

Excerpt from Chapter Two of "The Heartless Earl"

Sterling had stayed with Abbey longer than usual. With his grandmother's arrival later in the day, he did not expect another opportunity to sneak off to The Gold Ring any time soon. Sated, he rode his favorite horse leisurely through the mid-morning London streets. Abbey had repeatedly seen to his needs, and Sterling languidly sat astride the animal, permitting the reins to remain slack. However, the chaos awaiting him on his doorstep changed his mood. "What is amiss?" he demanded as he slid from the saddle.

Lord Brayton turned to meet him. Evidently, the viscount and Sterling's butler had argued over his whereabouts. "Merritt, thank God." The viscount caught Sterling's arm and directed him away from the waiting servants. "I came searching for you. It is your grandmother. Her ladyship has taken ill. She is at an inn some fifteen miles north. At the King's Galley. They are seeing to her needs, but the countess has no medication with her."

"Damn!" Sterling growled. "Do you know her condition?" The news had destroyed the indolent feelings of a few moments prior.

"Her ladyship has been given several herbal remedies. She was resting quietly when I took my leave of the inn."

Sterling started away. "Thank you, Brayton." He remounted. "I must be to her ladyship's personal physician and then ride north."

"Mrs. Mayer suggested you send your larger coach to bring the countess to London." Brayton trailed Sterling to the waiting mount.

He nodded his agreement. "Would you instruct Mr. Sprout to order the coach and to send a change of clothing for me?" Sterling turned the horse in a tight circle. "I must hurry."

"Certainly," Brayton called as Sterling rode away.

It was only after he had interrupted an examination the physician conducted at his Brook Street office and was on the road again that Sterling asked himself, "Who in the hell is Mrs. Mayer?"

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"Where is my grandmother?" Sterling demanded.

Fortunately, her ladyship's maid waited for him in the common room. He should berate the woman for not attending to her mistress, but he possessed no time for foolish servants.

"This way, my lord." Alberta led him through the common room and up the stairs.

When the maid held the door for him, he beheld only his grandmother's fragile form on the bed. Fearing the worst, he rushed to her side, completely oblivious to the nondescript woman seated on the bed's edge. "I am here, Gram," he whispered hoarsely as he caressed her cheek. "It is Sterling."

Her eyes flitted open and then closed again, but she gave him the hint of a smile. Sterling leaned forward to kiss her cheek.

"Did you bring her ladyship's medication?" a voice behind him demanded.

Sterling reached into his inside pocket and removed the powder packets the physician had provided him. He extended his arm to the side, but his eyes never left his grandmother's face. "Here."

"Thank God." The woman snatched them from his fingers. "Alberta, fetch fresh water and a clean glass."

"Yes, miss."

Sterling caught his grandmother's hand in his. He rubbed it gently between his two. "Do you remember how you used to rub my hands just like this? I was so foolish. I would rush outside to build snowmen and forget my gloves. But you never reprimanded me for being a boy. You would laugh and then tend to my frozen fingertips with the most gentle touch." He stroked the rheumatic hand with his fingertips. "Gram, Jamie desperately requires your touch as much as I once did. He has no one to love him but we two."

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Ebba watched in fascination as the earl tended his grandmother. Tears misted her eyes at seeing his gentleness. She had always longed for someone to care for her. Had never known it within her own family. Surprisingly, she felt a twinge of jealousy. What she would not give to have someone's undeniable devotion. Such had been her dream for as long as she could remember. But the likelihood of such love would ever exist for her. Instead, she must choose a different route: an adventure to fill her days when no one else cared to think upon her.

"Here, miss." Alberta returned with a fresh ewer of water.

Ebba poured a glass. "What is the dosage?" she said to the earl's back.

"The whole packet," he ordered without turning around.

Ebba stirred the powder into the glass to dissolve it. "If you will support her ladyship, sir, I shall spoon in the medicine."

The earl stood and maneuvered into the tight space where he might lift the countess to a seated position. He braced her against his shoulder and held her head securely in place without Ebba needing to instruct him.

"Countess," Ebba encouraged. "His lordship has brought your medication, ma'am." She gently tapped the countess's chin. "I shall feed you spoonfuls."

Thankfully, the woman opened her eyes. "Ebba," she murmured.

"Yes, ma'am. It is Ebba. I am here, and so is your grandson, Lord Merritt. We shall personally see to your care." She began to spoon in the medicine. After each mouthful, she held the countess mouth closed and waited for the woman to swallow before offering another.

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Sterling dutifully braced his grandmother's frail body and waited for the woman to tend to his kin. He had thought the stranger unremarkable, but then he had looked upon her face. Heart shaped. Sun kissed skin. Reddish gold hair pulled back in a tight braid. Several strands had worked their way loose and brushed her cheeks and ears with the lightest of wisps and his fingers itched to touch them. The sun streaked across her features, emphasizing the fatigue that marked the lines around her mouth, but it was still

a pouty mouth, one begging to be kissed properly. And she sported the bluest eyes he had ever beheld. The sunlight glistened off her eyelashes in flakes of gold, making the blue mesmerizingly enticing. Sterling forgot to breathe as he concentrated on her. Her small breasts pushed against the square neckline of her dress. And desire went straight to his groin. Barely seven hours earlier, he had taken his pleasure in Abbey's soft and very curvy body, but somehow this was different. This woman did not flaunt her wares.

