

"OUR CONTEMPORARY JANE AUSTEN."
Jill Barnett

Julia Quinn

New York Times
Bestselling Author of *Romancing Mister Bridgerton*



DANCING AT MIDNIGHT

Julia Quinn

DANCING AT MIDNIGHT

 HarperCollins e-books

Dedication

For my father, who never forgets to tell me how proud he is of me. I'm proud of you, too!

And for Paul, even though he seemed to think the story could be improved by moving the whole thing to the rain forest.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BOOKS BY JULIA QUINN

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ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

Dear Reader—

“What comes first,” someone once asked me, “the characters or the plot?” I find questions like this nearly impossible to answer, since they seem to imply that there is actually some kind of method to the madness that is my writing career. The truth is, it varies from book to book. In the case of *Dancing at Midnight* my second novel, however, it was definitely the characters.

I began with Belle Blydon, who had played such a prominent role in my first novel, *Splendid*. I already knew who she was—a closet bluestocking who wants nothing more than to find true love. Her hero, however, was a little more complicated. I had already written an out-and-out romp, and I wanted to try something new. And so I created John Blackwood, a war hero haunted by memories of violence, a man who feels he does not deserve a chance at happiness. He is a tortured hero in every sense of the word.

And suddenly I found myself with a new challenge: Could I write a book with dark and serious themes but still make it warm and funny? Could I create characters with very real problems and obstacles to overcome and still make my readers chuckle?

I hope so, and I hope you enjoy *Dancing at Midnight*.

With my very best wishes



Chapter 1

Oxfordshire, England, 1816

If, one by one, you weeded all the world—

Arabella Blydon blinked. That couldn't be right. There weren't any gardeners in *The Winter's Tale*. She held the book farther from her face. Even worse. She pulled the book closer. The type on the page slowly focused.

If, one by one, you wedded all the world—

Belle sighed and leaned back against a tree trunk. That made a lot more sense. She blinked a couple of times, willing her bright blue eyes to focus on the words that lay before her on the page. They refused to obey, but she wasn't about to read with her face pressed into the book, so she squinted and plodded on.

A chilly wind passed across her, and she glanced up at the overcast sky. It was going to rain, no doubt about that, but if she were lucky she'd have another hour until the first drops fell. That was all the time she'd need to finish *The Winter's Tale*. And that would mark the end of her Grand Shakespearean Quest, the semi-academic endeavor that had occupied her spare time for nearly six months. She'd started with *All's Well that Ends Well* and proceeded alphabetically, wending her way through *Hamlet*, all the *Henrys*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and a host of other plays she hadn't even heard of before. She wasn't exactly sure why she'd done it, other than the simple fact that she liked to read, but now that the end was in sight she was damned if she was going to let a few raindrops get in her way.

Belle gulped and looked this way and that, as if afraid that someone had heard her cursing in her thoughts. She glanced back up at the sky. A beam of sunshine burst through a tiny hole in the clouds. Belle took that as a sign for optimism and plucked a chicken sandwich out of her picnic lunch. She bit into it daintily and picked up her book again. The words seemed just as unwilling to focus as before, so she moved the volume closer to her face, which she contorted in a number of different ways until she found a squint that worked.

"There you go, Arabella," she muttered. "If you can just hold this exceedingly uncomfortable position for another forty-five minutes, you should have no problem with the rest of your book."

"Of course your facial muscles will probably be quite sore by that point," drawled a voice from behind her.

Belle dropped her book and whirled her head around. Standing a few yards away was a gentleman in casual, yet elegant, attire. His hair was a rich chocolate brown and his eyes were the exact same color. He was looking down at her and her solitary picnic with an amused expression, and his languid pose indicated that he'd been watching her for some time. Belle glared at him, unable to think of anything to say but hoping that her scornful gaze would put him in his place.

It didn't seem to do the trick. In fact, he looked even more amused by her. "You need spectacles," he said simply.

"And *you* are trespassing," she retorted.

"Am I? I rather thought you were trespassing."

"I most certainly am not. This land belongs to the Duke of Ashbourne. My cousin," she added f

emphasis.

The stranger pointed to the west. "~~That~~ land belongs to the Duke of Ashbourne. The boundary that ridge over there. And thus you are trespassing."

Belle narrowed her eyes and pushed a lock of her wavy blond hair behind her ear. "Are you certain?"

"Absolutely. I realize that Ashbourne's land holdings are vast, but they are not infinite."

She shifted uncomfortably. "Oh. Well, in that case, I am very sorry for disturbing you," she said in a haughty voice. "I'll just see to my horse and be off."

"Don't be silly," he said quickly. "I hope I am not so ill-tempered that I cannot allow a lady to read under one of my trees. By all means, stay as long as you like."

Belle considered leaving anyway, but comfort won out over pride. "Thank you. I've been here for several hours and am quite ensconced."

"So I see." He smiled, but it was a small one, and Belle got the impression that he was not a man who smiled often. "Perhaps," he said, "since you will be spending the rest of the day on my land, you might introduce yourself."

Belle hesitated, unable to discern whether he was being condescending or polite. "I'm sorry. I am Lady Arabella Blydon."

"Pleased to meet you, my lady. And I am John, Lord Blackwood."

"How do you do?"

"Very well, but you still need spectacles."

Belle felt her spine stiffen. Emma and Alex had been urging her to get her eyes examined for the last month, but they were, after all, family. This John Blackwood was a perfect stranger and certainly had no right to offer her such a suggestion. "You can be sure I will take your advice under consideration," she muttered, somewhat ungraciously.

John inclined his head, a wry smile touching his lips. "What are you reading?"

"*The Winter's Tale*." Belle sat back and waited for the usual condescending comments about women and reading.

"An excellent play, but not, I think, Shakespeare's finest," John commented. "I myself am partial to *Coriolanus*. It's not very well-known, but I quite liked it. You might read that sometime."

Belle forgot to be pleased that she had met a man who was actually encouraging her to read and said, "Thank you for the suggestion, but I've read it already."

"I'm impressed," John said. "Have you read *Othello*?"

She nodded.

"The *Tempest*?"

"Yes."

