

This excerpt was taken from *When Morning Breaks* by Stephanie Boles. It is the first in her 5 book *Called to His Purpose* series.

## **Prologue**

**July 1810**

**The Peninsula War**

**Côa River**

**Portugal**

GEORGETTE ROUSSEAU PRIDED herself on the fact that she did not frighten at the drop of a hat. But as she led her sisters through a copse of trees that swathed the hills above the Côa River, trepidation hissed up her spine. Her stomach flittered. The bitter taste of fear burned a path up her throat. Had someone tracked her from the British encampment, then waited outside the parson's home while she gathered her sisters?

Georgette shook off the fear that clawed at her insides. She surveyed the trail ahead. Shadows flitted through the trees. Perhaps the British had managed to uncover her scheme. She had only herself to blame. She'd clothed herself in betrayal and dishonor far too long. But what choice had she? Her sisters' hungry bellies drove her to disgrace. The blunt she earned put food on the table and a roof over their heads.

Georgette swabbed the raindrops from her face with a tattered sleeve. No amount of rationalization could justify her offense. *Oh, Papa, why did you force us to follow you to these gruesome battlefields?* Why had God allowed such wretched circumstances to enter her life? She felt old. She felt cheated. Feeling empty and alone, she glowered at the morning sky.

Rain trickled from the clouds in temperamental spats. The grim weather did not improve Georgette's negative frame of mind. She halted just briefly and put her face to the breeze. Preparations for the battle at the Côa River bridge reverberated against the hills. Fear hovered near. What if soldiers waylaid them? Wellington's men no doubt dogged their very steps. Her gut clenched. *Foolish, foolish girl! Why did I not take the longer, safer way back to our cottage?* She fisted her hands so tight that her fingernails sliced half moons into her palms. Blast her deuced lack of patience. And blast herself for putting Camilla and Elizabeth at risk.

Georgette tried to curse herself for a jackanape, but a vicious cough stopped her. Panting with exertion, she scrutinized the area

around them. She saw no one. Massaging her aching temple, she redoubled her gait and said, "Make haste." Her sisters' footsteps increased.

"Georgette, you look a fright," Camilla said, scurrying to catch up. "Oh, dearest, you seem dreadfully feverish."

Elizabeth stumbled up the rock trail and joined the conversation. "Yes, your nose is swollen and draining. Did you come down with ague while you worked at the British encampment?"

Georgette's nose gave a little twitch. She nodded. "Yes, Eliza. . . achoo!"

"Bless you," the girls harmonized.

Georgette rubbed her nose, feeling certain it would burst from congestion. But the condition of her body troubled her far less than the state of her soul. She grew sick unto death of shuttling messages between troops, sick of watching her sisters suffer amid the Peninsular War. A faltering smile touched her lips. Soon she would see her sisters home safe. So far she'd saved nearly the entire amount necessary to purchase passage back to England.

Gulping a fortifying breath, she peeked over the ridge. Still no one. She inspected the boy's garb she had donned for her three-day stint with the French. She felt a measure of protection cloaked in the masculine garments, but her young sisters sported no disguise. Their utter vulnerability terrified Georgette. How could she protect them from armed men bent on assault? "We must remain quiet. Someone pursues us."

"Who is it, do you think?" Camilla asked, forcing a copper ringlet out of her face.

"Can't say. Soldiers, likely." Georgette squinted through the mizzling rain. The sudden sharp pops of soldiers' weapons echoed against the hills. Her stomach knotted in fear. She dipped low and gestured for her sisters to follow suit.

A clump of mud and turf slurped beneath her feet. She pressed a hand to her nose to stifle a sneeze and searched the area. The thick dawn made it difficult to distinguish between the shadows and the solid forms of trees that stood steadfast around her. She snatched her pistol from her boot, cringing at the thought of using it. But she would do so without hesitation to protect her sisters.

Shoving up, she picked her way to the edge of the narrow track that led to their cottage.

Elizabeth bit off a cry. “Zounds, Georgette, don’t leave us!”

“Hush, Elizabeth. And keep low.” Georgette hunched low, creeping through the tangle of trees along the footpath. “I’ll just see if the trail is clear.” She advanced forward, then stopped dead in her tracks. Did she hear men whispering in urgency? She plunged to her knees.

Georgette’s trousers slurped up the moisture from the sodden earth. Fighting to keep her trembling body motionless, she breathed shallow and quiet . . . and listened. The crisp snap of a twig made her leap with fright. Someone stood directly behind her. She whirled around. *A man!*

The man wore the familiar uniform of Wellington’s Green Jackets. The British had found her out. Her hand shook slightly as she raised the pistol and leveled it at his heart.

“Sergeant Connolly! Lookie here,” the soldier cackled.

That cackle sent chills through Georgette.

“Aye, Harry, ah see,” Sergeant Connolly said in a heavy Scottish brogue.

Georgette inspected Sergeant Connolly. Large and frightening, with Scottish blue eyes and a halo of raging red hair, he gave one pause. A small company of soldiers flanked his side.

“It’s the Frenchie w’at’s been deliverin’ forged documents to camp. Reckon we got ourselves a spy, eh?” Harry smirked. Sergeant Connolly hoisted an inquisitive brow at Georgette.

