



Special Glimpse!

Dukes Are Forever

Prologue

*On the Battlefield in San Cristobel, Spain
November 1813*

“Forward!” Colonel Edward Westover yelled above the cracking gunfire and the clashing steel bayonets as he raised his saber into the air.

He dug in his heels, and his horse leapt toward the melee of blue and red uniforms on the field where until just hours ago sunflowers bloomed. The yellow petals now stained red with blood lay crushed beneath pounding hooves as the British cavalry charged the end

of the enemy’s cannon line. Known as the Scarlet Scoundrels for their red uniforms on the field and their roguish actions off it, the dragoons were ordered to stop the barrage of artillery for the infantry’s advance, but Edward’s personal mission was to protect as many of his men as possible.

His two most trusted captains flanked him as they charged together into battle, shooting and slashing without pause, both prepared to give their lives to win the battle for the allied forces.

“To the right!” Edward shouted, setting his horse toward a gap in the line.

Nathaniel Grey shouted in answer as he struck his saber at a Frenchman who had advanced farther than the infantry should have allowed. Beside him, Thomas Matteson pushed through the gap, firing his pistols and reloading on horseback while never breaking stride.

As the French infantry gave way against the onrushing cavalry, the three men galloped to the right flank of the cannon. The enemy line broke into a confused scurry, with men succumbing to the horses bearing down on them.

Within two hours, the allied forces had routed the enemy and sent them fleeing in a disorganized retreat. The French cannon line abandoned, the British infantry pushed forward to secure the village. By the time the cavalry returned behind their line, they were exhausted, their mounts’ heads hanging low and the men slipping gratefully from their backs.

“Westover!”

Edward turned. “Here!”

His shout split the noise of the line as the men reorganized around him by tending to the wounded, capturing loose horses whose riders had been knocked from their backs, and collecting weapons they’d captured from the enemy.

Leaving Lieutenant Reed still on horseback, the man having solemnly volunteered for the dangerous mission of being the line messenger for the battle, Nathaniel Grey walked slowly toward Edward, his spine straight with solemn determination.

As he approached, Edward saw the hard lines of his face and the harsh set of his jaw. His friend's normally bright eyes were somber.

It was the look of death.

He steeled himself. The battle had been horrific, and he was certain several good men perished in their charge. He'd grown used to the terror and fury of battle, but the aftermath never grew easier.

"Grey," he said soberly as the captain stopped in front of him, then glanced over at Thomas to indicate with a nod that the other man should remain. The three men had been through hell together during the past few years, and they would face together whatever was in the message that made Nathaniel Grey suddenly so grim.

"Colonel, there's news from England." Meeting Edward's gaze, Grey hesitated, then drew a shaking breath. "Your brother is dead."

Chapter One

London, March 1815

Edward Westover stared across the card table at the man he was about to destroy.

The balding, paunchy gambler dabbed at his sweaty forehead with a handkerchief, then tugged at his cravat as if it choked him. The man's gaze lifted to meet his, and a jolt of satisfaction pulsed through him at the fear on the man's face.

Let the bastard be afraid. Let him get exactly what he deserves.

During the past year, Edward had thought of little else than the satisfaction he'd feel when this moment arrived, when he'd finally receive the justice that the English courts had denied him. Nearly every moment since he returned from Spain had been focused on ruining this man's life, and even now, beneath the stoic expression he carefully showed the room, he burned with hatred and a driving need for retribution.

In a matter of seconds, Phillip Benton would lose his last hand, and with that, his life as he knew it would be over. Edward watched the man closely and waited, counting off each heartbeat, and the only outward sign of his anticipation was a slight quickening of his breath. This must be how the devil felt when he took a man's soul, Edward decided, except that Benton had no soul to take.

The dealer turned the last card.

Benton gaped at it, unable to believe he'd lost. As Edward watched him blanch, a flash of satisfaction shot through him.

"The game's finished, Benton." *And so are you.* "Now, I'll take what you owe me."

Welcoming the pleasure of the man's destruction, Edward reached for the marker and tossed it to him. "Everything you owe."

Benton forced a pacifying smile. "I haven't got it all with me tonight, of course."

Edward glared at him. From his arrogant demeanor, it was clear Benton still had no idea who he was or realized the tragedy connecting them. But he would learn soon enough, and then Edward planned on making him regret for the rest of his life the actions that brought them together.