John searched his brain for the most obscure Shakespearean work he could recall. "What about *The Passionate Pilgrim*?"

"Not my favorite, but I plodded through it." Belle tried but couldn't stop the smile that was creeping across her face.

He chuckled. "My compliments, Lady Arabella. I don't think I've ever even *seen* a copy of *The Passionate Pilgrim*."

Belle grinned, graciously accepting the compliment as her previous antagonism toward the man melted away. "Won't you join me for a few minutes?" she asked him, waving toward the empty expanse of blanket spread out beneath her. "I still have most of my picnic lunch, and I would be happy to share it with you."

For a moment it looked as if he would accept. He opened his mouth to say something, then let out a tiny sigh and closed it. When he finally spoke, his voice was very stiff and formal and all he said was "No, thank you." He took a couple of steps away from her and turned his head so that he could stare out across the fields.

Belle cocked her head and was about to say something further when she noticed with surprise that he limped. She wondered if he'd been injured in the peninsular war. An intriguing man, this John. She wouldn't have half minded spending an hour or so in his company. And, she had to admit, he was really quite handsome, with strong, even features, and a body which was lean and powerful in spite of his injured leg. His velvety brown eyes displayed obvious intelligence, but they also seemed hooded with pain and skepticism. Belle was starting to find him very mysterious, indeed.

"Are you certain?" she asked.

"Certain of what?" He didn't turn around.

She bristled at his rudeness. "Certain that you don't want to join me for lunch."

"Quite."

That got her attention. No one had ever before told her that he was *quite* certain he could do without her company.

Belle sat uncomfortably on her blanket, her copy of *The Winter's Tale* lying limply in her lap. There didn't seem to be anything she could say with his back half to her. And it would have been impolite to start reading again.

John suddenly turned around and cleared his throat.

"It was really too bad of you to tell me I need spectacles," she said abruptly, mostly just to get something in before he could.

"I apologize. I've never been very good at polite conversation."

"Perhaps you should converse more," she retorted.

"Were you using a different tone of voice, my lady, one might suspect that you were flirting with me."

She slammed *The Winter's Tale* shut and stood. "I can see that you were not lying. You are not dreadful at merely polite conversation. You are lacking at all forms of it."

He shrugged. "One of my many qualities."

Her mouth fell open.

"I can see that you do not subscribe to my particular brand of humor."

"I cannot imagine that many people do."

There was a pause, and then a strange, sad light appeared in his eyes. It disappeared just as quickly, and the tone of his voice sharpened as he said, "Don't come out here alone again."

Belle shoved her belongings into her satchel. "Don't worry. I shan't trespass again."

"I didn't say you couldn't come on my property. Just don't do it alone."

She had no idea how to reply to that so she merely said, "I'm going home."

He glanced up at the sky. "Yes. You probably should. It's going to rain soon. I've two or so miles to walk home myself. I shall certainly be drenched."

She glanced around. "Didn't you bring a horse?"

"Sometimes, my lady, it is better to use one's feet." He inclined his head. "It has been a pleasure."

"For you, perhaps," Belle muttered under her breath. She watched his back as he walked away from her. His limp was quite pronounced, but he moved much more quickly than she would have thought possible. She kept her gaze fixed on him until he disappeared over the horizon. As she mounted her mare, however, a compelling thought entered her head.

He limped. What kind of man was he that he preferred to walk?

John Blackwood listened to the hoofbeats of Lady Arabella's mare as she cantered off. He sighed. He'd acted like an ass.

He sighed again, this time loud with sorrow and self-loathing and pure, simple irritation. Damn. He never knew what to say to women anymore.

Belle set off back to Westonbirt, the home of her relations. Her American-born cousin Emma had married the Duke of Ashbourne a few months earlier. The newlyweds preferred the privacy of country life to London and had resided at Westonbirt almost continuously since their wedding. Of course the season was over, so no one was in London anyway. Still, Belle had a feeling that Emma and her husband would probably avoid much of London's social scene even when the next season was underway.

Belle sighed. She'd no doubt be back in London for the next season. Back at the marriage market looking for a husband. She was getting heartily sick of the entire process. She'd been through two seasons already and accumulated over a dozen proposals, but she'd rejected every one. Some of the men had been completely unsuitable, but most were decent sorts, well-connected and quite likeable. She just couldn't seem to make herself accept a man she didn't care deeply about. And now that she had a glimpse of how happy her cousin was, she knew that it would be very difficult to settle for anything less than her wildest dreams.

Belle spurred her horse into a canter as the rain began to thicken. It was almost three o'clock, and she knew that Emma would have tea ready for her when she returned. She'd been staying with Emma and her husband Alex for three weeks. A few months after Emma's wedding, Belle's parents had decided to take a holiday in Italy. Ned, their son, was back up at Oxford for his final year so he didn't need any watching over, and Emma was safely married. That left only Belle, and since Emma was now a married lady she was a suitable chaperone, so Belle went off to stay with her cousin.

Belle couldn't imagine a more pleasing arrangement. Emma was her best friend, and after all little mischief they'd gotten into together, it was quite amusing to have her as a chaperone.

Belle breathed a sigh of relief as she rode up a hill and Westonbirt rose over the horizon. The massive building was really quite graceful, with long, narrow columns of windows marching across the facade. Belle was already starting to think of it as home. She headed into the stables, handed her mare over to a groom, and made a mad dash for the house, laughing as she tried to dodge the raindrops which had started to fall at a furious rate. She stumbled up the front steps but before she could push open the heavy door, the butler opened it with a flourish.

"Thank you, Norwood," she said. "You must have been watching for me."

Norwood inclined his head.

"Norwood, has Belle returned yet?"

The feminine voice floated through the air, and Belle heard her cousin's footsteps clattering along the floor of the hallway that led to the foyer.

"It's starting to get quite wet out there." Emma turned the corner into the hall. "Oh good! You're back."

"A little wet, but none the worse for the wear," Belle said cheerily.

"I told you it was going to rain."

"Do you feel responsible for me now that you're an old married matron?"

Emma made a face which told her exactly what she thought of that. "You look like a drowned rat."

she said plainly.