“Ah dinnae ken.”

Georgette sneaked a look at her sisters, who were only a few paces away from Sergeant Connolly. The sergeant pursued her gaze. “You keep away from my sis—” She threw a hand over her face and, “Achoo!” Leaping to her feet, she attempted an escape. Harry seized her.

With a grunt of satisfaction, Harry wrung the pistol from her hand and tossed it to the ground. Even Georgette’s congested

state did not shield her from the stench of onion and garlic that permeated Harry. It made her stomach churn. She put her free hand over her nose and mouth. Obviously Harry did not abide by Wellington's orders that soldiers sponge clean daily.

Camilla tugged Elizabeth near and dashed forward. Georgette sucked in a breath and prayed for Camilla and Elizabeth to reach her side.

"Halt!" Sergeant Connolly aimed his Baker rifle at the girls. "Ah canna' let ye escape."

Camilla scampered in front of Elizabeth, shielding her with outstretched arms. "But we've done nothing wrong, sir."

Sergeant Connolly pulled a grim face. "Surround the lasses." He waved a hand at the unoccupied soldiers.

"Nooo!" Georgette cried in a croaky voice.

The company of soldiers immediately obeyed their sergeant's order. Sergeant Connolly sidled into the midst of the circle and caught hold of Elizabeth. His eyes snapped to Camilla. "Ach! Yer nothin' but bonny lasses. Ye canna' be spies."

"They've done nothing, Sergeant Connolly." Georgette squirmed against Harry's inflexible grip. He flipped her around and forced her head back, and then stared, vulgarly so.

"Yer mighty soft for a boy," he spewed through decayed teeth. "I'd swear on me mum's grave yer a wench. Eh?" He wound the lapels of her shirt in one hand and gave a violent tug. The front of the shirt ripped open, revealing Georgette's true gender to all eyes. His expression turned predatory.

Georgette dropped to her knees, shielding herself with both arms. *How dare he?* During his life, her grandfather walked among society's elite as a British peer of the realm. His noble blood ran through her veins. She would not tolerate ill treatment. Ignoring her humiliation, she set her chin at a stubborn angle and seized Harry's gaze. "We are British ladies, sir."

"Ladies!" Harry leered at them. "More like French doxies."

"Stop! Er ya a dunderhead, Harry? I'll put a bullet 'tween yer eyes if ye nae stop." Sergeant Connolly looked away from Georgette's

open shirt. “We’ll be lettin’ the cap’ain handle this.”

“Can’t. ’e’s in the infi rm’ry. Too sick to ’andle the wenches,”

Harry ogled Georgette with voracious eyes.

“Ah’ll not be hurtin’ the lasses,” Sergeant Connolly said. “Ye know the cap’ain delivers harsh punishment tae soldiers wot harm women.”

“Ye—”

“Harry White!” Sergeant Connolly growled. “No foul lang’age!”

Harry snatched Georgette up by the collar and shook her like a recalcitrant hound. “Can’t ye see this is the pup that delivered false orders for our regiment to follow?”

“Ye be referrin’ to me as Sergeant or ye’ll be clapped in irons. Ah dinnae ken who the lass is. Oor cap’ain wull determine that.”

“Well, *Sergeant*, I say we show this gal who the true conquerors are.” Harry set Georgette on the ground and planted a kiss on her mouth.

Georgette flung an arm at Harry’s head, but he blocked it with a pitiless laugh. Mopping his slimy kiss from her mouth with the back of her hand, she hissed, “How dare you!”

“Keep yer hands tae yersil’, Harry! Doo ye ken?” Sergeant Connolly narrowed winter-cold eyes on Harry.

Harry glared back at Sergeant Connolly.

“Captain’s coming,” one of the soldiers interjected.

Georgette pivoted and followed the soldiers’ stares. A solid man with ebony hair strode through the dripping trees. She supposed a more striking man did not exist. Unfamiliar with the man, she could not attest to his reputation. But his dark features and eyes, which tilted up slightly at the corners, warned that Gypsy blood stalked his family lineage. Strangely, the sparkling green hue of his gaze contrasted with his dark skin tones.

A sutured wound along the length of his right cheek marred his flawless appearance. Red and distorted, the wound looked very

painful. Georgette let a sympathetic sigh creep over her lips. He carried his left arm in a sling. A saber hole marked his Green Jacket on that same side. Still, he struck her as the handsomest man she'd laid eyes on in quite some time. She found it difficult to avert her gaze as a proper lady should.

Harry's fingers bit into her upper arm. "Let go!" She stamped his foot. When he bent his leg up in pain, she jerked out of his grasp and fell on her discarded pistol. Aiming it at his head, she fought down a wheezing cough, and said, "You should keep your hands to yourself."

"Drop the pistol," the captain ordered in striking tones. Georgette tore her eyes from Harry and stared hard at the Green Jacket captain. He tapped his Baker rifle in warning. She checked her sisters. They might suffer injury in crossfire. She blew out a breath. Her hand trembled as she lowered the pistol to the ground and stood glaring at the captain.

