

Chapter 1



OCTOBER 1839

Lord Jacob Haversley dismounted his sable horse and walked toward the shade of a large gazebo on the edge of the Chalestry estate. It had been more than fifteen years since his last visit, and his boyish mind of years ago had never noticed the expanse and wealth of the McCallisters.

But then he had only been Jacob Grysham, the younger son of Lord Haversley. That was before everything had changed. Perhaps he would have taken notice of the luxurious estate had he known then that he would become a lord. As an *unmarried* lord, it was high time he noticed which of his mother's friends had large holdings.

He hurriedly deposited himself on a marble bench to collect his wits before meeting Michael McCallister, Earl of Chalestry. No one expected him for a few hours, and Jacob would have gone straight on to Berkeley had his horse not slipped a shoe. He wished he could address the social part of the visit later, for Berkeley pressed on his mind, but now he needed to think.

It was his duty to make a perfect impression.

Jacob pulled a small leather-bound notebook from his vest and reread the hasty notes from Mrs. Tursley's ball two days previous:

Blanche Beecher—19, stunning, wide features, excellent singing voice. Seemed quite interested as I praised her song, excellent dancer. Quite flirtatious.

Amelia Livingston—17, first ball, extremely wealthy, shy, but well-proportioned and sweet temperament. Bright blonde hair, elaborate gown, seemed quite taken by me (complimented my waistcoat).

Julia Tursley—21, eldest daughter of the Tursleys. Asked her to dance out of obligation, as she sat alone. Quite tall and thin, overly giddy, a bit clumsy.

He mulled over the other entries. There were twenty-nine in all, just from the last six months alone. That was two fewer entries than the year of his age.

Surely there must be one female among these who could prove a suitable wife, he mused. He sighed, knowing the falsehood of his thought.

The problem did not lie in his effort but in his results. He had made *more* than ample effort.

And so he came to Elmbridge, half-heartedly hoping that one of the young ladies he met here might become more than just a small entry in his journal. But how could Elmbridge have any more interesting ladies than those from town?

Still, he tried to play the part—complete with his elaborate jacket. The words of his friend Colonel Unsworth rang in his ears: “A well-dressed man will obtain a lady with more ease.” Jacob brushed a speck of dirt from his lapel. He *did* always employ decorative cuffs and billowing cravats, and none of it had helped him thus far.

Ever since his father’s death, he felt bound to do his mother’s bidding. He would play the role of dapper, eligible bachelor, awkwardly on display, to perfection. He knew his mother hoped to secure an engagement for her son to her childhood friend’s daughter. At most gatherings, eligible girls flocked to him like seagulls to bread.

But with each girl, something was always missing. At times he told himself it was the family they came from, other times their financial status, or—although he tried not to be rude—sometimes the girl’s looks. But it was more than that. He had assumed for years that he would know the right girl when he found her, that he would feel it to be right.

Now he doubted such a notion. Who in their right mind went according to their feelings, anyway? That was a sign of a weak man.

Elmbridge would hold some answers. He could feel it. Something tugged at him, prodded him forward, telling him he *needed* to be here. He led Sylvester on, ambling his way to the gate of the McCallisters’ estate.

He dismounted and adjusted his newly tailored coat and immaculate cravat and summoned his parliamentary charisma.

A robust butler dressed in dark maroon livery opened the door. Once inside, Jacob dusted himself off gingerly as he was let into a marble-columned entrance hall. He examined himself in the large mirror to his left and brushed his hand across his hair, hiding the few greys that had recently shown themselves among the mahogany strands. His ensemble, he had to admit, especially the deep plum vest, complemented his brown eyes and dark eyebrows rather well. He knew he looked the part.

Gazing around at the winding staircase and brightly hued floor-to-ceiling paintings, he admitted to himself that perhaps the country did hold some charm.

