

CHAPTER ONE

“No. Absolutely not.”

Warwick Stone glared at his father, Neville, but Neville could never be shamed or cowed. He glared back, his expression bland and infuriating.

“Why would you automatically refuse?” Neville asked. “You haven’t heard me out.”

“And I don’t intend to *hear* you. Hunter told me you were about to start nagging.” Hunter was Warwick’s older brother. “Your badgering worked on him, but it won’t work on me.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes, I’m very sure.”

They were sequestered in a parlor at his father’s newly-inherited town house, seated side by side on comfortable chairs. A warm fire burned in the grate to ward off the evening chill. For once, they were alone, which was odd. They were rich and entitled, so they carried on extravagantly, liking to loaf and wager at their favorite clubs and haunts. It meant they were constantly surrounded by hordes of people.

Neville, especially, like being in a crowd and the center of attention, so it was an unusual moment, and Warwick was trying to cherish it. But he and Neville had a difficult relationship, so their interactions were never smooth.

“Our situation has changed,” Neville said.

“I realize that fact. I’m not a dunce.”

“That might be debatable.”

Warwick had just returned from an extended holiday in Scotland where he’d reveled outrageously. The end of the stay had culminated with his winning a thousand pounds in a reckless hundred-mile horse race. His friends were still agog over it. It was the sort of antic he

and his male kin were renowned for pursuing, and over the centuries, it had delivered all sorts of ruin.

He became more absurd by the month, and it was really quite amazing that he'd lived to be twenty-nine. Yet if he was negligent and foolish, he blamed Neville.

His father had been a worthless parent, and he'd provided no guidance or supervision whatsoever. Warwick's mother had died when he was small, and he and his two brothers, Hunter and Sheridan, had grown up at Neville's country estate of Stone Manor, while Neville had caroused in London.

He'd paid servants to raise them, and they'd been a lazy, unscrupulous bunch who'd had little interest in managing, and no ability to control, three rambunctious boys. Warwick and his brothers had wandered like a trio of abandoned wolf pups. There had been no challenge they didn't accept and no feat they wouldn't attempt.

As adolescents, then adults, they'd simply continued their rash routines, but their deeds were ever more dangerous. They had too much time on their hands, and they were much too brave. They loved trouble and mischief, and they exhibited an irrepressible amount of daring-do that could be astonishing.

Their impulsive conduct was only matched by their immoral tendencies. They possessed all of Neville's worst traits and very few of his good ones. Actually, Neville didn't have many *good* traits. He gambled and chased loose women, and he rarely engaged in any other endeavors. Even though he was fifty, he was still a debauched wretch—and he was proud of it.

"I'm an earl now," Neville said.

"You don't have to remind me."

"It seems as if I should."

“Are you planning to lecture me about how we have responsibilities?”

“Yes. We have a title and a line to protect, and I expect you to help me protect them.”

Warwick bristled with exasperation. “You never cared about any of this.”

“I’m beginning to care. I *have* to care.”

To the bewilderment of nearly every person in the British Empire, Neville was suddenly Earl of Swindon. Hunter, as the oldest son, was Viscount Marston and would be the next earl. Warwick and Sheridan weren’t anybody, and Warwick was happy to keep it that way.

Neville had never imagined he’d be earl, so he’d constantly wallowed in vice and sloth, having had no future elevation to weigh him down.

He’d had three brothers, and they’d sired a slew of sons, but they’d proved to be an unlucky and frail lot. One sibling had died, then another. The nephews had been wiped out too, from accident and disease. The last of them had perished during the prior year, and *voila!* Like magic, the family’s wealth and vast properties had been dumped on Neville.

Neville had to be viewed as a hideous custodian of such a huge windfall, but with it being bestowed, he was acting lucid and reliable. Despite *his* abrupt transformation though, Warwick wasn’t fretting over any of it.

Neville had pressured Hunter to wed immediately and produce some heirs. Hunter hadn’t been inclined to oblige him, but then, he’d met Hannah Graves, and somehow, he’d become a besotted swain. After a summer of rough events and dicey situations, he’d decided he couldn’t live without her.

They’d been married the previous week, in a quick ceremony with a Special License.

Hunter had warned Warwick that Neville felt an inexplicable compulsion for his sons to wed in a hurry. The fact that they’d never wanted to be husbands, that they were devoted cads

with disgusting habits, was irrelevant. They had to shuck off their bachelor freedom and tie the knot.

“Why don’t *you* marry again?” Warwick asked. “If we need to pack a nursery, why don’t you lead the parade? There’s nothing stopping you.”