"Cap'ain." Sergeant Connolly snapped to attention and offered his superior officer a proper salute. "Glad tae see ye up and aboot."

"What's happening here?" the captain's voice slammed into the hills like a clap of thunder. He strode to Georgette, scooped up her pistol and tucked it in his waistband. He slung his rifle over his right arm and glowered at Harry.

"Your men waylaid us." Georgette took in the captain's hard-edged appearance. Rough and battle weary with lines of fatigue creasing his face, his rugged façade might have frightened her had she not sensed innate gentleness in him . . . and something else. She felt oddly connected to him. He seemed familiar to her. Why, she could not fathom.

The captain doffed his jacket and draped it over Georgette's shoulders. Sandalwood touched her senses. The pleasing scent comforted her frayed nerves. He examined her, and his eyes clouded with regret. He touched her face with a depth of tenderness she'd experienced only once before in her life. Years ago her childhood friend, Rowan Desmond, had showered her with equal tenderness. She scarcely recalled Desmond nowadays. A smile touched her lips. She'd called him Des. The captain removed a handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it into her hand. She shied away.

"Blow your nose, child."

His deep velvet way of speaking sent unexpected quivers of pleasure through Georgette. She bent her head away from his disconcerting gaze and made good use of the handkerchief.

“Who struck this child?” the captain demanded. No one came forth with an answer. He guided Georgette across the uneven ground to the circle of soldiers. “She is obviously ill. You should have taken her to the infirmary, not manhandled her.”

Georgette supposed the captain intended to arrest her, once he saw her cold cured. “Take me, but do not arrest my sisters.”

The captain’s gaze dropped to her. He raked a hand through his short-cropped hair and turned an implacable scowl on the soldiers. “Well, don’t just stand about idle. Speak up. She has a fresh bruise on her face. Which one of you jackanapes struck this child?”

Sergeant Connolly cleared his throat. “Harry struck the lass, Cap’ain.”

The captain narrowed a chilling look on Harry. “Take him into custody. I will deal with this matter when I return to camp.”

“We was searchin’ for the spy, Captain, like you ordered us to do,” Harry squawked.

“Tormenting hapless girls in the trees is hardly an honorable deed.”

Harry’s face mottled with rage. He aimed an accusatory finger at Georgette “This wench ’anded forged documents to the major. We tracked ’er from camp this mornin’. Ye’ve got to arrest ’er.”

The captain tensed. He tugged Georgette close to his side.

“This girl is no wench, Harry. Now stow it. Or I’ll make you wish you had.”

Georgette pushed against the captain. “*Laissez-moi partir!*”

He offered her a sincere look. “I’ll not harm you, miss.” Georgette held the captain’s gaze. His voice, though firm, conveyed compassion. But her suspicious heart doubted his gentle manner. “It’s a man’s nature to harm women.”

His eyes flared wide in obvious surprise. He stared at her for

long, thoughtful moments then cut a decided look to Sergeant Connolly. “Connolly, lead the men back to camp and hand Harry over to the major for insubordination against me.”

“I’ll make ye sorry for arrestin’ me, Captain!” Harry slogged across the wet ground and jabbed a finger in Georgette’s shoulder. “And the wench too!”

Georgette tensed as the captain seized Harry around the neck and squeezed. “Do not threaten the girl again.” He loosened his grip and Harry collapsed to the ground, gasping for air. “Sergeant Connolly, get this man away from me before I kill him.”

Sergeant Connolly gave an energetic salute. “Aye, Cap’ain.” He confiscated Harry’s weapons and led him down the trail. The soldiers followed close behind.

Fear hammered through Georgette when the captain laid the back of his hand on her cheek. “You’re burning up with fever, child.”

She released her breath on a sigh. “I’m not so ill.” She covered her mouth and nose with the handkerchief. “Achoo!” She peeked at the captain over the edge of the handkerchief. “Do as you wish with me, Captain Green Jacket. But I beg of you, do not abuse my sisters.”

“I’ve no intention of abusing any of you,” the captain uttered. He removed the battered tricorne hat from Georgette’s head. Long auburn locks tumbled in fat curls to her waist. His gaze settled upon her hair, then moved to her bruised face and lingered there.

Georgette wanted to cry out in alarm. She could not. She must remain brave for her sisters. Choking down her terror, she held steady.

“Who do you report to after you complete your assignments? Do you report directly to Marshal Massena?” He gave her a little shake. “How did you come to live on the Iberian Peninsula, child? What drives you to work as a French spy?”

Camilla threw an angry hand on her hip. “How dare you accuse my sister of spying!”

The captain shrugged. “Many soldiers will attest to the fact that your sister works for the French. She’s a danger to my regiment

and my country.”

Elizabeth fidgeted nervously. “She mends uniforms for the soldiers. Tell him you’re a seamstress, Georgette.”

Georgette swabbed her nose with the handkerchief. “Can’t,” she said and coughed.

The captain grunted. “We’ll sort this all out when you recover from the ague. Right now I’m taking you to the infirmary.” He gestured at Camilla and Elizabeth. “You two follow me.” He secured Georgette near. “This way.”

