

Chapter One

1816

A chilling wind pierced the air, but the day was bright and there was the sparkle of moisture from a recent rain on the expansive parkland surrounding Harbrooke Hall. This proved an irresistible lure to Drake, the fifth Duke of Severly, and his steed, Blackwind. The duke decided he was enjoying his visit to Harbrooke Hall, his sister's residence in Kent. Or to be more accurate, it was the home that now belonged to his young nephew, Henry.

Harbrooke Hall brought to his mind many happy childhood associations. Indeed, this very stretch of field, leading to a wooded area to the east, reminded him of when he and Philip Harbrooke used to slay dragons and challenge highwaymen with stick swords. With a quick movement of his heels, he guided Blackwind across the field into the copse of wood, a nostalgic smile touching his handsome face.

Many years ago, before death and war had invaded his peaceful life, Drake and his family had often visited Harbrooke. One particular holiday—a lifetime ago, it seemed—stood out in his mind.

On an exceptionally fine spring day, he and his friend Philip had swaggered about the estate in their doeskin breeches and spurs. They had been drinking themselves silly and making absurd wagers with all the cockiness only young men on term break from Oxford could display.

Imogene had been just a slip of a thing, but already showing signs of great beauty. Philip, to Drake's disgust, had been casting sheep eyes to the girl who would soon become his wife. During luncheon, to their mothers' mutual horror, Philip challenged Drake to a steeplechase. Knowing the challenge was intended to impress Imy, Drake, willing to help his friend show off, had accepted with alacrity.

Drake would never forget that wild ride through the cool gloom of the evening, hearing the thudding of the horses' hooves and feeling the wind whip his cheeks.

Philip, several yards ahead, had thundered into this very wood, hoping for a shortcut. Drake could still see his fair head and hear his whoops of excitement. Drake reined in his horse, cautious for not knowing the terrain as well as his friend. Philip's horse fairly flew over the hill, leaving Drake well behind.

A moment later Drake heard a loud noise and Philip's distressed cry. He shouted Philip's name, terrified that his friend had broken his fool neck. As he crested the ridge, his horse stumbling in its haste, Drake came upon Philip up to his neck in a duck pond. Then Drake's horse, not being fond of water, had pulled up abruptly, pitching its rider over his head. Drake had landed quite near Philip, sailing face-first into the shallow murkiness.

After righting himself, he brushed a lily pad from his shoulder. Drake gave Philip a disgusted look. "I am certain this is not the way in which you intended to impress my sister," Drake said to his soaked and muddy friend.

Their fathers had roared with laughter, and even Imogene had hidden a few sniggers behind her hand when they had sloshed back to Harbrooke Hall. A pained smile now touched the duke's face at the bittersweet memories. He mused at the ironic fact that all their wealth and address had not protected him or Imogene or even poor Philip from fate's cruel stab.

Philip's father had died only a short time after the duck pond incident. Philip passed only a few years later from a lung ailment, leaving Imogene a young widow with two small boys. Drake still missed Philip, especially

on a day like this. With thoughts shifting to his parents, Drake experienced a faint yet nagging sense of guilt. He had been away on his grand tour, living in a rather disreputable manner, when his mother and father had been struck down by the pox. Now his family consisted only of his sister, Imogene, and her sons, Henry and Peter.

Not that life did not have its compensations. The duke was proud of his family seat in Derbyshire, a beautiful mansion in the Georgian fashion. Recently, he had gone to some expense in modernizing the huge place, even installing water closets in a number of the bedchambers and gas lighting in the staterooms. An invitation to Severly Park in the winter was a much-sought-after favor.

He tried to visit his sister and nephews two or three times a year, but his days were occupied with the running of his vast estates and other manly pursuits in which he so excelled. Though the duke would not admit it to anyone, it was a source of personal pride that he was becoming a respected speaker in the House of Lords. He also took care to ensure that no one could say that he had not added to the already immense family coffers. All in all, he was a man contented with his lot.

As the duke continued to gallop, he crested a knoll and decided to let Blackwind drink from a nearby pond so he could see how the terrain had changed in the last few years.

Upon hearing childish voices and splashing water, he pulled the horse to a slow walk. From a vantage point protected by an ancient oak tree and a dense thicket at the edge of the wood, the duke looked for the source of the voices. Soon he saw his nephews and their governess skipping stones on the recently thawed pond a little distance away.