Belle made an equally unpleasant face. "I'll change my clothes and come down for tea in a moment."

"In Alex's study," Emma advised. "He's joining us today."

"Oh, good. I'll be right down."

Belle headed up the stairs and through the labyrinth of hallways which led to her room. She quickly peeled off her sodden riding habit, changed into a soft blue dress, and headed back downstairs. The door to Alex's study was closed and she could hear giggling, so she wisely knocked before she entered. There was a moment of silence and then Emma called out, "Come in!"

Belle smiled to herself. She was learning more and more about this married love thing by the minute. Some chaperone Emma was turning out to be. She and Alex couldn't manage to keep their hands off each other whenever they thought no one was looking. Belle's smile grew wider. She wasn't exactly sure about the particulars of making babies, but she had a feeling all this touching had something to do with why Emma was already pregnant. Belle pushed open the door and walked into Alex's very large, very masculine study. "Good afternoon, Alex," she said. "How has your day been?"

"Drier than yours, I understand," he said, pouring some milk in his teacup and ignoring the tea entirely. "Your curls are still dripping."

Belle looked down at her shoulders. The fabric of her dress was damp from her hair. She shrugged. "Oh well, nothing to do about it, I suppose." She settled down on the sofa, and poured herself a cup of tea. "And how was your day, Emma?"

"Fairly uneventful. I've been going over various books and reports from some of our lands in Wales. It looks like there may be some sort of a problem. I'm thinking of heading out there to investigate."

"You are not," Alex growled.

"Oh really?" Emma countered.

"You aren't going anywhere for another six months," he added, glancing lovingly at his flame-haired, violet-eyed wife. "And probably not for another six after that."

"If you think I'm going to lay abed until the baby comes, you're mad in the head."

"And *you* have to learn who's in charge here."

"Well then, you—"

"Stop, stop," Belle laughed. "Enough." She shook her head. Two more stubborn people in the universe had yet to be found. They were perfect for each other. "Why don't I tell you how *my* day went?"

Emma and Alex both turned their faces to her expectantly.

Belle took another sip of her tea, letting it warm her up. "I met a rather odd man, actually."

"Oh, really?" Emma leaned forward.

Alex leaned back, his eyes glazing over with a bored expression.

"Yes. He lives near here. I think his land borders yours. His name is Lord John Blackwood. Do you know him?"

Alex shot forward. "Did you say John Blackwood?"

"It was John, Lord Blackwood, I think. Why, do you know him? John Blackwood is probably a fairly common name."

"Brown hair?"

Belle nodded.

"Brown eyes?"

She nodded again.

“About my height, medium build?”

“I guess so. He wasn’t quite as broad in the shoulders as you are, but I think he was nearly as tall.

“*Did he limp?*”

“Yes!” Belle exclaimed.

“John Blackwood. I’ll be damned,” Alex shook his head in disbelief. “And a peer now. He must have been granted a title for military service.”

“He fought in the war with you?” Emma asked.

When Alex finally responded, his green eyes were far away. “Yes,” he said softly. “He commanded his own company, but we saw each other frequently. I always wondered what happened to him. Don’t know why I didn’t try to look him up. I suppose I was afraid I’d find out he was dead.”

That certainly caught Belle’s attention. “What do you mean?”

“It was strange,” Alex said slowly. “He was an excellent soldier. There was no one you could depend on more. He was absolutely selfless. Constantly putting himself in danger to save others.”

“Why is that strange?” Emma asked. “He sounds like quite an honorable man.”

Alex turned his head to the two ladies, his expression suddenly clear. “The strange thing was that for a man who seemed to have such disregard for his own well-being, he behaved quite remarkably when he was wounded.”

“What happened?” Belle asked anxiously.

“The surgeon said that he’d have to cut off his leg. And I must say, he was rather callous about it. John was still conscious at the time, and the leech didn’t even bother to tell him directly. He just turned to his assistant and said, ‘Bring me the saw.’”

Belle shuddered, the image of John Blackwood so ill-treated surprisingly painful.

“He went crazy,” Alex continued. “I’ve never seen anything like it. He grabbed the surgeon by his shirt and pulled him down until they were nose to nose. And considering the amount of blood he lost, his grip was remarkably strong. I was going to intervene, but when I heard the tone of his voice, I held back.”

“What did he say?” Belle asked, on the edge of her seat.

“I’ll never forget it. He said, ‘If you take my leg, as God is my witness, I will hunt you down and saw off yours.’ The doctor let him be. Said he’d leave him to die if that’s what he wanted.”

“But he didn’t die,” Belle said.

“No, he didn’t. But I’m sure that was the end of his fighting days. Which was probably all for the best. He was a superb soldier, but I always got the idea that he abhorred violence.”

“How odd,” Emma murmured.

“Yes, well, he was an interesting man. I quite liked him. Had an excellent sense of humor when he chose to exhibit it. But he was more often than not silent. And he had quite the strictest sense of honor I have ever experienced.”

“Really, Alex,” Emma teased. “No one could be more honorable than you.”

“Ah, my lovely, loyal wife.” Alex leaned forward and dropped a kiss on Emma’s forehead.

Belle slumped back in her seat. She wanted to hear more about John Blackwood, but there didn’t seem any polite way to ask Alex to say more about him. It rather irritated her to admit it, but she couldn’t deny that she was incredibly interested in the unusual man.

Belle had always been very practical, very pragmatic, and the one thing she had always refused to do was deceive herself. John Blackwood had intrigued her this afternoon, but now that she knew a bit of his history, she was fascinated. Every little thing about him, from the quirk of his brow to the way

the wind ruffled his slightly wavy hair suddenly took on new meaning. And his insistence upon walking made much more sense. After fighting so fiercely to save his leg, it was only natural that he want to use it. He struck her as a man of principles. A man you could trust, depend upon. A man whose passions ran deep.

Belle was so surprised by the turn of her thoughts, she actually jerked her head back a little. Emma noticed her movement and inquired, "Are you all right, Belle?"

"What? Oh, just a little headache. More like a twinge, actually. It's gone now."

"Oh."

"It's probably from all my reading," Belle continued, even though Emma seemed perfectly willing to let the subject drop. "I have to try very hard to make the words focus these days. I think that perhaps I ought to have my eyes examined."

