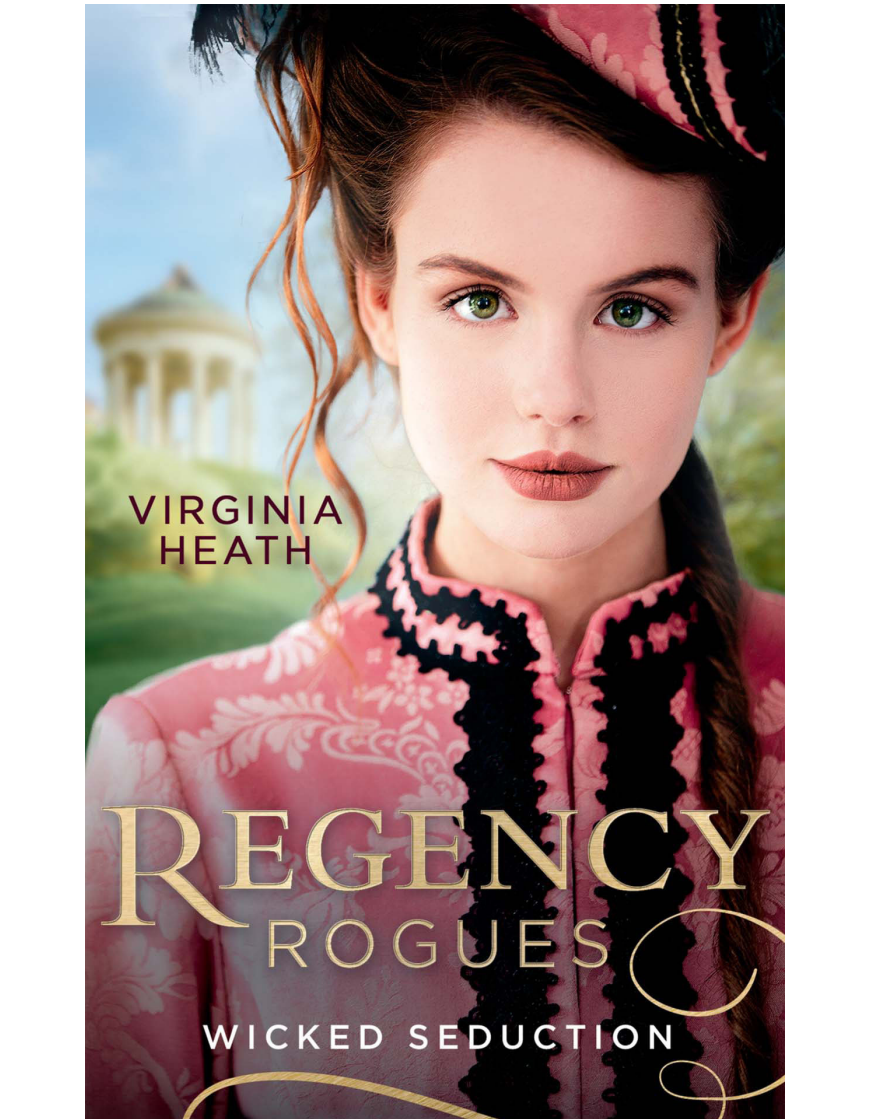




VIRGINIA
HEATH

REGENCY ROGUES

WICKED SEDUCTION

Virginia Heath
Regency Rogues: Wicked
Seduction: Her Enemy at the
Altar / That Despicable Rogue

Аннотация

Revenge is sweet Her Enemy at the Altar An unexpected end to the Wincanton-Stuart feud...? In a world where the ideal woman is supposed to be delicate and fragile, Lady Constance Stuart is neither of those, and resigned to a life alone. Except Aaron Wincanton is not the slightest bit afraid of her, something Connie finds most disconcerting. Especially as the Wincanton family are her greatest enemy! That Despicable Rogue A lady's mission of revenge... Lady Hannah Steers loathes Ross Jameson, and is determined to expose him for the rogue he is! Disguised as a housekeeper she infiltrates his home to build a case against him...except Hannah finds herself in a position she never expected...falling head over heels in love with him!

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Regency Rogues

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When **VIRGINIA HEATH** was a little girl it took her ages

to fall asleep, so she made up stories in her head to help pass the time while she was staring at the ceiling. As she got older, the stories became more complicated, sometimes taking weeks to get to the happy ending. Then one day, she decided to embrace the insomnia and start writing them down. But it still takes her ages to fall asleep.

Regency Rogues: Wicked Seduction

Her Enemy at the Altar

That Despicable Rogue

Virginia Heath

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REGENCY ROGUES: WICKED SEDUCTION

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Her Enemy at the Altar

Virginia Heath

For Katie

And all of the other beautiful tall girls out there.

Chapter One

A London ballroom—November 1815

He was surrounded by the usual gaggle of giggling girls who found him charming. Fortunately, mused Lady Constance Stuart as she watched him from the opposite side of the ballroom, she was not one of them. Like his father, Aaron Wincanton had hair as dark as night and a heart as black as sin, and Constance was predisposed to hate him with a vengeance. But there was something about Aaron Wincanton that had always grated. Perhaps it was his cocky arrogance, or perhaps it was the way he constantly flirted with any woman in possession of a pulse, or maybe it was simply the fact that he was the most irritatingly handsome man in the room, but whatever it was she had developed a deep well of loathing reserved especially for him.

The gaggle of silly girls all stepped back at his command and Constance watched in reluctant fascination as Aaron Wincanton held an unopened champagne bottle upright in his palm. He had obviously procured a sword from someone and held it aloft in his right hand with far more flourish than was necessary. The blade glinted in the light of the chandeliers above, attracting even more attention to the exciting spectacle at the edge of the dance floor. He lay the flat of the blade against the side of the bottle and his mewling disciples began to count out loud in squeaking

excitement. ‘One... Two...’

On three he slid the blade swiftly upwards against the glass, slicing off the cork and the neck of the bottle in one, deadly clean cut. Foaming champagne spilled from the top of the bottle like a fountain and the audience all held out their wine glasses for him to fill or clapped at the audaciousness of the trick.

As if he knew that she would be watching him, his eyes languidly lifted and locked on hers. Before she could look away, he was already smiling smugly and winked at her in that oh-so-arrogant way of his that suggested that he just knew she had been staring at him again. It was galling.

Irritated beyond measure at the man, and at her own stupidity at being caught gawping at him yet again, Constance forced her eyes to another part of the ballroom. The part that she had been deftly avoiding. For the third time this evening she spied her new fiancé, the Marquis of Deal, leering down Penelope Rothman’s ample cleavage. Despite the fact that her father had already instructed her to ignore it, explaining that a good wife understands that a husband might—from time to time—seek the company of other women, Constance still struggled to do so. She and the marquis had been engaged less than a fortnight. And he had chosen her over Penelope. Surely he could keep his urges under control for such a short period of time out of respect for his future wife?

Unless this was a bitter taste of the life she was destined to have with the man? Despite the fact that the marriage had

been arranged, Constance had hoped that they might find some sort of happiness together. Secretly, she had nurtured the belief that he might, one day, actually fall in love with her. That the Marquis of Deal would see beyond the hard exterior she had always presented to the world as a defence mechanism, find some beauty in the unruly, unsubtle, red hair that did its own thing and the tall, gangly, unimpressive figure, and uncover the real woman who lay beneath. The one who felt things a little too deeply and worried constantly that she was not quite good enough. What an idiotic, hopeless fool she was to have such a ludicrous dream!

Deal would never love her. It was no secret that her father had increased her dowry as a sweetener to lure him and Penelope Rothman was considered to be the diamond of the Season. It was humbling to realise that the Marquis of Deal had chosen his future bride pragmatically and solely for economic reasons. That is where his attraction to Constance started and stopped. Connie's vivid appearance could never tempt him in the same way that Penelope's golden hair and ethereal beauty did. She was merely a better financial prospect. It was still Penelope he really wanted and no amount of money would change that. Her eyes flicked back towards Aaron Wincanton and she saw him watching Deal and Penelope briefly before his gaze locked with hers again. She could tell by his bland expression that he also knew that her fiancé preferred petite blondes to gangly redheads. Everybody preferred petite blondes to gangly redheads.

The surge of disappointment was so sudden that tears

threatened to form and hell would have to freeze over before she allowed anyone see her cry. Constance quietly disentangled herself from her mother's group and slipped away to an empty alcove. Once she was composed she would give Deal the sharp end of her tongue and remind him of the behaviour expected of a gentleman. She might well be able to overlook his indiscretions in time, a very long amount of time, but that did not mean that she wanted to witness them as well. Besides, she reasoned as she watched festivities from a distance, nobody was likely to miss her—least of all her devoted marquis. As always, her dance card was woefully empty, aside from the occasional polite invitation issued from older family friends and the first waltz that she had already danced with her indifferent fiancé. She was now doomed to spend the rest of the evening with the matrons and the wallflowers. As usual.

It had always been that way. Ever since her come out six years ago, she had been doomed to watch every ball from the far side of the room. A situation that had been made much worse by the unfortunate, but incredibly apt, nickname that she had been given by Aaron Wincanton on the night she had been introduced at Almack's. Of course, it had caught on almost immediately and Connie had learnt of it when she had overheard another group of debutantes laughing about it in the retiring room. Thanks to Aaron Wincanton, from that moment on she had been referred to scathingly as the Ginger Amazonian.

The first year had been mortifying. Only her pride had got

her through it as she had stoically ignored all of the whispers and giggles, and tried to be grateful for the pathetic trickle of fortune-hunting suitors that still tried their luck. She knew that she looked ridiculous and ungainly up against the other girls. Nobody knew better than she how very unappealing she was. There had never been another debutante who had the audacity to grow to six feet. Nor was there one with feet so enormous that the cobbler had once bragged that he made the biggest slippers in London. The debutante pastels further washed out her already pale complexion and she positively towered over all of the other women—and most of the gentlemen as well. She endured every feeble joke about her height by laughing politely, even though she wanted to smash her fist in the face of the next person who asked her what the weather was like up there or suggested that she slept in a greenhouse.

In an attempt to blend into the background, for a few months she had even took to standing with her knees bent at all times. While this served to make her appear shorter when stationary, the effect was spoiled the moment she had to move because she found it far too painful to attempt to walk, or heaven forbid dance, in a crouch. Besides, as her younger brother had laughingly pointed out, her crouched gait was oddly reminiscent of that of the apes at the Royal Menagerie. She gave up squatting after that. It was bad enough being compared to a giant female warrior. She did not want to ever have to endure a simian nickname and would not put it past Aaron Wincanton to come

up with something even more insulting, like the Giant Ginger Gorilla. Heaven forbid!

The second year Connie was more prepared. If she was going to be compared to a mythical warrior she might as well act like one. Nobody would ever witness her lack of confidence in her own attractiveness ever again. She had learnt to watch the proceedings with a detached and slightly disdainful air, as if she would never deign to lower herself by courting the interest of the eligible gentlemen in attendance or attempting to make friends with the silly gossiping girls. She was better than that. Lady Constance Stuart never fluttered her eyelashes over her fan, or giggled or swooned or simpered. Lady Constance Stuart proudly loomed over any gentleman who had the audacity to be shorter. She also wore bold colours to set off her copper-coloured curls to best effect. Turquoise, emerald and, if she was feeling particularly unattractive, crimson became her preferred colours of choice. They were no longer merely gowns; now each dress was a statement of defiance. She might well be an ugly wallflower, but that did not mean that she had to be a shrinking violet. Connie had been doomed to stand out wherever she went so she gave the impression that she was comfortable with that by purposefully sticking out wherever she went. But she loathed it nevertheless. Almost as much as she loathed her wild red hair, pale skin and beanpole body.

Lady Constance Stuart earned the reputation for having a sharp tongue and used it to wound if the need arose, which it did

with less frequency as the seasons passed. She was formidable, like a true Amazonian, and the character she had created was now so convincing that sometimes Connie could forget how much it all hurt and how much she hated being relegated to a curiosity rather than a woman.

Out of the corner of her eye she spotted her fiancé brush his fingers over Penelope Rothman's perfect cheek and whisper something close to her ear that soon had those perfect cheeks blushing a very pretty shade of pink. Enough was enough. Lady Constance Stuart would never silently condone such insulting behaviour. She was going to talk to her fiancé and lay out some rules.

Connie regally walked towards the Marquis of Deal, where he was stood still fawning over Penelope. 'My lord, if I might have a private word?' She fixed him with a pointed stare and watched him blink in surprise at her icy tone.

'Of course, my dear.'

Connie headed purposefully towards the French windows that led out to the terrace and heard him follow. Despite the chill in the air, there were several other guests outside so she made sure that they were all well out of earshot before she turned around and faced him. Out of deference for the two inches of difference in their respective heights, Connie crouched until she could stare pointedly in his perfect blue eyes before she spoke. There really was no delicate way of putting it.

'Your behaviour this evening has humiliated me. I am your

fiancée. We are newly betrothed. It is insulting that you should continue to flirt with other women in public. If I am going to be your wife, I expect to be treated with some respect.'

Her comments appeared to startle him. 'How exactly have I been disrespectful? I danced the first waltz with you. I have spent several minutes in your company. Surely you are not put out by my socialising with my friends? It is the norm for married or engaged couples to not linger in each other's company at social events. People would talk if we did otherwise.' The Marquis of Deal gave her one of his benevolent smiles. The one that set off the dimple in his square chin to perfection and made his blue eyes twinkle against his thick, golden hair. The man was far too handsome and far too aware of it. 'Although I do find your jealousy flattering, it is quite misplaced. I can assure you that Penelope and I were simply having a brief and platonic conversation.'

'It was hardly brief. She has dominated your time for at least the last hour and people are beginning to notice.' Aaron Wincanton had certainly noticed. 'In the future I would prefer it if you avoided cosy chats alone with Penelope, or any other unattached woman for that matter, out of respect for me.' Connie had hoped that Deal would feel ashamed of his behaviour. Instead he looked angry.

'It is not your place to tell me what I can and cannot do, madam, and I will thank you to remember it. Do you seriously expect me to avoid all contact with other women? I have already

discussed this at great length with your father and he assured me that you understood that our arrangement was more about convenience than convention.'

Hearing that spew from his mouth was like a slap in the face and Connie balked. 'Do you have no affection for me whatsoever?' She had hoped that he had some and that the tiny seed would grow and she hated herself for that as well. Silly, needy fool!

Deal stared back at her as if she was quite mad. 'Ours is an arranged marriage, Constance. It is based on an agreement that is mutually beneficial to both of our families. I thought you understood that? I am doing you a huge favour by marrying you! You have been on the shelf for years and nobody else wants you. To be perfectly frank, you should be grateful for that and stop all of this nonsense. I will give you my name, a home of your own and a child or two to keep you company and secure the succession. In return, I have promised your father my support.'

A home of her own? What exactly did that mean? It certainly did not sound as if he wanted to share it. So much for her hopeful dream of a happy marriage. 'And then what?' she asked boldly, although she suspected she already knew the answer. Deal did not want her. He never would.

'And then we will both live our lives exactly how we want to! You will stay with the children in the country, of course, but as long as you are discreet I have no objection to you doing as you please once you have provided me with an heir.'

Connie was starting to feel a little queasy. Surely her father had not agreed to this? He had sold her off as a brood mare to a man who had no intention of being more than a temporary husband. ‘And I am to accept the fact that you will continue to live the life of a bachelor in town?’

At that he looked her up and down with obvious distaste and then his expression turned to bemusement. When he finally spoke it was the final nail in the coffin of her foolish dreams.

‘What else did you expect, Constance? Surely you did not think that I would miraculously fall in love? With you?’

Chapter Two

Aaron had seen her face change almost imperceptibly just before she had hurried out of the ballroom and found himself watching the Marquis of Deal with downright disgust. Whilst it hardly mattered to him that Lady Constance was marrying a libertine, he could not help feeling a little exasperated at the man's behaviour. To consort openly with another woman when your fiancée was in the same room was worse than poor form, in his opinion, especially when the woman you were consorting with did not hold a candle to the one you were apparently betrothed to.

Constance Stuart might well be snooty, disdainful and disapproving towards him, that was only to be expected when they shared such an unfortunate history. But to others she was always the epitome of what a proper lady should be. Yes, she might well be aloof and in possession of one of the sharpest tongues in Christendom, but she had a way of carrying herself that set her apart from so many of the other young women of the ton. And with her height and willowy figure and all of that red hair, she was certainly distinguished. Added to that was her obvious intelligence and innate grace, combined with a rare and spectacular smile that lit up the room. Not that she ever bestowed it on him, of course, nor could he conceive that she would ever have cause to, but he could imagine that such a smile must make the recipient of it feel as if the most glorious sunrise had been

created only for him to enjoy. Yet Deal preferred to humiliate the girl by fawning over the Rothman chit. And Aaron had never met a more scheming, manipulative and shallow creature in all of his life than Penelope.

Remembering his purpose, he turned back towards Violet Garfield and feigned interest. If he was going to propose to the girl, he had to at least appear to care about whatever it was she was currently wittering on about. Two hours into the ball and already he could feel his mask slipping. Being Aaron Wincanton was becoming exhausting.

Once upon a time being the charming and slightly mischievous rogue had come as naturally to him as breathing, but he had left that effervescent young man behind somewhere on a battlefield in Spain and he doubted they would ever cross paths again. The new Aaron Wincanton found no joy in balls or parties, nor did he find it in intimate gatherings or quiet solitary contemplation either. He did not deserve to feel joy any more. Most of the time he felt burdened. The rest of the time, if he was lucky, he just felt numb. He caught Violet looking at him as if she expected him to say something. He had not been listening and he did not want to offend her. Out of habit he turned on the charm. 'Violet, when I am with you I wish the minutes were hours and the hours were days.' They certainly felt like that.

As he had expected, the inane platitude worked wonders and she started to chatter afresh, with such gusto that all he had to do was listen and nod. A few seconds later and Aaron found his

mind wandering again—it made him feel quite unsettled. He had hoped that he could convince himself that he might be content with Violet. There was no doubting that she was very pretty, which was a bonus, but much as he liked her poor Violet bored him senseless. Unfortunately, she was also an heiress—with a staggeringly large dowry—so beggars, like him, could not be choosers. The estate needed funds fast and his father wanted him to start producing the next generation of Wincantons while he was still alive to see it. Therefore, Aaron needed to step up and propose to Violet. And he needed to do it tonight.

But before he did, Aaron definitely needed a bit of peace and little Dutch courage. With nothing stronger than ratafia at the refreshment table he excused himself from the conversation and wandered out of the ballroom to see if he could find something suitably fortifying to drink alone elsewhere.

