

Chapter One

England, 1860

Lady Jocelyn Townebridge stood at the graveside watching the casket holding her father's body being lowered into the ground. She dabbed at her eyes, trying to stem the rising feeling of claustrophobia as clods of dirt were shoveled on top of him. She and her father had been very close; it was no surprise that she imagined that this was what he must be feeling.

She knew, of course, that he wasn't feeling anything. She had sat with his body long enough to know he no longer inhabited it. He had gone on to a far better place where the ravages of consumption could no longer reach him.

She closed her eyes and let him go, allowing his spirit to soar up and away. At eighteen years of age, she was on her own, having to find her way in the world. Even now the creditors were ransacking her home, taking anything of value to repay her father's debts. He had been so ill for so long that the family fortune had dissipated. A workhouse, servitude, she did not know what the future held for her - a ruined aristocrat buffeted about by the winds of misfortune.

She knelt and prayed that God would bless her with his kindness and good grace. *Please keep me safe in your hands; please send someone to watch over me.* She repeated her prayer over and over like a chant, her head bowed and knee bent.

Unbeknownst to her, in the crowd of mourners she was already being watched by a friend of her father's, Lord Andrew Summerlain, the 8th Duke of Westchester. Andrew had known Jocelyn since before she was born. As a lad, he had served as a page at her father Lord Townebridge's wedding to the beautiful Isabella and very much enjoyed extended visits to their home. Unlike the cold austerity of his home, it had been a warm and loving place. He had been at Isabella's funeral as well when she died days after giving birth to Jocelyn. It had been a dark and gloomy day, similar to this one, when he'd witnessed her tragic burial.

He saw an opportunity to approach Jocelyn as it started to drizzle and the crowd of mourners quickly dispersed. He stepped up and held his umbrella over the delicate figure until she rose from prayer.

"Pardon me, Jocelyn but do you remember me?"

She looked up at him, a tall, dark figure and focused on his handsome face. He smiled at what a beautiful young woman she'd become and she saw a flash of white teeth.

"Andrew! Of course I remember you!" She rose up on tiptoe and gave him a hug. "When did you return from India?"

He was touched by the way her face lit up as she recognized him. "Just in time to hear the sad news, I'm afraid. I would have come sooner, but I did not know Edwin was so ill. His letters never conveyed...." His voice trailed off as he fought for composure. If he spoke further, he would betray the depths of his grief.

He offered his arm to Jocelyn and steered her away from the graveside. He could see a well-lit restaurant from where they were standing and decided to take her there to get her out of the rain.

"No, Father would not allow me to let on how sick he was to anyone. He told me that he thought of you as a son. He loved you very much." She gave his arm a comforting squeeze. "So, what brings you back to the continent?" she asked, trying to lighten the conversation.

Andrew was impressed by her graciousness as she consoled him even though it was her father who had died.

"My parents both passed recently, one quickly following the other. They had been ill for some time."

Jocelyn replied with sorrow, "I'm so sorry to hear that." She stopped and looked up at him, her eyes beginning to twinkle. Like she herself, Andrew was an only child, the only heir. "Well then I should curtsy to the new Lord Summerlain." She dropped into a deep curtsy, as if she were being formally presented at court.

Andrew threw back his head and laughed. This was the little girl he remembered, keeping her father entertained with her antics, bouncing about with a full head of dark curls.

Andrew stopped in front of the restaurant and asked if she'd care for a meal. Jocelyn's reaction was most curious. She looked inside the window and then down at her mourning gown and then back in the window. He took her arm and urged her inside. They were quickly seated and Andrew took it upon himself to order for both of them, a selection of their best dishes. When the food arrived, Jocelyn's eyes widened and she ate with gusto. He was amazed that such a little thing could put away so much food. Watching her, the thought occurred to him, could it be that she was hungry? He watched her carefully but without seeming to stare. Once when he looked away he turned back in time to see her dropping a roll into her bag.

