

## Chapter One

*The greatest way to live with honor in this world is to be what we pretend to be.*

- Socrates

John Swenton released the knocker to the apartments in a less than stylish section of Vienna. It tore at his heart she had fallen so low. A year had passed since he had last laid eyes upon her—actually sixteen months, one week, and four days—and John’s heart quickened with the possibility. He had dreamed of her every night since he bid her farewell upon the docks at Hull.

He had come to Vienna, not to call upon her again, but to say his farewells to Baroness Fiona Caroline Swenton, his mother; unfortunately, he had been too late. As she had always done, the baroness had made her exit with no regard for how her doing so might affect him. Another woman would have fought her illness until her only child had arrived upon her doorstep, but Lady Fiona had never known maternal heartstrings.

With his mother’s untimely passing, rather than dutifully sitting by her sickbed, John had made arrangements to have his mother’s body exhumed. He meant to see her remains buried in the Swenton family cemetery behind Marwood Manor. He was certain Lady Fiona would not appreciate the gesture, but John knew his father’s spirit would approve. Jeremiah Swenton had died, figuratively, the day his wife had walked away from the former baron and their young son. She had performed her duty of producing an heir, and the lady wished nothing more of their company. John had often imagined the late baron had simply held onto life until John had come of age and could assume the barony without legal complications. It had not been an easy life for either of them, but somehow they had survived the shame and the scandal brought on by Lady Fiona’s desertion.

“Yes, Sir?” A striking red headed beauty appeared as the door swung wide. She was dressed as a lady, rather than a servant, and for a moment, John wondered if he had the wrong directions. Her skin was pale and creamy, with a sprinkle of freckles across her nose, and despite his purpose in calling upon the household, John felt an unusual twinge of awareness.

Swallowing hard against his unconscious response to the woman, he bowed stiffly. “Baron Swenton for Miss Aldridge.”

“Baron Swenton?” The girl’s smile widened. “Please come in, Sir.” She stepped back to permit him access. Closing the door behind him, she said, “I am pleased for the acquaintance, Sir. Miss Aldridge speaks kindly of you.” John liked the idea of knowing Baron Ashton’s niece occasionally thought of him, and in a positive manner. He had thought of her every day and every night. “Please permit me to accept your hat and gloves, Baron.” John obediently obeyed. “I am Miss Neville.”

Realization dawned. This was the lady he had employed to keep him informed of Miss Aldridge’s needs. She was reportedly of good family, but had been left alone due to family mishaps. His man of business had made the arrangements, and upon initial impression, John had approved of the hire. As requested as part of her settlement with his man of business, the lady had unquestioningly sent him two letters in the previous five months outlining her employment and sharing many of the “secrets” of Miss Aldridge’s household. He did not think kindly on his actions in this matter, but as propriety had kept

him from corresponding with Miss Satiné directly, he had chosen the only course available to him to protect the woman he loved. The reminder of the woman's loyalty to her position had John wondering if Miss Neville had sent more than two letters. He had been from Marwood for some three months—first, with the art theft investigation, and then with travel during the winter across the Continent. It was exhilarating to have a face to accompany his image of the very articulate Miss Neville.

“Ah, Miss Neville,” he said with a second bow of respect. “I was not expecting Miss Aldridge's companion to act as man servant.” He relaxed, his smile without humor. “I was in the city,” John explained, “on family business, and I had hoped to have the company of Miss Aldridge. Please excuse my forwardness.”

A flare of panic crossed Miss Neville's countenance, and John wondered if he had overstepped the lines of propriety beyond reason. Naturally, his fascination with Satiné Aldridge did not mean the Baron Ashton's niece would return his regard. “I fear, Baron, Miss Aldridge is not receiving.”

John felt the pang of disappointment. “Of...of course,” he said through tight lips. It had been foolish of him to pin his hopes on this visit. “If it is acceptable, I will leave my card. I should have thought...” He paused to collect his composure. “If you would ferry my message to your mistress, I would be most appreciative. I mean to depart for England at week's end. Please ask Miss Aldridge if I might call upon her before then. You may reach me at Auersperg. Prince Vinzens has extended his hospitality.”

The lady appeared decidedly intrigued, but with an equally noticeable wary expression, she responded, “I am certain Miss Aldridge would enjoy having Prince Auersperg's acquaintance, but I should have explained more adequately: Miss Satiné has taken to her bed. I do not expect her to be available for visits or for social events for several weeks to come.”

