

# Chapter One

London, England.  
February 1850

If one had asked Griffin Sackville, Duke of Dorset, if he were a happy man at the start of that fateful day in February, he would have said that he was, thank you very much. After all, he had managed to live to the ripe old age of thirty without losing his hair or his freedom, two things that his old university friends seemed to be missing with increasing frequency.

Take Joseph Woodham-Anderson, the Marquess of Hamilton. Up until last year he had often joined Griffin for nights of drinking, gambling and general debauchery at theatres and gaming dens. Then all of a sudden the idiot had taken it upon himself to get leg-shackled, and to a governess, at that! That part was all hush-hush, but Joseph had told him the story himself one night when they were celebrating his forthcoming marriage.

Not that the new Marchioness of Hamilton was anything but lovely, of course; she had been known to the *ton*, the hundred or so families that made up London's high society, as Lady Elizabeth Warrington before her marriage. Griffin had immediately seen why Joseph had married her when she had come to his house, disguising herself as a governess. Any red-blooded man (or blue blooded, come to that) who had her in the house with him would have done the same. She was beautiful.

However, as far as Griffin was concerned, there were many beautiful women in the world, and one didn't have to go around marrying them to enjoy their company and bed. His own mistress was widely regarded as one of the most beautiful of the *demi-monde*, and she was available to him whenever he decided that he desired her attention. Frequent gifts of expensive jewellery and *carte blanche* at the most fashionable dress makers, milliners and purveyors of feminine accoutrements made sure that she was always pleased to see him.

He had been with Veronica on that particular day. It was early in the afternoon, and he'd spent the morning going over reports from his estates with his man of business. He was pleased with the revenues that his mines and other enterprises had generated, and he decided to celebrate with a visit to his mistress. He stopped off first at the Haymarket to visit Garrards, the jewellers. After some careful discussion with the proprietor, he selected some pretty emerald and diamond earbobs. Veronica had exotic, cat-like green eyes, and loved jewellery that accented them.

They had a pleasant lunch, cooked by the French chef his proud mistress insisted he hire for her. She always demanded the best, and he was happy to indulge her. She was famous amongst the select circle of noblemen that made up the *ton* as his mistress, and her status reflected on him. After lunch he presented her with the ear bobs, and she wore them and only them as she stripped naked in the dining room and rode him then and there at the table. Watching her lithe and sensuous body ripple as she rose up and down on his proud cock was a true pleasure, and the little pants and moans she made as he took her small breasts in his large palms and pinched her pink nipples were music to his ears.

She set a deliberately slow pace, creating a delicious sort of tension as she squeezed him with those tight internal muscles that kept him on the edge of release. This wouldn't do; he was

the master here, not a horse that she rode for her pleasure. He moved his hands to her backside, squeezing the firm muscle there encouragingly.

"Faster," he said, bucking up into her with slightly more force. He accompanied his instruction with a slap to her behind, enjoying the shocked look on her face. It took three or four more slaps to get her up to the speed he wanted, and the aggrieved pout on her pretty face made his cock, already ramrod-stiff, even harder.

Securing her small, light form with one of his arms, he rose from the chair he was sitting in, careful to stay sheathed within her. Using his free arm, he pushed the remnants of their intimate lunch to one side of the table, and deposited her in the cleared space. This change of position suited him; he liked to be the one in control of their encounters. He could thrust at a faster speed, now he was standing, and proceeded to hook her legs over his shoulders to get a better angle. Veronica began to squeal and thrash beneath him, but he knew that she loved the feeling of his big, thick cock pounding away inside her. Sure enough, it took only a few firm, deliberate circles of his thumb at her pleasure centre, and he could feel her body contract as her orgasm took hold. His responsibilities as a gentleman taken care of, he pursued his own pleasure now. He could hear her half-sob with every thrust, and he took delight in causing a strangled scream as he bit down on one of her pretty nipples as he felt his orgasm pooling in the pit of his stomach. He retained enough control to withdraw from her body, and grunted as he spent his seed over her olive-hued, perfumed skin.

He knew that ladies of her profession had their methods of preventing conception, and Veronica assured him that she made use of them, but he was scrupulous in his behaviour. He knew men of his class that sired bastards without any thought to their future lives, but he did not want to saddle any child with that ignominy. Bastard children, even if acknowledged by their fathers, suffered from the stigma of their birth all their lives. There was no way that he could bring forth a child into a world that would treat it with disrespect simply because of the circumstances of its birth.