He began to put together the pieces of the puzzle, how she had been alone at the graveside with no companion or escort, the shabbiness of her attire, her ravenous appetite. The child was living in poverty!

Andrew cleared his throat and began to question her, "How old are you now, Jocelyn?"

"I turned eighteen last month. I am of age, sir," she saucily replied, as if that solved all of her problems.

He smiled and reminded her of the last time he'd seen her, as a tiny twelve-year-old trying very hard to be grownup. She recalled how he'd shredded her newfound dignity into tatters with his teasing. They laughed together and then he cleared his throat and steered the conversation along more serious lines.

"I am sorry to be so crass as to discuss such matters, little one, but please take this inquiry in the spirit in which it is intended. I presume your father left you well provided for?"

Jocelyn shook her head and looked away, distracted by the dessert cart rolling by. Andrew signaled to the waiter. "One of each please."

Jocelyn looked at him with her big eyes and he nodded at her, encouraging her to talk as the waiter set several small plates of dessert before them.

"My father, may he rest in peace, was very ill for a very long time. Most of the family holdings are dissipated and the debt collectors have descended. Even as we speak, they are ransacking my home and taking anything of value." She stopped and bit her lip. She had not meant to confide as much to anyone, but there was something about Andrew that made her feel safe, safe enough to take him into her confidence.

"Whatever will you do now? Where will you go?"

"I will go home and see what is left. The reading of the will is tomorrow and then I will know who was named as my conservator, if anyone."

"Your father did not discuss these matters with you?"

"No, even though I am his only heir, I was not taken into his confidence. As a female I was not included in his meetings with his solicitors or his accountants. I have no idea what his final wishes were."

Andrew tried to hide his concern from Jocelyn but he was very worried indeed. He could not imagine one so tender in age being so completely vulnerable at this point in her life. He sat back and watched her blissfully tasting the various desserts and drinking her tea. She was a very young eighteen-year-old, one who had clearly been sheltered to an absurd degree.

As they left the restaurant, he gestured for a carriage and escorted her home. He studied Jocelyn as she sat across from him. She was exquisite, with her large violet eyes and small straight nose. Her lips were full and plush, causing him to imagine kissing them, licking them. He came back to himself with a start. He had known Jocelyn forever; she was practically his little sister. Such thoughts were inappropriate, but then he reconsidered. Although their families had been close, they were not actually related in any way. Jocelyn was no longer a child, she was now a woman, undeniably the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She sat with her hands folded quietly in her lap and her eyes lowered, suddenly shy with him.

Andrew was surprised at the emotions that being this close to her were unleashing within him. He felt a sense of recognition when he looked at her. Not the recognition of seeing an acquaintance but rather the recognition one experiences when finding the one they had long been searching for - the other part of themselves.

Andrew's friends had teased him about being a career bachelor. There had been many women in his past, but none who had caused him to consider marriage for even a moment. What had he been waiting for? And why were his thoughts turning to marriage now? Perhaps it was what Jocelyn represented? Her parents had always provided a safe harbor for him, but no - it was more than that.

Jocelyn looked up at him, admiration in her eyes. He felt his hard core of resistance to feminine charms begin to melt. He instinctively knew that the woman sitting across from him could ask anything of him and he would be powerless to refuse. Jocelyn smiled as she leaned forward and pointed out her house. Andrew signaled to the driver to stop and looked up at the house with concern. The entire structure was dark.

"Where are the servants?" he asked. She looked away from him, reluctant to answer. She had already told him too much. Her problems were not his concern.

He helped her out of the carriage and turned her to look at him. "Jocelyn, tell me. Where are the servants?"

"They left one by one sir, as we were unable to pay them." She lowered her eyes, ashamed.

He looked up at the cold, dark house. He decided to accompany her inside even if it were improper. Propriety be damned! It would be even more improper to let this young woman enter the forbidding residence by herself. She unlocked the door and they stepped inside. The house was very cold; it felt as if it not been heated in a very long time.

