady Arabella cast at her new gown could have curdled milk, but Hester lifted her chin and refused to be cowed.

"Lady Burrowes is making quite a show of favouring the girl," she heard Sebastian Grey remark to his brother as they passed. "One might almost think she approved of such an unsuitable connection."

"My grandson's life was saved through Miss Wynstanley's quick thinking and generous care," Lady Burrowes said clearly, though she hadn't paused in her progress across the room. "I should be a poor sort of grandmother indeed if I did not acknowledge such a debt."

The assembled company within earshot tittered appreciatively at this set-down, and Hester saw Sebastian's face darken with anger. His father placed a warning hand on his arm, though Edmund's own expression was hardly more pleasant.

"My dear Miss Wynstanley." A cluster of elderly ladies welcomed her warmly as Lady Burrowes made the introductions. "We have heard such wonderful things about you from dear Matilda. Do tell us about your clever management of your estate. Such presence of mind in a young lady is quite remarkable."

It was a far cry from Lady Arabella's sneering references to Hester's estate management.

These ladies, secure in their own social position, seemed genuinely interested in her capabilities rather than scornful of them.

Hester found herself relaxing slightly as she described the arrangements she'd made

to ensure Freddie's comfort during his convalescence.

"Quite right, quite right," one particularly ancient dowager nodded approvingly. "A young lady who can think practically is worth her weight in gold. All very well to paint pretty pictures and play the pianoforte, but what use is that in a crisis?"

"Though I'm sure Miss Wynstanley has all the usual accomplishments as well," another lady added kindly.

"I fear not," Hester admitted with a small smile. "My playing is indifferent at best, and my watercolours would make a true artist weep. But I can keep account books accurately and manage a household efficiently."

"Much more useful," the first dowager declared.

"Especially given the state of some of these young men's estates these days.

Take Lord Caldwell there, for instance. Handsome as you please, but his estate's mortgaged to the hilt because neither he nor his wife knows the first thing about management, and he's too stupid to hire a steward who could manage it for him! "

Lady Burrowes squeezed Hester's arm gently. "You see, my dear? True quality recognises worth where it finds it, regardless of its trappings."

The evening continued in much the same vein. For every snub from Lady Arabella's circle, there was a warm welcome from Lady Burrowes' friends. Hester began to understand that while she might never be fully accepted by certain elements of society, there were those who valued substance over surface.

Even Edmund Grey's attempts to subtly undermine her position fell flat. When he made several pointed references to her 'rustic upbringing' within earshot of some

influential matrons, one of them merely remarked that country air produced much steadier characters than London smoke.

As the evening wore on, Hester found herself actually enjoying the ball rather than merely enduring it.

The music was elegant, the refreshments excellent, and the company, for the most part, pleasant.

The blue silk of her gown swished pleasantly around her as she moved through the crowd, and she was grateful again for Lady Burrowes' generosity.

The gown lent confidence to her bearing, allowing her to hold her head high even when she encountered less friendly faces among the guests.

Lady Burrowes had orchestrated the evening perfectly, Hester realised.

By presenting her as an honoured guest rather than a suppliant, she had made it difficult for anyone to openly slight her.

Even those who might have followed Lady Arabella's lead were forced to at least maintain a veneer of politeness.

It was, Hester reflected, a masterclass in the wielding of social power.

She found herself admiring Lady Burrowes' technique even as she benefited from it.

The older woman had managed to counter weeks of Edmund and Arabella's subtle undermining in a single evening, all while maintaining an air of gracious hospitality.

When Freddie approached to claim her hand for a dance, Hester felt her heart skip

traitorously in her chest. He moved through the crowd with unconscious aristocratic grace, and though she knew she ought to refuse him, ought to protect both their reputations from further gossip, she found herself accepting his outstretched hand.

"Miss Wynstanley," he said formally, though his blue eyes sparkled with private warmth. "Might I have the honour of this dance?"

"The honour would be mine, Lord Frederick," she replied, equally formal. They both knew the proprieties must be observed, especially under the watchful eyes of society.

The orchestra struck up the opening notes of a waltz as Freddie led her onto the floor.

Hester was grateful for the hours she had spent practicing with her aunts in their shabby drawing room at home, for it meant she could move with confidence through the opening steps.

Freddie's hand settled at her waist, proper yet intimate, and they began to move together.

"You look beautiful tonight," he murmured, pitched for her ears alone. "That blue becomes you wonderfully."

"Thank you." Hester focused on maintaining the correct distance between them as they turned. "Your grandmother has been very kind this evening."

"She likes you." Freddie guided her smoothly through a complicated figure. "She has excellent judgment of character, you know. Always has had."

They moved together as though they had danced a hundred times before, their steps perfectly matched.

Hester found herself relaxing into the movement, allowing herself to enjoy these precious moments when she could simply be a young lady dancing with a handsome gentleman, without all the complications of their real situation intruding.

"I should warn you," Freddie said softly as they executed another turn, "that Lady Ashworth is determined to introduce me to her daughter tonight. Apparently, the girl is quite accomplished. Plays seven instruments and speaks four languages, though apparently none of them are Welsh."

"How impressive." Hester kept her tone light, though her heart clenched painfully. "Such accomplishments must be very useful."

"Not nearly as useful as knowing how to manage a crisis with calm capability," he returned. "Or how to make a man feel at home when he's lost and confused."

Hester's breath caught at the reference to their time together at Wynstanley House. "That was different," she said quietly. "This is London."

"And you think London changes everything?" His hand tightened slightly at her waist. "I am still the same man who recovered in your care, Hester. My feelings haven't changed with the location."

The use of her given name, though pitched too low for others to hear, sent a shiver through her. "Your feelings may not have changed," she replied carefully, "but your circumstances have. You know your position requires certain... considerations."

The music swelled around them as they continued to move in perfect synchronicity.

Hester was acutely aware of the eyes following their progress around the floor.

Lady Arabella stood with a cluster of other ladies, all watching with varying degrees



of disapproval.

Lady Burrowes, by contrast, observed them with what looked suspiciously like satisfaction.

"I'm well aware of what my position supposedly requires," Freddie said.

"I'm also aware that I owe my life to you.

Not just my physical survival, but my peace of mind during those days when I couldn't remember who I was.

You never treated me as anything but myself, even when you didn't know my real identity. "

"How else should I have treated you?" Hester asked simply.

His eyes softened as he looked at her. "That right there, that's exactly what I mean. You see people as they are, not as their titles or positions dictate."

The dance was drawing to a close, and Hester felt each remaining measure as a precious gift slipping away. Soon they would have to separate, and reality would reassert itself. Already she could see several mothers positioning their daughters for an introduction to Freddie.

"I see you exactly as you are," she said quietly as the final notes faded. "Which is why I know this can't last."

They made their bows as the dance ended, and Hester withdrew before Freddie could respond. She made her way to the edges of the ballroom, where she could observe without being obvious about it as Lady Ashworth successfully cornered Freddie with

her accomplished daughter in tow.

The girl was everything Hester was not: petite, golden-haired, and exquisitely dressed in the first stare of fashion.

She moved with the practiced grace of one who had spent years learning the proper way to stand, sit, and walk in society.

Watching her, Hester felt every inch the country mouse that Lady Arabella had accused her of being.

Yet she couldn't bring herself to regret the dance, or the moments of perfect connection it had brought.

She had lived out her girlhood dream of dancing at a London ball, and better still, she had danced with a man who saw her true worth.

Even if nothing more could ever come of it, she would treasure the memory of those few perfect minutes when the rest of the world had fallen away, leaving just herself and Freddie, moving together in harmony.

The orchestra began another dance, and life in the ballroom continued its glittering progress.

Hester straightened her shoulders, smoothed her blue silk skirts, and prepared to face whatever the rest of the evening might bring.

