



CHAPTER ONE

*Mayfair, London
June, 1823*

“Wait here.” Evelyn Winslow peered out the carriage window. “I’ll only be a moment.”

“We’re already running late for the breakfast,” Penelope Daniels protested as she followed Eve’s gaze, then made a soft sound of awe-struck appreciation at the sight of Mercer House.

London home to Dominick Mercer, Marquess of Ellsworth, the townhouse fronted seven bays on Park Lane, with a grand north wing stretching behind toward a private mews and what was rumored to have been one of the city’s finest gardens. No one had seen the gardens nor the house’s grand reception rooms since he inherited two years ago when his brother Timothy passed away.

Everything about the house was private. The marquess rarely accepted visitors, and he never hosted any sort of party.

Oh, it wasn’t that Ellsworth was a recluse. Not really. He attended sessions in the Lords...occasionally. And he attended society soirees...sometimes. If he wasn’t all that social, it was only because he’d lived in Italy until two years ago and was simply selective about the events he attended. So selective, in fact, that even now at the height of the season Eve couldn’t remember seeing the man at any of the events she’d been fortunate enough to attend as the guest of the dowager Duchess of Trent. Not once.

All right. Perhaps the man was a bit of a recluse. But today was her day to finally meet his Most Elusive Lordship.

“Everyone arrives late for breakfasts,” Eve reminded her. “It will only take a minute.”

Penelope pouted. “Why is this so important that it can’t wait until after the breakfast?”

“Because I have to collect Mariah and Robert’s wedding gift. The marquess is giving them a painting.”

Penelope screwed up her nose. “That’s an odd gift for a wedding.”

“It’s quite valuable, actually, and from his personal collection. The late marquess and Robert’s father were close friends. Besides,” she added with chagrin, “I promised the duchess I would collect it for her this afternoon.”

Elizabeth Carlisle had been overwhelmed this summer with planning Mariah and Robert’s rushed wedding, celebrating the birth of one grandchild, and expecting the birth

of another by fall. So Eve had offered to help ease her load by fetching the painting herself, which was too valuable to trust to porters.

Truth be told, she'd also been desperate to experience any sort of adventure, even one this small.

After all, she'd only recently been allowed to leave Papa's townhouse on her own for outings like today's breakfast with Penelope or for the charity work she did each week. Since they'd all returned from Scotland nearly two months ago, Mariah had kept a close eye on her, until her sister had become too busy with the family shipping business to insist on accompanying her everywhere she went.

Lately, Evelyn had begun to feel like a prisoner in her own skin. Her every move was watched, as if society was holding its collective breath while it simply waited for her to misstep and ruin herself. This time for good.

Even today, she would have to be on her best behavior at Lady Bertram's breakfast instead of being her true herself.

It was all for her own good, she knew that. But why did her own good have to be so blasted boring? Oh, what she wouldn't give for just one afternoon's escape from perfect propriety!

But that was the price a lady paid, Mariah kept reminding her, for running away with a man.

"I'll be right back!" Seizing on whatever fleeting freedom she could grab, Eve flung open the carriage door and dashed to the ground before Penelope could stop her, before the tiger had even put down the step.

She hurried onto the imposing portico that was meant to resemble an ancient Greek temple and reached for the brass knocker.

The wide door flew open. Two men carrying a large painting wrapped in brown paper and twine nearly trod over her. She jumped out of the way, only to end up right in the path of a brawny man carrying out an elaborately carved chair hoisted onto his shoulder.

"Watch out!" Another man called out to her as two more sets of porters joined the parade in carrying out more covered paintings and a gold brocade settee with its feet carved into paws.

She backed off the portico and sidestepped to move out of the way, but the corner of the settee nipped her in the shoulder. She staggered backward a step, off-balance. Tripping over her own feet, she tumbled ingloriously to the ground and landed on her bottom.

Dirt and mud marred her cornflower blue dress. Oh bother! But at least it was an old dress from three years ago, one which no one had seen because there hadn't been much of a season to her season that year because her wild antics with Mariah had ensured it. But her bonnet—that had fallen off her head and been crushed beneath one of the men's boots.