At the furthest end of the darkened hallway he found the empty library. Empty, except for the full brandy decanter and the one solitary redhead sat on an immense sofa and staring sightlessly into the fireplace. For a moment he considered turning around and looking elsewhere for sanctuary. The very last thing he needed was a dressing down from Lady Constance Stuart, even if he hoped that such encounters would eventually lead to an introduction to her brother, when he would broker the idea of an end to the silly feud that threatened to bankrupt him. His nerves were shot as it was and he needed a rest before he forced himself to become Aaron Wincanton again. But something about the way

she sat, with her shoulders uncharacteristically slumped, made him dither. Perhaps they both needed the comfort of a sparring match this evening?

‘How clever of you, Connie,’ he said to vex her, ‘to find a place where we will not be disturbed.’

Her startled head whipped around and Aaron thought he saw tears shimmering in her green eyes but, if he had, she covered them quickly with her usual frostiness. The shocked expression dissolved into a harsh frown instantly.

‘You are like a bad smell, Mr Wincanton, which always seems to follow me around.’ She stood stiffly and glared. ‘I was hoping that, for once, you would leave me in peace.’

‘And where would the entertainment be in that? I look forward to our little exchanges, Connie. I find your disdain refreshing when I am so admired by all wherever I go.’

‘So you seek me out for your entertainment, then? Does your father know that you regularly converse with a Stuart?’

‘No more than your father knows that you engage in discourse with a vile Wincanton, I will wager.’ Aaron gave her a cheeky wink because he knew that nobody else ever dared to flirt with her and he watched her eyes narrow in annoyance.

‘But I do not seek you out, Mr Wincanton. That is the difference. I could happily go to the grave and never exchange another word with you. Therefore, I must conclude that I must hold a particular fascination, or pose a particular challenge, to you. Does it bother you that I am immune to your flirtatious

charms? Does my obvious distaste wound your frail ego?

She gave him a withering look that only spurred him on further. When she was riled those green eyes hardened to cold emeralds and her red hair crackled copper in the firelight. It was a sight to see and one that might send a lesser man running for the hills. But Aaron was made of stern stuff. He had fought Napoleon, for goodness sake, so he could survive a war of words with this fiery redhead. Besides he had an ulterior motive that he could not ignore. He needed to improve relations to put an end to the costly feud between their two families, and so far Constance Stuart was the only Stuart who would deign to speak to him. 'Why don't you admit it, Connie? You find my persistence exciting. Too many men treat you like a marble statue with their dull politeness, the rest bore you because they are terrified of your sharp tongue. But I am different. I make your blood run hot. I suspect I might even fire your passions.'

The man was as mad as he was insufferable. In a strange way Connie was grateful that he was here. She could take out all of her hurt and anger on him. At least then she would not feel so utterly despondent and powerless. 'Do not flatter yourself, Mr Wincanton. You fire my temper, not my passions.'

'How many times must I ask you to call me Aaron? After all the jolly conversations we have shared these last two months, surely it is time that we dropped the formalities, Connie?'

He knew perfectly well that her name was always Constance—her father disliked informality of any sort—and that she would

never, ever give him permission to use it. He was also the only person in the universe who ever shortened her name to Connie. She despised his familiarity even though she quite liked the name. ‘In case it has escaped your notice, Mr Wincanton, we are mortal enemies. Have you forgotten the fact that the Stuarts and the Wincantons have been at loggerheads for nigh on three hundred years?’

‘We have? I confess I have forgotten what all of the fuss is about now. Why should we care about an argument that happened almost three hundred years ago? I would prefer to hold out an olive branch and declare a truce.’

‘Indeed. And I suppose we should simply brush under the carpet the despicable behaviour of your father, only a few years back, where he swindled mine out of land that should rightfully have been his?’

He merely brushed that away with his hand. ‘A misunderstanding, Connie. Nothing more.’

At times his irreverence did amuse her, not that she would ever let him see that. Nobody ever spoke to her like Aaron Wincanton did. No one else dared. ‘Then there is the unfortunate incident that occurred between our grandfathers. What did your foul grandfather do to mine again?’ She tapped her chin as if in deep thought. ‘Ah, yes! Now I remember. He shot him dead in a duel on Hampstead Heath.’

‘To be fair, my grandfather only did that after your grandfather seduced his wife. And it was a proper duel with rules and

seconds. It is hardly my fault that your grandfather did not have the good sense to try to dodge the bullet.'

Connie waved away his warped logic. 'Such things cannot be overlooked. If my father caught me talking to you, he would disown me. Yet here you are again, Mr Wincanton. Bothering me.'

It had been like this for the entire Season. Ever since he had returned from Waterloo, in a blaze of glory, he had sought her out. Despite the bitter and long-running feud between their two families, the Stuarts and the Wincantons had managed to co-exist in society very well by pretending that the other side simply did not exist—despite the fact that their ancestral estates were right next door to each other. They were always invited to the same functions and happily imagined the other to be invisible when in a social setting. Society understood this perfectly. Thus, there were never any public scenes and there was certainly never any attempts at conversation. It was a system that worked very well because it had been that way for centuries. Until now.

Unfortunately, Aaron Wincanton, heir to the house of Ardleigh and all-round blackguard, had no respect for tradition. It had been two months ago when he had first started to speak to her—and to her alone. It was never done openly, of course, or in front of any member of her family or his. But at every function he managed to catch her by herself at some point, no matter how much she tried to avoid it, and each time he did he would flirt a little and try and make her smile. Sometimes he would be

loitering near the retiring room just as she came out, other times he would find her in an alcove or he would appear behind a potted palm or at her elbow at the refreshment table. And now he was here, in this remote library where she had sought sanctuary, and he had almost seen her cry. That was a situation Connie found the most intolerable.

Yet he merely shrugged in response, as if all of that bad blood did not matter, and then fixed her with his unusual and intense gaze. Unusual because only when you were up close could you see that his eyes were almost russet brown surrounded by a ring of dark, melted chocolate. Those eyes could be very unsettling at times, as if they saw too much. ‘Has it occurred to you, Connie, that our situation might be similar to that of the Montagues and Capulets? History might dictate that we be enemies, but apparently fate wants us to be friends—or perhaps more than friends?’

‘You are aware, Mr Wincanton, that Romeo and Juliet are fictitious and therefore not really pertinent to our situation? But as I recall, things ended very badly for both Romeo and Juliet because they did not listen to their fathers, so perhaps they should have ignored the will of fate, as you put it. The ending might have turned out very different if they had simply let things be. However, you do seem to be missing the point. Juliet welcomed Romeo’s attentions. I do not welcome yours. And in case it has escaped your notice, Mr Wincanton, I am engaged to be married and happy to be so.’

‘How can you be happy to be marrying a man who has shown more attention to Penelope Rothman this evening than he has to you?’ As soon as the words came out of his mouth Aaron regretted them. He felt even worse when he saw her frown turn into an expression of raw pain before she attempted to cover it. ‘I am sorry, Connie. That was uncalled for. I apologise unreservedly.’

‘Pay it no mind,’ she said with a shrug of bravado that did not ring quite true. ‘The Marquis of Deal has had a little too much to drink this evening and Penelope Rothman is trying to incite my jealousy, and failing. It must be quite galling for her to lose her most favoured suitor to the Ginger Amazonian.’

She looked him dead in the eye as she said this and saw him wince. He still felt guilty about calling her that, more so that the nickname had stuck. But he had been young and foolish back then and she had dented his pride. He had never meant for her to ever hear it. Or for her father to respond with such malice. It had come as quite a shock to come back from years of fighting Napoleon to see how dire the situation between their two families had become. His own father had become so obsessed with the feud that he had almost bled the estate dry in his attempts to get revenge on Connie’s father.

‘For what it is worth, I am sorry that I called you that, too.’

She gave him a regal and cold smile that did not touch her eyes and stood slowly. At her full height her face was almost level with his. The woman must be close to six feet in height, he mused, as

she loomed in front of him, perhaps a little more. 'I can assure you, Mr Wincanton, that I have never really given it a passing thought.'

Then, to the apparent and total horror of both of them, she promptly burst into tears right there in front of him.

Aaron felt like a total cad. At a loss as to what else to do with a crying woman who was evidently not usually prone to crying, he rushed towards her and pulled her into his arms. 'There, there, Connie,' he murmured ineffectively as she buried her face into his neck and wept noisily, 'I genuinely am sorry for calling you an Amazonian. It was most ungentlemanly of me.'

'I am not crying because of that, you idiot!' Her brief flash of anger was still peppered with tears, but it did make him feel better. At least this rare and noisy display of emotion was not specifically directed at him. The poor girl was clearly upset at Deal's callous behaviour.

'I am sure Deal's flirting means nothing,' he said, not believing his own words. Deal was a shameless philanderer and one who liked to brag about his many conquests.

'Hardly nothing. It means that he prefers her charms to mine,' she sobbed. 'And who can blame him? Penelope is so beautiful. Everyone says so. And I am pale and plain in comparison, with hideous freckles and my figure is as flat as a washboard. And I have all of this ghastly carrot-coloured hair.'

Clearly, he had inadvertently kicked a hornet's nest. Aaron could feel her slim shoulders shaking as she wept and felt the

most peculiar urge to hunt the Marquis of Deal down and give him a well-deserved punch on the nose. 'For a start your hair is glorious. Your skin is not pale, as such. Think of it more as alabaster. The freckles on your nose are quite delightful. Really they are. I have never understood why freckles are considered unbecoming. And you are not as flat as a washboard. You have a lovely figure.' He could feel the gentle flare of her hips beneath his hands and there was definitely something interesting pressed against his chest that his body was responding to—against his better judgement and his black mood. What on earth was the matter with him? This was Constance Stuart. Constance Stuart.

Connie lifted her face from his shoulder and looked at him through puffy eyes, her expression the very picture of anguish. 'If I am so lovely, then why has he not even tried to kiss me? Answer me that. We are engaged after all.' She looked positively distraught. 'The man finds me repulsive. He has as good as said so.'

Further proof that Deal was a blasted idiot, Aaron realised. She felt splendid in his arms. It was nice to be able to look a woman in the eye, for once, rather than have to look down at her. Connie was a pleasant armful of woman who apparently fitted against his big body perfectly. And she had a brain. Nobody could ever claim that Constance Stuart was a dullard. Sparring with her was always one of the highlights of any ball. The sultry smell of roses tantalised his nostrils and overwhelmed his senses, giving him ideas that he had not had in a very long time. How on earth

did Deal resist her? Her full mouth was all red and swollen and positively ripe for kissing. If she were his fiancée he would not be able to stop himself... Before he could think about it, Aaron dipped his head and did just that.

The moment his lips touched hers he quite forgot everything else. She sucked in a breath of surprise at his impertinence, but did not push him away, so he brushed his lips over hers again. And again. His arms wrapped around her possessively and he pulled her closer still. Initially, she stood stock still, then he felt her breath catch. But then her lips opened slightly and she sighed. When she pressed her mouth tentatively against his, Aaron lost all sense of reason and kissed her like a starving man.



Kissing Aaron Wincanton was nothing like she expected kissing to be. Not only did she feel it on her lips, but she felt it in her legs as well. They were oddly unsteady. A million tiny goose bumps appeared all over her body and every nerve ending tingled involuntarily with awareness and need. Connie did not notice the passing of time or exactly when the kiss changed into something more visceral, but one moment she was stood in his arms upset and the next she was almost reclined on the sofa, her hands fisted in his dark hair and his large, warm palm sliding over the silk of her stockings until it rested scandalously on the bare skin above her garter. It felt glorious to be wanted this way and by a man who had no interest in her dowry or her prospects.

He was kissing her.

Connie.

And she could tell by the way his breathing was ragged and how his heart hammered against his ribs that he was as lost in the kiss as she was. The feelings and sensations created by this intense passion was so unexpected, so overwhelming, that she was transported by it all to a place that she had never been and never wanted to leave. Finally, she was attractive and desirable to someone. She felt beautiful and womanly and alive.

She had not heard the library door open nor had she heard several people pile in until it was too late.

‘What the hell is going on here?’

The angry voice of the Marquis of Deal had her sitting up and pushing Aaron unceremoniously to the floor while she did her best to put her skirts to rights. Her father stared at her coldly from her fiancé’s left and a very smug-looking Penelope Rothman stood at his right.

‘This is not what it looks like,’ Connie stuttered wide-eyed and frantically glanced at Aaron for support. His face was taut as he stood up, but he said nothing as he helped her to her feet.

‘Your daughter has been compromised.’ Deal turned to her father in disgust. ‘I will not have her now.’

Her father turned back to her with something akin to hatred burning in his usually cold eyes. ‘You have disgraced our family, Constance!’

Connie felt nauseous, dizzy, the floor having been completely

ripped from beneath her feet, and totally stunned. How could this be happening to her? Several other guests began to spill into the room to watch the dreadful scene unfold and she could hear more outside, shouting for others to come, too. Among their number she recognised her younger brother, Henry, and her mother. Both of their faces were pale with shock. Her mother looked close to tears. Behind them came Aaron's father, Viscount Ardleigh, the assembled crowd parting like the Red Sea as he entered the room.

No doubt he saw his son's dishevelled hair and the undone buttons of his coat. Connie did not want to think about how she appeared to their audience—but if it was anything like Aaron then she suspected she looked completely wanton and guilty of acting upon those urges with unbridled enthusiasm. One heavy lock of her shocking red hair hung guiltily against her cheek where he had removed the pins that held it. All around her, women were whispering behind their fans with outraged glee.

The oldest Wincanton took in the scene slowly. After an age his eyes rested upon his eldest son. 'Well played, Aaron,' he said with a note of pride. 'And I thought you did not have it in you.' Then he threw back his head and began to laugh.

Chapter Three

Connie had a vague recollection of being ushered out of the ballroom. She remembered the carriage ride home with perfect clarity, though. It had been terrible. Her mother had sat in brittle, terrified silence, her brother Henry had been pale and stunned. Her father had been incandescent with rage, spitting out profanity after profanity as he railed against her with more force than usual. In the end, his rantings all boiled down to one thing: he thought her a stupid, ungrateful whore and she was dead to him. She was to pack her bags and leave in the morning and never darken his door again. Even now, several hours later, Connie still felt numb. One ridiculous and ill-conceived moment of weakness and her life was in ruins and she had absolutely no idea what she was going to do or where she was going to go.

As soon as they had returned home, a maid had been sent up to her room to help pack her things and then left her to sleep. Two trunks and a bag were now stacked in the corner of her bedchamber, but Connie had not slept. She had spent most of the night relieving the awful events and could still not understand how it had all gone so horribly wrong. But she was very clear who was responsible.

Aaron Wincanton.

He had purposefully taken advantage of her when she had been vulnerable in some petty act of revenge. The man had

clearly gone out of his way to ruin her.

A maid knocked on the door timidly. 'You are required in his lordship's study, my lady. I am told to tell you not to dally.'

It was barely past dawn and already her father wished her gone. With a heavy heart, Connie stood and made her way downstairs. The study door was closed so she tapped upon it before entering. Her father had never appreciated being interrupted at the best of times and now was definitely not that. His voice was curter and colder than usual. 'Enter.'

'You wished to see me, Father?' Connie looked down at her hands rather than see the disappointment in his eyes. Even so, his next words were brutal.

'Do not refer to me as that again. As far as I am concerned I have no daughter.'

Connie's eyes snapped up and only then did she notice Aaron Wincanton standing stiffly in the furthest corner of the room. She could not work out what emotion was clouding his eyes as he walked towards her and neither did she care. Automatically, her hands curled into angry fists at her side. Were the Wincantons so callous that one of them had to witness her entire ruination? 'What is he doing here?'

Her father did not look at him. 'He has come to request your hand in marriage and, under the circumstances, I have granted it.'

'I will not marry him. I hate him!' Connie spat the last words directly in her despoiler's face.

'That is as may be,' her father continued, sounding bored with

the entire conversation, 'but your mother prefers that I do not throw you on to the streets, so this solution suits us well enough. You made your bed, Constance, when you lifted yours skirts for him.'

'I did not—'

Her father cut her off with a raised hand. 'Half of the ballroom witnessed it. Whether you did, or did not, consummate the act makes no difference. That you would allow this...this...' his head whipped towards Aaron for the first time and regarded him with absolute disgust '...this Wincanton to touch you when I had arranged the perfect union between you and Deal, it beggars belief. But you did and now you must live with the shame and the consequences. He has arranged a special licence and the pair of you will be married within the hour.'

Connie felt her legs give way and staggered backwards to steady herself on the arm of the sofa. 'No! You cannot make me. I am past the age of majority. You cannot force me to marry anyone that I do not choose to.'

'Yes, I can, Constance! The alternative is I throw you out on to the streets with nothing but the clothes that you stand up in.'

'I would rather that than marry a Wincanton.' Connie stalked to the door, refusing to look at either her father or him. Both men were vile.

'Then do so on the understanding that I will toss your mother out alongside you. If she had done a better job of chaperoning you, then this would never have happened. You have always been

as wilful and difficult as you are unattractive—and she has always given you far more credit than you were due. I have no intention of listening to her bleeding-heart pleas for your safety and I hold her equally as responsible for the disgrace that has been brought on to our family by your actions.’

Connie turned to her father in abject disbelief and met his stony stare with one of her own. Was the man truly serious? Surely he was bluffing? Was he truly callous enough to throw them both out in order to get his own way?

Bile rose in her throat when she realised that he was. The Earl of Redbridge’s word was always law and, in matters concerning the feud between the Stuarts and Wincantons, that law was cast iron. Both her mother and she were inconsequential. As long as he had an heir to pass it all on to her father would be content. Connie risked a glance at Aaron. He was still watching her intently, his jaw set and his dark eyes angry, but she did not know if that anger was directed at her or her father.



‘Then bring in the priest and let us get this travesty over with.’ Connie was beaten. He could see it in her eyes. It was as if all of the light had gone out of them. She might be brave and bold for herself, but her loyalty to her mother was too strong to ignore. Aaron wondered what that bond felt like. His own mother had died shortly after giving birth to him so he had never grown up with the unconditional love of at least one parent. His own father

and the Earl of Redbridge had a great deal in common and both were apparently hard on their children. He had almost stepped in to defend Connie, but realised that her father would likely throw them both on to the street immediately and if that happened she would never marry him. He could not leave her to the harshness of such a life on her own.

Connie's father marched to the door and spoke quietly with a footman, so Aaron took the opportunity to speak to her.

'It will be all right, Connie. I promise,' he whispered quietly as he gently clasped her hand with his own. She snatched it away as if she had been burned.

'Do not touch me! I despise you, Aaron Wincanton. That will never change.'

Whilst the words hurt he could not blame her for them. This whole, sorry situation was all his fault. He should never have gone into the library in the first place. He had made her cry. And he had instigated the kiss that had ruined her. No wonder she hated him. He hated himself as well—but that was nothing new. He was supposed to have proposed marriage to Violet Garfield and saved the future of the Wincanton estate. Instead he had made another huge mess and ruined yet another innocent person's life.

From the moment his father had patted him on the back in front of that room full of people, and congratulated him for getting one over on the Stuarts, Aaron had vowed to make amends for this latest transgression. But when he had seen Connie stumble out of that library with her life in ruins, the guilt

he had felt had been so overpowering that he could barely stand in the same room as himself.