If Emma was surprised by her cousin's sudden admission that her eyesight was not quite what it should be, she made no mention of it. "Excellent. There is a very good doctor in the village. We'll see what he can do."

Belle smiled and picked up her tea. It was getting cold. And then Emma said a marvelous thing.

"You know what we ought to do," the duchess said to her husband. "We ought to invite this John Blake person—"

"John Blackwood," Belle interjected quickly.

"Sorry, this John Blackwood person over for supper. With Belle here we'll be evenly matched and we won't have to go out hunting for an extra woman."

Alex put down his glass. "An excellent idea, my love. I think I'd rather like to renew our friendship."

"That settles it, then," Emma said matter-of-factly. "Shall I send him a note or would you rather go 'round yourself to invite him in person?"

"I think I'll go. I'm eager to see him again, and besides, it would be rude of me not to consider the fact that he saved my life."

Emma paled. "What?"

One corner of Alex's lips tugged upwards in a sheepish smile. "Just once, my love, and there's no point in getting upset over it now."

The look that the couple shared at that moment was so tender that it was almost painful for Belle to look at them. Excusing herself quietly, she slipped out of the study and headed upstairs to her room where the last few pages of *The Winter's Tale* awaited her.

John Blackwood had saved Alex's life? She could scarcely fathom it. It seemed that there was more to their new neighbor than his somewhat churlish exterior.

John Blackwood had secrets. Belle was sure of it. She'd wager that his life story put Shakespeare to shame. All she had to do was a little investigating. This excursion to the country might prove more exciting than she'd anticipated.

Of course, she wasn't going to be able to uncover any of his secrets until she befriended him. And he'd made it rather clear that he didn't much like her.

It was damned irritating, that.

Chapter 2

Belle woke up the next morning to the rather unpleasant sound of Emma retching. Turning over from her bed, she opened her eyes to see her cousin crouched over a chamber pot. Belle grimaced at the sight and muttered, “What a lovely way to start off one’s day.”

“And good morning to you, too,” Emma snapped, standing up and walking over to a pitcher of water which had been left out on a nearby table. She poured herself a glass and took a gulp.

Belle sat up and watched her cousin swish the water around in her mouth. “I don’t suppose you could take care of this sort of thing in your own room,” she finally said.

Emma shot her an annoyed look as she gargled.

“Morning sickness is normal, you know,” Belle continued in a matter-of-fact tone. “I don’t think you would put Alex off if you got sick in your *own* room.”

Emma’s expression turned positively peevisish as she spit the water out into the chamber pot. “I didn’t come here to avoid my husband. Believe me, he’s seen me sick plenty of times in the last few weeks.” She sighed. “I think I threw up on his foot the other day.”

Belle’s cheeks pinkened in a sympathy blush for her cousin. “How awful,” she murmured.

“I know, but the fact of the matter is I came in here to see if you were awake, and I just got sick along the way.” Emma turned a little green and suddenly sat down.

Belle got up hurriedly and pulled on a dressing gown. “Do you want me to get you anything?”

Emma shook her head and took a deep breath, valiantly trying to keep the contents of her stomach down.

“You’re not giving me a lot to look forward to about marriage,” Belle quipped.

Emma smiled weakly. “It’s mostly better than this.”

“I certainly hope so.”

“I thought I could keep down the tea and plain biscuits I ate for breakfast,” Emma said with a sigh. “But I was wrong.”

“It’s easy to forget that you’re expecting,” Belle said kindly, hoping to buoy her cousin’s spirits. “You’re still so slender.”

Emma flashed her a grateful smile. “It is very kind of you to say so. I must say, this is a new experience for me, and it is all very strange.”

“Are you nervous? You haven’t mentioned anything to me.”

“Not nervous exactly, more—hmmm, I don’t quite know how to describe it. But Alex’s sister is due in three weeks, and we are planning to visit her the week after next. I hope to be there for the birth. Sophie has assured me that we are welcome. I am sure I won’t feel so nervous once I know what is expected of me,” Emma’s voice was laced with more hope than certainty.

Belle’s experience with birth was limited to a litter of puppies she had seen her brother deliver when she was twelve, but nonetheless, she was not at all certain that Emma would feel more at ease about the procedure after witnessing Sophie having her baby. Belle smiled weakly at her cousin and murmured something unintelligible which was meant to convey her agreement, and then shut her mouth.

After a few moments, Emma’s complexion returned to its normal color, and she sighed. “There.

feel much better now. It's amazing how quickly this sickness passes. It's the only thing that makes bearable."

A maid entered, carrying a tray with morning chocolate and rolls. She set the tray down on the bed and the two ladies positioned themselves on either side of it.

Belle watched as Emma hesitantly took a sip of her chocolate. "Emma, could I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"And you'll be frank in your answer?"

One corner of Emma's mouth tipped up. "When have you ever known me not to be frank?"

"Am I not likeable?"

Emma managed to grab her napkin just in time to avoid spitting out her chocolate all over Belle's sheets. "Excuse me?"

"I don't think I'm not likeable. I mean, I think most people like me."

"Yes," Emma said slowly. "Most do. Everyone does. I don't think I've ever met anyone who *dislike* me like you."

"Just so," Belle agreed. "There are probably a few who don't care about my existence one way or another, but I think it's rather rare for someone to actively *dislike* me."

"Who dislikes you, Belle?"

"Your new neighbor. John Blackwood."

"Oh, come now. You didn't speak with him for longer than five minutes, did you?"

"No, but—"

"Then he couldn't have taken you into dislike that quickly."

"I don't know. I rather think he did."

"I'm sure you're mistaken."

Belle shook her head, a perplexed expression on her face. "I don't think so."

"Would it be so terrible if he didn't like you?"

"I just don't like the idea of someone not liking me. Does that make me terribly selfish?"

"No, but—"

"I'm generally considered to be a nice person."

"Yes, you are, but—"

Belle squared her shoulders. "This is unacceptable."

Emma choked back laughter. "What do you plan to do?"

"I suppose I have to make him like me."

"I say, Belle, are you *interested* in this man?"