She had survived Lady Arabella's morning reception and proven herself equal to Lady Burrowes' ball.

She could survive this too, even if her heart ached with the knowledge of what could

never be.

### Chapter Nine

Freddie had never imagined that he might one day be plotting against his own blood relations in his grandmother's elegant drawing room.

Yet here he sat the morning after the ball, examining documented proof of his uncle Edmund's treachery while Lady Burrowes poured tea with steady hands that belied her obvious distress.

The spring sunshine streaming through tall windows seemed a mockery of the dark matters they must discuss.

"These bank drafts," Lord Burrowes said, tapping the papers spread across the mahogany tea table, "show two cash withdrawals of one hundred pounds each from an account traced to Edmund.

Withdrawals which coincided with payments made to the driver of your parents' carriage, according to the man's wife, who had left him and was willing to speak with my agent.

She described the man who visited her husband very accurately; there is no doubt in my mind that it was your cousin Sebastian. "

Freddie's hand trembled slightly as he lifted his teacup. The fine bone china clinked against its saucer as he set it down untouched. "And you're certain there can be no innocent explanation?"

"None that I can conceive," his uncle replied gravely. "The amounts are substantial, far more than a man of that station could explain. One before, and one immediately after the accident."

Lady Burrowes made a small sound of distress. Though her back remained ramrod straight, grief etched deep lines around her mouth. "To think Edmund could... Louise was always kind to him, even when his gambling debts caused such scandal."

"Mother," Lord Burrowes said gently, "perhaps you should retire..."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," she declared, lifting her chin. "Louise was my daughter. If Edmund engineered her death and that of her dear husband, I will see justice done."

Freddie felt a surge of pride for his grandmother's strength. Though traces of her renowned beauty remained in her high cheekbones and full lips, it was her unwavering moral compass that truly distinguished her.

"We must proceed carefully," Lord Burrowes cautioned. "Edmund holds considerable influence among the ton. And there's Sebastian to consider."

"My cousin is cut from the same cloth as his father," Freddie observed.

"Indeed." Lady Burrowes set down her teacup with a decisive click.

"Which is precisely why we must protect you, my dear.

You are the rightful heir to Greystone, and Edmund knows it.

These attempts to discredit your competency, to suggest your head injury left you unfit. .. they cannot be allowed to succeed."

"How did you get these?" Freddie looked at the documents again.

"Well, that's the thing." Lord Burrowes didn't hide his smile. "You and your grandfather aren't the only Greys with a shred of honour left to them. Your cousin Montague brought them to me."

"Monty!" Freddie's eyebrows flew up. Edmund's younger son, Montague, was ignored by his father and bullied by his older brother Sebastian, but Freddie hadn't thought Monty had it in him to betray them.

"He wants to talk to you. I think we should arrange it."

Freddie nodded in slow agreement. "He can probably put his hands on more evidence." He felt a bit better, knowing that Monty didn't want him dead. They were the same age and Freddie had always liked Monty, despite their differences.

They spent the next hour crafting their strategy.

Lord Burrowes would present the evidence to his connections in Parliament and the judiciary, building support among influential peers.

Lady Burrowes would work through her extensive social network to subtly undermine Edmund's credibility without tipping their hand.

"And what of Miss Wynstanley?" Lady Burrowes enquired delicately. "The poor girl has become entangled in this through no fault of her own."

Freddie felt his face warm. "Hester is..

. remarkably capable. But I fear involving her further places her at risk.

I should send her home, but..." It was the last thing he wanted to do.

And he wouldn't put it past Edmund or Sebastian to send someone after Hester, to hurt her just because she'd helped Freddie.

"Love often flourishes in adversity," his grandmother observed with a knowing smile. "And from what I've seen of the lady, she possesses exactly the sort of practical good sense this family needs."

"Speaking of practical matters," Lord Burrowes interjected, "we should consider timing. The Little Season is in full swing. Edmund and his family attend most major social events. We must be strategic in our movements."

They agreed to proceed cautiously but steadily. Lord Burrowes would begin making discreet inquiries the very next day. Lady Burrowes would host a small dinner party where carefully selected guests might observe Edmund's behaviour under pressure.

As the meeting concluded, Freddie found himself lingering in his grandmother's drawing room. The familiar scent of roses from her conservatory mingled with beeswax furniture polish, reminding him of happier times spent here as a child.

"Your mother would be proud of you," Lady Burrowes said softly, laying her hand over his. "She valued justice above all else, save family. By pursuing one, you honour both."

Freddie squeezed her fingers gently. "I only hope we can accomplish this without bringing scandal upon the family name."

"My dear boy," she replied with a ghost of her famous wit, "what is a noble family without at least one properly dramatic scandal? We shall simply ensure it falls upon the deserving parties."

The shadows in St James's Park lengthened as Freddie waited near the duck pond, his greatcoat collar turned up against the evening chill.

Few people ventured here at this hour, which made it perfect for a clandestine meeting.

Still, every rustle of leaves made him start, wondering if Sebastian had somehow discovered his younger brother's intended betrayal.

A figure emerged from the gathering dusk, and Freddie tensed until he recognised Montague's slightly rounded silhouette. His cousin moved with uncharacteristic stealth, glancing frequently over his shoulder.

"You weren't followed?" Freddie asked quietly as Montague drew near.

"No. Father and Sebastian are at their club, likely to remain there until dawn." Montague's usually cheerful face was drawn with worry. "But we must be quick. If they discover I've taken these..." He withdrew a leather portfolio from beneath his coat.

Freddie accepted it, noting how his cousin's hands shook. "You're certain about this, Monty? Once done, it cannot be undone."

"I should have acted sooner," Montague replied, his voice thick with self-reproach. "When I first found Father's correspondence with the carriage driver... but I was afraid. Sebastian had already threatened me once for asking too many questions."

Opening the portfolio, Freddie examined its contents by the last rays of daylight.

A detailed accounting of payments and meetings leading up to his parents' fatal accident, and roughly scribbled notes from the carriage driver.



And then, in the back, letters from Sebastian detailing his hunt for Freddie, the language making it quite plain Sebastian did not intend for Freddie to return to London alive.

Reckless, Freddie thought, to commit this to paper, but Edmund and Sebastian were apparently blinded by their ambitions.

"How did you obtain these?" he asked.

"Father keeps them in his study. He's grown careless lately, too confident in his position.

But I've watched him, these past months.

Seen how he gloats when he thinks no one observes him.

" Montague's round face hardened. "He killed your parents, Freddie.

My own father orchestrated his own brother's death. What sort of man could do that?"

Freddie carefully returned the documents to their portfolio. "You understand what this means? These papers prove conspiracy and murder. Edmund may well hang if this reaches the authorities."

"And Sebastian with him, I expect." Montague gave a bitter laugh. "My dear brother knew everything. Helped arrange it all. Did you know he personally hired the driver? A man with gambling debts nearly as large as Father's... easily manipulated."

A chill that had nothing to do with the evening air crept down Freddie's spine. "What of your mother? Lady Arabella?"

"She suspects, I think, but has chosen wilful ignorance.

It's her specialty, along with social climbing and making everyone else feel inferior.

" Montague kicked at a loose stone. "I'm nothing like them, Freddie.

I never have been. That's why they mock me.

.. my weight, my lack of ambition. But I'd rather be fat and lazy than a murderer. "

"You're neither fat nor lazy, Monty. You're braver than any of them." Freddie gripped his cousin's shoulder. "This cannot have been an easy choice."

"Easier than living with the guilt. Every time I saw you grieving your parents, knowing what they'd done.

.." Montague swallowed hard. "But you must promise me something.

When you move against them, let me know first. I'll need to get Mother away.

Whatever her faults, she doesn't deserve to face the scandal alone. "

"You have my word." Freddie hesitated. "But where will you go? Edmund will guess who revealed his secrets."