‘I knew my heir would not let me down,’ his father had crowed when they were finally left alone. ‘Now no man will want her.’

Aaron recognised the truth in those words. Society was fickle and the transgressions of a woman would never be overlooked. If he did not make it right, then Connie would be shunned and doomed to an empty life of spinsterhood. ‘I will marry her,’ he had suddenly declared.

‘You will not. I forbid it. I will not have my bloodline sullied with a Stuart!’

‘It cannot be helped. I ruined the girl. It is my responsibility to marry her.’ Aaron went to walk to the door.

‘It is not your responsibility. The world is full of ruined women who should have known better. Once the dust has settled you could still propose to Violet Garfield. You are too good a catch for her to ignore.’

For the briefest of moments Aaron seriously considered the wisdom of his father’s words. Violet Garfield’s money could save them. Just as quickly he discarded the thought. He might well be a Wincanton, but the army had taught him about his responsibilities. It was his duty to do right by Connie. He had wronged her and he would not let her pay the terrible price alone. Aaron had ruined enough peoples’ lives already, he did not need another on his conscience. The guilt from all of his previous sins was already too heavy to bear.

‘I will offer myself as Constance Stuart’s husband and let her decide.’ He sincerely hoped she would turn him down—despite her unfortunate family connections she deserved a better man than him, but it had to be her choice.

‘If you do, then I will...’

‘You will what, Father?’ It was a familiar threat that he had lost patience with long ago. ‘You cannot disinherit me. The estate is entailed. You can throw me out until you die, which we both know will happen sooner rather than later, and I will survive well enough until then.’ Aaron stalked towards his father and loomed over him. ‘Take comfort that I inadvertently ruined a Stuart, Father. It is the only satisfaction that I will allow you to take from this whole sorry mess.’ Aaron turned to leave.

‘You are soft, like your mother. She had no backbone either. But, as I have always said, bad bitch—bad pup. And now you would bring another bad bitch into our house.’

Aaron spun around and practically growled into his father’s face. ‘If Connie will have me, then she will be my wife by tomorrow and you will treat her with the respect that position deserves. I promised you a grandson within the year. What difference does it make whose belly he comes from?’

He had stepped away then, frightened by his own need to cause the man who had sired him physical pain, and had stalked out into the street in search of a cleric senior enough to issue him with a special licence. Only then did he seek out her father. He had been surprised that the man had so readily agreed—but now, seeing

the way the earl treated his only daughter, he was not surprised at all. The earl was determined to make Connie pay for the shame she had brought down upon their family. To add insult to injury, the Earl of Redbridge only agreed to the match if Aaron agreed to take her without a penny—which of course he had. He might desperately need the money, but that was hardly Connie's fault. What better way to make her pay than to make her marry the enemy and disown her completely? Like his own father, the Earl of Redbridge was so fuelled with bitterness and hatred from the feud that he could not see past his own nose. Both men were tyrants. Both men made his flesh crawl.

Connie was now sat hunched on the sofa, looking defeated and disgusted in equal measure. Aaron had no idea what to say to her, so he sat in a chair close by and waited. Neither spoke. What was there to say? They were doomed to be stuck with one another now and neither one of them wanted to be with the other. Fortunately, they did not have to wait long. A very nervous-looking vicar arrived. He blinked awkwardly at the pair of them through the lenses of his thick spectacles. 'May I see the licence?'

Aaron handed it over and the man scanned it quickly. 'Everything appears to be in order. However, I cannot help but notice that the two of you do not look quite so keen.' He was peering kindly at Connie, but it was her father who answered him.

'That is simply natural bridal nerves. My daughter is as keen as I am to begin the wedding formalities.'

The priest did not look convinced and was still looking from Aaron to Connie with concern. 'We will need some witnesses.'

'They are waiting in the next room,' the Earl of Redbridge said curtly. 'I shall fetch them and you can get it over with.' He walked towards the door and then slowly turned back and spoke to Aaron directly as if his daughter was not there at all. 'I shall not be returning. Once the ceremony is over with, get that girl out of my house. I wash my hands of her. She is your problem now. And she will be a problem. She always has been.' And with that he left.

'It might be prudent to wait a bit.' The priest rested his hand gently on the back of Connie's. 'Perhaps in a few days all will seem clearer. This marriage is particularly fast.'

She shook her head without looking at the man and then retreated back into herself. Several ashen-faced servants filed in and stood uncomfortably in the room. Connie stood next to Aaron stiffly, staring off into space and struggling not to cry.

'Do you, Constance Elizabeth Mary Stuart, take this man, Aaron Phillip Arthur George Wincanton, to be your lawfully wedded husband?'

Aaron held his breathe until Connie nodded once.

'I need you to say the words, Lady Constance.'

There was a long pause. Aaron watched her hands fist at her sides and a myriad of emotions cross her face. After an age she turned to him with an expression of complete hatred.

'I do.'

She mumbled the rest of her vows as if in a trance. In his haste, Aaron had forgotten to buy a ring and was forced to use his own signet ring as a wedding band. It swamped her delicate fingers and looked completely wrong on her hand, as he supposed he did too. Everything about this marriage was wrong. At best they were strangers, at worst sworn enemies.

As the first rays of the sun filtered into the study the vicar declared them man and wife. He did not suggest that Aaron should kiss his bride. Even the vicar realised that Connie would rather kill him than kiss him. But it was done. What had possessed him to follow her into that library last night he could not say, only now they both had an entire lifetime to regret his impulsive decision.

‘Come, Connie,’ he said with a sigh of resignation, ‘it is time to go.’

Chapter Four

Aaron did not sit in the carriage with her as they travelled directly to Ardleigh Manor, instead he rode his horse alongside. While she was grateful that he had the good sense to realise that she really had nothing whatsoever to say to him, and probably never would have, it meant that she was left alone with her own thoughts and fears for hours on end.

Ardleigh Manor.

Whilst she had seen it almost every day of her life from her bedchamber window, the Wincanton estate was completely unfamiliar to her. It might well neighbour her father's land, but that might as well be the moon now, it was so far away. She was completely and irrefutably estranged from her family. Her father had made that quite clear. Never again would she while away the hours chatting to her brother, Henry, or her mother, nor would she ride her own beloved horse again, nor would she experience the comfort, smells and cosiness of her childhood home. Although she doubted that she would miss her father—she had been a disappointment to him from the moment she had been born—each of those losses was a cruel blow. Connie felt as if her heart had been ripped from her chest and shredded, and there was not a thing she could do about it. She felt raw and broken, wronged and ashamed.

And so very angry that she felt as if she might burst from

the way it boiled and curdled in her gut. She had let her mask slip in front of Aaron Wincanton, of all people. The man who had cursed her with that dreadful nickname, had seen how much it had hurt her, how it continued to hurt her because she had never been the kind of woman that men fancied, and that the only husband she could get was either bought or trapped into marriage.

Connie heard the sound of gravel under the wheels of the carriage and forced herself to look out of the window at her new home. Up close, Ardleigh Manor was larger than she had realised. The symmetrical, classically designed front appeared stark white against the night sky, the windows glowing warmly with candlelight. If it had belonged to any other family than the vile Wincantons, she might have considered the house pleasing to look at, rather than menacing, but as the carriage came to slow stop outside Connie physically steeled herself to go inside.

An austere butler and a small round housekeeper stood waiting just outside the open front door. Connie rudely ignored her husband's proffered hand and made her own way down the short steps to the floor, all the while staring up at the enormous double-front door looming menacingly from ahead. To all intents and purposes those doors represented the gates of Hell, although in this scenario Ardleigh Manor was Hell and Aaron Wincanton was the Devil incarnate. Connie had no idea if she was a lost soul or a genuine sinner. The truth was she was likely a bit of both. Aaron had instigated her ruination, but she had welcomed his

touch, silly desperate fool that she was. It was galling to have to acknowledge her part in the incident, but she would not meekly accept her fate. Aaron Wincanton would rue the day he had used her to get revenge. Of that, she was certain.

The stern butler stepped forward. 'On behalf of the staff, may I offer you our congratulations, Mr Aaron? I am Deaks. This is Mrs Poole. Welcome to Ardleigh Manor, Lady Constance.'

It was the first time she had been referred to as a Wincanton and hearing her new name made Connie feel queasy. Out of ingrained politeness she inclined her head towards the servant. It was hardly his fault that she was here.

'I have prepared the suite of rooms that you requested, Mr Aaron. I hope they meet your satisfaction, Lady Constance. There is also a light supper ready if you are hungry.'

Connie shook her head and then remembered her manners again. 'Thank you, but I am not hungry. Mr Deaks... Mrs Poole.'

'It has been a long day,' Aaron interjected, 'If you could have my wife's luggage brought up, Deaks, I believe she would prefer an early night.'

'Certainly, sir.' The butler turned to Connie with a smile and she knew exactly what was coming. 'Excuse my impertinence, madam, but you are tall, aren't you?' Mrs Poole, to her credit, rolled her eyes at this and nudged him unsubtly in the ribs.

Connie glared at him in response until he withered. Usually she would endure the crass stating of the obvious with a brittle smile. Tonight she did not have the strength. Aaron stepped

in and rescued the butler from the frigid atmosphere she had created. 'Thank you, Deaks, Mrs Poole. That will be all.' The butler bowed stiffly and then stood to one side.

Without touching her, Aaron guided Connie into the house and up an ornate and sweeping marble staircase. 'I am sure that you are finding all of this very daunting. I know I am.' He smiled at her a little awkwardly. His face fell when she remained stoically silent. 'I have put you in my mother's old rooms. They look over the gardens. Attached is a small sitting room. I thought you might appreciate a little privacy whilst you become familiar with your new home.'

They were walking to the end of a long hallway. Aaron opened the double doors and stepped back to allow her to go inside first. The feminine parlour was actually very pretty. A roaring fire had been set in the fireplace, around which were arranged a cheerful old-fashioned sofa covered in boldly striped satin brocade and two comfortable matching chairs. The walls were papered in a subtle lemon-coloured stripe while a large picture window dominated the wall. Connie nodded, grateful that she would have a place where she could sit away from this awful family. Away from the man who knew that she hated being tall and ugly. The man who had seen her cry. The man who had married her out of pity when no one else would because she was so unattractive.

'I have arranged for my father to stay in London for the next week so that you can settle in.' Aaron might have told the old man to stay away, but there was no guarantee that he would

comply. 'As the new mistress of Ardleigh Manor, some of the staff will expect to take instructions from you. Mrs Poole will introduce you to the cook and the staff tomorrow.' He could not help noticing that her green eyes were hard emeralds again and her mouth had begun to curl into what appeared to be a snarl. 'Unless, of course, you would prefer to postpone that until you feel more comfortable.' Despite the fire, the temperature of the room felt as if it had dropped several degrees since she entered it.

'Through here is the bedchamber.' Aaron opened the internal doors for her self-consciously, aware that he was rambling to fill the excruciatingly painful silence, and then his voice trailed off as he saw that the servants had already turned down the bed. Both sides of the bed. They barely knew each other and now they were stood alone in a bedchamber. The big, canopied mattress mocked him from the centre of the room. It was designed for two people to share, yet he had no idea if they would be sharing the thing tonight. A wedding night was the expected conclusion of a wedding day, he supposed, but as theirs had been so acrimoniously arranged with such speed he would not blame her if she wanted to wait a bit. They were little more than strangers.

'You have your own bedchamber,' she asked abruptly, staring at the bed as well.

'It is down the hallway.' Good grief—was a conversation ever more uncomfortable and stilted as this one?

'Good.' She turned her face towards his and he saw the venom

in her pretty face. 'You are not welcome in this one.'

Aaron slowly nodded in sympathy, oddly relieved that he would be spared the ordeal tonight. They were both still so shocked to find themselves married, they hardly needed the added burden of enforced intimacy now. 'I did not think you would want me here just yet. I believe we should get to know each other a little bit first, before we...ah...'

'I will never want you here. Be under no illusion that those feelings will ever change. They won't. The thought of your hands on my body makes me feel ill. The only way it will happen is if you force me and even then I will not lie meekly under you like a dutiful wife is supposed to. I will scratch and claw and scream my hatred for you so loudly that all of the servants will hear it!'

Well, that certainly left his position in doubt, Aaron thought, reeling, although he supposed he deserved it. He had a particular talent for ruining lives. 'I am sorry for the way things turned out, Connie. I never meant for this to happen.'

Her hands fisted and for a moment he thought that she might strike him, so vivid was her anger. 'How dare you lie to me? Do you seriously expect me to believe that a vile Wincanton would not seize the opportunity to ruin the only daughter of his sworn enemy? You planned it, Aaron Wincanton! You came to the library intent on compromising me. Intent on revenge.'

The woman clearly had a penchant for the fanciful if she could think that, although she was overwrought, so he replied calmly in the hope she would see reason, 'I most certainly did not. I will

admit I went into the library because you were there, and with hindsight I realise that was a reckless and stupid thing to do, but I never intended anyone to know about it.'

Her hands went to her hips. 'Oh, really? And I suppose you expect me to believe that your seduction, followed by the convenient arrival of my fiancé and both of our fathers, was also accidental? I am not a fool, Aaron.'

He could understand that it looked bad. 'I did not go to the library with plans to seduce you, Connie.'

'Then why did you?'

It was a fair question and one he was not sure he could properly answer without admitting how precarious his financial situation was. He ran a hand roughly through his dark hair in frustration. 'I suppose I kept seeking you out because I hoped that it would eventually lead to a conversation with your brother. I want to build some bridges between our families. I thought that, in time, as the next generation we might find a way to end this petty feud. I never meant for anything more than that.'

'Of course you didn't.' She was flouncing around, her long legs making short work of the distance from one wall to the next, and dramatically gesticulating as her mouth dripped sarcasm. 'You spouted all of that Romeo and Juliet rubbish and it inadvertently gave you romantic ideas. Then you kissed me, because you were so caught up in the magic of the moment and so dazzled by my obvious beauty—and then invited an audience to witness it, you snake!'

His own temper was roused now. Likening him to a snake was uncalled for. 'You kissed me back, as I recall, and with a great deal of enthusiasm, too. You are not completely without blame in this. My waistcoat did not undo itself, Connie. As for the audience, I was as shocked as you were when they all turned up.' It was then that he had realised that his own carefully laid plans for the future had been shattered as well. Now they were destined to be penniless and miserable together.

She planted her hands on her hips and gave him one of her imperious glances. 'How very convenient for you.'

Aaron saw red. Literally. He had never understood that expression until that moment. But to see her stood there so piously, as if she had not kissed him back with so much fervour that they had both lost their heads, while throwing ludicrous accusations at him, then sarcastically discounting every explanation he tried to make—well, it was too much. That ill-timed kiss had ruined much more than Constance Stuart's reputation, it had ruined the lives of every impoverished tenant on the Wincanton land.

'Convenient? Have you gone quite mad?' He found himself marching towards her and looming over her in a way he had never, ever done to another woman in his life. His hands were fisted tightly at his sides to stop him from grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking her until her teeth rattled inside that smart mouth of hers. 'You think that this marriage is convenient for me? Of course it isn't. This is a marriage of great inconvenience

to me, Connie. In fact, it is an unmitigated disaster. I was about to propose to Violet Garfield! Now I am stuck with you instead.' Violet might well be as dense as a suet pudding, but at least she had a cheerful disposition and looked at him with glowing admiration. Constance Stuart was tart as a lemon and looked at everyone as if they were beneath her. Especially him. Well, he was quite done with it.

'Answer me this, Miss Sanctimonious: if I constructed this whole ruse, in an attempt to bring about your ruin in petty revenge against your awful family, then why the hell did I not leave you to suffer it alone? Surely that would have been the greatest revenge possible for a vile Wincanton? Leave you compromised and doomed to endure the censure of everyone alone. Yet I did not. Against my father's wishes, and against my own better judgement I might add, I left that ballroom straight away and procured a special licence. And then I married you. I gave you my name and my protection. I gave you a home. A truly vile Wincanton would have seen you thrown on the streets, as your own father planned to, and laughed at you in the gutter!'

She gaped at him then, lost for words, but he was not done and she had it coming. He could not remember the last time he had unleashed his temper with such unchecked fury. He had long ago stopped feeling personally aggrieved at anything, instead he accepted everything thrown at him as just punishment for all that he had done. But in this instance, although he knew he was largely to blame as he was in everything, she had to take her share

of it. Yet she was still staring daggers back at him, completely unrepentant and totally aggrieved. Her self-righteous martyrdom enraged him further. Again he seriously considered shaking some sense into the woman or putting her over his knee and spanking her like the spoiled child she was.

In an attempt to calm his turbulent thoughts, Aaron started to pace backwards and forwards at the foot of the bed. Unfortunately, the more he paced, the more outraged he became at her accusation. His only crime had been a desire to end their expensive and destructive feud so that he could live in peace next door. He did not want to waste his life looking over his shoulder, like his father and grandfather had, waiting for, or plotting, the next attack. He had had a gutful of war and did not want to continue to fight one on his own doorstep. The only thing that came out of war was death and destruction. It was a pointless and futile state to be in. And expensive. Very expensive when the estate was practically broke.

He had harboured the ridiculous notion that by befriending Constance, and then in turn her brother, the silly feud would be done with once their fathers died. Meanwhile, he could use Violet's dowry to bring the estate back into profit, so that future Wincantons could live happily ever after even if he had to sabotage his own happiness to do it. Not that his happiness really mattered. Once he might have considered it important, before he had the ruined lives and shattered the dreams of his men and their families, now he had to make amends as best as he

could wherever he could. And right now that meant protecting the livelihoods of all of the people that relied on the Wincanton estate. If that meant he had to marry for money and spending a lifetime married to a woman he was incapable of loving, then he had been prepared to do it.

But that lofty plan had backfired spectacularly. Violet and her dowry were lost to him for ever. Worse still, Connie's father would unleash fire and brimstone now that his only daughter had been ruined by Wincanton. Instead of healing the rift between their families he had created an even greater chasm, yet had no way of clawing his way out of debt. Aaron had taken Constance without a penny. No, indeed, there was nothing convenient about this marriage. Everything was considerably worse because of it. The very least she could do was muster up a bit of contrition.

Aaron found himself glaring at his new wife. Her pale face was pinched and her lips were so pursed they were almost non-existent. And she thought that he would be disappointed not to be invited to her bed! That he might resort to forcing her to consummate the marriage! Quite frankly she would have to drag him there kicking and screaming, no matter how much his father wanted a grandson.

'Be under no illusion, madam, I am thoroughly appalled to be your husband. To think that I am now doomed for all eternity to spend my days shackled to you till death do us part—God help me, Connie!' Aaron marched to the door before striding back again to issue his parting salvo. 'And as for not wanting me in

your bed? Pah! What sort of a man would willingly want to bed a shrew like you? I would sooner go into battle again!’ He was glaring down at her, but still she refused to be cowed. When her hands planted themselves on her hips again it was like a red rag to a bull. How dare she? His index finger began to jab the air. ‘You are my wife now and you will do your duty if I decree it. And if I can bring myself to touch you, Lady Constance, you will provide an heir!’

