

SUITORS
AND
SABOTAGE
CINDY ANSTEY

Swoon READS

Swoon Reads | New York

A SWOON READS BOOK

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For my cheering committee, aka my family

chapter 1



In which Miss Imogene Chively prays for a sudden rainstorm or a stampede of goats

GRACEBRIDGE MANOR, FOTHERINGHAM, KENT—
EARLY JULY 1817

“Jasper!” Imogene Chively shouted as she jumped to her feet, flinging her sketch into the grass. “Don’t move! Stay. Stay exactly where you are!” Grabbing her skirts ankle-height with one hand and desperately waving the other, she raced across the courtyard of the old castle. “Emily, help!” she shouted over her shoulder without a backward glance.

She couldn’t look away; Imogene’s eyes were glued to those of Jasper. If she looked away, he might try to leap off the crumbling wall. And he couldn’t. . . . Shouldn’t. It was too high. There was no doubt of an injury—a broken leg or, worse yet, a snapped neck or a blow to the head. “Stay,” she said again but in a softer, crooning tone, almost a prayer.

Having reached the wall, Imogene found Jasper two feet

above her reach—even on tip-tip toes. He stared down at her, pleased with all the attention, tail wagging, tongue lolling.

“Oh, Jasper,” Emily Beeswanger said behind her. “You silly dog, what have you done now?” Emily, Imogene’s fast friend for all their eighteen years, was well versed in Jasper’s antics.

The St. John’s water dog continued to wag.

“Can you keep him from jumping, Emily? Yes, hold your hands up like a barrier. Exactly. I will go around behind him.”

“You can’t climb the wall, Imogene. It’s too fragile. It will fall down, taking you with it.”

“Yes, I know. But I need to get higher. I have to encourage him to back up—he doesn’t have room to turn,” she said, looking up at the narrow ledge of the ruins. Frowning, she glanced across the courtyard to where they had lain a coverlet on the grass beside the moat. “Or,” she said, her eyes settling on the basket atop the blanket. “I have a better idea; I know what always encourages obedience.”

“Food,” Emily said knowingly.

“Indeed.” Imogene turned and sauntered back across the cobblestone. She would have preferred to run, but doing so would have fueled Jasper’s excitable nature and encouraged him to leap over Emily’s outstretched arms to join her. She had just reached into the basket when a nearby voice startled her. Spinning around, Imogene locked eyes with a young gentleman standing on the arch of the moat bridge.

Imogene gasped in dismay. Ernest Steeple? Surely not. Her suitor was not due until the next day.

“Can I help?” he asked again when Imogene did not answer.

Gulping, Imogene tried to calm her panicked thoughts. She could feel the burn of embarrassment flaring up her cheeks as soon as she realized that the stranger was not Ernest but Benjamin Steeple, her suitor's younger brother.

Suddenly the air was filled with a cacophony of barking, whining, and yipping. Imogene turned to see Jasper's body undulating in serpentine waves as his excitement grew to a fevered pitch. He was staring at the new arrival.

"No!" Imogene shouted as the dog crouched. "Stay!"

Even as she called out, Mr. Steeple moved. In a flash, he was across the courtyard and almost to the wall when Jasper launched himself into the air. Emily jumped up to catch him, but Jasper sailed over her head with ease.

Imogene screamed as time slowed to a crawl. Jasper seemed to fall forever, but in those seconds, Mr. Steeple must have known he would not reach the dog. He flung himself under the dog's path in a spectacular sprawl, sliding across the ground on his back. The dog landed with a heavy thump on the poor gentleman's gut, eliciting a sharp gasp as they tumbled together. The tangled mess of dog and man finally came to a rest at the base of the wall.

Naturally, Jasper was the first on his feet. Bouncing with excitement, showing no injury or awareness of his peril, the dog licked Mr. Steeple's face with abandon. The poor gentleman tried to fend off the affection to no avail; he finally succumbed to the wash and laughed as he struggled to his feet.

Imogene wanted to ask if he was hurt, but her tongue would not cooperate.

“Are you all right?” Emily asked in an easy manner that Imogene wished she could emulate.

“Oh yes, indeed. Just a little dirt here and there,” he said as he swiped pointlessly at the ingrained dirt on the elbows of his well-cut coat. “Nothing that can’t be fixed.”

“That was quite impressive. I’m certain Jasper would have done himself an injury had you not caught him.”

Mr. Steeple laughed again. “I’m not certain I would call that a catch.”

“It was impressive nonetheless.” Emily smiled up at him as he smiled down.

It was a charming tableau: Emily, with her pretty, round face framed by cascades of brown curls peeking out from her bonnet, staring up at the handsome visage of Benjamin Steeple, with the old castle ruins behind them. The smell of flora wafted through the air while cattle lowed in the nearby fields. Yes, indeed, a lovely tableau.

Imogene huffed a sigh. This was dreadful.

Mr. Benjamin’s presence had only one possible meaning—disaster was about to befall them. Mr. Ernest Steeple had arrived early. There would be no meandering through the estate, sketching and chatting with Emily about their London Season. No relaxing at the old castle, chasing butterflies or picking wildflowers today. Guests were about to descend upon Grace-bridge Manor *en masse*.

Imogene sighed again. It was a long-suffering sigh, not that of eager anticipation.

Benjamin Steeple bent to accept Jasper’s continued

attention. It was the respite Imogene needed, and it gave her time to take a few deep breaths, release the tension in her shoulders, and lift her cheeks into the semblance of a smile. As the mutual enthusiasm continued for some minutes, Imogene had an opportunity to observe Mr. Benjamin without reserve.

They had met once before, at a soiree in Mayfair. Though her glance of Ernest's younger brother had been for a short duration—and she had spent the entire length of the conversation staring at his shoes—she had seen the likeness immediately.

There was no doubting that Ernest and Benjamin were brothers, and being so close in age, at twenty and nineteen, it would be difficult for anyone without the knowledge to say who was the elder.

Similar in build, the Steeple boys were tall, loose-limbed, and broad-shouldered. They both had dark brown hair, but Ernest wore his longer, brushed back from a widow's peak. Ernest's face was slightly broader; Benjamin's chin was slightly sharper. And while Ernest had an open smile, Benjamin's smile was wider, getting wider and wider—as Imogene continued to examine his face without speaking.

Oh Lud! She was *staring*.

Imogene gulped in discomfort and prayed for some sort of distraction—anything: a sudden rainstorm, a stampede of goats . . . or a fast friend coming to the rescue.

“It is a pleasure to see you again, Mr. Steeple, and a lovely surprise.”

Imogene's eyes grew wide—horror of horrors, was Emily going to tell him that they had not been expected until the next

day? While true, it might cause him embarrassment. Imogene cringed with the thought of mortifying poor Mr. Benjamin. What should she say? How could she prevent this travesty?

However, instead of flushing and looking uncomfortable, Benjamin Steeple executed a well-practiced bow. “Yes, we are a day early, aren’t we? Ernest would not be stopped; he could think of nothing else but to see this part of the country.” He did not turn to look at Imogene, but his eyes flicked in her direction and then quickly back to Emily. “I apologize for the interruption. I did not know that you were here.”

“That is disappointing, Mr. Steeple. I thought it was *our* company that brought you to the ruin—that you sought us out.”

“Had I known, had Ernest known, we would have been here an hour ago, but alas it was indeed the call of these old stones that sent me down the hill.” He gestured toward Gracebridge, the large sandstone manor visible behind Imogene, and then turned, making a show of looking at the ruin’s tower and south wing, where the sun glinted off the many panes of the mullioned windows. It was the only part of the castle still intact. The adjacent great hall and the floor that had been over it were gone; three arched doorways, and above them six glassless windows, led into the roofless shell, where all but the staircase had suffered from the ravages of time.

