

## *Chapter One*

London, England  
May 1865

Lord and Lady Maxwell's ballroom was decorated with colorful garlands of fresh flowers perfuming the air and countless flickering candles lighting the room. Long oak tables, draped with the finest linen cloths trimmed in Belgian lace, were laden with sterling silver platters piled with delicacies and refreshments of all sorts and sparkling Irish crystal champagne flutes arranged artfully along the side, ready for toasting. A myriad of obliging servants were there to accommodate the slightest need of the hundreds of invited guests, the crème de la crème of London society, arriving in their most formal attire. The full orchestra, hidden behind a delicate Chinese screen, played melodiously at the end of the room near the dance floor. The steady buzz of voices in animated conversation was punctuated with bursts of merry laughter echoing through the elegant crowd of young debutantes, hopeful parents, eligible bachelors, social climbers, and society matrons.

For the first grand ball of the Season, a general feeling of excitement and expectation was in the air and everyone was in high spirits.

Olivia Fairchild, the Dowager Countess of Glenwood, had wasted no time in introducing her two granddaughters to the sons and grandsons of her aristocratic friends, and soon both Emma's and Caroline's dance cards were filled.

"Now, girls, try to remember everything your Aunt Jane and I taught you," Olivia intoned in an encouraging whisper.

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At her insistence, both granddaughters had been dressed painstakingly for their debut. The preparations had taken nearly all day. As young girls traditionally did at their first ball, Caroline, although considered somewhat old at twenty-two, wore a gown of soft white satin with small capped sleeves, which accentuated her fair skin and slender figure. Her long, honey colored hair was pinned up loosely on her head, and tiny white rosebuds were arranged there, forming a delicate crown, while stray tendrils of hair curled softly around her face. The effect was casually elegant, but it had taken what seemed like hours to get it just right. Arm-length white gloves and white satin slippers completed the ethereal ensemble.

As Caroline Armstrong twirled the white satin ribbon that held her card, she dreaded the part she knew she had to play when the first gentleman came to claim his dance. In spite of her grandmother's hopeful predictions for her, a brilliant Season with scores of promising gentlemen vying for her hand in marriage was not in Caroline's future. She would make sure of that. She had to.

When Sir Edward Winslow extended his arm to her, Caroline gave him a half-hearted smile and lowered her eyes demurely as he escorted her to the dance floor. He was a nice looking young man of average height with a shy grin. Within a matter of minutes, she was thanking heaven for every dance lesson she had endured, because she needed all her resources to follow Sir Edward Winslow's jerky, erratic movements. Too enthusiastic a dancer to simply waltz, Edward marched her awkwardly about the floor, pulling on her arms with a determined look of concentration on his long face. As she struggled to stay in step with his clumsy gait, she wondered if the boy had ever had a dance lesson in his life.

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“It is a pleasure dancing with you, Miss Armstrong,” he declared while panting with exertion. “You are like dancing with an angel from heaven.”

“Thank you.” She looked down at her poor, trod-upon feet in their brand-new dainty slippers, and she bit her lip. The experience was quite the opposite of heavenly! Yet Lord Winslow seemed very kind, and feeling somewhat sorry for him, she hadn't the heart to put her secret plan into effect and simply let him fall under the impression that she was extremely shy. Not daring to engage him in any conversation, she did not speak again, only nodded her head in answer to his polite questions and marched the remainder of the waltz with him.

Her next partner, however, was fairly begging to be set down a notch or two and appeared to be an apt subject upon which to implement her untested method of deterring suitors. Caroline became much more blatant in her discouragement of him, if only to save herself from ever having to be near the man again. *Oily* was the only word she could think of to describe Lord Arthur Kingston. *Maybe a snake*, she thought, as he eased her to the dance floor. His hard fingers pressed tightly against her arms, and his too-bright smile seemed avaricious. Some women might have found him handsome enough in a slick sort of way, but the pair of thin wet lips under his fashionable set of whiskers and the calculating gleam in his sharp eyes unnerved her. Not quite sure why she felt so instantly repulsed by him, she reasoned now was as good a time as any to turn him away.

“You, Miss Armstrong,” he whispered heatedly in her ear as he squeezed her tighter, “are the prettiest girl here tonight. I thought I knew all the prettiest girls in London. Where have you been hiding all this time?”

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And without compunction for this ungentlemanly gentleman, Caroline put her secret plan into effect.

