

PROLOGUE

England, 1772

Muted weeping, pierced by a newborn's cry, penetrated the tomb-like silence of the library.

The earl's fingers curled around the spine of his feather pen, his mind and body fighting to deny what his heart refused to accept.

". . . I am truly sorry, my lord. I used every skill I own, but the impurities in her blood were too profuse. Perhaps if you had summoned me sooner . . ."

Piercing grey eyes narrowed with distrust. "You assured me a bloodletting was the only thing that could save her. What is it you tell me now, sir?"

"She is gone, my lord."

"Gone?" The snap of a broken quill echoed the single word. "Your judgement must be more feeble than your eyesight," he warned, his voice uneven. "I insist you return to my wife at once and amend your diagnosis."

The physician set his mouth in a grim line as he slowly backed from the room. "Her need for me has passed, my lord. I did all that I could, I am not to blame. Her ladyship was already weakened-- I warned you of this eventuality many years ago, my lord . . ."

Rising out of his chair, the earl seized his silver letter opener and thrust it forward. His hand trembled. "You miserable cur! My wife was well enough before you dug your bloodthirsty claws into her. Get out of my sight before I have you skewered like any mongrel that dares foul my land. And take heed, if I ever set eyes upon you again, you will wish your life already ended--you imposter--you mountebank--you quack!" When the last of his hurled invectives fell on empty air, the earl slumped to his desk. Struggling to contain the emotions that threatened his sanity, he shuddered as a jagged-edged sob tore through him.

Stirring from his station near the velvet-draped windows, a solemn, young Earl of Pendrake approached the grieving widower. Unsure of his welcome, he hesitated briefly before laying a consoling hand on the earl's shoulder. "We all share your loss, my lord."

The older man's throat convulsed. Shrugging off the gesture of friendship, he obliterated the traces of his weakness with his hands. "No one can share my loss, Pendrake. You hear me? No one." With an unsteady swipe of his hand, he waved aside the succession of clichés that civility dictated. "I duly appreciate your mother's well-intentioned intervention and your own efforts to assist my wife during her travail, but, most regrettably, they were not enough. Now, nothing is. So I beg you, leave me to mourn in solitude."

"I do not mean to intrude on your grief, sir, but there is a babe to consider."

"Drown her, cast her away, I care not. I have no use for the brat, nor do I ever want to set eyes upon her. Just leave me be."

Though the older voice cracked under the strain, the young earl continued as if he had not heard. "She will have need of a wet nurse, my lord. Do you wish me to arrange it for you?"

The earl's eyes turned bleaker than the greyness of death that had already shrouded his soul. "Do as you will. Hand her over to some God-fearing peasant, who . . ." The softly spoken words of an ill-fated vow spun back to secure his tongue. Finding himself bound by the invisible strands of his long-ago promise to his wife, the earl surrendered a sigh that trembled the depths of his being.

"See that she does not starve, I have not the strength to consider more." Clenching his hands over his ears, he bowed his head and closed his eyes. Soundless tears found their way down stubbled, ashen cheeks as a despairing plea wedged past gritted teeth. "God, how I wish that babe had never been conceived."

Swallowing back his own grief, the young man bowed and exited. To him, the countess's death had been a tragic error borne of fear and ignorance, but then the eighteen-year-old earl had little to no experience with the rigors of childbirth. He entered the nursery and strode toward the defenseless newborn fretting in her nursemaid's arms.

"She's just a wee thing, milord. It wasna her fault," the woman pleaded softly.

Amazed by this miracle of life he'd helped usher into the world, the young man reached down to brush a downy cheek with his forefinger. "I realize that," he whispered, fascinated by the way the babe tried to suckle his fingertip. "As would any sane man."

Far from being comforted, the nursemaid tightened her hold on her innocent charge.

"Have no fear, madam. The child shall remain safe in your care," he assured the woman with quiet confidence. "I vowed to guard this infant with my life, and upon that oath I pledged my honor. She will meet no harm under my protection." Then moving with the self-possession of one accustomed to obligation, he left to see his promise carried out.