“I did my duty to King and Country by siring three boys. It’s your turn.”

“I don’t understand how it’s my turn at all. In my estimation, I have no role to play in any of this.”

“What if Hunter drops dead tomorrow? You’d be in line after me.”

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Warwick said. “I’ll make sure he survives.”

“You think this is a joke.”

“No, I don’t. I simply fail to see how I’ve assumed any burden. If you’re desperate for more heirs, latch onto another debutante. Every girl in the kingdom would jump at the chance to have you.”

That was likely a lie. No sane father would chain his daughter to Neville. Then again, a title erased many sins.

Neville had already been wed twice and had driven both wives to early graves. The first had been Warwick’s mother. She’d been an appropriate aristocrat’s daughter, but also a pious, bitter harpy, so she’d been exactly the wrong bride for Neville.

Warwick had scant memories of his younger years, but those that remained were filled with his mother shouting, throwing things, and pitching fits because Neville had been such an untrustworthy libertine.

Because of their relentless quarrels, he’d spent his time in the city and had rarely shown his face at Stone Manor, so he’d mostly been a stranger to his children.

His second wife, Susan, had been a pretty, but frivolous ninny, thirty years his junior. He'd seduced her, and when her relatives had learned of her ruination, he hadn't been able to buy himself out of trouble. They'd dragged him to the altar.

She'd been thrilled to glom onto him, but no one had told her that he was a lazy, depraved rat. It had been another union filled with shouting and the pitching of fits, in which Neville had never participated. He simply wouldn't fight with a female.

Susan had recently passed away, so Neville was a widower again. He was a hale and vigorous fifty, and he had the health and wealth to be a husband, but he'd never consider it. No, he'd merely whine and insist his sons should bite the bullet instead.

"I still can't believe Hunter is married," Neville said.

"I never thought I'd live to see it."

To Warwick's great astonishment, Neville pulled a kerchief out of his coat and dabbed at his eyes. Warwick was aghast. "What are you doing? Don't tell me you're crying over Hunter's finally being leg-shackled."

"I'm happy for him, and he loves Hannah so much."

"Are you turning sentimental on me? How am I to assess such a stunning change of tune?"

"I'm becoming a romantic in my old age."

"No, you're not. Don't pretend. You don't think *love* exists, and you definitely don't think a good marriage is possible. Neither do I. We've witnessed too many disasters."

"I want Hunter's to be perfect, and I've persuaded myself it will be. Can't I be an optimist for once?"

"I suppose," Warwick grumbled. He adored his brother and wished him the best.

Neville sighed and stared into the fire. He was a handsome man—slender, dapper, stylish attired. His full head of blond hair, their Stone blond hair, had faded to silver. His blue eyes, the Stone blue eyes, could still dance with merriment when he was engaged in mischief.

He was incredibly debonair, but occasionally, he looked weary, as if his vices were finally grinding him down. He was such a fixture in Warwick's life, and he'd always been a charming, elegant scoundrel. If he wasn't present to make Warwick miserable, the Earth might cease to spin on its axis.

"Matrimony won't kill you," Neville said.

"How can you be sure? It almost killed you. Twice."

"You'd be better at it than I was."

"I can't imagine how, and where would I find a bride anyway? I'm only acquainted with doxies and tarts. They're the sole kind of females I enjoy." In that, he and Neville had a lot in common.

"We could choose someone without too much effort. Since my elevation, I've been deluged with letters from mothers."

"Well, that's totally bizarre," Warwick said. "What parent would give you her daughter?"

"I wouldn't be interested, but I'm certainly interested for you boys."

"You shouldn't exert yourself on my behalf. I wouldn't let you pick out the cravat I should wear to supper, let alone a suitable wife."

Neville ignored the snide remark. "I've mostly discounted the inquiries, but every so often, I receive an intriguing one."

Warwick blew out a heavy breath. "Why are you telling me this? I bet I can guess: You've stumbled on the perfect girl."

Suddenly, his father appeared very sly. “I might have.”

“I’m not getting married,” Warwick sternly complained. “How many times must I repeat myself? And why won’t you listen to me?”

“Our ancestors have held this title for...what? Four hundred years? I realize you’re a wastrel, and so am I, but we’re not so negligent that we’d imperil what our elders have protected and passed down to us.”

“Hunter will sire a dozen sons. I’m convinced of it.”

“Are you willing to make that wager? Really, Warwick? What if you’re wrong?”

The question hung in the air between them, and Neville glared at Warwick until he squirmed in his seat. He might have been back at school and being scolded by the headmaster, with a painful caning soon to follow.