Panic seized Georgette. Her father had often shared stories of how the French dealt with British spies. The British might deal with her in the same way. Thoughts of torture, violation, and years in a dark, dank prison cell besieged her. She dug her boots into the mud and drove the heels of her palms into the captain’s chest. He stumbled backward. She snatched her pistol from his waistband and leveled it at his head.

The captain’s expression turned volcanic. “I’ll be deuced sure not to underestimate you a second time.” He held out a hand. “Give me the pistol before you shoot your foot off, child.”

Georgette scampered out of his reach. “I’ll thank you to stop referring to me as a child. I am seven and ten. And I know how to use this pistol.” She pointed it at his heart.

The captain rolled his eyes and raised his uninjured arm in mock defeat. “I am your prisoner. Do with me as you will.”

“Do not think to bait me with your disdainful tones, Captain Green Jacket.” She shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it away. Too late, she remembered her torn shirt. She stole a look. It lay open, revealing far too much. She pulled the edges of the shirt together.

The captain gritted his jaw. “Did Harry do that?” His voice held a hint of the brutal punishment Harry would soon suffer.

“Yes, but I’m not hurt.” Georgette clarified.

The captain responded with a brisk nod. “As you say.”

“Elizabeth, get behind me. Camilla, come,” Georgette said in

a quiet rush.

Camilla pattered near, and Elizabeth followed.

Georgette thrust the pistol into Camilla's reluctant hand.

"What shall I to do with this?"

"Aim it at Captain Green Jacket's head. If he so much as winks, shoot him." Georgette crept cautiously near the captain. He lowered his face to hers and winked.

"You sorely tempt me, Captain." She pried the rifle from his hands.

"What are you doing?" Camilla demanded.

"Divesting the good captain of his weapons." Georgette relieved the captain of his saber. With wary eyes on him, she draped the rifle over her shoulder and gave the saber to Camilla.

"He'll be defenseless against the French, George," Elizabeth protested.

The captain gave Georgette's masculine attire a pointed inspection. "Well ain't that a fitting name. *George*," he drawled in silky derision.

"You may not call me George." Georgette ignored his arrogant snort and moved uneasy hands over his chest and down his body in search of additional weapons. Plucking an intimidating knife from a sheath strapped to his boot, she slipped it behind her waistband.

"You cannot leave the man defenseless," Camilla reiterated Elizabeth's admonition.

Georgette backed away from the captain. "I will not return his weapons."

Camilla put the pistol in Georgette's hand. "I daresay, George. I never thought I would see the day when you hardened your heart. Is that what the Word of God teaches us?"

The captain chuckled. "I daresay, George, you should listen to your sister."

Georgette sent him a scorching look.

Camilla offered the captain an assessing stare. “Grant us one day to flee before coming after us, and we will return your weapons,” she proposed. “Give me your word, Captain, that you won’t come after us today.”

His face hardened. “I give you my word.” He paused, sending Georgette a glare, “as a gentleman.”

“Hand him the weapons, George,” Camilla ordered in a schoolmarm voice.

“I doubt he will keep his word under battlefield conditions.” Georgette tapped the pistol thoughtfully. Had life among the battlefields stolen the Word of God from her heart? Could she leave an injured man defenseless against his enemies? With an inward sigh, she silently admitted to herself that she could not. She lugged his knife free and returned it to him.

The captain tipped his head at Camilla. “I am eternally grateful to you, miss.” He held out a hand to Georgette. “My rifle and saber, if you please.”

“I find you intolerably arrogant, Captain Green Jacket.” Georgette put the rifle in his hand, retrieved his saber from Camilla, and gave it to him as well. He caught her hand and held it.

Terror drove spikes of alarm into Georgette’s stomach. She met his inflexible stare.

The captain appraised her for sharp moments then said, “Honor dictates that I let you go. But know this, little George. Your demure smiles and flower-colored eyes will not help you escape when next we meet. You committed treason against Great Britain. I will see you punished for your crimes.” He dropped her hand, gathered his jacket, and strode away.

Camilla shivered. “I believe he intends to keep that promise.”

Georgette put a hand on her stomach and tried to control her rapid breathing. “It’s time we write a letter to our uncle in England.”

“But Uncle William swore he would have nothing to do with Momma after Papa joined the French army,” Camilla reminded.

“Surely he will not receive us.”

Georgette shrugged. “Perhaps. But I intend to remove you and Elizabeth from this dreadful place. I want you both to have a good life. Not this.” She gestured to their surroundings.

As they navigated the trail to their tumbledown cottage, she could not shake the feeling that Captain Green Jacket would one day make good on his promise.

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Marriage Mart**

#### **London**

#### **June, 1812**

TWO YEARS AFTER departing the peninsula, Georgette barely resembled the girl in masculine garments that had nearly found herself imprisoned for treason against Great Britain. Her sprigged muslin gown draped her dainty figure in delicate shades of violet and yellow. Her hair, arranged in a simple topknot and no longer disguised by the battered tricorne, smelled of rose scent. She tucked a wisp behind her ear and studied her uncle across the breakfast table while she sipped her morning tea.

William Saint Day, the Earl of Foxcroft, granted Georgette and her sisters a haven of safety in his home. He had proven amiable and honorable, and Georgette admired him greatly. They got on well if one overlooked the chronic quarreling about her lack of interest in the marriage mart.