Benton motioned the gambling hell manager to the table. "Thompson, I've gotten myself into a spot again." With a forced laugh, Benton's jocular tone belied the desperation of his situation. "Would you assist me with my friend here"—but the scornful glower Edward shot him was far from friendly—"by advancing me enough to pay off my losses?"

Thompson coughed nervously, his eyes darting to Edward. "Fraid I can't do that."

"Thompson!" he cried incredulously, loud enough that the men at the surrounding tables glanced up. He lowered his voice. "Have I ever failed to repay you? Have I ever forfeited so much as a pence?"

"You've always been a good customer."

Benton beamed. "Hand me a paper, then, and I'll swear out a note. My word's good."

Thompson turned awkwardly toward Edward. "What would you have me do, sir?"

"Why are you asking him?" Benton demanded.

"Because I hold your notes," Edward drawled, taking immense pleasure in the confusion that flashed across the man's face.

Benton snorted. "Thompson holds them."

"I bought them from Thompson," Edward explained, summarizing in a few words the time-consuming work of the past twelve months leading up to this moment, "just as I bought up all your debts. All the credit you owe the merchants, the lease on your rooms, your stable bills, and every pound of your gambling debt in every hell across London."

Benton turned scarlet. "What in God's name is going on here? Thompson!"

The manager shook his head. "You had too many notes, Phillip. You still owe me from last autumn. When I received the offer to purchase your debts—"

"Purchase my debts?" His voice rang loudly through the hell, stopping the play at all the tables. The men paused to stare, and hushed whispers rose throughout the room. "Sir, I demand an explanation!"

"I purchased your debts," Edward answered coldly, hating the man more with each passing heartbeat, "and now I demand repayment on them. *All* of them."

"You cannot demand such a thing."

"The law gives me the right to reclaim them with a fortnight's notice. Consider this your notice." Edward knew the answer, yet he took a perverse pleasure in asking, "Unless you can't pay?"

"Of course, I can pay!" His indignation sounded loud enough that everyone in the room heard it, but as he sank down in his chair, his shoulders sagging, he lowered his voice. "But not in a fortnight."

"Not at all," Edward corrected, relishing the man's defeat. "Even if you sold every possession you own, you would still be in my debt." *Exactly where the bastard deserves to be.*

Despite the heat of the crowded gambling hell, Benton shivered. He looked at the marker on the table as if staring at his own grave.

“You’d send me to debtor’s prison?” Benton’s voice strangled in his throat.

Edward had considered doing just that many times during the past year—thrusting him into a cold, windowless prison to let the man rot away in his own filth behind stone walls.

“No.” He wanted a public revenge with absolute control of every aspect of the man’s life. If he couldn’t hang the bastard, he’d at least make the man wish he were dead. There was no mercy in him tonight. That died a year ago with Stephen and Jane. “But I will take your house, all its furnishings, your horse, your clothes...” He venomously bit out each harsh promise and signaled to a distinguished-looking man standing awkwardly by the hall’s entrance. “Every last pence.”

“I’ll be left with nothing.” He dabbed at his forehead with the handkerchief, then croaked out a pathetic laugh. “Nothing except my daughter.”

“Then I’ll take her, too,” Edward said with an icy facetiousness. “And every last ribbon on her head.”

“Who are you?” Benton demanded again, furious at being publicly humiliated.

The man reached their table. “Yes, Your Grace?”

Benton blinked, then bellowed, “*Your Grace?*”

“This is William Meacham.” Edward calmly nodded toward his family’s longtime attorney. “He’ll inform you of the arrangements.”

“Go to hell!” Benton clenched his fists. “I’m not agreeing to anything.”

Benton swung his gaze to Meacham, and Edward could see the frantic thoughts spinning through the man’s head. He’d seen that same angry desperation on the faces of defeated enemies when the battle was over and the terms of surrender negotiated. How little men changed from battlefield to barroom. And for this man, surrender was unconditional.

He’d give no quarter of any kind to this enemy.

“If you refuse my terms, Benton,” Edward promised, “then I *will* throw you into prison.”

Benton’s face darkened with fury. “You would do that—you would ruin my life?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because you ruined mine.”

Benton caught his breath. “Who *are* you?”

“Don’t you recognize me?” Edward rose from his chair, drawing up to his full six-foot height. This was the moment he’d planned for during the past year with an almost blind relentlessness, and as he’d expected, with it came a sweet flash of shattering satisfaction. “Edward Westover.”

