

## CHAPTER ONE, DESCENT INTO DUST

I was twenty-three years of age in March of 1862 when I traveled to my cousin's home in the countryside of Wiltshire. The fifth day of that wretched month found me huddled in my carriage, the drizzly gray gloom outside soaking a bone-deep chill into every aching part of my body, which had been roughly abused by the long confinement and ill-kept roads over which I'd traveled coming up from Dartmoor.

I did not know then that these would be the closing days of ordinary life. The only suggestion of the monumental changes that were about to occur was the headache that had come upon me upon crossing the Dart River. The pain, as fine as tiny needles being pushed into my temples, increased as I crossed the chalk downs and approached Dulwich Manor.

At the time, I assumed this was due to anxiety, for my younger sister and her new husband were among the guests invited for an extended stay at my cousin's sprawling country house. As I was long accustomed to contending with Alyssa without anything like this haunting megrim, I suppose I should not have made this rather obvious misattribution. But how could I have thought differently, back then?

The house was a large, ugly thing, squatting low on the land like a spider on a softly rounded hilltop. Stones blacked with lichen and soot formed a plain rectangle of unadorned walls dotted liberally with cross-hatched windows, lying dormant under leaden skies. There was no sign of life about it or any of the outbuildings. Everyone had taken shelter from the rain.

I emerged into a light drizzle and drew the cowl of my cloak over my head. At the top of the impressive set of carved steps a very correct looking servant waited.

“Emma Andrews, Mrs. Dulwich’s cousin,” I told him.

He did not quite meet my gaze, as all good servants manage not to do, as he opened the door wider and ushered me inside to a vaulted hall. I was instantly struck by the feeling of being very, very small in a very, very large place. The gasjets on the wall leaked only a small puddle of light in which I stood, beyond which I saw only shadowy hints of the rest of the room.

“I shall tell madam you have arrived,” the manservant intoned soberly.

Once alone, I quickly checked my appearance in a pier glass hung on the wall. I was decidedly damp. My hair was nearly a ruin. The expensive gown I had donned that morning, thinking it would lend me courage, had been a bad choice. There was nothing to be done about the crushed silk. A smart travel dress would have been better, had I owned one. But such things required seamstress consultations and fittings, all amounting to too much time, time I never seemed to make room for in my ordinary routines. I did take comfort in the fine brushed wool of my cloak which Simon, my husband, had given me for Christmas last year, a month before he died. It was of excellent quality.

A voice brought me up sharp. “I am most put out that the weather is foul,” my cousin, Mary, said as she swept into the hall. “I wanted to show the house to its full advantage.”

She posed regally in the hall of the Jacobean house, her pride radiating from her. She knew her surroundings elevated her, as wealth is apt to do. She had married well and that is always a woman’s conceit.

And yet, it had not been mine. My late husband, Simon, had left me his wealth, something I found made my rather ordinary life a bit more convenient than it had previously been, but little else had changed because of it. I certainly took no pride in showing it off.

“The house is magnificent, Mary. I am anxious to see what you have done with its restoration. It seems very grand indeed.”

That pleased her, thawed her a bit. She cocked her chin at me and turned slightly so that I might press a kiss upon her cheek in a rather pretentious gesture for a woman only three years my senior. But I complied. I have no trouble indulging others’ vanities, if they are harmless.

“Come then, Emma,” she said, “the parlor is through here. Give Penwys your cloak. Alyssa and Alan have already arrived. I know she is anxious to see you. Penwys will see your things are delivered to your room and the servants will put everything to rights. You can go upstairs when you’ve met everyone and freshen up then.”

She was showing off a bit, taking on the same airs Alyssa was so fond of. Just as with my sister, they had the tendency to prick my sore spot and made me wicked.

“Oh, very well,” I conceded, “but please direct your man to be very careful with my portmanteau. It is old, and I take extra care of it since it had been my mother’s.”

