



Chapter One

March 23, 1822

Hazel had not slept well. Her crippled foot ached, despite it having been propped on a pillow all night to help manage the swelling induced by traveling. However, the discomfort was little in comparison to the ache that lingered in her heart after Uncle Elliott's bestowal of a dowry.

The offer had circled around and around in her mind like a pack of wolves until she thought she'd go mad. Or maybe she had gone mad. Or maybe she'd been mad to begin with. Or maybe Uncle Elliott was mad. That seemed likely in Hazel's opinion; he must be mad to think that a decent husband could be "bought." Even for fifty thousand pounds. And yet, Uncle Elliott was one of the kindest and most generous men Hazel had ever known.

Could he be kind and generous *and* mad?

Possibly.

She sighed at the ceiling and threw an arm over her forehead. Life had proven to her over and over that people were complex creatures with complicated motivations and confusing intentions.

Why should Uncle Elliott be spared such humanness? Though prone to the frailties of virtue, as all people were, Uncle Elliott was also part of her *family*.

A family who had routinely overlooked Hazel—why should he be so different?

Discarded by her parents, baited by her twin brother, pitied by her younger sister, and ignored by all of them. Not one of them had ever known her. Not one of them had ever tried. Why should she expect Uncle Elliott to see her any more clearly than they did?

Before yesterday, though, Hazel had thought Uncle Elliott was the family member who understood her best. Apparently, she had been wrong. And, oh, how that hurt.

The sky began to lighten toward dawn, and despite the miserable night's sleep, Hazel kept to her usual schedule of taking an early breakfast. With any luck, eating so early would prevent her from encountering Uncle Elliott until she knew how she should act.

As she dressed for the day, she thought of how just yesterday, the Gold Room, which had been prepared for her stay at Howard House, had seemed bright and elegant; a lovely place to spend the spring holiday between school terms. After Uncle Elliott had presented the dowry, however, Hazel had limped back to the Gold Room and found it tacky and overdone. She had cried herself to sleep in the gaudy room over long-buried dreams.

Morning had not offered as much of a remedy as she'd have liked, and the hurt lingered with her as she made her jerky way through the halls, down the stairs, and into the empty morning room where breakfast had been laid out on the long sideboard that spanned the entire west wall. Hazel was used to being surrounded by students and other teachers most of the time, which made the room feel even emptier.

She chose a soft-boiled egg and a single slice of toast from the

Love AND *Savender*

sideboard, then sat in one of the chairs at the long table that faced windows overlooking the Howardsford estate. The picturesque fields of Norfolkshire and countless shades of green still draped in morning mist could have been those of her childhood home in Falconridge some fifteen miles west. She had lived at Falconridge, the Stillman family estate, only until she was six, so her memories of that place were soft and faded.

Hazel looked away from the representation of a life denied her and returned to the task at hand: determining whether to make amends with Uncle Elliott and stay the week as planned, or leave today and return to the teacher dormitories at Cordon Academy and her tiny room on the second floor with a single window roughly the size of her breakfast plate.

Using the edge of her knife, Hazel swiftly sliced the soft-boiled egg in half, shell and all. She used the spoon to scoop the contents of each half of the egg onto the single piece of buttered toast. The liquid yolk soaked into the bread as she mashed the rest of the egg with the back of her fork. She was cutting her first bite and thinking about the long trip back to King's Lynn after she'd only just arrived, when the door to the morning room opened and a dark-haired man with equally dark eyes stepped over the threshold.

They'd never met, but she knew he was Duncan Penhale, her sort-of cousin. Duncan had been raised by Hazel's scandalous Aunt Catherine, whom Hazel had never met either. He had been expected yesterday afternoon, and had Hazel not been unraveled in her room after her conversation with Uncle Elliott, they'd have been formally introduced at dinner. Instead, she'd skipped dinner and wallowed in a rare bout of self-pity.

Duncan took three long steps toward the buffet, saw her, and came to an abrupt stop. He inclined his head, looked at the floor, clasped his hands behind his back like a schoolboy prepared to

give a recitation, and cleared his throat. “Forgive me, ma’am. I had not thought anyone else would be up at six o’clock for breakfast.”

Ma’am?

“Neither did I,” Hazel replied with the same even tone he’d used. “Though you owe me no apology.”

He continued to stare at the floor. His boots were not new but showed a recent polish. His trousers and coat were those of a working man, and his dark hair was combed smoothly back from his forehead. The tips reached his back collar with determined curls, the ends not entirely controlled by whatever substance he used to keep his hair in place.

It was not such a bad thing to have something—or, rather, someone—to distract her from the howling thoughts still omnipresent in her mind. Never mind that it was a someone she’d always been curious about.

