



Anthony

THE SHACKLEFORD SISTERS
BOOK NINE

BEVERLEY WATTS

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BaR Publishing

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Chapter One

Anthony Shackelford had long been acquainted with the word *duty*. Indeed, since the moment he could walk, it had been drummed into him every Friday between the hours of two and four in the afternoon, accompanied by tea and Mrs. Tomlinson's apple cake. His mother was especially partial to apple cake.

The essence of his obligation was this. The Duke of Blackmore could not be expected to keep his in-laws into their twilight years—though God knew if his mother continued to take her revolting tinctures, she'd be unlikely to reach her mid-afternoon years, let alone the twilight ones. And despite the fact that his sisters had all made extremely advantageous marriages, as the only son, it was his job to ensure his parents a comfortable dotage.

In all honesty, Anthony doubted his father had any intention of sliding gracefully into boring old age, although the loss of his faithful foxhound Freddy three years earlier had certainly taken its toll.

So, for the most part, his *duty* had always appeared very simple. Marry an heiress, preferably with a title.

Simple that is until he got to Eton and learned about the class system. In fairness, he didn't so much learn of it than have it beaten into him. At least in the beginning. Fortunately, his connection to the Duke of Blackmore ensured that nothing was broken aside from his pride.

As he got older, he also learned how to defend himself, until the bullies decided he was no longer worth their trouble. It helped that he was an affable young man, always ready to kick up a lark and well liked by those of his peers who were less hidebound by tradition. A riot of hair the colour of burnished copper and eyes that could deflower a virgin with just a single look

- according to the numerous maids who regularly fought to clean his room – one would be right in assuming he was also well liked by members of the opposite sex.

There was one other thing that set Anthony apart from many of his fellows – aside from his fondness for causing mostly harmless mischief. And that was an inexplicable urge to defend and protect. Mayhap because the word *duty* that had been so thoroughly drummed into him, he was entirely unable to remain aloof from the problems and misfortunes of any man, woman, child or indeed animal with whom he came into contact.

Naturally, in the intervening years since leaving Eton, such a disposition ensured he was rarely without company – either on two legs or four.

And now, here he was, six and twenty, propping up the wall on the edge of his brother-in-law's ballroom eyeing the first crop of young ladies being wheeled out for his scrutiny. Anthony was entirely certain that coin was no object for nearly all of the twenty or so twittering debutantes. The newly affluent merchant classes would do anything short of murder to align themselves with the powerful Duke of Blackmore. But on the other hand, there were no more than a couple of titles in the whole room. And those were there for much the same reason, though minus the necessary overflowing coffers.

His reverie came to an abrupt end with the arrival of Peter, Viscount Holsworthy and the Duke of Blackmore's heir in waiting. Despite their five-year age difference, he also happened to be Anthony's best friend. 'Anyone take your eye?' the younger man queried with a grin. Anthony rolled his eyes and grimaced.

'I doubt any one of them is over seventeen,' he muttered. 'Bloody hell, Pete, it's like a cattle market.'

Peter chuckled unsympathetically. 'Now mayhap you know why Aunt Prudence declared she'd rather remove her own extremities with a set of rusty pliers than take part in the marriage mart. And she wasn't the only one.'

'How the devil can I take a sheltered chit to the wilds of Dartmoor?

Especially to a house that's likely only standing through sheer bloody-mindedness?'

'It's on the fringes of the moor and is perfectly hospitable,' Peter scoffed. 'And anyway, Father offered to foot the bill for the repairs, but being a ridiculously stubborn oaf, you insisted on doing the reparations for yourself.'

Anthony sighed. 'Gifting me Bovey Manor and twelve acres of prime farmland is beyond generous of him. I couldn't in all conscience ask him to do more.' Anthony cast Peter a mischievous grin. 'And anyway, I wouldn't want to deplete your inheritance any further. What kind of friend would that make me?'

'An idiot one,' retorted Peter. 'You could have your pick of these lovely ladies and become a gentleman farmer, nary lifting a finger except to issue instructions to your estate manager.'

Anthony shuddered. 'Dear God, that sounds horrific. What the bloody hell would I do all day?'

'Take afternoon tea with the neighbours,' Peter suggested with a wicked grin. 'Learn to play whist, and of course, keep your beloved happy by bringing her up to Town once a year to keep her in fripperies whilst you indulge in your annual visit to White's.' He gave a mock sigh. 'Such is the sad lot of a gentleman farmer whose wife is swimming in lard.'

For a few seconds, Anthony didn't answer. He stared out over the sea of simpering misses. He wasn't in his best friend's enviable position. There was no pressure on Peter to find a wife. Indeed, it was fully expected he would sow his wild oats before getting leg shackled, and given that the Viscount was only twenty-one, he had plenty of time. Anthony had no doubt that this *particular* area of his friend's education would begin during his upcoming six-month trip to Europe.

Duty. The word that had shaped his life, no matter how much he'd bucked against it.

Every one of his sisters had been fortunate enough to have made a love

match. But for him, there would be no such luxury. He shook his head. God knew he'd been blessed and had no right to bemoan his fate. Love matches were rare, and if he was lucky, he'd find a wealthy young woman who was reasonably easy on the eye and in possession of a little wit. A wife he could rub along with in relative harmony and most importantly one his mother approved of. God help him if he didn't get that small matter right. He gave an inward chuckle.

And given that it really wasn't in his nature to wallow in self-pity, Anthony pushed himself away from the wall and went to claim his first dance.



Georgiana glanced back into the bedchamber before climbing carefully out of the window. Straddling the sill, she uttered a small gasp at an ominous creak. For one awful moment, she thought the whole frame was about to come free of its moorings. It was certainly not beyond the realms of possibility since she suspected the window might actually predate the house - or rather hovel - she was endeavouring to escape.

She swivelled her head back towards the darkened room. Dawn was still a couple of hours away, but the moon outside rendered the interior almost pitch-black, and she could no longer see the four sleeping forms snuggled together in their two cots. She held still for a second, heart in her mouth, convinced she'd discerned movement, but after a minute, relaxed. There was no sudden shout, only soft snores, almost in concert.

She smiled grimly. Old Bridy's sleeping tincture was worth the two pennies she'd filched for it. Taking a deep breath, she cautiously lifted her other leg over the sill until both feet were dangling in mid-air. This next was the tricky part.

The window was too far from the ground to jump. When she was first trying to devise a means of escape, she'd considered going upwards, rather straight down. There was a small lean-to on the other side of the roof she could easily have jumped down onto and thence to the ground. But the thatch had more

holes than her drawers, and she suspected she'd end up falling through and likely land bang smack between the Grimms. And no tincture would prevent them waking from *that*. Not that old man Grimm would have objected, she was certain, since the lecherous old jackanapes was the reason she was currently balancing precariously on a windowsill in the middle of the night.

In the end, she'd opted for straight down, *hopefully*, via the large sycamore tree with a convenient branch a mere foot from the window. It had seemed like a small distance during her planning. Right now, the limb might as well have been on the bloody moon.

George bit her lip again and gave another fearful glance into the bedchamber. Her stomach roiled until she thought she was going to cast her account. She squeezed her eyes shut, willing her rebellious stomach to subside. When was the last time she'd eaten? She couldn't remember, but what the bloody hell did it matter? She couldn't sit here all bleeding night, and if old man Grimm caught her, she'd likely never eat again.

Heart thudding, she gripped the top of the window and gingerly pulled one foot up to the sill. Then, using all her strength, she hauled her body upwards until she was standing – or rather crouching – on her two feet. The branch was tantalisingly close. Gripping the window with one hand, she reached out the other towards the swaying limb. It was no good, she couldn't reach that far. George inwardly cursed whoever her real parents were for gifting her with nothing but a short arse. She was going to have to jump.

OOOOOO

Reverend Shackleford sat on a small bench set in a secluded corner of the vicarage garden, Flossy on his knee. Despite the relative warmth of the July day, the little dog was doing her best to burrow underneath his cassock. In the end, with an impatient sigh, the Reverend lifted up the hem and she quickly scooted underneath. What was it about small dogs and even smaller spaces?

He glanced over at the small headstone simply inscribed with a name - Freddy. Surely after three years he shouldn't still feel the urge to shed

unmanly tears whenever he thought about the foxhound? Especially given that Freddy was likely having a high old-time frolicking with the Almighty.

He felt rather than heard Flossy give a contented sigh as she curled into his warmth. In truth, she was a delightful little dog - more his shadow than Freddy had ever been. But the Reverend knew she missed the foxhound too. When she'd first arrived at the vicarage, she'd been wary and skittish after the shenanigans with the King's Coronation. She'd been Freddy's shadow then - even sharing the old hound's basket until early one morning she'd barked and whined until he'd climbed out of his bed to see what on earth was the matter and found his faithful companion stiff and cold.

Freddy had died in his bed, with more years on him than any dog had a right to. But that didn't make it any easier - for him or Flossy. With another sigh, Reverend Shackelford got carefully to his feet, gently tipping the disgruntled little dog back onto the ground. 'Come on girl, I reckon it's time for a bit of Mrs. Tomlinson's lemon cake.' Giving Freddy's headstone a small pat, he turned and made his way back towards the kitchen, wondering when Anthony would be back from London.

Despite the years he'd spent desperately trying to get his daughters wed, Augustus Shackelford was surprised to discover that when Prudence finally left, the house was entirely too quiet for his liking. Naturally, he had Agnes to speak to, but his wife rarely had anything to talk about other than her potions and their son's not-so-impending matrimony. The Reverend had told her several times to leave the man alone. Whether Anthony did or didn't marry well, they still had eight daughters with wealthy husbands. It was unlikely either of them would end up in the poor house.

Unfortunately, there was no arguing with Agnes once she'd got a bee in her bonnet. It was no wonder Anthony restricted his visits. Still, tonight Percy and Lizzy were coming for supper and since he knew just how much the curate loved it, he'd asked Mrs. Tomlinson to make an extra-large bread-and-butter pudding. As he opened the kitchen door, the Reverend felt a lump rise into his throat.

Bread-and-butter pudding had been Freddy's favourite.



In the end, George not only succeeded in escaping with all limbs intact, but she managed to get clear away without alerting her so-called foster family. But that was hours ago and her stomach was now cramping badly. She had to find something to eat. Grimacing, she picked her way through the filthy lanes that comprised the town of Exeter. Fortunately, she didn't attract any unwanted attention since she was dressed as a boy. - and had been for as long as she could remember. She had no idea whether it was because the Grimms didn't see the point of buying new cloth when second hand would do, or whether they thought to keep hidden the fact that she was a girl. It didn't stop the old man's wandering hands though, and it had become harder and harder to avoid being alone with the bastard.

Grimm wasn't the family's real name. It was from a story she'd heard on one of her rare visits to the local Sunday School. Their actual names were Henry and Martha Atkins. They had twin boys John and Frank, both coming up to twelve. Fortunately, they hadn't yet got past the bullying stage so the worst she'd ever received from them was a thrashing. But she knew that would change soon.

Once her flow started and her bobbies began to develop, old man Grimm had begun to take an interest. It was only a matter of time before his sons followed suit.

George stood at the mouth of an alley overlooking the market square. She'd have to be bloody quick if she didn't want to end up bummed. She needed to get as far away from Exeter as she could, but if she didn't eat soon, she'd likely not last a sennight. She sidled towards a fruit and veg stall, only to receive a cuff about the head that sent her to her knees. 'If'n yer thinkin' to 'elp yersen, ye can think agin boy,' a vicious voice muttered in her ear.

Head ringing, George fought the urge to cast her account for the second time in as many hours and climbed shakily to her feet. *So much for freedom* she thought, almost hysterically. At least with the Grimms she had food in her belly. Most people would have said that was worth a quick priggling. But

even the thought of being pawed by the fat, filthy, toothless Henry Atkins elicited a terror so acute, it stopped her breath until she felt as though she was choking. She would rather die.

Wincing, she felt the side of her head where the stall owner's fist had connected. No one was paying her any attention. Cuffing raggedy boys was all in a day's work after all. Then abruptly, she jumped as a hand was laid on her shoulder. Instinctively, she stepped back to give herself room to flee.

'Please, don't run,' a soft voice pleaded. George stared in bemusement at the finely dressed lady standing in front of her. 'Are you hungry?' the woman continued.

Georgiana narrowed her eyes. She'd heard of so-called do-gooders who turned out to be wolves in sheep's clothing. Recruiting urchins from the streets with the promise of a hot meal and a bed. She took another step back, then paused as the woman began fumbling in her reticule. Would she have time to snatch it and run? George watched in agonised indecision. If she was caught, she'd end up in Devon County Gaol at the very least. More likely hanged.

Before she could make a choice, the lady abruptly drew something from her purse and held out her hand. For a second, George thought she was seeing things. In the woman's palm lay three guineas.

It was more than George had seen in the whole of her lifetime. Her eyes travelled from the money to the lady's face in wonder. 'Take it.' The voice remained low, but the woman's manner became nervous, and she began scanning the immediate area around them anxiously.

'Is it dirty?' George whispered harshly, staring at the coins as though they might disappear if she took her eyes off them. She felt rather than saw the lady shake her head. When she still didn't move, the woman gave a frustrated click of her tongue, and grabbed George's hand, tipping the coins into it before the girl had a chance to snatch her fingers away.

Reflexively closing her fingers over the blunt, Georgiana finally began to stutter her thanks, only to be presented with the strange woman's back as she

quickly strode away.

Catapulted back to the real world from what was surely a fairy tale, she looked round, suddenly aware that she actually held three whole guineas in her hand. Anyone could have spied the transaction and might even now be looking to gift her with a knife to her throat in some filthy alley. Swallowing, her heart thudding like she was just about to jump off a cliff, George shoved the coins into her deepest pocket and ran.

Chapter Two

Percy Noon eyed the huge tray of bread-and-butter pudding with a resigned sigh. In all the years he'd been in Blackmore, he'd never managed to persuade the Reverend that he loathed this particular dessert. But either his superior couldn't conceive of *anyone* not liking bread-and-butter pudding or had simply never listened. Possibly a little of both.

He glanced over at Lizzy who was biting her lip in an effort to hold in unseemly laughter as she watched the Reverend pile her husband's bowl high. 'There you go Percy, lad,' Augustus Shackelford declared. 'There's always more once you've managed that lot.'

He handed the bowl to Lizzy to pass on. 'There you go love, 'ave at it,' she murmured, placing the mountain in front of Percy. Observing his bilious face, she fought back a chuckle and handed him the large jug of custard.

Sighing, the curate poured a liberal helping over the top and reluctantly picked up his spoon. A small whine from next to his chair caught his attention after the first mouthful. Flossy sat gazing at him adoringly, her small tail wagging. The curate grinned down at her. 'Don't worry girl, there'll be plenty left,' he muttered.

Taking another miniscule spoonful, Percy turned towards the Reverend who was tucking enthusiastically into his own pudding. 'Have you heard from Anthony?'

His mouth full, Reverend Shackelford shook his head.

'Nicholas was holding a ball for him,' Agnes enthused into the pause. 'Can you imagine that? A Duke holding a ball *especially* for my son.'

‘Tare an’ hounds, Agnes, you’re talking complete deuced poppycock as usual. It weren’t specifically for Anthony. Peter’s finally finished at Eton and taking his place in Society.’

His wife gave an indignant sniff. ‘Well. I’m certain Grace at least would have ensured there were plenty of wealthy young women present for Anthony to choose from.’ She stopped and frowned as a sudden thought took her. ‘I do hope they made sufficient enquiries as to the dowries being offered.’ The Reverend shook his head wearily.

‘Likely, they had to fill in a form just to get a deuced invitation,’ he declared wryly, raising his eyes to the heavens.

‘Oh well, that’s a relief.’ Agnes responded, completely missing her husband’s drollness. She dipped her spoon into her pudding and lifted it towards her mouth before adding, ‘Do you think Nicholas would allow us sight of them?’

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‘I thought Miss Davenport seemed especially taken with you,’ Grace declared as they climbed into the carriage after their final overnight stop.

Anthony sighed. ‘If I listened to you and Peter, I’d be under the impression that every female with a pulse was especially taken with me.’

His sister pursed her lips while Peter gave a small chuckle. ‘It’s true you’re a handsome devil,’ the Viscount grinned. ‘Though – and please don’t take this personally – I can’t imagine where you get it from.’

‘I seem to remember Augustus was rather handsome when he was younger,’ Nicholas commented, giving his son a reproving look. ‘He was considered quite a catch.’

Both Grace and Anthony looked incredulously at the Duke. ‘It’s true,’ Nicholas protested with a chuckle of his own. ‘I have it on good authority.’ He shrugged and smiled over at his wife.

‘I remember when he arrived in Blackmore,’ he continued. ‘My brother and I were around eight at the time, I think. The unmarried women in the village were falling over themselves in anticipation.’

This time Peter joined the other two wearing identical disbelieving expressions. ‘You have to remember that the previous incumbent had been at least eighty-five by the time he retired,’ Nicholas added with a wide grin, ‘and given that the poor fellow had actually been Blackmore’s resident priest for at least sixty of those years, mayhap you can understand the excitement.’

He paused for a moment, clearly lost in reverie. It was so rare for the Duke to talk about his childhood that the other occupants of the carriage held their breath, waiting to see if he would continue. At length, he turned towards Grace. ‘I remember your mother,’ he murmured softly. ‘She had hair exactly the colour of yours.’ He reached over and tucked an errant curl behind his wife’s ear.

‘I didn’t know you’d ever met her,’ was Grace’s equally soft response. At times, she couldn’t quite believe how her husband had changed from the bitter taciturn man she first married. But even now, all these years later, he found it difficult to talk of his youth.

‘Oh, I never actually *met* her,’ Nicholas responded drily. ‘My father did not allow either of us to fraternise with the village riffraff.’

‘He’d be turning in his grave now then,’ Grace responded tartly.

‘I sincerely hope so,’ retorted the Duke before turning back to Anthony and firmly changing the subject. ‘The dog?’ was all he said, nodding towards the coach driver’s box at the front of the carriage. Only his inflection indicated it was a question.

‘I couldn’t leave it behind,’ Anthony defended. ‘The poor thing was starving. He likely wouldn’t have lasted the night.’

‘I’m not entirely sure the innkeeper would have shared your sentiment had he actually observed you cutting the rope,’ Nicholas responded brusquely. ‘And while I’m certain Thomas is wildly enamoured to be sharing his box with a

three-legged mongrel smelling worse than a privy. What exactly are you going to do with him?’

‘Well, naturally I’m going to bathe him first,’ Anthony responded with a shrug, ‘and then I’m going to train him.’ There was an ominous silence. ‘The hound reminds me of Freddy,’ he added finally, plaintively.

‘As I recall, Freddy had all four limbs intact,’ Peter countered.

‘Well, I’m sure Father will be absolutely delighted,’ Grace grimaced, shaking her head.

‘And if he isn’t, Flossy certainly will be,’ added Peter. ‘I’m told there’s nothing a woman loves more than a wounded hero. Isn’t that right, Father?’

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Georgiana finally relaxed as the stagecoach clattered through Exeter town gates and out onto the open road towards Plymouth. She’d never been beyond the confines of the wall, not that she could remember anyway. She’d grown up looking at it, wondering what lay on the other side, especially when she was feeding the pigs. She’d stare at the wall, daydreaming that on the other side lay a magical kingdom where her real parents were looking for her. The fantasy never lasted long and usually ended up with the end of old man Grimm’s switch round her legs. And for all she knew, she could have been born within half a mile of the godforsaken corner the Grimms called home. But somehow, she didn’t actually think so.

Once when she’d spilled milk all over the floor, Martha had screamed, ‘You ain’t worth the bloody pittance we get. Bleeding Uxleys.’ And though she hadn’t reacted at the time, George knew that was her name. She was Georgiana Uxley.

She reasoned that *Georgiana* had to be her real name – there was no possibility that the narrow-minded couple who raised her could possibly have concocted something so outlandish. And as long as she could remember, they’d dressed her in britches and called her George.

And now, having used some of her newfound wealth to wash and buy a serviceable but reasonably clean second-hand jacket, shirt, proper *breeches* and even shoes, George finally allowed herself to believe she was free. And since she was prepared to defend that freedom with her very life, she also availed herself of a small but sharp knife, which she tucked in the bottom of a small bag, along with some bread and cheese.

She'd sown the rest of her unexpected good fortune into the bandage that bound her breasts. The hard coins chafed a bit, but it was a good feeling. It reminded her that she wasn't entirely destitute. That she had *choices*. And the first one had been to get as far away from her foster parents as possible. She didn't have a particular destination in mind, although she guessed she'd be more likely to find work if she headed to another town and the nearest one to Exeter was Plymouth. She'd heard lots of stories about the bustling port, and as it was the only other place she'd ever heard of, she reasoned she could do worse. At any rate, even if the Grimms came looking for her, they were unlikely to be successful in such a large town. Not that she thought they'd bother.

The swaying of the carriage lulled her into a light doze. Hoping to save coin, she'd opted for a seat on the top of the carriage. It wasn't cold, especially as she was squashed right in the middle. Faced with the choice of a mealy-mouthed stick of a woman and a large gentleman smelling of mothballs, George allowed her head to loll towards a large gentleman reasoning he was more likely to prevent her falling off. The stink of mothballs went up her nose, and she guessed the coat he was wearing didn't come out of the wardrobe very often. As she drifted into slumber, she wondered what it would be like to have her own *wardrobe*. Or even anywhere at all to hang her clothes. Not that she'd ever owned any until now...

A sudden jolt caused her to wake with a start. Drool was tracing a path from the corner of her mouth, and she eyed her neighbour's coat with alarm, breathing a sigh of relief that there was only the slightest bit of dribble on his shoulder. Furtively wiping at her chin with her arm she suddenly realised that the carriage stopped. Along with the other travellers she leaned towards the edge to see why.

She watched as the coach driver climbed down off his box and went to throw

open the door. ‘Ye’d better all be gettin’ off,’ he advised in a gruff voice. ‘We ain’t goin nowhere further tonight, and I reckon there be an inn of sorts three miles down the road.’ He pointed to a narrow lane winding its way down a steep hill. George’s heart sank.

‘What’s happened? Why can we not continue today?’ asked the mothball man.

‘Wheel comin’ loose. Road’s ‘illy ‘ereabouts, and if we’re not careful the ‘ole bloody lot o’ yer’ll end up in a ditch. Not best any time, but when you can’t see ‘and in front o’ yer...’ He shook his head and spat into the dirt. ‘Like I said, there be an ‘ostelry just over the next ‘ill. Wi a bit o’ luck ye’ll reach it afore it gets too dark.’

‘You can’t simply abandon us in the middle of nowhere,’ a small, birdlike woman declared, her voice on the verge of panic.

‘I ain’t abandonin’ no one,’ the coach driver retorted. ‘I’ll be spendin’ the night fixin this ‘ere wheel an’ as long as you’re back ‘ere by eight in the mornin, you’ll be back on the road.’ He gave a ribald wink towards the frightened woman. ‘Course you be welcome to keep me company Mrs. if you’ve a mind to.’ The woman coloured up, tutting to herself, but said no more.

Unlike most of the passengers, Georgiana had only a small pack to carry, but could ill afford to spend what coin she had on an overnight stay at a hostelry. She was no stranger to sleeping rough though, and as she watched the carriage’s occupants start the long walk towards a bed, she decided she’d follow until she spotted a sheltered place to get her head down. The weather was still mild, and she had her new jacket to ward off any chill. She’d have stayed with the coach but didn’t fancy a whole night at the mercy of the coach driver, even if he was under the impression she was a boy. And using her small knife to defend her honour wouldn’t get her to Plymouth any quicker.

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Anthony stared at the bag of bones collapsed in front of him and swore. The dog was covered in sores and shivered uncontrollably despite the clement weather. Indeed, he'd had to carry the mongrel up the vicarage drive.

Fortunately, the kitchen was empty, the dishes piled high next to the sink ready for Maisie next morning. Opening the door into the hall a crack, he could hear the sound of voices. After a second he recognised Percy's. Clearly the curate and his wife were visiting for supper, and thankfully, it appeared Flossy was with them. Probably clearing Percy's plate of bread-and-butter pudding. Anthony gave a small chuckle and shut the door. The last thing he wanted to do was to explain another dog to his father. And anyway, the hound would be going with him when he left for Bovey Manor which he hoped would be within the next month. He wanted to take advantage of the fine weather to repair any leaks in the roof.

Quickly rummaging in the larder, he brought out what was left of a beef tongue. Ignoring the knowledge that he'd have to explain its absence when Mrs. Tomlinson arrived in the morning, he quickly cut it up into small pieces and placed them in front of the shaking dog, careful not to give him too much. By the time the mutt had finished, he'd stopped shivering, and his tail was beginning to wag uncertainly.

'Well, I'm certainly not going to bathe you tonight,' Anthony muttered, 'but smelling like you do, I can't leave you in the deuced kitchen. Let's have a look at that missing leg and put some salve on those sores. Then I'll make you a nice comfortable bed in the stable.'

Picking the animal back up, he made his way out into the twilight, heading towards the stable round the back. A soft whickering sound greeted him as he pushed open the stable door with his back. His father had finally seen fit to replace Lucifer after the bad-tempered nag's memorable trip to London before the King's coronation.

Kicking some straw into a pile, Anthony laid the dog gently down and lifted what was left of his right front paw. The wound didn't look putrid and was obviously old. 'Where the devil did you lose this, lad?' he questioned softly, laying it back down and going to work on the animal's more recent wounds. 'So what should I call you, he murmured, stroking the dog's head to stop him

licking the salve off.

‘How about Nelson? He lost his right arm too, and you deserve to be called after a hero. Will that suit, do you think?’ He gave a low chuckle, adding, ‘And I’m sure Nicholas would entirely approve.’ He turned his head towards the mare who was watching them curiously. ‘What say you, Delilah?’ The horse blew through her nose. ‘Think I’m being shockingly loose in the haft, eh?’ Anthony grinned. ‘Well, I think it’s perfect.’ He sat back on his heels as the dog finally curled up with a sigh. ‘Nelson,’ he murmured. ‘Nothing and no one will hurt you ever again.’ Climbing to his feet, he went to fetch some water and laid it by the sleeping dog. ‘Look after him, Del,’ he whispered, stroking the horse’s nose and feeding her a little hay. The mare tossed her head and whickered again as he left the stable, making sure to shut the door behind him.

The sun was going down in a blaze of orange and gold as he stepped outside. If he made haste he’d have time for a tankard of ale and one of Mary’s famous mutton pies in the Red Lion. Whistling softly, he pushed open the gate and started down the lane.

Chapter Three

As she crested the hill, George finally spotted a cluster of houses in the distance. If that was the village the coach driver spoke of, then she suspected some of the less fortunate passengers would be taking shelter in a barn. Standing still, she shaded her eyes from the lowering sun and admired the rolling south Devonshire landscape. To the left of the village, in a shallow valley, she could see a large country house. No doubt some gentry cove's *country seat*. She muttered the last two words out loud in what she considered was a passable nob's accent, then she grinned to herself. 'Why my lord,' she declared haughtily, tapping an imaginary fan on an imaginary wrist. 'Pray keep your wandering hands to yourself. I am no trollop to allow such liberties. Indeed, I am to marry...' she paused and creased her brow. 'I am to marry Edward Moneybags, Viscount Flush in the Pockets.' She drew herself up in imagined outrage and turned her back with a swish of her non-existent skirts. Unfortunately, having never actually worn a skirt, she misjudged the swishing and nearly ended up in the bushes at the side of the road. 'You'll never be a bloody lady, George. That's fer sure,' she muttered to herself, starting down the hill.

She'd deliberately allowed her companion travellers to get well ahead of her, and in the deepening twilight she was the only person on the road. As she came to the bottom of the hill, she began looking for somewhere to spend the night. She didn't want to get too close to the village in case she was seen and forcibly moved on but wanted to be close enough in the event she needed to run for help. Squinting, she spotted a small copse of trees about twenty yards off the road. That would do nicely. As she got closer, she frowned. It was a bit closer to civilisation than she'd hoped, but then there was little likelihood of anyone passing this way during the night.

Carefully, she made her way into the small group of trees, choosing a mossy

clearing in the middle. She put down her pack and sat down experimentally. She'd definitely slept on worse. Fortunately, the ground was dry.

Rummaging around in her pack, she drew out the small loaf and hunk of cheese she'd purchased for the journey. Breaking both in half, she put one half back into her pack and quickly devoured the other. Then, seeing little point in simply sitting there, she pulled out her knife, tucking it inside her jacket, curled up on her side and closed her eyes. Her last thought as she drifted off to sleep was that she needed to be up bright and early on the morrow if she didn't want to be left behind.



Anthony was just finishing his second tankard of ale when there was a sudden influx of strangers into the pub. Listening to their conversation, he gathered their stagecoach had developed a loose wheel on the Plymouth road. The coach driver had sent them to the nearest hostelry. Unfortunately, most of them would be out of luck. As far as he was aware, the Red Lion only had two bedchambers and one of them was taken up by the landlord Harry and his ... well, no one actually had the temerity to ask whether he and Percy's mother Mary were actually leg shackled.

Leaning back against his chair, he watched with amusement as the bidding war started for the sole bedchamber, wincing at the final price Mary shook on. The large gentleman who'd won the room would find the satisfied smile wiped off his face once he saw it. Anthony had had the odd occasion to bed down there when he was too tap hackled to find his way back to the vicarage and even drunk as a wheelbarrow, the chamber left a lot to be desired.

The other passengers grumbled as they handed over their coins for the barn round the side of the inn, then most of them opted to try one of Mary's mutton pies since it was the only thing on the menu.

Grinning, Anthony finished his pint and pushed his chair back to leave.

'Leavin' so soon, Tony?' He turned his head at the coquettish voice he hadn't

heard in nearly three months.

‘Nancy?’ he exclaimed, the delight in his voice unfeigned. ‘I thought you’d gone to live with your husband?’

Pouting, the voluptuous redhead, sat down in the vacant chair. ‘Boring bastard ‘e is. Better when I only ‘ave to see him three times a year. I reckon I was bacon-brained to think we could live together without bloody killin’ each other.’ She leaned forward, her ripe breasts almost spilling into his hands over the top of her dress. ‘You got enough coin fer upstairs,’ she winked. And there was another reason Anthony stayed in the pub on the odd occasion...

‘Alas, my dearest Nancy, our boudoir has been already taken for the night.’ Anthony felt his cock stir. He hadn’t had a priggling since he left for London. It wasn’t due to lack of opportunity, but something in him recoiled at the idea of romancing a young innocent whilst taking his pleasure in the arms of a courtesan. Nancy on the other hand was no innocent and since he last looked, there were no simpering virgins in the vicinity.

‘We could always sneak away into the barn,’ she purred before giving his ear a quick flick of her tongue. Anthony almost groaned out loud.

‘Taken, I’m afraid,’ he managed, nodding towards the additional patrons sitting at a table in the corner. ‘A stagecoach on the Plymouth Road was like to lose a wheel, so the driver sent his passengers here for the night.’ Nancy sat back petulantly, much to Anthony’s amusement.

‘Very well,’ he sighed dramatically at length, ‘if you’re determined to have your way with me, I know a small private place where we won’t be disturbed.’

‘Is it outside?’ Nancy frowned doubtfully.

‘I’ll keep you warm,’ Anthony promised with a wink. He rose to his feet and held out his hand. She considered him silently for a second, then gave a small breathless laugh and took his proffered hand, allowing him to pull her to her feet. ‘Oh, how I’ve missed you Anthony Shackelford,’ she murmured as he

led her to the door.



George woke with a start. For a second she remained still, her eyes shut – a habit she’d adopted during her years with the Grimms. Being savaged by a wild beast at the instant of waking was not something she feared. People on the other hand... She’d found by experience that feigning sleep, if only for the first few seconds, generally gained her a slight advantage, allowing her to wake properly and consider the situation without dreams clouding her judgement. She wasn’t sure what had drawn her so rudely from her sleep on this occasion and while she waited, she carefully drew her knife from the inside of her jacket.

Abruptly, she heard a soft giggle, followed by a sigh and a whispered, ‘Yes.’ Cautiously, George raised her head. Not five feet away a couple lay intertwined on the moss. She stared incredulously as the man lifted his head and began tugging at his companion’s bodice, then, heart thudding, she abruptly screwed her eyes shut and laid her head back down onto her arm. She didn’t dare move. At the moment, they had no idea they had an audience, and if she remained still, mayhap they would remain oblivious. She needn’t have worried. In truth, she could have stood up and she doubted they’d have noticed.

Desperately she tried to block out the groans and sighs which eventually became more and more urgent. She felt a strange stirring between her legs as the woman suddenly cried out. Impulsively, she opened her eyes and turned her head to watch. The woman had her legs splayed wantonly and the man was positioned between them, his upper body raised above her. The moonlight in between the trees revealed his urgent movements. His face was almost harsh as he gave a sudden low groan.

Heart pounding, George determinedly shut her eyes again and buried her head into the crook of her elbow. For the next ten minutes she endured more whispering and giggling until for one horrifying second, she thought they were going to do the whole thing again, but instead, a rustling sound told her

they'd both risen to their feet. Then finally, just when she thought she might scream, she heard them move away, back towards the road. She rolled over onto her back and listened to the sound of their voices fade.

For the next couple of hours, try as she might, Georgiana could not get back to sleep. For some reason, the picture of the man as he reached his peak felt as though it was indelibly carved into her brain. She felt a restlessness that had her tossing and turning on the hard ground until her whole body felt as though she'd spent the day in the saddle. Then, just as she thought she might as well give up, she finally sank into a mercifully dreamless sleep

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'Anthony darling, you're home. What the deuce is that ... that ... object you're carrying?'

'It's a dog, Mother,' Anthony answered cheerfully. 'He's called Nelson. I was just about to give him a bath. What are you doing up and about so early?'

Given that his mother never usually left her bed until well after eleven o'clock, her sudden appearance outside the stable before eight was unusual to say the least.

'I'm attending early Matins this morning,' Agnes replied, an artful wobble to her voice, 'to pray for your upcoming nuptials.'

'What upcoming nuptials?' Anthony carefully placed the wriggling dog into the large tin bath.

'The ones your father and I have waited for since the day you were born,' she answered increasing the wobble and giving a few pathetic sniffs for good measure.

Engrossed in gently cleaning the wounds on Nelson's emaciated little body, Anthony didn't immediately answer.

'Tell me you have a young lady in mind,' his mother demanded opting for

dramatic since the wobbly tone didn't seem to be getting her anywhere.

'Not a one,' Anthony responded blithely as he carefully picked the dog up and wrapped him in an old blanket.

'But ... but... I understood the Duke held a ball for you ... and darling Peter, of course,' Agnes quizzed, stepping closer in her frustration, only to be liberally covered in dirty bath water as the skinny dog shook himself.

Raising his eyes to the heavens, Anthony jumped to his feet, waiting for the histrionics. His mother didn't disappoint, tottering backwards with one hand to her forehead muttering, 'Salts,' in her best quavering voice.

Sighing, Anthony told Nelson to 'stay,' took hold of her arm gently and led her back down the path towards the house. 'This is far too early for you Mama,' he soothed, 'you need to lie down. Let me help you to your chaise longue, then Mrs. Tomlinson will bring you a nice dish of tea and some hot buttered toast.'

'But what about Matins?' she whispered brokenly.

'Matins can wait until tomorrow,' he answered patiently, helping her onto the couch.

'But how can I rest knowing you are going to be alone in that ... that ... *hovel* with no wife to take care of you?' she cried theatrically, laying her hand over her heart in evident anguish.

Anthony sighed as he fished the salts out of her reticule. 'And where do you suppose I'll find a wealthy spoiled chit willing to lower herself to take care of me?' he responded drily, waving the bottle under her nose. 'Truly, Mama I have a housekeeper who will be quite sufficient to see to my needs.'

'And a dog, evidently,' Agnes sniffed. Finally realising her hysterics were getting her nowhere, she pushed his hand away and sat up.

'For protection,' he deadpanned.

'Certainly not against fleas,' she retorted waspishly.

Feeling a sudden surge of guilt as *duty* raised its ever-present head, Anthony sighed and got to his feet. Almost since the day he was born, his parents had held on to the hope that he would marry and marry well. And naturally, once Grace had been elevated to an actual *duchess*, his mother had raised her aspirations accordingly.

He would get no peace until he gave her *something*. ‘There were several debutantes I was taken with,’ he said carefully, ‘but you must know, Mama, that I am not currently in a position to take a wife. Once Bovey Manor has been renovated, I promise I will choose a bride.’

‘But why can’t you ask Nicholas to do it for you?’ Agnes asked petulantly.

‘I think perhaps you have become too accustomed to the Duke of Blackmore’s generosity,’ Anthony retorted. ‘Nicholas has favoured me with a house and land of my own. Something I could never even have dreamed of as a boy. I cannot in all conscience allow him to do the refurbishment as well.’ Agnes opened her mouth to say something more, then catching sight of her son’s mulish features, she subsided sulkily.

‘I have put the years since Eton to good use, Mother,’ he insisted. ‘I *know* how to do what needs to be done to Bovey Manor. As soon as the house is finished, it will have a mistress.’ He paused and took her hand before adding, ‘and there will always be a place for you and Father.’

‘Thunder an’ turf,’ anybody would think I’d got one foot in the deuced grave.’ Stomping into the parlour, Flossy cradled under one arm, his father had clearly caught the end of the conversation. ‘I’ve told you to leave the boy alone, Agnes. He’ll marry when he’s good and ready.’