The thought of children of any state of legitimacy filled him with unease, if he was honest. He knew that sooner or later he'd have to secure the succession of the title; he had no brothers to inherit, or sisters to provide squalling, red-faced heirs. However, there seemed no need to rush the issue. Plenty of time for all that, he assured himself.

After he had spent the rest of the afternoon with Veronica, taking her again as she bent over the arm of the sofa and spending his seed across the smooth skin of her back, he told his driver to take him to White's, his club. There should be some of the usual crowd there, and no doubt they would make plans for the evening. He was required to attend two private balls, but they could both be dispensed with by ten o'clock, and other, less salubrious fun could be found elsewhere in London.

However, no sooner had he dropped into his chair in the smoking room and picked up a copy of *The Times*, than a footman appeared with a message that a solicitor was waiting at the front desk, anxious to see him.

"My solicitor? Barnes?" Griffin said, frowning. "He knows to contact me at home."

"No, sir, this gentleman's name is Mr. Halifax," said the footman. He paused, and then added, rather doubtfully, "He is not from London, sir."

The tone of astonishment that anybody would choose not to reside in London was clear in the footman's speech. Griffin schooled his features into an impassive state, which, he had been reassured by his valet, was most ducal.

"Show him into the library, if you please," Griffin said, standing. "Sign him in as my guest."

The footman bowed and withdrew. If Griffin had known it, this would have been the moment that he would have stopped thinking that this was a happy day. This was, in fact, the beginning of events that would forever have Griffin thinking that it was, in fact, a fateful day, and one that would change the course of his life forever.

The man waiting for him in the library was most definitely a solicitor from the middling classes; his clothing was well made, but cut from inexpensive fabrics. His shoes were polished to a blinding shine, but they were old. He was studying the room intently, taking note of the leather-bound tomes in their polished walnut bookshelves, and probably calculating the value of each of them, Griffin thought wryly.

"Mr. Halifax," he said, closing the door of the room behind him. "I am Dorset."

The solicitor bowed, with just the right inclination of the head to show respect for Griffin's position but not so much as to be obsequious. Griffin was impressed. There was nothing that irritated him more than people who assumed that because he was a duke, he required them to follow at his heels and lick his boots.

"Your grace, I apologise for interrupting your time at your club, but I was unable to find you at your residence," he said simply. His voice held the remnants of a country burr that immediately marked him as hailing from the middle of England's countryside. Griffin's mind began to run through scenarios that might bring a rural solicitor all the way to London to find him. He had no holdings in the Midlands, and he did no business there.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Halifax?" Griffin asked, walking to one of the desks that sat in the large room. It was close to the large fire that burned in the grate, and he sat there, enjoying the warmth. Mr. Halifax stood behind the chair opposite him until Griffin gestured impatiently that he should sit there, also.

"I am the legal representative of the Earl of Shrewsbury, your grace," the man said simply, reaching down to extract some suspiciously complicated looking paperwork from his briefcase. "Or rather, to be more accurate, I should say that I *was* his legal representative."

Oh, lord. Uncle Henry. The black sheep of the family, or rather, of his mother's side of the family. His mother, the self-titled Dowager Duchess of Dorset, had, like the rest of her family, turned her back on her wayward brother several decades ago. He had been, according to gossip, enamoured of a maid in the family's house in the country. Instead of bedding her, like any other aristocrat would have done, he had done the unthinkable—he had married her. It had caused huge consternation in the family, and he had announced that anybody who wasn't willing to accept his wife wasn't welcome in his company. His mother and sisters had decamped to the London home of the Shrewsburys, and he had remained in the country with his wife.

Griffin had never met him; his mother never spoke of him. In their copy of *Burke's Guide To The Peerage*, his mother had taken scissors to the page that listed him and cut him out of the book as neatly as she had cut him out of her life. In all honesty, Griffin had forgotten that the old man existed.

"I take it that my uncle has died?" he said, frowning.

"He passed away two weeks ago, your grace, and I am the executor of his will. I am here to inform you of your inheritance."

Griffin sighed. Of course. The old boy's wife had died ten years after their marriage, childless. The Shrewsbury title was his now, as would be the Shrewsbury estate and all its holdings. Hang on though; hadn't there been something in the papers six or seven years ago

about another marriage? He'd been on his Grand Tour of the great cities of Europe at the time, and so news from home had been infrequent.

