

Chapter One

Finding a husband was infinitely harder when one was considered to have addled wits. Lady Eve Langley snapped her lace fan closed and surveyed the crowded ballroom at the Levinson Manor. Lady Levinson enjoyed a reputation in Rutlandshire for holding elaborately themed balls and had quite outdone herself tonight. Large swaths of silk in varying shades of blue draped the walls giving the illusion of water, while marble sculptures of sea folk were interspersed with large, leafy plants around the room.

“Do smile, dearest,” Aunt Cecily said from beside her. The older woman was kind with a soft-spoken voice and an air of elegance Eve could only hope to emulate. She’d come to stay with her family and chaperone Eve. “A gentleman is unlikely to ask a sullen woman to dance.”

Eve pasted a polite smile on her face, though attracting a man seemed unlikely. “We’ve been here for two hours. Not a single gentleman has shown interest in asking me for anything, least of all a dance.” Despite her father’s title and wealth, a respectable suitor eluded her. As her father had said, she was not unattractive, but men preferred a simple woman who obeyed and didn’t rouse the gossips whenever she left the house. Eve was neither simple nor obedient, and the gossips needed no further fuel than the sight of her to cluck like hens. She was too much like her grandmama. A woman whose husband had locked her away until madness took her in mind and body. A fate Eve feared more than death.

“Perhaps I will remain on the shelf.”

Aunt Cecily's eyebrows rose. "Is that what you want, dear? I thought you wanted a family of your own."

She did. More than anything. But with every ball or dinner party, her dream of love slipped farther away. Surely there was a man of means who could see through the gossip and some of her more... *unusual* aspects of character, to the woman beneath? "Why is it so terrible to be different from others?"

"People fear what they do not understand." Aunt Cecily touched her shoulder gently. "You must try harder, Eve. They see what you choose to show. Therefore, you must decide what you want them to see."

"An average debutante with an agreeable dowry."

Cecily laughed. "Precisely. Let's have a tour about the room as we go for punch. I'm certain there's at least one young man here who will find you entrancing."

Eve followed her aunt, smile firmly affixed as they stopped to chat with other ladies of her aunt's acquaintance. She answered a few polite questions posed to her and otherwise attempted to appear simple and agreeable. The entire experience was painful.

They were almost to the line for punch when a familiar voice caught her attention over the strains of a quadrille and the murmur of guests.

"She is rather odd. Are you certain you wish to marry her? There are a number of young women here who are more suitable."

She knew the speaker at once. Lord Charles Barton was one of the few eligible men under the age of thirty at the Levinson's ball. He was tall and handsome, with curly blond hair

that looked soft. He'd smiled at her a time or two, but they'd never spoken past introductions. She'd hoped he might ask her for a dance. Now, her heart sank at his words. Whispered descriptions of her character often used terms like "odd" or "addled". Were they speaking of her?

Eve spotted him a dozen steps away, speaking with a silver-haired gentleman whose back was to her. She edged closer to them, stopping near a large potted plant whose wide leaves offered a spot with which to hear them unobserved. Perhaps it was untoward to hide behind a plant to eavesdrop on someone, but curiosity drove her. To whom was Lord Barton speaking? From here, she couldn't quite tell.

"None with the wealth her family brings to the union," the gentleman replied. "I need the spare that your mother was never able to provide."

She leaned closer. *Mother?* This must be Viscount Barton.

"I'm perfectly capable of assuming your title and responsibilities when the time comes," Lord Barton grumbled. He brushed a lock of blond hair off his forehead and glared at the man beside him.

"Not if you continue as a wastrel. One day you'll find yourself at the wrong end of a pistol when a husband catches you with his wife."

Lord Barton's jaw worked. "And what will you do with this new wife once you have your spare, Father? Surely you don't intend to bring her round to London for a Season? The gossips would delight to have her among their ranks. There would be no end to tales of Lady Eve talking to herself or staring into dark, empty corners."

Eve froze. His *wife?* But that would mean...

“I’ve spoken to her father. He assured me that no one else in the family suffers from her... affliction. She won’t pass it on to a child. We’re drawing up the marriage contract tomorrow. Once she’s given me a son, I’ll tuck her away in one of our lesser estates.” Another gentleman called Viscount Barton’s name and the two men moved away.

Eve wrapped her shaking hands around her waist. Her father was drawing up a marriage contract to a man she’d never met? A man who would breed her like a mare, then put her to pasture where no one could see his addled wife? Was she to become as mad as her grandmama?

“Whyever are you hiding behind a plant?” Aunt Cecily asked when she found Eve moments later. “What is it, dear? You’re pale.”

“I overheard someone say that father intends to draw up a marriage contract for me.”

Cecily flushed. “I had hoped you might find a young man to your liking at the ball tonight.”

Eve choked on a laugh that held no humor. “The young man to my liking is his *son*. Viscount Barton is older than father.”

“I’ve heard Lord Charles Barton is courting Miss Fairchild. But Eve, this could be your chance for a family. Many young women marry older men. They have children who fulfill them when their husbands are otherwise occupied and find much happiness in their lives.”

Occupied with their mistresses? Or their dotage? “Is love so rare then?”

Cecily sighed softly. “There are many kinds of love. Love of friends, of family, and sometimes when a woman is lucky, passionate love. But a young woman from an aristocratic family ought not set her heart on it.”

Whatever was she to do?

