

The Tycoon's Misunderstood Bride

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Chapter 1

Emma watched as the coffin was lowered into the ground, the feeling of freedom seeping into her bones with every turn of the crank. And she felt guilty. But she couldn't feel anything else for the man who had died. He'd killed any soft feelings she might have had for him over the last twenty five years.

The air was cold and the freezing mist that drizzled on the funeral attendees only made the whole burial ritual more uncomfortable. There weren't very many, Emma noted. Only a handful in fact. As she stole glances at the grave side mourners, she counted only about fifteen people. Almost all of them were employees of her father, the man who was now being lowered into the frozen, unforgiving ground. Appropriate, she thought since her father had been hard, cold and completely unforgiving of any transgression, no matter how small.

Emma knew that she should be feeling sorrow and grief for the man who had raised her but those emotions just wouldn't come. Hatred, anger, desperation and humiliation were the only feelings her father had engendered within her while he was alive. And now that he had passed away, the main emotion she was feeling was relief. And freedom. A small portion of her heart was even having that painful emotion; hope. It was small, tiny. But as she passed by the deep, heartless grave and tossed dirt onto the coffin, and as each person passed by and did the same, that small light of hope grew.

Was it possible that the life she'd lived with her father was finally over? Could she genuinely be free of his ridicule and harsh words?

Emma breathed in a lung full of the cold, wintery air, letting her body absorb the fact that her father was finally dead.

The possibilities for her future loomed up in her mind, crowding her imagination and jumbling that ray of hope into a larger light that was starting to fill her up. She tried to tamp it down, knowing that each time she'd started to feel hope in the past, it had been mercilessly killed by some sort of diabolical scheme of her father's.

It didn't matter that he was dead. The fear that somehow, some way, he would figure out how to destroy that tiny bit of hope was there in the back of her mind, pressuring her to release the kernel and give in to the depression and frustration that had been her life prior to his demise. The words he'd taunted her with over and over while he'd been alive came back to haunt her and if it weren't

for her early childhood, she might start to believe them. She had to hang on though! She had to survive and thrive, just to spite that mean, vindictive man!

Her father had tormented her from the moment her mother had left them twenty years ago, leaving a grief-stricken Emma to deal with the harsh father that had driven her mother away with his cruel tirades and accusations. Emma remembered the screaming and the allegations but as a small child, she hadn't understood them. She'd only understood the fear that had her hiding under her blankets at night, covering her ears as the fights raged on after she'd been put to bed.

As an adult, she understood that her father had been insanely jealous of her beautiful mother, the red haired and intensely gorgeous Elizabeth, and his constant accusations of unfaithfulness had driven her away. But why had her mother left Emma? Of all the things that had hurt over the years, Emma knew that her mother's abandonment had been the most painful.

Her memories of her mother were bitter-sweet. She had soft hands, a ready laugh, twinkling eyes and continually smelled of flowers. In Emma's mind, her mother had always been incredibly gorgeous, with lots of hugs and kisses at the ready for any hurt feelings or bruised knees. Emma had been carefree during those days, knowing that her mother would always be there for her.

Not only did the five year old Emma lose her mother on that horrible day, but she'd also gained the continuous censure of her father. Once her mother had fled, Edward Mason the Third, Earl of Denton, had turned his anger and humiliating accusations onto his daughter who had turned out to be the spitting image of her mother, according to Edward Mason.

Oh, Emma knew that she wasn't the raving beauty her mother had been although she only had one, stolen picture to remember her by. After Emma's mother had left, Edward destroyed all the other pictures of her that had been in the house, including a portrait that had been specially commissioned after their wedding by a world famous painter.

Besides demoralizing and humiliating Emma on a continuous basis, Edward Mason had been a bitter, evil man who had made millions of pounds by cheating and stealing in his business dealings. Emma had overheard him on numerous occasions laughing in his study with one person or another about how he had cheated someone or lied to another in order to scrape another million pounds together. The first time she'd overheard his laughter she'd been horrified that he

was so amoral. She'd been hiding from him that morning to avoid his wrath, which could be invoked for anything including a wisp of hair being out of place or her eyes looking happy.

When she'd started to understand how unethical he was with his business dealings, she'd shunned away from that information. Unfortunately, living in the same house with the man and hearing him brag about his felonious activities, it was hard to avoid seeing his truly black soul. It always amazed her that he'd never been caught. He'd been so blatant about his business dealings, she would have thought that eventually someone would have figured out what an awful person he'd been and not done business with him. She also didn't understand why the authorities had turned a blind eye to all of his tricks.