A dainty maid whisked through the hall as Jacob waited for Lord Chalestry. Then, hearing a slight sound of moving feet, he looked up and saw a young woman, barely visible behind a curtain on the second floor. She gave him one glance and then seemed to disappear as she stepped back for a moment. Her elaborate hair and gown must mean she was Lady Florence, the McCallisters' only daughter. Jacob watched her as she slowly descended the stairs. She lightly touched a blonde curl and wielded a demure smile. The staircase's curve gave this young woman the advantage of time as she slowly stepped down the stairs. She seemed to know better than to introduce herself before her father's formal introduction. When she finished her descent, she curtsied in silence. Jacob bowed back toward her, and then she exited toward the parlor.

Jacob smiled. Perhaps Elmbridge's females would impress more than he had anticipated.

A moment later, a round man with thinning hair and a silk paisley vest erupted through the door. His dark olive jacket fit snugly around his middle, and his smile extended across his entire face.

"Lord Haversley, it is good to see you again! Last time we were together, you were perhaps fourteen." Lord Chalestry quieted a minute and added, "I am so sorry for all that has befallen your family since our time together so many years ago. When you left Elmbridge, I thought your sister's death was enough grief for one family. And now . . . I am so terribly sorry."

"Thank you, Lord Chalestry. It has been a hard few years, but my mother and I bear it the best we can."

Lord Chalestry nodded. "Of course." He looked Jacob up and down, smiled, and said cheerily, "So again, welcome! My wife informs me that you, your mother, and niece plan to stay at least a month."

"Yes. Thank you for your hospitality," Lord Haversley said, his usual easy conversation now employing itself. "I arrived by horse, though the rest of the party should arrive this evening. I came early to attend to some business in Berkeley, but my horse threw a shoe not half a mile from here, so I decided to introduce myself here first."

"And welcome you are. My wife and your mother will have much to talk of, I am sure. We are all excited to meet your niece, Miss Grysham. I hear she has become quite the lady. Yes, yes." His hands bounded off his great belly in approval. "And of course you have pressing business. Please take one of my horses. I can tell you prefer to ride." Lord Chalestry clapped his hands and seemed filled with nothing but praise. "So we might expect you all at a late dinner, then?"

"Yes, sir." He had offered his horse without Jacob even having to ask. *How perfect*, Jacob thought.

"Splendid! I shall have my man show you your room." Lord Chalestry bowed and turned to leave. A servant entered as he exited. Jacob followed the servant up two flights of stairs and deposited his few personal effects in the striped forest green suite but had no intention of resting. He made his way to the stable to acquire his borrowed horse and pursue the real reason for coming to Elmbridge so early.

"Has Sylvester been fed and watered?" Jacob asked a towheaded stable hand who could not have been more than twenty.

"Yes, indeed sir, 'e has."

"Your master has said I can borrow one of his horses for the afternoon. Can you see that my horse gets another shoe? Sylvester is quite sturdy, and I need him back as soon as possible." Jacob thumped his large hand on the horse's left flank.

"Yes, of course, sir," the stable hand said, already placing the saddle on the back of a light brown mare. He handed the reins to Jacob, who mounted quickly.

Jacob knew he had only a few hours before everyone else arrived. He must make the most of his time. When his mother arrived, he would be almost entirely beholden to her wishes. Now, if only he could remember the exact way to go. He kicked his long leg over the side of the horse and looked down toward the stable hand once more.

"This way to Berkeley?"

"Oh, yes, sir." A thin hand pointed right. "About two hours or so down the east road there."

"Thank you," Jacob replied, determined to gallop all the way.



Miss Suzanna Spencer smoothed her slightly dirty work apron and checked the state of her unruly dark blonde bun. She reached for her basket and pressed deeper into her family's large vegetable garden. The fall sun shone with a warm hue as she smelled the rich, musky earth around her.

At the edge of the plot on a stone bench sat her sickly, coughing father, who dutifully inspected his radishes. She sat down a few yards from him and sunk her trowel near a carrot, unearthing a rock. Chocolate-colored soil flew all over the tidy linen cravat of Mr. Lacy, her father's studying vicar, who followed directly behind her, weeding the beds as she continued her story.

"You see," she said speaking quickly and with such animated hand motions that Mr. Lacy had no choice but to submit to the barrage of soil now covering his vest. "I could not believe it. That old man must have been nearly forty-five. What on *earth* did I do to give Colonel Newbold the idea that I would accept his hand in marriage?" Suzanna furrowed her brow toward Mr. Lacy, letting out a large breath. "Oh, Mr. Lacy! Your poor linen. I am ever so sorry. I just got carried away."