“Westover...” The name struck Benton with a violent shudder. “You’re *Colonel Westover?*”

As he stared at Benton, the full force of his hatred and revenge rising in him and vanquishing whatever brief satisfaction and pleasure he’d felt only moments earlier, Edward leaned over the table to gaze mercilessly at him. “I am the brother of the man you murdered.”

He spun away from the table and stalked through the gambling hell toward the front door, putting the length of the room between them before he strangled Benton with his bare hands. Lost in the wrathful thoughts of his vengeance, he was oblivious to the presence of the man standing in the corner, who had watched tonight’s events unfold and fell into step behind him.

His carriage waited at the front entrance, and he climbed inside. The tiger closed the door.

Shutting his eyes, Edward took a deep breath and waited for the peace that should have

been his, the relief and happiness at finally making the bastard pay. But it didn't come, and even the flash of exquisite satisfaction he'd felt when Benton realized his identity was now gone. He felt only the same need to destroy Benton that he'd carried for the past year, tempered by the deep emptiness he'd felt since the moment in San Cristobel when he learned of Stephen's death.

The door flung open, and the man who had watched him from the shadows jumped inside. He pounded his fist against the roof, signaling to the coachman to send the team forward into the night.

"Colonel Westover." Thomas Matteson gave a short salute as the carriage lurched into motion. "Interesting evening."

"Captain Matteson." Edward glared at the old friend who had become like a brother to him while fighting together in Spain. And whom he now wanted to throttle for interfering in his life. "Get the hell out."

Ignoring that, Thomas relaxed against the squabs as casually as if he'd been invited into the carriage rather than flinging himself inside.

"We're in London. It's Lord Chesney here, if you don't mind." Thomas flashed a charming grin, the same one that had attracted the hearts of women across the Continent. Edward had lost count of the number of times he'd rescued the man from angry Spanish fathers. "I'm a marquess now, I daresay."

"So I'd heard."

Shortly after the battle at San Cristobel, Thomas's father inherited as Duke of Chatham, which meant this fearless former captain was now Marquess of Chesney and heir to a duchy. Which meant his life was too important to risk in the army. Dying in battle was fine for second sons but never for peers or heirs, a lesson that Edward knew only too well.

"I've proven you wrong." Thomas angled out his long legs. "You said I'd never make anything of myself."

"I said you were reckless and would get yourself killed," he corrected solemnly, unable to keep his concern from his voice. He was afraid his friend might yet prove him right.

"We're both headed for the Lords now." Thomas grinned at him. "Say a prayer for Parliament."

But Edward was in no mood for teasing around tonight, especially given the way fate had thrust the peerage upon both of them. The irony was humorless.

"Where's Grey?" Edward wouldn't have put it past the man not to be outside hanging off the carriage at that very moment.

"Somewhere in England."

Thomas's answer wasn't facetious. After he was wounded in the war, Grey's connections to the underbelly of society made him valuable enough that Lord Bathurst, secretary of war and the colonies, insisted he join the War Office. Grey was one of their best agents, and "somewhere in England" was as close as anyone could know.

Edward reached toward the door with the full intent of shoving Thomas out into the night. "I suggest you join him."

The marquess clucked his tongue. "Becoming a duke has made you rather testy, Colonel. I prefer the man who used to set enemy tents on fire. He was more reasonable."

"You have no idea," he muttered. Then he exhaled a ragged breath, knowing the tenacious man wouldn't leave him alone until he had what he came for. No matter how damnably irritating the trait, Edward couldn't begrudge him. It was the same tenacity that had kept the former captain alive in Spain. "Why are you here?"

“I need your help,” Thomas answered solemnly. “I have a friend who needs me to save him from himself.”

Edward glared at him through the shadows. He trusted Thomas with his life, but in this, he was overstepping.

“If I wanted your help,” he growled, “I would have asked for it a year ago.”

“You weren’t ready for it then.”

Edward gave a derisive snort. “You think I’m ready for it now?”

“I think you’re just as bullheaded as you’ve always been,” Thomas answered, affection clear in his voice despite his words, “but I am not going to let you ruin a life without trying to stop you.”

“Benton’s, you mean.”

“Yours.”

Edward clenched his teeth, but even that small show of outrage was forced. He wasn’t angry at Thomas as much as at what he represented—his old life, the one he’d been forced to leave behind. But that life was gone forever.

