

Chapter I

London, 1772

The chill of late spring crept through the ill-laid brick. The weather, like all of Viscount Charmaine's life, was demoralizing. Attempting to shake away his negativity with a yawn, Robert departed his cramped flat. Tepid sunshine crept through the morning haze. The streets were relatively unoccupied. Most of its occupants were either elsewhere or hard at work inside. The neighborhood leisurely changed during his half-hour walk. Trash vanished from the streets, as apartments became houses and then houses turned into sprawling estates.

Robert reached the fashionable part of town without noticing the route there. His family's London residence was impossible to ignore. Columns dominated the façade of the ostentatious stone building. Ornate marbled statuary overwhelmed the neatly manicured garden. His mother's touch was everywhere, each detail announcing the wealth and power of those who lived within. Robert found the presentation more than a trifle overdone.

A familiar butler ushered the broad man into a drawing room. Tea was waiting. "May I take your coat, Lord Charmaine?"

Handing over his coat, he sank into a chair to await the doctor's decision that the Lord Donahue was ready for visitors. Once summoned, Robert took the stairs to his father's room quietly and slipped through the large open archway. Ceiling to floor windows drenched the room in sunlight. The room was decorated in light colors in an attempt to create a light, cheery air. Robert thought it looked like an asylum.

Robert's father - Ambler Anderson, the Earl of Donahue - sat propped on a large, white bed. His long, wispy gray hair was neatly brushed, his nightgown of the finest clean linen, but they adorned a man who was little more than a husk. Skin hung limply from his massive bones. His withered limbs long since left his control. The doctors gave in to despair, but Ambler refused to die. Robert smiled slightly. All the members of the family were fighters and his father was the greatest of them all. Ambler's vacant blue eyes stared aimlessly at the white wall.

Familiar frustration raged through Robert at seeing his father helpless. Taking the old man's hand, he sat by the bed and prayed. When he looked again, his father's eyes were closed. Depositing a kiss on the

wrinkled forehead, Robert stole quietly from the room. He would have time to go over the financials with his father later. Perhaps it made little sense to update the unresponsive man, but Robert held on hope his father would wake. When the Lord Donahue resumed his duties, he would be up-to-date on every part of the estates.

Robert's steps remained muted as he walked from his father's rooms. He hesitated to examine his appearance in a large gilded mirror before entering his mother's domain. Robert watched his reflection's jaw unclench and its mouth fight to achieve a neutral appearance; God, he wished his father were healthy again. With a deep breath, he forced his attention back to the mirror. His un-powdered chestnut hair was tied neatly at the nape of his neck. His mother would likely bemoan his lack of wig, but he found no use for such frivolity unless society demanded it. She would be hard-pressed to find anything wrong with his garb. His clothing was cut simply, but with the well-made elegance that spoke of quality and expense. His man, William, tied his cravat in a fashion so new Robert did not yet know what it was called. He momentarily regretted handing his coat to the butler; it was of an excellent cut and its dark navy color set off the sapphire of his eyes. Visiting his mother was a bit like going to war; his clothing the only arsenal he had against her.

Amelia awaited him in her light, airy, sitting room. Robert suspected she picked the moss green with pale rose accents colors of the room for how well they complimented her light blond hair and soft green eyes. Even long after the prime of her youth, there was no doubting she was once the catch of the Season. Robert's first sign of trouble was her shimmering green silk day dress. The gown was a childhood favorite. Robert remembered her wearing it while laughing at a joke his father told and the answering softness of his father's smile.

Robert stepped forward and bowed to his mother. Standing, he took her delicate hand and deposited a perfunctory kiss. "Mother. You look extraordinary."

A delicately arched eyebrow rose at his words as she withdrew her hand. "In this old thing? How can you insult me so?"

Knowing it was going to be a difficult meeting provided no comfort. Robert was doomed to play it through. "Insult you, Mother? You look lovely. That gown makes you glow."

"For shame. It is out of fashion, Robert. Everything I own is out of fashion. How am I supposed to go to balls, how am I supposed to go out, how can I help find you a wife if I cannot even leave the estate?"