Aaron slammed the door with such force that the windows shook and stalked towards his own bedchamber. Unsurprisingly he did not sleep well. But for once his sleep was disturbed, not by the usual incessant nightmares filled with blood and body parts, but by dreams involving a statuesque redhead who made his blood boil and his loins ache.

Chapter Five

A maid brought her breakfast on a tray the next morning. ‘Mr Aaron has told me to inform you that he has gone out for the day. If you need anything, Mr Deaks will see to it.’

Connie smiled at the girl politely and accepted the tray while her stomach growled in protest. The hot bacon smelled delicious, despite the fact that it came from the Wincanton kitchen, and reminded her that she had not eaten in over twenty-four hours. Perhaps once fortified she might be able to sort out all of her tangled and mangled thoughts and emotions. At least she was rid of him for a few hours.

Their fight yesterday had bothered her more than she wanted to acknowledge. Some of the things he had said rang uncomfortably of the truth, as galling as it was to have to face the reality she had never resorted to lying to herself. She had kissed him back. And enjoyed it. She could have slapped his face, she could have run screaming from the room, she could have left it the very moment that he had arrived. There were so many things that she could have done to have avoided her current predicament—but she hadn’t. She had stayed, cried like a baby and confessed all of her deepest darkest fears about her lack of attractiveness to the man who had given her that awful nickname. She had let Aaron Wincanton put his arms about her and she had revelled in the security of his warm embrace.

She had been so needy then, so pathetically vulnerable, that it made her want to scream just thinking about it. Then she had surrendered to his lips greedily the moment they had touched hers and practically melted. Whether that surrender was because she had been feeling unsettled and off kilter after hearing the Marquis of Deal reduce their betrothal to merely a financial settlement or whether it was because she had been so grateful to imagine that a man might actually find her attractive, she could not accurately say. Whichever it was, it did not excuse the fact that she had kissed him back and therefore had to take a small portion of the blame for the situation that she now found herself in.

But she would only take a small portion of the blame. Aaron Wincanton still held the lion's share. He had instigated the kiss. Although, in the cold light of day she was forced to acknowledge he really had gained nothing but grief in marrying her. Marriage was such an extreme thing to do for revenge that it seemed highly unlikely that he had gone to such a length to upset her family. If that was the case, he had been noble and to think otherwise was simply being petty.

And she still hated him for what had happened and how pathetic he had made her feel.

Now she was married to him and living in his house. As staggering and distasteful as Connie found that, there was no getting around it. The realist in her knew that continued outright rebellion was futile. She was his wife. The law dictated that she

must abide by his rules. Despite all of his bluster last night, she knew in her heart he would never force himself on her, no matter what the law said about it. His behaviour had, in the main, been more than decent. He was so decent that he might even let her leave, but she really had nowhere else to go.

Her father would never allow her back so there was no point fleeing there. Her father also had a cruel streak that meant that she would not put it past him to punish her mother or younger brother if they offered her sympathy. Connie was not prepared to take the risk.

She had friends. Most of them were long since married and it was unlikely that any of their husbands would condone harbouring the runaway daughter-in-law of Viscount Ardleigh. She had no money, so leaving was out of the question until she could afford to do so. She supposed that she could steal something of value and leave in the dead of night, however then she would be a fugitive and the consequences of that were too terrible to seriously contemplate. That left her with two options. Stay and make the best of it, knowing that she would never be the woman he truly wanted, or stay and continue to fight. Neither appealed.

There was one potential light at the end of the tunnel. An annulment. But for that she would need Aaron's consent. Granted, she would still be a scandal and an outcast from her family. Her father was unlikely ever to consider taking her back—but he could hardly put her mother on to the streets if Aaron

dissolved the marriage. It would simply be another vile thing that the Wincantons had done—as long as her father believed that the situation was not her fault. If her father still refused to mend the breach, she supposed that she could earn a living somewhere. Perhaps she could teach in a school for ladies or become a governess? If she changed her name and went very far away, she could manage.

Connie had only married Aaron because she had been forced to do so and he had only married her out of a sense of duty after he had compromised her. If that alone was not grounds enough for an annulment, then failing to consummate the marriage would guarantee it. And she would be free of seeing the disgust and disappointment on his handsome face at being tied to such an unattractive, giant of a woman—if she could convince her new husband to start the process.

The most sensible course of action would be to ask him. There was the slight chance that he would be quite open to the suggestion. He had called their union ‘a marriage of great inconvenience’ so she seriously doubted he would want to remain married to her for ever, any more than she did him. Especially as he had had his sights set elsewhere. But an annulment would bring about another dreadful scandal and he might be reluctant to weather another. And he was hardly going to agree to anything sensible that she suggested whilst they were at loggerheads. He would dismiss it out of hand just to vex her.

Neither was she prepared to apologise for her behaviour

towards him last night. The only thing that she had left was her pride and he had said some very hurtful things, too. He might not have called her unattractive, but his angry words had confirmed how unappealing he also found her. Hadn't he stated that he had no desire to bed her and he had called her a shrew? Even more humiliating was the fact that while he was shouting at her she found herself quite excited by his temper. Nobody ever stood up to her and most men avoided her. Aaron had gone toe to toe with her, his face mere inches from hers, so close that she could feel the heat of his body. The intensity and passion whirling in those dark eyes lit a fire within her that burned slowly, causing her body to hum with awareness and her mind to recall how wonderful it had felt when all of his passion had been directed at her in another way.

Her lips even tingled at the thought of touching his again even though she was outraged by everything that came spewing out of his mouth—until he had demanded that she would have to do her duty by him. Then she had been suffused with a heat that had nothing to do with the temperature in the room and everything to do with the way that the sheer presence of this man was making her feel. Had he kissed her right then, her traitorous body would have happily let him. Perhaps her needy heart would have, too?

But he left then, abandoned her to her own devices in a strange house surrounded by strange people consumed with equally strange thoughts. What if she did have his baby? Would that be so terrible? A family of her own to love and care for?

Of course it would, because he had already made it quite clear that he didn't actually want her. He was stuck with her. She was a burden to him, too, just as she had been to her father and to her indifferent fiancé. Nobody, it seemed, really wanted her at all. Like the Marquis of Deal, Aaron had reminded her that she was not the sort of woman that roused a man's passions and Connie was not prepared to let him see that she desperately wanted to be that woman for someone—even if that someone was him. The longer she was forced to stay here, the harder it would be to hide that need from him.

That meant that the only course of action left to her which left her with her pride intact while freeing him of his terrible burden was a mutually agreed annulment. Maybe later, when all was calmer and less fraught between them, could Connie bring up the subject?



By the time the maid brought her a lunch tray, Connie's small private sitting room was beginning to feel like a dungeon. Her new husband had failed to materialise all morning and Connie had had enough of waiting for him. Despite their fight, she would have thought that basic good manners dictate that he should show her around the house and introduce her to the staff. Seeing as he had failed in even that simple chore, she decided to acquaint herself with her surroundings in spite of him.

There was nobody on the landing when she finally plucked up

the courage to leave the room. Connie allowed herself a brisk snoop around upstairs, quickly opening doors and poking her head inside. There were a great many bedrooms, although the majority were not in use. At the furthest end of the east wing there was a monstrosity of a bedchamber that smelled of acrid tobacco smoke. The enormous four-poster bed was draped in a gaudy tartan fabric. Staring out from every angle around the walls were the stuffed heads of many animals. Stags, boar, badgers and even a lone wolf's head watched her with their glassy, lifeless eyes and Connie shuddered involuntarily. This was a not a room where a decent person could get a good night's sleep and she sincerely hoped it was not her new husband's room.

She dashed back down the hallway to the other side of her suite of rooms and began to look into the rest of the rooms. Just two doors down from her was another bedchamber that was obviously in use. Next to the neatly made bed was a pile of books. The one on the top had been laid face down, open. A pair of wire-rimmed spectacles were discarded next to it. Thrown over the washstand was the very coat she had seen Aaron wear yesterday. Realising that this must be his room and burning with curiosity, Connie stepped inside and quietly closed the door behind her.

This room smelled pleasantly of bay rum and fresh air. Despite the wet cold of autumn, one of the windows was cracked open, but a fire burned in the grate. His personal items were stood in a tidy row on a tall chest of drawers. Idly she ran her fingers over a comb and picked up a pair of cufflinks. They were plain gold

and unfussy. Aaron Wincanton was no dandy. She slid open the top drawer. The first thing that struck her was how organised it all was. Small, open boxes were filled with an array of items. One held tie pins, again, plain and not ostentatious, another more cufflinks. The drawer beneath was filled with plain, white cravats. All lightly starched, suggesting that he had no time or patience for some of the complicated and frothy knots that were currently all the rage.

The enormous oak wardrobe beckoned and, without considering whether she should or shouldn't, Connie pulled open the doors. A pristine line of snowy white shirts sat on one side. Stark black and navy coats on the other. He was always immaculately turned out and his austere clothing tended to make the more adventurous outfits of other gentlemen look a tad foppish. She might dislike a great many things about Aaron, but she could not fault his dress sense or the way he filled out his clothes.

Connie wandered towards the stack of books and read the title of the one he had been reading: *The Complete Farmer or General Dictionary of Agriculture and Husbandry: Comprehending the Most Improved Methods of Cultivation...* It hardly promised to be a riveting read. She picked it up and scanned the open page. As the title suggested it was indeed a dictionary, although the definitions of each term covered several pages and were accompanied with diagrams. The open pages were explaining, in great and laborious detail, the concept of ploughing. The

spectacles were a surprise and she could not help wondering what he looked like in them. Knowing Aaron Wincanton, he no doubt looked quite splendid in them. He had a tendency to look splendid in everything. The wretch.

As she went to put the book down she noticed the name of the book beneath. The Complete Works of William Shakespeare. There was a bookmark slotted between some pages so Connie opened them. Then her eyes narrowed. The words ‘For I am born to tame you, Kate!’ stared mockingly up at her from the top of the page. The rogue was reading *The Taming of the Shrew*!



Aaron ignored the light rain and slowly rode around the furthest perimeter of the estate. Feeling cold and damp was preferable to marching back into battle with his new wife. His father often accused him of avoiding confrontation or adversity—and perhaps that was true—but in this case it seemed the prudent thing to do. Besides, Connie was only one of his mounting problems.

The estate was another one. The fields were all empty of crops, something that did not really surprise him seeing as it was the middle of November, but they were also choked with weeds and something about that really did not seem right. Surely they should be ploughed like the tenant farms already were?

Not for the first time, he wished he had paid more attention when his grandfather had tried to teach him about estate

management. The old man might well have been a vindictive and tyrannical man, but he had known everything there was to know about farming—especially how to turn a profit from the land. His father had always preferred to delegate the task and Aaron had been so determined to leave and join the army that he had never shown any sort of interest. Now he was back, and would soon be in charge of the estate and wholly responsible for the many people who depended on it, his lack of knowledge bothered him.

What Aaron could not quite get to grips with was the fact that the price of wheat was fixed, yet they were falling deeper and deeper into debt every year. Obviously, he had asked his father. Unfortunately, Viscount Ardleigh was so arrogant and so absorbed with besting the Stuarts next door that he failed to acknowledge there was even a problem. He was happy to leave all responsibility for the farming to his estate manager while he plotted and planned and schemed against the Stuarts in his study. Mr Thomas, the estate manager, was as elusive as fox and probably just as wily. Aaron did not warm to the man at all. Unfortunately, his father would not have a bad word said about him.

Mr Thomas was responsible for the enormous parcel of land his father had bought while Aaron was fighting in the Peninsula. The viscount refused to allow Aaron full access to the estate accounts—not that it had stopped Aaron from snooping in the ledgers when his father was not around—and as far as he could make out, things were now very dire indeed. The unnecessary

purchase had created a massive void in the coffers that they had not recovered from. The land in question did not even border the Wincanton estate. It sat to the south of the Stuart estate, which probably explained why his father had paid ten times what the plot was worth just to get it. That the Earl of Redbridge had also desperately wanted the land had made his father even more reckless with his money. He was so pleased to have snatched it away from the Stuarts that he had apparently failed to notice that all those additional, ridiculously expensive acres were good for nothing. The soil was so thin it was barely a film upon the hilly rock beneath, so nothing would grow upon it. It had been a total waste of good money that had set them on the road to ruin. Each year since, they had failed to turn a healthy profit. Or, for that matter, any profit at all.

Aaron turned his horse towards the small hill. From the top he got a good view of the Earl of Redbridge's estate and there all the fields were dark brown from ploughing. A fortnight ago he had seen men sowing seed in the land ready for next year. Why were his fields still idle? Perhaps the fact that they did this task so much later was the reason why their wheat crop had been so sparse last season?

It irritated Aaron that he did not know the answer to these questions. It irritated him more that he had no control over any of it either way. Not yet at least. Until his father died, he would not relinquish his control and Aaron could do nothing but watch the decline and wait. Except now, when his father did die, Aaron

would not have the funds to fix things or to branch out into more modern investments. Thanks to his disadvantageous marriage.

Just thinking about Constance Stuart put him in a bad mood and he had no idea what to do about her. He had tried to be pleasant yesterday and had hoped that she would realise that they were both now stuck in the same boat and that she might come to appreciate his noble gesture. He had hoped that they might, in time, find a way to be able to co-exist without wanting to kill each other. After last night, he found that prospect less likely. The woman had no intention of making any form of compromise and trying to get her to see reason was exhausting. After hours of soul searching he had come to the conclusion that the best thing that they could do for the time being was avoid each other. At least until the dust had settled.

To that end, Aaron had been actively avoiding her all morning. He had ridden over every inch of the estate, was cold, soaking wet and the beginnings of hunger was gnawing at his belly. He wished he had had the foresight to bring some food and a blanket out with him, so he could have camped outside all night. He had slept quite soundly under the stars in worse conditions than this. Unfortunately, Connie would see such behaviour as cowardice rather than a tactical retreat and he was not prepared to give her that satisfaction. Clearly too many people had kow-towed to Constance Stuart for far too long and he was not going to be one of them. He had never run away from a battle in his life. Reluctantly, he turned his horse towards home and hoped for the

best.

Chapter Six

Connie whipped around, startled when the bedchamber door suddenly opened, but she was too angry with him to apologise for invading his privacy. Without thinking, she tossed the leather-bound volume of Shakespeare at him and it hit him squarely on his sopping wet head.

‘What the devil!’

Her hateful husband glared at her murderously as he rubbed his temple and Connie glared right back undaunted. ‘You were reading *The Taming of the Shrew*! *The Taming of the Shrew*! Did you hope it would provide you with a few pointers on how to deal with me?’

Connie stalked towards him, wielding another book. To his credit he did not back away from her. Far from it, in fact. He met her in the middle of the floor and stared right back at her with his hands planted on his hips as if she did not frighten him in the slightest. His confrontational stance reminded her that he was significantly larger than she was, something that was uncomfortably unfamiliar and quite intoxicating. He topped her by a few inches in height, but in width there really was no comparison. The dark, caped greatcoat that he still wore made him loom even larger and his expression was thunderous. Connie felt like a brittle sapling stood next to a mighty oak tree and was forced to raise her chin to look him in the eye. And they really

were magnificent eyes. Her mouth went dry as she stared into the outraged depths of them.

‘The thought crossed my mind.’ Up close, she could see flecks of gold shimmer in the irises. ‘Why are you in my bedchamber, Connie?’

How could she admit to wild curiosity about him without sounding pathetic? ‘I like to know my enemy!’

His dark hair was beginning to curl at the nape of his neck where it was wet. For some inexplicable reason Connie felt the urge to brush the droplets of water from his skin, but stopped herself. What on earth was the matter with her? This man thought her a shrew. Why did she desperately want to touch him?

‘Did you find anything useful?’

His expression had changed. He no longer appeared quite so angry at her behaviour, more amused. As if he knew that she had wanted to know more about him. His arrogance, combined with the awkward realisation that he had seen through her bravado, rankled far more than his temper did.

‘You read boring books.’ What an utterly pathetic and insipid response. Connie felt her cheeks redden at the banality of the insult. His eyes flicked briefly to the weighty tome on farming still on the table before the ghost of a smile touched his lips, mocking her.

‘That particular volume is spectacularly dull, I will grant you that, but monstrously heavy. I suppose I should be grateful that you had the Shakespeare so readily at hand. The Complete

Farmer might have killed me.' He rubbed his head for effect and then shrugged out of the heavy wet coat. After depositing it over the arm of the washstand Connie watched in alarm as he made short work of also removing the wringing, limp cravat around his neck. He had started unbuttoning his waistcoat when she stopped him.

'What exactly do you think you are doing, Mr Wincanton?' Surely he realised that undressing in front of a lady was grossly improper. Part of her hoped he would continue.

'I am taking off this wet shirt, Lady Constance Wincanton. This is my bedchamber after all. All of my dry shirts are in this wardrobe here, although I dare say you know that already seeing as you have been rifling through my things.'

Connie opened her mouth to refute everything he had just said and promptly closed it again when she realised he had a point. She was in his room and she had been poking through his things. And much as she hated being Lady Constance Wincanton, that was also now her name. Instead of a pithy set down, more banality spewed from her mouth. 'I was merely familiarising myself with the house because you had failed to do so.'

'I would be happy to give you a tour of the place as soon as I put on a clean shirt.' To her utter dismay he was already untucking the one he was wearing. She caught the briefest glimpse of the skin of his abdomen and it was dusted with dark hair. Her eyes fixed to that area in the hope that she would see more of his body before she tore them away, disgusted at her

own wayward thoughts.

‘Then kindly wait for me to leave. I have no desire to watch.’

‘I wouldn’t mind if you did. You might find it entertaining. Or educational.’ He shot her such an astute glance, his dark eyes practically smouldering, that she felt herself blush even hotter. He had known that she was looking at him wantonly. How mortifying was that? But then again, he was probably quite used to women looking at him and lusting after him. Not that she had been lusting exactly, it was more out of curiosity. Perhaps it was lustful curiosity? The man was devilishly handsome and knew it. In that wet shirt he looked delicious. It clung to his broad shoulders and chest, giving her a tantalising glimpse of the strength and power of his body. In places the fabric was almost transparent so she could definitely see that there was more of that intriguing dark hair that her fingers ached to explore.

Again she found her eyes drifting below his neck, but as she dragged them reluctantly back to his face the arrogant wretch was grinning unashamedly. Connie wanted to cover her burning face with her hands and curl up into a ball. She managed to paste a haughty expression on her face before she turned around and prepared to exit the room with as much fake dignity as she could muster. Lost for any suitable words, she stalked towards the door and yanked it open. She could still hear his deep chuckle after she slammed it shut behind her.



