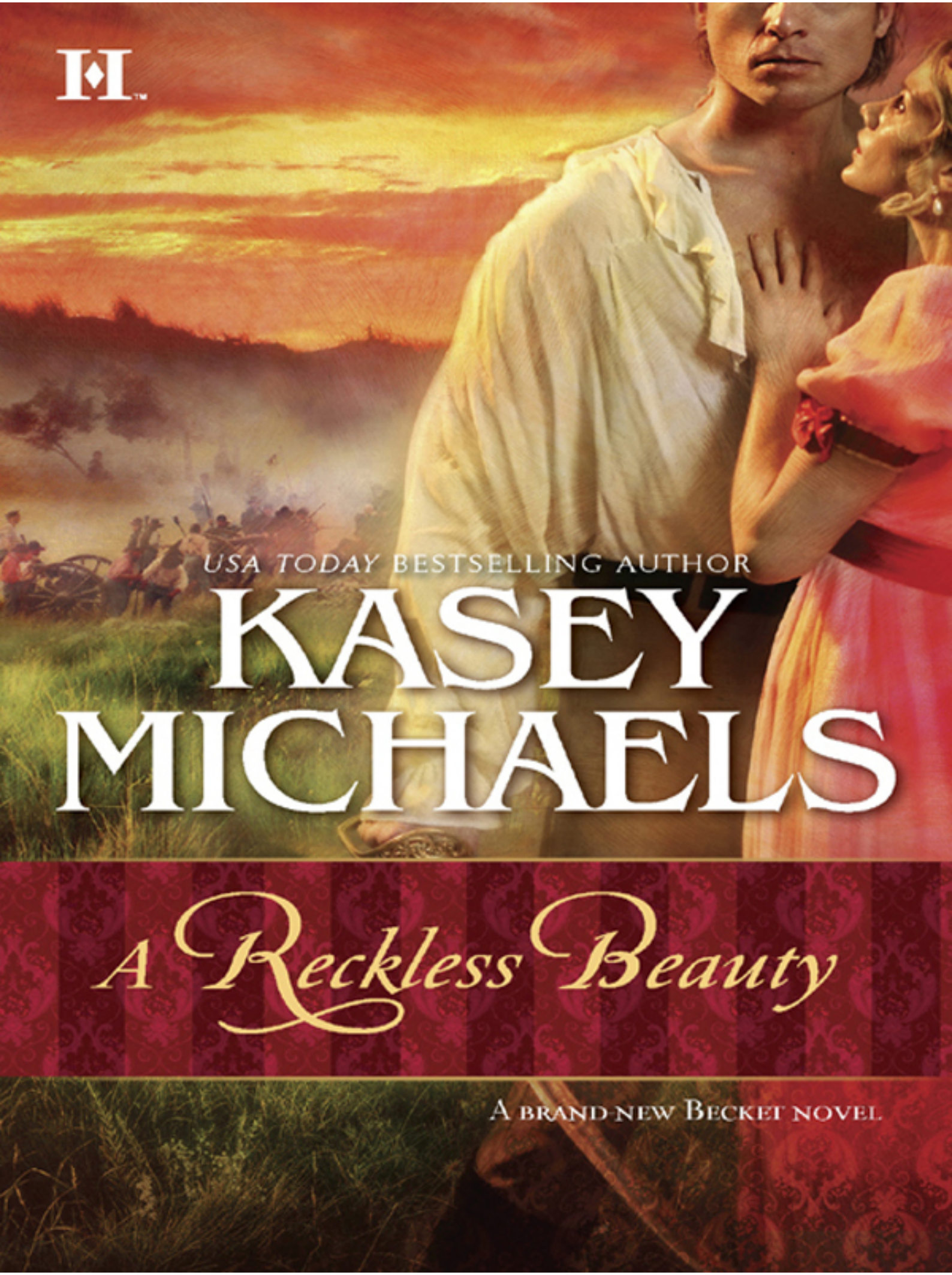
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KASEY MICHAELS
A Reckless Beauty
A BRAND-NEW BECKET NOVEL

Kasey Michaels

A Reckless Beauty

«HarperCollins»

Michaels K.

A Reckless Beauty / K. Michaels — «HarperCollins»,

Fanny Becket has adored her adopted brother since the day they both lost their parents and became part of the Becket family.Where he goes, she has always followed. But pursuing him into battle, Fanny quickly finds herself in the line of fire and quite unexpectedly–in the embrace of a handsome stranger. Valentine Clement, Earl of Brede, has seen enough of fighting to know there is no adventure to be found at Waterloo.Yet the moment he spies Fanny he is duty bound to save the reckless beauty, most especially from herself. Although with a woman such as Fanny, it may very well be his lordship who is in need of true protection.

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KASEY MICHAELS
A Reckless Beauty

To Joseph Charles Groller
Welcome to the world, Joey!

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PROLOGUE

March 1815

FRENCH SOIL ONCE MORE, so long denied him. Paris awaits!

Napoleon Bonaparte, by the grace of God, Emperor of France, King of Italy, etc., etc., halts at the head of his army of less than one thousand of the Old Guard who had chosen to be exiled with him on Elba for more than a year.

The moment is here. He comes face-to-face with an equal number of royal troops that have appeared with orders to exterminate him and his "band of brigands."

Bonaparte dismounts and walks forward ten precise paces on the dusty road. One slight, small man, alone between two armies. Unarmed. Vulnerable.

"Soldiers of the fifth army corps!" he shouts defiantly to the royal troops, his voice carrying in the still air. "Don't you know me? Is there one among you who wishes to kill his Emperor, let him come forward and do so. Here I am!"

And, in a move so daring it brings gasps of dismay from both sides of the line, he throws wide the simple gray cloak covering his chest.

After a tense silence, the cry goes up from all sides. "Vive l'Empereur! Vive l'Empereur!"

The one thousand are now two thousand. Bonaparte remounts and surveys his new army from atop his charger, and then stands straight in the stirrups.

Solemnly, silently, he points toward Paris.

And the world trembles…

CHAPTER ONE

Becket Hall, Romney Marsh

DINNER OVER, Ainsley Becket relaxed in his favorite chair in the drawing room, listening to his children as they discussed Bonaparte's adventures since escaping Elba several weeks earlier.

Breakfast, luncheon, dinner, the conversation never seemed to vary. What will Bonaparte do? Where will he strike first? Will the Allies cede all command to the Iron Duke? Will Wellington be able to defeat the man he had, remarkably, never before met in battle?

Ainsley let their individual voices fade into the background as he concentrated on his children.

Such a disparate group, all eight of his children; seven of them the children of his heart, and now all of them grown, some of them already gone their own way, with his blessing.

Morgan, a wife and mother now, lived on her husband's estate near London, her Ethan Tanner, Earl of Aylesford, undoubtedly laboring very long hours at the War Office.

Chance, Ainsley knew from the letter he'd received from his oldest son a week ago, was also back at work in the War Office, as all of England braced itself for the inevitable clash with the man they'd believed vanquished.

Ainsley sipped at his snifter of brandy, selfishly content that these two men had found a way to serve the Crown without exposing themselves to battle, and stole a look at his son Spencer, who was bouncing his young son, William, on his leg as Mariah Becket smiled at them both.

Would Spencer willingly leave his small family and go to war again? Ainsley planned a quiet talk with the boy, who had sacrificed enough in America, and needed to think first of his wife and son, and the second child Mariah now carried.

Eleanor and her husband, Jack, sat close together near the fireplace, a stack of Paris newspapers Ainsley had acquired in his usual secretive, inventive ways piled in Eleanor's lap. There still was no baby to be held in her arms, a sorrow she hid most times, but one that Ainsley knew ate at his oldest daughter's heart.

Callie, the youngest, and the only child born to Ainsley and his lost Isabella, continued her argument with her brother Courtland about the latter's assertion that he should buy a commission in the army Wellington was hastily forming to confront the French emperor, now that the majority of the Field Marshal's troops had been sent to fight the Americans. As it was, foreign troops would outnumber English troops two-to-one.

Courtland, always the solid one, the rock of the Beckets, firmly believed in duty.

Callie, with all the surety of a seventeen-year-old, firmly believed Courtland belonged to her.

"You and Jack have enough on your plates, Court," Ainsley said quietly now, making his point without overtly referring to the roles the two men played aiding the local smugglers, and Courtland nodded his reluctant agreement.

"I know, sir, but I believe you and Jacko are still reasonably capable and can run Becket Hall in our absence. Besides, we'll have Boney corralled and in a cage in a few months, if not weeks."

Callie, always sharp, sharper than most females were raised to be, spoke up. "In a cage, you say, Court? I believe—you'll correct me if I'm wrong, Papa—that it was Marshal Ney who promised the now displaced King Louis that he would bring Bonaparte to him in an iron cage and place him before Louis's throne."

She grinned at Court. "Would that be the same iron cage, Courtland, hmm? Especially now that Ney is back to perching on a cushion at Bonaparte's feet, apologetically licking his boots?"

Mariah Becket laughed as she took young William from her husband and lifted him into her arms. "She's got you there, Court. You men. So much bluster, so many promises. Spencer? I'll see you upstairs, and meet you with a book tossed at your head if you dare to even hint that you'll attempt to follow the drum again."

Everyone waited until Mariah had left the drawing room before bursting into laughter at Spencer's expense.

"Well and truly tied to the apron strings, aren't you, old fellow?" Jack Eastwood asked, earning himself a speaking look from the love of his life. Morgan or Mariah would have delivered a sharp jab to his ribs, but the petite, ladylike Eleanor needed only to send a level look from her speaking eyes, and Jack subsided, murmuring a quiet, "Sorry, Spence."

"It's all right," Spencer said, walking over to the drinks table to pour himself a glass of wine. "I know I can't go. And neither can you two, not when the Black Ghost has to ride out with regularity, and definitely not when we still don't know where our old friend Edmund Beales might next show his face—and recognize yours. What if he's acting as Talleyrand has, and has now thrown in his lot with the Alliance, abandoning Bonaparte after the fiasco that was his attempt to free him from Elba last August? Bonaparte might not be quite in love with the man now, you know?"

Mention of Edmund Beales cast the room into silence for some moments, and Ainsley was, as always, thrown back in time, remembering the days when he'd considered Edmund his best friend and partner. Before Edmund's betrayal. Before Isabella's death at Edmund's hands. Before the massacre on the island that had brought them all to England and the protective isolation of Romney Marsh seventeen years ago. Before they'd learned that Edmund still lived, and had taken his study of Machiavelli's mad genius to heart, believing himself destined to control the destinies of half the world. Before…before…before…

"It's true," Callie said, breaking the silence, as she saw the shadows in her papa's eyes, and wanted them gone. "None of you can be seen by Beales, as he may have seen all of your faces at one time or another. So you can relax, Papa, nobody is running off to war. Except Rian, of course," she added, her pretty face marred by a frown as she thought about the day, a few weeks earlier, Rian had made his farewells and ridden away with an eagerness he couldn't quite disguise, his commission in his pocket.

"Our brother is so damn hot to play the hero, the fool," Spencer said, shaking his head. "We can only hope he'll stay cooling his heels in Belgium, and never even set foot on French soil."

"Amen to that, Spencer. I still find it difficult to believe the way the French have embraced Bonaparte, after damning him just over a year ago," Eleanor said, paging through the newspapers she'd been holding on her lap. "Just look at these, for pity's sake. Let me read the titles of the articles written over the course of the past weeks by the Moniteur, once so loyal to the Emperor. Here, darling, help me before they all slide to the floor."

She passed some of the newspapers to Jack, whom she asked to read the oldest one first.

"It would be my pleasure. Ah, here we go. 'The Corsican werewolf has landed at Cannes.'"

"Yes, the werewolf," Eleanor said. "Now this one is next, only a few short days later. 'The tiger appeared at Gap, troops were sent against him, the wretched adventurer ended his career in the mountains.' They said he'd been killed, for pity's sake."

Jack reached for another newspaper. "And were forced to eat their own words. 'The fiend has actually, thanks to treachery, been able to get as far as Grenoble.'"