John drew in a deep breath to disguise the tension clutching at his chest. *Was Miss Aldridge seriously ill? Could he lose her before he had had the opportunity to declare his intentions?* “Has a physician seen to the lady's care?” he pleaded. He struggled with the desire to know what had occurred and balance it against Society's strictures.

Miss Neville gestured him to a nearby sitting room. Tactfully, she closed the door to assure their conversation remained private. Neither of them chose to sit. The lady wrung her hands anxiously. “I am at sixes and sevens, Baron.” Mixed with the fretful overtones in her voice, Swenton noted the twinge of an Irish accent. Many in York held Irish roots, and he was accustomed to the soft roll of the vowels and a few of the consonants. “Although I serve Miss Aldridge, I am aware you are most assuredly my employer, and I am indebted to you for your generosity.” John had pretended to act with Baron Ashton's approval when he had placed Miss Neville in Miss Aldridge's household. He fully understood others would not approve of his presumptuousness, but it was the only means he had possessed for information on Miss Aldridge. Miss Neville presented him a rueful shake of her head. “I hold an allegiance to both you and Miss Aldridge.”

Swenton's mouth thinned with displeasure. “I will not sack you if you keep your mistress's confidences, but you must know I hold Miss Aldridge with great regard. If the lady has need of my protection, I would perform my duty gladly.”

The deep cinnamon of her eyes flashed. *With annoyance or admiration?* She worried her bottom lip in indecision. Finally, with a sigh of resignation, she explained, “When first I came to Miss Aldridge, all appeared well, but as I confided in my last letter,

over the past three months, Miss Aldridge has become more withdrawn, barely leaving her rooms. Her appetite has become nonexistent.”

John stilled. “I have not received your most recent post,” he confided, “as I was away from my home.” His eyebrows rose in anticipation. “Was there nothing to be done for the lady?” He sucked in a deep breath and mentally braced himself for Miss Neville’s next pronouncement.

Anxiety sounded in Miss Neville’s tone. “Miss Aldridge’s illness was not one medicine could cure. Only time will do so.” She pressed her fingertips to her mouth as if she wished to snatch back her words. Averting her eyes, she continued, “This is not a conversation for strangers, especially strangers not of the same gender.”

He responded in a tight voice. “Yet, I insist, Miss Neville.”

She regarded him intently, and John cursed his weakness: The one in which he had always sought love where none existed. He had hoped this visit would lay the basis for Miss Aldridge’s return to England, as well as preparing the way for him to woo the woman with a proper proposal. To date, he was the only one among his associates who had yet to claim a bit of happiness, and John meant to right that particular situation with a woman he had cherished from their first meeting.

Miss Neville momentarily glanced away before meeting his gaze with her firm one. “Miss Aldridge’s lack of appetite was self-imposed,” she explained. “My mistress worried for her figure.”

A barbed smile formed on his lips. “I cannot imagine Miss Aldridge’s stature would tolerate anything less than perfection,” he declared with confidence.

“And I am certain Miss Aldridge sought perfection when none was to be had,” she countered.

His voice had a harder edge than he intended. “Perhaps you had best explain without all the niceties, Miss Neville. I tend to be a plain spoken man.”

Her expression sobered before the woman nodded curtly. “Miss Aldridge has kept a scandalous secret from all her dear friends and family. Her withdrawal was to disguise the fact she was enceinte. Miss Satiné delivered a son a fortnight past.”

John’s breath rushed from his lungs. For several elongated seconds the room had gone black: His hopes sucked from his soul. “A son?” he asked in incredulity.

Miss Neville’s countenance knew real regret. “I thought you knew, Sir. Your early instructions spoke of my tending Miss Aldridge through the lady’s despair of a terrible scandal.”

His mind raced to catch up with the reality. The child could not be the son of Lachlan Charters, the man who had attacked Miss Aldridge in Scotland, the source of her retreat to the Continent. It had been well over a year since the Scot’s attack. John easily recalled how angry he had been when the lady’s uncle and guardian, Baron Ashton, had abandoned his niece to her own devices when Miss Aldridge had reportedly embraced the freedom her European lifestyle had provided her. Little did John know when Ashton had vehemently disapproved of the girl flaunting her newest amour an unplanned birth would be the result.

John wished to inquire of the father, but he could not. Instead, he asked, “Are there plans for a speedy marriage?”

“I suspect, Baron, you should address your questions to Miss Aldridge,” she said with a defensive shift of her shoulders.

He felt as if someone had punched him solidly in his gut. Satiné Aldridge had been the only woman he had ever considered as a possible lover. John had always guarded his heart so closely; yet, the strength of his feelings had grown with their separation, but now adversity meant to tear him from the lady before he could claim Miss Satiné. "I hold no right to intrude upon the lady's privacy."