“How do you know about my plans for Benton?” he demanded.

“Your aunt Augusta. She asked me to talk you out of this scheme of yours.”

“Then you can tell her it’s too late,” he assured him. “Meacham is settling the agreement now.”

“You can still let Benton go.” Thomas met Edward’s gaze with deep sympathy. “What happened to your brother was unforgivable, and Benton deserved to hang for it. But he didn’t. The magistrates let him go, and now you need to let him go, too, before he destroys your life, as well.”

Edward stared at him blankly, saying nothing.

There was a time when he would have sought out Grey’s and Thomas’s counsel and most likely taken their advice just as he would have his own brother’s, but that was before his world changed. The Colonel Westover whom Thomas had ridden beside in the fires of war was gone. He might as well have died on the battlefield.

“You saved my life, Colonel, many times.” Thomas leaned forward, his face intense in the dim shadows cast by the swinging carriage lamps. “And I will not let you ruin your life now.”

Edward almost laughed. There was nothing Thomas could do to either stop him or help him. Except... “Can you watch Benton? I need someone I can trust to keep an eye on him until everything is settled.”

Apparently realizing it was time to surrender the battle in hopes of eventually winning the war, Thomas grudgingly agreed. “I’ll contact Grey to see if he has men to spare. But promise me you’ll consider letting Benton go.”

The hell I will. Edward held his gaze and lied, “I’ll consider it.”

But he would never change his mind. Benton was his prisoner now, as surely as if he’d chained him to the walls of Newgate himself. He might be free to come and go as he pleased, but he’d be living in rooms Edward chose for him. His every move would be watched, his every activity and choice Edward’s to make, and never again to have so much as a halfpenny to his name. There was nothing that would ever make him set that bastard free when his own brother lay dead in the churchyard.

“Good night, then, Colonel. And give my best to Aunt Augusta.” Thomas opened the

carriage door and swung outside, to drop away onto the street and disappear into the darkness.

Blowing out an irritated breath, Edward slammed the door shut.

Thomas was wrong. Revenge had proven easy. He didn't have to hang Benton; he didn't even have to give the man enough rope to hang himself. All he'd had to do was follow along behind and pick up the pieces. It had been that simple.

He'd won. He'd attained his revenge and received every capitulation he'd wanted, giving Benton exactly the punishment he deserved—the loss of everything he held dear. At the card table, when Benton realized who he was and what he'd done, an intense satisfaction struck him unlike anything he'd ever experienced before in his life.

But the sensation faded, and quickly, until all that was left was the same emptiness as before. Instead of the happiness and relief he expected, he felt hollow, as if he were missing half his life, with no idea where to find it.

Katherine Benton pushed back the hood of her cloak as she entered the blacksmith's house, her leather bag gripped tightly in her other hand.

"Forgive us, miss," Mrs. Dobson greeted her, "for fetchin' ye in the midst o' th' night like this."

She smiled reassuringly. "You did the right thing in sending for me."

The worried mother moved the toddler in her arms to the other hip as another child wailed from somewhere upstairs and two boys chased each other through the rooms. There were now ten children in the small but well-kept house, with Kate delivering the last baby herself.

"Bless ye, miss," Mrs. Dobson sighed gratefully, and for a moment, Kate saw the glisten of fatigued tears in her eyes, "you comin' to help us, an' you wit' all yer own troubles."

Your own troubles.

Ignoring the prickle of humiliation, knowing the woman meant well, Kate placed a comforting hand on her arm before Mrs. Dobson could go into detail about those troubles or remind her of how Mr. Dobson had been kind enough to buy her horse last year when she needed money. "Where's Tom?"

She pointed toward the stairs, then shooed away two youngsters at her skirts.

"Would you bring up a kettle of hot water and a mug, please?"

The woman nodded, and Kate hurried upstairs. Tom must have truly been ill tonight to have all the household in such an uproar, the children out of their beds and running wild, from the oldest at fourteen right down to the baby. Stomach trouble, the boy who had been sent to fetch her reported. *Please, God, let it something I can fix.*

Taking a deep breath to steady herself, she stepped into the little room beneath the eaves that served as the bedroom for all six of the Dobson boys, with the three girls and the baby sharing a room downstairs. A young boy lay scrunched up on the cot in the corner, his father trying uselessly to comfort him as he grasped at his abdomen and groaned in pain.