Her shoulders sagged as she snatched it off the ground. One of her favorites, ruined.

Even when she tried her best to be proper, fate schemed against her.

Wiping away the dirt clinging to the back of her skirt—and failing, which meant that Penelope would be even more aggravated at her for making them even later to the

breakfast because she now had to return home to change—she slipped through the front door between exiting porters.

The grand entry hall was filled with the same flurry of activity as the portico, and just as many paintings and furnishings coming and going. Footman scurried about, giving conflicting orders to the porters who roamed the room like a confused army, not knowing which pieces to grab up and which to leave behind.

A short man dressed in a black uniform with fastidiously combed hair stood in the middle of the foyer and smack in the midst of the fray, directing the movers with agitated gestures of his arms and shouts above the din. The man who was supposedly in charge.

She waved to catch his attention from across the room, unable to wind her way any closer. “I’m here on behalf of the Duchess of Trent to pick up the marquess’s gift to Lord and Lady Robert Carlisle.”

The man scowled. “Pardon?”

“A painting by Vincenzo that his lordship is giving them.”

Exasperation shone on the man’s grimacing face as he cupped his hand behind his ear to hear better. The scrutinizing gaze he moved over her narrowed in disapproval.

“The delivery entrance is in the rear!”

“Painting!” she yelled to correct him, drawing the attention of the men walking past. “Vincenzo!”

The man’s eyes widened, and his face paled, as if she’d just admitted to attempting to kill the king. He charged toward her across the hall, clearly agitated and not caring that he’d stepped in front of the porters and disrupted the flow of furniture and artwork out of the house.

“No,” he nervously—and angrily—chastised her. “No, no, no! You are in the wrong place. How dare you come here?”

That stunned her. Her mouth fell open. “But-but the painting—”

“Not here. Not ever here.” He took her arm and drew her none too kindly to a tall table pushed up against the wall near the door. Muttering to himself about scandal, lunatics, and Italian painters, he opened the small drawer, took out a calling card, and scribbled onto the back of it with quill and ink. Then he shoved it into her hand. “This is where you need to go. You are not welcome here.”

As Eve stared at him, flabbergasted and speechless that she would be treated this way by a member of the marquess’s household, he pushed her out the front door and onto the portico.

“Good day!” The man shot her a cutting glower over his shoulder, then he spun on his heel and marched back inside, wiping his hands as he went.

What on earth had she done to warrant that? Oh that devil! She had half a mind to go charging back inside and give him a talking down that—

A bubble of laughter escaped her.

Her hand flew to her lips in surprise. Goodness! How boring and painfully dull had her life become if this was most excitement she’d had in nearly a month, for heaven’s sake?

That certainly needed to change.

She returned to the waiting carriage, where a wide-eyed Penelope had been watching events unfold.

“The painting is elsewhere,” Evelyn explained succinctly as the tiger held open the door for her. But she didn’t step inside the carriage. Instead, she frowned at the address scribbled on the card. “This is all the way down in Chelsea.” At least an hour round trip and too far to fit in before the breakfast, especially since she now had to change.

An idea formed in her head...a wonderfully devilish idea!

“Just as well that it’s too far out of the way, then.” Penelope fussed with her skirts. “We’re already late. If we hurry, we can be there by—”

“You go on without me.” The words flew out, the outburst born of pure survival instinct. Because one more boring afternoon would end her.

Penelope blinked. “Without you?”

“Yes. Well...” Her mind whirled to make her excuse sound convincing. “I can’t attend the breakfast in a dirty dress, can I? There’s no point in both of us missing it. So you go on ahead without me and give my apologies to our friends. I’ll hire a hackney and—”

“A hackney!” Penelope was aghast at the idea.

“They’re perfectly safe.” Especially when she didn’t want to take the Winslow carriage and risk her father finding out where she’d been. “I hire them all the time.” Or at least she used to. Until her wrecked elopement with Burton Williams ruined everything. “I’ll hire one to take me to Chelsea, where I’ll pick up the painting, then I’ll go home to change and join you at Lady Bertram’s for the end of the breakfast. Our friends won’t leave before five o’clock anyway, especially if Cicely’s telling stories about her brothers’ days at Oxford.”

