

THE
LORD'S
PROMISE

LISA CAMPBELL

THE LORD'S PROMISE

Fate may be merciless, but love is relentless.

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SOCIETY'S SECRET SINS

Book#1

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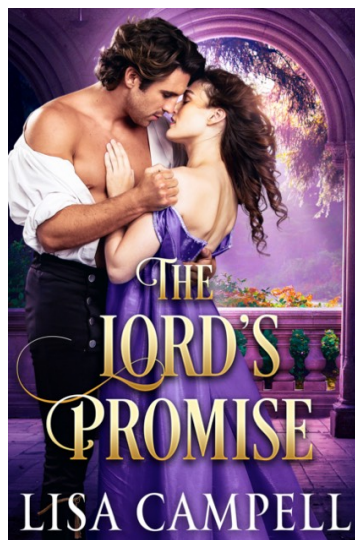


Book#2 (this book)

The Lord's Promise

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ABOUT THE BOOK



In a world where fate is a ruthless master, they are but two pawns in its game...

From the moment Lady Anne Fitzroy met Jace Reeves, she knew their fates were irrevocably intertwined. Alas, the merciless tempests of war tore them asunder, leaving Anne stranded in a desolate, loveless betrothal to a Duke, *whose grasp was suffocating and unyielding.*

Little did she know that her wish would come true at last...

Jace Reeves emerged from the battlefield bearing scars upon his flesh and spirit. His heart yearned for the embrace of Lady Anne, the woman who had captured his heart, only to find her ensnared by another. Yet, the flame of his love still burns with fervor, a passionate inferno that refuses to be extinguished.

But their reunion is not meant to be easy; for the walls that keep them apart are high and fortified. From Anne's betrothal

to Jace's broken spirit, they must fight with every fiber of their being to overcome the obstacles that stand in their way.

In the face of an implacable destiny, even the most resolute of wills may falter. So, how can they triumph over fate and emerge victorious from its relentless game?

Fate may be merciless, but love is relentless.



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PROLOGUE

*D*evonshire, England.

June 1806

Crushed strawberries and tangy apples mixed with a healthy dose of desperation; Jace touched Anne's lips with his. She knew he was tasting her to remember. His tongue sought solace within the confines of her mouth, entwined with her tongue, and they tangled in a feverish kiss.

Jace weaved his fingers into the wildness of her hair, and deepened the kiss, spurred on by her soft moans, the shallow rise and fall of her chest. Behind them, the ocean crashed against the Devon cliffs in a wild frenzy that echoed Anne's turbulent mood.

We sail at dawn.

Anne pushed those damning words from her mind and leaned into him, breathing in his scent, in a desperate bid to memorize it. Her fingers clung to the front of his shirt as she buried her face into his shoulder, and he wrapped his arms around her, his

head dipping so his lips rested on the crown of her head. Anne craved everything. She wanted the moment to last forever.

“Don’t go, don’t go,” Anne whispered against his chest.

It was small, but she felt Jace tremble.

“I can’t lose you,” she mumbled, her heart splintering as her mind ran to the worst possible outcomes. She raised her head, going up onto her toes so her lips could find his. She poured her anguish and hunger into that kiss, then raked her hands through his brown curls. Jace groaned into her mouth.

“I wish I didn’t have to,” he whispered.

Blinking back furious tears, she released him and sat facing the vast waters with her feet pulled up, her toes digging into the sand.

Jace threw his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close.

“I must sound like a selfish oaf,” Anne mumbled.

“Annie, don’t say that,” he soothed, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

She’d wanted to be brave for him, for this moment, but she could not stop the spill of words. “Our life now... I thought it was perfect. I thought you were happy.”

“I am. With you, I am happy. But—”

“But?”

Jace let out a frustrated breath. It had always been hard for him to explain his true feelings, his brows contorting as he considered his words. “Anne,” he said gently, holding her face and staring deep into her eyes, his voice raw with honesty, “you know what I am, and you know I cannot live off my brother’s largesse forever. I do not have the brains for a career in the law, and do you think I would make a successful clergyman?”

That surprised a laugh out of her, even if every part of her wanted to argue with him.

“See? Even you, who have always believed I can do anything, admit I’m not cut out for a career in the church or the courts. But the military, my love? Don’t you think I will look dashing in my regimentals?”

Anne’s gaze scoured every inch of his face. “I wish I didn’t understand you,” she sighed. “I wish you could stay here with me.”

Their stares collided, and for a breathless second, his face flickered in doubt, and Anne realized he was struggling just as much as she, despite his bravado. He drew in a ragged breath and placed a feathery kiss on her forehead.

“Your father would be proud of you for following in his steps,” she said.

“I’d like to think that.”

Jace’s hands slid down her arms until they reached her fingers, which he clutched tightly. Anne looked out at the sea, imagining what it would be like when he was on the other side of the waves.

“I know you have to go, Jace, and I know I’m being selfish asking you to stay, but I keep thinking of all the dangers, of all the things that could happen to you...” She trailed off. She remembered her father’s reaction to learning Jace had purchased a commission in the army, as well as his dark comments about the state of the war on the Continent.

Jace pressed her closer to him. He placed his fingers gently on her cheek and guided her to look back at him.

“Come now, Annie; don’t think like that. Of course, I will return; look who I have waiting for me.” He tickled her, and she laughed at the unexpected sensation. His lips crinkled into the mischievous grin she loved so much, and it was the most beautiful thing she’d seen all day. So he tickled her again.

“Stop! Stop! Stop!” she shrieked between giggles. Then, she gave his chest a light shove and sprang to her feet. Off she went, in a staggering run down the bank of the beach, with Jace hot on her heels.

A few stumbling steps in, he caught her by the waist and twirled her around. When the laughter stopped, he stood behind her and held her about the waist. Together, they looked

out over the brooding ocean as the torturingly brief moment of levity faded before their impending separation.

“What did Sidney say?” she asked, breaking the heavy silence.

He lifted his shoulder in a shrug, “You know my brother. He gave his support, but adventures like these have never been a part of him.”

Anne groaned, leaning into him. “I chose the wrong twin.”

Jace grinned into her hair. “That could be awkward, considering he’s married to your best friend. Besides, I’m not sure you’d hardly last a day with Sidney, as you’d die of sheer, mind-numbing boredom. Trust me, you have the right man.”

“The right man with a giant, swollen, arrogant head.”

Jace shifted, nudging some locks of hair aside from her neck and placed a kiss on its graceful line. “Yes,” he whispered on her skin.

“You’re making it harder to let you go,” she said, feeling goosebumps cover her body at the contact.

Jace turned her to face him. “I’m going to miss these emerald eyes staring at me. How will I know if I’m in trouble if I can’t see this pert little nose wrinkled up in annoyance? And this rosebud mouth of yours; my God, how will I stay sane without being able to kiss these lips again?”

Anne looked away. She knew what he was doing; memorizing her face as though he would never see her again. She almost hated him for it.

“Don’t let me go,” he said, bringing up her hand and placing it on her chest, “keep me alive here, and I promise, I’ll return to claim you wholly.”

She smiled but could not make it reach her eyes. “For a second, I thought you’d changed your mind.”

She shrugged out of his arms, ignoring the questioning glance he threw at her, and began to root around in the deep pockets of her skirts.

“Anne?”

“I have something for you,” she muttered and then smiled in triumph as her hand closed on the small ebony box.

“You’re not allowed to forget me,” she said, narrowing her eyes at him as she passed him the box. Jace opened it, and his gaze softened as his eyes fell on the delicate miniature inside. It had cost all of her pin money to commission her portrait to be painted, but his expression made it worth it.

“I couldn’t even if I tried, Annie,” Jace said in a hoarse voice. He tucked the portrait into his coat, his eyes bright.

“You are not allowed to forget your promise to come home to me, either. Because if you don’t, I will march straight to the

Continent to find you and give you a real piece of my mind.”

“You’ll scare the men half to death,” Jace said with a chuckle. He averted his gaze, blinking several times. “I’ll look forward to it.”

Anne felt her throat clog. “I mean it.”

Drops of tears slid down his cheeks, and Anne leaned in and kissed him. It was tender, belying the raging, longing passion between them. When they came apart, Jace regaled her with stories about everything they would do together upon his return. Anne wanted to share his enthusiasm, but she could not dredge it up.

He had been a part of her life longer than she could remember. Now, faster than either of them wanted, the hours slid by, and it was soon time to go.

Anne felt a cold that had nothing to do with the weather. Arm in arm, they traipsed back in silence, her anxiety growing with each step. She kept stealing glances at his profile, at his ruffled curly brown hair and strong cheekbones that tapered to a wide, arrogant mouth; his thick brows, beneath which lay twinkling brown eyes and a slightly broken nose.

Inside, she’d always known he’d leave one day. She had no idea how badly it would hurt her all over. He was a part of her, and she was unwilling to bid him goodbye.

Jace took a longing look at her and turned away with his back to her. Before she could question him, he pointed at the starry

sky. “Annie, if you’re ever lonely or scared, all you have to do is look up. We’ll be looking at the same pretty stars, at the same sky, and I’ll be thinking of you.”

“Oh, Jace.” Anne felt a hitch in her throat as prickles of tears burned behind her eyes. Jace had never been one to get sentimental. It made it all the worse to bear.

He faced her, his eyes darkened with hurt. Then, he reached up to his collar and withdrew a golden chain with a ring dangling from it, pulling it over his head. Anne gasped. Jace never took off that ring.

“My father’s ring,” he said. Silently, she lifted her hair. He slipped it onto her neck. “Will you keep it safe for me?”

“Yes,” Anne replied fervently.

His Adam’s apple bobbed. “Thank you.” He stroked a finger down her wet cheeks and wiped the trail of tears, “Don’t cry, Annie...”

Dusk had fallen. Her maid was waiting on the path, looking nervously around the corner to accompany her home. She uttered the last words: “I should go.”

He locked his eyes on Anne for another long moment before throwing caution and propriety to the wind and luring her into his arms, kissing her with a depth and passion that took her breath away. She only paused for a second before kissing him back, pouring all her fear, love, desperation, and hope into it.

Then she veered away, afraid to look back at him or watch him leave, afraid that if she stayed any longer, she would start crying and never stop. She turned and ran away, her maid hurrying to keep up with her.

Nothing would ever be the same. Even if he returned in a matter of months safe and in perfect health, Anne knew the trajectory of their lives was forever altered. Nothing could stay the same, no matter how desperately she wished it.

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CHAPTER ONE

*S*ix years later

It was always her beautiful smile that dazzled Jace. The wash of sunlight on her gorgeous body. The swirl of her white dress as she twirled around, filling his nostrils with the scent of lilies woven into her riotous dark curls.

Heaven.

There was no other explanation. He dashed toward her, seeking to embed himself within her pure warmth. She swept up her dress and ran, her hair flowing behind her. Then, her tingling laughter rang out. His heart gave the tightest of squeezes when the sound of it reached him.

It broke and healed something in him. How he'd missed hearing it. He lengthened his stride. Soon, he caught up with her, wrapped his arms around her slender waist and faced her.

The smile was gone from her lips. Her eyes drooped, heavy with sadness, thrusting Jace into confusion.

“Fight it,” she said, reaching up to caress the sides of his face.

“You have to fight, please. You promised.”

Jace’s heart started to pound. A rapid burning began in his gut as her eyes flashed with conviction.

“You have to hold on, Jace!”

Jace tried to cover the space between them, but she pushed him back. “Wake up!” Her eyes were pleading. “Wake up!” she shrieked.

A peculiar heat surged through him. He did not want to be anywhere else. He needed to be with her. All of him craved to be in that moment.

“Wake up!” she screamed and slammed her palms into his chest.

Jace’s eyes popped open, jolted by excruciating pain all over his body. Breathing hurt, the rancid smoke of gunpowder and burning buildings clogged his lungs like ground glass. He wiped his dirty hands across his eyes, blinking several times to clear his vision.

A high-pitched ringing noise had invaded his ears, refusing to go away no matter how hard he shook his head. He attempted to get back to his feet but fell back to his knees due to dizziness.

Sound slowly began to creep back in. Musket balls whipped through the air around him, burying themselves into bodies and sandbags without distinction between the two. Drumming, screaming, shouting, and the relentless sound of battle rose up and filled the world until he almost hoped for the ringing noise to come back and drown it out.

His head pounded as though the entire canon brigade had taken up residence in his brain, and the urge to vomit was strong. His mouth already tasted of blood and ashes, and he longed for silence, for sleep, and the absence of pain. In sleep, he could get away from this, and return home, back to her arms.

“Damn it, man, get to your feet! We have to move!” he heard someone shout.

“Leave me,” he murmured, his eyes closed tight as the pounding in his brain grew stronger.

“We have to move, Major! They’re rallying, and we can’t hold them here!”

“Leave me,” he repeated. He could hear screaming. It wasn’t just the sound of soldiers; there were citizens inside the citadel’s walls as well, and the Spanish were their allies.

They were supposed to fight for glory and honor. It was not supposed to be this kind of butcher’s yard.

“Jace! Wake up! Damn you, I need you to wake up!” he heard.

“Annie?” he croaked. He struggled to push past the pain, eager to turn his head in the direction of her voice.

“Not bloody likely in this hell hole. Now get up!”

His mind snapped to minor clarity. This voice was male and familiar. Captain Willis, or possibly Denny. One of the captains, at any rate. That was good. That meant they weren’t all dead.

Jace braced his hands on the ground, attempting to rise. They felt as though they were made of pins and needles and failed to hold him up. He fell back. From behind, a pair of hands slid into his underarms. They attempted to drag him to a sitting position. Jace opened his mouth to scream in pain. The Captain was relentless, forcing him to his feet and talking incessantly as he compelled him to take step after laborious step toward God knew what or where. When he stumbled and asked to be left alone to sleep, the Captain called him something coarse and rather rude.

“That’s insubordination,” he slurred. “Want to see Annie.”

“Aye, and that’s why I’m trying to save you, you ungrateful idiot. Keep walking, and I’ll get you back to your Annie.”

“Get back to Annie,” he repeated, but when he tried to nod in agreement a fresh scream of pain cut through his skull.

He kept walking, but his vision blurred and the ringing returned, and he must have succumbed to the darkness at some point during his walk, because the next thing he was aware of

was the thin material of the pack he was lying on, and the flapping of the tent above him. The air smelled like blood, gin, and smoke. There were still battle sounds in the distance, as well as cries of pain and quiet sobs from much closer by.

The moans of the wounded sent a moment of panic through him. He balled each hand into a fist and opened his palm, raised and folded both legs, then brought them down. Relief poured into him. Though they were sore, all his limbs were intact, and he retained control over them. If only the pain in his head would subside, he would be able to return to his men in no time.

He cleared his throat and tried to swallow, but his mouth was dry, and his gums cracked. He risked opening his eyes long enough to see if there was someone he could ask to bring him water. But he quickly realized he was surrounded by injured men, many in far worse condition than he, and that the ragtag collection of women which always followed in the wake of the army was busy making the wounded and dying as comfortable as they could under the circumstances.

He put his head back down, trying to recall who had rescued him. He closed his eyes and searched through the darkness in his mind for the memory, but his ears started to ring, and the headache tripled.

“Not dead, are you?” came a gruff voice.

Jace opened his eyes slowly and smiled.

“Colonel Hayworth,” he said in acknowledgement of his superior officer. “Excuse me if I don’t get up, but I have a

devil of a bad head.”

The large-framed man dropped to sit on the ground beside him. His scarlet regimentals were caked in dirt and blood, none of it appearing to be his own, and he looked exhausted.

“Captain Willis said you took half the wall to your head and were then staggering around without any cover. It’s a damned miracle they didn’t pick you off, but I suppose you had your angel with you again.”

Jace smiled, even though it hurt to do so. All the officers knew he carried Annie’s portrait into battle and had long ago begun to attribute his seeming immortality to her influence.

Hayworth frowned at him, and then called to one of the nearby women to bring Jace some water.

“No, don’t talk yet, Jace. Wait until you’ve had some water. You look terrible, by the way. They assure me you’ll survive with some recuperation, but they made no promises about your wits being intact. I laughed at that, and asked if they’d heard of Crazy Jace, for if you’d ever had wit in the first place then you’d likely have been dead four years ago.”

The Colonel paused as a middle-aged woman Jace vaguely recognized as a serjeant’s wife approached with some water. She held his head and placed the cup to his lips, scolded him like a schoolboy for attempting to sit up, and then ordered the colonel to move him to more appropriate quarters as soon as it was safe to do so. Hayworth meekly agreed to her demands, only to be met with an annoyed huff from the woman before she moved on to assist another unfortunate soul.

“Backbone of the army,” he murmured.

“Who?” asked Jace, his brain still feeling thick and heavy.

“The camp followers,” replied the Colonel. “It takes a strong woman to follow the drum, and whatever the old men at Horseguards think of them, it’s after every battle that I’m reminded how much the soldiers’ wives do to keep us alive.”

Jace’s mind wandered to Anne, and for the thousandth time, he caught himself wondering whether she would willingly follow the drum if he asked her to. He dismissed the thought like he always did; it was a hard life the camp followers undertook, even those married to officers and noblemen, and her silence had made her thoughts on the matter clear.

“So, how are you feeling?” asked Colonel Hayworth, running an appraising eye over Jace.

“About as good as you look, I suspect,” he replied. “Give me an hour or so, and I’ll be ready to rejoin the push on the walls again.”

The Colonel gave a grim smile. “I’m afraid you’ve missed the action, old chap, for you’ve been out cold for almost an entire day. The walls are breached, and the French garrison has surrendered to us.”

Jace struggled to prop himself up on his elbows, ignoring both the protests of his commanding officer and the wave of nausea that accompanied the movement.

“It’s over? My head must be worse than I thought, for I can still hear the sounds of battle.”

Colonel Hayworth’s expression grew dark. “That, I am afraid, is our own men. Whether it’s the alcohol they found or the pent-up rage of having seen so many comrades die in the ditches outside the city walls, they are taking out their frustrations on Badajoz, and will not listen to any officer or authority as they sack the place.”

“Sack the place... my God, Colonel, the people of Badajoz are our allies!”

“We know,” sighed Hayworth, rubbing at his temples. “We’ve been ordered to stand back and let them rampage, if only because Wellington is convinced the men will shoot their officers before they obey. He’ll hang the ring leaders later, but I’ll be damned if I can be proud of our achievements here when they are paired with such behavior.”

“My men...” Jace began, something like rage beginning to well up in his chest. “Surely, Willis and Denny would not allow them—”

“Willis and Denny are both dead,” said the Colonel flatly. “Denny was taken out by the same French grenade that addled your senses, along with most of his boys. Willis got you back to safety, but then rejoined the fight. Took a bayonet to the chest when on the walls after Colonel Ridge’s men made a breach. Ridge is dead, too. His regiment isn’t taking it well.”

The room was spinning again, the desire to vomit was almost overwhelming, and he could barely fathom what he was hearing.

“Willis *and* Denny? My God. And my men? How many made it out? What about Ensign Smith? He turned sixteen last week, and I told him to stick close to me. I promised I’d keep him safe.”

Colonel Hayworth didn’t say anything, but he reached over and, with a heavy hand, eased Jace back down onto the makeshift bed.

“I will see about finding you somewhere better than this to recuperate, Jace, but there’s no need for you to be here any longer than necessary, at least, not until we know what will become of the regiment now we’ve lost so many.”

“But my men...” Jace said weakly, not wanting to understand the implication being made by his superior officer.

They could not all be dead. Not Willis, whom he considered a friend, nor young Smith, who had stared up at him with something akin to hero worship.

“They don’t need you where they’ve gone, Major. I’m ordering you to return to England to convalesce for a while, for I’ll be damned if I see another one of my officers dead before the end of summer.” The older man’s voice cracked for just a moment, but he quickly recovered his austere mask.

“I can be of help,” said Jace, although, even to his own ears, it sounded like he was pleading.

Colonel Hayworth’s expression softened. “I appreciate your enthusiasm, Jace, however, I must decline your request. Besides, it’s been six years since you went home. Don’t you wish to see that angel of yours?”

Jace swallowed. It hurt more than he expected.

“I’m not sure she will want to see me,” he admitted. He’d received no letters, no word at all from her in almost two years. He knew she was alive and well, which left only one explanation for her silence.

Hayworth gave him a pitying smile. “Six years is a long time, at war and in London. People change in both, but battles like this one... they take the best of you and spit you out. Major, you fought valiantly, but your angel will have faced her own battles, for I’d rather fight a whole brigade of Frenchies alone than face the judgement of the London ton at a single ball. You will not find your answers in Portugal or Spain, Jace. Go home. The war isn’t going anywhere soon, and I’ll welcome you back once you are fit and ready.”

All the Colonel’s words did was cause a rising disquiet in Jace, but he knew better than to argue with the older man.

“Let me help finish this mess, then I promise to return to England,” he said. “If what you are saying about the troops rampaging is true, then I owe it to the memory of my officers to ensure that order and justice are established.”

The Colonel stared at him for a long moment before nodding his agreement.

“Very well, but by the end of the week I expect you to be on your way back to England,” he said gruffly, before turning and walking away.

Jace reached into his scarlet, dirt-stained jacket to find the comforting presence of the miniature portrait against his chest. The ivory had cracked on the bottom edge and the gilding was chipped off the frame, but he knew without looking at it that his Annie’s beautiful face smiled out from it regardless.

Why had she stopped writing to him all those years ago? He had been gone much longer than he’d intended, but there had been no hint of anger in her letters, no suggestion she had grown bored of him.

But then he’d told her about his plan to return, to ask for her hand in marriage if she was willing to become an officer’s wife, and despite his pleas, he’d never heard from her again. He hadn’t sent her anything in over a year, despite his heart’s stubborn refusal to give up hope.

But he was certain it was Anne who had saved him on the battlefield. Anne, whose voice had told him to wake up, fight, and survive.

Hope flared again as he tightened his hand around the miniature. Surely, that had been a sign, had it not? Surely, he had been spared at the walls of Badajoz so he could return to his angel.

He was not aware that Colonel Hayworth was watching him from the tent entrance until the older man spoke.

“Go and be with her, you damned fool, and that’s an order,” he said in a stern voice, and then left.



Anne’s own scream woke her as she sat bolt upright in her bed. Her cheeks were wet with tears, and her body was drenched in sweat, even as the nightmarish visions of the siege of Badajoz faded from her memory.

Her maid Eleanor scrambled up from the truckle bed she had been sleeping on, looking harried.

“Another nightmare, Miss?” she asked, reaching out a comforting hand. Anne had never asked her maid to sleep in the room with her, but Eleanor had chosen to do so ever since the first time her father had read out an account of the siege in the papers, and she was grateful for her presence.

“I’m fine,” she lied quietly. “It was not so bad this time.”

Eleanor did not seem convinced, and Anne realized she must have screamed quite loudly to wake the young woman from her slumber.

“I will fetch you some tea, Miss,” said Eleanor as she climbed out of her bed. “It will help calm your nerves.”

The moment her maid was gone, Anne slid out from the covers and padded across the cold floor to her window. She pushed the sash open to allow the cool night air to wipe the last of the dream's cobwebs from her mind. It was strange how the descriptions of the siege had taken hold of her imagination in a way no other account of the war had. Perhaps it was because of the losses, or the despicable behavior of the soldiers afterwards, but for a solid month now she had been awoken by nightmares of a place she had never seen or visited.

She did not even know for sure if Jace had been there, only that his regiment had. *The Gazette* had not listed his name among the casualties, nor the honors lists, but in her heart, she was sure he had been at Badajoz.

"Where are you, Jace?" she murmured into the darkness. "Why won't you write to me?"

Stuffed away in the back of her writing desk was a pile of unsent letters. After the abrupt end to his correspondence almost two years ago, she had sent many more, just in case there was good reason for his silence. But after twelve months she no longer asked her father to frank her mail for her and send out her letters. The pity in his eyes had been too much to bear.

She kept writing, though. Even when it felt foolish to do so. Even when she learned he no longer wrote to his brother, and that no one had heard from him directly since that last letter she'd received. Even though she never sent a single one.

He was alive, according to word Sidney had received from Horseguards, or at least, he had been some five months earlier. The news had been both comforting and devastating when Sidney and his Amelia came around to deliver it, and Anne

had found herself unable to face her oldest friends and neighbors ever since.

But then, her father had read out the descriptions of Badajoz in the papers, and an overwhelming sense of dread had made a home in her heart.

“Here’s your tea, Miss,” Eleanor said, stepping back into the room. Anne closed the window and returned to her bed, forcing herself to ignore her wild flights of fancy.

“You are too good to me,” she told Eleanor as the maid set down the tray and poured her a cup of steaming tea. The maid hesitated, and Anne knew immediately that the second cup was not for Eleanor.

“Annie, my darling,” said her mother as she floated into the room in a cloud of muslin and lace sleepwear, her arms outstretched. “I thought we were past these terrible nightmares.”

As her mother wrapped her slim arms about her, Anne threw an accusing look at her maid. Eleanor simply shrugged and mouthed *sorry* at her.

“It is nothing, Mama, I am quite recovered,” she said, untangling herself from her mother’s embrace. “Eleanor’s tea has done wonders for me.”

“But it does not change the fact you are still having these horrible dreams, dearest,” said her mother in a tone that made it clear that Anne was not getting out of this easily.

She sighed. Her mother had a reputation for being formidable when she wished, no matter how ethereal she may appear. Helen Fitzroy, the Countess Fitzroy, had married an earl of long but penniless pedigree and was widely credited as being the brains behind her husband's reversal of fortune, thanks to a clever mind and impeccable social manners. Lord and Lady Fitzroy were welcomed warmly in every home of the Ton, for more than one haughty duchess or lady had learned the hard way that to make an enemy of the Countess was to destroy one's standing in the Ton. It was a mistake to believe that Lady Fitzroy's sweet exterior did not mask a will of iron beneath it, and Anne knew better than to think she could fool her mother for more than a few minutes at a time.

Not that it stopped her from trying.

"It was just a dream, Mama. A bad one, I admit, but just a dream."

Her mother was evidently not convinced. There was a moment of silence between them as Eleanor passed Lady Fitzroy a cup of fresh tea, and then retired from the room.

"You must stop punishing yourself, Annie," said her mother the moment they were alone.

Anne was aware of a flare of annoyance. "I am doing nothing of the sort, Mama. I hardly have control over my dreams."

"You have been crying again, and it breaks my heart."

A familiar tightness gripped Anne's chest as her mother spoke. She wanted her to stop.

"It was only a nightmare," she said through gritted teeth.

Her mother was having none of it.

"Don't try to bamboozle me, dearest. You've never succeeded before, and you aren't going to magically succeed now. This is about Jace again, isn't it?"

Anne glared at her half-empty cup, not quite brave enough to turn such an expression directly on the infamous Lady Fitzroy.

"I was dreaming about Badajoz again," she muttered.

"So, Jace," sighed her mother. She took the cup from Anne's hand and placed it beside her own on the silver tray. "Darling, I think perhaps it is time to accept he is not going to return."

Anne tried to hide it, but her breathing grew choppy with each of her mother's words.

"Let go," her mother's soft voice urged.

"I sh-should have stopped him. I should have fought harder to keep him here," Anne gulped, a knot the size of an apple forming in her throat.

Her mother pulled her into her arms.

“Oh, my poor lamb, you know very well you could not have kept that boy from adventure. Had he stayed, any affection between you would have soon festered into resentment on his part, and you would have lost him.”

“I’ve lost him anyway,” said Anne bitterly. “If only I knew he was safe and alive, not... not...”

“Not dead in a ditch on some Spanish battlefield,” said her mother matter-of-factly. “No, do not gasp at me like that, Annie! I am only giving a voice to your fear, not stating what I believe is the truth. But my darling, and I truly do not wish to cause you pain by saying this, but my darling girl, have you considered what it means if he *has* been alive and well this last year?”

“Of course, I know,” she whispered into the crook of her mother’s arm. Lady Fitzroy did not belabor the point, at least, and allowed Anne to take comfort from her embrace in silence.

They both knew full well what it meant if Jace was alive. It meant he had chosen to cut all contact with Anne and had lacked the courage to tell her that his heart had found a new direction. It meant that everything she had believed in, held on to, and sacrificed her future prospects for had been for nothing.

And the result was that, while half of her desperately hoped he was alive and well, another, darker place secretly needed to

believe that something terrible had happened to prevent him from reaching her. Hence the nightmares.

Nothing appealed to her anymore, especially when her imagination veered wildly from imagining him safe and happy with another woman to the dark realities of the war in Portugal and Spain. Her father did not help matters. He told horrifying tales of what could happen to the men fighting the French, and the poor families that followed them, and often spoke of the permanently injured soldiers who returned to England, never quite the same. He seemed oblivious to the pain he caused, as though he assumed any affection that had once lain between Jace and Anne was nothing but a calf-love long forgotten.

At least her mother knew better, even if she insisted that Anne be honest and practical about the situation.

“Hearts heal, my darling, if you give them time. I know it does not seem that way to you right now, but it is the truth. Now, lie back down and get some sleep. Everything seems better in the morning, I find.”

Anne did as she was told, closing her eyes as her mother kissed her on the cheek. She yearned for sleep so she could spend a few hours without Jace interfering with her thoughts or her own inner voice chastising her for acting like an inept schoolgirl. She clutched the gold ring she wore on a chain around her neck, and while her dreams were still of him, they were pleasant memories rather than terrifying nightmares about the present.

CHAPTER TWO

*H*er parents were already seated at the breakfast table, her mother blowing on a steaming cup of coffee and her father reading the newspaper. As she walked in, they both looked up, and Anne was struck, as she always was, by how different her parents were in both appearance and demeanor. Lord Fitzroy was of average height and stout build, with a craze of black hair that never seemed to lie neatly no matter how he styled it. Lady Fitzroy was slender, elegant, and dainty in appearance, with pale skin and blonde hair. They were both intelligent and determined, but while her mother believed in using honey to catch flies, her father preferred to use a shotgun.

“Good morning,” Anne said as she walked over toward them, planting a kiss first on her father’s cheek, and then her mother’s.

“Get yourself some breakfast, child,” said her father, nodding to the silver tureens on the side table. “There’s plenty of scrambled eggs there for you, just how you like them.”

Anne hesitated only a moment before helping herself to some breakfast. She settled herself at the table, thanked the footman for pouring her a cup of coffee, and then quietly began to eat her eggs as she waited for the approaching storm.

It did not take long to arrive. Her father dismissed the staff from the room, and the moment the door was closed, he folded up his paper and set it down on the table with a decisive thud.

“Your mother tells me that your sleep is still troubled, my girl,” he said by way of starting the conversation. “If my interest in the war is what brought about these nightmares, then I am sorry for it.”

“It is not your fault that I have an overactive imagination, Papa. No doubt, it is all the silly novels I read.”

“Annie,” said her mother in a warning tone, but there was a smile playing on her lips.

“Well, I am sorry if you have felt pain as a result of my words, that is all I am saying,” said her father gruffly. “I love you very dearly and only want your happiness. I hope you know that.”

Something in the way he spoke caused Anne to pause. She swallowed the scrambled egg in her mouth and set her fork down on the plate.

“I have never doubted it, Papa, but I’m afraid you are causing me to worry. What is it you are trying to tell me?”

“Observant girl,” murmured her mother.

Her father sighed.

“Very well, I should have known better than to try to couch this in gentle terms. You are twenty-five years old, Annie, and it is time for you to marry.”

Anne took a steadying breath and resisted the urge to reach up and grab the hidden ring.

“I’m afraid I have not had any offers.”

Her mother gave an indignant snort. “We were hardly born yesterday, my dear! By my count, you have received six, although your father renders it closer to nine if he includes the fortune hunters he chased off before they had ingratiated themselves.”

Anne frowned. “None of those count, though. I received most of them in the first few seasons I was out, and of course, I had to turn them down because—”

She caught herself just in time, but irritation still crossed her father’s face.

“Because you considered yourself to be engaged to that jackanapes, Jace Reeves,” he said with evident displeasure.

It took every last bit of strength for Anne not to jump to Jace’s defense, but she managed to keep her tongue in check. Her mother, as diplomatic as ever, stepped into the breach with gentle dignity.

“We were not opposed to your marrying Jace if he could prove himself up to the task of providing for you, my dear. If you remember, we were quite supportive of his plan for a military career.”

“Well, he was hardly cut out to be a country parson,” muttered her father.

“What your father means,” said her mother with a menacing look at her spouse, “is that had he returned with a respectable position and having grown out of his wild ways, then we would have welcomed him as a prospective son-in-law.”

She looked up, hope flaring in her chest. “You would truly welcome him as a match for me?”

Her father winced. “I would not go so far as to claim to welcome him, but I would not have stood in your way had he been capable of providing you with a stable home, my girl. But that is beside the point, for he has neither returned nor asked me for your hand.”

“He still might,” she replied, hating how desperate those words sounded even to her own ears.

Her parents shared a speaking look.

“It’s been a year, Annie,” said her mother quietly. “Even if he is alive and well—”

“He is alive!”

“Then for reasons unknown to us,” her mother continued as though Anne had not interrupted her, “he has chosen to break off his communication with you. Even if he wished to marry you, then his actions are not those of a man we would consider worthy of your hand. Surely, you see our position on this, my darling?”

“He must have a reason,” said Anne, staring down at her plate, but she could not put any heat into her words. Had she not been thinking the very same thing herself, and coming to a similar conclusion, no matter how much it hurt? If Jace walked into the room that instant, she was not sure if she would shower his face with kisses or break the soup tureen over his head.

“I know your peace has been shattered by the lack of communication, but it *must* come to an end, Anne. You have wasted six years pining for him, and he has proven himself unworthy of such constancy. But you are practically on the shelf now, my dear, and I will see you settled comfortably for the future if it is the last thing I do.”

The direction of his words became clearer and clearer to Anne. She fought off a wave of dizziness.

“Father—” she attempted to cut in.

He spoke over her. “You are my only child, and although a substantial fortune will make much of your life an easier one, it also leaves you vulnerable to those who could take advantage of you. Marriage to the right man will protect you from the evils of the world.”

“Father! I do not wish to be married!” Anne exclaimed, although it was not strictly true.

“This world is not set up to be kind to spinsters, my love,” said her mother soothingly. “We understand your hesitation, truly we do, but we would be failing in our duty as your parents if we did not do everything in our power to see you wed.”

“At your mother’s insistence I agreed to wait this long for the Reeves boy,” said her father, grimacing at the words. “It was against my better judgement, but surely, you can agree we have been more than fair in this matter.”

Anne swallowed. Her father had never been a big admirer of Jace, but for the past six years, he had accepted her rejection of every suitor, if not with grace, then with grudging acceptance. He’d let her stay close to Jace’s twin, Sidney, and his wife Amelia, and done nothing to disprove the Ton’s rumors that she was betrothed to Major Jace Reeves.

Her parents had been more than fair, it was true. That did not make listening to him any easier.

“Come now, my girl. It is not as though I am forcing you into a distasteful match,” said her father, switching to a coaxing tone.

Anne looked up at him suddenly. “This is not a hypothetical conversation, is it?”

Her father had the decency to look uncomfortable before he decided to rush the fence.

“Do you remember the Duke of Hawthorne? You met him three years ago when you were in Edinburgh visiting your aunt.”

With an effort, Anne could vaguely remember a middle-aged man of tolerable good looks and some address talking with her at the Assembly Rooms.

“I think so, but it was only a handful of occasions, and he never called on me.”

Her father looked inordinately pleased at this news. “That’s the fellow! You were full of talk about Talavera and the march of the Light Division to reinforce Wellington’s troops. You quite tickled him with your passionate arguments.”

Which means I was full of talk about Jace, thought Anne, but she did not say so out loud.

“I remember now you mention it,” she conceded. “He is rather impressed by the French emperor, you know, which seems deeply unpatriotic to me.”

Her father looked a little taken aback at her declaration but rallied quickly.

“No doubt you misunderstood the admiration for a worthy opponent to be something more. Actually, I met the Duke a

week ago at my London club. Since our family has lived in Devonshire for generations, we struck up a conversation, and through a chance remark, I brought to his attention that he was already acquainted with you.”

“How fortunate,” said Anne, her face feeling as brittle as glass.

Her father nodded. “Indeed! It seems you made quite an impression upon him, my dear, and as soon as he learned you were unwed, he promptly asked for my permission to court you. What do you think of that?”

Anne licked her lips before responding.

“I don’t know what to think,” she answered truthfully, but her parents seemed to take more heart from this comment than she had intended.

“He is a very refined man, from what I have heard, my love,” said her mother, reaching out to give Anne’s hand a quick squeeze. “It seems that many had given him up as a confirmed bachelor, for he suffered from a broken heart in his youth, and never quite recovered.”

“We have something in common then, I see,” said Anne with a sigh.

“Not every marriage is born in love, child,” said her father sharply. “Some of the most successful ones have been dynastic arrangements built of mutual respect and good sense. My God, Anne, it is not as though I am suggesting you throw yourself at some upstart merchant; he is a wealthy Duke of good address

and appearance. What father would not wish to see his only daughter become a duchess?"

Anne looked up into his distressed face and saw how much effort he was putting into keeping his temper. Her heart softened a little; it was not his fault that he did not understand her feelings for Jace, and he was right that it was his duty to see her well married. In another life, she might have been excited, even grateful for the chance to become a duchess with all the power and status such a position brought with it.

It was not his fault that Jace had abandoned her.

"His Grace has written you a letter, my dear," said her mother, motioning at her husband to produce it from his pockets. "It is prettily done, and perhaps you will feel warmer about a prospective marriage after reading it."

Anne took it silently, staring at the single sheet of cream paper her parents had obviously read before her. How strange to finally hold a letter in her hand, yet know it was not from the man she wanted.

Maybe her parents were right. Maybe this was for the best. She reached for the ring about her neck, not caring whether her father saw her action.

I waited as long as I could, Jace, she whispered in her own mind. You are the one who abandoned me.

Besides, said a smaller, darker voice from deeper in her conscious, if he is alive, it will serve him right to see you

courted by a duke.

“I will consider it,” she told her parents. There really was not any other choice.

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CHAPTER THREE

Jace had not bothered to send his brother notice of his arrival back in England. The old family butler, Dickens, looked like he was about to have a fit of apoplexy when his eyes fell on the wayward son of his old master, but he nodded solemnly when Jace put his finger to his lips.

“I always knew you were a right one, Dickens!”

The old retainer broke protocol long enough to flash a rueful smile.

“It is good to see you, Major Reeves; very good indeed. Forgive my familiarity, but if your father could only see you now, he would burst with pride, I have no doubt.”

“I’m rather hoping for that reaction from my brother,” Jace replied as he set his pack down in the alcove. “Where is everyone?”

“I believe Sir Sidney is upstairs with Lady Reeves at present, while the children are occupying themselves in several different rooms, depending on their interests this morning.”

“Little terrors, are they?”

Dickens inclined his head solemnly. “They are spirited youngsters to be sure, Major, but not as troublesome as the twin boys I seem to recall playing cricket in the Long Gallery one rainy afternoon.”

“Good Lord, I’d forgotten about that! If I promise faithfully not to break anything, how about I go wait in the parlor, and you let my brother know there is a strange military man waiting downstairs for him—but don’t let on it is me, Dickens, or I swear I’ll practice bayonet drills in the dining room for a month.”

He threw the old butler a cheeky wink as he made his way to the front parlor of the Reeves London residence—well, his brother’s residence now, he supposed. His mother, the Dowager Lady Reeves, had a snug little place on Half Moon Street, where she lived the year round, but Sidney and Amelia had always preferred to stay at the main estate in Devonshire, so it had been by pure luck he’d discovered they were in London for the Season.

He pushed open the door to the parlor and paused on the threshold. A small child, not more than four years old, was busy setting up dominoes into an intricate pattern on the Chinese carpet, although she paused in her endeavors to study the man who had interrupted her game.

“You’re not Papa,” she pronounced after a moment. “You look like him, though.”

Jace felt a smile tug at the corner of his mouth. “Indeed, I am not. You, I see, are not Lady Reeves, but you look a lot like her.”

“No, silly. That’s Mama.”

He nodded slowly, as though understanding was slow to dawn for him as he walked into the room.

“Well, if I am not your Papa but Lady Reeves is your mother, that must make you my niece, Miss Charlotte Reeves.”

Her eyes widened a little at this statement, and she stared at him in honest awe as he sat down on the floor on the opposite side of the pile of dominoes. “You know my name! How?”

“Your father has written to me about you and your siblings a great many times. Can you guess who I am?”

Charlotte rubbed at her plump red cheek.

“Soldier,” she declared, pointing at his scarlet regimentals.

“Very clever!” said Jace with an approving nod. “But do you know who I am?”

“Not Papa, although you look just like him,” she said, then creased up her brow in deep thought.

If the child knew his identity or not, her need for a reply was cut short as the oldest of her siblings, Fred, came bounding into the room looking for her.

“Lottie, Nurse wants you to come up at once before—” He stopped dead in the room as his gaze fell upon Jace and the biggest smile imaginable spread across his face.

“Uncle Jace! It’s really you! Uncle Jace!” The boy rushed forward, nearly throwing Jace backward onto the floor as he did so. He caught the boy up in his arms, laughing at the enthusiastic welcome.

“Hello, Fred! Why, I swear you have doubled in height since I last saw you! How old are you now, five? Six?”

“I’m almost nine, as well you know, Uncle!” replied the boy happily. “Have you seen Father yet? He talks about you all the time, you know.”

Jace became aware of someone tugging on his sleeve, and he looked down into the serious expression of young Charlotte.

“You’re Uncle Jace,” she announced.

There was nothing for it; he burst out laughing.

Two more children appeared in the parlor, no doubt drawn by the commotion.

“Sally! Tom! Look, it’s Uncle Jace!” said Fred with a broad grin. “You probably don’t remember him, Sally, because he left when you were still a baby.”

“I remember,” said the young girl fiercely, although Jace could see the doubt in her eyes.

“Well, I have very fond memories of making paper boats to float in puddles with you, Miss Sally,” said Jace, and was rewarded by a delighted smile from the girl.

“I *knew* that happened! I thought it was Papa, though, and when he didn’t remember I wondered if perhaps I had dreamt it.”

“Well, he’s Papa’s twin, *stupid*,” said the second boy, who could only be Thomas, and who had been born mere months after Jace had signed up for the army.

“I’m not *stupid*, you are,” Sally snapped back, and the two fell into bickering.

“They do this a lot,” said Fred in a loud stage whisper, his arms still about Jace’s neck.

“Can we play?” asked Charlotte, tugging on his sleeve again.

Jace closed his eyes for a moment, the sounds of the four children’s incessant chatter mixing with the noise of London life on the street outside. His heart began racing, and he could

have sworn the stench of rotting meat and gunpowder was starting to swirl about the room.

The door swung open with a loud bang, hitting the wall, and Jace was on his feet in a moment, Fred still clinging to his body as he instinctively stepped in front of the other children.

“Who are you? Do you have news of my brother? Damn you man, speak! I—”

Sidney had stormed into the room in nothing but his breeches and shirt, not even a waistcoat in sight, and his face the perfect illustration of a man expecting the worst. The moment his eyes fell on Jace, however, he came to a standstill and was now staring at him with his mouth agape. A moment later his wife, Amelia, came rushing into the room, half her hair loose about her shoulders, while she desperately tried to stuff the rest of it under her cap. The buttons on the front of her morning dress had not been done up correctly, but it did not seem appropriate to tell her.

“Jace,” whispered his brother. “My God, Jace, is it really you?”

Jace tried to look nonchalant. “I should hope you still recognize me after all this time since you see me in the mirror every day.”

Amelia was staring at him with a mixture of anger and amusement. “You absolute... absolute wretch, Jace Reeves! When Dickens came to tell us there was a soldier in the parlor, we thought the worst had happened.”

“We thought you were dead you complete and utter bast—er—*cad*. I’ll never forgive you for this one,” said his brother, one eye on the children as he pulled Jace into a tight embrace, Fred crushed between them. “How dare you make me think you were dead and then have the nerve to turn up alive!”

“What your brother means is that he is terribly glad to have you home,” said Amelia, stepping forward for an embrace of her own, “but if you ever give me a scare like that again, I will murder you myself.”

“I’m so sorry to have given you both a fright, for it never occurred to me you might think the worst of the situation,” laughed Jace, his heart fit to bursting now he was with two of the people he loved the most. “I just wanted to surprise you.”

“Then you succeeded,” replied Sidney with a shake of his head. “My God, look at you! The regimentals suit you well.”

“They make you almost as handsome as your brother,” agreed Amelia.

Jace lifted a brow. “You do know we are identical, right?”

“Yes, but I am still half ready to murder you for scaring us like that, which takes the shine off. I see you have already met the children. No doubt they will be pestering you for stories about your exploits on the Continent, but don’t you dare tell them a single thing, Jace Reeves, unless we are there to enjoy them as well. Oh, Sidney, get Dickens to fetch us some refreshments, will you? Children, it is time to return to the nursery—yes, I know that Uncle Jace is here, I can see him with my own eyes,

but he will still be here after your lessons, and you can harass him all you like then. Let your father see his twin!”

Jace smiled as he took a seat on the sofa, but his heart was racing a little as he watched Amelia cluck and fuss over her children like a mother hen over her chicks. Her white dress brought back memories of the carnage that came after the siege at Badajoz, and a wave of bile came up his throat and threatened to erupt from within.

The white dress, fluttering in the wind. A feeble cry. A child's shoe, abandoned in a sticky pool of blood.

“Jace? Jace, are you feeling well? You’re looking all queasy.”

His brother’s concerned words cut through the memory, returning him to the present. He forced a smile to his lips as he addressed Sidney directly.

“Still have a few funny turns since I left the battlefields, but Dr. Knight assures me there is nothing to worry about.”

Sidney looked over at his wife, who gave a brief nod and then departed the room without another word.

“You can’t lie to me, Jace,” said Sidney the moment the door closed behind his wife, “so cut line. What just happened?”

Jace shook his head and gave a wry chuckle. “I never could pull the wool over your eyes, could I? It’s hard to explain, and I shall probably sound quite mad when I tell you.”

Sidney gave him a faint smile. “We have never had any secrets between us, Jace, and even if you were quite insane, I would still love you and be here to help. Was it a memory of some kind?”

“Of a kind. It’s strange, because I’ve been in more battles than I care to remember, and they are chaotic, hellish things, full of smoke and fear. You won’t have seen a French column, but there’s nothing quite like it to strike terror into your heart. Row upon row of soldiers, fanatical for their emperor, and led by a standard bearing a gold eagle, touched by the hand of Napoleon himself. They march toward you, relentless and unforgiving, chanting “*Vive la France!*” as they prepare to thrust their bayonets into your guts. I’ve seen lords flee in terror at that sight, some of whom are celebrated as heroes in London.”

“It sounds terrifying.”

Jace chuckled. “You’d think so, wouldn’t you? Oh, I won’t pretend it does not cause your heart to thunder in your chest, but it’s about discipline! If you’ve trained your men properly, if you’ve drilled them to stand their ground and fire three shots a minute into that column with the same relentless discipline the French use to march toward you, then the column will start to slow, their will dissolves as they stop advancing, and then they turn and they run, and you have not just survived, you have won.”

“You sound proud when you talk about discipline,” commented Sidney. “That’s not a virtue I would ever have associated with you, dear Brother.”

“I’ve learned to value it, thanks to Colonel Hayworth,” said Jace. “I was a better man in Portugal than I ever was at home.”

Sidney cocked his head to one side. “Was?”

Jace sighed, and then dragged his hands slowly across his face.

“Badajoz,” he said quietly. “Everything went to hell at Badajoz. It’s a walled city in Spain, right on the border of Portugal, and the French had seized control of it. The siege there was brutal, and we lost too many men to grenades and mines as we tried to breach those damned walls. When we finally made it over... well, I was knocked out clean just before that; took a lump of masonry to the head in an explosion that killed most of my men. I learned afterward that the fighting was bloody and brutal inside the city, but when the Frenchies finally surrendered, it was not enough to quell the rage in our own soldiers. They... they turned on the citizens, Sidney. Women, children, old men... it made no difference, they shot at them for sport. They robbed and looted with abandon, even though the Spanish are our allies! Then they found barrels of liquor, and it only fueled their rampage. So many dead and mutilated civilians...”

“My God,” whispered Sidney.

“We tried to stop them at first. As soon as I could walk without fainting, I went in with the other officers to try and get the rabble under control, but they attacked us, shooting at their own damned officers! Wellington told us to stand down, let them burn it out of their bodies, and so, for three days we stood back and let them do what they wanted to the poor people of Badajoz.”

Jace swallowed. He could not look at his brother, so he fixed his eyes onto the pattern of the Chinese carpet instead.

“We regained control of them, eventually. I helped to carry a dead woman and her babe to the church, so they could be buried properly. The little one... he looked just like Fred at that age.”

“What happened to the soldiers?” asked Sidney, his voice hoarse.

“We erected some gallows, but none were hanged in the end,” sighed Jace. “We found a few of them dead anyway, no doubt some old scores were settled in that anarchy, and the ringleaders we could identify were flogged as punishment.”

“That’s it?” asked his brother, unable to keep the incredulity from his voice.

Jace grimaced as he looked up at Sidney. “That’s it, but don’t think those men will not find themselves marked out by their officers. I doubt any will get out of this war alive and would stake my fortune on at least half of them dying by the noose. The Colonel reassured me that efforts are being redoubled to ensure that control is reestablished, but don’t ever forget, Sidney, that our brave, honorable, *disciplined* soldiers are only one hard battle away from turning into hellhounds.”

Sidney’s brow furrowed in thought. “I’m sorry that happened, Jace. Truly, I am.”

“It makes me wish that Father was still alive, so I could ask him how he reconciled his feelings on the matter. I’m a good soldier, Sidney. A damned good one, if I do claim it myself, and there is a camaraderie that makes you love your men like brothers, even the roughest guttersnipes among them. How did Father love his men even when he knew what they were capable of doing when they lacked discipline?”

“I wish I had the answers for you, but although I cannot provide the knowledge our father could have given you, I’m always here to talk if you need it. I’m always here if you just want to drink and glare at the fire in moody silence as well.”

“You’re the best of brothers,” said Jace. He straightened himself up and gave his head a slight shake. “Good Lord, listen to me going on about the past in such a maudlin fashion; I have not seen you for years, but now we are together it should be a celebration! Tell me everything, Sidney! I’ve been away for far too long and come back to discover two new Reeves babies to add to the family tree!”



Anne read over the newest letter sent by His Grace, the Duke of Hawthorne, and tried to feel something, *anything*, in response to his words. He was currently in London and affected by sadness that she was not there for the Season this year, but he was greatly looking forward to seeing her in person when he arrived in Devonshire the following week and having the opportunity to formalize the understanding between them.

Anne sighed. In accordance with her parents’ wishes, she had replied to his original note letting him know that yes, she remembered their first meeting and that no, her thoughts on Talavera had not changed, although perhaps she had been too

quick to judge Lord Wellington. She had not asked any questions or given him any indication that she wished to further their acquaintance, but she had been polite in her response and assumed that would be the end of it.

Much to her surprise, this had triggered a deluge of letters from His Grace, with at least one arriving each day for the past three weeks, much to the delight of her father, who—in line with propriety—read her correspondence before passing it to Anne, so that no accusations of impropriety could be levelled against her.

His Grace wrote on a great many topics without saying anything of substance, praised her intellect, hinted at his intentions toward her, and managed to fill at least two pages with bland nothings for her to peruse. She was courteous enough to respond perhaps every three to four days—which her father somehow managed to interpret as an appropriately feminine reserve instead of her being unable to think of anything to say, and never said anything to imply she was interested in a marriage between them. In her last letter she'd resorted to copying a flowery description of Dartmoor out of the novel she was reading, so now, she was forced to read two pages from the Duke discussing the relative merits of wilderness landscapes.

“He’s just so *dull*, Eleanor! I almost wish he would write me a glowing review of the Emperor Napoleon, just so I could have a lively argument with him,” she complained to her maid. “At least an argument would indicate I might find life with him interesting.”

“There’s much in a dull man to recommend him as a spouse, if you don’t mind me being forward, my lady,” replied Eleanor as she ran the brush through Anne’s long hair.

Anne looked up at her maid's reflection in the mirror. "Tell me, does every servant in the household know my father wants to marry me off to Hawthorne?"

Eleanor flushed a bright pink but kept her eyes firmly on Anne's tresses. "We know His Grace has taken an interest in you, my lady, and you can hardly blame us for thinking there's no woman alive more suited to being a duchess than you."