‘You’ve changed your tune, Augustus,’ his wife declared sharply. ‘Why the devil did you go to all that trouble to ensure good matches for the girls if not to provide our son with the very best?’

Too late the Reverend saw the trap he’d blundered into. ‘And he *will* have the best, my dove,’ he soothed hastily as Agnes turned an alarming shade of puce. As you say, we’re in a position to provide Anthony with whatever coin

he needs to ensure Bovey Manor is a house fit for a gentleman.' Hurriedly changing the subject, he turned back to Anthony. 'By the way, are you aware there's a deuced ugly looking mongrel with one leg missing out by the stable?'

'His name's Nelson,' Anthony declared defiantly.

The Reverend opened his mouth, then shut it again, 'Of course it is,' he responded at length with a sigh.

Chapter Four

George woke abruptly at the sound of two crows fighting noisily in the trees above her. For a second she was disorientated, then her memory came flooding back and with it, the sudden knowledge that the sun was too high in the sky for it to be early morning. Swearing, she leapt to her feet, stuffed her knife back into her pack and set off towards the lane at a run.

‘Damn, damn, *damn*’ she muttered as she sprinted back towards the main Plymouth Road. ‘Please, please, *please* don’t be gone.’ Her chest was burning, and she could hardly stand up when she finally crested the last hill, only to see the stagecoach disappearing into the far distance in a cloud of dust.

Abruptly, she sat down in the dirt, tears of frustration streaking down her red and sweating face. For long minutes, she simply let the tears flow. It was the first time she’d cried since escaping the Grimms, and deep inside her, she knew the tears were long overdue. When they finally dried up into the odd hiccup, she wiped her face with the back of her hand, unaware that in addition to being red and blotchy, her cheeks were now covered with streaks of dirt.

What the bloody hell was she going to do now?

She had no idea how long it would take her to walk to Plymouth, and being caught alone on such a busy highway was a recipe for disaster. Reflexively she felt for the familiar hard coin shapes nestling in between her breasts. George knew they wouldn’t last long if she was attacked and once her assailant discovered she was a girl, things would only get worse.

Climbing wearily to her feet, she hobbled a little way off the road, far enough that she couldn’t be easily spotted, and sat down next to a large clump of

bracken. Drawing up her legs, she rested her head against her knees.

This was all that damned couple's fault. Of all the bloody sheltered spots to enjoy a flyer in, they had to invade hers. She was well aware that it was the image of their actions imprinted in her mind that had kept her awake, and that made her even more angry. She was tempted to scream out her frustration when all of a sudden she heard the sound of hooves. Hurriedly, she drew her legs up even further and shrank back into the bracken, not moving until the clip clop had faded into the distance. She couldn't stay here.

Standing up cautiously, George peered over the bracken and was relieved to find the road empty. Then, for want of something better to do, she began to make her way back towards the village, her mind searching for a solution to her problem. Perhaps she could find work in the village. It would be safer than a large town. Easier to preserve her disguise. The large house she saw the night before might be in need of a labourer. Though she was small and wiry, she was strong. Years of chopping wood and other menial tasks had seen to that.

As she walked along, George looked around at the rapidly ripening fields. In a few weeks, it would be harvest time, and she was sure to find plenty of work then. All she needed to do was ensure she didn't starve to death in the meantime.



As much as he was determined not to involve his brother-in-law in Bovey Manor's renovation, Anthony was neither arrogant nor foolish enough to believe he needed no guidance whatsoever, and he knew too that Nicholas would relish being involved in at least a small part of the refurbishment, if only in an advisory role.

Consequently, as soon as he'd finished breakfast, he wrote a long list of things he needed to ask the Duke and sent a note with Maisie to ask if his grace was available after lunch. Until then, he determined to begin Nelson's training.

As soon as he spied Anthony at the stable door, the rescued dog climbed onto his remaining three legs, tail wagging furiously. ‘Come on, boy we’ll begin with a bit of a walk.’ Patting his side, Anthony walked backwards. ‘Nelson, come,’ he called. After a short hesitation, the dog came after him, perfectly at ease on three legs. Clearly, the limb had been missing for a long time. As soon as Nelson reached him, Anthony bent down and gave him a fuss together with a small piece of cheese.

That set the tone for the next half an hour, though soon Nelson didn’t appear to need any encouragement to stay with his new master. *And why would he?* Anthony thought, *given the place he’d been taken from.*

They ambled slowly along the road, away from the village. It was a beautiful day, the only sounds coming from the birds, the occasional distant sheep and Nelson’s snuffling around in the undergrowth. Busy putting another list together in his head, he failed to see the figure limping towards him. It was Nelson who barked a quick warning. Startled, Anthony looked up and frowned. Whoever it was had clearly suffered an injury of some sort and was carefully watching the uneven ground as they walked.

‘Hello,’ he called, quickening his pace. The figure looked up in alarm. ‘Do you need help?’ Anthony continued, holding out his hand in a conciliatory gesture.

The figure stopped and glanced towards the side of the road. Plainly the individual was considering whether to try and run or not. After a few seconds, common sense won out, and the stranger stopped and waited. As he got closer, Anthony could clearly see that it was a boy. How old was difficult to tell, but he suspected around fourteen or fifteen. The lad was small and thin with hair that had likely been hacked at with a knife some time ago. The jacket was obviously second hand and hung off him. ‘Are you injured?’ he asked finally reaching the boy.

‘Does ‘e bite?’ Anthony glanced behind him at Nelson who was hanging back anxiously.

‘I don’t think so.’

‘You don’t think so? ‘Ow come you ‘ave a dog and don’t know whether the bloody thing bites or not?’

‘I’ve not had him long.’ Anthony shrugged. ‘What have you done to your leg?’

‘Turned it on a bleedin stone is all.’ It was the boy’s turn to shrug.

‘What’s your name?’ Anthony asked.

‘Who wants ter know?’ Anthony simply raised his eyebrows and waited. ‘It’s George,’ came the sullen response a few seconds later.

‘Well, George, would you like me to have a look at that ankle for you?’

The boy eyed him apprehensively for a moment, then shrugged again and waved down at his swollen foot. ‘Do yer worst. I ain’t goin’ to earn any coin wi’out two bloody workin’ feet.’

So the boy was looking for work. Doubtful he’d find much in Blackmore. ‘Why don’t you sit over there?’ Anthony suggested, pointing to a large rock by the side of the road. Glancing uneasily down at Nelson who’d finally come forward to investigate, the boy backed away and hobbled towards the makeshift seat.

Removing his jacket, Anthony laid it on the ground, knelt down and reached for the boy’s surprisingly delicate foot. ‘Ow,’ the boy protested loudly as he touched the swollen ankle. ‘Steady on Mr. You ain’t no scab lifter to be bloody prodding and poking so.’

‘It’s not broken,’ Anthony observed, ignoring the boy’s outburst. ‘But it’s badly sprained.’ He sat back on his heels. ‘You won’t be doing any labouring on it for a while, I can tell you that much.’

‘Bugger it,’ muttered the boy resting the foot on the top of his shoe.

‘Didn’t your mother tell you it was rude to swear?’ Anthony commented mildly.

The boy eyed him with narrowed eyes. ‘Ain’t got one,’ he retorted. ‘Leastways, I don’t reckon I ‘ave.’ This last was muttered almost inaudibly.

‘How did you get here, George?’ Anthony queried. ‘Do you have anywhere to stay?’

The boy drew back on hearing his name and stared at his rescuer in suspicion. Anthony could clearly see the battle going on in the lad’s mind. Should he risk admitting to being homeless, or would he be better to lie and take his chances alone?

‘My father is the local vicar for Blackmore,’ he ventured, hoping to gain the boy’s trust.

‘That wot this place is called – Blackmore?’

Anthony nodded and waited.

‘I were on that coach,’ the boy confessed at length.

‘The one that had a wheel problem?’ A small nod.

‘Did the coach driver have you thrown off?’

‘No ‘e bloody din’t. I ain’t no thief.’ Anthony had to fight the urge to smile at the boy’s indignant tone.

‘I fell asleep an’ it went wi’out me,’ he confessed after a moment.

‘So you don’t have anywhere to go?’

‘I’ll stay in the stable if you’ve got one,’ the boy declared, obviously deciding he might as well be hanged for a sheep. ‘But I don’t want to stay in no vicar’s house. Bloody prayin’ mornin’, noon and night.’

‘You obviously haven’t met my father,’ was Anthony’s dry response. Climbing to his feet, he offered his arm as support and waited. After only a small hesitation, the boy eased the swollen foot back into its shoe and struggled to his feet. ‘I pay my debts,’ he declared, clinging on to his

rescuer's shoulders as they started walking. 'I ain't expectin' no charity.'

Anthony didn't answer. He gave a short whistle, and Nelson instantly looked up from his ongoing examination of something disgusting in the hedgerow, and with no hesitation at all, trotted along behind. Seeing him, Anthony gave an inward chuckle. The deuced stable would soon be full at this rate.

OOOOO

It was the bloody cove from last night, George was certain. She recognised his voice. Some vicar's son he was.

She wriggled to get rid of a piece of hay poking through the blanket he'd brought her and finished off her porridge. She looked down at her foot, swollen to almost twice its size and sighed. Things could be a bloody sight worse. She could be nursing the damage under a hedgerow. At least here she was warm and dry with a full belly.

She lay back and pillowed her head against a pile of hay, eyeing the ugly looking cur curled up near the door. *Nelson*, he'd called it. She didn't know much about British history, but everyone knew about the Admiral who'd lost his arm. The dog only had three legs, so at least her rescuer had a sense of humour. She just hoped the dog didn't end up being pickled in a barrel like his namesake.

Experimentally, she tried moving her foot, gasping as pain shot up her leg. The vicar's son was right, she wouldn't be doing any manual labour for a while. Fighting back sudden tears, she closed her eyes. Would his charity extend to the length of her recovery? Should she offer to pay for her food and shelter? Somehow she didn't think he'd want to take her money any more than she wanted to part with it. The coins strapped to her chest were all that stood between her and destitution.

And even if she was allowed to stay for the moment, as soon as her ankle was back to normal, she'd need to look for work. It was all very well to declare that she always paid her debts, but she couldn't live on bloody fresh air while

she was doing it. Groaning, she closed her eyes and thought back to the first time she'd seen her rescuer, head arched backwards in the throes of ecstasy. She didn't even know his name. He was handsome though; she'd give him that. She could understand why the unknown woman had succumbed to his charms.

Last night, she hadn't been able to see the colour of his eyes, but today she realised they were a silver grey and held a disconcerting directness. His hair was a riot of waves most women would give their right arm for, though it was clearly only given the most cursory attention. But the colour would stand him apart in even the largest of crowds. He was tall and slender, but moonlight had revealed a hard muscular chest with a smattering of hair. Unexpectedly, she felt another tickling sensation in the pit of her stomach.

Bloody hell, that wouldn't do. She dared not show any attraction towards him. She had no idea what he'd do if he discovered she was a girl. Despite the pain in her ankle, she determinedly turned over, forcing down the sudden totty-headed notion that mayhap she should find out.



'So you think two labourers will be sufficient to help me with the external work?' Anthony pressed his lips together in concentration as he studied the drawing Nicholas had unearthed showing the original plans of the house.

'Aye, if they know their trade.' Malcolm, the Duke's unorthodox valet and closest friend pointed to the shaded areas across the roof. 'This is where the slates have slipped, so your first job will be to make sure the roof is watertight before winter.'

'I'll organise to have the slates delivered in the next two weeks,' Nicholas added, holding up his hand when Anthony began to protest. 'Humour me,' was all he said.

At length, Anthony sighed and nodded. 'I'll go down to the Red Lion this evening and ask if anyone is looking for work.'

‘You’ll likely to be able to take your pick,’ Malcolm acknowledged. ‘as long as you can guarantee to get most of the repairs finished before the harvest.’

‘There’s no time to lose,’ Anthony agreed. ‘My intention had been to travel at the end of the month, but I’m thinking now two weeks.’

Nicholas nodded. ‘Tell me what else you need.’ At Anthony’s obdurate look, he added with a pained sigh, ‘Don’t worry. I’ll make sure you pay me back.’

Chapter Five

It was another two days before George learned her rescuer's name, though it wasn't he who told her. She was practising putting weight onto her foot when she heard a loud voice declare that if someone called Percy hadn't got himself a deuced backbone by now, he was unlikely to acquire one anytime in the near future. Frowning, she peeked through the stable door and saw a large man dressed in a black cassock. Aside from his robe, George didn't think he looked much like a vicar.

'Right then, where's this deuced young hemp Anthony brought home with him?'

Realising he was talking about her, George backed away from the door, heart hammering. To her, the fact that he was a clergyman meant nothing. She'd known plenty of God's so-called representatives on Earth who'd committed far greater sins than the population they'd supposedly been called to guide.

The stable door opened, and the portly figure of Blackmore's vicar stepped forward, blocking out most of the light. Nelson gave a small growl but didn't move from his bed in the corner – that was until a small whirlwind of fur dashed through the Reverend's legs and made a beeline directly for the mongrel. She watched as Nelson held his ground for all of five seconds, then did what most males would do when faced with a determined female – and it clearly was a very determined female - he rolled on his back and showed his belly.

'What's your name, lad?' The Reverend's tone was bluff but not unkind.

'George ... Sir.'

'No need to *Sir* me lad, Reverend'll do nicely. So, Anthony tells me you'll be

working for him once your ankle's mended.'

For a few seconds, George simply stared at the clergyman with her mouth open. Her immediate thought, *His name's Anthony* was closely followed by a relief so profound, she felt suddenly as light as air. Then she nodded so hard she feared her head might fall off. 'That's right, Sir... Reverend,' she stuttered. 'I'll do my best to repay him for his kindness.'

'I've no doubt you'll earn your keep, young man,' the Reverend declared. 'I might as well tell you that Bovey Manor's not for the fainthearted.'

Bovey Manor?

'Still, you look like you're no stranger to hard work, lad. Keep your head down, and do as you're told, and I'm certain you and Anthony will deal perfectly well together.'

He turned towards the two dogs who were now tussling in the hay. 'Tare an' hounds, Flossy, you're nothing but a deuced lightskirt. If you must pick a fellow to frolic with, at least choose one that don't look like he's been chewing a wasp.' And with that, he patted his side and went back down the path yelling, 'Seth! I could have walked to deuced Torquay in the time it's taken you to harness Delilah to the cart.' Flossy gave Nelson a last apologetic lick and scampered after her master.

George sagged against the bales of last year's hay lining the stable wall and slid slowly down to the floor. The initial overwhelming relief she'd felt was already giving way to trepidation. Where the bloody hell was Bovey Manor? It could be the other side of the bleeding country. But then, did it matter? She'd only chosen Plymouth because she didn't have enough coin to go any further. If she went with *Anthony*, she'd be putting herself at the mercy of a man she barely knew - but that said, the Grimms would likely never find her...

She stopped and examined her thoughts. Why was she so concerned that Henry and Martha Atkins would come after her? In truth, they were most likely relieved to have one less mouth to feed. But then she remembered Martha's outburst. Who were the Uxleys?

Somebody had paid the Grimms to look after her for as long as she could remember. Was it someone in the Uxley family? Could be she was a by blow. But if that was the case, they'd have stopped paying for her years ago. Nobody cared about bastards – especially female ones. George had wrestled with just such thoughts since she'd first heard the name. And always she came to the same conclusion. Her real name was Georgiana Uxley, and deep down, she didn't believe the Grimms would simply let her go.



'I'm given to understand that my father has already mentioned my hope that you'll come to work for me once your ankle's restored.' Anthony was carrying two bowls, one of which George hoped contained her supper. She was right. He put one on the floor for Nelson and handed the other one to her.

She took it eagerly, dug the spoon in and shovelled a spoonful of the hot stew into her mouth. She was bloody starving.

She didn't see Anthony lift his eyebrows at her voracious appetite, but if she had, she wouldn't have given a damn. In George's world, if food was offered, it was eaten as quickly as possible.

'Seemed to me there were no *ope* about it,' she said at length, her mouth still full.

'Despite my father's less than subtle phrasing, I would not force you to come and work for me.'

'I'd like to see you try,' George scoffed, finally placing her empty bowl on the floor.

Sighing, Anthony sat down next to her, and Nelson immediately snuggled up at his side.

'You are, of course, free to leave whenever you wish. There is no obligation. You certainly don't have to come and work for me.' He paused and shrugged, 'But you said you were looking for work, and I am looking to employ

somebody, so...' He trailed off and absently stroked Nelson's ears.

'What's Bovey Manor?' George asked.

'It's my home,' Anthony responded. 'Or it will be. There is some ... restoration work needed to make it fully liveable.' George didn't miss the pause. Likely the bloody house was all but falling down.

'I've already employed two men to help me put the outside to rights,' Anthony continued, and I have a housekeeper of sorts who will come in daily to see that we're fed. Now I need a labourer. One willing to work hard in return for a roof over his head, food in his belly and ten shillings a week.' She saw him look at her critically. 'You're quite small, but doubtless you'll grow some more, and you told me you're strong.'

Ha, he'd be lucky to see her grow another bloody inch, but ten shillings a week was more than she'd likely earn in Plymouth and that was without food and board. For as long as it lasted. 'What'll 'appen when the 'ouse is finished?' she questioned. 'You just throw me out?'

Anthony frowned and shook his head. 'I'm not in the habit of throwing those who serve me well onto the street. There will likely be a multitude of daily tasks to be done around the house - especially once I marry.' He gave a dark chuckle and shook his head. 'Doubtless you've had little experience with the fairer sex up to now, George, but you won't stay a lad forever, and if you wish it, there'll be a place for your wife too if you decide to get leg shackled.'

Georgiana didn't hear past *once I marry*. For some reason, she didn't want to think about her rescuer taking a wife.

'Where is the 'ouse? Is it 'ere in Blackmore?'

Anthony shook his head. 'It's about ten miles away give or take. Just outside the village of Little Bovey. The house stands in about twelve acres which I intend to farm...' He paused before finishing with, 'So what do you think? Will you come and work for me?'

In truth, George had little choice. What else was she going to do? She looked

down at the stable floor and picked at a piece of straw. She had to at least look as if she was actually considering the matter. After a couple of minutes, she looked back up and caught him staring at her, a thoughtful look on his face. Face flaming, she drew herself up haughtily and agreed to give him a six-month trial.

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A six-month trial. Anthony couldn't help chuckling. The bloody cheek of the lad. Still he was a likeable young rogue, and Anthony couldn't in all conscience simply abandon the boy. There would be little work in Blackmore, and though he knew neither his father nor Grace and Nicholas would see the lad without a roof over his head, George wasn't their responsibility.

Anthony didn't know why he felt so strongly that he had to take the lad with him to Little Bovey, he only knew that it felt the right thing to do. Ever since he'd spied the distant figure hobbling down the road, he'd felt an urge to take care of the boy. He supposed it meant he'd likely make a good father at least. He grinned to himself. Two waifs and strays in as many weeks. Peter would think him dicked in the nob.

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They arrived at Bovey Manor just as the sun began to sink, casting long shadows over the unkempt driveway. George wasn't sure what she'd expected, but it certainly wasn't a house that looked as though it had come straight from the pages of a fairy tale with its crumbling grey stone walls and mullioned windows. *Needs refurbishment* was a complete Canterbury tale. It needed knocking down more like. She glanced over at Anthony who exuded excitement. 'What do you think?' he quizzed turning towards her.

'It's a bloody dump,' was on the tip of her tongue, but instead George managed a faint. 'I reckon we've got a lot o' work to do.'

‘I think it actually looks worse than it is,’ Anthony chuckled, climbing down from the cart and grabbing hold of a wriggling Nelson. ‘Go and unlock the door, then you can help me unload the cart.’ He handed over a large ornate key, and with a sudden inexplicable surge of excitement, George took it and hurried over to the large front door. The lock was stiff, but after a few seconds, she managed to turn the key and force the door open.

The door opened up into a large hall, but before she could step inside to investigate, Anthony shouted, ‘Get your arse over here, George. I want to get everything inside and the horse bedded down before we lose the light.’

Both the horse and the cart had been a last-minute gift from Nicholas. ‘In part because I naturally wish to see you arrive at your destination safe and sound,’ he’d commented, ‘but also because my wife would never have spoken to me again had I allowed you to walk the ten miles carrying everything you own on your back.’

An hour later they’d piled the whole of the cart’s contents on the floor in a room that had evidently been a study in a former life. Nelson had been very little help, spending the whole time running backwards and forwards in a fever of excitement. At one point, George had had to stifle her laughter as the mongrel nearly sent Anthony arsey varsey into the bloody fireplace.

It was full dark by the time they’d fed and watered the horse and bedded him down in what vaguely passed for a stable, and George was truly ravenous. The temperature had dropped significantly too, and she was shivering as Anthony finally ushered her and Nelson inside the house and kicked the front door shut behind him.

The hall was almost tomblike in the darkness, and she could only vaguely see the stairs leading to a first-floor gallery above.

‘I’m hoping the stairs are sound,’ Anthony murmured, rummaging around in his pockets to find a flint and tender. ‘There should be a candle on that table,’ he added, nodding towards an indistinct shape next to another door.

‘I’ll break me bleedin’ neck at this rate,’ George muttered, feeling her way towards it and sighing with relief as her hand closed over the candle holder.

Finding her way back was easier with the small amount of light let in by a small window next to the front door. By the time she reached her employer, he'd managed to light the flint and seconds later they were standing in a pool of light.

'Right then,' Anthony declared. 'Let's see what Mrs. Parsons has left for us.' George hurried along behind him as he strode towards the door next to the now visible table.

The first room they entered was large with a few remnants of furniture covered in dust sheets. As the shadows danced, George fancied she could see things moving underneath the cloth, and she was practically treading on Anthony's heels by the time he opened the door into another hall, this time small and narrow. Yet another door and they entered a large, cavernous kitchen.

'Hold this,' Anthony ordered, handing her the candle stick and making his way towards a large table in the centre of the room. Placed on each end were two more candles. Lighting just one of them provided enough light for George to finally see the room clearly. Walking over to the table, she placed her candle at its opposite end and sat down wearily on one of several hard chairs. Nelson immediately came up and rested his head on her knee.

Much to George's surprise, having never been in a position to regard any animal as a pet, she'd very quickly grown fond of the cur. Although his stay in the stable had been considerably shorter than hers, he came to see her every day whenever his master let him out and seemed to enjoy fetching the stick she threw for him once she was able to walk well enough to venture outside.

In fairness, she hadn't been forced to live, eat and sleep in the stable during her recuperation. Indeed, Anthony had offered her a room of her own, but she preferred to keep her own company rather than having to watch her manners in a bloody vicar's house, of all things. Though she'd been provided with a bucket of water to wash her face, taking care of business had proved the most challenging thing, given that she had no access to a water closet and dared not let anyone see her perform her ablutions, but somehow she'd managed.

‘I’ll see if I can find us something to eat,’ Anthony murmured, walking over to the larder. A couple of minutes later, he emerged with a loaf of bread and a side of ham. George’s mouth watered, and Nelson immediately abandoned her in favour of his stomach.

Anthony cut all three of them a couple of generous slices and divided up the loaf. George thought she’d never tasted anything quite so fine. There was hardly any fat at all. Back with the Grimms, fat was all she’d ever been given.

‘Has anyone ever told you it’s exceedingly rude to eat with your mouth open,’ Anthony commented in a pained voice after a few moments. ‘At this rate, I’ll be able to see what you had for deuced breakfast.’

George snapped her mouth shut and glared at her employer. ‘I was just enjoyin’ it is all. Me belly thought me bloody throat ‘ad bin sliced.’

‘And from now on, no swearing whilst you’re in my employ,’ Anthony added. ‘Your mouth is like a privy, and I have no wish to offend sensitive ears.’

‘There ain’t no sensitive ears ‘ere,’ George protested, ‘and I don’t reckon Nelson gives a rat’s arse about me Ps and Qs.’

‘Nelson is not your employer – I am.’ It was the first time he’d had taken a harsh tone with her, and she felt her face flame. ‘What goes on in your head is your business, but what comes out of your mouth is mine.’

George swallowed, and after a second gave a curt nod and looked down at her food. Kind of him to give her leave to *think* whatever she wanted. She felt for the comforting hard edges of her coins, then she fought the urge to chuckle. ‘*Bastard,*’ she shouted inside. ‘*Bastard, bastard, bastard.*’

Chapter Six

The next day they were up just after dawn. George had slept in a small boxroom next to the kitchen. She'd made up a pallet using a straw mattress they'd found in one of the bedchambers and blankets they'd brought with them. She had no idea which bedchamber Anthony slept in and told herself she didn't want to know either. She was relieved to be sleeping so far away from the house's only other human occupant. It gave her the privacy she needed and meant he'd be unlikely to guess her secret anytime soon.

Nelson had started the night in the kitchen, but his whining at being left in a strange place quickly had her opening the door and letting him into her room where he happily curled up next to her on the makeshift bed. He provided extra warmth, and George couldn't imagine he had anymore fleas than she did.

Entering the kitchen, the early morning sun shone through the mullioned windows giving the cavernous room a warm inviting glow entirely different from the night before, and it was clear that the elusive Mrs. Parsons had been busy. In the daylight, George could see that every surface practically shone. Spartan it might be, but Anthony's housekeeper-in-waiting had at least made sure the floor was clean enough to eat on.

Speak of the devil. The door to the kitchen garden suddenly opened, and her employer strode in carrying a large jug of fresh milk. George's eyes goggled. She'd never seen so much milk at one time. 'Where the bloo- ... wherever did you get that?' she blurted, forgetting her anger of the night before.

'Found it at the gate. Reckon it might have been left by the next farm over,' Anthony grinned, plonking the jug onto the table before searching out two glasses. He put the remainder of the bread next to the jug and a pot of homemade strawberry preserve. 'A feast,' he declared reaching for the jug

and pouring them both a generous measure. George couldn't help herself; she grinned back before picking up her glass and draining the milk in one go. She sighed and smacked her lips, just about to burp when she remembered her manners. The creamy taste was wonderful. She reached out and helped herself to bread and preserve.

'Blimey, I'm stuffed,' she muttered ten minutes later, giving the last piece of her third slice to Nelson. 'So wot we goin' to do today then.'

An hour later, she wished she'd never asked.

Though Mrs. Parsons had cleaned the kitchen and surrounding areas within an inch of their lives, Anthony had ordered the matron to leave the rest of the house. Why the bloody idiot had thought to do such a thing, George had no idea. Indeed, in her head, she swiftly graduated to names much worse than *bloody idiot*.

The place was filthy. George lost count of the number of times she went out to the well for water. Thankfully, Anthony had instructed her to start with the downstairs so at least she didn't have to cart buckets of water up and down the stairs. *Yet*. Still, by the end of the day, the main salon at least looked good enough to entertain in.

At five o'clock, Mrs. Parsons arrived. She turned out to be a handsome woman with a capable no-nonsense manner George immediately found irritating, especially when she ran her fingers across the salon fireplace mantel with pursed lips.

She was a good cook though, George had to give her that.

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Anthony sat down on the roof and wiped the sweat from his eyes with his shirt sleeve. Squinting into the sun, he looked for any sign of a cart. Fortunately, the weather had remained clement since their arrival, but Anthony knew his luck was likely to run out very soon. Still, thankfully the slates were due today, and if the rain would just hold off for another couple

of days, he'd have the roof nice and watertight.

He heard a muttered expletive and looked over the edge of the roof in time to see George standing in a puddle of dirty water. He fought a grin. The lad had managed to refrain from swearing in his employer's presence, but Anthony had learned quite a few previously unknown obscenities whilst out of sight on the roof. True to his word though, the boy had worked hard without complaint.

'Bugger it, Nelson, do you have to get under me bleedin' feet every time I step outside the bloody door.' Anthony winced. Once he brought in more staff, he'd have to put a stop to George's foul mouth for good.

'He took a sip of water from the bottle that hung at his waist and unbeknownst to George, sat and watched the urchin march to the well for what was probably the umpteenth time since they'd been here. Anthony had cleared the area around the well, but the rest of the garden had long been allowed to grow wild.

It was entirely unlike his brother-in-law to allow one of his properties to deteriorate so, but he knew why Nicholas had done so on this occasion.

Bovey Manor had been Peter's favourite place. Though Nicholas spoke very little of his older brother, even after so many years, Anthony knew that growing up, the two boys had spent weeks of every summer in this house.

On Peter's death, the old Duke had locked it up and forbidden entrance to anyone. And when Nicholas returned on his father's demise, unable to face the ghosts of the past, it had been easier to simply put the house from his mind.

Until he began looking for a property and land to gift his youngest brother-in-law.

Since leaving Eton, Anthony had spent four years shadowing Nicholas's estate manager, learning how to manage a large estate. It had originally been

the Duke's intention to employ him once Jarvis retired. However, he slowly realised that Anthony, though quick to learn and eminently capable, did not take orders well. He was too much his own man, and Nicholas realised he needed to be his own master.

Unbeknownst to Grace, Nicholas rode to Bovey Manor and was surprised to discover that although the bittersweet memories remained in every stone, they no longer overwhelmed him. It was time to bring life and laughter to the house again, and he knew Anthony was just the man to do it.

The Duke's initial intention had been to have the property entirely renovated, though a thorough inspection revealed that the house had weathered the years of neglect remarkably well. However, when he mentioned his intention to his wife's youngest sibling, Anthony was at first speechless and then determined to undertake the necessary repairs himself.

A sudden cloud of dust appearing on the horizon had Anthony scrambling down from the roof, yelling, 'Slates are here.' Five minutes later, George appeared through the front door. Dirty and dishevelled with black streaks across his face and still wearing sopping wet britches. Anthony looked him up and down. 'You look like you've been down a bloody mine,' he commented.

'You said no swearing,' George retorted with a grin.

'For you, not me.' Anthony grinned back, and abruptly, he felt a connection between them and something else – something more. It took him aback, and he frowned, quickly turning towards the approaching cart.

'Greetings, Will,' he called to the driver as the cart came to a stop.

'Aye,' was the taciturn response as the man climbed down, and without further ado, began to unload the slates.

Anthony raised his eyebrows at George, and together they went over to the cart to help.

‘I thought Luke would be with you,’ Anthony huffed as he hefted the first load of slates.

‘Tommora,’ the man mumbled. ‘Where d’yer want these settin’?’

Anthony pointed to a cleared area near to his ladder. Clearly the man was no gabster, but at the end of the day, it meant the job would get done that much quicker.

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Reverend Shackelford finished reading through Percy’s sermon in record time. He had to admit that since the curate had wed, his readings had grown less about fire and brimstone and more about the heavenly kingdom. Though the Reverend was loath to admit it, Lizzy had definitely shifted her husband’s theological leanings. Of course, it might also be the fact that the Percy’s mother was living in sin with the landlord of the Red Lion. Hard to keep pontificating about the road to damnation when your mother’s likely to be the one holding the signpost.

With a small chuckle, Augustus Shackelford put the sheets of paper back onto the desk in the vestry and looked down at his pocket watch. Nearly five p.m. With a bit of luck, Percy would have finished polishing the alter candles by now and they could indulge in a swift tankard of ale before supper.

‘Have you heard from Anthony, Sir?’ Percy asked as they settled themselves at their usual table in the corner. The Reverend shook his head and patted his knee in invitation to Flossy. ‘Old Will left with the slates this morning, so he’ll likely send word once the roof’s on.’

‘Ere yer go, Son. That’ll put some ‘airs on yer chest.’ Mary Noon’s strident voice cut into their conversation as she plonked two tankards in front of them.

‘Mother!’ Percy protested faintly turning pink. Naturally, a ribald laugh was all he got for his objection.

Reverend Shackelford shook his head. 'I don't know why you rise to the bait,' he muttered, picking up his pint and holding it out of the way as Flossy circled in his lap. He waited until she'd made herself comfortable before taking a contented sip and adding, 'You fancy a farthing's worth of pork scratchings?' At the curate's nod, Augustus Shackelford waved towards the bar.

'A dish of pork scratchings if you please, Harry,' he shouted.

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes idly listening to the conversation at the bar.

'Yer mean that bloody lot who turned up a couple o' weeks ago?'

'Aye. I tol' 'im there weren't no lad wi' em.' At the word *lad*, the Reverend found himself suddenly paying attention.

'Don't 'old wi' no stranger askin bloody questions.'

'There was a stranger asking questions?' the Reverend interrupted.

'Aye, yer Revrenship. He wos askin 'Arry about them coves from the coach up on the Plymouth Road.'

'Tidy profit that night made me,' Harry chuckled, bringing the dish of pork scratchings over.

Reverend Shackelford frowned. 'What's that about a lad?'

'Wanted to know if there were a lad wi' 'em. Said he was blond 'aired an' skinny like.'

'That's a bit strange. What was the boy to him?' asked Percy with a frown.

'Reckoned 'e were the lad's father. But 'e 'ad a sly look about 'im. Bloody ugly too. Face like old Bernard's turnips.' There was a chorus of laughter.

'What did you tell him?' the Reverend interrupted their mirth.

‘Told ‘im nowt. Din’t like the look ‘o ‘im at all. Too smoky by ‘alf.’

‘An’ there were no lad wi’ em anyway,’ Harry added, dismissing the subject.

‘What about that boy Anthony took with him to Little Bovey?’ Percy quizzed his superior quietly. ‘Didn’t he come from that coach?’

The Reverend nodded thoughtfully, handing Flossy a pork scratching before pushing the dish away, having completely lost his appetite. ‘There’s something amiss here, Percy, but I can’t quite put me finger on it. If it was George that scapegrace was looking for, it wasn’t for any purpose that’ll benefit the lad.’

‘Well, he’s not likely to trace the boy to Bovey Manor,’ the curate reasoned, ‘but it might be worth sending a note just in case. If George is involved in some havey cavey business, Anthony needs to know about it.’

An hour later Augustus Shackleford was making his way back to the vicarage, Flossy trotting happily alongside him. For some reason, he couldn’t get the thought that someone was searching for Anthony’s fledgling labourer. In his experience, it would likely only be for one of two reasons. Love or profit.

And since the boy didn’t look like he’d ever eaten a decent meal in his life, the Reverend doubted it was out of fatherly concern. Which left profit.

So what possible benefit could the stranger gain from tracing the whereabouts of a raggedy arsed lad who didn’t appear to have sixpence to scratch with?

Chapter Seven

George saw very little of her employer over the next three days. He spent every minute of daylight up on the roof with Will and Luke. As far as she could tell, the two men were brothers. And while Will generally needed a poke up the arse to get him to say anything at all, Luke needed one to shut him up. A right bleeding jaw-me-dead, George was actually quite surprised Anthony hadn't shoved him off the roof.

Still, it made for a more entertaining supper. The first night when it was just Will, she was tempted to hit him over the head with a slate, just to see if there was anything between his ears other than fresh air. But after meeting his brother, she realised the poor bugger had likely never been able to get a word in edgeways, so he'd given up.

Chuckling, she carted her bucket up the stairs to start on the bedchambers, Nelson at her heels.

It was the first time she'd ventured further than the bottom of the stairs, and she felt a nervous excitement. In truth, she'd never actually been in a house as grand as this one before, even if it had been neglected, and couldn't really imagine what it would be like to have a bedchamber all of her own – one bigger than a bloody shoe box anyway.

Stopping at the first door she came to, George turned the handle and pushed it open with her shoulder, only to pause hesitantly on the threshold. This was obviously Anthony's room. Still bare by any well-to-do standards, it contained a large four poster bed - plainly slept in – and a huge wardrobe. Swallowing, George ventured further into the room.

He hadn't bothered to dust, and his footprints showed clearly on the wooden floor. Glancing towards the wardrobe, she saw several shirts and gentleman's

breeches hanging on the rail and at the bottom of the cupboard a pile of clearly dirty linen. George frowned. Neither of them had washed any clothing since they'd been here. Though her employer had provided her a change of clothes, she was still wearing the shirt and britches she'd arrived in. Come to think of it, she hadn't actually done more than wash her face in – well in truth, she couldn't remember if she'd ever had a bath. The Grimms believed washing too much caused an ague. Had Anthony been taking care of his ablutions? Looking round, she saw a washing bowl sitting on the windowsill. Obviously, he'd been making more of an effort than she.

Experimentally, she sniffed under her armpits and recoiled. Bloody hell, it was a wonder he hadn't said anything. She bit her lip. How the bleeding hell was she going to be able to take care of washing any more than her face? Doing her business hadn't been much of a problem – she just went outside and found a place at the bottom of the wild garden. What had Anthony been doing? Was there a water closet? She shook her head. Now was not the time to wonder how her employer was taking a piss. She had to get his room cleaned before he came down off the roof.

Then she'd think about washing.

In the event, it was Mrs. Parsons who brought the matter to a head a day later by briskly informing those sitting round the supper table that they stank worse than a dockyard privy. She went on to order George to gather the dirty clothing and leave it for her in the morning.

'Not me, Mrs,' Luke shuddered. 'I had me yearly bath less than six months ago and anyways, me an' Will ain't got no more riggin' wi' us.' He grinned, showing a mouth full of missing teeth. 'Less'n you don' mind us on the roof wearing just wot God gev us.'

Mrs. Parsons sniffed and pursed her lips but didn't rise to the bait.'

'Please accept my most humble apologies, Mrs. Parsons,' Anthony hurriedly cut in. 'I freely admit that I've been entirely neglectful of my appearance and given no thought to the distress it might cause you. But you may rest assured of my intention to change matters forthwith. George will provide you with our soiled clothing – naturally I would not expect you to wash them without

recompense - and then we will both take a bath tomorrow.'