"I seem to recall that my uncle had married recently, Mr. Halifax," Griffin said. "Is the Countess of Shrewsbury provided for in my uncle's will?"

The other man coughed, and shuffled the papers on the desk slightly.

"I am afraid to say that the Countess of Shrewsbury died after giving birth to Lady Amelia, your grace. She has been dead these six years."

Griffin tried not to show his annoyance. These were facts that he should have known, family feud or not.

"I see," Griffin said shortly.

"I'm afraid that you may not, your grace," Mr. Halifax said kindly. "Will you allow me to lay the facts of the matter before you?"

"Please do, Mr. Halifax," Griffin said heavily. He rose, and went to the bell-pull on the wall. "I think that I will be in need of some refreshment. Will you join me?"

"Thank you, your grace," the solicitor said calmly, laying out the sheaf of documents in front of him so that Griffin could read them. "These documents state that you have inherited the title of Earl of Shrewsbury, and all of the Shrewsbury estate. The late earl was a careful man, and the estate was prudently managed. You will find that there are no large debts, and the earl had made provision for his daughters."

"Daughters?" Griffin asked, stiffening. "I didn't know there were any daughters."

"When the earl married the late Countess of Shrewsbury, he welcomed her daughter from her previous marriage, Miss Sophia Preston. She was fifteen at the time of her mother's marriage to the earl. The earl and countess then went on to have Lady Charlotte and Lady Amelia. Lady Charlotte is eight years old, Lady Amelia six. The countess died after complications with the birth of Lady Amelia."

"My God," Griffin said, completely shocked. "I had no idea that the earl had children."

"He named you as guardian to them, your grace," Mr. Halifax said, indicating a paragraph of the will. "They have no other living relatives, save for their half-sister, Miss Sophia."

At this point the door to the library opened, and a footman glided silently in.

"I was going to have tea brought," Griffin said weakly. "But I think that a stiff drink is in order."

"I'm a Temperance man, your grace," Mr. Halifax said simply. "Tea will suffice for me."

"A large whisky, and a pot of tea," Griffin said to the footman, who bowed and retreated from the room. He found that he couldn't sit. He paced the floor, his mind whirling with thought. "Where are they now?" he asked sharply. "Who is looking after these orphaned children?"

"Their elder sister, Miss Sophia, still lives at the family home. She is unmarried, and since the death of her mother she has taken on the role of parent to her half-sisters."

"She's what, twenty-three?" Griffin said, with some quick mental calculation. "She should be married by now."

"I understand that there have been offers for her hand from some suitable gentlemen of the county, but Miss Sophia has always declined. Marriage would take her away from her sisters, who needed her."

"That, or she enjoyed living at the expense of my uncle," Griffin said, his tone sharp enough to ruffle Mr. Halifax's feathers.

"I can assure you, your grace, that Miss Sophia has only the best of intentions towards her sisters," the solicitor said indignantly. "She was devoted to the earl, and he to her."

"Did he leave her anything in his will?" Griffin asked, walking back to the desk and picking up the papers to scan through them.

"Miss Sophia has been provided with a dowry, as have Lady Charlotte and Lady Amelia, to be placed in trust until they are of marriageable age. As Miss Sophia is over the age of twenty-one, her dowry is accessible to her now, should you allow it. As guardian to the younger girls, you also control access to their dowries as well."

"No property?" Griffin asked shrewdly.

"Everything is entailed," Mr. Halifax said simply. "I believe that Miss Sophia has inherited most of her mother's jewellery and personal effects, with some being kept for the younger girls."

"And they're all in the country?" Griffin said, nodding to the footman who came in to deposit the tray that carried a steaming pot of tea for the solicitor and a large whisky for himself.

"They have no other home, your grace," Mr. Halifax said simply. "They are dependent on you for protection."

Griffin sighed, and took a deep swallow of his whiskey.

"All right," he said. "Tell me everything that I need to know."

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"No!" said the Dowager Duchess of Dorset firmly, not even looking up from her embroidery hoop to glance at her only son.

"Mother, we have no other choice," he said tiredly. This conversation was already an hour old, and the dowager remained intransigent.

"I have no brother," she said stiffly. "So you have no uncle, and no wards."

"Well, I have his title, his houses, his estate and the contents of his bank accounts," Griffin snapped. "I take it that you have no objection to my inheriting *those*."

"They are yours by right, as the only male grandchild of the last proper Earl of Shrewsbury," she said, looking critically at her needlework and snipping at a few errant threads with a small, silver pair of scissors.