Wishing to escape another unwanted dance partner, Caroline managed to slip away from the ballroom unnoticed. Her aunt and uncle were engaged in conversation with Lady Maxwell; her sister was dancing a reel with a rather short, blond gentleman; and her grandmother was having an animated discussion with Lady Weatherby. She would not be missed for a moment or two. She passed the card room, where the older ladies and gentlemen were playing whist and faro, and ambled aimlessly down a long hallway, taking a moment here and there to admire the formal Maxwell family portraits displayed on the walls. No one paid any attention to her as she ascended a short flight of stairs and stepped through a set of French doors, which opened onto a marble balcony overlooking a well-manicured garden.

A full moon bathed the balcony in a silvery light, and Caroline breathed in the fresh air, which was perfumed with the scent of blooming lilacs. The cool air felt refreshing after the stuffiness of the ballroom. Because she was so warm and still unused to wearing them, she peeled off her long, white gloves and stuffed them into her small reticule, reminding herself to don them again before she returned to her grandmother. Olivia would certainly disapprove of her granddaughter being gloveless.

Relieved to finally be alone, she leaned against a tall marble pillar, which felt deliciously cool against her warm skin, and breathed deeply. It was quiet here; she could

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barely hear the faint strains of music from the ballroom. Gazing up at the glowing full moon, her thoughts drifted and a slight sigh escaped her.

The mere fact that she was attending a ball in London at all was still unbelievable. Only months earlier she lived with her father and sister in a little cottage in the country. When her father died last October, he left her and Emma penniless, and Caroline had just accepted a position as a governess with a family in Sussex. Then her grandmother, Olivia Fairchild, the Dowager Countess of Glenwood, arrived, rescuing her and Emma from an uncertain fate and bringing them into a new world. She consequently met a family she had never known. During the past six months, she had grown to love her grandmother, as well as her mother's brother, Uncle Kit, and his wife, Jane, and their young son, Teddy. This new family was a soothing balm to help ease the ache of being left orphaned by the death of both her parents. Now after months of training in etiquette and deportment with her grandmother and Aunt Jane, she was finally making her Season debut in London, as all well-bred young ladies of society did. The ultimate goal, of which, was to find a suitable husband.

Caroline had agonized for weeks over what to do about this situation. Would she be able to deter any suitors without causing her grandmother to become aware of her true intentions? Would her newly devised plan actually work? Could she extricate herself from the possibility of marriage without arousing suspicions of the truth?

The truth that still haunted her night after night. The truth that she could not marry anyone.

“Such a beautiful young lady shouldn't look so sad on such a beautiful night.”

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Almost jumping out of her skin, Caroline was startled by the sound of a deep male voice. With her hand on her pounding heart, she turned and saw the tall figure of a man leaning against another white marble column in the shadows at the far end of the balcony.

“I apologize for startling you.”

After taking a shaky breath, her hand still on her heart, she murmured, “No, I am sorry, sir. I had no idea anyone else was out here. Forgive me if I have intruded.” She turned to leave.

“No apologies are necessary. There is no reason for you to go,” he said, his voice distinctive in its resonance. “We can both enjoy this incredible full moon.”

As he moved forward and the moonlight fell across his face, Caroline saw that she did not recognize the man standing in the shadows. In fact she was quite certain that she had never met him before, because she would have remembered seeing that face. Oh yes, she definitely would have remembered seeing that man's face before. Her heart skipped a beat as she stared up at him, startling her more than his voice had just done. He was quite tall and powerfully built. He possessed a muscular body that was evidently used to a great deal of physical activity, and he held himself with an easy confidence. A suit of the finest quality fit his masculine form elegantly, without being fussy. Dark black hair covered his head, and piercing blue eyes peered astutely from his classically chiseled face. He was not sporting a set of whiskers, as was the current fashion for men, but was clean shaven, which set off his features more prominently: an aquiline nose; a strong angular jawline; and dark expressive eyebrows framed eyes that projected honesty, intelligence and humor. He was handsome with a very commanding presence.

The man was perfect looking.

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“Why aren't you inside, trying to find a husband like all the other girls?” He stepped toward her, stopping about a foot away, and leaned himself casually against the white marble railing.

She saw him smile and then realized her was teasing her. Oddly unsettled by his physical presence and more than a little irked by his condescending comment, she offered back with slight sarcasm, “Maybe I don't want a husband.”