George froze. 'Now 'ang on a minute,' she started, trying to keep the panic out of her voice.

Her employer held up his hand, and she ground to a halt. 'No complaints, George,' he barked, evidently keen to impress upon his housekeeper that he meant business. 'There's a tin bath in the stable. Drag it round to the well and see it gets filled.'

'But it'll be bloo- ... freezing,' George spluttered, dread coursing through her.

'Good for the soul,' Anthony retorted unsympathetically. 'And it's hardly cold outside.'

'I have some soap,' Mrs Parsons chimed in, clearly mollified by her employer's words. 'I'll make sure to bring it with me in the morning.'

'Mrs. Parsons, you're a wonder.' Anthony gave the housekeeper his best disarming smile - which on this particular occasion George would have given her left arm to have wiped off his bloody face.

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'I reckon one more day'll see it done,' commented Will in a rare full sentence.

'The pointin's not 'alf as bad as we feared,' added Luke. 'Roof was the worst. But if any water gets through it now, I'm a bloody lud.'

'Thank you, gentlemen. I couldn't have done it without you. I owe you both a tankard of ale when I'm back in Blackmore.'

'Aye, ye do that,' grinned Luke. 'An mebbe more 'an one.' He shook his head. 'Right then, Will, let's get this bloody job over an' done wi'. Them fields won' plough 'emsens.'

Anthony watched as both men began to plug the holes in the grey stone walls. The house was very slowly beginning to look like a home. It was still lacking furniture, but George had done a good job cleaning the downstairs, and once he'd finished the first floor, it would be time to look at repairing the inside. He could hear the lad banging and clattering through the open windows, with the occasional, 'bloody hell, Nelson.' The dog had clearly taken a shine to the boy - likely because the hound spent every night sharing the lad's bed. George obviously believed it their secret.

Anthony shook his head and made a mental note to check the mattress for fleas. Then, he chuckled to himself as he remembered George's face when told he'd got to have a bath. Anyone would think the boy was allergic to water. But Mrs. Parsons was right. They did stink. He just hadn't realised how much until the housekeeper brought it up. Still, she'd taken the pile of dirty laundry, and if he had to drag George to the bathtub kicking and screaming, so be it.

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George's banging and clattering was not so much out of zeal but temper. Every mattress she thumped and every inch of floor she slapped water on; she imagined it to be her employer's thick skull. She was actually surprised at her inclination towards violence, though underneath it all, she knew it was really fear.

The bathtub was enormous. If she filled it as Anthony asked, she could bloody well drown. Not to mention the fact that just carrying that much water might be enough to have her pushing up bleeding daisies.

But if she didn't fill it up to the top and Anthony saw her, he would immediately know she was a girl.

No, not a girl. A woman.

George felt her heart clench with dread. Would he throw her out? Mayhap he'd think her a lightskirt? She clenched her hands and squeezed her eyes

shut, trying to shut out her lurid imaginings.

'George!'

Panic threatened to swamp her. She glanced out of the window and sure enough the sun was beginning to cast longer shadows. Swallowing, she took some deep breaths in an effort to regain her composure.

'Wot's the worst 'e can do?' she muttered to herself, picking up the bucket. He couldn't *force* her to have a bath. And anyway, if she took her time, just filling the bloody thing might take her until full dark. And then he wouldn't be able to see her anyway.

Satisfied she had at least a vague plan, she stepped out onto the landing. Then, ignoring the queasiness in her stomach, she made her way back downstairs.

Anthony was nowhere to be seen when she entered the kitchen, and she had no intention of going to look for him. Instead, she opened the kitchen door and took the bucket outside to dispose of the filthy water. He'd already moved the bath. It sat next to the well, a huge contraption of doom.

'George?' his voice came again, this time louder and definitely testier.

Rapidly losing patience with the entire world, she dropped the bucket into the grass and stomped round to the front of the house. *'What now?'* she yelled, only to stop as she spied Will and Luke preparing to leave.

'I thought you'd wish to say goodbye.' Anthony's tone was soft but cool. She winced, knowing he would most certainly take her to task for her rudeness as soon as they were alone.

Damn it, she needed to compose herself. *'Forgive me,'* she murmured after a few seconds, surprised to discover she meant it. *'I'm done to a cow's thumb and in a dudgeon.'* She looked over at Will and Luke. *'I'll miss the pair o'yer,'* she confessed ruefully. *'Mealtimes'll be tedious without you.'* She ignored Anthony's raised eyebrows.

‘Aye,’ muttered Will, clicking the reins and guiding the horse in a circle until they were facing the long driveway.

As the cart disappeared out of sight, George eyed her employer with trepidation, waiting for him to ring a peal over her head. But, ‘Start filling the bath,’ was all he said curtly before disappearing in the direction of the stable.

It took her nearly an hour to fill the bath up to the top, and she was beginning to hope she might have enough time to get in and out of the tub before he returned. Dipping her finger into the water, she shuddered. As she’d predicted, it was freezing. Whimpering, she hesitated. She’d need to hide her coins first and get Mrs. Parsons’ soap.

Muttering to herself, she hurried back into the kitchen and into her little cubby hole. Then, reaching inside her shirt, she pulled at the bandages and removed her precious coins, tucking them under the mattress. Heart thudding, she grabbed the soap from the table and went back outside. Only to skid to a halt just outside the door.

Anthony was seated in the bath, very obviously naked. His breeches and shirt lay discarded on the ground. ‘It’s a good job we have our own deuced well,’ he growled. ‘You’ve used enough water here to last us a sennight. Have you got the soap?’

Hesitantly, she walked closer and held out the soap. She couldn’t help noticing that his lips were blue and resisted the urge to mutter, ‘Serves you right.’

‘I suddenly realised that we haven’t named the horse yet,’ he said, soaping his hair. ‘How about Horatio?’

‘Bloody stupid name,’ she mumbled, looking anywhere but his lean torso as he stretched his arms over his head.

‘That was the Admiral’s first name,’ he argued. ‘So we’ll have Horatio and Nelson. Perfect.’ She stifled a gasp and looked determinedly at the floor as he stood up and began soaping ... other areas.

‘Can you grab the bucket and pour it over my head,’ he asked after a minute or so. She waited until she heard the splash as he sat down, then looked up and gingerly stepped towards the tub. ‘Just dip it in there.’ He pointed to the shadowy area in between his legs. ‘But be careful what you scoop out.’ He gave a bawdy laugh, and she couldn’t help it, her face flamed.

Carefully, she filled the pail with water and tipped it over his head. ‘Bloody hell, you were right,’ he muttered, ‘it’s perishing cold. One more and then you can fetch me a bath sheet. Mrs. Parsons left two hanging by the fire to warm.’

George poured another bucketful over his head, then scurried thankfully back into the kitchen. She was beginning to feel slightly feverish. She couldn’t do it. She just couldn’t.

‘Hurry up, George. My ballocks are likely to disappear up to my naval if I sit in here much longer.’

Quickly grabbing one of the bath sheets, George, hurried back outside, just as Anthony rose from the tub. For a second, she was transfixed. His body was perfect. Lean but taut, every muscle revealed in stark relief as the water slid down the hard planes of his chest, then his thighs, back towards the bath.

Now fighting ridiculous tears, George thrust the towel into his waiting hands and hurried back towards the dubious safety of the kitchen. ‘Your turn,’ he shouted as he wrapped the sheet around his shoulders and stepped out onto his soiled clothes. She didn’t answer. She couldn’t.

‘Come on, britches off,’ he ordered cheerfully, following her into the kitchen. ‘It will only take a few minutes, and I’ll help you the same as you did me.’

Oh no you won’t, she thought hysterically.

‘Get them off, George, or I’ll do it for you.’ Trembling, she began to fumble with the buttons on her britches.

‘Wot if I drown?’ she whispered, her voice breaking pathetically. He frowned and stopped drying himself for a second.

‘You can’t swim?’ She shook her head, feeling a sudden flare of hope. Mayhap he wouldn’t force her after all. Then he shook his head and chuckled. ‘Don’t worry lad, there’s not enough water for you to drown in, least not without help, and when we’ve finished the repairs, I’ll teach you to swim.’ To George’s mortification, he dropped the sheet and strode towards the fire to claim a clean pair of breeches.

Trembling, she pushed her filthy britches down to her feet and stood in her drawers and shirt. ‘Come on, the quicker you get in, the quicker you can get out. The water won’t wash you away.’ George merely remained rooted to the spot, wringing her hands, earning her a frown.

‘What the devil’s wrong with you lad? Surely you’ve had a bath before.’ George swallowed and shook her head.

‘Well there’s a first time for everything,’ he declared, not unsympathetically, ‘and in truth, you really do stink.’ He took a persuasive step towards her, and she stepped back correspondingly, causing him to click his tongue in exasperation. ‘Trust me, you’ll feel so much better once you’re clean.’

Feeling as though a huge lump had lodged itself in her throat, George simply shook her head again.

Anthony frowned. ‘You *are* going in that bath – even if I have to carry you.’ He stared at her, and she knew the instant he recognised she was going to run. What outcome she hoped to achieve didn’t even enter her head - reason had completely deserted her. She was acting entirely on instinct – her only focus to get past the obstacle in her path.

‘George...’ he began, putting up a placating hand. Abruptly, she saw her chance, scooting round the table in an effort to get to the door before he did.

She nearly managed it too, but at the last second, he snagged the back of her shirt and yanked her back, pulling her into his chest. She fought like a cornered animal, but seconds later, he threw her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. He wasn’t even breathing heavily, the bastard. Inexorably, he carried her towards the waiting tub and without ceremony, dumped her in it.

Her breath whooshed out of her body in shock as the water closed over her head and seconds later, she came up spluttering and screaming like a banshee. Abruptly, realising he wasn't holding her down, she pushed herself upwards and started to rise from the bath, only to catch sight of him staring at her in disbelief. Heart banging against her ribs, she looked down. Her bandages had slipped leaving a trail of cloth floating on top of the water and her breasts proudly on display underneath the shirt.

She might as well have been naked.

Chapter Eight

The next morning Reverend Shackelford was still pondering the problem of young George. He couldn't recollect if the lad had ever given a family name, but somehow he didn't think so. There was definitely something sour about the whole business, though when he'd mentioned it to Agnes at supper, she claimed he was the victim of an overripe imagination, likely due to too much cheese, and offered to dose him with one of her potions.

He shook his head, finished his last piece of toast and called to Flossy. Now wasn't the time to dwell on any havey cavey goings on, he had his parish rounds to get on with.

By the time he came out of old Mrs. Morton's cottage, it was past noon. Ninety if she was a day, he'd taken to coming daily to check she hadn't gone off to her reward during the night. He was just contemplating whether he had time for a swift tankard of ale before the walk back to the vestry, when he spied an elegant coach and four sitting outside the inn. That decided him, and he hurried towards the coach, a sudden sense of foreboding causing an uncomfortable lump in his breadbasket.

There was no driver seated on the box and no crest on the side of the carriage, but everything about it spoke of wealth. Augustus Shackelford didn't waste much time inspecting the interior, just enough to be sure it was empty. Whoever it belonged to had gone into the inn clearly taking the coach driver with them.

Picking Flossy up, he pushed open the door to the inn and stood for a second to let his eyes adjust to the dimness of the candlelit interior.

'Ere's the Revren now,' said a loud voice from behind the bar. 'You can ask 'im yersen.' The landlord's voice was carefully expressionless, but the

Reverend had been frequenting the Red Lion for nearly as long as Harry had been its innkeeper and the clergyman knew immediately something was amiss.

The man standing at the bar was dressed like a gentleman, but the one standing next to him – evidently his coach driver - looked as though he'd be more at home in a boxing ring.

'How can I help you, Sir?' Augustus Shackelford asked, making his way to the bar and taking care to keep his voice suitably obsequious.

'I'm looking for a girl,' the stranger stated abruptly. Reverend Shackelford felt an immediate flood of relief until the man's next words. 'Though it's my belief she might be masquerading as a young man.'

Harry put a tankard of ale on the bar, and the Reverend took it, swallowing a large mouthful in an effort to give himself more time to decide how to answer. Inside, he was putting two and two together. George was a deuced girl. Of course she was.

'Now why would a young woman do such a thing?' he queried mildly at length.

The stranger pursed his lips and glanced over to the thug next to him. For a second, Reverend Shackelford thought the man wasn't going to answer, but after a few seconds, he responded with a clipped, 'Girl's a thief. She stole a ring from my wife.' He paused then added, 'She was a servant in our house. The ring was a valuable family heirloom, and naturally my wife is distraught.'

'That's terrible,' the Reverend commiserated, 'when did this happen?'

Evidently beginning to get irritated at the ongoing questioning the response was short. 'Approximately five weeks ago. Unsurprisingly, the chit ran as soon as she realised the theft had been discovered.'

On the face of it, the story was perfectly feasible. If George had filched some of her mistress's jewellery, she faced the noose if she was caught, so she

certainly wouldn't have lingered. And it was just over a month since Anthony had found her hobbling down the road towards Blackmore.

But something about the story didn't ring true.

Firstly, the Reverend would stake his life George was no servant. Nor ever had been. Her mannerisms were all wrong. She'd slipped into the role of a boy far too easily for it not to have been familiar to her, and she was as skinny as a pole. In his experience, servants were not generally starved, and she hadn't been on the road long enough to lose so much weight. And if she'd worked in a wealthy household – how did she get so deuced filthy in such a short period of time?

He took another sip of his ale while he worked out what to say, but as he lifted the tankard to his lips, he became aware of a low grumbling coming from the region of his armpit.

It was Flossy. And if the Reverend didn't trust his own instincts, he trusted the little dog's. She was no stranger to cruelty and recognised a turk when she saw one.

Augustus Shackleford placed his tankard back on the bar and shook his head sorrowfully. 'I'm sad your wife lost something so precious to her, and you may rest assured, Sir, that I will pray for its safe return.' He adopted a pious expression before adding, 'Naturally, I will also pray for the misguided individual who has strayed so far from the path of righteousness.'

'So you haven't seen anyone answering my description?' the stranger questioned through gritted teeth.

'My dear Sir, you haven't actually given me a description of the person in question, but if anyone here happens to see a young woman disguised as a man, is there an address to which we could send a missive?'

The man eyed the Reverend narrowly, unsure if the clergyman was pitching the gammon. 'She – or he as we suspect – is small built with dark blonde hair, cut so long.' He held his hand up to his shoulder. 'Unfortunately, her looks are altogether unremarkable.' He gave a small shrug and began to pull

on his gloves. 'It is of no matter. I suspect the chit is long gone.' He glanced over at his coach driver who obligingly elbowed those shamelessly eavesdropping out of the way. Then he strode to the door of the inn without looking back.

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George hadn't seen Anthony since her exposure in the bath tub the evening before. He hadn't returned for dinner, and in the end, she'd eaten in anxious silence, every mouthful threatening to make an abrupt reappearance. In the end, she'd given the bowl to Nelson who clearly didn't care whether she was male or female.

Mrs. Parsons had been and gone, leaving that night's supper and taking the final items of soiled clothing. When she asked about Anthony's whereabouts, George had shrugged and abruptly informed the housekeeper that her employer had not seen fit to share the information.

Once in bed, she hadn't slept at all, tossing and turning and agonising whether she should take her few belongings and leave. Groping under her mattress, she drew out her remaining coins. She could get to Plymouth easily – surely someone in the village would tell her where the nearest stagecoach left from?

The problem was, she didn't want to leave. Not now, not ever.

But nothing would ever be the same. He would never again treat her with the casual friendship that had characterised their relationship thus far. She thought back over the few weeks she'd spent with Anthony Shackleford and finally acknowledged they'd been the best weeks of her entire life. She fought back a sob, tucking the coins back under the mattress. There would be no hiding them in her bodice – if she managed to find one. If he allowed her to stay, it would not be as a boy. And what the devil would Mrs. Parsons say when she found out?

She'd been such a bloody idiot. How long did she really think she'd be able

to fool him? Fool anyone? And then what would happen to her? She'd be lucky if she ended up in a nanny house. The alternative - plying her trade on the streets would be infinitely worse.

She couldn't hold back the tears any longer. Drawing up her knees, she curled into a ball and wept, until at length, emotionally and physically exhausted, she finally closed her eyes and slept.

'What's your name? Your *real* name?' Her head shot up as Nelson joyfully leapt to his feet, throwing himself at his master who was standing in the doorway. Absently, Anthony reached down to pet the dog, but his eyes never left hers. She wiped the sleep from her face with her sleeve and sought to get her thoughts in order.

'Georgiana,' she whispered finally. He stood for a second longer, then sighed and turned away.

'Get dressed,' was all he said, his voice brusque and cold.

Feeling sick, unable to stop her trembling, George pulled on her britches and tucked her shirt inside. There was no point in rebinding her breasts. That ship had already sailed. Finally, after scrubbing at her face with her fingers, she hesitantly made her way into the kitchen.

The outside door was open, and he was leaning against the door frame looking out over the wilderness that had once been a kitchen garden. He didn't turn as she came in. 'What the bloody hell am I to do with you?' He muttered. George had no answer to give him that would possibly make things any better, so she stood in silence, wiping her sweating palms on her britches.

After another five minutes, he finally turned round. His face was impassive, giving nothing of his thoughts away. 'Are you hungry?' he asked indicating the bread and preserves already on the table. She shook her head. 'Well, sit anyway,' he continued. 'We might as well be comfortable as we talk.' George was about as far from comfortable as she could possibly get, but she pulled out the chair and obediently sat on it, twisting her fingers in her lap.

‘If I ask you why, will you tell me the truth?’ Anthony asked levelly. George paused, staring down at her hands, then she looked over at him and nodded. What had she got to lose?

It took nearly an hour for her to tell her story in its entirety, and throughout the telling, Anthony said nothing, simply allowing her to speak. When she finally got to the part where she missed the stagecoach to Plymouth, she trailed off and shrugged, her throat hoarse from speaking.

For a moment he was silent, then, ‘Did you steal the coins?’ She opened her mouth to offer an indignant retort, but he held up his hand. ‘If you lie to me again, I swear I’ll take you to the workhouse myself.’ His voice was hard, his expression grim, and George knew he meant every word.

She swallowed and shook her head. ‘I don’t know who the lady was,’ she whispered, but she offered me the three guineas. A-at first, I was afeared to take ‘em.’ Her voice grew stronger. ‘I’ve heard of so-called *ladies* combing the streets for the likes o’ me, promisin’ hot food an’ a bed, all the while hopin’ to make a bloody profit from sellin’ us to the ‘ighest bidder.’

‘Don’t swear,’ Anthony commented, almost absently, before nodding at her to continue.

George took a deep breath. ‘The lady took ‘old of me ‘and put the coin right in the middle o’ me palm and closed me fingers o’er it. Just like this.’ She mimed the actions. ‘Then after ‘avin’ a quick look round, she jus’ walked away.’

‘What happened then?’

George shrugged. ‘Well, I weren’t goin’ to ‘ang around and wait to get bloody robbed. Who knows wot cutpurse might ‘ave been watchin’. So, I legged it.’ She looked down at her lap. ‘Saved me life that woman did. I ‘ad enough to get me some togs and fill me belly. The rest I saved for when I got to Plymouth.’

‘Do you want to continue your journey to Plymouth?’ Anthony quizzed, his voice short. George shook her head. ‘No, never,’ she declared vehemently.

Then she swallowed and blurted, 'I want to stay 'ere wi you and Nelson.'

Anthony leant back and ran his fingers through his unruly hair. 'You know I'm an 'ard worker,' George continued, 'an I swear I'll never tell you a plumper ever again.' She watched him close his eyes, uncertainty etched in the tenseness of his mouth. She felt as though he was a bloody judge, deciding whether to send her to the gallows.

But then his eyes opened, and she knew. She *knew* he wasn't going to send her away.

'I think for the time being while there are only the two of us in the house, you should continue dressing as a lad,' he decided. He paused before adding ruefully, 'I think Mrs. Parsons would likely have an apoplexy if she should come upon you in a dress.'

George simply nodded, not trusting herself to speak lest she burst into relieved tears.

'I have no need of a female servant in any case,' he continued, 'but once the repairs are complete and I begin hiring staff, if you still wish to stay, that's when you will reinvent yourself as Georgiana and apply for the position of...' he hesitated, trying to think of another role his erstwhile labourer might be suited for. In the end, he shook his head and shrugged... 'Whatever position I think is suitable at the time.'

'You won't regret it, I promise,' George vowed.

'As soon as you've eaten, you'd better go and ... do whatever it is you do to hide your ... err... femaleness.' Anthony waved vaguely towards her chest area while focusing determinedly on helping himself to preserves.

'I will,' George responded, feeling as though she'd just been handed the moon. Then, suddenly finding her appetite, she helped herself to bread, adding, 'And no one'll ever know.'

Chapter Nine

‘Well, wot the bloody ‘ell wos that all about?’ Harry shook his head and glanced towards the window, watching the stranger’s carriage depart.’

The Reverend fought to keep his face impassive, while inside he was frantically wondering what the devil he should do. ‘I’ve no idea,’ he managed nonchalantly at length. Picking up his tankard, he took another sip of his ale.

‘A bloody girl dressed as a lad? I’ve never heard the like.’

‘Bag o’ moonshine if you ask me.’

I ain’t seen no chit in britches or otherwise.’

‘Wot you goin’ ter do, revren?’

‘Do?’ Reverend Shackelford put Flossy back down on the floor. ‘Naturally, as I told the gentleman, I’ll pray for a satisfactory conclusion to the matter.’

‘Pardon me, but it ain’t like you to just sit around an’ pray, your revrenship. Looks to me like there’s something smoky goin’ on. Din’t like that nob’s eyes. Dead they was.’

The Reverend determinedly finished his pint. ‘Well, if I happen to bump into a chit dressed as a lad, I’ll decide on the best course of action then. Come along, Flossy.’ He started towards the door, before pausing and turning back. ‘If any of you gentlemen happen to spy such an irregularity, I’ll be at the vicarage.’

It wasn’t the Reverend’s habit to turn up at the Duke and Duchess of Blackmore’s house unannounced, but such was his apprehension, he decided

to walk there directly. His son-in-law would know what to do.

Unfortunately, only his daughter, Grace was in residence. 'He's gone to Wheal Tredennick for a meeting with Jago,' the Duchess explained to her father as they waited for tea.

'So why didn't you go with him?' the Reverend asked with a frown. 'I'm certain Charity would be happy to see you.'

'She would if she was there,' Grace answered, 'but she's visiting with Chastity in Cottesmore.' She paused as Huntley came in with a tray of tea and biscuits.

'So,' she commented at length, handing him a dish of tea. 'As much as it's a delight as always to see you, Father, why are you here.' Her voice was dry but wary. She knew her father well enough to know this was no social visit, especially since trouble generally followed him around like a bad smell. While she waited, she took a biscuit, broke it up and fed the pieces to Flossy who was gazing at her adoringly.

'The thing is...' Reverend Shackleford started, only to pause as Grace held up her hand.

'Is this you meddling in affairs that are none of your business, Father?'

'Certainly not,' her father retorted indignantly. 'Thunder an' turf, I'm cut to the deuced quick that you could think such a thing. Why, not one of you girls would be married today if it weren't for my quick thinking over the years.'

Grace raised her eyebrows. The fact that all his daughters had made good marriages was despite his involvement, not because of it. Well, mayhap that was not strictly true, but whenever he was left to his own devices, things had a tendency to go to hell in a handcart. She gave an inward sigh. No one could ever accuse her father of being dull.

Gritting her teeth, she forced a conciliatory smile and offered him a biscuit. Then she waited.

‘The thing is,’ Reverend Shackelford repeated, ‘Anthony’s found himself this labourer to help with the renovations of Bovey Manor.’ He paused and took a slurp of his tea.

‘And...?’ Grace encouraged.

‘Well, the *first* problem is, it looks as though this deuced labourer could well be a female, but Anthony don’t know it.’ He paused again and frowned. ‘At least I don’t think he knows it. I deuced well hope not anyway, I didn’t bring him up to fornicate with paid employees.’

‘What the devil are you talking about, Father?’ Grace interrupted his tirade in exasperation. ‘You think Anthony is having an illicit relationship with a woman masquerading as a man?’

‘No ... yes ... well, in truth, I don’t know if there’s anything havey cavey about their relationship.’

Grace blinked. ‘And that’s only the *first* problem?’ She picked Flossy up and set the little dog on her lap. Otherwise she might have been tempted to get to her feet and box her father’s ears.

‘I suggest you start at the beginning, Father.’ She used her clipped Duchess of Blackmore voice which was usually effective in ensuring the Reverend presented the facts without any of his legendary dissembling.

Augustus Shackelford took a deep breath, then presented the specifics as he knew them.

When he’d finished, Grace simply stared at him without speaking. How was it that her family continually became embroiled in such bizarre events? She was tempted to dismiss the whole thing as a bag of moonshine but for the description of the gentleman looking for this *George*.

Stalling, she leaned forward and picked up another biscuit, and nibbling on it absently before sharing the last piece with Flossy. She couldn’t help wishing that Felicity was here in Nicholas’s absence, but the matron was visiting friends in Bath and did not intend to come home until the end of the month

when Nicholas and Malcolm returned.

‘What do you think, then?’ the Reverend demanded when he could wait no longer. ‘Naturally, I’d have brought the whole havey cavey business to Nicholas had he been here.’

Grace shook her head. ‘I really don’t know what to think,’ she confessed. ‘We don’t even know if this ... missing person *is* the same labourer Anthony employed.’

‘Well, given that the fellow wasn’t the first person to ask, and this George fits the description...’ Reverend Shackelford trailed off.

‘Did the lad have any feminine ways about him?’ the Duchess quizzed. ‘Anything at all that might lead you to think he wasn’t a boy?’

Her father shook his head. ‘He was small, granted. But his face was so deuced dirty, it was difficult to see his features clearly.’

‘So, we must assume that Anthony still believes this George is a boy, and the only way we’ll put that to the test is by going to Bovey Manor to discover it for ourselves.’

Tucking Flossy under her arm, Grace stood up and walked over to ring the bell summoning Huntley. ‘If this labourer does turn out to be female, we’ll know that she is the person these unpleasant people are looking for. And at the very least, we must warn Anthony.’

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As soon as he left Grace, the Reverend hurried back to apprise Percy of the current state of affairs. He could hardly disappear off to Little Bovey without taking the curate into his confidence - especially as he had no intention of revealing his destination to Agnes for obvious reasons.

Though his nearest and dearest might scoff, in truth Reverend Shackelford did not really enjoy telling plumpers – mostly because his memory wasn’t

what it was, and he was finding it more and more difficult to keep track of his fabrications. Nevertheless, he was entirely convinced the Almighty had no objection to the odd Banbury story as long as it was in a good cause.

And as far as he was concerned, keeping his wife in the dark definitely fell into that category. Consequently, when he trotted off, Agnes was under the impression he was spending the night with old Mrs. Morton to keep her company on her way upstairs. As far as the Reverend was concerned, it wasn't too far from the truth since he'd very likely be doing just that in the very near future...

A mere three hours later, the Reverend was climbing into the Duke of Blackmore's comfortable carriage.

'Flossy!' A youthful voice he'd not expected to hear greeted his entrance. Jennifer Sinclair held out her hands for the little dog as the Reverend sat down.

'What the deuce are you doing here?' Reverend Shackleford quizzed her bluntly.

'It's lovely to see you too, Grandfather,' the young woman answered drily, taking a delighted Flossy out of his arms and holding her up to kiss her wet nose.

The Reverend hmphed and turned to Grace. 'I'd have brought Agnes along if I'd known we were going on a jaunt.'

Grace clucked and sighed. 'You are so deuced pig-headed sometimes, Father. If this George person does turn out to be a young woman, then Jenny is precisely who we need to put her at her ease and persuade her to tell us exactly what is going on.'

OOOOO

Anthony attacked the wilderness at the end of the garden with a ferocity that

would have impressed Peter if his best friend had been witness, though he might have been surprised to learn that anger was the motivation, since Anthony very rarely lost control.

In truth, Anthony himself had no idea why he was so damn angry. So George had lied to him. It wasn't as if she hadn't had good reason, and he'd undoubtedly have done exactly the same had he been in her position. He slashed viciously at a large clump of goosegrass. He had no need of a bloody maid. He'd hired a workhand. *A man to labour* for him.

Standing up, he swiped at the sweat on his forehead. He should have been tackling the inside, not wasting time out here on a vegetable garden he wouldn't be planting until the following year. But for some reason, he couldn't face being cooped up where he could hear George clattering about. He needed space to be alone with his thoughts. He gave a dry laugh – much good that was doing him.

Leaning on the scythe, he sighed. Why the hell *was* he so angry? Nothing had really changed. She'd already proven herself a hard worker and had undertaken every task he'd asked of her and more.

So she didn't have any ballocks – what difference did that make? And once the house was finished, she'd no doubt make a ... well, she'd likely make a... He paused, trying to imagine George bowing and scraping, toadying up to his guests and abruptly burst out laughing. The truth was she'd make a bloody awful maid. He shook his head. Dear God, what a mess.

But he couldn't simply dismiss her. Where the hell would she go? The thought of her alone in Plymouth made him feel sick. For all her bravery and bluster, it was only a matter of time before she came up against a situation she couldn't wriggle out of. Whether he liked it or no, she was his responsibility.

And with that acknowledgement, Anthony felt a sudden sense of peace wash over him. The anger died. George was his to take care, of and that was all there was to it.

Why the acknowledgement provoked such a feeling of ease, he chose not to

dwell on. Instead, he returned the scythe to the stable and after making a bit of a fuss of Horatio, headed back into the house.

‘George!’ he yelled from the bottom of the stairs, ‘get your arse down here.’



By early evening the whole house had finally been cleaned from top to bottom. ‘And now we can make a mess of it all over again when we start the inside repairs,’ Anthony declared cheerfully, scraping the mud off his boots in the kitchen.

George eyed him warily. Why the bloody hell was he in such good humour? Only hours ago, he’d been threatening her with the workhouse. She was sitting at the table polishing the few brasses still remaining in the house, in between throwing a stick for Nelson through the open kitchen door. She didn’t really know what to say or how to act. She felt unaccountably awkward, a nervousness she’d never experienced when he’d believed her a boy. In contrast, he seemed calm and relaxed which was unexpected given his anger only hours earlier.

She’d learned the hard way not to trust a sudden change of heart. Old man Grimm usually followed up a smile with a smack in the mouth. Anthony was as different from her foster father as night and day which made his sudden about-face treacherous in a way she’d never experienced before.

So she focused her attention on Nelson and the brasses and tried not to remember the sight of her employer naked in the bathtub.

‘Penny for them.’ Anthony’s low voice interrupted her musings, and hesitantly she looked over at him. His eyes were dark silver in the waning light, his hair tied carelessly back in a queue. She could just see a smattering of hair above his open shirt, and she thought she’d never seen anyone so beautiful. Abruptly, she turned back to her rubbing. ‘I ain’t thinkin’ nothin,’” she muttered. ‘Thinkin’ gets a body into trouble.’

For a few minutes Anthony didn’t respond, but George could feel his eyes on

her as she stared determinedly down at her brasses. Then, at length, he slapped his thighs and stood up. 'There's no sense in doing anything more this evening,' he decided. 'We'll make sure to be up bright and early tomorrow and get started on the sitting room.' He looked down at his pocket watch and went to shut the door. 'It's another two hours until Mrs. Parsons is due. Once you've finished those brasses, do you fancy a game of cribbage?'

George looked up and frowned. 'Never played it,' she shrugged, warily watching as he seated himself at the table. He leaned on his elbow and stared at her.

'Wot?' she said uncomfortably after a few seconds.

'We're going to have to work on your diction,' he sighed. 'It's very difficult to understand what you're saying sometimes, especially when you're being emotional.'

'I ain't never emotional,' she growled.

'I am never emotional,' he corrected.

George glared at him. 'If you're going to continue working for me, it's important that you provide a good first impression,' he insisted at her mulish look. 'If you're going to fight me at every turn...' He let the sentence trail off and raised his eyebrows.

Sighing, she acquiesced '*I am never emotional,*' she repeated mockingly. Ignoring her sarcasm, he nodded his head. 'Good. Now, would you like to engage in a game of cribbage?'

She pursed her lips before replying haughtily, 'I have never played it, but if you wish to teach me, I am certain I shall be beating your arse by the end of the evening.' He stared at her for a second, then burst out laughing. She grinned back as he shook his head and went to fetch the cards.

Her smile faded as he turned his back. Somehow she had to rid herself of this bacon brained attraction. Anthony Shackelford weren't for the likes of her, and she didn't dare allow herself to forget it.

Chapter Ten

‘It will be quite late by the time we reach Little Bovey, and I don’t believe descending without warning on Anthony would be advisable,’ Grace declared as the carriage got underway. ‘Especially as I very much doubt he will have any rooms ready to receive visitors.’

‘And if we simply turn up out of the blue, we might frighten the girl away,’ added Jennifer.

Reverend Shackelford frowned, but after a second, nodded his head. ‘I could do with a tankard of ale,’ he muttered. ‘I’m getting too deuced old for all this gallivanting round the country.’

Grace gave an incredulous snort. ‘I’ve not noticed any lessening of your urge to meddle,’ she retorted.

The Reverend sighed. ‘Deuced boring with just me and Agnes at the vicarage,’ he admitted. ‘I actually have to talk to her.’

‘And after all the effort you put in to seeing us all wed,’ the Duchess teased, struggling not to laugh. ‘And anyway, what happened to Agnes’s companion?’

It was the Reverend’s turn to snort. ‘Lasted all of three weeks. Said she feared for her life after Agnes gave her some concoction to help with her piles.’

Grace winced. ‘You really should put a stop to Stepmother’s obsession with physicks,’ she declared, ‘especially her proclivity for practising them on everyone she comes into contact with. It’s only a matter of time before she kills someone.’

‘Very likely me,’ her father muttered. ‘And don’t think I haven’t tried, but

any deuced time we have the conversation, she swoons onto the nearest object which is all very well except when it happens to be me. Nearly gave me a deuced apoplexy the last time I had to carry her to the parlour.’ He shook his head and sighed; a picture of weary martyrdom.

Pressing her lips together in an effort not to giggle, Grace composed her face into one of sympathy, but her eyes caught Jennifer’s causing her daughter to cough hurriedly into Flossy’s fur.

‘I believe there’s an inn in Little Bovey that has a reasonable reputation, she said after she had her urge to laugh under control. ‘I’ve told Thomas to drive us straight there. We shall take a room for the night and visit with Anthony in the morning.’ Her father brightened and nodded. ‘Hopefully, they’ll have a good beef stew,’ he declared, rubbing his hands. ‘Tasty they might be, but I have to confess I’m getting deuced weary of Mary’s mutton pies.’



‘She din’t get as far as Plymouth, m’lud, I’d stake me life on it.’

‘I would not make such a jest if I were you.’ The icy response caused beads of sweat to gather along Henry Atkins’s forehead.

‘I’ll find ‘er, yer ludship,’ Atkins avowed, feeling the nervous sweat begin trickling down past his ears.

‘We know she got on the Plymouth stagecoach,’ the cold voice continued evenly, ignoring the large man’s vow. ‘It had a problem with one of its wheels not far from the village of Blackmore. The coach driver remembers a lad getting off with all the other passengers, heading for the Red Lion Inn, but the boy didn’t get back on the stagecoach the following morning.

‘According to those who were present that evening, a young boy was not among those who arrived at the inn looking for accommodation.’ There was a pause and the sweat dripped down into Henry Atkins’s collar. ‘However, when I questioned the clergyman, he was hiding something, I’m certain of it.’

‘I din’t see no God botherer, but no one I spoke to ‘ad seen a lad,’ Henry hurriedly asserted.

‘There’s one more thing you need to take into consideration.’ The voice had turned back to ice. ‘Blackmore is Nicholas Sinclair’s country seat. If she comes to his attention, well let’s just say, it will be infinitely worse for you, Henry.’

OOOOOO

‘Hold it still,’ Anthony grunted. ‘Whatever you do, don’t move.’

‘Ow long for,’ George panted back. ‘I swear Goliath ‘issen would ‘ave dropped it by now.’

‘Goliath *himself*,’ Anthony corrected eyeing the length of wood critically. After a few seconds he nodded to himself and hammered in three nails at exact intervals.

‘That’s it, you can let go.’

‘Bloo- ... botheration, it took you long enough.’ George grumbled wiping her hands on her already grubby britches.

‘It’s crucial to get it just so from the first piece,’ Anthony answered, standing back to admire the restored panelling in the sitting room.

‘Do we ‘ave to do this fer the 'ole lot?’ George eyed the wall in dismay. ‘It’ll take forever.’ Anthony shook his head.

‘Only for the pieces containing woodworm and rot,’ he answered. ‘See?’ He pointed to a length of wood with small holes.

‘They worms in there?’ George muttered, stepping back in case one should suddenly pop out.

‘*Are there* worms in there,’ Anthony corrected. ‘And no, they’re not really

worms, more like small insects.’ George made a face, and he laughed. ‘Come on let’s replace the next bit.’

‘Well, you can take it down,’ she shuddered, ‘I ain’t...’ she paused and pulled a face. ‘*I’m not* going anywhere near no worms.’ Anthony shook his head and went to grab the hammer, when suddenly he heard the sound of a carriage. Frowning at his companion, he put the hammer down and strode towards the hall, throwing open the front door. Apprehensive but curious, George followed, taking care to stay behind her employer.