“And what do you think, Mr. Steeple? Does the castle live up to your expectations?” Emily turned toward the old hall. Imogene knew her interest to be a pretense. The building had lost its allure to her friend when Emily had learned that there were no ghosts or ghouls within its crumbling walls.

Mr. Benjamin took a deep breath, almost a sigh. “Indeed, yes, indeed. Wasn’t really a castle, though, was it? Not any longer. More of a fortified manor. Elizabethan?” Still staring up at the tower, he turned his body, stepped forward, and almost collided with Imogene. “Oh, I do beg your pardon.”

He glanced down, arms outstretched, preparing to catch her should she take a tumble. With effort and relief, Imogene retained her balance. She nodded her appreciation.

Mr. Benjamin shrugged with well-executed nonchalance, then offered Emily one arm, Imogene the other. “Shall I escort you back to your piazza?” he asked, using his head to indicate the blanket by the moat.

Emily grinned, accepting with alacrity. Imogene, however, was loath to put her arm in the crook of his elbow. . . . But it would be the height of bad manners to ignore the gentlemanly gesture. She timidly lifted her arm.

The young gentleman hooked her hand and with little fuss tucked it in place as if he took the arm of young ladies every day—which she supposed he did, being that he had been in London for the Season. Oh dear, and now he was walking. Imogene tried to match his pace, saw him look over with a friendly smile, and then, suddenly, their gait was in harmony. The awkwardness of their promenade disappeared, and Imogene sighed in relief—and then worried that he had heard it.

But if he had, Benjamin Steeple showed no sign and merely led them to the blanket by the moat. Jasper trotted happily in their wake. He assisted Emily as she gracefully reclined beside the basket.

“Yes, I believe the old Norman castle was rebuilt in the Elizabethan era.” Emily returned to the question at hand, glancing toward Imogene for a sign.

Imogene nodded, and Emily smiled. “Yes, Elizabethan.” It was a brilliant smile, well executed: spontaneous, friendly, and slightly sassy.

Imogene thought Emily had pulled it off with great aplomb, but when she looked to see how it was received, she noted that Mr. Benjamin was not looking in Emily’s direction. He was still studying the ruin.

With a shake of his head, Mr. Benjamin turned to face them. Silence reigned for eons—perhaps a moment or two—and then Emily and Benjamin Steeple began to speak at the same time.

Laughing at their folly, Emily indicated that Mr. Benjamin should go ahead.

“I apologize again for disturbing you. I will leave you to your . . .” He glanced at the basket. “To your alfresco meal.”

“Oh no, Mr. Steeple, don’t go. There is no need.” Emily sounded amused. “It is just a spot of tea . . . without the tea, to see us through until dinner. We have plenty to spare if you would care to join us.”

Mr. Benjamin’s brow folded for the merest second, and then he nodded. “Thank you. So very kind; however, before I do, I might take a wander around this fine building.” He looked over his shoulder almost wistfully.

“Of course.” Imogene surprised Emily by answering before her. Imogene wanted to say more, though—warn him about the

decay and less-than-steady walls. And it would seem that Emily had forgotten about the danger, for her friend silently gestured toward the castle with a bright smile.

Taking full advantage of the offer, Benjamin Steeple swiveled and quickly crossed the old cobbled courtyard to the crumbling great hall.

“Emily,” Imogene whispered, “warn him—about the hazards.”

With a jerk of realization, Emily called, “Stop, Mr. Steeple, please. The floor is weak in the center and the wall rickety. Best go round the other way. Yes, there is a path that goes around the back. . . .” Emily snorted a laugh and dropped her voice. “Well, I guess he found it.” Benjamin Steeple had disappeared around the corner of the south wing with a casual wave, Jasper scurrying after him. “Methinks the gentleman likes your . . . ruins.”

“Not everyone can say that.” Imogene grinned as they turned back to the coverlet. She sat on her side with proper decorum and then pulled the basket close. “Help me spread this out, Emily. We can make a pretty display of it. As usual, Cook has been generous.”

Spreading out the savory tarts, fruit, and sweet squares, Imogene sighed at the loss of their solitude. While it was clear that Mr. Benjamin had not intended to intrude, he had done just that. Manners dictated their behavior from here; he would stay long enough to nibble on the light repast, discuss the weather or the beauty of the countryside, and then he would be off.

With another deep sigh, Imogene realized that her sense of disappointment was not for her lost sketching time, but the loss of a suitor-free day. Ernest Steeple was now waiting up at the house, and she would have to be *enchanting* and *engaging*, as dictated by her mother. How was she meant to achieve such lofty traits without . . . the proper disposition?

“It will be fine,” Emily said as if understanding the source of Imogene’s discomfort.

Imogene shrugged, but it didn’t look as nonchalant as she had wished.

“You’ll have to practice that,” Emily offered.

“I’ll have to practice a great many things.” Imogene sighed, yet again, wishing that her feeling of dread would go away.

“Try not to think on it overly. You’ll only end up tying yourself in knots. Just remember, Ernest Steeple would not be visiting if you had not made an impression. Your most awkward moments are over.”

“I wish that were true. Just as I wish Father had not invited him to spend a seven-night with us. We don’t really know each other—a mere three or four conversations does not indicate a lifelong attachment—Pardon?”

“I think that’s the point, Imogene. Your father invited Mr. Ernest so that you could get to know each other. I wish the idea didn’t make you so uncomfortable.”

“I’ll be tongue-tied or say all the wrong things.”

“Well, then focus on art—a topic so close to your heart you’ll forget to be shy.”

“Yes, but that was how I survived our first four encounters. I can hardly continue in the same vein.”

“Bat your bright blue eyes, then talk of the weather.”

Imogene smiled and shook her head. “Yes, that will win his heart for certain.”

“Do you want his heart?” Emily suddenly looked serious.

Imogene didn’t answer immediately. She mulled over the effects of Ernest’s proximity, and though she quite liked him, she thought that her quickening heart might not indicate attraction, but fear. But was it fear of losing Ernest’s good opinion or fear of disappointing her parents?

“I don’t know,” Imogene said finally.

“Well, whatever you decide, your dearest mama cannot complain. Mr. Ernest Steeple is an excellent prospect. Your Season was not a failure as was mine; I did not *take* as you have so clearly done.”

Imogene laughed at the absurdity. “You were the belle of many a ball and were not looking for *any* offer, but the *right* offer. Mrs. Beeswanger seems quite enamored with the idea of giving you a second Season. My mother . . . well, she wants me settled and away with no more wasted expense.” She uttered the hurtful words as if they were of no consequence, but Emily knew better.

“They are so very different. Really, I don’t know how our mothers have remained fast friends all these years; they rarely agree.”

“Cousin Clara,” Imogene said, nodding without looking up

from her paper. Clara Tabard was not only a cousin of Imogene's mother but also a great friend of Diane Beeswanger, Emily's mother. At least, she used to be. A disease of the lungs had carried Cousin Clara away the previous autumn. "She kept the peace. It will be a strange summer without her."

"Yes, indeed."

By the time the tealess tea was spread out, the strawberries moved closer to the peaches and then shifted nearer the apricot squares . . . and then back again, the tarts moved in line with the fruit . . . and then back again, Imogene began to wonder why Mr. Benjamin was taking so long to return. She looked over her shoulder. "Where do you think he has gone? The old castle is not that big."

"Do you want me to go look?" Emily appeared eager.

"Yes, absolutely. After all, he might be lost on this tiny spit of land that has only one way on or off."