"Very diplomatic," Anne replied, but the compliment warmed her, nonetheless. She stared at the letter in her hand and sighed. "It's such a pity he is so very boring. I mean look at this paragraph; he spends six lines talking about the rugged coastline of South America but might as well be talking about Wiltshire for all the description he includes."

"Not everyone is gifted with your poetic soul, my lady."

Anne snorted. "I'm not after poetry or a prettily worded argument. I would take a mildly interesting description at this point. I'd take a *description*."

Her maid cracked a smile. "Perhaps he's just not a good correspondent, or he can't express himself well on paper."

"I suppose," said Anne sulkily, tossing the paper onto her dressing table. "I cannot even claim to despise him or to be violently opposed to making a match between us, I am simply indifferent. From Father's account of him, he is a perfect gentleman, too."

“And a duke,” added Eleanor.

Anne sighed again but conceded the point. “And he’s a duke, which is very much in his favor. But surely, a match cannot be made on a title alone?”

“There are plenty who have done it,” replied her maid with her usual practicality. “Plenty more have ended up happy in such an arrangement, too.”

Anne considered this in silence as Eleanor began to pin up her hair.

She knew her parents and Eleanor made excellent points. She was twenty-five years old, with no visible suitors, and Anne was too observant not to be aware that she had become the butt of many a cruel joke in the Ton. She was relieved when her father decided to spend the Season in Devonshire, where she would not have to endure snide remarks about her missing soldier sweetheart or hear rumors that Jace was refusing to return in order to avoid marriage to her. The thought of facing the cruel speculation of the Beau Monde, to know they were laughing at her and holding her up as a warning to every unmarried miss who had fallen in love with a scarlet coat was almost unbearable.

Why did you not love me as much as I loved you, Jace? Why was I not enough for you?

But if she married Hawthorne and returned to London a duchess, then no one would dare say anything against her.

A lump formed in her throat.

If she returned to London as Mrs. Major Reeves, with her handsome soldier husband staring lovingly into her eyes, then every last one of those taunts would have been worth it. It would mean that her faith in Jace was rewarded and that everything would work out for the best.

Eleanor seemed to know what she was thinking.

“Has Lady Reeves replied to your letter, Lady Anne?”

Anne shook her head slowly so as not to interfere with the elaborate hairstyle her maid was creating.

“No, but things have been strained between Amelia and I since...”

“Since the Major stopped writing.”

“Yes, since then,” Anne sighed once more. “Sometimes, I wonder if that’s not the worst part of it, Eleanor. Other than you and Mama, I have so very few friends left, and since Jace stopped writing, I’ve lost Amelia and Sidney, too. They never call by when they are at their estate, and in London, we never caught more than a few words together at functions.”

“Well, maybe they are embarrassed too, my lady. You said he wasn’t in touch with them, either.”

“So Sidney told me,” Anne mumbled.

Eleanor finished her work and stood back to admire the effect.

“There now, I think this style will be perfect for the ball, and it will complement your new dress beautifully, if I do say so myself.”

Anne looked at her reflection and smiled. Her hair was pulled into a morass of curls high to her crown, with just a few individual locks falling about her face and neck to emphasize her best features. It was remarkably like the hairstyle sported by the statue of Aphrodite in the formal garden, and Anne appreciated the connection Eleanor had no doubt been trying to make.

“I love it, and I am convinced Mama will as well,” she said, with neither of them outwardly acknowledging that it was Lady Fitzroy who would ultimately decide on Anne’s look for the ball. “I will keep it in for dinner and let you know her thoughts.”

“Very good, my lady,” said Eleanor, her full cheeks beaming with pride as Anne got to her feet. “Although may I speak freely to you? There’s something I’d like to say.”

Anne paused, noting the change of tone in Eleanor’s voice as it moved from affectionate to guarded. She turned to look at her maid, one eyebrow raising in question.

“Haven’t you always done so? No, my apologies, I should not tease when this is obviously something important to you.

Come, sit down with me, and you may tell me anything, and I promise not to act like a beast if it is something I do not want to hear.”

Eleanor hesitated, and Anne could see the conflicting emotions on her maid’s face, but at the last second, she set her jaw, picked up the letter, and joined Anne on the small settee in her dressing room fireplace.

“I hope you don’t mind me saying that I’m a little older than you, Lady Anne, and though I’ve been your maid this last decade or more, I’ve never seen fit to tell you much about my own life.”

“I don’t think I have ever asked about anything but your mother’s health,” Anne admitted, a sense of shame creeping over her.

Had she really been so self-centered, so obsessed with Jace that she had been oblivious to the rest of the world? It was not a pleasant realization.

“Well, I remember the night you stole out to meet him, and I insisted on waiting for you, to protect your honor should romance overrule your reason. I always liked Mr. Jace for you, but I think I was so desperate for your fairytale to come true that I failed you.”

“Never,” said Anne emphatically. “You have never been anything but a true friend to me.”

“I’ve tried to be, Lady Anne, I truly have. But I’m older and wiser now, and I’ve seen more marriages than I can shake a stick at, what with having five sisters and who knows how many female cousins in my family. I’ve seen the romantic ones, the fairytale ones, the practical ones, and the downright cursed ones happen, and if I knew back then what I know now, I would never have encouraged you to waste your life waiting for a man.”

Anne blinked. “I don’t think I follow,” she said carefully.

Eleanor took a deep breath and passed the duke’s letter over to her. “What I’ve learned from the women in my family is this: your husband will control your life, no matter what you think or what he promises, because the law and the church say he owns you, and you cannot fight the law, nor the church, nor your own kin. Men who are adventurous and rakish are appealing to females because they promise adventure and can make us feel like we’re the only woman in the world... right up until another catches their fancy. And then they’ll break your heart, and you can never escape them.”

“How awful,” murmured Anne, wondering which of Eleanor’s relatives had suffered that fate.

“And the ones who like to settle things with their fists rather than their words,” her maid continued, glaring down at the table before them, “the odds are that, eventually, they’ll settle arguments with their wife the same way too, sooner or later.”

Anne swallowed. The words “*but Jace is different!*” almost came out of her mouth, but she was intelligent enough to know she would be far from the first or the last to react in such a way.

Eleanor sniffed, then looked up at Anne, holding out the duke's letter to her.

“What I mean to say, my lady, is that His Grace might be duller than dishwater, but that's no reason to reject a man if he keeps you safe and treats you well. He's dependable, and he's not going to rush off on an adventure for years at a time, leaving you to nurse a broken heart behind him, if you excuse my impertinence. A rake redeemed might well make the best husband, but more often than not, redemption isn't something they're searching for.”

Anne took the letter. “What you're saying is that dull does not mean ineligible,” she said, opening the pages to look once more at the perfect, boring handwriting that neatly crossed the page.

Eleanor laughed. “You always did have a better way with words than me, my lady. I hope you forgive me if I have stepped over the line.”

Anne leaned forward impulsively to give the maid a tight hug.

“Never,” she declared. “You have always stood true to me, Eleanor, and I will always appreciate your kindness.”

It wasn't a *complete* lie, either. Anne truly did appreciate the older woman's counsel, and she could even see the wisdom in her words.

But she could not stop her traitorous heart from loving Jace, nor could she stop herself from believing there was some perfectly good, perfectly logical reason for him abandoning her.

She glanced at the latest letter from the Duke as a single tear dropped from her eyes to the paper, causing the ink to fan and distort on the bubbled sheet.

If there was a reason for Jace's silence, there was only a week for him to reveal it to her, for the Duke of Hawthorne was arriving the following Friday, and both he and her parents would, no doubt, expect her to accept his proposal.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Jace spent two days reconnecting with his twin and mother, and he devoted an ungodly amount of time to firmly establishing himself as the favorite relative of his nieces and nephews. He was used to operating on very little sleep, and so was up at dawn with the youngest members of the Reeves household, taking great joy in teaching him all the tricks that had so often got him and Sidney in trouble with their parents.

His sister-in-law Amelia took most of these escapades in good part, even the time when she and the housekeeper uncovered Jace and her children building a fort inside the pantry, with the very reasonable argument that soldiers required access to provisions. That these provisions solely consisted of plum cake and strawberry cordial was apparently of no consequence, and so Amelia had simply opted to walk away from the mess, but with a dark warning to her brother-in-law that he could be the one nursing the children when they spent the evening casting up their accounts.

Sidney thought it hilarious when a loud crash brought him running from the study, only to discover that Jace had been teaching the children how to slide down the banisters of the great staircase. He had neglected to remove the large vase from the entrance hall table, or, indeed, the table itself, however, and so when Fred had barreled off the end of the

banister at considerable speed, both had been smashed to smithereens. Amelia could not admonish any of them in the circumstances, but she had not seemed too pleased with Jace when he told her she was a queen amongst womankind.

By the morning of his third day in London, however, he discovered that even his unflappable sister-in-law had a limit, and that was the monkey.

“The shopkeeper promised me it was well-trained!” Jace protested as Amelia slammed the door behind Sidney, who had been tasked with returning the infernal creature to the store it had originated from. “How was I to know it would decide to rip down the new curtains?”

“You should have known to ask me first before you brought the little demon home for the children,” replied Amelia, her face anything but amused by the destruction to her parlor. “Four children who think their mother is a miserable old tabby for giving their new pet away, thanks to you, while Uncle Jace could not be higher in their esteem!”

“I’m sorry, Amy, truly, I am,” he replied, forcing down his amusement as he tried to adopt a conciliatory tone. “And the little brats adore you, as well you know. I’m still learning how to be a good uncle, so perhaps I try a little too hard to impress them.”

Amelia rolled her eyes. “As though you are not their firm favorite already, playing endless games with them or telling them stories before bed. You do not need to try to be a part of this family, Jace; you always have been.”

A lump formed in his throat, but he kept the irreverent smile on his face.

“Well, then perhaps I am just making up for lost time,” he replied, thinking of how sweet it was when little Charlotte fell asleep on his knee when he told them fun accounts of his adventures in Portugal, or how Thomas and Fred tried to march at quick time while Sally told them all the ways they were getting it wrong.

“It’s not the children you should be making things up to,” said Amelia coolly as she walked over to her writing desk by the far window.

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Jace lightly, but his head was beginning to buzz.

Amelia had opened her desk and was rummaging among a pile of papers.

“You know full well that I am talking about Anne and whatever has happened between you. Sidney and your mother might not berate you for all the hurt you caused with your neglect of us over the last year or so, but I have no such compunction. It was badly done of you; I had to watch them scour *The Gazette* in both hope and fear of seeing your name, and then help them through the relief, and then the hurt they experienced every time they learned you were alive and well but had not thought highly of them enough to write. Ah, here it is!”

Jace stood by the fireplace, dazed by this attack from one of the gentlest people he had ever known. They had been friends

since they were small children, and in all that time he had never known her to murmur the faintest of criticism of anyone.

“Amy, I had no idea—” he began, but she waved a hand to silence him.

“I know you did not, Jace. I am not accusing you of being deliberately cruel, just as thoughtless as you have always been, which is why I assume that Anne wrote to me out of the blue to give me this.”

She held out a small velvet pouch to him. Still reeling from her words, Jace took it silently, tipping it up so the contents spilled out onto his palm.

A ring. His father’s ring.

The buzzing in his head became worse, and he sat down heavily on the sofa before he could fall. The ringing became louder, and his head began to ache, the pain almost blinding him for a moment, until it began to fade away almost as quickly as it had come.

“Jace, Jace, come on back to me, if you please. Here, drink this. I know you hate ratafia but it’s all I have to hand right now.”

Amelia’s voice brought him back to the sitting room, and he took a mouthful of the God-awful drink she was holding to his lips.

“I’m sorry,” he said, surprisingly out of breath. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“It happens to injured men sometimes,” she replied, her expression far more tender than it had been moments before. “My cousin has a devil of a time whenever there are loud, unexpected noises. He says it’s from field-testing some of Congreve’s rockets, and that any sudden bang makes his head feel like it’s exploding.”

“I don’t blame him; those things are terrifying,” said Jace with a theatrical shudder. “You never did know which direction they were going to head off in.”

Amelia, however, was not to be diverted. “You were not expecting her to return the ring to you, I see.”

Jace rubbed at his temples. “When she stopped writing to me, I thought perhaps she had grown tired of waiting, but I knew she would not keep this ring if there was no hope for us.”

Amelia settled onto the seat beside him. “What happened between you two?”

He raised a brow in her direction. “You are her closest friend, Amy; I assume you know better than I.”

Amelia’s brow furrowed, but then she shook her head slowly. “No, I’m afraid I know nothing about it. Things have been increasingly... distant, between Anne and me recently. The last two years, if I am honest. She still visits to play with the children—she is Charlotte’s godmother, and positively dotes

on her—but it is like a chasm has grown between us, and I cannot work out how to cross it.”

“That’s about the time I received my last letter from her,” said Jace, turning over the gold ring in his hand. “It was different from any other, no hint that she was tired of me.”

“She asked after you a few times, just nonchalant questions about whether we had heard from you, but I could tell she was concerned, and I thought perhaps the two of you had had a falling out of some kind,” said Amelia. “We grew worried when there had been no word for six months, and so Sidney reached out to Horseguards, who confirmed you were alive and well, and excelling under the command of Colonel Hayworth. When we let her know, she did not seem... happy. Relieved, but not happy.”

Jace closed his hand about the ring, the cold gold biting into the flesh of his palm. “I don’t understand, Amy! Why would she stop writing to me but then act as though I had wronged her for no longer sending letters?”

“I don’t know,” Amelia admitted. “I tried to ask, but from pride or hurt, she would not discuss it with me. I know she loves you, though. That ring only arrived two weeks ago.”

He looked up in surprise. “Two weeks?”

“Indeed. Lady Fitzroy has also invited us to a ball at their Devonshire estate next Friday, although I do not know whether the two matters are related. We were intending to go, but if it will make you uncomfortable, we can make an excuse to remain in London awhile.”

A plan began to form in Jace's mind, and he could not help the grin that began to spread over his face.

“A ball, you say?”

Amelia's eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Please, tell me you do not intend to surprise Anne at the ball.”

Jace got to his feet and began pacing the room as the details of his plan began to fall into place. “Why not? She always loved surprises, and anyway, this way she cannot fob me off. Perhaps there is a perfectly good explanation for her not writing to me—her father was never fond of me, so perhaps he forbade it.”

“She would have told me if that were the case,” said Amelia. “Really, I think it would be best for you to write and let her know you are in England, or perhaps ride over a day or two before the ball and present yourself to the whole family.”

He waved a dismissive hand in her direction. “Where's the fun in that? Besides, did I not just say Lord Fitzroy has never been one to favor my suit? No, if I surprise them at the ball, perhaps even steal Anne away before Lord and Lady Fitzroy know I have arrived, then he has no way of preventing me from talking to her alone and discovering for myself if her feelings toward me have changed. Amelia, you are an absolute genius for suggesting this plan!”

She held up her hands. “Oh, no you don't, Jace Reeves, you are not pinning any responsibility for this hare-brained scheme of yours onto me! For once, will you listen to wiser counsel

and approach Anne in the proper manner? Have you thought how horrible this could be for her if her heart is no longer engaged?”

He held up the ring triumphantly. “Then she would have returned this long ago, I am sure of it. And not one word of this to anyone but Sidney, my girl! If I find out you have told anyone of my arrival home before the ball, then it won’t just be monkeys you’ll have to worry about me bringing home for the children—apparently, His Majesty is forever trying to dispose of those kangaroo creatures he was so successful at breeding, and I think they will look lovely jumping about your rose garden, don’t you?”

“You wouldn’t dare,” she said but with enough hesitation to show she knew that he absolutely *would* dare if it came to it.

Amelia threw up her hands in defeat. “Fine, but I want nothing to do with your idiocy! I know my husband too well to expect him to do anything but join you in this foolish escapade, but if Anne Fitzroy slaps you across the face the moment she sees you, it will be no more than you deserve!”



Anne was unable to describe what she anticipated the arrival of a duke to entail, but she had a vague notion that it would involve a large number of carriages, horses of the finest pedigree and form, at least three servants, and possibly a puppy.

What it was not, however, was the arrival of a shabby-looking hack drawn by a pair of broken nags, from which emerged two men, one wearing a grey riding coat with at least seven capes and the other a wiry little creature in a mustard-colored suit

who struggled to remove three large travel cases from the carriage.

“Go and fetch His Grace’s bags,” Lady Fitzroy ordered two of the shocked footmen, shooing them out of their stupor and sending them rushing down to help the smaller man, whom Anne could only assume was the valet.

“Welcome to Fitzroy Manor, Your Grace,” said her father, bowing formally as the Duke of Hawthorne approached with a theatrical flourish of his cape. “We are so pleased you have decided to stay with us.”

“Lord Fitzroy! How good to see you again, and how could I resist the opportunity to spend time in such excellent company,” said the Duke with a wide smile. “And this must be your wonderful wife, Lady Fitzroy; I should barely believe you were old enough to be married to my friend here, had he not assured me of your grace and beauty.”

Anne rolled her eyes as the Duke took her mother’s hand and planted a kiss on her fingers.

“I’m pleased to finally meet you, Your Grace,” said her mother with a faint detachment that Anne knew from experience meant her mother was not sure she was impressed with the man before her.

“And allow me to re-introduce you to my daughter, Anne,” said her father hurriedly.

The Duke turned to look at her directly, and Anne recalled how utterly forgettable he had been when she had met him two years earlier. He appeared to be on the shady side of forty, with his hair beginning to thin, just as his waist was starting to thicken. Like many men of his age, he mistakenly clung to the fashions of the previous decade, although he had obviously considered himself a Tulip of the Ton rather than a Corinthian if his ostentatious neckcloth and embroidered coat were anything to go by. He had probably been an attractive man in his twenties, and while there was nothing precisely wrong with his appearance, good living had evidently taken a toll.

“Miss Fitzroy,” said the Duke almost reverentially as he bowed deep enough to honor an Empress. “How I have longed for this day since I first received a letter from you. Now I have set eyes upon you once again, I know it was worth the wait. Upon my word, it was!”

Anne blinked a few times and found herself staring at him in stupefied silence as her attention was captured by the large bald spot at his crown. Her mother elbowed her in the ribs.

“How lovely to see you again, Your Grace,” Anne said reflexively. The Duke straightened himself, a smug smile on his lips.

“I know I shall enjoy this opportunity to get to know you better, and for you to learn more about me. It is one thing to converse through letters, but spending time in each other’s company is always more desirable, is it not?”

The image of Jace came into her mind unbidden, and she ruthlessly thrust it away.

“Yes, I suppose it is the most effective way of gaining a true idea of another’s character,” she replied. It was meant as a bland nothing, but for just a moment, Anne thought that she saw anger flash in the Duke’s eyes, but it was gone so fast she could not be sure.

“Let us get you settled into your room, Your Grace,” said her father, practically bowing a second time before he began to lead the Duke into the house.

Anne looked over at her mother expectantly. “Well?”

Her mother’s nose twitched before she answered. “Well... he said everything that is right and proper for a duke to say, and no fault can be found with his manners.”

Anne smirked. “Damning him with faint praise, Mama?”

“Language, Anne,” snapped her mother before stalking into the house after the Duke of Hawthorne.

Anne’s smile faded as her mother walked away, the faint joy of unsettling her parent far too brief in the face of the future.

That’s the man you are being pushed into marrying. What is he but a bland fool when compared to an adventurous soldier?

“Be quiet,” she muttered to herself, and then felt her cheeks flame with embarrassment when she realized that one of the servants was looking at her with a quizzical expression. Anne picked up her skirts and raced out along the path to the

gardens, hoping to get a last few minutes of freedom before she was forced into close companionship with the dull Duke of Hawthorne for the rest of the week.

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CHAPTER FIVE

The return to Reeves House was bittersweet. On the one hand, Jace was in his childhood home and surrounded by people who loved him, including his mother. He had been fussed over by old servants like he was the prodigal son, and there was a comforting familiarity in the surrounding landscape that was thankfully devoid of any reminders of Portugal, Spain, and, in particular, Badajoz.

On the other hand, however, was the knowledge that Anne was living on the other side of the hill that could be seen from his bedroom window; not even a mile of distance lay between them, and yet six years made it feel as though an eternity was contained in that road.

Just a few hours now, he told himself. Just a few hours, and you can win her heart all over again.

It did not matter that they had only arrived late the night before, or that the Fitzroys' ball was that very night; it was both too long and too short a time for Jace, although he could not find the words to explain why it was the case.

Sidney, thank God, seemed to understand implicitly. While Amelia had made it very clear that she was not in the least

happy with Jace's plan to surprise Anne at the family ball, his twin had enthusiastically supported the scheme.

"The staff have washed and pressed your uniform, Jace. It's a pity you're so ugly, though; it would have looked slap up to the echo on someone as handsome as me," said Sidney cheerfully as they met in the study a little after noon.

Jace rolled his eyes at the old joke but could not quite keep the smile from his lips.

"Everything is on hand for this evening?"

"Your lack of faith in me is hurtful, you know. Yes, everything is arranged."

"I'm an army Major, Sid; I know the value of going over every detail of a plan before the battle commences. Humor me."

His brother rolled his eyes. "Fine! Although it is not much of a plan, if you ask me. I will arrive with Amelia in the usual fashion, make our bows and be introduced to this mysterious old duke who wants to move to the county, and then Amelia will find a way to pull Anne to one side."

Jace nodded his approval.

"In the meantime," continued Sidney, pointing to random spaces on his desk like he was moving pieces around an imaginary map, "you shall sneak around the back of Fitzroy Manor, and then stride up onto the patio outside the ballroom,

which will be open for the evening to cool the guests. Once I have received your elaborate coded signal—”

“Sid,” said Jace with a warning scowl.

“When did you become the boring brother? Fine, when I see you on the patio, I shall join Amelia and Anne and suggest we take a stroll in the night air. Once we get far enough away from the doors to offer some small semblance of privacy, I will present you to her, and the rest is up to you.”

Jace smiled. “Excellent. I am sure there must be a reason for Anne to stop writing, especially since she held onto the ring for so long.”

Sidney’s smile faded a little. “You were gone a long time, you know. She had to endure much ridicule from the Ton as a reward for her faithfulness to you.”

Jace leaned back in his chair, trying to picture the vivacious, lively girl who had been the toast of the Ton when he left, as an object of pity and a source of laughter to the cruel, mercurial Beau Monde. It brought an angry fire to his chest, making him want to rip out the throats of everyone who had ever hurt her. Including himself.

And that thought only brought with it a sense of shame.

“Anne has every right to be angry at me for being away so long. Even four years was too much without so much as a visit home,” admitted Jace. “You know I love her, Sid. I have always done so, and I have always believed, deep down, that

Anne loves me with the same passion and intensity. But I took it for granted because I was experiencing such high adventure in Portugal, even when it was hellish, it was still an adventure, and before I knew it, years had passed me by without my realizing.”

Sidney scratched at the side of his nose, looking thoughtful at this disclosure. “I know why you joined the army, Brother.”

“Because I look more handsome in regimentals than I do in a cassock?”

“Yes, that too, but I mean I know you needed something to curb your restlessness, but that you get hideously seasick on a mere rowboat, so the navy was sadly out of the question. I just never have been able to understand how you could leave Anne for so long. I dislike being parted from Amelia unless I absolutely have to.”

Jace put a hand to his breast pocket, inside which he carried the portrait Anne had given him on the beach all those years ago. “Because she was always with me. I know you will say it is not the same and that you will be quite right on the matter, but so many times I just closed my eyes and imagined we were lying under the trees together, talking nonsense about the stars and our future and what we wanted from life. I was afraid the truth would shatter that perfect illusion I had built up in my mind.”

“Reality is never perfect because people are not perfect,” replied Sidney with his usual pragmatism. “But that does not mean two people cannot not be a perfect match for each other. While we are alike in many things, I have never understood your desire to go hunting for adventure in faraway places, nor

your conviction that the places and people you imagine will somehow turn out to be better than the real thing.”

“You always were the boring one,” Jace joked, but his twin remained serious.

“I mean it, Jace. You have fought and explored and seen more of the world than I ever will, and yet out of the two of us, who would you say is happier?”

Jace flinched as the words hit home. He thought of the tender expression that settled on Sid’s face whenever he looked at Amelia, and the sheer joy their four children brought to every aspect of his life.

The white dress, fluttering in the wind. A feeble cry. A child’s shoe, abandoned in a sticky pool of blood.

“Jace? Jace? What is happening? Tell me how I can help you!”

Sidney’s voice cut through the memory, bringing Jace back to the study with a deep, shuddering breath. His brother was standing over him, hands poised to start shaking him if necessary, but he stepped back as Jace waved him away with assurances that he was fine.

“It is nothing,” he said, drawing a shaking hand across his face. “Just a bad memory I have sometimes.”

“The one about the woman and child, in Badajoz,” said Sid grimly as he retook his chair. “I wish to God I could make you

unsee that horror.”

“It happens less and less with time,” Jace lied. His brother knew but did not call him out on it.

“So, the plan,” Sid eventually said, knowing implicitly when to drop a subject. “Are you certain it will work?”

Probably not if Anne is wearing a white dress and it sends my mind back to Badajoz, he thought to himself.

“Of course, it will work,” he replied, forcing himself into the biggest grin he could manage. “It’s my plan, and it is perfect. What could possibly go wrong?”



It had been raining for hours.

Anne stared out of the window at the deluge, while remaining perfectly still as Eleanor added the finishing touches to her elaborate coiffure. Her dress, a white muslin beneath a spangled lace overdress, was a simple affair in comparison to the hairstyle, and the overall effect was, even to Anne’s biased eyes, quite beautiful, which was precisely why it was such a problem.

Neither her father nor the Duke—who was insisting she address him by his title “Hawthorne” rather than the formal “Your Grace”—were taking the hint that she was not in the least bit interested in marrying the man.

He'd been a guest in their home for only a few days now, but it was enough to convince her that under no circumstances would she want to spend the rest of her life under the same roof as the Duke. And while she suspected her mother was also dissatisfied with the man, Anne had the horrible feeling that Lady Fitzroy was allowing the possibility of having a duchess for a daughter to crowd out her concerns.

“Am I being silly, Eleanor? Am I the only person who feels uneasy around His Grace?” she asked her maid as the other woman hunted for a long string of pearls among Anne's jewels. “He insisted I save the waltz for him this evening, but when I think of his hands on me, I have to fight the urge to vomit.”

Eleanor hesitated for a moment and then brought the pearls to Anne.

“Is there anything in particular you don't like about him, my lady?” she asked as she arranged the necklace but did not meet Anne's eyes.

“That's the strangest thing about it! No, I cannot think of a single thing he has done or said to make me unhappy in his presence, but there are so many little things that just don't feel quite right about him. His words and manner toward me have been nothing but proper, but then I will catch him looking at me like a spider would a fly. Then he talks of all his great estates and the places he visited on the Grand Tour, yet it feels like he is reciting passages from someone else's diary. He is never so vulgar as to discuss his vast wealth directly, but he likes to hint about it, so why does he insist on wearing coats of an inferior cut to those a merchant would wear?”

“His valet, Mr. Bridges, does not seem fond of his master,” murmured Eleanor, still not looking Anne in the eye.

“Why? What has he said?” she asked, knowing full well that even the most loyal of servants was not above gossiping about their employers.

“It is likely nothing, my lady, but Bridges was quite bitter last night and drank quite a bit of wine that he shouldn’t have, if you catch my meaning. He didn’t hold his tongue, not even in front of the scullery maids. He said His Grace has been living from hotel to hotel for the whole year he’s been employed, and that his pay is rarely delivered on time. He...”

“Go on, Eleanor,” Anne said, reaching out to give her maid’s hand a squeeze. “If there is something you know, I would be most grateful to hear it.”

“Mr. Bridges said His Grace is not very flush in the pocket, and he believes he’s out to snag himself a rich and stupid heiress, whose fortune will go to fund his lifestyle,” rushed out Eleanor, her eyes filling with tears. “Oh, Lady Anne, I am so sorry for counseling you to give the Duke a chance! If I had thought for a moment he might be a fortune hunter I would have kept him from you myself!”

“Don’t fret at all, you silly goose!” said Anne, leaning forward to give her maid an unexpected kiss on the cheek. “You have quite set my mind at ease, for I thought I was going mad when my father kept telling me what a perfect gentleman the Duke is! Tell me, have any of the other staff approached my parents?”

Eleanor looked miserable as she shook her head. “No, for they are afraid your father will be angry at them for gossiping or will turn them off for sullyng the good name of the Duke of Hawthorne. You must understand, Lady Anne, that everyone likes to talk from time to time, but we have no proof that anything Mr. Bridges says is true, and he drinks too much to be trusted.”

“Leave it with me,” said Anne, once again squeezing Eleanor’s hand. “My father might wish for me to marry, but he is not a tyrant, and he would never marry me off to a fortune hunter, not even if a title is attached to the bargain.”

“What are you going to do, my lady?”

Anne smiled as she got up from the dressing table and stepped into the dainty white slippers set out for her.

“Nothing tonight, other than getting through this horrible rigmarole. In the morning I will talk to Mother; she will know what to do for the best.”

Eleanor sniffed. “I don’t like the thought of the Duke dancing the waltz with you in the least, but at least I know you are so beautiful that all eyes will be on you, and he can do nothing to make you blush so long as you are in company.”

“Believe me, I have no intention whatsoever of being left alone with that man,” said Anne with a grimace. “Perhaps I should have insisted that you make me look old and dowdy instead of beautiful, so I might scare him off.”

“Impossible,” said Eleanor with such stubborn pride, Anne was deeply touched. She practically skipped down the corridor from her bedroom, feeling lighter than she had for weeks. For years, even.

This is the lightest you've felt since Jace abandoned you.

The thought caught her off guard, but she ruthlessly thrust it away. Tonight was not about Jace Reeves, his behavior, or his heart. It was about Anne freeing herself from the suffocating expectations of the Duke of Hawthorne, and the looming prospect of marriage to the man. In the future, she would have time to set her own direction and perhaps talk her father around to allowing her to have more freedom once she was officially on the shelf.

Tonight, she was absolutely determined not to give Jace Reeves and his handsome, laughing face a moment of her thought or concern.

The Duke of Hawthorne was, unfortunately, going to have her full attention.

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CHAPTER SIX

The plan was definitely *not* going according to plan, Jace realized, and he had the horrible feeling it was only going to get worse.

Sidney and Amelia had already left on time, and while Amelia had asked Jace several times if he really thought it was a good idea to walk over to Fitzroy Manor, he had waved away her concerns by pointing out that a little drizzle never hurt anyone. And besides, his great coat was good enough to keep him warm and dry.

Unfortunately for Jace, Charlotte had woken up from a bad dream after her parents' departure but before his own, crying out desperately for her papa. The sound had echoed through the otherwise quiet house, and Jace hesitated at the door as that little scream shuddered through his mind, and, for a moment, he had been back in the hell of Badajoz.

The white dress, fluttering in the wind. A feeble cry. A child's shoe, abandoned in a sticky pool of blood.

"You couldn't help them, Jace, but you can damn well help your niece," he told himself and took off the greatcoat before rushing up the stairs.

“Oh, Major Reeves! You needn’t have come, it was just a silly nightmare,” said the nurse as he entered, but he could see the desperate plea in her eyes.

“Nonsense! I’m a soldier, after all, and it’s my duty to protect children, especially when they are such special little ladies like Miss Charlotte Reeves here,” he said with exaggerated solemnity.

“Uncle Jace! Uncle Jace!” wailed Charlotte from her bed, putting up her arms for him to lift her. “There were monsters!”

Jace strode to her side with an exaggerated march, lifted her up and held her tight, before sitting back down on the bed with Charlotte snuggled in his arms.

“Monsters! Well, that explains it, then.”

The little girl took a few hiccupping breaths. “It ’splains what, Uncle Jace?”

“Why your father borrowed my musket, of course,” he replied. “I do wish he’d let me go with him, but I suppose I can always patrol the perimeter this evening, just to make sure.”

Charlotte crumpled up her little face in confusion. “You’re being silly, and it’s not nice! There really *was* a monster, and I saw it.”

“I believe you,” he replied.

“Major Reeves!” exclaimed the nurse, but he motioned for her to stay silent.

“You do?” breathed Charlotte, her eyes widening in surprise. “No one else believes me!”

“Of course, they do, but we all decided long ago that we wouldn’t tell little children about the monsters because we didn’t want to scare them. But I think you are a big, brave girl, Charlotte; am I right about that?”

She looked so serious as she nodded, it was all he could do not to laugh at how adorable she looked, even with red eyes and a dripping nose.

“Excellent,” he said, and planted a kiss on her forehead, “because your Papa is out monster hunting.”

“He is?” she whispered.

“He was exceedingly angry that a monster dared to enter Reeves House without his express permission! Mama has gone to block up the hole with stinky rubbish and a very heavy pile of bricks, while Papa will go and teach that silly monster a lesson. They are cowards, you know. They only try to scare people they don’t think are brave enough to fight them.”

His mind wandered to the British soldiers who had ignored every order to stand down and taken to ransacking Badajoz. Monsters and cowards, indeed.

“I’m brave now,” said Charlotte, holding up her chin in such a way that she was the perfect picture of a Reeves woman.

Jace tickled her gently and was rewarded with a giggle of delight.

“I knew it the moment I met you,” he replied and then moved to lay her down on the bed, tucking the covers tightly about her. “But the best part is, you do not have to be brave about this any longer, not if you don’t want to. Papa will give that monster a good hiding, and it will be so scared, it will run all the way back to the rest of the fey folk and tell them that they should never, ever again tangle with a member of the Reeves family.”

Charlotte yawned and then gave Jace a sleepy smile. “Papa is very brave, like you.”

“Can I let you in on a secret?” he whispered, and she nodded in response, a curious expression in her eyes. “Well, my secret is this: I’m only brave when I have to be, and your Papa is the courageous one. I used to be scared of the monsters as well when I was your age, but even though Sidney was only little himself, he was never scared of them.”

“Never?”

“Never ever. He picked up a poker from the fireplace and he hit the first monster he saw so hard that it yelped like a puppy, then it hobbled off in the darkness, swearing to never come back to our house ever again.”

She giggled and then yawned again. “Now you really are being silly and teasing me.”

Jace held up his hands and tried to look as innocent as possible. “Why would I lie to my brave, intelligent niece?”

She didn’t reply, as her eyes were already closed, her breathing becoming deep and steady.

“I think you just worked a miracle, sir,” said the nurse with a degree of awe. “She never falls asleep easily after a bad dream, and Sir Sidney sometimes has to sleep on the floor to soothe her.”

Jace smiled. “People are only afraid of monsters when they don’t know how to fight them, and children need to know they will never be left alone to face such a threat. If she wakes again before I am home, let her sleep with the fireplace poker, and tell her that as far as you have been told, Sidney and I have scared away every monster in Devonshire.”

He left the nursery and rushed back to the front hall where he had abandoned his waistcoat.

If only it was so easy to beat the monsters of Badajoz, he thought to himself, but seeing his youngest niece drift back into a contented sleep soothed something inside him.

The clock struck the hour, and Jace swore loudly. He was half an hour late setting off, and the rain had grown heavy while he was in the nursery. He would be unable to walk across the

fields to Fitzroy Manor without becoming filthy, and would, no doubt, be even later to reach the ball if he had to wade through the mud to get there.

An idea struck him, and he rushed down to the servants' kitchen, where he correctly guessed a few of the male servants would be up and sharing a beer.

“My apologies, gentlemen, but I have made a complete hash of things tonight. Would any of you be willing to drive me down the back lane that runs behind Fitzroy Manor? It's dark, wet, and you'll probably be miserably soaked through by the time you come home, for we will need to use the buggy, but there's ten shillings in it for you.”

One of the footmen Jace did not recognize got to his feet; he was only around twenty years of age, but he had the bearing of a much older soldier.

“I would be honored to drive you, Major, but there is no need to pay me for such a service.”

“Nonsense, it is not part of your duties, although I very much appreciate it,” said Jace, “but we must hurry to the stables! If luck is on my side, I shall win tonight's skirmish after all!”



The receiving line was possibly the most tedious aspect of a ball, and it made even less sense at a country event where everyone knew one another. Anne stood alongside her parents with a phony grin plastered on her face as she shook the hands of each guest and thanked them for attending.

As if they would risk being elsewhere, she pondered gloomily. Countess Fitzroy's parties were renowned for their sophistication, as Anne's mother spared no expense in providing entertainment and refreshments. Anne was not oblivious to the fact that she was the subject of many conversations, as gossip was of greater importance to the majority of guests.

I used to enjoy parties, she thought morosely. Even when Jace first left, I could still have fun at balls and soirees. Then, everyone else began to get married, and younger girls came out to Society, and then one day, I was no longer praised for my constancy to my absent beau but ridiculed for loving a man who would rather risk a lonely death in Portugal than marry me.

She almost stamped her foot in irritation.

You are not to think about him tonight!

"It is good to see you again, Lady Anne," came a familiar voice, and she almost fell over when she turned to see who was before her.

Not Jace, as her instinct had shouted, but his brother.

"Sir Sidney, I thought you were in London," she said, her heart thundering in her chest.

"It almost sounds as if you wish we had not come," came another voice with the half-laughing, half-nervous quiver to it

that made her soul ache.

“Why should I not want you here? It’s been far too long since we’ve been apart,” she said to her dearest friend as Amelia took her hand. “How are the children? Has Charlotte lost that tooth yet?”

Amelia and Sidney shared a look. “Yes, and she cut her new one almost four months ago, and is very proud of it,” said Amelia.

Four months? Had it really been so long?

“I am sure she is as proud as a peacock about it,” said Anne, mostly out of desperation as an uncomfortable silence grew between them. “I must come and see her. And the other children too, of course. Perhaps we can talk later? I must stay here and do my duty a little while longer, but no doubt we will find each other at some point.”

“Yes, we would like that,” said Sidney, sounding as uncomfortable as Anne felt.

She greeted the next few guests in a distracted fashion, watching her old friends as they made their way to the large patio doors, even though they were firmly closed against the storm outside.

They probably want to avoid me as much as I am avoiding them, she thought sadly. How can we talk without talking about—no, not him. Do NOT think about him.

“How nice to meet you, Lady Anne,” said a feminine voice she did not recognize. Anne forced her attention back to the present and realized she had not been paying attention to any of the latest arrivals to the ball, and she had no idea who the extraordinarily pretty woman who had addressed her actually was.

“Oh! Hello... Mrs...?”

The woman smiled. “Lady Cornwall,” she said. “Don’t worry, I am new to the area, and we have not met before; this is my first social engagement in a long time.”

Anne glanced at Lady Cornwall’s gray satin dress and realized she was in half-mourning. The lack of a Lord Cornwall at her side caused Anne to recollect her father talking about the widow of a young soldier moving into the nearby town, although she had been too busy thinking of Jace to pay attention at the time.

“Yes, I remember now that my mother paid a call on you a few months ago. I’m so sorry for the loss of your husband, but I hope you garner some comfort from meeting more of your neighbors tonight.”

Lady Cornwall murmured her thanks and moved on. Anne watched her go. The widow was about her age and had stayed in England while her husband had gone to fight in Portugal. She had not seen him again.

Could that have been me? she wondered, then dismissed the thought almost as soon as it occurred. *No, silly. Jace is alive and abandoned you. It’s not the same thing at all.*

She forced herself to smile and greet the next round of guests, falling back onto the social training her mother prized so highly, so no one would think there was anything wrong with her heart.



His plan was more flawed than Jace had wanted to believe, but there was no denying it: he had ignored the weather to his own peril, and the Colonel would laugh for weeks if he ever found out about it.

His greatcoat had kept the worst of the rain from soaking into his uniform, but he was painfully aware that, while his bicorn hat did make him look rather dashing, it was utterly useless as a tool to keep his head warm or dry. The drive over to Fitzroy Manor had been so miserable that even the prospect of seeing Anne again was failing to cheer him up, and Jace was starting to think that maybe Sidney had been right after all.

Still, there was no going back now. The footman had dropped him off in the little lane that ran to the back of the Earl's home, but Jace had not remembered that before he could reach the lawn and the verandah beyond, he first had to scale an old stone wall and cross the small, wooded area where they had played pirates as children.

The memory made Jace smile, but the wall itself did not.

“Sidney could have reminded me about you,” he told the stone in an accusing tone.

He could hear music in the distance, floating out from the ballroom where Anne would be dancing. He pictured Sidney waiting impatiently by the French doors, wondering what on earth had happened to him and why he was taking so long to make his grand entrance.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained,” Jace sighed and began to hoist himself up to the top of the wall. It was much easier than it had been in his childhood, and he swung his body over with ease before landing, catlike, on the soft ground of the other side.

He straightened up, grinning like a boy at his small achievement.

“I bet my brother couldn’t have scaled you so easily, old friend,” said Jace, giving the wall a pat. “Wish me luck!”

But whether the wall objected to his presence, or it was a vengeful tree that remembered a young Jace clambering up its branches, on his first step toward Fitzroy Manor, Jace’s boot collided with a root or stone that sent him sprawling, face first, into the wet dirt.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

The guests had all arrived, and Anne was certain that not a single person in the county had dared to turn down her mother's invitation despite the awful weather. The ballroom was a dreadful squeeze, for the French windows that usually allowed guests to spread out onto the verandah had been closed against the rain and wind.

Inside, however, it was easy to believe it was a glorious summer's evening full of champagne, laughter, and flowers. In the hidden gallery above the dancefloor an exceptional quartet was playing a succession of jaunty country dances, while local gentlemen in their best eveningwear did their best to peacock and impress the demurely beautiful young ladies fresh to the marriage mart. As always, the number of available girls vastly outnumbered the eligible bachelors, but since this was a country ball, the young maidens saw no issue with dancing together when no man was available to partner with them. Anne herself danced with Miss Anderson, a sweet but devastatingly shy girl of sixteen, before introducing the poor thing to the Squire's equally introverted youngest son and practically forcing the two of them into the country set.

"That was well done, my darling," said her mother with an approving nod, "although I do wish you would put as much effort into your own matchmaking efforts."

Anne arched one eyebrow. “Is that not why Father invited the Duke to stay with us?”

For the first time Anne could remember, something like uncertainty passed across her mother’s refined features.

“Yes, about that,” she began, but was interrupted by the arrival of the Dowager Lady Reeves, Jace’s mother.

“Helen, I swear you look younger every time I lay eyes upon you,” complained Lady Reeves before planting a kiss on the cheek of the Countess. “It is intolerable and makes me wish I were not your friend.”

Anne’s mother chuckled in response. “Wretch, as though you are not ravishing in that spangled silk. I did not know you were planning to attend! Are you staying with Sidney and Amelia?”

The Dowager shook her head. “No, I have some rooms in town I use whenever I am back from London; I find I rather like having my own space. Is that terrible? Anne, my darling, I have not seen you for an age!”

Anne curtsied as she was addressed, lowering her eyes so she did not see the look of pity in the eyes of the Dowager. Jace’s mother would have been more than happy for the two of them to have married; an earl’s daughter and only child was a splendid catch for a younger son, after all.

“Not since London, I believe,” she said placidly. “I am so pleased you could come, for I know how much you prefer the

city.”

“Yes, very true, but my son told me I would not want to miss this evening,” said the Dowager with a glance over toward Sidney.

“My mother’s entertainments are certainly legendary,” said Anne, glancing at Sidney herself in some confusion. He was hovering by the French doors, looking incredibly suspicious. “Forgive my impertinence, my lady, but Sidney is not planning a lark of some kind, is he?”

The Dowager looked back at Anne in surprise, and then burst out laughing. “Sidney? Good Lord, no! He is dependable to a fault! It is Jace who—”

Her eyes flared, and she snapped her mouth shut, glancing at Anne’s mother with what could only be called panic.

Anne smiled weakly. “There is no need to worry, Lady Reeves; I am aware that any understanding there might have been between Jace and I is long over. You do not need to guard your tongue around me.”

“It’s not that,” said the Dowager, glancing over at Sidney again, but Anne could not face hearing excuses for Jace from his mother any more than she could from his twin.

“If you will excuse me, I think Father is trying to attract my attention,” she said, leaving the two older women as quickly as she could without being rude.

It wasn't a lie, either. Her father, accompanied by the Duke, was indeed walking toward her with an inviting smile.

"Annie, my darling girl, you are by far the most beautiful girl in the room," declared her father with spectacular indifference to the truth. "I was just telling His Grace what an exceptional hostess you are, and what a help you have been to your mother in arranging this little entertainment of ours."

Anne plastered a Society smile onto her face and fought down the urge to tell her parent that so far from her helping the Countess to arrange anything for the ball, her mother had explicitly done the opposite of most of Anne's suggestions.

"You are too kind," she said before turning to look at the Duke of Hawthorne. "Are you enjoying yourself, Your Grace?"

The Duke drained his champagne glass before responding, and Anne wondered how many he had already consumed. His eyes were underscored by deep, gray circles, and the whites were tinged with a faint pink. He bared his teeth in what was probably supposed to be a smile.

Anne took the tiniest step back before she could help herself. This man did not seem quite so forgettable or harmless as he had the day before.

Drink can do that to some men; it is probably nothing, she told herself. Father would not tolerate an inebriate, even if he is a Duke.

"Your father underplays your beauty, Lady Anne," he said.

His voice was clear and strong, with no indication he was drunk. Anne relaxed.

“It is very kind of you to say so.”

“And such beauty must therefore be wooed,” he continued, “and such a woman as you is to be won.”

Anne blinked. She glanced at her father, who seemed as baffled as she felt.

“Er, yes,” she said slowly. “Shakespeare; Henry VI, I believe.”

The Duke seemed surprised she recognized the quote he had butchered.

“A learned woman as well as a beauty,” he said, pursing his lips in a way that made Anne long to slap him. “I am a lucky man indeed!”

“I believe the supper bell is about to be rung; perhaps you will escort my daughter in for some refreshments, Your Grace?” said Anne’s father smoothly, leaving no room for either of them to politely excuse themselves.

“A lucky many indeed!” simpered the Duke. He reached out and took Anne’s arm rather than offering his arm politely. His grip was as firm as a shackle, and she had no choice but to allow him to lead her in for supper.



“Blast it all!” snapped Jace, surveying the damage to his clothing. Wet mud and decaying leaf matter was plastered down his leg and across half his chest, with chunks of dirt embedded into the brocade. His boots were beyond salvageable at this point, and his hat had disappeared into the undergrowth.

Jace ran his hand across his face in despair. Rather than a handsome hero, he looked like some greenhorn whose horse had dumped him into a pigsty. Every instinct told him to call the whole thing off and just return home before anyone could lay eyes upon his sorry state, or worse, call for the village constable, thinking a madman was trying to attack the Earl.

He looked back up at the manor house. The rain was keeping everyone inside the ballroom, and although he could hear the general buzz and chatter of Lord Fitzroy’s guests, it was too far away, too muffled for him to pick out any individual voices.

He pictured Sidney waiting nervously by the French doors to the verandah, probably prowling like an incompetent thief and drawing attention to himself. The image made Jace smile, but his mirth was short lived as his mind shifted to Amelia and his mother.

“They wouldn’t tell her in advance, surely?” he murmured to himself. “They would not ruin the surprise.”

A moment’s reflection told him that women were absolutely capable of ruining such surprises, often being of the opinion

that a perfectly good scheme or lark was improper, or “unfair.”

He licked his lip and tasted both soil and blood upon his tongue. He thought of Sidney again and gave a weary sigh.

“I hope your evening is better than mine, Brother dear,” he muttered to the night. “Time for a new plan, but you had better be at your post or I’ll thrash you into next week.”

He set off across the lawn toward the verandah, the sodden grass squelching and slippery beneath his feet.



Anne stared at the tiny morsels on the plate the Duke brought over to her, comparing it to the generous helping of delicacies he had procured for himself. A wafer-thin slice of ham, a lone quail’s egg, and a mere slither of pate upon a cracker were all she had to sustain herself through the evening.

The Duke noted her expression and patted her arm. “I know ladies such as yourself prefer not to eat at these kinds of functions, but it is important to keep up your energy with such delights as these.”

Anne looked up at him. “Delights?” she repeated, stupefied by incredulity as he stuffed a second of Cook’s delicious fruit tartlets into his mouth.

“Indeed,” he said between chews. “I think it admirable the lengths young women will go to when it comes to reducing, but I must insist you eat at least a few bites.”

Anne was sure there was a devastating or at least cutting retort she could have delivered to make sure Hawthorne knew exactly what she thought of his insinuation, but, somehow, the only noise that came out of her was a strangled cry of outrage.

The expression on his face was one of smug pity. He leaned forward so that only she could hear his words.

“Do not fret, my dear child. *I* appreciate your beauty, even if these rustics do not see it.”

Anne opened her mouth to reply, found her mind had ceased to function, and so closed it again. She reached for the champagne flute before her, meaning to down the alcohol in one go, only to choke as soon as she took the first mouthful.

“Lemonade!” she spluttered and coughed. Everyone was looking at her with malicious interest as the Duke removed the glass from her hand and then tenderly pressed his handkerchief to her cheek, neck, and then décolletage as though he had a right to touch her in such a fashion. She froze in absolute shock, especially when his little finger skirted lightly across the top of her breast.

“I do apologize, Lady Anne! I had no notion that you did not like lemonade, but I will not make such a mistake again,” he said, but his eyes were firmly on the low neckline of her dress.

The smile on his face made her want to vomit, but her body refused to function, to move so much as an inch to get her away from the horrible man beside her.

The Duke pulled away suddenly, turning back to his plate as though nothing untoward had happened. Anne could feel her cheeks burning, but when she looked about for support, she found that all the guests had turned back to their own tables, leaving her alone in a sea of people.

She realized Hawthorne was talking. Anne forced herself to take a deep breath so she could regain control of her body again. With everyone acting as though nothing untoward had just occurred, she had to press her hand to the damp skin of her cheek to reassure herself it had been real.

Calm yourself, Anne said to herself, recalling all the social training she had received over the years. Find a way to leave politely, but do not make a scene.

“If you will excuse me, Your Grace,” she began, but Hawthorne’s hand was back on her arm, as tight as a vice.

“But I do not excuse you, Lady Anne,” he replied. His tone was jovial, almost teasing, but something in his eyes made it very clear to her that he was not joking in the least.

Her heart thundered with fear, and inside her own head, she screamed at her stupidity. This was her house! They were surrounded by neighbors and friends! There was no reason to be afraid of this man, even if he was a duke, for what could he possibly do to her surrounded by so many people?

You do not want to find out what a man like this is capable of, whispered an ancient instinct from the back of her mind. Play along for tonight, and all can be made safe in the morning.

She forced herself to smile, trying her best to make it playful. “I had no idea you enjoyed my company so much, Your Grace.”

He smiled in return, but his grip did not loosen.

“I find the longer I spend in your company, Lady Anne, the more convinced I am that you were made to be mine.”

“How flattering,” she said faintly.

“Anne, my darling, I have barely said two words to you all night,” came a much-welcomed voice. Anne looked up to see Amelia standing beside her, looking just like an angel set to defend her.

“Amelia, I am so glad to see you!” Anne cried, jumping to her feet to embrace her friend. The Duke let go of her arm to sit back and regard them both.

Amelia hesitated only a moment before returning the embrace.

“And I you! Charlotte misses you terribly, you know, and keeps demanding that her godmother visit her.”

“The little angel! Tell her that I miss her as well, but now you are back in Devonshire I will spend as much time with her as I possibly can,” promised Anne, and meaning it. It had been one thing to avoid her friend when Jace’s silence had been her biggest concern, but right now, it seemed imperative to keep as

much distance between herself and the Duke as she possibly could.

Hawthorne, however, was not to be fobbed off so easily.

“And I offer my services as your coachman, my dearest Anne,” he said loudly, drawing attention back to himself. “Will you make the introductions? I do not believe I have had the pleasure of meeting this fine lady before.”

“Oh. Yes. Of course. Um. Your Grace, may I introduce you to Lady Reeves, wife of Sir Sidney Reeves, of the estate beside our own? Amelia, this is His Grace, the Duke of Hawthorne, whom I met when I was sent to stay with my aunt.”

Hawthorne got to his feet and performed a bow that was only one degree short of being offensive to Amelia’s rank.

“Reeves, you say? Why do I know that name?”

Amelia’s smile did not reach her eyes, and it was painfully obvious she had taken a dislike to the Duke. “I cannot begin to guess, Your Grace, but my husband’s family has a long and noble history. Perhaps you were a contemporary of his father?”

Anne choked down the laugh before it burst out of her mouth, but the Duke’s eyes flared at the gentle insult.

“No, but you have helped me recall the memory, my lady. Was it not a Captain Reeves that you were so enamored with when

I first met you, dear Anne?”

Damn him, thought Anne.