"I've thought of that. I've a friend with estates in Italy. He's offered me a position managing his vineyards. I'll leave as soon as you give the signal." A ghost of Montague's old smile appeared. "I might even learn to appreciate wine beyond its ability to dull one's senses."

A twig snapped somewhere in the darkness. Both men froze, but it was only a

courting couple, too absorbed in each other to notice them.

"You should go," Freddie urged. "Take a roundabout route home, in case anyone is following you."

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"Be careful with Miss Wynstanley," Montague warned in parting. "Sebastian has developed an unhealthy interest in her. I've heard him speaking with Father about how inconvenient it would be if you managed to sire yet another heir to the earldom, and he's convinced you mean to marry her."

Freddie's hands clenched into fists. "If they dare threaten Hester..."

"Then you'll need these documents more than ever." Montague stepped back into the shadows. "Good luck, cousin. I'm glad you survived. The earldom needs a Grey with actual honour."

Watching his cousin disappear into the darkness, Freddie felt the weight of the portfolio like lead in his hands.

Here was everything needed to destroy Edmund and Sebastian, to avenge his parents and secure his inheritance.

Yet the victory would taste bitter, knowing how it would tear his family apart.

But there was no choice. Edmund had made his decisions, and now must face their consequences. Tucking the portfolio securely inside his coat, Freddie took a circuitous route home, planning how best to protect both Montague and Hester from whatever desperate schemes his uncle might attempt.

Hester rather thought London's Mayfair too artificially manicured for her tastes, but this morning she appreciated its predictable order. The neat rows of townhouses and carefully tended window boxes offered no hint of danger as she walked to the

milliner's.

Perhaps she should have waited for the maid to accompany her, but Hester had grown weary of being constantly chaperoned. In Wales, she regularly walked miles alone across the mountains. Surely a short journey through fashionable London posed no real threat.

She realised her mistake when the hired carriage drew up beside her, moving at an unnaturally slow pace. Before she could quicken her steps, two men emerged from a nearby alley. One was Lord Edmund Grey himself, his thin lips curved in a triumphant smile.

"Miss Wynstanley," he said smoothly, "allow us to offer you a ride."

Hester's heart thundered, but she kept her voice steady.

"No thank you, my lord. I prefer to walk.

" Why, oh why had she not put her pistol in her pocket?

She knew why; her own vanity. The cut of her gown would have been ruined by the pistol's heavy weight.

How she wished she was wearing one of her old Welsh woollens instead of this useless, fashionable muslin!

She turned to retreat, but a second man blocked her path. Sebastian Grey's handsome face wore an expression that chilled her blood.

"I'm afraid we must insist," Lord Edmund stated. "For your own protection, naturally. These streets can be quite dangerous for a young lady alone."

The irony might have made her laugh, had terror not closed her throat. Hester's gaze darted around the surprisingly empty street. Where were the usual crowds of servants and shoppers?

Sebastian reached for her arm. Hester reacted instinctively, employing a trick learned from dealing with aggressive rams during shearing season.

She ducked down and grabbed his leg, yanking his knee up sharply.

Startled and off balance, Sebastian fell backwards with a yelp, windmilling his arms and taking his father down with him.

Their shock gave her the moment she needed. Hester gathered her skirts and ran, not toward the main thoroughfare where their carriage could easily overtake her, but down the narrow service alley between two townhouses.

Years of scrambling over Welsh mountainsides had given her both speed and sure-footedness. She heard Sebastian curse as he scrambled up and pursued her, his boots sliding on the damp cobblestones.

The alley opened onto a mews filled with carriages and stables. Hester darted between vehicles, her country-bred nose automatically cataloguing the smells of horse, hay, and leather. A groom looked up in surprise as she passed.

"Help!" she cried, but Sebastian's voice rang out behind her.

"Pay no mind! My cousin's ward, having a fit of hysteria. We'll handle it."

The groom's momentary hesitation was all they needed. Hester kept running, her mind racing faster than her feet. She needed somewhere they couldn't follow with a carriage, somewhere her practical knowledge might give her an advantage.

A half-open door revealed stairs leading down to a coal cellar.

Hester ducked inside, hoping they would assume her too fastidious to enter such a filthy space.

The cellar was pitch black, but her fingers found the rough texture of coal against one wall.

She crouched behind a pile of it, controlling her breathing as she'd learned to do when stalking shy ewes.

Heavy footsteps clattered on the stairs. "She must be here somewhere," Sebastian's voice growled. "Get a lamp."

The yellow glow of a lantern illuminated the cellar. Hester remained still, knowing her dark hair and grey pelisse would blend with the shadows if she didn't move. Growing up in a draughty old house had taught her every trick of hiding from light sources.

"Search thoroughly," Lord Edmund commanded from the top of the stairs. "We cannot risk her reaching Freddie with tales of this attempt."

Hester watched Sebastian's boots move past her hiding place. When he reached the far corner, she gathered herself and sprang up the stairs, taking them three at a time. Lord Edmund grabbed at her but she ducked under his arm, her shoulder striking his chest hard enough to send him staggering.

Out in the mews again, she ran, turning corners at random, desperate to stay ahead of her pursuers.

She could hear Sebastian's feet pounding behind her, but she could also hear him

gulping for air – he did a great deal less exercise than she on a daily basis, she suspected.

He might be faster than her, with his longer legs, but if she could just stay out of reach she thought she could outlast him.

Turning another corner she found herself, blissfully, on a street she recognised. Berkely Square was just ahead, and the refuge of the Burrowes townhouse. Racing across the square, heedless of shocked faces staring, she ran pell-mell up the steps and pounded on the door.

The door opened and she practically fell into the butler's arms. Looking back, she saw Lord Edmund pulling Sebastian into their waiting carriage, which sped away before she could point it out to any witnesses.

"Good heavens, miss!" The butler helped her to a chair in the hall. "Shall I send for a doctor?"

"Lady Burrowes," Hester managed between gasping breaths. "Please... I must speak with her immediately."

The lady appeared within minutes, her usual dignity forgotten as she rushed to Hester's side. "My dear girl! What has happened? You're white as a ghost! And... is that coal on your gown?"

Hester related the whole adventure, her hands shaking as shock began to set in. Lady Burrowes' face grew grimmer with each detail.

"Unconscionable," she declared when Hester finished. "But not, I fear, unexpected. They are growing desperate."



"But why target me?" It didn't make sense to Hester.

"Because Freddie cares about you." Lady Burrowes' words were blunt. "Anyone with eyes can see it."

"And he's noble enough, and foolish enough, that he'd give himself up to them to save me," Hester whispered, the truth dawning on her. Lady Burrowes did not reply, but her knowing look confirmed Hester's suspicions.

As a maid helped her remove her coal-dusted pelisse, Hester reflected on the morning's events. She had escaped through luck and rural-learned skills, but Lord Edmund's attempt proved how desperate he had become. And if he would risk such a brazen attack in broad daylight, what might he try next?

More worrying still was the revelation that her presence in Freddie's life endangered him further. How could she justify remaining in London, knowing she provided his enemies with another weapon to use against him?

### Chapter Ten

Freddie stood among the gathered witnesses at White's Club, his hands clasped behind his back, watching as his uncle Edmund's carefully constructed world began to crumble.

The familiar surroundings, typically a haven of gentlemanly pursuits, now felt charged with an electric tension that made his skin prickle.

The gathering had been called with utmost discretion, yet the club's main salon was filled nearly to capacity.

Freddie noted the presence of several key members of Parliament, and no fewer than three judges of the King's Bench.

His grandfather, the Earl of Greystone, sat in a chair by the fire, looking more alert and healthier than Freddie had seen him in months.

Uncle Edmund and Sebastian stood before the assembled crowd, their expressions carefully schooled to project innocence, though Freddie could see the tell-tale tremor in Edmund's left hand as he gripped the back of a chair.