Miss Neville's voice was soft, barely more than a whisper. "Miss Aldridge desperately requires a friend who will act in her best interest. She is quite distraught, Sir. I would encourage you to ignore any protestations, as well as social constraints. You have previously shown great empathy by placing me in Miss Satiné's household. Do not forsake her now, Sir."

John's fists clenched at his side. He would love the opportunity to meet one of the Realm's enemies at this moment: He required a target upon whom to demonstrate his frustration. He cut his eyes toward where Miss Neville waited. "Tell Miss Aldridge I mean to speak to her immediately. If the lady refuses, instruct your lady I refuse to leave. Be adamant, Miss Neville. I am depending upon you to convince Miss Satiné of my stubbornness."

Her eyes flashed briefly with softness before becoming fiercely loyal. "As you wish, Baron Swenton. Make yourself comfortable. I shall ask Cook to send in some claret. I fear it is all that is available, and I imagine you will require a drink or two before confronting Miss Satiné." A satisfied smile curled the woman's lips. With a curt nod, she made her curtsy and strode from the room.

John watched her go. A shudder of longing raced along his spine, but "longing" for what, he could not say. Within minutes, a maid arrived with the decanter and a glass. He gestured to a nearby table, but did not reach for the drink. Instead, John continued to stare upon the empty passageway, as if he hoped to conjure Miss Neville's presence again. He had liked the woman upon reading her first words of acquaintance: The lady had demonstrated her empathy for others, as well as her quick mind and her strength of spirit. All were characteristics John had assigned to her personality when he had read her letters. It was well to be proved correct. "And Miss Neville is not hard on the eyes," he whispered to the empty room.

There was no fathoming the conundrum of Miss Aldridge household. He could not dwell on the impossible: Miss Satiné had chosen another. All John could do was the honorable thing: He would assist her in salvaging the remnants of her reputation. If he could discover the child's father, he would bring the man to reason. A quick marriage would resolve the issue of the boy's legitimacy. Being in Vienna would keep the news of Miss Satiné's anticipating her vows quieter. Scandal would still exist, but the *ton* was known to forgive such acts. If Miss Satiné and the gentleman remained from English shores for two to three years, no one but he would be the wiser, and John would carry Satiné Aldridge's secrets to his grave.

John would assist the woman he meant to claim as his wife to know the man to whom she had given herself freely, and then he would return to England and attempt to place the woman from his mind. "Everyone deserves to be treated with a touch of honor," he murmured.

When Miss Neville returned, John realized he had remained where she had left him. There was torment in the woman's eyes, but she presented him a congenial smile. With a rueful grimace, John asked softly, "Has Miss Aldridge agreed to see me?"

She nodded her affirmation, though she did not look at him. "Miss Aldridge begs you forgive her appearance, but she will accept your call."

John released his pent up breath. "Thank you for your caring nature, Miss Neville." He bowed stiffly. "I am prepared if the lady is."

Miss Neville glanced to the decanter. "You chose not to indulge in the claret. It is not to your taste, Sir?"

Despite the swarm of bees occupying his stomach, John managed a smile of bemusement. "I am not much of a drinker: I fear heavy spirits blacken my disposition."

"I have only our short acquaintance upon which to base my opinion, but I could never imagine your lacking control, Baron Swenton," she said evenly.

John thought, *Jeremiah Swenton never tolerated a lack of control. Only the Baroness Swenton had ever acted without consideration of the late baron's wishes.* "Lead on, Miss Neville," he said evenly. "It is time I earn my reputation."

He followed her up the main stairs to a third storey suite of rooms. When the door swung wide to admit him to Miss Aldridge's bedchamber, John's heart did a foolish flip. She was as he had always imagined her: Miss Satiné's coal black tresses spread across her shoulders, and her pale skin glistened in the candlelight. It was his fantasy come to life.

"Miss Aldridge," he said upon a rasp before offering her a proper bow. He had yet to enter the room.

Miss Satiné's eyes rose to meet his. "Baron Swenton," she said with cold politeness. "Please come in, Sir. How kind of you to call upon me. If I had known you were in Vienna..."

"I came on family business," John explained, as he took one step closer. "Please forgive me for pressing my wish to renew our acquaintance."

She nodded her agreement. "Gladly, Sir, if you will forgive my receiving you under less than pristine conditions."

John swallowed hard. "I have always been of the persuasion, Miss Aldridge, to forgive you anything."

"Come, sit," she said more cordially. "Isolde tells me you wish only to assist me."

