

Not So
A ^ Simple Plan

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Prologue

The trembling young woman crouched in a rain soaked corner of the crumbling castle as a frigid north wind whistled eerily through gaping, broken windows; the rain cascading from dark, swollen clouds forming dirty puddles in the rock strewn soil. Her ball gown, once a shimmering concoction of peach colored silk, lay plastered against her pale, bare shoulders and pooled about her ruined dancing slippers in a tattered heap of sodden fabric. With fingers shaking as much from fear as the cold, she gripped the sharp edges of the broken wall and peered around the shadowy corner into the darkness beyond.

A loud clap of thunder echoed through the cavernous remains and a sudden flash of lightning split the grey sky exposing the skeletal fingers of a stone tower reaching up towards the heavens. The young woman's ears were sharply attuned to any sound other than the storm and, when the clatter of a horse's hooves against the rubble came out of the darkness, she collapsed back against the wall.

The man pursuing her through the storm called out her name softly, as if she were a little lost kitten. She clapped both hands over her mouth to keep from crying out and pressed her eyes shut. When she gave him no answer he began to laugh, the sound quickly turning maniacal as he taunted her with vile descriptions of rape and torture, making her blood run cold. He made it very clear that if she became his prisoner death would be her only release.

Hearing the horse's labored breathing and steps coming towards her hiding place, the young woman knew it was only a matter of minutes before she would be discovered. Scanning the semi-darkness, she felt a cold gust of wet air and turned, noticing a gaping hole in the stone wall separating her from the man on horseback. Bunching up the ragged skirts of her gown, the young woman scurried like a frightened mouse towards the opening; the thunder and lightning continuing their assault on the abandoned keep and covering whatever noise she made sloshing through puddles and climbing her way over the rubble. She crawled on hands and knees through the hole and emerged outside the ruins into the raging storm, her eyes searching for and finding the tree line at the top of the hill behind the castle ruins. Leaning into the rain and wind, she pushed forward only to trip as the flimsy material clung to her legs and feet, bringing her tumbling to the rocky ground. A soft moan escaped her lips as she lay huddled in the mud and stones, tears coursing down her bruised and dirty face; her body exhausted and weak, her will to go on nearly gone.

Her thoughts turned to the man she loved and the tiny one now growing within her body and a rage as powerful as the storm around her began to build within. She turned her face to the dark sky and vowed not only to survive but to wreck vengeance on the man pursuing; the rain washing the dirt and her despair away. Rolling onto her knees, she struggled to rise. Taking a handful of the tattered material, the young woman ripped it to her knees and flung it aside then began climbing up the rocky hill, hoping the pouring rain and falling eventide would obscure the man's vision and provide a means of escape. Grasping bunches of long, wet grass in her hands she pulled herself forward, sliding backwards every few steps; her knees and fingers torn and bloody from the sharp rocks strewn about the hillside.

After what seemed an eternity she crested the hill and stumbled into the thick stand of tall pines, oak and chestnut trees. Gaining cover she collapsed under a wide oak tree and leaned back against the rough bark, her chest

heaving as she took in ragged gulps of air and pushed the dripping mass of hair from off her face. She gave herself only a moment to relax before peering around the trunk to see if the horse and its rider were following, a quick prayer of thanks falling from her lips to see no sign of anyone below. Resting against the tree, she looked into the deepening shadows and was relieved to spy a well-traveled footpath winding into the darkening forest. Standing, she glanced once again from behind the tree, her heart racing to see her pursuer holding the remains of her skirts in his hands and looking about; turned and raced down the trail.

The strong scent of pine, wet soil and decay filled her nose as she hurried further into the forest; the pounding rain soon becoming mere drips; the thick, intertwining branches and broad leaves creating a protective roof overhead. Her eyes adjusted to the murky light filtering through the trees as she followed the stilled upon hearing a rustling of movement or the snap of a twig close by, her heart pounding as she glanced nervously into the thicket relieved to see a fox or other small animals scurrying by, as anxious as she to be somewhere safe and warm. She had been wandering for perhaps thirty minutes when the forest thinned unexpectedly and she stood once again behind a large tree, looking out upon a wide, empty meadow spread out below, a road curving around the base of the hill and dividing the meadow that led to a large manor house.

A flicker of hope blossomed in her breast to see the bright lights of the house shimmering through the rain perhaps a mile away. Swaying on legs that trembled from weariness, the determined young woman dashed back into the rain; a ghostly apparition stumbling crazily out of the forest and into the exposed meadow. The storm seemed to surge, increasing in intensity; the long, wet grass pulling at her tired legs and feet; the road appearing to be a mirage as she trudged along. Coming to the road she began to think she would finally reach safety...until she felt the pounding of hooves on the ground beneath her feet. A sudden flash of lightning lit up the night sky and she looked back, frozen in place to see an immense black stallion bearing down upon her, the figure on its back looking like a demon, his dark cape flapping behind like wings.