Amelia's voice was already rising, a slight hint of hysterics entering her mannerisms.

Robert paused. He expected the charade of being upset, but this was much too soon. He took a moment to consider his mother and realized this was no act. Her nerves were coming apart. He set aside the usual family bickering and did the only thing he could think of. Closing the space between them, he forced her head into his shoulder. Robert held his mother tightly as she broke down in his arms.

There was nothing ladylike or polite about her sobs. The initial crying subsided quickly, but Amelia stood quietly in her son's arms for several long moments. Robert could feel the deep, shuddering breaths coursing through her body.

Amelia stepped back from her son's comfort and wiped her eyes. She took a deep breath and raised her chin, once again every inch the Countess Donahue. Robert stumbled for something to say and finally decided on silence. In the awkward moment that followed, Amelia poured herself and her son tea. Robert took it gratefully.

"I want you wed." It was a command, not a request.

"I know." Robert sounded resigned. "Perhaps you are right."

A delicate eyebrow arched in surprise. "Hm. What devious trick are you planning now?"

Robert fought a smile at his mother's automatic suspicion. "No trick. We are poor. A wife will come with a dowry. I created this predicament Mother; I should be the one to extract us from it. And, to be clear, this situation is temporary." His voice was firm. "I understand you are unused to a lowered allowance, but I will not access the endowments for anything less than a genuine emergency."

She flipped her hair, an action that made the older woman look girlish. "Our living in genteel poverty is not an emergency?"

Robert's expression was flat. "This is not genteel poverty, Mother. I will hear no more on this subject."

With a look of grave irritation, Amelia returned to her second favorite topic. "So, you have decided you should wed."

Still standing, he sipped his tea as his generous lips curved into a small smile. "Can I call being bullied decided?"

"Do not be ridiculous and insulting. No one can bully you into anything." She gave him a critical look. "Have you chosen a bride? I sent suggestions."

"No. And I have little care to who it will be. She must come with a generous dowry. I would like for her to have a pleasant temperament.

Other than that, I see no reason why one chit will not do as well as another.”

“All women are not the same, Robert. While I agree with your priorities, should you not also look for a partner who will match your character?”

“What brings on this change, Mother? What happened to wed, wed, wed?”

“You are being foolish, Robert. I have not changed my position.”

“Mother.” His flat tone indicated his disbelief.

She grew sober, her façade falling away. “You should wed. But there can be happiness in a marriage too, Robert. A great happiness that...” Her words trailed off.

“Mother?” He repeated himself, but this time his voice was gentle and questioning.

“I miss him, Robert, your father.” Her voice was fragile and oh-so-quiet. “More than I imagined was possible. I can see him. I can touch him. But he is not there. His awareness...he is gone.” A single tear rolled down her cheek.

Tentatively, Robert stepped forward and took his mother’s hand. They stood there in silence for a long time before Robert leaned forward and kissed the older woman’s cheek. “I will wed, Mother. Things will be well.”

She looked at him, her pastel eyes brimming with tears. “Your father is dying, Robert. Nothing will ever be well again.”

He stood there, feeling helpless, before she waved him away. Robert hesitated, not wanting to leave his mother upset, but relented as Amelia repeated her dismissal. Reluctantly, Robert retrieved his coat and cane and walked out into the cool, sunny day. Frustrated and helpless, Robert decided to do something he reserved for only very special occasions.

He decided to get exceptionally drunk.



Robert’s childhood friend, Edward Collins, deliberately purchased a London home near the Donahue’s townhouse. Thus, it was only a short time later Robert arrived outside Baron Stanton’s elegant estate. He found himself reluctant to approach. Collins and Robert were the best of friends as youths in the country, but life in London – and specifically the shrew Collins married – forced them apart. Yet, Collins was not only conveniently located, but he also knew the story of Ambler’s illness.

Sharing family secrets with him would not feel like betrayal; Collins was more like a cousin than an estranged friend. Nevertheless, reestablishing contact with Collins meant dealing with Elizabeth. Robert deliberated outside the Stantons' ostentatious drive for the better part of an hour before begrudgingly approaching the door.