"Is this a good stone, Celly?" Peter asked in his high little-boy voice.

The young woman bent to examine the stone.

"That should do very well, Peter," she responded seriously.

Peter turned and threw the stone at the pond. It sank without skipping once. Henry, the older of his nephews,

and already showing signs of being tall like his father and uncle, had a better understanding of it and threw his stone with more expertise.

“One . . . two . . . three!” the dark-haired Henry counted the skips excitedly.

“Why don’t my rocks skip?” Peter kicked a clod of dirt, dejected, as little brothers often are when an older brother can outdo them.

“Well, let’s see what we can do,” said the governess as she stooped to look for more rocks, lifting her skirts almost above her ankle to avoid the mud around the pond. “Ah, here is one. Now Peter, hold the stone so. Very good. Now hold your arm like this. Crook your elbow. That’s it. Hold it out sideways. When you throw, throw it sharply from the wrist, thusly.” She made the proper wrist movement to demonstrate.

With a deep breath Peter braced his sturdy legs, and, doing his best to follow instructions, he gave a flick of his wrist, forearm, and elbow.

“One . . . two . . .” Peter grinned with delight as Henry and the governess praised his effort.

The duke, sheltered by the trees, enjoyed watching his nephews’ youthful fun. He decided not to disturb them because he had noticed a tendency for them to become rather self-conscious in his presence. Bending down to pat his restive horse’s neck, Drake let his curious gaze drift to the governess. From this distance he judged her to be slim and fairly tall, with an elegant way of carrying herself. He noted her golden brown hair but could not recall any specific details of her face. In fact, he could recollect addressing the young woman only two or three times in the last ten years. He remembered fussing a bit when Imogene had engaged her, because the girl had been so young, but the boys had seemed to thrive, so he hadn’t given it much thought since then. His curiosity grew. His nephews were luckier than he had been, he thought with some chagrin. The duke’s own governess had been quite plump and would never have dreamed of skipping stones with him.

"Come, we must return to the hall now," directed the governess.

The boys protested this loudly.

"You are both filthy," Celia chided gently, "and if you are to get cleaned up before you have tea with your uncle, we must go now."

"Please, just a little longer, Celly?" Peter pleaded.

Henry scrambled around the edge of the pond for a suitable rock. With a triumphant cry he held up a beautifully flat, round stone to his governess. "Here, Celly, you skip this one," he encouraged.

"All right, but just this last one," she warned. Taking the stone from him, she crooked her elbow, and with an expert flick of the wrist she sent the stone skimming across the water.

"One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . six!" the boys counted in unison, and Peter jumped about in excitement.

"That was the best ever," said Henry. Both boys turned to their governess, awestruck, as little boys often are when they discover that someone is proficient at skipping stones. The governess dusted off her hands, shook her skirts, and picked up her reticule from a nearby rock.

"Let us go; we do not wish to be late," she said calmly, and turned toward the house.

The duke watched the retreating figures for a few moments with a slightly bemused smile on his face before steering Blackwind back toward Harbrooke Hall. He had no desire to be late for tea.

On the third floor, in the cheery nursery that faced the back garden, Celia was trying to comb Peter's hair. With his face contorted into a severe grimace, he was resisting her ministrations when Imogene, the Duchess of Harbrooke, swept into the room with the smell of lilacs surrounding her.

With her coffee-colored hair and hazel eyes, the duchess greatly resembled her brother, Drake, in countenance, though she appeared petite and almost fragile in her lavender tea gown compared to her brother's large-boned masculinity.

“I can see you two are almost presentable,” Imogene observed with a smile, approaching her eldest son and straightening his lapel fondly.

“Mother, why doesn’t Celly have tea with us when Uncle Drake is here?” Henry queried. This subject had been on his mind of late, and Henry’s brow furrowed from concern. He felt Celly was one of the family, and it did not seem right to him that she did not come to any of the meals when Uncle Drake was visiting.

The duchess gave Celia a disconcerted look. She knew Celia felt uncomfortable around Drake and took measures to avoid him during his stays. But how could the boys be made to understand this?

As she gave a last flick of the brush to Peter’s hair, Celia flashed a helpless smile back to Imogene. The boys had been questioning Celia since returning from the pond, and she felt at a loss as to what to tell them.

