

## Chapter 1

August 1820, Yorkshire

“Cannot recall the last time I slept in my own bed,” he murmured to no one in particular as he stood to gain his bearings. The room swirled before his eyes, but Rem shook off the feeling. Of late, it was common for him to know a dull vibrating sound marring his thinking.

Levison Davids, the 17th Earl of Remmington, set the glass down harder than he intended. He had consumed more alcohol than he should on this evening, but as his home shire often brought on a case of maudlin, he had drowned his memories. He turned toward the door, attempting to walk with the confidence his late father always demanded of his sons. Lev was not trained to be the earl. His father had groomed Rem’s older brother Robinson for the role, but Fate had a way of spitting in a man’s eye when he least expected it.

Outside, the chilly air removed the edge from the numbness the heavy drink provided him, and for a brief moment Rem thought to return to the common room to reinforce the black mood the drink had induced. A special form of “regret” plagued his days and nights since receiving word of his ascension to the earldom some four years prior, and he did not think he would ever to be comfortable again.

“Storm comin’,” the groom warned when he brought Rem’s horse around.

“We’re in Yorkshire,” Remmington replied. “We are known for the unpredictable.”

Customarily, he would not permit the groom to offer him a leg up, but Rem’s resolve to reach his country estate had waned. He received a note via Sir Alexander Chandler that Rem’s presence was required at the Remmington home seat, and so he had set out from France, where he had spent the last year, to answer a different call of duty.

Sir Alexander offered little information on why someone summoned Rem home, only that the message had come from the estate’s housekeeper. Not that it mattered who had sent for him. Tegen Castle was his responsibility. The journey from France had required that Rem leave an ongoing investigation behind, a fact that did not please him, even though he knew the others in service to Sir Alexander were excellent at their occupations. Moreover, the baronet had assured Rem that several missions on English shores required Remmington’s “special” skills, and he could return to service as quickly as his business knew an end.

He caught the reins to turn the stallion in a tight circle. Tossing the groom a coin, Rem kicked Draco’s sides to set the horse into a gallop.

As the dark swallowed them up, Rem enjoyed the feel of power the rhythm of the horse’s gait provided. He raced across the valley before emerging onto the craggy moors. At length, he skirted the rocky headland.

He slowed Draco as the cliff tops came into view. When he reached Davids’ Point, he urged the stallion into a trot. Rem could no longer see the trail, but his body knew it as well as it knew the sun would rise on the morrow. After some time, he jerked Draco’s reins hard to the left, and, as a pair, they plunged onto the long-forgotten trail. He leaned low over the stallion’s neck to avoid the tree

limbs before he directed Draco to an adjacent path that led upward toward the family estate, which sat high upon a hill overlooking the breakwaters.

When he reached the main road again, he pulled up on the reins to bring the animal to a halt. Rem patted Draco's neck and stared through the night at his childhood home, which was framed against the rising moonlight. It often made him sad to realize how much he once loved the estate as a child and how much he now despised it.

"No love left in the bricks," he said through a thick throat. "Even the dowager countess no longer wishes to reside here. How can I?"

It was not always so. Although he was a minor son, Rem always thought to share Tegen Castle with his wife and children—to live nearby and to relate tales of happier days.

"But after Lady Delia's betrayal and then, likewise, that of Miss Lovelace, I possess no heart to begin again."

In truth, of the two ladies, Rem had only loved Lady Delia.

"Fell in love with the girl when I was but fourteen and she, ten."

He crossed his arms over the rise of the saddle to study the distant manor house.

"Perhaps Delia could find no solace here," he murmured aloud.

Even today, it bothered him that Delia had not cared enough for him to send him a letter denying their understanding. He learned of Delia's marrying Baron Kavanagh from Sir Alexander, with whom Rem had served upon the Spanish front. Sir Alexander's younger brother delivered the news in a cheeky letter.

"I suppose Lady Delia thought being a baroness was superior to being Mrs. Davids. Little did she know I would claim the earldom. More is the pity for her." A large raindrop plopped upon the back of his hand. "If we do not speed our return to the castle, my friend, we will arrive with a wet seat."

He caught up the loose reins, but before he could set his heels into Draco's sides, a shot rang out. By instinct, Rem thought to dive for the nearby ditch. Yet, the heavy drink slowed his response, and before he could act, Remmington knew the sharp sting of the bullet in his thigh.