Constance did not blush prettily, Aaron realised. She positively glowed with abject mortification. Every inch of her visible, milky white skin had turned a most florid shade of pink. Two circular crimson spots had formed on her cheeks, as if they had been painted on with a brush, and her delicate, swanlike neck was covered in angry blotches. And with her vivid red hair already escaping the confines of its pins, tiny strands floated around her head like sparks rising from a bonfire. She had managed to create an entire spectrum of red above her neck in just a few seconds. Aaron had never seen anything quite like it.

She certainly had not looked anything like the ice maiden he had taken his vows next to or the firebrand he had fought with last night. Nor had she sounded like one. The woman who had just stormed out of his bedchamber was a completely different Constance altogether and one he doubted many people had ever seen. Rumpled, flummoxed, innocent Connie was a delight and Aaron could not help wondering if she blushed all the way down those glorious long legs of hers to the tips of her toes. Now that was a blush he would pay good money to see. To think he had brought about such an unexpected transformation just by attempting to take off his shirt—well, that was just too funny. He had only done it in the first place to remind her that she was overstepping boundaries and to get her to leave. Who knew that regal, haughty, argumentative Miss Stuart was easily embarrassed?

Not Miss Stuart, he corrected, she was Lady Constance

Wincanton now. She had been positively outraged to have been called that, too. Those were two little things he would squirrel away as ammunition for the future. Aaron had a feeling he was going to need it. When he had sneaked past her room earlier, in a rare display of complete cowardice, he had just congratulated himself on his stealth. Then she had thrown the book at him.

Literally.

He had not expected that. The irony of that book's title was not lost on him either. Connie could be quite shrewish when she put her mind to it.

But she was a blushing shrew. A shrew who was so loyal to her family that she had agreed to marry a man that she despised. A shrew who had cried in his arms because her fiancé was an idiot and one who had kissed him as if she had been born to do it. Despite all of the inconvenient aspects of his hasty marriage to Connie, Aaron could still not keep his mind off that kiss. His mind had wandered back to it repeatedly during his ride this morning and each time he caught himself thinking about it he was smiling. It had been such a long time since any of his smiles had been genuine that he had quite forgotten how invigorating one could be. And it had been a most spectacular kiss.

Catching himself smiling wistfully again, Aaron snatched a clean shirt from the wardrobe and then wound a fresh cravat around his neck. He wasn't entirely sure that he could tame Connie, even if he wanted to, but he did need to find a way that they could live together. At least in the short term. He had made

his father a promise. He might not want to father a child, but he wanted to put his father's mind at ease. It was the least he could do after everything he had done. He had taken a life so it seemed only fair that he should make one.



Back in her own room, Connie frantically dabbed her hot face with cold water. How she hated being a redhead. Her pale skin provided no camouflage for the embarrassment that had flooded her face and he had seen it. Why did fate keep allowing Aaron Wincanton to see her when she was at her least composed? He had seen her tears, witnessed the first bloom of her passion, been present when her father had cruelly berated her and now he also knew that she was a complete innocent in all matters pertaining to men. At the grand old age of four and twenty, the mere prospect of seeing a man without his shirt on had sent her running for the hills red-faced. All of her perfectly constructed, haughty, uninterested and unflappable façade had disintegrated in seconds and, to add insult to injury, she was more than a little peeved that she had not been brave enough to stand her ground and feast her hungry eyes on the wretch's nude torso. And that wretch had first called her the Ginger Amazonian. It was all too humiliating.

His knock at the door came too soon and Connie forced some steel into her backbone before she went to open it. Aaron completely filled the door frame and was smiling. Just that

made her silly pulse speed up. His hair was still slightly damp, which encouraged it to curl up boyishly at the ends, but he was perfectly turned out in a fresh white shirt and dark black coat. He looked exactly like the arrogant and handsome devil that he was and she felt so very unattractive in comparison. Aside from the unflattering pink tinge to her face, her hair was a complete disaster and was wilfully refusing to do as it was told. Connie had never been any good at pinning her own hair into submission, but without a maid of her own she had had no other choice this morning and it showed. She was not really surprised that he had no interest in bedding her. Who would?

‘Are you ready for your tour Mrs Wincanton?’

‘Do not call me that!’ It made her sound like his property, which she was, damn him.

‘But you continue to call me Mr Wincanton, so I was merely trying to be polite. As you are constantly reminding me not to call you Connie, I confess I am now at a loss at what to call you—perhaps wife?’ His lips were curving upwards in an expression that he probably knew made him appear to be charming.

‘My name is Constance.’ Her voice sounded suitably clipped as she gave him her very best imperious stare. It usually withered the most insolent of gentlemen but it only served to make Aaron Wincanton grin. Of course, that drew her eyes to the twin dimples that appeared on either side of his irritatingly perfect face, providing her with two more thing that she wanted to touch. And taste. Good heavens, where did that thought come from?

He was still smiling. 'I dislike the name Constance. It comes from the word constancy. That does not suit you at all.'

'Constancy means steadfast and resolute. I am both of those things.'

He appeared to ponder this for a minute. As he was still blocking the door Connie had no option but to stand and wait for him to finish whatever it was he seemed intent on saying. He smelled delightful.

'I looked the word up in the dictionary. It has many meanings, and whilst I agree you can be stubborn...'

'Steadfast and resolute,' she corrected automatically.

'Constancy also means that something remains the same, no matter what the circumstances. You, Mrs Wincanton, are a seething cauldron of different emotions. I never quite know which to expect from one moment to the next. You are as changeable as the weather. Therefore, I simply refuse to call you Constance. Which leaves me in a bit of a quandary. You do not like Mrs Wincanton and I could not help noticing that you winced a bit when I affectionately called you wife. So that leaves me with Connie, which was always my preferred choice.'

Connie was still reeling from being compared to a seething cauldron of emotions, but worried that he might elaborate on that observation more if she did not concede, so she rolled her eyes and looked down her nose at him. 'Call me what you will.'

Finally, he stepped away from the door and offered her his arm. 'Shall you call me Aaron or husband? Or perhaps my dear

or my darling?" His voice had dropped conspiratorially, giving it a seductive edge that set her traitorous pulse fluttering faster. Why did the man always have to resort to flirting? He must know that it was unsettling. Connie had never quite known how to react to it from anyone at the best of times, seeing it as a ruse to get to her dowry or as something disingenuous that was only done because that particular gentleman flirted out of habit. But from him, it was even worse. Whilst he did have a habit of flirting with every woman, he certainly was not flirting with her to get her dowry. It was too late for that. But when Aaron flirted with her, he had a way of staring deeply into her eyes as if he wanted to see into her very soul and truly understand her, which was a completely ridiculous notion. As if he cared one way or another about her soul. But he did have an intensity in his eyes that made her wonder nevertheless. It made her feel all at sea and so pathetically grateful that he had bestowed her with some attention that she did not quite know herself at all.

She limply took his arm, but avoided looking at him. It was easy to picture his smug expression well enough as she felt another ugly blush stain her wan face. 'Lead the way, Aaron.'

And now he had just seen her be petulant, too—and she just knew that he was smiling.

Chapter Seven

Fortunately, their paths only crossed briefly for the next few days. Connie wiled away the hours reading or embroidering in her own little sitting room, a place that had become both her sanctuary as well as her prison, and longed to go outside and ride as her new husband did. Aaron, on the other hand, disappeared for several hours every morning, surveying the estate. It apparently took up a great deal of his thoughts as well because if he was not out riding around it, he was ensconced in the library or his bedchamber reading about farming methods or animal husbandry or some other such endeavour. But he never invaded her private space and she never invaded his.

Connie was hopelessly lonely. She missed her mother and her brother dreadfully and was desperate to speak to them, but the one letter she had written, and risked sending to Redbridge House, had been unceremoniously returned unopened. The Wincanton servants were polite but understandably wary of her and, because she did not have a particular maid designated to her yet, Connie's only real conversations occurred with her husband. As they were still virtual strangers, and had been brought up to be mortal enemies, those conversations were hardly meaningful.

They met every evening for dinner, and occasionally over lunch, in the small family dining room. When they did, their interactions followed much the same pattern. He would flirt

and she would parry haughtily until the pair of them were issuing mindless barbs to top the other. With nothing else to do, those interactions had quite become the highlight of Connie's miserable day. Aside from that they had little to do with one another. Connie had not yet plucked up the courage to broach the subject of an annulment.

A maid disturbed her foray into self-pity. 'Viscount Ardleigh requires your presence in his study, Lady Constance.'

Connie had been dreading the return of Aaron's father. Now it appeared that he was here. 'Is my husband back from his ride yet?' Bizarrely, she did not want to face the viscount for the first time without Aaron, although it was a sorry state of affairs that she desperately wanted his comfort at all when he had made it quite plain he would never want hers.

'Not yet, Lady Constance. Shall I send someone out to find him?'

Connie shook her head. Viscount Ardleigh would see that as cowardice on her part. No matter how terrified she really was about meeting that dreadful man on her own, she would rather walk over broken glass barefoot than let him know that. The last time she had laid eyes on the viscount he had been cruelly laughing at her ruination in front of a room full of onlookers and congratulating his son for doing it. She had been stunned and ashamed.

Vulnerable.

Pathetic.

This time, he would see the unyielding and defiant Constance Stuart.

With a deliberate lack of haste, Connie rose and made her way to the study. It was a room she had only glimpsed from the hallway and, like his bedchamber, Viscount Ardleigh had decorated the walls with the heads of dead animals. She found his love of taxidermy both disturbing, and a little intimidating, but fortunately it was only confined to those two rooms. Outside the door, Connie drew herself up to her full height and composed her features into an indifferent mask. First impressions were important and this one would serve to set the tone of her relationship with her father's worst enemy.

'Enter.' The voice was deep and stern, not at all like his son's seductive, mellow tones that turned her to pudding. Connie grasped the handle and glided inside with her hands folded primly in front of her and her nose ever so slightly in the air because, despite her unfortunate marriage, she was still a Stuart.

'You wished to see me, my lord?' Because politeness dictated that she defer to his title, she inclined her head as little as possible, then looked him straight in the eye. The first thing that she noticed was how like Aaron he was, except much older. The once-dark hair was now more grey than black—but the eyes were almost exact replicas. Almost. Where Aaron's were warm and filled with mischief Viscount Ardleigh's were hard and cold.

'Come closer, girl, so that I can get a proper look at you.' Her new father-in-law made no attempt to disguise the fact that he

was looking her up and down. Connie did her best to endure his scrutiny stoically. 'You are so very tall close up, aren't you? But not a dead loss. You have quite good birthing hips and you look fertile enough. Turn around, girl.'

It was like being an insect under a magnifying glance and Connie refused to lower herself further. 'I am not an exhibit in a side show, my lord, therefore I will not turn around and behave like one.'

His grey eyebrows lifted slightly at her refusal. 'You have spirit, I will give you that, Constance Stuart, but I cannot pretend to be happy about this match. I had never thought to have to tolerate a Stuart under my roof. But Aaron is stubborn and I suppose your womb will do as well as any other woman's. However, I must say I am pleased that your betrothal to the Marquis of Deal did not come to fruition, so I suppose I must be grateful for that. Your idiot father must be spitting feathers.' His sharp, angry laugh grated.

There were a hundred spiteful retorts that she wanted to make so it was difficult to know which of his points to take umbrage with first. 'I can assure you, quite emphatically, my lord, that I will not be the mother of your grandchildren.'

To her delight that seemed to bring him up short and he glared at her. 'The servants have told me that you keep to your own chamber at night. That will have to stop, missy. I want a grandson!'

'And I want to be a million miles away from you and your

dreadful family. It seems that both of us are doomed to have to deal with some disappointment.'



Aaron had not been having a particularly good morning, not that any morning started particularly well any more. He had woken himself up with his own screaming an hour before dawn, drenched in sweat and tangled in the damp bedcovers. As usual, completely shaken and exhausted, he had crawled out of bed straight away to escape the images that haunted him. Bitter experience had taught him that he would not go back to sleep again, not with his heart pounding like a blacksmith's hammer against his ribs and the horrifying memories so fresh in his mind that he could smell the metallic tang of blood as if he were still surrounded by it. Covered in it.

When he had first started having the nightmares after his regiment had stormed Ciudad Rodrigo, Aaron had thought that they would only be temporary. As the war went on, the business of keeping the rest of his men safe had occupied most of his time, the dreams still plaguing him infrequently. They had been awful when they came, but he had been able to separate them from his daily horrors, almost as if he had locked them in a box to keep them for another time. Unfortunately, his box bore a striking similarity to Pandora's. As soon as his feet had stepped back on to English soil it had opened and steadfastly refused to close again. Every painful, horrifying memory had gushed out,

demanding atonement. The nightmares were incessant and vivid, coming nightly with alarming regularity. To begin with it had bothered him. Now that he had been home for a few months when so many of his comrades had been left behind to rot in foreign soil, he accepted the nightly ordeal as penance. Under the circumstances, he deserved the torture. He had caused death, therefore like every murderer he should pay.

This morning, Aaron had washed and dressed quickly, saddled his own horse and had been galloping across the estate as the sun's rays first appeared over the horizon. The exercise never made the horror disappear, but it did serve to exorcise the worst of it from his mind so that he could function. Just after dawn he had collided with one of the estate's tenants and the man was not very happy. Once he had noisily aired his grievances Aaron conceded that the man made a valid argument. Apparently, under the terms of his tenancy agreement he had to grow whatever crop the estate wanted him to grow and had to use the seed given to him. Quite rightly, he had wanted to know why the promised seed had not yet been forthcoming, especially as it should have been sown weeks ago. Aaron wanted to know the answer, too, and had promised the poor fellow that he would seek out Thomas, the estate manager, but the man was nowhere to be found.

It confirmed all of Aaron's worries about the future of the estate. He might not yet be an expert on farming, but even he could see that they were unlikely to turn a profit if their crop was so late in the ground. With a growing sense of foreboding,

and to have more proof to take to his stubborn father, Aaron had spent the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon checking on the other tenants. All had similar complaints—however, for many the lack of seed was merely the tip of the iceberg. It also appeared that while their revenues were consistently falling each year, the rents that they were charged were rising significantly. Many farmers complained that they were close to not being able to afford to continue. Already, several farms lay abandoned, their fields choked with weeds that would not make any money. Such gross mismanagement was not going to turn around the estate's ailing fortunes any time soon.

Aaron walked his horse into the stable yard, tired and completely worn down, but broke into a run the moment he spied his father's carriage parked outside. The old man had come home early to spite him and probably to cause mischief. The last thing he wanted was his father rubbing Connie up the wrong way, especially as she was showing some signs of civility towards him. Both of them needed a mediator when they collided or likely all hell would soon break loose. Unfortunately, as soon as he stepped foot in the house he heard his father practically roar and realised that he was too late. Hell had already broken and was running loose all over his father's study with its arms waving.

Aaron skidded to a halt outside the open door just in time to witness his fiery wife standing toe to toe and eye to eye with his snarling father. Her elegant hands were curled into her signature angry fists at her sides and Aaron found himself scanning the

immediate vicinity for heavy objects in case she was tempted to throw something again. The woman had an excellent aim and a very strong arm. 'I see you have already met?' he said breezily as he walked towards them, smiling as if nothing whatsoever was amiss. Both sets of eyes swivelled angrily in his directions, but neither dropped their combative stance.

'Your wife needs to learn her place, Aaron!'

'Your father needs to learn some manners!'

Someone had to behave like an adult. 'Sit down, the pair of you.' To emphasise that his words were an order, not a request, Aaron forcefully pointed at two empty chairs with each of his hands.

Connie sniffed, but retreated regally to one of the chairs, sitting primly as if butter would not melt in her tart mouth. His father looked a little blue around the gills and his breathing was more laboured than Aaron wanted to hear, but once Connie was sat he reluctantly did the same. He was going to have to tell her, he realised, and hope that she understood. As difficult and beastly as his father was, he was in no state to endure daily combat, no matter how much he might deserve it.

'Has anyone rung for tea?' Convinced that the answer was going to be no, Aaron walked towards the bell pull and gave it a hefty tug before sitting down himself. 'I appreciate that this is an awkward time for all of us,' he began with forced calmness, 'but we are a family now and, therefore, we must find a way to live together peaceably.'

‘Then I suggest that your father desists from treating me as if I am a brood mare up for purchase. He has done everything except check my teeth!’ Connie’s usually plump lips were drawn into a thin line and he could feel the outrage radiating off her, so incandescent was her barely controlled anger.

‘She says that she refuses to have your children, Aaron. How dare she?’

Aaron felt his spirits sink from despair to despondency. How typical that the pair of them would go for the most controversial of topics straight away. Even the most skilled of diplomats would struggle to find a way out of this bed of thorns and Aaron knew that there was absolutely nothing that he could say, here and now, that would please both of them. Under the circumstances, that left him with only one option and he just knew that he was going to pay dearly for it.

‘Connie, could you go to your room, please?’ Aaron tried to say it as kindly, yet as adamantly, as he could, but still her smart mouth opened to argue. Much as he hated to do it, he held up his hand to stop her. ‘I said go to your room, Constance! We will discuss this later.’ And he would probably feel the full weight of *The Complete Farmer* on his cranium, too, but it couldn’t be helped. Aaron had to separate them in order to deal with this issue effectively.

Connie’s green eyes widened, then he watched them harden into sharp emeralds as she glared back at him with barely disguised contempt. She stood abruptly and flounced out of the

room, slamming the door behind her exactly as a true shrew would.

Aaron turned to his father. 'How did you come to be discussing procreation with my new wife?'

The old man had the decency to look a little contrite. 'I merely mentioned the need for a grandson and she took it badly.'

Aaron sincerely did not believe it was quite as innocent as all that. Knowing his father's blunt way of speaking, he suspected he had probably been downright insulting. As usual, the stubborn old man started to bluster to cover his obvious guilt. 'I know that she has denied you your conjugal rights since you married, boy. The servants have told me. Do not bother denying it. I was merely setting her straight. I told her that she needs to open her bedchamber door and her legs for you promptly. The girl has to do her duty!'

'The poor girl has lost her family and her fiancé in one fell swoop, and been publically humiliated in the process. Do you not think that she might need a little time to adjust to her new situation first?'

This was met with belligerent silence.

'Connie is not a bad sort when you get to know her, Father. Yes, she is a little quick tempered...'

'And she's a blasted Stuart!'

'But she is also clever and I believe that she does have the capacity to be reasonable. Going forward, I must insist that you treat her with the respect that she is due—as your daughter-in-

law. You can start tonight, at dinner, where I will expect you to be polite. And you will make no mention of conjugal rights.'

For several seconds his father stared at a spot just to the left of Aaron's face before he nodded curtly. 'Do you promise that you will get to work making my grandson?'

'I shall get to it immediately, Father. In the meantime, I think you should get some rest before dinner.'

'I am not a child, Aaron. I will not be mollycoddled.'

'If you will not rest voluntarily, I shall have to fetch the physician.'