"No, of course not," Belle replied, rather quickly. "I just don't understand why he finds me so repugnant."

Emma shook her head, unable to believe this rather bizarre turn of conversation. "Well, you'll be able to work your wiles on him soon. With all of the men in London who have fallen in love with you without the least bit of provocation on your part, I can't imagine you won't find success in getting that Blackwood fellow to fall in *like* with you."

"Hmmm," Belle murmured. She looked up. "When did you say he's coming to dinner?"

Lord Blackwood may not have been born a lord, but he did come from an aristocratic, albeit impoverished, family. But John had the misfortune of being the seventh of seven children, a position which almost guaranteed that none of life's favors would come his way. His parents, the seventh Earl

and Countess of Westborough, certainly hadn't intended to neglect their youngest child, but they were, after all, five ahead of him.

Damien was the eldest, and as the heir, he was cosseted and given every advantage that his parents could afford. A year later, Sebastian came along, and since he was so close to Damien in age, he was able to share in most of the perks that come with being the heir to an earldom. The earl and countess were nothing if not pragmatic, and given the childhood mortality rate, they were aware that Sebastian had quite a good chance of becoming the eighth Earl of Westborough. Soon after, Julianna, Christina, and Ariana arrived in rapid succession, and as it was apparent at a very young age that all three would become beauties, much attention was paid to them. Advantageous marriages could do much to fill the family coffers.

A few years later a stillborn boy arrived. No one was particularly happy about the loss, but then again, no one grieved overmuch. Five attractive and reasonably intelligent children seemed an abundance of riches, and truth be told, another baby would have been simply another mouth to feed. The Blackwoods may have been living in a magnificent old house, but it was a trial each month just to pay the bills. And it certainly never occurred to the earl to try to *earn* a living.

But then tragedy struck, and the earl was killed when his carriage overturned in a rainstorm. At the tender age of ten, Damien found himself with a title. The family scarcely had time to mourn when, much to everyone's surprise, Lady Westborough discovered that she was once again with child. And in the spring of 1787, she produced one last baby. The effort was exhausting, and she never quite regained her strength. And so, tired and irritable, not to mention more than a little worried about the family finances, she took one look at her seventh child, sighed, and said, "I suppose we'll just call him John. I'm too tired to think of anything better."

And after that somewhat inauspicious entry into the world, John was—for the lack of a better word—forgotten.

His family had little patience with him, and he spent far more time in the company of tutors than in family relations. He was sent off to Eton and Oxford, not out of any great concern for his schooling, but rather because that was what good families did for their sons, even the youngest ones who were irrelevant to dynastic lineages.

In 1808, however, when John was in his final year at Oxford, an opportunity arose. England found herself entangled in political and military affairs on the Iberian peninsula, and men of all backgrounds were rushing to join the army. John saw the military as an area where a man might make something of himself, and he presented the idea to his brother. Damien agreed, seeing it as a way to honorably get his brother off his hands, and he bought a commission for John.

Soldiering came easily. He was an excellent rider and quite handy with both swords and firearms. He took some risks that he knew he should have avoided, but amidst the horrors of war, it became apparent that there was no way he could possibly survive the carnage. And if by some stroke of fate he managed to come through the conflict with his body intact, he knew that his soul would not be so lucky.

Four years passed, and still John managed to surprise himself by escaping death. And then he took a bullet in his knee and found himself on a boat back to England. Sweet, green, peaceful England. Somehow didn't seem real to him. Time passed quickly as his leg healed, but truth be told, he remembered very little of his recuperation. He spent much of the time drunk, unable to deal with the thought of being a cripple.

Then, much to his surprise, he was made a baron for his valor, ironic after all those years of his family reminding him that he was not a titled gentleman. That was a turning point for him, and he

realized that he now had something substantial to pass on to a future generation. With a renewed sense of purpose, he decided to get his life in order.

Four years after that he was still limping, but at least he was limping on his own land. The end of the war for him had come a little sooner than expected, and he'd taken the price of his commission and begun investing. His choices proved extremely profitable, and after only five years, he'd saved enough money to purchase a small country estate.

He had finally taken it on himself to walk the perimeter of his property the day before when he ran into Lady Arabella Blydon. He had been thinking about his encounter with her for quite some time. He probably should go over to Westonbirt and apologize to her for his rude behavior. Lord knew she wouldn't come over to Bletchford Manor after the way he'd treated her.

John winced. He was definitely going to have to come up with a new name for the place. It was a nice house. Comfortable. Gracious but not palatial, and easily served by a small staff which was fortunate, as he couldn't afford to employ a fleet of servants.

So there he was. He had a home—one that was his alone, not some place that he knew would never be his owing to the existence of five elder siblings. He had a nice income—a trifle depleted now that he'd bought a house, but he was fairly confident of his financial abilities after his earlier successes.

John checked his pocket watch. It was half past two in the afternoon, a good time to examine some of his fields to the west to see about farming. He wanted to make the soon-to-be-renamed Bletchford Manor as profitable as possible. A quick glance out the window told him that there wouldn't be a repeat of the previous day's downpour and he left his study, heading upstairs to fetch his hat.

He didn't get very far before Buxton, the aged butler who'd come with the house, stopped him. "You have a caller, my lord," he intoned.

Surprised, John halted in his tracks. "Who is it, Buxton?"

"The Duke of Ashbourne, my lord. I took the liberty of showing him the blue salon."

John broke into a smile. "Ashbourne's here. Splendid." He hadn't realized that his old army friend lived so close when he'd bought Bletchford Manor, but it was an added bonus. He turned around and headed back down the stairs before coming to a bewildered halt in the hall. "Hell, Buxton," he groaned. "Which one is the blue salon?"

"Second door on your left, my lord."

John made his way down the hall and opened the door. Just as he thought, there wasn't a single piece of blue furniture in the room. Alex stood by the window, looking out over the fields which bordered his own property.

"Trying to figure out how you can convince me that the apple orchard is on your side of the border?" John joked.

Alex turned around. "Blackwood. It's damned good to see you. And the apple orchard is on my side of the border."

John quirked a brow. "Maybe I've been trying to figure out how to fleece *you* out of it."

