

Chapter 1

“Respect was invented to cover the empty place where love should be.”
– Leo Tolstoy

Late May 1819–Cheshire

“Bloody hell!”

Adam Lawrence cursed as his horse bucked again, each ripple of thunder sending the skittish stallion turning in circles. The skies opened unexpectedly in mid-morning, and Lawrence traveled in the rain for nearly an hour. He rode into the storm, the weather following along the God-forsaken emptiness of Cheshire. He knew little of the area except of the Cheshire cheese he often consumed at some of London’s best parties and of the Trent and Mersey Canal, which connected rural Cheshire to the industrial Midlands. Now, as he passed what appeared to be abandoned farmlands, Lawrence took pleasure in noting the aristocracy’s end, at least, the aristocracy his father preached.

In fact, it was his father who sent him out in this torrential downpour. When the Earl of Greenwall summoned his son to Leicestershire, Adam thought he would receive the usual lecture on financial responsibility. Instead, Robert Lawrence delivered a different edict.

“You will bring the boy to me.” The earl narrowed his gaze to rest censoriously on Adam.

Adam stiffened with the unspoken threat. His father’s tone was hardly encouraging.

“Plan to replace me, Father?”

In matters of his father, Adam always expected the worst. Cynicism cloaked Adam’s shoulders so long that no trust remained in his repertoire. Greenwall’s expression signaled his father’s frustration with their renewed confrontational state.

“You leave me no choice.”

Adam heard what sounded of a hint of regret in his father’s tone. It bothered Adam that his lifestyle brought disdain to Greenwall, but Adam would never admit as such.

“You disregarded your obligation to the title, Adam,” His father spoke with cold indifference. “What am I to do? Turn everything over to your cousin? Atticus Duncan will ruin Greenwall with his taste for extravagance.”

“Worst than mine, Your Lordship?” Adam challenged.

Ignoring his finely tailored clothes, he flopped in a chair.

The earl ignored Adam’s provocations. He shuffled through a stack of papers. “I will not give credence to a debate on your and Atticus’s reputations.” His father extended a letter for Adam’s perusal. “This is from your own man of business. Mr. Jennings corresponded with the young lady who demands the money from you.”

Adam studied the page. His first thought was the letter wreaked of blackmail. “How are we to prove this woman even knows Cathleen Donnel? My God! I have not seen or heard from Cathleen for over six years—not since I put her on a public coach to Cheshire. I released my mistress to her family. Even gave her a generous settlement.” Adam’s eyes searched Jennings’s letter for details. “Where in bloody hell is Mobberley?”

“It is south of Manchester, some fifteen miles,” his father supplied.

Adam asked the question he avoided from the beginning.

“What will you do with the boy? How do we explain the sudden appearance of my son? Of your grandson? A child of whom we held no knowledge? A by-blow cannot inherit an entailment, Father.”

“It will be my concern.” The earl closed the conversation. “All you must do is confirm that the boy is yours and then bring the child to Greene Hall. I will see to the arrangements.” With that, his father stood, picked up his gloves, and

prepared to take his leave. “A bank draft is available for the woman—repay her for her kindness toward the child.”

“Pay the lady for her silence, you mean,” Adam snarled.

Greenwall’s brow rose in contention.

“Believe what you wish, Adam. All I ask of you in the matter is to provide the child safe passage. Then you may return to whatever entertainment is your latest avocation.”

It was typical of his father’s orders: They spoke of disappointment. No matter what Adam did, he never pleased the earl. Somewhere along the way, Adam quit trying. It spoke profusely of their relationship that his father would welcome an illegitimate child into his home in hopes of salvaging the title.

“As you wish, Sir.” Adam leisurely stood. “Incidentally, I may require an advance on my next quarter’s allowance.”

The earl’s eyes narrowed in disapproval.

“Bring the boy, Adam, and we will discuss it.”

Deep in thoughts of Greenwall’s purpose in this madness, Adam did not react fast enough to prevent the disaster about to beset him. From the mud, an apparition rose to appear before his rain-blinded eyes. It eerily spread its wings, opening first one appendage and then another before sending Adam’s mount pawing the air to fight off the attack. Before Adam could react to the manifestation’s appearance, he found himself sliding rear first from the saddle to land unceremoniously in a river of brown ooze. Somewhere in the recesses of his mind, he heard a shriek of surprise, but Adam could not tell whether it came from him or from the dark specter.

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A sudden summer thunderstorm caught everyone in the village unawares, but now only Aoife Kennice fought Mother Nature. She hurried along the muddy road from Mobberley to the small cottage she shared with her late cousin’s three children. The cousin passed from pneumonia two years prior, and since that time,

Aoife cared for the children, who were all born on the wrong side of the blanket. That fact might mean something to London aristocrats, but to Aoife the babes were simply the *mac and iníons of her col ceathrar*—the son and daughters of her cousin.