"His responsibilities are my mine by right, also," Griffin said, still irritated with his mother. "Your brother fathered two children, young girls, aged eight and six."

His mother interrupted with a disgusted diatribe about old men who didn't know how to behave responsibly. Griffin waited impatiently as she vented her rage at her dead brother with an acid tongue.

He loved his mother. He did, truly, because that was what one did with mothers. She had seen fit to bring him into the world, so he reasoned that a certain amount of filial devotion was required in return. She had always been a woman of firm beliefs and a healthy temper, but the loss of his father had hardened her somehow, turning her inwards and making her bitter. It was hard to love her sometimes, Griffin realised.

Take the whole ridiculous dowager business. By all rights, she should still be addressed as the Duchess of Dorset; although her husband had passed away, her son, the new duke, had not taken a wife. His parents had busied themselves with finding him a wife since the morning of his twenty-first birthday. He had managed to dodge all of their potential brides over the years, but since the death of his father, his mother had redoubled her efforts to see him married. The affectation of demanding to be addressed as the Dowager Duchess of Dorset was to be a constant reminder to Griffin that his duty was to marry and beget an heir, and do it in timely fashion.

It was a constant annoyance and had caused quite a social stir when his mother first announced her change in title, but it had not prompted Griffin to marry. She had not dropped the affectation, however; her stubbornness had not allowed her to back down. It had taken a little time, but the ton regularly addressed her invitations to the Dowager Duchess of Dorset, despite Griffin's unmarried state.

His mother needed a situation to control, and thwarting her plans to see him married off helped him establish himself as an adult in both their eyes.

Now she would have two little girls and their older sister to manage and control. Adopting his cousins into the household could serve a dual purpose; Griffin would feel that he was acting as a proper guardian to the girls, and his mother would have a project to manage.

Once his mother had finished venting her spleen about her brother's behaviour, Griffin cleared his throat loudly.

"Be that as it may," he said forcefully, "it seems that I have been named as guardian to these children, and I intend to see that they are cared for in a manner that their birth requires."

"You do not have to bring them here," his mother said, stabbing her needle through the material with perhaps more force than was strictly required.

"They cannot remain alone in Shropshire, Mother," he reminded her.

"There are nannies and governesses for that sort of thing," she said dismissively.

"Their father has just died!" Griffin shouted, making his mother look up from her work in shock. He had never raised his voice to her before.

"I remember what it was like when Father died," he said simply, forcing himself to hold back his temper as he turned to look at the large oil painting of the previous duke on the wall of the family's private drawing room. "I was not a child, but I loved him, Mother, and his death hurt me deeply. It's been five years now, and I still think of him every time I read a land agent's report, or make a decision about rents. He taught me how to be a good duke, and more than that, how to be a good man."

"He was the very best of men," his mother said quietly.

"I think about what he would do whenever I have to make a decision, and I know what he would have done now, Mother. He would have those poor children brought here and given a home with the only family they have left."

Silence reigned for a few moments before the steady pull and draw of thread began again.

"You are right," his mother said, clearly unhappy with the admission. "He would not have left children to be looked after by servants."

Griffin winced. Here came the other half of the story.

"The young girls, Charlotte and Amelia, will be accompanied by their half sister."

His mother looked up from her embroidery with a sharp glare.

"Half sister?" she repeated, disdain dripping from every note.

"A Miss Sophia Preston," Griffin said, ploughing onwards, regardless of his mother's obvious displeasure. "The daughter of the late Countess of Shrewsbury from her previous marriage."

"And how old is this half sister?" enquired the dowager duchess icily.

"Three and twenty," Griffin said, and added, unnecessarily, "Unmarried."

"A fortune hunter no doubt, like her mother!" the dowager duchess said fiercely.

Griffin said nothing; he wasn't sure about the woman, himself. The solicitor had been very defensive of her, but he didn't quite believe that a young woman would deliberately turn down decent offers of marriage. To be unmarried at three and twenty was risking permanent

spinster status, and no woman wanted that. Surely no woman was that devoted to her sisters, and to only half-sisters at that?

"We must do what we can for her, as well," Griffin said, wincing as his mother glared mutinously at her embroidery hoop and stabbed again and again at the material. "The sooner she's married off, the better. I am sure that with your support socially, we can find her a suitable husband."

His mother said nothing, but her glower spoke volumes.