“My brother-in-law, Your Grace, although he is Major Reeves now, and a recognized hero among his military peers. He and my husband have been great favorites with Lady Anne since they were children.”

Anne almost groaned at Amelia’s words. The last thing she needed was anyone bringing Jace into this situation, and she had no more wish to deal with Amelia and Sidney’s questions than she did the Duke’s ungentlemanly behavior.

“Yes, I have very fond memories of my childhood friends, as I suppose everyone does,” said Anne with a laugh that sounded almost hysterical to her own ears. “Is it just me, or is it infernally hot in here?”

“Should I escort you to the ballroom windows?” asked Amelia, looking genuinely concerned. “Sidney has taken a seat over there and would love to talk with you again.”

“Yes, why has Sidney been lurking by the windows all night?” asked Anne, suddenly recollecting his odd behavior.

Amelia blushed deeply. “Oh, you know what an odd creature he can be!”

Anne wanted to point out that no, she did not know how odd Sidney could be because odd was genuinely not a word that

would ever occur to her to use about him. Dependable, steady, and even boring were all good descriptors of her childhood friend, but never *odd*.

“No need to concern yourself, Lady Reeves,” said Hawthorne smoothly as he purposefully took Anne’s arm once again. “I believe the Earl plans to make a speech before the next set begins, and he will no doubt expect his daughter to be at his arm.”

Amelia gave Anne a questioning look, but her expression was laced with suspicion and hurt, and Anne did not think she had it in herself to endure a heart-to-heart with her friend.

Hawthorne’s grip was tight. On a normal day, in any other situation, Anne would have wrenched herself free with any number of insults aimed at his appearance, his alcohol-tainted breath, his balding head, or his beady eyes.

But this was different. Right now, in public when he was only planning to walk her to her parents, he was the lesser of two evils.

“I will call on you soon, Amelia,” she said with a bright smile, hating Jace for coming between them.

“If you are sure,” said Amelia quietly, and Anne knew she had hurt her. There was no time to make peace, however, for the Duke had begun to walk away from the table, and she had no choice but to go with him unless she wished to be dragged instead.

“Was it Captain Reeves you considered yourself engaged to?” asked the Duke conversationally, he smirked at her jump of surprise. “Really, Anne, do you not remember the way you spoke of him? One would believe he was single-handedly cutting a path to Napoleon himself, the way you eulogized the boy. I had to assure your aunt that most people found it endearing rather than foolish.”

Anne’s cheeks burned. “I had no notion I was embarrassing myself in such a manner.”

He gave an amused chortle. “You are hardly the first impressionable girl taken in by a scarlet coat, dear child. I can only hope that one day you speak of me with such reverence.”

The thought made her want to vomit. She felt him stiffen.

“Your infatuation with Captain Reeves is over, is it not?” he asked. His tone reminded her of her father when he was dangerously close to losing his temper with her.

“Major,” she said absently. “Major Reeves. He was promoted after Bussaco.”

“Major, then,” snapped the Duke. “Do you still fancy yourself a star-crossed lover?”

Anne swallowed down her irritation. “No, Your Grace. I am under no illusions about Major Reeves or myself.”

Hawthorne relaxed slightly. “I am glad to hear it, child, and not just for my own sake. Your aunt confided in me that you were throwing yourself away over a soldier and was afraid your youth and beauty would have faded before you had the chance to make a match suitable for your station in life.”

Anne winced at this revelation but was hardly surprised. “That sounds precisely like something my aunt would say,” she admitted. “I should be grateful she did not favor you with a detailed description of my future as a despised spinster firmly on the shelf.”

He gave her hand a slight squeeze. “I promise I do not despise you, my dear Anne. Quite the opposite, as it happens. I believe your critics are wrong in considering your statuesque build to be detrimental, for are not good, strong hips a desirable thing when a man wants his wife to bear his children?”

“I am not statuesque!” she spluttered, gripping to the least offensive thing out of his mouth before she fully grasped what he had said to her.

His smile was condescending. “You misunderstand, dear child—it is not an insult to you at all. I find that your figure is incredibly alluring.”

“That... that is not an appropriate thing to say to me,” she replied, damn her brain! Where was the quick wit and cutting tongue when she needed them?

“Very proper of you, my little prude,” he chuckled. “But with our understanding, I promise there is nothing untoward about such... intimacy between us.”

Anne fantasized about jabbing her fingers into his nostrils to see if he would still be laughing when she was finished with him. As soon as this stupid ball was over she would tell everything to her parents, and she was confident that even her father would be disgusted with the Duke's behavior. A few more hours, and this would be over.

Eleanor was right. Men were more trouble than they were worth.



Jace crept along the verandah, keeping to the shadows, even though most of the windows were covered by heavy curtains, and trying his best to stay beneath the wooden trellis-work that kept the worst of the weather from attacking him. By the time he reached the French doors, he was deeply regretting the risk he was taking and was even starting to think he should have listened to Sidney in the first place. The rain was still coming down in buckets; he was wet, cold, caked in mud, and thoroughly miserable. He had been in far worse conditions many a time in Portugal, but he had never been trying to impress the woman he loved back then, and besides, everyone else was equally covered in mud, lice, and dirt.

There was a narrow crack in the curtains covering the French doors, allowing the light of the room beyond to escape the manor house. One glance through the glass panes was enough to break any resolve Jace still had remaining. The world inside the ballroom was one of beautiful people in elegant clothing, of laughter, dancing, and champagne. The light of a thousand beeswax candles gave the whole thing a magical air, and the delicate strains of the string quartet seemed to weave a barrier he could not cross.

It was not as though he did not attend balls while on the Peninsular; they were a common feature of a soldier's life, whether hosted by the wife of a senior officer or occurring in the homes of the Portuguese nobility. They were different, though; the threat of death made all the laughter louder, the dances more intense, and the interactions more passionate. Military bands, while excellent, were not exactly known for their delicacy, while cheap local wine and spirits replaced the more refined drinks on offer back here in England.

What an idiot he was to think he could pass from one world to the other with such ease.

Jace wanted to retreat but could not tear away his gaze as he searched the faces of the people within. It did not take long to find Anne, and when he finally laid his eyes on her, she stole his breath away.

The miniature he carried was of a pretty young girl, but in the last six years, Anne had grown into the most strikingly beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her pale blonde hair was curled atop her head, emphasizing the perfect structure of her face, while her stylish gown emphasized her perfect body. She was on the arm of an older gentleman Jace did not recognize, but even this unwelcome stranger's presence did nothing to dull the sheer joy that coursed through his veins upon seeing her.

Then, she glanced toward the doors, although she did not seem to see him. Something in him cracked; his sweet, carefree Anne no longer smiled with her eyes, nor was there any trace of joy in her movements. She wore her sadness like a gossamer veil; invisible to anyone who did not know her, but to Jace, it was like a blanket thrown over the sun.

As much as he hated himself for it, that sadness gave birth to a surge of hope in his chest. As he reveled in the act of just looking at her, Jace knew beyond doubt, beyond question, that whatever the reason behind the end of her letters, Anne had not been responsible for the sudden silence. She ached as much as he did, he was sure, and all he had to do was run to her... and take her into his arms.

The French doors slipped open just a crack, causing Jace to jump backwards as Sidney slipped out into the darkness.

“What on earth happened to you?” gasped his twin in horror. “You look like you decided to swim through a pigpen on your way here, just after you let some local ruffian split open your forehead.”

“That explains the blood, then,” muttered Jace, touching his fingers to his face again. “Is it very bad?”

“It looks like you lost a fight with a bruiser. And you are late, you idiot. We have already had supper, and the Earl is getting ready to make a speech about something. There is no way you can confront Anne looking like that, let alone in front of half the county.”

“I know that, idiot,” snapped Jace, annoyed at Sidney, even though he’d not said anything false. “I was late because Charlotte had a nightmare, and it would have helped if you had reminded me there is a damned wall at the back of the lawn.”

Sidney knitted his brows. “Why did you need to know about the wall? No, forget that, how did you forget about a giant

medieval wall in the first place?”

“Because I was late,” said Jace through gritted teeth. “Mother has not said anything to Anne, has she? Or Amy, for that matter?”

His brother actually looked offended at the suggestion. “Oh, that is so like you! You are the one who makes a mess of your own plan, and somehow you want to blame everyone else! No, ugly, they have not said anything to Anne because, unlike you, we are all able to stick to a plan. Good grief, do you know how many strange looks I’ve had this evening because of you? A man can only insist on standing by a closed door for so long before he starts to look dicked in the nob, you know.”

Jace held up his hands. “I hear you, I hear you! Evidently, your evening has been so much worse than mine, and having a few nobodies give you funny looks is far worse than the prospect of losing the love of my life.”

“Which would not be happening if you had been reasonable and just come home once in a while,” snapped Sidney in return.

The French doors opened again, and Amelia’s pretty head appeared. She had pulled the heavy curtain across behind her to shield them from the room beyond.

“If you two are out here bickering, I swear I will give both of you such a hiding you will think you are schoolboys again,” she hissed at them. She gasped when her eyes fell on Jace. “If this is your idea of a lark, Jace Reeves, I will murder you right

now and then kill my husband, unless he helps me dispose of your body.”

“I am more than willing to assist,” growled Sidney.

“Some family you two are!” complained Jace, throwing up his hands in frustration. “It was an accident! I only came to the door to make sure you had not let the cat out of the bag with Annie!”

Jace had forgotten just how intimidating Amelia could be when she was angry.

“Of all the rotten accusations!” she said, seeming twice as tall as she really was. “And here am I, helping you against my better judgement, I might add!”

“Fine, fine! I am sorry, Amy, there’s no need to cut up rough! I am just at a loss as to how to proceed, that’s all.”

She softened slightly, but her head suddenly jerked around as she caught a sound that did not reach Jace.

“Lord Fitzroy is about to make a speech,” she murmured. “Sidney, you had better come back inside before you get yourself soaked in that rain. Go home, Jace! We will make everything right in the morning!”

He intended to do just that, truly he did, but then, Amelia did not close the door behind them, and as the wind caught the

curtains and blew them apart, he once again caught sight of his beautiful, sad-looking Anne.

“Just a few minutes, Amy, then I’ll go, I promise,” he murmured, knowing Amelia could not hear him, even though he was only a few paces behind her. He slipped in through the French door, taking care to remain shielded by the curtain.

“Friends!” began Lord Fitzroy, and silence fell as the guests all turned their attention to the host.



Hawthorne had somehow managed to maneuver Anne so she was standing just before him, his hands gripping her shoulders in a familiar manner, while her father made his speech. She did not listen, her attention drawn by the strange behavior of the guests on the far side of the ballroom. The heavy velvet curtains were twitching as though someone was hiding behind them, although Sidney and Amelia, who were standing nearby, seemed oblivious to what was happening behind them.

I wonder if someone is stealing a kiss with their love back there. Whoever it is, I wish them luck.

There was a polite smattering of applause, indicating that her father had finally finished talking. Anne put her hands together belatedly but frowned when the Duke pushed her forward two steps, his hands not leaving her shoulders.

“My thanks to Earl Fitzroy for his kind words,” boomed the Duke, “and to the Countess for her unimpeachable hospitality. I knew Devonshire would be a welcoming place, but I confess I had not quite expected to find my heart while I was here.”

A thousand bells began to ring inside Anne's head all at once, and she tried to inch away from the Duke. His grip was too strong, however, and his fingers began to dig painfully into her flesh.

"Please, don't," she murmured through her teeth, her Society smile not wavering.

Do not make a scene. Do not make a scene.

The Duke just continued talking, his comments causing laughter as he made sly allusions toward Anne stealing his heart. She looked across at her mother in desperation, only to see the Countess had frozen in a similar type of horror, while her father beamed happily at Hawthorne.

She could pull away. She could scream. She could laugh in his face or do almost anything other than just stand here, facing all these people, while the Duke backed her into a corner from which there would be no easy escape.

Do not make a scene.

But her training was taking over, and the knowledge that her father would never listen to reason if she made a fuss in public. She glanced at her mother again, and the Countess gave a tiny, infinitesimal shake of her head.

Let this happen, do not make a fuss, and then you can break the engagement in private tomorrow, she told herself.

The Duke's grip was painful.

“So then, I suppose there is only one last thing to say before I have the pleasure of escorting Lady Anne out to Waltz...”



Jace wanted to run his sword through the dowdily dressed old man who had his arms upon Anne's shoulders. Any fool could see she was unhappy, even if a bland smile was plastered across her face.

He had not paid any attention to what the idiot was blathering about, for all his focus was concentrated on the fact that the animal had his hands on the bare skin of Anne's shoulders. No one had the right to touch her, especially not when she was so blatantly uncomfortable with the contact.

Then she looked up, and Jace saw something like anger in her eyes as the man spoke his final words.

“Although you all know her as Lady Anne Fitzroy, it is my utmost pleasure to introduce her once again as the future Duchess of Hawthorne.”

The hall erupted in a chorus of “Congratulations!” Anne swerved her head from one side to the other, like a fox trying to escape the hounds. Jace wanted to move. He wanted to run toward her and run away from this place in the same moment. His heart thundered so loudly in his ears, a canon could have been let off beside him and he would not have heard it. He had to run, no matter what direction. Only he couldn't get his legs

to work. But then he watched the Duke, in defiance of all manners and the rules of polite society, pull Anne roughly against him and place a proprietary kiss on her cheek. Anne flinched.

A red haze descended, and Jace thrust the curtain aside.

“What are you doing?” shouted Sidney, and Jace found his legs were still rooted to the spot, even as everyone in the ballroom turned to look at him.



People swarmed around them, offering their congratulations to the Duke on catching such a treasure as Anne while telling her how lucky she was to be the next Duchess of Hawthorne. She accepted the kisses from the women and the envious glares of the unmarried misses with equal sanguinity. But it felt like a thousand bees were flitting and buzzing around her head, and she could barely tell one person from the next. She was suddenly aware of how little food she had consumed compared to champagne, and nothing at all since the mouthful of lemonade at the supper table. It was unbearably hot and stuffy, with too many people crowding all about her, and the taste of bile was rising in her throat. Her father beamed and reveled in the attention, happier with Anne than she had ever known him appear before. She knew there was no help in that direction. The Duke’s hand had moved from her shoulder to her waist, and she knew he had no intention whatsoever of letting her go.

She heard someone shouting, and the tone of the crowd changed from congratulatory to shocked to outraged.

“Good God, it cannot be!” her mother gasped.

“What on earth is he doing here?” she heard her father growl.

Anne frowned, going up on her tiptoes to try and see who they were talking about.

“What is it?” she asked. “What is going on?”

The Duke’s grip remained firm on her waist. “Nothing to be concerned with, dear child. It seems that some local vagabond has found his way through the French windows.”

“No, it’s not that,” she said, trying to pull away from him. “Let me go! I need to see what the fuss is about.”

“No, you can’t!” she heard a woman shout in desperation. No, not just a woman. Amelia.

The crowd parted as Anne tried to pull free from the Duke’s grasp, and her eyes fell on the mud-spattered, bloodied figure of Jace framed in front of the window, his eyes accusing as his uniform bore witness to every battle and skirmish that had kept him from her.

“Badajoz!” she whispered, the word rippling through the ballroom as though she had screamed it at the top of her lungs.

Her knees turned to mush, and she felt herself falling, thankful for the darkness that enveloped her before she hit the ground.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jack turned and marched out of the ball, back out into the garden before anyone could stop him. He pushed Sidney away before his twin could take hold of him, and ignored the pleas of both Amelia and his mother as they shouted after him. He was down off the verandah and into the darkness of the garden before he even blinked, painfully aware that the Earl's guests would be crowding at the windows, trying to catch a glimpse of him.

He *had* to move. He continued marching, taking solace in the familiarity of the stride as he continued to walk blindly away from the house. His insides were rising to his throat, choking the life out of him.

“Badajoz!” she had whispered accusingly, ripping open the thin scar that was holding him together, revealing his shame to the world. He had no idea how she knew, how she could possibly have guessed what had happened, how his men had turned to animals, and how he, along with the rest of the officers, had lost control of the mob.

No wonder she had stopped writing. It might have been long before the siege, but she must have known, somehow, that he would fail. His angel must have known he was unworthy of her love. He bit out a laugh. The battlefield had spared him,

but now he wished it had ripped his heart out. It could not have hurt even half as much as this.



Anne came to as a sharp, painful smell assaulted her nostrils, making her gulp down deep breaths of air as she came back to her senses.

“There she is,” said her mother kindly as she removed the smelling salts from beneath Anne’s nose. “That was a nasty shock you suffered, my dear.”

Anne realized she was lying on the couch in the withdrawing room, with only a handful of family and friends around her.

Had she thought about him so much that she’d conjured him?

Was it Sidney, dependable Sidney, playing some kind of cruel joke upon her?

When they were little, the boys would often pretend to be each other to torment the adults. But Sidney had despised every second of it because they always got in trouble at the end and were punished. It was a hoot for Jace.

No, not Sidney then. And besides, Anne had always prided herself on her ability to tell them apart with a single glance. The man who’d stared at her from across the room was a soldier to his roots, a man who would, and had, walked backwards through hell to achieve his goals.

A man who had stared at her with accusing eyes. A man betrayed.

What if it wasn't a dream? What if he is back?

She pushed herself into a sitting position, ignoring the protests of the people around her.

“Did you see him?” she demanded. “For God’s sake, someone *tell* me if they saw him, for I feel like I am going mad! It was like he’d come out of my nightmare, exactly how I saw him in the siege!”

Her voice broke, and she was ashamed of the sob that was torn from her throat.

Her parents were sharing a look, and she wondered if she had truly gone mad. The Duke, of all people, tried to put an arm around her, muttering ridiculous nothings until she violently pushed him away.

“Tell me!” she shouted as she got to her feet.

“You did not imagine him, Anne,” said Amelia, stepping forward from the far side of the room. Anne started at the sight of her friend, unaware she had even been in the room.

“He was here? He is real?” Anne repeated.

Amelia gulped. “Yes. It was Jace. He is home.”

Anne felt her lungs grow tight, as though someone gripped them and refused to let go. She could barely get enough air, no matter how deeply she tried to breathe.

Jace had crawled straight from the hell of her nightmares to find her, only to hear the Duke of Hawthorne proudly announce to a room full of his neighbors that she had betrayed him.

“I think I am going to be sick,” she declared, before walking toward the far doorway. Hawthorne took her hand before she made it three steps.

“My dear, think of the guests,” he said in a coaxing tone.

“I said that I am going to be sick,” snapped Anne as she wrenched her hand free. “Unless you wish for me to cast up my accounts all over your footwear, then I suggest you allow me to go to my maid.”

He seemed shocked at her tone, although only a moment later his face started to turn red with rage. Anne could not bring herself to care; there was no need to be afraid if Jace had come for her. She stalked out of the room, trusting her mother to smooth any ruffled feathers or whatever it was a Countess was expected to do.

No one, not even Amelia, followed her as she rushed out into the empty corridor and took a sharp turn toward the servants’ quarters. Here, the family’s staff bustled about in a frenzy to make sure the guests were suitably refreshed and entertained, and other than quick bows or curtseys as she passed, no one

stopped her as she made her way through the busy kitchen and out via the staff entrance, the shock of the cold rain on her skin washing away her confusion and care.

Jace! *Her* Jace! He was here and he was alive, and those horrible, haunting nightmares about him lying dead on a Spanish battlefield weren't real.

Suddenly, she didn't care about his silence or the lack of letters; there would be a perfectly good reason, she was sure because all that mattered was that he was right here, right now.

She paused, frowning.

Actually, where *was* Jace?

She hitched up her skirts and began to run toward the main lawn, assuming he must have walked in that direction after leaving the ballroom, but then an idea struck her; down by the stream was an old willow tree whose branches fanned out to make a beautiful canopy. It had been Jace's favorite place when they were children; the place he retreated to when he was in trouble, angry, or wanted somewhere private to think.

She turned toward the stream, not even pausing when she felt a hairpin fall free, and then another. She ripped out the remaining few and then ran her free hand through her wet hair, not even caring that she must look a fright, her dress soaked, her slippers ruined, and the hems of her dress caked in mud and dirt.

She glanced over at the shaded azalea bushes as she passed them by. There, she'd shared the very first kiss with him. He'd given her a rose and shouted "Spider on your dress!" Anne had jumped up, straight into his arms, and kissed his lips. Both of them had frozen at the contact. His lips were chapped and rough, but then he'd opened his mouth slowly and flicked hers with his tongue. All fear had faded away in that moment, and she'd known to the tips of her toes that she would marry him one day.

She had her doubts about the existence of the spider, but Jace had refused to admit it was a ruse.

Damn it, where was he?

"Jace?" she shouted. "Jace, it's me!"

She pushed aside the branches of the weeping willow, peering into the darkness beyond.

"Jace?" she repeated, her voice breaking when she realized there was no one there.

A twig snapped behind her. Anne whirled around, almost losing her footing before strong, familiar hands took a hold of her hips to steady her.

"Careful, Annie, you don't want to fall."

That voice! The one she had longed to hear all these years. A dam broke inside of her, and she let out a deep, unladylike sob

as he pulled her tight against him, crushing her against his chest.

“It-it’s y-you, really y-you,” she stuttered. Shudders wracked Anne, as tears streamed down her cheeks in big ugly globules. She squeezed him even tighter against her body, just to reassure herself that he was real, he was there, and he was alive.

“Don’t cry, Annie,” he murmured over and over as she composed herself.

Eventually, when she could trust herself not to cry, she took a deep breath and pulled back from him, just far enough to see his face in the moonlight.

She couldn’t help but give a tiny laugh through the haze of her tears.

“You look awful,” she said, wondering how on earth he’d managed to cut open his forehead and get covered in mud. It then occurred to her that she looked a complete mess herself, what with the rain, the dirt, and the tears.

But then, she realized he was not smiling in return. His almond-brown eyes, which she usually associated with tenderness, were like flint in the moonlight, and he stepped back from her like a soldier coming to attention.

“Jace?” she murmured the question, suddenly unsure of both him and herself.

“Congratulations on your betrothal. I wish you happy.”

She froze. The events of the evening came slamming back to her mind, and the liberty taken by that horrid, awful Hawthorne. Everyone had heard his announcement. Jace must have been in the ballroom, behind the curtain, at the time.

Oh, God! Jace must have heard the announcement!

“No, no...” Anne protested as she tried to take his hands. He stepped back again. “Jace, no, it’s not what you think, that’s not what happened—”

“You looked happy,” he said, his voice tinged with irritation. “I suppose any girl would be at the prospect of being a duchess.”

“That is not fair,” Anne snapped, anger rising in her heart. “I have no intention of marrying Hawthorne!”

He raised an eyebrow and folded his arms over his chest. “Really? So you just let him announce your engagement as what, a petty attempt to make me jealous?”

Anne felt all the emotion, all the anger and fear she had buried that evening, come spilling out in an uncontrollable wave.

“How dare you! I didn’t even know you were in the country! I didn’t even know if you were alive! I waited for you, Jace. I waited for years, and I would have waited until my grave if you had only bothered to write to me!”

“I did write,” he snapped.

She snorted in response “Oh, I suppose you considered a brief note every few months regular communication, and almost two years of silence acceptable for the girl you abandoned.”

“You stopped writing to me!” he said, his voice also rising with anger.

“Yes, because you did not respond!” she shouted back. “What was I supposed to do? How was I supposed to know if you still wanted me?”

“Because I made a promise to you, Annie. You knew I would never break it!”

“Unlike me, I suppose?” she snapped and jabbed at his chest with her fingers. “That is unfair, and you know it, Jace Reeves! You know it is different for women, we are not free to run off and join the army whenever we feel bored with Devonshire!”

He caught hold of her wrist. Strange how his grip was arousing while the Duke’s had made her shudder. Even now, when she wanted to beat at Jace with her fists and tell him what a sheer, idiotic ass he was, his strength made her long to submit to him.

“Damn you, my angel,” he growled, and then jerked her into his arms. His mouth found hers, and there was nothing gentle about his kiss as he took advantage of her surprised gasp to

slip his tongue between her lips. She moaned with sheer pleasure and melted against his chest as he buried one hand into her unbound hair and used the other to press her body tight against him.

Everything she had thought dead about her sprung back to life, turning toward him like a flower to the sun. She was angry and happy and desperate and most definitely angry, but to have him here, kissing her, touching her, was enough to rouse a passion she had thought lost forever.

Jace broke off the kiss with a cuss. He placed his forehead on hers, their harsh breaths mingling like their surging emotions.

“What am I doing?” Jace muttered. “Why can’t I let you go?”

“Don’t let go,” she whispered back. “Not again, not ever again. Don’t ever let me go.”

He cursed again, releasing her and stepping back once more.

“You aren’t mine, Annie. Not any longer. You should go back to your Duke and smooth things over before I get you in trouble.”

Anne stared at him. “You aren’t listening,” she said, shaking her head as she spoke. “I don’t care what Hawthorne said, or what my father has agreed to. I did not say yes. I don’t want to marry him, and I refuse to go through with it. I am betrothed to you, remember? You promised.”

He scrubbed a trembling hand on his face. “Annie. Want to know what kept me going all those years?” He jerked his coat aside and rummaged in the pocket. He took one of Anne’s hands and placed the miniature in her hand. She peered up at him.

“You kept it all these years?”

“If you have to ask, then you have forgotten what you mean to me.”

“I haven’t, you idiot! I know it can’t have been easy for you in the army, but the least you should do is acknowledge that I waited for you, loved—love you, pined away. No-no, look at me.”

He took further steps back, shaking his head. “I know what damage that did to your reputation, not to mention your relationship with the Earl. Don’t you see? If you throw over a Duke for a mere soldier and younger son, your reputation will never recover.”

“Reputation be damned!”

“No, sweetheart. I’m not so selfish as to ruin any chance of happiness you have left. You are the daughter and heir to Earl Fitzroy, and I was a selfish fool not to see you were above my reach. You will make a splendid duchess, I know it.”

“Jace, no,” she said, her voice cracking. “I don’t want to be a duchess. I want to be your wife.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, turning away from her, “but I do not want you.”

Anne stood in silence, her body shaking with rage and grief as she watched him walk away.

“You’re lying,” she whispered, but her pride kept her from following him, from begging him to take it back and just admit he loved her.

She glanced back up at the manor house, knowing that the ball continued without her, as every peer in the county celebrated her future marriage to a duke she despised, and gossiped about the return of her soldier sweetheart.

Jace was right about one thing; if she tried to cry off from the Duke after this, her reputation would never recover; especially not if he held fast to his lie and refused to marry her himself.

She began trudging back to the house, rain dripping off her nose and her skirts dragging in the mud. The miniature was in her hand, digging into the flesh of her palm as she made a fist about it.

Her maid Eleanor was definitely right; men were not worth the trouble.

She would have to find a way out of this mess for herself.

CHAPTER NINE

Jace stumbled home blindly, barely aware of where he was even headed before he found himself back at home. He did not recall pushing his way through the front door, stalking through the hallways, or finding his way to the study, but he recognized the room and the sanctuary it offered. He gruffly ordered a footman to bring him whisky and to leave the damned decanter on the table.

The silence of the study was not, as it turned out, a good thing. Under the stern portrait of his father dressed in full regimentals, Jace downed glass after glass of whisky. At some point he pulled off his filthy jacket, flinging it across the room before dropping himself to the leather Chesterfield sofa.

“Don’t judge me,” he told the painting, and then drank some more.

Underneath his pain lay a searing humiliation. There he was, longing to be reunited with the love of his life. The woman who was supposed to complete him. His fiery Anne. Standing in the room of people, gawking at her like a damned moon-calf.

An image of the Duke's hand on her waist flashed in his mind. Jace let out a guttural roar and threw the glass at the wall, uncaring as it shattered into a thousand pieces.

He grabbed a second glass from the tray the footman had brought him.

He pictured Anne smiling up at the duke with loving eyes, and almost shattered that glass too with his bare hand.

Get a damned grip, you fool!

He flopped back on the sofa and covered his eyes with his arm, trying to will his brain to think of anyone, anything other than Anne, but it was impossible. The more he tried not to think about her, the more she invaded his thoughts. The memory of holding her tight and kissing her warred with the image of that damnable duke holding her like she was his to possess.

There was nothing for it but to continue to drink.

A few hours later, or possibly weeks later, since Jace's head soon felt thick with an alcoholic fog, he became aware of voices coming from outside the study. They were arguing in fast whispers, but it was difficult to know who was winning.

"Can hear you," he slurred loudly.

There was a pause, more hurried whispers, and then the sound of feet withdrawing from the corridor.

There was a knock on the door.

“Jace? Are you in there?” asked a soft female voice.

Jace didn't move. He heard the door open and then click shut quietly. He didn't even have to open his eyes to know who it was.

“H'lo, Moth'r,” he said, or at least, tried to say. His mouth felt thick and dry like it was stuffed with gauze.

He felt her small, cool hand stroke his forehead as it had done when he was sick as a boy.

“Oh, Jace,” she sighed. “What have you done to yourself, you silly boy?”

He felt her sit down, perching on the edge of the Chesterfield while she stroked his hair. It was oddly comforting in a way he would have mocked when sober.

“Was goin' t' come home,” he said, glad his eyes were still tightly shut against the world. He needed the sympathy but knew he would not be able to stand the look of pity on her face.

“You are home, my darling.”

“Not... not now,” he said, irritated with her for not understanding. “Was coming home b’fore. When letters stopped.”

“I see,” said his mother. He knew she did not see anything, which was extremely annoying, but he didn’t say anything about that, because he did not want her to leave.

“Should have come. Know that now. But then Bussaco happened, and then a Major. Had to prove myself.”

“I know, my darling. I understand.”

“Do you?” he scoffed, pushing her away as he forced himself into a sitting position. That was a mistake, for it made the world continue to spin long after he stopped moving.

His mother leaned forward to place a kiss on his cheek and put one arm about his shoulder.

“Of course, I do! You felt you had a duty to be the best officer you could be, and a newly commissioned Major could not just up and leave his men. You made the right choice.”

He gave a bitter laugh and shrugged her arm away.

“Sounds good that way,” he said with a belch. “Not true, though. Staying easy, but scared t’come back. Scared she found a better match. Coward. That’s what I am. Selfish, and a damned *coward*.”

“No,” said his mother softly, but she did not push the issue.

“Was right!” he declared. “Annie will be a duchess! Did you know that? Man puts his hands on her as if he owns her.”

His mother sighed and shook her head. “We did not know, darling. Do you really think we would have gone along with your plan to surprise her if we had the slightest inclination it was a betrothal ball? I cannot believe Helen did not tell me about it.”

“Nothing to be done,” he said, laughing at the absurdity of it all. “Nothing to live for now. No angel watching over me. Should have died in Badajoz instead of Willis and Denny. Dash it all, I wish I had died there.”

“No,” said his mother harshly. She grabbed hold of his face in her hands, forcing him to look at her. “No, Jace. It was tragic that you lost so many men, but a miracle you came home to us. Your heart is broken right now, and it must feel like the world is over, but it is not. I swear it is not, and your family is here to help you through this. It will be hard, but you are a soldier, and you have never backed down from anything just because it is hard. You will sleep off the drink, you will straighten yourself out, and you will face tomorrow, no matter what comes. Do you understand me, Major Reeves?”

She looked so stern, so determined, something in him softened just enough to remember the pet name his father had always used for his mother.

“Yes, General,” he mumbled. It drew a tiny smile from her.

“Go to bed,” she ordered. “I am tired and have to return to my own apartments. Call on me tomorrow, child, or I will make Sidney drag you to me instead.”

He performed a lazy salute before getting unsteadily to his feet. He debated whether he should take the decanter with him but had the feeling that his sweet mother would turn into a demon if he tried.

Jace felt her eyes on him all the way up the stairs and had a strong suspicion she would not leave until she knew he was back in his chambers. With the whisky swirling around his brain, he could not find the energy to fight her and so half-crawled along the corridor, using the wall as a crutch until he found his bedroom and the welcome sight of his bed.

Sleep did not come easily, especially not when his body finally rejected the amount of alcohol he'd consumed, and there was nothing for it but to cast up his accounts into the washbowl. Twice. His head felt like a battle was raging there, all canons and screams obscured by thick smoke. There was no relief here, Jace knew. He *had* to find an outlet for all the emotions raging inside of him; otherwise, he was afraid he would explode like one of Congreve's rockets: destructive and unpredictable.



Anne had long believed that no matter how bad or insurmountable a matter might seem, everything always seemed better after a good night's sleep.

Now she understood that she had, in fact, long been an idiot for holding on to such a childish view of the world.

Nothing had improved save the weather, and rather than making everything look better, the bright sunshine streaming in through the morning room windows seemed to highlight everything that was wrong with her life.

“I’m afraid I do not understand what you are trying to say, my dear,” said the Duke with a condescending smile. “The announcement was made last night, and I have already sent a notice to *The Gazette*. Surely, that frightful drama last night has not frightened you? There will be no scandal attached to you once we are married, you know. It may even add to your consequence!”

Anne bit her tongue nearly in half as she attempted to control her temper. Hawthorne was lounging in a chair by the fireplace with the assurance of a man who assumed he was welcome to make any place his home. The shoulders of his drab brown coat appeared nearly worn through, and his boots had certainly seen better days. The more she got to know him, the more he reminded her of an old Tudor mansion; built to withstand the test of time, but out of style, sadly neglected, and in need of a small fortune to be restored to its former glory.

“You deliberately misunderstand me, Your Grace; I have never consented to marry you for you never asked me, but please be assured that while I have the greatest of respect for you, I have no desire to become your wife.”

Something flashed in his eyes for a moment, something sharp that brought back that sensation from the ball, where it had first occurred to her that this man could be very dangerous if he wanted to be.

Then it was gone, and the smug smile replaced it.

“Ah, so you have been upset by the little incident with your former beau! I am not a monster, my dear, and I can see how it must have unsettled your feminine sensibilities. A poor taste jest at your expense, I felt, especially when you were so happy to accept my offer of marriage before that.”

Anne started in confusion. “What do you mean? I have never had an offer from you, let alone accepted one!”

His look was pitying. “It must be so disconcerting for a young girl to be a slave to her delicate nature; I have often felt sorry for the weaker sex because of it. You accepted my proposal while we were walking around the grounds. I informed your father before the ball, which is why I announced the engagement. You cannot expect me to believe you have forgotten completely!”

Anne clamped her eyes shut and rubbed at her temples.

“I do not know what game you are playing, Your Grace, by trying to convince me that something happened when I know full well it never occurred. I am sorry for any embarrassment this may cause you, but really, it is quite your own fault for not asking me first.”

The Duke did not answer her. Anne opened her eyes and looked at him, only to see him studying her with an intensity that burned.

“Do you think you will really marry that soldier instead of me?” he asked, pronouncing “soldier” like a curse.

Anne swallowed. With the way everything had been left with Jace the night before, she had no idea whether he even wanted to speak with her again, let alone marry her, but the passion in that kiss gave her hope.

“This is not about Major Reeves,” she replied. “The truth is that we would not suit each other, Your Grace, and I ask you to cancel the notice you sent to *The Gazette* forthwith and say no more about this matter.”

The Duke tapped his fingers against his front teeth, studying her thoughtfully. Anne resisted the urge to cross her arms over her chest and forced herself to remain standing straight.

She insisted on wearing this printed mauve morning gown to her interview with Hawthorne, along with a chemisette so thick it appeared and felt as though she had tied a lamb around her neck. Even the cap that covered her hair was from an earlier era. It was not an attractive ensemble, which was a benefit under the circumstances, but she had chosen it as a form of protection. There was something about the Duke’s gaze that made her feel exposed and defenseless, but even he lacked the creativity to see beyond the shapeless mauve cotton and the enormous lace cap.

Hawthorne suddenly got to his feet. “Let us discuss this with your father.”

Anne wanted to scream. “Very well, but I must remind you that even the Earl of Fitzroy has not the power to command

me to the altar! It is quite illegal to force a girl to marry against her will.”

He flashed that smug smile again, and, as ashamed as she was of herself for doing so, Anne stamped her foot in sheer frustration before stalking out of the room and down to the study.

“Papa, I am so sorry, but there is something I must discuss with you,” she said loudly as she pushed open the door.

The Earl looked up from his papers in surprise. “Good morning, my dear. We missed you at breakfast, and your mother has gone out for the morning.”

“Lady Anne wishes to clarify some details about our engagement,” said Hawthorne as he sauntered into the study, clicking the door closed behind him.

Anne’s heart sank as her father’s face lit up with a wide smile. He set his pen down beside the inkwell and got to his feet.

“Of course, I have not given you my congratulations, have I, Annie? I am so happy you are conscious of the great honor Hawthorne is doing you. My little girl, a duchess!”

He had come around the desk to embrace her while he was talking, his arms open. She accepted it along with the kiss upon her cheek, waiting for him to take a breath so she could interrupt.

“Indeed, as I have explained to His Grace, I am deeply honored by his consideration, but I have no intention of accepting his offer nor of becoming his wife!”

Confusion clouded her father’s features as he looked first at the Duke and then back at Anne.

“I do not understand, child; the Duke informed me yesterday that you accepted his proposal.”

“I do not know what gave him that impression, Father, and, as I have already explained to him, that was not the case at all.”

“But you made no correction when he made his announcement,” said her father, his brow furrowed. “What game are you playing here, Annie?”

“There is no game, Papa. I did not know of the announcement until it was too late to stop His Grace, and, as I have explained to him repeatedly, I intended to discuss the matter today so we could avoid causing a devilish scene in front of our guests.”

The Earl opened his mouth to say something further, but Hawthorne interrupted before he could begin.

“It seems to me, Fitzroy, that the dear girl was perfectly content to accept my offer until the... incident with Major Reeves.”

“Ah,” said Anne’s father, turning a sharp look upon her.

“It has nothing to do with Jace!” Anne said, appalled at the almost hysterical pitch of her voice. The men just ignored her.

“Lady Anne has been beautifully candid with me about her past feelings for the young man in question, and I honor her for her constancy to him; truly, it is something I have admired in her,” said the Duke, looking at Anne the way old spinsters look at their pet pugs. “When she accepted my marriage offer I knew she would always have fond memories of her youth, but she believed herself to have grown out of such youthful fancy and her attachment to a boy who abandoned her, and I, too, believe that to be the case.”

“Jace did not abandon me!” Anne gasped, and the Duke had the nerve, the actual nerve, to pat her gently on the shoulder.

“My poor girl, your sensibilities must be tearing you apart, but such is the way of the weaker sex! Perhaps I should explain to you, Fitzroy, that while the theatrical entrance of the Major has understandably upset your sweet-natured daughter, she has explained to me that she has not received another offer for her hand.”

“Because—” Anne started to argue, but her father slammed his hand down hard on his desk, making her jump at the sound.

“That is *enough*, Anne! Your Grace, I am so sorry you are witness to such an odd display from my daughter, and I can assure you she has never before displayed such disordered nerves. I beg you will make allowances for the terrible shock she received because of that boy and leave me to counsel her in private. I have no doubt this will be straightened out quickly enough.”

Hawthorne took his leave, closing the study door with a soft click. The Earl returned to his chair on the far side of his desk without a word. He did not look at Anne, but rather stared into the middle distance while he drummed his fingers on the table.

Anne took a chair and waited as the silence stretched out between them.

“He did not ask for my hand,” she eventually said.

Her father sighed. “It is hardly something a man of his station would lie about, my girl.”

“It is not something I would lie about, either!” Anne replied, her anger returning with a crash.

The Earl flicked his gaze toward her and raised a single brow.

“Not even when Master Jace has returned?”

“That is beside the point, for I did not know that Major Reeves had returned to England until after the Duke made his ridiculous announcement,” she shot back, putting emphasis on Jace’s title.

“It is not beside the point, Annie, because where that irresponsible young man is concerned, you have always been willing to lie. You have done so ever since you were children, and I regret that you have not grown out of your infatuation with him despite the damage it has done to your reputation and your future.”

“It is not an infatuation, Papa, but please, this conversation is not about Jace; even if he were married to another or, God forbid, he had died on the Peninsula, I still would not wish to marry the Duke!”

The Earl threw up his hands in exasperation. “Fine! Let us presume I believe this little charade of yours about *that Boy*. Whether you want to admit it or not, Annie, marriage is the only way to secure your future comfort and happiness. I wish the world were not set up in such a way, but there it is. Marriage to Hawthorne would make you a duchess! I am not such a fool as to expect you to love the man or see the marriage as anything but a business arrangement, my dear, but I fail to see what you find so objectionable about the match.”

“I did not care for the way he leered at me during the ball,” she said, trusting in her father’s sense of propriety to make him understand her concerns.

It failed, and he actually rolled his eyes.

“A man is allowed to look at his betrothed with appreciation, my girl. I would have been more concerned were he leering at other young women instead of you.”

“But... fine, it was a bad example of what I am trying to explain,” she muttered, struggling to find a way to convey her conviction. “It was the way he put his hands upon me during the evening, there was something about the tightness of his grip that meant I was unable to pull away without becoming bruised. It was unsettling.”

Her father's gaze softened, and for a brief second, Anne knew a flicker of hope.

“My dear child, there are moments where I forget that despite being twenty-five, you are as sheltered as a girl in her first Season,” he said, blending condescension with affection. “You have such limited experience with men, you are mistaking the Duke's natural strength as something to be afraid of rather than appreciated. You have such a strong will and temperament, Annie, that he is no doubt unaware of your delicacy when it comes to such things. I will put a word in his ear and remind him to be gentle.”

Anne stared at her father. There was no way she could tell him that, actually, she was well aware of what a man's strength felt like since Jace had taken her into his arms just the night before. The Duke's touch had been that of a man who regarded her as no more than a cart horse, while Jace would worship her like a goddess.

Well, he would if she could just straighten this whole mess out.

“He would not let me eat, nor procure me anything stronger than a glass of lemonade either,” she said, amazed at how petulant and spoiled she sounded as she spoke the words out loud. “And he only listens to his own opinions. He pretends to want a conversation, then spends the whole thing telling you, condescendingly, why his perspective is the only valid one. He is so incredibly dull as a result.”

Her father ceased to look amused by her complaints.

“I thought I had done better at raising you to behave as a lady, but now I see I have woefully over-estimated your good nature,” he said with a disappointed shake of his head. “Anne, it is about time that someone forced you to take a look at yourself and realize you are no longer a prime matrimonial catch. Your reputation as an *eccentric* precedes you wherever you go, and it is not to your benefit. Were it not for my position and money, you would be a nobody. Quite frankly, I have been despairing of ever receiving an eligible offer for your hand, let alone such a splendid match as the Duke of Hawthorne! You will end this foolishness, child, and marry the duke as you intended to do before *That Boy* came back to Devonshire, for I order you to do so.”

Anne reeled as though she had been slapped. Her father was not known for gentleness, but never before had she known him to be so utterly callous toward her feelings.

“I will not do it,” she said quietly. “You cannot force me to marry against my will, for the law forbids it.”

“But I can cut off all monies and wash my hands of you entirely,” retorted her father, his face clouded with barely contained anger. “Mark my words, Anne; if you do not marry Hawthorne as you promised then you are no daughter of mine, and I will leave you to face the world without any support.”

“You would not be so cruel,” she gasped, unable to fathom how her dearest papa could threaten her in such a way. “Mother would never allow it!”

“Your mother does not control your allowance,” replied her father coldly. “Do not misunderstand me, Anne; it would break my heart to treat you in such a way, but it is for your own good.”

Words failed her utterly. For her whole life, she had been able to argue or cajole her father around to her way of thinking, but she had never considered for a second that he was capable of forcing her hand like this.

She got to her feet without a word, desperate to find somewhere quiet to think and plan. There had to be a way out of this; there had to be!

“Anne?” said her father just as she reached the door, “do not entertain any foolish notions of running off with Jace Reeves and marrying in secret. No daughter of mine is going to follow the drum just because some foolish boy thinks it would be an adventure. If you do so, I will ruin his career, and I will ruin him. Do not forget I am Earl Fitzroy, and I have far more power and influence than the Reeves family. Do you understand?”

Anne swallowed. “I understand, Father.”

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CHAPTER TEN

For two days Jace kept himself busy with the children, although in such a way that Amelia could not forbid him from disturbing them in the schoolroom. Charlotte insisted on holding his hand whenever her father was not present, while the older three reveled in the constant rounds of games, jokes, and stories. Avoiding Sidney was the hardest part, for he would insist on trying to talk through “the situation” at every available opportunity, but thankfully, it was easy enough to distract him, especially where his children were concerned, and so Jace was able to stay focused on playing and beating his brother for the entertainment of the little ones.

It did not stop him from thinking about Anne, no matter how much he tried. Some of his anguish must have seeped out through his actions, though, for one day, young Charlotte had woken him from a daydream with a sloppy kiss on the forehead and announced that she understood why he was sad.

“How can I be sad when I am with my favorite nieces and nephews?” he’d replied with a jovial grin. “I’m right as a trivet!”

Charlotte had patted his hand. “I miss God Mama as well, but she will come to play soon.”

It had been disconcerting to realize that a small child could read his heart so clearly, but Jace was confident he was containing the worst of his pain.

But then he had seen his brother's copy of *The Gazette*, where the engagement between the Duke of Hawthorne and Lady Anne Fitzroy, only child of Earl and Countess Fitzroy, jumped out at him like a crazed wolf, and it had all become too much.

The drink had not helped, of course, but Jace knew it was heartbreak rather than wine that had brought him out to Plymouth. And that it was the rage building up inside him which led him back to the shadier parts of the city, where, in his misspent youth, he had discovered every gambling den, boxing match, and cock fight running without oversight from the law.

It was definitely the wine, however, that had made him believe stripping off his coat and jumping into the ring with Mad Jack Barker was a good idea.

“Kill him, Jack!”

“Knock that toff's teeth out!”

Jace grinned. The crowd was clearly not on his side.

Barker was a brute, standing taller than Jace and possessing arms that would make any blacksmith proud. His ears were distorted, his nose was broken in at least three places, and his teeth were cracked and broken.

He could punch with the same force that a horse could kick.

“That all you got, Sweet Jackie?” shouted Jace after spitting out some blood. Barker’s last blow had made the room spin, but there was no way he was backing down now.

Barker cracked his neck to the left and right and grinned again. The crowd cheered wildly, and bets were taken on how long it would take for the brawler to knock Jace unconscious.

“A monkey on myself to win!” Jace shouted and was greeted by peals of laughter from the onlookers.

Barker came forward, his fists raised.

Jace lurched forward without warning, sprinted at full speed toward Barker, and collided with him with the intention of knocking him off balance. As the plan failed spectacularly, Jace swore; he concluded that Barker was made of solid iron because the impact sent bolts of pain through his shoulder.

Barker, who appeared amused rather than distressed by the assault, lifted Jace by his waist and threw him across the floor like a doll. Before Jace could even scramble to his feet, his opponent was upon him, raining blow after blow in a consistent, unyielding rhythm.

Definitely a blacksmith, thought Jace, before crashing down to the floor in a halo of exploding stars. *That, or a sergeant.*

The crowd cheered for Barker, who gratefully accepted a mug of ale from one of his well-wishers.

Jace stayed on his back, staring up at the dingy wooden ceiling as pain ripped through every part of his body he had a name for, and some he did not. He was exhausted, and his muscles were screaming, but for the first time in months, he felt well and truly alive.

He began to laugh.

A meat hook of a hand appeared above him, the palms open in an offer of aid. Surprised, Jace looked up to see Mad Jack Barker, bloodied and grim looking, standing over him. He took the proffered hand and found himself hauled to his feet in a moment, with a mug of ale miraculously appearing in his grip.

“Handy with your fives, ain’t you,” said Barker, looking Jace up and down with something akin to respect. “Yer lasted longer than most have, I’ll say that for you.”

“It was touch and go when you landed me a facer,” said Jace with a sad shake of his head. “I prize my prettiness greatly, and it would be a shame if I ended up looking like you.”

The bruiser let out a bark of laughter. “And a death wish ter go with it! Army, are you? Not one of those Hussar toffs, though.”

“Infantry,” said Jace between mouthfuls of surprisingly good ale. “Under Hayworth.”

Barker suddenly grinned. “Now I can place you, sir! You’re Major Reeves; Crazy Jace, they call you. I heard good things.”

“Coming from someone with the sobriquet “Mad Jack,” I take that as a compliment,” he said. “Sergeant, were you? Couldn’t be anything less with a left hook that strong.”

Barker puffed up with pride. “Aye, finished my time over a year ago. Since my Jane died, though, I’ve been thinking of going back since there’s nothing keeping me here. You, sir?”

Jace stubbornly pushed the thought of Anne away. “As soon as I can escape the family duties. King George commands and we obey, eh?”

“I’ll drink to that,” said Barker, and they smashed together their ale mugs.

There was a commotion from the far side of the pub. It sounded like a fight had broken out.

“What’s all that about?” asked Jace.

Barker snorted his contempt. “First time here, sir? That’s just some of the navy lads trying to claim this place for their own. They won’t accept it’s an army place now.”

Jace took another mouthful of ale before slamming the mug down.

“Well, we can’t have the navy getting too big for their boots, now can we? What do you say, Sweet Jackie? Shall we go lend a hand to our boys for the honor of the regiment, and all that?”

“Which regiment?”

Jace shrugged. “Take your pick,” he said, and then hurled himself into the middle of the brawl, enjoying himself more than he had in years.



Anne had endured an evening playing cards with her parents and Hawthorne, and then passed a sleepless night in bed as she tried and failed to come up with an idea, *any* idea, to extract herself from the situation. Her traitorous brain, however, seemed only to want to think about Jace and how to explain everything without him running off and somehow making everything worse.

So, she had forced herself to smile through gritted teeth and pretend she would go through with the unwanted marriage, but at least she had bought herself some time in that area.

“Oh, no, we cannot possibly marry without my aunt present!” she’d declared when Hawthorne had suggested procuring a license to speed things along.

Hawthorne had been surprised by her protest, and she fancied he was none too pleased either.

“There is no need to delay while she travels down from Harrogate, dear child. We can visit her on the way back to my

estates after the wedding.”

“Back to your estates? I thought you were buying property here in Devon for your principal seat?” her mother had interjected sharply, and the Duke had turned a soothing expression on her.

“That is indeed the plan, Lady Fitzroy, but I am yet to find anything suitable for my needs, and so we would remove to Northumbria for a while.”

“But I simply must have my aunt present,” Anne had continued, trying not to shudder at the thought of being removed to so isolated a place in the North of England. “She introduced us, after all, and is my godmother. She would take it extremely ill if she were not present at the wedding, even if she were to be the only guest. Is that not true, Papa?”

Her father had made a strange coughing noise as he looked between the Duke and his daughter.

“If His Grace would prefer to marry sooner, Anne...” he’d started, but then the Countess had placed a hand on his arm.

“It is your older sister, my dear. The last time you upset her, she came to live with us. For three months.”

Anne had found it hard not to laugh at the look of horror on her father’s face. He’d looked at Hawthorne apologetically and shook his head.

“I am afraid, Your Grace, that Anne is correct in this matter, and it would be improper for her to marry without her aunt’s presence. I will write to her immediately, and, in the meantime, we can instruct the vicar to read the banns while we wait on her response.”

Hawthorne had not been happy about it, but Anne had felt relief. She had a few weeks to come up with a plan.

And yet her brain refused to produce any cogent ideas.

Sunshine leaked in through the cracks in the curtains, so Anne got out of bed and went to open them fully. It was later than she had realized, but she had no wish to be forced into spending time with the Duke, or even her parents.

She stared out across the grounds, wishing she could go back to being a carefree young girl, romping around the woodlands with Jace. It had all seemed so easy back then, so inevitable that they would be together forever.

“I’m never going to stop thinking about you, am I?” She sighed at the window, but the world beyond did not answer.

She drifted over to her writing desk, where she kept her bundles of correspondence from the many friends and relatives she wrote to. Tucked away at the back, where she could not see it without deliberately searching it out, was a small wooden box, obviously made by an unskilled but enthusiastic amateur, with dirty brass hinges and an old metal clasp.

She picked it up, smiling at the memories it evoked, even when they were laced with pain.

“I made it,” said Jace gruffly as he thrust it into her hands. “For your birthday.”

Anne glanced at the wonderful, illustrated books the Reeves family had already gifted her.

“Um, thank you,” she said, staring at it. The lid did not fit quite straight, and while it had been sanded smooth, it felt lumpy under her fingers.

“He made it just for you,” said Sidney cheerfully a few feet away. “He said that since you were turning ten, you deserved to have something really special, just from him. He wouldn’t even let me help!”

“No, I didn’t,” Jace had snapped at his brother, his cheeks blazing red. “I don’t care above half that it’s Annie’s birthday. I was just practicing.”