Georgette set her teacup down and buttered her toast. She enjoyed a peaceful life with her sisters in England. But her serenity slammed to a halt the day her uncle informed the family that she would be presented at court and placed on the marriage mart. Why had he done that?

She sent her uncle a look of resentment over the paper he read as she recalled her presentation at court. Trussed up in skirts and hoops, the evening proved a miserable affair. And the feathers, goodness gracious, the ostrich feathers she'd donned made her sneeze. Repeatedly. As if that did not humiliate her enough, being forced to pay deference to the Prince Regent and his royal entourage with a plethora of obtuse and giggling debutantes certainly had. She cringed at the memory. After working among hardened soldiers in the theater of war, the life of a debutante quite degraded her.

She swung her gaze to Anne Saint Day. Dropping the toast onto her plate, she recalled Anne's admonition the week prior in regards to her impertinent conduct toward the gentlemen courtiers who hounded her.

Georgette frowned. Her reputation as an aloof debutante grew by leaps and bounds. She rolled her eyes. Well, of course she treated the bachelors with cold disdain. She hated the marriage mart. All those men ogling her made her feel like horseflesh. She did not want to marry. Her mother died on the peninsula alone and miserable because she followed the dictates of her husband. Georgette refused to sacrifice herself to marriage.

William dropped the *Morning Post* onto the mahogany dining table.

Georgette smiled at him, hesitantly. He glowered at her across his plate of uneaten eggs and ham. Exploring the elegant dining room, she pretended not to notice his fierce countenance. Her gaze skipped over several Trafalgar chairs that marched across the far wall, then fixed on a bank of low windows draped in heavy folds of burgundy damask. A determined beam of sun peeked through a crack in the drapes. She wished she could scamper up that beam. Forcing her attention to the dining table again, she considered Camilla and Elizabeth as they sat quietly picking at their food. William would likely demand that they marry as well. Georgette wanted to moan. Would they marry well? She hauled her gaze back to her uncle. His eyes changed to steely blue as he narrowed in on her. *Dash it all!*

William folded his hands together. "I cannot comprehend why you insist upon tossing perfectly good suitors aside." He drew a long, shuddering breath. "When you refused the last two offers of marriage, I took it upon myself to seek a match for you."

"What?" Sheer willpower kept Georgette from leaping up and running headlong from the dining room.

"His name is Lord Eaglebrook. He's a marquess," William proudly announced and sipped his coffee. "I persuaded him to take you to wife even though you are lacking in accomplishments. Oh, granted, your French is excellent, but your skill with watercolors and the pianoforte are sadly deficient."

Georgette's stomach tightened. "But . . . er . . . Uncle William, I don't want to marry."

William frowned at Georgette over the rim of his cup. He plunked the cup on the table. "Every girl needs a husband."

Georgette blinked. Was he daft? "I do not. I earn my own money. I have the means to live in a modest fashion for the rest of my life." She peeked longingly at the teapot on the buffet nearby. As if reading her thoughts, a liveried footman rushed to the table and refilled her teacup, then backed away.

William held up a hand for silence. "Tom, leave the room," he said to the footman. With only family members present he continued. "Had I known about those reprehensible novels . . ." His brows tangled into a frown.

"George's novels are very popular among the young set, William." Anne wiped her mouth with her napkin and laid it alongside her plate. "I enjoy reading them m'self."

"Actually, I suggested George write novels, you know," Elizabeth said with a proud air. "On the voyage from the peninsula to England. I expressed that she should write novels because she often made up stories to entertain us."

"Humph!" William did not sound impressed.

"Georgette may not be accomplished at the pianoforte or Italian or even watercolors. But she is an accomplished author." Camilla raised delicate brows at William. "Do you not agree?"

"Agree? 'deed not! I cannot suppose that a lady would be proud to be accomplished at any profession. But a novelist! A novelist, for goodness' sake." He shuddered. "A lady's concern should be to her husband and any children the good Lord sees fit to grant her." William's voice deepened and he shook a finger at Georgette. "It is not proper for a lady to write novels. If you had not promised the publisher one more book, I would demand you cease writing posthaste!"

"Thank you for allowing me to honor my promise, Uncle." Georgette tried not to sound harsh, but she heard the sarcasm that tainted her tones. With the success of her novels, life held promise. Why did William push her into the marriage mart? His determination quite frankly stole away her hard-wrought freedom.

"I should break your quill and throw away your ink," William

complained. "You submitted those manuscripts to the publisher without my permission."

"I'm glad for Georgette," Camilla proclaimed with blue eyes flashing.

William gave Camilla a quelling stare. "I am not glad that your sister duped me. If I'd not intercepted that message from the publisher, I likely would never have learned the truth."

"I'm sorry for deceiving you, Uncle William." Georgette gave a sigh. "But I felt it necessary to secure a good future for myself and my sisters."

"Why? Can you not depend upon me?" William questioned in offense.

"Ah . . . er . . . I mean to say, you treat us well." Georgette scooped sugar from a bowl nearby and stirred it into her tea. How could she explain her need of independence? "After my father forced us to follow the drum, I promised myself I would never be powerless again, let alone my sisters. Selling my novels grants me an income. And that income frees me from the dictates of men."