“You must be Duncan.” She smiled at him the way she smiled at new students in hopes of putting them at ease. “I am your cousin, Hazel Stillman.” She held out her hand without standing, palm down, and after a moment’s hesitation, he crossed the remaining space between them.

Instead of bowing over her hand as she’d expected, he took it as he would a man’s, gave two solid pumps, and let go before stepping back with almost military precision. “Duncan Penhale. Nice to meet you, Miss Stillman.”

“Please call me Hazel.” She heard plenty of “Miss Stillman” at school, though that was preferable to “Ma’am.”

“I do not think that appropriate, Miss Stillman. We have only just met.”

“But we are cousins.”

Duncan shook his head, his gaze still on the floor. “You and I share no blood relation.”

Love AND *Savender*

The rigid posture and the way he spoke without looking her in the eye reminded Hazel of some of her former students, one in particular. Audrey Mathews had been solitary and analytical in ways that set her apart, though the girl had never minded her isolation. She excelled at mathematics, which had put her and Hazel in accord.

Relying on her skill of reading people rather well and rather quickly, Hazel took a chance and spoke to Duncan in the same upfront way she'd found effective with Audrey. "My mother, Jane, and Catherine, your . . . guardian, were both Uncle Elliott's sisters, and he has been your benefactor just as he's been mine. Therefore, I feel it appropriate for us to continue on a first name basis due to our shared connection. Also, Uncle Elliott considers you his nephew as though you *are* a blood relation."

His tight eyebrows made him appear unconvinced.

"Would it be more comfortable to call me Cousin Hazel?"

"It is a false relational title."

"As I have never met any of my blood cousins and know as much about them as I do you, I think calling one another 'cousin' is appropriate. It at least gives us a distinction between any other person we might address more formally. Does that not seem reasonable?"

Duncan pondered a few moments, then nodded. "That is a reasonable distinction. May I breakfast here, or would you prefer to dine alone?"

Hazel celebrated the victory internally. "I am not opposed to company, *Cousin Duncan*. You are welcome to dine here with me."

He nodded and continued to the sideboard, filled his plate to heaping, and chose the chair two seats away from Hazel. Whereas Hazel's plate contained a single slice of toast with egg, Duncan's plate was full. Hazel did not eat that much food in two days'

time. She watched the way Duncan focused on his plate, the way he employed his fork and knife to cut exacting bites. He'd chosen three of each item—three links of sausage, three quarters of potato, three hard-boiled eggs, three slices of kidney pie, and three slices of ham. He had not served himself any hash or beans; perhaps those things were difficult to count?

“When did you arrive at Howard House, Cousin Duncan?” she asked when half of his plate had been cleared. He had eaten one slice of pie, followed by potato, ham, sausage, egg. Then he'd started over in the same order.

He finished chewing the egg from his second pass and swallowed before he spoke. “Yesterday afternoon. I shall stay until tomorrow morning at nine o'clock, which is when the carriage will fetch me for the return journey. I do not like to travel.” He continued to cut and eat his food, chewing each bite carefully and not talking with his mouth full.

Though Hazel's students were usually gentry of one level or another, she learned a lot about their upbringings by observing their manners when they first arrived. Duncan's manners were excellent—aside from his having shaken her hand instead of bowing over it—and above what Hazel would expect from the son of a laborer raised by a disgraced woman who, though the daughter of a viscount, had abandoned her privilege for reasons Hazel had never been told. Aunt Catherine was not the only scandal in the Mayfield line, but her fall from grace had taken a fair amount of the family reputation with it—people did not give up what she had given up.

“And where do you live, Duncan?”

He swallowed before he answered but still did not look at her. “In an upper apartment of the Burrow Building on Providence Street in Ipswich, number four.”

“I have never been to Ipswich,” Hazel said conversationally

Love AND *Savender*

after giving adequate pause to allow him to expand, which he did not. “Do you like it there?”

“Yes.” He paused in his breakfast, then looked up at her. He held eye contact for only a moment before turning his attention back to his plate. “You live in King’s Lynn, the once-famous port city, and you teach mathematics at a school for girls.”

Hazel startled slightly. “How did you know?”

“Lord Howardsford told me. He also said you are a twin with your brother, Harold, who was birthed ten minutes after your birth, making you the eldest child of Jane Mayfield and Horace Stillman.” He went back to cutting and eating his perfect bites.

“Yes,” she said, watching him surreptitiously while taking another bite of her egg on toast, which had gone cold. “I will have you know, however, that I am not only the older twin, but also the smarter, better behaved, and better looking one.”

