

# *The Ruby's Promise*

PROLOGUE PLUS 2 FREE CHAPTERS

PRAFULLA VYAS



## CHAPTER ONE

# Prologue

**T**he storm-ravaged night clawed at the man's coat as he staggered up the cliff path to Blackmoor Castle. Lightning split the sky, illuminating the fortress in stark relief—a mass of black stone and twisted turrets. Below, angry waves crashed against the rocks. The man trudged on, in spite of the freezing rain that soaked him to the bone.

He clutched a leather satchel to his chest, his knuckles white. The path beneath his feet threatened to crumble with each step, loose stones skittering into the darkness below. Another flash of lightning revealed the castle's great oak door, iron-studded and ancient, looming before him like the maw of some great beast.

The brass knocker echoed like a death knell through the castle's stone corridors. The man shuddered at the wind's relentless howl. Minutes passed and then the door creaked open.

Lord Augustus Blackwood framed the doorway, tall and austere in his smoking jacket. His grey eyes widened slightly at the sight of his

midnight visitor, but his voice remained steady. "My God, Harrison. They said you were in Dartmoor Prison."

"Was, m'lord. Not anymore." Thomas Harrison's voice was rough from disuse. "I've come to collect on your promise."

Lightning flashed again, illuminating Harrison's gaunt face, the prison-cropped hair, the desperate gleam in his eyes. Lord Blackwood studied him for a long moment before stepping aside. "Come in, then. You look half-drowned."

The castle's kitchen was a cavern of warmth and flickering shadows. A great fireplace dominated one wall, large enough to roast an ox, its flames casting light that danced across the copper pots hanging from iron racks and onto the stone walls, black with centuries of smoke. It came to life like a dragon spitting sparks of fire and smoke.

Harrison huddled before the fireplace while Lord Blackwood ladled thick soup into a earthenware bowl. Steam rose from a loaf of bread fresh from the oven. The convict ate like a starving man, while his host remained standing, watching.

"The bag, m'lord." Harrison finally spoke, pushing the leather satchel across the scarred oak table. "Just like we agreed. Keep it safe until I return. If anyone asks—"

"I know nothing," Lord Blackwood finished, taking the satchel. Its contents clinked softly. "How long?"

"A month. Two at most." Harrison stood, his bowl empty. "I have to clear my name, m'lord. These'll prove it, once I find the real culprit."

Lord Blackwood nodded slowly. "The east tower room will remain unlocked. Return at night, and be discrete."

Harrison pulled his wet coat closer. "You're a good man, m'lord. I won't forget this."

The storm swallowed Thomas Harrison into the night. He was never seen again.

Lord Augustus Blackwood died three months later, taking the secret of the satchel's location to his grave. Some say on stormy nights, when the waves crash against the cliffs and lightning illuminates the castle's towers, a figure can be seen trudging up the cliff path, forever seeking what was lost.

The satchel's contents—and Harrison's fate—remain one of Blackmoor Castle's many mysteries.

Until now.

A decorative border at the top of the page featuring various light-colored flowers and leaves, including what appears to be a rose and several smaller blossoms, rendered in a soft, watercolor-like style.

## CHAPTER TWO

# *Tea Among the Thorns*

**T**he scent hit him like a physical blow. Its sensual potency evoked memories of her, the heat of a night he never quite forgot. A sharp claw, like a vulture's pierced his heart. That perfume had once lingered on his pillow, on his collar, in the crook of his neck where she'd whisper lies that dribbled from her lips, like shimmering nectar.

The next breeze stirred the roses, and with it came the flood of memories he'd spent three years trying to drown; silk and sin and promises she never meant to keep. Now it only stoked anger; bitterness thick as smoke; and something far worse: love that had meandered into darkness. She'd walked away like it cost her nothing. But James? He was still paying in slow, measured fury.

"James, dear, do stop brooding and pour the tea." His grandmother's sharp voice cut through his reverie. She adjusted her cream cashmere shawl as a cold draft swept through. "The sun's finally out, and I won't have you wasting a perfectly good afternoon indulging in fantasy."

Lady Margaret Blackwood, at eighty-five, commanded her wheelchair with the same authority she'd once used to direct garden parties for half the nobility of England.