“I like it very much,” she declared, not altogether honestly.

“What will you use it for?” asked Sidney with an irrepressible grin.

She frowned at the box. “Well, for keeping things in, I suppose. That’s what boxes are for.”

“You can throw it in the fire for all I care,” said Jace, now the shade of a beetroot. “It was just for practice.”

And then he had bolted from the room, out of the house, and across the fields. Sidney had shrugged an apology, then chased after him.

Anne settled into her chair, placing the box carefully on the desk before her. She slid the clasp open, and the poorly-fitting lid slipped open with ease, although the hinges squealed out for a little oil.

Inside were all the letters Jace had ever sent her, including the ones from their childhood. Collections of silly poems he’d written to make her laugh, or letters describing life at school in Eton. As he had grown older, the notes were signed off with a pair of hearts merging into one.

She smiled. He always had been romantic.

She pulled out the letters he’d sent from Portugal, their tone and content ranging from carefree notes about camp gossip, to long letters detailing a battle and the resulting fatigue. He had shared his joy at victories, and his grief at the loss of friends.

Even at his lowest, though, she could sense the pride he took in being a soldier. She could almost feel his conviction that he was doing the right thing, and, more importantly, that he was dashed good at his job.

Anne’s heart did a painful squeeze. All those letters she’d sent in return, all the times she had said she had missed him and

wished him to come home. All those times she had written to reassure him that she was still waiting, still true to him, and still longing for the day when she would be his wife.

All those years, and when he'd finally come home in a typically dramatic fashion, he'd walked into a betrayal.

It did not matter that Anne had not intended for it to happen, or that she had no wish to be the next Duchess of Hawthorne. What mattered was her father's threat, and so, whether she liked it or not, she had betrayed Jace by becoming engaged to another.

But then, wasn't he the one who stopped writing to her? Had he not betrayed her first?

She groaned and slumped forward, resting her head on the writing desk as her thoughts once again began to chase themselves around in circles.

Her bedroom door opened, and Eleanor bustled into the room with a breakfast tray.

"Oh, you are awake, my lady! I'm so sorry, I would have been here sooner had I known."

"The fault is entirely mine," said Anne, sitting back up so she could tidy away her letters.

"His Grace was waiting to see if you wanted to go out riding with him, but I took the liberty of saying you were a little

under the weather this morning, and that he should go without you,” said Eleanor, fussing with the tray.

Anne smiled. “You always know exactly what I need, don’t you?”

“I aim to please, my lady,” said the maid, puffing up a little now she was reassured she had acted correctly. “What dress should I fetch for you?”

Anne scratched her head. “I... I am not sure, to be perfectly honest. Eleanor, may I ask your counsel on an important matter?”

Her maid’s eyes went wide with surprise, but she nodded her permission. Anne motioned to the small chaise at the end of her bed, and the two of them sat down together.

“It is about this dratted engagement,” sighed Anne. “Everything has become a terrible tangle, and I hardly know how to fix this mess before me. What am I to do?”

Her maid hesitated for a moment, as though wondering how much liberty she should take, but then set her mouth into a determined line.

“My lady, I know you have not wished to discuss what happened at the ball, but I think it is important that you know all before a decision is made either way.”

“What are you talking about? What has happened?”

“I know you do not like gossip, so I am sorry to confess that the... drama of your engagement is all the rage in the servants’ quarters, and so I was given the whole story from one of the footmen.”

Anne grimaced. “All of it? From the Duke’s announcement to Major Reeves appearing like an avenging ghost to taunt me?”

Eleanor reached forward to capture Anne’s hands. “I’m afraid so, and I’m so sorry that happened to you, Lady Anne. Truly I am, but it seems the guests and their servants thought it highly entertaining.”

“So I am once again the subject of every ill-natured rumor in the county, and likely the whole ton before the week is out,” Anne said with a groan. “Father will be mad as fire if I appear in those horrid cartoons again.”

Eleanor squeezed her hands, but her failure to provide reassurance spoke volumes. Anne shuddered at the thought of what lay ahead; the last time one of the satirists had decided to mock the progress of the war on the Continent, they had used a deeply unflattering cartoon of Anne to depict the blind faith in handsome but utterly incompetent officers. She had been on the receiving end of hundreds of petty, cruel jokes for months afterward, and her social standing had never quite recovered.

“Tell me quickly, Eleanor. How bad is it?”

“I have not seen it myself, but a copy of the cartoon arrived with the papers, and the Earl did not take kindly to it. Jenkins managed to get a peek at my request—I did not want you to be

caught off guard! —and he says it shows you being sacrificed to the Duke by your parents while Jace is surrounded by Frenchmen.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad for me,” said Anne, but Eleanor winced.

“Jenkins says you are depicted wearing an inappropriately sheer dress and were quite a willing participant.”

Anne groaned again. She could just picture every member of the Beau Monde laughing over the picture and sharing it among their friends. “How did Father react?”

“He has already set out to London. The Countess has gone to the village to do charitable works, and the Duke, as I said, decided to go out riding.”

“I should have stayed in bed,” sighed Anne, but then she brightened as an idea struck her. “I wonder if the cartoon might convince father that this marriage is a terrible idea? He does so hate any form of scandal.”

“If you forgive my boldness, my lady, but do you wish to cry off from the Duke because Major Reeves has returned?”

Anne’s eyebrows rocketed up at the frank question. Eleanor was usually so careful in the way she approached any matter that Anne had not expected the direct approach.

“Why do you ask?”

The older woman looked grim. “Because I know your heart well enough to know who possesses it, my lady, but I am not convinced that Major Reeves is worthy of your hand after hurting you so badly. You deserve better than that in a husband.”

Anne smiled tenderly at Eleanor, despite her criticism of Jace.

“Dear Eleanor, you have a higher opinion of me than I deserve.”

“But then there is His Grace. Any other lady I could understand marrying for his title, but it has never been something you have been concerned with. I do not know why you accepted his proposal, Lady Anne, but I do not believe you would be happy if you married him.”

“Then you will be pleased to know that one of the problems facing me is how to break off the engagement in such a way that my father supports the decision. I had no idea Hawthorne was going to make such an announcement at the ball, for he has never asked for my hand in marriage, no matter what he claims.”

Eleanor’s eyes went wide. “He did not ask you?”

“No, for I would have refused anyway. Oh, Eleanor, remember how you counseled me to put thought into the type of man I would marry? Well, I listened to you, and while I cannot put my finger on exactly why I have taken the man in dislike, his behavior at the ball has left me with the oddest impression that

he has been acting all this time, and that I would not like the man I found underneath.”

“Then you should trust your instincts,” replied Eleanor firmly. “Women know these things, and intuition should never be ignored. You must not marry His Grace.”

The complete acceptance of her stance on the matter almost brought Anne to tears. She swallowed the urge to cry, determined to keep her mind on the problem at hand.

“I tried to explain as much to Father, but he does not believe me. He thinks I am only crying off because of Jace, which is not true at all. I mean, I do want to explain everything to Major Reeves and tell him I would rather marry him than all the dukes in the world, but that’s not the main reason I wish to break my engagement to Hawthorne. Unfortunately, my father will not be swayed, and he has threatened to destroy Jace’s career if I do not obey.”

“Well, that rules out an elopement, then,” said Eleanor.

“And it rules out simply refusing to attend the wedding,” said Anne moodily. “I would accept being banished to my aunt’s care if only I were to suffer, but I will not see Jace have his career stolen from him, not after he has worked so hard for it, and sacrificed so much.”

“You are a better woman than most, Lady Anne,” said Eleanor with a shake of her head. “I wish he appreciated your loyalty to him.”

The maid got up suddenly, smoothed down her skirts, and headed over to the closet.

“Where are you going?”

Eleanor reappeared with a cream walking dress and powder-blue spencer.

“To fetch your armor,” said the maid with a knowing smile. “You are going to visit your godchild over at Reeves House, my lady, and find yourself some allies. There is a way out of this, I am sure of it, but the first thing to do is enlist some help to your cause.”

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

The carriage swept along the formal driveway of the Reeves Estate, coming to a halt just in front of the grand front entrance. Anne had never stood upon ceremony with the Reeves family, and so hopped out of the carriage with the aid of her groom before the butler had even opened the door. Eleanor followed on his heel, a reassuring presence when Anne's stomach was threatening to cast up her accounts at any moment.

She plastered a brilliant smile on her face as the door opened for her.

"Hello, Dickens!" she said in a bright, cheerful voice she was sure carried to every corner of the house, "where is everyone this morning? Is my goddaughter still giving you palpitations with her antics?"

The old butler was thrown off guard by the familiarity and was betrayed into not only revealing that Charlotte remained a little terror, but that the other children were not much better.

"Pooh! You would be ever so bored without us!" came a small voice from the top of the stairs, followed by the thunder of young feet stampeding down towards her.

“Aunt Anne! Aunt Anne! You came!” was the chorus of delighted shouts as the Reeves children, with a shocking lack of decorum, crashed into a laughing Anne with enthusiastic hugs. Even the older two forgot their lessons on polite behavior as they tried to shout over the top of each other, and even Eleanor was not immune from the rambunctious welcome.

“Yes, yes, I have missed you all as well!” declared Anne. “I shall inform your parents that you are not to go to London again without me, for it is far too dull in the country without you here to keep me entertained. Now, have you all been good?”

“Fred hasn’t, Fred broke the sugar bowl and he’s hidden the pieces in the garden,” said Tom loudly.

“You little rotter, you said you wouldn’t tell!” shouted Fred. Giggling, Tom sprinted off down the corridor, closely followed by his elder brother.

“No running!” Anne called, knowing it was pointless.

“*Boys*,” said Sally with real disgust. “I really don’t see why I had to have brothers.”

“Brothers have their uses, Miss Sally,” said Eleanor. “Lady Anne used to wish she had one to play with when she was your age.”

Sally looked up at Anne with something between surprise and disgust. “You actually wanted a brother?” she asked, the sheer incredulity on her face causing both Eleanor and Anne to start laughing.

Just then, Charlotte tugged lightly on Anne’s hand to get her attention.

“You haven’t picked me up,” said the girl simply. Dressed in a straw-colored smock dress, and with her bright blue eyes and silky red hair, Charlotte was as irresistible to Anne as she had been since their first meeting. She swooped her goddaughter up into her arms and kissed her apple cheeks until the child squealed with laughter, the sound like a balm to Anne’s nerves.

“And how are you, my little love?”

“Good! Miss Eleanor, did you bring shortbread? Yours is better than Cook’s.”

“Hush, you can’t say that out loud,” admonished Sally.

“Why not? It’s true,” replied Charlotte, wrinkling up her nose.

“I know it is, but we do not want to hurt Cook’s feelings, or she might not make any more plum cake,” said Sally, looking horrified at this potential future.

Anne smiled as she watched her maid melt during this exchange.

“Don’t either of you young ladies worry your heads, for I have brought plenty with me for you all,” said Eleanor, passing the brown paper package to Sally with a conspiratorial wink. “Now, I can trust you to make sure your brothers get an appropriate share, can’t I, Miss Sally?”

“Rather!” declared Sally, her eyes wide with mischief as she took off out through the front door, no doubt to feast on shortbread away from the grabbing hands of Fred and Tom.

“Wait for me!” cried out Charlotte, wriggling out of Anne’s arms now that shortbread was an option. “Don’t be a beast, Sally! I’ll tell!”

Anne grinned as she watched the little girl go, with Dickens quietly stepping out onto the porch to monitor her progress.

“I should probably not encourage them,” said Anne, pausing only to watch a harried governess come racing down the stairs, and then out to the back of the house where the boys had sprinted a few minutes earlier.

“Probably not,” agreed Eleanor with spectacular disregard for her own conduct.

“Well, I have no intention of stopping. It is one of the perks of being a beloved aunt and godmother. I can enjoy the fun and leave the discipline to her parents.”

“Yes, you do not seem to mind leaving devastation in your wake, do you?” came a clipped female voice from behind her.

Anne scrunched up her face and silently cursed. She turned, attempting to look both friendly and regal as she addressed her old, and once closest, friend.

“Amelia! I was just telling Eleanor how delightfully well-behaved your children are. They are such a blessing!”

“Mm-hmm.” Amelia looked Anne up and down, and there was nothing friendly about it. She turned to walk into the drawing room, motioning for Anne to follow her.

“I will go and visit my cousin down in the kitchens,” murmured Eleanor quietly. “If you need me, my lady, I will be busy telling her that the children far prefer my shortbread to hers.”

“Coward,” Anne whispered back. Her maid practically ran away, leaving her to follow Amelia into the drawing room alone.

Her friend had taken her favorite chair and was sitting as primly as a schoolteacher.

“So,” she said after a deep breath. “Planning on spoiling Charlotte, are you?”

Anne grinned with relief. “Who, me? No, why would I ever do that? I believe a firm hand and strict discipline is the—”

“Oh, stop it, you are practically bleeding guilt all over the rug,” said Amelia, a faint smile cracking her lips.

Anne lowered herself into the chair beside Amelia’s. “I can’t help it, she’s adorable. All of them are.”

“And yet we hardly see you these days,” replied her friend, her expression growing stern once more. “It has almost seemed like you were avoiding us.”

Anne’s composure wavered. “Yes. Well. Things have been different of late.”

“For a year at least,” agreed Amelia. She made no move to ring for a tea tray to be brought in or to remind Anne to remove her bonnet. It was obvious she did not intend the interview to be a cozy visit between friends.

“I suppose you must be wondering about the ball,” said Anne lightly but was interrupted by the arrival of Sidney in the room. He was always so much more somber than his twin, but right now, he was practically glaring at her.

“Hello, Lady Anne. Dickens said you were here,” he said, and she noted the formal way he addressed her. He stood behind Amelia’s chair, and his wife reached up to touch his arm, as if he was her mainstay. Jealousy bit at Anne, alongside anger at the way they were treating her.

I have done nothing wrong!

“Hello, *Sir* Sidney,” Anne retorted. “*Lady Reeves* and I were just about to discuss what happened at the ball.”

“You are engaged,” Sidney stated baldly.

“Yes, but—” Anne started.

“To the Duke,” Sidney cut in.

“Yes, but—”

“And you did not see fit to tell us or anyone else in advance,” he continued.

“No, but—”

“Then there is nothing to discuss, and—”

“Would you just be silent and let me speak!” Anne shouted as her frustration finally exploded. Sidney merely cocked a questioning brow at her outburst, but Amelia was glaring daggers at her.

Anne took a deep breath to calm herself.

“My apologies; that was shockingly rude of me, but I am under an awful lot of stress at present. Please, tell me, is Jace staying with you at present?”

Amelia hesitated before answering.

“He is, yes,” she eventually admitted.

Anne nodded. “I assumed he would be, rather than staying with your mother. Is he here now?”

“He has gone out on business,” Amelia replied, “and we do not expect him home for hours, not until well after nightfall.”

Anne clenched her jaw. *So I am not welcome to wait even if I wished to. Fine, that was not my plan anyway.*

“Good, for it is you I wished to talk to anyway. Both of you,” she added, looking directly at Sidney. “I know how everything appears, but I want to explain that although I have been forced to acknowledge an engagement to the Duke, I have no intention of marrying the man.”

Sidney and Amelia shared a look.

“It is in this morning’s papers,” said Sidney, his eyebrows knitted together. “It seems like a lot of effort to go to just to punish my brother for staying away for so long.”

“I am doing nothing of the sort, Sidney Reeves, and neither of you has the right to assume the worst of me!” Anne snapped, her hands balling into fists upon her skirt. “You both know I have stayed true to Jace, even when I was mocked and

ridiculed for it. At the very least, I deserve the benefit of the doubt from you!”

Amelia glanced up at her husband, who looked torn.

“Perhaps you better tell us everything,” she said.

And so, Anne poured out everything to them, from the lack of letters from Jace to the threats her father had made against him should she not marry the Duke of Hawthorne.

“You foolish girl, why didn’t you tell me from the start?” demanded Amelia, looking as though her own heart was breaking.

“I could not. You were both so happy, and I could not bear to cause any problems between you,” admitted Anne. “And I was embarrassed, I suppose. I did not want to be one of those clinging women who did not trust her betrothed, and yet I was terrified he might have grown tired of me.”

“Never that,” said Sidney, his brows still knitted together in deep thought. “Annie, you ought to know that something deuced odd is going on here, for Jace swore to me it was *you* who ceased to write to *him*.”

“Not until a half dozen letters had gone unanswered!”

“I believe you!” he said, raising a placating hand. “But my brother thinks he’s doing something dashed noble by keeping his distance. I need to talk to him.”

“No!” said Anne loudly, and she flushed with embarrassment. “I mean, I think perhaps it would be better if you could orchestrate a meeting between us somehow. Something private, so I have a chance to explain.”

“You need to tell him about your father’s threat, too,” said Amelia, “and your concerns about the Duke.”

“Not a chance,” said Anne, shaking her head. “I shall have to try and make up a convincing lie, while we come up with a way to get me out of this mess. I know what you are about to say, but you are wrong, both of you! Tell me truthfully: if Jace were here right now and I had told him everything, what would he have done?”

There was a brief silence, and then a loud sigh of defeat from Sidney.

“He would have charged out and challenged the Duke to a duel for your honor, and then probably gone to threaten your father and got himself arrested for his trouble.”

“Precisely,” said Anne, smug despite the whole situation.

“Does your mother know? About His Grace, I mean?” asked Amelia suddenly.

“I have not told her my feelings, and I do not think my father shared our conversation with her; why?”

“Because my mother-in-law is one of her dearest friends in the world,” said Amelia as a smile crept over her face, “and you are a prime catch for her son, even if she has not liked you since childhood. Sidney can go and talk to her about Hawthorne, to see if she can plant some suspicions in the Countess’s mind.”

“Do you think that could work?” said Anne, almost afraid to have hope.

“It sounds like a solid plan to me,” said Sidney with a fond glance toward his wife. “I shall set off for town immediately, and perhaps I can round up Jace as well before he does something idiotic.”

“Jace is in Plymouth?”

Amelia’s expression was grim. “We think so. I am afraid he did not take the news of your engagement well, and then when he saw the announcement this morning, he seems to have taken himself off to drown his sorrows.”

“I will find him, though, and bring him back for your talk,” Sidney promised. “I blame all of this on my brother; if he had not been such a fool dead set on surprising you, then none of this would have occurred.”

At least half of Anne tended to agree with this statement, so she contented herself with a smile.

Their plotting concluded for the day, Sidney took his leave of the ladies, determined to set off at once to locate his mother

and brother. Amelia stopped Anne before she left the drawing room by pulling her into a spontaneous, deep hug.

“You should have confided in me,” her friend whispered roughly into her ear.

“I know,” Anne whispered back.

There did not seem to be anything else to say after that, so Eleanor was summoned, the coach brought around, the children teased and fussed over one last time, and then they left.

“Progress, my lady?” asked Eleanor. Anne gave a speaking glance toward the coachman, but her maid just shrugged. “Every one of the staff is on your side in this matter, Lady Anne. Just say the word, and we will all jump to your aid.”

Anne could not voice how much this meant to her, and so was content to give her maid’s arm a gentle squeeze.

“A little progress, Eleanor. But it is a start.”



Jace ran down the dock roads of Plymouth, Mad Jack Barker and a handful of other soldiers at his side, while they were chased by a dozen of His Majesty’s finest naval marines. He laughed, even though his jaw hurt from the brawl that had broken out in the Dolphin after their group had already been kicked out of the Minerva, the Ship, and the Navy Inn. It took several streets before the marines gave up the chase, screaming threats and obscenities even after they were long

out of sight. Once they were safe, Jace collapsed onto the cobbles, still laughing even as he struggled for breath.

“And they call me the mad one,” said Barker, shaking his head in wonder. “It’s not even eight o’clock and I’ve had more trouble tonight than I’ve had in the solid year before.”

“I’ll smooth it over if any blame finds its way to your door,” said Jace with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Now, where’s this next place you told me about?”

“We could try the Admiral MacBride,” said one of his companions dubiously.

“A little on the nose, I think,” said Jace with a grin. “What about the Crown, or the Turk’s Head?”

“So long as you’re not going to start yet another brawl there, Major,” said Barker as he hauled Jace back up to his feet. “Some of us would like to finish our ale before having to show our fives.”

“It’s not my fault I have the kind of face men want to hit,” said Jace cheerfully.

“Perhaps not, but it is your fault when you go around calling every third sailor you meet a corny-faced bull-calf,” said Barker, but he ruined it by grinning and slapping Jace soundly on the back. “But then, you are the ranking officer, sir, so it’s our duty to follow you into the fray!”

“We’ve got them now!” came a shout from the other end of the alley. Jace swore when he saw the marines blocking the opening, each one grinning like a malicious fool.

“They’ve blocked us in, sir,” said Barker, bringing Jace’s attention to the other end of the short street.

“Looks like we need to give these sea dogs a good kicking,” said Jace as he raised up his fists. His companions cheered their answer, and they formed up into a small square, each one of them facing outward, and held position as the marines charged toward them.

He could not recall the last time he felt so alive. Jace dove, counterpunched and kicked out with all the vicious instincts of an infantryman whose survival depends on keeping the men around him alive. He was oblivious to the distant whistle of a watchman or the rumble of a coach stopping at the end of the street. He did hear the gunshot, but instead of fleeing with the others, he turned to face the source of the disturbance, waiting alone on the cobblestones as a man wearing a greatcoat approached him.

Jace tried to blink away the blood from his eyes. “Colonel Hayworth?” he asked.

“Not bloody likely, my boy,” replied the man, “although I am sure Hayworth would be disgusted to see you in such a state.”

Jace squinted. He stepped forward, shaky from the alcohol still coursing through his system. “Is that you, Lord Fitzroy? What the devil are you doing on the Plymouth docks?”

“Apparently running into you,” said the Earl, looking none too pleased about the circumstance. “Come and get into the carriage, my boy. I need to speak with you.”

Jace had no desire to speak with Annie’s father, especially since the Earl had a habit of making him feel as if he were a schoolboy caught with a bucket of water on the classroom door. He had not even considered it necessary to address Jace by his rank, yet here he was, following the old man into the carriage like a beaten dog.

Where was Sweet Jackie when you needed him the most?

Jace reclined on the velvet-upholstered seats of the Earl’s carriage and waited while Lord Fitzroy yelled instructions to his coachman that Jace missed. His host did not start speaking until the vehicle began to move along the crooked streets of Plymouth, causing the vehicle to jerk.

“You are to forget about my daughter and return to your regiment, my boy. You have cost her too much as it is, and I have no intention of allowing you to disrupt her life further by luring her away from an eligible match.”

Some stray thoughts of Jace’s began to war with the fog of alcohol in the front of his mind.

“I’m sorry, can you repeat that, my lord?”

“You heard me perfectly well the first time,” said the Earl icily. “You are to forget this childish notion of winning the hand of Lady Anne and shall return to Spain without her.”

Jace screwed his eyes tight shut, counted to three, and then opened them again.

“You think I came back to steal Anne from that duke of hers?” he asked, stating Hawthorne’s title like a curse word. “Not at all! I came to ask her why she stopped writing to me.”

There was but a single lamp burning inside the carriage, and it was difficult to read the Earl’s expression, but something in his attitude changed.

“So, you decided to take revenge upon her, did you? On my word, sir, it was poor for you to have done what you did. That cartoon will break her heart to pieces when she sees it.”

“What cartoon?” asked Jace, feeling his grip on the conversation slipping. “What revenge?”

“This, my boy! A petty and vicious move not worthy of a major in the infantry!” snapped the Earl, thrusting a sheet of paper into Jace’s lap. He stared at it, struggling to focus in the half-light of the back of the carriage. But once he grasped what he was looking at, he could understand why Lord Fitzroy was upset.

Damnation! If Jace ever found out who had sketched such an obscene picture of Annie showing interest in Hawthorne, while a poor soldier, no doubt supposed to be him, was fighting to survive on the other side of the drawing, then he was going to wring the man’s scrawny little neck.

“I had nothing to do with this, my lord,” he said in clipped tones, the fog of alcohol loosening its grip at the thought of how Annie must be reacting to such cruel mockery. “If you know who is responsible then point me in his direction, and I’ll have the cur bang to rights by morning.”

The Earl let out a surprised, bitter laugh. “Who is responsible? Are you really so blind to the world? *You* are responsible for this, Jace Reeves, just as you are responsible for every jibe and cut she has had to endure because of you. Do you know what the Ton calls my beautiful, intelligent daughter? No? The Reeves Reject. This is hardly the first time she will have to smile through such backbiting behavior, but to drag His Grace into this mess? That was below the belt, even for you.”

Jace shook his head in denial. “No, no, it was not like that. Her letters were always so full of parties and frolics, there was not a single hint she was suffering because of me.”

Lord Fitzroy’s snort of contempt was devastating. “She was protecting you, you slack-witted ninnyhammer. I begged her over and over again not to make it known that she considered herself promised to you, but she did not listen. Then, your absence went from months to years, and your refusal to return to England made her look foolish. There were vicious rumors about her chastity, about her mental competence, and about her moral character all because of you. And now here you are, determined to break her heart and ruin her chance of happiness once again.”

“I did not know,” murmured Jace. He knew the Ton could be vicious, but this seemed too much, even for the Beau Monde. Had they really believed he had rejected Annie?

Did she believe he had rejected her? Is that why her letters had stopped?

He straightened himself up, attempting to rebuild some of his soldierly bearing as he looked straight into the eyes of Annie's father.

"I will make it up to her, my lord, and to you. I will prove to Annie—I mean, to Lady Anne, that her faith in me was not misplaced. I am a major now, and my prospects in the army are good. If you would grant me the permission to offer for your daughter's hand, then I will swear on everything holy that I will never give anyone in your family a moment to regret it."

The bitter, horrified laughter of Earl Fitzroy burned like acid.

"Have you not listened to a thing I have said, boy? You are not to come near my daughter ever again. She is of age to marry without my consent, and I have no doubt you could bamboozle her with pretty words and force her to run away with you. But heed my words, Jace Reeves; if you do anything of the sort, I will cut her off without a penny to her name. Do you understand my meaning? Not a single penny."

"I am able to keep a wife, my lord, and I have no need of Annie's fortune," he replied, balling his hands up into fists.

It was not entirely true; Anne's fortune would go a long way to keep them comfortable, and perhaps even buy him a new commission, but he would rather she came to him with nothing than allow her father to bully him.

“You seem to misunderstand what I mean by nothing,” said the Earl, as soft as a viper. “She will leave with no dowry, no trousseau, not even a single one of her dresses. You could earn five times your current salary and still not hope to keep her in the style to which she has been accustomed. It would not matter, however, for I would use every connection, every favor, and every piece of good will owed to me to make sure your career was over, and that you were sent to some malaria-ridden backwater in the colonies so she would likely be a young widow before the year was out. Do you understand me?”

“You hate me that much?” asked Jace, almost bewildered by the venom Earl Fitzroy had aimed in his direction. “You hate me so much you would rather see Anne unhappy than with me?”

“Following the drum is no life for my only child,” snapped Lord Fitzroy, “and your selfish nature only convinces me further that she would be miserable in your care. His Grace may not be as handsome or dashing as you are, my boy, but he is a duke, and can offer her a title, stability, and above all, safety, that you could never dream of.”

“I would love her,” he replied simply. “I would love her and do anything to keep her happy.”

“Love and happiness are inconsequential,” scoffed Lord Fitzroy. “What do they matter when she can be a duchess and have influence? She was made for greater things than you.”

“At least we agree on the last part,” muttered Jace. “Do you intend to impugn my character for the rest of the drive home, or just stare at me in silence?”

“You always were an impudent wretch,” snarled the Earl. “Do you want to know the nature of the choice before her? Do you want to know what you are doing to my poor Annie’s heart?”

The drive was roughly half an hour, but Jace felt as though he was living through a hundred lifetimes as Lord Fitzroy explained, in excruciating detail, how life as a camp follower married to a mere major would be the death of Anne, while nothing but glory and adoration waited for her if she chose to go through with the marriage to Hawthorne. Jace wanted to argue and to point out why the Earl was so utterly wrong about everything, but he found he could not deny anything the man said.

The Reeves Reject. That was what the Ton called her, and still, she raised her chin and walked as though she owned the world. How it must have hurt as years went by without his return. Dash it all, why had she not just told him?

“I trust I have made myself understood,” concluded the Earl as his carriage finally rolled to a stop. “You can consider my words as you walk along the driveway. Do give my best regards to your brother, Major Reeves, but heed my promise: if you try to steal Anne away from the Duke of Hawthorne, then it shall be to the ruin of you both.”

“I understand,” replied Jace, depressingly sober as he climbed down from the Fitzroy carriage.

Part of his heart had begun to swell when he had realized the truth of what the Earl had been saying: Annie still loved him. Despite everything, the old lord was afraid she would elope with Jace in a moment if he asked her to.

And yet his mind told him that nothing had changed. She was still betrothed to another, and if anything occurred to prevent that marriage, her father would lead her to ruin alongside Jace.

He kicked at the gravel and swore.

If only he had not been such a selfish idiot. If only he had come home sooner. The Earl was right, in a way. Jace had ruined Anne's life once already; what kind of cad would he be if he went and ruined it again?

"Jace! Where in blazes have you been?" demanded Amelia as soon as he walked through the door. "Sidney is down in Plymouth speaking with your mother; we have been trying to find you."

Jace rubbed at his nose.

"I've been out driving with Lord Fitzroy," he admitted, pleased to see he still had the capability to shock his sister-in-law.

"Really? What on earth have you been talking about? Anne?"

Jace felt his heart sink.

"I've made a deuced mess of everything, Amy," he confessed, "and I haven't the faintest clue what I should do next."

A hundred emotions ran across Amelia's face in an instant.

“Sidney will be home soon,” she said, lacing her arm into his, “but in the meantime, let's go sit and down in the drawing room, and you can tell me everything.”

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CHAPTER TWELVE

“*L*ady Anne, have you been avoiding me?”

Anne cursed under her breath. She had been sure the hallway was empty, but the Duke had been lurking in a doorway, no doubt waiting for her. She put on the brightest expression she could manage and then turned toward him.

“Good morning, Your Grace. A splendid day, is it not?”

He walked toward her with that lazy, mincing gait that always struck her as ridiculous.

“All the better now I have seen you, my dear. I thought you should like to go out for drive; the coachman will be out front in a few minutes, so there is time for you to fetch a bonnet and carriage coat.”

She gritted her teeth at his high-handedness. Why, he had not even brought his own vehicle with him to the estate, and she had no doubt he had ordered her father’s phaeton without requesting permission first.

“Indeed! I had been intending to take a walk out across the countryside to call on some of my father’s tenants.”

“You can fulfill such trifling obligations later. Run along and fetch your coat, child; I thought a pleasant drive to Plymouth would be just the thing for us to get to know each other better.”

Anne hesitated, but a glance at the closed door of her father’s office was enough to remind her that, at least for now, she had to pretend she was committed to marrying this man.

She gave a little curtsy. “You are quite right, Your Grace. I shall be with you directly.”

She lingered as long as possible in her chambers, but it was her concern for the horses that ultimately prompted her to make her way to the duke’s side. When he observed her attire, there was a hint of disapproval in his eyes, but he said nothing.

Nevertheless, it rankled. Anne was well aware that her simple blue coat and straw bonnet with matching ribbons were both flattering and fashionable, despite not being the most dashing items in her wardrobe. Despite the fact that she was certain his coat was at least a decade old based on the cut alone, it seemed absurd that he had such an effect on her. Years of ridicule from the Ton over her devotion to Jace made her proud of her ability to appear self-assured and certain of her decisions in public, but in private it was an entirely different story.

He handed her into the phaeton, climbed up to the driver’s seat with a wheeze, and then dismissed the groom who held the horses. Anne brought up her parasol to shield her face from

the sun and resigned herself to an hour in the company of a man she now actively disliked.

“I fear you are upset with me, child,” said Hawthorne as they set off down the driveway.

“Upset, Your Grace?” she queried, keeping her eyes on her father’s beautiful bay horses. The Duke was far from an incompetent driver, she decided, but his hands were too harsh on the reins, and he was too free with the whip.

“Indeed. I was struggling to understand why you would deny your acceptance of my marriage proposal when you were far from indifferent to my attentions over the last few weeks. I was too caught up in my own happiness to consider how the return of your youthful infatuation at such an important moment in your life might disturb your peace.”

Anne tightened her grip on the parasol handle.

“It was certainly not how I expected the evening to progress,” she replied.

“I had not truly appreciated how much ridicule you had endured over the years, or that you would be particularly sensitive to the attention which comes with being a duchess. Once I saw that caricature, however, I understood immediately how your sensibilities would be impacted.”

Anne glanced at him. “I cannot claim to have seen it, Your Grace.”

He raised his brows. “Upon my word, have you truly not seen it? I thought you were in the habit of reading the papers and staying up to date with the latest political news?”

The Duke’s tone was teasing, and Anne was horrified to feel her cheeks flame under his smug mockery.

“I have been preoccupied as of late,” she muttered.

Hawthorne reached into his coat and then passed her a folded sheet of paper. Anne opened it tentatively, and bit down a groan of horror as she saw the thing in all of its glory.

Papa will blame Jace for this, she thought sadly.

She folded the sheet closed once again and held it out toward the Duke.

“I am disappointed they did not attempt to render my hairstyle correctly,” she sighed. “Poor Eleanor will be distraught to learn her genius went unrecognized.”

Hawthorne’s lip quirked up into something approaching a smile.

“Well done,” he acknowledged, turning his attention back to the road as they approached a particularly tight bend in the lane. “Keep it.”

Anne placed the paper in the deep pocket at her hip, resolving to look at it more closely later.

“I confess, I am not sure why you are taken with me as a future wife,” she said in as a cheerful tone as she could muster, but her eyes were firmly fixed on the horses. “I fear I am lacking in the qualities necessary to be a successful duchess.”

“Very true, but with time I can rectify those defects in your character,” he replied with equal cheerfulness. He laughed when Anne almost choked at his response. “Was I supposed to compliment you instead, child? I do not play such games, and you will never succeed in baiting me in such a way.”

Anne ground her teeth as she struggled to control her temper. She had to keep this ridiculous charade going for a little while longer; at least until she could come up with a plan that would not result in her father ruining Jace’s career if she failed to go through with the unwanted marriage.

“And if the defects in my character cannot be rectified?”

“Come now, no one is beyond redemption,” he said reassuringly. “If gentle correction does not work, I’ve found the whip to be a most effective tool.”

“The whip?” she exclaimed, her heart beginning to pound.

He smiled like a barn cat surveying a particularly plump dormouse.

“Indeed. Do we not employ it to correct the behavior of the most willful horse? It has similar properties on the most desperate members of society as well, you know. Perhaps you could ask that young officer you were infatuated with about it; no doubt he has flogged more than one soldier and found the man changed as a result of the discipline.”

“I do not think Major Reeves would indulge in such barbaric practice,” she replied, shifting in her seat.

“Perhaps that is why he had such poor control of his men at Badajoz, then,” replied Hawthorne. “Had he not spared the rod, then those under his command would not have committed such atrocities.”

“Most of his men were *killed* at Badajoz,” she snapped.

“Oh! I had not realized he was so incompetent,” said Hawthorne, his lips twisted into something between a sneer and a laugh. “Surely, the first duty of an officer is to keep his men alive?”

“I see you know nothing of war,” said Anne as loftily as she could manage, but her hands were shaking.

“And neither do you, child,” he pointed out. “It is unfortunate that you retain your immature hero-worship of the Reeves boy, but understandable in one so sheltered and unworldly as yourself.”

“I am not unworldly!” Anne cried, wondering when she had so thoroughly lost control of the conversation.

Hawthorne actually laughed.

“It is not a criticism, my dear, innocent Anne! Indeed, I find your ignorance to be quite endearing. An asset, in fact.”

“It does not sound like one,” she said, not caring if her tone was sullen. Ever since the ball, her conversations with the Duke had gone from boring to disconcerting. She disliked him intensely, and yet the smallest criticism from him made her desperate to prove to him that he had misjudged her.

It made no sense, and she hated it.

“Your father and I had a long discussion about your hysterical reaction to the return of your childish attachment, and while he wanted to assure me you meant nothing by your outburst, sweet Anne, I felt it important for you to know I am not alarmed by your reaction. Well-bred women such as yourself are expected to have delicate sensibilities, after all, and I am aware of the effect a scarlet coat can have on a young woman past her first blush of youth. You have been badly used by Mr. Reeves, and no doubt part of you distrusts the lucky turn of fate that has taken you from facing a life on the shelf as an unwanted spinster to becoming a duchess. I want to reassure you that I am not a man who breaks my word. I have declared to the world that you are to be my wife, and nothing will prevent me from claiming you as mine.”

Anne barely restrained the shudder that ran through her. She could not tell whether he meant it to be romantic or menacing, but every fiber of her being screamed that it was the latter. She chose to disregard his backhanded compliments because she lacked confidence in her ability to maintain the deception that

she intended to marry him if he continued to make such remarks.

“How flattering of you to say such things,” she murmured.

“Yes,” he replied. “Naturally, after our wedding, we will spend some time at my principal seat up North. You will grow to love it, I am certain. After all, it seems superfluous for me to purchase an estate here in Devonshire when you will inherit all the lands not entailed to your father’s cousin upon his death.”

“I see,” she replied, staring off in the direction of the sea cliffs and wondering if she could hurl herself over them, just to escape.

“Not the small cottage by the tin mines, of course,” he said with a self-satisfied chuckle. “I would not subject myself to living in such a place, let alone someone as delicate as yourself! Your father did suggest we consider living at the London address that will come with your dowry, but I feel we should sell that, or perhaps rent it out to some noble or other, for when you are round with child, as I intend you to be for the first few years of our marriage, you will not wish to risk the health of our sons by subjecting them to the air of the city.”

“Very wise,” she murmured, feeling sick at the idea of being pregnant with the Duke’s child.

He went on in this way for the rest of the drive, describing her future life in such a way that Anne rather feared she would live as a prisoner rather than a duchess. The worst part of it all, she soon realized, was that Hawthorne genuinely believed she would be pleased with his plans, if not outright grateful for the

opportunity to be separated from her loved ones and live completely under his thumb.

This is what Eleanor warned me about, she thought with a miserable sense of doom. Oh, Jace, forgive me; I will do everything I can to protect you from Papa's wrath, but I do not think I can subject myself to this man's control, not even to keep your future safe.

Finally, it was over, and the duke brought the panting horses to a stop just in front of Fitzroy Manor, the poor beasts sweating and uncomfortable. Anne accepted the footman's hand to help her down from the phaeton, catching the look of concern in his eyes as he looked from her to the Duke.

I must ask Eleanor about this, she thought, and then momentarily broke protocol by giving the footman's hand a quick squeeze.

"I am quite well, Stuart," she murmured.

"As you say, my lady," he replied softly, seeming relieved. "We are here should the situation alter."

Anne gulped down the wave of emotion that threatened to engulf her and instead began striding toward the house without waiting for Hawthorne to escort her. She had taken as much as she could bear from the Duke and needed to put some distance between them.

"Anne, there you are, my darling!" said her mother as soon as she entered the house. "No, do not remove your bonnet,

dearest; you have been invited out to visit your goddaughter; it seems dear Charlotte has been requesting your presence and is quite inconsolable without you.”

Anne’s heart soared; Amelia must have found a way to get some privacy for her and Jace! A moment later, it occurred to her it was strange that her mother was the one to deliver the news. For that matter, her mother was in her walking dress and looked ready to set out herself.

“Oh no! I shall head over to Reeves Manor at once,” she replied, “but I will ask the groom to take me over in the gig. Father’s horses need resting.”

“Nonsense, the beasts are capable of going for hours,” said the Duke as he appeared through the door behind her. “I will drive you over so you can visit for ten minutes, dear Anne. It is no trouble.”

Before Anne could think of anything to say in response, her mother had stepped forward.

“How kind of you, Your Grace, but there is no need for you to trouble yourself. The invitation is primarily for me, so I can visit with the Dowager Lady Reeves. Anne is to keep me company and to entertain the children once we arrive. We will not return before dinner, I think, so you are free to do as you wish. Come, Anne.”

Anne was flabbergasted. There was no other word. The Duke was so wrongfooted by her mother’s speech, he stood in the hallway with his mouth opening and closing like a particularly

ugly trout, while the Countess drew Anne out of the house with the dignity of the Queen herself.

“Not yet, my dear,” her mother murmured. “Wait until we are safely on the lane.”

The phaeton was still waiting for them, but while Anne was inside, the grooms had replaced her father’s bays with her mother’s slower but gentler chestnuts. As soon as Eleanor and Stuart took their places in the small servant’s perch behind the main chair, the Countess seized the reins and set the horses in motion; she was renowned for being an exceptional driver.

Anne risked a look back at her maid, who merely nodded in encouragement.

She knew in her heart that something had changed for the better.



“What are you playing at?” asked Jace, casting a deeply suspicious look at his twin.

“Nothing!” protested Sidney. “I just do not think today is a good time to go fishing.”

“Why? We have no engagements, and we agreed not four days ago that it would do me good to go down to the river and fish.”

“It looks like it will rain,” said Sidney before tugging at his collar.

Jace pointedly went to the window to inspect the cloudless sky. He looked up, back at his brother, and then up again.

“I see what you mean, a veritable downpour looks like it will begin any second.”

“There is no need to be like that,” mumbled his brother. “I just do not want to go fishing today.”

“Very well, there is no need for you to come with me.”

“But I do not want you to go fishing either!”

Jace raised his brows. “Well, that’s just shockingly selfish of you, ugly. Why should I forgo such a simple pleasure on a whim of yours?”

“Because Mother is coming,” said Sidney, beginning to pace up and down the drawing room.

Jace crossed his arms over his chest. “If Mother’s arrival has set you so out of sorts, then my leaving the house to go fishing is the best thing I could do.”

“It’s not that!”

“I know it is not. You are a terrible liar, Sidney. Confess the scheme and be done with it.”

His brother kept tugging at his collar. It was possible Jace might have felt sorry for Sidney under different circumstances, and, certainly, he would have been entertained in the majority of situations, but since his discussion with the Earl, his temper was thin and his tolerance close to zero.

“Out with it, man!” he snapped, slipping comfortably back into his role as a major.

Sidney looked like he had been struck across the face.

“Good Lord, I almost snapped to attention at that,” he said with grudging admiration. “Is that how you talk to your men when they are being insubordinate?”

“No, for none of them are foolish enough to try my patience. Last chance, ugly, or I am off to the river regardless of your wishes.”

“The children have a surprise,” blurted out Sidney. “Damn! And I promised them I would not ruin it by warning you.”

Jace softened his stance but still watched his brother closely for signs of a lie. “The children, hey? What kind of surprise?”

“I am not so poor a confidant as that,” retorted Sidney, looking appalled at the suggestion that he would share any further information. “Sally will be here in a moment to fetch you, but I never thought you would be such a nuisance about the matter.”

“You are still lying,” observed Jace, “but less so than before. What plan have you roped the children into?”

“I have not roped them into anything,” said Sidney with such relieved certainty that Jace immediately came to attention.

“What has Mother done?” he asked. “Or is it Amelia I should berate?”

“You will not berate my wife for anything,” said Sidney darkly. It was an intensity Jace rarely saw in his twin, and so he raised his hands in submission.

“I jest, Sid; no need to fly up into the boughs. I do not like feeling like the family is conspiring against me, even if it is meant for the best.”

His brother turned a quizzical look upon him. “Is that so? I suppose I have no idea how that must feel.”

Jace acknowledged the hit.

“Very well, I shall play along. What is this surprise of theirs, then?”

Sally appeared at the doorway and threw a rueful look at her father.

“You told him!” she accused.

“Not in the least!” said Sidney in a reassuring voice. “I merely said you were taking him somewhere. Uncle Jace is a very intelligent soldier, and he guessed the rest. He has always been good at guessing surprises.”

Sally scrunched up her face. “How dull to never be surprised,” she said, but held her hand out toward Jace. “Still, you will never guess this one!”

Unable to resist any of his nieces and nephews, Jace took the proffered hand and let her guide him outside of the house, chattering away to him the whole time. He soon formed the impression that the surprise was likely to be a picnic of some kind at one of the follies that littered the family estate, and he resolved to enjoy it as much as possible.

He adored the children, but after everything that had happened, what he wanted more than anything else was some time alone at the river to think about his options.

“That’s the tree I fell out of last year, Uncle Jace!” said Sally, pointing at an oak that at least three generations of Reeves children had injured themselves on.

“How strange! That’s the tree I fell out of when I was your age!” he replied, which led to a long monologue from Sally about all the trees she had fallen out of and why her brothers had fallen out of far more.

Jace let his mind wander as they walked. Anne had fallen out of that tree when she was no more than twelve. She’d been so determined to return a chick to the nest above, she had not

paid attention to her footing, and as soon as the frail bird was safely home, she had slipped and come crashing to the ground.

“Why didn’t you catch me?” she’d demanded as she fought the tears threatening to pour down her cheeks.

“I didn’t know you were going to fall, did I?” he’d protested, but his attention was on checking she had not broken any bones. “Does it hurt anywhere?”

“Just here,” Anne had muttered, pointing to the cut a twig had left on her cheek. “Is it bad? Will it scar?”

“Pooh! It’s barely a scratch!”

“Well, it hurts! How am I supposed to know how bad it is?”

He’d smiled at her temper, knowing her well enough even as a child to understand it was her way of disguising that she was both scared and hurt.

So, he had done the last thing she expected, by leaning forward to kiss the shallow scratch.

Anne had flushed with embarrassment. “Thank you,” she had muttered.

Jace had grinned at her discomfort. “Well, since you are such a baby, I had to kiss it better.”

“I am not a baby! I bet you could not climb as high as I did without getting hurt!”

“I’ll take that bet!” he’d replied with cheerful arrogance.

Which was how he’d ended up face-down on the lawn with half a trouser leg still in the branches.

He chuckled at the memory, drawing Sally’s attention.

“What’s so funny, Uncle Jace?”

“I was thinking about the time Lady Anne fell out of a tree and made a huge fuss about the tiny graze she received.”

“She told us about the time you fell out a tree and tore your breeches,” said Sally. “We love that story!”

“Oh, did she now?” said Jace, half amused, and half horrified at this piece of information. “Did she tell you about the time she got stuck in the hayloft? Or when she fell into the lake fully dressed?”

“Yes, and both times it was your fault,” said his niece with a grin. “I would be angry at you for being mean to her, but Lady Anne says you ended up the worst off in most of your encounters, and Papa says that was because you acted like a moon-calf around her. What’s a moon-calf, Uncle Jace? Why did you like doing impressions of them for Lady Anne?”

“I will explain when you are older, and there are plenty of young suitors acting like moon-calves all around you,” he said, wondering whether he should kill his brother or just torture him.

“Oh, suitors,” said Sally with disgust. “I don’t ever want to marry; having brothers is bad enough! Are you Lady Anne’s suitor, Uncle Jace?”

Jace stumbled at the question but quickly regained his footing.

“Lady Anne is to marry the Duke,” he replied, ignoring the taste of bile as he spoke. “It would be inappropriate for her to have suitors now she is engaged to be married.”

Sally shook her head. “I thought you were better than other adults, Uncle Jace. They never answer questions either. Besides, Lady Anne isn’t going to marry the duke.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You didn’t answer my question just now.”

“No, I mean what makes you say Lady Anne is not marrying the Duke of Hawthorne?”

“She told Mama so. He is not very nice to her, you know. Look! The ruins! Race you!”

As the ruins of a small cottage built by his grandfather came into view, Sally let go of his hand and raced ahead of him along the forest path. Never fast enough to catch her, but fast enough to make her shriek with laughter, Jace trotted along behind her.

Anne did not want to marry Hawthorne, and Amelia knew but did not tell him? What was everyone up to?

Jace pressed his lips firmly together; the Earl may have cautioned him against marrying Anne, but there was nothing preventing him from being her knight in shining armor if she needed one. Once the children were satisfied with his presence, he would find a way to assist her. It was the least he could do to protect her.



“Eleanor came clean to me about everything,” said Lady Fitzroy. “No, Annie, do not look at her as though she has betrayed you; it is quite the opposite. I have had some reservations about Hawthorne ever since his arrival, but I ignored them for the prospect of your becoming a duchess. That was wrong of me, my darling; women should never ignore their intuition when it comes to men.”

Anne swallowed, desperate not to cry.

“I could not make Father understand.”

Her mother sighed. “No, sweetheart. You father is a good man, and so he makes the mistake of presuming that all men of rank and power are equally good. He has never had to consider putting his life into the hands of another and does not

understand how essential it is to pay attention to sensations of discomfort and unease.”

Anne reached over and put her hand onto her mother’s knee. The Countess looked away from the lane briefly to give her a sad smile, and then turned her attention back to the horses.

“I asked the other servants for their thoughts,” continued her mother. “Stuart, here, shared that His Grace’s valet gets shockingly drunk most evenings and is free with his criticism of the Duke. It seems that not only is the man waiting for three months’ salary to be paid to him, but he also thinks Hawthorne has run up debts all across the country.”

“How can that be? Father himself was under the impression that the duke is almost as shockingly rich as we are.”

Her mother’s mouth twisted. “Yes, well, you are well aware it was my influence that led to your father rebuilding the Fitzroy fortune, but that is not of concern at present. What matters is your future, child. I am meeting the Dowager, for there is a mystery here that I think Helen and I might be able to get to the bottom of. If you and Jace still wish to marry, then you will have my support going forward, Annie, but only if it is something you both truly wish for.”

The traitorous tears began to gather.

“I do wish it, I truly do, but Father said—”

“Let *me* deal with your father,” said her mother almost angrily. “You should have felt you could tell us everything. That you

could tell me anything. Instead, you have been suffering and I... well, I am sorry, child. If you and Jace can reach an understanding, then so be it. Even if that is not the case and you choose to remain a spinster to the end of your days, I will do everything in my power to ensure you will be safe and independent of the whims of the men in your life.”

“Mama,” said Anne, her voice cracking as she threw her arms around the Countess in an impulsive hug. Her mother hesitated for only a second before releasing one hand from the reins so she could deepen the display of affection.

“Ah, I see the young masters have spied our carriage,” said the Countess as Reeves Hall came into view. “I am to pull up at the statue of Venus, I believe... ah, there they are!”

Fred and Tom were kicking gravel in front of the statue, while Anne’s goddaughter, pretty as a picture in a checked green dress, was waiting impatiently. All three were waving as though their hands would fall off any moment, and then swarmed her as soon as her feet touched the driveway.

“Only a quarter of an hour,” said the Countess sternly. “Helen and I will be there on the hour.”

“Be where?” asked Anne laughingly as the children began to tug her toward the woodland, and her mother drove off toward the front door of the house.

“Surprise! Surprise!” Charlotte kept on babbling happily but refused to elaborate. Fred and Tom marched like they were her military escort and refused to say anything of use or sense. It

was delightful and irritating in equal measure, and Anne truly had no idea what was going on.

Then the old, ruined cottage came into view; the Reeves family had long used it as a folly where guests could go for refreshments and to appreciate the views across the countryside to the ocean in the far distance. But for Anne, it had other memories, other stolen moments of happiness.

Sally came tearing out toward them, wearing a grin so wide it looked as though her cheeks would burst.

“Hello, Lady Anne! Surprise! Mama said to say there is wine and cheese and bread and that she will keep the Countess busy with Grandmama as long as she can. We’re going back to the house now!”

And then Anne understood. She kissed the children quickly before sending them on their way and then turned to walk toward the cottage.

There was Jace, tall and handsome in his civilian clothes, and looking as sheepish and mischievous as he had when they were children.

“Hello Annie,” he said.

“Hello, Jace,” she replied.

He ran a hand through his hair.

“I missed you terribly,” he admitted.

Perhaps he intended to say more, but Anne did not care in the least. She threw herself into his arms and kissed him with all the love and fury and pain and devotion she’d carried over the last six years.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*H*e grasped Annie's face in his hands and pulled back slightly to get a good look at her.

"I should never have stayed away so long," he told her, taking in the contrast between her ethereal beauty and earthly, tear-bound eyes. "I'm so sorry, Annie. I'm such an ass. I should never have made you wait so long."

"I don't want to marry him," she replied, pulling him close so she could shower his face with kisses. "I never wanted to marry anyone but you. I should never have doubted you. I'm so sorry."

"It's my fault," Jace began, but then Annie captured his mouth again and started to drag her hands through his hair. He growled with longing and indulged his desire to run his hands over every inch of her body through the frustratingly thick layers of clothing.

"Touch me, Jace," she begged, taking hold of his hand, and guiding it to her breasts. "I only survived by thinking of you touching me. Please."