"That spark of independent thinking is why I determined to secure a husband for you, m'dear," William said with fervor. "You must marry. The funds you boast of having cannot be touched without my consent, so you may as well give up your thoughts of independence."

Georgette blinked. "But Uncle William, that is not fair." How could he refuse her access to the funds she'd earned?

"William knows what is best for you, Georgette." Anne patted Georgette's hand. "Your success pleases me. But I am glad you utilized the good sense to employ a pen name. Otherwise the family would suffer scandal." She laid a hand over her heart. "Upon my word! If my acquaintances ever discover that you are the famed Lady Danielle, I shall be forced into exile." She sighed dramatically and bleated, "Oh! I cannot believe you've authored three novels."

"And one more nearly completed," Elizabeth added with an admiring look at Georgette.

"Lady Danielle will write no more after this novel." William

did not seem disposed to yield in the matter.

Elizabeth dropped her fork. “Oh, but her readers will be devastated.”

William shook his head. “I care not. As Eaglebrook’s wife, Georgette must cease writing novels. He is not a man to tolerate a free-thinking woman or the nonsense of novel writing.”

Georgette laid her napkin beside her plate. “My novels are not nonsense.”

William seemed not to attend Georgette’s words. “The blunt you’ve earned by writing novels will be under the control of Lord Eaglebrook the moment you wed him.”

Georgette leapt up so quickly that her chair skidded and wobbled backward on its legs. “No man takes my money!” William appeared in control of his temper if one overlooked the revealing twitch in his cheek. “Sit down, Georgette.” He massaged his temple.

Georgette glared at William a moment then dropped into the chair. “If I refuse to marry Lord Eaglebrook,” she said, smoothing a wrinkle from the tablecloth, “Will you force me to wed him?”

“Absolutely.”

Trepidation shuddered through Georgette. As her guardian, William had the power to force her to marry Eaglebrook. “The last gentleman that offered for me stood no taller than me. His clammy hands did not know their place. He quite disgusted me.” A compelling need to squash that little man like a bug beneath her kid leather boot struck her each time she found herself in his company. “And you fault me for rejecting *him*.”

Anne sucked in a sharp breath. “Really, Georgette, your speech is decidedly low.”

“Forgive me, Aunt Anne,” Georgette whispered.

“Are you saying you would wed Eaglebrook without a row if he were handsome?” William looked genially flummoxed.

“Don’t want to marry,” Georgette reiterated.

“Elocution, Georgette.” Anne threw a hand to her forehead.  
“Have you no concern for my frail constitution? You will quite murder me with your lackadaisical speech.”

Georgette sent a beleaguered glance to Camilla and said,  
“I’m sorry for my disobliging elocution, Aunt Anne.” Looking to William, she waited for him to continue.

William rubbed his forehead as if his head ached. “Eaglebrook is an amiable fellow. I daresay you will grow fond of him in time, Georgette.”

“I cannot wed him, Uncle William.”

William’s countenance darkened. “You will wed him willingly, Georgette, or I’ll stand in as your proxy.”

Georgette’s temper flashed hot and fast yet again. She’d not survived life as a spy on the peninsula and become a thriving novelist by being submissive and weak. She did not consider the error of her pride as she spoke. “I will not marry Lord Eaglebrook. If you force me, I’ll leave London, even England if I must.”

William slammed a fist on the table. Dishes clattered in protest. He shook with anger. “How dare you defy me?”

Anne cried out and half swooned in her chair.

Georgette’s stomach flipped, then flopped.

“I would like a moment alone with Georgette.” William waited while Anne fanned herself and fretted all the way out of the room. Camilla and Elizabeth followed her retreat with their heads bent low. He narrowed impatient eyes on Georgette. “You will make a good match.”

Georgette tried not to fidget beneath her uncle’s rigid stare. “My mother thought she made a good match. But marriage only brought her misery.” Georgette added milk to her tea, stirring it with too much force. The spoon clanged against the bone china, and she laid it aside. “I want peace and contentment in my life. Not a preening, prancing, high-society husband.”

William shoved up and strode to the dining room windows. “You must learn to trust again, Georgette. Not all men act as your father did. A lady needs a husband to depend upon.” He did not

speak for some time, but merely stared out the windows.

Georgette traced a finger along the rim of her teacup. Sugar crystals clung to the cup. They stuck to her finger, feeling like tiny grains of sand. She wiped the sugar on her napkin and took a sip of tea. In the voice of an old woman she said, "I haven't the energy to trust again, Uncle William. I much prefer depending upon myself." She set the cup down with a thud. A drop of tea slid over the side and crashed onto the tablecloth. She pounded at the spilt tea with her napkin. Her gaze followed William as he pivoted from the windows and paced the room.

"It's obvious you will never secure a husband of your free will. I've done right by you."

"Astounding," Georgette declared with upraised brows. "If I were your nephew instead of your niece, I cannot imagine you would force a husband upon me."

"I should hope not," William chuckled. He stopped pacing and clasped his hands behind his back. "When you make Eaglebrook's acquaintance, you will not be disappointed. He is most definitely not an impecunious Frenchman."