She shot a plaintive glance to her father, her light blue eyes reverting back to her schoolgirl pleadings. "Surely you do not blame me for my refusal, Papa?" She pushed her unmanageable hair out of her eyes and continued to drive the point with her look.

Mr. Spencer's dark hat shaded his white hair and conservative black suit. His modest clothing befitted his reserved personality, even though he stood as rector of the largest parish in Elmbridge, possessing one of the most robust livings in all of England. Coupled with his yearly sum as a younger son of an earl, he lived quite simply for one with so much influence and disposable income.

Mr. Spencer's curved back attempted to straighten a little.

"Colonel Newbold is a respectable man, Suzanna. And might I remind you, there are many 'old' men who are still very fine." He smiled warmly

toward his daughter as he collected the last of his produce. "But I know that, from your infancy, you have never acted against your conscience. And your conscience, luckily for me, is quite well-mannered and amiable. So if he is not your choice, then so be it, I suppose. Although . . ." He coughed again and cleared his throat, and Suzanna noted it sounded worse than it had a few weeks before. "I would like it if you were married before God takes me from my mortal sojourn."

Suzanna nodded, for once not speaking. She feared her father might leave them much too soon. She lifted her basket again, this time analyzing the turnips, and glanced sideways at Mr. Lacy, who listened to the whole conversation silently. Thank goodness for him. His presence eased her father's mind and workload a great deal.

It was Lord Chalestry's duty as lord of the manor to fill the position. Consequently, he had asked Oxford for their brightest new vicar, knowing he would act as assistant for Mr. Spencer, whose health was deteriorating. The sad truth was that Mr. Lacy would then take over the rectory once it fell vacant. He had therefore arrived at the Spencers' home just a few months earlier.

Suzanna came out of her reflections. "You know I do *wish* to be married, Father. I have always wanted what you and Mother had. But not many men really interest me, and Colonel Newbold is no exception."

"All in good time." Her father smiled.

Then Mr. Lacy finally chimed in, only quiet enough for Suzanna to hear. "I did see a few of his false teeth fall into his glass during the last dinner party." He winked at her. "But you did not hear such a report from me."

Suzanna chuckled and smiled at Mr. Lacy as his strawberry-blond head dutifully returned to his produce. Mr. Lacy would do credit to her father. She could not have wished for a better friend and vicar, for he had proven an almost indispensable part of their family in their short acquaintance. His coming had been like rain on parched soil.

A few moments later, Mr. Spencer declared, "Mr. Lacy, I must return to my study, for I have had as much sunshine and breeze as my health allows. You and Suzanna finish collecting a few of the vegetables, and then deliver them to the cook before dinner."

"Yes, of course," Mr. Lacy said. "We shall finish in no time." He tried to brush the earth from his shirt.

Coming back to herself, Suzanna remembered she had not said everything as she ran her fingertips over the edge of the carrot stems.

"I am sure," she continued, becoming animated again, "the colonel is only fifteen years my father's junior. He could almost *be* my father. Surely I should at least *like* the man I marry. And he would expect me to entertain his old navy friends and their wives all day. I don't want to be some perfectly prim hostess who never thinks of anything but what carriage to order."

"Any sensible man could see that you care about far more than that. Your sense of duty always returns to your quest to help the less fortunate," Mr. Lacy said, his bright green eyes wrinkling. "The vivacity with which you proceed to buoy the world, one poor farmer's wife at a time, is incredible. I know no one with your kind of stamina toward good deeds."

Suzanna responded with a smile. He truly understood her. She rose from the garden, wielding a full basket of vegetables. "Everyone remembers my mother as the very best rector's wife—constantly serving those around her. At first, my desire to help others came only from a sense of obligation to her legacy. But now, I want to find a way to *really* make a difference. Not just helping here and there, but changing lives." She daintily brushed her apron, noticing how clean she seemed compared to Mr. Lacy. "Oh, I fear I have given you a sermon," she said. "Forgive me."