The young woman turned and ran for her life but within seconds the horse's warm breath blew hotly upon her back and neck and a powerful arm reached down and closed around her waist, lifting her high into the air. Her scream pierced the air.

"Be still!" He commanded, his deep voice rasping in her ear as he attempted to maintain control of both her, and his mount in the raging storm. An iron band held fast across her ribs, the breath knocked from her lungs as they pounded down the road; her struggle for release futile. The horse covered the remaining distance to the manor house quickly and came to a sudden stop at the steps leading up to the front door.

Nearly unconscious, she was dragged from the horse and held tightly in a pair of strong arms. Hearing the man's deep voice speak her name, she looked up expecting to see the face of impending death but, instead, saw the face of her true love and fainted.

Chapter 1

Allegra Chesterfield gazed up at the intricately carved ceiling above her bed; the dog-eared pages of her favorite romance novel lying against the snowy white linen sheet tucked securely under her chin. Her aqua eyes followed the swirling curlicue pattern above and she frowned, considering how sad it was that her life was even more boring than the ceiling; predictable and without any interesting twists and turns.

Why could she not experience adventure and love such as that found in books? Was she so undesirable that no man would ever look at her with adoration in his eyes, hold her in a passionate

embrace and whisper sweet words of love in her ear? Knowing no answer was forthcoming, Allegra carefully placed her glasses and the oft read book on the bedside table, turned down the lamp then plumped her feather pillow with a fist. Flopping onto her side, she gazed out the window at the starry night sky.

What was it that made one woman more worthy of a man's love than another? She could not believe all men were so shallow that mere looks would cause them to fall at a woman's feet and swear undying love and devotion. Surely there was a man somewhere who would be impressed more by a woman's character and intelligence than whether or not she possessed wealth and intelligence? Did it never occurred to men that women were like dormant seeds of a flower; its full beauty only revealing itself after loving nurture and tender care? It seemed to Allegra that such love was rare, existing only on the pages of romance novels...excepting her own parent's marriage, of course.

Allegra would be the happiest of women if only a man would look at her with the same love in his eyes as her father looked at her mother. Her wide mouth turned up in a silly grin as she recalled tales of her parent's meeting and courtship, their early marriage and the challenges of raising many children. The remarkable events that had occurred within their family over the past few years had wrought unexpected but wonderful upheaval and changes.

Her father, Richard Chesterfield, had taught at a private boy's school on the outskirts of London when he met and married Clare Whitman, an impoverished aristocrat who had been forced to become a governess for the family of one of his favorite students. They took a small house near the school and Clare supplemented their income by offering music lessons to many of the wealthy students, putting away every extra penny she earned for their future.

Two years after their marriage they welcomed their first-born, a son named James. Their first daughter, Allegra, joined the little family almost three years later and the family increased in size and volume with the addition of Violet and Randall over the next several years. The true test of parenthood came when the twins, Charles and Chelsea were born; proof the good Lord possesses a disturbing sense of humor. When their darling little Emily was born the family felt finally complete.

Even though the house had been bursting at the seams there was much love and happiness within the walls of their home. They lived simply; the children all working side by side, helping to raise a large garden and tending to a few animals. It was a common sight to see the family making deliveries to neighbors in need or traipsing around the countryside in a large wagon drawn by a swaybacked, but much loved horse, the numerous children hanging out the sides, laughing and calling out to passersby.

Allegra counted herself very fortunate to have been raised in such a family and tried hard to emulate her parents. She had come to realize that there were no secrets to raising such a large, happy brood. It simply required a lot of hard work, many sacrifices and loving devotion, along with much laughter and fun thrown in for good measure. Richard and Clare were independent and uncompromising in their parental philosophy and placed great emphasis upon educating both their sons and daughters and did not tolerate indolence or being unkind to anyone, including God's creatures.

Shortly after Allegra's sixteenth birthday, Providence smiled down upon her family when Richard Chesterfield received a sizeable fortune upon the death of a reclusive, elderly uncle. As the distant baron's only living male relative, his title and wealth passed to her father which included an expansive London town house, a sprawling country estate in the Lake District and a shipping company the baron had won many years before in a lucky game of cards. The unexpected but welcome inheritance brought with it an income of twenty-five thousand pounds a year, more money than her parents would have earned in their lifetime, as well as a position in Society. Unfortunately, the aristocracy would eat their own young to get ahead, let alone upstarts like the Chesterfields, so their experiences with many members of the ton had been ridiculously hostile.