Eleanor continued with the title of a later article, "'The tyrant has reached Lyons, where horror paralyzed all attempts at resistance.' But, Papa, haven't your agents in France already told you Bonaparte was greeted with cheers and bouquets?"

Ainsley nodded. "Eleanor, you really expect truth from a newspaper controlled by the state? I thought I'd taught you to be more discerning than that. Read the rest, if you please. They are amusing, in a rather macabre way."

Jack lifted another newspaper, scanned it and smiled ruefully. "Ah, no longer the werewolf, tiger or tyrant, I see, but actually at last referred to by name. And in just a few days time. 'Bonaparte moves northward with rapid strides, but he will never reach Paris.'"

"And these last two," Eleanor said, shaking her head. "'Tomorrow Napoleon will be at our gates.' And, lastly, this, 'His Majesty is at Fontainebleau.' His Majesty, is it? Hypocrites, all of them! But if that's how rapidly the French can turn their coats, can Bonaparte sleep easy at night?"

Ainsley drained the last of his brandy and stood, ready to return to his study and the maps he'd been poring over since first he heard of Bonaparte's escape, comparing those maps to the steady stream of information his money so cleverly bought. He'd correctly picked Cannes as the man's initial destination. Now he looked north, to the area around Brussels, feeling that to be the logical ground for Wellington and the Emperor to at last meet across a battlefield. He'd already forwarded his thoughts to Chance and Ethan, with little hope such an necessarily anonymous warning would be heeded by their superiors.

And Rian, God help them, was already in Belgium.

"Remy," he said, referring to his informant in Paris, "has written me that Bonaparte paused on the steps of his palace the day of his arrival, to look out on the quiet city, and said, 'They have let me come, just as they let the others go.' So, if that answers your question, Eleanor, I would say that the man knows his rule is tenuous, at best. Which I believe, sadly, means he will march out of Paris soon, to confront the Allies, rather than wait for them to come to him. He has to prove that he is still the strongest man in Europe."

Courtland, who had spent many hours poring over the same communiqués and maps as Ainsley, disagreed. "It will be the end of July before the Russians and Austrians can meet up with our own army, and neither we English nor the Prussians will be fool enough to engage Bonaparte until all of the Allies are together."

Ainsley smiled indulgently. "Don't think of rosy scenarios, where the world works to your hopes, Court. Better to think like your enemy. Can you conceive of a better reason for Bonaparte to move now? His people will want to see a victory, a bit of the old soldier in his battle-worn green greatcoat, even if that means coming out with a smaller army than he'd like. And I do not believe he wants that initial fight to be a defensive action, one that takes place on French soil. No, Bonaparte is first and foremost a soldier. War may have been declared on him by the Alliance, but he will take the initiative, attack. If only the fools in the War Office could understand this."

"Pray God they will, Papa. So…so Rian could be closer to this first battle, when it comes, than we believe?" Eleanor asked, slipping her hand into Jack's.

"That blasted girl!"

All heads turned to look at Mariah, who was standing in the doorway, her cheeks flushed, and clutching a thick lock of light blond hair. She held it aloft, shook it with some fury.

Ainsley looked at the hank of hair and felt a frightening chill, as if a goose had just walked over his grave. "Fanny?"

Mariah nodded, scarcely able to speak. Fanny Becket had pushed back from the dinner table the previous evening, complaining of the headache, and gone to her room. "I knocked on her door a few times today, but there was no answer. You know how can she can be, sulking ever since Rian left, and I decided—Eleanor and I decided—to simply let her stay locked up in there until her stomach finally forced her out again. But tonight, well, enough is enough, so I commandeered a key and… and she's not there."

Callie turned in her chair to ask, "She's run away? Did she leave a note?"

"She didn't have to," Ainsley said, sitting down heavily, feeling all of his years. "We all know where your sister has gone."

CHAPTER TWO

FANNY BECKET hid herself just at the entrance to a foul-smelling alley fronting on the bustling wharf where soldiers and horses milled about as dusk fell, waiting for the order to take ship. She nervously fingered the gad hanging around her neck from a gold chain, one of the especially prepared alligator teeth her old nurse and Voodoo priestess, Odette, insisted all the Beckets wear.

It was a silly thing, but Odette renewed the protective magic in each gad every spring, and how could Fanny leave such a potent weapon against the bad loa, the bad spirits, behind as she went off to war?

Dear God, she was going to war!

She'd ridden through the night and day to make Dover before anyone could catch her, drag her home, but she'd been standing in this alley for the past two hours, not knowing what to do next. Because Dover wasn't Ostend, and she knew she had to get herself across the Channel to Ostend before she could travel inland, to Brussels.

To Rian.

Her mare, Molly, stood obediently behind her, nuzzling at Fanny's neck, hoping for a treat, and she absently dug into the pocket of Rian's cloak for the last broken bit of carrot she had brought with her, handing it up to the horse.

It was a mad scheme she was considering now as she peeked out at the milling soldiers, but desperate times called for desperate actions. After all, Rian had told her she was pretty, even as he laughed at her, pretended not to love her as anything more than his sister, even though they were not related by blood.

But they'd always been together, for as long as Fanny could remember. From that day when, at no more than three years old, she had knelt beside her mother in the pretty, whitewashed island church, and the priest was holding up the chalice, and her mother bowed her head, striking her breast three times, once for each time the bell was rung on the altar.

Just as the bell rang that third time, the cannon had exploded all around them, and Fanny had looked up, seen the blue sky, seen bits of the roof raining down on them before being pushed to the floor, her mother lying on top of her, protecting her.

That's where the man later to christen himself Ainsley Becket had found her, still half-crushed beneath her mother's lifeless body. There were others, other survivors of the Spanish pirate's attack that had come from the sea without warning, Rian among them. Three of the women still lived in Becket Village, but other mothers and their children, and the four other orphans of that day, had survived only to die several months later, when Edmund Beales attacked their island.

Pirates. Brigands. Warm white sands and clear blue waters. Death. Death everywhere; once, and then again. Fanny barely remembered any of it. Just watching her mother beat at her breast as the bell rang, calling down the roof onto their heads…and Rian, only a few years her senior, but always there, always holding her hand, protecting her, swooping her up into his own thin arms that last day and carrying her deep into the trees, away from Edmund Beales's treachery.

She'd do anything to protect him, as well.

Even see if he was right, that she was pretty. A pretty girl.

Fanny tested the knot holding the colored scarf around her head, hiding her badly butchered blond hair, and flipped the edges of her cloak back over her shoulders, the better to display the rumpled gown she'd donned over her breeches once reaching Dover.

"Don't follow me, Molly," she admonished the mare that hung her head as if she understood, and she probably did, for Molly was very intelligent, and Fanny had trained her well.

Then Fanny stepped out of the shadows, heading directly toward the slim young boy in the scarlet uniform of the 13th Regiment cavalry. She'd chosen him for his regiment, for his youth, for his size.

"You're to be sailin' off tonight, is it, you pretty thing?" she asked him, circling around both him and his horse, effectively cutting the youth from the herd of his fellow soldiers, all of them exhausted after sailing from Cove, their ship damaged enough that they'd had to put in at Dover for both repairs and provisions before following their two other ships to Ostend.

It had been unbelievable good luck, an omen, Odette would have said, that she'd found some of the 13th here, on this overcrowded dock. Rian's own regiment; fine, brave Irishmen from County Cork, and beyond. It had seemed fitting to Rian that he fight with the Irish, even if the only thing still Irish about him was his blood, and his name. For the past seventeen years, since the age of nine, since that bell had rung a third time, he had been a Becket.

The young boy Fanny had singled out—he seemed such a child—dipped his head at Fanny's question, swallowing down so hard that his Adam's apple seemed ready to collide with his chin. "And that we are, Miss. Off to chase Boney back where he belongs, give him what for."

Fanny measured him with her eyes. Yes, this was good. He topped her own not inconsiderable height by only a few inches. "Well, God bless you then, boyo," she said, pushing even more of a lilt into her voice. "And would you be wanting somethin' to take with you then? A last kiss from a grateful lass late of County Clare? Mayhap a bit more than a kiss?"

The young soldier looked about him, wetting his lips. "I'm not supposin' you'd be offerin' such a thing for free."

Fanny smiled. "And what are you takin' me for, boyo? One of them loose wimmen?" She reached up, stroked his smooth cheek that had only a hint of peach fuzz. What was he? Sixteen? "No brave man should be goin' off to fight without first bein' with a willin' lass, now should he?"

"I been," the soldier protested, his cheeks going red. "I been plenty." He clasped his rifle with one hand and took her elbow with the other, even as she deftly grabbed on to his mount's bridle, steering her toward the alleyway, which was right where she wanted to go. "But it's quick we'll be, a'fore the Sergeant-Major misses me, you hear?"

Fanny felt herself pushed rather roughly against the wet brick as the boy fumbled, one hand holding her still even as he propped his rifle against the wall and began unbuttoning his breeches.

That was helpful. He was giving her a head start, in a way, or so Fanny thought as she closed her eyes, whispered a quick "I'm so sorry" and brought the heel of the pistol she'd extracted from the pocket of her cloak down hard on the soldier's temple.

Fanny might be young, and slim, but she was also tall, and fairly strong. Bending only slightly beneath the dead weight of the soldier, she dragged him deeper into the alleyway and lowered him gently to the ground.

She worked quickly, stripping the boy to his last little bit of clothing, for she was wearing Rian's underclothes, and didn't much care to exchange them for drawers that looked, even in this dim light, capable of standing up by themselves.

Five minutes later, leaving behind a small purse of coins, as well as a rough pair of trousers and a shirt for the boy to cover himself with when he awoke, and with her white braces in place across her now red-coated chest, the rifle slung over her shoulder, as well as the heavy pack containing the best of the soldier's gear and her own, Fanny emerged from the alleyway once more, leading Molly and the black gelding by the reins of their bridles.

She stayed between the two horses and kept her head down as she joined the men just now being formed up to go aboard, wondering if she'd just saved one young Irish life, but never doubting her own fate.

Ostend awaited. Brussels awaited.

Rian, although he didn't know it yet, awaited.

CHAPTER THREE

RIAN BECKET sat alone at a back table in a small roadside tavern in an area he believed was called something akin to Scendelbeck, the top button of his uniform opened, his overlong black hair damp and plastered against his forehead above bright blue eyes that hadn't seen more than a few hours of sleep in several weeks.

So much for the romance and glory of war.

Thus far, that war consisted of a prodigious amount of parading under a hot sun or a drenching downpour, a good deal of tending to his horse, a measure of drinking, and much too much sitting and waiting.

At least at long last Rian had seen the man he'd been cheated out of meeting last year in London, as the Duke of Wellington himself had just today inspected their forces, along with the Prince of Orange, the Duc de Berri, the Duke of Brunswick and even Field Marshal Blücher, the man, it was said, who had drunk half of London under the table when there last August for, it turned out now, the premature Peace Celebrations.

"Lieutenant Rian Becket?"

Rian looked up at the tall man standing in front of the table, about to rise if that man had been wearing a uniform. But as he wasn't, and looked very much as if the clothes he did stand up in were the same clothes he'd laid down in several nights in a row, Rian only slipped lower on his spine in the wooden chair and motioned for the fellow to join him.

"I'd offer you some of my wine," Rian said, hefting the dark blue bottle in front of him, "but as you can see, alas, I've finished the last of it. You know my name. If you'd now return the favor, perhaps we can then split a new bottle."

The sandy-haired ruffian—he did, truly, look the ruffian—smiled as he sat down and extended his hand. "Valentine Clement, Mr. Becket, at your service. Jack Eastwood wrote to me, asked that I—"

"Jack? Oh, bloody hell," Rian swore, sitting up straight while ignoring the man's outstretched hand. "My brother-in-law thinks I need a nursemaid? No, thank you. And if you're applying for the role of batman, Clement, it should have occurred to you to first clean up your dirt before presenting yourself."

The man withdrew his hand, his light hazel eyes twinkling in amusement. "A thousand pardons, Lieutenant Becket. I'll inform your brother-in-law of your so polite refusal." He pushed back his chair and got to his feet before making a damned graceful bow for a ruffian, a small smile on his face. "Good day to you, sir."