Ignoring the teasing in Imogene's voice, Emily shifted as if about to rise, and then her face fell. "Oh, there he is. I missed my opportunity." Emily straightened. "We were despairing of you, Mr. Steeple. Thought you had fallen down the well."

The young gentleman stopped partway across the courtyard, the warm breeze fluttering his hair. "There's a well? I didn't see that. Where?"

"It was a jest, Mr. Steeple. The well was filled in years ago, for safety's sake."

"Oh, that is most unfortunate. I find studying the foundations, the base structure of a building of this age, fascinating. It is nothing short of amazing that the Normans had such

advanced knowledge of weight-bearing and distribution principles. The Elizabethans used it to great advantage when they built on top.”

Upon reaching the blanket, he joined them on one of the unoccupied corners and continued to extol the virtues of the castle’s architecture. “The tower would be an excellent vantage point to see the great hall in its entirety. There appears to be a door at the top of the stairs leading into the tower. Is it still function—” He stopped midsentence, staring at the sketch Imogene had rescued from the grass. It was propped up on the basket, out of the way.

Imogene felt the flush of heat rise up her cheeks and spread across her face. She hadn’t bothered to hide her drawing of the old castle; she thought it of no interest to anyone—and yet Mr. Benjamin continued to study it with deep interest.

“This is quite . . . accurate.”

Imogene rolled her shoulders forward and dropped her gaze to the blanket, wishing she could disappear into the ground.

“Impressively accurate,” he continued.

Suddenly it would seem that the Fates had answered Imogene’s call. The earth began to rumble as if it were thinking about splitting open. However, the noise was not coming from beneath her feet; it was coming from the ruin. Startled, Imogene jerked her head to look over her shoulder. As she watched in alarm, the floor to the great hall collapsed into the cellar below in a cascade of stone and dust.

Jumping up, they backed away from the huge cloud of debris until they could go no farther. The moat was at their backs.

And then the rumbling stopped—except for the occasional skitter and plop of an errant rock dropping into the newly formed hole visible through the arched doorways.

Imogene waved the dust out of her eyes, coughing in the thick air.

“Oh dear, that is most unfortunate,” Mr. Benjamin said with more tragedy in his tone than his words implied.

Even Emily looked upset.

Imogene shook her head in dismay. As the dust and dirt began to settle, it became apparent that the floor was not all that had been damaged in the collapse. The front wall of the great hall was leaning in at a worrisome angle. “We might lose the entire face as well,” Imogene said in a whisper of melancholy. The castle was her favorite sketching subject. More than half of her artwork featured the castle in some capacity. . . . And now it . . . “Well, it’s not gone,” she said with conviction. “The tower still stands, and with bracing, I imagine we can secure the wall.” She looked over to Mr. Benjamin. He seemed to know about these things. “Would you agree?”

“Most certainly. It is still a beautiful structure—worthy of praise and study.”

Imogene nodded and turned back to stare at the mess. “The lower floor will have to be dug out.”

“Yes, but as you can see, the stairs are still intact. Once the debris around is cleared out—Miss Chively? Is something wrong? Why—Miss Chively, stop! The wall might give way. Where are you go—?”

Imogene ran toward the ruined ruins, her heart hammering.

She couldn't breathe, so acute was her fear. "Jasper," she screamed.
"Jasper! Come, Jasper!"

She listened.

And in the silence, she heard a terrible sound. A whimper.
Coming from under the collapsed floor.

chapter 2



*In which rubble and a peered father confound
Miss Chively and Mr. Benjamin*

“No!” Imogene shouted as she tried to race forward, tried to get closer to the hole—tried and tried . . . to no avail. Something prevented her from moving. Looking down, Imogene saw a hand on her arm, clamped and holding tight. She looked up at Mr. Benjamin, confused. “Why . . . ? Let go, Mr. Steeple. Jasper is in there. He is hurt.”

Mr. Benjamin immediately released his grip, placing his hand in front of her instead. While not truly barring her way, his stance gave Imogene pause.

“I hear Jasper whining—” she said in a shaky voice. “He is hurt,” she repeated, for, really, what else was there to know?

“I beg your pardon, Miss Chively, but could you wait—just for a moment? I really should check the wall first. It could come

down on top of you, and then you will be of no use to Jasper whatsoever.” His voice was calm and matter-of-fact.

“Yes, of course.” Imogene nodded, ignoring the blur in her eyes and the trickles of moisture down her cheeks.

She watched as Mr. Benjamin strode to the central arch. Leaning across the threshold, he shifted back and forth, looking up. “I think there is little danger for now,” he eventually called over his shoulder. “But we will have to be very careful not to jar it any farther. And it will have to be braced sometime in the very near future.”

With a nod, Imogene stepped through the nearest doorway, stopping at the brink of the collapsed floor, listening for Jasper. Other than a few feet of stone edging the walls and central fireplace, the floor was completely gone. It was now a *tremendous* pile of rubble, filling what had once been the storeroom below the hall. Dust had painted every inch of the clumped and crumbling debris in the same hue of gray. Contours were near impossible to discern—certainly nothing dog-shaped.

Was Jasper under the rubble? Imogene caught her breath and swallowed with difficulty.

Squinting in concentration, she stepped gingerly down onto the top of the nearest collection of rocks. She listened for any change in Jasper’s tone. The stones shifted under her feet, and Imogene landed on her knees. It was jarring. Rocks cut into her palms and through the thin material of her gown, but Jasper’s whimper remained the same. She had not fallen on him or the rocks on top of him. And now his whine was louder, but it

echoed. Cocking her head, she listened, but it was near impossible to understand the direction from which the high-pitched whine was coming.

“Imogene, are you all right?” It sounded as if Emily were standing directly behind Imogene.

“Yes, I’m fine. But I need to hear. Shhh.”

“He’s whining, Imogene. Jasper is whining. That is not a good sign.”

“No, not really. But it means he is alive, and I can use the sound like a beacon. Silence would mean something else entirely. So please, Emily, shush. Or better yet, go get help. The gardener, the coachman. Anyone and everyone, but hurry.”

Closing her eyes, Imogene swiveled her head, trying to understand the echoes. With relief, she heard Emily’s retreating footsteps, running across the bridge. Another sound caught her attention—shifting rocks—and her eyes flew open.

In the center of the great hall, Mr. Benjamin had joined her on top of the rubble. He was not on his knees but squatted, tilting his head from side to side and listening as she had been doing. Above him, the wall loomed.

“That is the most dangerous place to be, Mr. Benjamin. If the wall comes down, it will rain down on you directly.” She was protected by the strength of the corner that abutted the tower.

“Indeed. If I could trouble you to warn me should the wall start to wobble, I would appreciate it. . . . If it wouldn’t be too much trouble.” He lifted his cheeks.

Imogene nodded, and while she did not return his smile, she did appreciate his attempt to lighten the situation.

“Or perhaps I should borrow your parasol,” he said as he tilted his head lower.

Imogene snorted; it was half laugh, half sob.

“I left my stone-repelling parasol at the manor,” she said after a moment of intense listening. “So seldom do I need it.”

Leaning back, he squinted and then scuffled to the side.

“Your bonnet, then?” he asked eventually.

Imogene bent in the opposite direction, listening.

“I don’t think the style would suit you.”

“I have to proceed bareheaded, then.” He scuffled again to another spot—and then sudden silence bore down on them.

Imogene waited. She swallowed and waited. Looking up, she caught Mr. Benjamin’s gaze, and they stared at each other, waiting for Jasper to whine again. “Jasper!” she called. But nothing. No dog sound, and the hush continued far, far too long.