Georgette toyed with her spoon. Would she ever be forgiven for being the daughter of an impecunious Frenchmen? "I can think of far worse things than being poor and French," she muttered.

William glowered at Georgette. "The French bring much sorrow into our lives."

"Is that what you think of me and my sisters?"

"That's pure fustian," William said. "And well you know it."

Georgette scooted from her chair and pattered to her uncle's side. Gently she laid a hand on his arm. "I know you love us." She frowned. "It is true that Momma suffered and died because of her faith in the wrong man. My father was selfish to insist the family follow him to war." She sighed. "But you must own that his beliefs made him wrong, not his heritage."

William nodded. "I do not understand why you fight me about this. I believe this match will please you." He heaved a breath.

"Need I remind you that you're ten and nine? If you do not make

a match this season you will be irrevocably on the shelf.”

“I know my age, Uncle William. And I do not mind being on the shelf.”

“Life as a spinster is—”

“Scandalous!” Georgette sent him a mischievous glance. William’s expression gentled. “You delight in vexing me, child.”

She hid a smile. “I must admit sometimes I do.”

“Much more than sometimes, I daresay,” William grumbled and then added, “Eaglebrook is well regarded in society. You should be grateful I found a good match for you after the refusals you handed out this season.”

Georgette examined her uncle. Pronounced lines around his mouth lent a gloomy cast to his face. “I’m sorry I’ve disappointed you, Uncle.”

“Obey me in this and I will not be disappointed.” William cupped her shoulder and then stated, “You’ll make Eaglebrook’s acquaintance tonight at the Haversack ball. It’s for the best, George.”

Georgette knew once William made up his mind about a thing, it could scarcely be changed. At the moment, surrender seemed less taxing on her nerves. “As you wish, Uncle.”

William sent her a stern look “Eaglebrook does not care for independent-minded females. So you must give up your notions of independence and that infernal novel writing.” He guided her across the dining room and paused at the door.

Georgette ground her teeth. “Why should I give up who I am simply to capture a husband?”

William gave her an evasive shrug. “Eaglebrook owns a fine barouche. You may go for a ride with him in Hyde Park if you like.”

Georgette covered a yawn with her hand. “Well then,” she said in a voice like drizzling rain, “I simply must meet the man.” She traipsed out the door and ascended the wide staircase that led to

the refuge of her bedchamber without glancing back.

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That same morning Rowan Desmond sat behind his father's oak desk in the family's St. James's Square home. Since his return from the Peninsula War three days prior, members of the *ton* felt it necessary to inundate him with well wishes and invitations. Their accolades over his heroic measures in the war only angered him. And why would they congratulate him on his new title? The blasted thing did not come to him without a price. His father's death had granted him the dukedom.

Desmond squeezed his eyes shut as pain clawed up his injured leg. Visions of battlefields and dead men stacked upon another like broken toy soldiers tormented his thoughts. His saber had tasted the blood of innumerable Frenchmen during the war. Images of the men he killed floated before him akin to angry apparitions, their eerie voices demanding retribution. But he ignored their cries. Why should he grant Frenchmen mercy? They deserved death. Opening his eyes, he dropped the glass of brandy on the desk and drove a hand through his hair. He jabbed his cane into the carpet and struggled to his feet. Why could he not forget? Why did he dream every night about the storming of Badajoz and those trenches filled with dead men? And why did the London newspapers not cease regaling the world with tales of his heroic actions at Badajoz? He did not feel like a hero. He felt hollow.

"Your Grace?" the study door eased open. The butler entered.

"Your cousin, Lord Eaglebrook, to see you."

"Send him in." Desmond limped on his cane to the door. He grimaced at the thought of how he looked now compared to the young, handsome rake that strutted about town with his mates so long ago. He smiled. It was a slow and ironic thing, that smile. War knocked the arrogance out of many a young buck.

The butler held the door wide, then disappeared down the hall. Eaglebrook's broad form filled the doorway. His eyes skimmed over Desmond, flaring briefly. "Desmond." He smirked. "Or would you prefer I call you Duke Blackwood, now that you're the head of the family?"

"I am still Desmond to friends and family."

"And you may call me . . . milord." He laughed.

“Hardly.” Desmond let his voice convey his displeasure. *Why did they always quarrel?* “How did you discover I’d returned?”

“I read it in the *Morning Post*.” His eyes blazed with anger. “Why did you not notify the family of your return to London?”

“I informed my family of my return,” Desmond replied.

“I suppose I’m not significant enough to be *informed*.” Eaglebrook’s face detailed his resentment. “The last I heard, the surgeons did not expect you to survive the wound.”

“My leg improved,” Desmond muttered laconically.

“Obviously.” Eaglebrook’s gaze fell to the cane. “Glad you’re home,” he said in a perfunctory manner.

“The circumstances of my homecoming did not make for a joyful arrival.” Desmond drifted to his desk and slanted into the chair. “Sit, sit.” He waved a hand at an empty chair before the desk and stared ruminatively at a spot on the Persian carpet. He inhaled, breathing in the comforting aroma of the cedar walls and his father’s leather chair. Egad, but he missed his father and brother.

