

CHAPTER ONE

“No. Absolutely not.”

Hunter 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.

“The answer should be obvious.”

“Not to me.”

They were in his father’s new town house, in his library. Neville was seated behind the massive oak desk, and Hunter was slouched in the chair across from him. The butler had poured them an expensive brandy, and they sipped their beverages, acting cocky and confident, but they recognized the absurdity of the moment.

Neville kept glancing at the door, as if worried guards might burst in and announce that there’d been a huge mistake.

“Let me spell it out for you,” Hunter said. “I have no desire to ever be a husband. It is not a condition that appeals to me in even the slightest way.”

“It wouldn’t kill you.”

“How can you claim that? It almost killed *you*. Twice. You’re not a man who should be touting the benefits of matrimony.”

Neville was a contented widower, having endured two disastrous marriages, both of which he fervently wished he’d never contracted.

The first had been to Hunter’s mother who’d been a pious, bitter harpy, so she’d been precisely the wrong wife for an unrepentant libertine like Neville. She’d struggled valiantly to rein in penchant for sloth, gambling, and slatterns, but who could truly rein him in? He was a

spoiled bully who always picked the path that would deliver the most pleasure.

His second debacle had been to flighty, immature, Susan, a pretty girl thirty years his junior with whom he'd had naught in common. But he'd seduced her and had gotten caught, so he'd been dragged to the nearest church by her male relatives.

She'd jumped into the match quite enthusiastically, having had no notion of what life with Neville would be like. When she'd realized how she'd been tricked, she'd driven him mad with tantrums and pouts.

Hunter had two brothers, Warwick and Sheridan. Warwick was currently on an extended holiday in Scotland, and Sheridan was...

Well, who could guess his whereabouts? They were never sure.

Their mother had died when they were small boys, so they'd grown up like orphans. Neville hadn't been interested in their upbringing, so they'd been handed over to jaded, incompetent, unsupervised servants he'd paid to be do the job for him.

They'd enjoyed a wild, unrestrained childhood at Neville's rural estate, and they'd carried on like a trio of abandoned wolf pups. There had been no antic they didn't try, no dare they didn't accept, no exploit they deemed too dangerous to attempt.

The result was that they'd become adults who were just as degenerate and immoral as Neville. Hunter was thirty, Warwick twenty-nine, and Sheridan twenty-eight. They'd adopted every one of their father's bad habits, and they shared his disdainful opinion of ethical conduct.

Why walk the straight and narrow when the wicked route was much more amusing?

"I'm not an advocate for matrimony," Neville said. "As my own circumstances have proved, it can be a trap."

"That's putting it mildly," Hunter muttered.

“Our situation has changed though. We have to bite the bullet and sire some heirs.”

“I don’t see you rushing to the altar. Why not?”

Neville smirked. “I’ve done my duty to England and produced three strapping sons who are hale and healthy. I don’t have to torture myself with a third wife.”

“For which I’m certain all the women of the kingdom heartily thank you.”

“You boys have to step up and do your part.”

Hunter bristled with aggravation. “I don’t care about any of this.”

“I know, but you’re British, and I’m British, so it’s in our bones to behave appropriately.”

“And the *appropriate* thing would be for me to inflict myself on an unsuspecting female? I would never be that cruel.”

He was the most dedicated bachelor in the country. Neville had supplied a front-row view of the horrors of marriage, and Hunter had vowed to never suffer them.

His great-grandfather had shrewdly invested in numerous commercial ventures that had left the family obscenely wealthy. The money was held in trust accounts and managed by smart accountants who kept it growing like weeds in a flowerbed. It provided all of them with an existence of complete ease and leisure.

Hunter reveled in every depraved sin the demimonde of London had to offer, and he never felt guilty about any of his outrageous deeds.

He always had a mistress, but never for longer than a year. By then, he was impatiently ready to move on to another doxy. During that year, he remained free to trifle with any tart who tempted him. His mistress couldn’t be jealous or possessive about it.

There was never a problem convincing any of them to agree to his conditions. With his blond hair, tall height, and muscular physique, he was handsome enough to entice any woman,

and with his debauched ways totally entrenched, none of them could resist.