“You’ll be the death of me, Annie,” he whispered against her mouth before taking a trail of kisses along her jaw and down her throat. His hands worked feverishly at the buttons of her spencer, finally pulling the garment free so that only the pale cream muslin of her day dress stood between him and her skin.

“Please,” she said again, pulling at the neckline of her dress to reveal the full curve of her breasts and a tantalizing glimpse of her pink nipples. He ran his thumbs against the sensitive peaks, teasing them hard as Annie pushed herself against him with instinctive want.

He took her breast into his mouth, worshipping her in the way he’d longed to do on so many cold, lonely nights, with only his hand and his imagination to bring poor relief. And yet right here, as she wrapped her arms around his neck and begged him to suck and lick, he knew he had been denying himself heaven.

“Annie,” he breathed when he finally gained enough control to pull himself away, “Annie we can’t, not like this. There is so much I need to say to you.”

“I’m sick of words,” she said as something between anger and desperation flickered across her face. “Every time I think of you a heat builds up inside of me, and no matter how I try to release it, it’s never enough. I need you, Jace. Don’t you think I have waited long enough?”

His manhood hardened at her words until it was straining uncomfortably against the falls of his trousers, and the desire to take her was almost overwhelming.

But not like this, said a voice of reason at the back of his heart. You did not make her wait so long so her first time would be a few desperate thrusts in the back of a dilapidated folly. She deserves more.

“I think there is something I can do about that heat, my love,” he murmured, and then hitched up her skirts. She looked at him in a sort of trusting confusion that tried his self-control to the limit, but as his hand slid up into her curls, then stroked down across her nub with a light, teasing touch her expression moved to shock and then bliss. Anne arched her back and brought her own hand to caress her breast, her sighs of pleasure all the encouragement he needed to sink his fingers into her slick, welcoming passage.

“God, Annie, you are so ready for me. Have you any idea what you are doing to me? How much I want to be inside you?” he asked. Her response was to push herself against him, driving his fingers deeper.

“Why don’t you?” she murmured with an innocent seduction he had not known she possessed. “Let me touch you and stroke you before you slip inside, Jace. I have had too long to think about all the things I want to do with you.”

“Not this time, my love,” he said, his voice hoarse as he imagined just how warm and sensual she would feel. “You want me to give you some relief, don’t you? Will you let me kiss your frustrations away?”

“I never tire of you kissing me,” she said, and then there was that delightful confusion again as her innocence betrayed her desire.

“Ah, now, my love, you have never been kissed like this,” he told her, and then dipped his head between her legs and pulled her tight against him. He pressed his mouth to her pearl, where he began to suck and lick to the same rhythm his fingers used to slide in and out of her passage.

“My God, oh my God, what is... oh, Jace... Jace do not stop, I beg you,” Annie began to pant. She dug her hands into his hair, the pain just on the right side of his pleasure as she squirmed beneath his touch. He growled as she shifted away, and he pulled her right to the edge of the sofa so he could suck harder and faster, knowing his ruthless movements were taking her to a crescendo she had never obtained by herself.

“Jace! Jace! Please! I need... just ... oh Jace, please!” she cried out, her thighs pressing tight against him as she buried her hands into his hair. Her body went rigid, and she came hard against his tongue, panting out his name like a prayer as she shuddered with pleasure against his mouth. He gave her one last lazy lick before pulling away so he could stare up into her eyes.

“That was... what *was* that?” she half gasped, half laughed as Jace regretfully fixed her skirts. He was as hard as iron and did not trust himself to withstand the temptation.

“Something I have thought about doing to you many, many times, my sweet Annie,” he said, placing a kiss on her exposed nipple before fixing the neckline of her dress.

“I had no idea,” she said with a shake of her head. “Jace, why are you fixing my clothing? You have not allowed me to touch you in return.”

He gave a regretful chuckle. “I would like nothing more than to allow you free reign to have your wicked way with me, my darling, but my family knows we are here, and no matter our feelings on the subject, they will not allow me to compromise you further than I already have.”

“Oh God, Mama!” gasped Annie with alarm. “She said she would be here with your mother within a quarter of an hour!”

Jace swore and grabbed at her spencer, helping her to thrust her hands through the sleeves and refasten the fiddly buttons encasing those beautiful breasts of hers. While he knew his mother would welcome a union between Anne and himself, he also suspected she would beat him into next Tuesday if she thought he had done more than kiss the Earl’s daughter. Chastely. On the cheek.

Annie must have seen the horrid realization dawn upon his face because she began to giggle uncontrollably. He stared at her, unsure how to react when her laughter finally dissolved into tears.

“Annie, my love, don’t cry! We are together, are we not? We are finally together, are we not?”

“That’s the problem,” she sniffed. “Oh, Jace, what are we going to do? My father says that if I do not marry the Duke then he will ruin your reputation at Horseguards!”

“Did he, by God! My poor girl, is that why you agreed to marry Hawthorne?”

She shook her head. “No, for I never agreed to marry the Duke in the first place! He put me in a deuced awkward position from which I could not free myself, and then he had the nerve to lie about it to anyone who would listen.”

Jace winced. “And even I did not listen to you. Sidney was right, I should have come straight to you when you stopped writing to me.”

“Amelia said the same thing,” said Anne, shaking her head with frustration. “Jace, I swear to you that I did not stop writing to you until I had no word from you in over six months.”

Jace pulled her into his arms. “I believe you, Annie, if you believe I only stopped writing when you did not respond to my proposal.”

“Proposal?” she asked, her head shooting up. “What proposal?”

Jace rubbed at the back of his neck. “I could have done it better, and I could do it better than I am right now, but Annie, I wrote to you asking if you would consider following the drum and coming to the Continent with me as my wife. It’s not an easy life but there are plenty of ladies who do so, even Colonel Hayworth’s wife has accompanied us, so you would not be alone.”

Annie’s expression moved from one of shock to one of pure sunshine. “Come with you? Jace, I would love nothing more!”

She threw herself into his arms, kissing him with such enthusiasm, he could not help laughing.

“Uncle Jace! Godmama!” came a loud, demanding voice in the distance. “We’re coming to join the picnic! Mama said to shout loud!”

Annie chuckled as she got to her feet. “Amelia has guessed, I see.”

Jace took her hand and led her out of the cottage. “I have the distinct impression Amy knows everything. Ah, I see our mothers are here as well. Shall we tell them of our engagement?”

She squeezed his hand. “Yes, and let’s see if they can help us to fix this whole mess.”



Anne struggled to maintain her composure as she sat on the picnic blankets laid out in front of the ruined cottage. Her mind kept returning to how Jace’s mouth had felt on her core, distracting her in a delightfully awkward manner. It did not help that every time she looked into his eyes, he gave her a smoldering look that left no doubt that he was sharing her thoughts.

As soon as the children finished their treats and wandered off to play, the adults engaged in a more serious discussion.

“From the way you are both mooning over each other, should we assume that you are once again engaged, my dears?” asked

Anne's mother, wineglass in hand and an amused smile on her lips.

"Lady Anne has indeed agreed to be my wife, Lady Fitzroy, although I fear there are a few matters that must be overcome first," said Jace, evidently putting on an effort to be charming.

His brother sighed. "Well, there is no accounting for taste, Annie, but since I must have a sister-in-law, then I am very glad it will be you."

"I didn't know you cared, Sidney," she replied, reaching over to give his knee a quick squeeze.

"There is the engagement to the Duke to consider," said the Dowager Lady Reeves, looking thoughtful. "If he wishes to kick up a fuss then he has the means to make Jace's career in the army very difficult."

"I could sell out if that happens," said Jace with a sigh of deep resignation. "Ever since the Earl made it clear he would do everything he could to blacken my name at Horseguards, I have wondered if I would be better out of the army."

"No, for you would hate it if you were forced to leave before the war is over," said Anne firmly. "I love you very much, my darling, but if you sell out, then what will you do for a living? You would be bored to death studying the law, and you admit yourself you have no head for business."

"The navy's out as well," added Sidney. "You'd be as sick as a dog nine days out of ten."

“And even if we could convince Lord Fitzroy to provide Anne with a small income, my dear, I do not think politics would suit you either,” said the Dowager with all the tact her son lacked.

“The confidence you all have in me is overwhelming,” muttered Jace, but his wry grin betrayed his agreement with them.

“I think we have all overlooked the most obvious career open to my dear brother-in-law,” said Amelia with a thoughtful tone. “He should join the clergy.”

It took the group five minutes to stop laughing at this suggestion or any of the other equally absurd ideas they came up with to make fun of Jace. He took it all in stride, even arguing that a career as a rum smuggler would be appropriate, until he was reminded of his tendency to cast up accounts when forced out into the open sea.

“The only path open to us is to convince Papa that the duke is an unsuitable match for me,” said Anne, bringing the conversation back to its purpose. “Mama, surely you can bring him around to your way of thinking?”

But her mother shook her head sadly. “I have had no luck in the matter, my dear. I have had my reservations about Hawthorne for a while, but your father is so set on the idea of your becoming a duchess that nothing I say holds weight.”

“He is being so unreasonable,” growled Anne, but then Jace reached over to wrap her hand inside of his own.

“No, Annie. I have no love for the Duke and wish I could make your father see I am the better man for you, but it is wrong to call him unreasonable. All he knows of me is that I was an impetuous youth who consistently led you into hare-brained scrapes. Even now, I’m nothing but a half-pay officer who has been selfish, unsteady, and far from the kind of man I would wish to see wed to a sister or daughter of my own. Given the options for your future husband, I cannot fault him for choosing a wealthy duke for you.”

“That’s if he is wealthy,” said the Countess as she drummed her fingers on the wineglass.

Anne pulled her gaze away from Jace to regard her mother closely.

“What are you thinking, Mama?”

“Your aunt is the only person who has personally vouched for Hawthorne, my dear, and as her word carries weight, I am far from confident that your father has performed his due diligence in this matter. He is certainly a duke, and I do vaguely remember him in London around the time of my marriage, but he has spent so much time at his estates or abroad, I know very little of the man himself.”

“He was in Portugal until about five years ago,” said Amelia. “Or at least, he was in Lisbon before he moved back to Yorkshire.”

Everyone stared at her in silence.

“What?” she asked. “I danced with him at the ball, and he likes to talk about himself.”

“If he was in Lisbon, then I might be able to learn more about his time there,” said Jace thoughtfully. “My colonel’s wife is Portuguese nobility.”

“We might not have enough time,” said Anne’s mother. “Anne’s aunt will arrive in a little over a week, and at that point, it will be difficult to stall the wedding beyond an extra day or so.”

“Why is the duke so set on marrying Annie, though?” asked Sidney, then winced when he realized the connotations of his words. “Not that you aren’t a splendid catch, Annie, but you have told the man explicitly that you do not want to wed him.”

“My fortune, I expect,” sighed Anne gloomily. “While the title and the main estate will be inherited by a cousin of my grandfather, all the unentailed holdings will come to me.”

“The real reason my husband allowed Anne to remain unmarried for so long was not out of respect for the understanding between her and Jace,” explained her mother. “It was because of his habit of regarding every man under the age of forty as a gazetted fortune hunter. Jace provided him with an excuse to say no.”

“Well, of all the shabby things!” said Anne, crossing her arms over her chest. “He made me feel like I am the unreasonable one for never having suitors, and there he was, chasing them all off!”

“Forgive me, sweet Annie, but I feel as though preventing eligible men from courting you is not something we should be angry about,” said Jace with a placid smile.

“That doesn’t explain it,” said Sidney, his brows furrowed in deep thought. “A fortune, no matter how great, is not worth an unwilling bride to a man of means.”

The dowager looked at Anne’s mother with a respectful nod. “Which is exactly what you said, my dear Helen. He may have convinced your sister-in-law he has money, but he does not dress, travel, or act like a man in possession of a large fortune.”

“He did seem rather shabbily dressed at the ball,” said Amelia. “Not to an extent that would raise concerns by itself, but if that coat was less than a decade old, then I do not know my fashion plates.”

“And my wife knows her fashion plates,” confirmed Sidney, not without pride.

“He has not paid his valet either,” said Anne, thinking back to her conversation with Eleanor.

She looked at Jace, who grinned widely.

“My dear, sweet Annie, it appears that your titled suitor is nothing but a fortune hunter!”

“The thing my father hates above all else!”

“Yes, but how to expose him?” asked Amelia. “If there is any hope of you marrying Jace with your father’s consent, then we have less than a week to discredit Hawthorne.”

“Multiple lines of attack,” said Jace, getting to his feet to pace back and forth while he thought. Anne could not remember him looking so handsome before.

“Which are?” prompted Sidney. “I am not possessed of your military genius, so you need to explain.”

“With time this short we cannot leave anything to chance, and so must attack from every direction we can,” Jace explained, drawing all of them into his plan. “I will use my connections in Plymouth to find out more about the Duke’s time in Lisbon. Sidney, you see what you can find out about the Duke’s financial affairs in London. Amelia, you are going to find every excuse you can to invite Anne to spend time with you, or better yet, to take the children to visit the Fitzroys.”

“How will that help?” asked Amelia, and Jace gave a wicked grin.

“Because we will give them permission to be the most odious little terrors imaginable, while Anne will dote on them and encourage their hijinks whenever the Duke is present. The terrors, however, must remember to behave perfectly in front of the Earl and whenever I am with them.”

“That seems cruel, but if it gives me some peace at home...” said Sidney, only to have Amelia punch him lightly on the arm.

“What about us?” asked the Dowager, indicating herself and Anne’s mother.

“The Countess must invite you to stay for a while; I’m sure you can come up with a suitable reason. Ladies, as you will be deep in enemy territory, as it were, you will be playing the key role of providing us with information about the effectiveness of the campaign, but also spreading as much misinformation as you can manage.”

“I have an idea,” said Anne tentatively, but the look of encouragement on Jace’s face gave her confidence to continue. “What if Mama lets it slip that my fortune is to be tied up so tightly upon my marriage that it would be impossible for my husband to gain access to it? If he truly only wants to marry me for my money, then surely, he will let something slip that could alert Papa to his intentions.”

“An excellent suggestion,” said Jace, clapping his hands together and rubbing them. “If we do not find proof that Hawthorne is unworthy of Anne’s hand, then we will scare him off instead.”

“But what am I to do?” asked Anne, frustrated that everyone else had a hand in shaping her destiny, while her only part was to spoil the children. “I have been trying to pretend I am resigned to the marriage, but I fear Hawthorne sees right through my act already.”

“Hawthorne be dashed,” said Jace cheerfully. “You have always been popular with the servants, so bring them into your confidence to not only make the Duke as uncomfortable as possible but to see what information they can find out about him. His Grace has underestimated you, my love, if he thinks he can bully you into an unwanted marriage. It is time he found out just how awful you could make his life if it came to it.”

“I think there was a compliment in there,” said Anne, laughing yet annoyed at the tears stinging her eyes once again.

Jace crouched down and took her hand.

“You are not alone in this, sweet Annie. I will never abandon you again.”

“And now you have us here to support you,” said her mother, her own eyes unfashionably dewy as she stretched out to take Anne by the hand. “I will always regret that you could not talk with me, my love, but from now on, I am at your side. We all are.”

Anne swallowed the knot in her throat, sniffed loudly, and then gave a firm nod of acknowledgement that did not even come close to explaining the tumult of affection spilling out of her heart.

“Well, then. We should get started,” she said.

Sergeant “Mad Jack” Barker leaned back against the pub wall as he digested Jace’s words.

“Well?” asked Jace, struggling to maintain his patience. “Will you do it?”

Barker sniffed.

“I’ve only met you once, Major, and because of you I’m barred from three alehouses and have to be on my guard every time I see a sailor. And in case it has escaped your notice, sir, this is Plymouth. There are a lot of boats around here, and boats mean bloody sailors.”

“But that won’t matter if you come back to the army, now, will it?” said Jace, playing with his hand. “We’re under-strength and could do with an experienced sergeant. Hell, I’ll even request you’re made color sergeant if you want it.”

Barker looked shocked. “You hardly know me, sir!”

“I know you well enough,” grinned Jace. “Now, will you help me?”

The Sergeant scratched at his nose thoughtfully. He picked up his mug of ale, downed the contents, and then stood to attention.

“Sergeant Barker reporting for duty, sir!”

“I knew you were a right one, Sweet Jackie!” said Jace, gripping the man by the shoulder. “Now, the first thing I need you to do is...”



“My dearest, darling Helen, how can I ever thank you?” sniffed the Dowager as she entered Fitzroy Manor. “I always knew I could rely on my closest friend.”

Anne watched the performance from the top of the stairs and had to admit she was impressed. The Dowager Lady Reeves truly appeared to be suffering from a disorder of the nerves as she fell upon the Countess for both physical and emotional support. She would probably have been taken in herself if she had not known it was mere theater.

“What’s all the commotion about? Good Lord, has something happened, my lady?” asked her father as he came puffing out of his study.

“Fitzroy! Oh, how can I ever thank you for your kindness in letting me stay here for a few weeks. It is my nerves, you know; they have been shattered! Frayed! Cut to the quick!”

“She has had a nasty shock, my dear,” translated Anne’s mother. “Naturally, I thought it better that she recuperates here rather than at her rooms in Plymouth.”

“Naturally, naturally,” repeated the Earl, although he looked horrified as the Dowager moved from the Countess to drape herself, sobbing, around his neck instead.

“It is so mortifying!” she sobbed. “To think I was taken in by such a charlatan! Fortune hunters, my dearest Lord Fitzroy, are horrid creatures. Something must be done about them! You

must bring it up in Parliament! Were my dear departed husband still here, I have no doubt he would call the man out for his impudence!”

Anne suppressed a giggle. Jace’s mother was playing her part well; the mention of fortune hunters had brought a dark but sympathetic cloud to her father’s features, and now both her parents were helping the Dowager to his study. The Earl had even called for brandy despite the early hour.

“I seem to have missed the commotion, my dear Anne,” said the Duke as he appeared from nowhere, making her jump. “Did I frighten you, child?”

“There is nothing about you that frightens me,” she scoffed with more confidence than she felt. “You missed the arrival of the Dowager. It seems someone has tried to relieve her of her fortune, and although they failed, it has left her quite upset.”

“How unfortunate,” said Hawthorne, glancing down the hallway. “A fortune, you say? But what does that have to do with the Earl and Countess?”

It is such a strange power he has, mused Anne, that whenever he opens his mouth, I itch to slap him.

“Mama is one of her closest friends, so naturally she would come here for emotional support,” she replied with great aplomb. “Besides, everyone knows my father is on a crusade against those who would try to obtain another person’s money through dubious means. He has tried to introduce bills to parliament—but surely, you know that, Your Grace, having a seat in the House of Lords as well.”

“I rarely trouble myself with such insipid things as politics,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I am aware of your father’s feelings about fortune hunters, of course. Was that not the reason he objected to your marrying the Reeves Boy?”

The hit connected, but she was not about to let him see so. Anne instead smiled as sweetly as she could manage without causing her mask to shatter.

“Not at all, for while Major Reeves is not possessed of a fortune in the way you are, Your Grace, even Papa can recognize he has an acceptable competence, even without his career. Now, had Papa thought for a moment that Jace was attempting to gain control of my inheritance by tricking me into marriage, he would have spent the last six years doing everything he could to ruin not only him, but the entire Reeves family. Papa is a wonderful man, but he can be excessive when it comes to his ideas of justice.”

There was the tiniest flicker of concern in Hawthorne’s eyes as he glanced toward the study, and then back to Anne.

“The Earl has never appeared to be anything but a gentleman of a mild disposition to me,” he said carefully. “His sister, who is superfluous in her praise of his character, was heard to say more than once that his only flaw was that he is too soft.”

Anne struggled not to laugh out loud, having heard this very complaint from her aunt on more than one occasion.

“My aunt considers the Emperor Caligula to be a misunderstood genius,” she replied.

Hawthorne looked surprised, and then laughed gently at her little joke.

“I forgot you have an adequate understanding of history and the classics,” he said. “Impressive for a woman.”

Anne struggled to keep her smile in place.

“Why, thank you, Your Grace. My parents felt it important that a woman of my station was able to demonstrate an appropriate amount of intelligence.”

The Earl appeared in the hallway, looking harried but quite determined. When he caught sight of Anne, he changed paths and came toward her.

“Annie, my dear girl, can you speak with the housekeeper and have the Blue Bedroom made up for Lady Reeves? She has had a nasty shock, the poor woman; when I think there are men out there who will try to take advantage, why I-well, you know what I mean.”

“Are you sure the Green Bedroom would not be better? Aunt Serena is most particular about having the Blue Bedroom when she stays, and the Dowager may wish to remain with Mama for more than a week.”

The Earl blanched. “Serena! Good God, I had forgotten in all the commotion. You are a good girl, Annie; the Green Bedroom then.”

“Excuse me for intruding, Lord Fitzroy,” said Hawthorne, stepping into the conversation as though he had a right to be a part of it, “but would Lady Reeves not be more comfortable with Sir Sidney? He is her son, after all.”

Anne wished she could memorize the look of disgust on her father’s face when he heard this suggestion. For all her Papa’s faults, he was an exceptional host who, alongside her mother, would go to any length to make a friend comfortable.

“The Dowager finds it difficult to be at the Hall since her husband’s death,” said Anne, stepping into the breach. “And with the best will in the world, it is not the most restful of environments with the children there.”

“I must go and speak with the steward,” said her father, looking away from Hawthorne without a word to him. “I know I can rely on you, Anne, to be sure everything is ready for our guest.”

If the Duke realized he had been snubbed by Anne’s father, he did not show it outwardly. Instead, he turned a condescending smile upon her, and he had the audacity to catch up her hand so he could kiss the air just above her fingers.

“I shall leave you to your area of expertise as you arrange for domestic bliss,” he said with a joking air. “I will find you once your arduous duties are completed, and we can continue to get to know each other.”

I would rather scratch out my own eyes, thought Anne.

“I look forward to it, Your Grace,” she replied. Considering what was in store for him over the coming days, for once, she was telling the truth.



After a good-natured squabble over who was the better driver, Jace had allowed Sidney to drive his own gig over to the Fitzroy estate, although he had great fun criticizing his twin's handling of the reins.

“I think this is the happiest I have ever seen you,” Sidney commented. “You have not teased me this badly since your return from Spain.”

“Life is good, older twin; life is good,” said Jace, thinking of the way Anne had enthusiastically accepted his proposal. “My angel loves me, I am to be married, and my future is promising for the first time in years.”

“I had hoped you'd stay in England on half pay,” admitted Sidney. “I'll always be grateful to Annie for luring you back home, and I confess I missed your ugly face.”

Jace thumped his brother on the shoulder. “I would drive you crackers within the year, and Amelia in under six months! She's your angel and will always love me for being your handsome and dashing brother. But giving the children a monkey was a misstep on my part, and I do not wish to incur her wrath by making another.”

“She’s trying very hard to forgive you for the monkey,” said Sidney solemnly, “but given the choice, I think she would like you and Anne to stay close as well. No, don’t say anything! We understand perfectly! You two are not us; Annie has the spirit of an adventurer, and you are a damned fine soldier. All we ask is that this time, you do not stay away for so long.”

Jace swallowed, the lump in his throat making it painful. “Agreed, Sid. No matter what was happening with Annie, I should have come back for you and for Mother.”

“At least you are able to admit when you are wrong,” said his twin. “Now if you would only concede I’m the handsome one...”

“Only if you admit I am the better driver. Good grief, Brother, we’re not hunting the squirrel here!”

The banter continued right up to the end of the journey, where they handed the gig into the care of the Earl’s excellent grooms.

“Are you ready to start this ridiculous scheme of yours?” asked Sid, running his eyes up and down Jace with grudging approval.

“We had better, or Mother will never forgive me,” replied Jace.

They crossed into the manor, where the Fitzroys’ butler asked them to wait while he went to see if the Countess was able to

receive them.

Jace glanced around but could see no sign of Anne. He was aware that his disappointment was childish, but he had anticipated her reaction to his full uniform. It had always been a source of pride for him, and he was not so modest as to pretend it did not enhance his appearance.

It cost a considerable amount of money but was well worth the expense. The jacket was composed of scarlet superfine fabric with dark blue collar, lapels, and cuffs. His brocading and epaulettes were made of gold thread, and he had personally polished the brass buttons to a sheen. A red sash tied at the hip encircled his waist, and scarlet brocade was looped to the side. The gray wool trousers did not expose Jace's legs as well as the traditional white breeches and full gaiters, but they were significantly more comfortable and, in Jace's opinion, just as stylish. His right eye's bicorne had survived the damage sustained on the night of the ball and now rested at an amusing angle.

It took a great deal of willpower for him not to tug at the gorget around his neck, despite the fact that he knew he resembled a respectable infantry major.

It was not the Countess but the Earl who came to greet them in the hall. Jace swept off his bicorne, and bows were exchanged.

“Sir Sidney, Major Reeves, no doubt you have been sent word about your mother's troubles in Plymouth.”

“Thank you for taking her into your home, Lord Fitzroy; I know she will find it a soothing environment,” said Sidney,

dropping into his own lordly demeanor like it was a second skin. “I will not insult you by insinuating you might find her presence troublesome, but I do wish to express how grateful I am to have such an excellent neighbor.”

The Earl beamed a little; he had always preferred Sidney, but Jace did not blame him for that. He preferred Sidney over himself as well.

“Indeed, indeed, Sir Sidney. I will take you, boys, to her now if you will.”

Jace snapped his heels together, drawing Lord Fitzroy’s attention.

“I would appreciate a quick word with you in private first, my lord,” he said, addressing the Earl in the same way he would Lord Wellington.

Fitzroy looked suspicious, but he was too well-bred to refuse the request. “Very well, I have a few moments to spare.”

The Earl showed Sidney into the room where his mother and the Countess were sitting, then closed the door, so it was just him and Jace in the corridor.

It was hardly private; there would be eavesdropping servants, no doubt, and God alone knew if that Hawthorne was lurking about somewhere.

“Well, Major? What is it?”

The Earl had not addressed him as ‘boy’ and Jace took that as a good sign.

“I wish to thank you, my lord, for reminding me that I am an officer and a gentleman in His Majesty’s Army and that I was indulging my emotions in an unbecoming manner. You knew my father well, so no doubt you understand that I take my role seriously, and I plan to live up to the example he set for me.”

Lord Fitzroy raised a brow.

“You intend to become a colonel, do you?”

Jace inclined his head. “That is the intention, my lord, and Colonel Hayworth himself believes I have it in me to succeed. I thank you for reminding me of that and setting me back on course.”

Fitzroy stared at him for a long time. Jace remained at attention, wondering if he made his new recruits feel this uneasy when he inspected them on parade.

“You relinquish any pretensions to my daughter’s hand, do you?”

Jace had been prepared for this question. He’d thrashed out a thousand possible answers with Amelia and Sidney, and then practiced until he could deliver the chosen one with the impression it was his spontaneous reaction.

“I will always hold Lady Anne in my heart, Lord Fitzroy, for you have raised an exceptional young woman who should be held sacred by any man lucky enough to capture her attention for a mere second. I will, however, abide by your wishes in this matter and will do nothing to bring hurt or shame upon her. I will forever remain her friend and defender, but only at your direction.”

“A pretty speech,” said the Earl, but there was no scorn in his tone. “I am glad to see you are growing up, Major Reeves. It took a long time for you to mature into half the man your brother is, but at least you are moving in the right direction. I will watch your career with interest.”

Jace bowed. “Thank you, my lord. If it pleases you, I should like to talk with my mother about this shocking incident that has so upset her.”

“Fortune hunters, liars, and confidence tricksters,” spat the Earl. “They are truly the vilest of creatures when they prey on the vulnerabilities of widows and unwed women.”

“I could not have said it better myself,” replied Jace.

Everything was going to plan.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*A*nne was up early the following morning, learning as much gossip as possible from Eleanor as her maid helped her dress.

“His valet, Mr. Bridges, is one step from walking out on His Grace completely,” Eleanor said with a shake of her head. “He is only hanging on in the hope of getting the three months’ pay he is owed, and fears if he leaves, he’ll never see a penny. Forgive the crudeness of my words, my lady, but Bridges described you as the Duke’s golden goose, and that he expects him to clear some of his debts once you are his wife.”

“Only some debts?” asked Anne, unhappy but not surprised by the valet’s opinion on the marriage.

Eleanor looked grim. “It’s only servants’ gossip, of course, but after several large pours of Lord Fitzroy’s finest brandy — you did say we should obtain information at any cost, Lady Anne, and Bridges is a heavy drinker — well, once his tongue was loosed, he said some shocking things, even implying he’s committed near-criminal acts on his master’s behalf. He stated that some of these issues would soon catch up with them. Evidently, His Grace has not paid the bills at a number of hotels where he has stayed over the past year, and on more

than one occasion, foreigners have demanded that the Duke pay them back!”

“Foreigners?” said Anne in surprise. “From where?”

“Spain or some such place. Bridges didn’t speak their language or know what they were saying, but they were gentlemen, he said, and very angry.”

“That is interesting,” murmured Anne, turning over the information in her mind. “I wonder if they were Portuguese and it has to do with him leaving Lisbon? Eleanor, you are an absolute dear and the best of all people.”

Eleanor flushed pink at the praise. “It is my duty to look out for you, Lady Anne, that’s all. None of us can like His Grace; he might be a Duke, but he does not act like a proper gentleman. It would be lovely to see you set up as a duchess, but not if it means being married to such a man.”

“What do you mean, he doesn’t act like a proper gentleman, Eleanor? Has something happened?”

Her maid hesitated, chewing her lip for a few seconds before coming to a decision.

“There are some households, Lady Anne, where the housekeeper would never hire a young girl, and never a pretty one, for fear the men of the house might turn the girl’s head with pretty words she might mistake for promises.”

Anne blanched at this revelation. "I... I see, Eleanor. The girls are ruined."

"Most of them," sighed the maid, "although some are lucky and marry a good man, or they get a small pension from the family in exchange for not making a fuss. The thing is, even the Earl's departed father was not the sort to countenance such behavior in his house, nor in the houses of his neighbors, so it has never been much of a concern. The Duke, however..."

"Eleanor, if Hawthorne has so much as glanced at one of our girls in the wrong fashion you must tell me at once," Anne demanded.

The smile on Eleanor's face was full of sisterly affection. "There is no need to worry about a thing, Lady Anne, for Mrs. Higgins is an excellent housekeeper and changed everyone's duties while the Duke is in residence. He was a little free in his speech to poor Daisy, but none of the girls are ever left alone with him now."

Anne was enraged, not only for the safety of her servants, but also because Hawthorne's behavior under their roof was a disturbing display of disdain for Anne's family. The thought of a stranger violating the trust that the Fitzroys had spent decades establishing with the local community infuriated her. Her parents took great pride in being excellent employers who genuinely cared for the welfare of those who relied on them.

"Mrs. Higgins must tell my father at once," she declared, but her maid gave a sad shake of the head.

“It is not so simple, Lady Anne. His Grace’s words were perhaps inappropriate, but even Daisy swears they were only words, only an invitation, and she has no proof of what she claims. He’s a duke, Lady Anne. If you cannot stand against him without so much help, what would happen to Daisy if he demands that your father turns her off without a reference, for “lying” about him?”

“Father would not do that,” said Anne, but she doubted her own words. He had not believed her about Hawthorne’s behavior, so why would he believe a scullery maid?

“I’m sorry, Eleanor, you are right as always,” she sighed. “I trust Mrs. Higgins has everything in hand, but I will share this knowledge with my mother, if only as confirmation of the Duke’s true character.”

“Thank you, Lady Anne,” said Eleanor, the tension in her shoulders evaporating.

Anne was in a reflective mood as she descended the stairs to the breakfast room. It had not occurred to her before that the maids, and all women staff she supposed, could be at such risk from gentlemen in their employer’s home. Even with the hope of escaping marriage with the Duke, she was still deeply uneasy in his presence, and the thought of being dependent on his good humor to survive made her feel sick to the stomach.

“Something will have to be done about that,” she muttered to herself. “Once I am married to Jace, I will see what I can do to help.”

“Aunt Anne! Aunt Anne!” came a chorus of young voices from the driveway, interspersed with a small but insistent cry of “Godmama!”

The butler pulled back the front door, and a whirlwind of excitable young children cannoned into the house, Amelia trailing in their wake, with a faint smile on her lips.

“We came to see Grandmama!”

“Tom fell out of the same tree Uncle Jace did this morning!”

“Did not, Sally!”

“Did too!”

“Has Miss Eleanor got shortbread for me, Godmama?”

“Or cake?”

“Lady Fitzroy has the best cake!”

“Cake! Cake! Cake!”

Anne’s parents appeared in the hallway, taking the invasion of their peaceful morning with grace, and even a degree of enjoyment.

“Master Frederick, Master Thomas, I see you are growing nice and tall,” said her father with a stern expression, but he was barely able to keep his face straight as the two boys immediately stood to attention and stretched themselves up as much as they could manage.

“Nurse says I’ve grown three inches, Lord Fitzroy,” said Tom proudly.

“And I have grown four,” lied Fred with such a mischievous air, Anne was stunned at his similarity to Jace at that age.

“You will have to tell your grandmother all about it, then,” said her father, motioning toward the breakfast room. “There are eggs, bacon, and even some sausage if you are up to a few bites.”

“Are we ever!” breathed Tom, and then raced his brother across the hall.

“How do you do, my Lord and Lady Fitzroy,” said Sally primly as she dropped into a curtsy. Anne smiled as both of her parents returned the formalities with a dignity usually reserved for the Royal family.

“I believe your grandmother’s nerves would benefit greatly from seeing you, Miss Reeves,” said the Countess. “You have a very soothing effect upon her.”

Amelia managed to cover her laugh with a cough, but Sally did not notice. She thanked Anne’s parents for their invitation to breakfast with them and then crossed the hallway with an

overblown poise that suggested that a pile of books was still balanced atop her head.

“Don’t laugh, my dear, for I remember when you were exactly the same,” chuckled the Earl with such affection that Anne could not bring herself to argue the point.

“Thank you so much for inviting us, Lady Fitzroy,” said Amelia, now three of her children were gone from her vicinity. “They are very excitable today, I am afraid because getting to spend time with both their grandmother and Lady Anne is a high treat to them all.”

“You mean they get spoiled rotten,” replied Anne’s mother with an affectionate smile. “Not all, my dear Amelia. It will do your mother-in-law a world of good to be with you.”

“Is Sir Sidney not with you, my dear?” asked the Earl, with a hopeful glance at the door.

“He was called away on business, I am afraid, although I suspect that he and Jace are trying to bring the scoundrel who tried to trick the Dowager to the ground. Major Reeves has a lead through some of his military connections.”

“Does he, indeed?” said the Earl, looking surprised but in a pleasant fashion.

Whatever Jace said to you yesterday, it left a good impression, thought Anne.

An insistent little hand tugged hard on her skirts. She looked down into the adorable face of little Charlotte, who stared up at Anne with all the pathetic charm of a newborn puppy.

“Can we have cake, Godmama?” she asked.

Anne picked the girl up despite Amelia’s protests.

“I do believe there is a little cake still left, or at the very least, a pastry or two,” she told the girl as the party made its way back to the breakfast room.

“I’ll sit with you!” said Charlotte, “and with Mama and Grandmama!”

Anne had not achieved the complete anarchy she had hoped for in the breakfast room, but there was enough disorder to consider her plan a success.

Hawthorne, seated on the opposite side of the table, struggled to conceal his disgust at the two young men who had chosen to occupy the chairs on either side of him. Tom and Fred enthusiastically embraced their roles as first-class terrorists, alternating between telling the Duke every third thought that occurred to them, even when their mouths were full of scrambled eggs, and leaning over the man’s breakfast plate to argue with one another.

Sally, for her part, had taken a seat next to her grandmother and was loudly opining on the newest trends in men’s attire as if she knew what she was talking about.

“Mama’s magazine says that the cut of a coat is very important and that it has to be high at the front, just like Lord Fitzroy’s,” she announced while the stragglers took their seats.

“Your father and uncle have long shared the opinion that gentlemen should be well dressed at all times,” agreed the Dowager, a twinkle in her eye.

“Uncle Jace looks very handsome in his regimentals,” continued Sally, “and he said that when I have my come-out ball, he will wear his very best dress uniform, and bring a whole score of handsome officers with him so they can all fight over who will dance with me.”

“I am sure your father is already horrified by such a proposition,” said the Earl wryly, but only the Duke laughed at his comment.

Sally’s intelligent little eyes narrowed, but she did not look directly at Hawthorne, instead turning her attention to Anne and Amelia.

“Grandmama thinks Uncle Jace looks bang up to the echo in his scarlet coat,” she said, louder than necessary, even when accounting for the noise her brothers were making. “Don’t you think he’s the most handsome officer in the whole world, Mama? Or you, Aunt Anne?”

A little too obvious, thought Anne. Best to tread carefully here.

“I have to think that about your uncle, sweetheart,” said Amelia with a disarming laugh. “I am married to his twin,

after all!”

“And what an uncomfortable position for poor Lady Anne to find herself in!” said the Dowager with a sympathetic shake of her head. “She has no choice but to agree that my dear Jace is the most handsome officer in the world, or risk offending her neighbors!”

“A tricky path for me to navigate, to be sure,” said Anne, throwing Sally a cheeky wink when no one was looking. “But I think the safest answer is to admit that Major Reeves is the most handsome soldier in the neighborhood.”

Even her father seemed amused by her answer, considering that Jace was the only soldier of any description in the immediate area, but Hawthorne was clearly needed by her words.

“It never fails to amuse me how easily women’s heads are turned by a scarlet coat,” he said with a self-important chuckle. “All it takes for a mediocre man to become a prize catch is the King’s shilling and a set of regimentals.”

“Is that why you are unmarried, then, Your Grace? Because you did not join the army?” asked Sally with such earnest innocence that Anne giggled before she could help herself. The dowager and her mother practically spat their tea across the table, Amelia’s shoulders shook silently as she covered her mouth with one hand, and Anne’s father was suddenly afflicted by a violent bout of coughing.

“No,” said Hawthorne coldly. “I had no need to seek my fortune with the infantry.”

“Speaking of fortunes,” said the Dowager loudly while Sally sat in demure silence at her side, “is it not shocking to think there are confidence tricksters out there, preying upon vulnerable women like myself? I declare, every time I think of it, I feel I shall faint again.”

“Then perhaps, my dear lady, you should try thinking of something else,” said Hawthorne acerbically. He had given up on eating the bacon and eggs on his plate and was squeezing the handle of his coffee cup like his life depended on it.

“While excellent advice, Your Grace, it is difficult for such a wealthy peer as yourself to understand the threats we poor females face when we lack male protection,” said Anne’s mother smoothly.

The Dowager’s eyes had a malevolent glitter as she lifted her lavender-smelling salts to her nose.

“So true, my dear Helen! How can he hope to understand? That... that cad who tried to trick me into handing over my funds to him has no doubt duped many a poor woman over the years, although I count myself lucky it was not worse.”

“Like poor Mrs. Carrow’s daughter,” said Anne’s mother with a sage nod.

“Oh, that poor woman!” exclaimed the Dowager.

Amelia, knowing her cue when it came, looked up with an inquiring air.

“Who is Mrs. Carrow’s daughter, Lady Fitzroy?”

“A most unfortunate creature,” said Anne’s mother. “It was back when we were still unwed girls ourselves, but Miss Carrow’s fate was held up as a lesson to us all.”

“I am not familiar with this name,” said the Earl, his brows knitted together. “Where were they from?”

“Liverpool,” said the Dowager.

“Lincoln,” said the Countess in the same moment.

There was an awkward silence, broken only by the incessant chatter of Tom and Fred as they debated the relative merits of poached eggs and scrambled ones.

“You are mistaken, my dear; the terrible incident happened in Lincoln, but the poor girl met her fate in Liverpool after the fact.”

“You are quite right, my dear; I was thinking only of the tragic ending.”

“But who was this Miss Carrow?” Amelia asked pointedly. The Duke seemed close to his limit of Reeves children and was clearly set to leave the breakfast table at any moment.

“A girl who fell in love with a rogue and thief,” declared the Countess. “Your Grace, surely you are familiar with this tale?”

“Before my time, I fear,” he replied, looking none too happy for the insinuation about his age.

“Really? Oh, perhaps you are like my dear husband—not too interested in female problems.”

The Dowager took up the story, leaning forward as though sharing a great secret. Even Tom and Fred quietened down at the prospect of a new tale.

“Mr. and Mrs. Carrow were wealthy merchants, well respected in their community and in local circles. Their son died tragically young, but they were blessed with one other child, a beautiful daughter, and a true diamond of the first water. I cannot be sure exactly, for my memory is hazy, but it was claimed that after her father’s death, she was worth over fifty thousand pounds.”

“At least that much,” agreed the Countess. “Mr. Carrow’s death was unexpected, but he had made a will leaving everything to his daughter, with his wife as the sole executor.”

“That was his first mistake,” muttered Hawthorne. Anne saw a sharp look of surprise appear on her father’s face as he regarded the Duke, but the Earl did not respond to the comment.

“Do not believe that Mrs. Carrow was a silly woman, for she was anything but,” said the Dowager, picking up the story

once again. “With the help of her late husband’s former man of business, she continued the successes the family had so long enjoyed, and raised a lovely, sweet daughter at the same time.”

“Such a sweet girl,” sighed the Countess.

Amelia kicked Anne lightly under the table. Her friend was struggling to keep her mirth in check while Anne’s mother and Amelia’s mother-in-law were wringing every inch of drama from this part of the plan.

“The man of business, being so well known to the Carrow family, took the liberty of introducing the young woman to his nephew, who was a minor lord in Cumbria or some such place. He quickly charmed both the girl and the mother, showering them with lavish gifts and taking them to all the best places in Lincoln. Before long, he had proposed, and both Mrs. Carrow and poor Miss Carrow were overjoyed at their fortune.”

“Let me guess; he was a fortune hunter,” sighed Hawthorne.

“Don’t ruin it!” gasped Fred in horror. “It’s not good form for a chap to ruin stories, Your Grace!”

“He was more than just a fortune hunter,” said the Dowager, practically shouting over the rest of the people at the table. “He was not a lord of any description, nor was he from Cumbria. He was, however, a charming but selfish gambler, and within the year he had not only lost every penny of his poor wife’s fortune but had also destroyed the reputation of the Carrows’ business in the process. When the family had the opportunity to travel to the New World for a fresh start at life,

the rascal took off alone, leaving his poor bride to die of a broken heart in Liverpool.”

“I think I shall never marry,” declared Sally.

“Me neither,” agreed Charlotte between bites of cake.

“A very dramatic tale of strife you have woven for us, ladies,” said the Duke with a faint smile. “How reassuring it must be for you, Lady Fitzroy, to be assured that I am indeed a lord, although I do not own estates in Cumbria.”

The Countess smiled sweetly in his direction. “There is no concern about your marriage to dear Annie at all, Your Grace. Even if you were not a man of substance, it is not as though you could access a single penny of her fortune without the agreement of her family members.”

Hawthorne froze with his coffee cup halfway to his lips.

“I have no need of her fortune, my dear lady, but I am not sure I understand what you are trying to convey.”

Anne’s mother feigned confusion, looking first at her husband, then at the Duke, and then at her husband again.

“Oh, dear, have you not talked with His Grace about Anne’s dowry, my love? How horribly awkward in front of the children, although my dearest friend here knows of our plans.”

“Mama is referring to the fact that my fortune is to be tied away in a number of trusts and funds that cannot be cashed in without approval from one of my relatives,” Anne said to Hawthorne. “It is something of a tradition in my mother’s family to ensure our women have control of their fortunes, and it was a condition of her marriage to my father that, should they have daughters, the same traditions be upheld upon our becoming married. Is that not so, Mama?”

“Well summarised,” replied the Countess, with a nod of approval.

Her father coughed again. “Perhaps this is not an appropriate time to discuss such matters,” he said, but the Countess was having none of it.

“It is hardly a secret to the Reeves family, my darling, and it is good for dear Amelia here to consider such options for Sally and Charlotte’s futures.”

The Duke’s face was scrunched up in a deep, unattractive scowl.

“Forgive my ignorance, Fitzroy, but when we discussed the details of our approaching nuptials, I do not recall you commenting on any restrictions or covenants upon dear Annie’s expectations.”

Anne’s father looked genuinely affronted by this attack. “What was there necessary to say? I outlined her worth, what she will obtain upon the marriage, and what she will inherit when I or her mother pass. The details as to how those funds are tied up

and how they are to be accessed were in the paperwork I showed you. Did you not read them, Your Grace?”

Anne had the feeling that Hawthorne had not read past the largest numbers, but she did not give voice to the thought. Instead, she asked innocently, “Is something amiss, Your Grace?”

The look he turned on her was not one she drew pleasure from. It was the calculating look of a hawk trying to determine whether it was worth expending his effort to catch a helpless mouse below.

“It is merely surprising, my dear child. Nothing that cannot be brought to clarity by my man of business.”

“I do not see what is so confusing, Your Grace; surely you have encountered such arrangements before?” said Anne’s mother, her perfect eyebrows raised in mock surprise. “Naturally, you are acquainted with Lady Jersey; it is common knowledge that her grandfather settled his entire fortune upon her, for her sole use and benefit without the interference of any spouse, parent, or sibling. Robert Child was a friend of my own grandparents, you know, and likely stole the idea from my ancestors.”

“Not that it matters to a man of your substance, Your Grace,” added the Dowager with a gracious nod. “Such agreements protect a girl from the fate of Miss Carrow, for no fortune hunter would marry a girl under such circumstances.”

“You are very right, my lady,” said the Duke, his lips twisting into what he may have intended to be a smile.

“Perhaps I did not adequately explain dear Annie’s assets to you,” said the Earl, a worried crease appearing along his forehead, although what, precisely, he was worried about was far from clear. “Ladies, children, if you will please excuse us, His Grace and I will be in the study discussing business.”

They took their leave, much to the dismay of Fred and Tom, who had taken genuine pleasure in sharing their every thought with Hawthorne, no matter how banal. Sally nibbled on a slice of toast, while Charlotte continued to stuff handfuls of plum cake into her mouth.

“I am starting to think our duke really is not as plump in the pocket as he claims to be,” said the Countess once the door was firmly closed.

“Is Anne’s fortune really tied up in such a way?” asked Amelia. “Surely he will cry off under such circumstances?”

It was Anne who replied.

“We may have exaggerated a little; while my future husband will not be able to sell or access most of my capital, it would not be unreasonable for him to require the interest to be paid to him directly, and it does not include all my inheritance from the Fitzroy side of my family. It’s all rather complicated, thanks to my grandfather. Normally, it is a perfectly lovely problem to have on my hands, but I’d rather give every penny away than have to marry that man.”

“That will not happen,” said the Countess firmly. “Now, time to prepare for our next move.”

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*I*t was almost five when Jace arrived at Fitzroy Manor; a ridiculously early hour for dinner, but then, country hours were always so different to life in both the military and the Ton. It had been a frustrating day for him, stuck at home while pretending to be in Plymouth searching for a fictional confidence trickster, but the worst part by far was knowing that Anne was having to live under the same roof as that scoundrel Hawthorne.

Nonetheless, he was present at the moment, and perhaps the plan was already having an effect on the situation. If Hawthorne was dissatisfied with the reduced earnings he would receive by marrying Anne, he might choose to withdraw from the engagement. If the Earl became suspicious of the Duke's motives for marrying his daughter, he might withdraw his threat to cut her off if she married Jace instead.

If. If. If.

Was there a worse word than *if*?

“Major Reeves, my lady,” announced Fitzroy's butler as Jace entered the sitting room. Amy had changed into a lovely evening gown he guessed belonged to Anne, who had opted

for a dress that really did not seem to be designed to flatter anyone. It was a dull brown satin trimmed with far too much lace at the hem but not enough at the sleeves, while her delicate blonde hair had been scraped back into a severe bun usually favored among governesses.

She was still beautiful, he knew that in his heart, but she had done an awfully good job of concealing it. He was rather proud.

“My darling boy,” said his mother, holding out her hand toward him. “I will never tire of seeing you in your regimentals. Your father would be so proud.”

“Uncle Jace! Uncle Jace! Aunt Anne said you’re the most handsome soldier she knows!” said Sally, bounding over to him. “And she said it in front of His Grace!”

“Be reasonable, dearest; I said he was the most handsome soldier in the neighborhood,” corrected Annie with gentle humor.

Sally inclined her head in that ladylike way Amelia often used. “Yes, Aunt, but we all know what you meant to say instead.”

“Wretch!” laughed Annie, and even though she was dressed to look as unbecoming as possible, Jace wanted to sweep her up in his arms and kiss her soundly.

“I have invited the children to dine with us,” said Lady Fitzroy, coming to her feet as the door opened wide behind

them. “It is not often I get to enjoy the company of young people, and I wish to indulge my fancy.”

“As you wish, my love,” said the Earl as he entered alongside Hawthorne. “So long as you do not mind His Grace and I sitting down without changing. Ah, Major Reeves. I see you are joining us.”

“Lady Fitzroy was so kind as to extend me an invitation,” he said with a short bow.

Anne was frowning. Jace assumed their plan had gone off without a hitch that morning, and if so, then the results were not as expected. Hawthorne and Fitzroy were on good terms with each other, while Jace’s reception had been chilly.

Dinner, however, turned the tide back in their direction.

“I do hope you are not offended by my simple spread,” apologized the Countess as the staff laid out tureens and plates of food upon the table. “Anne and I have decided to follow the advice of a Notable Woman in the Lady’s Magazine, and so are limiting the table to a single course with minimal removes.”

“It is on the advice of His Grace that we have decided to change our habits in such a way,” said Anne with a sickly-sweet smile. “Hawthorne has been so good as to suggest some methods that will help me be a better duchess.”

“And good advice should be followed by all,” added Jace’s mother with approval. “What an excellent example you have

set us, Your Grace.”

Jace, who knew how much Lady Fitzroy prided herself on being an excellent hostess, struggled not to laugh as dish upon dish of bland, tasteless food was revealed for them. Lightly boiled chicken sat beside unsalted ham, while the few vegetables present had been steamed to within an inch of their life. Dry crackers made up the largest side dish, and the jellies looked to be both clear and unflavored. The only condiment on the table was malt vinegar, and if they got desperate, the mint leaves adorning each plate as decorative garnish.

“An unexpected decision, my dear,” said the Earl, unable to contain his disappointment.

“I fear that dear Annie misunderstood my intent,” said the duke through gritted teeth. “I merely suggested a reducing diet as something of benefit to the weaker sex.”

Jace almost felt sorry for the man when four sets of feminine eyes turned on him in disgust.

“For my part, this is a veritable feast compared to some of the atrocious meals I’ve had to eat while on the march. I can live on the most meager of foodstuffs when necessary, but do not hand me raw tripe and expect me to enjoy myself!”

“Tell us about your adventures, Uncle Jace!” asked Fred, waving his fork around enthusiastically. “Was it hard having to do all that marching and shooting?”

“Not at all, the only difficult part was the food!”

“Surely, we keep our men well enough provisioned on the Continent,” said the Earl gruffly, as though challenging Jace to claim otherwise.

“For much of the time you are quite correct, my lord, but there are times when our feet are too swift for the supply lines, or the French take out a wagon before we know what has happened. It is in those times when we soldiers tend to become creative with our foodstuffs.”

“Surely, you can just buy provisions from the local peasants,” sniffed Hawthorne as he prodded at a piece of boiled chicken. “The Portuguese and the Spanish are our allies, are they not?”

“It is a shade more complicated than that, Your Grace, and besides, the farmers cannot sell what they do not have.” Jace put down his cutlery as he recalled memories of some of the hardest months he lived. “Take last winter when we were not far from Burgos. Our provisions were miserable in the extreme, and even the most persuasive of the camp followers could not buy food for love or money. We were reduced to eating bean tops, vine leaves, and any other green herb that could be digested. When we were able to get hold of a bullock to kill, we would use every part of it, even collecting up the blood so we could boil it down into a type of substitute bread — it is vile, and I do not recommend eating it if you have access to a single dandelion leaf. The knives would scrape the bones until they were free of any trace of flesh, and then boil them up for a thin broth flavored with the marrow. It was never for so long a time that I was afraid my men would starve, of course, but it is hard to motivate a battalion of men when their stomachs are rumbling, and the wine is running low.”

“I had no notion,” said Anne softly. “You did not tell me about such things in your letters.”

Jace shrugged, suddenly conscious that all eyes were on him. “Well, there was never enough room to tell you such trivial things, my lady, not when there were so many interesting things to share! Remind me, Fred; have I told everyone the tale of the Frenchie soldiers who tried to convince us to send them to England?”