‘*Grace!*’ she heard him say, astonishment evident in his tone. Then, ‘*Father?*’ Peeping round him, George felt her heart thud. The carriage clearly belonged to somebody very flush in the pockets. She started to back up a step when suddenly a small whirlwind of fur took a flying leap from the coach and hurtled towards them, only to be intercepted by Nelson who’d come round the side of the house. The two dogs rolled about, clearly delighted to see one another, and George found herself smiling, only to have the grin wiped off her face as she watched a young woman begin to climb down.

‘What the deuce are you doing here, Jenny?’ Anthony shook his head before griping, ‘If you were planning on a family outing, a note warning me of your visit would have been helpful.’

‘I’m so sorry, darling.’ The beautifully dressed woman who was apparently named Grace came towards them. On route, she tripped over a stone and George stifled a small snigger. Anthony grinned, quipping, ‘And you’re not even in the house yet, dearest sister.’

Sister? Curiosity getting the better of her, George stepped to the side to gain a better view. As the lady got closer, it was evident she was much older than Anthony and certainly did not appear in any way embarrassed by her stumble as she unceremoniously pulled Anthony into a hug. ‘Forgive our abrupt arrival,’ she declared, stepping back to eye her sibling critically. ‘You’re looking well, Tony. Hard work clearly agrees with you.’

Anthony favoured her with a dry look and turned to his father and the young woman he’d called Jenny. George stared at her curiously. It was very clear the girl was her employer’s niece. She and her mother were like two peas in a

pod. Abruptly, George became aware she was being scrutinised in return.

Face burning George took another step back, realising it wasn't just the young woman who was staring at her, she was being observed by all three visitors. She glanced up at Anthony, resisting the urge to hold onto his arm.

'Hello again, George,' the Reverend bellowed jovially. 'When did you reckon on telling Anthony you're a woman?'

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There was a stunned silence as his daughter and granddaughter glared at the clergyman in unison. George had no idea what to do. Her instinct was simply to run, but before she could move, Anthony stepped in front of her. 'I'm already aware of the fact,' he commented evenly. 'Is that why you're here?'

Grace gave one last exasperated look at her father and stepped forward. 'We have much to tell you, dear one,' she explained. 'Information that I believe - Georgiana is it? - will wish to be privy to. Can we take this discussion somewhere more comfortable?'

For a second Anthony remained where he was, then with a small sigh, he stepped aside. 'We'll go into the kitchen,' he murmured. 'Lead the way, George.'

With an uncertain look towards her employer, Georgiana resisted the urge to bolt through the open door and led the way to the back of the house.

'Do you have any tea?' Grace asked as she looked around the spotless kitchen with approval.

'We're not heathens,' commented Anthony drily, striding towards the range in the huge fireplace. The visitors seated themselves at the table while George hovered near the back door, watching them warily.

'The renovations appear to be going well,' Grace commented. Anthony nodded, handing her a dish of tea. 'The outside is finished, and we started on

the inside this morning.'

'I have to say it looks cleaner than I was expecting,' Grace observed with a chuckle.

'We have a housekeeper who comes twice a day,' Anthony informed them, sitting down. The fact that he'd said, 'we,' on both occasions was not lost on either Grace or the Reverend. Neither was the smile he favoured George with when he requested she come to the table.

After a brief hesitation, George stepped away from her only means of escape and took a seat next to Anthony. Instinctively, her eyes sought those of the only other young woman in the room. Jennifer smiled at her reassuringly.

'So, as lovely as it is to see you,' Anthony commented mildly. 'Why are you here? Surely you haven't come all this way simply to tell me my labourer is female?'

Grace looked anxiously at the Reverend.

'Come along, Father, spit it out.' Anthony's patience was clearly wearing thin.

Augustus Shackelford hmphed before taking a deep breath and turning towards George. 'Some people are looking for you, lass,' he stated without preamble. 'And they're not characters I'd be happy bumping into in a dark alley.'

George felt her stomach lurch, and for one horrifying second thought she was about to cast her account.

'Did they say why?' Anthony's calm response slowed the churning slightly. The Reverend shook his head.

'The first one who turned up looked as though he hadn't washed in the last decade. Bit of a puff guts with few teeth and even less hair. Didn't mention anything about his quarry being a girl.' Reverend Shackelford turned to George who had gone a sickly pale colour. 'Does that ring a bell?' he asked

shortly.

George swallowed convulsively and unconsciously turned to Anthony. 'It's Atkins,' she breathed, terror lacing her voice.

Without thinking, Anthony reached out and touched her shoulder reassuringly. 'You said he was the first one. Who was the other?'

The Reverend shook his head and shrugged. 'No idea but I didn't like the look of him either. Dressed like a gentleman with the manners to go with it. But he had an odd kick to his gallop.' The clergyman paused to think. 'He stated from the outset he was looking for a girl. I didn't immediately recognise the fact that both men were looking for the same person. Until he said the chit he was looking for might be dressed as a lad.'

The Reverend stopped to take a sip of his tea before looking over at George. 'The fellow said you'd stolen a family heirloom,' he declared gruffly.

Georgiana shook her head, fighting back tears. 'Whoever 'e is, e's pitchin' the gammon,' she whispered. Then she looked over at Anthony before adding, 'I'd bet a shillin' the first cove wos me foster father, though why 'e's wastin' time lookin' fer the likes o' me I ain't got no idea.'

'So you have no inkling who the gentleman might be and why he would be looking for you?' quizzed Grace.

'I ain't stolen nuffin' from no gentry cove,' George reaffirmed. 'Why the 'ell 'e's lookin' fer me...' She spread her hands in a gesture of bafflement.

'I think it would help if you told my family what you told me,' Anthony suggested. 'I promise you it won't go further than this room.'

'I don't think we can promise any such thing,' Grace interrupted. 'If George is in some kind of trouble, burying our heads in the sand will help nothing.'

George looked around the table. For some reason, the Grimms were looking for her, and not only them but some nob. Her gut told her she was in trouble – though why she couldn't even begin to fathom. The four people sitting in this

kitchen hadn't judged her and had simply accepted her word that she hadn't filched some toff's family heirloom. Taking a deep breath, she told them everything.

Chapter Eleven

‘Can you remember how old you were when you came to live with the Atkins?’ The sympathy in Grace’s voice caused Georgiana to swallow several times before she could croak out an answer.

‘I reckon I couldn’t ‘ave bin more ‘an two or three,’ she managed hoarsely at length. ‘But then I don’ rightly know ‘ow old I am now.’

Grace glanced at the two men present before asking quietly, ‘How long have you had your menses?’ George’s face coloured, but she answered without hesitation.

‘More ‘an six years.’

‘Then I would suggest you’re at least seventeen, possibly eighteen,’ the Duchess guessed.

‘The same age as me,’ Jennifer declared with a warm smile. Georgiana found herself smiling hesitantly back.

‘Can you remember anything from before that time?’ Anthony asked. George began to shake her head, then creased her brow.

‘Only flashes,’ she muttered at length. ‘I remember someone cryin’. Cryin’ so ‘ard like their ‘eart wos broke.’ She narrowed her eyes, lost in thought, then finally shook her head and shrugged. ‘That’s all.’

‘Was it a woman?’ Jennifer asked, intrigued. George screwed her face up, trying to remember.

‘I dunno,’ she admitted after a few minutes. ‘I mean, it’s more likely it were a

woman but...' She trailed off.

'If someone's been paying Henry and Martha Atkins to look after you,' Reverend Shackelford declared, 'then that tells me someone wants to keep you out of the way. Likely you were born on the wrong side of the blanket.'

'I've thought o' that,' George nodded. 'They never spoke of it, 'cept once.' She paused to gather her thoughts. 'I spilled some milk, and Martha was in an 'igh old dudgeon. Screamin' in me face she was. Said I wasn't worth the pittance they got for me. Then she said, *bloody Uxleys*.' She looked round at the silent table. 'I reckon that might be me real name. Georgiana Uxley.'

'Do you know of a well-to-do family with that name?' Anthony asked his sister. Grace shook her head.

'That doesn't really mean an awful lot. Felicity would be much more likely to be able to place them.'

'But you're not likely to see her until the end of the month,' Jennifer grumbled, 'Surely we can't afford to wait that long.'

'But then, what's the chance of anybody tracing her here?' the Reverend declared. 'Little Bovey's not exactly well known, even to those living in Devonshire.'

'But most of the villagers in Blackmore know where I've gone,' Anthony countered. 'If the individuals looking for George are determined enough, it's only a matter of time before someone mentions I brought an unfamiliar lad with me to do some labouring.'

'I don't reckon anybody in Blackmore has seen George,' his father retorted, 'and I certainly haven't mentioned you taking on a boy to help you with the work here.' Reverend Shackelford thought back to the uncomfortable feeling he had in the Red Lion when he first heard about the puff guts who was possibly Henry Atkins.

'Will and Luke know,' Anthony said abruptly. His father groaned.

‘Will’s no problem,’ they’ll be lucky to get a grunt out of him. But *Luke*. Thunder an’ turf, he’s a right jaw-me-dead. Ask him the time, and he’ll tell you how to build a deuced watch.’ The Reverend shook his head in frustration.

‘If we return to Blackmore immediately, we might be in time to ensure he doesn’t say anything,’ Grace declared. ‘I mean, it’s unlikely the varmints will be back quite this quickly.’ She shook her head and turned back to George. ‘It’s my belief it will be safest for you to remain here with Anthony,’ she continued, her voice gentle. ‘We will return to Blackmore immediately and seek out Luke and Will.’ Then turning her attention to Anthony, she added, ‘I will send a missive to Felicity immediately to ask if she has any knowledge of the Uxleys.’

‘And me and Percy will take a visit to Exeter,’ the Reverend added. ‘It’s a long time since we’ve paid our respects to the Bishop. While we’re there we can make a few discreet enquiries.’

Georgiana felt her eyes well up again. ‘You’ve all bin so kind,’ she whispered. ‘An’ you ‘ave me thanks, from the bottom of me ‘eart. I dunno ‘ow I’ll ever repay yer.’

She looked over at Jennifer and found the other woman looking at her strangely. ‘By ‘eart, do you mean *heart*?’ she quizzed. George winced and glanced over at Anthony before nodding her head, clearly ashamed.

‘Anthony ... I mean, Mr. Shackelford is trying to get me to speak proper, but I reckon it’d be easier if ‘e jus’ cut out me tongue.’

Jennifer held out her hand and shook her head. ‘No ... no ... I’m so sorry, I wasn’t criticising your speech.’ She paused, then ploughed on. ‘It’s just that you said ‘eart for *heart*, ‘ave for *have*, and ‘ow for *how*.’ She looked round the table. ‘What if it’s not Uxley, but *Huxley*?’

Anthony nodded slowly. ‘That would make sense,’ he agreed.

‘Huxley,’ Grace mused, with a smile of approval at her quick-thinking daughter. ‘That does sound more likely.’

‘Right then, Anthony, lad,’ Augustus Shackelford muttered. ‘I reckon a bit of bread and cheese and we’ll be on our way.’

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Agnes couldn’t help wondering how poor Mrs. Morton was. True, she was well past her three score years and ten, and the Almighty had likely been preparing the old gooscap a place for the last twenty years. But still, Blackmore wouldn’t be the same without her.

Sipping her tea, Agnes gave a small chuckle. If it was anything like the last time, Augustus would undoubtedly have all on sending her anywhere. Indeed, when he’d read her the last rites on the preceding occasion, she’d told him in no uncertain terms that she’d changed her mind and would stay until after Prudence’s wedding. That was six years ago.

Still, the fact that her husband had not yet returned, told the matron that this time, Mrs. Morton was truly on her way upstairs, though clearly she was taking her time about it.

Agnes helped herself to a piece of Mrs. Tomlinson’s apple cake and looked out towards the garden. It was a beautiful day, most definitely not the kind one would wish to depart this mortal coil on. Taking a bite, Agnes found herself thinking that neither was it the kind of day one would wish to spend lying on a chaise longue.

Surprised at the sudden thought and wondering where the deuce it had come from, Agnes put her piece of cake back onto her plate. Mayhap she’d get Seth to hitch Delilah to the cart and drive her into the village.

Climbing to her feet, Agnes picked up the remainder of the cake and took it in to the kitchen where she had Mrs. Tomlinson wrap it in some muslin. She would take it for Lizzy, she decided. Totally unaware that the cook was regarding her mistress as though she’d suddenly grown two heads, Agnes went outside to find the stable hand.

It took some time to explain to Seth exactly what she wanted. Anyone would

think the man simple. What was so difficult about ‘*It’s a beautiful afternoon, and I wish to go for a drive into the village.*’ It certainly didn’t warrant the look of complete incomprehension on his face.

Still, they got there in the end and were now on their way into Blackmore, though Seth’s continued bewildered glances in her direction were quickly becoming tiresome. As they approached the village, Agnes had a sudden idea. Mayhap Augustus would welcome a slice of cake since Mrs. Morton appeared to be taking an inordinate amount of time kicking the bucket. Tutting at some people’s lack of consideration, she ordered Seth to stop the cart outside the old lady’s cottage and help her down.

She didn’t bother to knock since it was possible she’d arrived at an inopportune moment and didn’t wish to distract her husband if he happened to be overseeing Mrs. Morton’s ascension to the Pearly Gates. Instead, she pushed open the door, went to the bottom of the narrow stairs and listened. After a few seconds, she frowned at the complete silence.

Taking care to make as little noise as possible, since she didn’t wish to disturb Augustus while he was talking to the Almighty, Agnes crept up the stairs. The silence was actually quite soothing, and she felt a sudden well of tears. However much a fustock old Mrs. Morton had been, she’d raised eight children and seen off three husbands, and that took fortitude.

At the top of the stairs, she turned into the small bedroom and spied the figure lying still on the bed. Fumbling for her kerchief, she dabbed at her eyes, feeling suddenly proud of her husband. What a courageous and honourable man he was. She took a step towards the bed and frowned as it suddenly occurred to her that said brave and virtuous spouse was nowhere to be seen. Clearly, Mrs. Morton was already sharing afternoon tea with the Almighty, and Augustus had likely gone to fetch the undertaker.

Sighing, Agnes decided to pay her last respects before leaving. Stepping up to the bed, she looked sadly down at Mrs. Morton’s peaceful features. It looked as though she was simply sleeping. Dabbing her eyes again, she bent down to press a light kiss on the old lady’s forehead, but just as her face was two inches away, the corpse’s eyes suddenly popped open. Both women screamed. Mrs. Morton’s head shot up as she shouted, ‘*Murderer!*’

headbutting Agnes who stumbled back shrieking, only to trip over the dead woman's boots and land directly on top of the chamber pot.

Of Reverend Shackelford, there was obviously no sign.

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Completely oblivious to the less than congenial reception waiting for him back in Blackmore, Reverend Shackelford rubbed his hands together in excitement. It was a long time since he'd got his teeth into a good mystery, and he was persuaded that Percy would eagerly embrace the opportunity to do a spot of investigating in Exeter, even if it did mean paying their respects to the Bishop.

'Do you recollect the name Huxley at all, Mama?' Jennifer asked as they turned out of the long drive. Grace grimaced and shook her head.

'I'm as bad at remembering names as I am at avoiding obstacles, though I'm certain if the family is even remotely genteel, then Felicity will know of them.'

'What did you think of George?' Jennifer went on to quiz her companions.

'Well, Flossy liked her, and Anthony's mutt appeared to worship the ground she walks on, so despite the smoky business surrounding her, I'm inclined to go along with the dogs' view.'

'There definitely seemed to be something more than master and servant between her and Anthony, though,' Grace mused. 'He was very protective of her.'

Reverend Shackelford frowned. 'Agnes will have a deuced apoplexy if the lad doesn't marry into royalty at the very least. If this girl turns out to be some minor nobleman's by blow, then I think we'd all be better off leaving the country.'

'I hate to disillusion you, Father, but the chances of Anthony marrying

anyone remotely connected to royalty are exceedingly slim.'

'She might turn out to be a Princess in disguise,' Jennifer breathed excitedly.

'And I'm the deuced Pope,' muttered her grandfather morosely.

'Take heart, Father,' Grace murmured, trying to hold back her laughter. 'Anthony is a handsome young man, and I've no doubt he will make a perfectly acceptable marriage when the time is right.'

'Agnes has it in her head that he'll need to take care of us in our dotage,' the Reverend sighed. 'And in truth, that's been the whole reason for getting all of you girls wed.'

Grace smiled and touched his shoulder. 'You and Agnes will never be without a home, Father, you must know that. All of *us girls* will not allow Anthony to shoulder the entire burden of you without any teeth.' She softened her words with a wink before adding, 'When the time is right, Nicholas will use his influence with the Bishop of Exeter to have Percy installed as the next incumbent of the parish. You and Agnes may not even have to leave the vicarage.'

The Reverend snorted. 'Let's hope not. The only way they'll get Agnes out of that house is in a deuced box.'

OOOOOO

Agnes Shackelford went through a myriad of emotions on discovering that her erstwhile heroic husband was in fact a lying toad. Naturally, she was happy to see Mrs. Morton still hale and hearty and left her a piece of Mrs. Tomlinson's apple cake by way of apologising for having her in the ground before the old lady was actually dead.

However, her descent downstairs was anything but quiet and when she emerged from the cottage, she marched straight past the cart towards Percy and Lizzy's house. If anybody knew where her errant husband was, it would be his curate. Her wrath surrounded her in a palpable force, and after one

look at her determined features, anybody even thinking of passing the time of day, hurriedly stepped aside.

However, as Agnes walked past the Red Lion, she suddenly spotted someone she didn't recognise. Automatically slowing her steps, she eyed the newcomer suspiciously. In truth, it was his loitering that attracted her attention. If there was one thing Agnes couldn't abide, it was loitering – especially when she was in a dudgeon.

'Are you looking for someone?' she quizzed in her haughtiest tone. The man, a large unwashed individual whose face even his mother had undoubtedly winced at the sight of, turned towards her and hurriedly took off his cap.

'I'm lookin' fer me son,' Mrs.,' he mumbled. 'There ain't no one wot's seen 'im in there.' He waved in the vague direction of the inn. 'But the last time anyone seen 'im wos near 'ere, so I keep 'opin' someone, somewhere...' He trailed off and wiped at his eyes with a grubby kerchief.

Agnes frowned. The man looked entirely unsavoury and doubtless he had less than sixpence to scratch with. But it was commendable that he was looking for his boy. She was about to suggest he try the next village over, but suddenly remembered the skinny lad Anthony had brought home a few weeks earlier.

'What does he look like, this boy of yours?' she asked

'E's so high,' the man returned, holding his hand to his shoulder, 'wi' blondish wavy 'air. Thin 'e be, no matter 'ow much grub 'is ma puts in front o' 'im, there ain't no fat on 'im.'

Agnes thought back to Anthony as a lad. He was coltish too, even though he was forever eating.

'If'n you seen 'im Mrs., I beg ye to tell me where,' Henry Atkins pleaded, recognising the old baggage knew something. 'Is ma's so afeared, I ain't sure wot she'll do if 'he don' come 'ome.'

Now, under normal circumstances, Agnes would never have been taken in so

easily by what was plainly a Canterbury tale. But her ire was such that it had completely eclipsed her common sense, and she found herself saying, 'Does his name happen to be George...?'

Chapter Twelve

The news that she was being pursued by not just her foster father but also by some unknown gentry cove, instilled a terror so acute that George found it difficult to breathe. Despite her employer's avowal that *they would never find her here*, she wanted nothing more than to grab her bag and run.

Huddling on her makeshift bed, she instinctively felt for the coins, back safely under her bandaged chest. She'd retreated to her small cubby hole as soon as Anthony's family had departed and nothing he said or did could get her to move. At length, he decided to leave her be, at least for a couple of hours. Hunger, he decided would eventually draw her out.

And he was right, though only in part. George had never had anybody give a rat's arse what happened to her. She'd spent the whole of her life looking out for herself until eventually it had become instinctive. But suddenly, having someone care – and more than just one someone – was a completely new experience. One she'd find it very hard to walk away from.

In the end, her instinct to be alone was overtaken by a desire for comfort, and hesitantly she emerged from her bolthole.

'Are you hungry?' Anthony asked evenly. George nodded her head. 'Mrs. Parsons has left us some rabbit stew. Sit down, and I'll get you some.'

George glanced outside as she sat down. It was not yet dusk, though the housekeeper had been and gone which indicated it was after six. Nelson came over and pushed his nose into her hand until she relented and stroked his head.

'Here you go.' Anthony put the bowl down in front of her, and another on the floor for Nelson who naturally abandoned her immediately. 'Toad eater,' she

muttered, picking up her spoon. Keeping her head down, she ate the stew with a single-mindedness that spoke of someone who didn't know where their next meal was coming from.

'Going somewhere?' Anthony commented mildly. She looked up startled, then gave a shrug.

'Nowhere to go.'

'Then why are you eating as though it's your last meal?'

She gave a reluctant grin. 'Habit.'

'You sounded your *h*' he retorted, grinning back.

'Well seein' as it's lookin' as if I might be some toff's bastard...' she trailed off and gave another shrug before adding, 'Likely whoever ankle-sprained me real ma is the one been payin' the Grimms.'

'But then again it might be your mother,' countered Anthony. 'If she accidently became expectant after an indiscretion, it could be her family paying for your upkeep.'

'Wot I don' get is why they din't jus' leave me outside the poor 'ouse? I mean, if I am some nob's by blow, then it stands to sense they ain't goin' to want to 'ave me creeping out o' the woodwork all these years later.' She gave a dark chuckle before adding, 'I reckon they're wishin' they 'adn't bothered right about now, an' once they catch me, they're more like to murder me in me bed than bring me into the bosom o' the family.'

'They might have done when you were alone, but now you have friends who care about you.'

'Is that wot you are then, a friend?' George questioned wryly, 'Shall I start callin' you Tony?' She shook her head and climbed to her feet. 'Lord knows I'm grateful for everythin' you done for me, but you ain't my friend, nor could you ever be.'

Without waiting for Anthony's response, she pushed her chair back under the

table and walked towards the door. ‘I reckon I’ll take a turn around the garden,’ she decided. ‘You comin’, Nelson?’

Anthony remained seated as he listened to the diminishing sounds of George and Nelson. She was right. It was a bloody stupid thing to say. When had the lines between them become so blurred? Even before he discovered she was a woman, he’d felt a contentment in her company that he hadn’t found with anyone else – and that included Peter who was as close to him as a brother.

But when he’d seen her in the bathtub... He gritted his teeth, trying to dislodge the image that felt as though it was etched into his brain. His cock told him that was easier said than done. Why she should affect him so, he had no idea. He’d bedded his fair share of women, and God knew, George didn’t have either the wiles nor the refinement of any of them. He found himself chuckling as he thought of her manners. No wonder he’d never realised she was female. She’d lived as a boy for the whole of her life and would have to learn how to conduct herself as a woman.

In some ways, she reminded him of his sisters – especially Prudence. His cousin Mercy too was less than genteel in the way she conducted herself. He was convinced they’d both like George when they finally met her... His internal voice abruptly screeched to a halt. How were they ever likely to meet her? And if they did, it would be with George as a maid. A servant.

Anthony clenched his hands. *No*. After everything that had happened, he could never accept her as a servant in his house. ‘*So what,*’ the voice said viciously. ‘*You’d prefer her as a mistress?*’ With effort, he shoved the thought out of his mind. She deserved more than that. She deserved a husband to take care of her.

But it wouldn’t be him. He was well versed in his *duty*. Dear God, he’d never hated that word quite as much as he did now...

Climbing to his feet, Anthony picked up the empty plates. George was right. They weren’t friends, couldn’t ever be. But he was beginning to realise that his reason for thinking so was entirely different to hers...



As soon as the boy's name passed her lips, Agnes wished she could have taken it back. The look in the stranger's eyes went from beseeching to shifty in a split second. And in that same second, she knew that his intentions for the lad were anything but loving. Instinctively, she stepped back, thinking quickly, and before the man had the chance to answer, shook her head and frowned. 'Oh no, come to think of it, I was thinking of Albert's lad.' She gave a small, embarrassed titter. 'I swear I'm getting so muddled these days.'

The man took a step forward, and her heart began to race. Fortunately, at that precise moment, Lizzy came round the corner. After a last panicked glance towards the now menacing stranger, Agnes hurried towards her friend exclaiming, 'Lizzy darling, how fortuitous, I was just coming to call on you.' She linked arms with a bemused Lizzy and, spinning her round, dragged her back round the corner, saying in a loud voice, 'How is that six-foot, brawny son of yours? Has he taken part in any boxing matches lately?' Fortunately, Lizzy was entirely too baffled to answer immediately, and since Henry Atkins could only see the women's backs, he was unaware the newcomer was actually staring at her friend as though she'd suddenly turned into a simpleton.

It was only when they arrived back at Lizzy's house a few minutes later that Agnes finally spoke again, and then her muttering was confined to the word, 'salts,' as she sank into a chair and thrust out her reticule.

'What the devil's wrong, Agnes dear?' Lizzy finally dared ask at length. 'Who was that man you were speakin' to?'

'Never mind that,' Agnes retorted, obviously recovered enough to remember why she was on her way to her friend's house in the first place. 'Has Percy told you where Augustus is?'

Lizzy creased her brow, entirely bewildered at the abrupt transition from a mythical six-foot son to a missing husband. 'When did you lose him?' she asked hesitantly.

Agnes shot her a withering glance. 'He went off yesterday after telling me he was seeing old Mrs. Morton off to her eternal rest.'

'Oh, I am sorry to hear that,' Lizzy exclaimed, 'though I confess, I was beginning to wonder if she might still be here when the rest of us are pushin' up daisies.'

'Well, that's the thing,' Agnes declared. 'She's not dead. Well least she wasn't when I saw her twenty minutes ago.'

'Oh, well ... err ... that's good,' Lizzy answered. 'So what did the Reverend say?'

Agnes tsked in irritation. 'That's the problem. I've no deuced idea where the deceitful toad is to ask him.'

OOOOO

Victoria Huxley stared at herself through the dressing table mirror. Sometimes she fancied that the image was another *her* trapped in some alternate world. Reaching out, she touched the cool glass. Why she should have this sense that she was somehow incomplete, she couldn't even begin to fathom, but the feeling had plagued her for as long as she could remember.

Drawing her hand back, she lifted it to her face, and used the tip of her fingers to trace the shape of her features, watching as her reflection mirrored her actions.

Occasionally, she actually wondered whether she might be losing her mind, but Grandfather dismissed her fears with a wave of his hand, stating only that she clearly took after her mother. 'Always flighty, that one,' he'd declared as though that explained everything. In truth, she didn't think Grandfather cared one way or the other. Out of sight was out of mind as far as he was concerned. And since her suite of rooms were right at the top of the house with only one way in and one way out, she was most definitely out of sight.

Oh, she was allowed out of her rooms every now and again, or rather

wheeled out when there was someone Grandfather needed to show her to. As long as she remained biddable, of course. She suspected he would just as soon confine her to her suite and throw away the key if she refused to play along.

But sometimes, she just wished she knew what the game was.

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Unfortunately, by the time Reverend Shackelford reached the vicarage with the good news that Mrs. Morton was not in fact about to kick the bucket, Agnes had worked herself up into a high old dudgeon. Percy, the traitorous ingrate had evidently abandoned him at the first whiff of trouble which had resulted in Agnes spending the last hour ringing a fine peal over his head.

Still, the Reverend was able to block out a large portion of the curtain lecture, in part because so much of it was repeated - specifically the words beetle-brained which she used to great effect with varmint, bounder and scoundrel - but mostly because he was entirely preoccupied with the thought of her reaction once she got to the part where she thought to ask where he'd actually gone.

He did wonder whether he'd get away with another plumper, but considering the severity of the situation, decided he would be better coming clean about the whole havey cavey business.

So he waited until she finally stopped to draw breath and suddenly thought to ask the question.

‘The thing is, my dove...’

The Reverend paused as she held up her hand. ‘Don’t you “*my dove*” me, Augustus Shackelford and if you even *think* of feeding me another Canterbury tale...’ she trailed off, leaving the rest of the sentence to his imagination.

Reverend Shackelford gave an injured sigh and sat down. ‘You know that lad

Anthony brought home? The one with the swollen ankle? Name of George?’ Agnes frowned and opened her mouth to speak, but before she got the chance, he added, ‘Well, to cut a long story short, much to Anthony’s surprise, young George turned out to be young Georgiana...’

OOOOO

By the next morning George declared she was done with worrying. Tucking into her breakfast, she loftily informed Anthony that a healthy dose of caution was one thing, but only a chucklehead would remain cowering in their bed all day.

She’d come to this conclusion around three a.m. Still awake and awash with *what ifs* and fear, she’d suddenly sat up and announced to Nelson that *enough was enough*. She had a roof over her head and food in her belly. For now, that was all she needed. If whoever was looking for her managed to discover her whereabouts, then she’d deal with that when the time came. She still had her coins and two bloody working legs. If she needed to run, that’s exactly what she’d do.

Privately she also concluded that dangling after a man who could never be hers was entirely totty headed. Though, whilst that was perfectly true, it wasn’t quite as easily put aside.

‘I need to take the cart into Little Bovey this morning to acquire some more nails and wood for the panelling,’ Anthony decided. If he was surprised at her sudden change of heart, he didn’t say so. ‘Does your newly discovered boldness extend to coming with me?’ When she hesitated, he added, ‘The fresh air will do you good.’

‘Fresh air ain’t never done me no good up to now,’ she grumbled, climbing to her feet.

‘*Hasn’t ever done you any good*’ Anthony corrected, adding, ‘I’m persuaded the air you were accustomed to breathing when you lived with the Grimms was the very opposite of *fresh*.’

‘Specially wi’ the public bog house jus’ up the road,’ grinned George, laughing out loud at his appalled expression.

‘Too ‘igh in the instep to talk about shit are we?’ she poked fun at him. ‘An’ talkin’ o’ necessaries, you goin’ to ‘ave a water closet in the ‘ouse? You’ll be freezing yer baubles off come winter otherwise.’

Anthony winced and sighed as he followed her through the kitchen door, Nelson dancing between them. ‘Please refrain from talking about baubles – or any other part of a man’s anatomy in public,’ he remonstrated her. ‘It’s enough that I have to listen to your revolting prittle prattle.’

In answer, she laughed even louder and took off towards the stable at a run, the dog at her heels. Following more slowly, Anthony watched her disappear round the corner, before allowing himself to laugh. Despite her vulgarity, George was the funniest person he’d ever met. He could only hope that the acquisition of good manners did not come at the price of her spiritedness.

Chapter Thirteen

By the time they reached Little Bovey half an hour later, the blue sky was slowly disappearing behind ever darkening clouds. 'We're well overdue for some rain,' Anthony muttered, eyeing the encroaching greyness apprehensively, 'I'd better get a move on if we're going to avoid a drenching.' Climbing down from the cart, he told George not to venture far from the horse and cart.

Jumping down, George wandered curiously around the small village green with its tiny, thatched cottages and pond. An inn completed the idyllic scene, though a closer inspection revealed the hostelry was overdue a lick of paint. Idly, she picked up a stick and threw it for Nelson, just as she heard the first faint rumble of thunder.

The mongrel's ears immediately flattened to his head, and he scampered over to her, the stick forgotten. George looked uneasily up at the sky. The clouds to the west were almost black. There was an ominous flash, and the thunder came again, this time a little louder. Nelson whimpered at her feet, and she bent down to lift him into her arms. 'Baby,' she admonished looking round for any sign of her employer.

Anthony appeared just as the first drops of rain began to fall. Beckoning to her, he hurried back to the cart. 'We won't get far in this,' he predicted as the rain began to come down heavier, 'and Horatio is likely to bolt if the thunder gets any louder.' He held the horse still as George climbed back onto the box, Nelson shivering in her arms. 'We'll shelter in the *Green Man*,' he decided and taking hold of the horse's bridle, he guided the stallion towards the inn.

George bent her head over Nelson, protecting him against the now driving deluge while Anthony guided the nervous horse into the inn's stable yard. 'Go inside,' he shouted as he began tugging at the soaking bridle. Helplessly,

George watched for a second until a flash followed by a loud clap of thunder impelled her to move. Gripping Nelson under her arm, she hurried towards the inn's entrance, just as someone ran out to assist Anthony in stabling the horse.

Ten minutes later, he entered the inn, soaked to the skin. 'You'll get a bloody ague if you don't get out o' those wet clothes,' George advised him, shifting up so he could get nearer to the fire.

'Unfortunately, I neglected to bring a spare set with me,' he answered drily, not bothering to berate her for swearing. 'A tot of brandy will have to suffice.' He sat down on a stone plinth next to the fireplace. 'What'll you have, George?'

'I reckon the same as you if your purse can stretch to it.' He gave her a droll look and ordered two brandies.

'We din't see this comin',' the innkeeper commented, pouring two brandies. 'I ain't seen such a deluge since nineteen.' He nodded towards the rain driving against the window. 'I reckon we might lose the road if it keeps up.'

'Lose the road?' Anthony quizzed, paying for their drinks.

'Aye, the river'll burst if it gets much 'igher.'

'*Shit,*' muttered Anthony under his breath. Of all the days to decide to come into the village... He sat back down next to the fire and handed a glass of brandy to George.

'You reckon we might be stuck then?' she asked, taking a small sip. He raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

'Nothing we can do about it. We'll have to stay overnight if the road's impassable. Do you have any rooms?' he questioned the innkeeper.

'Aye, we got one spare, an' a nice oxtail stew on tonight.'

Just then, the door banged open, and two men hurried in. 'Bloody soaked through to me draws, I am,' the first one complained sourly.

‘Road’s gone,’ the other added, ‘better ready yersen fer a few more customers, Jack.’

The innkeeper looked over at Anthony. ‘You takin’ that room then?’ Anthony sighed and nodded. ‘And we’ll have some bread and dripping if you have it and two tankards of ale.’

‘Want some pickled eggs to go wi’ it?’

‘Ooh yes,’ George responded enthusiastically. ‘I love a pickled egg.’

‘We’ll do without the eggs, thank you,’ Anthony interrupted swiftly. ‘I might have to share a room with you,’ he declared at his companion’s scowl, ‘but I’m not sharing it with your deuced arse as well.’

Against her will, George found herself laughing. ‘Pickled eggs ‘r deadly,’ she agreed.

She sipped her brandy chuckling, until abruptly she registered what he’d said. *Share a room*. Hugging Nelson to her, she buried her head in his fur to hide her flaming face. Clearly he’d *already* forgotten she was a woman...

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‘Thunder an’ turf, Agnes, you’re such a deuced gabster at times.’

‘I only asked if the lad he was looking for was named George,’ his wife answered indignantly. ‘There are lots of Georges, and if you hadn’t tried to sell me a bag of moonshine before disappearing Lord knows where, I would have had more of my wits about me.’

‘Well, it’s a deuced good job Lizzy came when she did. I wouldn’t have put it past the bounder to have put you to bed with a mattock.’ He gave a loud sigh. ‘This whole business is looking smokier by the minute, and I don’t mind admitting that I wish Nicholas was here. It’s just fortunate we got to Luke before he had the chance to open his gob.’

‘Do you think Anthony’s in danger?’ Agnes breathed, wringing her hands. ‘It sets up my bristles that he should be confined to his house with some ... ne’er do well. It must be frightful for him. He’s simply too kind-hearted for his own good.’

The Reverend wisely refrained from mentioning that Anthony had looked anything but blue-devilled. Instead, he nodded sagely and patted her arm. ‘He gets it from you, my dove.’

Agnes gave a small sniff. ‘I must concede I am tempted to go to him,’ she confessed, dabbing at her eyes with a kerchief. ‘There are times when only a mother’s comfort will do.’ She reached for a biscuit, so fortunately missed the Reverend’s look of sudden alarm.

‘I don’t think that would be wise dearest,’ he answered carefully at length. ‘Anthony is a man grown, and we must trust his instincts. They have been fine-tuned from the many years he’s spent under your wise guidance.’ For a second, the Reverend thought he might have done it a bit too brown as Agnes gave him a narrow look, but then she followed it up with a dramatic sigh.

‘It’s emotionally draining being a mother,’ she murmured brokenly. Augustus Shackelford nodded sympathetically whilst privately thinking, *especially on a Friday afternoon between three and four...*

‘When are you and Percy going to Exeter?’ Agnes questioned in the next breath, reaching for another biscuit.

The Reverend blinked at the sudden change in conversation. ‘I was thinking we’d borrow one of Nicholas’s carriages and go tomorrow,’ he responded. ‘There’s no sense in dilly-dallying. The sooner we get to the bottom of this mess, the sooner Anthony can ... err ... rid himself of his imposturous labourer.’

‘Then Lizzy and I shall accompany you.’ Agnes declared, much to the Reverend’s horror. He opened his mouth to protest, but before he managed to say a word, she added, ‘Since I cannot give my darling boy a safe refuge in his mother’s arms, I will make it my sacred duty to liberate him from the *undesirable* currently residing in his house.’



Andrew Pettigrew stared intently at the small miniature.

‘Her hair may be slightly darker, and she could very well be dressed in lad’s clothing, but aside from that, it is a good likeness.’

‘And she went missing from here in Exeter you say?’ A short nod of confirmation.