He led a fun and thrilling life, and dissolute trollops were happy to join him in it. When he showered them with his favor, it opened doors and furnished experiences they couldn't have arranged on their own. Of course they all expected to tame him, so he'd fall in love and marry them, but it would never happen.

He was who he was: Neville Stone's corrupt, lazy, entitled son, and he'd never be anybody else.

Neville sighed, and it dawned on Hunter that his father was looking older. He was fifty, and he'd staggered through decades of gambling, vice, and amorous affairs. Apparently, all that reckless living was wearing him down.

"It's shocking to hear myself say this," Neville told him, "but we have an obligation."

"You might have one, and you're obviously feeling a heavy burden, but you can't shuck it off onto my shoulders."

"I never anticipated this ending. I never *wanted* any of it, but it's arrived, and we have to deal with it."

"It's fascinating to me that our male kin were such a feeble, unlucky bunch. If I'd known how weak and ill-fated they were, I'd have rounded them up and locked them in a dungeon to keep them safe."

"There are worse things in the world than being an earl and a viscount."

"At the moment, I can't think of any."

Neville had had three older brothers, all of whom had sired several sons. He'd been perched so low on a thin branch of the family tree that an elevation had never occurred to him.

Yet gradually, one brother, then another had passed away. His nephews had slowly

perished too, having been felled by accidents or disease. The last four had died recently, within months of each other, and the astonishing turn of events meant that Neville was suddenly Earl of Swindon.

Hunter was now Viscount Marston and next in line to be earl. It was such an outlandish, startling conclusion that he was surprised it hadn't sent the Earth spinning off its axis.

"You have to wed, Hunter," Neville quietly stated. "You don't have a choice. Neither do Warwick or Sheridan. The three of you have to get busy."

Hunter shuddered with dread. "Get *busy* with what? Picking a bride and filling a nursery? You're deranged to imagine I will."

"We've proven ourselves to have a very frail bloodline, and Fate hasn't been kind. We can't lollygag and hope for the best."

Hunter snorted. "Don't pretend to be worried about the title. I'll never believe you're serious."

"It's been in our family for three hundred years! What if we all dropped dead tomorrow? Everything our ancestors have built would vanish in an instant."

"You're not concerned about any of that."

"Maybe I'm becoming concerned. Maybe old age is making me wiser and more responsible."

Hunter laughed caustically. "I can't fathom how the word *responsible* emerged from your mouth."

Neville sipped his brandy and stared at Hunter over the rim of the glass. His gaze was cunning and steely. "I repeat: It won't kill you to be a husband. As far as I'm aware, no man has ever died from matrimony."

“If you’re about to extol the benefits of having a wife, you probably shouldn’t.”

“I won’t claim it’s a benefit. I’m not demanding this because I assume you and your brothers will enjoy being husbands. I’m demanding it because it will preserve our name and heritage.”

“Bugger our heritage,” Hunter crudely spat.

On hearing the callous comment, a pitiful gleam entered his father’s eye, so he appeared abashed and even a tad remorseful. “This isn’t about matrimony,” Neville ludicrously said. “It’s about you and me and our legacy. It’s about what we owe to our ancestors, and I’m growing old.”

“You’re a very hale fifty. You hardly have one foot in the grave.”

“For some reason, this inheritance matters to me.” Neville was being unusually sincere. “I’m determined to protect our wealth and these vast properties that have been handed to me, practically on a silver platter. It just seems as if I should.”

“Are your deceased brothers and nephews haranguing at you from the Great Beyond? Are they begging you to step up for a change?”

“They’re shouting so loudly I can barely sleep at night.”

His father was never earnest. At all times, he was the most self-centered rogue in the kingdom. It was peculiar and intriguing to have him wax nostalgic, but Hunter didn’t have to participate in the lamenting.

“You’ve never listened to anyone,” Hunter said. “Not once in your entire, sorry life, so don’t start with ghosts.”

“I’m turning over a new leaf.”

“Liar. I can’t figure out what’s driving you, but you’ll never convince me that you’re

adopting better morals.”

Neville smiled. “All right, I’ll stop trying.”

