

## CHAPTER ONE

“LA, JOSEPHINE, I’VE heard the most *extraordinary* news!” Honoria’s voice rang out in Josephine’s dressing room with only two hours left to dress for the evening’s ball, and Josephine, Countess of Mareck, knew exactly what fascinating news her friend was about to impart. “Sir *Noah Rutledge* has returned to London—but surely you’ve heard.”

That news. Oh, yes. She’d heard. Instead of continuing to visit aggravation on her from the Mediterranean, Sir Noah had apparently decided to come to London and aggrieve her in person.

Josephine studied the gowns carefully set out on her bed. “Hold up the dark blue again please, Mary.” The dark blue had never been a favorite. Perhaps it was finally time to admit the mistake and retire it.

“Josephine, I won’t stand for you feigning disinterest.” Honoria moved in beside her. “I was just on my way to visit Lady Allen—poor thing turned her ankle this afternoon and can’t attend tonight—and I thought surely you would be able to give me some

details about Sir Noah's visit with which to entertain the poor soul." She pursed her lips at the gown Mary held. "You aren't finally going to wear *that*, are you?"

"I ought to wear it at least once."

"Oh, fie. Where is that delicious gold taffeta? After all the trouble you went through with the fitting, I haven't seen you wear it even one time, yet now you're considering *this*. If I wasn't in such a hurry to see Lady Allen, I would *demand* that you find that gold taffeta."

"I'm afraid I can't be of much help about Sir Noah. I knew nothing of his visit until today," a fact that was beyond vexing. He'd given her no warning, no time to plan.

"Mr. Woodbridge said nothing of it?"

"Not a word," most likely because Josephine had been answering Sir Noah's letters to Elias Woodbridge herself. Well, in a manner of speaking. The signatures all read *Joseph Bentley*.

And now it was a good guess Sir Noah had grown tired of communicating with his cousin Elias by proxy.

"Well that isn't helpful at all," Honoria fussed. "How is anyone supposed to discuss Sir Noah if those who know the most about him do not share what they know?"

How indeed.

Honoria frowned suddenly at the floor, the chair, the love seat by the window. "Where is darling Bentley?"

"In the girls' rooms. They positively dote on him, and he has abandoned me completely."

"Ha. Only wait until they find husbands, and the poor little turncoat will return to beg your affection once more." Honoria fingered the dark blue gown. "Whatever made you choose a color like this? With your auburn hair?"

Josephine stared at the fabric blankly. Sir Noah, here. In London. And now that he was, she would not be able to keep him and his pernicious business plans away from Elias for very long. It was imperative to thwart him until she could decide exactly how to make sure that his business proposal would fail to pique Elias's interest.

A new shipyard venture in Turkey. At Elias's age. In his condition. With his listless frame of mind.

It was outrageous. Sir Noah hadn't been the one here, in London, looking in on Elias, talking to doctors, watching a decline that seemed impossible to prevent. But Sir Noah certainly did think, according to his letters, that Elias should abandon the London shipyard that represented his life's work and travel to Turkey.

"You aren't even listening," Honoria said, and turned to face her. "Josephine, I'm terribly worried about you."

"Because I might wear the blue?"

"Don't be obtuse. I won't stand for it. Because you aren't trying, when I know very well you could find happiness if you would only put the smallest amount of effort into it. Lord Tidewell will be there tonight."

"Who's to say he doesn't care for blue?"

"*Josephine.*"

"Very well. I shall wear the bronze." She gestured for Mary to set the gown back with the others. "That will be all, Mary. Thank you. I shall be ready to dress in an hour."

"It isn't right that the only male company you keep is with your uncle, dear though Mr. Woodbridge is. It isn't natural. I don't mean you should consider marriage, but for heaven's sake—you had that lover in Paris. I don't know why you couldn't take one now."

“For one thing, we’re not in Paris.” For another, the brief affair had been nothing more than an attempt to distract herself. It had kept her from hiring a coach and returning to Gibraltar, so in that sense it had been a spectacular success.

“People have affairs in London.”

“You are a fount of enlightenment, Honoria. Perhaps, once I have found suitable husbands for both my nieces and a physician who can restore Elias’s strength—” and a man of business to take her place working for Elias, as well as a solution that would send Sir Noah back to the Mediterranean alone, and permanently “—I shall turn my attention to romance.”

“Of course,” Honoria mused, ignoring her completely, “now you’ll have Sir Noah’s company, as well.” Her eyes brightened with possibilities. “Lady Devon said she saw Sir Noah outside Lord Poole’s house—she’s got a direct view from her window, you know—and she vowed he was the most striking figure of a man she’s seen in years. *Years*. Only imagine what that could signify.”

“Coming from Lady Devon, I should think it means he has two arms and two legs.”

“La, Josephine, you are too contrary! I should think it means a good deal more than that. I’ll say this... Sir Noah may only be a knight, but he is rich as Croesus, and he is something new. I daresay he’ll offer a bit of exotic spice to our humdrum existence.”

Josephine made herself laugh, even as she wondered whether there was anything she could have done differently—or that *Joseph Bentley* could have done differently, rather—to avoid Sir Noah’s coming to London in person. “Such high expectations for a mere mortal.”

“Is he? Mortal?” Honoria’s eyes flashed with mischief. “To hear Lady Devon tell it, I rather think not.”