Penelope bit her lip. “I don’t know...”

“It’s the middle of the afternoon, for heaven’s sake!” She held out her arms in the bright sunshine to make her point. “I’ll go straight there and back, and I’ll be at breakfast before they serve the cake. Besides,” she added, only feeling a tiny prick of guilt at using the duchess to gain a small bit of freedom, “I’ve promised Her Grace that I would take care of this today.”

She waited anxiously, ready to shoot down whatever new objection Penelope might raise. A whole hour to herself—she could barely dare hope! No pitying looks from her family, no prying glances from her friends, no gossipy old hens just waiting to cut her for being different from the rest of society. An hour in which she could be completely alone, free from the suffocating rules of proper behavior. And have the chance to experience some sort of adventure, however slim.

Exactly the kind of adventure she hadn’t dared attempt since her return from Scotland. For the past two months she’d been forced to play the role of a perfectly proper young lady. A lady who would never elope with a man or do all the daring antics she and Mariah had committed in the past. One who was slowly going mad with boredom.

But for this afternoon, perhaps, she could be herself again. Truly, that was all she wanted—to be free to live her life with all the adventure and romance, love and joy she could seize for herself. Because she was so very terrified that she wouldn’t have it for long.

When Penelope didn’t seem swayed, she played her trump card. “Won’t Michael Thompson be at the breakfast?”

Her friend’s face lit up with a faint blush. “Do you think he will be?”

Eve hesitated. It was wrong to use Penelope's affections against her like this. But who was to say that Lord Michael didn't return her interest, just because she had yet to see the man talk to her friend once this season? "Oh yes! Henry Palmer told me so just yesterday. All the men from King's College will be there."

"Truly?" Penelope wavered between her duty as companion and her unwillingness to miss Lord Michael. "You're certain you'll be all right by yourself?"

Oh for heaven's sake! Thousands of women ventured out into the city on their own every day and survived to do it again the next morn. Why were young ladies of the ton so frightened of going anywhere alone in broad daylight? What did they think would happen—a savage attack by vicious wolves roaming Grosvenor Square? A raid by Vikings from the Thames?

She smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry. It's only Chelsea in the middle of the afternoon. Everything will be perfectly fine."

More than fine, in fact. Simply joyous to escape!

"I'll see you at Lady Bertram's!"

With a wave goodbye, she fought to contain the bounce in her step as she nearly skipped to the wide avenue encircling the park. She signaled for a hackney, then gave the driver the direction and climbed inside. She settled back against the worn leather squabs with a deep sigh.

Free...if only for one precious hour.

No one would understand if she tried to explain how she felt. How she felt overwhelmed at times by a dread of the passing hours, by the desire to race forward and embrace as much of life as she could, by the need to just move. Life was precious and could be taken away without notice. Her own mother's life had ended suddenly, and Eve was terrified that the same thing would happen to her. That just like Mama, one day she would lie down to sleep and never wake up.

Faced with all that, she'd gladly take whatever breath of freedom she could capture. But she could grab hold of the life she had now with both hands and wring from it every precious moment possible. Even if only a short carriage ride across the city.

Already the tension was easing from her shoulders, and her chest was lighter. That old familiar sensation that she loved crept through her, that tingling sense of excited anticipation, of adventure and romance. The one she remembered from right before she and Mariah had plotted some wild antic or another, some audacious endeavor that finely bred young ladies of the ton would never have dreamed of committing but which they as daughters of a shipping merchant were just daring enough to do. One that chased away the darkness that always nipped at her heels.

For the first time in months, excitement pulsed in her veins. To return home—or God forbid, go on to Lady Bertram's breakfast—would have smothered her.

She watched out the window as the hackney wound its way south toward the Thames, from the avenues of Mayfair into the lanes of Chelsea, where the buildings were smaller, older, and made of rough brick and stone. Only the grand townhouses fronting the river along Cheyne Walk gave note that more than working class Londoners lived here, but even those now held an air of disuse and abandonment, having become the haunt of artists, writers, and musicians who had been chased out of the more expensive rooms to the north and east.