His grey eyes softened at the sight of his grandmother, the woman who had been his anchor through every storm that had battered the Blackwood name. Yet beneath that tenderness lay the unmistakable bearing of nobility for he was cut from the same stone as Blackmoor castle itself – tall, angular, proud and with an aristocratic beauty. Even in repose, he bore a brooding intensity that marked the portraits of his ancestors hanging in the gallery. Five centuries of Blackwood blood coursed through his veins, and he carried that legacy like armor. The castle wasn't merely his inheritance—it was his identity, every weathered stone a testament to his lineage. He'd rather see it crumble into the sea than let the family name fall to ruin.

Behind them, like an ancient dowager, Blackmoor castle perched proudly on the edge of the Atlantic coast. Its weathered stone walls rose defiantly against the sea spray. Below, waves crashed against the black rocks with an endless, thunderous rhythm like distant mourning. The castle's harsh, stone walls were softened by climbing roses that had, over centuries, worked their way up like brave warriors.

James's mouth twitched as he reached for the silver teapot, its surface showing more black tarnish than silver these days. "I wasn't brooding, Gran. I was contemplating."

"Contemplating, brooding, plotting the downfall of your enemies – it's all the same thing when you furrow your brow like that." She accepted the teacup with steady hands. "Now, about Robert."

"Ah." James settled into the wrought-iron chair beside her. The small, antique furniture appeared doll-like against his tall frame. The sun caught the threads of premature gray at his temples. A legacy of

five years of plotting, scheming, trying to keep the estate afloat. "I suppose he's threatened to leave again?"

Mrs. Harris, the cook hovered near a crumbling stone urn. Like her mother before her, she had perfected the art of being simultaneously invisible and omnipresent. She stepped forward with an apology. "Begging your pardon, my lord, but Robert's got the gout something fierce this time. And with his wages being three months behind..." She trailed off diplomatically.

Lady Margaret sampled a cucumber sandwich with judicial care. "The sandwiches are excellent, Mrs. Harris. Your mother's recipe, I believe?" After the cook's pleased nod, she continued, "Now, about the Italian proposal."

James stiffened. "Gran—"

"James Edward Blackwood, you will listen." Lady Margaret's voice could have frozen the Atlantic below. "This castle has been in our family for five hundred years. Your father – God rest his soul – did his best, but times change and so must we. Clinging to our stubborn pride will bring nothing but ruin."

"It's not about pride," James protested, though his tone suggested otherwise. "It's about preservation. These developers sweep in, gut everything of character, and turn ancient homes into theme parks for wealthy tourists."

"The Romano family has an excellent reputation," his grandmother countered. The roses behind her swayed against the breeze, releasing a fresh waft of perfume. "They've restored three properties in Italy. Preserved their character while making them sustainable. And the daughter – Chiara Elena – she has quite the eye for historical detail, according to my research."

James raised an eyebrow. "Your research?"

"The internet is quite useful, dear," lady Margaret chuckled. "Jenny helped me with the Google." She took a dainty sip from the China teacup, then stroked the cat thoughtfully. "Her family owns vineyards in Tuscany. Old money. Very respectable."

"If you don't mind me saying, my lord," Mrs. Harris interjected, setting down a fresh pot of tea, "My cousin works at the Hartley Manor over in Devon. They did similar there, turned it into one of them boutique hotels. Says the family still lives there, right comfortable, and the tourists never know the difference."

At that very moment, a black cat crossed her path and she jumped nervously. The cat settled into the dowager's lap with a menacing look. Plagued with superstition and fear, it was hard to ignore the bad omen and the sudden chill in the air. Like all long-term staff, she knew better than to mention the odd occurrences that intensified whenever change threatened Blackmoor Castle.

"Did you see—" Jenny began, but her mother's sharp look silenced her.

In the highest window of the east tower, a shadow passed – though that wing had been sealed for decades. The roses trembled and scattered petals across the tea table like good omens.

"We can't even pay Robert," he cried out, frustrated. "How are we supposed to maintain our part of the castle, even if we do lease the rest?"

Lady Margaret reached over and patted his hand. The diamond on her finger – one of the few pieces of jewelry she hadn't sold yet – caught the light. "That, my dear boy, is precisely why we need to consider this offer."

A seagull's cry broke the deathly silence.

"I don't want that woman in my home!" James shouted. The fragile bistro set shook and a silver spoon fell to the floor. He picked it up and flung it across the garden.

The spoon clattered against the rose bed with a pathetic thud, burying itself in soft earth and crushed petals. Lady Margaret didn't flinch. She sipped her tea with the unbothered grace of a woman who'd seen far worse tantrums in crinolines and corsets.