“Your father’s death one month ago shocked everyone.” Eaglebrook dropped into the high-back chair situated before the desk and said, “But your brother’s death one week later secured the dukedom for you. For that you should be glad.”

Desmond tore his gaze from the carpet. “I don’t want the blasted dukedom.” He tightened his mouth. “I would rather my father and brother be alive.”

A cloud passed over Eaglebrook’s face. “Right! Family, love, and all that rot.”

Desmond drummed his fingers on the desktop. “People are more important than titles and wealth.” When Eaglebrook merely shrugged, Desmond changed tacks. “I hired a Bow Street Runner to investigate their deaths.”

Eaglebrook choked, then recovered. “To investigate hunting accidents?”

Desmond gritted his teeth. “The chances that a father and son

would die one week apart by falling from their horses cannot be great.”

“Stranger things have happened,” Eaglebrook announced with casual disregard.

Contempt thumped through Desmond’s veins. He leaned back and searched Eaglebrook’s face. Deciding not to quarrel, he stood and blew out a calming breath. “Perhaps, Eaglebrook.” But he did not think his father and brother died by mere occurrence. He sensed something much more sinister at work.

Eaglebrook gestured to the scar on Desmond’s face. “How’d that happen?”

Desmond traced a finger along the jagged disfigurement. “Frenchman’s saber,” he grouched. “That Frenchman suffered a hard death for slicing my face open.”

“It’s gruesome, to be sure,” Eaglebrook blurted. “Good thing you’re a wealthy duke now. Without your rank and wealth, no woman would claim you.”

“I do not want a wife!”

“Didn’t mean a wife.” He grunted. “Take a courtesan.” Desmond resisted the urge to clout his cousin over the head.

“You shame the family by speaking that dishonorable blather.”

“What? And you did not act dishonorably while on the peninsula?” Eaglebrook slurred.

Desmond’s temper rose. “What the deuce?”

“Talk that you let your French companion escape the death sentence for spying reached England,” Eaglebrook enlightened him.

“Lies have wings.” Desmond bit back a curse as he recollected the spy. Her aster eyes had haunted him during the better part of two years. He would grant her no quarter when he got his hands on her.

Eaglebrook leant forward in the chair. “Will you not tell me what happened on the peninsula with that spy?” He made a rude

gesture. "Did she have . . ."

"Stow it, Eaglebrook!" Desmond barked in a voice low and deadly.

Eaglebrook positioned his hat on his head and rose. "Have you plans for the evening?"

Desmond rounded the desk and gave Eaglebrook a puzzled stare. "My plans?" He reckoned he'd lay about the house and pamper his moody leg.

"I must attend the Haversack ball tonight." Eaglebrook walked to the door. "Join me?"

Desmond tried to remember the last ball he attended. He could not. Nor had he the desire to attend one now. "Why would you wish me for company?"

"It's good for my reputation to be seen with a duke," Eaglebrook emphasized.

Desmond drove his cane into the carpet and curled his lip at Eaglebrook.

"You should rejoin society. It may help quell the tales of your work as a French spy."

Desmond limped to the windows and glowered at the heart of St. James's Square. "I did not spy."

"Whatever you say," Eaglebrook sneered. Then he added, "I meet my fi ancée tonight."

Desmond swiveled on his cane. "You have a fi ancée. You've not met the chit?"

"I'm newly engaged." Eaglebrook smoothed a hand over his superbly tailored tailcoat. He waved a hand in the air. "She'll bring a sizable dowry."

Desmond crossed the study. "Are you so deep in dun territory that you must wed this girl?"

"A gentleman's tailor costs a great deal. And my losses at the tables added up of late."

“If you haven’t the funds to pay your debts, don’t gamble.”

Eaglebrook snorted. “Before the war your exploits as a gambler and a rogue kept the gossips chattering.”

“I never gambled without the funds to pay my debts.”

“You rarely lost,” Eaglebrook huffed and aimed a resentful glare at Desmond.

Desmond shrugged. “I did not play to lose.”

“Ha!” Eaglebrook retorted. “Say you’ll come to the Haversack ball with me so I can make you envious over my wealthy fiancée. We’ll find a game at Whites afterward.”

“I gave up gambling,” Desmond said in a flat voice.

“Have you lost your pluck?”

Desmond stiffened. “No.” He rubbed the head of his cane, broodingly. Why did his old life seem to belong to someone else? “Diversions such as Whites no longer appeal to me.”

“Tripe!”

“No.” Desmond stabbed his cane into the floor, emphasizing each word on a jab. “If you cannot pay your debts, keep away from the clubs.”

“Treat me to a sermon if you must, cousin, but come and meet the fiancée that will make me rich again.” Eaglebrook rubbed his hands together as if the dowry rested between them.

Desmond tapped his cane against the tip of his boot. Meeting Eaglebrook’s fiancée would provide a diversion. Besides, he needed to forget about a pair of flower-colored eyes. He nodded. “I will indulge you, Eaglebrook. You may make me pea green with envy.” But even as he agreed to accompany Eaglebrook, Desmond knew he would never forget those eyes . . .

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