Jace stuck to some of the more humorous anecdotes from his time abroad; the type of tales that caused the older gentlemen to chortle and the ladies to giggle. Only the Duke, who had abandoned any pretense of eating the sad excuse for a meal that had been prepared for them, appeared unimpressed by Jace’s tales, but he was not so unaware of the mood of the room as to mock him directly.

Annie attentively listened to every word he said, interjecting only to request clarification or make an insightful observation. Jace felt himself falling deeper in love; he had the strangest notion that he could tell the most boring story imaginable in the most monotonous manner possible, and his angel would still hang on his every word.

Dinner was just coming to an end when the butler came over to the table, quietly murmuring to Jace that he had a message waiting for him outside the front door.

The Earl, who had been entertained during Jace’s stories, looked irritated at this breach of manners.

“What is it, Major Reeves, that cannot wait until an appropriate hour?”

Jace stood up, pausing only to make an apologetic bow to those assembled.

“I am sorry for my shocking lack of manners, Lord Fitzroy, but it is regarding the confidence trickster we are tracking, and I fear the information is time-sensitive. Please, excuse me.”

He left the room quickly, thanked the butler, and then made his way outside. Dusk was still a long way off, so the evening air was both warm and bright. Waiting to the side of the manor house, outside the servant’s entrance, was the very man he had been hoping to see.

“Evening, Major,” said Sergeant Barker with a lazy salute. “I think I have some things you might want to know about.”



The ladies retired to the drawing room to allow the Earl and the Duke to enjoy their brandy and cigars, for Jace had not returned from whatever message had called him away. Anne pulled the bell to alert the butler that it was time to send through some light refreshments, wondering how long they had before she had to endure the presence of Hawthorne once again. Antagonizing him was an amusing pastime, but until she was free of him, it would not be enough.

“Well done, my darlings,” the Dowager said to the children, pulling them all into her embrace. “Sally, my darling, you are going to be a devastating wit when you take your place in the Ton!”

“I ate two whole helpings of chicken!” announced Tom, his little chest puffed out.

“And he didn’t even pull a face once,” said Fred with brotherly admiration. “He looked like he enjoyed it!”

“Poor Cook’s nerves are shattered,” sighed Anne’s mother. “It went against every instinct she has to send us such poor fare for our dinner, and I was afraid she would hand in her notice when I insisted upon it. We cried together for ten minutes.”

The footman, Stuart, entered the room bearing a tray laden with glasses of wine for the women and lemonade for the children. There was also a cloth-covered plate that immediately drew the attention of everyone, including Anne.

“Miss Eleanor and Cook sent these up with their compliments,” said Stuart, removing the cloth with a flourish to reveal a veritable mountain of freshly baked shortbread.

“Dear, dear Stuart, you are the best of men,” sighed the Countess. “Pass them around quickly; we do not wish the gentlemen to know about them.”

“If I may make a suggestion, my lady,” said Stuart as he brought the plate of delicious biscuits to each of them in turn, “if the children would like to play a game of Treasure Seekers, they could hide the shortbread in their cave so they can help themselves during the evening. I believe the pink sofa, if moved at an angle beneath the window coverings, would make an excellent pirate cave for them.”

“Stuart, I may need to steal you,” said Amelia as her children made a cheer of approval at this plan. “Oh my, this shortbread is heaven.”

“Not a pirate cave, a city under siege!” declared Fred, waving an imaginary sword around him.

The footman moved the furniture and cheerfully helped Tom, Fred, and Sally set up their play area, while Charlotte climbed up into Anne’s lap and snuggled into her arms for a nap.

No sooner had Stuart withdrawn from the room, but Anne’s father came strolling in.

“Where is Hawthorne?” asked Anne, surprised to see him alone.

“It seems he, too, had some urgent business to attend to,” replied the Earl, clearly unimpressed. If the meal had put him into a bad mood, then the exit of his two male guests had compounded it. Thankfully he was too well-mannered to challenge his wife about dinner while guests were present, but Anne could see he suspected something was afoot with the women.

“We were just discussing Lord Wellington’s progress in Spain, my dear,” said Anne’s mother, always adept at managing her husband’s moods. “Major Reeves will be returning to the Continent in a matter of weeks, and we were speculating where the army will go next.”

“He’ll push on toward Madrid, mark my words,” replied the Earl, settling down in his favorite chair while the children played around him.

Anne did not hear the rest of the conversation, for she felt as though her world had spun around once again. She knew Jace was returning to Spain soon, of course, she knew that but hearing the words spoken so casually out loud was almost too much to bear.

Amelia squeezed her gently on the arm. “It will be settled by then, dearest. He will not leave without you, I guarantee it.”

She gave her friend a grateful smile, but snuggled Charlotte tightly, nonetheless.

Soon after, the dowager proposed a game of whist, and since only four players were required, Anne volunteered to sit the handout, using her sleeping goddaughter as an excuse to remain seated. In reality, she awaited Jace’s return so that she could steal a few moments of his company. It was beyond aggravating how impossible it was for her to have him to herself, and the memory of how he had touched her at the cottage was sweet torment when there was no hope for the foreseeable future.

Unfortunately, the next person to join the small group was Hawthorne, who entered with the confidence of a man who believed he ruled the world.

“Whist! A delightful game,” he said, walking across to the card table.

“Do you wish to take over my hand, Your Grace?” asked Amelia politely, but Hawthorne gave her that condescending chuckle he used so often.

“No, no, Lady Reeves! I find it intolerably frustrating to follow a player whose method is incomprehensible to me. I shall take this opportunity to sit and converse with my dear fiancée, I think.”

“Yes, excellent,” muttered the Earl, his eyes on his cards. “Get to know Annie better, and all that.”

Anne’s skin crawled as Hawthorne lounged on the seat beside her in the affected style only Lord Byron was able to pull off without appearing boorish.

“I fear you have not been honest with me about your intentions, dear child,” he said in a soft, conversational tone that only Anne could hear.

“Whatever could you mean, Your Grace?”

“I am not a fool, girl, and it would be best for you to learn that before we are wed. I will not tolerate such attempts to undermine me from my wife, and I am not afraid to whip you into submission if necessary. I think I might even enjoy it.”

“How dare you!” she began, but he raised a finger to place firmly to her lips. The contact was so shocking, she did not even consider biting him until he had removed it.

“Careful, my child, you would not wish me to tell your father that you are conspiring with the Reeves family to force me to cry off, now, would you? I would not like to think how far he would go to exact his revenge on the soldier boy, or just how far I would go, either.”

Anne swallowed.

“I do not know what you are referring to, sir,” she said icily.

He turned to look at her, his lips twisting as he regarded her appearance.

“Do you not? Well, there is no need to go over it all again; I shall have to accept that it will take longer to shape you into a proper duchess than I had thought. If I must treat you like a spirited filly, dear child, I am not averse to doing so. I trust you know the first stage of teaching a horse who its master is?”

Anne stared down at the perfect little face of Charlotte as she tried to remain calm.

“Men like you break them,” she replied.

He chuckled. “It is the same with unruly women, and in the past, I have found it to be quite an enjoyable activity. Well, for me at least. And, I need to thank you.”

Anne looked up at him in confusion. “Thank me?”

“Yes, for bringing the ridiculous terms of your inheritance to my attention. Your father and I are at quite an accord on the matter now, and for those areas where we may disagree... well, that is what lawyers are for.”

“I hate you,” she said softly. “How can you hold me to this marriage when you know I am only going through with it to protect the man I love?”

His expression was scornful. “Because I have decided that you will be mine, Anne, and with time, I will make you love me instead. It is time I got what I wanted out of life, and I will not be thwarted.”

“Please, excuse me,” she said, getting to her feet suddenly. The movement disturbed poor Charlotte, who cried out in protest as Anne took her across to Amelia. “I am so sorry; I just need a few moments.”

She fled before anyone could ask her what was wrong.



Their plan finalized, Jace and Barker shook hands before parting ways.

Jace whistled to himself as he sauntered back toward the house, pleased with the progress they were making.

There was a loud bang from the side of the driveway, and Jace ducked instinctively at the sharp retort. From a crouching stance, he began to look all around him for the telltale wisp of

smoke that would reveal a musket or pistol, but he could not make it out.

He jogged back to the grand portico at the front door of Fitzroy Manor, alert to any sign that someone was out there, waiting for him, but there was nothing to suggest that another living soul lingered around the drive or the gardens.

Jace swallowed. He knew he had not mistaken the snap of a twig for the sound of a gun; he had too much experience in the area to be wrong. His mind, however, refused to believe it could be real. It was far too close to the house and far too early in the evening for poachers to be active, and there was no need for Fitzroy's servants to be using firearms at this hour.

He walked slowly back up the drive, following the telltale scuff marks he had left on the gravel until he came back to the place where he had crouched down at the sound of the shot. He let his eyes roam over the loose stones, looking for—there! A dark orb of lead lying among the cream stones. He picked it up carefully, rolling it between his fingers.

A musket ball. He had not been mistaken. Someone had hidden in the shrubbery and tried to shoot him.

He glanced up at the likely hiding spots for his enemy but knew they had already left, or else they would have already shot a second time. Jace grimaced. It appeared his angel's influence was still upon him, even when he did not hold the miniature. Had the man been a half-decent shot, he would surely be dead.

He walked back to the house, mulling over the ramifications of this act. It made absolutely no sense! Despite the fact that Hawthorne was the most likely culprit, it seemed unlikely that the Duke would have taken such drastic measures, and certainly not by his own hand; if Jace had been eliminated from the equation, there would have been nothing compelling Annie to marry him. Lord Fitzroy disliked him, but he was not a violent man, and his scheme to force Annie into a marriage with the Duke depended on Jace's survival.

He slipped the musket ball into his pocket, determined to consider it later. He had just re-entered the residence and was about to proceed to the drawing room when a slim hand shot out of the cloakroom door and forcibly drew him inside.

“Kiss me again,” Annie demanded before pulling him into her arms and kissing him first with a hunger that set his whole body on fire.

“Annie, your father! The servants!” he managed to gasp out around her feverish mouth, but his own hands were exploring her body through the ugly satin, cupping her breasts, sliding around her waist, and pulling her tighter against his own arousal.

“I know, but I needed to remind myself that you're here, that you are really with me,” she whispered, and something about her tone unsettled him.

He pulled back, not letting go of her but far enough that he could study her closely. “What has happened, my love?”

“Hawthorne is aware of our attempts to scare him off and swears he will have me regardless. I cannot bear the thought of being without you, my love, let alone of being under his control.”

He kissed her forehead softly, deciding there was no need to worry her with news of the shot fired at him.

“You do not have to be without me, my love, and even if you wished to remain a spinster for the next one hundred years, I would see to it that Hawthorne had no power to disturb your peace, even for an instant. Do you trust me, Annie?”

“Implicitly,” she answered without hesitation.

“I carried your miniature across the Continent, and you kept me so safe that every man in the regiment called you my angel. So let me watch over and protect you this time.”

“I should really give you that back,” she sniffed.

Jace leaned in to kiss her again, a slow, lingering kiss that was about reassurance and love rather than passion. Still, it was hard to let her pull away.

“Go back to the drawing room, I will follow in a few minutes,” he told her, unable to resist planting his lips gently on the tip of her perfect nose.

“Thank you,” she said, and then hurried out before any servants could see her.

Jace took a moment to compose himself. He wished Sidney was there, or Colonel Hayworth or even Sergeant Barker. There was a deeper game afoot than he had realized, and it was turning deadly.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sidney returned home from London late the next morning, bleary-eyed but beaming.

“I have something!” he said as soon as he entered the house. “Yes, hello children—yes, you can tell me all about it soon, I promise, but I have something very important to tell uncle Jace and Mama.”

“Off with your governess, children, or there will be no shortbread when Miss Eleanor visits this afternoon,” admonished Amelia, which made them disappear like a magic trick.

Sidney, despite his air of urgency, paused to embrace and then kiss his wife. Jace, who had been watching from the door of the study, looked away from the quiet moment. A pang of envy pulled at his heart; he did not begrudge his twin the happiness he had found with Amelia, but until he was sure he would have the same with Annie, it was difficult not to be a little jealous.

“Ah, you’re here already—excellent!” said Sidney as he entered the study, his hand holding Amelia’s tightly as she followed him. “I have something!”

“Yes, you said that already, ugly. But what is it?” asked Jace, dropping onto the Chesterfield.

“Is it about the Duke? Can you prove he is a fortune hunter?” asked Amelia, looking at Sidney with adoring eyes.

Sid deflated a little at this question. “No, not prove as such, but it is devilishly suggestive of it, and not something the Earl can easily ignore.”

“Do not keep us in suspense, then!” said Jace.

Sidney grinned. “It must be sending you crackers to have waited at home while I had a little adventure.”

Jace thought about the musket ball still in his regimental jacket pocket.

“It is killing me. Now speak!”

“Oh, very well! You will be pleased to know that I have a wide range of business connections in the Capital, and that I am owed more than a few favors. It took a bit of arranging, but I managed to secure a half-hour interview with Mr. Crockford, and his information was most illuminating.”

Amelia gasped. “Not the fishmonger!”

“Who on earth is Crockford?” asked Jace, somewhat bewildered.

“Ah, you will not have been aware of his rise to power while you were in Portugal,” said Sidney, a smug grin on his face. “How nice to be the one in the know! William Crockford is a gambler, Jace, and a dashed good one at that. I’ve played a game of cribbage against him before now—just once, mind, for once was enough to teach me that I was a greenhorn in the hands of a Captain Sharp.”

“Sounds devilish.”

“Quite the opposite, in fact. He’s intelligent, honest, and fair in his dealings, but I expect he would be ruthless if he lost. I’ve had it from the horse’s mouth that Lord Granville lost over ten thousand pounds to the man in a single game, and that he still went back to lose more. Rumor is that Crockford’s looking to establish a new club of his own.”

“Good God, I am in the wrong line of work it seems,” said Jace, trying to comprehend that almost twenty-five years’ worth of his own wages had passed into this man’s hands in one night.

“But what has Crockford got to do with Hawthorne? Did he lose money to him as well?” asked Amelia.

Sidney looked triumphant. “Not exactly, but almost as good. Crockford knows the financial status of every potential pigeon in the Ton, and the duke is no exception. They have not met in person, but it seems that Hawthorne lost a fortune to Lord Sefton over a decade ago, and when Sefton proceeded to lose

to Crockford last year, he put up the IOUs from Hawthorne as a way to pay back his debts. Crockford gave him only a quarter of their value, seeing as the Duke is a difficult man to locate, but he was very interested to know where he might be located.”

“What kind of scoundrel does not pay his vowels?” asked Amelia in disgust. “No wonder the duke has not dared to show his face in polite society. How can the Earl have missed such a thing?”

“How much?” asked Jace, leaning forward. “How much does he owe?”

Sidney told them.

“Good God,” said Jace, blinking slowly. “Just to this Crockford fellow?”

“And according to Crockford, that’s the least of it. The Duke owes so much to various lords and money lenders that his vowels are considered worthless.”

“How is this not a scandal?” asked Amelia, still reeling at the amount owed by Hawthorne.

“Because not only is he a duke, but he sits on some large expectations,” replied Sidney. “When his grandmother died, he had already squandered most of his wealth, and so, while she left him a sum of twenty thousand pounds, he can only access it if he marries an heiress of impeccable lineage. He failed to secure the hand of such a girl, for they are few and far

between, and most of those are the daughters of men he owes money to.”

“Except for Anne,” murmured Amelia.

Sidney nodded. “Exactly, but there’s more. According to Crockford, there have been a few dubious-looking characters asking about Hawthorne as well, although, from his description, I think Crockford was using ‘dubious-looking’ as a synonym for ‘foreign.’”

“Like the people the duke’s valet mentioned,” said Jace slowly. “Perhaps this is why he had to return to England despite his sizeable debts; if he owes money on the Continent, he does not have the same legal protections as he does here.”

“Then this is it!” she cried excitedly, looking from Sidney to Jace. “This is the proof we need! Lord Fitzroy cannot deny Anne’s request to cry off from the engagement once he learns Hawthorne is so dishonorable.”

Jace considered everything his brother had told them, and then slowly shook his head.

“No, it is not enough,” he sighed. “We have only the word of this Crockford fellow for any of it unless you managed to purchase Hawthorne’s IOUs?”

Sidney looked sick at the thought. “Crockford wanted half their face value; too rich for my blood, I’m afraid.”

“Then we have only his word.”

“But what about the inheritance part?” asked Amelia. “Surely, that will trouble him?”

“Not if the Duke will receive a fortune of his own from the marriage,” said Jace, dropping back into the Chesterfield with a sign of defeat. “Twenty thousand might not cover Hawthorne’s debts, but we have no proof of those, anyway. Damn his eyes! He’s nothing but a loose screw, and I refuse to let him marry Anne!”

“It will not come to that,” said Amelia soothingly. “Perhaps this alone will not convince Lord Fitzroy of his mistake, but coupled with his attitude toward the children and our laying down hints that he will be unhappy with the way Anne’s fortune is tied up, the Earl is sure to see his error.”

“Unfortunately, Hawthorne is on to us, and now we understand why he is so desperate for Anne’s hand in particular, I am afraid of what lengths he will go to,” said Jace.

He thought about the musket ball again.

The butler, Jenkins, stepped into the study.

“A letter has been delivered for you, Major Reeves,” he announced, holding out a folded sheet of ivory paper. “The boy who delivered it said he did not know who it was from and left before I could give him a penny for his trouble.”

“How strange,” said Amelia as Jace took the note from Dickens. “He was not on horseback?”

“Not that I could see, my lady,” replied the butler. “It was most odd.”

Jace, who had been reading over the spidery handwriting contained in the letter, began to feel uneasy.

“It is from a man of mine in Plymouth, one Sergeant Barker,” he explained. “He claims to have made an extraordinary discovery, but I must meet him at the Dolphin in Plymouth if he is to share what he has learned.”

He handed the letter to his twin.

“And you are sure it is from him?”

“I strongly suspect it is not,” said Jace. “All sergeants can read and write, it is essential for their promotion, but I am not familiar with Barker’s lettering. I highly doubt, however, that he has the spare coin to afford such fancy paper, nor such high-quality ink to write with.”

“It could have been given to him by someone else,” said Sidney, but he sounded dubious. He passed the letter to Amelia, who subjected it to her own attention as well.

“A fair point, but then there’s the matter of the location he wishes to meet me at.”

“The Dolphin? Is that not the alehouse near the docks?” asked Amelia.

“Indeed, it is. However, Sergeant Barker and I got into a small disagreement with some navy boys at the Dolphin just a few nights ago, and we would be foolish to show our faces there again before the fleet has sailed.”

“How well do you know this Barker fellow?” asked Sidney.

“Hardly at all,” admitted Jace. “Former military looking to rejoin, and I offered to put in a good word with the colonel. We met in a sparring match, and he struck me as a good sort. I know what you are about to say, Amy, but you learn to judge the quality of your subordinate officers quickly when in the field, and a good sergeant is worth his weight in gold.”

“You think it is unlikely that he betrayed you, then.”

Jace rubbed at his neck. “I think it’s almost impossible, but almost is not a certainty. Look, there was an incident last night when I left the dining room; Barker had come up from Plymouth with some information, but after I sent him on his way, someone shot at me.”

“Someone did what?” his twin shouted.

Jace held up a hand. “No need to fly up into the boughs, Sid, people shoot at me all the time, it is the nature of soldiering. Some of them have even aimed at me. Whoever fired this musket had no talent with a firearm, and then lost their nerve the moment they missed.”

“Perhaps the Sergeant set a trap for you, and has now set another,” said Amelia. “I do not like this.”

Jace considered things and then shook his head. “No, if anything, it exonerates Barker; had he been there to kill me, I’d be toes up in a box already. This letter, though; this is certainly a trap.”

“The only person who could wish you harm in this way is Hawthorne,” said Sid, scratching at his chin as he thought about it. “We must be close to uncovering something about him that is truly terrible if he is willing to go to these lengths to stop it from coming to light.”

“Or the Earl is softening toward Jace, and the duke is afraid that he will allow Anne to marry whomever she chooses,” added Amelia. “Either way, it seems we are on the right path, although I do not like the idea of people shooting at you.”

“I will send word to Napoleon immediately that you disapprove of his soldiers trying to kill me,” he replied solemnly, only just managing to duck before the pillow she threw hit him.

“This meeting at the Dolphin could be dangerous,” said Sidney, ignoring them both. “If it really is a trap, then what are we to do about it?”

Jace grinned.

“That, dear Brother, is obvious. I’m going to walk straight in.”



“There is something amiss, Lady Anne,” said Eleanor as she bustled into Anne’s bedroom with a small tray of luncheon. “The Duke and your father have gone out shooting for the afternoon, so young Daisy and I took it upon ourselves to have a look about His Grace’s quarters.”

“You should not have put yourselves at such risk just for me,” exclaimed Anne, but Eleanor shrugged in response.

“I rather think Daisy wanted to do it, truth be told; she does not like the Duke one bit.”

“Did you find anything of interest?”

Eleanor passed the plate to Anne, motioning for her to eat.

“It’s what we did not find that’s most interesting: Bridges was gone.”

“His valet? I do not understand. Has he given up hope of being paid?”

“That’s the thing, my lady! All his things are still in his room, but after he was summoned unexpectedly by the Duke last night, he left the kitchen to see what was wanted, and then never returned.”

“What time was this?”

“A little after dinner was finished, I believe. Around the time Stuart snuck the shortbread in for the little ones.”

Around the time Hawthorne had taken his leave as well, thought Anne. What was he playing at?

“Please let me know the moment Bridges is back, Eleanor. Was there anything else you noticed?”

Her maid screwed up her face in disgust. “His clothing, my lady! Only five neckerchiefs in total, and not one a crisp white. I knew he favored the same few outfits to wear during his stay with your parents, but up close, you can see where they have been restitched or patched on the lining. Clothing of the type you might see on a merchant who is trying to look wealthier than he is.”

“Or a formerly wealthy man trying to maintain the charade,” Anne murmured. “This is excellent news, Eleanor! Excellent indeed! I would like you to share it all with the Dowager and Mama, if you would be so kind, but first, send word to the stables to prepare my horse. I will ride out to Reeves Hall and apprise them of these developments.”

She finished her lunch, changed into her riding habit, and went to collect her favorite mare, Cassandra, before riding her over to the neighboring home. Her anticipation at seeing Jace again was quickly quashed, however, although she made sure to hide any disappointment from both Amelia and her children.

“They were called to Plymouth,” said Amelia when Anne tried to casually ask where Jace and his brother were. “With luck,

they will be furnished with proof of the Duke's poor character, and your father will release you from this ridiculous marriage."

"Proving Hawthorne to be a man of low principles will not induce him to allow my marriage to Jace, though," said Anne as they began to take a slow walk around the gardens together. "I may only have five days to escape one wedding, but only a few weeks more to be allowed the other."

"We shall cross that bridge when we come to it," said Amelia airily. "As for the former, however, Sidney may have uncovered the reason why Hawthorne is so relentless in his pursuit of you!"

Anne listened intently to Amelia's story, her emotions vacillating between horror and outrage. When her friend reached the part about Jace being shot at, however, she practically exploded.

"Someone shot at him, and he did not think to tell me?" she cried, before screaming in frustration. "That idiot, foolish man!"

"Hush, he was only trying to protect you," said Amelia in the same soothing tone she usually reserved for the children.

"Protect me?" snapped Anne. "What good will it do with him trying to protect me all the time if he wishes me to follow the drum? Is he going to come home from each battle and try to convince me everything is fine because none of the Frenchmen shot at him directly? It is not funny, Amelia!"

“It sort of is when you put it like that,” replied her friend before giving in to her giggles. “I can just see it now! He will come back covered in blood and mud, with his arm in a sling and, a patch over his eye, but swear blind to you that it was just a good-natured bit of fisticuffs with the boys, and they you should not fuss over a mere scratch!”

Anne tried to remain angry, but Amelia’s laugh was infectious. “Oh, blast you for ruining my foul temper!” she complained and then started to giggle herself.

When they finally regained their composure, Amelia leaned over to give Anne a tight squeeze. “You will learn this soon enough for yourself, dearest, but husbands are the most annoying and frustrating creatures alive, even more so than children.”

“Even the good ones?”

“Especially the good ones,” replied her friend as she linked her arm through Anne’s. “I need to know more, though, dearest. Do you really mean to follow the drum? All the way to the camps, or will you remain in the liberated towns instead?”

They wandered back to the house slowly, indulging themselves in conversations about the future and taking every opportunity to joke about the men they loved. Anne felt all her doubts drift away as she and Amelia talked, and the vision of her life married to Jace grew the sense of hope she had ignored for so long.

They were almost back at the hall when the sound of a carriage being driven at a devilishly fast pace began to echo

down the driveway.

“That must be Sidney and Jace,” said Amelia brightly, “They must have something exciting to share with us.”

Before she had finished speaking, however, Sidney’s phaeton came careering into sight, his horses almost frantic with excitement. In all their lives together, Anne had never seen Jace drive his horses so recklessly, let alone the staid and thoughtful Sidney.

“Something is wrong,” she said, gripping hard onto Amelia’s arm. “Something is very, very wrong.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“It was an ambush,” said Sidney. “We damned well knew it was an ambush, but we went in anyway.”

“Who attacked him? Was it the same man that shot at him?” asked Anne, her heart thundering so loud she could barely hear herself think.

“I have no idea, but I will kill whoever did this as soon as I get my hands on them,” replied Sidney, and Anne did not doubt it.

“My fault,” whispered Jace. He was slung between them, one arm around Sidney’s neck and the other resting on Anne’s shoulder as they half carried, half dragged him into the house. Amelia had run ahead, shouting orders at the staff for hartshorn, witch-hazel, and brandy.

“What happened to uncle Jace?” cried Tom as he saw them attempting to climb the stairs.

“Nothing to worry about, old bean,” said Jace, struggling to smile through the pain. “Just got into a fight with two giants and a gargoyle, but your father rescued me.”

The other children had appeared on the landing, Charlotte holding tight onto Sally's hand.

"Monsters," said the little girl, before bursting into tears. Anne's heart went out to her little goddaughter, but Jace needed her full attention.

"Fred, I need you to be in charge while your parents and I help your uncle. Can you get Charlotte some milk and show her that everything is going to be quite fine? Uncle Jace has battled bigger monsters than this, and always come out right as a trivet."

"That's because of the angel," said Jace woozily.

"You can count on me, Aunt Anne," said Fred with a smart salute.

By the time they reached Jace's bedchamber, Amelia had prepared everything they might need. Sidney helped his brother to undress, passing the bloodied clothes to the housekeeper, while Amelia studied and fussed over every scratch or bruise that was revealed.

"Don't cry, Sweet Annie," said Jace, attempting to smile. "The chap caught my nose, and it bled like a fountain, but you need not fear for my beauty, for nothing is broken. Ouch, woman! That hurt!"

This last cry was caused by Amelia poking at his chest. "Just making sure nothing is broken, dear Brother. Your ribs are bruised, though, and will hurt for a while."

“But more importantly, will my face bruise?” asked Jace as Sidney and the butler began to remove his boots for him. “I have a role in this family as the handsome one.”

Amelia looked over at Anne with a wry smile. “Are you certain you want to follow the drum with this one, dearest?”

Sidney looked up in surprise. “Anne! You’re still here!”

“Where else would I be?”

“Well, not here; it’s not entirely proper...” He tailed off at the look his wife gave him, and even had cause to blush.

“Anne, dearest, bring me the wash basin if you please. Let us clean up these injuries and see what there is to be done about them.”

Jace laid back on the bed, closing his eyes as he submitted to their tender ministrations. In all the times Anne had imagined him naked, it had never before occurred to her that the experience would be so laced with fear and uncertainty. He hissed in pain more than once, and even uttered a filthy curse when she pressed too hard on a large black bruise that was beginning to grow across his back. But she also saw old wounds and deep scars from his time in the war. Some she could place from his early letters, but seeing his reactions to simple bruises made her realize that he had always downplayed the severity when writing to her.

He needs me to take care of him, whether he knows it or not, she thought. I should never have let him leave without me.

She paid close attention to Amelia's instructions as they worked, looking for the telltale signs that an injury might be more severe than it first appeared.

"How do you know all this?" she eventually asked, as Amelia explained the exact measure of hartshorn to water she was using.

"Their mother," Amelia replied. "She has nursed Jace on more than one occasion."

"Thirteen at the last count," quipped Sidney. "Me several times fewer."

"Stop teasing your twin and fetch his nightclothes," replied Amelia. "We must leave at this point, Anne, to preserve dear Jace's reputation, but we will be back in a few minutes to learn what happened at the Dolphin."

"Only if you bring brandy," said Jace, weak but with more cheer than a half hour earlier.

"I do not know why we bother with men," sighed Amelia, and then dragged Anne out of the room.



"You say nothing," Jace ordered, but his twin merely lifted an eyebrow.

“I’m afraid I do not lie to my wife, dear Brother. I tried it once. Never again. Now, hold up your arms so I can drop your nightshirt over you.”

“I am not an invalid, man,” Jace snapped and then cursed sharply at the bolt of pain that ripped through his shoulder.

“I know, but you came damned close,” shot back his twin. Nevertheless, he was gentle as he helped Jace to straighten his nightshirt and then slip on a housecoat over it. “Taking a beating well is one thing, but that *bastard* had a knife.”

Jace sighed. “Fine. We can tell them everything if you agree not to mention the knife. He took a swing at you as well, remember? How do you think Amy will react when she learns about that?”

Sidney considered this for a moment.

“Fine. Everything except the man with the knife.”

The ladies returned, and Jace smiled as his absolute diamond of a sister-in-law passed him an over-poured glass of brandy.

“There,” she said. “Now we know you are not at death’s door, tell us what happened in Plymouth, and why you felt the need to rush home hell-for-leather instead of finding a doctor in town.”

Jace opened his mouth, intending to make light of the situation, but Anne took his free hand into hers and then knelt at his bedside. There was no fear in her eyes, no weakness or threat of the vapors, but there was concern, and deeper still, there was absolute trust.

He sighed, took a large sip of his brandy, and then rested back against the pillows.

“We arrived at the Dolphin without any fuss, and I scouted about the back to see whether anyone lay in wait for us. It looked clear enough, but to be safe, I told Sidney to wait outside and make sure the exit remained clear in case I had to leave abruptly. The barkeep was different to the one who threw me out last time I was in there, and so there was no issue with buying myself an ale or taking a seat by the window.”

“That’s when you were attacked?” asked Anne, squeezing his fingers gently in sympathy. He did not have the heart to tell her that his knuckles felt like sandpaper had dragged across them, or that he was certain that every last inch of his hand felt bruised.

“No, that’s when I realized Sidney was surrounded.”

Amelia’s head whipped around so she could stare, wide-eyed, at her husband. “They attacked you?”

Sidney gave a dark bite of laughter. “Not a bit of it. Some of them seemed to think I should recognize them, and there was a very confusing conversation when I tried to explain the concept of identical twins.”

“I came out and greeted the six men who had circled around him,” Jace continued, “at which point one observant chap announced, ‘Bloody hell, there are two of them! Which one are we supposed to give the thrashing to?’ His companions were not the most intellectual of fellows, so while they stood there dumbstruck, Sidney and I took our gracious leave.”

Anne furrowed her brow. “So how did you get hurt?”

“We had not accounted for the three other sailors who were waiting for us in the back alley,” sighed Sidney. “We were surrounded.”

“One of the new fellows was able to tell us apart for some unknown reason,” began Jace.

“Because you called him the cross-eyed son of a sea hag,” interjected his brother.

“The fellow could tell us apart because, apparently, I had used that insult in a previous altercation between us,” amended Jace, the disapproving expression on Anne’s face making him feel sheepish. “At which point our attackers decided that two of them would hold back Sidney while the rest subjected me to a good drubbing.”

“How did you fight them off?” asked Amelia, looking slightly nauseated.

“We didn’t, not at first,” replied Sidney with grim shame. “I was hollering at them to stop at the top of my lungs, and even managed to get free of one of the blighters, but by sheer luck

we were heard by some militiamen who were just looking for an excuse to fight with the sailors, and they charged into the rescue.”

“Do not be modest, Brother! The militia had no interest in me since by this stage I was on the ground, and at least two of them kicked me in error as they entered the scuffle. It was Sidney who jumped into the middle of the brawl, dragged me to my feet, and got me out of there.”

“How brave of you, darling!” sighed Amelia, looking up at Sidney as though he had single-handedly taken out Napoleon’s entire army. Jace did not begrudge it one bit.

“But why the rush home?” asked Anne. “When we heard the carriage, I thought you were at death’s door.”

Because of the man with the knife, thought Jace, sharing a look with Sidney.

His brother stepped into the breach.

“Because of the man with the knife,” he said.

“Why did God curse me with you as a brother,” muttered Jace as both Anne and Amelia began to shout.



“You should not have tried to hide from me that Hawthorne is trying to have you killed,” Anne told Jace not ten minutes later. She had pushed Amelia and Sidney from the room,

telling them roughly that she cared not a whisker for her reputation while Jace was in pain, and firmly closed the door behind them.

At least he had the good grace to look remorseful.

“I cannot be sure that it *is* the duke, sweet Annie. It could be a horrible coincidence, for I made quite a few enemies in a short space of time while in Plymouth.”

An unnerving, horrifying thought began to demand her attention.

“Or perhaps someone was only trying to scare you away,” she said quietly. “Not from the Duke, but from Devonshire.”

He looked confused. “What do you mean, my love?”

She shook her head. “Ignore me, just a foolish notion. What are we to do, Jace? This whole fiasco is starting to feel very dangerous, and I am afraid someone will end up with even worse injuries before we can bring our marriage about. I love you, but I could not bear it if someone we care for is hurt because of us.”

He stretched out an arm, and without stopping to think about it, she climbed onto the bed beside him, paying her head very gently on his upper chest. The patterned velvet of his housecoat felt smooth on her cheek, and she could not help but remember his bare skin beneath.

“I forgot to give you something,” she mumbled and then fumbled about in her skirts. She pulled out the miniature of her as a girl of only eighteen years and pressed it into his hand. “You said it protected you. I forbid you from taking a step out of this bed without it on your person.”

The noise he made was almost a sigh of profound relief.

“I will never let it out of my sight again, sweetheart. I want you to have my father’s ring, but not until I can be sure that having it in your possession will not cause you harm.”

“I would far prefer to possess you,” she replied, and then stretched up to kiss him tenderly. She pulled back at his tiny hiss of pain. “I am so sorry!”

“Do not be, it feels better already,” said Jace, his gaze becoming darker and more intense. “Kiss me again.”

She did as he asked, but he lay still on the bed, allowing her to take the lead as she tentatively moved her hand to stroke his cheek while she teased his mouth open with hers and slipped her tongue gently between his lips.

Heat began to pool inside of her as she pushed herself up and closer to him, pressing her body against him so gently, so slowly, when her every instinct was to tear off all their clothes so she could feel his skin upon hers.

“I wish you were naked, Jace,” she murmured into his mouth. “I want to kiss away every bruise and scar you’ve ever had, and then explore all of your glorious body with my mouth.”

He made a noise like a strangled growl, bringing his hand around to bury into her hair.

“You have no idea what you are offering, Anne, but by God, I want to feel it.”

She pulled her head back a little way to meet his gaze as she spoke.

“I know exactly what I am offering; Amelia explained much of it to me years ago. I want to run my tongue all over your chest until I reach your manhood, and then I shall caress you the way you caressed me at the cottage.”

“You are going to drive me mad, woman,” said Jace, his voice hoarse. He tugged at the neckline of her dress, making Anne gasp with pleasure as he ran his thumb against her tightening peaks. “Tell me more. Tell me what you’ve thought of doing with me when you have been alone.”

“More of this.” She gasped as he began to suck gently on her breast. Even though the blankets provided a barrier between their bodies, she could feel his erection, large and firm against her thigh. “But I told you in the cottage that I want to touch you in return.”

Whatever he had intended to say in response was lost in the moan of pleasure he made as her hand pressed against his throbbing flesh.

“I want to do this with no blankets between us, nothing but my hand wrapped around you. I would move up and down the length, following it with my tongue. I would demand that you touch me in return, let me feel your fingers at my core again, bringing me close to the edge, until I am wet with desire.”

Jace threw his head back onto the pillow. “You’ll be the death of me, Sweet Annie,” he growled, “and you are lucky I can barely move without the pain cooling my ardor. I swear that is the only thing stopping me from giving into temptation right now, for consequences be damned, I would give my life to be inside of you right now.”

Anne swallowed.

“Show me what you did when you were thinking of me.”

He fixed a hungry gaze on her as he slid his hand beneath the blankets and closed around his shaft. The sheets obscured her view as he ran his hand along its length, but somehow it made it all the more tantalizing.

“I would think of what it would be like, having you to myself every night. I would imagine undressing you, then lying you back onto fresh white sheets, so I could see every part of your naked glory, your hair undone and spread across the pillows. I would run my hands and my mouth across your skin, finding every secret place that makes you gasp and sigh when I touch them. I thought about your bare breasts, about cupping them with my hands, and teasing them into hard peaks with my fingers.”

“Like this?” asked Anne, curling her fingers around her exposed breast so she could pinch and tease at it. Jace growled his approval, his hand moving harder and firmer along himself.

“I would try to imagine how you would taste, and dear Lord, I had no idea you would be so warm and sweet when you came apart against my tongue. I dreamt of making you slick with desire for me, of taking you over the edge time and time again, with my mouth and my fingers, until you would beg me to take you, beg me to slide into your warmth, over and over again, until you were screaming out my name as the pleasure became too much for us both.”

Anne leaned forward, her lips brushing softly against his ear.

“Take me, Jace,” she begged, “Please, I need to feel you inside of me, I need you to fill me and pleasure me. I want you to take me, not just with your mouth and fingers. Please.”

Jace swore roughly. He pulled her tight with his free hand, pressing his face into her breasts as his movements beneath the blanket became almost frantic. Anne wrapped her hands about his head, holding him tight as he lost all control and pleasure took him crashing over the edge.

He lay still, panting in her arms for a perfect minute, and Anne never wanted to let him go.

She would do anything to keep him safe, she realized, but she would do so from his side, forever. Whoever had set these ruffians upon him had made a terrible mistake.

And she had a heavy, sickening idea of who it might have been.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The hour was late when Anne finally made it home, for she had remained with the Reeves family until Jace had fallen into an exhausted sleep. If Amelia or Sidney had suspected anything untoward had happened in the bedroom, they did not acknowledge it and contented themselves with making sure she returned home safely.

There was nothing safe about her mood, however.

Anne did not pause to remove her hat and gloves when she entered the manor and was almost rude as she stormed past the servants on her way to the study.

“Was it you?” she demanded as she flung the door wide open.

Her father looked up in surprise.

“What is wrong, Annie?”

“I want to know if it was you,” she demanded. “I have run it over in my mind a thousand times, and there is only one person whom I can think of who would do such a thing. I hope

to God I am wrong, Father, but after the threats you have made in the past, I am inclined to fear you are capable.”

“You are hysterical,” he said flatly. “If you are going to indulge in a fit of dramatics, kindly do so elsewhere, and then return when you are of a more sober mind.”

“Dramatics?” scoffed Anne. “*Dramatics?* Someone tried to have Jace killed this morning, and I need to know it was not you.”

“Someone tried to kill the Reeves boy?” said her father, his brows knitted together. “Where? What happened?”

“He was lured to the Dolphin in Plymouth, where he and Sidney were set upon by a gang of ruffians who were out for blood. They beat him badly, and at least one attempted to stab him for good measure,” she replied, her voice breaking at the end as tears began to gather behind her eyes. “Was planning to ruin his career not enough for you, Father? Did you have to disable or murder him as well?”

“That is enough, Anne,” shouted the Earl, banging his fist down hard upon the table. “I am sorry to learn the Major has been hurt in such a manner, but I am hardly surprised by it.”

“So, you *were* involved!”

“Do not be such a fool,” snapped her father with evident disgust. “Jace has never been anything but a reckless, foolhardy young man with a selfish disregard for those around him. It is about time his antics caught up with him.”

“That could not be further from the truth, and you know it,” Anne argued in response. “He would not be a major if his superior officers did not have faith in him, and he has always cared for the wellbeing of those around him.”

Her father’s lip curled. “Is that so, my girl? Even if I could forgive him for all the times he dragged you into scrapes—”

“—That he always pulled me out of,” she interjected.

“Even then, his behavior the night I found him in Plymouth myself combined with his failings at Badajoz would be enough to convince me that whatever occurred at the Dolphin this morning, Jace Reeves brought it upon himself.”

“He did not fail at Badajoz!”

Her father gave a world-weary sigh. “Trust that some of us may know better than you about matters, or war, Annie. The Duke had it directly from Horseguards that Major Reeves was sent home due to his failure during the siege. He lost every man in the party he was leading, and two good captains besides, then lost control of his remaining soldiers as they rioted through Badajoz, in some cases attacking our Spanish allies.”

Anne crossed her arms over her chest. “You are wrong about what happened at the siege, and besides, what was Hawthorne doing, spying on Jace in such a fashion?”

“Acting appropriately as your fiancé,” retorted her father. “He was concerned about your childish infatuation with Jace and feared the boy might lead you astray. I confess I agree with him in this matter, and although it breaks my heart to tell you that he is far from the glorious infantry officer you imagine him to be, the truth is that the boy is as reckless as ever!”

Anne let out a bitter laugh as she shook her head. “Are you so blinded by Hawthorne’s coronet that you cannot see that he is lying to you, Father? How did he manage to correspond with Horseguards when he has no servant to send? Who, precisely did this supposed servant speak to there, and who provided this account of Jace’s actions? Was it Colonel Hayworth himself?”

“His Grace has no faith in the skills of Hayworth, having seen him in action while he was in Portugal.”

“How convenient for him! Naturally, the Duke, a man with no military experience or knowledge to speak of, knows that both Jace and his colonel represent the poorest aspect of his Majesty’s Army, despite them both having been lauded in *The Gazette* for their bravery! I knew you could be stubborn at times, Father, but I never thought you could be so obtuse!”

“Hold your tongue, girl,” shouted her father, rising to his feet. His face was turning purple with rage, and his hands had balled into fists on the desk. “Your blind devotion to the Reeves boy was ridiculous before he joined the army, but now it is childish in the extreme! Any normal girl would have lost interest in him the moment I stopped the correspondence between you, but no, you had to dig in your heels and continue to behave as though you were betrothed to some penniless soldier with no prospects to speak of! I had nothing to do with what happened to Jace this morning, but by God, if I had

thought it would keep the two of you apart, then I would have ordered a beating the moment he set foot back in England!”

Anne gripped the back of the chair before her. Her vision swam and her ears rang as she took in the full implications of what the Earl had just admitted to her.

“It was you?” she whispered, not wanting to believe it.

“I just said I had nothing to do with Jace’s altercation,” snapped her father. “I am sorry if he was hurt, but I have no doubt he brought it upon himself.”

“The letters,” said Anne, feeling as though the rug had been pulled from under her feet. “Jace did not stop writing to me, nor I him. You were keeping the letters to yourself.”

She watched a thousand expressions cross over her father’s face, but irritation won out over shame.

“It was for your own protection, Annie. You were ruining your chance to make a splendid match with that childish infatuation.”

“You promised me,” she pressed as the pain of his betrayal warred with her rage. “You gave me permission to write to him and promised that if he made something of himself, you would consider the marriage.”

“I did consider it,” he snapped, his anger returning. “I considered it briefly and decided that no child of mine was

going to a camp follower or the future wife of some half-pay officer who could not be trusted to put her needs before his own.”

There was so much she could say, so many things she wanted to scream and cry and shout, but they disappeared beneath a sense of numb clarity as so many of her father’s comments and criticisms over the years finally fell into place.

“I trusted your word,” she said simply. “I trusted that you were an honorable man and that you would never break your word, for your honor was sacred.”

He looked uncomfortable, and then coughed hard into his hand.

“I had to protect you from yourself,” he muttered, but he would not look up to meet her eyes. “Once you are a duchess you will see I acted for the best.”

“I will never forgive you for this,” she said quietly and left the room. She thought she heard him call after her but did not stop to look back.

She almost crashed into Hawthorne at the bottom of the stairs.

“My dear child, why are you not dressed for the evening?” he asked, looking her up and down with what she knew was feigned disappointment.

She turned her eyes to him, and while she did not know what he saw in her expression, it was enough to make him take a step back.

“You are a vile creature who is without honor or redeeming qualities,” she said. “What’s more, your debtors in London are aware that you are here.”

She felt a flicker of satisfaction as the color drained from his face, but she did not wait around for him to form a response. She climbed the stairs in a daze, wandering down the corridors until she found herself, quite unconsciously, outside of her mother’s bedchamber. She knocked gently and was admitted by her mother’s maid.

“Annie, what has happened my love?” asked the Countess. She was dressed for the evening but had not finished putting on her jewelry. She discarded the gold necklace without a thought, however, as she rushed over to Anne, her arms outstretched.

“Mama,” she whispered as the rage finally died and was replaced by the overwhelming sadness of betrayal. “Oh, Mama, I can never forgive Father for this.”

Anne fell into her mother’s welcoming arms and began to sob.



Jace did not know when he had fallen asleep, but from the light coming through the gaps in the curtains, he could tell it was morning. He remembered begging Anne to leave and get home safely, half for his peace of mind, and half to maintain his remaining sanity. If he had hoped a small taste of her

would dull his need to touch her, then he had been a fool. The greater the intimacy they shared, the more he wanted her.

He sat up slowly in the bed, wincing at the pain in his chest, arms, legs, basically everywhere. It was not unbearable—he had been wounded far worse while on campaign—but it was far from a pleasant sensation. He ached, but he was alive.

There was a small bundle curled up on the foot of his bed that at first, he thought might have been a puppy or large cat wrapped in a blanket, but it stirred at his movement to reveal the bleary-eyed face of his youngest niece.

“Good morning, Charlotte. What are you doing in here?”

She yawned and stretched before answering him, a wooden sword still clasped in her hand.

“Scent duty,” she said with great dignity.

“Sentry duty is a very important job,” said Jace, diplomatically forgetting to mention that she had been fast asleep only a moment before. “Why did you need to stay in here to keep watch?”

She gripped her wooden sword and brandished it about her. “So monsters know not to fight us!”

“Were you defending me, little one?” asked Jace, touched by her concern. “I thank you very much, but the monsters who

tried to give me a good licking soon learned what a brave man your father is when he saved me, you know.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes. “Not those ones, silly. The ones who come when you are sleeping. I heard you shout out this morning after I had breakfast, but you were still asleep, so Mama said I could stay to keep the monsters away if I promised not to wake you. And do you know, Uncle Jace, that after I waved my sword over you, they did not come back?”

Jace nodded, not trusting himself to speak around the lump that had formed in his throat. He knew he had been dreaming of Badajoz again, of the innocents whom he could not save from the men who had supposedly liberated them, and yet here was the most innocent child of his acquaintance, sacrificing her playtime just to save him from the monstrous actions of soldiers in what felt like a lifetime ago.

“Thank you for protecting me, Charlotte. You have done the Reeves name proud.”

She sat straighter and beamed at him, but then jumped as she remembered something important.

“Mama said that when you *do* wake up, I have to tell you there are some people waiting to see you.”

“Which people? Have they been here long?”

Charlotte clambered down off the bed and then gave a shrug. “New people. I am going to go play with Tom now, bye!”

“At least send someone in to help me get dressed!” he shouted after her.

It was almost half an hour later when Jace walked down the stairs, cautiously but at close to his usual pace, feeling smart and much stronger in his freshly laundered regimentals. For all the jokes that women were irresistibly attracted to a scarlet coat, Jace secretly believed the uniform bestowed a special sort of confidence upon the wearer, and right now, he felt that his bruises and aches had been magically subdued by his clothing.

He strolled into the drawing room, to find it full of familiar faces, and standing beside the window with Sidney was the only man whom Jace was convinced looked better in regimentals than he did.

“Colonel Hayworth! How good to see you, sir!” he cried with genuine happiness.

“Well met, Major! It’s been devilish tricky talking to your double here, I seem incapable of remembering you are a twin.”

“Sidney is the better man of the family, but I assure you, I am the better soldier. Sweet Jackie, you prince among sergeants! How ever did you find him so quickly?”

The Sergeant looked sheepish. “It happens they were looking for you as well, sir, and we crossed paths on the London Road, them coming to Plymouth, and me heading the opposite way. I recognized the Colonel’s wife as I was heading past a coaching inn, so doubled back to hand them your letter.”

Jace turned to see a familiar, dark-haired beauty reclining on the couch beside Amelia.

“Dona Luisa, queen of the regiment!” Jace cried, capturing her hand to kiss the air above her fingers. “Forgive me for not bowing or kneeling before you, but I’m in a shockingly bad way, much to my shame.”

The Portuguese wife of Colonel Hayworth laughed indulgently at his flattery, going so far as to wrap him lightly on the knuckles with her lace fan.

“I have always know that you are a terrible flirt, and you prove it, no?” she said, her thick accent just making her as alluring as ever.

“Never, for we are all devoted to you,” he replied, then threw a smile at Amelia. “Mrs. Hayworth—Dona Luisa—is a gift from heaven to us, for she is never afraid to muck in at a camp, and after a battle, she can be relied upon to have supper ready for those who can eat and have organized the care of those who cannot. She is the colonel of the camp followers, and they will jump to attention if she issues a command.”

“I am not so bad as all that, Senhora, but I like to make my husband comfortable,” Luisa told Amelia with a smile, “but do not believe that he is a worshipper to me! No, that is for his *linda anjo*.”

“And also, why we are here,” interjected her husband smoothly. “It seems your angel is in the clutches of the same blackhearted fellow my wife’s family has been hunting for some years. I will not let another young woman be ruined by

her association with that devil. Does her family know of his true nature?"

"Her mother does, but Lord Fitzroy has been taken in by the Duke's rum dealings, and I fear that a distaste of the idea of me as a son-in-law has only strengthened Hawthorne's suit."

"The Earl will not think so when I have told him how things stand in Lisbon," said Hayworth grimly.

"But how came you to find Barker?" asked Jace. "Capital fellow, by the way. I've convinced him to join the regiment, as I need a good sergeant."

Hayworth raised an eyebrow. "Crazy Jace and Mad Jack Barker, fighting side by side? Napoleon with surrender immediately if he ever catches sight of the two of you."

"The Colonel had got wind of some gentleman asking around London after the Duke, and some foreign fellows too, and dropped the name Reeves in his ear," said Barker, still standing to attention despite Amelia's attempts to lure him to a seat.

"Crockford?" sighed Sidney.

The Colonel nodded, his lips tugging upward at the corner. "Crockford, indeed, although I assumed it was you doing the asking rather than your good brother here."

“He did not tell me he was writing to you, Colonel, nor that you were in England, or I would have called on you myself when I was in London,” said Sid, sending a reproving look toward Jace.

“In my defense, I was only guessing that Lord Hayworth was in London,” Jace explained. “The excellent Sergeant Barker here—did I mention, Colonel, that he intends to re-enlist as soon as possible?—was the one who confirmed it, which is why I sent him on his mission.”

“This must be enough for the Earl, surely,” said Amelia, looking at each of them hopefully. “Coupled with all the things we have uncovered for ourselves, surely he will relent and let Anne cry off from the engagement.”

“He would be a villain to force his child onto such a man,” said Dona Luisa with deep disgust, “but perhaps he will not get the chance.”

“My brothers-in-law,” said the Colonel by way of explanation, “were following a lead up to Harrogate when we learned he may be here in Devonshire instead. I have sent word after them and expect them to rush here without delay.”

“Then you can be married to her, Jace!” said Amelia, beaming with happiness.

Jace instinctively pressed his hand to the pocket where he carried Anne’s miniature.

“One thing at a time, Amy. The Earl still thinks I’m a dashed loose screw who is unworthy of his daughter.”

“He isn’t exactly wrong in that assessment,” said Sidney, “but you are still a perfect match for Annie, and she for you. The Earl does not know his daughter if he thinks she would settle for anyone but Major Crazy Jace Reeves as her husband.”

There was a commotion outside of the house, echoing in from the windows. Jace and Sidney were at the front door before anyone else could blink, although Barker was only one step behind them.

“There’s no time for propriety, Dickens! I must give this message to the Major right now!”

“Then remember your place and use the servant’s entrance, Stuart. This is a respectable home.”

“Hang respectable, you old badger; my mistress is in need of support, and Sir Sidney’s mother sent me post-haste to summon her sons!”