Aaron rose as he watched his father glare at him. He could just imagine him considering if the threat was an empty one or not. They would need to talk about the estate later, too, and the likelihood was that conversation as going to be equally as difficult, perhaps even more so. Aaron needed to show that he could not be cowed. For good measure he folded his arms across his chest and glared right back at his father until the old man capitulated.

'Perhaps a little nap wouldn't hurt.'

Chapter Eight

Connie was in grave danger of wearing a hole in the rug with her frenetic pacing, but she was so furious she could not stop. She was not entirely certain which Wincanton she was madder at, his father for being so utterly obnoxious or Aaron for dismissing her so curtly as if she were the one in the wrong. It was probably Aaron. She certainly expected a little more of him. He had not even listened to her complaint properly before he had sent her away. How typical. Hadn't her father just done exactly the same thing? Well, if he thought she was going to take that sort of treatment lying down he had another think coming.

She spun around at the light tap on the door, ready for the fight, and watched it open barely a crack. Instead of Aaron, only his large hand squeezed in and it was waving a white handkerchief. The man was incorrigible! Surely he did not seriously think he could get around her with charm, not after he had so rudely dismissed her like that?

'Oh, just come in, you fool!' Already she could feel the sharp edge of her temper soften despite her determination to remain livid.

The door edged open slowly to reveal him standing there with the handkerchief of surrender in one hand while the other hand held a bucket over his head like a helmet. He surveyed the room with exaggerated wariness before he gingerly stepped inside, still

holding his bucket armour about his head and looking, much to her utter consternation, quite delightful. 'I come in peace, Connie. Put down your weapons.'

It was such an unexpected sight that her first reaction was to laugh at the ridiculousness of it. Fortunately, she held the bark of laughter back. She would not be charmed by him. 'How dare you send me out of the room like that? I am not some servant that you can order around!'

'I am sorry. It couldn't be helped.'

'Of course it could. You should have told your rude and ill-mannered father off immediately. He said the most outrageous things to me.'

Aaron nodded contritely. 'He has a blunt way about him sometimes.'

The intense lustre in her green eyes reminded him of a stormy sea he had witnessed one afternoon off of the coast of Portugal. The water had been beautiful, mesmerising and deadly. A stark reminder of the force of nature. Now he was confronted by the full force of Connie's temper, which showed no signs of ebbing any time soon. Her shoulders were thrown back and her delicate pointed chin was already raised, ready to do battle. The stance left the lily-white curve of her neck exposed and he wondered how she would react if he gave in to the sudden urge to place a kiss at the base of it rather than argue with her.

'He said that I looked fertile! That I had birthing hips!' Her voice had risen several octaves and she had started to pace again,

using her demonstrative hands to punctuate her words. She was all fire and heat and Aaron found that even in a temper he enjoyed watching her. 'He said that I had to open my...' All of the air rushed out of her lungs in one fell swoop as she swallowed the last word in complete outrage. A small blush of indignation bloomed on her cheeks. 'I have never been spoken to like that in my life!' She stopped pacing then and turned to him. Immediately her expression changed from fury to exasperation. 'Please take that stupid bucket off your head. I refuse to argue with a man who has a bucket on his head.'

'Then if you don't mind, I shall keep it on. I don't want to argue, Connie.'

She hesitated then, before she slumped down on to the chair behind her. All the anger and outrage disappeared and she suddenly looked so very sad and lost. 'I don't want this marriage, Aaron. It is all wrong and doomed to make us both miserable. I am so very unhappy. I want an annulment.'

He had not expected that. The sheer misery in her voice brought him up short. Her eyes rose to his and he saw the suffering and torment swirling in their depths. There were no jokes or clever remarks that would diffuse this situation and his heart ached for her. He lowered the silly bucket to the floor. 'I cannot agree to that, Connie. I'm sorry.'

Aaron's own legs felt oddly unsteady so he sat heavily in the chair across from hers. The very last thing he wanted to do was make her miserable, but he could tell by the way her face had

paled, and her posture dissolved, that he had just condemned her to worse than misery.

‘Why not? You do not want this marriage either. We were both forced into it. I could argue that my father used the safety and security of my mother as collateral to make me agree to the marriage and you could argue that you felt under an obligation to do the right thing as a result. It all happened so quickly. We have reasonable grounds, Aaron. It has to be worth a try. Please release me.’

Aside from the fact that the process was unlikely to be that simple, and there was a very good chance that it would be thrown out and they would be stuck with each other anyway, it could drag on for years, Aaron did not have years to do what he had promised. ‘Please, Connie, do not ask me to do that. I cannot.’

‘We both know that you would never have wanted to marry me under any other circumstances. You had your heart set on Violet. If our marriage was declared null and void, you could be free to marry whomever you wanted. I am sure Violet will wait for you.’ There was a pleading edge to her voice that tugged at his conscience. ‘And I know that your father would be pleased to see the back of me.’

And there, in a nutshell, was the rub. ‘You are quite wrong there, Connie. My father would be quite devastated if we started such proceedings now.’ Aaron realised that he had to be completely honest with her and had to hope for the best.

‘Can I trust you with a secret?’ She inclined her head in

acknowledgement, her eyebrows drawn together in confusion. 'He's dying, Connie.'

Instead of the relief or triumph he might have expected from a Stuart at this grave news, Aaron saw sympathy dart across her features and realised that telling her the truth had been the right thing to do. Underneath all of the fire and ice and sharp, acidic tongue Constance Stuart had a heart. Telling her actually felt like a relief. 'His health is in rapid decline and has been for some years. He did not tell me else I would have come home from the Peninsula sooner. The man believes himself to be invincible—but his heart is weak. He suffers from a lung condition that has significantly worsened in the short time since I arrived home. He firmly believes that he has at least a year left. I have kept the truth from him as it feels unnecessarily cruel to burden him with the reality, but his physician believes that he has a few months at best, although realistically he could go at any time. I know better than anyone my father's shortcomings, Connie, but I promised him a grandson. If we begin the proceedings for an annulment now, I will destroy all of the hope that he has for one while he is still alive and I will not do that.'

She was so silent that he could hear the bones in her stays whisper as she breathed in and out. The breaths came in staccato bursts as she absorbed the enormity of the situation.

'I am to be made to pay the price for this. You would keep me here, against my will, because your father wants an heir?' Her eyes were suddenly dewy, but typically she merely inhaled deeply

and gazed back at him proudly, refusing to give in to tears. 'Will you force me to have a child?'

Aaron felt the bile rise in his throat at the suggestion. In truth, he was not fit to be a father to anyone, but he would not admit that to anyone, least of all the delightful woman in front of him. 'Of course not.' Her slim shoulders slumped in relief. 'Even if you were to carry my child, my father will be gone before it could be born. But it matters so much to him that I would like for him to believe that there is a chance of one.'

That was a much better compromise, he realised. He would not have to face the expectation and responsibility of being a father, and the inevitable disappointment that would cause to the unlucky offspring. But if Connie would agree to the ruse, then his father would be placated and would go to his grave a happy man.

'You want me to lie?'

'If you consider making a man's passage from this life to the next easier by telling him what he wants to hear as a lie, then, yes, Connie. I want you to lie.'

'Why should I? Your father hates my family. He could not have been more disrespectful towards me if he tried. I have no loyalty to either him or you. I would prefer to leave here and live on the streets than pretend to want that man's grandchild!'

She saw his anger then, even though he fought to hide it from her. His jaw clenched and Connie could see the tops of his knuckles whiten as he gripped the arm of the chair. 'Have you ever seen a man go to his death petrified and screaming for the

things that matter most to him, Connie? Seen the panic and terror in his eyes when he realises that he has run out of time and that he will go to the grave without any sort of comfort? Have you ever heard grown men weeping like babies, pathetically begging you to fetch their mothers or wives or children so that they can see them one last time and then had to tell those men that you cannot help them? It is the most horrific thing, to see all hope die before death takes them. I have seen it and I wish every day that I had not. Had you seen it, too, then you would know that it is not such a terrible thing to lie to a dying man. Not if you give him hope. No matter how much I sometimes detest my father, I would at least spare him that torment.'

There was no lazy charm or bravado about the man in from of her. His pain was almost visceral and it shocked her to her core. Revealing it to her had also clearly shocked him. He appeared stunned at the enormity of what he had just confessed. Connie watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed and saw how ruthlessly he suppressed his anger, as if he were taking it all inside of himself before he turned to her again, the usual half-smile firmly in place, almost as though he were pulling on a mask to hide the real man beneath. 'Give me until then, Connie. Let me allow him to believe that we are man and wife in the literal sense and then, when he goes, I will move heaven and earth to secure you an annulment, if that is what you truly want. I promise.'

Of course, still stunned, she had readily agreed to his terms and he had thanked her and assured her that his father would

be on his best behaviour going forward. Then he had left her, as if nothing meaningful had just passed between them and there was not an abyss of torment hidden behind his russet eyes. But Connie worried about what she had seen for the rest of the afternoon and wished that she was brave enough to offer him some comfort.



Dinner was a stilted affair, although Viscount Ardleigh remained polite, even though he made no secret of the fact that he was doing it under duress, and Connie allowed Aaron to bait her so that they could exchange a version of their usual sparring to relieve some of the awkwardness of the meal. She had excused herself after that, ostensibly to leave them to their port and male conversation, but she had found the whole ordeal quite draining. To know that you sat opposite one who was so close to death—who did not know that it was imminent, and conscious that he would be mortified to know that she knew that—had made the meal even more trying. But she had made Aaron a promise and would be rewarded with her freedom in due course. Once she had thought about it all, her compliance did seem a small price to pay.

However, Aaron's intense reaction and the emotion that she had seen fleetingly in his dark eyes made her wonder about the man she was temporarily married to. Connie requested a bath be drawn and spent the better part of an hour soaking in it and

pondering that question. What did she really know about Aaron Wincanton?

All these years she had thought him to be one of those superficial but confident types. He had always been at the centre of any social affair, laughing, telling amusing stories and charming everyone from the crustiest old curmudgeon to the most invisible of wallflowers. Such things came so naturally to him. To think that he might have hidden depths beneath all of that ease and swagger, that he also might feel things a little too deeply and be wounded by events, was unnerving.

It was strange and probably showed her complete lack of understanding about war, but when he had come back home a few months ago and been heralded as a hero for all of his brave deeds in the battle against Napoleon, Connie had been dismissive. How like Aaron Wincanton to blithely go off to war and come back the darling of everyone and a hero to boot. The adoration of others had always been something that he appeared to achieve without any effort. She had always envied that about him. How could he be so confident and so charming and so comfortable in his own skin when she found such things so difficult? Aaron Wincanton always gave the impression that he tiptoed through life largely unscathed.

But he hadn't. Have you ever seen a man go to his death petrified and screaming? Imagining the horror of what he had described was almost too awful to contemplate, but she now knew that he had witnessed such things and that they had hurt

him. Deeply. And he still carried all of that hurt around with him. She was sure of it. Connie had seen his pain with her own eyes, felt the power it had over him for a split second before she had watched him cover it as if it did not matter. Almost as if it had not happened at all. Like her, she now had to entertain the prospect that he also wore a face in public that was quite different to the one he wore when he was alone with himself. Oddly, she felt almost privileged to have seen that.



By the time that she was dressed in a fresh nightgown and sat on a low footstool in front of the fire so that her unruly, thick hair could dry, Connie was feeling quite unsettled. She supposed that it was unsurprising as it had been a taxing day. Despite the revelations about the failing health of Viscount Ardleigh and the new and burning questions she now had concerning Aaron's experience on the battlefields, at least there was now a light at the end of the tunnel. He had agreed to an annulment, even if she did have to wait a few months for the proceedings to begin. She could make plans for a new life somewhere where she was not a duty or a burden. That had to be a good thing, didn't it? As her husband was being quite generous, Connie made a silent vow to behave more benevolently towards him going forward. It must be difficult to sit by and watch the demise of a parent whilst pretending that all was well. If nothing else positive came out of this travesty of a marriage, at least she could ease his burden on

that score just a little bit. She hated all of this forced inactivity and lack of purpose. It would be better to do something.

Connie tipped her head forward and drew her brush through the underside of her hair. It always took such a long time to dry. If she had had any sense she would have delayed washing it until the morning. Now, she would have to wait up another hour. The light tap on the door startled her at first, but assuming that it was a maid come to see if she needed anything before she retired for the night, Connie did not move from her spot by the fire.

‘Come in.’

She heard the door open and footsteps approach, but the maid never said a word. Flipping her hair back to its proper place, Connie turned towards her with a smile.

Chapter Nine

Aaron had never seen quite so much magnificent hair in all of his life. Unbound, it hung all the way down to her waist in sensual, copper waves that positively glowed in the firelight as if they were burning from within like the hot embers crackling in the hearth. In places it was still slightly damp, he noticed, making some of the heavy tendrils appear almost chestnut brown in a sea of swirling red. Her skin was rosy from her bath and he found himself wondering exactly what lay beneath that chaste and proper nightgown.

‘What do you want?’

Her initial smile had been replaced by a look of bewilderment. Aaron watched her eyes flick towards the cut-crystal balloon glasses he held in one hand, then to the brandy decanter he held in the other. It occurred to him that her hair and the brandy were much the same colour and both were enhanced by the firelight.

‘If I am trying to pretend to my father that I am impregnating you, I cannot do that from down the hall. Besides, my father will be kept informed of our nocturnal habits by the servants. You are going to have to put up with my company every evening from now on. Just to put on a convincing show, of course.’ In an attempt to divert his attention away from the alluring sight of her sat by the hearth and the embarrassing topic of the conversation, he set the two glasses on the small table near the sofa and began to pour

a healthy amount of the amber liquid into them. Bizarrely, his hand shook slightly.

‘Yes, of course. That does make sense.’

Aaron made the mistake of turning towards her as she slowly rose from her low position on the footstool. Fortunately, she was unaware of the fact that, with the firelight behind her, the gauzy material of the voluminous nightgown became more translucent. It no longer took his imagination to wonder what lay beneath. The dark silhouette of her lithe body was illuminated like a cameo. Aaron could make out the gentle mounds of her shadowed breasts, the trim waist and the seductive curve of her hip. His eyes moved lower, taking in the unbelievably long, shapely legs and felt his breath quicken. Unwanted images of those legs wrapped around him filled his mind and the memory of the silky feel of the skin on her thigh came back to haunt him, forcing him to take a large gulp of his brandy to cover his reaction. A little startled, he turned away from her and pretended to take in the room.

He sensed when she came up alongside him. The fragrance of her perfume wafted under his nose, exactly the same heady fragrance he had first smelled that fateful night in the library where they had lost their heads. The sultry undertones of rose were more intoxicating than the alcohol he held clenched his hand. Quite why she was having such an effect on him, he could not say. His body had shown no interest in any woman in the better part of a year. Apart from her. That one time. But now, apparently, it had decided to reawaken. Aaron hastily sat in one

of the large armchairs to disguise the fact that half of the blood in his body had suddenly just rushed to his groin.

How inconvenient. For the sake of appearances, he would have to visit her here almost every evening for as long as was necessary to maintain the ruse. Was he now doomed to suffer through these visits in a state of complete and unwelcome arousal as well? He had promised the girl an annulment so he could hardly take her to bed. But he wanted to.

That came as a shock. He wanted to bed his wife and he couldn't. Fate certainly had a warped sense of humour.



Connie picked up the other brandy glass and perched in the chair opposite him, feeling at a distinct disadvantage. He was perfectly dressed, as usual, without a single dark hair out of place. She was naked under her nightgown, with all of her own unruly hair twisting into its usual tangle of brambles all around her shoulders. If she hastily plaited it now it would appear that she was bothered to been seen in such a state and he would find her vanity amusing. He would assume that she had wanted to improve her appearance just for him. Therefore, she had to appear as unaffected by this intimate intrusion into her private quarters as he was, despite the fact that she had never been so aware of her own body before or wished that she was wearing several protective layers of protective clothing under her nightgown. To cover her embarrassment, she took a sip of her

brandy and felt the liquid burn a warm path down her throat. When the brandy hit her stomach she found the warmth it created there strangely calming, so she drank a little more. 'If we are going to be thrust together like this for the next few months, we might as well get to know each other better.' Clearly the drink was also making her bolder as well.

Connie watched fascinated as he cupped the bowl of the glass in his palm and swirled the golden liquid around. 'I agree. We can hardly spend the next few months arguing. That will soon become quite wearing. Shall we begin by asking each other some simple questions?' He was smiling that lazy, slightly flirtatious smile again. 'Shall I begin? What is your favourite colour?'

Connie answered without hesitation, 'Emerald green.'

'Like your eyes.'

He thought her eyes were like emeralds? Flattered, Connie took another quick sip of her brandy to cover the silly smile that threatened. 'What is your favourite colour?'

'I am not altogether sure that I have one—but I have become rather partial to red of late.'

The bubble of laughter escaped from her lips before she could stop it. 'You really are the most shameless flirt, Aaron. Do you practise it? Or does it come naturally?'

She watched him lean back into the chair and make himself comfortable before he answered. 'In the spirit of honesty, I will admit that I used to practise it a great deal when I was younger. Now, I think most of it just spills from my mouth naturally. Out

of habit'

'Do you ever mean any of it?'

She could see that her question surprised him because there was laughter in his eyes. Laughter in his eyes? What on earth was the matter with her to suddenly be so poetic? It was probably the brandy scrambling her wits. Just in case, she put down the glass.

'I mean everything that I say. Usually. As I am sure you do to.'

'Touché. Perhaps it is better if we ask questions about more practical topics. What did you win your medals for?'

For the briefest of moments his face clouded and then the clouds dispersed. 'Surviving.'

He did not elaborate and quickly changed the subject. 'What do you enjoy doing, Connie, when you are not railing at me, of course?'

'I like to read. Not the sort of learned tomes you do, but I enjoy novels. I also love to ride.'

A devastating smile split his face. 'You do? That is splendid. So do I. Perhaps we should ride together tomorrow?'

The suggestion pleased Connie immensely and she forgot to behave in a uninterested and haughty manner. It would feel so wonderful to get out and enjoy the fresh air. She felt herself grinning in return. 'I would love that! I am curious to see the Wincanton estate.'

He told her then of all of the best places to ride on his land and of his great love of horses. She told him about how she had learnt to ride and described her favourite parts of her father's

estate next door. In doing so, Connie felt suddenly homesick and desperately floundered for something else to talk about that was not as personal or as sensitive to her.

‘Do you love Violet Garfield?’

He actually laughed at that. Amusement crinkled his eyes as he poured the last of his brandy down his throat. ‘No, Connie. I tried to care about her and I actually find her sweet but, no, I do not love Violet.’

‘Then why were you going to propose to her?’

There was an over-long pause before he answered and Connie noticed that he did not meet her eyes. ‘My father wants a grandson and therefore I needed to marry someone quickly to ensure that it happened in time. Speed was of the essence and Violet appeared to be open to the idea. Why did you agree to marry the Marquis of Deal?’