“There’s your father,” Aunt Cecily said. “I think he’s speaking with Viscount Barton now. Let’s go make his acquaintance. You might take a fancy to him.”

A few hours later, Eve had not taken a fancy to him. Quite the opposite. He spoke to her as if she were a child, never asked her for a dance, and made no effort to come to know her. It seemed quite clear that her family’s money was of more interest to him than her. How could she marry such a man? She’d be expected to share the marriage bed until he got her with child, then by his own admission, he’d lock her away someplace where she couldn’t be an embarrassment to his family name.

“Please, father. I don’t wish to marry Viscount Barton,” she said as they arrived home. Though her father was a good man, he had little time for a daughter he considered addled.

“Don’t speak such nonsense. Viscount Barton is an excellent match.” Her father handed his greatcoat, hat, and gloves to their butler. “Far better than you could do otherwise, I’ll warrant.”

“Have care, dear brother,” Aunt Cecily said. “Eve would like to choose her own husband. She has that right.”

“Not when it comes to our family. I’ll not allow a simple fool to make decisions that could ruin us.”

“Does the viscount bring so much to the match?” Eve asked.

“Eve, marriage to the Barton family would give you and your sons a better title. He’s offered to let me invest in his shipping company which will increase our family’s standings and provide further security to your aunt and me.”

“Don’t include me in this,” Cecily murmured. “You know perfectly well that my husband left me well cared for upon his death.”

“And Lord Barton is heir to the title,” Eve added. “Any child I have would never inherit the viscounty.” His reasoning made little sense, unless the investment in the shipping operation was his true motivation for securing this match.

Her father waved away her objection. “The Barton heir is nothing more than a young buck with dangerous proclivities. The viscount has a right to be worried for his title. I shouldn’t be surprised if the boy lived to see his next birthday.”

Eve gasped. What a horrid thing to say. “Father!”

“Enough, Eve. I’ll hear no more of this. You’ll do your duty to your family with no further objections.”

“But—”

“Do not force me to compel you, daughter. You will not like the consequences.”

“Roland!” Cecily said.

“Another word and you may be on your way home, Cecily,” he growled.

Her aunt snapped her mouth shut and sent her an apologetic glance.

Eve bit her trembling lip and spun on her heel. She refused to shed a single tear in front of him and fled to the safety and comfort of her bedchamber. It was terribly unfair, but she knew she'd never change his mind. How could she possibly marry a man so much older? Especially one who considered her an embarrassment?

Rose entered from the dressing chamber. The maid's drab brown dress skimmed the floor and hung on her slender frame. She knelt to stoke the fire that had burned to only coals. "Are you well, my lady?"

Eve shook her head. "Father is betrothing me to a man older than him. I know it was foolish to dream of finding love. I admit that I have been fanciful, and that my prospects aren't as good as some debutants."

Rose scoffed. "The man is a fool. You're beautiful and from a proper family. Any man should be happy to take you as a wife."

"You know that isn't true," Eve murmured. "Not when..." She shook away the thought. "Even if I have been foolish in my fantasies, is it so terrible to want a man to care for me? One who isn't at this moment deciding exactly where to sentence me once he has his spare?"

Rose gasped. "He can't!"

"On the contrary. As his wife, he may do as he pleases. Even lock me away as my grandfather did to my grandmama." A lump lodged in her throat, making it hard to swallow. "I wish things were different, Rose. I wish *I* was different."

Rose reached out a hand to stroke her cheek.

Eve felt the cool touch and took comfort from it.

“Run,” Rose said. “Run far away.”

“Where would I go? I have no money. No means.” But oh, how she longed to do just that. To run far away where no one knew her. She could be anyone she wanted. Not the odd, addled daughter of Baron Langley.

“There’s a church half a day’s ride from here. They have been known to give young women sanctuary for various *afflictions*.”

The chambermaid seemed to speak with familiarity. Had she once had difficulties? It was impertinent to ask such a question, but she had no fear of Rose gossiping. “Have you sheltered there?”

Rose glanced away. “I was foolish once. I fell in love with a young man who only considered me a dalliance. When I became with child, he sent me away.”

Eve stepped toward her, but Rose waved her off. “If you take your horse before dawn, you could be there by nightfall tomorrow.”

“It’s madness.” Eve’s heart began to pound as the idea took root. “I have no money. Nothing to bargain with.”

“What of your mother’s jewelry?”

“Father keeps it locked away.”

Rose smiled. “Let me do this for you, my lady. I couldn’t have my young man, but I would never rest knowing that you’d been sold to another, never having the chance to find your own love.”

Could she do it? Could she run? Excitement sizzled through her. “You’re certain this church would shelter me?”

Rose nodded. “The friar there has never turned a woman away. He’ll help you find a place to go. Perhaps a family in need of a governess.”

Eve couldn’t marry the viscount. She’d never survive being locked away, and the harsh words he spoke at the ball showed he cared only for his spare and her family’s wealth. Her father believed that a husband had the right to do what he would with his wife. She knew he’d never argue against the man. Especially since he believed she was addled.

Only one choice remained—to run. She smiled, feeling her shoulders relax as the fear faded. “Thank you, Rose.”

The chambermaid squeezed her hand. “Once your father is asleep, I’ll slip a few pieces of your mother’s jewelry out and bring them to you.”

Eve nodded. “I shall make myself ready.”

Rose gave her one last look, then disappeared through the wall as if she’d never been.