The door to the estate opened before Robert finished traversing the stairs. He handed a footman his hat and cane before asking after his friend: "Is Collins in?"

Lord Stanton, Edward Collins, had never adhered to the traditional naming scheme of the *ton*. Rather than being Edward to his friends, Collins to his mates from college, and Stanton to his peers, he managed to simply be Collins. It irritated Robert; not for the lack of proper etiquette, but rather that Collins maintained such simplicity. Being Robert, Anderson, or Charmaine seemed unnecessary to Robert – why not have only one name?

The footman took the items with a bow. "I will inquire, Lord Charmaine. Would you care to wait in the front parlor?"

Robert acquiesced with a nod and escorted himself to a pale champagne sitting room. A crystal vase on an ornately carved table dominated the room. The hearty floral sent of cream-colored roses filled the air. He smiled at the distinctly feminine touch to the room; his rough and ready friend would never have chosen a table carved with cherubs.

Robert's broad shoulders and rugged looks were currently out of fashion. Collins' tall, lithe frame wore the current long tailed coat as if the trend was created specifically for him. His cream-colored breeches were tightly cut and the green of his coat was so vivacious Robert had trouble imagining what was used for dye. His hair was styled *à la mode*, curled and powdered several feet off of his head. His appearance was so removed from the friend he remembered. Robert's eyebrow arched unintentionally.

Collins grinned as he lifted the glass of brandy. "Go ahead. Say it."

Robert held up his hands defensively and searched for a neutral reply. His memories of Collins had them both in breeches dirty from climbing trees. Edward Collins had truly become Lord Stanton. Robert chose to remain silent.

His friend answered as if Robert had spoke, "I know. I should be wearing ripped clothing covered in mud and have sticks stuck in my hair." Collins shrugged. "Times change. Elizabeth taught me I like nice things." He took a sip of his brandy while one side of his mouth curled

upwards in amusement. “Aside from admiring my dress, what brings you to my doorstep?”

“I beg your pardon, Collins. That was not a polite greeting, was it? I was surprised to see you looking so...”

“Foppish?” Collins offered helpfully.

“Noble, actually.” Robert grimaced. “Not that you were not before, ah...”

Collins smiled. “I forgive you, Robert. I know I was far from the height of fashion as a youth. However, now I am considered a paragon of appropriate attire.” Collins sat on a chair that looked too delicate to support him. “What brings you to my home? I would invite you to my study, but,” he looked at the ceiling as the sound of shattering glass echoed down the stairs, “I fear it may be in the process of being redecorated.”

“That is perfectly alright. I do not wish to further upset Lady Stanton. I am aware she is not fond of me.”

Collins gave Robert a scolding look. “Considering you have been open in your belief my marriage to her was the worst thing I have ever done, I cannot imagine why you would expect her to enjoy your company.”

Robert looked at his large hands. “I did what I thought was right. I stand by that. If you are happy, I apologize.”

“I am happy.” A muffled clunking noise radiated down the stairs. “And I will accept your apology if you will stop evading my question.”

Robert glanced inquisitively over at his friend, “What question?”

“Why are you here? I have not seen you in over a year and now you are unexpectedly at my doorstep. Anyone would find this curious.”

“I...ah.” Robert ran his hands over the top of his head, smoothing out his unpowdered ponytail. “I would like us to go get foxed tonight.”

Now it was Collins turn to raise an eyebrow. “You do not drink.”

Robert nodded. “I know. But I think this might be a time where allowances are called for.”

“I...see.” Collins leaned back in the chair and considered. The Lord and Lady Stanton maintained a full social calendar. Tonight was no exception. There was a play, followed by a dinner that would last late into the night. He balanced the social implications of canceling his plans. “Do you wish to tell me what this is about?”

Robert frowned. “No.”

“Hm.” Collins’ lips tightened as he considered his friends request. If he missed the play, it might be possible to still make dinner. Hopefully

Elizabeth would understand. “I will meet you at Brooks at nine of the clock.”