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Ebba spooned the medication into the countess's mouth, but she was completely aware of the man who supported Lady Merritt's back. She could feel his concern for his grandmother. It was fierce. Primitive even. Protection with which she held few personal examples, but thankful to view its existence. From her eye's corner, she could see his long fingers holding his grandmother's shoulders. His hands fascinated her. They spoke of strength and love and dependability. Then she foolishly raised her eyes to meet his. Steel-gray. Nearly black. Framed by dark brows. Dark pools so deep, she sat transfixed.

"Is that all, miss? Anything else I should fetch her ladyship?" Alberta asked from somewhere behind Ebba.

She blushed. "That...that should be adequate," she stammered. She placed the glass and spoon on the end table. "Do you wish to sit up, your ladyship?" She reached to straighten the countess's clothing.

The earl moved from behind his grandmother. "Here, Gram. Permit me to assist you." He gently lifted the woman as Alberta adjusted the pillows. Then he sat beside the countess again. "You gave me quite a scare. Thank goodness Lord Brayton knew to come to Baxter Hall."

His grandmother motioned to the water pitcher, and he poured some in an empty glass before bracing her again so she might sip. Finally, she said, "I suspect Ebba sent the viscount."

"Ebba?" Lord Merritt turned her. "Would that be you, miss?" She could hear the caution in his tones.

Instinctively, her chin rose in defiance. It appeared that the countess was the exception in the Baxter family. "I am Ebba Mayer, sir."

He stared at her as if considering her for the first time. "Ah, yes. Lord Brayton mentioned you." He stood and offered Ebba a bow. "I thank you, ma'am, for your attention to her ladyship. It was most kind of you to give up your travels to remain with the countess." His words were meant as a dismissal—an arrogant dismissal, at that.

"No, Sterling." His grandmother reached for his hand. "You do not understand." She paused to catch her breath. "I have asked." Pause. "Mrs. Mayer...to be my companion." Pause. "And I shall provide her...my sponsorship for the Season."

Lord Merritt stiffened, and he eyed Ebba cautiously. "From the time I returned to London to your departure from Yorkshire, you have made Mrs. Mayer's acquaintance and taken on her sponsorship?" He stood by the countess's bed and held her frail hand, but he did not remove his eyes from Ebba. "What might we know of Mrs. Mayer?"

"I know all I need to know, Sterling." Pause. "Without Ebba, I would not have survived the night," the countess declared. "Her quick thinking made the difference."

He replied, "Then the lady has earned my deepest gratitude." However, his body language spoke of his suspicions. Ebba recognized his critical eye: The earl had assessed her plain clothing and had drawn the conclusion she had taken advantage of his grandmother's kindness. He said with circumspection, "I believe I will seek a room. At Mrs. Mayer's suggestion, I have requested the traveling coach. When you have recovered, we will return to London in style." He squeezed his grandmother's hand.

Holding silent, Ebba lifted her chin and ignored the earl's glare. "Alberta, shall you require assistance with her ladyship's needs?"

"No, miss. I can attend the countess."

"Then I shall freshen my things. I shall order a tray, Lady Merritt," she said with more confidence than she felt. "Let us see if you can eat something." Ebba started toward the door.

As she expected he would do, the earl followed. "May I have a word, Mrs. Mayer?" He caught her elbow and directed her to the hallway, politely closing the door behind him. Then he guided her along the passage. "Which is yours?"

She pulled up, breaking his hold. "I am afraid, sir, that despite my affection for your grandmother, I shall not entertain you in my chambers."

Surprisingly, he reached for her again, jerking her into his body. "When I ask for something, Mrs. Mayer, I am not in the habit of being denied," he hissed.

In bold disobedience, she stared intensely in his eyes, her pure fury unmistakable. "I would have thought you had had your pleasure satisfied already today," she challenged.

Lord Merritt set his mouth in a tight line. "Explain, Mrs. Mayer."

Undaunted, she accused, "Even after riding for hours across the English countryside, you still reek of your ladybird." She could not disguise the look of triumph from her features when he reacted to her charge. His cheeks knew a slight flush of color.

"How does a genteel lady even know the word *ladybird*?" He gave her a little shake to emphasize his point.

Despite being held awkwardly against him, Ebba straightened her shoulders. "First, I never claimed sophisticated breeding," she declared. "I am but a gentleman's daughter and a squire's sister; yet, I can attest neither ever came home from a night with their women, clothes rumpled, unshaven, and covered with the scent of a woman's perfume. I suppose I should have pretended not to notice, but acting was never my strong point." She braced herself for his retort.

The earl gritted his teeth in what appeared to be frustration. "Ours is not a conversation I care to have in this dark passageway," he growled, but then swallowed his next remark before saying more calmly, "You will join me, Mrs. Mayer, in the inn's private room for supper."