Griffin spared a moment's pity for Miss Preston; fortune hunter or innocent spinster in the making, she didn't deserve his mother's wrath. Having been exposed to it continually during his formative years, he knew just how terrible it could be.

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"Begging your pardon, Miss Sophia, but a letter's come for you."

Sophia looked up from the breakfast table to see a housemaid carrying the letter on a silver tray. She picked it up and murmured her thanks as she broke open the unfamiliar seal and began to read it. The housemaid left the room, expertly dodging around the six dogs currently stretched out across the floor at various intervals.

Down the table, and free from their older sister's supervision, Charlotte and Amelia began flicking blobs of marmalade at each other.

Sophia frowned as she read and re-read the contents of the letter. She had expected it to be another letter of condolence from another friend of the earl's. Of course, she should have expected the Duke of Dorset to write to her at some point, but as he hadn't attended his uncle's funeral, she hadn't thought he'd rush to acknowledge her.

Clearly, she was mistaken.

There was no mistaking the ducal arrogance of his letter, though. Miss Preston, Lady Charlotte and Lady Amelia were to present themselves at the home of the Duke of Dorset in Mayfair in a week's time, for a stay of extended duration. No messages of condolence for their loss. No polite enquiries for their health.

Sophia frowned and rubbed her head as the start of another headache began to make itself known. It was natural, she supposed, that he would want to meet the girls. After all, he was now their legal guardian until they married. She was in a more unusual position. The duke controlled her dowry, but was not legally responsible for her. If he took a dislike to her, he could have the girls removed from her care, and she would have no recourse, despite the fact that she had been acting as a mother to them since she was sixteen.

She glanced up from the letter to look at them, and sighed wearily. They should have been in the nursery with their nanny, she knew, but since the death of their father, she had tried to give them little treats, like eating downstairs in the breakfast room and dining room rather than up in the nursery, and having the dogs escort them everywhere.

Charlotte had marmalade in her hair; she might be the elder of the pair by two years, but Amelia was by far the better shot. Yesterday Sophia had confiscated a catapult from Amelia. Goodness knows where she had got it, but the sudden spate of mysteriously broken windows in the glasshouse suddenly made more sense. Amelia was currently wearing a smug smile, but that soon disappeared as Charlotte's glass of milk ended up in her lap.

"Quiet, both of you!" Sophia shouted over the indignant wails of both of her sisters and the enthusiastic barking of some of the dogs, who sensed a game starting. "I may as well be taking breakfast with apes in the jungle, rather than two young ladies!"

Both children quieted, but stared daggers at each other.

"If you cannot sit at the table and eat like the well mannered young ladies that I know you are, you will return to the nursery and eat there," she continued. "Like *babies*," she said forcefully, knowing the exact effect this dire insult would have on the proud little girls.

"Charlotte, wipe the marmalade from your hair. Amelia, use your napkin to soak up the milk. Both of you go upstairs and change your dresses, and send Miss Markham down to me. I have matters to discuss with her."

With muttered apologies, the girls left the room, three or four of the dogs trailing after them. She watched them go, two small figures in hastily dyed black dresses. The colour drained both of them, making them look pale and wan. Sophia was grateful that custom called for covering all the mirrors in the house with black cloth, as she was sure that black did her own complexion no favours at all.

Her head began to throb in earnest, and she rubbed at her temples, trying to ease the pain away. Dear Papa—although not her father by blood, she had thought of the kindly man in this way—had left behind an orderly household and a staff accustomed to thinking of her as lady of the house. As such, she was used to coping with the everyday details of running a large home. Since the death of the earl, she'd had to make some decisions about the estate's tenants, as well, until the Duke of Dorset took over. Coping with all of this, two small unhappy children, and her own real, honest grief was getting almost too much to bear.

She looked again at the letter. Perhaps taking the children away from Shrewsbury House was a good idea. London held all manner of diversions for the young. She was sure the Duke of Dorset was only acting on his conscience by bringing them all to London. When he saw what handfuls the two young girls could be, she was sure that he would be only too glad to send them back to the countryside, and her with them.

There. That was it. This trip to London would be a chance to impress upon the duke just how inconvenient two little girls could be to a bachelor household. Soon they'd all be back here in the countryside, and she could focus on bringing her sisters up in peace and quiet.

She eyed Amelia's catapult, confiscated at breakfast yesterday and still sitting on the sideboard. Perhaps it was time to return it to its owner. After all, the London home of the Duke of Dorset must have many windows, indeed.