The morning light filtering through the tall windows cast harsh shadows across their faces.

"My lords, gentlemen," Lord Burrowes began, his voice carrying clearly through the hushed room.

"I have called this gathering to present evidence of a most grievous nature.

Evidence that proves, beyond any doubt, that Lord Edmund Grey and his son Sebastian Grey were responsible for the deaths of my sister, Lady Louise Grey, and her husband Lord Charles, parents to Lord Frederick. "

Freddie's heart thundered in his chest, though he maintained his outward composure.

He had known this was coming, had helped piece together the evidence himself, but hearing it stated so baldly in front of witnesses made it horrifyingly real.

Fury still burned in his chest after the previous day's horrifying attempt on Hester, however.

They could wait no longer. He would not risk Hester's safety another day.

Lord Burrowes proceeded methodically, presenting documented proof of Edmund's gambling debts, of money borrowed against properties he had no right to mortgage, of meetings with unsavoury characters who specialised in tampering with carriages.

With each new revelation, Edmund's face grew paler, while Sebastian's developed an ugly flush.

"This is preposterous," Edmund finally burst out, his voice wavering. "These documents are clearly forgeries. I demand to know who has orchestrated this... this farce!"

"The documents," Lord Burrowes continued smoothly, "have been verified by independent experts. Furthermore, we have sworn statements from multiple witnesses, including your former groom, who observed you meeting with known criminals in the weeks leading up to your brother's tragic accident."

Freddie watched as Sebastian's composure cracked. "This is your doing, isn't it, Freddie? Couldn't bear the thought of someone more capable taking control of the estate?"

"Be silent," the Earl of Greystone commanded, his voice carrying the weight of decades of authority. Though physically frail, his presence dominated the room. "I have heard enough to convince me. Edmund, you have brought shame upon our family name."

The room fell silent as the Earl struggled to his feet, refusing assistance.

His blue eyes, so like Freddie's own, blazed with fury.

"I should have seen it sooner. The way you hovered, waiting for me to decline further.

The doctor you hired, who gave me far too much laudanum to keep my mind clouded!

Even your new attempts to discredit Freddie after his head injury, what utter nonsense!

Anyone can see the lad is in perfect possession of all his wits. "

Freddie felt a surge of warmth as his grandfather continued speaking.

"As for my health, once I returned to London away from your quack of a doctor, things soon began to become clear.

I have those remarkable Wynstanley sisters to thank for the return of my health.

Miss Felicity's herbal remedies are quite remarkable, and I must say that Miss Cecilia's eminently sensible conversation has helped me to clarify my thinking. "

The mention of Hester's aunts caused a ripple of murmurs through the crowd, and Freddie himself stared at his grandfather in surprise. He'd had no idea that Hester's aunts had been visiting his grandfather! God bless the pair.

Edmund's face twisted in fury. "Those interfering spinsters? You would listen to country nobodies over your own son?"

"Those 'nobodies' restored my health when your carefully selected physician kept me in a fog of laudanum and confusion," the Earl retorted.

Sebastian made a sudden move toward the door, but found his path blocked by two burly footmen. Freddie watched as his cousin's shoulders slumped in defeat, while Edmund remained rigid with fury.

"The evidence will be presented to the proper authorities," Lord Burrowes announced. "Until then, both Lord Edmund and Mr. Sebastian Grey will remain under house arrest at their London residence, under guard."

As the gathering began to disperse, chattering with the excitement of what they had just witnessed, Freddie caught sight of his grandfather watching him with concern.

He managed a small smile of reassurance, though his mind was whirling with the magnitude of what had just transpired.

The truth was finally out, but he knew this was only the beginning of what promised to be a very public scandal.

The most surprising revelation had been the role of Hester's aunts. Freddie felt a fresh

wave of gratitude toward the Wynstanley family, even as his heart ached with thoughts of Hester. He could hardly wait to get back to the Burrowes townhouse and tell her that it was over; they had won.

The crowd had thinned considerably, but those who remained represented the cream of society's legal and political circles.

Freddie stood at his grandfather's right hand as the Earl of Greystone prepared to make the most momentous declaration of his life, one that would reshape the future of their ancient family line.

The earl had refused to sit down again, determined to make his declaration standing, though Freddie could see the slight tremor in his legs that betrayed his fatigue.

"My lords, gentlemen," the earl began, his voice carrying the weight of centuries of nobility, "what we have witnessed today goes beyond mere family scandal. It strikes at the very heart of what we are sworn to uphold: honour, duty, and the sacred trust placed in us by Crown and country."

Freddie watched as his grandfather's words registered with their audience. These were men who understood the gravity of such concepts, who had dedicated their lives to maintaining the delicate balance of power that kept their society functioning.

"Therefore, it is with great sorrow but absolute conviction that I hereby formally disown Edmund Grey and his son Sebastian Grey.

" The earl paused, allowing the gravity of his words to settle over the room.

"Furthermore, I shall petition Parliament to remove them both permanently from the Greystone line of succession, though Montague Grey may retain his rights. "

A low murmur rippled through the assembled witnesses.

Such a move was nearly unprecedented in modern times, and generally reserved for treason against the royal house.

Freddie caught fragments of whispered conversation: "Haven't seen anything like this in years.

.." "Political implications..." "House of Lords will have to consider. .."

"I am fully aware of the gravity of this request," the earl continued.

"The removal of hereditary rights is not a matter to be taken lightly.

However, the evidence presented today proves beyond doubt that Edmund and Sebastian Grey have committed acts that render them unfit to hold any position of trust or authority. "

Lord Burrowes stepped forward. "My lord, speaking as a member of Parliament, I can assure you that your petition will receive full consideration. The proof of their involvement in the deaths of my sister and Lord Grey alone would justify such action."

"To murder one's own brother," someone murmured. "Utterly heinous! Cannot possibly take the risk that Edmund would not continue his attempts to murder Lord Frederick." Heads nodded in agreement around the room.

Freddie felt a curious mixture of emotions as he listened to the formal proceedings that would reshape his family's future. Relief warred with sadness, justice with regret. He had grown up with Sebastian, shared childhood games and lessons. How had it come to this?

"Until Parliament renders its decision," the earl declared, "Lord Frederick Grey remains my heir presumptive, as he has always been. Any attempts to challenge or circumvent this will be met with the full force of law."

Freddie straightened his shoulders, feeling the weight of responsibility settle more firmly upon them.

The gathering began to disperse in earnest now, lords and politicians clustering in small groups to discuss the implications of what they had witnessed.

Freddie overheard snippets of conversation about precedents, legal frameworks, and the potential impact on other noble houses.

"You've borne up well, my boy," the earl said quietly, finally allowing himself to lean slightly on his grandson's arm. "Though I suspect this is not the end of our troubles."

"No, sir," Freddie agreed, his mind already racing ahead to the challenges that awaited them.

The political ramifications would be significant.

Other families might see this as an opportunity to press their own claims or grievances.

The House of Lords would debate every aspect of the petition extensively.



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Yet beneath all these practical concerns lay a deeper unease.

The betrayal he had survived had left its mark, teaching him harsh lessons about trust and vigilance.

As he stood in the familiar surroundings of White's, Freddie couldn't help but wonder how many other secrets lurked behind the polite facades of society's most respected families.

His grandfather's voice drew him back to the present. "We shall weather this storm, Freddie. The Greystone line has survived far worse in its history."

Freddie found his thoughts turning to Montague. The memory of their predawn meeting felt almost dreamlike now, though it had occurred mere hours ago. He had met his cousin in the park again, having slipped a note to him the previous evening.

The meeting played out again in his mind: Montague's familiar figure materialising from the darkness, his usually cheerful face drawn with concern.