Although Aoife's family departed Ireland when she was seven, Aoife often thought and spoke her parents' native language: Another characteristic, which Aoife shared with her cousin Cathleen. Dear Cathleen, who left home at twenty to join a light opera company. Years later, when Cathleen Donnel passed, Aoife discovered her beloved cousin had, in reality, lost her way and became the mistress of one rich aristocrat after another. When Cathleen returned home briefly following the passing of Aoife's father, Cathleen brought a tale of a marriage and a husband in the British military. It was only after Cathleen's untimely demise that Aoife learned the truth. Cathleen's illness and her trust in the wrong people left nothing for the care of the children, nothing but a few personal belongings; and when no one else stepped forward to care for them, Aoife did not hesitate when the call for assistance went out. She sent for Daniel, Aileen, and Elaine right away.

Today, Aoife made the trek to Mobberley in hopes that the solicitor she contacted in London finally sent word. She desperately needed to locate the children's father. Realizing the small nest egg her parents left her nearly gone, Aoife abandoned her pride and made a plea for financial assistance. Three growing children could go through clothes and food at an astounding rate. When Aoife contacted the solicitor, Louis Jennings, a man whose name she found in her cousin's papers, Aoife prayed for a monthly stipend from Cathleen's former protector, anything to make their lives easier.

In addition to seeking word from Mr. Jennings, among her other errands on this particular day, Aoife dutifully mailed a teaching application to a girls' school near Newcastle, where her brother was a village vicar.

Now, as the mud practically sucked her worn half boots from her feet, she rued her decision to walk to the village. Not a stitch of her clothing remained dry, and her serviceable bonnet drooped on all sides, permitting a steady stream of water to run down Aoife's back and between her breasts. A deep rumble of thunder did not threaten her any more than the rain, but knowing Elaine's fear of storms, Aoife quickened her efforts to reach the cottage.

The water stood on the road, the ditches lining the hardened pathway overflowing. Light-brown ooze filled every nook and crevice as Aoife trudged toward the cottage. As miserable as she every remembered being, she made herself say her daily prayers of thanksgiving, hoping praise would replace the curses fighting to escape. When her foot sank several inches into yet another mud hole, Aoife did not anticipate being slammed face first into the mud and the gook.

Spitting muck and wiping sludge from her eyes, Aoife did not see the stranger before she staggered to her feet, but by then it was too late. All Aoife could do was shield her face with her arms as the animal clawed the air about her head. Impending doom circled about her head. Without thinking, she screamed at the top of her lungs.

Frozen in place, waiting for the worse to happen, Aoife's mind, initially, did not register the sound of the man hitting the ground. A guttural grunt announced the impact, which knocked the air from his lungs. The curse followed, as his ankle popped, when his weight came down on it at an odd angle.

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Adam struggled momentarily for a coherent thought and a complete breath before realizing the muddy ghost was actually a woman wrapped in a dark cloak.

"Bloody Bedlam," he yelled over the pounding rain. "Do you plan to stand there like a damn statue or will you offer me your assistance?"

As Adam sprawled on the ground, the woman lowered her arms and stared at him. He grappled with bringing himself upright. Two heartbeats later, she was by his side.

"I beg your pardon, Sir." She reached for him, realizing too late that mud covered her hands. "What may I do to assist you?"

With the storm swirling around them, the woman spoke close to Adam's ear, and he recognized the satiny tone of her words. It made him think of silken scarves and luscious fruit spread out before him. Unfortunately, the steady drip of the water from his hat sliding down the back of his shirt carried a taste of reality Adam had no wish to claim.

Adam emitted several expletives regarding the stupidity of the locals before he shouted, "Can you bring my horse around?"

Without hesitation, the stranger nodded her agreement, but Adam watched in doubt as the girl looked up, her bonnet flopping in unladylike pursuits. Muddy trails streamed down her face and seeped slowly into her day dress's high neckline. When she finally spotted the animal at a short distance, to his amusement, she hiked the swirls of her wet skirt around the upper part of her legs and sloshed off after it.

When the woman stepped over Adam's outstretched leg, he took a closer look at her. Adam assumed her a farmer's wife, but after the delectable view of her mud-spattered legs, he certainly hoped the woman belonged to no one. The legs were thin, but muscular, and although he lay on his backside in filthy mud, Adam envisioned those legs wrapped around his body. His gaze rose higher to her small waist and the soft curve of her hips as the rain plastered the woman's clothes to her lithe form. Even though he was soaked and cold, blood rushed to Adam's groin, and a smile turned up his mouth's corners.

The natural lilt of the girl's voice brought his attention to her efforts.