The mention of Laura—my beautiful, tragic mother—changed her expression to one rife with thoughts best left unsaid. “Your belongings will be treated with the respect they deserve.”

We proceeded together down a short corridor. Above, a series of large arches stretched across the high ceiling like ribs, giving me the unsettling feeling of traversing

the interior of a vast corporeal chest. My eye was caught by some words carved at the apex of the last of these stone vaults, just above the heavy double doors beyond which I could hear the muffled sounds of conversation. An odd place for decoration, I mused. It would be easily overlooked as it was placed high overhead. But I could read the three words.

*Corruptio optimi pessima.*

I stopped. Something strange and unpleasant fluttered through me. The air went crisp, as if ionizing in preparation for an electrical strike.

Mary saw me staring. “Interesting, isn’t it? Those carvings are all over the house. The man who built the original manor was a bishop, back before Henry, when the papists still had the run of the place.” She laughed. “It’s a curiously religious dwelling as a result, and I’ve kept it that way through the restoration. These ominous sayings carved here and there are terribly quaint, don’t you agree?”

My voice was dry as dust. “Do you know what it means?”

She must have forgotten my unfortunate habit of overburdening my brain with reading, for she thought I didn’t know. “I believe it means ‘the best of men are incorruptible.’”

It did not. The fact that she didn’t know made my uneasiness grow. It felt to me—very strongly so—that it should be important the owner of this house understand what was written into its very bones. The correct translation was “Corruption of the best is worst.”

The fingers of pain in my forehead dug deeper and my hand pressed at my temple as Mary flung open the doors to the drawing room. “Emma has finally arrived,” she announced as she swept me inside.

My eyes sought and found the woman seated on the long divan. Alyssa, my sister, nearly five years my junior—luminously beautiful, newly married and still very much annoyed with me for my intractable stubbornness in insisting on not being anything like her.

Roger, Mary’s husband, a tall, lanky fellow with a crown of curls that never came close to appearing tame, hurried toward me. “Emma, you are absolutely glowing with good health.” He embraced me, then bent to kiss my hand in the French manner. “I daresay your loveliness increases each time I see you. I trust you are faring well these days?”

He was thinking of Simon—of my loss, and his, for they had been friends. His sincere affection touched me as it had three years ago on the occasion of my father’s death. Then, too, he had shown special solicitude towards me, even over my sister’s delicate sobs.

“Roger, it is so very good to see you,” I replied sincerely. “Your home is...quite unique. How are you liking living back here, lord of the manor in the house where you grew up?”

He made a face as he drew my arm through his. “The house is atrocious, it always was.” Leaning closer, he lowered his tone conspiratorially. “Do not tell my wife I said so, but I find it depressing. We have been here but a fortnight and I am already

longing for our lesser lodgings in Cheltenham. But Mary will have me play the country gentleman now that the house is ours.”

“And Henrietta? It must be all a great adventure to her, a new house, woods to explore...”

“She is a quiet child,” he said, not answering my question.

“She is an absolute angel, and if you have scruples about being a braggart over her, I do not.”

He laughed. It was no secret that I was absolutely in a dotage on the child, had been from the day of her birth. She was what my Uncle Peter, who was the wisest man I knew, called an “old soul,” a calm, peaceful presence with a serene nature and penetrating mind. “Perhaps she and I shall do a bit of exploring tomorrow,” I suggested. “We can have an adventure or two.”

He hesitated, frowning slightly. “I’d prefer it if she kept close to the grounds. Henrietta is hardly familiar with the neighborhood, and with you as her guide, someone who is equally unknowledgeable of the safe—well, that is to say, the better traveled areas—I think it best if excursions out of doors are kept to a minimum for now.”

“Why, certainly,” I murmured, somewhat dismayed by his excessive caution.

“Oh, dear, I almost forgot,” he added with a snap of his fingers. “We are going for rabbit in a day or two. You must join the shooting party; I will not take no for an answer from you, even at the risk of my wife’s darkest scowl. Like those hearty ladies of the American West, you are an excellent shot and I require you with me.”