Unable to sleep, Allegra kicked off her covers, turned the lamp up once again and crossed to her dressing table. Sitting down, she squinted at herself in the mirror, turning her face this way and that. She had never been one to deceive herself into believing she would ever be a beauty, but neither did she think she was hideous to look upon. Leaning her elbows upon the vanity Allegra pulled the heavy braid over her shoulder and idly twirled the end as she stared at her reflection.

The light shining from behind on her nightstand made her hair glow like a flame as red-gold tendrils escaped the braid, softly framing her oval face. According to her father Allegra's mane was as thick as a horse's tail, only softer...a compliment she was sure. Large almond shaped eyes rimmed with long, dark lashes and arching brows gazed back; deep pools of aqua blue when she was calm or a flashing brilliant jade when she was angry. Allegra's lips turned up in a crooked smile as her father's booming voice played inside her mind. He had often made suggestions that they should have named her Tempest because of her frequent outbursts and tantrums as a child. Perhaps the man turned to nature to describe his oldest daughter because there was nothing else volatile enough to describe her quicksilver moods.

For some insane reason Allegra could not now recall, when she was about fourteen she had decided to hack off her thick, unmanageable hair in the hopes that it might grow back in like the silken curls her younger sisters all possessed. Unfortunately, that did not occur. Instead she was cursed with short, fiery tufts of hair that reminded her of the colorful chickens pecking in the yard and garden. Allegra kept her spiky feathers covered with a bonnet or snug cap for nearly a year. It was also about this time that she started shooting up until she stood nearly a foot taller than all the other girls of her acquaintance, and, in the hopes of looking shorter, she began slouching and would shy away from any and all public activities, becoming withdrawn and shy. Her older brother James had been cruel in his taunts and jibes, telling her that she resembled Quasimodo, the hunchback.

Allegra straightened her spine and stared pensively at her reflection. *At least my bosom finally filled out and I can be quite proud of the fact that I no longer resemble a flat board*, she scoffed. There was nothing to be done except embrace the fact that her unusual height and flaming hair made her completely unfashionable and different, but she had come to terms with it. At twenty-three years of age, not only had Allegra's fiery temper cooled somewhat, but her sharp angles had also become softly rounded in all the right places.

As fate would have it, her life had changed drastically and so had her responsibilities with the inclusion into the aristocracy, however lowly they were upon that social ladder. As far as Allegra was concerned, not only did she possess physical attributes that were undesirable but she was also a spinster who was far too outspoken for her own good. Plus, she had a plethora of freckles, which no fashionable young lady would ever have permitted considering Society preferred females who were pale. Add to that the preference for docile, petite ethereal creatures with nothing more than fluff between their ears and honey dripping from their falsely sweet lips and Allegra stood not a chance in the marriage mart. It was mind-numbing how vacuous and artificial the men and women of the ton so often appeared.

Shaking off her reverie, Allegra wrapped a soft shawl around her shoulders and lighted a candle to carry downstairs to the kitchen for a glass of warm milk. Finding a few coals still glowing in the kitchen stove, she rummaged about the immense center island for a small pan, which was almost impossible to find since every cooking pot or pan used would be huge with so many people living in the mansion. She took a cup and saucer from the large cupboard and placed them on the island then took her candle to see what she could find in the huge pantry.

Allegra searched for cook's large, colorful biscuit tin used to store her delicious gingersnap biscuits, smiling when she found it hidden behind bags flour, rice and onions. Placing the candlestick on a shelf, Allegra took a handful from the container and slipped them into the pocket of her nightgown then hid the tin in an altogether different place, rearranging the bags and crates in

random disorder. Cook would question who might be pilfering her pantry when things appeared in such disarray but would never suspect it was Allegra stealing the well-guarded treats. Taking the candle from the shelf she closed the doors and took the treats from her pocket, inhaling the spicy fragrance then placed the biscuits on her plate.

Pulling open the heavy wooden door to the walk-in larder, she shivered in the cold darkness, holding the candle high to scan the heavily laden shelves for the shining silver pitcher of milk. Grabbing it off the shelf she hurried from the larder and quickly poured a small amount of milk into the pan then returned the pitcher to the larder, the cold stone floor making her glad she had thought to wear slippers. Allegra spied a covered platter heaped high and peeked underneath, grinning to see the leftover honeyed ham they had enjoyed for supper. Snatching a thick piece, she hurried once again from the larder and pushed the door closed, scurrying over to the gigantic cast iron stove to stir the milk and warm her chilled bones. The juicy meat was sweet and flavorful and Allegra devoured it quickly, licking her fingers clean.

It had not been so very long ago that her family had been the ones not only doing all the cooking but also planting, harvesting and storing the various fruits and vegetables and raising livestock on their small plot of land. She certainly didn't miss hearing her brother's laughter as they watched chicken's with their heads cut off running about the yard nor plucking countless feathers for pillows or mattresses. However, Allegra loved the rewards of hard work and the comfort being prepared brought on a cold winter day.

