
Chapter 1

London, 1809..

LORD ROBERT LAMERCIER, Earl of Medwell, rubbed his temples with his knuckles and stared at the woman in front of him. His head ached and his mouth was dry from the copious amounts of brandy he had consumed the night before and, by damn, it was far too early to have to think. What was this woman doing here? He was fairly certain that she had not shared his bed last night. As his vision cleared, he was convinced of it. He would never bed such a plain, sensible-looking woman.

As his bleary eyes began to focus, he studied her more closely. His mouth thinned into a line of disapproval. She was shorter than the average woman, and her mousy brown hair was scraped into a knot at the back of her head as if she had no desire to make herself in any way appealing to those who had to look at her. Her grey dress seemed designed to make her as unattractive as possible. The earl shuddered. Such a sight was more than his aching head could cope with so early in the morning.

She was talking, and somewhere beneath the haze of his hangover, he found her voice surprisingly soothing. It was like the gentle susurration of a breeze on a warm spring afternoon. But then he frowned as what she was saying began to fall into patterns of meaning he could follow.

"I am sorry to disturb you, your lordship. I had not thought you would not be properly attired at such a late hour of the day." She spoke politely, but the disapproval in her voice could not be disguised.

The earl glanced down at the quilted blue and gold dressing gown he had pulled over his shirt and breeches. His shirt was open at the top as he had not yet put on a waistcoat or cravat. Arranging his cravat to his satisfaction took at least fifteen minutes when he was sober. With a hangover, it took considerably longer.

"It is not yet noon, and yet you invade my house and criticize my apparel," he observed, his smooth voice containing a hint of warning that many men would have found intimidating, yet this woman, or girl, he amended as he observed her more closely, didn't flinch. Her steady hazel eyes simply swept over him. If he had not been watching her so closely, he would have missed the consternation that flashed in their depths. "Besides," he added, "I have no idea who you are or why Tomlinson thought he should let you disturb me at such an ungodly hour."

"Decent people have been up and about for hours. Half the day has passed already and I had not thought to find you still asleep," she bit back, the softness of her voice overlaid with asperity that reflected both the irritation and uncertainty in her eyes.

Medwell blinked and then stared at her again. Her hazel eyes flashed with indignation. They were very large eyes, and now, with the spark of fire burning in them, they lit her whole face, and for a moment, she looked almost pretty. He

shook his head and sank back against the cushions on the sofa. He did not invite her to sit, even though not to do so showed a want of manners that would have horrified his mother. "Tomlinson," he called, turning his head slowly to avoid the sharp pain that stabbed through his skull as he looked for his butler.

"I have arranged for some coffee to be served to you, my lord, and your guest." The butler's voice was impassive as was right for a butler, but he could not help showing a hint of disapproval at the earl's lack of manners towards Miss Jane Goodwin. He had served the earl for many years and considered his position as more of an adviser and mentor than simply a servant.

The earl ignored the note of censure and sat up a little straighter as a footman entered, carrying a large tray on which a silver coffee service was set out. As the footman placed the tray on a low table at the earl's elbow, the butler continued with a sympathetic look at Jane, "Will Miss Goodwin be joining you for breakfast, my lord?"

The earl grunted something unintelligible, but Jane smiled sweetly at the butler. "Thank you, Tomlinson, but I had breakfast hours ago." Then, without invitation, she seated herself primly on a chair directly in Medwell's line of sight. "I will try not to take too much of your time, my lord, as I am sure you are wanting to engage in whatever idle occupations you have planned for today."

He raised his eyebrow but did not respond to her taunt. "I still don't know who you are or what you are doing in my house at this ridiculous hour," Lord Medwell grumbled, pouring himself a cup of coffee and dropping three cubes of sugar into the dark liquid.

Jane rose and approached the tray. "I might not require breakfast, but I will take a cup of coffee, thank you." She spoke as if he had not snubbed her at all, and then, with a

severe look at the lumps of sugar he was putting into his cup, added, "You might find it more effective to take unsweetened coffee, in your condition."