Feeling as if he might have made some sort of mistake, Rian called for another bottle. But, instead of the barmaid, one of his superiors from the 13th Light Dragoons delivered the wine, as well as a second glass clearly meant for himself.

"Remain seated, Lieutenant. That conversation was a mite short," Captain Moray commented, pulling the cork from the bottle and pouring them each a full tumbler of surprisingly good wine. "What did his lordship want? He say anything about what's going on with Boney?"

Rian looked at the older man, the quick flip of his stomach telling him he probably didn't want to hear anything Moray might say next. "His lordship? You're not mistaken? His lordship?"

Moray nodded, and then drank deeply from his glass before setting it down again. "I still hate this part, the waiting. One more bloody parade, Becket, and we'll all be busy reshoeing our horses while Boney is driving over us with his cannon. And, right you are, his lordship. That was himself, Valentine Clement. Earl of Brede, you know. Haven't seen him in a while, and us that know are never supposed to let on who he is, but I've been down this road before, and that was him, I'm sure of it. The great bloody Brede himself."

Rian jammed his fingers through his hair, feeling young and stupid. “Oh, well…hell,” he said, disgusted, and then slumped back against his chair. “I just turned him down for the position of my batman. And all but told him he smelled, needed a bath. Which he did, damn it all anyway, on both counts.”

Moray’s braying laugh had heads turning in the tavern. “Cheeky young pup. But he knew you, didn’t he, called you by name? Brede’s one of Wellington’s own, you know, and been with him forever. Handpicked for being sneaky. Flits around wherever he wants, his ear always to the ground. Odds are his lordship supped with Boney at that fancy Versailles of his three nights ago, and then flirted into the mornin’ with all the prettiest mam-selles. And you all but served the man his notice? There’s bollocks for you, I’ll give you that. I think that calls for another bottle, I do.” And he leaned back in his chair, snapping his fingers at the barmaid.

Rian drank silently, mentally kicking himself for his own arrogance. Elly’s husband had written a letter, sent Brede to him. Jack never spoke much about what he’d done years ago, but they all knew he’d acted as a spy on the Peninsula, among other things. A spy like Brede. So did Jack then break both his hands affixing a seal to the letter to Brede, so that he couldn’t send another to his brother-in-law, warning him as to what he’d done?

“That man—Brede—he looked as tired as old death itself, didn’t he?” Rian asked his Captain, feeling young and damned foolish. “He’s seen things I shouldn’t want to see, I think. I thought this all would be…different somehow. Good. Noble.”

Moray lifted his head, smacked his lips together a time or two, as the wine, far from his first bottle of the evening, had begun to make his tongue numb and thick. He peered across the tabletop at Rian. “Noble, is it? Then that’s your mistake, boy. You never should have set foot from home, not a dreamer like you. Put that dreaming away. If you don’t, you’ll end up dead, mark my words.”

“Then I’ll put away the dreams, if that’s what it takes. I want to fight, Captain Moray,” Rian said, bristling. “And I’m damn good at it.”

The captain grinned, his head sort of sliding down between his palms as one cheek made slow, gentle contact with the tabletop. “You can ride like the very devil, I’ll give you that. Never miss the straw with your saber, either. But a heap of straw ain’t flesh, boy, and that fine, light-footed bay of yours will probably be shot from under you in the first minute of the charge. When you’re knee deep in blood and mud, tripping over pieces of the men you drank with the night before, and the Froggies are screaming, running at you—then we’ll see how damn good you are. Enough. Jesus, I hate this… I hate this. Too much waiting…too much thinking. Too much remembering the last time. Cursed Boney, he was supposed to be gone….”

CHAPTER FOUR

FANNY SAT WITH her back against the raw wood planks that made up the hold of the small ship, her knees bent as she braced herself against the storm raging in the Channel. Molly, her lead tied to a hook like the other sixty-five horses jammed in together in the cramped space, kept trying to nuzzle Fanny's shoulder, her huge brown eyes wide and frightened.

"It's all right, Molly," Fanny told the mare, reaching up to stroke the horse's velvety muzzle. "Just a little wind, just a little rain."

Her eyelids heavy, Fanny continued to comfort Molly, but the black gelding was becoming anxious, rolling its red-rimmed eyes and jerking back its head, trying to be free of the rope, the dark hold, the ship itself, most probably.

"Shamus Reilly! Control that damn horse before it sets the others off, or I'll have your skinny guts for garters!"

"Yes, sir!" Fanny said, jumping to her feet.

"And, by Jesus, don't be callin' me sir. That's Sergeant-Major Hart to you, boyo!"

"Yes, sir—Sergeant-Major Hart!" Fanny repeated, wincing at her mistake. She reached into the pocket of her uniform trousers and pulled out the scarf she'd worn tied around her head only three hours ago, talking softly to the gelding as she reached up to tie the material around those wild, rolling eyes.

"Good work, Private Reilly," the mutton-chopped Sergeant-Major said, prudently standing at Blackie's side, and not directly behind the animal, in case it decided to kick. "You see that, boys? All of you, cover their eyes, keep 'em quiet. Move!"

Fanny kept her back to the Sergeant-Major, mumbled a quick thank-you, then wondered if she should have spoken at all.

Probably not, as the Sergeant-Major was still paying entirely too much attention to her.

What did he see? What could he see, in this near-darkness? Why didn't he just go away? Was he about to discover her deception?

She was tall, tall as the real Shamus Reilly. She'd clubbed her hacked-off hair at her nape with a plain black ribbon. Nothing unusual there. And Lord knew her bosom wasn't giving her away, as nature had already snubbed her nose at Fanny and given most of it away to her sister Morgan.

"Private Reilly."

Fanny's spine stiffened. "Yes, Sergeant-Major!"

"How old are, boyo? Fifteen?"

"No, Sergeant-Major!" Fanny, who had just passed her twentieth birthday, denied with what she hoped was the indignation only a lad who had not yet felt the need of a razor could muster. "It's ten and seven I am, come last Boxing Day."

"A poor liar you are, Private Reilly. I'll not have babies in my troop. But I need every man I have, and that includes you. Christ. Ten and seven, my sweet aunt Nellie. Next they'll be saddlin' me with babes in arms."

"Yes, sir—Sergeant-Major!"

By the time they'd finally reached Ostend, Fanny had convinced herself she was safe.

She was wrong.

"Private Reilly!"

Now what did that man want? Fanny fought down a yearning to roll her eyes at the sound of Sergeant-Major Hart's voice as the man edged his mount in close beside hers as they rode out of the city. Did the man have nothing better to do but to hound her, set her heart skipping every time she thought she was safe, anonymous, hopefully invisible?

"Sergeant-Major!"

"We can talk more private now, can't we? Who are you huntin', Private Reilly? A brother? A lover? The father of your unborn child?"

"Sir?" Fanny kept her eyes forward, even as her stomach attempted to drop onto the cobblestones beneath Molly's feet.

"Sergeant-Major, damn your eyes! And it's denyin' it that won't work, Private Reilly, not when you're up against a man like me, who's seen it all before."

Fanny swallowed hard, trying to moisten her dry mouth. "Yes…yes, Sergeant-Major."

"Who you after, Private?"

"I'd rather not say, Sergeant-Major."

"Now, see, lass, there's where you'd be wrong. I wasn't askin' you. It's not a friendly chat we two are havin' here, you understand?"

Fanny lifted her chin. "He doesn't know I've followed him. It's no fault of his, sir."

"Sergeant-Major. How thick would be your head, Private Reilly, that you can't remember such a small thing, such an important thing? You'll stay by yourself, sleep with the horses and keep your yammer shut, even if that means my men think you stupid. Would they be far wrong, Private Reilly, were they to be thinkin' that?"

"No, Sergeant-Major," Fanny said, aware that she was blinking rapidly now, on the verge of angry tears. "It's Lieutenant Rian Becket, cavalry officer in the Thirteenth who I'm searching for, Sergeant-Major. My brother."

Sergeant-Major Hart rubbed at his florid face with the palm of his hand. "Brother, eh? At least there's no bun in your oven, thank the Virgin. Seen that enough, I have. He'll not be thankin' you for trailin' after him, Private Reilly. Man wants to think he's a man, all on his own."

Fanny nodded, miserable. What had seemed such a grand plan as she'd conjured it up in her bedchamber, now seemed silly, and impossible. Once out in the sunlight and, according to the Sergeant-Major, even in the dark of the hold, her charade had lasted no longer than the Romney Marsh mist on a sunny August morning.

"He's been here for a bit, sir," Fanny said, giving up any attempt to be soldierlike. "Do you know where he'd be?"

"Right where we're headed in a roundabout way, I'd wager, poor devil. Place called Scendelbeck. You just keep your head down and your yap shut, and you'll be seein' him soon enough. Wouldn't be you, though, lass, when he sees you, not for all the world."

RIAN WATCHED AS the Earl of Uxbridge rode past after a day of reviewing his troops, looking just the sort of romantic hero Rian had dreamed of in his youth, when he'd first thought of war, of soldiering. A rather flamboyant fellow he seemed, the tailoring of his uniform definitely in the first stare, his dark hair waving over his forehead, his brasses twinkling in the sun, the horse beneath him stepping high, seemingly proud of the handsome man on its back.

Wellington had turned command of the cavalry to Uxbridge, but not too happily, Rian had heard, disliking the man's taste for the dash and flash, but as Uxbridge was also the best cavalry general in the whole of the British army, the Iron Duke hadn't really had a choice.

"The dear earl eloped with Wellington's sister-in-law some time ago, you know," said a voice beside Rian…drawled, actually. "A huge scandal, of course, for which the Duke has yet to forgive our handsome Lothario. It speaks to Uxbridge's talents in the field that he isn't still cooling his heels in London, with nothing to do but nag at his tailor."

Rian reluctantly turned his head to see the Earl of Brede next to him, nonchalantly leaning back against the stone fence bordering a sadly trampled wheat field. The man looked no better than he had a few days previously; if anything, he looked worse. Worst of all, those world-weary hazel eyes were still twinkling the way they had in the tavern as Rian dismissed him as a nursemaid, and he still looked more than a little amused.

Rian jumped to the ground and bowed to the man. “My apologies, my lord. I allowed the drink to speak for me.”

“That, and your youth.” Valentine Clement smiled, running his cool, lazy gaze up and down Rian’s well-turned-out figure. Had he ever been this young, this eager? Perhaps before Talavera, before Albuera, Salamanca and the rest. Damn, how he wished this over, and now they were going to have to best Old Boney yet again. “But you’ve found a batman, perhaps? Neatly pressed, that pretty scarlet coat. Ever pause to think, Becket, what a marvelous target scarlet makes? But you all look so…spiffy, on parade.”

Suddenly emboldened, for he was young, after all, Rian gestured at the Earl’s filthy greatcoat, the nondescript white shirt and loose trousers. “Better the inconspicuous gray of the field mouse… or the kitchen rat?”

“At times, Lieutenant, yes, it is,” Brede drawled, clamping an unlit cheroot into a corner of his mouth, striking a match against the fieldstone, then looking at Rian beneath his brows and the lank, light brown locks that fell over those brows as he put flame to tip. There was something cold, almost calculated, about the man, for all his seeming ease and conversation. He didn’t suffer fools gladly, not this Valentine Clement, Earl of Brede and rumpled spy. “We move soon.”

“Do we?” Rian said, keeping his own tone even. “And I suppose you know where we’re going?”

Brede looked around at the dismissed soldiers, all carrying their rifles inelegantly slung over their shoulders as they headed for any space of ground or comfortable flat rock they could find, still sweating like fatted pigs from another full day of marching about to impress their superiors. He sighed, shook his head. As if marching ever won a battle—although strict discipline did, and that was really the point, wasn’t it? Poor bastards, marching straight into cannon fire whenever the order came. Not for him, not for Valentine Clement. He’d live or die on his own merits, using his own wits, making his own decisions.

“Come with me,” he said, and then vaulted neatly over the wall, heading for the line of trees at the side of the trampled wheat field, expecting young Becket to follow him.

Rian looked behind him, saw Captain Moray wink at him and carefully secured his sword at his side before hopping onto the wall, sliding his legs over and down, to follow after a man he couldn’t quite seem to like. Probably because this man had already proved himself, and Rian knew he still had so much to prove.