But in all the times she'd hidden away in a closet as a child or teenager, she never heard of anyone who had bested her father. He'd taken delight in bragging about his deeds.

These thoughts and many others floated through her mind as the funeral progressed. She didn't hear the words, didn't mourn the passing of the man so much as the passing of her life under his dictatorial and cruel parentage. So when the final words broke through her contemplation, she was surprised that the ceremony was finally over.

The minister came over and took Emma's hands, offering his condolences. Then each of the other guests who had attended the funeral, one by one, they came over and did the same before moving off to their vehicles and driving away.

Emma accepted their words and hoped that her face was appropriately somber. But that strange feeling was growing inside of her. Hope. Was it possible? Could she actually have a life? Was it possible that she could move on to something new? Something fresh? Something untainted by her father's despicable mind? Could she actually be a reflection of her mother instead of carrying on her father's legacy? She'd had her mother for only five years and her father for twenty, minus the periods when she'd been away at boarding school. She'd just have to recall her mother's goodness and kindness, countering all of her father's heartlessness.

One after another, the people stood in front of her, offering words of sympathy that Emma neither needed nor wanted but she nodded and smiled,

eager to be off and consider the possibilities of what she could now do with her life.

"Ms. Mason," a strong, tanned hand reached down and gently clasped her cold white one. The touch sent an electric shock through her fingers and Emma was so startled, she actually looked up, directly into the handsome man's eyes. He was tall! Definitely over six feet. His face was tanned with lines in the corners of his eyes as if he laughed a lot. But his dark, black eyes weren't smiling now. They were looking at her as if he were trying to see into her soul. Emma's mouth opened and she almost gasped, a tingle of fear shooting through her and she was afraid he might be able to read her small light of happiness.

"My name is Jason Montenegro. I worked with your father several years ago. I'm very sorry for your loss," he said.

The words were spoken but Emma didn't want them. She wasn't sorry, except for all the horrible things her father had done. Not just to her, but to anyone around him. "Thank you. You have kind words," she recited the same thing she'd been saying over and over again to the others as they'd passed by her.

Emma looked around but they were now alone except for the bulldozer operator who was waiting to push the remaining dirt onto the coffin and finalize the end of an evil man's life.

"Mr. Montenegro," she replied, her fingers shaking and a shiver of awareness sped down her spine. "I think I do remember you. I believe you came to the house several times for meetings with my father. What are you doing here?" she asked. "It has been a long time," she replied.

"Yes, it has." Jason Montenegro looked down at the defeated beauty of Emma Mason, trying to determine if she mourned the passing of her father. She probably didn't know what a bastard he was, Jason thought. And he wasn't going to tell her. He'd been called three days ago to be told about the death of Edward Mason from the old man's solicitor. Something about Mason's will and how Jason needed to be there for the reading. At the moment of the call, Jason considered simply disconnecting the line and ignoring the command performance for the reading of the will. But something had stopped him. It was the gentle innocence of Edward Mason's daughter he remembered from twelve years ago.

Edward Mason had given Jason his first job out of college and Jason had been thrilled, eager to learn the ropes of corporate takeovers and management. Edward Mason had built an empire that had impressed Jason at twenty two. In those years, he ate, breathed and slept Mason Enterprises for two, long years before Jason understood exactly how Edward had made so many millions. And with that understanding, Jason found that he had wanted nothing to do with it.

Jason still remembered that rainy afternoon when Edward had ordered him to lie about a target company to the board of directors in order to gain final approval for the acquisition. The rage that filled the office that afternoon when Jason had refused had been intense. And when Jason tendered his resignation the following day, Edward had promised that Jason would never work in the industry again.

Now, twelve years later, Jason could have bought and sold Edward Mason several times over if he had the inclination. Montenegro Industries was worldwide and Jason's business acumen was reported on almost daily in one newspaper or another, depending on what country he was working in at that moment. His accomplishments had far outweighed Edward's conglomerate, a fact which Edward had hated, Jason knew.

Jason was just as ruthless as Edward Mason but the difference was that Jason never broke the law or lied. He used intelligence and cutthroat business tactics but they were all ethical and always passed audits. He had, in fact, become the darling of the business world whereas Edward Mason had burned too many people with his business practices and, recently, had become known in business circles as a pariah to be avoided.