The earl glowered at her. "Good God, woman, what would you know about the best damn way to handle a hang-over?" He deliberately added another lump to his already too sweet coffee.

Jane poured herself a cup of coffee and returned to her seat. "My father always preferred unsweetened coffee when he was indisposed because of excessive drinking," she stated in such matter-of-fact tones that Lord Medwell stared at her for a moment. He was not used to a woman who spoke openly of such matters.

"I have no idea who you are or who your father is," he repeated. "Nor do I wish to know."

Jane sat down, took a sip of coffee and glanced at him before answering. "My name is Jane Goodwin." She paused, but when he showed no sign of recognition of the name, she added, "I was expecting you to be somewhat older."

The earl gave his head a slight shake at this complete *non sequitur*. "What has my age to do with why you, Miss Goodwin, are sitting in my drawing room drinking my coffee?"

"From what my father said, I thought the Earl of Medwell was at least as old as he was. You are not yet in your fifties."

"My fifties!" the earl spluttered. "I should think not. Why would you think I am that old? In fact, why would you think of me at all?"

Jane took another sip of coffee and a serene smile lit her face. "This coffee is very good."

"Damn you, woman! You are the most frustrating person I have ever met."

Jane gave him a severe look. "Do watch your language," she admonished.

Lord Medwell's voice rumbled as the coffee he had been swallowing began to take effect. "I will swear in my own damn house if I please. No one invited you to come here, and I do not need a nursemaid correcting my language at every turn." He glared at her. "I will be driven to use words far worse than that if you don't get to the point of your visit, and then your prissy ears will truly be offended, perhaps enough for you to leave me in peace."

Jane ignored this outburst. She placed her coffee cup on the saucer and reached into her pocket for a letter which she smoothed with a slow sweep of slender fingers that he watched in fascination. There was something almost sensual in the slow, careful movement and he felt his cock harden unaccountably. He fought for control of his unruly body and studied her face again closely. For the first time since this strange interview had begun, she looked a little unsure of herself. With a conscious effort, she set her shoulders back and looked squarely at the earl. "Mr. Baldwin said you had been apprised of the situation."

Robert uttered another groan. "Who the hell is Mr. Baldwin? If you don't start beginning to make sense, I am going to turn you over my knees and spank your bottom until you begin to speak clearly."

Jane's eyes widened. "You wouldn't." Her voice conveyed more of a question than a challenge and there was a hint of awe that sent blood rushing to the earl's groin.

"Wouldn't I?" He had a sudden vision of her slight body placed over his knees, her skirt raised to bare her bottom, creamy and delightful, waiting for his attention. He swallowed hard.

Jane regained some of her composure. "I am beginning to think a grave error has been made. I cannot believe that Father would have left us in the care of such a profane and overbearing man. Although," she added philosophically,

"when he was in a temper, he often used words that no lady should ever hear."

Her words galvanized the earl. He sat bolt upright, almost knocking his coffee cup over. He grabbed it before it crashed to the floor and placed it back on the table with a loud clatter. "What the f..." He stopped himself just in time, took a deep breath and then as calmly as he could, considering the thunderbolt she had so casually thrown at him, demanded, "Explain yourself more clearly. Who exactly am I supposed to take care of, and more importantly, why the h... Why should I?"

Jane's eyebrow arched disapprovingly at the profanity, but she merely said, "You have been appointed to take care of my sisters. The will says that I, too, am to be under your guardianship, but that does not seem necessary to me. Unfortunately, it gives you the right to our finances and I am obliged to ask you when I need access to our resources. It is most annoying. I would not have approached you at all, as I have been taking care of my sisters for years, even before Father died, but our circumstances have changed and now I find myself in need of the help of a person well-established in society."

"Sisters?" He gulped. "How many of you are there?" He had a sudden image of a dozen or so girls all identical to Jane, but each a little smaller than the previous, invading his home and glowering at him every time he did something they did not approve of.