“I am not a member. White’s?” Robert suggested instead.

“I should have pegged you for a Tory, Robert. Lucky for you, I am a member of both. Brooks’s may have my crowd, but White’s has better whist players.” Collins chuckled. “Then again, the man of no vices does not gamble.”

Robert stood with a wry smile. “Oh, I gamble. But only with notably large quantities of money.” He bowed. “I will see you at nine.”



Collins found Robert tucked into a rear booth, hunched over a decanter of whiskey. Several glasses were already missing. Collins sat without invitation and poured himself a drink. Robert remained focused on his beverage, apparently oblivious to Collins’ arrival.

Collins adjusted his long waistcoat and leaned back in the booth. “Nice weather we are having.”

Robert nodded. “Yes. I found today remarkably pleasant.”

“Elizabeth is especially fond of afternoon rides in the park while the weather is still cool. As the Season progresses she finds them tedious.”

“For once I find myself in agreement with Lady Stanton.” Robert shifted and pushed himself up so he was sitting straight in the booth, “The days grow quite warm after The Ascot. I much prefer the first half of the Season myself.”

Collins shrugged to indicate his dissenting opinion, “On the other hand, I am not fond of rain. I would rather face the heat than the damp. Lucky for me, Candlemas was bleak and dreary this year.”

“Yes. How does the rhyme go?”

Collins attempted a slight Scottish burr. “If Candlemas day be dry and fair, the half o’ winter to come and mair.” He shrugged. “The rest is lost to me.”

Robert emptied his tumbler suddenly. Slamming the glassware forcibly onto the table, he grumbled, “This conversation is foolish.”

“Yes,” Collins replied equably, “it is. Do you want to tell me what is bothering you, or shall I go back to remembering the rest of the rhyme? I know it has something to do with Yule.”

“Yes. No.” Robert’s eyes fell to his glass. “I do not want to tell you, but I want to tell you.”

“I understand.”

“You do?” Robert frowned in surprise. “I am not sure I do.”

Collins refilled Robert’s tumbler. “Something is bothering you. You either feel as if you should talk it through or someone has convinced you to talk it through. You have never been one to disclose your personal feelings. So you want to share, but do not want to share.”

“Exactly.” Robert took a large gulp of whiskey. “I intend to wed.”

“Considering a year gone you swore off marriage, this is indeed a change. Pray tell.”

Robert turned his drink as if examining the honey colored liquid. “This is the part I do not wish to reveal. But also why I requested your company.”

Collins’ expression provided no hint of his thoughts. “I contemplated your earlier visit. You are the only man I know who would plan to get foxed as a form of escape. You plan everything. I know you have friends here in London, so why would you turn to me? The choice was deliberate. The only reason I can think of is there is something wrong with your family.”

Robert nodded.

Collins fell quiet, sounding troubled. “Is it...Ambler?”

“No, no. Well, nothing new, anyway.” Robert shook his head quickly. “And my mother is well.”

“Good. I was worried. Is it too much to hope Ambler’s health has turned for the better?”

Robert frowned as he refilled his tumbler. “My father is still the same. His eyes open and shut, but he can do naught else. We still meet weekly to discuss financials.” His brow furrowed as he shut his eyes for a moment. Robert’s voice was gruff as he continued speaking. “I’m not really sure why. I don’t believe he can hear me. Hope, I suppose.”

Collins raised his tumbler. “To the health of Lord Donahue.”

The two men clinked glasses. Robert put his drink down and scowled at the table. “He’s not going to get better, Collins. Or, if he does, it will not be in time. I need to do something now.”

“Why? What’s wrong?” Collins leaned forward conspiratorially, speaking in same plotting whisper Robert remembered from their childhood. That voice had guided him on many ill-advised adventures and gotten him into plenty of trouble with his parents.

“It is,” Robert paused before continued fatalistically, “money.”

“I heard you fell on hard times lately. How bad is it?”

Robert swirled his drink before answering. “Bad.”

The two men sat in silence for a few moments. Collins spoke first, deliberately keeping his voice even and level. “Are you asking to borrow money from me?”