They made their way through the cantonment, the neat lines of small white tents, the cooking fires now just coming to life again, and into the trees, at which point Brede turned to Rian, looking hard at him again, measuring him again.

“If you don’t want to tell me anything, I—” Rian began, only to be cut off by a wave of the Earl’s hand.

Brede inhaled hard on the cheroot, blew out a stream of blue smoke and then said what he’d come to say. Hell of a thing, being beholden to somebody. Even Jack, who’d saved his life for him, twice. But he’d be damned if he’d wrap this pretty boy in cotton wool. Every man has to be given the right to prove himself, sometime.

“Jack swears you’ve got a good head, can ride anything with four legs or even less, know how to shoot, and how best to use that pretty sticker you’ve got strapped to that neatly pressed uniform. You know your place, says my old friend, and how to guard a secret. Now, listen to me. You saw Uxbridge today, Becket. Frippery fellow, you’d think, looks useless, but you stay close to him if you can. He knows what he’s about, he’s as hard as rock at his center. By tomorrow the Eleventh, the Twelfth, the last of the Thirteenth, the Sixteenth and the Twenty-third—they’ll all be here. Light Dragoons, mostly. You’ll be maneuvered all over hell and back at a field not far from here, eight, possibly ten hours or more a day, until Uxbridge is satisfied. After that, Becket, rest. Rest as much as you can, you and your horse. Stay sober, feed your belly, keep your socks dry—hang the wet ones around your

neck, dry them that way, and for God's sake don't lose your extra pair. Your feet rot off and you're no good to anybody. The next time the men move from here, Becket, it will be into battle."

Rian felt his blood singing through his veins. "When? Where?"

Brede smiled, the cheroot still stuck in the corner of his mouth, and Rian was still having trouble separating the unkempt clothes from the obvious intelligence in those piercing hazel eyes. God, he looked the ruffian. Not an earl at all, at least not at all like the Earl of Uxbridge. "I'd guess Quatre Bras or Ligny, somewhere in that direction, although nobody else does. Not yet. But they will, I can only hope, once I've made my final report. Now, listen to me. We can none of us stop this, you understand? The Alliance won't allow it, Napoleon can't avoid it. But I can get you out of here."

"Jack asked you to do that?" Rian could barely see through the bright red of his sudden fury.

Brede smiled. "No. But he holds an affection for you, and I have an affection for him. I also have enough consequence to get you reassigned to Wellington's own staff. He needs good men, with Pakenham and so many others cut to pieces in New Orleans, damn that stupid war for the folly it was."

Rian nodded his agreement. "My brother Spencer fought at Moraviantown. He called that battle considerably less than laudable."

Brede brushed aside the comment. He had places to go before nightfall. "The Duke doesn't hide, so if you're with him, you're not out of danger. But there's more than one way to fight a war, Becket. With your body, thrown into the field against other bodies, or with your brains." He extracted the cheroot from his mouth, stared at the glowing tip now that the sun was sliding toward the horizon and it was growing darker beneath the trees. "I offer this only the once, Rian Becket, and for the sake of an old friend who did me more than one good turn on the Peninsula. As you so rightly said —I'm no nursemaid."

"Thank you, my lord," Rian said, bowing to the man. "I would, of course, be honored."

"Only a damn fool wouldn't be," Brede said, smiling once more. "Two days from now, as I have things to do, things that don't concern you. I'll see you on Monday, exactly here, sometime before noon, with new orders for you in my possession. You will be ready to go, or I'm leaving without you. Understood?"

Rian opened his mouth to answer, but the Earl of Brede had already turned to walk away, taking no more than ten steps back out onto the wheat field before gracefully throwing himself up onto the saddle of a sleek, dappled gray stallion whose head had been held by no less than Captain Moray.

Brede turned the horse, pulled back on the reins so that it reared up on its back legs as the Earl threw Rian a casual salute, and then he was gone, gray figure and gray horse soon fading into the equally gray twilight.

"Uxbridge isn't the only flamboyant one," Rian mumbled as he headed toward a grinning Captain Moray. "He merely dresses better…."

CHAPTER FIVE

THIS WASN'T TOO TERRIBLE. The countryside was beautiful, the air not too uncomfortably warm, and the horses a grand protection. Fanny might miss her soft bed and Bumble's fine way with a chicken, but the adventure made up for that.

And, with every mile, she drew closer to Rian.

"Who will probably attempt to box my ears for me," Fanny muttered quietly behind the scarf she'd tied around her nose and mouth to keep out the dust raised by the horses.

She rode at the back of the troop, which meant that after the dried strip of beef she'd had for breakfast, she was having road dust for luncheon. Mentally, she added the lovely tin tub in her bedchamber at Becket Hall to the list of things she missed most.

"Private Reilly!"

Fanny rolled her eyes and straightened her slim shoulders. Honestly, the man was constantly at her; her own father didn't guard her half so closely. Of course, if he had, she wouldn't be riding across Belgium at the moment, would she? "Yes, Sergeant-Major!"

"We'll be at the cantonment in another few minutes. Just around the next bend, I'm told. Now, here's what I'm doing. You'll see that brother you've come all this way to see, and then you'll be off to Brussels with the rest of the women who had nothin' better to do than follow along with us. No women here for much longer, Private Reilly, to help with the cookin', the washin'. Uxbridge won't allow it. You'll have plenty to do, helpin' with the wounded when the time comes, honest women's work, and then you'll be shipped off home, wherever that is."

"But, Sergeant-Major—"

The Sergeant-Major shook his head, sighing in an exaggerated way. "And here she goes again, dear God, thinkin' she has somethin' to say to any of this. Show me an army of women, and I'll show you pure disaster, every one of them questionin' me, thinkin' she knows best. 'Oh, no, Sergeant-Major Hart, we should camp farther from the stream, it's too damp here. We'll catch a sniffle.'"

Fanny pulled down the scarf and grinned at the man. "When you get to heaven, Sergeant-Major, the good Queen Boadicea may have a word or two to say to you."

For the first time since she'd encountered the Sergeant-Major, Fanny saw the man smile. "Her? She was only in a snit."

"She raised an army against the Romans, destroyed London and was responsible for killing seventy thousand soldiers. That's a bit more than a snit, don't you think? And then we might discuss the Maid of Orleans, the famous Joan—"

"And they don't know when to stifle themselves, women don't," the Sergeant-Major grumbled, pulling on his muttonchops. You'll be goin' on to Brussels, where it's safe, you hear me?"

Fanny was fairly certain she shouldn't ask him to say please, and simply nodded her agreement. "I was stupid, sir. I shouldn't have come."

The Sergeant-Major slapped his huge thigh. "Well, now, that's what m'sister shoulda said, back in aught-six. But she chased her Bobby Finnegan all the way to the Peninsula. He didn't thank her for it, any more than this brother of yours will be thankin' you. Dead these eight years, the both of them."

Fanny's stomach clenched. "On the Peninsula?"

He nodded. "Caught a fever, like so many. Private Reilly, I've seen men starve. I've seen men drown in holes they dug to protect themselves from the enemy. I've seen…You do what I say. I'm not to be havin' you on my heart along with my Maureen. I've no one now, no home, no family. So I take good care of you boys…you all."

Fanny pulled up the scarf once more. "I'm sorry, Sergeant-Major, that I've worried you, even as I realize how fortunate I am that you're the fine man you are. When this is over, I know my papa will want to shake your hand, want to thank you. Will you please remember this? Becket Hall, in Romney

Marsh. If I could find my way here, you can find your way there. You'll always have a welcome and a home there if you wish it, that's a promise. Papa has a great respect for honest, brave men."

Sergeant-Major Hart looked at her rather incredulously, but then nodded. "Becket Hall, in Romney Marsh. I'll remember. Now, you stay with these horses, tend to them, and I'll find your Lieutenant Becket for you. Mayhap keep him from saying what he should say. And no tears from you, Private Reilly. You hear me?"

"Yes, sir!"

He shook his head in mock dismay. "Such a simple thing, lass. Sergeant-Major."

Fanny grinned behind her scarf as he rode back toward the head of the line. "Such an honorable man—sir."

And then, because she knew she'd been wrong to follow him, because she knew Rian was going to tell her how wrong she'd been to follow him—and at some length—Fanny blinked away her tears and prepared to do battle with the man too stupid to know she loved him. Had always loved him.

RIAN WATCHED the Sergeant-Major walk away and then turned to look at his sister as she sat cross-legged on the ground in front of him. Her face was smudged brown with road dirt from the middle of her cheeks to the top of her butchered blond hair, the whites of her eyes and their emerald-green centers thrown into stark relief above the bottom half of her face, which seemed unnaturally pale.

And she was in uniform. Even the Sergeant-Major, who had been pleading her case for her—if calling her a brainless baby was pleading for her—had been aghast to hear her at last admit how she'd come by that uniform.

Rian stayed seated on a large flat boulder, his elbows over his knees, staring at her, and said nothing.

He was quiet for a long time. He looked so sad to Fanny, so angry. So disappointed in her. She longed to run her hands through his black as night hair, put the blue sky back into his stormy eyes. If, as he'd said, she was pretty, he was beautiful. Like some tragic Irish poet, his brothers had always teased him. Almost too pretty to be real. He'd wondered why she'd worried for him, followed after him?

Her heart broke for him. She swore she could feel it break.

"Rian?" Fanny said at last, as the grass was wet, and her rump was getting cold. That was the difference between them—he felt his own torment, while she, more pragmatic, mostly felt the damp. "I said I was wrong. I said I'd be willing to go to Brussels."

Rian swore sharply and leapt to his feet. "Well, Fanny, isn't that above all things marvelous? You'll go to Brussels. You'll do us all this great favor—after making a bloody mess and having the family out of their minds, worrying about you. Hell, they'll probably all be here by morning, looking for you. Why, we'll have us a party, won't we? Jesus!"

"Oh, don't be so dramatic. They won't do that. Will they? Come here? Not Papa, surely. He never goes anywhere."

Rian beat his fists against his chest, reminding Fanny of her mother rhythmically beating her fist against her chest just before the sky fell in on them all. "This is my time, Fanny! My turn, damn you. I'm not some infant who needs caring for, and I damn well don't want to be caring about you. Not now. This is war, Fanny—not some bloody adventure."

"You always said it was an adventure," Fanny said, then quickly bit her lip. She should keep her mouth shut, Sergeant-Major Hart had warned her. Take all he throws at you and don't argue with him. "I…I'm sorry. Go on."

"Go on?" Rian looked around the small clearing, the same clearing he had stood in only days earlier with the Earl of Brede as that man offered him a place on Wellington's staff. Well, Fanny had put paid to that, hadn't she? "Damn you, Fanny! We're not children anymore. We're not on the

island. We're not even at Becket Hall, chasing across the Marsh together. And hear this, Fanny—you're my sister. You're my bloody sister!"

"No, I'm not," Fanny whispered. "I was never your sister, and you were never my brother. You were my friend. And…and I love you."

Rian turned his back on her, his chest stabbed by a very real, physical pain. "Sweet Jesus," he said, looking up at the trees, seeing the sun almost straight above his head through the leaves. He'd seen this coming, for years, Fanny's infatuation with him. He wasn't an idiot. Or maybe he was, but was this the time for that most important conversation? No, damn it all, it wasn't. Not with Brede showing up at any moment.

He turned back to her, held out his hand to pull her to her feet. "There's no time for this now, Fanny. The Sergeant-Major said he'd make arrangements for you to ride to Brussels with the other women tomorrow or the next day—three at the most. Did you bring a gown with you in that pack you're carrying? You're not staying in uniform. I won't allow it."

Predictably, Fanny's despair flashed into anger. They'd often fought, growing up together. Fought together, as well as laughed together, cried together. "You won't allow it? And who are you, Rian Becket? You said you're my brother, you're not Papa. You can't tell me what to do. I won't allow it!"

Rian felt his own anger drain out of him, to make more room for the fear—fear for Fanny that she didn't seem to understand. "You do have a gown. You wouldn't be so angry, if you didn't have a gown rolled up in here," he said, grabbing the pack before she could move toward it. He unbuttoned it and dumped the contents onto the grass. "And there it is. I don't suppose you thought to bring a brush—and some soap." He picked up the gown, tossed it at her. "Go back into the trees and put this on."