“Are we finished?” Hunter asked. “I have a card game waiting for me, and I’d hate to be late for it.”

Hunter would have stood and left, but out of the blue, Neville announced, “I’ve found a possible bride for you.”

“You what?”

“I found a viable candidate.”

“Since I haven’t requested you implement a search, why would you have?”

“Her mother contacted me. It was too coincidental to ignore.”

“Well, *I* have no problem ignoring it.”

Despite Hunter’s snide retort, Neville continued. “Her mother and yours went to school together, and after my ascendency was in the newspapers, she wrote to me about her daughter. She was hoping *I* would be interested, but I’m not about to marry again. I wouldn’t risk it.”

“No, you want to sacrifice me instead—by shackling me to some girl I’ve never met. It’s an absurd idea, and I would never consider it.”

Neville shrugged. “I suggested you rather than me, and the woman is amenable. And look at it this way: You wouldn’t have to search on your own or hire a matchmaker. You can just agree, then tell your fiancée to plan the ceremony. Your contribution will simply be to walk down the aisle on the appointed morning. It will be easy.”

“Except that I’d be wed when it’s over. I’d have a wife, and I’d be a husband.”

“She has a fat dowry, and she owns a good-sized estate. She’s quite an heiress, which is always a boon.”

“If she’s an heiress, why has no one snatched her up already? She must be homely as a mud fence.”

“Her mother insists she’s pretty.”

“Her mother would.”

They stared forever, and Hunter couldn’t move beyond the fact that Neville appeared tired—and even a bit sad. Perhaps he was finally slowing down and mellowing.

“Won’t you oblige me in this, Hunter?” His father’s tone was imploring. “I can’t remember ever previously asking you for a single thing, but I’m asking this. Please get married. This month—if you can accomplish it that fast.”

“You bastard! Don’t play on my sympathies, and don’t gape at me like a puppy that’s lost its mother. You can’t coerce me into such a horrendous debacle. It won’t work.”

“Will it help if I beg?”

“Gad, don’t beg! I might be sick at my stomach.”

He was irked to find that his father’s expression was very riveting. Neville was correct that he’d never asked Hunter for anything. He was so conceited that he never reached out to others. In his view, he was master of his universe, and he didn’t require assistance from anyone, especially from a son who’d never exactly been a devoted child.

“Just meet her,” Neville said. “What can it hurt?”

Hunter glared, fidgeted, glared again. “What’s her name?”

“Miss Graves. Her father was the famous mariner, Sir Edmund Graves. She owns his estate called Parkhurst. It will be given to her husband upon her marriage.”

“Is she a blushing debutante?”

“I don’t believe she’s ever had a Season. Apparently, she hasn’t wanted one.”

“I suppose that’s good news. She must have some sense between her ears.”

Hunter pondered the situation. As with his father, he’d never expected to be thrust into the role of aristocrat, and he was secretly relishing how they’d been raised up. He could envision a line of his sons and grandsons holding Swindon into infinity.

There was such solace in the notion of longevity, so maybe he was just as British as his father had accused him of being.

“I might do it for you,” he muttered. “I *might*.”

“On what condition?”

“She would have to be exceptionally beautiful.”

Neville nodded. “That goes without saying.”

“*Beauty* is non-negotiable.”

He was renowned for dallying with only the most gorgeous trollops, and he refused to have a plain woman by his side. In that, he had exhaustively high standards, and he wouldn’t apologize for them. He was rich, handsome, and incredibly arrogant. Why settle for less than the best?

“May I write to her mother,” Neville said, “and request an introduction?”

“Not yet. It’s a big decision, and I need to think about it. Until I’ve made up my mind, I won’t have you nagging at me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of nagging.” Hunter stood and started out, and Neville said, “Where are you going?”

“To my card game. You’ve distressed me enough for one afternoon.”

“When can I have your answer about Miss Graves?”

“Give me a week. I’ll let you know.”

He strolled out, wondering if he would follow through. A betrothal? A hasty wedding? A wife? Would he jump in and do his part? Or would he be his usual lackadaisical self who couldn't be bothered?

He had no idea, so he had to engage in some serious introspection. He scoffed with disgust and kept on without glancing back.

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