He paused a moment and then lifted his eyes to her chin. He smiled, revealing a dimple in his right cheek and a slight gap between his front teeth that gave him a boyish look that belied his years. “That is a clever answer, Cousin Hazel. I have never met your twin brother and therefore cannot prove whether or not you are joking.”

She no longer needed the forced teacher-smile. “Well, then I hope you shall never meet him so that my pronouncement shall remain uncontested.”

He held her eyes another moment and then went back to his breakfast.

They were quiet for some time, her eating as slowly as possible in order to prolong her reason for staying in the room. “You also *work* in Ipswich, do you not, Cousin Duncan?”

He nodded and took a drink of his ale. “I am a junior clerk at

Perkins & Cromley Accounting. It occupies office number nine also located in the Burrow Building, which is highly convenient.”

“You enjoy numbers, then?”

“Numbers are unchanging and only need formulation to be understood,” he said without looking up. “You teach mathematics, which is a rare subject for a girl’s school to offer but even more rare for a woman to teach.” He looked up. “Do you enjoy numbers?”

“I do like numbers, but I also like teaching. The two of them together is highly satisfying.”

Duncan took a bite of ham, paused in his chewing, and then resumed, his jaw moving slowly and carefully while he stared at the table with fierce concentration. Was he counting how many times he chewed?

After he swallowed, he looked up at her, though he did not meet her eye directly, and pointed at the ham on his plate. “You must try this ham, Cousin Hazel.” He laid his silverware on the edges of his plate and stood.

“I usually only have an egg on toast for my breakfast.”

He moved to the buffet and returned with a piece of ham on a fresh plate without acknowledging that she’d spoken. He set the plate in front of her and nodded toward it as he sat down at the table again. He did not resume his own meal but instead looked expectantly between her and the plate.

Hazel hesitated, then pulled the plate closer to her and cut a bite of ham. She chewed it slowly and swallowed before smiling at him. “It *is* very good.”

He nodded, apparently satisfied with her reaction, and returned to his meal. She hesitated before deciding to finish the ham. It *was* quite good, though she was not much of a critic. Most of her meals these last twenty years had been taken in school dining halls—first as a boarded student and then as a teacher. There was little variety

Love AND *Savender*

or excitement about the dishes, and over the years, she had come to approach eating with the same rote as sleeping and washing.

“King’s Lynn is a fair distance from East Ashlam,” Duncan stated.

“Thirty-five miles, I think.” The ham tasted better and better with each bite—was it flavored with maple? Who thought of such things like flavoring ham with maple? “I had to wait for the winter term to end before I was able to accept Uncle Elliott’s invitation.”

Mentioning the invitation reminded her of the reason behind it. Which reminded her that she needed to decide whether or not to stay. Uncle Elliott had hired a private carriage for her journey here, a luxury that had made the trek far more comfortable than it would have been if she’d taken a mail coach that flew across the roads with little consideration to the passengers bouncing around inside like marbles.

It felt presumptuous to expect the same accommodation for the return travel if she left earlier than planned. A public carriage, then. Bounced like a marble. Pressed in among strangers. She would have to pay for the miserable journey herself as well, which would cut into her carefully guarded savings. Had she even brought enough coin with her to cover the expense of a return journey?

“You did not attend dinner last night,” Duncan said, drawing her from her thoughts. “Lord Howardsford said you were tired from your journey.”

“That was part of my reason for not making an appearance,” she said, hearing the tightness in her voice. She eyed her sort-of cousin, wondering if he would be as unfailingly honest as Audrey had always been. It was beastly to take advantage of that possibility, but, well, she felt rather beastly. “What is the purpose of your visit to Howard House, Cousin Duncan?”

He finished chewing and spoke while cutting a bite of his

last piece of sausage. “Lord Howardsford wanted to tell me about marriage inheritances he has drafted for each of his nieces and nephews—and myself, even though I am no blood relation. He asked me here so we might discuss the inheritance he has designed for me.”

Even though she’d asked, she hadn’t fully expected such an honest answer. She hesitated before choosing curiosity over manners a second time.

“What was his marriage inheritance for you?”

“Should I marry a woman of gentle birth and appropriate disposition, as approved by Lord Howardsford, the title for the Burrow Building will transfer to me, and I shall be the sole owner of the entire office block.” He relayed this without the animation he’d displayed regarding the ham and took the final bite of his sausage.

His inheritance was nowhere near the value of Hazel’s dowry, yet it put Duncan in a very different economic position than he was right now. It was generous for Duncan’s situation in a similar way that Hazel’s dowry was generous for hers. But his inheritance would be his *own*, while Hazel’s, because of the patriarchal laws of England, would belong to her hypothetical husband. She tried to tamp down her irritation at such laws by keeping her focus on Duncan’s situation.