"On the contrary. I quite enjoyed it," he said. His smile lingered long enough Suzanna hurried to change the subject.

"Now if you could please take these inside," she said, briskly filling his arms with vegetables, "I will deliver some of them tomorrow morning to the Pincers, whose eldest three children have caught the croup. It will do them good."

Suzanna watched Mr. Lacy nod but did not notice he had shuffled the produce and extended his arm until he cleared his throat. She tilted her head and smiled, allowing him to escort her to the top of the root cellar, where she bid him farewell and continued with her usual bounding step down the stairs.



Less than an hour later, Lady Florence McCallister, daughter of Lord Chalestry, entered Suzanna's parlor.

"I feel it has been *ages* since I have seen you, my dearest friend," Lady Florence began, surveying the window treatments as though she almost approved of them.

"We have been quite busy these past few months," Suzanna answered. "I try to assist my father any time he needs me. His training of Mr. Lacy has been fulfilling, but it tires him."

"Ah, yes. Mr. Lacy," Lady Florence replied. Suzanna watched her friend's eyes twinkle toward her. "My father's choice for future rector is quite good, don't you think? I am sure *you* have spent much time with him then, as well?"

Suzanna *did* enjoy the presence of Mr. Lacy, but the way Lady Florence pried into her affairs caused Suzanna to stiffen.

"He has learned a great deal from my father," Suzanna said stoically, looking across the room.

"Just right!" Lady Florence continued with a dainty clap. She quickened the pace of her speech. "Then I shall extend *your* invitation to my ball to include him as well. Bring Mr. Lacy, to be sure! Tell me, dearest, that you will attend next Thursday. I promise it shall be the biggest event of the year, excepting our annual fox hunt! And my mother is quite set on showing off all the gems of Elmbridge, so you must be there. Of course she means to show me off, for we have invited Lord Haversley from town to attend. His mother and mine are dearest friends, you know. Quite old chums, in fact. He has not been to Elmbridge for several years. He's devilishly handsome, for I saw him after he arrived. He gallantly came by horseback. I assure you there is not a better specimen around."

Suzanna wondered for a moment if Florence meant the horse, but she rather doubted it. Lady Florence had paused for effect and air, and smiled toward Suzanna. "I daresay I drag on. Bring Mr. Lacy and your father, if he is able, next Thursday. We shall have a fabulous evening!" She stopped only long enough to begin again. "I must be going. I am to have a special dinner with Lord Haversley and his mother. Oh, and his niece who now lives with him. So good to talk with you, my dear."

Lady Florence gathered her ornately embroidered shawl around herself and gave a small wave. The carriage that brought her quickly bore her away almost before Suzanna had walked back to the parlor. She had not yet seated herself again when Mr. Lacy entered from the library into the sitting room.

"Oh," he said, lowering his book and quickly smiling. "Forgive me, Miss Spencer. I did not know you presently employed this parlor."

Suzanna gave a wry smile and folded her arms. "On the contrary, sir, I am sure you heard *every* high-pitched word of Lady Florence."

A guilty look crossed his face. "Quite thin walls here in Elmbridge," he said, gesturing with his book toward the doorway behind him. He looked down and scratched his head. "So she is to have a ball?"

"Yes, to secure her courtship to Lord Haversley of London, whoever he is. You are invited to attend, of course, she wishes me to add."

"I shall indeed! Sounds quite entertaining." He cocked his head to the side, a smile pulling up one side of his face. "And from what I hear"—he shifted his weight on to one leg—"Lord Haversley is one of the most eligible bachelors in all of England."

"And how do you come to know such information?" Suzanna asked, her eyes narrowing.

"All of the ladies sewing for the poor were talking of his arrival today. You know how they can be—times of service often turn into a bona fide gossip hour. According to the female report, he is thirty-some-odd, uncommonly handsome, well off, and has made it *quite* clear he desires a wife."

"Well, with such a list of attributes, we must assume him to be very picky or quite insufferable to have not yet obtained one," Suzanna declared.

Mr. Lacy nodded emphatically. "My thoughts exactly! Seems like the ball shall be quite the scene to behold." He stood proudly, like a pleased show dog.

"Definitely," Suzanna said. "We shall not miss it."