As the drizzle increased to rain, Jason looked down at the shy woman who was shivering from the cold and remembered how he'd felt the first time he'd seen Emma Mason. Twelve years ago, he'd seen the small, red haired teenager in a dress three sized too big for her as she scurried down the hallway. She hadn't seen him outside her father's office but he'd seen her. And he'd watched in horror as her huge green eyes monitored her father's door. She was almost out of sight when Edward Mason's door opened but Jason hadn't been watching the office door. He'd been watching Emma Mason and had to swallow the lump in his throat when the small, terrified girl dashed into a closet, closing the door only seconds before her father appeared in the same hallway.

The idea that a man's daughter would be so terrified of him that she would hide! And in a closet dammit! It had sickened Jason that day. If it hadn't been for that scene, Jason never would have started looking into Edward's business practices more closely and he wouldn't be where he was today.

He remembered the way Edward had looked at him that afternoon. Jason hadn't had time to look away from the closet fast enough and Edward's eyes had gone from Jason's, to the then-closed door. Nothing had happened, but Jason saw the narrowing of the older man's eyes, as if he knew that Jason had seen something he shouldn't have.

Emma pasted a false smile on her face, wondering if it were possible for cheeks to freeze from the cold. "Well, it is good to see you again. Thank you for stopping by," she said and walked to her waiting car.

Jason watched the tiny woman disappear into the back seat of the black sedan. As she stepped in, her long dress pulled up slightly and he was given a glimpse of one shapely leg, the calf encased in black stockings, was slender with a dainty ankle and small feet. Jason's eyes narrowed, curiosity firing in him. What was going on? Why would a woman with legs that lovely hide them under long, woolen skirts like that? Why was she wearing those awful looking clothes? He wasn't sure, but years of experience with the opposite sex told him that she probably had an incredible figure hiding underneath that dress.

And why the hell didn't she wear some makeup? Let her hair down? Of course, with skin like that, she didn't really need makeup. A redhead should have freckles, but Emma Mason's cheeks were pure, soft and blemish-free, making her long, dark lashes seem almost black as they surrounded those fascinating green eyes.

Jason pushed thoughts of the mysterious woman out of his mind. This whole issue was none of his concern. He was furious with the curiosity which had driven him here today after the phone call. Edward Mason's will was none of his concern, and the man's daughter was better off without the father in her life to mess things up.

He walked over to his own waiting car and ducked into the back. Immediately picking up his phone, he pressed the speed dial, instantly connecting with his secretary.

"Betty, what's the story on the figures for the DiMarco acquisition?" He listened

for a long moment, then nodded. "Fine, have the papers on my desk by the time I get back. I should be back at the office in less than thirty minutes."

"The flowers were delivered this morning," Betty said.

"Flowers?" Jason snapped, his mind already moving on to the details of the next business meeting. He flipped open the file folder Betty had given him that morning that outlined the details.

"The flowers you asked to be delivered to Ms. Stephanie Michaels this morning," Betty reminded him.

"Ah," Jason said, ignoring the issue of his now-past mistress and moving on to more current issues. He'd asked Betty to send some flowers but had immediately dismissed it from his mind moments after he'd given the command. "Fine, thank you. What about Tom Daniels? Has he called back?"

"Of course. He's confirmed that the package was delivered and all the terms were accepted."

"Good." Jason eased back in his seat, a feeling of success washing over him as yet another company joined the Montenegro conglomerate. But that moment passed and he went through the details of five other deals that were currently in the works. Montenegro Industries bought companies and incorporated them under the larger umbrella, cutting the fat, trimming down the superfluous employees and making all of the systems more efficient and profitable. Each additional company was bought in order to somehow benefit the others, making the Montenegro machine more and more powerful.

"How was the funeral?" Betty asked when Jason stopped giving her directions fifteen minutes later.

"The funeral?" Jason asked absently.

He heard a small sigh, before, "The funeral of Edward Mason?" she reminded him. "You mentioned you were going to stop by earlier today."

"Oh. Yes, fine," he replied. The memory of a slender, sexy leg and shy green eyes popped into his head. But he pushed it aside and rattled off a new list of things for Betty to finalize.

He hung up and sat back, reading through the file, his sharp mind memorizing every detail as soon as he read it. By the time Tim, his driver, pulled up in the underground garage of Montenegro Industries headquarters, Jason had already moved on to the meeting.

Chapter 2

Coming home after the funeral, Emma walked into her father's study, looking around in curiosity. She had never been permitted in this office while her father had been alive. She'd only had glimpses when the door cracked open. But if she'd been near, Emma had been too terrified of her father finding her to stop and peer inside. Her life's goal had been to become invisible. Whenever he caught sight of her, a lecture or some sort of perceived misdeed was brought down upon her. And punishments always followed.