Alex smiled. "How have you been? And why haven't you stopped by to say hello? I didn't even know you'd bought this place until Belle told me yesterday afternoon."

So they called her Belle. It suited her. And she'd been talking about him. John felt absurdly pleased about that even though he rather doubted she'd had anything nice to say. "You seem to forget that one is not supposed to call upon a duke unless the duke has done so first."

"Really, Blackwood, I would think we'd be beyond the trivialities of etiquette at this point. Any man who has saved my life is welcome to call upon me any time he likes."

John flushed slightly, remembering the time he had shot a man who had a knife poised to plunge

into Alex's back. "Anyone would have done the same," he said softly.

~~One corner of Alex's mouth tilted up as he remembered the men who had lunged at John as he~~ took his aim. John had taken a knife wound in his arm for his bravery. "No," Alex said finally. "I don't think that anyone would have done the same." He straightened. "But enough talk of war. I prefer not to dwell upon it myself. How have you been?"

John motioned to a chair, and Alex sat down. "The same as anyone else, I suppose. Would you like a drink?"

Alex nodded, and John brought him a glass of whiskey. "Obviously not quite the same, Lord Blackwood."

"Oh, that. Got made a baron. Baron Blackwood." John shot Alex a jaunty grin. "Has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

"A very nice ring."

"And how has your life changed in the last four years?"

"Hadn't changed much at all, I suppose, until the last six months."

"Really?"

"I went and got myself married," Alex said with a sheepish smile.

"Did you now?" John raised his glass of whiskey in a silent toast.

"Her name is Emma. She's Belle's cousin."

John wondered if Alex's wife looked anything like her cousin. If so, he could easily see how she would have caught the duke's attention. "I don't suppose she has also read the entire works of Shakespeare?"

Alex let out a short laugh. "Actually she started to, but I've been keeping her busy lately."

John raised his eyebrows over the double meaning of that comment.

Alex caught his expression immediately. "I've got her managing my estates. She has quite a head for figures, actually. She can add and subtract much faster than I can."

"Brains run in the family, I see."

Alex wondered how John had learned so much about Belle in such a short time but didn't say anything. "Yes, well, that may be the only thing the two of them have in common, besides the uncanny ability to get exactly what they want without your even realizing it."

"Oh?"

"Emma's quite headstrong," Alex said with a sigh. But it was a comfortable, happy sigh.

"And her cousin isn't?" John asked. "She struck me as quite formidable."

"No, no, Belle has quite a strong will, don't get me wrong. But it's not quite the same as Emma. My wife is so stubborn she'll often plunge herself into situations without quite thinking about it first. Belle isn't like that. She's very practical. Very pragmatic. She's got this insatiable curiosity. It's damned difficult to keep a secret around her, but I must say, I quite like her. After seeing some of the hellish situations of my friends, I consider myself quite fortunate in my in-laws."

Alex realized that he was speaking far more openly than he normally would with a friend whom he hadn't seen in years, but he supposed that there was something about war that forges an indestructible bond between men, and it was probably for that reason that he was talking with John as if the last few years had never passed.

Or it also could have been that John was a very good listener. He always had been, Alex remembered. "But enough about my new family," he said suddenly. "You'll meet them soon enough. How are you? You managed to avoid my questions rather neatly."

John chuckled. "Same as ever, I suppose, except now I've got a title."

“And a home.”

“And a home. I bought this place by investing and reinvesting the price of my commission.”

Alex let out a low whistle. “You must have quite the golden touch in financial matters. We should talk about it someday. I could probably learn a thing or two from you.”

“The secret to financial success is not difficult, actually.”

“Really? Pray tell, what is it?”

“Common sense.”

Alex let out a laugh. “Something I fear I’ve been lacking these last few months, but I’m afraid that’s what love does to a man. Listen, why don’t you come over to dine soon? I told my wife about you, and she’s very eager to meet you. And of course you already know Belle.”

“I’d like that,” John said. And in a rare show of emotion, he added, “I think it will be very nice to have some friends in the district. Thank you for stopping by.”

Alex looked at his old friend intently, and in a flash he saw just how lonely John really was. But a second later, John shuttered his gaze, and his expression adopted its usual inscrutability. “Very well then,” Alex said courteously. “How about in two days’ time? We don’t keep town hours out here, so we’ll probably dine around seven.”

John nodded his head.

“Excellent. We’ll see you then.” Alex stood up and shook John’s hand. “I’m glad our paths crossed again.”

“As am I.” John escorted Alex out of the house to the stables where his horse was waiting. With a friendly nod, Alex mounted and rode away.

John walked slowly back into the house, smiling to himself as he looked up at his new home. When he reached the hall, however, Buxton intercepted him.

“This arrived for you, my lord, while you were conversing with his grace.” He handed John an envelope on a silver tray.

John raised his eyebrows as he unfolded the note.

I am in England.

How strange. John turned the envelope over in his hand. His name was not written on it anywhere. “Buxton?” he called out.

The butler, who had been on his way to the kitchen, turned around and returned to John’s side.

“When this arrived, what did the messenger say?”

“Just that he had a note for the master of the house.”

“He didn’t mention my name specifically?”

“No, my lord, I don’t think so. It was a child who delivered it, actually. I don’t think he was more than eight or nine.”

John gave the paper one last speculative glance and then shrugged. “It’s probably for the previous owners.” He crumpled it in his hand and tossed it aside. “I certainly have no idea what it’s about.”

Later that night as John was eating dinner, he thought about Belle. As he nursed a glass of whiskey over the pages of *The Winter’s Tale*, he thought about her. He crawled into bed, and he thought about her.

She was beautiful. That much was irrefutable, but he didn’t think that was the reason she pervaded his thoughts. There had been a gleam in those bright blue eyes. A gleam of intelligence and...compassion. She’d tried to befriend him before he’d gone and completely foiled her attempt.

He shook his head, as if to banish her from his thoughts. He knew better than to think about women before bed. Closing his eyes, he sent up a prayer for dreamless sleep.

He was in Spain. It was a hot day, but his company was in good spirits; no fighting for the last week.