Pouring the warm liquid into her cup, she took the pan to the sink and rinsed it out then picked up the candlestick, cup and saucer and left the kitchen for the dark vastness of the mansion. Enjoying the peaceful solitude, Allegra nibbled contentedly on the sweet, flavorful biscuit as her shadow danced along the cool marble floor and long hallways.

The music room was her favorite room in the whole house, filled with all the things that brought joy to the Chesterfield family; an elegant mahogany grand piano, several stringed instruments including a beautifully sculpted harp. Moss green watered silk walls were covered with family portraits and beautiful landscapes as well as scribbles from a child's hand lovingly displayed. Against the longest wall was a huge jade green and black marble fireplace with tall cherry wood bookcases on either side; the shelves crammed full to overflowing with leather bound books of every description and size. Polished furniture with sumptuous coverings and plump cushions were strategically placed around the room; colorful Tiffany lamps encouraged individuals to sit and read, visit or listen to music while relaxing.

Throughout long winter months, heavy crimson velvet drapes would be drawn across wide bay windows at the front of the room to keep out the frigid cold, and the sound of a crackling fire would welcome anyone entering the room; the aromatic fragrance of hickory or apple wood lingering in the air. It was not unusual to find one or two children and an occasion adult curled up in one of the overstuffed armchairs or stretched out on a settee; a book in their lap enjoying a nap in the comfortable warmth. During the cool spring days the drapes would be pulled back and the tall windows would be opened wide to allow the fresh air of the flower gardens inside, the heady perfume of peonies, lilacs and roses wafting into the room, cut blossoms in crystal vases and beautiful color filling the rooms of the house.

Now, the gardens and vases held hydrangeas, lavender, tuber roses and asters while tall sunflowers, their faces turned to follow the sun, swayed in gentle, warm breezes. And whether sitting out of doors in the garden or within any room of the house, one could almost always hear the sounds of music and children's voices.

At the crack of dawn the household servants would begin their busy, hectic day; the work of preparing meals, stoking fires, cleaning and laundry seemed to never end. They did their work in relative peace and quiet, until the children awoke. Then, within minutes, the sound of little feet

would be heard pounding downstairs, bodies crashing against walls and each other on their way to breakfast, voices raised in shouts, laughter and childish bickering. It was like a vast army setting up camp, creating a cacophony that could make one's head spin, never ceasing to amaze the servants who, until just a few short years ago, had lived a quiet, mundane existence.

At this moment however, there was only peaceful stillness...and aloneness. Allegra's lips twitched at the irony that she could be lonely in a house filled to overflowing with people. The soft light from a lamp cast an amber glow upon her hair as she sat curled up in one of the plush chairs sipping the warm milk and munching on a biscuit. She considered her blessings and in almost every way was truly content and grateful; however, there was something missing. Her mind turned to past events and, like the ripple effect of a small pebble tossed into a pond, one encounter that had changed so many things for so many people.

At the age of eighteen, just a few months prior to Richard Chesterfield receiving his inheritance, her brother James had left home and joined up with a merchant ship to fulfill his dream of seeing the world. This journey proved to be a most auspicious event for, during the voyage, James miraculously saved another young man's life and the two became best of friends and future business partners. When they returned to London nearly two years later, James was introduced to his friend Marcus' family, the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire and his younger sister, Charity.

James was quite embarrassed when Marcus immediately related the harrowing story of his near-drowning and how James had courageously risked his own neck to save Marcus from certain death. Hearing that her beloved boy had nearly drowned, Lady Cavendish fainted dead away, sending the entire household into an uproar. After she was revived and assured her son had not suffered irreparable harm, the Duke and Duchess adamantly insisted on meeting James' family, graciously overlooking the fact that until very recently, the Chesterfields had been mere commoners and their wealth was due in large part to industry and commerce, something most members of the ton looked down their collective noses upon.

Allegra was almost sixteen when she met Marcus Cavendish for the first time and was instantly smitten with the blond, blue-eyed Adonis. As fate would have it however, she was recovering from a bout of the measles and her complexion was pock marked and red; she was going through yet another growth spurt, and of course, the meeting took place shortly after the attack of the cutting shears. She had looked like an ostrich and would have preferred not only sticking her head in the ground, but also tucking her whole body safely away from critical eyes. The handsome young god had not only been kind, but seemed to completely overlook Allegra's odd appearance, as did his sister and parents, which had locked her affection immediately into place.