“No.” Robert’s reply was firm, even a bit heated. “Not at all.”

“God’s teeth, Robert, speak plainly. Either confide in me and tell me how I can help, or let us leave this topic and drink ourselves into a stupor.”

Robert looked at the whiskey decanter as if seriously considering the latter option. “My shipping investments have been delayed or destroyed. My liquid assets are almost all spent. My debt is exorbitant.” He finished his whiskey again. “The only answer I can see is to wed. I need a wife with capital. Land or title does not matter, nor if she is pleasant in temperament or unsightly to look upon. All that matters is she has a sizable dowry that can be accessed immediately.”

Collins refilled both their glasses as he considered the situation. Robert was particular with women. More troubling, Collins knew under Robert’s callous exterior he dreamed – or at least had dreamed – of love. “I am sure there are a plethora of such women who would be pleased to have your suit.”

His friend replied by grunt.

“Robert, listen to me,” Collins leaned forward over their drinks, “finding the right woman is important. There is more than one girl with money; you need to find the right one.”

“Otherwise I will end up with an Elizabeth?”

“You are foxed, so I will graciously forgive the insult to my wife. What you overlook is Elizabeth, for all her faults, is exactly what I want in a partner.” Collins voice was steady but filled with passion. “She is frisky, determined, interesting, fashionable, caring, and, most importantly, someone I am proud to call my wife. Do you want any less from Lady Charmaine?”

“Bloody hell, Collins, of course I want someone I am proud to call my wife. But the truth is what I want no longer matters. What matters is I am tempting ruin! I cannot pay my creditors. If I have to marry a poxy shrew to do so, I will!”

“Let us try to avoid that.” Collins critically analyzed his friend. “Are your estates secured?”

Robert gave him a foul look. “Yes. I locked that money away last year. And I have all my teeth, too.”

Collins ignored Robert’s foul temper as he continued, “Then I fail to see the difficulty. If we dust off these country manners that you are so

fond of inflicting upon yourself, you are a fair looking man and a Viscount.”

“A courtesy title,” Robert objected.

“Yes, Robert.” Collins replied. Exasperation crept into his voice. “The courtesy title held by heir of the Earl of Donahue.”

“I do not,” Robert paused. Sentences were rapidly becoming difficult to form. “I do not want someone who wants me for my title.”

Collins stared silently.

“I know. I want the chit for her money, but I want her to want me for me.” Robert set his empty tumbler down. “But I want, oh piss and bother what I want. Need is more important than want.”

Silence fell over the booth. Collins attempted to refill the glass but Robert waved him away. With a rueful grin, Robert shook his head. “I think I am done.”

Collins smiled. “Foxed?”

“Three sheets.”

“Will you even remember this in the morning? Oh, never mind. I already know you have no head for drink.” Collins gestured over to a servant and gave whispered orders. The man returned with ink and a quill; Collins jotted something down and handed it to his friend.

“What is this?” Robert unceremoniously crumpled the paper without waiting for it to dry. He shoved the smeared mess into his pocket.

“A reminder you will be joining Elizabeth and I for dinner Thursday night before the opera. We have a box.”

“I have no interest in the opera, Collins. It is frivolous nonsense.”

“Whether or not you like the opera is irrelevant, Robert. Opening night at Covent Gardens is one of *the* events of the Season. If you are on the hunt for a bride, it is where you need to be.”

Robert frowned slightly. “Fine.” The wrinkles on his face abruptly faded. One bushy eyebrow perked up, “Does this mean you are going to help me?”

“Yes.” Collins stoppered the whiskey decanter. “Did you honestly think otherwise?”

“I did not ask.”

“I know.” Collin smirked. “Do you remember when we were playing on the ruins and you pushed me off the wall?”

“You broke your leg. Never forgave me.”

“Correct. This will be my revenge.”

Robert’s brow furrowed. “Seeing my family slip and lose their fortune?”

“No, my foolish friend, not that.” Collins smirk grew into a full-fledged smile. “Seeing you suffer through a full London Season will be all the revenge I have ever needed.”