When the carriage stopped, she slipped to the ground and handed up a coin from her reticule to the driver. He nodded his gratitude and pointed toward a narrow, cobblestone alley lined with tall brick walls running parallel to the Walk. “Down th’ way, miss.”

“Thank you.” She hesitated, wondering if she should ask the man to wait, then decided against it. The day was so lovely and warm and the thought of hurrying back to Mayfair—and back into her prison of boredom—so unbearable that she wouldn’t mind if she had to wait for a hackney to roll by once she collected the painting.

By the start of next season, she could put this whole foolishness with Burton Williams behind her and ease back into her old life, in which she was allowed to attend whatever diversion she chose with little supervision from Papa or Mariah. But until then, she had to seize her moments whenever she could get them.

And this was a moment to seize!

Humming to herself, she strolled down the narrow alley. It cut between the service yards of a row of terrace houses to the north side and was fronted on the south by a series of mews that served the grand residences of the Walk. The scent of horses and the nearby river mixed in the afternoon air, and a church bell rang quietly. Thick ivy spilled over the brick wall, and she stepped carefully over the fresh puddles of water formed by that morning’s rain. Now, not a single cloud marred the porcelain blue sky.

She had no idea which of the buildings was the one she sought, or why Lord Ellsworth’s man would send her here, of all places. But breathing in deeply the glorious day around her, oh, she simply didn’t care!

A young man walked briskly toward her.

She stopped him with a smile and showed him the card. “Do you know where I can find this place? I’m looking for a paint—”

“Of course,” he drawled in a heavy Italian accent. Then he took the liberty of raking a licentious gaze over her from face to feet, one that had the audacity to linger at her bosom long enough that she uncomfortably placed her hand at her neckline. He yelled over his shoulder. “Maestro! La nuova ragazza è arrivata. E lei è niente come previsto.”

He grinned at her and gestured toward one of the carriage houses near the end of the alley. Then he walked on, swinging his hand to slap her on the bottom as he stepped past.

She jumped. Instant outrage flashed through her, but the glare she shot him only elicited a laugh. Oh that arrogant cad!

“Arse,” she whispered and raised her head higher as she stomped away.

Taking a deep breath, she approached the carriage house, then hesitated. The green double doors hung open wide, and she peered inside. She frowned, then rechecked the directions on the back of the card. This couldn’t be right.

A large room filled with rows of canvases in wide-ranging sizes and in various stages of completion greeted her. Worktables lining the walls held brushes, jars of paint and bladders of pigments, and various metal tools of all kinds. From the open doors, the woody scent of linseed oil wafted engulfed her. A large easel stood in the middle of the floor, facing a cream-colored chaise longue.

Ellsworth's man had misunderstood. Clearly. Instead of sending her to the painting, he'd sent her to a painting studio.

"Good afternoon," a deep voice drawled from the rear of the carriage house.

And apparently directly to the artist himself.

She caught her breath as he sauntered forward. He circled her as she stood in the doorway, half of her in the studio and the other half wondering if she should flee. He moved slowly, with the natural grace of an athlete and with the deep attention of a scientist whose dark eyes coolly assessed her.

She swallowed. No one had ever looked at her this blatantly before. And certainly not a man scandalously undressed in shirtsleeves and paint-speckled brown waistcoat, with the unbuttoned collar of his shirt open wide enough to reveal his bare neck and the faint teasing of dark hair on his chest. So she did what any young lady in her situation would have done.

She looked back.

He was handsome, in a rugged, unkempt sort of way, and nothing at all like the polish of Burton Williams and her gentlemen friends. His thick black hair spilled in an unruly mass of curls that framed his face and accentuated the dark color of his brown eyes and the faint scruff of a three-day old beard. The width of his chest narrowed to his waist. His mouth tightened in concentration as he scrutinized her, and her pulse beat faster as she stood perfectly still, her gaze following him warily.

She'd wanted an adventure. Well, she'd certainly gotten one.

"Eads sent you, then?"

Eads...that must have been the butler's name. "Yes."

"You've done this before, then?" He stopped in front of her and folded his arms across his chest, drawing the shirt tight across his shoulders and giving her a glimpse of just how well developed the body was beneath.