Kate gently elbowed Mr. Dobson away, set her bag on the edge of the bed and opened it, then looked down at the boy. "Hello, Tom."

"Hello, miss," he returned, forcing the greeting out through gritted teeth. Sweat beaded on his forehead. His face was pale, and his arms never released their hold over his middle.

She frowned. "James said your stomach hurts."

“Somethin’ awful, miss.” He swallowed down another groan.

“Show me exactly where.”

The boy glanced uncertainly at his father, who nodded his permission, and Tom pushed the blanket down to his hips with one hand while pulling up his nightshirt with the other, baring his little, flat belly.

Kate touched his stomach carefully, starting with his lower left side and working her way across. “Here?”

He shook his head. Moaning, he placed his fingers over a spot high in the middle just under his sternum.

“Here?” Kate pushed into his abdomen, and he cried out. Her eyes narrowed, and from what she knew about this particular boy, she suspected. . . “Open your mouth for me, Tom.”

He opened wide, and when she looked inside, she scowled, all worry inside her vanishing.

Now, she *knew*. “You sneaked out of bed tonight, didn’t you?”

His eyes widened—he’d been caught. “Miss?”

“And judging by the pains, I’d guess most likely around midnight. Isn’t that so?”

With competing looks of suffering and guilt flitting over his young face, he nodded.

She sat back on the bed and raised a sharp brow. “You got into your papa’s tobacco.”

He shot a worried glance at his father and moaned. Being caught—and fear of the punishment to come—only made his bellyache even worse.

“Your son has an upset stomach,” Kate informed both husband and wife, who had remained in the doorway, the baby still in her arms and a tenacious toddler clinging to her skirts. “He’ll be better by morning.” She cast a sideways glance at the boy. “And I have a feeling that after tonight, he’ll never touch your stash again. Will you, Tom?”

The boy glumly shook his head.

“Good. This should help.” She pulled a bottle of white powder from her bag and poured some into the cup Mrs. Dobson handed her when Kate signaled for both it and the kettle. She poured in hot water, then stirred it. “Drink this.” When the boy frowned warily into the bubbling mixture, she explained, “It’s saleratus. The bubbles will help settle your stomach. Go on—drink it up.”

Making a face as if being tortured, Tom gulped it down, then gasped in distaste.

“You’ll be better in a few hours.” Kate stole a glance at the mother and father, obviously overwhelmed by their brood. “How old are you, Tom—nine or ten?”

“Eleven, miss.”

Even better. “Old enough for a job, then. Come visit me at Brambly tomorrow. We could use a boy for the stables.”

That was a lie. Brambly had no need of stable boys, because Brambly had no stables. Because Brambly no longer had any horses except for an old swayback no one would take off her hands if she paid them. But she also knew that one less child to worry about would help ease the burden of the Dobson household, even if she wasn’t certain how she’d manage to feed one more mouth in hers. But she would. Somehow, she always managed to find a way.

She closed her bag and stood to leave.

“Miss, are ye certain ’bout Tom goin’ to work fer ye?” Mrs. Dobson pressed as she followed Kate downstairs. The couple wasn’t poor but neither were they wealthy, and although sending Tom to work for Kate meant less money spent on him, more importantly it meant one less child to supervise.

“We could use the extra hands.”

From the twitch of the woman’s lips, she clearly didn’t believe Kate, but she didn’t challenge her. “T’would be a great help, miss. It’s always somethin’ wi’ children, ain’t it?”

As if on cue, the baby wailed. The woman sighed and opened the door.

Kate stepped outside into the darkness and cold, not looking forward to the miles she’d have to walk home through the darkness.

“Ye should count yerself fortunate, miss, that ye don’t have no children t’ constantly scold an’ fuss over.”

Kate forced her smile not to waver despite the stab of jealousy. No, she had no children of her own and most likely never would. To make the sacrifices necessary to have a husband and family...She simply couldn’t bring herself to do it.

“Yes.” She drew her hood down over her face. “How very fortunate I am.”

Inside his study, Edward poured himself a whiskey. Taking a gasping swallow and welcoming the burn, he turned toward the fireplace, where dying embers still glowed. He jabbed at them with the brass poker until he’d sparked a weak flame, more to physically expel the pent-up frustrations inside him than to stir up a fire. Around him, the town house was dark and quiet, with Aunt Augusta and the servants catching the last few hours of sleep before dawn.