Draco bolted forward before Rem had control of the stallion's reins. He felt himself slipping from the saddle, but there was little he could do to prevent the impact. He slammed hard into the packed earth just as the heavens opened with a drenching rain. The back of his head bounced against a paving stone, and a shooting pain claimed his forehead. Even so Rem thought to sit up so he might take cover, but the effort was short coming. The piercing pain in his leg and the sharp sting claiming his vision fought for control. The blow to his head won, and Rem screwed his eyes closed to welcome the darkness.

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"It still be raining, Miss Comfort," the child said as she crawled into bed.

Comfort tucked the blankets about the girl. Little did she know when Baron Kavanagh ordered her to deliver Miss Deirdre to the Earl of Remmington that she would be more than a month tending the child without any sign of his lordship. "The weather shan't stop us from gathering herbs in the morning," Comfort assured the child.

Deirdre had taken to the study of herbs and healing as quickly as had her mother. Poor Lady Delia had done all she could to know more children, even though she was not of a frame to carry a child properly. Comfort had attended the baroness on more than one occasion, each time the lady more desperate to provide Kavanagh with an heir. In Comfort's opinion, Lady Kavanagh had drawn a short straw in marrying the baron, and she never understood the lady's choice. Kavanagh treated his wife poorly and only when Lady Delia finally delivered the baron an heir did the man permit his baroness any surcease.

"Good," the child declared. "I enjoy the days when we search for all the herbs for our food and for assisting his lordship's tenants."

Comfort smiled easily at the child. The girl was truly the spirit and image of her late mother. Poor Deirdre had suffered the venomous attack of Lord Kavanagh before Comfort and the child departed Ireland. It was a wonder the girl did not fear the world. Comfort supposed childhood resilience had something to do with how Deirdre accepted her father's words as the truth, but it was more than that. The child was forever hopeful, and Comfort prayed those hopes would not be shattered by Lord Remmington.

"I want Remmington's bastard from my sight," Kavanagh had thundered as Miss Deirdre cowered behind Comfort's skirts. "I cannot claim another to marriage while the earl's by-blow wears my name."

Comfort wanted to remind the baron that legally Deirdre would always be his responsibility, and the child would always claim his name. Comfort also wished to warn Kavanagh against using such crude language before his daughter, but she did neither. Instead, she had negotiated additional funds to tend to Miss Deirdre's needs until Lord Remmington could claim the girl's guardianship. She prayed the earl would treat Miss Deirdre more kindly than had the girl's father. It was only after their arrival in York that Comfort learned that Remmington had always denied his fatherhood, and his lordship had no idea Lord Kavanagh was intent upon denying the girl.

She set a candle on the far table to provide the girl solace until Comfort could finish her chores and join the child in the bed.

*My sweet Deirdre*, she thought as she glanced again to the countenance of the sleeping child. Comfort wondered at the irony of the choice of the girl's name. *Deirdre* was a tragic figure in an Irish legend, one who died of a broken heart when she was forced to marry Ulster's King Conchobhar. The King killed her lover Naoise. Every true Irishman recognized the name "Deirdre" as coming from the old Gaelic name "Derdriu"—meaning *unknown*.

The girl, less than six years of age, certainly held no identity. Lord Kavanagh refused to claim his first born, and Lord Remmington did likewise. If neither was the child's father, with whom had Lady Delia lain?

"What vice have I executed against the girl by escorting her to York?" Comfort wondered aloud. "I pray the earl returns soon. This not knowing Miss Deirdre's future has both of us playing a game I fear will break the child's heart."

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Rem held no idea how often he had come to only to succumb to the darkness of his soul rushing inward again. Twice he attempted to reach where Draco ate his fill of the wet grass. Once he managed to lift his head to whistle for the stallion. Draco responded as Rem had trained the horse to do, but Rem's efforts to catch the stirrups proved fruitless. At length, Draco moved away to take up his unexpected feast, and Rem permitted the exhaustion its due.

Partially conscious throughout his ordeal, Rem knew when the heavy rain dwindled to the steady dripping from the trees. He recognized the slow decline in the temperature as the coolness slipped into every bone of his body except the one supporting the area where the bullet filled his veins with fire.

*Will I die on this lonely road?* His mind asked the question again and again. *Irony. I am but a half-mile from my childhood home, and there is no one to tend me.*

Rem considered again how few would think his demise worthy of note, except perhaps his mother and his sister. He would be simply the latest Earl of Remmington to meet an unexpected death. His father tripped on a loose board upon the stairs and plunged head first to the foyer of the main hall. His brother had an equally unprecedented accident less than a year into Robbie's reign as the earl. Robinson Davids had cleaned his favorite gun one too many times. The servants discovered the Earl of Remmington slumped over his desk with a bullet hole in his chest.