"We are five altogether. I am the eldest and Messy... Esmeralda, at thirteen, is the youngest."

"Five schoolgirls! Who on earth thought I would be a suitable person to care for a passel of little girls."

Jane bristled. "I am not little. I am quite grown up and Cecilia is well past the age for coming out. Only the younger ones are still in the schoolroom."

The earl ran an appraising eye over Jane's slight form. "You are little, just a scrap of a girl. How old are you, exactly?"

"Did no one ever teach you that it is not polite to ask a lady her age?"

"I think I have every right to know many intimate details about you if I am to have the care of you and your sisters foisted on me."

His slight emphasis on the word *intimate* brought all kinds of inappropriate ideas into Jane's mind but she brushed them aside, realizing that the Earl of Medwell was softening and seemed prepared to hear her out. "I was one-and-twenty on my last birthday and well past the age of needing anyone to care for me."

Lord Robert raised his eyebrow skeptically as he poured himself another cup of coffee. "I doubt that." He cast a meaningful eye over her clothes. "I think you are in desperate need of someone to ensure that you make the most of your assets."

Jane flushed. "We have only just come out of mourning and most of my clothes are grey. Besides, it made sense to buy each of my sisters a new dress, as they have all grown quite a bit in the last year. My clothes are more than adequate for my needs."

The earl eyed her curiously. In spite of the after-effects of his drinking bout the night before, he discerned much about Miss Goodwin from her matter-of-fact reply. She was intelligent, capable and considered the needs of others before her own. She was clearly well-bred and he would consider more about her when he was alone, but for now, he focused on the immediate problem. "You were in mourning for your father?" he surmised.

Jane nodded. "Father died just over a year ago, after a protracted illness. I believe that Mr. Baldwin sent you a letter

at the time. I was surprised that we never heard from you, although we managed quite comfortably in Hampshire on our own during the mourning period."

"I recall no such letter." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Of course, it might be possible that the letter was meant for *my* father."

Jane's face brightened with sudden hope. "That would make sense." She began to rise. "I do apologize, your lordship, for disturbing you. If you could let me know how to contact your father, I will leave you to your breakfast and consult the *right* person about my sisters."

"Not so fast, little girl. Sit down." The sudden undertone of authority in the earl's voice compelled Jane to return to her seat. She looked at him with a frown and puzzled eyes. "My father passed away about eighteen months ago. If you had taken the time to think, you would have realized that I could not be the Earl of Medwell if he were still alive."

Jane looked crestfallen. The long months of carrying the burdens of her family suddenly seemed too heavy a weight for her shoulders. Her voice lost the assured tone she had displayed for most of the interview. "What am I to do? Everything is such a dreadful muddle."

The vulnerability in her eyes stirred Lord Medwell's compassion, a quality that was usually deeply buried beneath his cynicism. "Let me see the letter you brought with you."

Silently, Jane handed it to him and watched anxiously as he read it. Nothing on his face gave any indication of what he might be thinking. He reached the end and then began again from the beginning, reading slowly. The protracted silence made Jane nervous. She wanted to do something very childish, like shout or stamp her feet to break the dreadful tension, but her sense of dignity and long years of looking after her sisters had taught her to show a calm facade, no matter what storms were rioting in her heart.

She breathed a sigh when the earl folded the letter and placed it on the table beside his coffee cup. "The specifications are watertight," he remarked. "There is no loophole through which I can wriggle my way out. Your father named the Earl of Medwell in his will as the guardian of his five daughters, so you will have to tolerate my profane assistance."

Jane wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. She covered her confusion by reaching for the coffee pot, but when she tried to pour some into her cup, she realized it was empty. The earl rang for his butler and soon Tomlinson had refreshed the coffee pot and organized the footmen to bring in some cold meats, fruit and cake.

Lord Medwell ushered Jane to the table near the window. "There are a few things we need to discuss, and I need my breakfast." When he had loaded his plate with slices of buttered bread between which he stuffed thick pieces of ham and Jane was nibbling a sweet, juicy apple, he asked, "Why have you brought your sisters to London? Would it not have been more expeditious to remain in Hampshire?"