"Really, James," she said coolly, "must we resort to cutlery every time you're emotionally inconvenienced?"

"I don't want that woman in my house," he snapped. "She's prying. Smiling too much. Asking questions she has no right to."

"She is merely doing her job like a good professional should."

"You don't understand. She's not just some guest. She's looking for something—digging into the past. Into our past."

"Oh, I understand perfectly," Lady Margaret replied, with a soft twist to her smile. "She hurt your feelings, and you'd rather burn the house down than let her in."

"She played me," he said bitterly. "She left. Without a word."

"As did your mother. Your governess. The Labrador. Shall I keep going?" Lady Margaret arched a delicate eyebrow.

"No," she said, leaning forward to pat his hand, "you need a spine. And perhaps a little less ego. That woman's presence disturbs you because you never truly stopped loving her."

From the corner of her eye, she noticed James reaching for the China teapot. "Do try not to throw the teapot next, darling. It was your mother's."

James' hands twitched nervously. He wasn't sure if he wanted to punch the air or apologize. "I shouldn't have... the spoon thing. That was idiotic."

Lady Margaret didn't look up. "Indeed."

"You're right. I acted like a damn fool."

"That's progress, I suppose."

A ghost of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. He reached for the shawl she'd dropped and draped it around her shoulders with a care that didn't quite suit his usual brooding. Then, in an impulsive flicker of guilt, he leaned down and pressed a brief, boyish kiss to her cheek.

"Are you dying?" Lady Margaret shot a surprised look at him.

"No," James muttered. "Just trying not to be a complete arse."

"Hmph." She took a sip from her teacup. "Do keep trying. Miracles take time."

But his treacherous heart betrayed him again and again.

She lived in his head like a sin—Elena, all curves and curls, knowing the effect she had. James could still feel the heat of her breath near his ear that night in Edinburgh, the whisper that meant nothing and everything. She had mellowed after dinner and wine, the candlelight working its magic. When he'd invited her to his room for a nightcap, her lips had trembled, hesitated, then she'd given a quick nod. But then came that heated argument about his "crumbling rocks" comment, her finger jabbing his chest as she called him a "dinosaur."

"There are plenty of qualified restoration experts in England, Grandmother dear," he burst out, angrily. "We don't need some Italian heiress with modern ideas trampling all over our heritage."

"Elena Romano is one of the most respected historical preservation architects in the field," Lady Margaret countered. "And the Romano Foundation's grant would cover the entire restoration budget."

He hated that name but still, a rush of heat swept through him. God, how he'd wanted her that first evening. The way she'd commanded the room, her wild dark curls bouncing with each emphatic gesture, those deep brown eyes sparkling with passion as she spoke.

"That woman," he said through gritted teeth, "called hereditary estate holders 'dinosaurs clinging to crumbling rocks.' Direct quote, Grandmother."

Lady Margaret's lips curved in a smile. "And you called her methods 'nouveau riche vandalism,' if I recall the gossip correctly. Really, darling, such drama." She selected another scone with deliberate care. "Elena arrives next week for the initial survey. I expect you to be civil."

James nearly upset the tea tray. His heart pounded. "Next week? You've already invited her?"

"Indeed." His grandmother calmly spread clotted cream on her scone. "The Romano Foundation's offer is too generous to refuse, and this castle has been in my family for generations. I won't have it fall to ruin because my grandson is too stubborn to accept help from a beautiful woman who clearly affects him far more than he's willing to admit."

"This has nothing to do with her being beautiful," James snapped, even as his mind conjured the image of Elena biting her lower lip as she'd studied architectural plans. A gesture that had driven him to distraction.

"Of course not, darling," Lady Margaret said, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "More tea?"

James slumped back into his chair with mixed feelings of dread and pleasure. Elena Romano would walk through the gates of his precious castle, unaware of its dark, secret passages, dungeons and treacherous towers. Devious plans formed in his head. Plans to teach her a lesson that she could never forget. A wicked grin broke his face.

"I suppose," he said casually, reaching for a scone, "we might at least meet with her."

"Excellent." Lady Margaret's smile was triumphant. "She arrives on Tuesday."

James choked on his scone. "Tuesday? Next Tuesday?"

"No time like the present, dear. Mrs. Harris, I believe we'll need to prepare the Blue Room. It has the best view of the rose garden."

"You should have consulted me first, gran."