"Isolde?" he asked with a frown. In myths, Isolde was an Irish princess.

"I am Isolde," Miss Neville explained from somewhere behind him.

John nodded. "Of course. I should have understood immediately." He forced his feet forward. Assuming the seat Miss Aldridge had indicated, John filled his senses with the lady's beauty. From the first moment, he had laid eyes upon her, he had thought her the most magnificent woman of his acquaintance. True, Miss Aldridge favored her older sister, Velvet Fowler, the Duchess of Thornhill, and was the twin to Cashémere Wellston, the Countess of Berwick, but in Swenton's estimation, Satiné Aldridge held a magically ethereal vulnerability not found in her siblings.

"It grieves me for you to discover me in such deplorable conditions. You have been a loyal friend to me, Baron, and then your recommendation to Uncle Charles of Miss Neville has been a God-send." John sent a quick glance to Isolde Neville; evidently she had kept his instructions regarding how she came to serve Miss Aldridge. He appreciated the lady's allegiance.

"We all were most concerned with your recovery after your ordeal in Scotland," he solicitously remarked. When her uncle had left her alone in Italy and had returned to

England, it had taken all John's hard-honed control not to storm Chesterfield Manor and beat Baron Ashton to within an inch of the man's life. Instead, he had used his contacts with Wellston and Fowler to learn of Miss Satiné's whereabouts, and then he had taken it upon himself to write to the woman. He had encouraged her to call upon his mother in Vienna and to permit Lady Fiona to provide Miss Satiné with the proper introductions. Finally, he had begged his mother to grant him the favor of writing to Miss Aldridge and inviting her to join the baroness at Lady Fiona's summer home. Of course, he had not spoken of his true relationship to Lady Fiona to Miss Aldridge; his mother would not have cooperated if he had, nor had he admitted to Lady Fiona his interest in the youngest of the Aldridge sisters. His actions had been beyond the pale, but if anyone had called him on them, John would have gladly have spoken his plight to Miss Aldridge.

"Yes," she bitterly spit the words. "My life changed forever when I permitted my vanity to rule my better judgment. I should have accepted Lord Yardley's initial attentions. Instead, my sister has claimed the title, which should have been mine."

John did not care to think on the possibility either Marcus Wellston or Aidan Kimbolt might have claimed her. "Your life is not over," he said lamely.

Tears flooded her eyes. Through sobs of despair, Miss Satiné lamented, "I am certain Miss Neville has spoken of my fall from grace."

John looked to where Miss Satiné's companion waited patiently in the shadows. Their eyes met and held for several elongated seconds, and a new awareness crept into John's being, but he denied its appearance with a shake of his head. "Miss Neville simply insisted I extend my benevolence. Perhaps it is best if you tell me what I should know. As always, I am your servant." He handed her his handkerchief. His nerves reverberated, as taut as a harp's strings. John was not certain he cared to think of her with another. His insides tightened into a knot as he waited for the lady's response.

"In my conceit, I had thought... In truth, I do not know what I thought." Her tone harshly shredded all John's illusions. "Even though Uncle Charles assured me Charters had not...had not..." *Violated me.* John's mind announced the dreaded words. "I could not abandon the image of..." Her hands cut the air in wild gestures.

John leaned closer and lowered his voice. He did not think it necessary for Miss Neville to be privy to all Miss Satiné's sordid details. "You need not speak of the Scottish events. Instead, explain how you came to accept another's attentions."

"It was all so foolish," she whispered through a watery smile. "He was so sophisticated."

John bit the inside of his jaw to keep from crying out against the injustice. He should have come to Vienna sooner. Should have made his proposal known earlier. "If you will speak his name, I will call upon the gentleman. A marriage now would not be ideal, but if you are willing, a clergy can be found in one of the smaller villages who, for a price, would post date the marriage certificate to reflect a time before the child's birth. It will not be an uncomplicated doing, but I maintain connections in the area. I have resources I will place at your disposal."

Her tears had returned. "You have always been so kind of me," she wept.

John fisted his hands so as not to reach for her. "You are the youngest sister in marriage of two of my dearest companions," he assured.

She dabbed at her eyes, and John knew misery. He had been furious on the day he had assisted Marcus Wellston and Lucifer Hill with the rescue of the Aldridge twins.

Furious at what all Miss Satiné had suffered. The moment he had pulled the girl over the lip of the glass cone and into his embrace, he had wanted her. Memories of that one brief moment had nourished his hopes for well over a year. Now, they were dashed. "I thought," she said with glistening eyes, "we knew more familiarity than my being the sister to both a duchess and a countess."