A mischievous smile raised a dimple at the corner of Celia’s mouth. She tried to imagine how they would respond if she said, “I have no tolerance for your arrogant and heartless uncle. And even if I did, he would raise a disgusted brow if a mere governess were so familiar as to join him for tea.” No, that would not do, she thought with a mental shake of her head. Especially with Henry. He would never stop asking questions until he was satisfied with the answers. Celia knew something had to be said, and since Imogene didn’t seem inclined to offer a response, the job was left to her.

“I am sure your uncle would like to spend some time with the two of you without me tagging along.” It was as good a response as any to offer, she thought as she put away the hairbrush.

Henry gave Celia a level gaze with his surprisingly mature blue eyes. “Mother is always there at mealtimes when Uncle Drake visits,” he pointed out logically.

What could she say to that? Celia wondered in dismay, looking around the cozy nursery for a clue. At thirteen, Henry would not easily be fobbed off with evasions. Imogene, Henry, and Peter stood in the middle of the room, staring at her expectantly.

With an inward sigh, Celia decided to be straightforward with her charges. "Henry," she began carefully, "it just would not be seemly for me to join you and your uncle at mealtimes. After all, I am not a member of the family, and your uncle is the Duke of Sev—"

"Yes you are too family!" interrupted eleven-year-old Peter. He looked at his mother and older brother with wide brown eyes, not understanding how Celly could say such a thing.

"I am the Duke of Harbrooke," Henry said, and for the first time in his young life he sounded like it. "Mother and Grandmama are both duchesses. You *always* eat with us unless Uncle Drake is here."

"Such a fuss over nothing." Imogene, seeing this conversation was not progressing well, stepped forward. "Celia just means that she does not know Uncle Drake, and he, of course, does not know her. Really, we can't expect him to love Celly as we do. Besides, the only time Celly gets a chance to read or sew is when you two are otherwise occupied. My goodness, I did not realize how selfish you two have become! Uncle Drake is waiting for you. Now run along, and I shall be down presently."

This seemed to satisfy Peter, but Henry still frowned, though neither one said anything as they left the room. Both women sighed in relief as the door shut behind them.

"My, you've been having a time of it, haven't you?" Imogene observed as she seated herself before the fireplace and watched Celia pick up the boys' discarded clothing.

"Yes, rather." Celia laughed, a lovely, trilling laugh that usually elicited an answering smile from those who heard it.

Celia looked at the duchess, her expression changing to chagrin. "My goodness, Henry sounded like a barrister! Can you imagine what the duke would say if Henry had dragged me to tea?"

Celia envisioned the duke sneering down his perfect, aristocratic nose and ordering her from the room for being so presumptuous. Not that she had any desire to

be included. In fact, for the last ten years she had been successful at avoiding any contact with the duke on his visits to Harbrooke. She had paid close attention to his habits, when he rose and retired, which parts of the house he rarely visited, all so that she could avoid the imposing man. Granted, Napoleon had aided her, for the duke had been much away because of the war, but it was still disquieting when he did arrive. The whole house became unsettled. The maids and footmen bustled about nervously. Even the cantankerous cook strove for unusual perfection in the normally delicious meals she served.

"I cannot imagine that Drake would say anything," the duchess replied. "This is my home, and Drake is too well mannered to censure me for who sits at my table. Besides, Celia, you are my dear friend and it would be natural for you to dine with me."

Imogene had never understood Celia's marked aversion to her brother. She always suspected that Celia knew that years ago Drake had been critical of so young a girl caring for the boys. Even so, she never pressed Celia on the subject, out of respect for the sensitive girl's feelings.

"What a dear you are!" Celia exclaimed, crossing the room to sit next to the duchess. "It is just that we are all so familiar and used to one another here at Harbrooke that we forget that the duke is used to town manners. I am sure it would offend his grace's sensibilities to be forced to dine with the governess," she reasoned.

"Oh, twaddle! You aren't really the governess anymore; you are more of a companion to me. As for Drake's sensibilities, I believe he gave those up long ago," Imogene opined dryly.

Celia made no response, and the duchess could see that she was not going to budge. She never had. And it was unlikely that she would now.

Changing the subject, she told Celia, "Jarvis rode over today. Edna has taken a bad turn and he is hoping that you will go over to Harford Abbey and sit with her. Evidently she is giving Jarvis and the servants fits again."

