

Chapter Two

The Compton Manor, Tear of a Meadowlark at the Dawn of Remembrance

Suffolk, England 1871

Genevieve Rufina Compton sighed as she arched her back against the luxurious velvet of the recital bench, straining to see through the gilded bay window—a gift from her husband on the third anniversary of their second courtship. She inhaled slowly and delicately cleared her throat.

Hurried footsteps were heard from the hallway as Cyril, her least favorite servant, entered the room. He was small in stature with striking features that many would have seen as quite handsome if his gaunt appearance could not be so easily attributed to malnutrition. He wore an ill-fitting pair of pantaloons, white stockings, black shoes, brass buckles, a smock with elaborate frills, and a wig which hung slightly askew revealing small tufts of brown hair underneath. He looked for all the world like a professional jockey who had been disparaged by the wardrobe department on the set of a period drama.

“You called Madame?”

Lady Compton rolled her eyes, frustrated that he still asked this question. It had been just over twenty-two years since she adopted him as a newborn when his mother, a servant in the Compton household, died tragically during childbirth. She had expired hours before any medical assistance from Doctor Chadwick was available as Adelaide Hampford, who lived two manors to the east, had seen a mouse and was being treated for acute exasperation. Word of the rodent incident rapidly spread throughout the community but Genevieve roundly dismissed the

imploring, tearful pleas of her attendants to send for help—utterly shocked at their lack of civility. She had already called on Lady Hampford earlier in the day and to do so again was ridiculously out of the question.

And so, in an uncharacteristic fit of altruism, she resolved to raise the boy as her own. One week into this new form of maternity her lace kerchief fell from the music stand while in the midst of practicing an aria. She called for help and stood there, on the verge of crying, for what felt like an eternity. Finally, with the fabric held aloft in one hand, and her prostrate lady-in-waiting kissing the other, she happened to glance at the infant. It suddenly dawned on her that the death of his mother had left them short a servant and her maternal instincts quickly gave way to what she considered to be clever insight. Thus, Cyril's future was laid out plain and clear. Now he stood before her—an impudent reminder of her youthful indiscretion.

“Have you received word from my daughter?” she asked impatiently.

“No, but we have sent messengers.”

“Send them again.”

The impossible nature of the request was not lost on Cyril but he knew much better than to ask questions. “Of course,” he said, turning to leave.

“Oh, and Cyril?”

“Yes, Lady Compton?”

“I hate you.”

“Very good.”

He abruptly stood at attention, bowed, and exited the room. Reentering the hallway he began making his way toward the kitchen to prepare the afternoon tea service, pausing for a

moment to stare at the portraits lining the wall. Each subject shared a pretentious glare that was nearly identical from one to the next—their rigid jawlines and defiantly furrowed brows the very picture of nobility. The current Lord of the manor, Frederick Earnest Compton, was the lone exception. He stood in plain view on an unassuming hilltop wearing full hunting regalia, a setter on point at his feet, as a pheasant flew overhead. The scene belied the reality that Frederick was an atrocious marksman. The dog pictured on the canvas was number four—numbers one through three being the only successful conquests of previous excursions. Cyril heaved his shoulders as he recalled Sir Compton briefly entertaining the notion of mounting the canines as trophy kills. He found a great deal of comfort in knowing that nearly all of these men were dead.

Lucy Compton stood before her mother as she was gently chastened. She twirled a single white rose between her fingers which she clutched toward her bosom and savored at intervals. Each time she did, her eyes fluttered visibly—though they were closed—and her sighs were whispered secrets spoken by her heart.

“...working for hours in the kitchen. The leaves arrived from India just yesterday. And we were so worried. So very worried. I mean to think that we had sent messe-... Lucy, you are not listening to me at all,” chided Lady Compton.

“I am Mother. I heard them as they passed. I was only in the garden.”

“Well they have not returned for hours. The search continues. Why the silence? You could have missed the afternoon service!”

“Oh Mother! You know as well as anyone that I do not speak to the *help*.”

“There will come a time my dear when you will not have that luxury. In order to run a

proper manor you must learn to deal with the noblesse oblige that is bestowed upon someone with your character. You must learn to *descend* to their level. To attempt, though it may at times try your patience, to communicate with them. They are not as refined as we are. They do not understand the finer points of human interaction. These points I will gladly concede. But you must in turn understand my child, that their uncouth mannerisms are not contagious. You cannot catch, oh, *servantitis*.”

Lucy smiled warmly and laughed.

Lady Compton continued. “Blissful though the thought may be, can you imagine a world in which we didn't speak to them at all? The idea is absurd. How would they know to help us? What we needed? Why, if we were not here at all, perish the thought, they would be tiny ships without anchors drifting headlong toward oblivion.”

“Your points are valid, as is your council. I can only hope to one day live in accordance with your words. Be that as it may, I didn't want to heed their calls. I didn't want to come home. I didn't want to be distracted. Today, my path lay not in following your footsteps. Today I walked inside a lucid dream.” She twirled in place and exhaled.

“Well now, this is something I thought I would never see.” Lady Compton walked toward her daughter and lovingly grasped her arm. “Now then. Tell me about this boy.”