Jumping to her feet, swaying and then finding her balance, Imogene grabbed a stone and tossed it up and over the lip of the hole. She turned and grabbed another. Stone after stone, Imogene frantically grabbed, tossed, and turned. It was some minutes before the utter futility of her actions penetrated her frenzy, and she stopped, dropping the rock in her hands.

Closing her eyes, Imogene felt her knees wobble. She would have fallen had arms not come around her shoulders to prevent her from dropping to the ground. Imogene laid her head on the shoulder provided. “Jasper,” she whispered in profound misery. Her trickle of tears became a torrent, and she turned her face into the coat to muffle her sobs.

Standing together, locked in wretchedness, Imogene lost her

sense of time; it no longer mattered. It felt like an eon of seconds when Mr. Benjamin stiffened and grabbed a sharp breath of surprise.

Imogene lifted her head, his reaction breaking into her grief-filled mind. “What is it?” she asked, pulling away and only just realizing how entwined they had become. She tilted her head and looked up at his expression.

He was smiling. Broadly. It was almost a grin. And then a burble of laughter burst from him, and Imogene wondered about his sanity. About to inquire, Imogene was instead directed to turn around.

“Look,” he said, pointing to the corner occupied by the stone spiral staircase.

Imogene squinted into the shadows and, at first glance, saw nothing worthy of happy acclaim. Then two dark spots disappeared only to reappear in the blink of an eye.

With a gasp, Imogene stared, waiting for the two dark spots to blink again. And they did. “Jasper!” she screamed. Yes, it was a most unladylike sound.

Scrambling as best she could, Imogene rushed with Mr. Benjamin across the rubble, holding each other up as they tripped across the uneven surface.

Only Jasper’s head could be seen peeking out from behind the central stone newel post. He appeared to be on the widest step where the entrance to the great hall had been. But he was not moving. As she got closer, Imogene could see that Jasper was panting. Was it anxiety or pain? He was so entirely covered in gray dust that it was hard to discern that his mouth was

even open. She was not at all comfortable with his lack of enthusiasm. The only time Jasper was not high-spirited was when he was asleep. As she neared, the dog began to whine, but still did not move.

“I’m coming, dearest puppy. Almost there.” With eyes on Jasper, Imogene spoke to Mr. Benjamin. “If you go round the other way, we can approach him from both sides. I’ll take his head to comfort him until we can understand . . . oh.” Imogene blinked. “Oh, Jasper, what have you done?” She was both relieved and concerned.

“His tail,” Mr. Benjamin said as they looked at each other over the dog’s back. “Well, it might not be too bad. We’ll know better as soon as I move the rock.”

It was not done easily. The rock was not a single stone but, in fact, a group of stones still mortared together—heavy and unwieldy. Still, Mr. Benjamin did not have to lift the weight far, just off Jasper’s tail. Once free, Jasper jumped to his feet, tried to wag, and then yelped in pain. The tip of his tail was kinked and matted in blood. Imogene crooned as she half lifted, half dragged him out of the stairwell and into the fresh air and light. Once there, she laid him down and gave him a thorough inspection.

“Oh dear. He has a significant cut on his shoulder and is missing a patch of fur on his side. And, of course, his tail is quite mangled.”

Mr. Benjamin knelt beside them, nodding as Imogene pointed out Jasper’s terrible injuries. “Yes, indeed, he *was* very lucky.”

Imogene smiled. “You are right. It could have been so much worse.” She laughed; it almost sounded like a giggle. She was so very relieved.

“I will carry him if that is all right with you and Jasper.”

“Your coat will be ruined. He is filthy and bloody and—Oh, I’m afraid—”

“Yes, rather pointless to be concerned about my coat now. Too late for both of us, I’m sorry to say. Your lovely gown is not at its best, either.”

Imogene looked down, snorting at the understatement. Not at its best? Her dress was ruined beyond repair, stained with dirt and blood, and ripped about the knees, and her lovely cerulean sash was missing. She grimaced. “Mother will not be pleased.”

“Under the circumstances, I’m sure Mrs. Chively will understand the forfeiture.”

Imogene shrugged—rather handily; it was a shame that Emily was not there to witness the feat. “I’m sure you are right,” she said, knowing otherwise. She would not allow thoughts of Mother’s anger to ruin her euphoria. Jasper would be fine. That was all that mattered.

Placing his hands carefully under the dog, Mr. Benjamin lifted Jasper easily, despite the precious creature’s weight of three and a half stone. Imogene guided them back across the rubble, providing support whenever rocks shifted beneath Mr. Benjamin’s feet. Once up and over the lip of the hole, walking became much easier, and Imogene trotted alongside, patting and crooning to Jasper. It seemed to be unnecessary, because

Jasper was as content as any injured dog can be, no longer panting in distress.

They had just crossed the bridge and started to climb the hill toward the manor when they heard a hail. Imogene looked up and saw Emily and Mr. Beeswanger rushing toward them.

“Thank heaven,” Emily said when she was near enough to be heard without the necessity of raising her voice. She stopped in front of Mr. Benjamin, stroking Jasper gently. “Well done, Mr. Benjamin.”

“Jasper deserves the praise, not me. He cleverly stayed near the stairs and out from under the worst of the rubble. His tail suffered the most damage.” He pointed with his nose.

“Oh, you poor dear,” Emily said, leaning to look closer. “It’s rather flat.”

“This is a much happier outcome than expected.” Mr. Beeswanger joined the group. He was winded, likely from the act of rushing across the lawn. Emily’s father was an affable, somewhat portly gentleman, prone to laughing and jolly conversation, and brought comfort with his company. Not at all like—

“Imogene! What have you done?”

Imogene’s heart sank at the sound of her father’s voice. She took a fortifying breath and turned to look up the winding path to Gracebridge. Walking . . . no, marching . . . toward her, Imogene’s father quickly set upon them. His expression was thunderous; his countenance had a tendency to be pinched and critical at the best of times, but he had added a ruddy complexion and piercing gaze to the ensemble.

And then, to increase the uneasiness of the situation, Mr. Steeple—Mr. Ernest Steeple—stepped out from behind her father, and Imogene was suddenly very aware of her disheveled appearance. She smiled awkwardly.

“Look at you,” her father continued, speaking with a raised voice, despite having joined the company. “You are in complete disarray.” He turned to speak over his shoulder. “I can assure you, Mr. Steeple, that this is a highly irregular state of being. Imogene is usually the epitome of a properly brought up young lady.”

Without responding, Mr. Ernest stepped past her father and approached Imogene. He hesitated, and Imogene feared that he might try to take hold of her hands while greeting her. Instead, he bowed his head, and Imogene returned his greeting with a bobbed curtsy. She tried not to chew at her bottom lip.

“So good to see you again, Miss Chively. Are you well? You seem to have had a slight mishap.” The breeze played with the hair that had fallen in front of his eyes. His grin was half self-conscious, half admiring.

Imogene nodded with a ghost of a smile. “Thank you, Mr. Steeple. I am as well as can be expected after—”

“After you brought down the castle.” Imogene’s father gestured toward the ruin, flailing his arms about.

“The erosion was significant, Mr. Chively. Likely made worse by the frosts of last winter—”

“Winter has been over for some months, Mr. Benjamin. I hardly think we can blame the weather for this disaster.”

“Perhaps the ravages of time, then.”

“What?” Imogene’s father turned his head to stare at Mr. Benjamin. He added a frown to his stormy expression and a slight curl to his lip.

It was a clear display of condescension, and Imogene was insulted on Mr. Benjamin’s behalf. No, more than insulted, she was peeved—yes, truly peeved. Here was a helpful young man in a ruined coat carrying *her* injured dog, and her father was not only ignoring this act of gallantry but also deriding the bearer. Still, Imogene knew better than to confront her father directly.