Summoned home from the Continent to assume the earldom, Rem examined all the evidenced that Sir Alexander had accumulated, but like the baronet, Rem uncovered nothing more suspicious than a dozen unanswered questions. *At long last, perhaps the baronet will know success,* Rem considered. *No one can call the bullet in my leg an accident.*

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Comfort tugged harder on the vegetable cart she had rescued from the shed behind the dowager house she shared with Miss Deirdre. The three-wheeled cart bounced along the root-filled path.

When she and the child arrived at Tegen Castle, the earl's butler refused them admittance, literally driving her and Miss Deirdre from the threshold. Only by the goodness of Mrs. Stoddard, the castle's housekeeper, did they find a means to survive. Against Mr. Flood's wishes, Mrs. Stoddard presented Comfort the key to the dower house. "Her ladyship retired to another of Lord Remmington's properties, but if you are handy with a pot and a few chores, you may remain until I send for the earl." Mrs. Stoddard caressed Deirdre's cheek. "His lordship would expect me to protect Lady Delia's child. I will have the servants bring you firewood and as many supplies as I can spare from Mr. Flood's oversight. Can you do as I ask, Girl?"

Needless to say, Comfort made all the necessary promises, but now she held second thoughts. Before she departed Ireland, she had sent a letter and a promise to her cousin to join Isolde's household to tend Lady Swenton's delivery of the baron's first child. Isolde married Lord Swenton six months prior, and Comfort was to assist with Isolde's lying in. Unfortunately, Comfort was more than a week tardy in her arrival at Marwood Manor.

"For what do we search today?" Deirdre called as she danced along the rutted path before Comfort.

Comfort brought her thoughts to the task at hand. "Soapwort for Mr. Thorne's carbuncle," she pronounced with a grunt of effort to right the cart when it veered to the left. "Devil's claw for Mr. Pratt's sore knee." When Mrs. Stoddard learned that Comfort had the gift of healing, the housekeeper turned over several of the earl's tenants to Comfort's care. "Shepherd's purse for Mrs. Stoddard's niece, Pearl," Comfort thought aloud. "We can always use dandelion root, watercress, rosemary, parsley, and winter savory for the meals, so keep your eyes sharp for any of those."

"Why can we not use the herbs in the estate's garden?" Deirdre reasoned.

“I would prefer not to be more indebted to Mrs. Stoddard than we already are. The lady places her position in jeopardy to protect us. Moreover, we hold no knowledge of his lordship’s ready return.”

Deirdre nodded her understanding, but the child appeared distracted by something up ahead.

“What is amiss, Deirdre?” Comfort called as she maneuvered the cart up the incline to the road leading behind the estate.

Deirdre stood squinting into the early morning sun. “Do you see a bit of red where the forest opens for the lane leading to the manor?”

Comfort wiped her brow against her sleeve and used her arm to block the sun. She had foolishly left her work bonnet behind. A sense of dread skittered up her spine. “We should have a closer look,” she murmured. “Likely nothing more than a wildflower or a lady’s abandoned ribbon, carried by the wind to snag a hedge.”

Comfort took up the handles of the cart once more and started toward the spot Deirdre noted. She glanced to the child who walked a half step behind her. The girl knew fright, but she trusted Comfort to protect her. The idea pleased Comfort, but it also brought on her own anxiety. They approached the spot slowly. Neither of them spoke. The road curved at an odd angle, and a deceptively steep incline kept them from discovering the answer until they were within yelling distance of the place.

“It is a horse,” Deirdre declared as she rushed forward.

Comfort abandoned the cart and raced to reach the animal before the child. “Wait, Deirdre,” she cautioned. “We must be certain a gentleman is not...”

The child screwed up her face in confusion. “Not what?”

Comfort swallowed her embarrassment. “Men are obstinate creatures, and we women cannot predict their ways.” Her answer made little sense in relation to the child’s question, but Deirdre appeared satisfied. “You wait here. If I tell you to run,” Comfort warned. “Go quickly. Find Mrs. Stoddard.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Deirdre said in quiet fear.

Comfort edged closer to the horse. It was a beautiful stallion. Strong hindquarter. Black as coal. The bit of red was a line detailing the saddle’s engraving.

“*Éasca, mo áilleacht,*” she said as she stroked the animal’s neck. “Where is your master?” Comfort noted the saddle and harness were wet. The horse had been out in the rain all night. “*An bhfuil tú gortaithe?*” She ran her hands along the animal’s leg to search for swelling or a cut. Catching the harness, she turned the animal back toward the road.