Tenderly pulling a gold locket from beneath the lace trimmed neck of her nightgown, Allegra gazed upon the miniature portrait of the man who had been the cause of her young, unrequited yearnings. In the beginning it had been a sweet, rapturous longing; her heart beating like the wings of a hummingbird every time they had been in the same vicinity., which had not been often for they resided some distance from London, at Rose Manor. Whenever Marcus did come to their home, she would sit like some addle-minded patient at Bedlam, fidgeting and rarely speaking unless addressed, her shyness almost painful to behold. No matter how many times others tried to engage her in witty conversation, she would shake her covered head or just mumble incoherently. It was only when she relented to play the piano or sing with her siblings that Allegra was able to lose herself and shine, her talents and wit on display for anyone willing to see.

Two years later Allegra attended her first debutante ball for Marcus' younger sister, Charity, with whom Allegra had become close friends. She was terrified of making a mistake or looking the fool, and, by the end of the night, those fears had come to fruition. During her one and only dance of the evening, which happened to be with Marcus, she confessed her feelings of love, which caught him completely off guard. He had laughed then tweaked her nose and thanked her for the

compliment, calling her a sweet child who would someday understand the difference between true love and infatuation. He gallantly finished the dance before escorting her back to her chair, leaving her tender heart broken in pieces and the laughingstock of the ton. Within days of that debacle James and Marcus left England, sailing for America to expand the Chesterfield Shipping Co. and Allegra fled London for Rose Manor, believing she was the biggest fool on the planet.

During the next few years at the country estate Allegra nursed her wounds, immersing herself in discovering every nook and cranny of the large manor house and its vast property, content to become friends with servants and tenants. Since James was absent and Randall had expressed interest in learning about the shipping business, her father was perfectly happy to let his daughter learn about the management of the estate, something relatively unheard at this time for a female, especially one so young. She was possessed of a keen mind and intellect; was hardworking and determined to learn everything there was to know about the estate. These responsibilities, and her absence from Society, gave Allegra a strong independent streak, but also made her headstrong and vocal in her ideas and opinions.

Being a practical girl, she took to wearing James' outgrown pants and shirts, tucking her long, flaming tresses up under a decrepit cap, looking like a gangly young lad mucking out the stalls or riding hell-bent across the hills; her outlandish and unfeminine ways causing her mother a great deal of anxiety. She was perfectly content to stay in the countryside, and only returned a few times over the next several years to London for special family occasions or to see Charity. While in the city she obstinately shunned polite Society like the plague.

If it had not been for her parent's insistence that she leave Rose Manor to attend her younger sister Violet's upcoming debutante ball, Allegra would have dug in her heels and refused. The mere thought of the upcoming formal affair filled her with horrible anxiety so she did the only thing that helped calm her nerves; walked to the beautiful piano and uncovered the keyboard, her fingers gliding over the ivory keys. She had started lessons from her mother at the age of four and it became quickly evident the child was a prodigy, her quick mind and nimble fingers learning almost by instinct. It appeared she possessed a photographic mind, for once she read or saw something, she almost never forgot it.

Allegra relaxed once again as the music flowed over and through her body, the night deepening until answers to her questions came into her mind. She closed the lid of the piano, picked up her dishes and returned them to the kitchen, then went back up the stairs. Climbing into the now cold bed, Allegra snuggled down for warmth under the thick coverlet, her determination and focus set.

I'm a fool for not thinking of this sooner. It's a simple plan, one that can't possibly fail if I stick to it. A tiny ember of hope, so small it would have fit inside a thimble, flickered within her heart; a smile tugging at the curve of her lovely lips as she fell into a deep slumber.

Chapter 2

Lord Edgerton was dead. Or at least Ian felt as if he should be dead. This contemplation of death was suddenly cut short when his head began to pound mercilessly, pain coursing through his bruised and broken body. Dark, matted blood covered one side of Ian's battered

face, and an incessant ringing sounded in his ears. Standing on tiptoes, arms pulled high above his head, Ian could only take shallow breaths, the sharp jabs of pain indicating he probably had several broken ribs. He slowly raised his head and stared through the eye not swollen shut to see a curved iron hook protruding from a thick post to which his hands were securely tied. Faint yellow light filtered through a row of dingy windows high above, revealing a cavernous warehouse filled with shadowy stacks of shipping crates and barrels, heavy ropes and tools hanging from various posts, and ladders leaning precariously against shelves overflowing with more boxes.

Ian peered about for something he could use to stand on but could see nothing but some thick corded rope curled nearby on the hard packed dirt floor. Lifting his feet, he used his body as a weight, pulling and swinging from side to side, stretching his long body until his bare toes snagged at the rope. Grimacing at the pain that nearly sent him into unconsciousness again, Ian dragged the rope closer and closer until he was able to pull it into a pile beneath his feet. It was just enough to give him some leverage to extend his arms upwards until he was able to free his bound wrists from the hook, collapsing to the ground where he lay in agony.