He envied them. He’d hadn’t slept well in over a year. And he knew he wouldn’t tonight, either.

He was simply tired. That’s why he didn’t feel the lasting happiness he’d expected at bringing Benton to justice and why he let Thomas’s words prick him. In the morning, once he’d slept and the success of his revenge settled over him, the joy of vindication would come. He would feel happy then.

Happy? *Christ*. He’d be glad if he could feel anything.

With a curse, he tossed back the remaining whiskey and stared at the fire.

“Your Grace?”

He glanced up as Meacham paused in the doorway. Edward signaled his permission to enter, glad for the man’s arrival. The sooner they settled everything regarding Benton’s situation, the better.

Meacham nodded politely. The Westover family attorney for nearly thirty years, William Meacham had proven himself time and again to be a superior lawyer and a dedicated employee. Occasionally over the years, even a friend. When Edward’s father died and Stephen inherited, with the two brothers just twenty and nineteen, Meacham had been an invaluable advisor, and Edward owed him more gratitude than he could admit or the man would accept.

For all the history between them, however, Meacham would never assume familiarity, and he would never cross any lines of decorum, not even at four in the morning. As the new duke, Edward should have been pleased by the deference paid to him, but it rankled. Since he’d inherited, no one was open and honest with him anymore.

His lips twisted. Apparently, except for Thomas Matteson.

“My apologies for the late hour,” Edward said quietly.

“None necessary, Your Grace.” Meacham reached inside his coat and withdrew the papers he’d prepared. “Benton agreed to your terms and in exchange signed over all his possessions, just as you demanded. He is bankrupt and in your debt.” Then he added quietly, “Congratulations, sir.”

Edward glanced at the papers, only long enough to make certain Benton’s signature crossed the bottom of each, then turned back to the fire.

It was done, then. Phillip Benton was now penniless, his life completely and publicly ruined. He would live in the small room in Cheapside that Edward provided, on a single pound’s allowance that Edward gave him, watched at every moment and unable to make a move without permission—he had become a prisoner, or as close to one as he could be without being put into chains. His life had become Edward’s to ruin, just as Benton had ruined his.

So why wasn’t he happy?

“Thank you, Meacham. We’re done for tonight.”

The attorney hesitated. “There is one more item, Your Grace.”

“What is that?”

“He has a daughter.”

Edward frowned into the fire. Benton mentioned a daughter, but he hadn’t thought the man was serious. In the months since he’d been having Benton trailed, his investigators hadn’t seen nor heard any mention of a child.

He shouldn’t be surprised, though, to learn Benton had a daughter who meant so little to him that he never went to see her nor contacted her. The bastard had destroyed his own life through gambling, whoring, and drinking, and ruined the girl’s life right along with his by denying her the care she deserved. A man like that didn’t have the heart to love a child.

Meacham continued cautiously, “He requested that you become her guardian.”

“No.”

“If I may, sir, I think you should reconsider. Her mother is dead, and now with her father’s situation—” A sharp glance from Edward made him censor himself. *Good.* Meacham and Thomas could both keep their bloody opinions about Benton to themselves. “You have your reputation to consid—”

“Damn my reputation,” he muttered.

Meacham stiffened. “Your Grace, I do not believe you mean that.”

Edward narrowed his eyes on him. This was as close as the man had ever come to overstepping between them, of being so familiar as to attempt to chastise. But Meacham wasn’t wrong. Edward couldn’t have cared less what happened to his own reputation, but now as the duke, he held the responsibility for the reputation of the Westover family and the title, whether he wanted it or not.

“Sir, you have made it so her father is no longer able to financially support her. Morally, she has become your responsibility. Best to make it legal, as well.” The attorney added plainly, his expression as paternal as Edward had ever seen it, “If you do not provide for her, and her situation becomes common knowledge, you will become a social pariah.”

And Augusta right along with him. His aunt was his only family now, and he would never do anything to hurt her. “Fine.” He turned dismissively back to the fire. “Write the contract.”

“This is the right decision, sir,” Meacham assured him. “It would have been regrettable to you if an innocent had been hurt.”

Edward said nothing, not able to summon enough guilt to care. He'd seen hundreds of innocents hurt during the atrocities of war. What was one child's lack of ribbons compared to that?