"No."

"Fanny…"

She held the rolled-up sprigged muslin against her chest and glared at him through slitted eyelids. "I hate you."

"Oh, dear me. Have I somehow stumbled over a lovers' quarrel? A thousand pardons, Lieutenant Becket, I'm sure."

Rian swore under his breath. Brede. You'd think the man had rags wrapped round his boots, muffling his steps, he moved so quietly.

Fanny whirled about to see a man standing behind her, negligently leaning against a tree trunk. He was dressed all in dark gray, a long white scarf carelessly looped around his throat, his mussed, sun-lightened tawny hair falling from a ragged center part to the middle of his cheeks. His brows were low over amused hazel eyes and he had a straight, faintly wide nose; a slight growth of beard smudged those cheeks. The unlit cheroot trapped in the corner of his wide, full-lipped mouth made him seem rakish. Dangerous.

And he was looking at her in a way that made her wish herself back at Becket Hall. In her bed, under the covers. Behind a locked door.

"Lieutenant?" he said, pushing himself away from the tree trunk, and he advanced on them both with a slow, almost insolent grace. "You'll not be introducing me to the…lady?"

Fanny smacked her palms against the sides of her head in frustration. "Have I fooled no one? I cut my hair. I'm wearing a uniform. I'm filthy."

The man removed the cheroot from his mouth and leaned close to her ear. "And you most unfortunately smell very like a horse. There's also that, my dear. Becket? An explanation, if you please. Quickly. I'll be in Brussels by nightfall, with or without you. We are at war, if you'll recall the matter? There's no time for private skirmishes."

Fanny looked to Rian to see the telltale flush of anger in his cheeks. She wasn't an idiot. She knew she'd ruined something for him, and it was up to her to make it right again.

She held out her hand in her forthright way. “My name is Fanny Becket. I’m afraid, sir, that I’m at fault here, entirely. I gave in to impulse and donned this…masquerade, in order to follow my brother. And now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll—”

“Your sister, Becket?” Brede said, ignoring her hand. “And I imagine Jack has an affection for her, as well? Christ. He should have just let them shoot me. It would have been a mercy compared to this. I was not fashioned to run herd on an unruly nursery. Becket?”

“Sir! Arrangements have been made for her, my lord. I’m free to go whenever you wish.”

Free to go, was it? Oh, Rian would pay for this! But she understood his eagerness. Then Fanny frowned as she looked at the strange man once more. My lord? My lord what? My lord Ratcatcher? And yet there were those eyes, and that cultured voice. And, again, those eyes…

“You’d leave your sister, Becket? Perhaps you’re not the man Wellington needs.”

“No! No!” Fanny raced into speech at the sound of the name. Wellington? Rian all but worshipped the Iron Duke. She went to her knees, hastily stuffing her belongings back into the pack. “Truly, my lord, this is all my fault, and Rian has already made arrangements for me. I’ll be quite safe. Please take him with you.”

Rian bent down, put his hands on her shoulders, gently pulling her to her feet even as she was hastily pushing a decidedly feminine undergarment back into the pack. “No, Fanny. Beckets don’t grovel, not even to the Earl of Brede. You’re my responsibility. My lord, I thank you for your intervention on my behalf, the trouble you’ve gone to, but I’ll be staying here until I know my sister is safely on her way to Brussels with the other women in less than three days time.”

Brede stuck the cheroot back into the corner of his mouth and clapped his hands together in mocking applause. “Bravo, Lieutenant Becket. A belated self-sacrifice, but not unappreciated by your sister, I’m sure. Miss Becket, the uniform will suffice for now, but not for long. The two of you—be ready to leave here in twenty minutes, not a moment more.”

“But, sir—”

“Becket, don’t make me regret this bit of charity even more than I do now, which is considerably, by the way. We go to Brussels, where your sister will be placed in the house I’ve taken there—locked inside a room there if she protests—and you and I will continue with our business.”

Fanny would have hugged the man’s neck, except that she’d also rather die than do anything so foolish. “Thank you, my lord.”

Brede removed the cheroot once more, smiled down at her—my, he was tall. “Oh, no, Miss Becket. Don’t thank me. You’ll only regret it later.”

CHAPTER SIX

THEY RODE INTO Brussels with the sun just sliding behind the Gothic buildings at the heart of the teeming city filled beyond overflowing with, Valentine thought, imbeciles.

Had half of fashionable London gotten together to say, "Here's a brilliant thought. Bonaparte has escaped, he's marching somewhere on the Continent with a reformed Grande Armeé, there will be a terrible battle, perhaps a terrible war—what say we all go watch? What fun! Jolly good time, what?"

Idiots. Fools. Did they plan to ride out in their fine open carriages, picnic on some grassy hill overlooking whatever battlefield might present the best view of the carnage?

There were times Valentine Clement heartily despised his fellow Englishman. Or perhaps he was tired, weary to the heart. Of war. Of the things he had witnessed, things he had done.

He'd not spoken above a few words to young Lieutenant Rian Becket, and less to his sister, in the past several hours, but had turned inward, considering what he'd learned on his last foray into French territory, and how best to present that knowledge to Wellington and the others.

Everyone was so sure the battle was still weeks away, and the Russians and Austrians would have by then swelled the ranks of the British and Prussians, turning that battle into a rout.

But if they were all wrong and he was right? What then? If he was right, even Blücher's Prussians might not arrive in time, leaving Wellington's depleted force alone to face what could be more than seventy thousand Frenchmen. All those French soldiers and, much worse, the most gifted, charismatic commander the world had seen in a long time.

And, while he should be thinking—gathering the right words, the most convincing arguments—Valentine was instead playing nursemaid to a foolish young girl whom he'd deem as having more hair than wit, if it weren't for the fact that she'd damned near shorn herself like a spring sheep in a ludicrous attempt to pretend she was a man.

With eyes like that? Granted, her brother was a shade too handsome to be taken seriously, but at least he was obviously male. This Fanny Becket, with her catlike, tilt-tipped green eyes, could no more conceal her sex than she could climb to the top of that bell tower over there and hang from the steeple while singing verses of "God Save the King."

The coach traffic on the streets had slowed them, and Valentine kept his slouch hat pulled down low over his face to lessen the chance that anyone would recognize him, try to stop him. He needed his house, his valet, a hot tub and a hot meal. He had no time to be corralled by some curious peer who wanted nothing more than a fine bit of gossip with which to regale his companions at tonight's dinner party, tonight's ball.

Valentine heard a muffled giggle from behind him, and turned back sharply to remind Miss Becket that someone in her tenuous position should have precious little to laugh at. But then he smiled, for the young woman who seemed completely at ease in her uniform, riding astride, was pointing toward the public fountain featuring the figure of a small boy urinating into the water.

"The Mannekin-Pis, Miss Becket," he told her, and watched as she blushed furiously and dipped her head so that he couldn't see her face. "Very famous. It amuses you?"

"No, my lord," she muttered, and for the first time since Valentine had met with him today, Rian Becket grinned, looking young and eager, and more than happy to join in the joke at his sister's expense.

Good God, Valentine thought, turning front on his mount once more, I am a nursemaid. Jack, my friend, we are even, more than even. He touched his heels to the gray's sides and pushed ahead through the congestion, and a few minutes later they arrived at the narrow house he'd rented.

Not waiting for the other two to dismount, he tied Shadow to the black iron railing fronting the street, and bounded up the full flight of stone steps to the bright red door, banging down three times with the knocker.

The door opened to reveal his man, Wiggins, looking comfortable in shirtsleeves, two buttons open at his neck, his usual lace cravat nowhere in place. “My lord! You…you were not expected.”

“I should never have guessed,” Valentine drawled, stepping past the short, red-haired man and into the infinitesimally small foyer. “Rouse the cook, Wiggins, as I’m starving. Oh,” he added, turning back to look at his two charges, “and…do something with these, if you please.”

“Do something, my lord?” Wiggins asked, but he’d asked it of his lordship’s back, as the man had already bounded up the stairs. “Um…” the servant said, turning to smile rather weakly at Fanny and Rian. “Would…um…would you two gentlemen care to follow me?”

“The one gentleman might, Wiggins,” Fanny said, used to the free and easy way of the Becket servants—actually referred to as the crew by the Becket family, who had all been raised to lend a hand whenever one was needed. The protocol between London society master and servant was totally lost on her. She looked up the empty staircase, longing to know if this small household boasted more than one bathing tub. “However, I, lady that I am beneath this dirt and uniform, would much rather be pointed in the direction of my chamber so I can wash off this dirt. Would that be possible, please, Wiggins?”

The servant pushed his head forward on his short neck and goggled at her. “A lady, sir? Never say so.”

Fanny looked to her brother. “At last, Rian, someone who believes my deception. And at entirely the wrong time.”

Rian stepped forward, taking the servant by the elbow and walking him to the other end of the foyer—not a large distance. “My sister, Miss Becket, is in dire need of food, a bath and a change of clothing. Mostly, Wiggins, that change of clothing. Now, how do you suppose two intelligent gentlemen like ourselves are going to manage that, hmm?”

While Fanny kept her head lowered, pretending not to hear, Wiggins said worriedly, “Why, sir, I surely don’t know. Your sister, you say?”

“Wiggins!”

All three people in the foyer lifted their heads to look toward the upstairs landing where the Earl of Brede stood, stripped to trousers and shirt. He tossed a folded square of paper over the railing. “Take this to my sister in the Rue De La Fourche, if you please, and fetch her back here with you. Don’t allow her to say no or I may have you flogged. And where in bloody hell is my supper?”

He disappeared again, that disappearance followed quickly by the sound of a slamming door, and Fanny rolled her eyes in disgust. “What a monster he is,” she told Wiggins, who was in the process of hastily rebuttoning his shirt. “Wiggins, do as he says or else he’ll most likely bite your head off. My brother and I will find our own way to the kitchens, as we’re able to more than bellow to fill our bellies. We’ll even fill his for him before he tears down the house.”

Wiggins looked caught between loyalty to the Earl and his need to take the note he clutched in both his hands to the man’s sister. “I…um, that is…thank you, miss. I’d say I shouldn’t be a minute, but the good Lord knows Lady Lucie can’t so much as say good day to a person in less than ten, so I don’t know when I’ll be back.” He pulled a plain brown jacket out from behind a small marble statue of some Greek goddess and slipped his arms into it. “Did his lordship say anything about…That is, he’s not usually so…so in his altitudes. The battle comes soon?”

“It would seem so, Wiggins,” Rian said, motioning for Fanny to join him, as he’d opened a narrow door, exposing a set of equally narrow stairs leading down, and from the smells emanating from beyond, felt certain he’d found the way to the kitchens. “So, your master isn’t always so unfriendly?”

“Oh, no, Mr. Becket, sir, I wouldn’t want you to think that,” Wiggins said, winking. “He’s always so unfriendly. He just usually takes pains to hide it better. We’re sorely short-staffed, what with the city so crowded. So I thank you for your help, sir. We’d best feed him. Soon.”

FANNY KNEW SHE WASN'T a patch on her sister Elly when it came to organizing a household. But she'd watched her enough, and had spent enough hours in the kitchens at Becket Hall to know the rhythms and routines of that particular area, usually chopping up carrots as punishment for something she'd done and would doubtless go off to do again once Bumble released her from her stool and pile of vegetables.

Within the hour she had struck up a smiling, gesturing friendship with a buxomy old woman named Hilda, who spoke no English. As for herself, she spoke no German or whatever language the woman kept tossing at her. She'd washed her face and hands at the wooden trough in a corner of the narrow kitchen, shoved some lovely fat slices of ham into her cheeks and made certain a heavily loaded tray had been sent up to the Ogre in the Tower, which is how she'd decided to think of the Earl of Brede.

Her filthy scarlet jacket draped over the back of one of the high-backed chairs, Fanny sat cross-legged on her chair—wonderfully comfortable in her uniform trousers—and looked across the scarred wooden kitchen table at her brother, once again urging him to, for pity's sake, stop pouting and eat something. After all, it wasn't the end of the world, was it?