Not pausing long to wonder at his predicament, Lord Edgerton grabbed hold of the post and managed to pull himself into a standing position, wobbling like a new-born calf on trembling legs. When he saw more dim light seeping through a set of large wooden doors down the wide center aisle, Ian stumbled forward, holding onto shelves and crates along the way. When he reached the doors he was disappointed, but not surprised to find they wouldn't open. Putting a bruised and bloody eye to a wide crack between the doors, Ian could see a heavy chain and padlock securing the warehouse doors.

The docks were barely discernible through the yellow fog of breaking dawn. The creaking of large ships moored nearby and the bumping of smaller vessels against the wooden docks came eerily through the disorienting mist. A cold, damp breeze blew through the crack in the warehouse door, the odor of rotting fish and other decay carrying on the moist air. Ian tensed upon hearing a squeaking noise nearby then let out his breath as he caught a glimpse of a large sign swinging to and fro in front of the warehouse. Squinting, Ian attempted to read the sign, but to no avail.

The sound of shuffling footsteps and garbled voices floated towards him, the grey forms of two men materializing out of the fog and coming towards the warehouse. Backing away from the doors, Ian looked desperately about for some kind of weapon and spied a pry bar lying on the ground by an open barrel. Grabbing it up he hobbled into the shadows behind a large stack of crates just as a key grated in the fat padlock and the chain rattled noisily through the iron handles. The murky morning light cast unnatural outlines of two men as they lurched into the gloomy warehouse, pulling the heavy doors closed.

"We wasn' suppos'd ta do the gent in," grumbled a short, bandy legged man, his taste for rum apparent from his slurred speech and stumbling gait.

"Aye, n' wha da ya thin we coulda done diffrent? He's bigger n' most blokes we ever try to get on a ship, so we done wha we had ta do." A hiccup followed this shrewd observation from a lumbering giant who swayed drunkenly alongside his small companion. "The gen'leman was still breathin' when we left, an tha's wha counts."

"Well, we best be getting' 'im on board afore anyone else is about. If'n he dies we don't wanna be anywhere's close by."

The two held aloft lanterns as they passed Ian's hiding spot and shuffled further into the darkness. They stopped suddenly, bumping into each other as their bloodshot eyes scanned the vacant post. The small man removed a tattered hat and scratched his bald head, quite befuddled, as he looked under a nearby crate. His huge companion turned in a slow circle, one eye bulging and the other covered by a patch, as he scanned the dim warehouse interior.

"Ya ain't getting away from us, yer lordship...no siree. We was promised a fat bonus if'n we

get ya on a certain ship alive, an we aim's ta do just that." The giant smacked one platter sized fist into the open palm of the other.

Ian peered cautiously around the edge of the stacked crates and cursed as the smaller of the two men stumbled drunkenly toward his hiding place. Placing his hands against the heavy crates, Ian pushed hard and was rewarded when they came crashing down upon the short, balding man.

Hearing his inebriated friend's cries, the lumbering brute turned in time to see the man buried under a pile of debris. When Ian limped away, the brute bellowed like a crazed bull and lunged forward, his huge hands ready to wrap around the viscount's neck. Ian swung the pry bar wildly at the oncoming giant, the pain in his ribs making him gasp for breath, but managing to keep out of the man's grasp. What little strength Lord Edgerton possessed quickly began to ebb and he knew it would only be a matter of seconds before those gigantic hands would have him in a viselike grip, beating him senseless once again.

Spying a stray barrel lying behind the giant, Ian reversed course, turning and charging as he yelled at the top of his lungs. Swinging the iron bar wildly, Ian forced his assailant to take several steps backwards. As the drunken man's legs bumped into the barrel, Ian rushed forward, the iron bar making a sudden jarring connection. He watched the giant's arms wave like a windmill as his body tumbled backwards over the barrel and went down like a load of bricks on the hard packed floor.

Ian stumbled through the unlocked warehouse doors and threaded the chain back through the handles, securing the padlock, all the while praying that no one else was lying in wait. Limping along the wharf he glanced back, relieved to see the fog quickly swallowing the warehouse and his escape. He leaned upon a wooden post as he gasped for breath, fresh blood trickling into his eye and down the side of his neck, the pounding in his head like the sound of cannon. Turning a corner he could see the faint outline of a man puffing smoke as he leaned against a flea-bitten nag, hitched to a dilapidated hackney.

The unsuspecting man nearly jumped out of his skin when Lord Edgerton emerged like a ghost from the predawn gloom and grabbed hold of the cabbie's worn jacket; the viscount's swollen and bloody face an inch from the poor man's nose. Hearing the mumbled address, the man's eyebrows shot up and he grabbed Ian underneath the arms just as he collapsed then heaved the unconscious gentleman onto the floor of the hackney.