BUT SIR NOAH *was* mortal, and two hours later as Josephine and the girls bustled through the entrance hall on their way to the coach, she nearly collided with him on her way out the door.

“Good heavens.” She jumped back, looked up, and there was a heartbeat when she couldn’t breathe. His eyes were that blue. It didn’t matter that she’d never seen him before, that he hadn’t introduced himself—she knew immediately who he was.

“Pardon me, madam,” he said quickly. “Do forgive me.” He offered a bow, and it was all she could do not to stare. He looked as if he’d just disembarked from a ship, which of course he very recently had. It was dark outside, but the chandeliers illuminated a face kissed deeply by the Mediterranean sun and cut with lines that creased the corners of his eyes and mouth. His burnished-gold hair was streaked with blond and cropped, yet long enough to testify to his scorn of a wig at sea. He stood with that wide-legged stance that could identify a seaman from a hundred yards.

He was the Mediterranean itself, come wildly to life on her doorstep.

“Sir Noah Rutledge,” he said now. Those blue eyes glanced over her, leaving sparks on her skin. “Please pardon my intrusion, but I was told there is a Mr. Joseph Bentley at this address.”

She debated the wisdom of letting him think her a complete stranger, but decided it would only make her look foolish when he learned that she wasn’t. “How do you do, Sir Noah? What a pleasure to finally make

your acquaintance. I am Lady Mareck, Elias Woodbridge's niece by marriage." She glanced over her shoulder. "Lettie, Pauline, do hurry—the carriage is waiting." And then, "I'm afraid there's nobody by that name here," she said. "There must be a mistake."

There was a small ruckus behind them, followed by an outraged shriek from Lettie. "Auntie Josephine, Bentley just tore a bit of lace from my gown!"

Josephine turned just in time to see Pauline snatch the strip of lace from Bentley's mouth. "Mary, could you bring a pin?" Josephine called. "Quickly, please." Bentley darted toward Josephine in a frenzy of excitement. "Edgar, could you please—" But Sir Noah was already bending down to scoop Bentley into his arms, where Bentley became a wiggly bit of silver fluff with a pink tongue, desperately trying to lick Sir Noah's chin.

"We are just on our way out, as you can see," she told him. "I assume you're in town to see your cousin?"

"Yes." Thick, strong fingers ruffled Bentley's fur and expertly kept that small, furry face at a safe distance from Sir Noah's own very—oh, yes, *very*—handsome one. "It's been a long time—too long," he said. "There's much I'd like to discuss with him." Of course there was. And he would have the opportunity to discuss exactly none of it until she'd had a chance to speak with Elias about his sudden arrival. "Although I understand he's been feeling poorly," he added.

She saw now that the back of his hand had been tattooed with a geometric Ottoman design. She forced herself not to stare.

"I'm afraid Elias *has* been feeling a bit worse than usual these past few days," which Sir Noah already

knew because she'd told him as much in the note she'd sent him earlier today.

Or rather, the letter "Joseph Bentley" had sent him in response to a note Sir Noah had sent to Elias. It was a miracle she'd been at Elias's house to intercept it.

Edgar reached to take Bentley from Sir Noah. "Pardon me, sir."

"Bentley, you naughty dog!" Lettie scolded from the bottom of the staircase, where Mary was pinning the torn lace, and Josephine felt a twinge of unease. Hopefully, Sir Noah would not make the connection.

When Josephine returned her attention to Sir Noah, she found his unnerving gaze resting somewhere between her chin and her bosom.

"Elias's health is always unpredictable," she told him a bit more sternly than she might have, and his gaze lifted to meet hers once again, which didn't help things because his eyes were a shade of blue she hadn't seen since overlooking the sea at Gibraltar. "It is a very distressing situation." *This* was fast becoming equally distressing. "I can never be certain myself when I might find him asleep—" just to reinforce what she'd said in the note about Elias's sleeping patterns—"but thankfully his staff is adept at having meals ready during any window of opportunity. When he's of a mind to take food, naturally." That might have been a bit of an exaggeration.

"Good God." His lips tightened and he rubbed the back of his neck. "Dare I ask the prognosis?"

"There's no need for that." She hadn't anticipated this level of concern. "His condition is serious—you mustn't misunderstand—but it has been for quite some time. I don't expect any sudden changes. But you may have difficulty catching him awake when you call."

Perhaps expectation of failure would keep him away a bit longer.

“Indeed. I ran into exactly that issue this morning, and again this afternoon.” She didn’t like the way he was looking at her. “In the meantime, I’d hoped to find his man of business. Joseph... Bentley.”

“Of course. Have you inquired at the shipyard?”

“It was the shipyard manager who gave me this address.”

Had he. And after being under the strictest instructions not to give the address to anyone under any circumstances.

A sharp bite of anger had her making an effort to keep her lips fixed in a pleasant smile. “A simple mix-up, I’m sure. He must have given it to you by mistake. I do spend a good deal of time with Mr. Woodbridge—perhaps they keep my address in case of an emergency.”

“Perhaps they do at that.”

“I’m ready, Aunt Josephine,” Lettie called.

No, she did not like the way he was looking at her at all.

“I shan’t keep you,” he said, and bowed again. “A pleasure, Lady Mareck. And a pleasure to meet... Bentley.”

The corner of his lip curved a little as he turned away, and her muscles tensed. She had a terrible feeling that her alter ego had just been discovered.