Rian sat back in his chair, shaking his head at her. "You have no bloody idea how difficult you've made things, do you? Just as long as you're happy."

"Rian, that's not true," she said, waving a fork at him, the threat lessened quite a bit by the small roasted potato stuck on the tines. "I said I was sorry, and I am. But we've suffered no major setback, now have we? I've seen you, I'm safely here with the Ogre, and you're to be joining Wellington's staff in the morning, or even later tonight. I know how happy that makes you. I'll pen a note to Papa tomorrow and I'm sure the Ogre will frank it, so there's nothing to worry about there. All in all," she said, pushing the potato into her mouth and maneuvering it against the inside of her cheek, "daring to overlook my punishment when I get back to Becket Hall, I'd consider the exercise a success."

Rian gave up his moody pose and smiled. "As I remember the thing, you also thought coaxing Molly safely over that five-bar fence a success, even if you'd fallen off and broken your arm in the process, and couldn't ride again for the rest of that summer. But Wellington's staff, Fanny! Can you imagine? I'll be right in the thick of things."

Fanny plunked an elbow onto the tabletop and rested her chin in her hand. Although at least six years her senior, he was so, so young. "What do you suppose you'll do?"

"I've thought about that, about how Brede mentioned how Jack told him I can ride anything with four legs—or even three. So I'm thinking, since I really don't know anything about strategy so that the Field Marshal will be soliciting my opinion on matters, I'll just be one of those riding out again and again, taking orders from Wellington to his generals during the battles. Jupiter will be magnificent there. He may not be the fastest of foot, but he's got the best heart, and he'll go forever. You know that."

Fanny speared the last potato on her plate and popped it into her mouth, mumbled her question around it as she chewed. She knew she was being inelegant, as Elly would call it, but real food tasted so good. "So, then, you'll be safely behind the lines?"

Rian shook his head. "Would you stop that, Fanny? But, yes, I'll be fairly safe. Except when I'm riding by myself, between our ranks. Then things might become interesting."

"You're just saying that so I'll worry," Fanny said, gathering up her dish and utensils and carrying them over to the sink already piled high with plates and pots. "But if you're not, please remember to ride low on Jupiter's back, your head close down by his neck, so that you don't present too tempting a target."

Rian set his own dishes into the sink and smiled a thank-you to Hilda. "How many times, Fanny, have I outrun the Waterguard on the Marsh?"

Fanny took a quick look at Hilda, not that she thought the woman could understand her, yet when she answered Rian it was in a whisper. Beckets learned early not to trust many people. "Riding

with the Black Ghost and outrunning the Waterguard from time to time as you guard the men moving a haul inland is not facing Bonaparte's army, Rian Becket. I'm just saying—don't go riding along the top of a ridge with the sun at your side, waving your hat in the air, that's all."

Rian bent and kissed her cheek. "You're such an old woman. You've been listening to Court entirely too much, you know. I won't let any of Boney's men kill me. I wouldn't give you the satisfaction of believing yourself right."

Fanny shut her eyes, swallowing down a sob. "Oh, Rian…"

He put a finger to her lips as he turned in the direction of the narrow staircase. Moments later a pair of legs appeared, followed closely by the head of Wiggins, who looked none too happy. "His lordship's sister is here and with his lordship in the drawing room. You're to join them, please."

"Is the Ogre still biting off heads, Wiggins?" Fanny asked as she hastily grabbed her uniform jacket and shoved her arms into it. "Or has food soothed the savage beast?"

"That's very funny, miss," Wiggins said, not smiling at all. "If you were please to follow me?"

Rian pushed a nervously giggling Fanny up the stairs ahead of him, then pulled her aside to insist she spit on his hands so that he could attempt to tamp down her butchered and dirty hair with his fingers. "Now, remember, Fanny-panny. Not a word of protest, no matter what the man says. As Sergeant-Major Hart warned us, even the luck of the Irish runs out from time to time."

Fanny nodded quickly, reluctant to tell Rian that her entire insides seemed to be shaking. Would she be back aboard ship by morning, heading to Becket Hall? Had this all been for nothing? Was the Ogre about to send her on her way?

Together, they entered the small drawing room.

"Ah, and here they are again. It wasn't a nightmare and I'm awake now. How unfortunate," Brede said from his place standing in front of the cold fireplace. Rian stopped short to slam his ankles together and smartly salute him. "Yes, yes, very pretty, thank you, Lieutenant. And the redoubtable Miss Fanny Becket, as well. Don't you look—so depressingly the same."

Fanny opened her mouth, but Rian's elbow was in her ribs before any words could come out, so she merely inclined her head slightly, mockingly, in his lordship's direction.

"My stars, Valentine, you weren't funning me, were you? And you expect me to, as you begged me, do something with that? My stars!"

Fanny's attention went immediately to the couch and the petite young woman sitting there, at the moment waving a black-edged lace handkerchief beneath her softly rounded chin. The woman was handsome rather than beautiful—there was too much of her brother in her for beautiful—and dressed in the most becoming mourning black London could fashion.

Not that she held a patch on Brede himself, who was also in black, his linen white as a gull's wing, his streaked light brown hair ruthlessly combed back from his face. Rough and tumble, dirty, he was formidable. Dressed as he was now, he was truly frightening. And, again, those eyes. And that dangerous, smiling mouth…

"Ma'am," Fanny said, caught between a bow and a curtsey, so that she nearly tripped over her own two feet, eliciting a short bark of laughter from the Earl.

"Did you see that, Valentine? Oh, my stars!"

"Lucille, if you could dispense with that repetitious and quite annoying exclamation, so that we might move on? Lieutenant Rian Becket, Miss Fanny Becket, you are in the presence of my younger sister, one Lady Lucille Blight, widow of the late and largely unlamented Viscount Whalley, although she is quite enjoying her blacks, aren't you, Lucille? Please, Miss Becket, don't attempt that maneuver again—you may injure yourself."

"Valentine, you're such a wicked tease," the woman said, waving at Fanny. "Please, call me Lucie. Everyone does. Everyone save Valentine, but I pay him no never mind, although he is quite right about poor William. I don't know what possessed me to think I had to have him, and all over my dear brother's objections. He drank like a fish, you understand, and chased anything in skirts. Oh,

don't scowl so, Valentine, it's not as if no one knows. And aren't you pretty, Lieutenant? Valentine—isn't the Lieutenant pretty? You couldn't give me him, could you, and just keep the girl for yourself? You go about looking nearly as bedraggled half the time anyway. I mean, she's wearing trousers. My stars!"

Fanny, unable to help herself, actually snorted, and Rian rushed into speech to cover her rudeness. "Thank you, ma'am," he said for lack of anything more intelligent springing into his mind, bowing yet again. "My lord, again I apologize for the monstrous inconvenience my sister and I have put you to, and I would like to say that I am more than cognizant of your forbearance and—"

"Oh, for the love of heaven, Becket, shut up," Brede said wearily, looking at Fanny. "Lucille, what do you think? Can you rescue that?"

"In time for the Duchess of Richmond's ball this Saturday night? That's only four days away. Oh, I hardly think so, Valentine. My stars. When have you known me to perform miracles?"

Brede smiled slightly. "A miracle? Surely, Lucille, you don't see Miss Becket here as on a par with loaves and fishes?"

Lucie gnawed on the side of her index finger as she looked at Fanny, who was caught between amusement and longing to wring the Ogre's neck with his own snowy cravat. "I suppose a bath might be of some small help? And then I could have my Frances attempt something with the hair. And there's this lovely little modiste a few blocks from—Yes, all right, Valentine, if I must. I shall gather all of my depleted strength and attempt to do my best."

This last was completed with the tragic pose and half-gulping voice of the truly put-upon, and Fanny looked at Rian, whose shoulders were shaking as he attempted to tamp down his mirth at her expense.

"That's my brave Lucille. The trials you endure for your quarterly allowance," Brede said bracingly, wondering idly if he was right as to Bonaparte's current position, and the possibility of riding there, lashing himself to the mouth of one of the French cannon. "You're dismissed."

Lady Whalley got to her feet, clearly in a huff. "Dismissed, is it? You drag me away from a perfectly marvelous lamb cutlet, just to dismiss me? Oh, very well." She looked to Fanny yet again. "Tomorrow. But no one can see her until I work this miracle you require of me. Bring her round to the servant's entrance tomorrow morning at eleven. Clean, if possible."

Fanny didn't bother to either curtsey or bow as Lady Whalley swept out of the small room, trailing her ruffled black skirts and enough scent to make a meal of by itself, and then turned back to glare at the Ogre. "Definitely your sister, my lord. There's no question there."

Brede ignored her, the cheeky brat. When forced to deal with females, ignoring them had always topped his list of the ways preferable to him. "Lieutenant, you will accompany me tomorrow morning at precisely eight of the clock. You'll be quartered with other more junior members of the Duke's staff, which means the food will be good and the beds dry. Take any opportunity to ride out these next few days, familiarize yourself with the topography of the area—I suggest you concentrate on the area south of Brussels, all the way to Quatre Bras, Ligny, and beyond—as I expect you'll be traveling that ground quite often in the next week or two. But keep an eye out for Boney's advance parties. I last spied one only a few miles below Givet. He's been there before with his army, years ago. But he won't wait for us to come to him there, fight on traditionally French soil. For the moment, I suggest you scare up Wiggins from where he's hiding himself and he'll show you to your chamber. The same goes for you, Miss Becket."

"I'll want a bath," Fanny dared.

"If you are applying for my opinion, I completely concur. However, I do not number that among my duties to Jack Eastwood. There are other females in this house—I'm sure I've glimpsed at least two of them. Go find one, Miss Becket, and beg a tub. Difficult as this may be for you to comprehend, I have other things to do."

Fanny watched, her mouth screwed to one side, her fists jammed on her hips, as the Earl of Brede quit the room in much the same way his sister had moments earlier. The sound of the door to the street slamming behind him lent her the happy information that the Ogre was gone.

She turned to Rian and grinned. “Papa would adore him, wouldn’t he?”

Rian gave a single shake of his head. “If he didn’t kill him, yes.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

WIGGINS HAD WORKED a small miracle of his own, Fanny decided the next morning as she donned the freshly laundered and pressed gown she'd rolled up and stuffed in her pack. She'd had a bath last night before slipping in between clean, fresh-smelling sheets, and felt very nearly human again. Her only regret was that she'd slept the sleep of the dead until nine, which meant that Rian had gone off without saying goodbye to her.

But she'd find him again, she had no fears there. After all, she'd found him before, hadn't she?

After breakfasting in her chamber, something she did at Becket Hall only if she was ill or, when younger, when being punished for something or other and temporarily not allowed to "associate with reasonable human beings," she made her way downstairs, leaving her pack and uniform behind her, for Wiggins had promised he'd have the pack sent round to Lady Lucille's later in the day. She'd miss those trousers.

She'd only just entered the small drawing room, wondering when the Ogre would make an appearance and toss her off to his sister, when the Earl, in the act of passing by the entrance, saw her. Stopped. Walked into the room.

She narrowed her eyes, daring him to say anything cutting.

He was dressed in buckskins and a dark blue superfine jacket, and still held a small riding crop in his right hand. He smelled vaguely of horse and tobacco and sunlight, and she knew he'd been out and about, delivering Rian to Wellington's headquarters.

"My lord," she said, dropping into a very abbreviated curtsey. "Rian is now situated with—"

"Hush," he said, using the riding crop to tilt up her chin as he examined her, head-to-toe. He walked slowly around her, and she was rather forced to turn with him until he allowed the riding crop to slide from her chin to her modestly revealed shoulder, skim across her back, and finally come to rest against the base of her throat before he, now standing in front of her once more, removed it. "I was afraid of this," he said at last. "The hair remains an issue, naturally, but you're quite attractive in that gown, Miss Becket."

Would he stop looking at her that way! The way, she realized, her cheeks flushing, she was looking at him!

"And…and that's made you unhappy, my lord?" she asked, unable to tear her gaze from his.