‘He asked me.’ As soon as she uttered the words she regretted them. The brandy was loosening her tongue. Aaron sat forward in his chair, his dark eyebrows drawn together as he regarded her with undisguised interest.

‘Really? That was the only reason?’

She had just admitted her desperation and her lack of suitors to Aaron Wincanton. Connie felt incredibly stupid and gauche, but tried to cover it with her usual haughty disdain. ‘My father chose him. He thought it would be a good match. I am a pragmatist. I know that I am not the sort of woman who appeals to the majority of men and I had no desire to remain a spinster.

Deal suited that purpose well enough.'

'So your heart was not engaged?'

'Not in the slightest.' It was then that she remembered how he had seen her cry when her fiancé had made his ambivalent feelings towards her plain and knew that Aaron did not believe her blithe words at all. At his look of disbelief, she deflected. 'Your father said that he was relieved when my betrothal was called off. Why would he care who I married?' That odd comment had niggled her all day. Ardleigh had laughed because her father must be spitting feathers. An odd turn of phrase that suggested that she was missing something.

Aaron had been about to take another sip of his drink, but the glass paused midway. There was bemusement in his expression. 'Did it not occur to you that your father had arranged your marriage to spite my father? You do know that the Marquis of Deal's estate borders the Wincanton estate to the south. Or did you think that was simply a coincidence?'

The awful reality was that she had never even considered it. She had been so relieved to have received an offer of marriage from a handsome and titled gentleman that she had never considered that her father had arranged her future so strategically. That realisation was accompanied by an overwhelming sense of disappointment. Not just at her own pathetic stupidity in being so hopelessly flattered by it all, but also in the way her father had manipulated the situation to benefit himself. No wonder he had urged her to ignore Deal's

philandering. He had put his own desire to get one up on the Wincantons above the happiness of his only daughter. Once again, Connie had been made to look a fool in front of Aaron Wincanton, who had the nerve to be wearing an expression of pity. It suggested that he, too, knew that she was pathetic. She wanted to slap it off his face.

‘How much longer do you need to stay here? It has been a very long day and I am tired.’ The words came out without any real venom, but fortunately he took his cue and stood.

‘I did not mean to upset you again, Connie.’

‘The only thing upsetting me is your continued presence. Whilst I have agreed to your request to maintain this charade for the sake of your father, do not take that to mean that I think any better of you, Aaron Wincanton. I still dislike you and would prefer to spend as little time in your company as possible until this marriage is annulled.’

Connie turned and walked swiftly towards her bedchamber door without a backwards glance. Only once she was safely on the other side, her back pressed against the wood, did she allow the tears of shame to fall.

Chapter Ten

The maid woke Connie early with a breakfast tray. 'Mr Aaron said that he will meet you in the stable yard at eight, Lady Constance.'

Connie considered sending the maid back with an excuse and then rapidly decided against it. She would not be cowardly and avoid him. At some point today she would have to face him so she might as well get it over with. Besides, she was desperate to get out in the fresh air again and did not want to squander the opportunity to go riding. He might never ask her again and she was not convinced that it was an activity that she would be allowed to do alone. She ate quickly, allowed the maid to pin her hair to within an inch of its life and then donned her favourite forest-green riding habit before she hurried outside.

Aaron was waiting for her in the stable yard as promised, a lively looking chestnut mare already saddled next to his horse. She watched his eyes scan the entire length of her body before he smiled lazily and wished her a good morning. He was probably thinking how gigantic she looked. The habit was cut to show off her willowy figure to its best advantage, but whilst she did like the way it made her appear to have curves, it also emphasised her extreme height. Her father had been most critical of the outfit, claiming that in it she appeared to be all legs and no bosom and that no man wants to be seen riding with a giraffe. Connie

would not lower herself to crouching beneath the folds of the skirt in order to look more feminine. She already knew that he did not find her the least bit attractive, so why bother? Theirs was a temporary marriage, thank goodness. Nothing more. Defiant pride made her smile back with equal cheerfulness and Connie deliberately pulled herself up to her full height as she strode purposefully towards her horse.

He looked a little sheepish then, but fortunately made no mention of her former fiancé. 'I thought that we might have a side saddle, but alas we do not. Ardleigh Manor has been a house of solely men for too many years.'

A robust and proper gentleman's saddle was strapped on the mare's back and Connie blinked at it covetously. She had always wanted to ride astride. It always appeared to be so much more fun. On a side saddle she could never truly gallop fast and always had to be conscious of her balance and her ladylike posture. Riding astride was more daring, and thus far more appealing, however, for appearance's sake, she regarded the thing with distaste. 'I am sure that I can manage well enough.'

A groom scrambled forward with a riding block, but Aaron shooed him away. With a smug grin he cupped his hands so that he could bolster her foot. Connie purposefully ignored it. At times, there was great benefit in being so tall. One of them was that she certainly did not need anyone's help to get on a horse, especially his. Boldly, she placed one foot in the stirrup and then hoisted herself on to the back of the horse. Only once

she was sat astride the saddle did the limitations of the tight riding habit present itself. The skirt had been designed to have as little bunched fabric as possible when she was perched on a side saddle. Therefore, there was precious little extra fabric to accommodate the width of her splayed legs on the top of the animal. The hem of the skirt had risen in protest, giving her new husband an excellent view of her calves, whilst the top of the skirt was stretched tight across her thighs and bottom. Desperately she tried to wiggle it down to no avail.

‘Allow me.’

To Connie’s complete consternation, Aaron reached up and manoeuvred the heavy fabric around her thighs so that he could cover the majority of her modesty. This operation took much longer than Connie felt was necessary and was made worse by the fact that she could feel the heat of his gloveless hands, all the way through the layers of skirt and petticoat, until an imprint of them was seared on to her very skin. Her ankles were still on full display to the world when he stepped back and grinned knowingly. At a loss of what else to do, and still feeling shaken by the effect of his touch, Connie thrust her nose in the air and stared out over the fields beyond.

Aaron mounted his horse quickly and the pair of them set off at a sedate pace out of the yard and up a well-worn path away from the house. Connie had to concede that even now, at the start of winter when all was at its bleakest, the woodland and meadow surrounding the estate was quite lovely. Aaron pointed out the

occasional feature or entertained her with stories about scrapes he had got into as a boy. By the time they crested a small hill, Connie's horse was sufficiently warmed up and she was aching to feel the wind on her face.

'I will race you to that copse of trees.' It might not be ladylike, but it was hardly as if her father was ever likely to get wind of it and, even if he did, it really was none of his business any longer. There were some benefits to the estrangement after all. That thought made her feel much better, so she crouched low over the horse's neck and nudged him to go faster still. It felt marvellous.

Before Aaron was prepared, she had raced off ahead of him, a broad smile on her face and her body moving gracefully in the saddle as if she had been born to ride. He chivvied his own horse into a gallop, holding the beast back so that he could keep a short distance between them. In his mind he rationalised this behaviour as gentlemanly. It would make her happy to win. But in truth, from that position he could also enjoy the spectacular sight of her rounded bottom bouncing in the saddle, snugly encased in green velvet.

And he had thought that she looked splendid when he had first spied her in that outrageously bold riding habit. It had fitted her like a glove, highlighting the womanly curve of her trim waist where it met her hips. From there downwards was a slim column of green that went on and on until it hit the floor. The woman had legs that went on for ever. After catching an illicit glimpse of the shape of those magnificent legs last night, he had spent a great

deal of time thinking about them. Before he had inevitably woken himself up screaming, he was certain that he had dreamt about them, too. He had certainly drifted off to sleep, wondering what it might feel like to run his fingers through all of that hair when he should have been thinking about how to salvage the estate. Connie had a way of permeating a great many of his thoughts since they had been thrust together. Even now. His morning rides had been a place to strategise about the future of Ardleigh Manor or contemplate his guilt—but there would be no strategising or guilt today. His new wife was too much of a distraction.

By the time they reached the trees they were both a little breathless. The ridiculously small hat that she had pinned on the top of her tightly bound hair was slightly askew, several copper tendrils had sprung free of their pins and were beginning to curl in the damp morning air. Combined with the victorious grin that lit up her eyes, the overall effect was simply stunning. It fair took his breath away.

What did not make any sense to Aaron was the fact that she had agreed to marry that wastrel Deal purely because he had asked her. That little snippet she had inadvertently let slip had occupied his thoughts a great deal last night and he still could not understand why she would sell herself so short this morning. Surely other men had asked? Connie had caused quite a stir when she had first come out, he remembered. Every young buck had been positively gushing about how glorious she was. One or two compared her poetically to a Titian painting but, he recalled

with sudden clarity, when he had first seen her all those years ago he had thought that she was more like Botticelli's Birth of Venus, rising proudly out of a giant clam shell, red hair tumbling carelessly over her milky-white shoulders and looking positively ripe for seducing.

How was it possible that five years later such a fine specimen of womanhood was still on the marriage mart? Unless she had frightened all potential suitors off with her feigned haughtiness and uninterest. And it was feigned, he now knew. Connie used it as a disguise in much the same way he used his charm. He had seen her reach for the emotion last night when she had realised that her betrothal to Deal had been nothing more than a way of perpetuating the feud. He had watched her transform her features from anguish into indifference and had wanted to go to her and hold her, and tell her that she did not have to wear her mask with him. Except if he did that then she might expect him to do the same—a preposterous thought that he could never entertain. He had left then, knowing that it would be simpler if they both played the characters that made them feel safest, and had regretted it instantly.

The smiling creature riding next to him appeared not to be wearing her mask at this moment. Connie looked relaxed and happy to be outside. Aaron let her gloat about her victory as they rode around the trees to the empty fields behind, secretly pleased that he had made her happy with such a simple act.

‘Why are your crops not planted?’ she asked after a minute,

taking in the acres and acres of nothingness.

‘A very good question, Connie, and one that I cannot answer. I suspect my father’s estate manager is an idiot.’

‘I do not know a great deal about farming, but surely if the man is an idiot your father should dismiss him and hire someone more competent?’

Aaron gave her a wry smile. If only things were that simple. ‘Unfortunately, my father will not hear a bad word against the fellow. Mr Thomas is credited with orchestrating the purchase of land next to your father’s estate. Therefore, he is a genius according to my father.’

‘Because nothing is more important than the feud.’ She understood instantly and gazed off into the distance. ‘My own father is much the same. His main priority always has been the feud, too. Nothing else matters quite so much. Not peace or harmony and definitely not daughters.’

Her face had clouded a little and he realised that she was thinking about her betrothal again, only this morning she was inclined to be more reasonable about it. That was another thing he had noticed about her. Her temper burned hot, but quickly disappeared. She did not hold a grudge very well and faced her own shortcomings head on. He envied that.

‘I did think that you knew that Deal’s land borders ours. I wasn’t trying to be cruel last night, Connie.’

She brushed his apology away with a swat of her green-gloved hand. ‘I should have realised it myself. The signs were there.

Why else would a man like Deal agree to marry me? I am quite annoyed that it never occurred to me sooner.' But she had been so desperate to be a wife and a mother that she had ignored her better judgement, preferring to fool herself into believing he might miraculously grow to love her one day. As if a beautiful man like that would find something attractive in a gangly, ginger-haired giant. Connie doubted she would ever forget the look of disgust that had passed across her fiancé's golden features when he had explained why he had agreed to the betrothal. If ever she had needed clarification of how unappealing she was as a woman, then that had been it. Yet Aaron's words had also wounded. Perhaps more so. What sort of a man would willingly want to bed a shrew like you? She would spare him that ordeal because he had been honourable in marrying her. They rode in silence a little longer, side by side, neither looking at the other.

'For what it's worth,' he suddenly blurted with an irritated expression on his handsome face, 'I am glad that you never married Deal.'

Connie stared resolutely ahead because she did not want him to see how much talking about it hurt. 'I am sure you are. It would have been very inconvenient if my father's plan had succeeded. You would be surrounded by Stuarts and my father would have the upper hand once again.'

'Stop being daft, Connie!'

She could feel herself bristle at his harsh tone and was about to give him a set down when he surprised her.

‘I do not give two farthings if this estate is positively ringed by Stuarts. I keep telling you that the silly feud needs to stop—and that I refuse to play any part of it. What I meant was Deal is a toad of a man. He’s a gambling, narcissistic lecher. The man brags about his many conquests at White’s and shows no regard or respect for the poor women he has seduced. I have always found him to be quite odious. You deserve better than that, Connie. And it irritates me to hear you sell yourself short by claiming you agreed to marry him simply because he asked.’

He looked irritated and that irritation on her behalf was very flattering. In case he saw that, she encouraged her horse to trot ahead of his before she allowed herself a little smile. She could not remember another man, save her brother, ever coming to her defence before. A little part of her heart rejoiced at that.

They rounded another copse of trees and the sight beyond brought Connie up short.

Redbridge House.

She could see it plainly in the distance, so near that she could just about make out the wisps of smoke coming out of the four large chimneys on its roof. If all of the fires were lit, then that could only mean one thing. Her family were in residence. The wave of longing was so swift and sudden that she could not hide it as he pulled his horse up alongside.

‘You miss your family.’

‘I miss my mother and my brother.’ There was no point denying that. She did not care one whit about her spiteful, critical

father.

‘Perhaps you should write to them? I am sure that they would be glad to hear from you.’

It occurred to Connie then that Aaron was not keeping tabs on her, else he would have known that she had already tried. ‘Then you do not know my father. I sent a letter a few days ago. It came back unopened.’

‘Your brother and mother might think differently. Perhaps you should write to one of them.’

Connie turned her horse abruptly away from the painful view. ‘I am sure my father would ensure that any letters would be intercepted before they got to the rest of my family. You were there, Aaron, when he said that I was dead to him. The man never backs down.’ Once again she saw a flash of pity in his eyes and decided to nip it in the bud. ‘Let us not talk about it any more. Discussing it is pointless and will only serve to spoil my ride.’

They meandered slowly back towards Ardleigh Manor, the mood somewhat more sombre than he had been. Aaron said little, which she was grateful for, and was apparently deep in thought. Two stable lads intercepted them in the yard and led the horses away and Aaron offered her his arm as they walked back towards the house. In the spirit of their awkward truce, she took it, trying not to enjoy the solid feel of him beneath her hand or remember how that arm had once held her with such passion.

The sound of another horse arriving behind them had them both turning. ‘That is Mr Thomas,’ Aaron said with a mixture of

urgency tinged with disgust. He abruptly disentangled her arm from his. 'If you will excuse me, Connie, I really need to talk to him.'

He practically sprinted back towards the stable yard, leaving Connie rooted to the spot. Mr Thomas's eyes met and locked with hers. For an instant he appeared startled, then he inclined his head politely before turning his full attention back to Aaron as if nothing untoward was going on at all.

Except it was. Connie had seen Mr Thomas before. Many times. The last time had been a little over a fortnight ago, in her father's study.

Chapter Eleven

Connie had no idea how to react or what to do, so she went inside and quickly changed, wrapping herself in a warm shawl before heading back downstairs. Pretending to go out for a walk, Connie wandered nervously up and down the paths closet to the stables, looking for any sign of Mr Thomas and filled with an enormous sense of foreboding. There was more afoot here than she had been aware of and unexpectedly she found her loyalty torn. Eventually she saw him striding towards the building. Fortunately, he was alone.

‘Mr Thomas! Might I have a word?’

He spun around and then gave her a slow smile before walking towards her, then bowed politely. ‘Lady Constance, what an unexpected pleasure.’

‘I hardly think it should be unexpected, sir, not when we both know that you have dealings with my father. You must have realised I would seek you out and demand an explanation the moment I clapped eyes on you. Why are you here?’

‘Have you told all this to your husband?’ The man’s eyes were suddenly cold and his expression, although trying to remain bland, was also hostile. It made Connie feel uneasy.

‘Not yet.’

She watched his shoulders sag with relief before he pinned her with his gaze. ‘Good. Let us keep it that way. I dare say he would

get quite the wrong impression. I am merely of an acquaintance of your father's, though Viscount Ardleigh and his son might not be particularly forgiving of that relationship if they were to find out about it.'

'You are more than a passing acquaintance, Mr Thomas. You have visited Redbridge House at least once a month for several years. I believe that you are working for my father. He is using you to sabotage the Wincantons in some way. That is why the fields still lay idle, isn't it?'

The estate manager's eyes narrowed and his voice became clipped. 'I can assure you, madam, that I have no idea what you are talking about. I am simply an acquaintance of your father's. That has nothing to do with my position here. Occasionally, I might tell your father snippets of what the Wincantons are up to, in passing conversation, but that is hardly a crime.'

'Do you expect me to believe that your only purpose here is to keep my father informed of the latest gossip? I am not a fool, sir.'

His thin lips curled into a snarl as he watched her coldly. 'Your father would be very disappointed in you if he heard that you had interfered in his personal business, Lady Constance.'

'My father is already disappointed in me, Mr Thomas, as I am sure the whole world now knows, therefore I fail to see what difference my interference would make.' Connie turned on her heel and began to march away. She had to find Aaron and tell him.

'I should imagine that it is very painful to be estranged

from one's family, Lady Constance.' Instantly, Connie's footsteps slowed and she turned back to the estate manager suspiciously. Mr Thomas merely smiled. 'You always did have such a strong bond with your mother. I have seen first-hand the strain this breach has put on her. I dare say she misses you as much as you miss her—and your father can be quite stubborn. However, I am certain that his poor opinion of you will change once he hears of your loyalty and discretion in this delicate matter.'

'I doubt my father would bend, sir, in which case you are asking me to be disloyal to my husband for naught.' Why did she suddenly feel the need to be loyal to Aaron Wincanton? It was not as if she had any affection for the man or owed him anything. Yet she felt it just the same.

Mr Thomas was all charm and subservience again. 'Perhaps. And then again perhaps not. I was only with your father yesterday and he did specifically ask me to enquire about your health. He mentioned something in passing about how badly his wife was taking it all and he wanted to know if you were well cared for. I am to report back to him straight away if there is anything amiss.' He paused briefly to let this news sink in and when he next spoke it was conspiratorially. 'The Earl of Redbridge might be stubborn, but he is also still your father. His feelings for you are still there and his anger will pass in time. I know it will pass more quickly if you keep our little secret. Just for a little while. It might be just what is needed to heal the breach between you.'

Everything about what he was suggesting did not sit well with

her—yet still she was seduced by the possibility. The idea that her father had enquired about her gave her some hope. He would see it as disloyal if she interfered and that could only serve to make the gulf between them wider. And she was desperate to see her mother again. Once her marriage was dissolved, her father might see his way to allowing her to visit from time to time if she could prove to be an asset to him while she was here. It was not as if she had any loyalty to the Wincantons. But Aaron had been noble in marrying her and he was kind. Did he deserve such duplicitousness?

Mr Thomas sensed her dilemma and regarded her solemnly. ‘I give you my word, my lady, that nothing untoward is going on. I merely keep your father abreast of the Wincanton family and what they are doing.’