Jocelyn lit a candle and gasped. The entire room was emptied, not a stick of furniture remained. They wandered through the empty rooms until they reached a bedroom. She walked over to a closet and threw it open and cried, "They took everything, my toiletries, my clothing, everything." She began to weep.

He was touched by Jocelyn's despair. Who would not be? She was so lovely and so small. He longed to take her in his arms and comfort her as she shook with sobs. That however would not do. She needed him to be clearheaded and helpful now, not preying upon her vulnerability. Andrew ached with an intense desire to scoop her up and take her to the safety of his estate, but he had no rights. Her future was now in the hands of whomever Lord Townebridge had

appointed as her conservator, if he had even done so. Andrew prayed for her sake that a guardian had been appointed, someone to take her in.

Andrew took her away from that house, never to return. What was he going to do with an eighteen-year-old girl that would be socially acceptable even for one night? He thought of his maiden aunt, Fiona. She was not in the best of health, but was in residence at her London home. He had the carriage deliver them there.

The housekeeper showed them into his Aunt's presence. "Andrew, I thought you were going to the funeral..." her voice died out as he stepped to one side and she saw Jocelyn standing behind him. "Oh my dear," she cried as she slowly rose to her feet and walked towards the child, while leaning heavily on her cane. She embraced the young woman and said, "I was so sorry to hear about your father. I would have come to the services, but my physicians won't allow me out in this weather."

Jocelyn curtsied and smiled sadly. "Thank you, Lady Darby, I wouldn't have wanted you out in this weather either."

"Auntie, Jocelyn has no place to sleep tonight, her home is... uninhabitable."

Fiona looked sharply at Andrew and then back at Jocelyn, instinctively understanding that an unpleasant subject had been broached, one not to be dwelt upon. "You shall spend the night here, child. Mrs. Burton!" she called. The housekeeper must have stayed close by because she instantly appeared.

"Please take this child and put her right to bed. She looks exhausted." She kissed Jocelyn on her forehead and placed her small hand in the housekeeper's. Mrs. Bates smiled kindly at Jocelyn and led her away. Jocelyn looked back at Andrew and he smiled reassuringly at her. She turned and followed the housekeeper out of the room.

"Sit, Andrew, and tell me, what's going on?"

"The little one has apparently been left destitute, I'm sorry to say. Lord Townebridge was so ill for so long and left many debts. Tomorrow Jocelyn will discover if anyone has even been named as her guardian. I cannot imagine being so powerless at such a sensitive age." Andrew closed his eyes in distaste. He again felt that overwhelming urge to protect the little one, to scoop her up and take her away with him to the safety of his estate.

Lady Darby watched him closely. It was plain to see that her nephew had feelings for this young woman. "I am sorry to hear about Jocelyn's misfortune, but I strongly suspect that all will turn out well in the end, nephew. Go now and get some sleep."

"Thank you, Auntie, I'll be back first thing in the morning to collect her. I've been named in Edwin's will, so will escort Jocelyn to the reading."

Lady Darby stood and linked her hand in Andrew's arm. She leaned heavily on him as she walked him to the door. "Plan to join us for breakfast, dear, and do get a good night's sleep."

As Andrew walked to the carriage, his step slowed and he reluctantly turned back to look at his aunt's townhouse. He did not want to leave Jocelyn behind, not even for one night. He looked at the upstairs bedroom windows and sent a silent message of support, then reluctantly turned to take his leave.

The next morning Andrew helped Jocelyn up the steps to the solicitor's office. Mr. Wellington was the attorney for his family as well as the Townebridges. At the reading, Andrew quickly learned what Edwin had bequeathed him. It turned out that his dear friend had left him his library, knowing that Andrew was a voracious reader and had the facilities to house his extensive collection. Andrew smiled at this. As a boy he had spent hours in that library and would love to have received those books, but they had been removed from the house by the

creditors. The collection was no more. Andrew vowed to recreate his friend's library by purchasing the titles he could recall.