They had stood among the winter-bare trees beside the Serpentine, their breath forming clouds in the cold air as Freddie explained what was about to happen.

"You must get your mother away from London immediately," Freddie had told him, watching his cousin's face carefully in the grey predawn light. "Today. Take her to Bath, or better yet, get on a ship to Italy, if one is available. Anywhere but here."

Monty had listened without interruption, his normally mobile features absolutely still.

When Freddie finished speaking, he had remained quiet for several long moments before saying, "Thank you for keeping your word, Freddie.

" He offered his hand for Freddie to shake, before nodding. "Goodbye. And good luck."

Now, hours later, Freddie felt a profound gratitude toward his younger cousin.

The fact that Edmund and Sebastian had appeared at White's completely unprepared proved that Montague had kept their conversation private.

He had chosen to protect his mother rather than warn his father and brother, a choice Freddie knew must have cost him dearly.

Their relationship had always been different from the one Freddie shared with Sebastian.

Where Sebastian had been competitive and often cruel, Montague had maintained a certain warmth, even in the face of his father's disapproval.

Freddie remembered countless shared adventures in their youth, times more recently when Monty had covered for him with Uncle Edmund, small kindnesses that spoke to his cousin's fundamental decency.

The morning's events would change everything for Montague as well. Though not directly implicated in his father's schemes, he would bear the burden of their shame. Society had a long memory for scandal, and the Greystone name would be on every tongue in London for months to come.

Yet Freddie felt confident he had made the right choice in warning him.

Montague's mother, Lady Arabella, might be a social climber, but all Lord Burrowes' efforts had found no evidence that she had ever been party to her husband's darker schemes.

She deserved the chance to avoid the public humiliation of being present for Edmund's downfall.

A club servant came to his elbow just then with a hastily scrawled note. Freddie recognised Montague's distinctive hand:

"We are safely away. Mother does not want to believe. I am sorry for everything. God speed, cousin. - M"

Freddie folded the note carefully and placed it in his pocket.

The simple words carried the weight of years of complicated family history, of shared secrets and divergent paths.

He wished he could have offered Montague more comfort, some assurance that his own future would not be entirely blighted by his father's crimes.

But perhaps that would come later, when the initial shock had passed and the legal proceedings were concluded.

The earl had always had a soft spot for Edmund's younger son, recognising in him a gentler nature than either his father or brother possessed.

With time, there might be a place for Montague in the reformed family circle.

The morning's events had proven that blood ties were not always enough to ensure loyalty, but they had also shown that loyalty could exist even in the face of competing

obligations.

Montague had chosen honour over family loyalty, had chosen to believe in Freddie's word over his father's lifetime of influence.

"Good luck, Monty," Freddie murmured to the glass, his breath briefly fogging the pane. They had both chosen their paths now, and only time would tell where they might lead.

One look at his grandmother's face told him she carried news he would not wish to hear, as he entered the drawing-room, jubilant and eager to tell Hester his news.

"She's gone, isn't she?" he asked, his voice rougher than he intended. The words scraped his throat like broken glass.

Lady Burrowes nodded slowly. "She left for Wales this morning, with her aunts. They departed soon after you left for White's." She hesitated, then held out a letter. "She left this for you."

Freddie accepted the paper with steady hands that belied his inner turmoil. The neat, practical handwriting was so characteristic of Hester that his chest ached just looking at it. He unfolded the sheet carefully, aware of his grandmother's sympathetic gaze.

"My dearest Freddie," he read silently, "By the time you read this, we will be well on our way home to Wales.

I cannot stay to witness your triumph, though I rejoice in it.

Your grandfather's restoration to health and the exposure of those who sought to harm you bring me more joy than I can express.

" But I have come to understand that I cannot be part of your world.

The events of recent weeks have shown me how vast the gulf is between us.

You are the heir to an earldom, and I am merely a country gentleman's daughter.

My presence in your life can only complicate matters at a time when you need absolute clarity and support from your peers.

Moreover, I will not allow myself to be used as a weapon against you, as Lord Edmund sought to make me .

" Please know that you have my heart, completely and irrevocably. But sometimes love must bow to duty and practicality. Be the earl your grandfather knows you can be. Make your family proud. And sometimes, perhaps, think kindly of your friend, Hester ."

Freddie lowered the letter slowly, aware of a curious numbness spreading through his chest. "She thinks she's protecting me," he said finally, looking up at his grandmother. "She believes her presence would somehow damage my position."

Lady Burrowes sighed. "She's not entirely wrong about the challenges you would face. Edmund still has his supporters, and you and your grandfather have a fight ahead with the legal course you have chosen. A marriage to someone of her station would provide ammunition to your detractors."

"And yet you don't sound convinced," Freddie observed, noting the slight frown that creased his grandmother's forehead.

"I have watched you these past days," she replied carefully.

"I have seen how you've grown stronger, more sure of yourself, since meeting her.

Since returning to London, you have shown a maturity and grace that would have done any earl proud.

" She paused, smoothing her skirts. "I cannot help but think that Hester's influence has contributed to that growth. "

Freddie stood and walked to the window, watching the fashionable promenading in the square below. Another day in London, another day of political machinations and social climbing. It all seemed terribly hollow without Hester's practical wisdom to cut through the artifice.

"She restored me," he said quietly. "Not just my memories, but my sense of self. How can I simply let her go?"

"Perhaps you shouldn't," his grandmother suggested.

Her voice held a note of careful consideration that made Freddie turn to look at her.

"The ton will always find something to gossip about.

But a man who can face down the schemes of Edmund and Sebastian Grey might well be strong enough to weather the storm of marrying for love. "

Freddie felt something shift inside him, like pieces of a puzzle finally clicking into place.

He looked down at Hester's letter again, seeing beyond the words to the love and sacrifice they represented.

She had removed herself from his life out of a desire to protect him, to ensure his position remained secure.

But she had not considered one crucial factor: he was no longer the confused, vulnerable man who had stumbled into her life in Wales. He was Lord Frederick Grey, heir to the Earldom of Greystone, and he had faced down threats far more serious than social disapproval.

"I'm going after her," he announced, straightening his shoulders.

His grandmother's face broke into a warm smile. "I thought you might say that. Shall I have Thompson pack your things?"

"There's no time." He grinned at her. "But can I borrow Uncle Anthony's horse? I sold mine..."

"I shall not mention to Anthony that you borrowed him." Lady Burrowes returned his smile. "I did send ahead, to book rooms for the night at the Wheatsheaf in High Wycombe for the Wynstanley ladies, and gave the coachman strict instructions. I expect you will find them there."

Delighted, he stooped to kiss her cheek. "You are a wonder, Grandmother. Thank you."

She reached up to pat his cheek gently. "Your mother would be so proud of you," she said softly. "She always said that love was worth fighting for."

Freddie covered her hand with his own, drawing strength from her approval.

"Now go and find her, and if you come back without them I shall be exceedingly cross. Miss Felicity makes a herbal tea that has done wonders for my arthritis, and I

neglected to ask her for the recipe!"

Laughing, he turned on his heel and made for the door. "Whether I am able to bring them back will depend entirely on Hester, but I promise if nothing else I shall get that recipe for you!"



### Chapter Eleven

Hester Wynstanley had never felt quite so adrift as she did that bitter winter's evening at the Wheatsheaf Inn in High Wycombe.

The familiar comforts of home - her beloved Plas Wyn with its weathered stones and eternal mountains - seemed as distant as the moon hanging behind the storm clouds outside the inn's windows.

Even the rich aroma of lamb stew rising from her bowl failed to lift her spirits, though the innkeeper's wife had proudly proclaimed it her finest recipe.

Her diminutive aunts sat across the rough-hewn oak table, exchanging worried glances when they thought she wasn't looking.