"Someone should also travel to her home to ensure the suitability of her situation. I'll arrange for one of my assistants to leave next week—"

"No," Edward interrupted. "I'll go."

Meacham paused in surprise. "Pardon?"

"I'll go myself." Not that he truly cared about the little girl's feelings, but a legal clerk swooping down on her and frightening her was the last complication he needed when he wanted everything settled with Benton's situation as quickly and easily as possible. Screaming children and angry nannies would only add to his headaches.

He had another reason for going, as well. After the ordeals of the past year, it would do him good to spend a few days alone in the countryside, riding and hunting, far from the family seat at Hartsfield Park and all the memories there. He wanted to go someplace where he could forget, if only for a few days, and where he wouldn't have the constant reminder of Stephen and Jane.

So he would meet the child, determine her living situation was satisfactory, then be on his way. Most likely, he'd be gone by teatime.

"If there's anything else," Edward instructed, "see me in the morning. Good night, Meacham."

"Your Grace." With a shallow bow, Meacham retreated from the study.

Edward refilled his glass and swirled the golden liquid thoughtfully. *So Benton has a daughter.*

Had.

She belonged to him now, as close to being his own daughter as possible without sharing his blood, and she'd become his responsibility to raise, educate, and eventually marry off when she came of age. Rather, that is, she'd become Meacham's responsibility, as he planned on never directly concerning himself with the child again after his visit to Sussex.

He hadn't planned on this, but now that she was part of the battle's aftermath, the guardianship would only make his revenge that much sweeter. She was a spoil of war he had no intention of ever letting Benton see again.

A daughter's life for a brother's.

Fair retribution.

"Strathmore?"

Aunt Augusta appeared in the doorway. Despite the late hour, she held her head regally, every inch of her a countess.

He returned his tired gaze to the fire. *Good God*, he was exhausted... "No, just Edward."

"*Just* Edward?"

He rolled his eyes at the oncoming onslaught from Augusta and her fierce dedication to social position. Childless herself, his widowed aunt raised him and Stephen after their mother died when they were just boys, her duty as the duke's sister to keep them in line and away from scandal. They'd been a handful for her, but she'd corralled them with a stern command and a sharp glance. One of the few people in the world able to reprimand him, she still possessed the ability to shake him with a single look.

Such as the one she now leveled at him. "You are the Duke—"

“It is what I desire tonight.” Forced decorum was the last thing he wanted to deal with, all those reminders of how much his life had changed. Tonight, he wanted to be just Edward again. “Please, for tonight, let it be.”

She drew up her shoulders in that posture of grudging surrender she assumed when she knew she’d pressed as far as possible but wouldn’t win.

“I apologize for waking you,” Edward offered, hoping to mollify her and avoid further argument.

“I heard the door.”

“It was Meacham,” he told her gently. “You should go back to bed and get a good night’s rest. I’ll join you for breakfast.”

“Do you need anything? Should I call for Huddleston?”

He shook his head. Huddleston was a good valet, always eager to assist and please, but Edward found the attention cloying. He preferred to dress himself, just as he had in Spain despite having an aide-de-camp at his disposal, preferring his privacy. He would gladly do without a man completely if he could, but as a duke, that was impossible, and because Huddleston had been Stephen’s valet, Edward kept him on.

“Sleep well, then.” As she turned to leave, she rested a hand against his arm.

But he shifted away. He didn’t want her motherly concern tonight, preferring to be left alone in his misery. Or it would have been misery, had he been able to feel even that.

Her face softened. “The title does not rest easy on you, does it, Edward?”

With a sag of his shoulders, he looked away, not wanting her to see the grief in his eyes. “It was Stephen’s burden to bear, not mine.”

“Your brother never considered it a burden. He saw it as his heritage.”

“I’m a soldier.” He shook his head. “This life was not meant for me.”

“But it *is* your life now. Dear boy, you can spend all your time trying to convince yourself that you are still an army colonel, but you are not.” A deep sigh escaped her, not of pity or mourning, but one borne of a wish that he could accept his new place as she had. “And you will never be *just* Edward.”

With a soft kiss to his cheek, she left the room.

For several moments, Edward simply stared after her, unable to gather enough emotion inside him to be angry or hurt at her words. But he felt nothing.

He leaned a tired arm across the mantel, too apathetic even to refill his glass and drink himself into oblivion.