Jace recognized the footman from Fitzroy Manor, especially as Anne had singled him out alongside her maid, Eleanor, as two of her fiercest allies among her father’s staff.

“Stuart, is it not?” he said, strolling toward the front door. “It is quite alright, Dickens, let the man in to deliver his message.”

The butler heaved the sigh of the much put-upon, but, nonetheless, stepped back to allow the Fitzroy's footman into the hallway.

“I apologize for the nature of my intrusion, Sir Sidney, Major Jace, but the dowager Lady Reeves asks that you make for the manor with all possible haste. The Earl's sister, the Lady Serena, has arrived earlier than anticipated, and things have come to *point non plus*.”

The twins exchanged a look.

“Unfortunate, but not the end of the world, surely? It is not as though Lady Anne can be forced to the altar by morning.”

“It seems that the duke procured a license without informing my mistresses,” said Stuart grimly. “Lady Anne is trying to stall for time by throwing a dramatic tantrum, aided by the Countess. It is not... *pleasant*, sirs. The ladies beg that if you have any cards left to play, that you do so immediately, for they are running out of decorative vases, and are loathe to throw the Ming.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Stay away from me!” screeched Anne before hurling the old-fashioned tulip vase over the landing, gaining some satisfaction from the almighty crash it made when it connected with the floor below. “I hate you! I hate you!”

“Well done,” whispered Eleanor. “You sound quite mad, Lady Anne.”

“At least I could run away and join a theater troop if all other options fail me,” Anne whispered back. “Have I anything else to throw?”

“Only the chamber pot, my lady, but I have not had the opportunity to empty it.”

Anne considered it for a moment. “I shall save that for the Duke should he dare to show himself.”

“Annie, I demand you stop your histrionic display immediately,” came an imperious female voice from below. “What will His Grace think of you? Do you wish to make him disgusted by you?”

“Yes, Aunt Serena! That is exactly what I wish! He is nothing but a lying, devious, fortune-hunting dog with more gambling debts than he has had hot dinners!” she screamed back.

“How dare you insult Hawthorne in such a fashion, he is a duke!” shouted her aunt, aghast at the suggestion that any peer could be less than unimpeachable.

“He is a liar, and I would rather die than marry him!” Anne screeched. She glanced at Eleanor and whispered, “Too dramatic?”

“The perfect amount of drama,” Eleanor reassured her. “I have just remembered there are some breakables in the Blue Bedroom; should I fetch them?”

“Oh, yes! Especially those horrid little china dogs Aunt Serena loves so much.”

“You will stop this insolent behavior at once, young lady!” came her father’s voice from somewhere near that of his sister’s. “Good grief, Anne, I have never known you to be such a recalcitrant child before.”

“You never tried to force me to marry a white-livered shaver who hasn’t a feather to fly with before!” she screamed back. “Do not *dare* to come up here, Father! I have the chamber pot and I am not afraid to use it!”

“Fitzroy, what are you doing to our poor child!” shouted her mother as she came storming out of the morning room. “After everything you have done to her, how did you think she would

react when you tried to force her into an undesirable marriage?”

“You have coddled that girl too much, Helen,” Aunt Serena sneered. “I said so when she came to stay with me in Harrogate, and it is true to this day. How can marriage to a duke be undesirable, I ask you?”

“This is none of your concern, Serena,” snapped the Countess.

Anne crept forward on the landing so she could sneak a look at the proceedings on the floor below. Aunt Serena, leaning heavily on her cane in the center of the reception hall, was scowling at the Countess with a lifetime’s worth of resentment, while Anne’s mother looked like a lioness defending her cubs. Her father looked torn between the two women, his gaze occasionally darting to the staircase or his study door.

A wail of despair came from the morning room, and Anne grinned at the show being put on by Jace’s mother on her behalf.

“Do you hear what you have done, Fitzroy?” her mother snapped. “Our dearest friend came to us for rest and recuperation, and you have set her nerves to complete disorder!”

“How am I responsible for that?” spluttered the Earl. “I am not the one tossing every breakable thing in the house over the landing!”

Eleanor, returning with perfect timing, passed a small soap dish to Anne, who threw it over the balustrade with an incoherent scream.

“You are the one who insulted the character and conduct of her son, that’s why, and were the architect of the heartache that afflicted both Jace and our daughter,” snapped the Countess, and Anne knew that her mother was truly angry about this act. “Was that on your advice, Serena? Or did he not tell you that the Major had not neglected poor Annie, but that *he* was the one who stole and withheld their correspondence?”

“Is this true, Fitzroy?” Anne heard her Aunt Serena demand, a cold note to her voice.

“I did it for the both of them,” protested her father. “I will not have my child traipsing across Spain as an army wife!”

Eleanor passed Anne a water jug. She hurled it down toward her father but missed him by several feet.

“You had no right!” she screamed, not acting this time. “You made me believe I was abandoned, and him to believe I was shallow and flighty! It damaged my friendship with Amelia and left me with no one I could trust with my heart!”

A sob escaped Anne, and she ducked back down behind the balustrade, where Eleanor put a soothing arm about her.

“This is not what you told me when Annie came to stay with me,” said Aunt Serena in a loud, imperious tone. “You said she was in love with a half-pay officer who had chosen to gallivant

about in Portugal rather than follow through on a promise to marry her!”

“He was an unsteady boy and look how it has worked out! She is engaged to the Duke of Hawthorne!”

“That is hardly the point, Fitzroy!”

“Exactly what I said, Serena!” agreed the Countess.

Anne almost smiled; her father’s silence practically screamed out his confusion as to how his sister, his staunchest supporter, was now siding against him.

She heard the front door swing open, and the footman, Stuart, breathlessly announced the arrival of guests.

“What are you playing at, boy? Tell them we are not at home!” shouted the Earl, but the sound of boots crunching broken pottery underfoot told Anne that his order came too late.

“It seems we have called at a bad time, Lord Fitzroy, but I am afraid it cannot wait,” said a familiar male voice. Anne stood up so she could see the new arrivals, and her heart soared.

“Not now, Sir Sidney, and you, Jace Reeves, can leave at once because you are not welcome in my home!”

“He is welcome in mine!” the Countess said loudly over her husband. “Or did you forget that their mother is prostrate in

the withdrawing room and needs their support after the callous way you have treated her?”

“I have not treated anyone callously!” the Earl protested, his exasperation clear.

“Except my niece, from what you have revealed to me,” said Aunt Serena with an acerbic edge to her words. “You two I remember, Sir Sidney and Major Reeves, but who are these people with you?”

“May I make Colonel Hayworth and his wife, Dona Luisa, known to you all? This is Earl Fitzroy, the Countess, Lady Fitzroy and his sister Lady Serena,” said Jace, every inch the proper officer. “My Lord, the Colonel and Dona Luisa have some information to share with you that cannot wait.”

“And this good fellow is Sergeant Barker,” added Sidney, indicating the large, middle-aged man lurking at the back of the group. The poor Sergeant did not look happy to have been brought to the attention of the Earl at all.

“Jace! Jace, should you be up and about? Do you not need to rest?” said Anne as she raced down the stairs, ignoring everyone but him. His face had escaped any bruising, but she could tell from the way he was holding himself that he was in some pain despite his stoic expression. She paused just short of throwing herself at him, not from any sense of decorum so much as she was afraid of hurting him further.

“I am well enough to be here, Lady Anne,” he replied, the formality for her father’s benefit, she was sure. “I have a promise to keep to you.”

“La linda anjo,” said the woman Jace had introduced as Dona Luisa. “Her picture did not do her justice, I think. She will be popular with the officers and ladies.”

“The world has gone mad,” declared the Earl. “All of you are quite mad.”

“The only madness here is your refusal to listen to the information and evidence others have presented to you, Father,” said Anne coldly. “If you will not listen to your daughter or your wife, then perhaps you will listen to our guests.”

“Please, Fitzroy,” said her mother, changing tack and approaching her husband with her arms outstretched. “My darling, you have always heeded my counsel before Hawthorne’s arrival, and so I beg of you to come to the morning room and just listen to what we each have to say. I cannot bear for us to be out of accord like this.”

Whether it was because her father was incapable of resisting his wife’s gentle manipulations or just because he was glad of a friendly face amid the chaos, Anne watched as he grumbled about them all being at least one pigeon short of a coup, while her mother drew him into the morning room, where the Dowager had made a remarkable recovery from her attack of the nerves.



No matter what the Earl thought of everyone else in the morning room, Jace watched as the man came under Dona Luisa’s spell. She flattered and cajoled Lord Fitzroy before

beginning her tale and had him eating from her hand long before she finished it.

“My cousin was only a child at the time, Senhor, not fifteen but full of fire. She thought she knew better than anyone, and her mother agreed. Her father died, you see, and left everything to Juana. He was a count, and a rich one, so my cousin had money, birth, and beauty. Not unlike *la linda anjo*, your daughter, no?”

“Juana was too young to have suitors, but her mother—my father’s sister—let Juana have her way, and so she went to parties and flirted, but like a game, no? She liked to be loved but never did she bring us shame. Understand that, Senhor, for it is important. Juana thought she knew how to flirt, but she did not know that the British soldiers indulged her as a pretty child and that my countrymen did the same.

“Then she met Hawthorne,” said Dona Luisa, and pretended to spit on the ground.

“This is where I enter the story,” said Hayworth, his expression grim. “I became aware of the Duke early in my visit to the capital, for while he was popular with the local gentry, Lord Wellington—he was still General Sir Arthur Wellesley at the time—had taken him in dislike, as had numerous other officers. He played deep, and while he had successfully taken the fortunes of several of my brothers-in-arms, he owed money to several more. When I realized that the young heiress he spoke of as his future bride was none other than little Juana, I brought everything I knew about the man to Luisa.”

“That devil had found a way into Juana’s mind long before we knew what was happening,” growled Dona Luisa, her dark

eyes growing darker still. “He went from flirtation and flattery to picking at her, *pick pick pick*, until she barely ate, barely danced, and was afraid the world laughed at her, not with her. He did the same to her mother, *pick pick pick*, until his word was law to her, and her own mind a traitor. He convinced her that little Juana needed his guidance and the protection of his title, for only he could keep her from trouble in a world of war and uncertainty.”

Jace noticed that the Earl, his brows furrowed deeply, had stolen a look at Anne during this part of Dona Luisa’s speech, while his sweet Annie just leaned against her mother for support. Damn, but he wished he could gather her up in his arms and kiss her fears away.

“When we arrived in Lisbon,” continued Dona Luisa, nodding toward her husband, “we were to stay with my aunt, and I was surprised to find Juana with spirits so low when there were so many parties to attend, while her mother was afraid of everything in case people should think my cousin badly behaved. I coaxed the truth from them; Hawthorne was pressuring them to arrange the marriage but could not do so without the agreement of her guardians, all of whom are excellent men, and who refused to consider it while my cousin was so young.

“Once my dear husband told me that, even with his title, he was no man of honor, I talked with Juana, who confessed all to me: Hawthorne had convinced her they must elope that very night, and every objection she made was met with more picking until she no longer knew her own heart on anything. When I told her she did not need to do anything she did not wish for, and she could live with me if she so wished, Juana cried and told us that she did not know if she loved the Duke, for although he told her that she did, the thought of him touching her even a little made her cry.”

“That poor child,” murmured Anne with such heartfelt sympathy that everyone, even her father, nodded in agreement.

“At the request of Juana’s mother, I paid a visit to Hawthorne and informed him that any agreement he had extracted from the girl was void, and that he would do well to leave the family in peace. He did not argue or threaten me as I supposed he might, but he treated me with such contempt, I came close to demanding satisfaction. Had I known then what I know now, I should have beaten him and enjoyed every moment.”

“What happened, Dona Luisa?” asked the Countess, although all of them had guessed from that lady’s stricken expression that the tale would not end anywhere good.

“He did not listen to my husband. We met him again at a ball hosted by the English officers, after a week of keeping him away from my cousin. Little Juana had regained some of her vibrant air and was practicing her flirting once again with the handsome soldiers. Hawthorne went up to her and tried to tease her to embarrassment, but it did not work. She dismissed him, and so many of the men present laughed at his expense, he must have decided to hate her.

“We do not know how he got into their home the next morning, perhaps he paid one of the servants who soon left after what happened, but he got into her room, and—” Dona Luisa’s voice broke into a sob.

Jace felt the world swim as he thought of how the poor girl must have suffered at the hands of a supposed gentleman.

The white dress, fluttering in the wind. A feeble cry. A child's shoe, abandoned in a sticky pool of blood.

They were supposed to protect the innocent in the world, not hurt them.

“He horsewhipped her,” said the Colonel with cold anger. “He treated her worse than a dog, while her mother had to listen helplessly from the other side of the door. Hawthorne escaped before he could be apprehended, but as no one saw him enter or leave, it was only Juana’s word against his.”

“But who could we tell of what he had done?” begged Dona Luis. “Juana would be ruined, and the protections a Duke enjoys made it impossible to get justice. My brothers, though, decided he cannot go unpunished and have sworn to make him pay his debt to my family.”

“What of Juana? Is she well?” asked Anne and Jace loved her for her concern over an unknown girl.

Dona Luisa smiled wanly. “She is healed, which is good, and a young officer from the Rifles chose to marry her. She is happy now, despite what that man did, and my aunt is at peace, knowing a good man looks after her daughter.”

“Hawthorne’s perfidy does not end there,” added Colonel Hayworth. “Luisa’s brothers found a second woman whom the Duke had been courting and controlling, up in Yorkshire. However, he cried off when he learned the girl’s grandfather had been a humble fishmonger despite the wealth and prestige of his descendants, claiming they had deceived them. He did

not pay back the significant sums that had been outlaid for his convenience by the girl's family either."

"And so, Senhor, do you see why we could not let you marry your child to such a man without trying to intervene?" said Dona Luisa, imploring the Earl to take on board her story. "He owes my family a great deal, and we will not rest until he has paid for his crimes."

The Earl was not the one to respond to this speech, but rather it was his sister.

"I am appalled to think I was taken in by such a wicked man," she declared. "Fitzroy, you must summon him immediately to answer for his perfidy!"

"I need to think on this," said the Earl, getting to his feet suddenly. "There is much to consider."

A hush fell upon the room as Lord Fitzroy left.

"I believe refreshments are in order," said the Countess before pulling on the bell to summon the butler.

"I need some air," said Anne, her voice underscored with a slight tremor. "I will take a turn about on the terrace, if you do not object, Mama."

"Take Major Reeves with you," ordered her aunt before her mother could say a word in response. "You must go nowhere alone while that rascal of a Duke is under this roof."

“As you command, Lady Serena,” said Jace, at Anne’s side in less time than it took for the older woman to blink. “I will guard her with my life.”

Pausing only for Anne to collect a shawl, they were soon alone together in the gardens, save for Sergeant Barker tailing them from an appropriate distance.

“I owe you an apology, my love,” said Anne. She had interwoven her arm through his and was holding on to it as though she might collapse without his support. “I confronted Father in the belief he had set those ruffians upon you, and instead, I discovered it was he who stole your letters before they ever reached me, and never sent forward the ones I wrote to you. He lied to everyone.”

“It was your father?” exclaimed Jace. “Good grief, why did we never consider that before now?”

“Because I trusted his word, and so did you,” sighed Anne, resting her head gently upon his arm. The bruise below ached in protest, but it was worth the pain to have her so close. “He did not want me to follow the drum with you, and so preferred to put us both through heartache and misery instead. I will never forgive him.”

Jace gave her arm a light squeeze. “He did what he thought was best for you, sweet Annie. Do not judge him too harshly for trying to protect you.”

“How can you forgive him so easily?”

“It is not easy in the least, my love; but I can understand it. Life is difficult for the women who follow their husbands to war, and not at all like anything you have known before. Your father underestimates you by believing you are not up to snuff, but I can appreciate the impulse to do anything to protect one you love.”

“You are too good a man, Jace Reeves,” sighed Anne, and then turned so that she could snuggle into his arms. They stood like that for several minutes, Annie’s arm wrapped around his waist and his about her shoulders, and Jace could not think of a more perfect moment in all his days.

Barker gave a polite cough, and Jace looked up to see the Earl approaching them, his movements tentative, as though he feared he was unwelcome on his own property. Jace stepped back from Anne to could give Lord Fitzroy as deep a bow as he could manage with his bruising.

“My lord,” he said respectfully.

“I, err, I need to speak with you both,” said the Earl, speaking to the gravel rather than to them directly.

“Of course, my lord.”

“In light of everything that has been brought to my attention,” he began, then paused as he tugged at his cravat. “What I mean to say is that I was wrong. About the duke, damn his eyes, and about the two of you. I will never be happy about your match, and I do not wish to see my Annie exposed to the life of a camp follower, but she is old enough to make her own

decisions, and I should not have tried to come between you the way I did.”

“Are you giving your blessing to Jace and me, Father?” asked Anne. The earl harrumphed before replying.

“I will not stand in your way if you choose to wed the Major, nor will I do anything to the detriment of his career or your inheritance,” the Earl clarified. He threw a dark look at Jace. “If she comes to any harm, my boy, I am holding you personally responsible.”

“As would I, Lord Fitzroy. As would I.”

The Earl sniffed again and rocked back and forth on his toes for a long, awkward silence.

“Well. Come with me now, Major, if you will. There are settlements to be made if you are to be married within the week. What? Well, don’t look so surprised! Serena is already here, so we may as well see the thing done before the week is out.”

Jace glanced at Anne, who motioned with her hands that he should follow her father quickly before the man changed his mind.

“Go back inside, my love,” he told her.

“At once, I promise,” she replied, and then turned toward the back of the house, where the kitchen entrance was located.

Jace followed the Earl in the opposite direction, toward a side door that linked his study to the formal gardens. Lord Fitzroy paused on the threshold, his shoulders heavy with resignation and sadness.

“She has not forgiven me, has she?” said the older man.

“Give her time, my lord. She will come to understand that you acted with her best interests at heart.”

“I would not have carried out my threats, you know,” said Lord Fitzroy as they entered his study together. “I would never have tried to destroy your career out of spite, nor would I have reduced my dear girl’s inheritance. I thought it would be enough to sway the both of you, but as my wife has pointed out to me a thousand times already, I did you both an injustice by underestimating your characters. When I think how I was misled by that rascal Hawthorne, I begin to think I may not be so good a judge of character at all.”

“You were acting in Annie’s best interests, my lord, and while we may disagree on what that looks like, I cannot fault you for loving her. Where is Hawthorne at present?”

“Gone,” growled Lord Fitzroy. “It seems the arrival of your Colonel was enough to put the fear of God into the man, for he and that servant of his, Bridges, have absconded with only what they could quickly stuff into some hand luggage. I pray Dona Luisa’s family catches up to him before he disappears once again, for he deserves a thrashing. Now, take a seat, Major Reeves. We must run through the terms of Anne’s fortune, so you understand what you will and will not have access to.”

Jace did his best to pay attention, but some of the clauses the Earl kept referencing were convoluted and quite dull to consider. On the other hand, Lord Fitzroy was treating him as an equal for the first time in his life, and so he was determined not to ruin the tentative peace between them by yawning or appearing disinterested.

An hour had passed by when Sidney and the Colonel charged into the study, both breathless and agitated. The Colonel's hand rested at the space where his sword should be, and he looked every inch a soldier about to go to war.

“Where is Annie, Jace? Is she in here with you?”

“What has happened?” demanded Lord Fitzroy, panic written across his features. “Why are you looking for Annie?”

“I found Sergeant Barker slumped over by the formal garden,” explained Sidney. “He is recovered but has suffered a nasty blow to the back of the head. Everyone is accounted for save for the Duke, his valet, and Annie.”

The world spun around Jace as he blindly stumbled toward his commanding officer.

The white dress, fluttering in the wind. A feeble cry. A child's shoe, abandoned in a sticky pool of blood.

No, he could not have failed her already. She was finally his, and he could not, *would* not, allow her to be hurt under his watch.

“Prepare the horses,” he said firmly. “They cannot have gone very far.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY

*A*nne screamed for the thousandth time, but the gag muffled any sound, and the Duke slapped her hard for her trouble.

His disgusting little manservant, Bridges, had overpowered her just before she reached the kitchen entrance, forcing a filthy rag across her face that had made her lose consciousness. By the time she came to, she found herself trussed like a hog and thrown across the body of one of her father's horses, which Hawthorne was riding at as fast a pace as he could manage.

"Damn the Earl's nags," snapped the Duke as he laid the whip hard into the poor beast's flank. "Are all his animals as slow and useless as this one?"

Anne would have loved to point out that the poor creature was carrying two people over uneven terrain while a sadistic idiot was inflicting pain on its rump, but she was unable to speak due to the gag. In addition, it was extremely painful to be transported in this manner. She tried to figure out where they were, but the angle at which she was made it difficult to distinguish any features other than horse, grass, and boot.

She loathed this man with every ounce of her being. Annie fueled her rage by recalling every indiscretion he had committed during the time she had known him, no matter how trivial, as well as what he had done to the poor Portuguese heiress.

Annie did not care if he took a whip to her as well; if he tried it, she would see him dead for it.

She quickly realized that the Duke was not in peak physical condition, as he was wheezing as if he had engaged in strenuous activity. Anne could finally see where they were when he ordered Bridges to head in a particular direction while they were still in the countryside.

It was Bridges who hoisted her down from the horse, tossing her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. He delivered a painful slap to her rear when she tried to struggle and threatened to do far worse if she continued to try his patience.

They were at the folly on the Reeves estate, the very cottage where Anne and Jace had reconciled. Bridges dropped her unceremoniously onto the velvet sofa that remained there and smirked as she tried to murder him with her glare.

“No need to tease your future mistress, Bridges,” said Hawthorne as he followed them inside. Take your station by the window and alert me the moment you see them coming.”

“As you say, Your Grace,” the valet replied, but his gaze lingered on Anne with a hunger that made her afraid.

“I will remove that filthy gag from your mouth in a moment, dear child, but let me make it clear that if I so much as think you are going to scream, I shall leave you alone here with Bridges and not prevent him from treating you as he wishes, do you understand?”

She nodded in response. He removed the strip of material from her mouth, and she took a moment to stretch her jaw before speaking.

“You will not get away with this, Hawthorne,” she said calmly. “Jace will already be searching for me, and the Colonel will no doubt be hunting you.”

The Duke gave her a bemused smile, then showed her the pistol he had been carrying all the while.

“I am rather counting on both of those things being true.”

Bridges sniggered from his place at the window.

“I do not understand,” said Anne, glancing from one man to the other. She had presumed the goal of her kidnap had been in the misguided belief Hawthorne would force her to marry him, but the realization that the Duke panned something even more sinister began to creep over her. “It was you, wasn’t it? You were the one who shot at Jace and then set those ruffians upon him.”

“To be fair, it was Bridges who made the shot, but yes, I paid those sailors well to beat your soldier,” said Hawthorne,

“although they were interrupted before the job could be finished.”

“But why?” asked Anne, looking at him in bewilderment. “The only reason I had to go through with a marriage to you was the threat of hurting Jace; if he were dead, I would never have gone along with it.”

Hawthorne snorted his disbelief as he moved to stand just inside the door of the cottage, where his presence would be concealed from anyone approaching.

“Females will ultimately do as they are told by the men in their lives; you will marry me when your father commands it.”

His arrogance surprised a laugh out of her. “Marry you? Are you completely delusional? My father knows exactly what you are and will never force me to do such a vile thing.”

“He will, to cover up the scandal,” murmured the Duke, his attention on the land before him. “With your soldier boy dead and my child growing within you, what other choice would he have?”

“You disgust me,” she spat. “Has that been your plan all along?”

“Not at all, I was happy to leave your soldier to his pathetic little life, but then he began poking around in matters that did not concern him.”

Anne began to work and stretch the material that kept her wrists tied behind her back.

“Dona Luisa’s family, you are afraid of them,” she said with a spark of triumph. “After what you did to poor Juana, you are afraid of just how far they will go to exact their revenge.”

“I am afraid of no one, especially not some Portuguese peasants,” the Duke snapped.

“But they are not peasants, are they?” pressed Anne. “They are wealthy, connected, and powerful in Portugal, and with Colonel Hayworth married to Dona Luisa, they have allies in Britain as well.”

“Not for much longer,” said Hawthorne with a detached calm. He walked back over to her and, despite her protests, retied the gag about her mouth. “I am afraid I do not trust you to remain quiet at this critical juncture, my child. Do not worry; a band of gallant heroes is racing toward us at this very moment, planning to rescue you. Once they are dead, we can continue toward our future. You will make a marvelous duchess with time, dear Anne, but only if you stop fighting and accept that I will always win.”



“There,” said Colonel Hayworth, indicating the old folly house. “The tracks lead right to it.”

“Why the devil did they come here?” asked Sidney. “Why not flee to the main road?”

“Because they knew we would overtake them if they tried it,” said Jace as he dismounted. “Take the horses, Sid. The Colonel and I can take it from here.”

“You’re dicked in the nob if you think I am remaining behind, old chap,” said his twin angrily. “Annie may be the love of your life, but she has been my sister and friend for far longer.”

“Then take them out of the way of potential gunfire,” said the Colonel as he, too, handed his reins to the still-mounted Sidney. “You are welcome to rejoin us, but I am not walking those beasts into battle fire; they present too big a target.”

“Battle fire?” repeated Sidney, blanching at the word.

“Can you not see a trap when it is before you, Ugly?” said Jace grimly. “I would bet my commission that Hawthorne and that man of his are hiding inside the cottage, just waiting to put a shot through us. Unfortunately, they have Anne as a shield to prevent us from shooting wildly at them.”

“But they only have one shot each,” protested Sidney, “and we know one of them is a poor enough shot to have missed you even though you were standing on an open driveway.”

“Hence not taking the horses,” said the Colonel with more patience than Jace could have mustered. “Too large a target, and dangerous for the rider.”

“I see,” said Sidney, then removed the horses to a safer distance without another word.

“You forgot to mention they could have more than one weapon each, sir,” said Jace.

“No need to be cruel, Major. He might not be a soldier, but your brother is a brave man for coming with you instead of staying to watch over the women with Barker and the Earl.”

“I only made Barker remain because I was afraid he might keel over,” muttered Jace. “I swear to you, Colonel, if Hawthorne has done so much as frightened Anne, I will kill him.”

The Colonel gripped his shoulder. “No, you will not, Major Reeves, and that is an order. I need you back in the army, not swinging from the gallows for murdering a duke in cold blood. He has the privilege of being a peer while you do not, so under no circumstances are you to kill him, do you understand?”

Sidney returned, his face set in an expression of stoic determination. “It just occurred to me that they could have more guns with them than a single musket. What is the plan, gentlemen?”



Anne continued to attempt to undo the knots that bound her wrists and ankles, but to no avail. She began frantically searching the cottage for anything that could help her create a commotion to alert Jace and Hayworth of the danger, but instead of discovering a useful tool, her eyes fell upon the worst possible thing she could have discovered.

Four pairs of terrified eyes stared back at her from behind the trunks and old table in the far corner of the cottage.

The children! Oh God, not the children! They must not be here!

Fred stuck his head up a little higher than that of his siblings and began to mouth something at Anne. While she did not know precisely what he said, his intention was clear: he was planning on striking Bridges with a toy wooden sword.

Anne began shaking her head frantically, then attempted to communicate to the children that they should remain hidden until it was safe to flee. But Fred either did not understand or was deliberately misunderstanding her, for he dropped back down for a silent conversation with his siblings, and then reappeared as he crept in a slow, exaggerated fashion across the stone tile floor.

Anne's heart thundered as she worked frantically at the knots, still desperately afraid for Jace and the Colonel, but knowing her duty was to protect the children. Fred, the brave, obstinate, and foolhardy little Fred, was almost upon Bridges and ready to strike when his movement must have alerted the valet.

“What the devil—?” he began, but then Fred was upon him, screaming like a demented beast as he brought his wooden sword down hard upon the valet's wrist.

Anne saw the duke begin to swing about his pistol, and there was nothing for it but to act. She unfurled like a spring and hurled her body toward him, colliding with him so suddenly, he lost his footing, and the two of them fell to the ground in a tangle.

The pistol fired.



“Gunfire,” said the Colonel, his drawn sword in hand. “What the hell is that racket?”

“My children,” said Sidney, and he was already running before the two soldiers knew what they were doing. “That racket is my goddamn children!”

The three men charged the cottage as if hell’s hounds were at their heels, and Hayworth’s orders were disregarded before they even took their first step. Jace roared with rage.

If he has harmed any of them, he will endure an eternity of vengeance at my hands, Jace thought, as a red haze threatened to obscure his vision.

He came to a stop just inside the cottage, his anger replaced by sheer bewilderment as he attempted to comprehend what he was seeing.

The man he believed to be Bridges lay wailing on the ground, clutching his wrist while his other hand hung at an unnatural angle. Blood flowed from a wound on the back of his thigh; Jace thought it was not fatal, but painful. The Colonel had the valet at the point of his sword, but he was preoccupied with congratulating young Fred, who was hopping from foot to foot.

“I did it! I got him! Did you see, sir? I got him!”

“Brave and foolhardy of you, my boy,” answered Hayworth, but it was said with a great deal of respect.

The Duke was laid out on the stone floor, apparently unconscious, with Annie sitting at his side, while young Sally and Tom were undoing the gag and bindings at her wrists and feet. Sidney was struggling to gain control of Charlotte, who repeatedly bashed her wooden sword over Hawthorne’s exposed back while screaming, “Monsters lose to Reeves! Monsters lose to Reeves!” over and over again.

“Indeed, they do, Miss Charlotte,” said Jace, which finally made the child pause long enough for Sidney to gain control of her wooden sword.

“We found the monsters, Uncle Jace!” she declared as she ran over to him. “Now you don’t have to worry about them again!”

“I have never before known such brave, heroic children,” said Anne as Sally finally freed her from the gag. “You saved me from the monsters! How can I ever repay you?”

“Marry Uncle Jace,” said Sally, to which her siblings cheered their approval.

Jace went to Anne and pulled her into his arms.

“Are you hurt, my love? Did he touch you? Tell me, and I will kill him this instant.”

“Major,” said Hayworth with a warning tone.

“He did not hurt me, my love. You got here in time,” said Anne, tears beginning to fill her eyes. “I was so scared when I saw the children, but they are as ridiculous and brave as you are. God help Amelia as they grow older.”

“I should be angry at you all for doing something so dangerous,” said Sidney as he forced his children into a tight hug, kissing each of them on the forehead over and over again, “but you saved your Aunt Anne from these men, and probably saved the Colonel, your uncle, and myself as well. Just do not let it happen again!”

“You don’t have to worry, Papa,” said Tom soothingly to his father. “Charlotte was right about the monsters, but we’ve beat them now, just like you and Uncle Jace do.”

Sidney gave a splutter of laughter, tears stinging his eyes as he pulled his sons and daughters into his arms once again.

“Damn you, Jace,” he sighed into their hair. “I never thought I would have to worry about you turning my children into brave warriors.”

“They take after their parents in that regard,” said Jace. “You cannot blame me for that.”

“I can only hope our children are half so brave,” said Annie, leaning into Jace’s arms like they were all she needed to be

safe. "Take me away from here, Jace. If I never lay eyes on these scoundrels again, it will be too soon."

"As you wish, my love," he murmured, kissing her forehead for the tenth or eleventh time. "Let us get you back to your parents, where we can begin to plan for happy things, like our future together."

The Duke began to stir, groaning as consciousness began to return. Jace grabbed at the bindings that had been discarded on the floor and tied Hawthorne's hands before he could gather the strength to fight him.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Anne, and Jace was relieved to see there was no fear in her eyes when she looked at the two prisoners, only disgust. "Do we fetch the magistrate?"

"I would request that we do not," said Hayworth, eying the Duke with acute dislike. "As a peer of the realm, I do not put it past him to weasel out of this situation, for it will be difficult to prove his intent despite us all being here to witness it."

The Duke began to laugh, but it soon descended into a cough. "You have nothing on me, you fools," he spat.

"There are his debts," suggested Sidney, and Hawthorne shut his mouth as his eyes went wide with fear. "Crockford is among the least objectionable men he owes money to."

"Allow me to take care of the matter," said the Colonel. "You hear my wife's story, and her brothers would be happy to

remove this problem from British shores. Perhaps if he faces justice in Lisbon, wounds there can be healed.”

“As you wish, sir,” said Jace. Anne stared at the Duke and then nodded her approval.

“You cannot do this!” screeched the Duke. “You cannot do this to a man of my position! Fight me, Jace Reeves! I demand satisfaction from you! A duel between gentlemen, at this very hour!”

Jace paused, his eyes raking over the pathetic, half-mad figure of the Duke of Hawthorne.

“You are no gentleman, sir,” he said coldly, and then led his sweet Annie out of the evil man’s shadow, and into the glorious light of their future together.

EPILOGUE

“It is not much of a honeymoon, my love, but at least the sheets are clean,” said Jace as he carried his new bride into the Plymouth hotel suite.

“If you had not been barred from half the public houses for starting brawls with sailors then perhaps there would have been more options,” she laughed, and then inspected their surroundings. “Oh, how lovely! How long until we sail?”

“At high tide if the winds favor us,” said Jace, “so tomorrow at the earliest. We will rejoin the army at Burgos, and I will have the pleasure of introducing you to my brother officers. Don Luisa is already trying to plan a ball in your honor, I hear.”

“She is a darling,” said Anne, “I already love her as much as you do. But if we are stuck at this hotel at least until morning, Jace, I think it is high time that I see you naked.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Direct of you, my love.”

She shrugged, her cheeks glowing an adorable shade of pink. “I want you, Jace. I have wanted you for so long. I do not wish to wait a moment longer than we have to.”

“On that score, we are in perfect agreement,” he said.

Anne began to loosen the ties of her dress.

“Remove your boots, Jace, and your coat and trousers. Remove everything, and so will I.”

It was ridiculous how clumsy Jace felt as he took off each item of his clothes as quickly as he could manage, while Anne removed each layer of her clothes with a seductive grace that only increased his desire for her. By the time she stood before him, naked and with her hair undone, it was all he could do to keep himself from ravishing her.

Her eyes were hungry as they roved across his body, lingering on his manhood with an appreciative sigh.

“Lie down, Jace, please,” she said as she crawled up onto the bed herself. “I want to explore you.”

“As you wish, my angel,” he replied, following her command.

It proved more challenging than expected for him to remain still as her hands stroked and touched every inch of his skin. He clung tenaciously to the headboard’s railing, occasionally closing his eyes as the sight of her innocent desire that drove him to desperation. Then, when she wrapped her slender hand around him and pressed her lips to the hot tip of his manhood, he nearly fell over completely.

Jace abruptly sat up and yanked Annie toward him so he could savagely kiss her while feeling her smooth skin press firmly against his own. She sighed with pleasure as he cupped her breast, the soft peaks of her breast becoming firmer as he teased her with his fingers.

“Touch me, Jace. I want you inside me,” she whispered against his mouth.

Jace stroked his hand up the inside of her thigh, parting her legs gently until his fingers passed through her soft curls, slid across the bud of pleasure, and then entered her warm, slick passage.

She gasped with delight, squirming her hips to help him reach the perfect place inside of her.

“Let me take you to the edge, my love,” he told her, and then took her breasts into his mouth as he continued to tease her with his fingers, stroking against her core until he could feel the heat building inside of her.

“Jace, oh, Jace, do not stop, please do not stop!” she said breathlessly, burying her hands in his hair.

“I... I... oh my God, that feels...” she panted breathlessly, shifting her body to press against his fingers. “Please, Jace, please, don’t stop.”

He responded by quickening his strokes and sucking harder on her breast. Anne’s body went rigid; she clung to him tightly as the waves of pleasure crashed over her body, even screaming

his name as she crested their peak. Then she relaxed, safe in his arms, in all her beautiful glory.

“I have loved you for so long, my sweet Annie,” he murmured, stroking the hair out of her face. “I want to spend a lifetime making you come apart just like this.”

“Then let me do the same to you,” she replied, and did not wait for a response before her mouth was upon his, hot and demanding as her tongue collided with his own. Their naked skin pressed against each other, chest to chest, legs to legs, with his swollen manhood hard between them.

“Please, Jace,” she replied, her voice thick and hoarse. “I want to be the one who takes you to the edge this time.”

“The ride me, my love,” he said, guiding her over him until her core rested above his member. She hesitated, her wet heat against his avid flesh, her thighs tight about his hips.

“Gently, sweet Annie, gently,” he murmured as he used his hand to guide himself inside her. She closed her eyes, gasping at the sensation as he slid his length into her slowly, feeling her relax about him as he did so. With her hands on his chest, she began to lift herself up and down, rocking back and forth against his body as she gave little moans of satisfaction.

“I had no idea it would feel so good, Jace,” she told him, arching her back and giving him a splendid view of those perfect breasts of hers. “Tell me it feels this good for you.”

“Like heaven, my angel,” he murmured hoarsely.

She was slick with desire, and as she rocked her hips, grinding their bodies together, he could feel the shivers of another climax building within her. Her fingers clawed slightly, the bite of her nails in his flesh arousing him still further. He took hold of her by the hips and began thrusting up into her, harder and faster than he had intended, but when she begged him for more, to press himself inside her deeper, he lost all sense of reason. Her breathing became shallow and her rhythm uneven, until she came with a fevered cry above him. The sensation broke any thought left inside of Jace, and he roared out her name as he climaxed within her warm, welcoming core.

They lay together in the aftermath, breathing heavily as they remained tangled up in each other's arms.

“Is it always like that?” asked Annie, still breathless.

“It will be between us,” he promised. “We have the rest of our lives together, my love, and I intend to grow old with you. We will learn all the ways to bring each other to the edge, and such intimacy will only grow better with time.”

She gave a happy shudder in his arms and snuggled in closer.

“I would love that, Jace,” she told him.

They fell asleep like that, wrapped up with each other, certain that nothing would ever tear them apart again.

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

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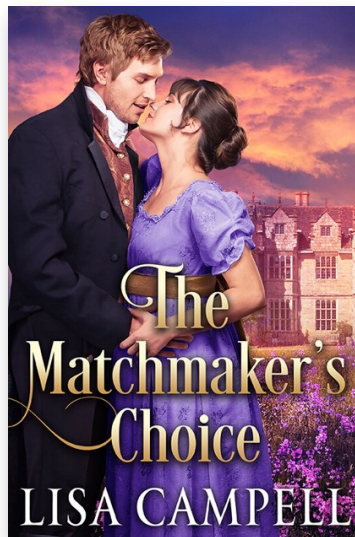
If you're a true fan of the steamy Regency romance genre, here are the first chapters of my previous best-selling story, and it's called: **The Matchmaker's Choice**

Susan Seymour, a masterful matchmaker, has made a vow to never again open herself up to the pain of love. But when she sets out to find a match for the infamous womanizer, Benjamin Forbes, the very man who embodies all she despises, she finds herself ensnared by his charms and falling deeper with each passing day. As Susan struggles to resist his alluring gaze and devilish grin, she finds herself questioning all she thought she knew. For in the game of love, one must be willing to take a leap of faith; and Susan, with her shattered heart in tow, must decide if she's ready to take that leap once again.



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THE MATCHMAKER'S CHOICE



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PROLOGUE

*B*ath, March 1812

“Oh my days, how well you look!” Louisa Seymour exclaimed, fluttering her fan at her very red and rather blotchy neck. It wasn’t usually that blotchy, and she wasn’t usually this emotional but, see, it was the morning of her daughter’s wedding, and the day called for a glass of champagne rather than tea.

“Mama, you have seen me in this gown before. You were there at the modiste for the fitting, remember?” Susan said, trying to keep from laughing. It was a funny sight; her mother lounging on the chaise with little regard for her modesty, all poppy-red from excitement and an excess of bubbly.

“Yes, but it’s different now! The day has finally come! I remember you were there, up on the stool with that lovely gown on, so flattering to your figure, whilst that poor Cassandra Newbury was next to you looking like a great cow. Oh, dear, there’s a girl that’s hard to match. Poor thing. Several stone heavier than she ought to be and such a freckled complexion! If her father were not a baron, she’d have no chance.”

“Mama, that was quite rude of you,” Susan said firmly, cutting off her mother before she went on another tirade about matchmaking and other ladies’ looks. “Should you like to tie the sash?”

Susan smiled gratefully at the maid who had helped her dress. The woman had tightened the stays too much, and they now pinched at her skin, but that was the way of it. It was her wedding, and she was to look her best, comfort be damned. Come to think of it, everything was uncomfortable. Her shoes were just a hint too small and pinched her toes, and the pins keeping her dark curls intact poked too sharply into her scalp whenever she turned her head. Her father had arranged for a portrait sitting after the reception, so her mother had instructed the maid to make sure neither her hair nor her flesh moved so much as an inch.

This is a culmination of everything you have waited and trained for your whole life, her mother had said the night before whilst watching the maid tie rags in her hair to curl it overnight. Susan had complained that they were wound too tight and her hair would fall out, but her mother’s nerves were quite fraying at the seams. Logic simply would not work at the moment, so Susan knew she’d have to bear it or subtly steer her in a different direction.

The maid handed the light green sash to Louisa, whose eyes softened. *To match your eyes,* she’d said at the modiste. The perfect finishing touch to the ivory and lace gown that so flattered her figure now. Susan held her arms up to let her mother tie the sash and fashion it into a delicate bow at the back.

“How lovely you look,” she gushed.

Susan regarded herself in the large standup mirror. She did not look bad at all—quite pretty, in fact—just wildly uncomfortable. An accurate reflection if there ever was one.

“Are you ready for the veil, Miss?” the maid asked.

Susan and her mother nodded. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see her mother’s eyes turn to glass with unshed tears.

“My sweet child. Oh, I knew this day would come, but this makes it so much more real!” And then Lady Seymour burst into tears, blowing most indelicately into her kerchief.

“Mama, it is alright. This is your business, remember? Matches and weddings. Please, do not cry,” Susan said with as much gentleness as she could muster, as she herself was on edge, and her mother’s ebbing and flowing tears did not help.

The maid handed the delicate lace veil to Lady Seymour, whose hands were trembling. For a moment, Susan feared her mother might trip and tear it, but she did no such thing. Instead, she placed the comb at the back of her daughter’s tightly, beautifully coiffed hair, fanned the light fabric out behind her, and placed the front over her face. Susan could see the waterworks beginning from behind the lace. She tried to ease the tension.

“You know, I have never understood the custom of a veil. Why must a bride’s face be covered? Would not the groom like to see her as she walks down the aisle? Unless she is very ugly, I confess I don’t see the point.”

“Hush, child!” Louisa said, gently smacking her daughter on the arm. “You are not ugly, and William will be very pleased indeed to see you. This veil is like... wrapping paper on a gift. That’s what you are—a gift to him.”

Susan did not much appreciate that analogy, as she did not believe women were property to be bought and sold. William did not treat her as such. Oh, William... with that devilish grin and twinkle in his eye. Such a spark, almost immediately. They fell in love fast and hard, and the entire ton commented on how lucky it was that they were a love match. A true love match did not happen often. Feelings of mutual affection and delightful acquaintance were indeed common, but real love? Very rare. Now that very love would unite them so they could face the world together as husband and wife.

At least, that’s what Susan hoped.

William had not contacted her in two days. The adage was that it was bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding, but Susan thought that meant on the morning of the event, not days beforehand. She had not even had so much as a letter or a word from his family. Perhaps it was simply her hairpins and stays pinching her, but something didn’t feel right. Her intuition was usually correct, but sometimes she wished it wasn’t. Today she blamed it on a stomachache, a hot room, a tight corset, and a tipsy, blubbering mother who fussed over her like a hen.

“I think my stays are too tight,” she said with a wince.

“They most certainly are not!” her mother countered, indignant. “Think of all the moving you shall do today. It will loosen over the course of the day and then be perfect in time for the portrait.”

Susan took as deep a breath as the stays would allow and looked in the full-length mirror once more as her mother and the maid scurried about, fussing over her hemline. She looked very fine indeed—she wasn't sure she felt *beautiful*, per se, but she doubted she'd ever look this fine again. Women were supposed to be and feel at the peak of their beauty on their wedding day... so why did she not feel so?

There was a quick, urgent-sounding knock at the door. The maid and Susan's mother beamed at each other.

"Perhaps it's William; come to peek at his bride," Louisa said with a giggle. The maid was equally blushed and giggly.

Susan turned from the mirror and faced the door, putting on her most sweet and pleasing expression. But instead of William, it was her father. Mr. Seymour looked very grave indeed, and Susan's heart began to sink.

Mr. Seymour was not a grave-looking man by nature. Serious, yes, but not that serious. And he certainly could have quite the temper if provoked.

"Mr. Seymour, whatever is the matter? Why are you not joyous for your daughter?" her mother asked.

"I am afraid there is little cause for joy this morning," he said, his face and voice of stone.

"My dear, you cannot be serious. Come, have some champagne with us before we are off to the church," she urged

with a nervous giggle.

“Papa,” Susan implored, her voice quiet and even. “What is vexing you?”

It was then she saw the small envelope in his hand. The seal was broken even though it was addressed to her. Mr. Seymour would not invade his daughter’s privacy without cause, and she had an unpleasant inkling she already knew the cause.

He crossed the room quickly and handed her the letter. Susan frantically tore it open, her eyes scanning the words. It was a short letter, not one that should have taken her long to read, but she read it repeatedly just to make sure her eyes and brain did not deceive her.

My dearest love,

It is with all the regret in the world that I write to you this morning. But I cannot continue the ceremony. I cannot marry you. It is not for lack of love, which you know full well I have for you. Rather, you and I are young. It is better we both explore the world before settling down. Remember how I told you I wanted to see the Mediterranean and the Near East? I am going to do just that. I cannot be married when there is so much more of the world to see. Please do not be angry. In time, perhaps you’ll even grow to forgive me. I board a ship to France this morning, then I shall begin the Grand Tour. I hope you can understand. I do love you.

Evermore,

William Shelley

Susan was stunned into silence for the longest time. Her mind had worked itself into such a jumble that she could not make sense of her thoughts. Without meaning to, her eyes filled with hot tears, and her bottom lip began to quiver. Sensing a proper meltdown, Louisa placed a loving hand on her daughter's arm.

“Susan? What is it?”

She finally looked up but neither at her mother nor her father, for she could not bear to look anyone in the eye.

“He's not going to marry me,” she whispered.

Those words sapped all feeling out of the room. It was painfully silent for a few seconds until Susan crumpled to the floor and burst into tears. And then the room was a flurry of activity. Louisa and the maid fretted over Susan while her father paced angrily back and forth, muttering to himself about responsibility and the “cheek of the boy.”

Susan was wild and frantic, crying and coughing, feeling smothered by the women trying to help her. She tore at her veil and threw it aside, then pulled all the pins out of her hair and threw those aside, too.

“How c-could heee!” she sobbed, sitting up and gasping.
“What did—what did I d-do wrong?”

“You did nothing wrong, my dear,” Louisa said, holding her daughter’s face in her hands.

“Of course, she didn’t do any wrong! The cheek of that... *boy*, the *nerve* of that boy!” her father spat as if the word itself was venomous, “the insolence, the disrespect!”

“It is alright, Susan. We shall fix this. We shall find him and make it right,” Lady Seymour said, her voice suddenly much more authoritative. Gone was the quivering voice that had accompanied the happy tears just moments ago. Everyone else was losing their heads, so *someone* had to keep theirs on.

“You can’t find him!” Susan cried. “He’s gone. He’s probably s-sailed away already.”

“I shall hire a man. Have him followed and brought straight back here to answer for his selfish behavior,” Mr. Seymour declared.

“It is no use, Papa. You *know* William. He will not come back,” Susan managed between sobs.

“You will recover, Susan. Everything will be alright,” her mother assured, holding Susan to her chest and smoothing her hair.

Susan shook her head. Her face felt hot and sticky, and she could barely breathe. She would collapse if she were standing; for she was seeing double, and the room was spinning.

“I’m a matchmaker’s daughter,” she continued through her sobs. “It was supposed to be easy! And now everyone is going to laugh, and I am going to be a spinster!”

“Let them laugh. Let them gossip,” her mother said. “But that only shows how small-minded they are. And with any luck, it will reflect poorly on him rather than you. It is in deplorable taste for a groom to leave a bride at the altar.”

Susan’s sobs renewed with vigor. “We didn’t make it to the altar. We didn’t even make it to the church!”

“You’ll be alright, my dear. You are a bright young beautiful girl of good breeding. You shall snap someone else up in no time.”

Susan’s ears burned at that. She knew her mother was just trying to help, but that was the last thing she wanted to hear. “I don’t want anyone else. I want William, and I want him to want me!”

She’d heard stories of women being left at the altar for various reasons, but she never imagined she’d be one of them. She, the daughter of the most successful matchmaker in all England, being left at the altar was perhaps the social embarrassment of the century. It threatened to shake the foundations of the Season. If she was not guaranteed a match, was anyone else? The cynicism began to set in her mind. It had taken root upon the arrival of William’s nasty letter but now was fast spreading. He had claimed he loved her but was that true? Could she trust anything he said? If he really loved her, wouldn’t he want to be with her no matter the circumstances? And if he really loved her, wouldn’t he want to travel with her? Married couples traveling together was not unheard of,

and they had spent countless hours looking at the atlas in the study, planning future voyages.

And then the note. No wonder he hadn't spoken to her in two days—he must have been preparing to leave.

“A true man would have the decency to call it off long before and in the flesh!” her father raged.

Susan agreed in her mind, still crying and unable to verbalize. She had seen enough matches, enough marriages, and enough looks of adoration, affection, and love all her life. It was all she'd wanted; to love and be loved in return.

That's all the Season was. The Marriage Mart. Women preening like pigeons and men inspecting them like cattle or competing for baseless affections like prizes to be won at a fair. Susan understood it now, the entire matchmaking business. It was a sham. Marriage was purely transactional, a contract to be fulfilled when the woman produced a viable heir. That was all. How blind she had been, how stupid! She berated herself and continued her crying, angry at herself, at William, and the world for letting her fall into this trap.

When her cries subsided, she sat up and dabbed her under eyes with her mother's handkerchief. Love was foolish, and she would never fall into it again.

CHAPTER ONE

*L*ondon, November 1815

Benjamin Forbes was convinced there was not enough Madeira in the world to help him at that moment. The East India Company could hand him their entire inventory, and he still wouldn't find the amount adequate. He'd have to switch to gin after that—the horror. He picked up his glass by the rim and held it to the light, watching the dark red liquid swirl around. He was only catching snippets of the conversations around him, varying in volume and tone:

“...Whigs've made a right mess of things...” “The missus won't allow port in the house anymore...” “...not ready for the legion of mothers...” “so I show her the bag and (the man whistled) never seen a woman lift her skirts so fast!”

That last line was met with raucous laughter from his table, distracting Benjamin from his inspection of the glass.

“Ben, what's the matter? You look like you've lost a bet. You haven't, have you? We've talked about this,” Cillian said with a pointed yet mischievous look.

The other men at the table laughed again. Cillian was good at that—amusing others.

“No, no lost bets. I never lose, you know,” Benjamin quipped, plastering a smile back on his face.

“You look upset with the wine. I’ve never seen you turn down a drink of any kind,” said Albert, another friend at the table.

“Surely you have a better story than Albert’s,” Cillian said, elbowing the aforementioned gentleman in the ribs. “You also can’t turn down a woman.”

“I’m afraid those days are likely behind me,” Benjamin said with the most pathetic, crestfallen demeanor.

“Has some overbearing mama snapped you up for her daughter already?” Albert asked incredulously.

“They might as well have,” Benjamin answered dryly. “My mother and father wish me to find a wife. Apparently, if my rakish behavior continues, there will be no heir to carry on the Forbes name or Pembroke dukedom for that matter.”

“Well, they’ve got it wrong. Surely you have several heirs by now,” Cillian said, bursting into laughter with Albert.

Benjamin laughed but rolled his eyes nonetheless. “They would prefer a legitimate one, in the confines of wedlock, to a lady they deem appropriate.”

“Marriage might not be so bad,” Albert said. “You wed her, bed her, she has a son, then you go back to your old ways.”

“It would take a miracle to make Benjamin marry. Unless there was a lady of superb quality whom he could not resist, I do not see you complying with your parents’ wishes,” Cillian said solemnly.

“What sort of woman would suit our Benny boy, then, hmm?” Albert asked. “Let’s build one for him. Firstly, she must have an ample bosom.”

They all laughed at that.

“But not too ample, you know—he wants a lady, not a dairy maid,” Cillian teased.

“Fine ladies can have ample bosoms as long as they comport themselves well!” Albert protested.

“Well, when we fashion you a lady, we’ll make sure to include that on the list,” Cillian said to Albert.

“Would she be dark or fair?” Albert continued.