Aunt Cecilia's curls bobbed as she fussed with the placement of the salt cellar, while Aunt Felicity's fingers worried at the edge of her shawl.

Their concern radiated across the table like the heat from the crackling hearth behind them.

"The stew really is quite excellent," Aunt Cecilia ventured, her voice carrying that particular tone of forced cheerfulness that had marked the entire day's journey from London. "Almost as good as Mrs. Jones makes at home, wouldn't you say, Felicity?"

"Oh yes, indeed," Aunt Felicity agreed quickly. "Though perhaps a touch more thyme would not go amiss."

Hester managed a wan smile, stirring her spoon through the steaming broth.

The vegetables were perfectly tender, the meat succulent - everything a good country stew should be.

So different from the delicate consommés served at Lady Burrowes' table, those refined concoctions that seemed to epitomize everything about the world she had fled.

A world of crystal and silver, of perfectly arranged place settings and carefully measured social graces.

The dining room buzzed with the comfortable sounds of travel-weary guests seeking sustenance and warmth.

A pair of merchants discussed the price of wool at a nearby table.

A family with three small children tried to maintain order over their meal.

A young couple sat in a corner, heads bent close together over their plates.

All of them seemed so certain of their place in the world, while Hester's had never felt more precarious.

She glanced out the window again, watching raindrops trace patterns down the wavering glass.

"My dear," Aunt Cecilia's soft voice interrupted her reverie, "you've barely touched your food."

"I'm sorry, Aunt. I find my appetite somewhat diminished this evening."

"Perfectly understandable," Aunt Felicity interjected. "Travel can be so unsettling to the constitution. Though perhaps..." she hesitated, sharing another meaningful look with her sister, "perhaps we need not have set off quite so soon?"

The question hung in the air between them, heavy with unspoken meaning. They could still turn back. London was only a day's journey behind them, and Lady Burrowes had almost begged them to stay. The thought made Hester's heart clench painfully in her chest.

"I cannot go back," she said softly, more to herself than to her aunts. "I would never truly belong there."

"But my dear," Aunt Cecilia leaned forward, her face earnest in the flickering candlelight, "is that not for Lord Frederick to decide?"

Hester's fingers tightened around her spoon.

She did not want to think about Freddie.

"It is for society to decide, and society has made its opinion quite clear.

Did you not see how Lady Arabella Grey looked at my hands that day she asked me to play the pianoforte?

These are not the hands of a lady." She held them up briefly - strong, capable hands marked by years of practical work.

Hands that knew how to mend fences and tend sick lambs, not merely how to pour tea or hold a fan.

Outside, the wind howled more fiercely, rattling the windows in their frames. Several

other diners glanced up nervously at the sound, but Hester found it oddly comforting. It reminded her of winter storms at Plas Wyn, where practical concerns always took precedence over social niceties.

"I cannot help but think," Aunt Cecilia said carefully, "that you may be doing both yourself and Lord Frederick a disservice. I rather think it was precisely who you are that drew him to you in the first place."

The truth of her aunt's words stung more sharply than any society matron's subtle barb. Freddie had never asked her to change, had never seemed anything but delighted by her practical nature and independent spirit. It was her own fears, her own doubts that had driven her to this precipitous flight.

A particularly violent gust of wind rattled the window panes, and Hester shivered despite the warmth of the room.

The stew grew cold before her as she stared into its depths, seeing reflected there all the possibilities she might be leaving behind.

The love she might be running from, simply because she feared she wasn't equal to its demands.

"Perhaps," she whispered, but before she could complete the thought, the inn's door burst open with a crash that made every diner in the room jump in their seats.

Lord Frederick Grey stood in the doorway, rain dripping from his greatcoat onto the inn's wooden floors, his fair hair darkened by the storm and plastered to his forehead.

His commanding presence drew every eye in the room, though his appearance was far from the polished elegance one might expect of an earl's heir.

Mud spattered his riding boots and breeches, and his cravat had come entirely undone, hanging in limp folds around his neck.

"Hester," he said, his voice carrying clearly across the suddenly silent room. "My dearest, most impossible woman."

The spoon slipped from Hester's nerveless fingers, clattering against her bowl. Her aunts, far from showing proper dismay at such an irregular entrance, wore matching expressions of poorly concealed delight.

"Good heavens," the merchant who had been discussing wool prices muttered to his companion. "Whoever is that?"

"Look at his coat!" his companion whispered back. "A lord if ever I saw one. What on earth is he doing in such a state?"

Freddie paid no attention to the whispers rippling through the room. His eyes remained fixed on Hester as he strode forward, leaving puddles in his wake. The innkeeper's wife appeared with a cloth to mop up the water, then stopped, transfixed by the unfolding scene.

"I have ridden through this abominable weather for the past six hours," Freddie announced, coming to a halt beside their table.

Hester rose slowly to her feet, her heart thundering in her chest. "Freddie, you'll catch your death..."

"I don't give a damn about catching my death," he declared, with such passion that several ladies at nearby tables pressed their hands to their hearts. "I care only about catching you before you disappear entirely from my life."

"But surely," Hester began, only to be cut off by a raised hand.

"No. You've had your say - Grandmother gave me your letter this morning.

Now it's my turn." He reached into his coat and withdrew a somewhat damp piece of paper, which Hester recognized as the farewell note she had left him.

"You write here that love me. Well, I love you too, hopelessly and completely, and I am not leaving here until you agree to marry me! "

The young couple in the corner had abandoned all pretence of eating, their faces alight with romantic interest. Even the children at the family table had fallen silent, watching with wide eyes as the scene unfolded.

"My lord," Hester tried again, her voice barely above a whisper, "the ton will never accept..."

"Hang the ton!" Freddie's declaration echoed off the inn's oak-beamed ceiling.

"Hang them all, with their sophisticated soirees and their empty headed gossip.

Do you think I care a whit for their opinion?

Do you think I would trade one moment of your honest conversation for a thousand afternoons of their insipid chatter? "

A smattering of applause broke out from several tables, quickly hushed by those trying to hear every word.

"But your position," Hester protested weakly, even as her heart leaped at his words.

"Your responsibilities to Greystone..."

"Will be far better served by a wife who understands the true meaning of stewardship than by some pampered society miss who has never seen beyond her own drawing room.

" Freddie stepped closer, his blue eyes intense in his rain-washed face.

"Do you know what my grandfather said when I told him I meant to marry you? "

Hester shook her head mutely.

"He said, 'That girl has more sense in her little finger than half the peerage has in their collective heads. Don't you dare let her slip away, boy.'"

Aunt Cecilia let out a distinctly unladylike snuffle, while Aunt Felicity beamed like a proud mother. The innkeeper's wife had given up any pretence of work and stood openly wiping tears from her eyes with her apron.

"And so," Freddie continued, dropping to one knee, heedless of the puddle spreading around him, "I have come to ask you properly, in front of all these good people, to do me the very great honour of becoming my wife.

Not because you are or are not what society expects, but because you are exactly what I want and need. "

The entire room seemed to hold its breath. Even the storm outside appeared to pause in its fury, waiting for Hester's response.

"But the ton..." Hester began weakly.

"Will adapt," Freddie said firmly. "Just as they adapted when an American inherited the earldom of Havers, or when Lord Holbrook married his mistress, and when the

Duke of Rutherton chose a merchant's daughter.

Besides," a mischievous glint appeared in his eye, "half of them are already in debt to their merchants.

Perhaps it's time they learned something about practical economics from someone who actually understands estate management. "



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A few chuckles broke out among their audience, particularly from the merchant who had been discussing wool prices earlier.

"I don't want some delicate hothouse flower who's never set foot outside London," Freddie continued. "I want a partner who understands that true greatness lies in service to others, who knows that the strength of an estate lies not in its ballrooms but in its farms and workshops and people."

His grip on her hand tightened slightly.