Celia's eyes flashed to the duchess in surprised concern. Harford Abbey was a musty old manor house built on the ruin of an ancient abbey some three miles away. Edna Forbisher was the local eccentric, a recluse who had not left her house for over thirty years. Local gossips liked to claim that old Miss Forbisher had been crossed in love in her youth and had never recovered from her broken heart.

There was some truth to that supposition, but Celia felt she knew the full reason: Edna Forbisher could not stand the company of most people. She was headstrong, intolerant, and in bad health. It had just been easier for the woman to grow old staying at home alone than to deal with the local populace.

Celia's mother had taken her to visit Edna many years ago. At first, the odd old woman had rejected the kindness of the good vicar's wife. Slowly, though, Celia's mother had won her over, and Edna became grudgingly grateful for the company.

Celia made her first visit alone to the frightening old woman's home a few months after her parents' deaths. Somehow it made her feel closer to her mother to continue to do something they had shared. After a while, she came to enjoy her visits with the peculiar woman and the dark, faded beauty of Harford Abbey.

"I had planned to visit her the day after tomorrow, but of course I will go in the morning if Jarvis thinks she's that poorly," Celia said, a concerned frown on her brow. Edna must be ill if her butler came all the way to Harbrooke to see if Celia would visit.

"I don't know how you can abide that gloomy place. It would fair give me the shivers, even in the light of day," Imogene said, emphasizing her point with a good shudder.

"It's not so bad when you've been there a few times. The house reminds me of an old woman who was once a great beauty. You can still see vestiges of her loveliness in unexpected ways," she said thoughtfully, sadness touching her lovely eyes.

Imogene looked at her friend with some surprise.

“You really are fond of the place and old Miss Forbisher, aren’t you? It’s not just a duty to you.”

“Oh, no, I look forward to my time with Edna. She wasn’t always this way. Once, she led an interesting life.”

And it was sad—sad to be old and lonely with no family. Knowing that her friend would strongly disagree, Celia did not tell Imogene that she felt an affinity with Edna Forbisher. Celia knew she could very easily end up the same way as the old woman.

That evening, Celia had her dinner on a tray in her room, her usual practice during the duke’s visits. After several hours of unaccustomed inactivity, Celia soon tired of her pretty cream and blue room. Setting aside a pair of stockings she was darning, Celia rose from the chair by the fire, deciding to seek a book from the library before retiring.

Avoiding the duke had never proved a difficulty. She would just take the servants’ stairs and ask one of the maids for the duke’s whereabouts. If he was not in the library, she would dash in, choose a book, and be back in her room in a trice.

All went according to plan until she stepped from the library, holding the prized book.

“Ah, just the person I was hoping to see,” came a deep voice from down the hall.

Celia froze in terror, feeling as if she had been caught trying to steal the crown jewels. Why did she always have this reaction to him? she wondered, annoyed at herself for reacting so. It was as if she were ten years younger and he still had the power to throw her out.

She took a deep, steadying breath. “Yes, your grace?” she asked, turning toward him with a quick curtsy. Celia was a tall girl, but she still had to look up to see his face. She saw that he was dressed for dinner in a coat of Spanish blue superfine, well molded to his broad shoulders. His waistcoat was a cream-colored brocade picked out in blue thread, and his beige trousers hugged his muscular, well-defined legs all the way to the ankles. He wore his dark hair slightly long and styled in the fashion-

able windswept mode. She could not help perceiving that he evidenced the epitome of manly elegance.

Celia always found the duke's appearance a bit jolting, for his face proved a masculine version of his sister's countenance. She noted a square jaw with a slightly cleft chin, a straight, aristocratic nose, and darkly fringed hazel eyes. A small, jagged scar marred the high plain of his right cheekbone, but she thought it suited the rakish air that surrounded him. His smile was dashing, she knew, for she had noticed it once when she had chanced to see him playing with his nephews in the garden.

Despite the languidness of his stance, Celia sensed something assessing in his eyes. It occurred to her that beneath his polished and urbane exterior, his grace was a formidable man.

"May we speak in the library?" He gestured toward the room, pleased that coincidence finally presented him with the opportunity to take a closer look at the young figure that had intrigued him earlier in the day.

"Of course." She stepped past him to stand in the middle of the library, feeling curiosity surface through her fear. Why in the world would he wish to speak to her?

The duke walked to the fireplace and stood with his back to it, facing her. He scrutinized the young woman before him. Her gown was a dark gray-blue and very plain, without even a ribbon to relieve its severity, but the color showed to advantage her very pale, ivory complexion.