As the second son, he was raised to make his own way in the world, and he had gladly done just that by purchasing an officer’s commission when he finished university. On the battlefield, it mattered nothing that his family was one of the most powerful in England. What signified was character. His ability to carry out orders with an unfailing dedication to his men set him apart. And he excelled at it, earning himself four field promotions.

Then, in a cruel twist, fate stripped away all he’d worked so hard to achieve. The moment he inherited, his life as Colonel Westover disappeared, as if he had also died that day in the carriage accident that killed his brother and sister-in-law. He had been forced to step into his brother’s life and carry on. As if his own existence up to that point hadn’t mattered.

Legally, he was now Duke of Strathmore with titles and properties scattered across England, but he deserved none of it. By rights, he should still be fighting on the Continent, and Stephen should still be alive.

With Jane.

Even now, his chest tightened at the thought of her. The night Edward met her, when she'd entered the ballroom for her debut, he'd been mesmerized. With her dark hair and brown eyes, she wasn't a typical English beauty, but she had a vitality that drew him, a charm that the stiff rules of English society hadn't yet forced from her. He'd somehow managed to secure a waltz, and by the time the orchestra sent up its final flourishes and he whirled her to a stop, laughing in his arms, he was lost, despite knowing she wasn't meant for him.

The daughter of an earl, she was born to be the wife of a peer, and her future—and choice in husbands—had never been her own. And in truth, she'd never made any commitment to him.

Still, he pursued her in that reckless manner he possessed when he was younger, with the devil and his consequences both be damned. But he'd been too young, too inexperienced with women and the world, and far too arrogant to realize there were some things he'd never be able to have. No matter how much he wanted them. And he'd wanted her, not just for an affair but for the rest of his life, yet he never suspected she didn't share the same desires for a future together. So one warm afternoon as they lay tangled in the sheets of an unused guestroom at Hartsfield Park, he told her he loved her.

His eyes pressed shut against the memory. From ten years away, he could hear the sound of her nervous laughter and stunned voice as clearly as if she were still in the room with him...

Love? At least she'd had the decency to cover her mouth with her hand in apologetic shame as she murmured, *Surely, you cannot seriously think that I could ever marry an army officer—oh, Edward, no...* Her wide-eyed disbelief melted into a soft expression of pity. *I thought you understood...*

Apparently, he hadn't understood at all.

One week after that, he left for war, to put as many miles as possible between them, with no intention of ever returning.

And two months later, his brother Stephen, Duke of Strathmore, announced his engagement. To Jane.

Despite the fires of war and his anger at her betrayal in marrying his brother, it took several years to purge her from his mind. He'd led reckless charges into battle and offered to take the place of men of lesser rank in dangerous missions, not because he had a death wish but simply because he no longer cared what became of him, if he lived or died. Eventually, he purged her from his body, too, with a string of nameless women.

All of this he kept from his brother, who had once been his best friend and closest confidant. At first, he was too ashamed to share with Stephen how he'd fallen for a woman he should have realized all along could never be his. Then, when he learned of the engagement, this second, deeper humiliation by the woman who became his sister-in-law changed everything between the two men, and Edward knew he would never be able to tell him. The confidence they'd shared in each other since they were boys had been irrevocably destroyed, costing him not only his heart but also his brother.

The result, he calculated, was a distinguished military career and an immeasurable distrust of women. He would allow himself to enjoy their flirtations and attentions and gladly take whatever pleasures they willingly gave, but he would never again trust one with his heart.

Then, in an instant, his world ended.

Stephen and Jane had gone to London to celebrate the long-awaited news that she was with child. But drunk and angry from a night losing money at cards, Phillip Benton raced his phaeton through the narrow streets, blindly speeding around a corner and into the oncoming carriage. The two teams collided in a mangle of wood and metal, blood and flesh. Stephen and

Jane were cut down in the prime of their lives, while Benton walked away without a scratch.

Edward had been a country away when it happened, oblivious to the horrific and monstrous changes that fate had flung at his family.

The full weight of the Strathmore legacy descended upon him like an avalanche, ripping him from his command and forcing him back to England and into a life he'd never known nor wanted. Overnight, he'd become one of the most powerful men in the kingdom, responsible for estates and all their tenants and employees, bank accounts worth small fortunes, a seat in Parliament, and the private confidences of the Prince Regent himself.

His brother and Jane had been killed, but Edward had been sent to hell.

*To continue reading Edward and Kate's story,
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