"Uncomfortable, Miss Becket," he said, abruptly turning away from her to pick up a folded newspaper that someone had placed on the table between the couches. Reading whatever ridiculousness the French newspapers were spouting now was much preferable to looking into those exotic green eyes. "There's a difference. How old are you?"

Fanny felt herself bristling. But he'd been nice to Rian, and he still hadn't said anything about sending her back to England, so she bit down her anger. "Twenty, my lord."

Then she lifted her chin, the chin she'd swiped at the moment he'd taken away the riding crop. She had needed the feel of him gone. It had been bad enough, looking into his tired, hazel eyes, and when she'd transferred her gaze to his full mouth that had been…well, that had been worse, although she wasn't sure why. She merely knew that the Earl of Brede bothered her. More than a bit.

"Twenty? My, my," Brede said, dropping the newspaper back onto the tabletop as he looked at her again. "Quite ancient."

"Not nearly as ancient as you, my lord," she said, tiring of this dance he seemed to be doing around her.

"True, Miss Becket. I'm two and thirty, and many mornings feel twice that. This morning, alas, being one of them. Tell me, what did you use to hack at that lovely blond hair? A dull sickle?"

"Frances will fix it."

Brede frowned. "I beg your pardon? Frances?"

"Your sister's maid, or whoever she meant. Lady Whalley mentioned her by name last night. Weren't you listening?"

"I make it a practice to never listen to Lucille," Brede said, smiling at last. "Let that be my advice to you, my dear. You'll thank me for it. Never listen to Lucille. She'll only depress you."

"Really? Oh, my stars!" Fanny exclaimed, her hands to her breast, and then laughed.

And Brede laughed with her.

Which, as it happened, left Wiggins quite nonplussed as he stood at the entrance to the drawing room, clearly unaccustomed to seeing his employer in such a good humor. "Um…my lord?" he asked, as if unsure of the smiling man's identity.

"Wiggins, yes," Brede said, collecting himself. "You're here to say the carriage is waiting, aren't you? But Miss Becket has voiced a desire to see more of the city, so we'll walk to Lady Whalley's instead."

Fanny looked at him quizzically. What on earth was the man about now?

"Um…certainly, sir."

"Ah, my wishes meet with your approval, Wiggins. How reassuring." Brede extended his arm to Fanny, who hesitated only a moment before slipping her arm through his elbow. "We won't mention your sad lack of a bonnet, Miss Becket."

"We just did, my lord Brede," she pointed out cheekily as Wiggins raced ahead to open the door leading down to the flagway. "Oh, what a beautiful day. Look at these grand old buildings. And all the flowers, all the different colors. Everywhere! It's difficult to believe danger could be so close, isn't it?"

"So very close, yes," Brede agreed, looking down at her as she lifted her face to the sun. Smudged, grubby, she had been interesting, different, almost exotic. But the miracle of soap and water seemed to, for the moment, rival that of the loaves and little fishes, for she was now radiant. Young, eager, so very alive. Fearless. And dangerous.

He must be exhausted from too many months spent watching Napoleon's maneuvers around France. He must be old. He must be too long without a woman.

He must be mad.

He must see Fanny Becket smile again. And again. And again…

Fanny was uncomfortably aware of the Earl's closeness to her as they made their way down the flagway crowded with ladies in fine gowns and bonnets, parasols held high over their heads, near hordes of soldiers clad in several different sorts of colorful uniforms, solemn-faced gentlemen walking and talking and gesturing without regard to anyone else on the flagway.

"I've never seen a city this large, my lord," she said, if only to break the strained silence between them.

"You've never been to London?"

"No. I've been to Dover. Just the one time. The largest house I've seen is Becket Hall, which is considerable, but I believe that building just over there, across the square, could make three Becket Halls, with room left over for Becket Village. I'm a bumpkin, aren't I?"

"I'll do my best to forgive you if you promise not to admit to such a terrible sin when we're in company," Brede said, patting her hand as it lay on his forearm. "Jack's signature included the address of Romney Marsh. You'll pardon me my ignorance, but I thought only sheep lived there. And smugglers enjoying the proximity of Calais across the narrow Channel, of course. I imagine your family enjoys French brandy from time to time."

"I wouldn't know," Fanny said quickly. "My father and our family are involved in other pursuits. And Jack now, too, since he married my sister Elly and came to live with us. Have you known Jack for very long? We're all extremely fond of him. And Elly dotes on him, of course."

Brede thought he sensed something almost nervous in Fanny's voice, as if that lighthearted tone was somehow deliberate. Which was ridiculous, as she was young and innocent, and couldn't possibly

have anything to hide…other than that atrocious hair, and he was actually beginning to get used to even that. The sun seemed to turn the light, white-gold strands into spun silk. Or spun sugar.

And he was becoming fanciful again.

They were only a few doors from his sister's rented residence now, and Brede knew chances for private conversation with Fanny would be few and far between once Lucille had her teeth in the poor girl. In addition, he'd just received another assignment from Wellington that would take him out of the city until late tomorrow night at the very least.

"Fanny," he said, pulling her over to stand in front of one of the buildings.

"My lord?" she answered, noticing for the first time that he, among all the men on the street, was not wearing a hat. He'd done that for her, she was sure of it; if she had no bonnet, he would wear no hat. She'd thank him, but then he'd probably just say something cutting and sarcastic and make her regret thanking him and long only to box his ears.

"I've written to Jack, explaining that I don't have the time or the wherewithal at the moment to find a way to send you home to your family. Nobody knows where Bonaparte will strike, or when."

"But you said you thought Quatre Bras or Ligny," Fanny reminded him, and then mentally kicked herself, because she probably should not let him know how closely she listened to him.

"He could, I agree. He could also retreat after showing himself, only so that we likewise show him our strength or, at the moment, with no sign of Blücher's forces as yet, our lack of it. He could head west and north, hoping to come at Brussels that way."

"He won't go east, because that's where the Russians and Austrians are advancing against him," Fanny said, as she and Rian had spoken long into the night last night, and Rian had even drawn a small map for her on paper he'd found in the Earl's miniscule study. Then, remembering how much she wanted to remain in Brussels, near Rian, she quickly added, "But he could go west, as you said, skirt around us. No, I certainly can't be riding toward Ostend, can I?"

Brede allowed one side of his mouth to rise in a small smile. "I'm not sending you home, Fanny. Not until this is either over or more manageable than it is now, the situation more stable. You were protected enough, in the eyes of society, with Rian in my house with you last night, but now that he's gone, you'll stay with my sister. I think that's penance enough for chasing your brother across the Channel."

"My sister Morgan says London society ladies are a breed apart. I didn't know what she meant, until I encountered Lady Whalley," Fanny said, smiling. "But please don't worry, I'll manage. Morgan, however, would probably have tied your sister's tongue in a knot at the third 'Oh, my stars'!"

"Your family becomes more and more interesting. I think I'll enjoy escorting you back to them."

Fanny kept her smile in place, even as her stomach did a small flip. The Earl of Brede, at Becket Hall? A man who seemed to see everything, spending time with her family? Clearly, when the time came, she needed to disappear, again. He might follow her; he seemed that obstinate. But at least she'd have time to prepare her family, in case Jack just thought of the man as a friend. "How very…delightful, my lord."

"Valentine," Brede said, watching Fanny's tip-tilted green eyes as shadows seemed to come and go in them. "I have, after all, seen you in trousers."

"I think we can safely forget that memory, thank you," Fanny told him, wishing he would let go of her arm, finish escorting her to his sister's residence. He was beginning to make her very nervous. Not just by what he was saying, but by the way he was looking at her. Rian had never looked at her that way, not ever. As if she was somehow…fascinating to him. She rather liked it.

"Agreed. The memory is consigned to the distant past. However, as you have already shown that you forget nothing you've heard, let me explain about Lady Richmond's ball. It's one of any number of balls, routs, our fellow countrymen are hosting here, as if the world is gathering in Brussels for one large party. Wellington himself hosts at least one a week. I've been fortunate enough to escape

most of them, but I can't escape the Duchess of Richmond if I'm in town that night. Barely anyone can. You'll attend, as well, with Lucille, even if I cannot."

"Why? The Duchess of Richmond doesn't even know I'm alive, for pity's sake."

"Ah, but she knows Lucille. And, Fanny, where Lucille goes, you go. She's been warned not to let you out of her sight."

"That's insulting," Fanny told him. "If I give you my word that I won't go…go chasing after Rian again, will I then be able to remain at your sister's? I have no desire to spend an evening standing in a corner, watching people laugh and joke when the world could be turned upside down in an instant."

He felt so damned old. "The world is always poised to go upside down in an instant, Fanny."

She pulled her arm free, turned away from him. "Now you sound like my papa."

Brede smiled at her turned back, fought down the urge to reach out, stroke her sun-bright hair and its poor, chopped ends. "That most assuredly wasn't my intention. In any event, I'll definitely be elsewhere until at least tomorrow evening, so you don't have to fear me barging into my sister's demanding to know your whereabouts."

Fanny turned quickly, putting her hand on his arm, then just as quickly grabbing it back when she realized what she'd done. "You're…Where are you going?"

"And that, my dear, is really none of your business, is it?"

"No, it's not," Fanny agreed, mentally kicking herself for worrying about this arrogant man. She had enough to worry her about Rian, who seemed to have much in common with the Duchess of Richmond and the others, as if Bonaparte marching toward them with unknown thousands of soldiers at his back was just too exciting, too titillatingly delicious for words, and they simply couldn't miss out on the fun.

Fanny was very far from titillated. Because she'd been having dreams ever since Rian left Becket Hall. Terrible dreams. Dreams of the island on that last day. She'd been young, too young, to remember that day, and yet, in her dreams, she thought she could hear, as well as see it. Hear the screams of agony. See the white sand, the ghastly red blood soaking into it. Terror then, war coming at them now. Was there a connection? What could that connection be?

She could have gone to Odette, asked her why these dreams, these nightmares, were plaguing her. But then Odette would answer her, and she wasn't sure she wanted to hear that answer.

To Fanny, Rian was the answer. Rian, who had always been her haven of safety. She'd needed to see him, yes. But she'd also fled to him…not that she'd say anything like that to him. He had enough to concern him, what with Bonaparte out there somewhere, planning his attack. But she was frightened about more than Bonaparte. So very frightened…

Brede tipped up her chin with his knuckle, smiling into her eyes. "Such a solemn little face, Fanny. Are you worried about me? How novel. Lucille cares about her quarterly allowance. Of course, Wiggins, bless him, actually seems to have a care or two for my welfare, although he might only worry he won't again find such a congenial employer."

"Yes," Fanny said, banishing her thoughts and forcing some levity into her tone, "I can certainly see that. You are above all things mellow, my lord."

The corners of Brede's mouth twitched in amusement. He didn't understand it. He was feeling younger by the minute, just looking at this girl, just talking to her, teasing with her…having her tease right back at him, just as if she couldn't care a twig about who he was, about his consequence.

He had so damn much consequence; sometimes it hung around his neck like an anvil.

He really did need Bonaparte gone, and himself back in London, where he didn't spend the majority of his time dressed in dirty clothes, with danger all around him and only Shadow for company. "As I was attempting to say before your rude interruption—it's pleasant to believe you might have some small worry for my well-being. Was that what spurred you into asking where I might be going when I leave you?"

What did she feel? Did she feel anything? How could she know? And why would she, for pity's sake? She'd barely met the man. She loved Rian—she'd always loved Rian, ever since she could remember being alive.

So why was she looking at this man, feeling suddenly hungry to memorize his every feature? Why was he looking at her in an unsettling mix of amusement and something she felt was far more dangerous?

Perhaps it was the danger itself that hurt her heart, perhaps it was the thought of Bonaparte marching toward them all, turning the world upside down? Everything—the flowers, the sun, Brede's hazel eyes—seemed to be in such sharp relief. Intense. "It's…That is, I…"

"Yes, of course," he said, smiling in a way that made her itch to slap the smile from his face. "Exactly as I thought." He offered her his arm once more, and he felt suddenly distant from her, even as he walked beside her….