Jane swallowed a piece of apple. "There are a few reasons. We had to leave our home because the estate is entailed and father's closest male relative, a third cousin, has now returned from the West Indies and has moved in. He has a family of his own and we would have been in the way there."

Robert munched his ham sandwich thoughtfully. His lifestyle was not conducive to looking after a group of school-girls, and yet his deep sense of responsibility urged him to listen carefully to Jane Goodwin, hearing in her tone, reading in her gestures, much that she did not openly say. He felt an annoying stirring of sympathy for the young woman who was so primly explaining her situation.

He swallowed a mouthful of bread and ham. "Was there

no relative who could help you? I still do not understand why your father chose me—or at least my father—to be your guardian. There must be some kind of annuity allowed by your father's will that would support you and your sisters in Hampshire?"

Jane looked out the window at the watery March sunshine that did little to make the London morning appealing. "The countryside is far more attractive than the city, but it is important for Cecilia to have a London Season." She turned to the man who was now guardian to her sisters. "She is very beautiful and Father always declared that her face would be her fortune. I do believe that she will attract a suitable husband and then I will be able to pay more attention to the younger girls." When the earl raised a quizzical eyebrow, she explained, "Mama passed away when I was thirteen and I have been responsible for them ever since. And, yes, we do have an annuity, but it is not very much. Besides, we need you to access the funds for us. It is most annoying that Father did not appoint me as guardian, but that is one of the other reasons we came to London. The cash we had available is running out and we will need to draw on the funds." She blushed as she admitted, "Father was not very careful with his income and although we can live comfortably day to day, there is not enough for a respectable dowry for each of four sisters."

"Four sisters? I thought there were five of you." Robert was thinking rapidly as he listened. The last fumes of his drunkenness evaporated and his agile mind was putting things together quickly.

Jane gave a light scoff. "I am past the marriageable age and with no dowry, no one would choose to marry me. I am content to help my sisters."

Robert glared at her. "You are a spring chicken. Twenty-one is hardly time to put yourself on the shelf." He finished

his bread and ham and selected a pear from the fruit dish. "So, let me see if I have this right. You are the eldest of five sisters who have a moderate income and no dowries to speak of. You have no relatives to turn to for help and you have brought your sisters to London because you believe that your one sister is so beautiful that she will attract a rich husband." He bit into the pear. "And I am responsible for all of you."

Jane shifted on the chair and moved a piece of apple around on her plate. "You make it sound almost sordid, but, yes, that is a reasonable summary of our situation."

"I suppose you have developed your romantic notions about your sister from the stories of the Gunning sisters. Many have tried and most have failed to do what they achieved."

A blush brought color to Jane's cheeks and her eyes flashed with indignation. "We are far more respectable than they were. Cecilia is a decent and modest young lady and it is her character that will ensure her success." Her voice dropped a little. "Besides, she is not completely penniless. She will have my dowry portion as well as her own." She raised her hazel eyes to him. "If you met her, you would soon agree with me."

"We shall see," he bit back. "What exactly did you expect my father to do for you?"

Again, Jane's eyes clouded with anxiety. "I had thought that he would introduce Cecilia into society and that his wife would support her, guide her in how to behave at balls and dinners, to ensure that she attracts the right kind of suitor."

The earl raised a skeptical eyebrow. "My mother does not go into society. She remains at our country estate."

"I don't suppose you are married. I cannot imagine a wife would allow her husband to loll about all day."

"You would suppose right. I have avoided marriage for

many years and do not plan to marry until I am well over forty years of age."

"Would you introduce us into society? I am sure once Cecilia has made some acquaintances, she will receive invitations, and of course, I will chaperone her, so that will not be a problem."

Lord Robert almost dropped the cup of coffee he was drinking. "You are in need of a chaperone yourself. I think it might be best if I came to visit you and your sisters, and then I will decide what is best to be done."