Generally, Warwick was indolent and distracted. He was rich enough to be slothful. His great-grandfather had been brilliant at commerce, and he’d wisely invested in exports, imports, and other lucrative endeavors. The family had smart accountants who managed their money, so it increased at an obscene rate.

He didn’t have to work or worry, and he reveled to excess with his dissolute companions. He loved slatterns, and he wallowed with the most beautiful trollops in the demimonde. He was never bored, but because he never applied himself, people thought he was a detached slacker.

But his father was correct: He wasn’t so negligent that he’d imperil an earldom. Neville was fifty, and Hunter was thirty. As Warwick’s slew of cousins had proved, they were unlucky. What if Hunter walked outside in the morning and was kicked by a horse or run over by a carriage? What then?

Neville was a cunning devil, and Warwick was not a mystery to him. Frequently, he

seemed able to read Warwick's mind.

"I've been invited to a hunting party," Neville said, "but I hate hunting."

"You may hate the hunting, but you always like a country house party."

"These days, I'd rather stay in town. I figured you could attend in my place."

Warwick snorted with disgust. "Why am I supposing there will just happen to be a fetching young Miss in attendance as well, and that she's dying to wed me?"

Neville shrugged. "I've known the hostess, Blanche Milton, for decades. I was chums with her deceased husband, Harold."

"That news has me trembling."

"Her daughter, Cassandra, is prepared to marry this year."

"Is she a debutante?"

"No, she's twenty-three."

"She's on the verge of being a spinster," Warwick said. "Why hasn't she wed before now. There must be something wrong with her."

"Apparently, they've been avidly searching, but haven't found a good candidate. She's had numerous offers, but they've rejected them."

"You better not have put my head on her chopping block by claiming I'm ready to select a bride."

"I haven't. I simply informed her that you might come, instead of me."

Warwick smirked. "I can't imagine spending a week locked away in a rural manor, while an aggressive mother throws her anxious daughter in my face."

"She has a huge dowry, with property included in it."

"I don't need money or property."

“Don’t be absurd. A man can never have enough of either.”

Neville stared him down, his focus even more irksome. Warwick was riveted by the fact that his father was looking older.

“Just attend for me,” Neville casually urged. “During the day, you can hunt like mad. Then in the evenings, you can dine and frolic with the blasted girl. See what you think. What can it hurt?”

“I’m positive she’ll be horrid, so why bother?”

“Do it for me. Please?”

“You’re nagging, Neville. You promised you wouldn’t.”

“Have I ever previously asked you for a favor?”

Warwick scowled. “No, you haven’t ever.”

“Well, I’m asking for this: Go to Mrs. Milton’s home and be introduced to Cassandra.”

Hunter had warned him that this very conversation was about to occur. Warwick had laughed and insisted Neville could never persuade him, but evidently, he could. Most times, Warwick felt he didn’t have a parent, and obviously, he was a weak-kneed character, desperate to oblige his father and make him happy.

He fussed and fumed, dithered and silently debated, as Neville’s steely gaze dug deep.

“I’ll agree—on one condition,” Warwick ultimately said. “I won’t view it as a marital interview. I won’t assess Miss Milton with an eye toward matrimony. I will socialize and revel and that’s it.”

“Fine. I can consent to that, and we’ll discuss her after you’re back.”

“I’ll have to bring a guest. Probably Holden.”

Holden Drake was his best friend, and he’d keep Warwick from being too bored.

Especially if Mrs. Milton or her daughter were exhausting.

The Stone men were renowned for their passion for gorgeous trollops, and Warwick said, “Cassandra Milton better be pretty or I will wring your bloody neck.”

“I’m not acquainted with Cassandra, but the mother—Blanche—was a great beauty when we were younger. I’m sure Cassandra is very attractive.”

Warwick scoffed with derision. “I can’t believe I let you talk me into this.”

“It’s just a hunting party. You love those.”

“It’s *not* a hunting party. Stop being so irritating.”

“May I write to Blanche and tell her you’re coming?”

“Yes, you can tell her, but be abundantly clear that I will be there for the wine, the company, and the horses. She has to understand that I’m not about to marry her insipid daughter. I won’t have Miss Milton mooning over me or her mother bragging about the size of her dowry.”

“I will contact her immediately, and I’ll be very blunt about your attitude. And if you don’t like Cassandra, there are girls lined up everywhere who’d like to meet you.”

Warwick shuddered with dread. “If that is even remotely true, I might have to find a very high cliff so I can throw myself off of it.”

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