That was why I liked Roger so well. He didn’t seem to mind my being unconventional. Only Simon had liked me just as I was. “You must remember my paltry

skills at riding, which may hold the party back. And as for my cousin's scowl, it will be substantial, I should think."

"But I do approve, and a husband must have his way every once in a while." He patted my hand resting in the crook of his arm. "Now, let me introduce you before Mary scolds me for neglecting my duties. I am to make a toast to the queen. Come let me get you a glass."

He steered me to the elderly curate, Mr. Bedford, and his pleasant wife. Mr. Bedford was a large man, with not a wisp of a hair on his head. His wife was a straight-shouldered matron whose beauty had not quite faded. Turning from them, Roger introduced me to a knot of men who were discussing the quality of local horse breeding where I was presented to the local squire, Sir William Pentworth, and his son Ted. [are these part of the knot of men? A little confusing here.] The former had little interest in me, and I likewise in him. The latter, however, a rather rakish looking young man perhaps a year or two my junior, gave me an utterly male look that bordered on impertinence, and immediately lifted my spirits.

Another was introduced as George Hess, a retired Oxford don. Sporting a wild mane of gunmetal grey hair and a keen, intelligent face, Mr. Hess proved a friendly man with the air of an elder statesman. I felt an immediate affinity toward his gentle presence as we exchanged pleasantries, after which I fortified myself and at last approached Alyssa and Alan.

"You are late," she murmured, taking in my wrinkled skirts and then on upward to the softly curling hair at my temple. "I've been waiting for you all day. Alan and I arrived yesterday, you know."

I made the only response I could as I bent down to kiss her cheek. “Darling, you are absolutely lovely.”

This was no faint praise. Alyssa was perfectly beautiful. Fair where I was dark, petite where I was tall, plump where I was lean, we looked nothing like sisters, a fact attributed to our having had different mothers.

Alan Newgate, posted like a sentry behind his wife’s chair, inclined his head in my direction. I nodded in reply. Alyssa’s husband was a cold man, handsome in the extreme, and devoted to my sister nearly as deeply as he was to himself. He did not like me, nor I him, but neither one of us would dream of giving the other so much satisfaction as to ever demonstrate even a hint of anything less than cordiality.

We were all given glasses of sherry and Roger led the salute. “To Her Majesty, Queen Victoria,” he bellowed, raising his glass up high. We followed suit and chimed out agreement, after which we found seats. The curate’s wife settled down by me. She was the chatty sort, and immediately launched into a discussion of the area, the grand houses, which delighted Alyssa, and the old Roman road nearby.

“Did I not read about Avebury having a stone circle like Stonehenge nearby?” I asked.

Mr. Hess joined us, taking an empty seat to my right. “Several of them, in fact, and an entire complex of avenues and barrows as well. We are not nearly as famous, but known well enough.”

“It is because many of the stones have been removed,” Mrs. Bedford chimed in.

Mr. Hess’s expression of distress was acute. “Oh, the pity of it. But there are still enough remains to keep me busy.”

Mrs. Bedford smiled at him. "Mr. Hess has come to the area to study the ruins. He has several absolutely grisly theories as to the purpose of the monuments."

"I was persuaded once to go to Stonehenge," Alyssa said. "I found it unutterably boring. Nothing to see but large rocks, and not very pretty ones at that."

My sister could be charming, but never when she was in a snit, as she was now. We had yet to make our amends, she and I, and she would sulk until the proper ritual had been observed.

"I am not familiar with the term 'barrow,'" I said to Hess.

"It is, in effect, a mass tomb."

Alyssa exclaimed and gave an exaggerated shiver. "How dreadful."

Hess smiled at her. "Our barrow is part of an avenue of standing stones that stretches all the way to West Kennett. What we call The Sanctuary is the other end of the line, where stones once stood in a circle. The West Kennett stones are still present and quite majestic."