"Together, we can build something new at Greystone.

Something that honours both our backgrounds - your practical wisdom and my family's traditions.

We can show that true nobility isn't about who has the finest carriage or gives the most elaborate balls, but about who best serves their community and cares for their dependents. "

Aunt Cecilia was openly weeping now, while Aunt Felicity had produced a handkerchief and was dabbing at her eyes.

"The ton may sneer at first," Freddie acknowledged, "but they cannot deny results.

When they see how Greystone flourishes under our joint care, they will have to acknowledge that there is more than one way to be a countess.

That perhaps the best countess is one who knows the price of wool as well as the steps of a quadrille. "

His voice softened, becoming more intimate despite their public setting.

"I love you, Hester Wynstanley, precisely because you are not what society expects.

Because you challenge conventions and make me see the world differently.

Because you understand that true worth lies not in what we inherit, but in what we build together. "

Hester looked down at Freddie, still kneeling before her despite his sodden state, and felt the last of her doubts dissolve like morning mist before the sun. In that moment, she saw their future laid out before them with perfect clarity.

"Yes," she said, her voice carrying clearly through the hushed room. "Yes, I will marry you, Freddie. Not because you're the heir to Greystone, but because you see me - truly see me - as I am."

The smile that broke across Freddie's face was like sunrise after the storm outside.

He surged to his feet, pulling her into his arms with no regard for his wet clothing or their spellbound audience.

"My practical, beautiful, impossible love," he murmured, before claiming her lips in a kiss that managed to be both perfectly proper and thoroughly passionate.

The dining room erupted in cheers and applause.

The merchant raised his glass in a toast, and soon every glass in the room was lifted

in celebration.

The innkeeper's wife hurried away and returned moments later with bottles of wine, declaring that such a romantic occasion demanded proper celebration.

"Oh, my dears," Aunt Cecilia dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief that had long since become damp with happy tears. "I knew you would sort it all out properly."

"Indeed," Aunt Felicity agreed, accepting a glass of wine from a beaming serving girl. "Though I must say, Lord Frederick, your timing could be better. It's been a jolly damp journey today."

"You're damp!" Freddie groaned, finally releasing Hester though he kept her hand firmly clasped in his. "It's utterly miserable out there!" He shook his head. "I've never been so glad to see a warm inn in my life."

"But how did you know where to find us?" Hester asked, still somewhat dazed by the rapid turn of events.

"Grandmother," Freddie admitted.

"Of course." Hester half-laughed, remembering Lady Burrowes' insistence that they must overnight at the Wheatsheaf. "She fully intended to send you after us, didn't she?"

"You were so insistent on going she could not stop you, but yes. She told me most sternly not to dare come back without you. Or without Aunt Felicity's recipe for herbal tea, for her arthritis!"

The family with children had given up all pretence of maintaining decorum, allowing their offspring to gather around Hester and Freddie with wide-eyed wonder.

"Will you be a real countess?" the youngest girl asked Hester, her eyes shining.

"Indeed she will," Freddie answered before Hester could respond. "The finest countess Greystone has ever seen. One who knows that true elegance lies in how we treat others, not in how many silk gowns we own."

"Though perhaps," Aunt Cecilia interjected with a gentle smile, "we might see about having a few new gowns made regardless. A countess should be practical, my dear, but she need not be austere."

Hester laughed, the sound bright and free from the worry that had weighted it earlier. "Very well, Aunt. Though I insist they be made of good, sturdy fabric that won't tear at the first fence I need to climb."

"My grandfather will be delighted," Freddie said, drawing her closer.

"And the ton?" Hester asked, though the question held none of the fear it had earlier.

"Will learn to appreciate you." Freddie's eyes sparkled with both mischief and devotion.

"Though I must warn you, my love, that you've rather forced my hand on the announcement.

Half of London will know of our engagement before we return, thanks to our friend there.

"He nodded toward the merchant, who was already scribbling what looked suspiciously like a letter to his London connections.

"Good," Hester said firmly. "Let them know that the future Earl of Greystone chose

his bride not for her conformity to their expectations, but for her ability to help him build something greater than mere social acceptance."

"My brave, practical love," Freddie murmured, drawing her close for another kiss that set the room cheering again.

Outside, the storm began to ease, the clouds parting to reveal stars twinkling like diamonds scattered across black velvet.

But Hester didn't notice. She was too busy planning improvements to Greystone's farming operations, even as Freddie kissed her, and their audience celebrated, and her aunts began discussing wedding details with the innkeeper's wife.

The future stretched before them, bright with promise, practical as good Welsh wool, and romantic as any tale ever told in London's finest drawing rooms. It would be uniquely their own, this marriage of practical wisdom and aristocratic tradition, and all the better for it.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

### Epilogue

The morning sun streamed through the tall windows of Greystone Court's breakfast room, casting long golden fingers across the Meissen porcelain and sterling silver that graced the table.

Hester watched contentedly as her aunts presided over a morning ritual with that would have seemed impossible just six months ago.

Gone were the stiff formalities that had characterised breakfast at Greystone Court on their arrival, shortly after Hester and Freddie's wedding in London.

The change had come about gradually, beginning with Aunt Cecilia's gentle suggestions about the proper preparation of porridge and what constituted a healthy breakfast. Now, the earl sat at the head of the table looking remarkably well, his white hair gleaming in the spring sunshine as he helped himself to a portion of kedgeree.

"My dear Felicity," he said, his blue eyes twinkling, "I must confess that your insistence on raw honey in my morning tea has worked wonders. Though I confess I was sceptical at first."

Aunt Felicity beamed, her round face pink with pleasure. "It's all in the timing, my lord. The honey must be stirred in precisely three times, always widdershins, and only when the tea has steeped exactly four and a half minutes."

"Indeed?" The earl raised one silver eyebrow. "And what, pray tell, happens if one

stirs it the wrong way?"

"Oh, terrible things," Aunt Felicity assured him with perfect seriousness. "The whole therapeutic effect is quite ruined. One might as well drink water."

Hester caught Freddie's eye across the table and saw her own amusement mirrored there.

Her husband was looking particularly handsome this morning, she thought, the sunshine bringing out golden highlights in his fair hair.

He had recovered his memories completely now, though sometimes he claimed that the bump on his head had given him new and improved ones.

Aunt Cecilia, ever practical, was supervising the placement of a fresh plate of toast. "Do remember to cover it properly with the warming dome," she instructed the footman. "Cold toast is an abomination."

Hester smiled, letting the familiar banter wash over her.

How different everything was now from those first awkward days after the wedding, when the aunts had arrived with their trunks full of herbal remedies and their heads full of plans to revolutionise the ancient household.

She had worried then that their rather unconventional ways might clash too severely with the traditions of Greystone Court.

But somehow, impossibly, it had all worked out. The aunts had known exactly when to push and when to defer, when to insist and when to suggest. They had brought their practical Welsh mountain sense to bear on the running of the great house, and somehow made it work better than before.

The breakfast room itself seemed to reflect the change.

Where once it had been formal and rather cold, now flowers brightened every surface, their sweet scent mingling with the aroma of coffee and freshly baked bread.

The morning light caught the crystal drops of the chandelier, sending rainbow patterns dancing across the cream-coloured walls.

"I was thinking," Freddie said, breaking into her reverie, "that we might walk down to the home farm this morning. The lambs are coming along splendidly."

"An excellent idea," the earl approved. "Though perhaps I might not come quite so far. A turn about the rose garden, ladies?"

"Oh yes," Aunt Felicity said eagerly. "But before you go, Hester, I have a new tonic that would be perfect for the weakest lambs. Made from dandelions gathered at midnight under a waning moon."

"I'm sure the shepherd will be fascinated," Freddie murmured, and Hester had to bite her lip to keep from laughing.