‘We believe she was taking a stagecoach to Plymouth. The coach cast a wheel, and the passengers were forced to seek shelter in the village of Blackmore. It seems that no one in the village can remember seeing anyone answering her description, but *something* happened to prevent her getting on the coach the next morning. I suggest you start there.’

‘Was she still wearing boy’s clothes?’

‘That’s what I am paying you to discover.’

Pettigrew tucked the miniature into his pocket. He knew better than to ask any more questions. Likely the chit he was looking for was the nob’s by blow, but at the end of the day, it was none of his business. ‘How do I contact you when I find her?’

‘Take her to this address.’ Pettigrew took the card offered to him and raised his eyebrows.

‘There’s no way I’m venturing in there,’ he declared decisively. ‘I’ll be lucky to escape in one bloody piece.’ He looked up. ‘How about I send word here?’ He looked around the bustling inn. ‘I’ll hide her somewhere safe before I send the note. What name should I use?’ Pettigrew forced himself to meet his new employer’s stony eyes. If he backed down now, he’d be lucky to survive more than a day after catching the chit.

‘Address it to Mr. Field,’ was the eventual wintery cold response. Pettigrew nodded and turned to go.

‘And Mr. Pettigrew?’ The private detective stopped and looked back. ‘Don’t even think of crossing me. If you do, that pretty young woman you enjoy visiting every Friday ... well, let’s say she won’t be quite so pretty when my associates have finished with her.’

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By the time they were served the promised oxtail stew, George suspected that she might be more than a little half-sprung. The afternoon had been lively verging on boisterous. With the storm raging outside, a large number of villagers had congregated in the Green Man for shelter, and for the landlord at least, the foul weather was providing a tidy profit.

For the most part, George sat tucked in the corner watching as Anthony traded good natured insults with the locals. It was obvious the village’s inhabitants were delighted Bovey Manor was to be a home once more, and the older ones had many an entertaining tale to tell about the previous owner’s escapades during summers spent in the manor.

Anthony hadn’t told her who owned the house before he did, but from the conversation, she suspected it might have something to do with his sister Grace. In truth, he knew far more about her than she did him, but while he possessed few of the airs and graces she’d come to associate with those swimming in lard, she did not think him from a poor background, for all that his father was a country vicar. His sister and cousin had been dressed in the finest attire and though she didn’t know whether he had any more siblings, it was clear that one sister at least had married well.

While she was undoubtedly a little foxed, by eight o’clock, Anthony was drunk as a wheelbarrow. As the jokes and comments became more ribald, she became increasingly certain that he had indeed forgotten she was a female. Torn between equal parts relief and irritation, George finally decided to head up to their bedchamber while the going was good. Hopefully, by the time he came up, he would forget she was there and simply pass out.

Well, that’s what she told herself while she stood in the doorway watching

Nelson cock his leg up the nearest post and getting royally soaked in the process. Watching the dog do his business had her hoping their room had a chamber pot, though she'd need to use it before Anthony came to bed. 'Bloody hell, Nelson,' she grumbled as the mongrel immediately shook himself once he was back undercover, effectively showering her with water.

Gingerly picking up the wet dog, she went back through the bar, and without looking at Anthony, made her way up the steep winding staircase that led to the inn's two bedchambers.

George had been mistaken in her assumption that Anthony had forgotten she was a woman. Indeed, he'd been so achingly aware that he'd deliberately set out to get himself foxed, also hoping he'd simply pass out once he'd made it to their bedchamber. He could not bear the thought of lying next to her sober while unable to even touch her.

At least in Bovey Manor there was a floor between them.

He made sure to remain down in the bar until the last customer went out to brave the storm. Then, bidding the landlord good night, he went outside and sprinted towards the stable to check on Horatio. Fortunately, the stallion didn't appear unduly agitated by the wild weather and indeed was already half asleep. Stroking the horse's nose, Anthony looked back outside. He was already half soaked. Going back the other way would finish the job.

Unless he stayed where he was.

The stable was warm enough, and there was plenty of straw to cover himself with should he get chilly. It would also keep him from temptation. Stepping to the stable door, he looked up at the bedchamber window. All was in darkness, so George was undoubtedly asleep. If he went up now, stumbling around in the pitch-black, he would almost certainly wake her. Despite his inebriation, his cock surged up in enthusiastic response, and Anthony gave a low groan, resting his head on the door frame. Staying put was most definitely the right decision, but that didn't mean it was easy.

Chapter Fourteen

George had no idea what woke her up, and she lay staring into the darkness for a few seconds, completely befuddled, until memory came flooding back. All was silent. The rain had slowed, and the wind was no longer whistling around the eaves like an angry spirit. She was about to turn over, then stiffened, remembering Anthony was in the bed beside her. Motionless, she listened but could hear nothing. Evidently her employer was not a snorer. Nevertheless, she should at least be able to hear him breathing in the quiet.

Without thinking, she rolled over and stared in confusion at the empty space next to her. Sliding out her hand, she felt the cold dampness between the sheets. Anthony had obviously not come to bed at all. Heart thudding, she sat up. He wouldn't have left without her, would he?

She turned her head and could just make out the small lump snuggled up next to her. Nelson hadn't even moved. Her employer might have abandoned her, trouble that she was, but he'd never have left without his dog.

Carefully, so as not to wake the sleeping hound, she drew back the covers and padded over to the window. As far as she could tell, the stable yard was dark, silent and empty apart from the steadily falling rain. She couldn't see whether Horatio was still in his stall, but the cart was a vague shape under the porch. George turned away from the window. Mayhap Anthony had decided to sleep downstairs in the bar. She snorted, or more likely he'd keeled over and was sleeping where he fell.

Shaking her head at the stupidity of men, she started to climb back into bed.

But what if the nobby had fallen and hit his head? She paused, one knee on the lumpy mattress. *Bloody hell*, the last thing she wanted to do was wander round the inn in her drawers. Muttering under her breath, she felt her way to

the only piece of furniture in the room apart from the bed – a rickety chair that was likely older than she was - and grabbing hold of her britches, hurriedly pulled them on and shoved her feet into her boots. The room was nearly pitch-black, but she had no flint to relight the candle. She'd have to make her way down the stairs in complete darkness and hope she didn't break her bleeding neck.

Standing still to reacquaint herself with the position of the door, George finally made out its rectangular outline. Slowly, arms outstretched, she shuffled towards it, and once her hands connected with the wood, she quickly located the knob.

Taking a deep breath, she eased the door open and peeked out onto the tiny landing. A loud snore behind her suggested that Nelson had no intention of joining her foolhardy escapade, and with one last longing glance back towards the sleeping dog, she stepped out onto the top of the stairs.

There was no banister, and her heart was in her mouth for every step she took. How the devil more guests didn't end up at the bottom with their toes up their nostrils she had no idea. The stairs were a bloody death trap. But then doubtless there weren't many guests bacon-brained enough to go wandering around in the middle of the night without a bleeding candle.

It took her nearly ten minutes to finally reach the door to the bar, and by then she was in a high old dudgeon. If Anthony Shackelford wasn't dead, she'd be sorely tempted to bloody well remedy the situation. Grasping the knob, she gave it a hard shove and promptly fell out into the bar.

Which was empty.

The mullioned windows let in enough light for her to be sure there was nobody seated in any of the chairs or indeed sprawled anywhere on the floor. Biting her lip, she stood indecisively in the doorway. Common sense told her to go back to bed. But where had common sense ever gotten her?

There was one more place to look. And while she didn't exactly relish getting wet through for the second time in twenty-four hours, she knew she'd never be able to sleep without knowing the idiot man was safe. Chances were he

was in the stable with Horatio. But she couldn't be sure he hadn't stumbled out to relieve himself and never made it back inside.

Sighing, George pulled open the door leading out towards the kitchen and yard. There were no windows in the small square hall but plenty of obstacles, and she muttered several expletives as she nearly went arsey varsey over a pair of boots, then broke a fingernail trying to undo the bolt on the outside door. Finally, however, she managed to pull the door open and step outside.

Still under the eaves, she waited for a second to get her bearings. The rain was steady now, falling straight down like God was pouring water from a jug in the sky. She scanned the yard but could see no sign of a prone body. Clearly, the numbskull had decided to bed down with Horatio. George breathed a sigh of relief. She could go back to bed now.

Backing up towards the door, she suddenly paused. What if he'd been kicked in the head by the horse? 'Bleedin' 'ell, George,' she muttered to herself in frustration, 'it's your 'ead wot needs seein' to.' She stared across the yard where she could just make out the stable door. She had two choices – run for it, or make her way around the side, trying to keep under cover as much as possible. After hesitating for a few seconds, she opted to try and keep dry and began to make her way carefully along the line of the eaves, grumbling, 'I must be dicked in the bloody nob.'

It took her nearly five minutes to weave around barrels and wooden boxes, not to mention the cart, but she was still relatively dry when she got to the stable door. After a brief, nervous pause, she slowly lifted the latch and pushed the door inwards...

...Only to be faced by a giant shadow wielding what looked like a bloody great pitchfork. 'One more step, and I'll turn you into a stuck pig,' the shadow warned. With a squeak George stepped backwards, only to stumble on the cobbles. Seconds later she was sitting on her arse in the pouring rain.

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‘The girl’s disappearance has become more than an inconvenience. His lordship remains disturbingly robust, despite his advancing years. If the girl should surface while the bastard still has all his wits, everything I’ve worked for will be for nought.’ Simon Linfield poured himself a large brandy and emptied it in one swallow.

‘Does she resemble Miss Huxley so very much?’

Linfield gritted his teeth, reminding himself that he needed patience. The Earl of Ruteledge’s lineage was complicated, even to those who were familiar with its history. Sighing he poured himself a second brandy and sat back at his desk before answering.

‘A damned mirror image. There would be no doubt in the Earl’s mind that they’re twins.’

‘But why the devil would he care anyway? He shows no affection towards the granddaughter who lives under his roof. I don’t think the chit has left the house in the whole of her life.’

‘As long as he believes her his daughter-in-law’s bastard, she’s never likely to.’

‘So why would the other twin turning up convince the Earl otherwise?’

Simon Linfield sat forward in his chair, steepling his fingers on the desk. ‘The first born of each generation of the Linfield family, is always a twin. It’s been that way since the family came over from Normandy with the bastard Duke. Additionally, *One* of the siblings – and not necessarily the elder - *always* possesses a distinctive birthmark somewhere on their body.’

‘Do you have a twin?’ Linfield shook his head.

‘It affects the direct line only.’

‘And Georgiana Huxley has this ... birthmark?’

Linfield nodded. ‘If she comes to my cousin’s attention and he discovers the mark, he’ll know the girls were Roland’s get. And if that should happen, no

longer being his heir will be the least of my worries.’ He shrugged and swallowed the rest of his brandy before adding, ‘Or putting it another way, being the Earl’s second cousin will be no guarantee that my head will remain on my shoulders.’

‘Well since the twins were born under your roof, why didn’t you just have one of ‘em smothered at birth?’

‘Oh, believe me I wanted to, but my dearest wife wouldn’t hear of it.’ He shook his head. ‘Suddenly developed some bloody morals would you believe. After we shipped the child without the birthmark to Edward, she actually wanted to keep the other one with her. Said Julia Huxley had once been her best friend and she had a duty to her child. She swore Edward would never set eyes on her.’ He swallowed his brandy and slammed the glass back on the desk. ‘I humoured her for two bloody years, but I could see she was getting attached to the brat.

‘Stupid bitch wouldn’t let me put her in the workhouse, so I told her the girl was going to a nice family who would raise her properly.’ Linfield gave a dark chuckle. ‘And, as long as the chit was with Atkins, it was easy enough to keep an eye on her.

‘Until the lecherous bastard couldn’t keep his nutmegs in his bloody breeches.’

‘And that’s when she ran?’

Linfield nodded, then stared at the Earl’s opium addicted doctor challengingly. ‘So, are you in?’

‘You’ve told me enough to see you crop. What’s to stop me crying rope? Likely the Earl would pay me handsomely to tell him about the viper in his nest.’

Simon Linfield gave a short laugh. ‘Pay handsomely? Have you listened to nothing I’ve just said? The Earl of Ruteledge would swat you like a fly. Oh he’d thank you cordially enough, but you wouldn’t last the night. Your body would be found in some filthy alleyway – if it was even found at all.

‘Believe me, If you ever want to get out from under Edward Linfield’s blackmailing arse, doctor, you’ll help me speed the bastard on his way to hell.’

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‘George?’ The shadow turned into Anthony Shackleford as he dropped the pitchfork and stepped through the stable door. ‘What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing?’ he hissed, staring down at her.

‘Coming to find you,’ she spat. ‘Who did you think it was? The bloody Queen of England? Are you goin’ to ‘elp me up or wot?’

Frowning, Anthony held out his hand and pulled her to her feet. ‘I nearly skewered you with a deuced pitchfork,’ he growled, hauling her under cover. ‘Damn it, you’re soaking wet.’

‘Sharp eyes,’ she muttered, allowing him to drag her into the relative warmth of the stable. Cursing, he fumbled around for his flint and tender, then facing the meagre light shining through the doorway, managed to light a small lantern which he hung high in the rafters well away from where it could be knocked over.

Shaking his head at her dripping form, he grabbed an old horse blanket he’d been lying on and held it out to her. ‘Wrap this around yourself and get out of those wet clothes. You’ll catch your bloody death.’

‘Don’t swear,’ she mumbled, taking the blanket. ‘Bleedin’ hell, this stinks.’ Anthony raised his eyebrows.

‘I’m beginning to think we should start using a swear bucket.’

George looked over to him and grinned. Then turning round, with the blanket around her shoulders, she began to strip off. ‘At least yer in one piece,’ she murmured, dropping the shirt on the floor. ‘You wos that tap ‘ackled, I worried you’d fell over and brained yoursen.’

‘You were worried about me?’ George glanced behind her as she stepped out of her britches.

‘Well, if you kick the bucket, what’ll ‘appen to me then?’

‘And there was me thinking you cared.’

George drew in her breath. Somehow he’d stepped closer without her realising. Gripping the blanket tightly around her shoulders, she turned round. He was so close she had only to lift her hand to touch him. Swallowing, she lifted her wet britches between them and shoved the sodden fabric at his chest. If she’d thought the cold wetness would be enough to make him step back, she’d misjudged entirely. Without taking his eyes from hers, he grabbed the britches and flung them away. With a small gasp, her eyes followed to where they landed in the hay. ‘Wot did you do that for?’ she whispered. ‘I’ll be itchin’ for bloody weeks now.’

Anthony didn’t answer. Instead, he lifted his hand and stroked her cheek. ‘What have you done to me?’ he murmured, almost under his breath.

Heart hammering, George simply stared back at him. The feeble light hid his expression, so she was unable to read what he was thinking. But she could feel it. She stifled a small gasp as he closed the remaining distance between them, his hard thigh stepping between hers.

Achingly slowly, he lowered his head until his lips hovered above hers. ‘Tell me to stop,’ he murmured hoarsely. In answer, she lifted her own hand and slid it around his neck, her fingers tangling in the damp hair at his nape. ‘I can’t,’ she whispered, her dark gaze clinging to his. With a low groan, his mouth settled on hers. For the merest second, she had no idea what to do. Then instinct took over. With a soft sound, almost a whimper, she raised herself on tiptoe and let go of the blanket, curling both arms around his neck and pressing herself against the hard planes of his chest.

Anthony didn’t need further prompting. His mouth opened on hers, lips sliding, tongue invading, stroking, playing. Feverishly, almost unconsciously, she rubbed her peaked nipples against the rough linen of his shirt, each pass sending an exquisite bolt of lightning directly between her legs. His hands

slid round to cup her bare bottom, pulling her against that part of him that showed her just how much he wanted her. The feel of the hardness at the juncture of her thighs had George moaning at the blissful unsatisfied pleasure. She pressed, rubbed and squirmed against him until finally he groaned against her mouth and held her still.

‘Hold, love,’ he murmured, his voice almost growling. When she would have protested, his lips began tracing a fiery path down her jawline to her throat sending shivers down to her toes. She was panting now, almost delirious with the need for some kind of release. Then, suddenly, he slipped one hand in between them and used his thumb to stroke the hard little pebble of her nipple. She cried out, throwing her head back at the exquisite shock of sensation, grinding herself against the hardness in his breeches.

‘*Anthony...*’ she began. Then the breath left her body in a woosh as he bent his head and closed his lips over her nipple.

George shuddered from the exquisite pleasure of it and heard herself gasping, ‘*Please...*’ but she couldn’t complete the sentence. She was lost in a world of sensation and a pleasure she’d never even dreamed could exist. But it wasn’t enough. She gripped his shoulders, crying out as he transferred his attention to her other nipple.

At the same time, he moved his hand downward until he reached the mound between her legs, then, shockingly slipped one finger right into where she was wet and aching, his thumb tracing a circle just above it. ‘*Anthony... yes,*’ she keened as the sensation spilled over, her body jerking violently with the force of her release. At length, as her tremors subsided, he pulled her back into him, cradling her head against his chest.

For a while, George didn’t speak, simply revelled in the feel of his hard warmth. But eventually, Anthony stepped back and stared at her, his chest rising and falling as though he’d just run a race, but his face unreadable. Inexorably, her eyes were drawn to the large bulge still evident in his breeches.

‘I reckon I can do the same fer you if yer want,’ she murmured.

‘George.’ His voice was a warning growl.

‘I ain’t never done it, but I seen it done more ‘an once.’

Anthony gritted his teeth. ‘Stop. Talking. I can’t ...’ He put his hands over his face. ‘Please, Georgiana, cover yourself with the blanket.’ The last was said in a pleading whisper.

Swallowing, George bent down and picked up the blanket, throwing it over her shoulders and clutching the edges over her chest. ‘I’m covered up,’ she muttered. He opened his eyes.

‘I should not have done that.’ His voice was harsh with regret, and George felt the last of her euphoria slip away. She gave a shrug, fighting back tears of disappointment and humiliation.

‘Don’ mean nothin’. Just a quick ‘and job is all.’

‘Is that all it was to you?’ For some reason her answer had made his voice even bleaker.

Blinking, she stepped forward. ‘Wot d’ye want me to say? That it wos the best tuppin’ I ever ‘ad?’ She leaned towards him, her voice low and furious. ‘O’ course it wos. ‘Ow many times you think the likes o’ me ‘as a man touch ‘er gentle like? I ain’t ‘ad no man touch me like you. The only touch I’ve ever ‘ad is a clout across the ‘ead. An’ I’ve ‘ad that so many times from so many turks, I’m lucky I’m not dicked in the bleeding nob.’

Anthony stepped towards her shaking his head, but before he could speak, she waved her hand contemptuously and continued, her voice now sad and resigned. ‘I ain’t lookin’ fer nothin’ from you, Anthony Shackelford. Jus’ a roof over me ‘ead and food in me belly in return for a day’s honest labour. Wot we jus’ did?’ She held one hand to her chest. ‘I’ll ‘old it ‘ere to me ‘til I kick the bucket, ‘cos I know it’s all I’m ever goin to get.’ She stopped and brushed her hand across her wet cheek. ‘But I’ll not be beggin’ yer bloody pardon fer it, neither.’

Chapter Fifteen

Reverend Shackelford had a sleepless night. It wasn't often such a thing occurred since he generally slept the sleep of the righteous – as he was extremely fond of telling Percy.

But the truth was, he'd told Agnes a plumper three times in as many days, and while he was entirely of the opinion that he had a good reason for each one, he wasn't completely sure the Almighty would see it that way. And the knowledge that in his experience, too many faradiddles generally came back to bite one in the unmentionables, did not make for sweet dreams.

That said, he couldn't help but feel that plumper number three was more of an omission rather than an outright lie. He wasn't sure that such pedantics would buy him much grace when he shared his first pot of tea with the Almighty, but just in case, he thought it would be advisable to go over his excuses to Percy a fourth time.

Percy on the other hand, did not appear to be showing the singular attention that the Reverend felt warranted such a confession. Indeed, Augustus Shackelford was very much concerned that the curate might have actually stifled a *yawn*.

They were sitting in a carriage belonging to the Duke of Blackmore – unfortunately not the one with the extra deep cushions – a fact the Reverend's posterior would willingly attest to. It was still early in the morning, and Agnes, as far as he was aware, was currently sitting up in bed with her gossip sheet and hot chocolate.

Naturally, he'd informed her that he was going out on an *errand*. Which was perfectly true. What he didn't say was that the *errand* was in Exeter and was actually the *errand* Agnes had insisted she accompany him on not twenty-

four hours earlier.

Sighing, Reverend Shackelford leaned back against the comfortably upholstered cushions. There was nothing to be done about it now. He simply had to accept that he was in the suds. So much so, that in truth, his conversation with the Almighty was, at this moment in time, of less concern than the one with his wife. Unless of course the one should lead to the other.

Shaking his head, the Reverend looked out of the window. The dirt road had been replaced by cobbles indicating they were nearing their destination. He looked over at Percy. The curate had moved on from yawns and was now busy snoring in concert with Flossy.

‘Tare an’ hounds, the whole of deuced Exeter will know we’re coming if you two snore any louder,’ Augustus Shackelford muttered irritably.

Percy opened his eyes, stretched and leaned forward to look out of the window. ‘Are we nearly there yet, Sir?’

‘Another twenty minutes or so should see us at the Bishop’s Palace,’ the Reverend answered. ‘Now remember, Percy, try and look intelligent. We don’t want some dry boots coming in and appropriating your position as Blackmore’s next vicar.’

‘What can I say, Sir?’ Percy spluttered, going pink. ‘I’m honoured you have such faith in me.’

Reverend Shackelford patted his knee. ‘You’ve been practising for this role since the day you arrived, Percy,’ he declared emotionally, ‘and while I’ll admit there have been occasions when you’ve been a bit lacking in back-bone – even a bit chuckle-headed if I’m honest...’ He paused and frowned. ‘And even though in truth I’m not entirely certain that the many bangs on the head you’ve sustained over the years have not made you a trifle addled, I’ll not have some affected puppy come in and whip it out from under your nose. Especially seeing as that would mean me and Agnes would have to move out of the vicarage.’



Grace eagerly opened the missive from her best friend and former mentor. ‘What does she say, Mama?’ Jennifer asked, closing the lid on the piano. Though she would have died rather than admit it, Grace was beyond grateful for the respite. Her daughter’s talents definitely did not lie in a musical direction – clearly she took after her... well, the whole family in truth.

The Duchess scanned the letter from the woman the world knew as Miss Felicity Beaumont. However, to those who knew her best, she was Mrs. Felicity Mackenzie.

‘According to Felicity, the Huxley family were very much nouveau riche.’

‘Were?’ questioned Jenny, coming to sit down. Her mother nodded.

‘Apparently, the family was as rich as Croesus.’ Grace looked back down at the letter. ‘The money was made by one Josiah Huxley, a woollen merchant from Manchester. He married very late and had just the one daughter – evidently his wife died in childbirth, and he never remarried.’

‘How sad. So what happened to Josiah and his daughter?’

‘Well, according to Felicity, poor old Josiah developed an ague, but before he died, he arranged for his daughter Julia to marry into an extremely influential family.’ She looked over at Jennifer. ‘And *this* family I *have* heard of. At their head is Edward Linfield, the Earl of Ruteledge.’ She gave a shudder. ‘Odious old man. I wouldn’t trust him as far as I could throw him, and if Nicholas were here, he would almost certainly have more to say on the subject.’

‘So Julie married the Earl,’ Jennifer interrupted, eager to hear more. Grace shook her head.

‘She married his son, Roland.’ The Duchess put the letter down and wrinkled her brow in thought. ‘Thinking about it, I seem to remember the son actually died not long after the wedding and Julia less than a year later. It was all very

sad. I had no idea her maiden name was Huxley.'

'How on earth does Felicity know all these things?' Jennifer wondered.

Grace chuckled. 'She's been around the *ton* for a long time.'

They were interrupted by the housekeeper bringing in a tray of tea and homemade shortbread.

'You're spoiling us, Mrs. Tenner,' Grace smiled. 'Homemade biscuits and only an hour since breakfast. I am still fit to burst with Mrs. Higgins' delicious honey cake.'

'Speak for yourself, Mama,' Jennifer grinned, helping herself. She took a bite and closed her eyes in bliss. 'Still warm,' she breathed. 'Mrs. Higgins is truly a treasure.'

Mrs. Tenner gave a mock sigh. 'I will not be passing on such comments to cook, your grace,' she chuckled, 'Mrs. Higgins has been barely tolerable since her cakes won first prize in the Totnes show.' She winked at Jennifer as she gave a small curtsy. 'Please ring if you wish for another pot.'

Grace watched her go fondly. 'It was Mrs. Tenner and Mrs. Higgins that made my life bearable when I first became a duchess,' she remembered.

'What about Huntley? Jennifer queried. 'He was here when Papa was a boy wasn't he?'

Grace smiled. 'Huntley was and is a rock. But he has always been first and foremost your father's man. Even now, he would lay down his life if Nicholas should ask it of him.'

'Well, given that he must be well past his seventieth year, there might not be any asking involved,' Jennifer quipped, her chuckle tinged with sadness. The young woman paused, before adding, 'Surely Papa wasn't so awful when you first wed.'

'Beyond awful,' her mother commented cheerfully, giving in and taking a biscuit. 'He was completely and utterly insufferable.'

Jennifer laughed. They'd had this conversation many times, and her father always acquiesced to her mother's point of view. The Duke might have started their marriage on the wrong foot, but he was clearly a very quick learner.

'So what have we learned about the Huxleys and George so far?' Jennifer quizzed, pouring them both some tea.

'Nothing about Georgiana,' conceded Grace, taking a sip of her tea. 'And as far as we're aware, the Huxley family died out with Julia.'

'Could it be the Earl of Ruteledge searching for her then?' Jennifer questioned.

'The chances are, George is someone's by blow,' Grace mused thoughtfully. 'The Earl must have already been past his prime when Roland married all those years ago, so I doubt she's his get. But I suppose she could have been his son Roland's.'

'How long ago did he die?' Jennifer asked. Her mother frowned, then shrugged.

'It must have been about eighteen years ago, I suppose. So if George is Roland Linfield's daughter, she'd have to have been conceived very close to his death.'

'Well, she obviously wasn't born to Julia. I can't imagine why the Earl would have wanted to rid himself of a legitimate granddaughter.' Jennifer paused, then added, 'The man Grandfather spoke to in the Red Lion looked as though he was flush in the pockets...'

'...I doubt very much he was the Earl himself,' Grace interrupted. 'A man such as Ruteledge would be highly unlikely to get his hands dirty, and I didn't get the impression that the man Father spoke with was in his dotage.'

'Perhaps he's a brother or cousin? A lesser member of the family?'

Grace tsked in irritation. 'And he might just as easily have no connection at

all to the Earl of Ruteledge. The only link we have is the name of Huxley. And now we're simply clutching at straws.' She pursed her lips. 'I'm beginning to think I should ask your father to return here as soon as possible. I really think we need his help in solving this mystery.'

'If we find this man, the chances are he'll lead us to whoever is looking for George.'

'Well, we'll have to hope your grandfather discovers something without getting himself and poor old Percy completely in the suds.'

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George opened her eyes as a hand was laid gently on her shoulder. Turning over, she stared into the unreadable eyes of her employer. 'The rain has stopped. I'm going down to harness Horatio,' he murmured. Can you be ready in fifteen minutes?' George nodded her head warily and watched as he turned swiftly and headed for the door, calling Nelson to him.

Watching them both leave, Georgiana found herself fighting back tears. Shutting her eyes tightly, she wondered what the bloody hell she was going to do now.

Last night had changed everything.

But even if she was given the chance to turn back the clock, she would not, *could not* do so. When she told Anthony she would remember what happened between them until the day she died, she was saying nothing more than the truth. Though now it now felt almost dreamlike, she could still feel that wonderful sense of belonging. Of being cherished. That, even more than the astonishing pleasure he'd given her would be the piece she held to her heart.

Even though he would never love her as she loved him.

Scrubbing her hand through her tangled hair, she pushed back the covers and climbed out of bed.

She and Anthony had returned to the bedchamber around four in the morning, just as the eastern horizon was beginning to lighten. It had still been raining, but it had eased enough for them to cross the yard without another thorough soaking. Fortunately, they managed to reach the bedchamber without being seen.

Pushing open the door, they'd discovered Nelson still curled up in exactly the same position she'd left him in. 'Lazy arse,' she'd muttered, climbing into bed next to the dog. Her clothes were still damp, but that was nothing new. She'd stared over at Anthony, still hesitating by the door.

'We're both fully dressed,' she murmured drily. 'I swear I'll not try and box yer Jesuit.' Then she turned her back and scooted to the edge of the bed. Seconds later, she felt the mattress dip as he slid into bed. The longing to turn over and throw herself into his arms was so strong, she had to grip the edge of the mattress until finally, she heard his soft snores.

And there she'd remained, unmoving, watching as the sun came up over the horizon, until eventually falling into an uneasy doze.

Harnessing Horatio, Anthony felt like the biggest bastard who'd ever lived. It would be easy to blame what happened with George on his drunkenness, but in truth, it was the desperate desire to touch her that had led to his inebriation.

He had no idea how to proceed - all he knew was that he couldn't bear the thought of never seeing her again. He wasn't sure they could go back to the way things were before - indeed he wasn't certain he even wanted to.

George had made it clear that she had feelings for him. But what did she know of love? No one had ever shown her even the slightest affection. It would be understandable if she latched on to the first person who'd ever offered her any.

And would you really excuse what you did by calling it a show of affection?

Anthony stopped what he was doing and covered his eyes. No he couldn't. He had no excuse. He'd taken advantage of a helpless girl. One who was in

his care.

His only recourse was to offer marriage.

As the thought entered his head, he instantly felt a strange sense of calm. Of course it could have been because he knew that offering to wed her was the right thing to do. But in truth, it felt like coming home.

God only knew what his mother was going to say...

Chapter Sixteen

‘Right then, Percy, let me do the talking. My lord Bishop’s a deuced prickly fellow at the best of times, and since we want to get in and out as quickly as possible, there’s no sense in you setting up his bristles. So best if you stubble it.’

They were standing outside the Bishop’s Palace, looking up at the imposing façade. ‘Oh, and while we’re at it, stick Flossy inside your cassock.’

‘Why do I have to put her under my cassock, Sir?’ Percy protested. ‘She’s your dog.’

The Reverend gave a pained sigh. ‘Well, much as it troubles me to say it, Percy lad, I’ve gained a few pounds in recent months, and in truth me robe is sitting a trifle snugly.’ He looked over at his skinny curate, adding, ‘Whereas your cassock could fit you and the whole of the front pew inside it. So the Bishop’s unlikely to notice you’ve got a small furry animal in your drawers.’

Knowing of old the futility of arguing with his superior, Percy sighed and bent down to pick up Flossy, feeding her through his sleeves until she was tucked under his robe and sitting comfortably atop the leather belt cincturing his cassock. ‘I look ridiculous,’ he complained, looking down at the lump critically.

The Reverend eyed him unsympathetically before giving a small chuckle. ‘Stay behind me Percy, and I’m certain no one’ll notice.’

Ten minutes later, they were placed in a large office outside the Bishop’s receiving room. The silence was only broken by the scratching quill of the Bishop’s assistant as he worked on a ledger.

Abruptly, the sound of raised voices came from through the closed door. While the assistant didn't look up, the Reverend glanced apprehensively at Percy. The voices came again, and Flossy emitted a low growl. Unfortunately, this time the clerk did look up with a frown. 'Wind,' Reverend Shackelford explained hastily. Percy gave a helpless shrug and gave the lump an awkward pat. The assistant coughed and went back to his writing, lips pursed in distaste.

The voices came again, causing Flossy to utter another, louder growl. The clerk put down his pen and looked up again, his face thunderous – just in time to see the bulge above the curate's belt begin undulating. With a strangled sound, the official climbed hurriedly to his feet, just as the receiving room door flew open.

'You may be assured I will not forget this, my lord Bishop,' announced a gentleman, striding swiftly through the doorway. His voice was cold and clipped, and the Reverend was certain he'd heard it before.

Without casting them so much as a glance, the man continued across the room and out into the passageway, slamming the door behind him.

The Reverend stared after him in stunned bewilderment. It was the gentry cove he'd last seen in the Red Lion. The reason they were in Exeter in the first place.

The man looking for George.

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It took them nearly two hours to reach Bovey Manor. The direct road was still flooded, forcing Anthony to lead Horatio through a succession of narrow bridledpaths. Fortunately, the cart didn't get lodged in any muddy holes since the only item it was carrying was a large bag of nails. Anxious to get back, Anthony had declared he'd return once the road was passable to collect the planks of wood he'd ordered.

Throughout the journey, there was very little conversation, and George was

content to watch Nelson dash in and out of the hedgerows, paying no heed to the mud at all. Having only three legs didn't seem to impede him, and by the time they turned into the drive leading to the manor, the dog was cheerfully filthy.

Ordering her to remain with Horatio, Anthony immediately strode into the house to see if the roof had held during the storm. Fifteen minutes later, he reappeared his face wreathed in smiles. 'As dry as a bone,' he announced, the relief in his voice clear. 'I'll stable Horatio while you get Nelson cleaned up. The dog's ears perked up at the sound of his name, his tail wagging. 'You won't be so 'appy when I dump you in the blo- in the well,' George grumbled, tying the hound onto the lead.

By the fifth bucket of water, Nelson was relatively clean, but looking down at herself, George decided that most of the mud had ended up on her. She'd have to ask if Mrs. Parsons would do another wash. It was scandalously soon she knew, but somehow she no longer felt the same indifference to wearing grimy clothing. Indeed, she might even have to consider having a wash.

Not a bath. She'd never be having one of those again as long as she lived if she could bloody well help it.

Leaving the dog outside to contemplate the error of his ways, she went into the kitchen to find Anthony busy frying some eggs. The smell was heavenly, and she realised she was starving. She sat down at the table and picked up the pitcher of milk Mrs. Parsons had left.

'May I have some milk,' she asked slowly and carefully.

Sliding the eggs onto two plates, he turned round and raised his eyebrows. 'You may,' he responded, equally politely. George scowled, knowing he was trying not to laugh.

With a sniff, she helped herself to milk and a large hunk of bread. After slathering the bread with butter, she dunked it enthusiastically into the first egg and ate it with her eyes closed in pleasure.

She had egg yolk dribbling down her chin, but nevertheless, Anthony felt his

cock stir at the look of almost ecstasy on her face.

‘I ain’t never...’ She paused and grimaced, ‘I mean, I *haven’t* never had a fresh egg before,’ she amended, helping herself to more bread.

Anthony didn’t bother to correct her misuse of *never*, but grinned at her, enjoying the sight of a woman savouring her food. His sisters had never had any time for the female practice of eating like a bird, and all of them enjoyed healthy appetites. But since Prudence had married, he’d become accustomed to watching well-bred ladies pick at their food.

‘What did you eat when you lived with your foster parents?’ he asked her.

‘Bread an’ taters,’ she answered promptly. ‘A bit o’ porridge at the beginning o’ the week if John an’ Frank din’t get there first.’

‘Taters?’ Anthony quizzed.

‘Taters, you know, them wot grow in the ground.’

‘You mean potatoes?’

She nodded, giving a mock sigh and repeating, ‘*Pow tate oes*,’ in an exaggerated accent. ‘Don’t tell me you din’t call ‘em taters when you wos a lad - afore you got too ‘igh and mighty.’

He shook his head, and George frowned, adding, ‘So ‘ow is it a vicar’s son’s got the coin to own this place?’ She waved her hunk of bread around the kitchen. ‘And wot about your sister? She ain’t ... I mean *isn’t* ... short o’ blunt if ‘er fancy clothes were anythin’ to go by.’

Anthony abruptly realised how little she really knew about him. If he told her the truth, would it make her more or less likely to accept his marriage proposal? And that thought led to a second realisation.

He was actually quite desperate for her to say yes.

He took another hunk of bread and began buttering it slowly. Watching him, George raised her eyebrows, well aware he was fudging.

From the very first meeting, their relationship had been plagued by half-truths and complete fabrications. Anthony was very aware that if he was ever to win her absolute trust, it was time to come clean. She'd shared her past with him, and now it was his turn.

Anthony put down his bread, took a deep breath and started with the Duke of Blackmore.

It took nearly an hour before he finally got to the part of Nicholas gifting him Bovey Manor, and throughout his account, George hadn't interrupted once. However, once he trailed off, she shook her head in amazement and muttered, 'It sounds like a bloody fairy tale. You sure there ain't no fairy godmother 'angin' around you lot somewhere?'

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Reverend Shackelford jumped to his feet and stuck his head through the still open door into the receiving room, where the Bishop was busy pouring himself a swift brandy. 'I'm sorry, my lord,' he bellowed, almost causing his superior to shove the snifter up his nose. 'You'll have to excuse me. The Lord be with you.' He waved a vague cross and hurried back towards the door into the passageway, muttering, 'Get a move on Percy.'

The Bishop's assistant remained rooted to the spot but began muttering the Lord's Prayer as the curate jumped to his feet, cradling his still undulating bulge which now appeared to be emitting a whining noise.

Offering a tremulous smile to the terrified clerk, Percy made a grab for the rippling lump and took off after his superior.

'Can you see him?' hissed the Reverend once the curate caught up with him outside.

'See who?' Percy panted, hurriedly releasing Flossy from her cosy cocoon – much to the little dog's disgust.

'If only Freddy was still here,' Augustus Shackelford lamented.

‘Who are we looking for,’ the curate repeated, bending down to give Flossy a quick fuss.