Mrs. Bedford poured a second cup of tea for herself. "Who was that who studied the stones, Mr. Hess, who wrote that book to which you are always referring?"

"It was William Stukely," Hess replied, his enthusiasm growing. "He called it The Great Stone Serpent. The combination of the structures create the shape of a snake as it lies on the countryside. The complex almost certainly had to do with funerary purposes. The ancients were quite devoted to the dead, you know. It is noteworthy that the serpent, by virtue of its cycle of renewal in shedding its skin, is considered a symbol of eternal life." He paused, and smiled sheepishly. "I am lecturing, am I not? I tend to do so. Forgive me."

“Not at all,” I rushed, for I wished very much to hear more.

Alan sniffed and rolled his eyes. “I warn you from handing too much significance to the habits of these long-gone peoples. Weren’t they the ones who worshipped trees?”

Alyssa joined him in a stifled snicker.

I sat back, adding a small amount of sugar before taking my first sip of the tea, darting a sharp look at my brother-in-law. It would not do if Alan continued to mock Mr. Hess, whom I had decided I liked very much.

“What a silly conversation,” Mary declared. “Worshiping trees, indeed. That is a stunning shawl, Alyssa. Is it Chinese?”

The transition was expertly done. My sister grew more cheerful. “Oh, it was my grandmother’s. You know how that generation loved all things Oriental. The Prince Regent’s influence.” She smiled, rearranging the silk, obviously feeling very proud that she, too, could speak a word or two on history. I had to credit her—no one knew the history of clothing better.

The conversation went the way of fashion plates and the merits of silk over taffeta for evening gowns. I sipped my tea, savoring the feeling of the heat on the back of my throat and closing my eyes against my resurrecting headache. Placing two fingers against my temple, I rubbed gently.

“Emma?” Roger’s tone was almost strident. “You are not unwell, are you?”

My eyelids flew open to find everyone looking at me.

“Roger, darling, that cannot affect us,” Mary chided in a strained voice that conveyed a meaning beyond her words. A tense silence fell.

“Is something the matter?” Alyssa inquired suddenly.

“No, dear. It is nothing. You mustn’t worry,” Mary said quickly.

“There is an illness in the village,” Roger explained.

“But that is among the farmers, darling,” Mary countered, her face growing florid.

“Illness?” Alan said, his eyebrows rising slightly. On Alan, this was an expression of great alarm.

“It is nothing to be concerned about.” Mary spoke with authority. She picked up the pot and refilled all of our cups without asking permission. “A family lost several children recently. It was very sad, their deaths coming as they did one right after the other. We sent food and blankets to them, of course.”

“The house had to be quarantined.”

“—which prevented the illness from spreading to the village,” Mary was quick to add. “So, it was only the one family affected.”

“And the man outside town,” Roger added darkly. “He was found in the road, dead, apparently of the same wasting disease.”

The band around my head constricted. The icy tap of a forceful rain began. It sounded like the light touch of sharpened nails on the old leaded glass. A maid moved quickly to draw the hangings, and the sound was muffled behind folds of green velvet.

“It is nothing contagious,” Mary assured everyone.

“We do not know the nature of the illness.” Roger was grave.

Mary put the pot down with a resounding thud. The lid clattered and the noise jerked all of our attention to her. “An unfortunate sickness of the local crofters is a sad story, to be sure, but it is of no consequence to any of us here. Illness occurs, Roger, we

cannot become upset by it. Now, we are going to have a wonderful visit and put all thoughts of such unfortunate happenings out of our heads.”

There was an awkward silence, ended when Mrs. Bedford said with pointed cheerfulness, “Well, I for one am looking forward to bowls tomorrow.” She turned to her husband. “I do hope the weather holds, for I love a good match of bowls, isn’t that right, dear?”

Mary was happy to have a change of subject introduced and launched into a discussion of the activities she had planned, but I could see Roger’s brow remained furrowed. His disquiet sat heavy with me, for I felt a strange mood hovering over me as well, a sense of something not right. But I did not yet imagine what it was.