“Father, I made mention of the growing number of cracks and sagging floor yesterday.” She had been assured that there was nothing to be concerned about—a great fuss for nothing were her father’s exact words.

“Yes, well you should have explained yourself more fully, Imogene. Now the whole will have to come down. It’s a danger to everyone.”

His words unsettled her, as they were meant to. Shaking her head in distress, Imogene stepped forward as if to put her hand on her father’s arm. “No. Please, Father. It can be repaired.”

Leaning back, away from his daughter, Imogene’s father lifted his chin—allowing him to look down his nose at her. “I would say not. Look at that mess. A piece of history utterly destroyed. If you had stayed away, this would not have happened. All that tramping about.”

Mouth agape, Imogene glanced at Mr. Ernest, who exuded sympathy and confusion at the same time. She didn’t wonder

at his uncertainty. Her father's angry declaration made little sense; though, to point that out would only increase his ire. And yet she had to try—the thought of losing the castle entirely was just too upsetting to stay her tongue.

“But, Father, there is no need for—” Imogene began, but she was interrupted.

“No need for such drastic measures, sir. The west wall would require only bracing. The tower is undamaged, and once the storeroom is cleared of rubble, you can secure the remains of the foundation.”

Silently releasing her pent-up breath, Imogene felt her heart swell with appreciation. Mr. Benjamin had picked up the gauntlet and was crusading to save her castle.

Father's lip curled higher, and he smiled in a most unfriendly manner. “Ah, I see. Know a lot about castle ruins do you, young man?”

“Yes, actually.”

“Oh?” It was amazing how much haughtiness could be instilled in a single word.

“Ben has been studying with Rudyard Newbury in Canterbury this past year. He is a first-year apprentice,” Mr. Ernest explained, pushing the hair out of his eyes. “You have heard of Lord Penton, the legendary architect, I assume?” He turned to smile and nod at Imogene. His pride in his brother's prowess was evident.

Imogene returned her gaze to that of her father. His countenance underwent a gradual change as he mulled over the comment cum query. His brow lost the multitude of folds, lifting

until he looked almost even-tempered. “Indeed, I have heard of Lord Penton. Your mentor? Indeed. Looking to make your mark in the world, are you? Erect a building or two?”

“That would be the ultimate goal, sir. Though it will be many years yet.”

“Why are you not there now? In Canterbury with Lord Penton? Not playing truant, are you? Won’t have none of that.”

“No.” Ben laughed easily. “Indeed not, Mr. Chively. I can rightly understand. No, Lord Penton has graciously allowed me the summer off. Rather unheard of, but I believe that Lady Penton insisted that her husband rest after completing the last project. I will be returning to Canterbury in the autumn.”

“I see. And you think the old castle worth saving.”

“Absolutely, sir. In fact, just before the floor gave way, I wondered if Lord Penton might be interested in knowing of your stonework, particularly where the great hall and tower come together. A masterful design.”

“Really? The stonework?”

“Oh, indeed, finest I’ve seen.”

Imogene frowned ever so slightly. Was there a tinge of sarcasm in Mr. Benjamin’s reply? No, it was just her imagination—the gentlemen were nodding at one another without any display of rancor.

“Oh, well, we must preserve that then, mustn’t we.” Imogene’s father stepped closer, one with the group again. “Yes, yes. Preserve it, we must. Might I ask a great favor of you, young man? Might you consider overseeing these repairs? Shouldn’t take too long, I would think. Just a word or two to Mr. Opine,

my land agent. Suggestions and whatnot. *You* are the expert. What say you?"

"It would be my pleasure, sir." Mr. Benjamin glanced at his brother with a smile and a wink before he looked down at the bundle in his arms. "At the moment, however, I believe this fellow needs attending to."

Imogene's father dropped his eyes to Jasper; he offered a startled expression, as if only just realizing the dog's condition. "Yes, indeed. He looks worse than Imogene, and that's saying something. The stables are the best place for him."

Imogene straightened. "Yes, Father, that's where we were headed." Laying her hand on Jasper's furry head, she scratched behind the dog's ear. She glanced at Mr. Ernest; he was watching her. Should she invite him along?

"Come up to the house, Imogene. You need to make yourself decent. I was just about to show Mr. Steeple my superb collection of snuffboxes. Come, everyone, we can leave the dog in Mr. Benjamin's capable hands. I'm sure he can find the stables."

"I would rather accompany Mr. Benjamin and speak to Mr. Marshal about Jasper's care, Father. We will follow you directly." The words were out of her mouth before Imogene could consider the consequences. She turned, hiding her self-conscious swallow and wide, horrified eyes from all but Mr. Benjamin, who was standing in the wrong place.

However, when their eyes met, Imogene did not look away in mortification . . . or disgrace . . . or discomfort. She didn't feel the need. If he had noticed her disagreement with her father, he gave no sign. He turned instead to his brother.

“Yes, we will away to the stable while you run up to the manor. You shall have to admire the snuffboxes for both of us, Ernest. How many do you have in your collection, Mr. Chively?”

“Oh, well, let me see now. Over fifty, perhaps as many as sixty.”

“Most impressive, sir. I’m sure Ernest will want to see each and *every* one . . . and to know their entire history as well.”

“Might we not wait until Ben’s return?” Mr. Ernest offered the company a guileless expression. “It would be a shame for him to miss out. I’m sure they must be wonderful works of art.”

“Ah, but that is far more your interest than mine. You know my taste runs toward brick and mortar. No, no, you gentlemen go right ahead. I shall appreciate the music boxes at another time.”

“Snuffboxes,” Mr. Ernest corrected his brother.

“Yes, just so.” Mr. Benjamin grinned. His tone was cordial—too cordial.

Imogene highly doubted the sincerity of their words; they were funning. She would have appreciated the jocularities so much more if it were not for her father’s presence and the possibility that he would be insulted. However, either oblivious to or simply ignoring the undercurrents of the conversation, Imogene’s father started up the hill, expecting everyone to fall in behind him . . . which they did.

Except Emily.

“Might I join you?” she asked as she matched Mr. Benjamin’s gait and direction. Leaning back, Emily glanced behind his back to Imogene walking on his other side. She lifted her

eyebrows in her friend's general direction—several times. Imogene felt the stirring of . . . hmm, she wasn't entirely sure what she was feeling. Disquiet came to mind, or something in that order. Despite Imogene's frown, Emily grinned and straightened.

"I've seen the snuffboxes before. . . . Many times. I could even describe them to you, if you wish," Emily chatted as they skirted the manor.

Mr. Benjamin chuckled. "Thank you, no, Miss Beeswanger. Don't use the stuff."

"The snuff?" Emily interrupted and giggled.

"Just so." Mr. Benjamin chuckled again, softly this time. "I don't use snuff, and I'm not entirely sure why one would go to such lengths to beautify what amounts to a box—a tiny one at that." Then, glancing in Imogene's direction, he added, "I mean no disrespect."

"None taken, Mr. Steeple. I do not share my father's fascination. I prefer a larger canvas." Imogene frowned and glanced over her shoulder toward the ruins. "Oh dear, my sketch is still at the castle."

"I'm sure Sawyer will ensure your art supplies are brought up when they collect the basket and foodstuffs," Emily reassured her.

"Yes, I'll mention it to him when we get to the house."

Turning back, Imogene looked up at Mr. Benjamin and was surprised to meet his gaze. It was brief but enigmatic—a puzzled frown. "My brother mentioned your interest in art. But he

did not tell me that you were an artist yourself. You have an enviable talent.”