They had settled into a small town, nearly a month ago. The locals were, for the most part, glad to have them. The soldiers brought money, mostly to the tavern, but everyone felt a little more prosperous when the English were in town.

As usual, John was drunk. Anything to wipe out the screams that rang in his ears and the blood that he always felt on his hands, no matter how often he washed them. Another few drinks, he judged, and he'd be well on his way to oblivion.

"Blackwood."

He looked up and nodded at the man settling across the table from him. "Spencer."

George Spencer picked up the bottle. "Do you mind?"

John shrugged.

Spencer splashed some of the liquid into the glass he'd brought over with him. "Do you have any idea when we're getting out of this hellhole?"

"I prefer this hellhole, as you call it, to the deeper one on the battlefield."

Spencer glanced at a serving girl across the room and licked his lips before turning back to John and saying, "Never would have took you for a coward, Blackwood."

John shot back another glass of whiskey. "Not a coward, Spencer. Just a man."

"Aren't we all." Spencer's attention was still focused on the girl, who couldn't have been more than thirteen. "What do you think of that one, eh?"

John just shrugged again, not feeling especially communicative.

The girl, whose name he had learned during this past month was Ana, came over and set a plate of food in front of him. He thanked her in Spanish. She nodded and smiled, but before she could leave, Spencer had pulled her onto his lap.

"Aren't you a nice piece?" he drawled, his hand creeping up and covering her barely mature breast.

"No," she said in broken English. "I—"

"Leave her alone," John said sharply.

"Christ, Blackwood, she's just a —"

"Leave her alone."

"You're an ass sometimes, did you know that?" Spencer pushed Ana off of his lap, but not before giving her backside a vicious pinch.

John forked a bite of rice into his mouth, chewed, swallowed, and said, "She's a child, Spencer."

Spencer flexed his hand. "Not the way I felt it."

John just shook his head, not wanting to have to deal with him. "Just leave her alone."

Spencer stood up abruptly. "I gotta go piss."

John watched him leave and turned back to his supper. He'd not taken more than three bites before Ana's mother appeared at the table.

"Señor Blackwood," she said, speaking in a mix of English and Spanish she knew he understood. "That man—he touch my Ana. It must stop."

John blinked a few times, trying to rid his mind of its alcoholic haze. "Has he been bothering her for long?"

“All week, Señor. All week. She no like it. She frightened.”

John felt disgust roiling the contents of his stomach.

“Don’t worry, Señora,” he assured her. “I’ll make sure he leaves her alone. She’ll be safe from my company.”

The woman bowed her head. “Thank you, Señor Blackwood. Your word comforts me.” She returned to the kitchen where, John presumed, she would spend the rest of the evening cooking.

He went back to work on his meal, downing another glass of whiskey along with it. Closer and closer to oblivion. He craved it these days. Anything to wipe his mind free of the death and the dying.

Spencer returned, wiping his hands on a towel as he entered. “Still eating, Blackwood?” he asked.

“You always did have a penchant for stating the obvious. “

Spencer scowled. “Eat your slop then, if that’s what you want. I’m going off in search of entertainment.”

John raised a brow as if to say, “Here?”

“This place is ripe, I think.” Spencer’s eyes gleamed as he swaggered up the stairs and out of sight.

John sighed, glad to be rid of this man who had always been such an annoyance in his company. He’d never liked Spencer, but he was a decent soldier, and England needed all of those she could get her hands on.

He finished his meal and pushed the plate across the table. The food had been tasty, but nothing seemed to satisfy him anymore. Perhaps another glass of whiskey.

Oh, now he was drunk. Really drunk. There were, he supposed, still a few things for which to thank the Lord.

He let his head slump down toward the table. Ana’s mother had been quite nervous, hadn’t she? Her face, lined with worry and fear, floated through his mind. And Ana, poor child, she couldn’t like having these men around. Especially one like Spencer.

He heard a thump come from the floor upstairs. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Spencer. Oh, yes, that’s who he was thinking about. Pain in the ass, he was. Always bothering the locals, caring for nothing but his own amusement.

Another thump.

What was that he’d said—he was going off in search of entertainment. That was rather like him.

Another odd noise—this one sounded like a woman’s cry. John looked around. Didn’t anyone else hear this? No one seemed to react. Maybe it was because he was closest to the stairs.

This place is ripe, I think.

John rubbed his eyes. Something wasn’t right.

He stood, bracing himself against the table to ease the nausea rocking his body. Why did he have this odd sense that something was amiss?

Another thump. Another cry.

He walked slowly toward the stairs. What was wrong? The noise grew louder as he made his way along the second-floor hallway.

And then he heard it again. This time it was clear. “Noooooooooooo!” Ana’s voice.

John sobered in an instant. He burst through the door, knocking it off one of its hinges. “Oh, God, no,” he cried. He could barely see Ana, her slight form completely beneath Spencer, who was pumping her relentlessly into her.

But he could hear her weeping. “Noooo, noooo, please, noooo.”

John didn’t pause to think. Crazed, he pulled Spencer up off the girl and threw him against the

wall.

~~“What the hell—Blackwood?” Spencer’s face was as mottled and red as his member.~~

“You bastard,” John breathed, his hand coming to rest on his gun.

“For God’s sake, she’s just some Spanish whore.”

“She is a child, Spencer.”

“She’s a whore now.” Spencer turned around to retrieve his breeches.

John’s hand tightened on his gun.

“That’s all she ever would have been.”

John lifted his gun. “His majesty’s soldiers do not rape.” He shot Spencer in the ass.

Spencer howled and went down, letting loose a swift stream of expletives. John immediately went to Ana, as if there was something he could possibly do to erase her pain and humiliation.

Her face was blank. Completely devoid of expression ...

Until she saw him.

She cringed. She turned away from John in horror. He staggered backward at the force of her terror. He hadn’t... It hadn’t been him... He’d meant to...

Ana’s mother burst into the room. “Mother of God,” she cried out. “What is —Oh, my Ana. My Ana.” She ran to her daughter, who was now weeping uncontrollably.

John stood in the middle of the room, dazed, in shock, and still drunk with whiskey. “I didn’t...” he whispered. “It wasn’t me.”