‘If I have any doubt about that, be advised, Mr Thomas, that the first person I shall speak to is my husband.’ Connie did not really believe the man. It was all too coincidental, but the prospect of seeing her mother and brother again was too tempting to risk offending her father further. For the time being she would maintain the status quo. If there was the slightest chance that she could heal the rift, then she had to give it a go. She would hold her tongue for as long as it took her to find proof that Mr Thomas was a liar and no longer. What difference did a few more weeks make?



Aaron arrived at the door of Connie's sitting room a respectable hour after they had endured another awkward dinner with his father. The fraught atmosphere was made worse by the fact that Aaron and the old man had been arguing about the state of the fields for most of the afternoon. But his father would not listen to reason and Aaron was hesitant to push him too far in case it overtaxed his fragile heart. For the time being, they agreed to disagree. A situation that was beyond frustrating because with every passing day things were becoming less salvageable.

Unfortunately, Connie was not in her nightdress when she bid him to enter. In fact, she was as formally dressed as she had been at the dinner table and was sitting primly on her sofa, embroidering something. He would have much preferred to see her drying her splendid hair by the fire, although this way was probably for the best.

'I brought port this time,' he said, waving the decanter in front of her and she smiled stiffly in response, barely lifting her eyes from her sewing. Her guard was up again, he could tell, and Aaron decided he was fonder of her when she was being true to herself.

'I have never tasted port.'

'Then you are in for a treat. This is one of my father's best bottles. I pilfered it from the cellar and he would be livid if he knew that I had taken it. He would be more livid if he knew that I was sharing it with a Stuart.'

'Then I shall enjoy the taste of it even more.'

He saw a brief flash of her humour then. Her green eyes had lit up with mischief and wiped away the mask for a moment. Aaron poured them both a glass and sat down on the armchair opposite. 'I am going to visit some of the tenants tomorrow if you would like to come with me? There are a lot of them so I will give you fair warning that you might be stuck in the saddle for a couple of hours.' Aaron also wanted to check up on Mr Thomas. The man had claimed that the seed would be delivered to all of the tenants on the morrow and Aaron wanted to catch him out on that blatant lie. Perhaps then his father would listen to reason and dismiss the wastrel. Of course, there was no real reason for dragging Connie around while he did this, except for the fact that he had found her presence today soothing.

Most mornings since his return, he rode around aimlessly for hours, trying to banish the horrifying images of his dreams from his mind. To his complete surprise, he had found that process much easier to do with Connie in tow. He had forgotten today's nightmare at almost the exact moment she had brazenly marched up to him in that magnificent riding habit. Lustful feelings aside, he had also thoroughly enjoyed her company. It had been nice to have somebody intelligent and witty to talk to rather than moping around on his own, stewing in his own pessimistic juices. Being with Connie made him feel more normal.

She positively beamed at him, forgetting to be haughty and uninterested, or regally benevolent. 'I would like that immensely! Do you think we might find the time to squeeze in another race?

I thoroughly enjoyed thrashing you this morning.'

Aaron had enjoyed it, too, but for very different reasons. 'We can race from cottage to cottage if you want to.'

'Oh, I want to! I have not had so much fun in ages. My father forbade me from racing years ago. He said it was not ladylike.' She lowered her embroidery frame and the corners of her pink lips curved slightly, although her eyes clouded at the mention of her father. 'That has always been his most common criticism of me. Racing is not ladylike, arguing is not ladylike and having such strong opinions, and daring to voice them, are certainly not ladylike. Do you know he once told me that my red hair was not proper at all and that towering over everyone was not ladylike either? I think I have been a tremendous disappointment to him, aside from the fact that I went and got myself ruined, of course, because I have been quite unable to stop doing all of those things that he most dislikes about me. I do not think I have been a very good daughter.'

Bizarrely, she was smiling wistfully at the memory so Aaron held back what he wanted to say. He did not want to sour the mood by telling her that he thought her father was a nasty piece of work. He rather liked her height, her eyes and lips came level with his, and as for her hair? How the devil could hair be unladylike when it was quite the most beautiful head of hair he had ever seen? It was simply further proof to him that the Earl of Redbridge was a tyrant and a fool. Much like his own stubborn sire.

‘Pay it no mind, Connie. As a fellow disappointment to a parent I can assure you that you will never truly be able to please him, no matter how hard you try.’

She lowered her embroidery again and gazed at him intently. ‘How have you disappointed your father? Aside from marrying me, of course.’

Where to start? ‘My father has always enjoyed hunting and I do not. When I was younger he used to force me to accompany him in the hope that it would toughen me up. He used to get very frustrated when I refused to kill anything.’

‘Then I am to assume that you are not responsible for any of those ghastly stuffed heads?’

Aaron pulled a face that made her smile. ‘They are awful, aren’t they? But to answer your question, I am not responsible for even one of them. I could never understand what pleasure there was in chasing a frightened, senseless animal through the woods unless you needed to eat them. That disappointed my father a great deal. He was also dead against me joining the army. I had to wait until I reached the age of majority and then I had to purchase my own commission. My father thought he would stop me by reducing my allowance to such a paltry sum that I could barely afford to go out.’

‘How did you manage to purchase a commission and a uniform? Those things are expensive.’

Now it was his turn to smile at a memory. ‘I took all of the money I received religiously to a gaming hell and gambled until I

had won enough to buy it all for myself. My father was livid when I came home in my new regimentals. He threatened to disinherit me.'

'But he did not?'

'This house, the estate and the title are all hereditary. The worst he could do was banish me until he died. The law states that it would still all come to me regardless of his wishes. Once I realised that, I knew all of his threats were empty ones. My father likes to control things. He could hardly attempt to control me if he had disowned me. It was all bluster and I called his bluff, the stubborn old fool.' She watched him take a sip of his port to cover his sudden agitation. 'He is still being stubborn. I tried to talk to him about the estate again today and refused to leave his study when he met with Mr Thomas.'

Inadvertently, he had given her an opening that she was not prepared to squander. Connie peered at Aaron over the top of her embroidery frame, suddenly nervous. Subtlety had never really been her strong suit and she would need to be very subtle now if she was going to find out what Mr Thomas was truly up to without tipping Aaron off. 'Did you find out why your estate manager has not yet planted the fields?' She pretended to focus on her sewing as if she were merely making polite conversation.

Connie could hear the frustration in his voice. 'That man is a weasel. He came up with some convoluted explanation about a new farming method he had been researching, that doubled the yield of a wheat crop by delaying it. It is apparently all the rage

in Holland and the landowners there have seen a dramatic rise in their profits. My father was utterly convinced by it.'

'But you were not?'

He leaned forward in his chair, resting his forearms on his knees, and shook his dark head in exasperation. 'I just know that he is lying through his teeth. Unfortunately, I still do not know enough about farming to be able to argue back. I never paid attention growing up and now I am trying to cram in a lifetime's worth of knowledge in just a few weeks. I am beyond confused by it all. I just hope that it does not do more irreparable damage until I can take over.'

Connie jabbed her needle into the frame to cover up her own unease. 'Surely one bad harvest does not constitute irreparable damage?'

'One wouldn't—but this will be the fourth. The estate is not in a good way.'

She was certain, then, that her father had a hand in it and that Mr Thomas was up to much more than merely reporting back gossip. 'Exactly how bad are things?'

'They are not bad, Connie,' he said with resignation, 'they are dire. Many of the tenants cannot survive another poor harvest and, if things continue like they are, this estate could be bankrupt in two years. Why on earth do you think I was marrying Violet Garfield?'

Chapter Twelve

‘You needed her dowry?’

‘She came with twenty thousand pounds and a share in her father’s businesses. Mr Garfield was quite desperate for his daughter to marry a title.’

For the first time Connie considered the implications that their marriage had had on him and it rendered her speechless. All this time she had been wallowing in her own self-pity and had not even spared a single thought to what it had cost him, apart from his freedom. ‘I am so sorry, Aaron. I did not realise that you needed to marry Violet quite so desperately. Do you think that there is a chance that she might still marry you once our marriage is dissolved?’

He was silent for so long that Connie began to feel uncomfortable. When he finally spoke it was with resignation. ‘I doubt it. I shall have to find myself another heiress to save the livelihoods of my tenants. With her riches, someone is bound to snap her up.’

Much like Connie had been by the Marquis of Deal. Ironically, her father had agreed to increase her dowry to twenty thousand pounds to convince the man to marry her. She suddenly felt a strange affinity with poor Violet Garfield. Both of them were apparently unappealing to any man without the lure of riches and Aaron was obviously disappointed to have been left

with just her. Her needle slipped and pricked the top of her index finger. Pretending to try to save her embroidery rather than let him see how much his words had cut her, Connie hastily dropped it into her lap and examined the wound with irritation. She had to tell Aaron about Mr Thomas. Feud or no feud, her conscience would not let her keep such a dreadful secret. Not when innocent people were suffering. But the truth was likely going to cause a huge row, not only between the Wincantons and the Stuarts, but between her and Aaron. He would want to know why she did not tell him the moment that she had realised, but at least it was better late than never. Steeling herself for the inevitable, Connie turned to him.

Aaron's eyes were locked on her fingertip. More specifically, they were fixated on the small red globe of blood oozing out from the needle prick. His face was stricken and she watched all of the colour drain out of it until he was positively ashen. He suddenly stood with such force that the legs of the heavy chair scraped behind him in his haste to get away.

‘Goodnight, Connie.’

He started to march towards the door as if his life depended on it. ‘Aaron, wait, I need to talk to you...’ The door slammed behind him and he was gone, leaving Connie completely at a loss as to what had just happened.



Aaron originally headed towards his bedchamber, but by then

he could physically smell the blood. The rational part of his mind told him that was ridiculous, but there was nothing rational about his body's intense reaction. The metallic tang was burning his nostrils, making him gag, and his skin itched with the warm stickiness of it. Within seconds, the stench was so bad that he had to get some fresh air. Fearing that his dinner was about to make a sudden reappearance, Aaron bolted down the stairs, taking the steps two at a time. He ran through the hallway, ignoring the startled looks from the few servants he collided with, then through the morning room until he reached the large French doors at the far side of the room. Only when he threw them open, and felt the biting November air rush into the room, did he feel that he could breath.

Hastily, he tore the cravat from his throat and braced his arms on his knees while he sucked in the cold air like a starving man eating food at a banquet. It had just been a pinprick. Nothing more. Yet in that one simple accident he had immediately been transported to a different place. The place of his nightmares.

Ciudad Rodrigo.

Aaron forced himself to breathe slowly, hoping that by being calm he could chase away the blind panic that clawed at his gut. After several minutes he was still shaking, but able to stand up. He staggered towards the nearest chair and slumped into it, trying to make some sort of sense out of what had just happened.

His reaction to the blood had been so sudden and so violent, he had never experienced anything like it. He had fought battles

where his uniform had been soaked with the stuff, retrieved the bloody remains of the bodies in the aftermath and even marched across fields so sodden with death that the mud itself had been almost bleeding as his boots had squelched across it. He had hated every second of it then, but he had coped. Why was the mere sight of a tiny droplet of it now enough to render him incapacitated? God only knew what Connie must be thinking.

Not that he had any intention of explaining it to her. How exactly did one go about telling someone that there was a distinct possibility that they were going slowly mad? That could be the only explanation for what had just happened. The nightmares had been getting worse. They were certainly happening more frequently. Last night he had awoken twice and each time he was reliving the same dreadful scene on the battlements of the fortress. But now, apparently, he could be transported back there whilst he was still awake, too. Alongside the awful smell of the blood had been the unmistakable cries and sounds from that battlefield in Spain. He could see the broken bodies of his men strewn out around him. He was in Connie's sitting room one minute and then that had faded away and he was all alone in the smoke and the chaos, stood amongst the carnage and wondering what the hell to do.

What would a gently bred young lady like Connie make of all that? At least his insanity would be good grounds for her annulment. That thought made him laugh bitterly without any trace of humour before he forced himself to make his way up

to bed. At this rate, he would be carted off to Bedlam before he could fix the estate and that thought brought Aaron up short. He could not let that happen. There were people depending on him. No matter how many tricks his mind decided to play on him, he had to hide that from the world and get on with the task in hand. Once the estate was safe it would make no difference if he suddenly declined into complete insanity. If that happened, they could lock him in his bedchamber for all he cared. He just had to hold it all together until then. At least he had more of a plan now than he had had this morning. That was something positive to focus on. Now, once his father died he had to secure the annulment as quickly as possible so that he could find another heiress. It might not be the greatest plan in the world, and it hurt to even contemplate losing Connie, but it was all he had right now.



Connie woke early and, in the absence of any maid or any breakfast tray, dressed herself in a more forgiving habit and headed downstairs to find her husband. Yesterday he had offered to take her riding again and she needed to tell him about Mr Thomas. The first person she collided with was the housekeeper. ‘Good morning, Mrs Poole. Have you seen my husband?’

The older woman shook her head apologetically. ‘Sorry, Lady Constance, but we have not crossed paths this morning. Perhaps he has gone out for an early morning ride. He does that most

mornings, usually before the sun is fully up. He is awake before the lark most days.' The smile on her face faltered and she looked down briefly, as if she were considering her next words carefully. 'On that subject, I am very worried about him.'

'You are?'

'If you would permit me to speak out of turn, Lady Constance, I have known Master Aaron since he was a boy and he is not the same man who went off to war. Something is very wrong, yet half the time he appears to pretend that those five years never happened and that he is exactly the same devil-may-care lad who went away. I am not convinced that he is. He disappears for hours on end some days, much like he has done this morning, or he locks himself away in the library. He never used to be so solitary or so preoccupied. He doesn't sleep well either. I hear him up at all hours of the night; sometimes I hear him screaming. Deaks went in to check on him one night and Master Aaron was furious. He threatened to move out if anyone disturbed him like that again. He never sleeps past dawn. Wild horses would not have dragged him out of his bed before noon before he went away. I have asked him about it, but he will not confide in me. He just pretends that nothing is amiss and that I am imagining things. I thought that now he has a wife perhaps he might open up to you in time. I hope he does.'

The housekeeper's concerns reminded Connie of what she had witnessed last night. Aaron's behaviour had been odd in the extreme and Connie could not shake the feeling that it had

something to do with seeing her blood. It made her wonder if he had deliberately gone out without her to avoid explaining it. Then there had been that brief flash of temper when he had let slip that he had witnessed the horror of men going to their deaths petrified and screaming, and she had seen for herself how deeply that still affected him. Something was definitely not right with Aaron. However, discussing it further with the housekeeper felt disloyal to him. He would hate that, she already knew, because he was so very proud.

‘Thank you for telling me. I shall certainly keep an eye out for him.’

Mrs Poole looked relieved. ‘Thank you, Lady Constance. That is a weight off my mind.’

Connie continued her search for her elusive husband to no avail, but she found his father in the breakfast room, reading the newspaper.

‘Good morning, my lord,’ she said politely from the doorway, ‘I am looking for your son. Have you seen him?’

To her surprise the old man beckoned for her to join him. ‘Deaks, bring Lady Constance some tea and set another place for breakfast.’ Connie had no choice but to sit down. To do otherwise would be unforgivably rude and Viscount Ardleigh did appear to be making an effort. Whether that was truly the case, Connie supposed she was about to find out.

He offered her an approximation of a smile. The corners of his mouth turned up ever so slightly so she responded in kind,

noticing that his did have a bit of a blue tinge to them. ‘Aaron went out over an hour ago, I believe. Am I to guess, judging by your attire, that you expected to go with him?’

A cup of tea appeared miraculously at her right elbow, giving Connie a prop to hide behind if she needed it. She picked it up and used it to cover her disappointment. ‘Perhaps he forgot. It is of no matter.’

‘It is not like my son to be absent-minded. More likely he was avoiding trouble. He does that a great deal. Did the two of you have another fight?’ It was obvious, by the knowing glint in his dark eyes, that he was regularly appraised about her and his son’s relationship. The servants must have seen Aaron storm out of her rooms last night and assumed that he had done so because he was angry at her. But they had not fought and, since her illuminating conversation with Mrs Poole, Connie was even more convinced that it had been something more sinister that had sent him running away.

‘Things were cordial between us last night.’

At the viscount’s immediate smug smile, she realised that he had just misinterpreted what she had said. ‘Well, that is splendid! I am glad to know that the pair of you are using your evenings properly.’

Connie gave him a brittle stare and took a sip of her tea. Aaron wanted the old man to think that they were going to provide him with a grandchild. She could hardly correct him in that belief, no matter how much she wanted to. The man was dying.

‘With any luck you will have some news in the next few weeks.’ She was not going to discuss their non-existent attempts to create a child. The very idea was as preposterous as it was improper. ‘These things take time. It might even take many months. We all have to be patient.’ She said the last quite pointedly in the hope that he would get the message. Unfortunately, the viscount simply laughed.

‘Nonsense! We Wincanton males are very vigorous. Why, my wife was carrying Aaron within a month of our marriage.’ He said this so proudly that Connie almost missed his eyes flick to a portrait of a woman over the fireplace.

‘Is that Aaron’s mother?’ His good humour was suddenly a little subdued when he nodded. ‘She was very beautiful.’

‘Indeed she was. I think Aaron has also inherited a great deal of her personality. Elizabeth was always more affable. She died when he was a year old, but I think she would have been proud to know the man he has become.’

Something about the way he said this made Connie wonder if he was actually capable of something akin to genuine affection. He had never remarried, which was unusual for men with titles. It would have been expected that he produced another son in case the unthinkable had happened. Her own father would have, she knew. Had the roles been reversed, he would have got over the death of his wife quickly in order to cement the succession. Hadn’t he repeatedly complained of his disappointment at having been given a daughter first? Especially such an outspoken and

ungainly one. Perhaps, underneath all of that bluster, Viscount Ardleigh would soften towards her in time. Already, he had invited her to break her fast in his company. Surely that was something?

Connie stood and began to help herself to the covered breakfast dishes. If her father-in-law wished to have a convivial breakfast with her she might as well eat. It was not as if she had anywhere else to go, seeing as Aaron had disappeared without her. 'Aaron told me that you were unhappy with his decision to go into the army.'

'Of course I was. It was a reckless decision that could have killed him. But he is stubborn and went anyway. I am eternally grateful that he came back in one piece.'

'And by all accounts he came back a hero, although he is very closed lipped about it. What did he win his medals for?'

Connie had expected to see pride shining in the old man's face, but instead the viscount appeared irritated. 'He won them for putting himself at risk! Officers should lead from the rear, not the front. But, of course, Aaron has no regard for proper rules so he was always in the thick of it as far as I can tell. He won one of them at Badajoz, where he apparently went after a few of his men who had been taken by the French and took them back, single-handed. Like a blasted fool. He should have left them there. The second was at Ciudad Rodrigo, for another foolhardy act of selfless bravery. I cannot say how he came by it because he refuses to talk about it. Those damn medals do not

seem to bring him any pleasure at all.'

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