Imogene lifted one corner of her mouth in a half smile. She was rather pleased. Few persons, other than family or friends, had seen her work, and her family was less than impressed. Harriet, Emily’s youngest sister, while appreciative of Imogene’s abilities and lessons, was an easily impressed twelve-year-old. To hear such a compliment from someone who was, to all intents and purposes, a learned stranger was rather heady.

“Thank you, I quite enjoy—”

“Imogene has been drawing since her nanny put a graphite pencil in her hand,” Emily interrupted, helping her out, filling in the awkward conversation.

Except this time, it was not awkward, and the rescue was unnecessary. Perhaps it was his easy manner, or his aid in rescuing Jasper, or that moment when Mr. Benjamin held her as she cried—yes, when she thought on it, that moment had broken down a barrier or two. She should have been in her highest state of embarrassment, but she wasn’t.

Imogene did not regret finding solace in his arms—not at all. She had needed consoling, and Mr. Benjamin had provided it; it had felt natural. And rather pleasant. He had smelled earthy and manly and . . . yes, indeed, *quite* pleasant. Her heart started to beat faster with the memory.

Surprisingly, she was comfortable in his presence . . . and charmed. She wanted to talk with him, understand him better and—stranger still—have him understand her. She was filled

with excitement when he turned his eyes in her direction, not fear. It was a most unusual state to be in, something that she had never experienced before. Something she rather liked.

And as these thoughts raced through her mind, Imogene did her best not to regret that Emily had taken over the conversation, leaving her with an inexplicable longing.

chapter 3



*In which Ben inadvertently
interferes with Ernest's wooing*

Stepping across the threshold into the somewhat small but well-lit bedroom to which he had been assigned, Ben yanked off his starched neck-cloth with grubby hands. The long strip of white linen, which *had* been expertly tied, was now spattered with dirt. “I do apologize, Matt,” he said to his valet as he dropped it into the man’s waiting hand. The mess would require a fair amount of labor to see it returned to its former glory, but at least it was salvageable. His coat on the other hand . . . “Is there any hope for this?” He shucked the coat off his shoulders and passed it to his man as well.

“Of course, sir.” Matt’s doubtful tone belied his assurance. “Well, I will do my best. You will need it—can’t get by on one coat. What would our hosts think?”

Ben smiled at Matt’s horror. His valet was a young man and

fairly new to the job, and yet he was traditional in his views—taking pride in the manner and style of the gentlemen he attended.

“Is my brother dressed for dinner?” Ben asked as he pulled off his dirty vest and shirt before leaning over the pitcher and bowl. He scrubbed at the grime on his hands and then washed his face.

“Indeed,” said a new voice. “Ready and waiting.”

Ben turned to watch Ernest enter wearing a charcoal dress coat with a contrasting vest of vermilion; his neck-cloth was tied in a formal oriental knot, and his hessians shone.

“Well, well, doing it up proud.” Ben nodded. “That should impress.”

“You think so? I am uncertain. I seem to have her father’s interest more than hers.”

Smiling, Ben turned back to his ablutions. He knew that the *her* was none other than Miss Imogene Chively—who had risen in his estimation just this afternoon. “I was rather captivated by your Miss Chively today, Ernest. She forgot to be shy when the floor of the castle caved in. Showed a great deal of character while trying to get her dog out. Yes, I can see what appeals to you after all.”

“There, now are you satisfied?”

“Yes, I will concede this was not the fool’s errand I had labeled it. I will support your decision in the face of any objection from Sir Andrew.”

“It wasn’t Grandfather I was worried about, but Grandmother.”

“Oh, I don’t think she will remain disgruntled when she meets Miss Chively. There is a winning way about your young lady that I think will shine through and sway Grandmother.”

“And she is lovely, isn’t she? Admit it now, Ben.”

“Yes, I will concede that as well. But, really, you can hardly fault my doubt. Until today, I never saw her eyes or her face. She was always looking at the ground.”

“She is shy.”

“Yes, of that there is no doubt, and because of it, you will have to sparkle with wit to overcome that natural tendency. She definitely has a great interest in art and quite the talent. I’m rather envious of her ability.” Which was, in truth, a gross understatement. “Now, let’s see . . . hmm, do you know of Turner?”

“Who?”

Tossing his towel onto the mattress of the four-poster bed, Ben accepted a clean shirt from Matt. “Joseph Turner. He’s quite a famous artist, Ernest. Really, you *have* to have heard of *him*.”

“Even I’ve heard of him, sir,” Matt commented while helping Ben into his vest.

“There you go. See! Even Matt has heard of him.”

An excessive amount of silence emanated from the other side of the room.

“What?” Ben asked, looking toward his brother while doing up his buttons.

“Stonework?” Ernest shook his head and then raked his fingers through his hair.

“I beg your pardon?”

“His stonework? In the castle. Don’t take down the castle, Mr. Chively,” Ernest said in a high voice likely meant to represent Ben—though it sounded nothing like him. “The stonework is too important.”

“Well, it worked, didn’t it? The purpose of my comment was to keep Miss Chively happy—you would never have gotten so much as a smile from her if she was mourning the loss of her beloved ruins.” Ben tugged down the corners of his sapphire vest, affixed the fob of his watch, and then dropped it into his pocket. “So now, not only will the castle *not* come down, but I will see that it rises from the ashes. Miss Chively will be ever so grateful.”

“To you.”

“To your brother, Ernest. I’m standing in your shadow.” He snorted a laugh. “I barely exist to her father.” Wrapping a clean band of linen around his neck, Ben tied the neck-cloth in a simple knot.

“Yes, but what happens when Lord Penton does not arrive and there is no interest in his *stonework*? The man will look at us with jaundice eyes.”

“Well, Chively can’t expect Penton to drop everything and rush into the country, especially when I stated that the old gentleman has taken a hiatus.”

“There’s no telling what he expects.” Ernest lowered himself to the window seat and turned his gaze to the view. The roof of the old castle tower could be seen peeking above the trees.

Lifting his arms into his dress coat, Ben let Matt pull it on and then smooth out the shoulders. He was rather pleased with the reflection in the looking glass; he rarely took the time to dress for dinner—a habit that annoyed his grandmother and amused his grandfather. “Let’s cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“Hmmm.” Ernest continued to stare out the window.

“She’s not there, you know.”

“Pardon?” Ernest turned a sheepish grin in his brother’s direction. “Oh, yes. Well, no . . .”

“Well said.” Ben laughed. “Let’s go downstairs so you can make calf-eyes at the lovely Miss Chively in person.”

Ernest was up from his seat and waiting at the door in a flash. “If we must,” he said with mock nonchalance and another grin. “Tell me all about Turner on our way down.”

Ben chuckled and shook his head. “Well, I’ll give the basics. How’s that?” And he ushered his brother into the hallway.

The upper corridors of Gracebridge Manor were not wide, but they were long and convoluted because they accommodated the irregular shape of the building and its many bedrooms. Ben and Ernest had been assigned chambers at the far end—far north end, if he was judging the direction correctly. It took a little navigation to wend their way to the noble, carved staircase and allowed Ben to provide Ernest with enough information about Joseph Turner to give his brother something to talk about, if he found himself searching for a

topic of which Miss Chively might be interested. At the top of the stairs, they lapsed into dignified silence—yes, dignified. That had been Ernest’s request; Ben was not entirely sure how one was silent in a dignified manner, but he did his best.

While the staircase delivered them into a lovely reception room on the ground floor, complete with seating in front of a marble fireplace as well as the nearby window, the family could not be seen.

“This way, young sirs.” Sawyer, standing beside the newel post, indicated a corridor to the left from which voices echoed. He was a tall man, with sharp features and a no-nonsense cast to his eye. Rather intimidating.