A loud pounding on the front door caught Lord Edgerton's butler just as he was sitting down to a warm breakfast. Snarling at the interruption, Smithers threw his linen napkin on the table and scurried down the hallway as fast as his shuffling feet could go, jerking open the front door to yell at whoever stood there at such an ungodly hour. On the stoop stood a disheveled cabbie, nearly collapsing under the weight of a large man bearing a faint resemblance to his lordship.

Yelling into the dark and cavernous entry for assistance, Smithers shook his gray head, wondering what bedevilment the viscount had gotten involved in this time. Looping Lord Edgerton's arm around his bony shoulders, the butler pulled his unconscious employer and the cabbie through the wide doorway. A young maid, coming to see what had caused the commotion, shrieked to see her master's bloodied face and unconscious form, twisting her apron in her hands. The two men half carried, half dragged Lord Edgerton's large form up the broad staircase and into his bedchamber, the worried girl following close behind.

"Well don't just stand there slack-jawed, lassy!" Smithers barked, after dumping Lord Edgerton's unconscious body upon an immense bed. "Go fetch some hot water and towels so we can clean his lordship's wounds." The old man sighed as the girl scurried from the bedchamber then addressed the cabbie. "I'd be much obliged sir if you'd bring our physician here. I can assure you if

the viscount survives, he will be most grateful for your assistance. Unfortunately, I can't say I feel the same way about the man."

Giving the cabbie the physician's address, Smithers quickly stripped Ian of the torn and bloody clothing, noting the dark purplish bruises and bloody gashes that seemed to cover the viscount's entire body. This was no ordinary brawl Lord Edgerton had been involved in, of that Smithers was certain. The elderly man pulled the covers over Ian's nude, inert body as the maid came hurrying back through the door, and placed a steaming bowl of water on the washstand along with several snowy white linen towels.

"Thank you, Gretchen. Please go rouse the rest of the household. Tell Mrs. Crabtree to show up the physician when he arrives and pay the cabbie sufficient to show the viscount's appreciation. Have her instruct cook to prepare a simple breakfast for the staff as well as some poultices for his lordship's injuries. Make sure she tells cook not to confuse the two."

The maid fled when Smithers began to uncover Ian's naked body. The old man gently sponged the blood and grime away from the viscount's wounds, a frown upon his grizzled brow. There was a nasty gash on the back of Ian's head, his ebony hair matted with dried blood. One eye was a ghastly shade of purple and completely swollen shut; his formerly dignified, straight nose was now bent with a large bump in the middle. Smithers sighed as he examined Lord Edgerton's tortured frame, sure there were more injuries below the surface.

The butler decided to wait to send a message to Ian's father, the Earl of Wexford, until after the doctor had attended and they knew better the extent of Ian's injuries. This would give the household staff time to better prepare for the upheaval that was sure to follow the Earl's arrival. It was a tender mercy from the Lord that the viscount's father and stepmother were out of the country at the moment or instead of everything being handled calmly and with alacrity the Earl's booming voice would have been raised to the rooftops, his ranting making everyone jumpy and nervous, especially if he threatened to drag the entire household back to Ireland for the remainder of the Season. This would lead the haughty Lady Katherine to come unhinged, her hysterical screeching making a bad situation even worse. Oh, to return to happier times.

Smithers scratched at the grey whiskers on his chin, remembering clearly the wonderful boy Ian had been; filled with love and warmth, curiosity and compassion. When his mother died during childbirth, everything had changed. The Earl retreated into silence and despair then left the country altogether, leaving his son to mourn alone. When the Earl returned almost two years later he found his son much changed; sullen, prone to nightmares and tantrums. The son discovered his father was no longer the warm, caring man he had always been.

Lord Edgerton had grown into a man filled with unresolved anger, self-loathing and jaded appetites. Smithers wondered how and when the viscount would discover the answers he so desperately sought and who would be the one to help him heal. He certainly had no answers to these questions. However, he knew if things didn't change soon it might be too late.

"Smithers!" Ian squawked, grabbing his bandaged, throbbing head. He had no intention of doing that again. Opening his eyes he was horrified to find he was blind in one eye. Lifting his hands, his terror subsided a bit to discover a patch covering one eye then fumbled for, and yanked on the cord hanging against the wall by the side of the bed. He moaned in agony as he rolled back against the pillows, his chest and ribs hurting like the very devil.

Several minutes later his butler pushed open the door, a silver tray balanced in his aged hands. "I see you have decided to rejoin the land of the living, sir. Shall I do a jig, or run screaming from the room?"

Ian scowled. He could get no respect, especially in his own house. "What the blazes

happened?" he croaked out. "Am I blind?"

"No you are not blind, sir," his butler drawled, placing the tray on a bedside table, the delicious aroma of warm, crusty bread assailing Ian's nose and making his mouth suddenly water. "Your injuries, although severe, were unfortunately not life-threatening. It appears someone, or something, finally had enough of your roguish ways."