“He is a mighty one,” Deirdre said in admiration. The child had always wished for a pony of her own, but Lord Kavanagh denied the girl any show of affection.

“He is at that.” Comfort bit her lip in caution. “I just wish I knew the whereabouts of his rider.”

“Do you think he is in the forest somewhere?” Deirdre’s fear flared again. “Should we not seek out Mr. Flood? He would know if the horse belongs to one of his lordship’s neighbors.”

Comfort glanced about them. “The horse was out in the rain overnight. A gentleman would never leave such a fine animal unless something amiss occurred. I think we should look about before we seek out Mr. Flood. His lordship’s servant already holds us

in contempt. If we bring a false tale to his attention, Mr. Flood will use it against us when Lord Remmington arrives at the manor. The earl's butler will not be pleased if we set up a stir without proof." The child did not appear convinced, but Deirdre followed Comfort's lead. "Look for hoof prints. They should be clear after the rain," she instructed. "But do not go into the woods alone. Just look from where the horse exited the forested area onto the road."

"Yes, ma'am."

Comfort looped the animal's reins loosely about one of the cart's handles. "I shall search this side of the road. You take the other side."

Deirdre nodded her agreement.

They moved slowly along the lane, inspecting each marking. Comfort smiled when she noted how Deirdre squatted to look at several loose stones. The child embraced every task Comfort presented her. It was a true shame Lord Kavanagh could find no place in his heart for the girl, for certainly Deirdre held a quick mind and a pleasing temperament.

"I plan to inspect the path upon which we discovered the horse," Comfort instructed. "I shan't go far, just deep enough into the passage to determine if the stallion and his rider followed the lane." She pointed to a large elm overspreading the main road. "You are to go no farther than the large tree at the fork. Wait for me there. Call out if you discover anything."

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In the deepest recesses of Rem's mind, he thought he could hear someone talking, but the words remained garbled. His last conscious thought had been of his impending death. Therefore, he wondered if the voices were those of God's angels. Although he was certain his expression had not changed physically, the thought brought a smile to his lips. "More likely the Devil's disciples," his mind announced. "You are not of the nature to know God's mercy."

The voices dwindled to an uncomfortable silence, and Rem fought for the clarity his injury denied him. For several elongated moments, his unconscious mind claimed dominance, and Rem found himself tumbling toward the darkness once again, but just as he had abandoned the hope of the angels claiming him, a comfortably heavy weight landed upon his chest.

Thump.

The suddenness of the attack had Rem searching for his next breath.

"Here!" A harsh squealing voice demanded. "Down here!"

There was fear and anxiousness in the tone, and something in Rem's body reacted to the cry for assistance. His mind shut the door leading to the dark pit and began its climb toward the speck of light beckoning to him.

"Wake up!" the voice demanded.

Hands caught the lapels of his jacket to tug him forward. Even so, it was several seconds before he ventured to open his lids. When he did, the light caused him to blink hard.

"Can you hear me?" the voice screeched as a body blocked out the sunlight to tower over him.

"I'm not deaf, demme it," he hissed as he cracked his eyelids open to claim the light once more.

In the end, the face hovering above his took on a familiar form. Dark curls. A heart-shaped face. The soft complexion of youth. The image brought him comfort while it frightened him beyond reason, for he knew the figure before him was dead.

“So, it is true?” Rem struggled through a dry throat, swallowing hard against the unreality of the situation. “God prefers his angels to possess the innocence of children.”

“I am no angel,” the face assured him.

“You are...” Rem stumbled over the familiar name.

“Deirdre.”

“Delia.”

They said in unison.

“What?”

Rem squeezed his eyes shut to clear his vision, but when he opened them again, the childlike image remained.

“Are you or are you not Lady Delia?” he demanded testily.

“Not,” the figure pronounced as confusion crossed her features.

Yet before Rem could gather his thoughts, the image retreated to be replaced by another. Blue-green eyes. Golden-red wisps of hair flamed with the light behind it. Full lips. Creamy white skin touched with flecks of the sun’s kiss. Although concern crossed the celestial being’s expression, the countenance before him was his idea of an angel.

“Can you tell me what occurred? Are you injured?”

The “angel” ran her hands over his body to search for wounds, but he held no thoughts of the woman’s charity. Her clean, slightly floral scent tempted him as nothing had in some two years.

“Oh, my,” she said on a gasp as her fingers grazed his leg and came back bloody. She jerked a scarf from her head and leaned over Rem’s body to wrap the cloth about his leg.