Ben nodded, with continued dignity, and allowed his brother to take the lead. It was a good sign that the general tone of the voices bouncing toward them was convivial. Proceeding to the far end of the corridor, they passed the library and billiard room as well as a large dining hall.

The reception room at the end of the corridor, however, gave no hint as to its size or décor until they passed through the double doors and were presented with a grand saloon. Two huge mullioned oriel windows lit the company in rays of sunshine and offered a spectacular view of—what else?—the old castle. The room itself was opulent in color, material, and trinkets—knickknacks that Ben could admire though not identify. However, the chimneypieces at either end were modeled with Tudor elements and quite impressive.

As much as Ben would have liked a closer look, he was forced to note the company in the room instead of the

architecture surrounding them. A silent company—for the happy chatter was no more.

They were a party of ten; fortunately, only four of the faces were not familiar. The elder Chivelys stood with Mr. and Mrs. Beeswanger between them in a group by one of the windows. Well-dressed for what had been touted as a casual meal, it was still clear that the Chivelys had taken great care with their toilette. Mrs. Chively, in particular, had not been sparing in her use of jewels.

The younger members of the group had gathered by the ornate chimneypiece at one end of the room, where, if one could go by their positions, a young man enjoyed the attention of two young girls who looked to be around the ages of fourteen and twelve. The young man bore a striking resemblance to the Chivelys—blond hair, blue eyes, oval face—though there was a hint of merriment that was entirely missing in his father's gaze. This, of course, must be Percy Chively, Miss Chively's older brother.

Standing next to Miss Beeswanger, Miss Chively was a reflection of her parents in dress, though not in expression. Her eyes sparkled as much as the jewel in her necklace when their eyes met. A smile hovered on her lips . . . until her gaze shifted to Ernest, and she swallowed visibly, the promising curl to her mouth faded.

A lady of some indiscernible age between twenty and thirty sat sour-faced on the settee between the two groups. Her gown shouted mediocrity—an unembellished serviceable gray. This was likely the governess.

“Welcome, Mr. Steeple, Mr. Benjamin.” Mr. Chively stepped forward, enunciating and projecting his words so that it felt more like a performance than a greeting.

Fortunately, the company laughed, and the atmosphere relaxed immediately.

“Chively, old fellow, no need to be so formal,” Mr. Beeswanger called out.

Mrs. Beeswanger, who looked as genial as her husband, nodded with great vigor. “Indeed not.” She stepped to the center of the room, glanced toward Mrs. Chively—who shrugged—and then back to Ernest. “The countryside lends itself to a far less decorous lifestyle—the strictures of society can be relaxed somewhat here. To that end, we”—she gestured to those around her—“are quite comfortable with given names for the younger generation, and if it would not insult your sensibilities, we would offer you the same casual address. A little untoward, perhaps, but we are all on good terms.” The implication being, of course, that the good terms would soon include the Steeple boys. There was no hiding why they were visiting.

Ben glanced at Ernest, knowing he would be flummoxed. Ernest found great comfort in those strictures; they provided a template—expected behavior drilled into him since birth. Well, no, that was an exaggeration. Their regimented life had begun only when Sir Andrew and Lady Margaret had accepted the responsibility of two lads while their parents traipsed around the Continent. Still, five years of rules and regulations had been of comfort to Ernest . . . though not to Ben.

“Untoward, indeed, Mrs. Beeswanger,” he said, stepping into the fray, allowing Ernest to gather his wits. “But a welcome deviation. Another reason to appreciate country life.”

“Marvelous” was her reply, said with an exhalation as if she had been holding her breath.

Ernest’s silence continued a tad overlong, forcing Ben to nonchalantly shift in his brother’s direction and knock him shoulder to shoulder.

“Yes, yes, indeed.” Ernest came to life. He turned toward Imogene, raising his voice slightly to include the offset group. “Call me Ernest. Benjamin prefers Ben.”

Looking at Ben, Miss Chively smiled quite broadly. “Thank you, I shall. I’m Imogene.” She turned and swept her arm back as if to indicate those standing with her, but her gaze moved as she did, falling on Ernest. She turned a bright shade of pink—that Ben thought rather becoming—then blinked and swallowed, all in silence.

Clearing her throat, Miss Beeswanger secured the attention of the room. “Ernest . . . Benjamin . . . please, call me Emily.”

Ben noticed the use of his full name, pronounced slowly as if it were being measured, and he lifted the corner of his mouth, offering a weak smile. *Benjamin* was pretentious in his mind; it reminded Ben of his namesake, General Benjamin Steeple, a great-uncle of a stern and pompous repute. Not exactly a person he wished to emulate.

“These are my sisters, Pauline”—Emily gestured toward the older girl first and then, the younger—“and Hardly Harriet.”

“Em,” Hardly Harriet whined with a deeply entrenched frown and . . . yes, a pout. “You can’t say that to strangers. It’s not right.”

“I beg your pardon,” Miss Emily said, facing Ben, not her sister. “Harriet prefers Harry.”

“Do not!”

“Percy Chively.” The young man stepped forward with a nod, ignoring the teasing. “Everyone calls me Percy.” He, like his parents, was focused on Ernest.

“There we go. The formalities of the night are over; we can enjoy—” Mrs. Beeswanger started to say.

A gravelly noise emanated from the settee. They all turned toward the sound and the person making it—by clearing her throat.

“Oh, dear me. I apologize, Miss Watson. Please, let me introduce Miss Bertha Watson, Pauline and Harriet’s governess.”

With introductions truly complete this time, the host and hostess dragged Ernest into their group—almost literally, for Mrs. Chively asked Ernest to walk her to the window, a distance of a mere ten feet or so. Ben, unfettered for a moment, drifted toward Percy’s group. Though not interested in the man’s bragging about his hunting prowess, Ben thought this discourse held more promise than a soliloquy about the weather . . . or snuff-boxes. Catching Miss Imogene’s eye, he winked, eliciting a light laugh from her. It sounded so enchanting that Ben was taken aback.

Looking down at Miss Imogene, Ben tried to imagine her as a member of the Steeple family and discovered that the

prospect was no longer as unwelcome as it had been a mere day ago. In fact, the possibility was rather buoying.



“LORDY, LORDY, ERNEST. I don’t envy you your in-laws. . . . Possible in-laws.” Ben chuckled quietly while closing the door behind him. He had followed Ernest to his bedroom for a private chat about the whys and wherefores of their evening.

“Really? How could you not be fascinated by . . . now let me see if I recall—the compound interest of debt or was it the compound debt of interest. No, no, I’m quite certain it was the former. . . . Or was it the latter?” With a snorting laugh, Ernest shook his head and pulled off his coat. “What in heaven’s name would give Mr. Chively the idea that I cared about the ins and outs of banking? His chosen occupation, not mine.” Ernest frowned at the door until it opened briefly to allow Matt to slip in, and then he handed the valet the coat and limp neck-cloth that he had just tugged free.

“Well, I might have mentioned something.”

“Ben, you didn’t.”

“Not intentionally. It was an innocent comment. We were talking of Musson House, and I simply stated that Grandfather already appreciated your opinion in regard to management of the estate. I was trying to impress the man with your competence; I did not know that he would take it as a sign that you were kindred spirits in all matters of economics. See, nothing untoward—all very innocent.”

Ben smiled, for in truth he *had* known that Mr. Chively

would take the comment and run with it; though Ben had not expected the man to monopolize Ernest completely and leave his brother with no opportunity to woo all evening. Ben had meant to set his brother up for a boring conversation, not an entire night.

Ernest looked at Matt. “Does he ever make an *innocent* comment?”

“Not that I have observed, sir.” Matt made no attempt to hide his grin.