CHAPTER EIGHT

"YOU'RE NOT AFRAID OF HIM?" Lady Whalley looked at Fanny in some shock, then gave a dismissive wave of her hand as she settled back onto the satin settee she'd earlier sworn had been fashioned by sadistic foreign devils intent on bruising her poor bottom with their outlandishly uncomfortable design. "Oh, you're only saying that to build your own courage. Everyone is afraid of Valentine, most especially of his horrid tongue, always so cutting. And that's just the way he likes it. What's worse, Fanny, he absolutely revels in their fear. The great, unapproachable Brede. My stars, if I wasn't his sister, I'd cut a wide path around him myself, I vow it."

Fanny was barely listening to the woman. She'd taken Brede's advice, for the most part, and had spent the past two days pleasantly smiling, and nodding, and allowing herself to be guided into gowns, slippers, pelisses, cloaks and several yards of satin ribbon she had no use for at all—although she felt fairly certain Lucie did, and delighted in the fact that all the bills would go to her brother.

Besides, Fanny didn't want to hear about the Earl of Brede. She wanted to see him, demand that he take her to see Rian. Rian would have come to her if he could, so obviously he couldn't, which meant she would go to him. Ladies were riding out to the various encampments every day in open carriages, picnic hampers tucked on the facing seat, parasols held high to keep off the warm June sun.

"Are you sure, Lucie," she asked, turning away from the window overlooking the street, where she encamped herself as often as possible, "that you don't wish to ride out to see the troops parade? I'm sure it would be great fun—and you could show off your new bonnet?"

Lucie had lifted her small feet up and onto the settee as she lay back against at least a half-dozen cushions commandeered from every corner of the rented house. "Well," she said, dragging out the word, "I suppose we could. Except—no, Valentine forbade it. He left me very distinct written orders. You are to remain here until he returns. And it hasn't been so long, only yesterday and today. Although I agree, an afternoon can seem a week long, when there's no gaiety. Alas, this is a house of mourning, drat William."

Fanny took up a seat at the very edge of a chair placed across a low table from the settee, her hands on her knees, about to demonstrate to Lucie the sort of logic that had the rest of the Beckets sighing over her with regularity. "He said I had to remain here. Ah, but where is here, Lucie? Here, as in this house? I don't think so, because we did go out shopping all day yesterday, didn't we? Or did he mean here, as in Brussels? Or even here, as in Belgium itself? There are so many definitions of here. He should have been more clear, don't you think? It wouldn't be your fault that he wasn't more specific, now would it?"

Then Fanny arched her brows, watching the gears begin to turn in Lady Whalley's pleasant but limited brain.

Lucie sat up, sliding her feet to the floor once more. "My stars, yes! He should have been more specific, shouldn't he? That was very lax of him, wasn't it? Exactly where is here?"

"I suppose he simply thinks you should moulder here, like some warden watching her prisoner," Fanny said, blinking several times in baffled innocence as she turned the screw. "And why he should punish you, his dear and loving sister? Why, it passes beyond my imagination, it truly does. Your brother seems to have no consideration for you. Some—not you or I, of course—might even call him a selfish brute."

Lucie drew up her features in a scowl, and then rose quickly, her spine straight, and began to pace. "Yes, the brute! How dare he? Giving me orders, as if he was Wellington himself. My stars! The whole world is here, enjoying the fun, and here I am, wardening a perfectly rational young woman who is at least presentable now, no thanks to him, but thanks to me. And what is my reward? I'm supposed to just sit here…sit here…"

"Twiddling your thumbs?" Fanny suggested helpfully, then winced, fearing she may have overplayed her hand.

But, with Lady Whalley, Fanny would not only have to overplay her hand, she'd probably have to write on the nearest wall, in foot-high letters: I'm leading you down the garden path, madam.

"Yes! Yes, that's it—twiddling my thumbs," Lucie said, tugging on the bell pull. "The nerve of that man! Fanny, run upstairs and have Frances bring me my things. We're going out!"

Fanny all but flew up the stairs to alert the maid and fetch her new bonnet—a lovely thing, all buttery-yellow straw, and with cherries on the brim—and was back in the hallway before skidding to a halt, remembering her gloves and shawl, and skidding back into the small bedchamber to retrieve them. Seconds later, and only slightly out of breath, she was descending the stairs in a most ladylike-Elly fashion, a refined young miss about to take the air.

Frances came huffing and puffing from the rear of the narrow hallway, having had to negotiate the steep servant stairs, and the carriage was waiting for them in the street.

Fanny kept looking to her left and right, sure Brede would show up somehow and ruin all her fine plans, but the carriage, a pretty thing of foreign make, with its leather top folded down so that she and Lucie were sitting in the sun, moved off toward the wide avenue at the corner.

"You forgot your parasol," Lucie scolded as Frances, commandeered to ride along, unfurled Lucie's and held it over her head. "Are you going to make me order the roof put up? Oh, stars, I hope not. Nobody's seen my new bonnet as yet, you know." She frowned. "I don't know that I should have let you have that one. I do like those cherries. Perhaps even more than my silk roses. I'm just so glad William's gone six months now and I can wear my lavenders, too. Black is so boring, although I will say I do believe it flatters me."

Fanny smiled and nodded, and Lucie kept on talking, when she wasn't waving at passersby and then making quiet comments to Fanny. "Did you see her cane? My stars, does she think wrapping it in satin ribbon will make anyone forget she's older than dirt? Oh, look, isn't that the Marquess of Daventry? Yes, yes, it is! And doesn't he look marvelous in his uniform? So handsome. Yoo-hoo—Banning!"

"I don't think he heard you, Lucie," Fanny said, biting on the insides of her cheeks, as the man had most definitely heard Lady Whalley, and seen her, but he'd then made a quick business out of stepping into a nearby shop rather than speak to her. She could be wrong in her conclusion, but she was fairly certain that fine London gentlemen did not make it a habit of frequenting corsetiers. Lady Whalley could talk the ears off a donkey, and if she, Fanny, saw a handy corset-makers shop, she might duck into it, too, poor man.

"Well, that is too bad. He's single, you know, and quite wealthy. Although cut much in the same pattern as Valentine, so he most probably would feel the need to throttle me within days of the wedding. Oh, well," Lucie said, sighing, "there are so many other lovely men to choose from. Valentine says I should be on the lookout for a deaf one, but he was just being facetious…."

Fanny bit the insides of her cheeks once more, nodded, and then pretended a great interest in her surroundings as Lucie prattled on and on about nothing.

Not that she had to feign interest for long, for Brussels was quite the largest city she'd ever seen, and full of things to look at, admire. Several times she saw scarlet-jacketed soldiers traveling in groups down the flagway, but none of them walked with that certain elegance and grace that came so naturally to Rian.

It was only when the carriage left the city for a smooth path that ran along through greener-than-green grass that Fanny began to despair of finding her brother, for the fields seemed to have grown full regiments of scarlet-jacketed soldiers. They were everywhere, some marching in close formation, others sitting in groups, cleaning their weapons, others cooking over small fires.

"Oh, wait," she said at last. "There, just at the crest of that hill, all those large tents. That must be the Duke's headquarters, don't you think?"

Lucie sat up straight and squinted into the sun. “Yes, I would suppose Wellington could be there. See the flags? Everything looks so…regimental. Do you think your brother is with him? He’d make a lovely excuse to get down and stroll about a bit, don’t you think? Unless you think the sight of a widow in her mourning, even her half-mourning, would perhaps be seen as a bad omen? You know, it would have been ever so much better if William had died in battle rather than by simply falling off his horse and cracking his head in the gutter, because then I’d be welcomed as the widow of a hero. That was so inconsiderate of him. But, then, that was William all over, and never a thought for me.”

Fanny opened her mouth to say something, but then realized that, as with so many of Lucie’s statements, there was just no proper way to comment, to answer. “There—I see Jupiter. Rian has to be here. Please tell your coachman to stop.”

“Jupiter? But isn’t that a—Oh, my stars, you don’t mean a planet, do you? And not some ancient God, either, I’d imagine.”

“Lucie, please?” Fanny said as the carriage moved on along the roadway. “I really want to stop here.”

Lucie called an order to the coachman and then looked at her reprovingly. “High-strung, aren’t you, my dear? But I can see the grass, Fanny, and it’s still wet from last night’s rain, so I’ll just sit here and you can take Frances with you to—Oh, my stars! Fanny, you should wait for the coachman to put down the stairs.”

But Fanny had seen Rian striding toward Jupiter, and she wanted to reach him before he could mount and ride off. She’d fussed with the handle of the low door for a moment, ready to vault over it if the latch wouldn’t budge, and then jumped down to the ground, almost immediately feeling the squish of water running into her brand-new black patent slippers. She lifted her skirts and headed up the hill.

“Rian, wait!” she called out when she was halfway there and a Private was holding Jupiter for him to mount. At first she thought he didn’t hear her, or was going to ignore her as the Marquess of Daventry had ignored Lucie. But then he turned her way, his fists jammed on his hips, and impatiently waited for her to climb all the way to the top of the hill.

“Well, look at you,” he said, his tone not all that welcoming. “Does his lordship know you’re off the leash?”

“I don’t care what his lordship knows,” Fanny said, still holding up her skirts, as the hill was not only wet, but covered in horse manure. “Don’t let Jupiter get any of this mess stuck beneath his shoes or he’ll—”

“Fanny, I know how to take care of my own horse,” Rian interrupted, and then looked past her, toward the carriage. “How’s Lady Oh-my-stars? Are you behaving yourself?”

“She’s still breathing, isn’t she? Although, I’ll admit it, yesterday in the shops, and again this morning, it was a pretty close-run thing,” Fanny grumbled, and then smiled when Rian laughed out loud. “Have you seen the Duke yet, Rian? Did you talk to him? Are you going to be a courier, or whatever?”

“I’ll be taking messages, orders, to our commanders, yes,” Rian said, visibly preening. “I spent all day yesterday doing as the Earl said, riding out with Jupiter, all the way to Ligny, as a matter of fact. I’d like to be in the thick of things, smack in the battle, but this is important, Fanny. Deadly important. If only Blücher’s army would show itself before Boney does. We’re outmanned, Fanny. We may be the better men, but there aren’t enough of us. Not with the news the Earl brought this morning.”

Fanny felt her stomach do a small flip. “He’s here? He’s back?”

“That he is. Rode in here an hour ago, his horse all lathered, and nearly fell out of the saddle. He saw them, Fanny. At least a small party, probably out looking for us. And he got too close, if you ask me. I saw a hole from a ball in his cloak. He’s with the Duke now.”

“They shot at him?” Fanny turned toward the tents, suddenly feeling slightly sick in her stomach. “How do you know he wasn’t hit?”

"Because he told me," Rian said, grinning. "Right before he cordially told me to go to hell, asking asinine questions, because he was still walking, wasn't he? I like him, Fanny, so don't pest him out of his mind the way you do the rest of us. He wrote to Jack yesterday, told him you're all right and that he'll act as your guardian until he can get you home again. So you're his ward now, I think it's called, and that means he's in charge of you."

"Oh, he is not," Fanny protested, wishing she felt as confident about that as she sounded. "You're here. You'll act as my guardian."

Rian pushed his spread fingers through his dark hair. "But you see, Fanny, the thing is, I don't want to. I already know you'd drive a monk to drink, but the Earl doesn't. Let him find out for himself."

"And that's fine with you?" Fanny asked him, looking at him narrowly, and in some disappointment. "You'll just hand me over to him, a stranger, and wash your hands of me?"

"I washed my hands of you—no, let me start over before you launch yourself at me. I said goodbye to you at Becket Hall, Fanny. I'm here now, where I want to be, and it's not my fault you got it into your head that we…that we…"

"That I love you," Fanny whispered, as three soldiers walked by, on their way to their horses. "That you love me. That you'd want to see me as much as I needed to see you. Rian, I've been having strange—" She clamped her mouth shut, realizing she'd almost blurted out some nonsense about her frightening dreams, had almost added to his worries. "Please, Rian, understand…."

Rian's hair took another raking from his stabbing fingers. "Oh, Christ, Fanny-panny. I do love you. You're my sis—My best friend," he corrected quickly. "My very best friend, Fanny. But you're young, and you've never seen the world."

"And you have?" she asked him, blinking back tears as she looked into his beautiful face. His kind eyes. Didn't he know that he was her world?

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