"Easy now," she coaxed as she slowed her progress, moving closer to the animal. "Come on, my pretty. *Is minic a rinne bromach gioblach capall cumasach,*" she murmured, as she reached for the reins before patting his horse's neck. "You are magnificent," the girl whispered close to the stallion's ear, and Adam prayed she might say the same thing of him.

The calming effect the woman had on the skittish animal did not escape Adam's notice. Taking a hold on the harness, she turned the stallion and led it back to where he sat in the murky mess. Although it still came steadily, the intensity of the rain slackened, but both the woman and Adam moved as if it did not exist. Completely soaked and mud-spattered, they had no reason to protect themselves from the elements.

Without instructions, the girl brought the horse along side where Adam sat. He breathed a harsh sigh as he lifted his weight to his knees.

"Hold him still," Adam demanded before employing the horse and saddle to pull himself to one leg, avoiding putting his weight on the swelled ankle. Using his upper body to right his stance, Adam managed to first stand and then to place his injured foot into the stirrup. Using the saddle's horn, he lifted upward. Gritting

his teeth, Adam placed his weight on the injured foot as he swung the other leg over the horse's back and settled into the seat. Releasing a steadying breath, he ordered, "Come." Adam extended his hand to the woman. "I will take you up with me."

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The rain having washed away much of the dirt that once covered her eyes, Aoife now fully saw the man. His wide shoulders tapered to a flat stomach—a muscular back supporting his frame and strong arms and thighs, which bunched as the stranger lifted his weight into the saddle, and for a moment she wondered how it would be to know such a man, a man of strength. Deep in thought of masculine arms, it took several heartbeats before the stranger's words penetrated Aoife's conscious mind. When she looked up to see his outstretched hand, she backed from him.

"I cannot, Sir," she pleaded for his understanding. "We know not each other. Moreover, I am covered in mud. It would ruin your fine clothes."

The absurdity of her contention amused him, and the gentleman offered his best seductive smile.

"I am Adam Lawrence. If you provide me your name, we will know each other, and as far as my clothes, my valet will wish to burn these when he sees them."

Aoife found herself staring into steel gray eyes, mesmerizing orbs beneath dark brows. As handsome as the devil, she thought. Just looking at him sent her heart pounding uncontrollably in her chest.

"You are...you are Viscount Stafford?" she stammered.

A crooked smile indicated the man's appreciation, but he retracted his outstretched hand. He chuckled as he stared down at her.

"I realize I hold somewhat of a reputation, but I did not think my fame spread to Cheshire." He leaned down, crossing his arms over the saddle horn. "However, I will learn more of this vicious gossip later; for now, I wish to be from the rain,

and I wish to tend my ankle. However, as a peer and a gentleman, I cannot leave you to tramp through this prank of nature.”

The man gestured to the stream of mud flowing down the road’s center.

“You will come with me, my unknown lady of the sludge; my gentleman’s consequence requires I see you safely to your residence.” Again, Lord Stafford pointedly offered Aoife his hand.

“I thought you said your reputation already poor, Sir?” she challenged. “I would not wish to contribute to your societal renown.”

Aoife watched as his eyes narrowed in disapproval.

“Miss Sludge, you will ride with me of your own free will, or I will take you up without your permission,” the viscount snapped.

Aoife’s chin rose in defiance.

“A threat lacks a choice, Sir.”

Noticeably frustrated with the dampness seeping into his bones and with the logic Aoife threw back at him, the viscount edged the horse forward and caught her upper arm. With a gargantuan effort, he lifted her first beside the horse where he took a better hold, and then Lord Stafford jerked Aoife to his lap, sitting Aoife decidedly before him before touching the horse’s flanks with his heels.

“That is better.” The man caught her around the waist and sat her upon his right thigh. “Now tell me your name, Miss Sludge, or would you prefer my endearments.” Lord Stafford whispered close to Aoife’s ear, permitting his lips to brush across her lobe.

Aoife sputtered from the viscount’s forwardness, but she managed to sit tall, very prim and proper before answering, “Aoife Kennice,” she said waspishly.

Apparently amused by his own consequence, the future earl only half listened. "Pardon me," he said huskily. With his forefinger, he turned her chin in his direction.

"Did the mud affect your hearing, my lord?" Aoife answered with a smirk. "My name is spelled A-O-I-F-E. It is Irish for 'Eve' or for 'Life.' It is pronounced 'Ee-Fa.' My surname is Kennice, which means 'Beautiful.'"

The viscount's smile broke his mouth's line, and Aoife thought that if he smiled at every woman as such he must possess a sheik's harem.

"Beautiful life. I like that much better than Miss Sludge." Lord Stafford pulled her closer, where her left shoulder lined his chest's muscular wall and her hips rested above his manhood. "I am Adam, and you may be my Irish Eve."