"Of course, dear." Lady Margaret sipped her tea with perfect composure. "I am still the Dowager Lady Blackwood, after all. Now, do try the strawberries before they wilt completely."

Without further argument, James picked up the plumpest strawberry and spread a generous dollop of clotted cream on it. It tasted bitter in his mouth and he left it half-eaten on the plate. That night she had rejected him, stabbed him with her wild ideas of renovation. And now she was back, to do more damage, to wring his heart and desecrate his precious castle.

He looked up at the sky for a ray of hope.

But clouds had already gathered, dark, menacing clouds that swallowed the afternoon sun.

A decorative border at the top of the page featuring various light-colored flowers and leaves, including what appears to be a hydrangea and some smaller blossoms, set against a white background.

## CHAPTER THREE

# Elena

**J**ames Blackwood. Elena swallowed hard. She hated that name! Cold like the icy wind that tore through her hair. She shuddered. He maybe lord of his castle but he certainly did not own the world and definitely not her. She felt pin pricks of anxiety at the thought of facing him again. His imposing frame towering over her with that cruel, dismissive sneer. And that sculpted jaw of his. Some God with a grudge must have carved it, for it jutted out more than necessary. And yet, she couldn't resist staring at him and her stomach would tighten, like she was seventeen and stupid again. He had the kind of face that made women whisper and men watch their step—but that mouth of his? It could slice a soul in half, especially when he turned it on her.

She'd tried. Threw him a laugh, a look, even a compliment once, and he'd brushed it off like dust on his cuff. Like she was some street-corner flower girl daring to speak to royalty. It stung. Still did. And yet, here she was, replaying every moment he looked at her, his

eyes swirling with lust. She couldn't decide if she wanted to slap him or pull him in by the collar and kiss the disdain off his lips.

God, he infuriated her. And that was the worst of it—because underneath that aristocratic chill, she knew there was fire. And damn it, she wanted to see him burn.

\*\*\*

The castle rose out of the mist like a cruel mistress —grey stone weathered by centuries, wrapped in ivy and silence. Elena stood at the edge of the long gravel drive, her eyes tracing the jagged lines of the rooftop against the dull sky. It looked exactly as it had in the photos her mother kept hidden at the back of a drawer. And now, standing under its shadow, Elena could feel its vehemence.

She adjusted the fall of her cream blouse, tightening over the curve of her hips. She wasn't dressed for nostalgia. She was dressed for war.

The official story had been clean and cruel: her mother died in Tuscany. A fall from a cliff. Instant. Accidental. The kind of death people lit candles for and then quietly forgot. But Elena hadn't forgotten. Not the strange phone call days before. Not the way her mother's voice had sounded—tight, breathless, afraid. Nor the single word she'd whispered before the line went dead: *Blackwood*.

This castle—James Blackwood's ancestral estate—had something to do with it. Her mother had stayed here once, long ago. That much Elena had pieced together from letters, old receipts, and one torn photograph of a smiling woman in the rose garden out back. Her mother had come here whole. And something had followed her home to Tuscany.

Elena meant to find out what.

She walked forward, heels crunching deliberately on the gravel, claiming the space with every sway of her hips. Her skin was a warm bronze kissed by southern sun, and her figure—voluptuous, effortless,

unapologetic—drew eyes whether she wanted them or not. Thick dark curls tumbled freely down her back, softening the sharp glint in her eyes. Her lips, full and expressive, curved into a practiced, unreadable smile. The kind men mistook for invitation—until it wasn't.

She didn't care what James Blackwood thought of her. Not his clipped manners or his aristocratic detachment, that look he gave like he was staring down the help. He could sneer all he liked from his cold stone tower.

But she would be the one peeling back his walls.

Because there were things buried in this place. In the rooms that hadn't been opened in years. In the family portraits no one dusted. In the locked drawer of the library desk her mother had once stood beside.

She wasn't here to restore his ruin but to tear it down brick by brick—until the truth crawled out screaming.

And if James Blackwood got in her way?

Well... she hoped he did.

\*\*\*

#### READY TO KEEP READING?

You've just experienced the first three chapters of *The Ruby's Promise*

Want to know what happens next?

- Will James overcome his tragic past?
- Is Lady Catherine's ghost real?
- Can their forbidden love survive?

**GET THE FULL BOOK NOW**

Available on Kindle Unlimited (Read FREE with membership)

Or purchase for just \$3.99 on Amazon.com

Thank you for reading!

I hope you loved meeting James and Elena.

Prafulla