‘That deuced gentry cove,’ breathed the Reverend, staring around wildly. ‘It was him, Percy, I know it was.’

Abruptly, Flossy began to growl again, pulling against her lead. Both men’s eyes followed the direction she was straining in. ‘What was he doing with the Bishop?’ asked Percy, trying to see what had the dog’s hackles up.

‘How the devil should I know?’ muttered the Reverend.

‘Is that him, Sir?’ Flossy was now practically strangling herself trying to reach the man they’d seen in the Bishop’s receiving room.

‘Tare an’ hounds, I remember now - Flossy didn’t like the fellow when she saw him in the Red Lion.’ The Reverend gave a delighted grin. ‘Freddy’s popped down to give us a hand. Follow that gentry cove, Floss.’

The little dog needed no further urging. Indeed, both the Reverend and Percy struggled to keep up. ‘What do you suppose he’s doing in Exeter?’ Percy questioned as they followed their man into Fore Street.

‘Could be he lives here,’ the Reverend responded, without taking his eyes off their quarry. ‘Though I can’t imagine him wanting George living on his deuced doorstep.’

‘But he knows the Bishop,’ Percy panted, ‘or at least he knows somebody who knows the Bishop.’

‘A bit devilish odd, I agree. And who did he mean when he said, *He wouldn’t forget this.*’

The Reverend stopped suddenly. ‘Fiend seize it, where’s the varmint gone?’

Their quarry appeared to have vanished. Nevertheless, Flossy was still tugging on her lead. ‘Let her go where she will, Percy,’ Reverend Shackelford directed. A few seconds later, she pulled them into an alleyway. Dark, fetid and unfortunately empty. ‘It’s a dead end,’ Augustus Shackelford

muttered.

‘No, it’s not, Sir,’ Percy whispered. ‘Look.’ He pointed to a shadowy gap in the buildings, about fifty yards away.

‘Right then, lead on, Flossy.’ The Reverend’s eyes were glinting, adding to Percy’s unease. He knew of old what that look meant.

The two men tiptoed down the alley. The only noise was Flossy’s almost constant grumbling as she continued to drag them along.

‘Strange she didn’t take to the fellow,’ the Reverend whispered. ‘But then I suppose she can spot a blackguard half a mile away.’ He paused before adding, ‘Just like Freddy could.’

They reached the shadowy gap which turned out to be an even narrower passageway – filled almost to bursting with detritus that had clearly accumulated over a long period of time.

‘You think George lived here?’ Percy asked, covering his nose with his hand.

‘Wouldn’t think so,’ the Reverend murmured in response. ‘It don’t look as if anybody’s actually lived here in years.’ He nodded towards the tall crumbling buildings leaning perilously close to one another, almost completely blocking out the light. ‘I reckon these buildings are used as storage, if anything at all. The whole deuced place needs knocking down.’

Percy looked apprehensively into the dank alleyway. ‘Do you really think our gentleman went down here?’

‘Well, unless he’s got deuced wings, he couldn’t have gone anywhere else.’ The Reverend looked down at the little dog who was still grumbling under her breath. ‘And Flossy looks convinced.’ Craning his neck forward, the clergyman squinted into the murky passage. ‘I can see a couple of doors halfway down,’ he muttered. ‘Come on, Percy.’

The Reverend stepped gingerly into the alley, wrinkling his nose. ‘Stay close to me, lad,’ he murmured. Percy didn’t need to be told twice. Indeed, he was all but sitting on his superior’s shoulders.

‘I’m sure I can hear something, Sir.’ His panicked whisper directly into the Reverend’s ear caused the clergyman to jump and step in a particularly noxious pile of ... *something*.

‘Thunder an’ turf,’ Augustus Shackelford muttered, lifting his foot up to inspect it, just as a loud voice sounded at their feet. Rearing backwards in surprise, his foot still in the air, the Reverend threw his arm round Percy’s neck. After wobbling dangerously for a couple of seconds, the two men fell backwards into the same pile of mulch decorating the clergyman’s boot. Behind them was a small window set into the brickwork at ground level.

‘Is that a finger?’ Percy’s voice was a panicked squeak as he held up what looked like a piece of bone. The Reverend recoiled. ‘Put the deuced thing down, Percy. It could be some poor fellow’s Thomas for all we know. With a panic-stricken whimper, the curate tossed his gruesome discovery as far as he could before frantically wiping his fingers on his robe. Glancing over at him, the Reverend realised the smaller man was on the verge of legging it until Flossy climbed up onto his shoulders and bared her teeth at the small window.

Both men turned to peer in through the grimy glass, gradually making out the figures of two men, one of them carrying a flickering candle. The other was the man they’d been chasing.

‘We have run out of time,’ their quarry’s voice lashed out in a furious undertone. ‘And I swear Atkins, if I’m cropped, you’ll be swinging right next to me.’

The Reverend and Percy looked at each other. Clearly the lick spittle was George’s former foster father.

‘The old woman - she knew summat, I know she did,’ Atkins jabbered. ‘She asked if ‘is name were George. Give me twenty-four hours an’ by the time I’ve finished wi’ the fussock, she’ll be beggin’ to tell me wot she ‘ad for ‘er bleedin’ breakfast.’

The Reverend felt as though he’d been kicked in the breadbasket. Agnes. They were talking about Agnes.

Chapter Seventeen

‘Please send our fastest rider, Huntley. I would like this missive to reach my husband by tomorrow morning.’

‘As you wish your grace.’ The elderly butler expressed no curiosity as to the message’s contents, but simply bowed and withdrew.

‘I hope your father’s still with Jago,’ Grace fretted. ‘It could take days to find him if he’s not at Tredennick.’

‘Why all this sudden anxiety, Mama?’ Jennifer frowned, helping herself to an orange. ‘Has something happened since this morning?’

The Duchess shook her head. ‘I can’t really put my finger on it, but this business with Georgiana has put me on edge, and I’d feel much happier if your father was here...’ She paused before adding, ‘These men looking for her – I’m certain that one at least has a connection to the Earl of Ruteledge. The man might be old, but he has a dreadful reputation. According to Nicholas, he has no conscience to speak of, and I’m aware they’ve had more than one confrontation in the Lords.’

‘And you really think this odious individual is the one looking for George?’

‘I don’t know,’ Grace murmured, ‘but I feel certain that the Earl’s involved in this unholy business somewhere.’

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The voices continued, but Reverend Shackelford was no longer listening. ‘We need to get back to Blackmore before Atkins does,’ the clergyman

hissed, climbing to his feet and taking hold of Flossy.

Without further ado, the two men hurried back up the alleyway, and a few minutes later emerged back onto Fore Street.

‘I think it’s time we sent word to the Duke,’ Percy wheezed as they hastened back to the carriage. ‘If Agnes is in danger...’ He trailed off, and for once the Reverend entirely agreed with him.

‘This whole business is too smoky by half, and we’re ill-equipped to deal with it.’

Turning the corner, Augustus Shackelford finally spotted the carriage, thankfully right where they left it. ‘We also need to get word to Anthony,’ the clergyman added, hurrying towards it. ‘Warn him that these people have no issue with using violence to get what they want.’

On reaching the coach, he was about to climb inside, before suddenly pausing. ‘I think we’d better remove our frocks, Percy lad. I can’t imagine Nicholas will take kindly to having potentially putrid body parts decorating his upholstery.’

A few minutes later, they were seated in their underclothing, cassocks relegated to the floor. If Thomas was surprised at the sight of the two clerics sitting in their smalls, he had the good sense not to mention it.

‘Blackmore as quickly as you can,’ the Reverend demanded.

‘Do you really think they’ll hurt Agnes?’ Percy fretted.

‘We can’t rule out the possibility that they’ll try. Mind you, I doubt very much they’ll have come up against anyone quite like my wife.’

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By the time Andrew Pettigrew arrived at the village of Little Bovey, he was beginning to tire. This was the third such village he’d investigated, reasoning

that since no one in Blackmore had seen the chit, it wasn't beyond the realms of possibility that she was hiding in one of the other hamlets lying close to the main Plymouth Road.

He was almost certain she hadn't made it to Plymouth itself, and while it was possible she was being sheltered somewhere in Blackmore; his gut told him she wasn't there.

And he'd learned over the years to listen to such feelings.

Still, the road to Little Bovey was almost impassable since the storm the night before, and it took him an extra hour to actually persuade his horse to venture through the water flooding the lane. If Georgiana Huxley had been here before the storm, then it was very likely she was still here.

When he finally reached the small green, he sat for a moment and took in his surroundings. The village was undoubtedly pretty, but it was much smaller than Blackmore. He doubted it would contain many places the chit could actually hide in; especially given she was likely starving. If she was here, he'd easily find her. And since it was well into mid-afternoon, he decided he would start at the inn.

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In the absence of any additional wood, Anthony decided to make a start on an area of the kitchen garden nearest the house. Initially, he eschewed George's offer of help with the excuse that there remained plenty of unfinished tasks inside. Somehow, since he'd privately determined to do the right thing, the thought of her undertaking such backbreaking work seemed entirely wrong.

Naturally, George paid no heed to his suggestion that she indulge in less arduous tasks. And since she wasn't yet aware of his impending heroic gesture, she told him in no uncertain terms to stubble it.

'What kind of 'erbs you reckon on plantin' then?' she asked when they'd been working in silence for nearly an hour. Anthony leant on his shovel and frowned.

‘I have no idea,’ he grinned finally. ‘Have you any experience with the kind of herbs used in cooking?’ George gave a vulgar snort and followed it with a shrug.

‘I got a tincture from old Bridy to put the Grimms to sleep when I legged it. Lookin’ back I should ‘ave used a bit more, then I’d ‘ave put the bastards to bed permanently.’ She shook her head. ‘No idea wot it were called though.’

‘I think Grace has an excellent book on herbs,’ Anthony went on, abruptly lost in a daydream of Georgiana lovingly tending their herb garden. ‘Would you like to borrow it? I’m certain she’d be more than happy to let you read it.’

George gave him an irritated look that also held more than a trace of embarrassment. ‘An jus’ when d’you think I’ve ever ‘ad time to learn to read?’

Anthony stared at her, his fantasy abruptly shattered. Of course she couldn’t bloody well read. What an imbecile he was. He watched her face redden with mortification as she bent down and began tugging viciously at a weed nearly as big as she was.

‘I could teach you if you want?’ he said quietly at length. She looked up, and he drew in a breath at the look of sheer joy on her face.

‘You’d do that?’ she breathed.

‘I’d be honoured,’ he smiled. ‘We’ll start after supper this evening.’

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To say Agnes had been incensed when she discovered her faithless husband had sneaked off to Exeter without her was putting it mildly. Indeed, had the Reverend returned at any point prior to her afternoon tea, the matron might have been sorely tempted to pay Mary to add a large dose of Epsom Salts to his tankard of ale.

As it was, a conversation with Lizzy over a large slice of chocolate tart helped calmed her ire considerably. So much so, that by the time Agnes was alone again, the Reverend's odds of surviving the night were almost even. Unfortunately, though she wasn't yet aware of it, her own likelihood of surviving as long as the next two hours very much rested on that same devious spouse.

On Lizzy's departure, Agnes elected to take her usual afternoon nap. Making herself comfortable on the chaise, she spent an enjoyable ten minutes imagining her beloved coming to a selection of untimely ends before drifting off into a light doze, from which she was rudely woken not a half an hour later by a large, particularly foul-smelling hand placed over her mouth.

'Scream an' I'll slit yer bleedin' throat,' a voice whispered directly in her ear.

Agnes stared up at the coarse features of the man who had accosted her outside the Red Lion. He grinned, directing a blast of putrid air from a mouth full of rotten teeth. 'I'm goin' to ask you a few questions, an' you're goin' to answer me all quiet like.'

Agnes glanced towards the door. 'There ain't no one there to 'elp you, Mrs.,' he added. 'Jus' watched 'em walkin' that way.' He tipped his head in the direction of the village. 'And that fella' in your stable is away wi' the fairies.' He cautiously lifted his hand and gripped her arm.

'You haven't killed him, have you?' Agnes breathed, her voice filled with horror.

Atkins chortled and shook his head. 'Might 'ave a bit o' a bloody 'eadache when he wakes up though.'

'How did you find me?' she asked, the outrage in her voice mostly feigned.

'Well known, you are,' he snickered. 'Only 'ad to ask where the puff-gutted, sour-faced bitch wi' the blue bonnet lived and they wos fallin' over themselves to tell me.'

He leaned close to her face until his ugly pockmarked face was all she could

see. 'Now I'll be the one askin' the questions. Answer me true, or I swear I'll cut you from ear to bloody ear.'

Agnes swallowed, pushing down her fear. She glanced at the door again. There was no way she'd be able to reach it in time, even if she did manage to escape the wretch's grip.

He sat down on the edge of the chaise, one hand holding her arm in a bruising grip and the other pointing the wicked looking knife towards her neck. 'Where's George?' he hissed.

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'Do you think we'll arrive in Blackmore before Henry Atkins?' Percy asked, his voice threaded with fear.

'Depends if he left the same time as we did,' the Reverend responded brusquely, 'and whether he's in a carriage or on a horse.'

'Shall we go straight to the vicarage?' the curate quizzed. 'It seems likely that Atkins doesn't actually know who Agnes is.'

The clergyman nodded. 'That's my hope, Percy lad. It'll take the varmint some time to find out who she is and where she lives. Still, I'll direct Thomas to drop us off at the end of the lane, just in case he's watching.'

'But we're in our *underclothes*,' Percy muttered, his voice quietly appalled. 'People will believe the vicarage a den of iniquity.'

'There's always the chance it might increase attendance,' the Reverend retorted, undeterred. 'And to be fair Percy, the sight of you in your drawers is unlikely to inflame the lust of old Mrs. Morton, let alone the entire parish.'

'I do wish the Duke was here,' Percy muttered. 'He would know what to do, I'm certain.'

Reverend Shackelford sighed. 'I'm of the same mind, Percy lad. I'll be

surprised if Grace hasn't already sent him a missive. But if she hasn't, as soon as we've made sure Agnes is safe, I'll be sending Nicholas a deuced letter myself.'

The two men were silent for a while, the only noise that of Flossy's snores as the little dog sprawled out on the seat next to Percy. Gradually, the landscape became familiar until, finally, they turned onto the Blackmore Road.

Augustus Shackelford gave a sharp rap on the carriage roof, and as Thomas obediently slowed the horses down, the Reverend leaned out of the window with instructions to drop them off at the bottom of the lane leading to the vicarage.

Being as discreet as before, Thomas refrained from reminding the clergyman that his attire was hardly appropriate for walking a few feet, let alone a hundred yards, and instead gave a stoic nod. One didn't remain in the Duke of Blackmore's employ for so many years without recognising that his grace's extended family were predominantly dicked in the nob.

A mere fifteen minutes later, the two men were clambering down from the carriage. 'Please inform her grace to expect an extended visit from her stepmother within the hour,' Augustus Shackelford shouted as the carriage was about to leave. 'Oh, and ask her to have our robes laundered...' Thomas favoured the Reverend a flat look before directing the horses towards the Duke's estate.

'Come along then, Percy, don't just stand there, take hold of Flossy. No sense in making a cake of ourselves needlessly.' The curate opened his mouth, then shut it again with a sigh and followed the Reverend up the lane towards the vicarage.

Just as they reached the boundary, Reverend Shackelford suddenly stopped dead before abruptly dragging Percy behind a large bush.

'Did you see something, Sir?' the curate whispered, panic stricken.

The Reverend narrowed his eyes. 'What time is it Percy?'

The curate frowned, pulling out his pocket watch. ‘Nearly half past the hour, Sir’ he murmured. ‘Why?’

‘Can you hear snoring?’

The curate listened for a second, then shook his head.

‘Neither can I,’ the Reverend declared with a groan. He parted the bush and peered towards the parlour windows – just visible from where the two men were crouching.

‘I don’t understand,’ Percy muttered. ‘Whose snoring?’

‘Agnes’s,’ Augustus Shackleford hissed. ‘She’s *always* asleep on the chaise longue at this time in the afternoon. Regular as clockwork.’ He paused and listened again. ‘Surely you haven’t forgotten her snoring. Like a honking goose.’ He gripped the smaller man’s shoulder. ‘Percy, *there’s no snoring.*’

The curate frowned and stuck his head through the gap in the bush. ‘Perhaps she’s just not tired.’ The Reverend shook his head. ‘Cake and tea then forty winks. We could be in the middle of the Second Coming, and she’d insist on having her nap.’ He pushed Percy out of the way. ‘Something’s definitely wrong,’ he muttered. ‘That blackguard must have got here before us.’

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‘If the lad you’re lookin’ fer’s a bloody thief, it ain’t the one who were ‘ere last night,’ declared the Green Man’s landlord, once Pettigrew had finished spinning his Canterbury tale.

‘There was a boy in here last night?’ the private detective asked casually.

‘Aye, came in wi the new owner o’ Bovey Manor. The lad din’t ‘ave much to say, but he were pleasant enough. Din’t look like no gull groper.’

‘Bovey Manor you say?’ Pettigrew finished his pint and called for another. ‘You wouldn’t happen to know the new owner’s name would you?’

The landlord shrugged. 'I don't rightly know if I'm honest. Place used to belong to the Duke o' Blackmore.'

Andrew Pettigrew's ears picked up at the name of Blackmore. But he couldn't imagine the chit managing to cut the wheedle with a bloody duke.

'Shackleford,' another man standing at the bar supplied. ''e's a vicar's son. You know, that God botherer over Blackmore way wi' all the daughters.' The stranger shook his head and looked expectantly at Pettigrew. 'Kicked up a bleedin' lark over the years they 'ave,' he added helpfully.

'Can I buy you a tankard of ale?' the private detective asked, giving in to the inevitable.

The man grinned and tipped his cap.

'Must've 'ad summat goin' fer 'em though, seein' as the eldest married the Duke o' Blackmore,' he said after taking a long draft of his pint. 'Reckon that's who the young cull got Bovey Manor from.'

'I 'eard one of 'em got leg shackled to a prince.'

'Bag o' bloody moonshine,' the landlord scoffed.

'So did this lad have a name?' Andrew Pettigrew asked, drawing the conversation back to his victim.

'Aye, 'is name were George,' the stranger offered. 'Reckon the boy's bin doin' some labourin' fer our new lord o' the manor.'

Chapter Eighteen

‘Right then, Percy, there’s no time to lose. If the varmint’s trying to wheedle George’s whereabouts out of Agnes, he’ll have his work cut out, but I’d prefer to put a deuced rub in the way before he gets to her fingernails.’

Percy stared at the Reverend in horror. ‘Surely he wouldn’t do such a thing...’ the curate stammered.

‘No, he won’t, because we’ll get there first,’ declared the clergyman firmly. He peered through the bush again. ‘We’ll never reach the parlour window without being seen. We’ll have to go through the stable yard.’

‘How do you know Henry Atkins has her in the parlour?’ Percy questioned.

‘There’s no way he’d have been able to shift her off that chaise without alerting the whole of deuced Blackmore,’ the Reverend answered matter-of-factly. He looked down at Flossy who was happily scratching behind her ear.

‘You’re going to have to stay here, Floss,’ he muttered. ‘I’ll tie you to this bush, so no one’ll mistake you for breakfast.’ He bent down to pick the little dog up before squeezing through the bush. ‘Thunder an’ turf, I think me arse’s just been stung by a nettle,’ he winced. ‘Come on, Percy. If I can get through there, so can you. Especially with your spindle shanks.’

Five minutes later, the two men had managed to sneak round to the yard. As they turned the corner, Percy looked back to see Flossy sitting next to the bush staring after them, tail wagging hopefully, then he hurried after the Reverend who was just about to disappear into the stable. ‘Tare an’ hounds,’ the curate heard him mutter a couple of seconds later.

‘What’s wrong?’ Percy hissed, wavering at the door. ‘Is it Agnes?’ A sudden

groan had him hastening inside in time to see the stable hand, Seth, hold his head and try to sit up.

‘The rogue walloped him from behind if that lump on the back of his head is anything to go by,’ Reverend Shackelford muttered. ‘You stay here with him, Percy, while I go and see where the scoundrel’s holding Agnes.’

Percy took a deep breath, then surprised himself by shaking his head. ‘I won’t let you go in there alone, Sir.’

Reverend Shackelford looked wordlessly over at the curate, a sudden lump forming in his throat. He and Percy had been through so much together over the years, and the clergyman came to the abrupt realisation that the curate was actually his only true friend.

In truth, Augustus Shackelford might not have felt quite so overcome with emotion had he known that Percy’s newly found backbone was very likely due to the fact that he’d just finished reading *The Illustrated Art To Manliness*, but as it was, he simply muttered a gruff, ‘Thank you,’ before pushing Seth back down into the straw and ordering the stable hand to keep his head down.

‘We’ll go through the kitchen,’ he added, climbing to his feet. ‘Since Mrs. Tomlinson and Maisie will be off in the village.’

The two men tiptoed through the back door into the kitchen. Once there, the Reverend immediately hurried over to the larder. Before Percy had the chance to protest that this was hardly the time for a snack, the clergyman suddenly reappeared with Mrs. Tomlinson’s prize rolling pin in his hand.

He gleefully held it up for Percy’s inspection before giving an experimental swing. Only the curate’s razor-sharp reflex (*Chapter Four – Evading Confrontation*) prevented him losing the end of his nose.

At the entrance into the hall, Reverend Shackelford opened the door a crack, put his head to the narrow opening and listened. At first, he could hear nothing, until suddenly, he heard a voice growl, ‘Where’s George?’



When Anthony offered to teach her to read, George was torn between elation at the possibility of finally being able to understand what had always been unintelligible squiggles, and anguish at the thought of spending so much time in close proximity to her employer without being able to touch him or admit what was truly in her heart.

I reckon you've already said more than enough, her internal voice declared bluntly.

The trouble was, the words she'd spoken to Anthony weren't quite true – not the whole truth anyway. Put simply, she would die rather than leave him. But to be close to him without ever being able to touch him again... She wasn't sure she could bear it.

George knew he would marry one day and likely soon. But until then, he was hers. How could she tell him that until that time came, she wanted more than just a roof over her head?

She wanted to share his bed.

Glancing up, Georgiana watched him out of the corner of her eye. His shirt was plastered to his chest revealing the sculpted muscles. He was clearly unaware that his shirt was open nearly to his navel revealing a smattering of curling chestnut hair dusting the hard planes of his chest. She felt the very core of her contract with need at the sight and had to fight the urge to throw down her spade and press herself against his body, to intimately savour every firm inch of him.

With a small groan, she turned her back, only to give a surprised gasp as a man suddenly appeared round the corner of the house.

Immediately, Nelson started up a cacophony of barking, dashing towards the stranger, then dancing back in alarm as he got too close. George glanced back at her employer who was staring impassively at their visitor. Putting down his shovel, Anthony dragged his sleeve across his forehead and wiped his hands

on his breeches. 'Stay here,' he murmured to George as he strode past her towards the stranger, who hadn't moved.

'May I be of assistance?' he asked pleasantly, stopping about six feet away.

The man gave a small bend of his head. 'Am I correct in thinking you Anthony Shackelford?'

Anthony nodded, adding, 'I don't believe we are acquainted, Sir. Perhaps you could favour me with your name and your business here.'

'This is your young labourer I presume?' The stranger nodded towards George and gave an oily smile, seemingly unaware that his failure to answer the questions about his name and business was not only ill-mannered but threatening.

Anthony's voice turned hard. 'The boy is no business of yours,' he countered. 'And unless you have good reason for being on my property, may I suggest you be on your way ... Sir.'

George stepped backwards, unaccountably awkward under the man's penetrating stare. Heart thudding, she gave a carefully nonchalant shrug and picked up her shovel. Then, deliberately turning her back on the man, went back to her digging, all the while feeling the prickle of his eyes upon her.

Anthony took a step forward and finally the man's eyes returned to him. 'My apologies, Mr. Shackelford,' he murmured after a second. 'I am looking for a small, strong lad to assist me in cleaning my chimney, and the landlord at the Green Man mentioned your young labourer here.' He gave another smile, showing far too many teeth in Anthony's mind.

'I'm afraid I'm unable to spare him,' Anthony responded coldly. 'As you can see, there is much work to be done here.'

'Indeed,' the stranger acknowledged his glance encompassing the overgrown garden. For a second there was an uncomfortable silence, then, to Anthony's relief, the man inclined his head. 'I will leave you to your exertions. Good day, Mr. Shackelford.' With that, he turned on his heel and began retracing

his steps. After a moment, Anthony followed, watching as the stranger climbed onto his horse and rode away.

‘Who’s ‘e?’ George quizzed, coming up to stand beside him.

Anthony shook his head. ‘I don’t believe I’ve ever seen him before,’ he answered thoughtfully.

‘You reckon ‘e was up to no good?’ she continued, unable to hide the anxiety in her voice.

Anthony looked down at her, his eyes tracing her face. ‘I will never let any harm come to you,’ he murmured. It was on the very tip of his tongue to ask her to marry him right there and then, but before he could take that final, irrevocable step, a sudden bark came from their feet, and the moment was lost.

‘I think Nelson’s hungry,’ he said dryly instead.

‘I know how he feels,’ she whispered. ‘In all honesty I’m fair blo... gutfounded.’

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‘The only George I know is Albert’s son,’ they heard Agnes retort, her voice commendably waspish. ‘I told you that the last time you asked.’

Glancing over at the curate, Reverend Shackelford raised the rolling pin in one hand, pointed towards the parlour with the other and mimed them tiptoeing across the hall. Percy swallowed and nodded.

‘And anyway, what do you want with the poor lad?’ Agnes was saying as they stepped into the hall. ‘Clearly he’s not your son.’

‘I tol’ yer I’m the one askin’ the bleedin’ questions,’ preceded a loud slapping sound followed by a sharp cry. The Reverend stopped briefly and gritted his teeth before continuing on, his expression grim. Agnes’s voice when it came again was wobbly but undeterred.

‘I don’t know any other George,’ she quavered. ‘And using your fists will not change that.’

‘That’s my girl,’ muttered the Reverend as they finally reached the parlour door. Although it was closed, fortunately the latch had not been engaged, so he was able to ease it open slightly. With a worried glance at Percy, he bent forward and put his eye to the crack in the door.

At first he could see nothing, then pushing the door open a little further gave him a view of the parlour window with the chaise longue to one side. On it sat Agnes glaring at her attacker.

‘Right then, Percy, on my signal, we’ll charge in and catch the varmint off guard.’ He gave a downward chopping motion with the rolling pin. The curate nodded and began hopping from foot to foot, much to the Reverend’s perplexity. ‘Making sure I’m ready,’ Percy huffed, making jabbing motions with his fists. (*Chapter Five – The Art of Instant Readiness*)

Wondering if Percy had finally had one bang on the head too many, Augustus Shackelford put his eye back to the crack, and his heart sank to his stockinged feet as the next thing he saw was Flossy standing up on the bench outside, looking through the window. ‘Tare an’ hounds,’ he muttered inwardly. Unfortunately, the little dog caught sight of him at the same time and her tail began wagging furiously.

‘No more shammin’ it,’ Henry Atkins was saying. ‘You know who I’m talkin’ about, Mrs., so don’t waste yer breath unless it’s to tell me where the lad is. The next lie’ll cost you a bloody finger.’

Observing the dog’s excitement, the Reverend gave an almost soundless moan. ‘Down, Flossy,’ he mimed. Unfortunately, he entirely forgot his instructions to Percy only seconds earlier, and also used his hands to perform a quick downward motion.

Percy didn’t wait to be told twice. With a wild cry (*Chapter Eight – The Native American Battle Cry*) he shoved open the door with his foot and charged towards Henry Atkins.

For a few vital seconds, the other three were rooted to the spot, staring at the curate in astonishment. Then with a rarely used expletive, the Reverend came out of his shock and took off after Percy, brandishing his rolling pin.

Now, it could have been the uncommon sight of an individual running towards him screaming dementedly wearing only his undergarments that caused Henry Atkins to pause long enough for the Reverend to get close enough to wield his rolling pin to potentially devastating effect - except that the clergyman did not catch sight of Agnes's gossip sheet lying on the floor until it was too late.

With an oomph, Augustus Shackelford's legs parted ways and he slid along the floor at breakneck speed towards the open-mouthed Henry Atkins who went down like a set of skittles.

In the ensuing confusion, the Reverend struggled to free the rolling pin which had somehow got stuck down his drawers. Finally freeing it with a triumphant shout, he lifted his arm in the air, ready to give the varmint a headache he'd never forget. Unfortunately, behind him, Percy was at that precise moment executing a complex boxing move (*Chapter Ten – Planting A Prime Facer*) which he discovered was not quite as effective on a wooden cooking implement.

Seconds later, Henry Atkins scrambled to his feet and fled.

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'I'm perfectly well, Augustus. Please don't fuss so.' The Reverend stared at his wife in astonishment. He'd spent the last five minutes delving into her reticule in a fevered attempt to find her salts, only to have her push them away.

'I think I might have broken my thumb,' Percy complained.

'You're lucky it wasn't your deuced head,' Reverend Shackelford muttered. Shaking his head, the clergyman climbed to his feet and went to let Flossy in through the window.

‘We certainly sent the blackguard off with his tail between his legs, though, didn’t we, Sir?’ Percy continued, his voice uncharacteristically excited.

The Reverend threw his curate an irritated look. ‘Since when did you become Blackmore’s answer to Gentleman Jack?’

Percy went pink but didn’t think mentioning *The Illustrated Art To Manliness* would add anything positive to the situation.

‘Old Atkins has likely run back to that nob he works for, so we can assume they’ll be sending reinforcements before long.’

‘I didn’t tell them anything,’ Agnes declared, indignantly.

The Reverend chuckled. ‘The puff guts definitely got more than he bargained for when he took you on, Agnes old girl. Still, I’ll wager he suspects we know more than we’re letting on. We need to get word to Anthony pretty sharpish.’ He looked over at the curate, still nursing his thumb. ‘Should I count you out, Percy?’

‘Certainly not, Sir. Once Lizzy’s bandaged me up, I’ll be ready to give the varmints their just deserts.’ (*Chapter Twelve – Staying the Course*).

Raising his eyebrows, the Reverend couldn’t help wondering if the curate had suddenly developed a maggot in his head. Still, this new brazen-faced Percy was a distinct improvement on the old chuckleheaded one.

Giving an approving nod, the Reverend picked up Flossy. ‘I suggest we make Seth comfortable, put on some deuced clothes, then get over to Grace. I want to find out if she’s sent word to Nicholas. I’ll feel a sight happier once the Duke’s here to put a deuced rub in the way of the whole havey cavey business.’

Chapter Nineteen

‘She’s hanging on the sleeve of a young bumpkin by the name of Shackleford. From what I could see, the cake still thinks she’s a boy.’

Linfield stared at the private detective thoughtfully. He’d heard the name Shackleford before, but for the life of him couldn’t remember where.

It was nearing eight in the evening. The two men were sitting in the corner of the bar in the same inn they’d met previously.

Earlier that same evening, Pettigrew had sent word that he’d located their quarry in a manor house not far from the Plymouth Road near to the village of Little Bovey, but had unfortunately been unable to snatch her.

‘Now here’s where it gets complicated,’ Pettigrew went on. ‘The young cove she’s working for is by all accounts the brother-in-law of the Duke of Blackmore.’

That was where he’d heard the name before. Linfield swore softly. ‘She must have run into him when she got off the bloody stagecoach,’ he ground out, resisting the urge to punch something. ‘No doubt she fed the idiot a bag of moonshine. Does the manor house they’re in belong to Blackmore?’

Pettigrew shook his head. ‘Not anymore. Gifted it to his brother-in-law according to the locals.’ The private detective took a large swallow of brandy before adding thoughtfully, ‘Looked to me as if there were only the two of ‘em in the house. Well, them and a bloody yapping mongrel. If you take ‘em by surprise and manage to shut the dog up...’ He shrugged. ‘The house is in the middle of nowhere, so no one’s likely to hear any commotion - though Shackleford’s likely to put up a fight...’ He paused and eyed the brooding man in front of him. ‘Is she really important enough to piss off a powerful

duke?’

Before Linfield had the chance to answer, the door opened to reveal an anxious looking Henry Atkins. Never an appealing sight at the best of times, Atkins’s pallor looked almost waxlike in the candlelight.

‘Well?’ Linfield barked, as a greeting.

Atkins sank into a chair as the other two men regarded him distastefully. In answer, he simply shook his head and mopped at his sweating forehead with a kerchief, leaving an unappealing streak of glistening muck. He didn’t dare admit he’d not only failed in getting any information but had actually revealed far more than he’d learnt.

‘For God’s sake, go and dip your bloody head in a barrel of water,’ Linfield spat in a heated whisper. ‘You look and smell disgusting. When you look halfway presentable, meet us at the Plymouth Road gates no later than midnight.’

‘But I just come from there m’lud,’ Atkins wheezed. ‘Me throat’s fair parched. I need a drink afore I die o’ bloody thirst.’

Linfield narrowed his eyes. ‘You won’t be swallowing anything but your own blood through a slit throat,’ he ground out. ‘No thanks to you, we have the location of the chit. I want her back in our hands before dawn.’

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It was the first time George had ever been completely and totally happy. But then it had been a day for firsts. It was the first time she’d ever felt protected and cared for. The first time anyone had sworn never to allow any harm to come to her.

It was the first time she’d actually *enjoyed* a bath. Of course that might have had something to do with the fact that this time Anthony had sat the tub in front of the kitchen fire and warmed the water for her before she climbed into it. Truly, she never realised how wonderful being warm and clean could feel.

He'd tactfully left her alone while she bathed, although she could have told him it was a bit like shutting the gate after the horse had bolted. But the privacy was delicious – indeed she almost laughed out loud at the thought that she was actually enjoying the feel of the water on her skin.

And then, later, after she was warm and dry, he'd sat with her and talked to her about the *Alphabet*. He had her tracing the letters he'd put down on the paper. By the time she'd finished, dusk had descended, and she was scratching the shapes by candlelight.

It was the first time anyone had ever thought her important enough to teach her anything.

Supper was a lighthearted affair. Mrs. Parsons's favourite rabbit stew – George privately wondered at the seemingly endless supply of rabbits – mopped up with fresh bread and real butter.

'Blo- blimey, I'm stuffed,' she complained after her second helping. 'I ain't goin' to be able to fasten me britches if I keep this up.'

'Perhaps we need to think about buying you a couple of skirts,' Anthony commented evenly. Georgiana glanced over at him in surprise.

'I thought you wanted me to stay as George for the time bein'?'

In answer, Anthony took a deep breath. 'What happened between us...' he began.

'Ain't nothin' worth mentionin',' George interrupted, her face flaming.

'I should not have taken the liberties I did,' he insisted. 'My behaviour was unforgiveable. The thing is...'

'I forgive you,' she countered, 'There. We can forget all about it.'

'I don't *want* to forget all about it,' Anthony found himself growling. He watched her begin to frown. Bloody hell, this was all going wrong.

'The thing is,' he repeated, trying hard not to grit his teeth, 'I think you

should marry me.'

George opened her mouth, but no sound came out. She simply stared at him. Then abruptly, she started to laugh.

Anthony stiffened. 'I fail to see anything remotely funny in my suggestion,' he snapped.

George simply laughed harder, while he sat stony faced, arms crossed, and waited for her mirth to subside. 'Are you bloody addled?' she managed at length. 'The likes o' you don' marry the likes o' me.'

'And how are we so different?' Anthony bit out. 'I am a vicar's son, George. My sister is the one with the fancy title.'

'And she ain't the only one,' George countered. 'You reckon to put me in wi' all these nobs and lead me round like a prize bloody pig, jus' to watch me fall flat on me face?' She swallowed, her humour disappearing, replaced by a sudden flare of anger. 'You'd be that cruel?' She shook her head before adding, 'An all because you almost 'ad a tuppin' you thought you'd no right to.'

'That is not why...' Anthony began, then stopped. It was exactly why. Or it had been when he'd first considered it. But now...? He stared at her pale, determined face. And abruptly realised just how much she'd come to mean to him. He wanted to sweep her into his arms and tell the whole world to go to hell in a bloody handcart. And then he wanted to love her with his hands and his mouth until every single inch of her was truly convinced he wasn't asking her to marry him out of guilt.

Before he could do anything, she pushed her chair back and stood up. 'I think you've 'ad one too many brandies,' she commented matter-of-factly. 'So I'll bid you good night, and by tomorrow morning, we'll 'ave put this foolishness behind us.'

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‘I sent word to Nicholas this morning, Father.’

‘But that was before Agnes was accosted by a murdering hellhound,’ the Reverend protested. ‘Look at her. A deuced shadow of her former self.’

Grace threw a suitably concerned glance towards her stepmother, privately thinking she’d never seen the matron looking better. Her face was flushed, and her eyes held an unaccustomed gleam. Even more tellingly, there was no sign of her salts or any of her revolting potions.

‘I’ve told you, Augustus. I’m perfectly well,’ Agnes commented tartly, echoing the Duchess’s assessment.

‘I don’t think Nicholas will be in any doubt of the severity of the situation,’ Grace added. ‘Even before stepmother was so...’ She paused, searching for the correct words.

‘...cruelly accosted,’ Percy supplied helpfully. The Duchess nodded.

‘Indeed. Even before then, I had an inkling that this whole business would turn unpleasant. It’s my hope that Nicholas and Malcolm will be here by tomorrow evening at the latest.’

‘Can we afford to wait that long?’ Percy demanded. The Duchess looked at the curate in surprise.