There was so much noise. Spencer was screaming and cursing in pain. Ana was crying. Her mother was railing at God. John couldn’t seem to move.

Ana’s mother turned around, her face full of more hatred than John had ever seen in a single person. “You did this,” she hissed, and spit in his face.

“No. It wasn’t me. I didn’t...”

“You swore you’d protect her.” The woman seemed to be trying to restrain herself from attacking him. “It might as well have been you.”

John blinked. “No.”

It might as well have been you.

It might as well have been you.

It might as well...

John sat up in bed, his body soaked with sweat. Had it really been five years? He laid back down trying to forget that Ana had killed herself three days later.

Chapter 3

When Belle arrived at breakfast the next morning, she discovered that neither Emma nor Alex were up yet. This was rather surprising because Emma tended to be something of a morning person. Belle guessed that Alex was keeping her abed for his own purposes and wondered if a woman could get pregnant while she was already pregnant.

“For someone who is usually considered quite bright,” she muttered to herself, “you know pathetically little about the important things.”

“Did you say something, my lady?” a footman immediately inquired.

“No, no, I was just talking to myself,” she replied, rolling her eyes at her behavior. If she kept this up, half of Westonbirt would think she was daft.

She helped herself to a bit of breakfast, glancing through the day-old newspaper that was sitting out on the table for Alex’s perusal. The newlyweds still hadn’t arrived by the time she finished her omelet. Belle sighed, trying to decide how to occupy herself.

She could raid Alex’s library, she supposed, but for once she didn’t feel like reading. The sun was shining brightly, a rare treat during this exceptionally rainy autumn, and she suddenly wished that she weren’t alone, that Alex or Emma had decided not to sleep in that morning, that she had someone with whom to share the fine weather. But there was no one. Except—Belle shook her head. She couldn’t just prance over to Lord Blackwood’s house and say hello.

But then again, why couldn’t she?

Well, for one thing, he didn’t like her.

Which, she countered, was precisely the reason she ought to pay him a visit. She wasn’t going to be able to rectify the situation if they never saw each other again.

Belle raised her eyebrows as she pondered the thought. If she brought along a maid as a chaperon she wouldn’t be so far outside the bounds of propriety. Well, actually she would, but no one was about, and Lord Blackwood didn’t strike her as overly high in the instep. Making her decision, she wandered over to the kitchen to see if Mrs. Goode could spare some scones. They would make a lovely breakfast. Perhaps Lord Blackwood hadn’t yet eaten.

She’d be fine. This wasn’t London, after all. Forty gossips would not be wagging their tongues later that evening at her scandalous behavior. And she wasn’t going to do anything dreadful. She just wanted to greet their new neighbor properly. Mostly she just wanted to see what his house looked like, she told herself. What was it called? Alex had told her the night before. Bletchwood Place? Blumle Manor? Blasphemous Burg? Belle laughed to herself. It was something hideous, that’s all she remembered.

She wandered down to the kitchen, where Mrs. Goode was only too happy to arrange a basket. Belle soon departed, laden with fresh jams and homemade scones.

She strode purposefully to the stables where she mounted Amber, her mare. She wasn’t quite certain where John’s house was located, but she knew it was to the east. If she stuck to the roads and kept heading toward the sun, she’d be bound to run into it eventually.

She set off at an easy trot as she headed down the long drive that led from Westonbirt to the main road. Emma’s lady’s maid knew how to ride, and she kept pace alongside her. They turned east on the

main road, and sure enough, after about a quarter of an hour, they happened upon a drive that looked as if it led to another house. After a few moments Belle found herself in a wide open clearing, at the center of which stood an elegant stone house.

It was small by the standards of aristocracy, but it was stylish and obviously well-built. It suited her. Belle smiled and urged her mare forward. She didn't see any stables, so she saw to her horse herself, tying it to a tree. Emma's maid did the same. "Sorry, Amber," Belle murmured and then took a deep breath and marched up the front steps.

She picked up the giant brass knocker and let it fall with a resounding thud. After a few moments a white-haired, elderly man answered the door. Belle took him to be the butler. "Good morning," she said in cultured tones. "Is this the home of Lord Blackwood?"

The butler raised an eyebrow. "It is."

Belle offered him her brightest smile. "Excellent. Please inform him that Lady Arabella Blyden has come to call."

Buxton didn't doubt for a moment that she was a lady, not with her fine clothes and aristocratic accent. With a regal nod of his head, he showed her to an airy room decorated in shades of cream and blue.

Belle was silent as she watched the butler disappear up the stairs. Then she turned to Emma's maid and said, "Perhaps you should, ah, go to the kitchens and see if there are any, ah, other servants about."

The maid's eyes widened slightly at being dismissed, but she nodded and left the room.

John was still in bed when the butler arrived, having decided to treat himself to some much-needed rest. Buxton entered silently, then put his mouth very, very close to his master's ear. "You have a visitor, my lord," he said loudly.

John swatted the butler with a pillow and reluctantly came awake. "A what?" he asked groggily.

"A visitor."

"Good Lord, what time is it?"

"Nine o'clock, my lord."

John staggered out of bed and grabbed a robe to cover his naked body. "Who the hell comes calling at nine in the morning?"

"Lady Arabella Blyden, my lord."

John whirled around in shock. "Who?"

"I believe I said Lady—"

"I know what you said," John snapped, his temper shortened by his rather unceremonious awakening. "What the hell is she doing here?"

"I am sure I do not know, my lord, but she did ask for you."

John sighed, wondering when Buxton would realize that every question did not require a response. He sighed again. He didn't doubt for a moment that the sly old butler knew very well that John's remarks had been hypothetical. "I suppose I have to get dressed," he finally said.

"I should think so, my lord. I took the liberty of informing Wheatley that you would require his services."

John turned around and headed to his dressing room. Like Buxton, the valet had also come with the house, and John had to admit that it was not difficult to get used to the luxury. In no time, he was dressed in form-fitting biscuit-colored breeches, a crisp white shirt, and navy blue coat. He deliberately ignored his cravat. If Lady Arabella required a cravat, she shouldn't have come calling at nine in the morning.

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