“Uncle Elliott would purchase the building and deed it into your name?”

“He already owns the Burrow Building and would only need to sign the deed over to me.”

Duncan lived *and* worked in a building Uncle Elliott owned? Uncle Elliott had played quite a hand in the organization of Duncan’s life, it seemed, and was now trying to manage even more of the details.

Love AND *Savender*

“You must be very excited by the prospect of owning the building.”

Duncan turned his attention to a hard-boiled egg. “Owning the building would be a grand financial security for me and therefore exciting, yes. But I do not want to marry.”

“Why not?”

He speared some egg onto his fork and did not answer until he had sufficiently chewed, savored, and swallowed. “I have been told that I am odd, and a genteel woman would never marry a clerk. I, therefore, do not feel my prospects are high in regard to making an arrangement that would satisfy Lord Howardsford’s terms.”

Hazel’s cheeks turned hot at the ease with which he spoke of the sort of things most people never said out loud.

“What did Uncle Elliott create for you to inherit upon marriage, Cousin Hazel?”

Hazel felt instant offense at the impertinence of his question but immediately saw the hypocrisy. It was only fair that she answer as honestly as he had.

“A dowry,” she said flatly. “Fifty thousand pounds.” She hadn’t said the words out loud until now, and the marvel of it shimmered down her spine. Then the offense shimmered back up to her head where it buzzed like an angry hornet.

Duncan straightened, his shoulders drawing back as he looked at her with wide eyes. “Fifty thousand pounds? That is an incredible sum! Is that in addition to your existing dowry from your parents or is it a combination of the two?”

His enthusiasm was surprising, and a little bit gauche. “I did not have an existing dowry.”

His eyes moved back to her chin. “You did not?”

“No one has ever expected I would marry, dowry or not. And my father tended to spend any money that came his way, not

set it aside for his children.” Harry had followed their father’s pattern of not worrying about anyone but himself. Gallant men, the Stillmans.

“No one but Lord Howardsford, you mean.”

Hazel pulled her eyebrows together. “What?”

“You said no one has ever expected you would marry, dowry or not, but apparently Lord Howardsford *does* expect you will marry.”

Hazel would have laughed out loud, but she was still a gentlewoman. “For fifty thousand dollars, a great many men would marry their horses.”

Duncan pulled his eyebrows together as though trying to make sense of her statement.

The pause went on long enough for her to feel awkward. “Never mind,” she said, shrugging one shoulder to feign her indifference.

Satisfied with her acknowledgment, Duncan returned his attention to his plate, which was nearly cleared. She finished the last bite of her cold egg on toast and took a sip of cold tea, watching him.

It had been Harry who had told Hazel about Duncan several years ago, when they’d been home from school at the same time—a rare event outside of Christmas holiday.

“Did you know we have an illegitimate cousin?” Harry had said, his eyes wide with fascination as he’d plopped down beside her on her bed where she had been reading *Robinson Crusoe* for the fourth time that week. There was a limited selection of books at Falconridge, and she’d not thought to borrow from the extensive library at St. Mary’s before she’d left.

“We do not,” she’d said in the authoritative tone she used most often when talking to Harry.

Love AND *Savender*

“We do.” His eyes were bright with anticipation to share his gossip. “I heard Mother talking to Mrs. Moyle about it just now. It seems our Aunt Catherine—she died when we were five years old—took up with a man who already had a child, and Mother called Aunt Catherine ‘his mistress.’” Harry had grinned at the delightful scandal. “Catherine promised Uncle Elliott she would marry that man, but she never did, and then *he* died, and she was left with the care of his son, who became *her* ward. He is twenty years old and works as an apprentice clerk in Ipswich. Mother said that Uncle Elliott has paid for all the boy’s schooling and helped him find an apprenticeship, and she is furious.”

“If the boy’s parents were married when he was born, he is not illegitimate,” Hazel had said.

“But his father never married Aunt Catherine, and that is how Mother identified the boy to Mrs. Moyle—‘Catherine’s illegitimate son.’”

How *should* they reference this boy’s relationship to their dead aunt? Hazel had wondered. Catherine hadn’t been his stepmother, because she’d never married his father. Not wanting to admit she didn’t know the answer, Hazel had gone back to her book.

“You are an imbecile, Harry. Why does petty gossip hold such interest to you?”

Harry’s cheeks had gone red, and he had grabbed her book and thrown it against the wall, breaking the binding, before jumping off the bed and running from the room while she screamed additional names after him.

