

Chapter 1
Signs of the Season

London, England
September 1878

“Will you do me a favor, Jeffrey?” asked Lucien Sinclair, the Marquis of Stancliff.

“That depends entirely on what it is.” Lord Jeffery Eddington smiled lazily at his oldest and closest friend. He settled into the large leather armchair, stretching out his tall form and placing his feet upon an upholstered footstool, quite at home in Lucien’s grand study. “It’s good to be back!”

“It’s good to see you here again,” Lucien said. “Everyone has missed you.”

“Of course they have.” Jeffrey had spent the better part of the last year in France on business and had just returned to London. “So,” he prompted Lucien, “this favor of yours... What is it?”

“It’s rather important...” Lucien hesitated, looking slightly uncomfortable.

“Something only you can do for me. And I need your utmost discretion.”

“Sounds serious.” Jeffrey’s blue eyes narrowed and his lazy smile disappeared.

Lucien began reluctantly, “It is... And I’m not quite sure how you’ll feel about it.”

“Go on then.” Jeffrey inclined his head.

“I need you to keep an eye on Yvette while we’re in America,” Lucien asked.

Jeffrey blinked. “You’re jesting.”

“I wish I were.” Lucien’s mouth formed a grim line.

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"I don't understand." Jeffrey sat up, suddenly not as comfortable as he had been. "Isn't she going to New York with you and Colette?"

Frowning, Lucien shook his head. "I would much rather she come with Colette and me, but Yvette is quite determined to stay in London without us."

"That's ridiculous!" Jeffrey wondered at the wisdom of allowing Yvette Hamilton, the youngest of the five sisters, to remain at Devon House without her family. It was unthinkable. "You should insist that she go with you."

"Believe me, I have tried, but you know Yvette as well as I do." Lucien sighed in heavy resignation. "She can be headstrong, like all the Hamilton women. Being the youngest, she's used to getting her own way. And she has made up her mind to stay in London and my wife has given her permission to stay. Naturally, I can't fight them both. Yvette's not foolish, but I don't like leaving her behind."

"But who will be here with her? Who will look after her?" Jeffrey asked, incredulous at this turn of events. They couldn't simply leave the girl alone!

"Well, Paulette and Declan are in Ireland until Christmas as usual, so Mrs. Hamilton has agreed to come up from Brighton to stay with her daughter here at Devon House, that way Yvette will not be unchaperoned at home. As much as I don't care a great deal for them personally, the girls' aunt Cecilia and uncle Randall Hamilton have agreed to escort her to any social events. They are actually looking forward to it, with the hopes of arranging a successful match for her. And of course, Lisette and Quinton are in town as well, but with Lisette just having had the baby, they won't be much help on that score." Lucien paused, giving his friend a pointed look. "You understand what I'm

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saying, Jeffrey. I need someone here who will know what is truly going on.” He flashed a knowing glance in Jeffrey’s direction. “Keep an eye on her.”

Yes, Jeffrey knew exactly what his friend meant. It had been the same with all the Hamilton girls, this quintet of lovely women who had become like his very own sisters. In one way or another Jeffrey had been there to protect each of them over the years and they had grown to trust him. Oh, the stories he could tell Lucien! But since he was a gentleman, and he loved each of them dearly, Jeffrey would never betray their trust by telling anyone what he knew about them.

Now Yvette was the last unmarried Hamilton sister and she would more than likely need the most looking after. With her blond hair and blue eyes, pretty little Yvette had always been a charming, flirtatious, and social creature seeking out grand, romanticized ideals and splendid dreams. She wanted to live her life as a princess. Yet after a season or two she still remained inexplicably unattached. Jeffrey wondered at the reasons for that. Why hadn’t his little Yvette married already? Why hadn’t some eligible nobleman snatched her up and made her his wife? She would be an asset to any man for Yvette was very beautiful, well educated, and utterly charming.

Although he hadn’t even seen her in months, he had known Yvette since she was a young girl and had always thought her the most striking of all the Hamilton sisters.

Having just returned to London that morning, after spending the better part of the last year working in France, the very thought of seeing everyone at Devon House tonight had kept his spirits up while he was away. This little family, *his* family, meant more to him than any of them realized. And Yvette... Well, little Yvette Hamilton had a special place in his heart.

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“Do you know why she’s so insistent on staying in London?” Jeffrey asked.

“No.” Lucien gave him another knowing look. “But I’m sure you’ll find out what her reason is before long. Or who.”

“Do you think there is someone in the picture?”

“That would be my guess.” Lucien shrugged helplessly. “But she hasn’t mentioned a word to me about it. Or Colette for that matter.”

Now that was surprising news. Yvette had always been quite keen on romance and most vocal about her romantic pursuits. Why was she keeping it such a secret now? What had happened? And who could have captured her attention enough for her to pass up a trans-Atlantic trip to visit her sister in New York? It was quite unlike Yvette. Was there a valid reason for her secrecy? Could she have fallen under the spell of a gentleman unworthy of her? Perhaps someone with an unsavory background or a man with questionable honor?

Someone had definitely caught her interest and the need for concealment did not bode well in his mind. A twinge of worry coursed through Jeffrey, though he did not mention it to Lucien. There was no need to make the man more anxious than he already was about leaving his youngest sister-in-law behind.

“You’ll do it, then?” Lucien asked.

“Yes, of course, I’ll look after Yvette,” Jeffrey promised. He could not refuse his childhood friend. He and Lucien had looked out for each other since they were young boys at Eton, bonding over the unhappiness that was rife in both in their families. They were as close as any brothers could be. He would do anything for Lucien.

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Besides, Jeffrey could never ignore one of the Hamilton sisters, least of all sweet, little Yvette. He would readily and gladly give his life for any of them. In all honesty he would have watched over her even without Lucien asking him.

"Thank you." Lucien said with relief in his voice as he handed Jeffrey a glass of bourbon. "Here," he added with a rueful laugh. "You'll probably need this."

"You're the one going to visit Juliette. You'll need it more than I," Jeffrey retorted with a wicked grin. "Hell, take the whole bottle."

Jeffrey and Lucien laughed together, for Juliette Hamilton had given them both cause to lose sleep at one point or another. However, the second Hamilton sister had calmed considerably since marrying Captain Harrison Fleming and happily settling down in America.

"No, my friend," Lucien's face turned serious. "I'll leave this for you. I'm not sure what she's up to, but if anyone can drive a man to drink, it might just be Yvette."

Jeffrey was inclined to agree in spite of himself. "You're more than likely right about that." The girl was too pretty and too romantic to be trusted to act rationally.

"Whatever you do," Lucien added with a note of solemnity, "don't let Yvette know I asked you to do this. Be subtle in your watching over her. Anything heavy handed and she's likely to rebel out of sheer stubbornness."

"I'm not an idiot, Lucien. She is the fifth Hamilton sister, and not my first go around. Didn't I manage to get the others safely married? I know how to handle this situation." At least Jeffrey thought he did. He was like Yvette's older brother, for Christ's sake. He could handle a little girl like her. "You and Colette should enjoy yourselves in America. Don't give another thought to what's going on here. I'll make

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sure Yvette stays out of harm's way and doesn't do anything too foolish." Jeffrey raised his brows in mock alarm. "Although if she takes after her older sisters, I can only hope whatever she does isn't as drastic as any of their adventures were."

Lucien smiled at Jeffrey. "Just try to keep her from doing anything reckless. Quinton will do the best he can also, but he's preoccupied with Lisette and the baby. Colette and I will be home in time for Christmas. Just keep her safe until then."

"That's three months," Jeffrey said.