Edward Mason never hit his daughter. No, that could be too easily discovered by the bruises or the marks. He'd always been more evil than that. There were times Emma had wished he'd hit her. For then, perhaps the punishment would be over or maybe she would black out.

But God was never that compassionate. Emma had endured seemingly endless hours of lectures about how she had been born from a slut but he would not allow her to become one herself. He would order her to accompany him on a function but if she dared to look at a man, even if he spoke directly at her, Emma would be banished to her room, sometimes without food for days. Later, when he arranged dates for her, he would accompany her on the activity himself and would always find fault with her demeanor or conduct.

During her teen years, one of the punishments she'd "endured" had been banishment to an all girls' boarding school. She had thrived during those four years of high school, making friends for the first time, learning new things, being out in the open more often when she'd dared to join a sports team. She had spent almost every second of her spare time studying, fearful that even one low grade would have her brought back to her father's merciless supervision but she'd absolutely loved the four years during which she'd been sent away from her father's heavy presence.

University was almost as good but she was required to attend closer to home. According to her father, she was becoming too independent and needed a man to guide her as she moved into adulthood. And since he was the only trustworthy man capable of defending her virtue, she lived at home and was chauffeured to all her classes.

The solicitor cleared his throat and Emma snapped out of her memories. She smiled an apology, then quickly glanced down, afraid the solicitor would think

she was coming on to him as well. The thought occurred to her that her father was no longer around to punish her, but years of training couldn't be pushed away only three days after his death.

The solicitor, Mr. Bernstein, was obviously uncomfortable. "I apologize for the odd requirements of your father's will, Ms. Mason," he was saying.

Emma's eyes snapped up quickly. It was the first sense that she had that something was wrong. Something terribly, terribly wrong. The small ray of hope that had been building for the past hour was flickering.

"Please, let's just move along," Emma said softly. She dropped her eyes, afraid the anger and despair she was feeling would show in her eyes. Emma didn't know what her father could do to her from the grave, but she braced herself for the pain he was about to inflict.

"Ahem," Mr. Bernstein said again, "According to your father's last will and testament, all of his money will be held in trust for his grandson." Mr. Bernstein straightened his glasses, the movement indicating his discomfiture with the terms. "Ms. Emma Mason will have access to the funds for six month, allowing her time to plan her wedding. After that point, she will have access only after she has become pregnant with a son, a sonogram being needed to verify the gender of the child. This son must come from the union of Mr. Jason Montenegro and Ms. Emma Mason and a DNA test will need to be confirmed once the child is born."

Emma's body froze in fear and dread. The horror was too much and she bowed her head in shame for her father's terms. Without hesitation, she shook her head. "I'll forego the money. You can give it to charity or whatever he stipulates if I don't comply with the terms."

Mr. Bernstein's face turned red and Emma knew that the nightmare was only beginning. "He left a letter for you in case you insist on ignoring his dying orders." An envelope was pulled out from under some papers and handed to Emma.

She took the white envelope with shaking fingers, determined to not fall victim to her father any longer. Unfortunately, her father was more diabolical than she could ever have imagined.

With a stiff chin, Emma read the words, her heart breaking as once again her father won the battle. The words were horrible and just as vicious as she remembered him being.

Emma – if you are reading this then that means you have scorned my wealth once again. You are an ungrateful, evil child who will definitely rot in hell for all the anguish you have caused me over the years with your promiscuous ways.

Knowing that there is more than one currency for everyone, I have endeavored to find a way that will ensure your compliance with my will. In anticipation of your behavior, I have set aside certain clues that will allow you to find your slut of a mother. Each clue will be given to you once you reach certain milestones. Marrying Mr. Jason Montenegro will give you the key to a storeroom where all of your mother's belongings were taken after her departure. Conception of a child will allow you to have her diary. It is from this that I have been able to identify her current location. At that point, you should come to your senses and realize that my money will ensure the security of your child. But if it does not, and you have not located your mother by that point, there is one final clue which will be given to you once you deliver my grandson.

Just so you know, your mother has been fighting for custody of you ever since her ill-thought out departure. I have been ultimately successful in keeping her filthy, cheating hands off of you

One more thing. You can try and search her out yourself. I warn you though that, given all my resources, it took me seven years to find her on my own, even while she was fighting for custody. The bitch has herself well hidden.

Mind me well, daughter. The fastest way to find your mother is to obey my will.

Sincerely yours

Edward Mason

Emma crumpled the paper in her hands, her whole body working to maintain control and not release the tears of anger and frustration which welled up inside her with her father's words.