“I say fair, but if she were not alabaster, it would not be a crime,” Cillian said. “You know,” he continued, turning back to Benjamin, “I can see you with a redhead. A fiery little thing with a fearsome temper.”

“It would be like taming a lion,” said Albert.

“Only a pretty one,” Cillian reassured.

“It is of no use, gentlemen,” Benjamin finally interrupted their construction of the perfect woman. “I shall have no say in the matter. My mother...” he sighed dramatically and took a generous swig of his wine. “Has enlisted the aid of a matchmaking service.”

His words shocked the table into silence for a moment. Albert was clearly trying not to laugh, but Cillian looked a bit more curious.

“A matchmaker *could* find you the ideal woman,” Cillian finally said.

“Is it not embarrassing? The idea that I cannot find a wife on my own?” Benjamin snapped.

Cillian held up his hands in mock defense.

“My mother is actually thinking of it for me,” Albert said miserably, looking down into his now-empty cup.

“Who is the matchmaker?” Cillian asked.

“You cannot be serious in asking me that,” Benjamin said curtly.

“Some of them have better reputations than others,” Cillian said.

“Oh, and you would be the expert?”

“Yes!” Cillian maintained. “My sister used a matchmaker, and she’s happy as can be with her husband.”

Benjamin dug the small card out of his waistcoat pocket. On a cream-colored background with light pink script, read “The Eros Agency,” and underneath that, two names: Louisa and Susan Seymour, with an address.

Cillian took the card and studied it for a moment. Albert looked over as well, his curiosity piqued.

“This is the agency my sister used,” he said.

“Indeed, I’ve heard of this as well,” Albert murmured.

“How am I so uninformed?” Benjamin asked, snatching the card back from Cillian and stuffing it back in his waistcoat pocket indignantly.

“A great deal of the ladies of the ton make use of their services,” Cillian said, sitting back proudly in his chair.

“Because introducing each other in a ballroom is too much work?” Benjamin said derisively.

“The matchmaker is the go-between for families not previously connected,” Cillian said matter-of-factly. “I can explain it to you if you’d like.”

Benjamin waved his hand in consent for Cillian to proceed.

“So, the parent or guardian of the person seeking a match speaks with the agency, much like an interview. They talk about their likes and dislikes, what they are looking for in a match, what they have to offer, be it financial or character-related, and the matchmaker adds you to a list. Then they go through that list and compare the men and women to see who is most compatible. Then, they set up a meeting. Sometimes it is direct, and sometimes the matchmaker makes it seem as though the meeting was natural. Then you begin courting, and voilà, marriage.”

Benjamin listened, secretly fascinated by this idea, but he decided to remain outwardly unimpressed.

“So it is a shopping list. An elaborate one. And an eligible lady chooses you as if she is choosing a button in the haberdashery,” he said.

“Well, you also have the option to choose a lady if you find you like one. The street goes both ways,” Cillian offered. “And it is a bit more work than choosing a button in the haberdashery.”

“Have you ever been to the haberdashery with your sister? Choosing a button *can* be tiresome,” Albert said. Cillian elbowed him sharply.

“You ought not to be so gloomy about it. My sister and her husband are quite happy together. As I’m sure many couples are. All those marriages you see in the papers, I guarantee you half of them were orchestrated by a matchmaker,” Cillian said emphatically.

“So what you’re telling me is that nothing is real. Everything is part of the carefully crafted, precious little image the ton wants,” Benjamin said ruefully.

“Some people just need a little push in the right direction,” Cillian said, sipping his drink.

“If anything else, I’ve heard the matchmaker’s daughter is quite pretty. Hot-tempered but pretty,” Albert offered.

“Is that not motivation enough?” Cillian asked with a laugh.

Benjamin hated to admit it to himself, but the idea of not having to do any work to find a suitable partner was tempting indeed. He did have a reputation as a rake and a flirt, but shouldn’t that work in his favor rather than against it? He hated the idea that he would be so incompetent in finding a wife that he had to hire a matchmaker. But then again... if it meant that overbearing mamas would stop shoving their exhausted, hapless daughters at him, maybe it was worth a try. It wasn’t as though he was lacking in funds. Perhaps with some persuasion, he could have the matchmaker only send him the creme de la creme or be on a similar list. In his experience, the best of the best were always behind a paywall.

“No one’s good enough for our Benny boy, anyway,” Albert said dramatically.

Benjamin rolled his eyes again. He was sure that if he rolled them anymore this evening, they'd roll back into his head permanently.

"Enough of this. Let's have fun, un-orchestrated by the ton," he said and finally downed the Madeira he'd been nursing.

Albert signaled for some attractive ladies of the night, and they flounced over with all their feminine wiles.

"Let's have a dance, shall we gentlemen?" said the one who'd settled on Benjamin's lap, ironically, a buxom redhead. "I'm Liz-Marie," she continued, placing her hands on his shoulders.

Benjamin chuckled. "You should've saved yourself the introduction, love. It's likely I won't remember come morning."

Cillian and Albert guffawed, but the woman was offended. She straightened up and shoved him hard against the chair as she left, scoffing at so-called gentlemen.

"So, no redheads for you, then?" Albert called as another woman pulled him toward the cleared space for dancing, the musicians beginning a jaunty tune.

"I find the Spanish variety a little more intriguing," Benjamin called back over the din, raising the bottle of Madeira as a gesture.

“Suit yourself!” Yelled Cillian, who looked soon to be preoccupied with a curvy brunette in a sickeningly yellow gown.

And suit himself, he did, with another glass of wine, crafting the perfect woman in his mind.

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CHAPTER TWO

Susan sighed and slumped back in a most ungraceful manner. Usually, her mother would chide her for it, but they had had an exceptionally long and social day. An array of concerned mamas had been to see them with their unwed sons and daughters, seeking the magic of the matchmakers at Eros Agency.

“I suppose that’s the last of them?” Susan asked, reaching for a spare macaron.

“I should think so,” her mother replied, standing and stretching as she had wanted to do the entire day.

“How many more people can there be?” Susan asked, using her free hand to thumb through her small notebook with her client’s information.

“The entire ton is anxious for their own to get married,” Louisa answered. “We are bound to have some busy days ahead of us. And the season is only just beginning.”

It was silent for a moment, the evening sunlight filtering through the curtains of the parlor and bathing the well-

furnished room in its golden light, warming Susan's limbs after a long day of sitting in one position and smiling too much.

"Your father would be proud, you know," her mother said.

Susan looked up to see a gentle smile on her mother's face. Much had changed in the past three years. The death of Mr. Seymour had come as a shock to the both of them, almost exactly a year after William abandoned her the morning of the wedding. He had not been young, of course, but the doctor had always said he was in good health for a man of his age and should live to see a grandchild. Susan was always silent at that as she thought it nigh impossible that either of her parents would have a grandchild on whom to dote.

"What makes you talk so?" Susan asked.

"You're making quite the name for yourself as a matchmaker. No broken engagements, no unhappy marriages—you've a knack for understanding people and matching them up."

"I learned from the best," Susan said with a wink and a smile.

Her mother sat gracefully on the sofa next to her and poured herself another cup of tea.

"You're in wonderful shape to take over the business," her mother continued. "Your father would have agreed. He was always so fond of you. Loved the quickness of your mind."

Susan sniffled and blinked back tears, setting the macaron down on her saucer so she could dab at her eyes with her handkerchief. She tried to keep her emotions locked tight after being left at the church so as to avoid any meltdowns, but thinking of her father's kindness and love always made her a bit teary-eyed.

"I do miss him so," she whispered.

"I am sure he is sitting in the stars, beaming down at you," her mother offered. Even the high-strung Lady Seymour had been subdued after the death of her husband. She threw herself and her daughter into their matchmaking business to stay afloat, and now they were at least as prosperous as they had been when he was alive.

"He was the better part of both of us," Susan said.

Louisa patted her daughter's hand and straightened her back. "Enough sad talk. We are not the melancholy type. We have a business to tend to. Mr. Eliot delivered some new stationery earlier this morning."

There was a twinkle in Lady Seymour's eye as she said that, which Susan did not like. Whenever Mr. Eliot was brought up, the conversation inevitably turned to Susan making herself available once more.

"Did you have a chance to look at it? I rather like the ivory cards with the pink calligraphy," Susan said, pointedly ignoring the obvious mention of the man.

“Susan,” her mother said in a serious tone. “He is a kind man. You ought to give him a chance.”

Susan laughed cryptically. “I have put all that behind me.”

“Well, I wish you wouldn’t. Not all men are so bad,” her mother admonished gently.

“I think they are. Haven’t I seen enough of the male species to make that judgment? Love is only a card game, and I am its dealer. That is my lot in life, and that is what I intend for the rest of it.”

“Susan. You ought not to speak that way. You are still young, after all. You have the best years ahead of you. Please do not waste them in bitterness,” Louisa urged.

Susan was feeling fiery at that moment, and she might have had a sharp retort for her mother if a footman hadn’t knocked on the parlor doorway at that moment.

Louisa shot her daughter a glare that said they’d finish the conversation later.

“Yes, Haxby?”

“You have one last client, Madam. They are waiting in the foyer. I informed them of the hours you receive clients, but they insisted. Shall I send them up?”

That was the one part of the job that Susan did not care for: the business was located in their home. Lady Seymour insisted it was more genteel and that their clients were more likely to call on someone at home rather than at an office. People wanted matchmaking to feel as organic as possible, and an office was the opposite of that. Sometimes that meant guests at unexpected hours, much like this one.

Louisa sighed. “I suppose we have time for one more. Susan, straighten up. And we’ll need a fresh pot of tea,” her mother instructed Haxby. He bowed and left to tend to his tasks.

“Remember to smile, my dear,” her mother said.

Susan gave a wry, slight smile, despite her exhaustion. “Always.”



Keeping a smile on her face turned out to be a little more difficult than Susan would have liked. As soon as Haxby ushered in the last client, she could immediately tell it was going to be a difficult one. Now, she expected mothers to be overbearing and not so tactful when the season arrived. The Marriage Mart was a frenzy, after all, and securing a fine husband was practically the only way a woman was guaranteed a comfortable future. However, the way this particular daughter and mother stood revealed much about the dynamics of their relationship already. Susan had seen enough clients and been privy to hushed conversations at the edges of ballrooms to know a harpy when she saw one. The mother was a tall, robust-looking woman, with a sharp jawline and cheekbones; it was a wonder she did not cut the ribbons of her bonnet when tying it under her chin. She looked rather like a bird of prey as she surveyed the Seymours’ modest parlor. Her dark gown and cloak did not help matters. But her daughter

looked very different indeed. It was like Night and Day coexisting in the room. The girl looked young; she could not have been more than nineteen, and she was a cherub of a creature with fair skin, Titian hair, and pale blue eyes on a round, rosy face. She kept her eyes downcast most of the time and stood behind her mother as if she were afraid to take up space. Haxby had introduced them as Lady Marie Notley and her daughter, Miss Jane. Everyone gave their curtsy in greeting, as was customary.

“Welcome, ladies. Do have a seat anywhere you please; Haxby will take your hats and cloaks,” Lady Seymour began.

Lady Notley gave her things to the footman rather presumptuously while her daughter handed them over with a small, grateful smile.

As they sat themselves on the two sofas facing each other, Susan began the preparations for tea. She was very good at setting a lovely table and, as silly as it sounded, was actually quite accomplished at pouring tea. Her mother insisted she do it for every client’s first meeting to show her skills.

“I will not waste time or mince words,” Lady Notley began in a sharp voice befitting of her appearance.

Susan raised her eyebrows in amusement; she simply could not help it. Her mother gently tapped her ankle with her slipper in quiet admonishment, for she did not want her daughter’s temper to cost them a client.

“You know why we are here. My daughter, Jane, needs a husband.”

Jane looked at her lap, fingers playing with the ruffles on her sleeve.

“Well then, you have come to the right place,” Lady Seymour said, but Lady Notley didn’t seem to hear her, instead continuing on in her imperious tone.

“As you can see, Jane is quite beautiful. Her complexion is enviable and often remarked upon. But she is timid, and that is unforgivable. No one finds that attractive—”

Jane cut off her mother. “Some people do!” she said earnestly.

“Clearly not enough, as you are still unmarried,” her mother snapped. “Normally, I would not be so concerned. However, we are beginning her second season. It will not do for her to sit by the ballroom looking at the floor, and I refuse the notion that she will have a third season. How unsavory that would be. Everyone knows if you are not engaged in your first season, then there must be something very wrong indeed, and I will not have the ton thinking such thoughts of my daughter.”

“I understand your concerns,” Lady Seymour said in the calmest voice she could muster. It was clear that Lady Notley was high-strung, and she did not want to stir up any stronger feelings. “Perhaps tell us a bit about what you’re looking for.”

Louisa touched her hand, which signaled for Susan to begin serving the food and pouring the tea.

“He must be of good breeding, of course. No one without a title.”

“I should very much like it if he liked animals or was gentle with them,” Jane piped up.

Susan smiled brightly. She had not heard this request before, but it appeared to be important to Jane by the way her face lit up at the prospect.

Lady Notley rolled her eyes and rounded on her daughter. “Jane, I swear to high heaven! Gentlemen do not concern themselves with beasts!”

“Sometimes they are one and the same, are they not?” Susan quipped with a wry smile as she poured a cup of tea for Jane.

Jane looked at her with wide eyes, mirthful but also mindful of her mother’s presence, so there was no raucous laughter at that.

Lady Seymour kicked her daughter’s ankle under the table as Lady Notley raised an eyebrow and regarded Susan with a critical eye.

“Indeed. You are young to be a matchmaker, aren’t you? And to have such a low opinion of men at such an age?”

Susan opened her mouth to retort, but her mother’s diplomatic tone soothed things over again.

“Let us talk more about your situation. Jane, tell me what your ideal husband is like.”

Susan admired her mother’s ability to assuage people and smooth over conflict. She was very diplomatic, a trait Susan did not possess as she had inherited her father’s quick temper and penchant for troublemaking.

Jane looked very pleased to be addressed directly. Susan wondered if she’d ever been allowed to speak without permission before.

“Well, I *am* serious about him liking animals. It’s more than a common interest; I think it speaks well of a man’s character if animals like him,” she said, her voice soft and pleasing, her smile earnest.

“It absolutely does,” Susan agreed. “It’s been said that animals sense a person’s true nature.”

“Yes! And I would not at all mind if he kept any of his own, especially—” when Jane moved forward to place her teacup on the table, she missed the edge, and it came tumbling down, tea spilling everywhere, the cup hitting the saucer and breaking in half. Jane cried out, and everyone else started back. The poor girl’s face was as red as a poppy, and she almost looked as if she might cry.

“I am so terribly sorry,” she said, her voice wavering.

Lady Notley said nothing much to Susan’s surprise and only gave the Seymours a pointed look as if to say *Look what you*

are getting yourselves into.

“Susan, send for the maid. We’ll have this cleaned up in no time; do not fret, my dear,” Lady Seymour said, laying a calming hand on Jane’s. “My lady, perhaps we should talk more about your qualities and assets and give the girls some privacy to talk about what Jane would like out of marriage. I find having less pressure like this makes the work easier.”

Lady Notley agreed, and she and Lady Seymour went to the end of the parlor behind the screens near the hearth.

Susan rang the small bell at the table, and in little time, Bridget, the maid, arrived to clean up the rug and broken teacup. Meanwhile, she and Jane had moved to the chairs by the window.

“I really am very sorry. I did not mean to break it,” Jane apologized again.

“Miss Notley, let me tell you a secret—that is not the good China. It’s the stuff my mother uses for clients in case something like this happens. Do not worry.”

In closer proximity and the evening glow, Susan was able to study her client more directly. Jane did indeed have a wondrous complexion and a pretty figure, but something about her was not quite right. Upon closer inspection, she realized there was a bit too much powder on spots of her face, likely to cover some blemishes. And she sat as straight as a soldier because her stays were laced too tight, which of course, pushed her chest out. It was not an entirely vulgar look, but Susan made a mental note of it for Jane’s file. *Someone* was

bound to notice her over-powdered face and bosom nearly bursting at the seams. That would not do well for any potential matches, though she suspected Lady Notley had done both on purpose.

Other than those two things, she was a very pleasing girl with a slim figure, beautiful hair, and big deer-like eyes in the color of a spring sky. Barring any interference from her mother, Susan felt very positively she could find a match for this young woman.

“I spilled the tea all over the biscuits, too. No doubt you were saving them for later,” Jane said sheepishly.

Susan waved her hand dismissively. “Hardly. They were last week’s bunch, anyway. I am supposed to bake them and do beautiful sugar work to go on top, but I couldn’t be bothered.”

Every blithe comment seemed to put Jane even more at ease, and it looked as though she was relaxing as much as her stays would allow, but she still stole glances at the street from the window. Susan’s sharp eyes did not miss that.

“I know this must all feel very dreadful,” she said sympathetically.

Jane shrugged. “I suppose I’m used to my mother steering me in the direction she wants. But...” she took as deep a breath as she could muster, “I have never had the skills to woo a man. It does not come so easily to me. I see other young ladies in ballrooms, laughing and fluttering their fans just so, but when I do it, I feel quite silly.”

Susan patted Jane's hand. "There is no need to feel silly. You are young, and the world is wide. And there is more to life than flirtations and keeping a fine figure to catch a husband."

Jane shook her head. "But that's just it. Us women have no future if we have no husbands."

"My mother and I do quite well for ourselves, as do other women in similar professions," Susan offered.

"But aren't you lonely? Don't you wish for... affection sometimes?"

Susan tried to ignore the pain in her heart at the question. It was an innocent one from an innocent girl, but it felt like the cold steel of a knife.

"Sometimes," Susan admitted. "But I'm in the right profession should I ever wish for it," she said, smiling to cover her pain. "And I promise I shall take good care of you. Now tell me, what is your ideal husband like?"

Jane smiled and talked as if she'd never been given the opportunity before. As Susan listened to the sort of man Jane described, she vowed internally that she would take extra care of the girl. The innocent young woman had triggered something within her, and she determined to find her the best of the gentlemen the ton could offer.

CHAPTER THREE

*B*enjamin groaned as the light peeked through the curtains. It would have been unobtrusive to anyone else, but to a young man with a rather intense headache from whiskey, it was torture. As soon as he sat up, he regretted it. His head felt like a cannonball atop a toothpick. With that, he crashed back down to his bed, the room spinning around him. The pounding at the door did not help matters, it resounded so loudly in his head that he held his pillow over his ears to block it out, to no avail.

Finally, the door opened, and his footman, Stokes, barged in rather grumpily.

“Sir, the family and I have been knocking at the door all morning. I finally got Mrs. Douglas to give me the keys so I could let myself in. Why was your door locked, sir?” Stokes asked, exasperated so much that his already bulbous eyes were nearly popping out of his head.

“To prevent anyone from coming in,” Benjamin said dryly.

“Have you any idea of the time?” Stokes continued his tirade as he crossed the room.

“No, but I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

“Half past eleven,” the footman replied, tearing the curtains open unceremoniously and much to Benjamin’s dismay. He made a show of groaning and pulling the blanket over his head. In a moment, that was ripped off too, and Stokes’s thin face was looking down at him.

“You missed another dinner last night. Your father and mother are quite displeased with you.”

“Well, that’s nothing new,” Benjamin scoffed.

“I’m afraid that’s what is so concerning to them. Now, up. I told your family I’d have you down before noon.”

“Stokes, why are you betraying me like this?” Benjamin mock-whined as he rolled out of bed and thumped over to the wash basin.

“You’re not the one who *pays* me. I’d hardly consider this betrayal.”

“A knife in the back, truly.”

It wasn’t much longer until Benjamin was dressed and deemed presentable enough to go downstairs. Breakfast had finished hours ago, so the family was sitting down to a light lunch in the dining room. It was a modest spread of cold meats, honey cake, and fruits, with a pot of tea, of course. He tried to ignore

his family's obvious glares as he filled up his own plate before plopping down into a chair across the table from his father.

"What kept you last night?" Lady Forbes, Duchess of Pembroke, asked.

"Are we really starting this right now?" Benjamin asked, biting into a fresh plum.

"Have a care how you speak to your mother," the Duke, warned.

"The day has barely started."

"For you, perhaps. But for us respectable people, it started nearly five hours ago," his father said pointedly.

Benjamin looked across the table at his sister Alexia who was smiling into her teacup as though holding back laughter.

"And I suppose you're enjoying this, sister?" he asked.

"I have said nothing. And you have not even wished me a good morning!" she exclaimed.

"Is it *really* a good morning, though?"

"You still have not answered *my* question," his mother said, delicately cutting a piece of meat.

Benjamin rolled his eyes. “I was simply enjoying my last days of freedom.”

That remark led to a series of groans, sighs, and objections as well as, “Honestly, Benjamin!” from the rest of his family.

“It is time you took your title and responsibility to this family seriously,” his father said, a hard edge to his voice and an angry glint in his eye. “It is good for a young man to sow his wild oats before he settles, but you have sown long enough, and you may reap some consequences if you don’t stop soon.”

His mother seemed to bristle at that comment but said nothing. She, like all other women of the ton, was very concerned about her outward image. Everything had its place, and it was best not to question it.

“People are beginning to talk. When too many tongues wag, nothing good ever happens,” his mother counseled. Benjamin had half a mind to say that he begged to differ on that, as a wagging tongue could be quite sensational if used correctly, but he thought not to offend his mother’s sensibilities. As annoyed with his family as he was, he was still a gentleman in the eyes of the ton and by his birth, not some common dock worker.

“I don’t care what the ton thinks,” he said, biting into his plum again.

His mother gasped and clutched at the neckline of her dress as if to steady her heart. “Benjamin Forbes! That is a very dangerous line of thinking.”

“Oh, it’s dangerous to have a mind of my own?”

“If you use it the way you usually do, yes. It is all well and good to be a rake for a little while, but your roguish ways have gone on long enough. Where is your sense of propriety?” his mother cried, the fair curls around her face trembling with anger.

“There is talk that you have bedded half the women in London,” his father said disapprovingly.

Benjamin opened his arms and smiled wickedly. “Perhaps I have.”

It was probably a good thing Lady Forbes was seated; otherwise, she might have fainted. Alexia’s eyes were bright, and her smile was wide. Benjamin looked at her curiously. His sister seemed to feed off of chaos sometimes.

“In all seriousness, Mother, I have not found a good match. There is no lady with whom I would wish to wed. If I had found one, trust I would have a wife by now.”

“You won’t have an option for choice much longer,” his father said grimly. “The list of eligible women in England isn’t endless. And it may be that no woman ticks all your boxes. Take your mother and me, for example. We were a terrible match, but we did well for ourselves, didn’t we, dear?” he said, patting his wife’s arm.

Lady Forbes smiled coldly over the rim of her teacup.

“What your father is trying to say is that love can be learned. All you need is basic compatibility and a bit of charm. After marriage, you have plenty of time to figure each other out. I’m sure you can manage to do the same. You’ve already refused three matches. It will not do for you to refuse a fourth.”

Benjamin regarded his parents curiously. They were not the most affectionate people, and he wasn’t sure he’d ever heard them say “I love you” to each other. But, they had been married nearly thirty years with no explosive arguments, at least to Benjamin’s knowledge. He wondered if his mother simply closed her eyes and thought of England on her wedding night to secure the title of Duchess. Climbing the ranks for titles was not unheard of in the Marriage Mart.

“Have you considered that perhaps it is not in my nature to marry? That it is simply not a path my life will take? That the stars have deemed it so?” His voice was dripping in sarcasm at the last phrase, which neither of his parents appreciated. Alexia, however, was biting her bottom lip hard to keep from laughing.

“Perhaps you are consulting the wrong astrologer,” Lady Forbes said dryly.

“I am my own astrologer,” he replied, indignant and annoyed. “And I know what I like. And that is fine wine, beautiful women, and good times. Do you know what the opposite of those things are?”

“That is quite enough!” His father shouted, slamming his hand down on the table. It was at that moment that Alexia chose to

burst out laughing, attempting to hide it with a series of coughs.

His mother's lips were pursed so tight he wondered if she could breathe.

"You have until the end of the season to accept a match," his father continued, his voice still hot with anger, "or I will disown you."

Benjamin's nostrils flared, and his jaw clenched. *How dare...*

"You would do that to your own son? Take away my birthright for simply not marrying?" he shouted back.

"It is not only that! It is your behavior, boy. Missing dinners that your mother worked hard to coordinate, practically spitting in the face of the matchmaker, and your rakish ways about town. You are a disgrace to the esteemed Forbes name. Marriage is your last chance. Find a wife, or you are disowned!"

Benjamin had never been so incensed in his life. There were many other men like him, of the nobility, of good breeding, who enjoyed the same things as he did, and their parents never disowned them. He was *furious*.

"We shall most certainly see about that," he seethed, then grabbed a small piece of honey cake before departing, feeling his father's eyes burn into him as he left the dining room. As the door shut behind him, he heard Alexia's raucous laugh again, quickly followed by his mother's angry voice.

Stokes was waiting in the hallway, eyebrows raised in amusement, but with one look, his thin face softened into something more neutral. Benjamin snatched his greatcoat and hat off the hook and strode out to town, his mind reeling and face still hot with rage. Lord Forbes did not understand. Benjamin was not avoiding marriage just to be a little shite. There simply was no woman he cared for enough to ask—and he'd met plenty. The eligible ones of good breeding that his family deemed appropriate were all the same. All the ladies at the various balls and dinners and parties blurred together. They all acted the same, wore the same clothes, and had the same looks and interests. He did not want some passive, demure, weak little thing. What an absolute bore that would be. No, Benjamin Forbes wanted someone who would make his passion arise; make his blood boil. He wanted someone with whom he could argue and tease, who could match him intellectually.

But he had not met anyone like that, and he was sure he never would.

CHAPTER FOUR

“*W*hat did you think of our clients last night?” Lady Seymour asked her daughter as she bit into a piece of toast. Since it was just the two of them in their townhouse, they usually took their meals in the small breakfast room on the first floor.

Susan peeled her persimmon and looked out the window thoughtfully before beginning her initial assessment.

“I think... the mother is quite rude and spoiled. I should not like to be in the presence of Lady Notley any longer than I ought to be.”

“We are of a similar mindset there,” Louisa agreed. “Though, it is rare that I care for any of the mamas. I hope you do not find me so tiresome,” she added suddenly, looking at her daughter in alarm.

“Of course not, Mama. We understand each other too well. That being said... it seemed there was a severe lack of understanding between Lady Notley and Miss Jane.”

“How so?”

“Did you see the poor girl? Her mother spoke over her at almost every turn, as if she did not trust her daughter’s own likes and dislikes. And when Miss Jane did speak, it was so fast and difficult to follow, as if she was afraid of being cut off too soon.”

“Yes, I noticed that as well,” her mother mused.

“When I talked to her alone, I noticed some odd things about her appearance, too,” Susan said.

“Oh? Like what? She is a very attractive girl.”

“Oh, undoubtedly! But evidently not perfect enough for her mother. In the light, I could see powder too heavily applied in some spots, and her gown was laced too tight, the neckline too low. If we are to take her on for business, we shall have to change that. People might find that kind of look too vulgar.”

Louisa nodded, a content smile on her face. “I know I’ve said it before, but you really are becoming an excellent matchmaker. Your ability to read others and discern their faults and virtues are nearly unmatched.”

“Nearly?” Susan asked with a quizzical brow.

“Yes. I am still alive, after all.”

“Mama, you tease me so!”

Her mother gave a faint chuckle. “When I grow too tired of this, I shall be proud to hand over the business entirely to you.”

“Can I share another shocking revelation with you about Miss Jane?”

“Do tell,” her mother encouraged as she topped off their cups of tea.

“It is my good opinion that Miss Jane Notley is already in love.”

Lady Seymour’s eyes widened so much that they rivaled the saucers on the table, and she set her teacup down with a clang.

“My goodness. Has she said as such?”

“No,” Susan admitted. “But I have a very good feeling about it. She was so specific with me in her description of an ideal husband that I could not help feeling she was describing a man she knows instead of a fictional one.”

Truthfully, Susan recognized many of the signs in Jane’s description from her own much earlier courtship. Before William left her at the church, how she blushed and described his traits was much like how Jane defined her mystery gentleman. She also suspected her mother knew that, but she had the good sense not to pry.

“Unless you are sure of the man’s character, social standing, and breeding, you should not say anything,” Louisa counseled her daughter. “Love, of course, is ideal but can be very dangerous if improperly directed in the matchmaking business. We cannot risk young Jane’s reputation.”

“You mustn’t worry, Mama. I would never willingly endanger a client like that. And...” she hesitated, watching the tea leaves swirl in her cup for a moment. “Truthfully, she reminds me somewhat of myself. I have made a vow to protect her as if she were a little sister.”

“Jane does remind me of you if only a little.”

Susan smiled gently. “Yes, perhaps that is why I feel the personal need to secure a good match for her. She seems quite loving and lovesick. She should not have to feel the pain that I have.”

Her mother reached over and patted her hand. “You should not have had to bear that pain in the first place and never at such a young age. I blame myself.”

“Why should you blame yourself, Mama? You are not William. You did not choose to run away at the very last moment.”

Lady Seymour sighed deeply and leaned back in her chair.

“Sometimes I wonder if I pushed you into courtship and marriage too early.”

Susan shook her head. “You did no such thing. I loved William. At the time, there was no one else for me. But it does not matter now. We have clients to help.”

“Yes, but let us focus on our breakfast first. We have a full day ahead of us, and we ought to enjoy this calm while we can.”



It had indeed been a busy day—meeting clients at the Pump Room, at the modiste, for tea, for promenading in the park—and Susan was glad to be back in the study, poring over her clients’ files. It helped her to see them in action in the real world rather than continue all conversations in their parlor. Seeing them interact with others and attending events they liked revealed much about their character and gave her personal insight into their requirements for a partner. In summary, it allowed her to see parts of themselves they did not even know they had, which made for better judgment in matchmaking.

And now, she was sitting at the desk that was once her father’s, in what was once his study. It was late, and she probably should not have been thinking about matchmaking at that hour, but she could not sleep. She had Haxby light a fire, and she’d lit some candles too.

Perhaps it was her imagination or maybe it really was the light that kept illuminating one particular name on the page: Benjamin Forbes, son of Edward Forbes, Duke of Pembroke. This young man caused her and her mother undue stress. He had a reputation for being quite the rake, always galivanting about the city in search of a lass, a glass, and a game of cards. Lady Forbes had engaged the Eros Agency to find a match for her son to rid him of that sort of lifestyle.

Unfortunately for everyone involved, he had refused the last three matches. What's more, he had not the decency to say it in person. Each time, he provided a letter with some poor excuse for not agreeing. Neither Susan nor her mother had even met him in person—it was always Lady Forbes doing the talking because, apparently, *he* had other business. Susan could easily guess what that other business was if the gossip was true.

Susan's brow furrowed as she looked at his file, then over at Jane's file. Was she... was she *mad*? She looked once more at Forbes's file; a man of good breeding with a title and the money to back it, handsome (at least according to Lady Forbes and other women she'd met), with a fiery personality that could use some soothing. Then there was Jane; a young lady also of good breeding with a title, although lesser in rank, exceedingly good-looking, with a sweet, demure personality that needed to be coaxed out into confidence.

Opposites do attract, Susan mused, holding each of their files. No, she was not mad. This was good. No, it was better than good—it was *perfect*. Feeling quite pleased with herself, she wrapped both their files together with the red ribbon that signified a match and placed it in the center of the desk for her mother to find in the morning. Then she blew out the candles and called Haxby to put out the fire in the hearth. There was no possible way Lord Forbes could find fault in Miss Jane—Susan would make heaven and earth meet to make sure of that.

Benjamin tugged at his collar uncomfortably, wondering if Stokes had tied his cravat extra tight in retaliation for the fiasco in the dining room the previous week. He could be like that sometimes. It was almost like having another mother to fret over him.

Oh, and there was not enough spiked punch in the world for him to bear the evening. Lady Notley was hosting a ball in honor of her daughter's birthday, and as the forces that he had decided the young Miss Jane was his match, he could not escape attending.

He had met her once last season in a setting, not unlike the current one, and found her to be a proper lady. Much like the other demure and simpering ladies of the ton, he could not deny her physical beauty. The problem was that his parents approved of her, a fact he detested. If he had to marry as they insisted, he at least wanted to find someone they didn't adore so that he could further provoke them. His father's threat rattled around in his mind too often. No wife, no title, no fortune, no future. That was it.

"You look absolutely miserable," Cillian remarked, yanking Benjamin out of his reverie. His friend had suddenly appeared by his side, holding out a glass of punch.

Benjamin accepted gratefully.

"How can you be so cheery? Look at it," he gestured to the rest of the ballroom with a sneer. "All of them, participating in this ridiculous parade."

"Such is the way the world turns. Are you not pleased to meet your future bride?" Cillian asked, his eyes drifting to the dance floor where Jane had stood up with another gentleman for a dance.

"No," Benjamin answered flatly.

“Most men would be.”

“I am not like most men. I think of this meeting as my execution and the matchmakers as my executioners,” he said gloomily. “I should be free to make my own choices, should I not?” He looked at his friend for support.

“Benny boy, if you had your way, you would never find a wife.”

“Yes, that is the point.”

Cillian sighed deeply, leaning back against the column.

“I visited the matchmaking agency myself just to see what it was like.”

Benjamin raised an eyebrow. “And they did not yoke you to a woman on the spot?”

“Of course not. It takes more effort than that,” Cillian answered thoughtfully, seemingly oblivious to his friend’s sarcasm. “It was a fine place. Run by the widow of a baronet and her daughter, both of whom were very affable and knowledgeable.”

Benjamin cocked his head and regarded his friend with confusion.

“Who are you, and what have you done with Cillian? Or has my father dug his claws into you as well?”

“I visited as a joke. But... it doesn't seem like too bad an idea,” Cillian said quietly, his gaze drifting over to Miss Jane. “Something good may yet come of it.”

“Do you want to marry her instead?” Benjamin asked.

“No, indeed. I await my one true match.”

“Is it really true if someone else decides it for you?”

“It is too early in the night, and I am too sober to answer that. Come now, at least act like you're having a jolly time.”

Benjamin only rolled his eyes and downed the punch in one gulp.

CHAPTER FIVE

Susan fluttered her fan at her neck, wishing the ballroom was not quite so hot. It was hard to tell that it was actually October, for there was a light sheen of sweat on all the dancers and most bystanders by now. And she was more than just a little tired of being bombarded by all the concerned and interested mamas and their daughters. She was also no stranger to the Marriage Mart and the ways of the ton—and her late father’s barely-noble title had helped her notoriety—but sometimes it could be overwhelming. Quite frankly, she was thinking of asking her mother if they could hire another matchmaker to remove some of the strain.

She also did not miss the judgmental eyes of some of the mamas, who no doubt wondered why a matchmaker was still unwed. For them, it was like consulting a midwife who had not borne children. She wanted to scream at them that it was not for lack of trying, that she’d almost had it within her grasp, but that would only fan the flames of gossip in a way she did not want.

Speaking of gossip, Lord Forbes had not yet graced the ballroom with his presence. His mother, the Duchess of Pembroke, was already making the rounds with her daughter, but the son was nowhere to be found.

Typical, Susan scoffed mentally. If his earlier antics were anything to go by, she should not be surprised. Since he had not yet made himself known, she decided she would take a small break from the throngs of people someplace more private. She gently excused herself, receiving a sympathetic look from her mother before she all but raced out of the ballroom.

Once in the safety and coolness of the hallway, which was miraculously free of couples who'd snuck away for some kissing and heavy petting, she felt like she could breathe. It was already cooler out here than it was in the dance hall. But she still felt like she needed a place to clear her head in privacy, so she wandered until she found a large, imposing wooden door on the second floor. To her surprise, it was unlocked and opened without much coaxing. And then, to her delight, it was a well-stocked library. Leather-bound books lined the shelves which spanned from floor to ceiling. There was even a small lofted area with a window and more shelves, accessible by a ladder, which looked like it attached to the top shelf and could be moved anywhere in the room. It was absolutely delightful. Her late father's study was lovely but not nearly as impressive as this one. Had she been able to go to university, she imagined this was what such a library looked like. There was a large fireplace and two sumptuous chairs in red velvet in front of the fire, with a small table between them, upon which there was a decanter of some amber liquid. The rich dark wood, the smell of old books, and the slight scent of burnt candles filled her nostrils, and she sighed, slumping against the door. If she did indeed take over the matchmaking business completely, she intended to add to her father's study and make it more like this room.

As her finger ran delicately over some of the spines on the far wall, she heard a noise—a bit like coughing and scratching. It was far too large to be a mouse or a rat. Susan gingerly shelved the copy of *History of England* from Catherine Macaulay and tiptoed toward the sound.

“Is someone there?” she asked, more curious than afraid.

“That depends on who’s asking,” came a deep male voice.

Susan involuntarily jumped back as the man stepped into view, and her heart leaped into her throat. His beauty caught her off guard. He was tall, which was impressive, for she was not a short woman. His blond hair gleamed in the candlelight and shone in his blue eyes, matching the sparkling grin he bore. He seemed well-built as he cut a fine figure in his blue velvet coat and cream waistcoat. Suddenly Susan felt very small and silly, but she refused to be seen that way.

“Oh,” he said again, cocking his head and regarding her with a look of amusement. “You’re not who I thought you were. You’re not the maid, are you?”

Susan’s cheeks burned with a mixture of anger and embarrassment.

“Of course not. Do I really appear so lowly to you?” she snapped.

The handsome gentleman raised an eyebrow, and a smirk spread slowly across his face.

“Ah, so you’re a lady then. A fine lady such as yourself should not be alone in an unfamiliar place.”

“And who are you to tell me where I can and cannot spend my time?” Susan was amused at the cheek of this handsome man, although she was painfully aware of how such a situation might look to an outside observer.

He only laughed in response, which sent a pleasant shiver up her spine. It was a lovely sound, rich and warm, and she wished she did not like it so much.

“Why are you hidden away in here? There is a ball going on, and I do not see dancing couples or musicians in here,” she asked.

“How observant. What makes you think I’m hiding?” he asked, taking a step closer.

Susan stood her ground, looking up at him defiantly. “People do not usually sequester themselves in libraries when there is fun and merriment to be had.”

“Then I shall ask the same of you. Why are *you* hiding?”

Susan sensed she wasn’t going to win this argument, so she sighed and looked at the ground, relieved to not make eye contact with those piercing eyes.

“I needed a moment away from the crowd.”

“If that is the case, you must be quite the eligible young lady,” he practically purred, moving in even closer. She looked up

again in surprise, as there was hardly any room to breathe between the two of them now.

Her heart beat so rapidly and so loudly that she was sure he could hear it. Why else would he wear such a wicked grin on his face? And why were her feet still firmly planted on the ground; why was she not moving away?

“Meaning?” she inquired, determined to keep up her boldness.

“Meaning, you must have a horde of suitors after you if you feel you must get away,” he said, looking down at her in a way much too amorous for first acquaintances. But her feet would not budge. It was as if her curiosity kept them held fast.

“If you are indeed eligible,” he continued, bringing his face so close to hers that she could feel his warm breath, “I should like to get to know you on a more... intimate level.”

Susan knew she should be shocked at such an indecent proposition, but she was utterly captivated. She knew girls had been ruined for far lesser transgressions, and she was risking her reputation by simply being alone in a room with a man she did not know, but she also wanted to see how it played out. And it had been so long since she'd felt the gentleness of another's lips pressed upon hers... surely she could risk it for one moment.

She felt her eyes close and his hot breath on her cheek, but voices outside the library shook them out of this fantasy. They jumped back from one another as if they'd been electrocuted, and suddenly she felt as if she had been doused in ice-cold water. Yes, this was indeed wrong, and she was very foolish

for letting her desire to be wanted overcome her. She would have been happy marrying William, but being forced to marry a stranger to hastily patch up a scandal would be unbearable, not to mention the damage it would do to her mother's business.

Susan cleared her throat and smoothed the front of her dress.

"I think that's enough hiding. You must excuse me," she said abruptly, turning around and scurrying across the room.

"Pray tell, what is your name?" the handsome gentleman asked, still looking after her with that amorous expression.

"It is no use. I doubt you will remember it tomorrow." She did not stay to see his reaction. When the door shut behind her, she walked quickly to the end of the corridor and found an alcove where she could slump and catch her breath. Her face was burning with embarrassment and shame. It was doubtless red as a beet, and her bosom was heaving as she breathed deeply to calm herself. It was just a handsome man. Those were plentiful during the Season. She could find another if she so chose... or she could stick to her work as a matchmaker and put such thoughts out of her mind. It had been lovely to be desired at that moment, but upon further reflection, she felt rather silly and foolish for letting it happen and even thinking it in the first place. Moments later, she returned to the ballroom, not a trace upon her person of what transpired in the library.

Benjamin was utterly flabbergasted by the situation. That woman was so striking. Not at all demure in that sniveling way that so many girls were. But her attitude was also not mean-spirited, either. He found her to be quite playful in a stubborn way. And, of course, physically beautiful. Her dark

hair, green eyes, and smooth complexion were so stunningly in contrast. She reminded him of some Classical Greek heroine; that was how wondrous her face was. And her figure... he'd been able to steal some glances as she walked away. The cream-colored gown fit her well. That had to be indicative of a beautiful figure. The whole situation was a fantasy that all men entertained on some level; to find a beautiful woman wandering alone, take her, and then return to the party as if nothing had happened. The very thought drove him wild. Unfortunately, the very thought also manifested itself in his breeches. There was nothing he could do to relieve it at the moment, so he had to think of very unpleasant things to stop it. Marriage. There, that was unpleasant. But to that mysterious girl, it might not be so bad... no! He could not let his thoughts wander there. Marriage to a dowdy old frumpy woman who kept him on a short leash and did not let him drink...

There. That was better. His arousal was already calming down. His face was still warm, however, and he desperately needed to cool off. He strode toward the window at the end of the room, and leaned out ever so slightly, letting the cool air kiss his face.

"I hope you're not thinking of jumping. Surely marriage is a better alternative," Cillian said some distance behind him.

Benjamin groaned and clambered down from the window seat, shutting and locking the window behind him.

"How would you know?" he sulked, plopping down onto the upholstered window seat bench.

"I just met Miss Jane. She's lovely. Nothing about which to complain. What ails you? You look..." Cillian cocked his head. "Odd."

“I *feel* odd. I just met the most bewitching woman, and now I wonder if I’ll ever see her again. She refused to tell me her name.”

“Alright, well, what did she look like?”

“A fairy,” Benjamin breathed, “or a siren.”

Cillian hid his laughter behind some pitiful-sounding coughs. “This is not *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare.”

“Well, how else do you explain the bewitching?”

“Spiked punch, a hot ballroom, and denial of the fate that awaits you,” Cillian answered in the most rational manner Benjamin had ever heard from him.

“Do you not believe me?”

“Oh, I do not doubt that you saw a beautiful woman in the library. But she was perhaps only a maid doing her chores. Come out and meet your future bride. Your mother is quite upset with you.”

“I don’t care about that sniveling little creature; I have been bewitched by that siren!”

Cillian rolled his eyes. Normally he would find his friend’s antics amusing, but lately, he felt like a nursery attendant. And

that was saying something; usually, he was the messier of the two.

“On second thought, we have to get you sober enough before you go downstairs. It will not do to embarrass yourself in such a state.”

Benjamin groaned but let Cillian do what he needed to do. Truthfully, he was not that inebriated. He was fully aware of his faculties and had complete control over them, but any excuse to stay away from the ballroom was a welcome one.

When Cillian was satisfied with Benjamin’s appearance, the two walked back to the ballroom; Benjamin’s head on a swivel for that enchanting woman. She was nowhere to be found, but he could see his mother and another woman at the other end of the ballroom, engaged in conversation with polite smiles.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Cillian said, clapping Benjamin on the back before going to join his own family.

Benjamin wished he could have made an obscene gesture at his friend, but the ballroom was no place for that. After everything that had happened, he had to be on his best behavior to earn his dukedom.

“My son,” his mother said airily as he approached them. He gave a short bow in greeting as his mother continued talking. “This is Lady Seymour, a dear friend of mine.”

Benjamin had heard that name before and assumed she must be the matchmaker. He bowed deeply despite his misgivings

about matchmaking.

“So, you are responsible for my fate, I hear,” he said, tongue-in-cheek.

“I am not responsible for anyone’s fate. I am only its right hand and helper,” Lady Seymour replied smoothly.

Benjamin was impressed with this woman. She was perhaps a little younger than his mother and incredibly self-assured. Her confidence and graceful air gave her a sense of authority, and it seemed that people were more deferential to her than they were to other higher-ranking members of the nobility.

“And as fate’s right hand, there is someone I’d like you to meet,” she said, gesturing to her side. The girl he recognized as Jane Notley stepped forward. “May I present young Miss Jane Notley and her mother, Lady Notley?”

Benjamin caught Jane’s hand in his and kissed her knuckles ever so briefly as he bowed once more, then stood up and gave a short, courteous nod to Lady Notley. If nothing else, he could be charming, and decided to lay it on as thick as cream tonight.

“I had heard of the beauty of the Notley women before, but words did not do it justice. I feel very blessed indeed to experience it firsthand, Miss Notley,” he said to Jane, throwing a quick wink to her mother. Both Lady Notley and her mother blushed while his own mother regarded him with suspicion.

“Thank you, my lord, you are too kind,” replied Jane. He took a quick look at her now that the two of them were up close. She was indeed beautiful, so his earlier words had not been untruthful. Her alabaster skin, Titian hair, rosy cheeks, and large blue eyes framed with long lashes were not unlike a Renaissance angel’s. Her figure was light and pleasing, so she was indeed a catch. He hated to admit that to himself. But it seemed as though she held back. As soon as she remarked upon his kindness, she looked at the floor once again as if she were afraid to meet his eye. No matter, he thought, his charm was notorious.

“I suppose I must congratulate and thank you for finding such an excellent match. I look forward to our time together,” he said, regarding Lady Seymour and then Miss Jane.

“Actually, you have my daughter to thank. I consider her my business partner in all ventures, and she has a knack for this sort of thing,” the matchmaker replied.

“Well then, I must find her and thank her. Do you know where she is?”

“Yes, of course, I-oh! Here she comes now!” Lady Seymour said, gesturing behind him.

Benjamin turned to look, that practiced smile plastered across his handsome features, but it soon melted right away as soon as he saw the matchmaker’s daughter. Absolutely stunned into silence, it was the mysterious, beautiful woman from the library.

CHAPTER SIX

*I*t took Susan a moment to catch her breath. That devilishly handsome stranger from the library was standing before her. And worse... it was Lord Benjamin Forbes, their absolute worst client. She could feel her heartbeat slow and sink down to her toes. This could not possibly be Lord Forbes. In every instance, she had pictured him as an arrogant, incomprehensible ass, and unattractive. In her experience, the pickiest men tended to be the ones with the least looks to recommend them. But there he was in the flesh, handsome as ever, regarding her with perhaps the same level of surprise. She was vaguely aware of a voice calling her name, but it sounded distant as if she were submerged underwater and the person calling her was standing on the bank nearby.

“My dear, will you not introduce yourself?” her mother asked, her tone smooth but her eyebrows raised and eyes wide with that impatient look.

“Oh... yes, yes, of course. Please forgive me; it has been such an exhilarating evening,” Susan said with nervous laughter. Then she cleared her throat and stood up straight. “Miss Susan Seymour, at your service. Delighted to make your acquaintance, my lord.” She curtsied as was proper and sized up the group before her. The Ladies Notley and Forbes had those polite expressions on their faces while Jane smiled

widely at the sight of her friend. Her mother still looked at her quizzically.

“A pleasure indeed,” Lord Forbes said, nodding to her as was customary.

“I have no doubt that you and Miss Jane will make a fine pair. You look very well together,” Susan remarked.

“Tell me, Miss Susan,” Lord Forbes took a step toward her, his hands clasped behind his back like a businessman. “Have you ever been wrong in your business? Mismatched a client? Given them the wrong person?”

She could see the look of mischief that spread across his face. He was trying to catch her out at something, to make her look stupid in front of an audience. But two could play this game, and she was more than prepared.

“No, of course not. I find that it is usually the clients who are stubborn and unable to identify what they want.”

Jane giggled behind her hand while Lady Forbes looked on, amused. Lady Notley and Susan’s own mother seemed less than impressed, though; she could tell her mother was using all her strength to keep from reprimanding her on the spot.

“If you will excuse me, I must speak with other clients,” Susan said gracefully. “I do hope you and Miss Jane have an excellent evening. If I do not see you take to the floor together soon, I shall be very displeased indeed.”

She turned on her heel and whirled away into the throng of people, leaving the lot of them gaping in disbelief behind her. That had been very improper of her, but she did not care. Lord Forbes was an arrogant, sour, entitled young man who needed to be checked. Who better to do that than the matchmaker? At least Jane had seemed amused at the whole situation. Susan said a little prayer in hopes that she could survive his roguish ways, as she was rather uneasy about the match considering everything that had... transpired.

The rest of the night was a blur, as most of the balls of the Season were. Susan was ever so thankful for her trusty little notepad and pencil she kept in her reticule. She used it to jot down names and other defining characteristics she'd noticed, then she'd go home and start an official file for them. What wasn't a blur though was Benjamin Forbes. How absolutely shocked she was to learn that he'd been the handsome stranger in the library. His fine features and rich, warm laugh haunted her memory. It was rather annoying.

It was only when she and her mother climbed into their carriage in the wee hours of the morning that she finally found some momentary reprieve from him.

"I raised you better than that, Susan," her mother said curtly, her mouth drawn in a thin line.

Susan genuinely had no idea what her mother meant. "I thought it was a successful ball. Many potential new clients and we introduced Miss Jane to Lord Forbes."

"Yes, precisely, that moment. You were incredibly brazen when he spoke to you about matchmaking."

Oh, *that* moment. Susan could feel the anger rise. “Mama, he baited me! He meant to embarrass me!”

“Well, that does not mean you had to embarrass *him*! It does not look well, Susan! He ranks so very highly. It is very unwise indeed to ruffle their feathers. If his family does not like our services for whatever reason, and that display was reason enough, we could lose business!”

“I highly doubt he was embarrassed. He is far too self-assured for that.”

“Susan, *listen* to me!” her mother implored, grabbing both her hands. “I know you are young and impetuous and have inherited your father’s temper, but you cannot let it get the better of you. If the ton finds you difficult or rude, they could spin such horror stories about you.”

“I am tired of the ton. It could do with a little shock every now and then to keep it in check.”

That right there earned her a disciplinary smack on the back of her hand from her mother—she was surprised.

“*Listen. To. Me.* You are unmarried, and I am a widow. We have no one to look out for us except ourselves. Our reputations are at higher stakes than everyone else’s because we do not have the support of husbands or fathers to help. Furthermore, our business is now being sought after and looked at even more because Lady Forbes has recommended us to her friends. We have to succeed, or there is nothing else. Do you understand me?”

Lady Seymour's curls were trembling around her face as if even her hair was angry. Unfortunately, she was right. Susan had failed to understand the gravity of the situation. Chastened, she slumped against the upholstered seat of the carriage.

"I'm sorry, Mama," was all she could say lest she might cry.

"It is alright. Just be mindful. Hopefully, Benjamin's two dances with Jane are enough to divert the ton. It is a beautiful match, Susan. Very excellently done."

Oh, Mama, Susan thought. If only you knew.

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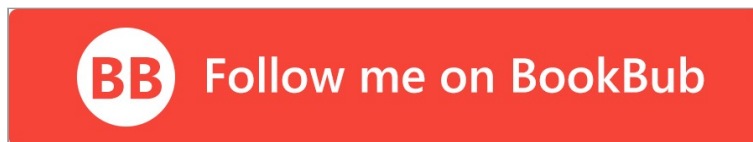
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Campell is an American author specialising in Steamy Regency romance tales. She came to realise her lifelong dream of becoming a writer at a relatively mature age, after an inciting event taught her that it's better late than never. Transferring the intricate storylines of her boundless imagination to ink and paper has been her passion ever since.

Her historical fiction novels have been distinguished for their intriguing plots, their well-situated characters and the attention to detail level they display.

Lisa lives in Santa Clara, California, together with her dear husband. They are the parents of two children. Before devoting herself to Regency romance, Lisa split her time between being a mother and working as a travel clerk. She now finds her youthful spirit to be revitalised every time she brings one of her stories to life.



Note from Lisa

I'm always happy to communicate with my readers. So if you want to stay up to date with my newest releases and win little treats, please [subscribe to my newsletter](#), and you will always be the first to know about my newest Regency novel.

Thank you,
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