A heartbeat of silence elapsed. He read what he thought were her expectations in the painfully acute expression, which crossed her countenance. John felt a probing shudder run along his spine. Although the words had come easily to his lips, as quickly as he had spoken them, he knew he had made an error. "You must know, Miss Aldridge, I hold you with the highest esteem."

"If only..." She sighed heavily. "It seems I spend so much of my time of late with *if only*." She looked so very young. Her complexion creamy. Her lips so kissable. The nearness of her swarmed John's reason.

John gave a small shake of his head. "I must see to your immediate marriage." The implication that Miss Satiné might have chosen him if he had not postponed his return to Vienna tore his heart to shreds.

"I fear, Sir, it is too late. The gentleman has departed the country," she said in a voice barely more than a whisper. Her green eyes shone with the tears she readily shed.

John purposely shook off her protestations. "My connections are extensive, Miss Aldridge. All I require is a name."

Tears streamed down Miss Satiné's cheeks. "The gentleman has a wife," she confessed.

Air rushed from his lungs while John murmured a curse he would prefer to shout to the Heavens. "You knew...you knew of the man's wife?" he stammered.

A sadness, which matched his own, crossed Miss Satiné's countenance. "Not until afterwards."

John's blood ran cold, while dread raced through his veins. The full magnitude of her situation slammed against his heart. Miss Satiné had turned so pale he thought she might faint. A laden silence stretched between them. Finally, he reached for her hand. Clearing his throat, he said, "I realize I am not the man you wished to call 'husband,' but I would be blessed among men if you would accept my hand in marriage." From behind him, he heard Miss Neville gasp, but John held Miss Aldridge's gaze. The moment was not as he had imagined it, and John wondered if the differences spelled doom.

"I cannot permit you to sacrifice..." Miss Satiné began.

However, he interrupted her. "It would be no sacrifice. I am the only one of my associates, who has not taken a wife, and I have thought of us often," he admitted. "We can marry quickly. I have papers to sail to England at week's end. I can book additional passage..."

"What of the boy?" she asked. "Am I to leave the child behind?"

John frowned deeply. "I would not... It is not in my nature to abandoned a child... I had not thought..."

Miss Satiné slid her small hand from his grasp. "...I understand. I release you, Baron, from your offer. It was kind of you to stand in my defense."

John was on his feet and pacing the small opening between her bed and the windows. "I do not wish to be released," he declared. "But to accept another's child as

the future baron would be a betrayal of all my father held most holy. I have a responsibility to the title.”

“The Earl of Berwick always said you were of your father’s nature,” she affirmed with a bit of petulance.

John jammed his fingers into his hair. “That particular fact may be so, but in this matter I cannot relent.”

“Then we are at an impasse,” Miss Satiné said bitterly.

John rolled his eyes heavenward. The woman he had desired for the past year and a half could be his if he could find a means to settle the child’s parentage. Never could he desert the child to an orphanage. Never would he permit the boy to possess no knowledge of its parents. He had experienced the stigma of his mother’s absence, and John could not inflict such pain on another innocent.

“What if I claim the boy, but we admit I did not arrive in time for our vows to be pronounced before the child’s entrance in the world?”

“Say my son arrived early?” Her voice held dismay.

John’s gaze met hers. “It will be several weeks before we reach England. No one will know the child’s age. I will provide the boy a gentleman’s education, property when he is of age, and the protection of my name. It is not an ideal solution, but it would provide any children of our joining their rightful position in Society.”

“Rupert would be your by-blow.” She spit out the word.

“No,” John assured. “The boy will know only that he was conceived in honor. It is the most I can offer, Miss Aldridge. Mine is a superior solution to the child possessing no father. You would return to England as my baroness. I will draw up papers to protect the boy; they will be part of your marriage settlement. You may have your man of business review them. I promise to act with merit.”

Her forehead scrunched up in disbelief. “You would tell your associates a prevarication to protect my reputation?”

John’s senses were far sharper than he would prefer. Part of the code of the Realm was built on trust: No one could rely on a man who would speak untruths to his closest friends. He had always thought of himself as an honest man, but he openly plotted to deceive his Realm brothers. “Of course, we must speak a version of the truth to both Thornhill and Yardley. The others need not know more than you are my wife, and I have given the child my name.”

Her expression held a bittersweet quality. “Then I accept, Baron Swenton. Your offer is most generous.” Her tone was all politeness, but the tenor of the lady’s words reinforced the bargain he had just negotiated: a Devil’s bargain.