Earlier, at the pond, he had thought her quite slim, but now he noticed her subtly voluptuous figure. His lazy gaze traveled up to her faintly flushed cheeks. He saw the perfect oval of her face, and her cheekbones, high and smooth. She was beautiful. But her eyes were what made the breath catch in the duke's chest.

They were the most arresting eyes he had ever seen, and he was a man who had looked into the eyes of many beautiful women. They were large, dark-lashed, brownish, and slightly aslant at the corners. Even in the poor light of the fire he could see green flecks in the irises.

He wondered how he had ever missed this lovely creature. How had half the men in Kent? *And what the devil was I going to say to her?* he asked himself vexedly.

Staring down at the book in her hands, Celia struggled to quell the nervous trembling of her fingers while waiting for the duke to speak.

After a moment, as the duke still had not spoken, she glanced up and met the full force of those hazel eyes and instantly found it difficult to breathe correctly. It suddenly occurred to her that she had never been alone with a man in the whole of her life, nonetheless one as imposing as the Duke of Severly.

This was all rather daunting for Celia, because even in quiet Harford, the duke's reputation was well known. She had heard it said that all of London proclaimed him a famous whip for having beaten Lord Alvanly's record from London to Windsor with his matched grays. Rumor had it that Gentleman Jackson considered the duke his best pupil, and that if he had not been a duke, his grace would have made an imposing pugilist. Even his own sister said that he casually wagered enormous sums of money on the turn of a card, and won more often than not.

Imogene and her mother-in-law, the Dowager Duchess of Harbrooke, discussed in hushed tones, and with much concerned shaking of heads, the duke's reputation for having broken more than his fair share of hearts.

Celia knew that someone as sophisticated as the duke could only find her the dowdiest of bumpkins, and decided that that must be why he looked at her so oddly. Gazing at him expectantly, she waited politely for him to speak as she sought to hide her trembling.

Recalling himself, the duke began, "Er . . . Miss . . . Ahh?" *Oh, famous*, he thought, *I can't even recall the dashed girl's name*. He could not very well call her Celly, as the boys did.

A hint of a dimple appeared in the left corner of Celia's mouth. "My name is Celia Langston, your grace," she supplied quietly, her lashes lowered to her cheeks.

"My apologies, Miss Langston. How remiss of me not

to recall the name of my nephews' governess," he said, giving her the slightest bow of atonement, accompanied by a smile that had set more than one lady's heart aflutter.

To Celia, who had long been accustomed to thinking of the duke as a monster, the smile appeared menacing. Her skittishness increased, and she glanced at the double doors, desperately hoping someone would enter.

The duke noticed her distress and wondered at it. He couldn't positively recall ever speaking to the girl, nonetheless giving her a distaste of him. He frowned. In truth, he could not recall giving *any* female a distaste of him.

Walking over to one of the bookshelves, he said, "I wish to discuss Henry and Peter." He noticed the frown that instantly marred her delightfully arched eyebrows. "They are getting older and I am concerned. I want to know if you feel they do as well as they should in their studies."

In her surprise at his words, Celia forgot her nervousness. He did not know if his nephews, of whom he was guardian, were prepared for school or not? Celia thought he should be ashamed for not taking a better interest.

"Yes, your grace, it is my opinion that Henry and Peter are doing very well. They are both intelligent boys with a desire to learn, and a curiosity about the world around them. Their tutor, Mr. Drummond, is quite pleased. You have no reason to worry about them academically." She stood very straight and her tone was defensive, as if he had implied an insult.

The duke, who had been a successful strategist during the war, knew when it was wise to retreat. Somehow he had gotten off on the wrong foot with the lovely Miss Langston. He could not explain her abrupt manner toward him, but he did know when to cut his losses.

"Thank you, Miss Langston; that is my opinion also. I did want to confirm it with you, as you are their governess and are with them regularly."

Celia's ire immediately deflated. To give him his due, he had always taken great interest in everything concern-

ing the boys. Maybe he just needed reassuring, she reasoned. Either way, the encounter had not been so horrid, and it appeared she would be able to escape momentarily.

“I understand, your grace,” she said quickly with a curtsy. She waited for his dismissal and looked at the scar on his cheek, since she found it impossible to meet his unsettling gaze.

With a slight inclination of his head he wished her good-night, and Celia hoped she did not appear rude in her haste to leave.