‘One too many bumps on the deuced head, in my opinion,’ Reverend Shackleford muttered.

‘I don’t believe that acting in haste is in our best interests,’ Grace responded firmly. ‘We need to get word to Anthony apprising him of the most recent events certainly, but beyond that, I think we should wait for Nicholas and Malcolm’s return.’ She turned to Agnes, adding, ‘However, if you’re amenable, Stepmother, I do believe that you and Father should stay here until then.’

Clearly, Agnes had not entirely eschewed the dramatics, and her sigh as she nodded her head and accepted three shortbread biscuits was the very essence

of martyrdom.

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Climbing wearily up the stairs, Anthony could have kicked himself. He'd handled the whole bloody conversation like an unlocked cub. But strangely, her laughter had finally eliminated the last vestige of doubt that Georgiana Huxley was the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. He didn't give a tinker's damn about her background. Whether she was some gentry cove's by blow or she'd been stolen at birth. She was simply George. And her self-depreciation, her lack of airs and graces, her unbridled joy in even the littlest things drew him to her like a moth to a flame. In truth, he couldn't imagine his life without her in it.

Climbing into bed, Anthony determined to keep his distance and bide his time. He would win her over eventually.

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Anthony Shackelford had asked her to marry him. Even now, she wanted to burst into hysterical laughter at the thought.

What the bleeding hell was the idiot thinking?

But despite the fact that his offer had clearly been made out of some ridiculous sense of honour, George felt her heart warm at the thought he would do such a bloody stupid thing. For her.

Didn't he realise she already belonged to him? That she'd been his almost from their first meeting? He didn't have to make an honest woman of her. Indeed, she'd rather he didn't. The idea of being picked apart by a bunch of stuck-up nobs filled her with horror. And in truth, she could never put him through such humiliation.

George abruptly sat up on her mattress. Her hilarity earlier had been mainly a

reaction to her disbelief, but could Anthony have believed her laughter a rejection of him entirely? ‘Bugger it,’ she muttered. Surely after what they’d shared, the idiot wouldn’t think she was declining *any* kind of relationship. Just the leg shackled bit.

Her current bed partner looked up in sleepy disgust as she made to scramble to her feet. ‘I’m sorry, Nelson. I’ve got to go and sort this out. Tomorrow might be too late.’ She tucked the dog up into her blanket and eased open the door. Then before she could change her mind, she ran barefoot towards the hall.

At the foot of the stairs, she paused slightly. What if he snubbed her? Well, at least she’d know where she stood. Biting her lip, she started up the stairs. Halfway up, she almost started laughing again – God knew why she was tiptoeing. There were only the two of them in the bloody house if she didn’t count Nelson.

In moments, she was standing outside Anthony’s door. Should she knock? If she went straight in, she risked being put on her arse again. Taking a deep breath, George banged on the door. The noise sounded like thunder in the silence. Wincing, she snatched her hand away. Likely she’d been a bit heavy handed.

There was a brief quiet, then she heard a mumbled expletive. Seconds later, the door was thrown open. ‘What the dev-’ George stepped back hastily when she saw an actual sword in his hand.

‘Where the bloody hell did you get that?’ she heard herself asking in disbelief.

He didn’t answer, just stared at her as though she was a ghost. She stared back, everything she’d thought to say driven right out of her head by the sight of him wearing only his nightshirt. His almost *transparent* nightshirt. Her heart slammed against her ribs as she realised she wanted to rip it off him. She wanted it more than she’d ever wanted anything in her whole life.

Swallowing, George was abruptly made aware of two things. Firstly, that her own attire was equally diaphanous, and secondly, he was gazing at her with

much the same expression.

His sword clanging on the floor was the only warning she got as he reached out and pulled her to him, his lips swooping down onto hers in the same instant. As he plundered her mouth with his own, she felt his hands run down her back, dragging up her shirt until his hands closed for the second time on her bare bottom. With a deep-seated groan, he fitted her to him, grinding her against that place that *needed*. Giving an almost kittenish whimper, George allowed him to take her weight, lifting her legs around his waist, her fingers feverishly threaded through the curling hair at his nape as he carried her into his bedchamber, kicking the door shut behind him.

Seconds later, she was dropped onto the bed. Opening her eyes, she looked up at him in awe as he drew off his nightshirt. Truly he was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. She watched his face as he bent forward and cupped her mound with his large hand, slipping his finger into her already soaking warmth. With a cry, she arched off the bed and Anthony used his other hand to rip open her shirt, revealing her small pert breasts, the nipples already peaking in anticipation. Bracing himself with one hand on the mattress, he bent his head and took one ripe bud into his mouth, his thumb circling relentlessly at the entrance to her core even as his finger continued to delve deeply.

Blindly, George reached down and took his cock in her hand. She heard him groan as she inexpertly stroked the velvet heat of him in the same rhythm as his finger until suddenly she was exploding, gushing over a precipice. So much pleasure, she could hardly contain it. She heard herself crying out his name as sensation rippled along every nerve until abruptly his finger slid from her and she writhed in protest, only to feel him shift above her, his cock slipping from her fingers. Her eyes flew open, and she stared up at him, feeling him position himself in between her legs.

‘If this is not what you want, tell me now, love,’ he rasped, ‘or God help me, I won’t be able to stop.’

In answer, she wrapped her legs around him and pulled him to her, feeling the blunt hot tip of his manhood at her entrance.

With a guttural moan, he plunged deep inside of her. The pain was fierce but

brief. Instinctively, she squeezed her eyes shut and arched closer, only to feel him pause. Opening her eyes, she stared up at his features contorted in almost agony as he fought to keep himself still, allowing her to get used to the feel of him filling her body.

Wonderingly, she lifted her hand and tunnelled her fingers through his hair. His eyes burned into hers as he whispered, his voice ragged, 'I want to go slow for you, but I'm not sure I can.'

In answer, she stroked the rasp of his cheek. 'Please,' she whispered achingly.

Slowly, his eyes never leaving hers, Anthony began to move. The last vestige of pain disappeared as the heat came back. The sensations from earlier began to gather again and instinctively she locked her legs around his back, arching up to meet his thrusts.

Her release came out of nowhere, and she cried out as the sudden rush of pleasure crashed through her. As soon as he felt her tighten around him, Anthony lost control. His mouth sought hers in a kiss that was almost savage, and she returned in kind, her tongue tangling with his as she rode his urgency, clutching at his shoulders. Seconds later, she felt his whole body shake as his release wracked him. Gradually, his thrusts slowed until finally he stopped, and with a ragged sigh lowered his body gently onto hers.

They lay just so for a few minutes, each inexplicably knowing a peace that had hitherto been missing from their lives, until at length, Anthony lifted his head and stared down at her.

With an almost imperceptible grin, she lifted her hand and languidly touched his face. 'Can I be your mistress now?'

Chapter Twenty

‘You will not kill her. Do you hear me?’ Simon Linfield turned on his wife with a snarl.

‘I am in this bloody mess because of you,’ he bit out. ‘I should have wrung the chit’s neck the minute her mother breathed her last.’

Judith Linfield flinched away from the rage in her husband’s eyes but didn’t back down. ‘If you so much as harm a hair on her head, I swear I will expose you to Ruteledge,’ she hissed, repeating the threat that had kept Georgiana alive all these years.

Linfield half raised his hand to strike her, then stopped and took a deep breath. ‘There will come a time in the *very* near future, dearest wife, when that warning will no longer work,’ he murmured chillingly instead. ‘And at that moment, you would do well to look to your own position lest the little bitch is not the only one to end up unaccounted for.’

His wife blanched and swallowed. She knew well that the only reason she was still walking free was the fact that her husband needed her family’s money.

Simon Linfield had lived his whole life on the fringes of society. The only two things standing between him and titled wealth were Edward Linfield and Georgiana Huxley. Judith would have informed on her husband years ago if she hadn’t believed that Georgiana’s life with her grandfather would be even worse than the one she had now.

She had seen Victoria. Locked away in a tower room for the whole of her eighteen years.

No, she would have to bide her time and ensure that she and Georgiana were as far away from Simon as possible when the Earl finally breathed his last. She had no illusions that either of them would survive for even a day once that news reached her husband.

She listened to the door slam and prayed that her threat would prevent him from doing his worst when he finally got his hands on his quarry.

OOOOO

Anthony was beginning to drift into sleep when George suddenly sat up in bed. 'I forgot about Nelson,' she explained when he raised a sleepy eyebrow. 'If I'm goin' to stay 'ere with you for the rest o' the night, we can't leave 'im down there all on 'is own.'

'Why the devil not?' Anthony protested, pulling on the blanket she'd dislodged. 'I'm certain he's more than comfortable stretched out on your bed.'

George shook her head and tossed back the bedclothes to climb out of the bed.

'Are you always this restless?' he complained, yanking again at the blanket. She looked down at him.

'Some of us 'ave never 'ad the luxury of a good night's sleep,' she reprimanded him. 'Keepin' one eye open meant you got to open the other one in the mornin'.'

Anthony stared at her, fully appreciating, perhaps for the first time, just how difficult her childhood must have been. He turned onto his side, leaning on his elbow. 'From now on, you'll never have to sleep with one eye open,' he vowed, reaching out to stroke her arm.

Her answer was a ribald chuckle. 'Long as I keep yer bed warm, I dare say.'

Anthony shook his head with a sigh. 'You will always keep my bed warm,

George, and I yours.’ He spoke slowly and carefully as if to a child. ‘I will never marry another.’ She made no answer to that but turned her head away quickly and climbed off the bed.

‘I won’t be long,’ she declared, pulling her shirt on to cover her nakedness. Anthony watched as she slipped through the door, then with a sigh, sat up and lit the candle on the nightstand before lying back against the pillows, his hands behind his head.

While he understood in part her continued reluctance to marry him, she had clearly failed to take into account the possible consequences of their lovemaking. He could not protect her if she became with child unless she agreed to become his wife. Earlier, he’d vowed to wait, but their lovemaking had changed everything. Somehow, he would convince her that marrying him would not be the traumatic experience she believed. None of his sisters would even think to judge her - God knew, they’d have no grounds given their own behaviour over the years. He just needed to convince her of it.

And he was certain that once his mother and father recognised his resolve, they too would accept the inevitable. He gave a rueful chuckle. George had already met his father and clearly thought him more than a little dicked in the nob - what she’d think of his mother when she finally met her, he couldn’t even begin to imagine.

A couple of minutes later, he heard footsteps on the stairs followed by a scratching sound at the door. ‘Old yer ‘orses,’ preceded a whirlwind on three legs as Nelson launched himself onto the bed. Giving the mongrel a fuss, he looked enquiringly at the young woman who was now hovering by the door.

‘What now?’ he murmured as she scanned her eyes around the room. Shutting the door, George looked over at him and bit her lip. Evidently something was bothering her that was preventing her from returning to bed. He sat back up and stared at her expectantly.

At length, she sighed and held out her hand. ‘I need somewhere to ‘ide these.’ Her two remaining guineas were sitting on top of her customary bandages, now crushed into her palm.

‘Why do you need to hide them?’ he questioned evenly. She gave a shrug.

‘In case.’ He waited for her to elaborate, but she seemed to think the explanation enough.

‘Then why don’t you keep them where you’ve always kept them.’ He nodded to her breasts, visible through her shirt. He felt his cock stir as he clearly saw her nipples poking through the linen.

‘I can’t keep takin’ em off every time you fancy a tuppin’ she retorted matter-of-factly. ‘And wot wi’ all this bloody washin’, I’ll end up losin’ ‘em.’

Frowning, Anthony beckoned her closer, and reluctantly, she sat down on the side of the bed. Leaning towards her, he parted her shirt, only now noticing the red weals in between her breasts. He touched the mark gently, tempted to reassure her that she didn’t need to stash money away any longer. Instead he murmured, ‘Why don’t you let me keep them for you?’

‘Wot about when I fancy a tuppin’?’ she teased.

‘I won’t lose them,’ he insisted. ‘See if the bandage will stretch. After a brief hesitation, George put the coins onto the bed and rolled out the long piece of cloth. ‘They’d be much better in some ‘idin’ place I reckon,’ she griped as she passed the bandage under his armpits.

Anthony couldn’t have articulated why he felt the need to take care of George’s precious coins, but somehow, in his mind, it symbolised his commitment to taking care of *her*. He watched the top of her head as she carefully positioned the two coins onto his chest, securing them underneath the bandage. Then she sat back to regard her handiwork. ‘I don’t reckon they’ll stay put fer long,’ she fretted. ‘I think we...’ she stopped as she heard a sudden noise. Nelson stood up on the bed, his fur on end, and uttered a warning growl.

Anthony frowned and climbed out of the bed, putting his finger to his lips in a warning for her to remain quiet. Quickly pulling his shirt over his head, he went towards the window. There were no curtains, so he stood to one side to avoid being visible in the candlelight. George remained seated on the bed,

holding onto Nelson. She stared at him wordlessly, her whole body poised for flight.

At first, Anthony could see nothing, but the longer he stood, the more he could make out of the shadowy drive. Finally, he saw slight movement just inside the treeline bordering the drive. He remained unmoving, staring out into the darkness, and after a few moments, four men materialised out of the trees.

He watched as they carefully made their way towards the house, and just before they disappeared from view, his heart thudded in sick fear as he saw one of them pull out what looked like a pistol.

Muttering an oath, he stepped carefully away from the window. Clearly, the men were making their way towards the back of the house.

‘Where are your britches,’ he hissed to George. She didn’t waste her voice in replying, but simply pointed downwards. With another expletive, Anthony strode towards his wardrobe and pulled out two pairs of breeches, tossing one of them over to the bed. ‘Put these on,’ he ordered George in a low voice. Without arguing, she quickly pulled them on, tucking the shirt in as best she could and tying the front in a makeshift knot.

Her face was ashen in the darkness, but she stood up bravely and waited for his next instructions. ‘I saw four men,’ he whispered. ‘I think at least one of them is carrying a pistol. I have my sword but no other weapon.’

‘Are they after me?’ George breathed, trying to control her fear.

Anthony shrugged. ‘The only thing we know for sure is that they’re not calling for tea and bloody cake.’ He took a deep breath. ‘I can’t risk taking them on. I’m a passable swordsman but certainly no match for a firearm. Our only hope is to escape before they discover where we are.’ He strode towards the door and threw the bolt, then wedged a chair underneath the door handle. Next, pulling the two sheets off the bed he swiftly knotted them together. ‘Listen by the door love,’ he murmured to George before hurrying back to the window. ‘Let me know if you hear someone coming up the stairs.’

Forcing the catch open, he leaned his shoulder against the frame and pushed. At first nothing happened, then with a whine that set their teeth on edge, he finally managed to force one section of the window open. When it was wide enough for a person to slip through, he glanced enquiringly back towards George who shook her head, then swiftly tied one end to the bed frame. Eying the knot critically, he could only hope the bed was sturdy enough to take their weight.

Then, picking up his sword, he motioned George to join him at the window. 'Are they inside?' he murmured. She nodded.

'Downstairs, in the sitting room I think.' Anthony bent his head and gave her a swift fierce kiss on the lips.

'I'm going to let you down first. Then Nelson. Once both of you are safe on the ground, run for the stable.' She shook her head and opened her mouth to argue, but he silenced her with a gentle finger. 'Saddle Horatio if you can, I've shown you how. I promise I'll be right behind you.'

George said nothing more as he tied the makeshift rope around her waist and lifted her onto the windowsill, holding her steady as she swivelled to face him. She pressed another quick, hard kiss against his lips then allowed him to lower her from the window. Thirty seconds later, she was standing on solid ground. Quickly untying the sheet, she watched, heart in her mouth as he reeled it in and repeated the whole procedure with Nelson. The dog whined softly as he was lowered towards her but made no protest as she caught him in her arms and untied the sheet.

She stood holding the shivering animal and watched as he dragged the sheet upwards and began tying it around his own waist. At that moment a loud crash indicated someone was trying to get in through the door. 'Go,' he hissed down to her. Swallowing a sob, she nodded and turned to run towards the stable, as the crashing becoming more urgent behind her.

Once in the stable, she put Nelson down and ran towards Horatio, lifting his saddle with fearful, fumbling hands. She had just managed to get it onto the stallion's back, when a sudden shout stopped her in her tracks. Hurrying back towards the stable door, she saw Anthony with his back to the bedroom

window. A sudden shot rang out, and she shoved her fist in her mouth to stop herself screaming as she watched him slide to the floor.

The sudden appearance of a stranger at the window, forced her to move. Sobbing freely now, she feverishly went back to saddling Horatio, who was stamping nervously, clearly affected by her distress. Finally, she got the saddle secured. With trembling hands, she picked up Nelson and climbed onto the wooden makeshift mounting block. Swinging her leg over the stallion's back, she managed to seat herself on the saddle. Suddenly afraid she was going to be sick, she took the reins in one hand and urged Horatio towards the open door.

Once outside, she looked again towards the bedchamber window, but this time could see nothing. Moaning, '*No, no, no,*' inside her head, she held Nelson against her chest with one hand and gripped the saddle tightly with the other before pressing her heels against the horse's flanks as Anthony had taught her. The horse gathered himself to spring forward, but just before he took flight, a figure appeared through the front door, pointing a pistol directly at her.

Another shot, Horatio rearing up in panic, feeling herself slipping helplessly to the ground, a blinding pain, then blessedly nothing...

Chapter Twenty-One

For a few seconds, Anthony actually believed they would succeed in escaping, but as the bedchamber door began to give way, he realised there was no way he was going to be able to climb down the makeshift rope in time. Ordering George to go, he turned back into the room and unwound the sheet from his waist, placing both hands instead on his sword. The only thing he could do now was hold them off for as long as possible to give the love of his life enough time to escape.

The palms of his hands slick with sweat, Anthony stepped towards the shuddering door. As the chair finally gave way, a hand was pushed through the gap. Foolhardy mistake, Anthony thought with ferocious delight, lifting his sword in the air before bringing it down, severing the fingers with one blow. The hand was snatched back with an unearthly howl, and Anthony stepped backwards to give himself more room, just as the door finally crashed open.

With grim satisfaction, he briefly saw a man rolling around the hall in agony before his attention was taken up by a well-dressed, hawk-nosed man pointing a pistol directly at him.

‘Well, I suppose severing his fingers is one way to make the idiot keep them to himself,’ the man chuckled.

‘Who are you?’ Anthony bit out. ‘What do you want?’

The man tipped his head to one side and tutted. ‘You know what we want. We’ve come for George, that’s all. Really, it didn’t have to be this messy’ He sighed before casting a contemptuous glance towards the rumpled bed. ‘But evidently you’ve already surmised she’s a girl and sampled the wares. That makes it ... well, let’s say I’d rather that knowledge didn’t leave this room.’

He closed his eyes briefly before suddenly barking, 'For pity's sake, shut your bleating, Henry, you're giving me a damned headache. Tell the others to go after the chit. She can't have got far.' The muffled sobbing faded as Atkins staggered to his feet and stumbled down the stairs.

'Some people have no backbone, I'm afraid,' he continued conversationally.

'Who the bloody hell are you?' Anthony repeated between gritted teeth, 'and what do you want with George?'

The man sighed again and stepped further into the room, brandishing his pistol to direct Anthony back towards the window. 'I don't suppose there's any harm in giving you a name,' he murmured, 'since you won't be in a position to use it.'

'It's Linfield,' he continued. 'But since we'll never have the opportunity to be properly introduced, I must tell you I'm aware of your relationship with the Duke of Blackmore.' He gave a small pout. 'Unfortunately, it's that connection that's sealed your fate, I'm afraid.' He shook his head sadly. 'I really can't have this whole sordid affair coming to the ears of the sanctimonious Nicholas Sinclair.' Then without another word, he raised his pistol and shot Anthony through the heart.

OOOOO

George woke to the feeling of someone laying a compress across her head. For a second, she didn't move, her mind trying to process what exactly had happened. As the memories came flooding back, she gasped. The last thing she remembered was falling from Horatio.

Anthony! Her eyes flew open, and she grabbed hold of the hand hovering above her face. 'Where am I?' she rasped, struggling to sit up.

'Please, lie still,' a soft voice begged. 'You've had a nasty bump on the head.' At her words, right on cue, a blinding headache that felt as though her skull was like to split in two suddenly made itself known. Abruptly, George leaned over the side of the bed and threw up, only narrowly missing a set of

feet.

Groaning, she sank back against the pillow and shut her eyes. The hand replaced the cold compress across her brow, then came the sound of someone moving around the side of the bed. Doubtless cleaning up the mess she'd made. George felt too weary, confused and heartsick to care. Anthony was dead. She'd seen him shot from close quarters. Whoever had done the shooting was very unlikely to have missed his target.

She fought back a sob, wanting to simply curl up and die.

'Georgiana!' The soft voice was back. Reluctantly opening her eyes, she stared up at a woman, frowning in evident concern. Her face was familiar, but George couldn't think where she'd seen it before. She became aware that the lady's hand was attempting to lift her head towards a glass of water. Suddenly thirsty, George managed to assist by lifting herself up onto her elbows. Ignoring the pain in her head, she drank greedily, although half the liquid spilled down her front.

For a second, as she collapsed back against the pillow, she thought the water might come straight back up, but after a moment, the urge to cast her account lessoned, and she watched silently as the lady sat down on the edge of the bed.

Eying her narrowly, George suddenly realised where she'd seen her before. It was the same lady who'd given her the guineas when she'd first escaped from the Grimms.

'Who are you?' she croaked.

'My name is Judith Linfield. I am ... I was ... your mother's best friend. Sleep now, I will tell you everything in the morning.'

George opened her eyes to protest that she needed to escape, that she needed to know what had happened to Anthony, to Nelson and Horatio, but somehow her tongue wouldn't work. Her last thought was that the bloody woman had given her a sleeping tincture, and then a welcoming blackness descended.



It was the licking that finally woke him, that and the whining which he originally thought was in his head. Slowly opening his eyes, it took several minutes before he was able to focus enough to recognise Nelson. Seeing his master finally awake, the dog sat back on his haunches and wagged his tail.

Weakly, Anthony put out his hand to touch the coarse fur, then slowly turned his head to the side, spying the familiar bed, covers spilling onto the floor.

George! He struggled to lift himself up, only to fall back to the floor with a harsh groan. The whole of his chest was on fire. Staring up at the ceiling, he struggled to breathe, bunching his fists in an effort to stave off panic. Gradually, his breathing eased – evidently as long as he didn't try to move.

He'd been shot. How the bloody hell was he still alive? Slowly, he raised his hand off the floor and gently probed at his chest with his fingers. Sliding his hand towards the centre of the pain, his fingers finally encountered a twisted lump of metal. Frowning, he gripped an edge and pulled, almost crying out as he belatedly realised that some of the metal was embedded in his skin. Panting, he lifted the object in front of his face.

It was a coin. If it didn't hurt so much, he would have laughed out loud. One of George's guineas had saved his life.

Letting the coin fall to the floor, he looked up towards the window. Weak daylight shone through the glass. Clearly, it was early morning. If Nelson was here, it meant that George had been caught.

He tried lifting himself again, only to fall back with a strangled gasp. Minutes later, after he finally managed to take a deep breath, he swore weakly. He might lie here for days before anybody found him. There was no guarantee that Mrs. Parsons would suspect anything amiss and come upstairs, especially since he couldn't shout louder than a babe.

He looked over at Nelson, wagging his tail and whining softly. 'Nelson, find Mrs. Parsons,' he croaked. The dog cocked his head to one side, then lay

down, his head on one front paw. Anthony sighed. Clearly he was no Freddy.

Somehow he had to get off this bloody floor. George needed him. Anthony refused to consider the possibility that she'd suffered the same fate as him. He needed to believe the intruders wanted her alive. The alternative was too terrible to contemplate.

Linfield ... that was the bastard's name. Anthony grimaced. What the bloody hell was George to these people? By all accounts no one had given a damn about her while she'd been growing up. She'd been left to fend for herself in the slums of Exeter. Clearly, someone had been keeping an eye on her, but whoever it was couldn't have cared less whether she lived or died. Except, all that changed when she'd run away.

Then she'd become a loose cannon.

Gritting his teeth, Anthony tried to move again, this time managing to slide towards the bed without feeling as though his ribs were about to cave in. He lay there panting when all of a sudden, he heard the sound of a horse coming up the drive towards the house.

Had the bastards come back to finish what they started? No, Linfield would have been confident he was good and dead. He listened to the sound of someone dismounting underneath the still open bedchamber window. Taking a deep breath, Anthony tried to cry out, but could only utter a low croak. Tears of frustration ran down his cheeks.

Fortunately Nelson suddenly decided to live up to his namesake. Jumping up, the dog stood on his two good hindlegs, and barked for all he was worth.

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'You knew my mother?' were the first words George whispered when she finally woke for the second time. She could see the woman's face much more clearly in the weak daylight leaking through the small window. The woman nodded, seating herself again on the edge of the bed. Leaning forward, she picked up a glass of water from the small table next to the bed, but before she

could do anything with it, George lifted herself up and knocked the glass out of her hand, listening with grim satisfaction as the glass crashed against the wall.

‘I ain’t drinking none o’ your bloody sleepin’ stuff,’ she ground out, collapsing back against the bed.

The woman pursed her lips for a second but didn’t attempt to pick up the shards of glass. Instead, she took a deep breath. ‘We haven’t got much time, she commented instead. ‘You won’t be aware of the importance of this, but your grandfather died last night.’ George simply looked at her blankly.

‘Do you know anything of your background?’ George shrugged.

‘I know me name’s Georgiana ‘Uxley an’ yours is Judith Linfield. An’ I know you was s’posed to be a pal of me ma’s...’ she paused before adding harshly, ‘Who’s likely now pushin’ up bleedin’ daisies.’

Judith bit her lip and nodded. ‘Your grandfather is ... was ... the Earl of Ruteledge. My husband is his heir.’

‘Sounds like a bag o’ bloody moonshine,’ George spat. ‘An’ I ain’t interested in some stuck-up nob who let me live in a bloody ‘ovel fer eighteen bleedin’ years.’

The older woman shook her head. ‘The Earl was never aware of your existence.’

Georgiana stared, abruptly lost for words. Then she shook her head. ‘None o’ that matters. Right now the only thing I care about is Anthony Shackelford and whether your bloody ‘usband murdered ‘im.’

Judith Linfield twisted her hands together. ‘I doubt Simon would have left him alive. He wouldn’t have wanted any witnesses.’

‘Ave you asked ‘im?’ George demanded, fighting back tears. ‘Did the bastard tell you Anthony was dead?’

‘I haven’t spoken to him,’ Judith whispered. ‘He left as soon as the news

about the Earl reached him.’ She paused and waved her hand around the room. ‘Naturally, he locked us both in here first.’

‘Why’d ‘e lock you in?’ George asked, intrigued despite her distress.

‘I suspect he intends to kill me at the same time as you,’ the matron replied simply. ‘Kill two birds with one stone as they say.’

George sagged back and stared down at her hands. She stopped trying to stem the tears. Anthony was dead. It hardly seemed real - but she’d watched him fall. Anguish welled up inside her, and to her companion’s shock, she put her head into her hands and let out a long keening wail.

‘For pity’s sake, stop,’ Judith cried, gripping hold of the younger woman’s shoulders and shaking her. ‘You’re acting like a child.’

George looked up, her eyes a blaze of fury. Abruptly, she drew back her hand and slapped the other woman across the face.

Sudden shock silenced both of them, and for the next few seconds, the only sound came from the birds outside the window.

‘I’m sorry,’ George whispered brokenly, ‘I...’ Judith grabbed hold of her hand and squeezed, shaking her head violently.

‘No, it’s I who should be sorry,’ she countered, her voice filled with shame. ‘I allowed him to leave you in that dreadful place. I should have taken you away from there years ago.’

George sniffed and sighed. ‘An’ if you ‘ad, we’d likely ‘ave been sharin’ a plot next to me ma.’ She touched the older woman’s red cheek. ‘You saved me life when I ran from Atkins. Wi’out those guineas, I’d never even ‘ave got out of Exeter.’ She forced back the memory of wrapping the coins around Anthony’s chest – was it only hours ago?

‘Tell me where I came from,’ she demanded. ‘Tell me how the granddaughter of a bleedin’ Earl ended up spendin’ eighteen years in a shit ‘ole.’

Chapter Twenty-Two

‘I’m *not* about to die, Mother. Will you please stop shoving those deuced salts up my nostrils.’

Agnes’s newly won bravado had immediately deserted her as she watched Anthony being carried into Blackmore by two burly footmen. He had refused to be put to bed, insisting on being placed on a chaise longue in his sister’s sitting room.

‘Where’s Nicholas,’ he’d asked without preamble as soon as his mother had satisfied herself that he was not about to die of heart failure, pneumonia or possibly even Dengue fever, which she assured the room was most definitely on the rise.

‘On his way home, I hope,’ Grace declared, taking charge of inspecting the nasty wound on her youngest sibling’s chest. ‘Ouch,’ she declared with a wince when she saw the mess the coin had made to his chest.’

‘That’s your professional opinion is it?’ Anthony quizzed. ‘*Ouch!*’

‘You don’t know how lucky we were growing up with Malcolm around to patch us up,’ Jennifer interrupted from behind her mother.

‘Of course I do,’ Anthony scoffed. ‘Who do you think gave me this scar on my lip?’ Ignoring his eldest sister’s glare, he pointed to the silvery line barely visible below his bottom lip. ‘I have the dubious honour of being the last of Grace’s *mishaps* prior to Malcolm’s arrival.’

‘I wondered why Father was always the one to carry us up the steps.’ Jennifer grinned at her mother’s outraged scowl. ‘You know we love you, Mama,’ she quipped, leaning forward to kiss her mother’s cheek. ‘But I really think we

should wait for Malcolm to get here unless your less than deft touch makes it worse.'

'Is it gangrenous?' Agnes moaned. 'Please tell me it won't have to be removed.'

'I don't think removing my heart is likely to help much, Mother.' Anthony commented drily, trying hard to bury his fear for George. The banter had succeeded in pushing it back for a while, but now it was back with a vengeance.

'It's a good job we sent John with the note when we did,' Grace declared matter-of-factly, realising her brother was actually close to tears. She laid a piece of gauze over the wound and covered him up with a blanket. 'I think it's time for a brandy, Father,' she added, climbing to her feet.

Reverend Shackelford had never experienced quite such acute terror as he did when he watched them carry his youngest child up the steps. He loved all his daughters, but Anthony... Anthony was the son he never thought he'd have. Everything the Reverend had done since marrying Grace to the Duke of Blackmore was to secure that son's future.

And right at that moment, watching them lay him down, pale and sweating, he couldn't help but reflect how little it mattered that Anthony married well, that he was accepted in all the right ballrooms. It was all fustian nonsense.

Swallowing a sudden rush of emotion, he hurried to the cabinet and poured three brandies.

'Are you well enough to tell us exactly what happened?' he asked, his voice gruff with suppressed emotion.

Anthony swallowed his brandy in one gulp and closed his eyes against the sudden burn. At length, he gave a sigh and recounted the events of the last twenty-four hours. He left nothing out, including the fact that he fully intended to marry Georgiana when they finally got her back. His mother gave a small moan and tottered a little when he got to the leg shackled bit, but since nobody took any notice, she contented herself with a quick swig of *Dr.*

Brodum's Botanical Syrup and Restorative Nervous Cordial.

'So, this Linfield fellow. He didn't give you any idea why he wanted George so badly?' the Reverend asked. Anthony shook his head.

'Do you think he's connected to the Earl of Ruteledge?' Jennifer asked.

Anthony gave a shrug. 'At the end of the day, it doesn't really matter why he took her. I have to get her back, and that's all there is to it.'

'Do you think he'll harm her?' Percy asked, speaking for the first time.

Anthony was silent for a second, the anguish clear on his face. Then he shook his head again. 'Why keep her alive all these years only to kill her now. It doesn't make sense.' He winced as he shifted to get comfortable. 'Somehow I got the impression that he didn't intend to harm her – at least for the moment.'

'Do you have any inkling of where he intended to take her?' Grace probed.

'The truth is, I have no bloody idea,' Anthony retorted, running his hand through his hair in frustration.

'Well, since Percy and I spotted the blackguard in Exeter, it makes sense to start there,' the Reverend suggested.

'You saw him?' Anthony quizzed frowning.

Augustus Shackleford abruptly realised that Anthony hadn't actually read the note they'd sent to Bovey Manor. The clergyman quickly recounted what had transpired since their last visit to his son's home.

'Are you all right, Mama?' Anthony asked in concern when he heard about his mother's ordeal. Unfortunately by now, Agnes had partaken of nearly half a bottle of *Dr. Brodum's Botanical Syrup and Restorative Nervous Cordial* and was actually feeling a trifle disguised. It was all she could do to sniff into her kerchief and nod her head bravely.

'What the devil was he doing in the Bishop's Palace?' Anthony quizzed. His

father shook his head.

‘Deuced odd it was.’ The Reverend paused for a moment, his brow creased in thought. ‘But they definitely knew each other.’

‘Linfield said, “*I won’t forget this.*”’ Percy remembered. ‘Do you think he might have been paying his Excellency to watch over George?’

‘If that’s the case, the Bishop will likely know where we can find the varmint?’ Reverend Shackelford declared excitedly. ‘We just have to convince him to tell us.’

‘He’ll tell us,’ Anthony predicted grimly, attempting to rise.

Grace unceremoniously pushed him back onto the chaise longue, taking care to avoid his wound. ‘There’s no sense in us running off half-cocked,’ she declared. ‘It’s essential you rest, Anthony. I’m certain Nicholas and Malcolm will be back before nightfall. We need to wait for them.’

Anthony gritted his teeth in frustration. He understood his sister’s reasoning and in truth agreed. But he couldn’t afford to delay beyond the end of the day.

‘Whether they have arrived or not,’ he stated, ‘tomorrow, I will be paying a visit to the Bishop’s Palace.’



The former Earl of Ruteledge was not even cold in his grave before the new Earl made his appearance at the country seat. Although Simon Linfield made an effort so show at least a little sorrow, the household staff agreed the look in their new master’s eyes was anything but grief stricken.

Establishing himself in his cousin’s former study, Linfield helped himself to a brandy, then sat behind the desk and gave himself a toast. The good doctor had fulfilled his part of the bargain – and much quicker than Simon could have hoped. In truth, a little more time might have been helpful, but

thankfully, he'd managed to get his hands on the runaway chit.

All that remained now was for him to slit Georgiana's throat and arrange for his blackmailing wife to have a nasty accident. He took a sip of his brandy and grinned. The nastier the better.

A knock on the door brought him out of his reverie. 'Come,' he called, swallowing the rest of his brandy.

'My lord, the solicitor is here.'

'Ah, show him in,' Linfield answered, fighting a sudden unholy urge to laugh. 'We'll do the will reading in here.'

'Very well, my lord. Should I send someone to fetch Miss Victoria?'

Simon Linfield frowned. Bloody hell, he'd forgotten about the twin. He sighed and nodded his head. Watching the butler depart, he mentally added her to his list of nasty accidents waiting to happen

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'My threats no longer have any power,' Judith concluded. 'He'll kill both of us at the first opportunity. Somehow we have to escape before he gets back from Ruteledge Hall.'

'What about yer father?' George countered. 'Won't he 'ave somethin' to say about his daughter bein' 'ushed?'

'Not if it's made to look like an accident,' the older woman retorted. 'Once Simon is confirmed the new Earl, no one will give a damn what he did beforehand – including my father. Any leverage I had disappeared the moment Edward Linfield died.'

George shook her head, hardly able to believe the fantastical tale she'd just been told. In truth, since Anthony's death, she'd felt numb inside. Mayhap her detachment would subside with time, but at this very moment, she hardly

cared whether she lived or died.

Except that she had a sister. 'You say Victoria don't know nothin' about me?'

Judith shook her head. 'She has no idea she was born a twin. Indeed, I think Victoria out of everyone has perhaps been dealt the cruellest hand.'

'Ow so,' George demanded harshly. 'She's 'ad a bloody roof over 'er 'ead ain't she, and food in 'er belly?'

'She's been a prisoner for the whole of her life,' Judith answered simply. 'Confined to three rooms at the top of that house. Seeing and speaking to no one. At least you had your freedom.' She paused before adding, 'And I doubt she will live much longer than you and I.'

'You reckon 'e'll 'ave 'er done in?'

'Oh I don't doubt she'll have a tragic accident,' the older woman sighed. 'Probably in about six months.'

George grimaced and shook her head. 'Bloody families. Better off wi'out 'em I reckon.'

'When money and a title are involved.' Judith shrugged and they sat in silence for a few seconds.

'So where are we anyway?' George asked suddenly.

'My husband's house in Topsham.'

'That near Exeter?' George quizzed, frowning. Judith nodded.

'About three miles as the crow flies.'

'So are we likely to be given any breakfast?' George queried at length. The older woman gave another nod.

'We might be locked in, but the staff here are loyal to me. I'm certain I can

persuade one of them to let us escape.'

'Well, wi' yer 'usband's reputation, I'd be surprised if any of 'em'll take a risk in lettin' you go,' George scoffed.

'I've sent word to my former maid,' Judith continued. 'She will take us in once we are free of this place.'

'Don't sound like much of a plan ter me,' George protested. 'Wot about Victoria? I take it we ain't goin' to jus' leave 'er to rot 'til she 'as 'er *accident*.'

Judith shook her head. 'Once we're safe, we can think what to do about your sister.'