"Never," she answered honestly. Usually footmen were sent to fetch important goods. "Ellsworth's man said that I should—"

"Ellsworth?" His face hardened. "You went to Mercer House?"

She forced a smile. "Well, yes. I mean, that is where—"

"You're never to go there again, understand? You're to keep absolute silence about me and my studio."

Well, that would be easy. "Who are you?"

His eyes narrowed for a confused beat. "You don't know?" Then the anger smoothed from his brow as he laughed. The rich and deep sound spun through her down to her toes. "I'm the man who's going to hire you." His lips curled into a grin. "I'm Domenico Vincenzo."

No. That was impossible...He was the famous Italian painter? The man as notorious for the rumors surrounding his scandalous lifestyle as for the erotic subjects of his paintings? She'd been sent to the man himself!

Then the rest of his statement slapped her— Hire her?

"There's been a mistake," she ventured breathlessly. "There was a lot of confusion at Mercer House, and I think—"

"The Pall Mall picture gallery. That's probably why Eads got confused and sent you there first."

She blinked. “Pardon?”

“The Marquess of Ellsworth is a patron of the Royal Academy of Arts and a noted collector of art. The British Institution has been trying to coax him into joining their organization, and so this year they’ve attempted to flatter him into a membership by asking him to lend several of his paintings to their old masters exhibition.” An amused gleam lit his eyes. “If the porters arrived today to take the collection to Pall Mall, then Mercer House must have been in an uproar.”

Somehow she’d lost control of the conversation. She tried again. “I’m here for the painting.”

He shook his head. “Pigments and canvases are expensive. We’ll start with a few sketches first to see if you have the spark to be a model before I paint you.”

Her mouth fell open. He thought she was...? “I’m not a model.”
“So you said, that you’ve never done this before. You’re an actress or a singer, barmaid, prostitute—”

“I am not!”

He grimaced. “And not at all what I expected.” He took another rake of his gaze up and down her body, this time much slower than before and more akin to the one the young man had given her in the alley. While that man-boy’s leering had set her teeth on edge, this man’s gaze heated her from the inside out.

“But you have potential,” he murmured as he took her chin in his paint-speckled fingers and turned her face gently to each side, his eyes studying her. “Delicate bone structure, skin like porcelain, the slight stature of a waif but with deceptively ample curves...”

Folding her arms in front of those same curves, she flushed, certain that the porcelain skin he’d complimented was now scarlet. “I don’t think—”

“Beautiful.”

Beautiful. She stared at him, her protest forgotten. With a single word, he’d stunned her speechless.

He dropped his hand away, then turned to step back inside the studio. He grabbed up a pile of clothes lying across the chaise and handed them to her.

“You can change behind the screen in the corner. And hurry up.” He gestured for her to come inside. “You’ve already arrived too late in the day. If you waste any more time, we’ll lose all of our light.”

Eve stared, utterly bewildered, yet oddly excited as a quiet thrill curled through her. For the first time in two months she felt energized, adventurous, daring...alive. The roiling mix of emotions tingled to the tips of her fingers and toes with wild anticipation. Oh, it was simply divine! And exactly what she’d been missing from her recent boring life.

She looked at the costume in her hand. She should stop Mr. Vincenzo right now and explain the mistake and how she was there to retrieve a painting, not pose for one. That she was a respectable young miss—well, as respectable as a shipping merchant’s daughter could ever be—and not someone who was paid to let men look at her, on stage, in a painting, or otherwise. But if she explained herself, the precious freedom she’d found this afternoon would be snuffed out, and the oppressive dread would press in around her once more.

Yet if she remained...an adventure.

And anyway, what harm was there in missing the breakfast and pretending to be a model? Society women paid thousands of pounds to have their portraits painted, and there was certainly nothing scandalous about that. They bragged about it, in fact. No one would ever know that she'd been here. And what was the worst that could happen, that he would be angry with her when he learned that she knew nothing about being a model? If he was going to be angry and send her away anyway, then—

“Well?” he called out. “Are we going to do this or not?”

With a deep breath to tamp down the excitement spilling through her, she stepped inside.