Rem knew he should warn her not to touch his wound, but the heat of her body draped over his danced through his veins. Her breasts brushed against his manhood, and despite his every limb feeling the numbness of inaction and the overnight rain, his body reacted to her closeness.

“We must remove you to safety,” she said in anxiousness as her image returned to a point above him. Without the scarf to cover her locks, the woman was more angelic looking than before for the sunlight set the fire dancing in her tresses, and Rem permitted himself the hint of a smile.

“I shall return to the manor and plead for assistance,” she said as she prepared to stand. “You must have the services of a surgeon.”

Her words cleared the fog clinging to Rem’s mind. “No!” he snapped as he caught the stranger’s arm to stay her rise.

“You require a surgeon,” she reiterated.

Rem knew her correct, but his wound was no accident. He did not know whom he might trust among those at Tegen Castle.

“Even though I’ve recovered your horse, I cannot permit you to ride on your own.”

“You found Draco?” he asked with an attempt to sit up only to have the woman shove downward on his shoulders.

“You cannot think to ride,” she insisted. “You’re too weak.”

“You are not my demme mother,” Rem accused.

She shoved hard against his frame, and although he knew the woman meant it as part of her chastisement, his mind returned to the pleasure of having her so draped across his body.

“First, you, sir, will not speak so freely before the child. If you continue to act without respect for Miss Deirdre’s tender nature, I shall leave your carcass here to rot.” The woman poked Rem’s chest with her finger to punctuate her threat, but all his faculties could claim was the floral-scented drape of her hair as she leaned over him. His fingers itched to run them through the heavy ring of fire. “Moreover, from the cut of your clothes,” she continued without an acknowledgement of his distraction, “you are a gentleman. Therefore, you must be expected at Tegen Castle.”

“Is Lord Remmington at the castle?” Rem said suspiciously. Some of his renowned reasoning had returned. After all, the woman leaning over him was a stranger. Though he prayed it not so, perhaps she was involved in the attack upon his person.

“The earl is expected,” the woman repeated in what sounded of earnestness. But when she looked with more purpose upon his countenance, Rem noted a flicker of confusion crossed her expression.

“Despite your objection,” Rem spoke with the authority he had developed during his time serving under Wellington, “I mean to mount Draco and seek my own care giver.”

The woman continued to study Rem’s expression closely—too closely for his ease. “Very well,” she said at length. “Permit me to lead your stallion to the shade of the tree. Draco will be waiting for you there.”

With that, she strode away, catching the girl by the hand and tugging the child along behind her. In her anger, the female was magnificent. Rem raised himself to his elbows so he might observe her retreat. It was as he had expected. The sway of her hips as she sidestepped across the short expanse leading to the back road of his estate was a magnificent sight to behold.

Swallowing a cry of pain as he lifted his weight to a seated position, Rem calculated how many steps it would take to reach the large elm.

“Twelve,” he grunted while rolling to his one good knee. Not placing weight on his left leg, he grabbed the spindle-like branches of a large shrub, pulling himself to a standing position. Blowing out a short breath, he took a tentative step forward, followed by a hobble step. His good leg remained numb from a lack of use, while his injured one shot pains through his body to lodge in his tightened jaw, but his determination won out.

“Four,” Rem hissed as he repeated the maneuver, and his resolve took a firmer hold. However, the rocky path had a mind of its own, and it meant to bring him down. As if the land rose up to claim his footing, he stumbled to land face first in the mud.

“Hold the horse,” the woman instructed the child.

When he looked in her direction, she was scampering over the short distance to reach him. “Keep back?” Rem growled as he shoved himself upward. The woman came to a stumbling halt. “I require no assistance,” he insisted in sharp tones.

Biting down on his stubborn will, Rem slowly repeated the process of standing—this time without the aid of the shrubbery. Yet, his earlier resolve had suffered a blow with his fall, and he swayed in place. His disorientation was enough to send the woman into action again. She rushed forward to brace Rem's stance, and her floral scent filled his lungs with an enticing aphrodisiac.

"Please permit me to assist you," she pleaded.

"It is not necessary," Rem insisted.

"Allow the woman her due," a very masculine voice called out from behind where the child waited with Draco.

"What the bloody hell are you doing here?" Rem snapped as he took in the countenance of his former friend. "You've no demme business in York."

Yet before the Marquess of Malvern could respond, the woman shoved hard against Rem's chest, sending him backward to land upon his posterior.

"I warned you, sir, I would not tolerate your foul tongue!"