

*The Belle of Belgrave Square* Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

Cossack tossed his head at something in the distance.

Julia's gloved hands tightened reflexively on the reins. She squinted down the length of the Row at the rider coming toward them. "Easy," she murmured to Cossack. "It's just another horse."

An enormous horse. Bigger and blacker than Cossack himself.

But it wasn't the horse that made Julia tense in her sidesaddle. It was the gentleman astride him: a stern-faced, battle-scarred ex-military man.

Captain Blunt, the Hero of the Crimea.

Her mouth went dry as he approached. She was half-tempted to bolt. But there was no escaping him. She brought Cossack down to a trot and then to a walk.

She'd met the captain once before. It had been at Lady Arundell's spring ball. Viscount Ridgeway, a mutual acquaintance of theirs, had introduced him to Julia as a worthy partner. In other circumstances, the interaction might have been the veriest commonplace—a few polite words exchanged and a turn about the polished wood dance floor.

Instead, Julia had gawped at Captain Blunt like a stricken nitwit. Her breath had stopped and her pulse had roared in her ears. Afraid she might faint, she'd fled the ballroom before the introduction had been completed, leaving Captain Blunt standing there, his granite-hewn features frozen in a mask of displeasure.

It had been one of the most mortifying experiences of Julia's life.

And that was saying something.

For a lady prone to panicking in company, mortifications were a daily occurrence. At the advanced age of two-and-twenty, she'd nearly grown accustomed to them. But even for her, the incident at Lady Arundell's ball had marked a new low.

No doubt Captain Blunt thought her actions had had something to do with his appearance.

He was powerfully made. Tall, strong, and impossibly broad shouldered. Already a physically intimidating gentleman, he was made even more so by the scar on his face.

The deep, gruesome slash bisected his right eyebrow and ran all the way down to his mouth, notching into the flesh of his lip. It gave the impression of a permanent sneer.

Rather ironic that he was hailed as a hero. In looks, there seemed nothing heroic about him. Indeed, he appeared in every way a villain.

"Miss Wychwood." He removed his beaver hat, inclining his head in a bow. His hair was a lustrous raven black. Cut short to his collar, it was complemented by a pair of similarly short sideburns edging the harsh lines of his jaw. "Good morning."

She scarcely dared look him in the face. "Good morning."

He didn't reply. Not immediately. He was studying her. She could feel the weight of his stare. It set off a storm of butterflies in her stomach.

Ride on, she wanted to say. Please, ride on.

He didn't ride on. He seemed intent on making her squirm.

She suspected she knew why. She'd never apologized to him for her behavior at the ball. There'd been no opportunity.

Perhaps he wanted her to suffer for embarrassing him?

If that was the case, Julia was resigned to take her medicine. Heaven knew she deserved it.

She forced herself to meet his gaze. The butterflies in her stomach threatened to revolt. Goodness. His eyes were the color of hoarfrost—a gray so cold and stark it sent an icy shiver tracing down the curve of her spine. Every feminine instinct within her rose up in warning. Run, it said. Flee.

But this wasn't Lady Arundell's ballroom.

This was Hyde Park. Here in the open air, mounted on Cossack, she wasn't the same person she was at a ball or a dinner dance. For one thing, she wasn't alone. She had a partner—and an imposing one, at that. Cossack lent her his strength and his stature. Made her feel nearly as formidable as he was. It's why she was more confident on horseback.

At least, she'd always been so before.

"How do you do?" she asked.

"Very well." His voice was deep and commanding, with a growl at the edge of it. A soldier's voice. The kind that, when necessary, could be heard across a battlefield. "And yourself?"

"I'm enjoying our spell of fine weather," she said. "It's excellent for riding."

He flicked a glance over her habit. Made of faded black wool, it did nothing to emphasize the contours of her figure. Rather the opposite. It obscured her shape, much as the net veil on her short-brimmed riding hat obscured her face. His black brows notched into a frown.

She suppressed a flicker of self-consciousness. Her clothing wasn't meant to attract attention. It was meant to render her invisible. But it hadn't-not to him.

The way he looked at her . . . Hades might have regarded Persephone thus before dragging her down to hell to be his unwilling bride.

And everyone knew Captain Blunt was looking for a wife.

If one believed the prevailing rumors, it was the sole reason he'd come to town. He was on the hunt for a vulnerable heiress he could spirit back to his isolated Yorkshire estate. An estate that was said to be haunted.

"You ride often at this time of day?" he asked.

"Whenever I can," she said. "Cossack is glad for the exercise."

"You handle him well."

Some of the tightness in her chest eased at the compliment. "It's not difficult." She stroked Cossack's neck. "He may look imposing, but he's a lamb underneath. The biggest creatures often are in my experience."

Captain Blunt's own mount stamped his gigantic hooves as if in objection to her statement.

She gave the great beast an interested look. He was built like a medieval warhorse, with a broad chest, heavy fetlocks, and a thickly waving mane and tail. "What do you call him?"

"Quintus."

"And is he-"

"A brute through and through," Captain Blunt said. "Sometimes, Miss Wychwood, what you see is precisely what you get."

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