Ian's Irish brogue was even more pronounced than usual, as he mumbled a curt reply. "Thank you for that useless, and slightly condescending, bit of information, old man. Can you not tell me anything of how I came to be in this condition?"

Drawing himself up to his full height, which was not much over five feet, Smithers replied haughtily, "I am as baffled as you, sir. However, if I recall correctly, your instructions to me the night of your assault was...and I quote, "that you might or might not be at your club, and that you might or might not come home, and, here's the kicker, sir...I was to mind my own business, and stop asking so many infernal questions."

Leaning his head back against the pillows, Ian replied caustically. "Indeed, Smithers, I thank you for your heartfelt concern. Send someone over to fetch Blakeslee. I'm sure he can shed some light on what has occurred."

"Your friend has been here several times over the past two days, patiently waiting for you to regain consciousness. No doubt most likely short on coin again, and with debts that need paying. He indicated he had no idea what could possibly have occurred."

"What are you blathering about? What day is it?" The older gentleman attempted to tuck a linen napkin under Ian's chin. He swatted at the butler's attention. "I'm not an invalid, Smithers! I can certainly feed myself." Ian tried to sit up, his head immediately beginning to pound as if a herd of horses were trampling through. He sank back down.

"Now may I proceed, sir?" Seeing Ian meekly wave a hand, Smithers snapped the napkin and none too gently, placed it under the viscount's chin. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he put a spoon into the broth, the metal tapping against the bowl as his feeble hand shook.

Ian glanced at the sound, his eye barely opened. "If you will help me sit up a little, Smithers, I think it will be easier for us both if I just drink the broth from the bowl." Relief was visible on the old man's face, and he helped pull Ian forward, placing more pillows behind the viscount and handing Ian the delicate porcelain dish. "Now, please just tell me what you know," he said, closing his eye in ecstasy as he took a mouthful of thick beef broth.

"It is Tuesday afternoon, my lord. You were brought in at dawn on Sunday by a cabbie who found you on the wharf front, beaten nearly to death." Smithers watched Ian's reaction to this news.

Ian's dark eye, uncovered by a black patch, narrowed. He sipped the broth, his body aching all over. "From my bandages, I assume the doctor has been in?"

"Yes he has. Unlike the rest of us who have enjoyed the relative peace and calm, I'm sure the doctor will be relieved you have regained consciousness." Smithers straightened the blanket across the bottom of the bed. "And of course, Mr. Blakeslee will be ecstatic to find you didn't go and die on him."

Lord Edgerton scowled yet again. The old man had never been fond of his friend, but for what reasons, Ian had never ascertained. "He is my oldest friend. I would think you would have more compassion for a man who was orphaned not once, but twice in his youth."

Smithers looked down his nose at the viscount. Perhaps the time was coming when he could speak his mind freely. "You have been a devoted friend, sir. He should be grateful." Ian handed him the empty bowl. The butler gave him a small, dark glass bottle and teaspoon with instructions. "Take your medicine then eat your bread. I shall send a message to both men that you are awake." With those parting remarks he lifted the tray, and hurried from the room.

Staring at the closed door, Ian winced as he tried to get more comfortable. The old man had

become more disrespectful over the last couple of years. *"I shouldn't be surprised,"* he thought, as he lay back and stared at the ceiling.

Smithers had been with the McClellan family for what seemed like centuries but had worked as Ian's personal valet and butler for the past eight years. The elderly gentleman had begun speaking his mind with little concern for what the viscount thought, over the past several years, his sarcasm biting, but usually accurate. Ian's dark eyes crinkled, thinking how he had learned that particularly satisfying skill from the old man, so he could hardly fault him.

Lord Edgerton stared at the intricately carved ceiling above the huge mahogany bed, his fingers plucking at the expensive emerald green satin coverlet. It was disquieting to consider he had enemies that hated him so much that they desired his disappearance or death. Evidently, the piper wanted to be paid, and the reckless choices Ian had made over the past dozen years were finally catching up.

Taking stock of his life gave Lord Edgerton pause. A deep crimson flush crept up Ian's neck as he thought about his sweet, deceased mother and how disappointed she would be over his immoral behavior and shocking lack of character. It was galling to know he had utterly failed in becoming the man she had expected of him. Unless Ian wanted to suffer more of what had brought him to his present condition or worse, he needed to make some serious changes quickly. He needed a plan.

I hope you have enjoyed this preview and look forward to having you read the entire book. It has been a pleasure researching one of my favorite time periods and embedding actual events that occurred during the reign of Queen Victoria into the story. Please visit the [Coming Soon](#) page to sign up for new book release notifications, pre-launch specials & to sign up for my mailing list. If you wish to make comments, please click on this link for my [Comments Page](#).

Thank you!

~Clarisse