'*Safe?*' George scoffed. 'We ain't never goin' to be safe from the likes o' Simon Linfield. I ain't never even spoke to the bastard, but I know that.' She paused and gave a grim chuckle. 'Your bleedin' 'usband'll chase us to the end o' the bloody earth...'

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Simon Linfield stared with distaste at the pale, pathetic little thing drifting into the study. She didn't look anything like her more robust sister, and for a second, he wondered if she had consumption. The problem of her would be short lived if she was afflicted with the wasting disease.

The girl remained silent as she took a seat next to him and Simon shifted in distaste. When was the last time the chit had had an actual wash? Swallowing his revulsion, Linfield turned towards the elderly solicitor who appeared to be hunting around for his eyeglasses. 'Get on with it, man,' he ordered brusquely. 'I have much to do today.'

The solicitor didn't react, but simply continued with his frustratingly slow process. At length, just when Simon was tempted to snatch the papers and read them himself, the elderly man coughed and spoke.

Ten minutes later, Linfield was seriously concerned he was about to have an apoplexy.

There was no money.

Both the estate and the property in London were mortgaged up to the hilt.

‘Then how did my cousin manage to live so ... comfortably?’ he stuttered hoarsely, waving at the sumptuous furnishings dotting the study.

The solicitor gave a moue of distaste and looked over at the still silent young woman. ‘The former Earl had control of his granddaughter’s fortune,’ he intoned. ‘However, at this present time, you, my lord, do not.’

Simon Linfield blinked. ‘What fortune?’ he spluttered. ‘How...?’

‘Miss Huxley’s mother left her family’s entire fortune to her descendants,’ the solicitor explained pompously. ‘Since she had only one daughter, on her death, the money came to Miss Victoria.’ He gave another uncomfortable cough and fiddled with his glasses. ‘The late Earl made no secret of the fact that his granddaughter was...’ He paused before adding delicately, ‘...*not* of the Ruteledge line. However, as her declared legal guardian, he was able to make use of the money to ensure her continued well-being.’

The solicitor looked over at the pale woman sitting so silently with her hands crossed in her lap. Did she understand what he was saying?’ Nothing in her demeanour hinted that she’d even been listening. He began collecting the papers. ‘Should you wish to apply to the courts for continued guardianship, my lord, I suggest you do so swiftly as I understand that once Miss Victoria reaches twenty-one, her fortune will revert back to her control.’

Chapter Twenty-Three

Anthony had never been so glad to see his brother-in-law, and judging by the welcome he received, neither had the rest of the family. Indeed, even Flossy and Nelson had not left the Duke's side since he walked through the door...

'Clearly, I shall have to go away more often,' was Nicholas's dry comment as Grace thrust a brandy into his hand. Relishing the fiery liquid, he looked around the sitting room, then back at his wife.

'Not that I don't delight in having company, dearest, he continued, 'but given the ... panicked nature of your letter, I assume this is not a social visit.' He suddenly noticed Anthony, now seated in a large, winged chair by the fire. Taking in the young man's pallor, he put down his drink and said simply, 'What happened?'

Half an hour later, the Duke had been acquainted fully with the events of the last couple of weeks and Malcolm had finished dressing Anthony's wound properly.

'Dear God, I can't leave you all alone for five minutes,' was Nicholas's only comment when they'd finished - aside from the request for another brandy. He sank into the chair opposite Anthony and stared into his glass for a few moments.

'I think it likely the Earl of Ruteledge is involved somewhere in this whole havey cavey business,' he said at length. 'I'm not acquainted with this particular Linfield, but since he shares the same surname, I can only surmise he's a cousin or some such.' He frowned. 'As Felicity disclosed, the Earl's son died some years ago, so it's possible the character after Miss Huxley is actually the Edward Linfield's heir. If so, chicanery clearly runs in the family.' He gave a sigh. 'Unfortunately, we won't know for sure until we ask

the blackguard.'

'Ah take it we'll be paying the good Bishop a visit first thing tomorrow.' Malcolm's soft burr was not phrased as a question.

The Duke nodded and looked back over at Anthony. 'I have to say you look like shit, Tony,' he stated frankly with an apologetic look towards his wife and daughter for his language. 'But I assume we can't persuade you to remain here?'

Anthony shook his head. 'Not a chance in hell,' he grated.

Nicholas nodded. 'Then I suggest we eat and retire early. We'll need to be on the road tomorrow at dawn.'

Percy stood up. 'I will go home and explain everything to Lizzy,' he declared, 'but rest assured, your grace, I will return before dawn tomorrow.' The Duke raised his eyebrows at the curate's enthusiasm, but made no comment. Instead he looked towards his wife.

'Grace, I'd prefer it if you ladies remain here in safety. These ruffians have already shown they are completely without scruples.' He did not hide his sigh of relief when for once, his beloved didn't argue. He suspected it was due to the presence of their daughter.

'We'll have Nelson and Flossy to protect us,' she murmured, leaning forward to give him a quick peck on the cheek.

Anthony struggled to his feet and gave a small bow. 'I will be forever in your debt, your grace,' he murmured formally, his voice husky with suppressed emotion. Nicholas stepped forward and laid a hand on his shoulder.

'You are my family,' he said simply, 'and I know you'll always have my back should I ever have need of it.'

Anthony placed his hand over the top of the Duke's, not trusting himself to speak.

Abruptly, a loud snore cut into the poignant moment, accompanied by the

sound of a bottle falling to the floor.

The Reverend sighed and went to pick up the bottle. ‘Thunder an’ turf, if I’ve told her once, I’ve told her a dozen times, the Reverend tutted, picking up the empty bottle. ‘The pedlar’s a deuced ivory turner.’

He held up the bottle. ‘If this is *Dr. Brodum’s Botanical Syrup and Restorative Nervous Cordial*, then I’m the Archbishop of Canterbury.’ He gave a weary shake of his head. ‘It’s nothing but a bottle of grog.’

He paused, then brightened slightly before adding, ‘Still, she’ll be unlikely to surface before tomorrow afternoon. As the Almighty constantly shows us, there’s always a light at the end of every tunnel.’

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Simon Linfield had spent the last few hours pacing the study. What the bloody hell was he going to do? His bastard of a cousin had bamboozled him. Anger swamped him, and he sloshed another brandy into his glass. He would have to apply for guardianship over Victoria immediately, but there was no guarantee it would be granted. But without her money, the title was worthless. In a sudden fit of anger, he threw the glass against the fireplace.

Suddenly producing Georgiana wouldn’t help. What good would it do now to prove she was Roland’s get? He’d still be left with nothing but a worthless title.

Unless he married her. *No, not her. Victoria.*

If he married Victoria, her fortune would be his to do with as he wished. There would be no complications. Why the devil hadn’t he thought of that immediately?

But first he needed to throw George down the deepest bloody pit he could find and rid himself of his shrew of a wife...



They reached Exeter before most of the farmers and traders began queuing to bring their produce into the city market.

‘Is the Bishop like to be abroad at this godforsaken hour?’ quizzed Malcolm.

‘I’m told he’s a pious man, so doubtless he’ll have been on his knees for a good couple of hours,’ the Reverend retorted with a dubious shrug.

‘Pious or not, it hasn’t stopped him accepting illicit coin when the mood takes him,’ the Scot countered matter-of-factly.

‘In fairness, we don’t know it was illicit,’ Nicholas returned evenly.

‘Well, it’s damned immoral at least, and even if we have got the wrong end of the stick, I canna see the murdering varmint we’re looking for being the sort to give money to good causes,’ Malcolm snorted.

‘I suspect the only charity Linfield is interested in is himself,’ Anthony commented caustically. ‘And I think murdering *bastard* is a more accurate description.’

Nicholas looked at his brother-in-law in concern. Anthony was pale and had spoken little on the journey. ‘Are you well enough to continue?’ the Duke questioned bluntly. The young man nodded grimly.

‘I think it would be better if Malcolm and I question His Excellency,’ Nicholas went on. ‘The Bishop has the power to remove your incumbency Augustus, and since I’m assuming that’s the last thing you wish to happen, I suggest you and Percy remain in the carriage with Anthony.’

The curate breathed a sigh of relief. He certainly wasn’t looking forward to a repeat visit to the Palace. Even *The Illustrated Art To Manliness* declared that discretion was occasionally the better part of valour. (*Chapter Fourteen: Saving One’s Bacon*).

The Reverend was clearly of the same opinion and for once didn't argue.

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'Well fer sayin' the bloody staff are loyal, they ain't in no hurry to feed us,' George grumbled a pair of hours later.

'No doubt Simon left that oaf Henry Atkins to keep an eye on them,' Judith responded, standing up and walking over to the window.

'Atkins is 'ere?' Sick terror swamped George, and for a second, she couldn't breathe. Hearing the panic in the young woman's voice, Judith looked back over her shoulder.

'He wouldn't dare touch you,' she reassured. 'He's Simon's lackey, nothing more.'

'Din't stop the bastard's wandering 'ands when 'e 'ad me under 'is roof,' George spat.

'That's why you ran away?' The matron came back to sit on the bed. 'I wondered why you chose that particular moment.'

'Why else?' George retorted. "'Ow long d'yer think it would o' bin afore John an' Frank thought they'd 'ave a go too?' She shook her head and shuddered, silent for a second as she contemplated the horrors of such a fate. Then a sudden thought occurred to her. "'Ow come you was there that day?'

'I used to watch for you,' Judith replied simply. 'I made sure I always had those guineas in my pocket. I knew the day would come when you'd need them.' The two women looked at each other, and George touched the matron's hand in a gesture of thanks.

Suddenly, there was the sound of a key turning in the lock. Instinctively, George drew her legs up and scooted to the top of the bed, watching the door as it slowly opened. She drew in her breath as Henry Atkins swaggered in. Then she wrinkled her nose. She could smell the bastard from where she sat.

He was followed by a nervous looking maid carrying a tray with a jug of water and some bread and butter.

Both women's eyes remained on Atkins as the servant placed the tray on a dressing table, and abruptly George noticed his hand was wrapped in swathes of bandages. 'Cut yersen shaving, Henry?' she couldn't resist saying, then could have cut out her tongue as he glared at her spitefully and stalked towards the bed.

'You'll get yer comeuppance, bitch,' he spat, spraying saliva onto the sheet.

'*Get out,*' Judith ordered, her voice oozing authority despite being locked in a bedchamber for twenty-four hours.

For a second, George thought he'd ignore the older woman's words, but at length, he backed away, his eyes radiating pure hatred.

Seconds later, they were gone.

'What the devil did you think you were doing, goading him?' Judith demanded. 'The man's an animal.'

George couldn't have said what prompted her to prod the bastard. 'Is 'and's putrid,' she said instead. 'Whatever 'e's done, it's turnin' bad.' She grinned fiercely at her companion. 'E ain't likely to last the week.'

'Well, we don't have a week,' Judith sighed, turning to the tray and picking up a slice of bread.

Underneath it was a folded piece of paper.

With a triumphant glance towards the younger woman, Judith picked it up. 'Wot's it say?' George breathed, climbing onto her knees.

'It's from Jane – my lady's maid, and you're right, Atkins is not well.' Judith looked up. 'Apparently, he took a sword cut to his hand.'

'*Anthony,*' George crowed.

Judith nodded, then looked back down at the spidery writing. ‘She’s left some laudanum where he can see it. Everyone knows he’s in agony. It’s only a matter of time before he succumbs. As soon as he’s sleeping, she’ll come up and release us.’

‘Wot if yer murderin’ ‘usband gets back in the meantime?’ George fretted.

‘Ruteledge Hall is in Somerset,’ Judith answered. ‘It’s unlikely Simon will be back before tomorrow.’

‘So we jus’ ‘ave to ‘ope the lecherous bastard downstairs kills ‘issen ‘afore then.’

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‘Linfield has a house in Topsham,’ Nicholas announced as he climbed back into the carriage.

‘That was quick,’ Reverend Shackelford muttered.

‘The Duke can be mighty persuasive when he’s a mind to be,’ Malcolm grinned, pulling the carriage door shut.

‘Let’s just say his Excellency was delighted with my donation towards an additional hospice next to the Cathedral.’

‘Nothing like killing two birds wi’ one stone.’ Malcom winked.

‘Not the best analogy, my friend,’ Nicholas retorted drily, as the carriage lurched forward.

‘Do you have an address?’ Anthony grated. The Duke nodded.

‘Don’t get your hopes up, Tony. We’ve no way of knowing whether either she or Linfield are there.’

Anthony gave a reluctant nod. ‘I know, but we have to start somewhere. And

I doubt Linfield would have wanted to take her too far across the country.’ He gave a wan grin, ‘George is nothing if not resourceful.’

The five men sat in silence for a while, watching the cobbled streets and houses give way to pasture and cornfields. After about half an hour, the fields again began to make way for buildings as they approached the small town of Topham on the River Exe.

‘Do we go storming in through the front door?’ Malcolm asked. Nicholas pursed his lips.

‘I think initially we take the polite route, see what that brings us,’ the Duke answered.

‘Let me knock at the door,’ Anthony suggested. ‘I know what Linfield looks like, and if the bastard is there, at the very least, the sight of me is likely to put him off balance.’ Nicholas paused, then gave a quick nod.

‘I’ll go with you,’ Reverend Shackleford chimed in. ‘Linfield may not know I’m your father, but likely he’ll be reluctant to point a pistol at a man of the cloth.’

‘There’ll be no shooting unless someone’s life depends on it,’ Nicholas ordered.

‘All this is assuming Linfield is actually in residence,’ Malcolm added.

‘Should I sneak round to the back door, your grace?’ Percy demanded. ‘You know, stop the blighter if he runs.’

The other four men simply looked at him in bemused silence.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ten minutes later the carriage began slowing down, finally stopping a little way from a handsome townhouse with three floors.

‘Malcolm and I will wait here while you gain entrance, Anthony,’ Nicholas declared. ‘We have a good view of the front door.’ Then he cleared his throat and looked over at the eager curate. ‘I suggest you also wait here for the moment, Percy, just until we see how the land lies.’ Unaccountably, the small man looked actually disappointed but after a moment, offered a brief nod.

A few minutes later, the Reverend and Anthony were knocking at the front door. After a couple of minutes, it was answered by a small woman wearing a cloth cap and an apron. ‘Clearly, the bastard’s coffers won’t stretch to a butler,’ Malcolm murmured.

They couldn’t quite hear the conversation, but at length, the maid stood aside and let them in, the door shutting like a death knell behind them.

‘You think it wise we sit and twiddle our thumbs here?’ Malcolm growled after a few minutes had passed.

‘We’ll give it another five minutes,’ Nicholas responded. ‘If Linfield and Georgiana aren’t there, all of us charging in will not help matters at all.’

‘And if he is?’ The Duke was just about to answer when another carriage passed them, stopping directly outside the townhouse. As soon as the carriage came to a stop, the door swung open, and a tall thin man jumped quickly down the steps and strode up the path to the door.

‘Devil take it, that’s got to be Linfield,’ Nicholas growled as they watched him fish a key out of his pocket.

‘Talk about bad bloody timing,’ Malcolm muttered.

‘Or good,’ Nicholas countered. ‘We’ll follow Percy’s plan and head round to the rear entrance.’

The three men climbed down from the carriage, watching the front of the house carefully to see whether they were being observed. A few minutes later, they’d made it through a side gate and were creeping round the side of the house.



Anthony felt for the comforting shape of the pistol in his jacket pocket. In truth, he felt done to a cow’s thumb. His chest was throbbing in time to his heartbeat, but there was no way he was going to leave George’s rescue to others. Gritting his teeth, he waited, eventually hearing footsteps coming towards the door. Just before it opened, he glanced over at his father. ‘Let me do the talking, Son,’ the Reverend murmured. Anthony didn’t argue but gave a quick nod to indicate his agreement.

The door finally opened to reveal a young maid of all work. ‘Can I ‘elp you?’ she queried, with a nervous look behind her.

‘We are here to visit with the mistress of the house,’ Reverend Shackelford intoned in his best *man of God* voice.

‘Err... the mistress is indisposed.’

‘My dear child, no one is indisposed to the Almighty. Pray tell her we are here.’ With a beatific smile, he stepped over the threshold obliging the maid to move hurriedly to the side. ‘Is there a small space we might avail ourselves of while we wait?’ the Reverend queried, folding his arms and planting himself squarely in the middle of hall.

‘I... I...’ the maid wrung her hands, clearly at a loss as to what to do.

Anthony waited silently, fighting the urge to shake the woman. The maid had

not declared her mistress out but indisposed, and she was obviously frightened. He was beginning to think that George was indeed somewhere in the house.

After a few seconds, she hesitantly led them into a small anteroom off the hall. 'If you'll wait in 'ere... I'll... I'll tell the mistress,' she mumbled before scurrying away.

'George is here,' Anthony declared as soon as the door closed behind her. His father nodded.

'I'm inclined to agree with you.' He watched as his son stepped towards the front window and peered through the curtain. Craning his head to the side, Anthony could just see the front of their carriage. Reassured he turned around.

'I think I should investigate while you wait here,' Anthony went on brusquely. 'We're sitting ducks in this deuced room.' For a second, he thought his father was about to argue, then the Reverend sighed and waved towards the door.

'Be careful, lad. No heroics for God's sake. You're no use to her dead.'

Anthony gave a brief nod and strode towards the door, pulling it open just enough to see into the hall. It was empty, the only sound the ticking of a large grandfather clock. Without preamble, he pulled the door wider and slipped through.

Once back in the hall, he glanced down the corridor, which he thought likely to lead to the kitchen, then looked up. If George was here, it made sense she was locked in a bedroom. His decision made, he swiftly began climbing the stairs.

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George sat on the bed, picking at the cover morosely. She'd eaten most of their meagre breakfast after Judith declared herself not hungry, but the dry

bread was now sitting in her belly like a rock. She couldn't stop thinking about Anthony. It was still almost impossible to believe him dead. And all because of her. She gritted her teeth, fighting the urge to burst into tears. Turning on the bloody waterworks wouldn't help anything.

All she had left was revenge.

But first she had to escape. *Then* she'd send Linfield straight to hell.

Judith gave a sudden gasp. 'There someone outside,' she called over. Hurriedly, George climbed off the bed and went to look.

'It's a bloody vicar?' she muttered. For an incredulous second, she wondered if it was Anthony's father, but she'd never seen this God botherer before, and he was as skinny as a mopstick.

Just then, they heard footsteps along the landing, followed by a familiar voice, clearly coming from downstairs.

'It's Simon,' Judith breathed, terror lacing her voice.

'Shit, shit, *shit*,' George groaned, looking around for something they could use as a weapon. Grabbing a small candlestick, she watched the door, heart thudding as the key began to turn, all the while wondering hysterically how Linfield had made it up the stairs so quickly.

Just as the door began to open, she glanced over at Judith, then charged towards the doorway, ready to hurl her makeshift weapon.

Only to skid to a stop in disbelief, a foot away from Anthony.

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At Linfield's sudden appearance, Augustus Shackelford was almost tempted to do a runner. Indeed, he might have turned tail had Anthony not been upstairs.

‘What the devil are you doing here?’ In that few precious seconds, Reverend Shackelford realised that Linfield had not yet made the connection between the sudden appearance of a clergyman and the man he’d murdered in cold blood only two days ago.

All the Reverend had to do was keep the varmint talking long enough for Nicholas to arrive.

‘Blessings to you my son,’ he murmured, taking his time to clamber to his feet. Linfield simply stood and stared, trying to remember where he’d seen the clergyman before.

Heart hammering, the Reverend took a step forward, taking care to keep his head lowered in seeming piety. ‘I am here on behalf of the ... err ... church roof fund.’ *Church roof fund?* Augustus Shackelford winced. Clearly he was losing his touch.

Linfield took a menacing step forward, then stopped and turned at the sound of footsteps running down the stairs. Muttering an oath, the master of the house began to retrace his steps toward the door, drawing a pistol at the same time.

Thunder and deuced turf. The Reverend acted without thinking. Ignoring the fact that the last time he’d jumped on anything was when he saved Queen Charlotte from a dunking in the duckpond, the clergyman lifted his cassock and took a running leap onto Linfield’s back.

The two crashed to the floor at the same time as Anthony reached the bottom of the stairs, Georgiana and Judith behind him. Seeing the pistol still in Linfield’s hand, Anthony swore and threw himself towards the two women, pushing them out of harm’s way - just as the pistol went off, the bullet ricocheting past their heads.

After a stunned second, George gave a wild cry, clambered to her feet and snatched up the candlestick she’d dropped to the floor. Then before Anthony could stop her, she bludgeoned Linfield over the head and yelled, ‘See how you like it, you murdering bastard.’

There was a shocked silence, then abruptly, another shot broke the brief hush. Georgiana cried out and fell backwards, gripping her arm.

'I'll see you dead you bitch,' yelled Henry Atkins, staggering down the hall, brandishing a pistol in his good hand.

Ignoring the pain in his chest, Anthony leapt to his feet and faced the frothing man. There was no time to draw his own weapon.

'You,' Atkins spat, raising his hand again and shakily pointing the pistol. Anthony didn't hesitate, he threw himself at the man who'd caused Georgiana so much misery for so many years. The second shot went wide, and without any mercy, Anthony grabbed hold of his opponent's injured hand and squeezed, causing Atkins to howl like a rabid animal.

Now only intent on escape, the large man kicked out, his foot connecting with Anthony's injury as he somehow managed to struggle to his feet. Nursing his hand, he turned to run back towards the kitchen, only to stop as one last shot rang out.

As if in slow motion, Henry Atkins fell backwards, his eyes forever open, a bullet wound in the middle of his forehead.

As Nicholas and Malcolm hurried past the body, Anthony pointed to George. *'She's been hurt,'* he rasped holding his chest. Malcolm nodded and continued on, kneeling next to the young woman nursing her arm.

Anthony closed his eyes, unable to bear the possibility that she might be dead. Until suddenly he heard, *'Ouch, watch wot you doin' wi' them 'ands yer foozler, they're like bleedin' dinner plates...'*

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Georgiana gripped Anthony's hand as the carriage finally turned into the drive leading up to Ruteledge Hall. *'Do you think she'll like me?'*

'She's suddenly discovered she has a twin sister,' Anthony responded

carefully. 'It's a lot for both of you to take in. I think you'll both need time to adjust.'

George swallowed and nodded, unconsciously rubbing at the birth mark at the top of her leg that signified she was the Earl of Ruteledge's legitimate granddaughter. Not that she cared. He was just a name to her, and by all accounts, he'd been little more to her sister.

It was nearly a month since they'd succeeded in putting a rub in the way of Simon Linfield's nefarious plans, and both were only now fit to travel beyond Blackmore. Naturally, that meant that Bovey Manor had been standing empty for all that time. But not for much longer. Autumn was around the corner, and Anthony wanted to be back in the manor before the weather turned.

But before that, and much more importantly, he and George needed to tie the knot.

Georgiana had taken some persuading. Indeed she was adamant she only eventually agreed because he was giving her bloody earache.

Now they were here, not only for the two sisters to get to know one another, but George was hopeful Victoria would feel comfortable enough to attend the wedding.

As the carriage drew to a halt outside the imposing façade, George shuddered. Truly, her sister was welcome to the place. It was a bloody mausoleum.

Now there was a word she never thought she'd even think. But spending weeks in bed had its advantages. Her reading and writing had come on in leaps and bounds. She was still finding it an uphill struggle to mind her Ps and Qs, but she was definitely getting better, especially since discovering the phrase *fiend seize it* to replace her more colourful expletives.

As Anthony helped her down from the carriage, Judith appeared at the top of the steps with Victoria trailing shyly behind her.

George's wallop with the candlestick had not actually succeeded in sending

Simon Linfield for tea and a red-hot poker with old Nick himself which the Reverend had stated unequivocally was a crying shame, but it had at least rendered the varmint unconscious for long enough to be arrested and taken to Devon County gaol.

His estranged wife Judith had volunteered to stay with Victoria and act as the young woman's chaperone while the complexities of the late Earl's will and her inheritance were sorted out. George had rejected any claim to their mother's money, content to let her sister use the coin to finally begin living on her own terms.

Gripping Anthony's hand, Georgiana slowly climbed the steps towards her waiting twin. By the time she reached the top, tears were unashamedly running down her cheeks. But as she paused, trying to get herself under control, she saw the very same tears sliding down her sister's face.

With identical hiccupping laughs, the two girls, separated since birth, hastened towards each other and embraced for the very first time.

Epilogue

The wedding took place in Blackmore church - as had all the Shackleford weddings since Grace Shackleford had first married Nicholas Sinclair nearly twenty years earlier.

Like always, the church was fit to bursting. There were those who had been present at that first wedding and those that talked still about old Queen Charlotte's mishap in the duckpond.

Naturally, there was concern expressed about Anthony's distinctly odd choice of wife, especially since nearly everyone in the village had lost money to Mary Noon after betting the youngest Shackleford would marry a title. And, of course, there were the whispered rumours that he'd actually first set eyes on her dressed as a lad...

But still, no one could argue she made a radiant bride.

Everyone present agreed that autumn was the perfect time to get leg shackled and, as expected, all of the Shackleford girls were there with their husbands and numerous offspring.

Indeed, more than one guest commented that there appeared to be more children than adults - so much so that Blackmore's residents were firmly of the opinion that the Reverend would not be slipping into a comfortable retirement any time soon, since this next generation of Shacklefords would undoubtedly keep him on his toes for a long time to come.

THE END

Not ready to say goodbye to Shackelfords just yet...?

Watch out for Jennifer – Book One of The Shackelford Legacies coming at the end of 2024.

Keeping in Touch

Thank you so much for reading *Anthony*, I really hope you enjoyed it. For any of you who'd like to connect, I'd really love to hear from you. Feel free to contact me via my [facebook page](#):
or my website: www.beverleywatts.com

While *Anthony* is the final book in The Shackleford Sisters, for those of you not ready to let the family go quite yet, *Jennifer*: Book One of The Shackleford Legacies will be released on the 30th November 2024. The Kindle version is now available for pre-order.

And lastly, if you're enjoying the Shackleford world and don't want to wait until *Jennifer* is released you might be interested to know that I have a series of romantic comedies set in beautiful South Devon, featuring the Great, Great, Great, Great, Great Grandson of the Reverend. In this series he's an eccentric, retired Admiral who, like the Reverend would be in if he fell in...

The series is titled *The Dartmouth Diaries* and in Book One: *Claiming Victory*, the Admiral is determined to marry off his only daughter, Victory. Keep reading for a sneak peek...

If you'd like to know a little more about the Shackleford family timeline and where both the Reverend and the Admiral fit in, click on the link below to join my newsletter and download a FREE short story featuring the Admiral, his daughter Victory and the Shackleford Family Bible...

[A Potted Shackleford History](#)

Turn the page for a sneak peek at *Claiming Victory* - Book One of *The Dartmouth Diaries*...

Claiming Victory

'At thirty two, Victory Shackelford is undeniably overweight, arguably frumpish and the only romance in her life is provided by her dog. She still lives at home with her father - an eccentric retired Admiral who she considers reckless, irresponsible, and totally incapable of looking after himself. Her father on the other hand thinks Victory is a boring nagging harpy with no imagination or sense of adventure and what's more, he's determined to get her married off. Unfortunately there's no one in the picturesque yachting town of Dartmouth that Tory is remotely interested in, despite her father's best efforts. But all that is about to change when she discovers that her madcap father has rented out their house as a location shoot for the biggest Hollywood blockbuster of the year. As cast and crew descend, Tory's humdrum orderly existence is turned completely upside down, especially as the lead actor has just been voted the sexiest man on the planet...'

Chapter One

Retired Admiral, Charles Shackelford, entered the dimly lit interior of his favourite watering hole. Once inside, he waited a second for his eyes to adjust, and glanced around to check that his ageing Springer spaniel was already seated beside his stool at the bar. Pickles had disappeared into the undergrowth half a mile back, as they walked along the wooded trail high above the picturesque River Dart. The scent of some poor unfortunate rabbit had caught his still youthful nose. The Admiral was not unduly worried; this was a regular occurrence, and Pickles knew his way to the Ship Inn better than his master.

Satisfied that all was as it should be for a Friday lunchtime, Admiral Shackelford waved to the other regulars, and made his way to his customary seat at the bar where his long standing, and long suffering friend, Jimmy Noon, was already halfway down his first pint.

'You're a bit late today Sir,' observed Jimmy, after saluting his former commanding officer smartly.

Charles Shackelford grunted as he heaved his ample bottom onto the bar stool. ‘Got bloody waylaid by that bossy daughter of mine.’ He sighed dramatically before taking a long draft of his pint of real ale, which was ready and waiting for him. ‘Damn bee in her bonnet since she found out about my relationship with Mabel Pomfrey. Of course, I told her to mind her own bloody business, but it has to be said that the cat’s out of the bag, and no mistake.’

He stared gloomily down into his pint. ‘She said it cast aspersions on her poor mother’s memory. But what she doesn’t understand Jimmy, is that I’m still a man in my prime. I’ve got needs. I mean look at me – why can’t she see that I’m still a fine figure of a man, and any woman would be more than happy to shack up with me.’

Abruptly, the Admiral turned towards his friend so the light shone directly onto his face and leaned forward. ‘Come on then man, tell me you agree.’

Jimmy took a deep breath as he dubiously regarded the watery eyes, thread veined cheeks, and larger than average nose no more than six inches in front of him

However, before he could come up with a suitably acceptable reply that wouldn’t result in him standing to attention for the next four hours in front of the Admiral’s dishwasher, the Admiral turned away, either indicating it was purely a rhetorical question, or he genuinely couldn’t comprehend that anyone could possibly regard him as less than a prime catch.

Jimmy sighed with relief. He really hadn’t got time this afternoon to do dishwasher duty as he’d agreed to take his wife shopping. Although to be fair, a four hour stint in front of an electrical appliance at the Admiral’s house, with Tory sneaking him tea and biscuits, was actually preferable to four hours trailing after his wife in Marks and Spencer’s. He didn’t think his wife would see it that way though. Emily Noon had enough trouble understanding her husband’s tolerance towards ‘that dinosaur’s’ eccentricities as it was.

Of course, Emily wasn’t aware that only the quick thinking of the dinosaur in question had, early on in their naval career, saved her husband from a potentially horrible fate involving a Thai prostitute who’d actually turned out to be a man...

As far as Jimmy was concerned, Admiral Shackelford was his Commanding Officer, and always would be, and if that involved such idiosyncrasies as presenting himself in front of a dishwasher with headphones on, saluting and

saying, 'Dishwasher manned and ready sir.' Then four hours later, saluting again while saying, 'Dishwasher secured,' so be it.

It was a small price to pay...

He leaned towards his morose friend and patted him on the back, showing a little manly support (acceptable, even from subordinates), while murmuring, 'Don't worry about it too much Sir. Tory's a sensible girl. She'll come round eventually – you know she wants you to be happy.' The Admiral's only response was an inelegant snort, so Jimmy ceased his patting, and went back to his pint.

Both men gazed into their drinks for a few minutes, as if all the answers would be found in the amber depths.

'What she needs is a man.' Jimmy's abrupt observation drew another rude snort, this one even louder.

'Who do you suggest? She's not interested in anyone. Says there's no one in Dartmouth she'd give house room to, and believe me I've tried. When she's not giving me grief, she spends all her time in that bloody gallery with all those airy fairy types. Can't imagine any one of them climbing her rigging. Not one set of balls between 'em.' Jimmy chuckled at the Admiral's description of Tory's testosterone challenged male friends.

'She's not ugly though,' Charles Shackelford mused, still staring into his drink. 'She might have an arse the size of an aircraft carrier, but she's got her mother's top half which balances it out nicely.'

'Aye, she's built a bit broad across the beam,' Jimmy agreed nodding his head.

'And then there's this bloody film crew. I haven't told her yet.' Jimmy frowned at the abrupt change of subject and shot a puzzled glance over to the Admiral.

'Film crew? What film crew?'

Charles Shackelford looked back irritably. 'Come on Jimmy, get a grip. I'm talking about that group of nancies coming to film at the house next month. I must have mentioned it.'

Jimmy simply shook his head in bewilderment.

Frowning at his friend's obtuseness, the Admiral went on, 'You know, what's that bloody film they're making at the moment – big blockbuster everyone's talking about?'

'What, you mean The Bridegroom?'

'That's the one. Seems like they were looking for a large house overlooking

the River Dart. Think they were hoping for Greenway, you know, Agatha Christie's place, but then they spied "the Admiralty" and said it was spot on. Paying me a packet they are. Coming next week.'

Jimmy stared at his former commanding officer with something approaching pity. 'And you've arranged all this without telling Tory?'

'None of her bloody business,' the Admiral blustered, banging his now empty pint glass on the bar, and waving at the barmaid for a refill. 'She's out most of the time anyway.'

Jimmy shook his head in disbelief. 'When are you going to tell her?'

'Was going to do it this morning, but then this business with Mabel came up so I scarpered. Last I saw she was taking that bloody little mongrel of hers out for a walk. Hoping she'll walk off her temper.' His tone indicated he considered there was more likelihood of hell freezing over.

'Is Noah Westbrook coming?' said Jimmy, suddenly sensing a bit of gossip he could pass on to Emily.

'Noah who?' was the Admiral's bewildered response.

'Noah Westbrook. Come on Sir, you must know him. He's the most famous actor in the world. Women go completely gaga over him. If nothing else, that should make Tory happy.'

The Admiral stared at him thoughtfully. 'What's he look like, this Noah West... chappy?'

The barmaid, who had been unashamedly listening to the whole conversation, couldn't contain herself any longer and, thrusting a glossy magazine under the Admiral's nose, said breathlessly, 'Like this. He looks like this.'

The full colour photograph was that of a naked man lounging on a sofa, with only a towel protecting his modesty, together with the caption "Noah Westbrook, officially voted the sexiest man on the planet."

Admiral Charles Shackelford stared pensively down at the picture in front of him. 'So this Noah chap – he's in this film is he?'

'He's got the lead role.' The bar maid actually twittered causing the Admiral to look up in irritation – bloody woman must be fifty if she's a day. Shooting her a withering look, he went back to the magazine, and read the beginning of the article inside.

"Noah Westbrook is to be filming in the South West of England over the next month, causing a sudden flurry of bookings to hotels and guest houses in the South Devon area."

The Admiral continued to stare at the photo, the germination of an idea

tiptoeing around the edges of his brain. Glancing up, he discovered he was the subject of scrutiny from not just the barmaid, but now the whole pub was waiting with bated breath to hear what he was going to say next.

The Admiral's eyes narrowed as the beginnings of a plan slowly began taking shape, but he needed to keep it under wraps. Looking around at his rapt audience, he feigned nonchalance. 'Don't think Noah Westbrook was mentioned at all in the correspondence. Think he must be filming somewhere else.'

Then, without saying anything further, he downed the rest of his drink, and climbed laboriously off his stool.

'Coming Jimmy, Pickles?' His tone was deceptively casual which fooled Jimmy not at all, and, sensing something momentous afoot, the smaller man swiftly finished his pint. In his haste to follow the Admiral out of the door, he only narrowly avoided falling over Pickles who, completely unappreciative of the need for urgency, was sitting in the middle of the floor, scratching unconcernedly behind his ear.

Once outside, the Admiral didn't bother waiting for his dog, secure in the knowledge that someone would let the elderly spaniel out before he got too far down the road. Instead, he took hold of Jimmy's arm, and dragged him out of earshot – just in case anyone was listening.

In complete contrast to his mood on arrival, Charles Shackelford was now grinning from ear to ear. 'That's it. I've finally got a plan,' he hissed to his bewildered friend. 'I'm going to get her married off.'

'Who to?' asked Jimmy confused.

'Don't be so bloody slow Jimmy. To him of course. The actor chappy, Noah Westbrook. According to that magazine, women everywhere fall over themselves for him. Even Victory won't be able to resist him.'

Jimmy opened his mouth but nothing came out. He stared in complete disbelief as the Admiral went on. 'Then she'll move out, and Mabel can move in. Simple.'

Pickles came ambling up as Jimmy finally found his voice. 'So, let me get this straight Sir. Your plan is to somehow get Noah Westbrook, the most famous actor on the entire planet to fall in love with your daughter Victory, who we both love dearly, but - and please don't take offence Sir - who you yourself admit is built generously across the aft, and whose face is unlikely to launch the Dartmouth ferry, let alone a thousand ships.'

The Admiral frowned. 'Well admittedly, I've not worked out the finer details,

but that's about the sum of it. What do you think...?'

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About The Author

Beverley Watts



Beverley spent 8 years teaching English as a Foreign Language to International Military Students in Britannia Royal Naval College, the Royal Navy's premier officer training establishment in the UK. She says that in the whole 8 years there was never a dull moment and many of her wonderful experiences at the College were not only memorable but were most definitely 'the stuff of fiction.' Her debut novel *An Officer And A Gentleman Wanted* is

very loosely based on her adventures at the College.

Beverley particularly enjoys writing books that make people laugh and currently she has two series of Romantic Comedies, both contemporary and historical, as well as a humorous cosy mystery series under her belt.

She lives with her husband in an apartment overlooking the sea on the beautiful English Riviera. Between them they have 3 adult children and two gorgeous grandchildren plus a menagerie of animals including 5 dogs - 3 Romanian rescues of indeterminate breed called Florence, Trixie, and Lizzie, a neurotic 'Chorkie' named Pepé and a 'Chichon" named Dotty who was the inspiration for Dotty in The Dartmouth Diaries.

You can find out more about Beverley's books at www.beverleywatts.com