Looking around the table at her family, Hester felt a warmth that had nothing to do with the spring sunshine.

The earl was looking better than ever, thanks to the aunts' determined ministrations.

Freddie had fully recovered from his accident and subsequent amnesia, growing more confident in his role as heir with each passing day.

And the aunts... well, they had transformed Greystone Court from a mere stately home into something far more precious: a true family home.



The gentle clinking of china and silver continued, punctuated by bursts of laughter and the steady murmur of conversation.

Outside, birds sang in the gardens, and somewhere in the distance, a clock chimed the quarter hour.

Hester reached for another piece of toast, perfectly warm beneath its silver dome, and thought that she had never been quite so content in all her life.

The air was crisp and fresh as Hester and Freddie made their way across the meadows towards the lambing barn.

New grass sprouted beneath their feet, and overhead larks trilled their endless songs against a sky without so much as a wisp of cloud marring the endless blue.

The season's early lambs were growing well, frisking merrily all around while their mothers grazed contentedly.

Hester's hand rested comfortably in the crook of Freddie's arm as they walked, their steps naturally falling into the same rhythm.

She had given up wearing her finest boots for these daily inspections, having learned early in her marriage that Greystone Court's fields could be every bit as muddy as those at Plas Wyn.

Today she wore sturdy leather boots that had been properly waxed, and her skirts were sensibly shortened to avoid the damp grass.

"I saw Thomas heading out early this morning," Freddie said, referring to the head shepherd. "He seemed quite pleased with how things are progressing."

"The last ewes should lamb any day now," Hester replied, then pressed her lips

together firmly. She would not interfere. She had promised herself that she would not interfere. The shepherds at Greystone Court were perfectly capable and had been managing the flocks for generations.

Freddie glanced down at her with an amused smile. "You're thinking about the lambing techniques you used in Wales, aren't you?"

"I most certainly am not," Hester said with dignity. Then, unable to help herself, she added, "Though I do think that if they tried positioning the ewes differently during the difficult births..."

"Darling," Freddie said, patting her hand, "I believe you promised not to give any more advice after the discussion about the timing of the shearing."

"That's different," Hester protested. "And I still maintain that shearing according to the phases of the moon makes perfect sense. Aunt Felicity swears by it."

"Yes, well," Freddie said diplomatically, "perhaps we should leave the sheep management to Thomas for now. He's been doing this since before either of us was born."

They had reached the lambing barn now, and Hester could hear the gentle bleating of ewes and the higher-pitched cries of new lambs from within. The familiar sounds and smells brought back memories of springs at Plas Wyn, where she had spent so many hours helping with the lambing.

Through the open barn door, they could see the shepherds moving efficiently among the pens, checking on ewes and adjusting bedding.

Everything was clearly well in hand, though Hester couldn't quite suppress a small noise of concern when she saw a particularly large ewe that looked ready to deliver.

"I hope she doesn't have triplets," she murmured.

"We'll have to try and get one of the ewes with a singleton, or that's lost a lamb, to take one... "

"Shall we move on?" Freddie suggested quickly, clearly recognising the signs of imminent interference. "There's a lovely view of the valley from the hill beyond the barn."

Hester allowed herself to be led away, though she cast one last glance over her shoulder at the barn. "I suppose they do know what they're doing," she admitted.

"Just as you knew what you were doing at Plas Wyn," Freddie reminded her gently.

They climbed the gentle slope hand in hand, pausing at the summit to look out over the patchwork of fields and hedgerows that made up the vast Greystone estate in the southern Cotswolds.

The morning had warmed considerably, and Hester found herself grateful for the light breeze that played with the ribbons of her bonnet.

"It's beautiful here," she said softly. "Different from Wales, but beautiful in its own way."

"Are you happy?" Freddie asked, turning to face her. "Truly happy?"

Hester looked up into his beloved face, seeing there all the strength and gentleness that had first drawn her to him, even when he couldn't remember his own name. "More happy than I ever imagined possible," she said honestly.

"Even with all the changes? The responsibility of being a countess-in-waiting?"

"Even with that," she assured him. "Though soon, there will be even more changes to come."

Something in her tone made him look at her more closely. "What do you mean?"

Hester took both his hands in hers, suddenly feeling rather nervous despite having planned this moment carefully. "Well," she said, "I believe that by the time next spring's lambing season arrives, we shall have a new arrival of our own to celebrate."

For a moment Freddie just stared at her, then his face broke into a smile of such radiant joy that Hester felt tears spring to her eyes. "You mean... are you certain?"

She nodded, unable to speak past the lump in her throat.

"My darling!" Freddie swept her into his arms, spinning her around despite her startled squeak of protest. "How long have you known? Have you seen the doctor? Does anyone else know?"

"A few weeks," Hester managed, clinging to his shoulders. "Yes, I've seen the doctor. And no, no one else knows yet, though I suspect Aunt Felicity has her suspicions. She's been watching me like a hawk at breakfast times."

Freddie set her carefully back on her feet but kept his arms around her. "The next heir to Greystone," he said wonderingly. "Grandfather will be overjoyed."

"I thought we might tell him at dinner tonight," Hester suggested. "Though we should probably warn him first that Aunt Felicity will immediately begin preparing all sorts of peculiar remedies for the baby's health."

"Poor Grandfather," Freddie laughed. "Though I must say, her remedies have worked wonders for him." He sobered suddenly, looking down at her with concern. "You're feeling well? No sickness or fatigue?"

"Some," Hester admitted. "But nothing too terrible. Though I may need to stop joining you on these morning walks soon, at least until the ground is firmer."

"Then we shall find a comfortable bench in the garden where you can sit and direct all the gardening activities instead," Freddie teased. "Since you're not allowed to interfere with the sheep."

Hester laughed and leaned against him, breathing in the familiar scent of him mixed with the fresh spring air.

Above them, the larks were still singing, and from the barn came the peaceful sounds of new life beginning.

Soon enough, she thought, those sounds would be echoed in the nursery at Greystone Court, where the next generation would begin their own story.

For now, though, she was content to stand in her husband's arms, sharing their joyful secret while the spring breeze whispered promises of the future all around them.

THE END

Don't forget to look for other books in the To All the Earls I've Loved Before series! While linked by the theme of having an earl as a principal character, every book can be enjoyed as a standalone story. More to come soon!

A Suitable Countess by Susanne Bellamy

Lady Viola Winspear's parents are missing in a sandstorm in Egypt and she must secure a proposal, preferably from the wealthy catch of the season, to save them.

If she fails, her only chance to keep her siblings from starvation will be to risk everything, even if it means dressing as a man and playing poker in a gaming hell.

Lord George Amhurst, the Earl of Romney, must marry by his thirtieth birthday.

Grimly determined to fulfil the promise to his mother in order to return to his explorations in Africa, he attends a ball where he is intrigued while dancing with Lady Viola.

She is unlike all the others, and his hopes rise—until he later discovers her dressed as a man and winning at poker in a gaming hell.

What sort of earl would still consider her a suitable countess?

All Roads Lead To Earls by Ebony Oaten

Patrick Belconnen, Earl of Tullamore, loses his carriage and almost his life on the dangerous road through North Wales.

Fortune smiles upon him as he finds shelter and hospitality at Rosstrevor Hall. He also finds the enticing Miss Jones, who captures his attention.

At a party given in his honour, he is ensnared in a dubious trap. Miss Jones defends his innocence against baseless allegations. Alas, her defence of his honour compromises Miss Jones herself.

The only decent thing to do is offer for her.

Hannah Jones, lady's companion, yearns for true love. It's difficult not to, when she's surrounded by newlyweds who dote on each other.

The Earl of Tullamore is completely out of her social class. When he makes her an offer after a public scandal, Hannah frees him from his obligations, knowing he asked out of duty and could never love her. He should be happy that she's set him free, so why is he so put out?