His demand had surprised her, and she found herself saying, "As you wish, Lord Merritt. Now if you will pardon me, I wish to freshen my clothing before returning to your grandmother's care." Defiantly, she broke his grasp and strode away.

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Despite the anger she had engendered in him, Sterling could not resist the vision of her hips' gentle sway as she stormed away. Without thinking, he brought his sleeve to his nose and took a deep whiff. An amused eyebrow rose in recognition. The lady was correct. Abbey's expensive perfume, a gift from him, in fact, lingered on his clothes. He heard the bolt shot seconds after the woman's door slammed shut. He chuckled when he considered how he had treated her. "Not proper for a woman of the gentry," he chastised himself in a soft whisper. Yet, he wondered: Would it be his relation or him who would suffer with the loss of Mrs. Mayer?

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Sterling had ordered a hot bath and had made a point of scrubbing away any remnants of Abbey's presence from his body. His coach had arrived, and although he had made do without a valet, the change of clothing had brought him renewed confidence in dealing with the appealing woman the countess had engaged as a companion. "Mrs. Mayer," he said as he stood. "Thank you for being prompt." Sterling held the woman's chair for her. "I have taken the liberty of ordering." Although she made no remark, he sensed she found his doing so amusing. "I fear," Sterling continued, but with less confidence, "you and I have gotten off to a poor start. My earlier behavior was all inconcinnity. I must beg your forgiveness. My grandmother is an integral part of my life, and my worry for her health and safety resulted in my less than gentlemanly actions."

The lady sat with downcast eyes throughout his practiced speech. "Neither of us performed to our best," she said softly.

"Her ladyship has explained your role in her recovery." Sterling poured them both a glass of wine. "May I ask where you learned to tend someone with a weak heart?"

"My maternal grandfather suffered in the latter years of his life."

Sterling did not approve of the fact she had yet to look at him. He would not mind another opportunity for losing himself in her eyes. The innkeeper interrupted their awkward conversation when he delivered their meal, and for the next few minutes, they busied themselves with arranging the plates for easy serving. Sterling finally swallowed a deep, steadying breath. "Mrs. Mayer, I could ask my grandmother the nature of your relationship, but I do not wish to tire her. Would you be so kind as to explain how you came to be traveling with Lady Merritt?"

For the next thirty minutes, Mrs. Mayer confided details of the countess's kindness to her and her fellow travelers, his grandmother's offer of employment, her initial denial, the card game, and the countess's illness.

"If I understand you, Mrs. Mayer, Lord Sutherland was less than amiable after the game." Sterling had found that part of the woman's story very interesting. Sutherland had long ago become Lady Claire's paramour. After his wife's leave-taking, he had discovered Sutherland had been his wife's lover prior to both his marriage to Lady Claire and the baron's joining to Lady Ellen Prinsep. The baron lost his wife to childbirth and, afterwards, resumed his place at Claire's side. Sterling had thought it more than a bit suspicious that Sutherland visited the same inn as his grandmother. The coincidence increased his mistrust of Mrs. Mayer. *Did she present a false face?*

“The baron stormed from the room, not even offering her ladyship common courtesies,” she disclosed.

Taking a sip of wine, he stalled. *Could Claire be up to a new provocation? But what? How could Sutherland be involved?* Sterling had thought his wife satisfied with the freedom he permitted her, but mayhap Lady Merritt’s sudden interest in their child was not just another of her whims to irritate him. Vigilance would be required. He was thankful he had had the foresight to bring his son to London. He would feel more at ease knowing he could protect the boy himself. “Such sounds of Sutherland’s character,” he assured. “The baron holds a reputation for a quick temper.”

“Lord Brayton made a similar observation.” The woman assured him.

Sterling held more questions than answers. Obviously, he would allow Mrs. Mayer to accompany his grandmother. The countess trusted the woman, and he would not upset the countess, but he would remain observant. “Your brother held no objections to your coming to London alone?” he asked as they finished their meal.

“My brother has his own family, and we were never close. He was our mother’s favorite, but Papa catered to me. Yet, is that not the way of life?” she observed. “Girls win their father’s hearts, and mothers lovingly tend their sons.”

“I suppose,” Sterling remarked. “My mother was often ill, but her ladyship stepped in when I was alone.”

The woman finally looked directly at him. She had avoided their eyes meeting during the meal—actually addressing many of her comments to her plate or her wine glass. “I noted your gentleness with the countess.” She paused. “I would not wish to appear uncharitable. God has been good to me, but I shall own I quite wished to someday know such a devotion.”

Sterling studied her countenance. The lady was either truly sincere or the greatest actress he had ever known. “My family is my responsibility.”

Unfortunately, his remark appeared to make her uneasy. “I should have withheld my opinions. My observations are of no significance,” she murmured.

“On the contrary, Mrs. Mayer. If you are to reside under my roof, I want to know your thoughts.” He paused, wondering whether to humor the woman or not. “You may express your opinions in my presence. I will keep your confidences.”