Mr. Wellington announced the conservatorship of the fair Jocelyn. It was only then that Andrew realized the dire straits that the girl had been condemned to. The people that her father had appointed as her guardians, Andrew's uncle and aunt, Lord Arthur and Lady Charlotte Darby, would not be able to fulfill their responsibilities. Aunt Charlotte had recently perished and Arthur had been suffering from dementia for quite some time. They would have been a good choice at one time, but no longer.

Andrew spoke, sharing the sad news. "I am sorry to say this, Mr. Wellington, but my Aunt Charlotte is deceased and Uncle Arthur has gone mad. News of his delicate condition has been kept in the family thus far, but Arthur is unable to care for anyone, let alone a young girl."

Jocelyn broke down at this announcement.

Mr. Wellington explained to a weeping Jocelyn that her guardian was incompetent and unable to fulfill his responsibilities, therefore the matter would have to be taken before the magistrate. Andrew stepped forward and offered his services. He would take over guardianship of Jocelyn.

Mr. Wellington harrumphed, "This is most unusual, sir. A proper search must be done first to see who else may be available. Perhaps Lord Darby's maiden sister Fiona?"

Jocelyn was crying too hard at this point to add to the conversation.

"My aunt is elderly and in poor health. There are no other relatives. I am the conservator of Arthur's estate and now that Jocelyn has been left to him, she is part of that responsibility," Andrew tersely explained. "It makes sense, John, besides the guardianship of such a high-ranking member of the nobility must go to a well seated gentleman with the means to properly provide for her. As the lord of a large estate and the next male in the family line, I am the logical choice."

John Wellington expressed concern about the arrangement. "I cannot in good conscience send an eighteen-year-old girl to live with a single bachelor gentleman."

Andrew looked down at little Jocelyn and asked, "Would you like to come and live with me at Westchester Estates, Jocelyn? Would you consider becoming my ward?" With tears in her eyes, Jocelyn looked up at Andrew and smiled, nodding her agreement.

"This is outrageous!" the solicitor sputtered. "You cannot leave such an important matter as this to the whims of a young girl. This matter must be settled by the authorities."

Andrew pulled himself up to his full height; he towered over the solicitor. "Jocelyn has indicated that this solution is acceptable to her. I will secure the services of a governess, a mature woman companion to oversee the daily care of Jocelyn. Perhaps then you would think it proper?"

Jocelyn was looking at Andrew, blinking in astonishment. He was the only person who had extended a helping hand to her since she'd fallen on desperate times. A smile illuminated her face. Wherever she ended up, she would never forget Andrew's kindness. She looked back at the solicitor for his decision.

The solicitor shrugged, defeated. It did seem to be the only solution. "I will set up a court date two weeks hence and leave the matter to the judge to decide. In the meantime, Jocelyn will stay with my family – my wife and I have five daughters, what is one more? Lord Summerlain, you will have to prove to the judge that you are ready to take on the responsibility for this young woman. We will all abide by what his honor decides."

Andrew spoke to Jocelyn briefly before he had to depart. She was tiny, only coming to mid-chest on him. He tilted her chin and looked into her red-rimmed eyes. "I will return for you

within the fortnight, my dear. I vow to secure your guardianship and keep you safe in my home. When the time comes, I shall sponsor your debut and see to it that you have every prospect in place for a promising future."

Jocelyn looked up at her white knight and laid her hand on his arm. Even through his sleeve, her touch caused his arm to tingle. "Thank you, my Lord," she whispered. "I shall eagerly await your return."

As Andrew strode to the door, he turned to take one last look at the small woman he was leaving behind. He realized that the last thing he wanted to do was leave her, but at that point he had no choice. There was planning to do and arrangements to be made.