“See?” Ernest offered Ben an ineffectual glare. “In our employ only a month and already Matt knows *that* to be a bouncer. Really, Ben, the point of this visit is to become better acquainted with Miss Imogene, *not* her father.”

“Too true.” Ben shrugged and dropped onto the window seat that was similar to the one in his room. It was, perhaps, the only similarity; this chamber was larger and much more lavishly appointed. “Well, tomorrow is another day in which Mr. Turner might still provide fodder for a lively discussion. The tutelage was not for naught.”

“It felt like a waste. . . . Not the tutelage, the evening. If I hadn’t seen that you were entertaining Miss Imogene, I would have called the night a *complete* loss. By the by, what were you talking about? She seemed fascinated. Extolling my virtues?” Ernest raised his brows in a hopeful manner.

“Mother and Father’s Italian journeys. Might be an idea for a bridal trip.”

“Oh.” Ernest huffed a sigh as he unbuttoned his vest; he stared without focus above Ben’s head. “Miss Imogene is of a

retiring disposition, Ben. She's not a traveler. We can hunker into Musson House in harmony. Not stir beyond Chotsdown."

"That might be to your taste, Ernest, but I got the impression that Miss Imogene would enjoy a wider view of the world."

"No, no. You are mistaken. Miss Imogene was quite unhappy in London. Mentioned several times how much she preferred to be at home—in the country."

Ben frowned. He was not mistaken in Miss Imogene's interest. She had leaned forward with rapt attention, asked about the ruins in Rome, the canals of Venice, his parents' collections of paintings and sculptures—where they had been found, what was their condition, what subjects were depicted. The shyness from which she usually suffered was hardly evident. In fact, they had become so involved in their discourse that it had taken a nudge from Miss Emily to pull Miss Imogene out of her reverie.

Ben thought it likely that his brother misunderstood the nature of Miss Imogene's desire to stay in the country. A bashful character would not enjoy the squeezes of London balls and soirees, but a Continental journey with a husband at her side—well, that would be an entirely different matter.

Ernest became very still. "I have no cause for concern . . . do I?" He lowered his gaze.

"About what?"

Ernest continued to stare, his jaw tightened.

"What is going on in that pea-brain of yours, brother?"

"Miss Imogene hung on your every word. Don't think I did not notice."

“You just said that the evening would have been a waste had I not entertained your lady-fair.”

“Yes. But she has never looked at me in such a way.”

“Ernest, Ernest, Ernest. I helped rescue her dog and saved her castle from destruction. Of course she is kindly disposed to me. It was a traumatic afternoon, and you should admire her ability to step past it so quickly. She *is* impressive; no vapors, no histrionics. . . . Still, worry not, brother dear, she was not looking at me in *that* way.”

“She was quite animated when you spoke.” Ernest spoke with careful enunciation.

“True. But a shared experience does create a bond.”

“A brother-sister bond?”

“Indeed.” Ben nodded, happy that Ernest was coming around. “Be her hero tomorrow, and you’ll be all set.”

“How?”

“Ernest, you are so unimaginative! Let’s see. Offer to carry her art supplies.”

“Hardly heroic.”

“True. But I don’t recommend throwing Jasper down a well so that you might rescue him or setting the manor alight so that you might carry Miss Imogene from the flames. Perhaps jump into the fray when Mrs. Chively offers her daughter a particularly snide remark . . . which she does on a regular basis.”

“That’s not heroic, either.”

“Really, Ernest.” Ben shook his head in frustration. “I have little doubt that Miss Imogene would simply appreciate someone coming to her defense. As you must have observed,

the Beeswangers are far kinder to Miss Imogene than the Chivelys.”

“Yes I did. Perhaps they are too practical. Don’t value her artistic abilities. Yes, I will talk to Miss Imogene about John Turner tomorrow. Prove that I, unlike they, appreciate creativity.”

“Yes, yes, excellent idea.” Ben rose to his feet and slapped his brother on the back as he headed for the door. “However, I think you will impress Miss Imogene more if you call the gentleman *Joseph* Turner instead.”



IT IS DIFFICULT to maintain an air of indifference while one is rushing down a hallway in desperate need to talk to one’s closest friend. It was just as well that Imogene was not trying to deceive those around her but simply to maintain her privacy. A privacy that was about to come to an end . . . as soon as she and Emily put good English oak between them and the rest of the household.

Imogene could hardly contain her disquiet; she needed Emily’s opinion.

Had she noticed? Had her friend seen the way Ben looked at her?

Imogene was certain . . . almost certain . . . that Ben’s interest in her was not of a brotherly nature. Had he not stared at her throughout dinner? Had he not engaged her in a discourse of which she, and she alone, could be a part? Had he not reached out to touch her as they sat at the table? And then he had split

his dessert, offering the sweet, delectable seed cake to her and Emily when Imogene declared it her favorite.

How could he flirt so openly with her when Ernest was watching from the other end of the table? It was a most uncomfortable situation—made worse by the fact that she quite enjoyed Ben’s company.

What was she to do?

“Oh, Imogene, we have so much to discuss,” Emily said. A mere step or two behind Imogene, Emily grinned with excitement.

“Let us hurry,” Imogene said, though to hurry more would necessitate running. Even without her mother’s watchful eye, Imogene could not do something so undignified.

It seemed an age before Imogene could close the door to their shared bedchamber, though in fact it was but a moment or two.

“I can hardly believe it.” Emily was the first to speak, unaware of Imogene’s troubled thoughts.

“Indeed,” Imogene squeaked. She walked over to the bed and then, changing her mind, strode over to her window seat. Even that did not appeal. How could she sit still when every fiber of her being was tense with concern? She wanted to fling back the shutters and fly away, soar high into the sky until all the worries and complexities of the evening disappeared.

She paced instead.

“It has happened,” Emily said as Imogene passed by for a second time. Grabbing her hands, Emily leaned back, and

they spun together in the center of the room. "I am in love!" she shouted . . . quietly.

Imogene gasped. Had she not been caught in the momentum of their spin, she would have tripped. "Oh, Emily! That is wonderful." Could she mean Percy? No, probably not. They had known each other forever, and he had paid Emily no heed this evening. Surely, she didn't mean *Ben*.

Imogene stopped twirling. "Who . . . ?" She suddenly found it difficult to form words.

Fortunately, Emily did not notice. She threw her hands up and began to twirl on her own. "Can you believe it? Never would I expect to attract the attention of such a splendid young man. But we have so much in common: our interests, our pursuits. Yes, we will be laughing and chatting into our dotage. Oh, Imogene, I feel as if I could slay dragons—I know the knight is supposed to slay the dragon, but . . . well, I feel as if I could, too. Life is a marvel, don't you agree? Can you imagine, Imogene, we are going to be sisters as well as fast friends? You shall be Mrs. Ernest Steeple, and I will be Mrs. Benjamin Steeple. Can you think of anything more glorious?"

Imogene swallowed. "What makes you think that Ben might be entertaining romantic thoughts about you?"

"Oh, Imogene, did you not see? It was glorious. . . . I love that word, don't you? Yes, glorious. He stared at me with growing affection all through dinner. He spoke to me, and me alone. Did you not notice how he answered my questions about Florence? And then Benjamin reached out to touch my arm as

we sat at the table. Yes, that was when I began to hope that he was mine, but I knew for certain when he offered me his seed cake after I declared it to be my favorite. He claimed to be sated, too full to eat even a morsel. But I knew the truth; it was a sacrifice—for me. How could I not return such glorious affection? Imogene, I am so very happy.”

Imogene stared wide-eyed. Emily’s words were an echo of Imogene’s thoughts. Was Ben attracted to them both? How was that possible? This was terrible—a disaster in the making.