Now Hazel watched their “illegitimate” cousin take the last bite of his breakfast and calculated that if he had been twenty years old when she had been eleven, he was thirty-six years old now—the same age as her cousin Peter—and nine years her senior. She wondered what it had been like for Duncan to live in

rented rooms above shops with a woman who was not his mother. What a strange life.

Duncan took another drink of ale.

Hazel decided to push for more information. "You do not find the requirement of making a genteel match offensive?"

Duncan leaned back in his chair. "Lord Howardsford said that he hopes to help each of us establish what he himself was unable to have in his youth. His hope may have blinded him to reasonable expectations."

"Did you tell him that?"

Duncan shook his head. "As he has always done me such kindness, I did not want to be rude. I was taught to always say thank you when given a gift."

"You had more manners than I did, then," Hazel said, pushing both of her empty plates aside and feeling foolish for having spoken her mind so directly yesterday in light of Duncan's restraint.

Uncle Elliott had paid for Hazel to attend St. Mary's, a more advanced school than her parents could afford, and he'd arranged to have gifts sent at her birthday and Christmastide, even though he had lived in India most of her life. He had come to see her whenever he was in England, and he was the first person to suggest that a specialty boot might be made for her clubbed foot. Walking had required crutches before then. It had been a wondrous thing to walk on two feet like every other nine-year-old girl, even if she still could not run or play.

"You *were* offended by his gift of dowry for you, then?" Duncan asked her.

"Completely." It felt silly to say so. It was not as though she had anything less now than she'd had before. Somehow it felt as though she'd lost something, though. "I have no marriage

Love AND *Savender*

prospects, and for Uncle Elliott to try to induce a man to marry me for money was quite . . . painful, really.”

“Is your lack of marriage prospects due to your deformed foot?”

Hazel’s spine snapped into alignment, and her eyes popped wide. The burn in her cheeks blazed red-hot, and she looked away not only to take a breath and center her thoughts but also to give him ample opportunity to restate his question or apologize. When he did not do either one, she turned back to him and stared at him coldly. He missed the look completely because he was not looking at her.

“Yes, Duncan. My *deformed* foot.” Her twisted, grotesque, and mutilated foot that had set the course of her life from the day of her birth.

“Is it so bad? I mean, you can walk, can’t you?” He looked around the room. “I see no crutch or bath chair.”

Hazel’s chest tightened up like planks of a barrel. “I can walk.”

“That is *very* good, then,” he said with a nod. “As you are of gentle birth, intelligent, and well-featured, a deformed foot is not such a deficit as to interfere with your ability to marry. As there are many men of gentle birth in need of fortunes for one reason or another, you will have no trouble finding a husband.”

While Hazel’s blood boiled, Duncan finished his ale and then pulled a battered watch from the pocket of his unadorned waistcoat. The footman came in to clear their plates.

“That was a most excellent breakfast,” Duncan said, nodding at the stoic footman. He turned his attention to Hazel with an expression free of any awareness of her response to the egregious things he’d said. “I am glad to have met you, Cousin Hazel.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” she said stiffly. She wanted him to understand that he’d offended her, and yet looking into his innocent expression made her question the right to have been offended.

He hadn't said or done anything that indicated *scorn* of her failing; he'd simply been direct about her foot in ways no one ever was.

Deformed, she repeated in her mind. While shocking in its starkness and a completely inappropriate term for casual conversation, Duncan's description of her clubbed foot was not *wrong*. Her foot was *de*-formed.

Duncan stood and straightened his coat, less awkward than he'd been when he entered the room, though still . . . odd. She did not quite know what to make of him. Was he slow-witted or, like Audrey, was he advanced in some ways and unskilled in others, like social graces that determined what one did and did not talk about?

"I am going to take a walk around the back pond before it rains," he announced. "Lord Howardsford showed me the path from the window yesterday evening, and I enjoy walking. Perhaps I shall see you at luncheon, Cousin Hazel. Do you find number riddles interesting?"

"Sometimes," she said, unsure how she felt about the prospect of further conversations with him now that her initial curiosity competed with defensiveness. Even in her offended state, however, she found his directness a bit refreshing in a world where people said one thing but meant something else or often spent hours talking of nothing at all.

"I collect number riddles. They are fun," Duncan said as he straightened his simple brown waistcoat beneath his darker brown coat. "Most people lack the rational ability to factor them for the sake of entertainment. As you are a mathematics teacher, however, I expect you may be up to the challenge. I shall think of some we can entertain ourselves with at luncheon. Good day, Cousin Hazel."

He nodded, smiled quickly as though someone had whispered in his ear that he should, and left the room.