



A Summer to Remember

Mary Balogh

A SUMMER

TO

REMEMBER



MARY BALOGH

A DELL BOOK

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London's Hyde Park was decked out in all the splendor of a May morning. Sunlight beamed down from a clear blue sky and twinkled off a million dewdrops, giving a fresh, newly washed appearance to the trees and grass. It was a perfect setting for the customary promenade along fashionable Rotten Row, the riders cantering along the wide stretch of turf that ran from Hyde Park Corner to Queen's Gate, the pedestrians strolling on the footpath beside it, separated from the equestrians by a sturdy rail.

Perfect except for one discordant detail. In the middle of an open stretch of grass well within sight of the Row some sort of commotion was rapidly drawing a crowd of the curious. That it was a fight became quickly evident. Not a duel—there were four participants instead of two and the morning was far too well advanced—but an indecorous outbreak of fisticuffs.

Gentlemen, and a few ladies too, rode closer to see what was transpiring. Many of the gentlemen stayed to watch the progress of the fight, their interest in the morning considerably piqued. A few of those unfortunate enough to be escorting ladies, were obliged to ride hastily onward since it was most certainly not a genteel sight for female eyes. Some pedestrians too approached the scene along the path that ran close by and either hurried on past or drew closer, depending largely upon their gender.

"Scandalous!" one haughty male voice declared above the hubbub of the crowd gathered about the empty square in which the brawl was proceeding apace. "Someone ought to summon a constable. Riffraff should not be allowed into the park to offend the sensibilities of decent folk."

But although the shabby garments and generally grubby, unkempt appearance of three of the participants in the fight proclaimed them to be undoubtedly of the very lowest classes, the elegant though scant clothing and general bearing of the fourth told an entirely different story.

"It is Ravensberg, sir," the Honorable Mr. Charles Rush explained to the outraged Marquess of Burleigh.

The name was apparently explanation enough. The marquess raised a quizzing glass to his eye and from the vantage point of his position on horseback peered through it over the heads of those on foot at Viscount Ravensberg, who was stripped to the waist and at that particular moment was having much the worst of the encounter. He had an assailant clamped on each arm while the third pummeled him with hearty enthusiasm in the stomach.

"Scandalous!" the marquess declared again, while all about him gentlemen cheered or jeered, and two or three were even engaged in laying wagers upon the outcome of such a seemingly unequal

contest. "I did not believe I would live to see even Ravensberg stoop so low as to brawl with riffraff."

"Shame!" someone else called as the red-haired giant who was doing the pummeling changed the direction of his assault and planted a fist in his victim's undefended right eye, snapping his neck back in the process. "Three against one is no fair odds."

"But he would not accept our assistance," Lord Arthur Kellard protested with some indignation. "He made the challenge—and insisted that three against one suited him admirably."

"Ravensberg *challenged* riffraff?" the marquess asked with considerable disdain.

"They dared to be insolent after he rebuked them for accosting a milkmaid," Mr. Rush explained. "But he would not simply chastise them with his whip as the rest of us suggested. He insisted—*oh, say!*"

This exclamation was occasioned by Lord Ravensberg's response to the punch in the eye. He laughed, an incongruously merry sound, and suddenly lashed out neatly with one slim leg and caught his unwary assailant beneath the chin with the toe of his boot. There was a loud cracking of bone and clacking of teeth. At the same moment he took advantage of the astonishment of the two who held his arms and twisted free of them. He spun around to face them in a half crouch, his arms outstretched, his fingers beckoning. He was grinning.

"Come on, you buggers," he invited profanely. "Or do the odds suddenly appear less to your advantage?"

The opponent whose jaw had just been shattered might have thought so. But although his eyes were open, he appeared more intent upon counting stars wheeling in the morning sky than considering odds.

There was a roar of appreciation from the ever growing crowd of spectators.

Viscount Ravensberg showed to far better advantage without his shirt than with it. A gentleman of medium height and slender grace, he had doubtless appeared an easy mark to the three thugs who had taken him on with a collective smirk of insolent contempt a few minutes before. But the slim legs encased in fashionable buff riding breeches and top boots, showed themselves to be impressively well muscled now that he had descended from the saddle. And his naked chest, shoulders, and arms were those of a man who had exercised and honed his body to its fullest potential. The white seams and numerous scars on his forearms and chest and one the length of the underside of his jaw on the left side proclaimed the fact, as his clothes did not, that at one time he had been a military man.

"Atrocious language to use in a public place," the marquess remarked disdainfully. "And an unseemly display of flesh. And all over a *milkmaid*, you say? Ravensberg is a disgrace to his name and a pity his father."

But no one, not even Mr. Rush, to whom his remarks were addressed, was paying him any attention. Two of the bullies who had thought to amuse themselves by coaxing unwilling kisses from an unaccompanied milkmaid in the park were taking turns rushing at the viscount, who was laughing and repulsing them with his jabbing fists every time they came within range. Those who knew him were

well aware that he spent a few hours of most days at Jackson's boxing saloon, sparring with partners far his superior in height and weight.

"Sooner or later," he said conversationally, "you are going to put together your two half-brains and make one whole and realize that you would stand a far better chance against me if you attacked me simultaneously."

"This is *not* a sight for ladies," the marquess said sternly. "The Duchess of Portfrey is walking past with her niece."

But although one gentleman detached himself hastily—and perhaps reluctantly—from the crowd at the mention of the duchess's name, his lordship's disapproving voice was largely drowned out by a roar of enthusiasm as the viscount's remaining two assailants took his advice and charged him in tandem, only to find their progress checked when he reached out his arms and cracked their heads together. They went down as if their four legs had turned to jelly, and they remained down.

"Bravo, Ravensberg!" someone called above the chorus of whistles and cheers.

"E's bloomin' broke my jaw, 'e 'as," the third young man complained, clutching it with both hands and turning over on the grass to spit blood and at least one tooth onto the grass. He had abandoned counting stars but did not look as if he were about to resume the fight.

The viscount was laughing again as he wiped his palms on his breeches. "It was too easy, by Jove," he said. "I expected better sport from three of London's choicest laboring men. They hardly merited my getting off my horse. They were definitely not worth stripping down for. If they had ever been in my regiment in the Peninsula, by thunder, I would have put them in the front line to shield the worthier men behind them."

But the morning had one more incident of interest to offer—both for him and for the cheering spectators. The milkmaid who had been the unwitting cause of the fracas came hurtling across the grass toward him—the crowd parted obligingly to let her through—flung her arms about his neck, and pressed her person against his.

"Oh, thank you, *thank* you, your worship," she cried fervently, "for saving a girl's virtue. I'm a good girl, I am, and they would of stole a kiss or p'raps worse if you 'adn't 'appened along to save me. But I'll kiss *you*, I will. For a reward, like, being as you earned it an' all."

She was plump and shapely and ruddily pretty and drew shrill whistles and admiring, bawdy comments from the spectators. Viscount Ravensberg grinned at her before dipping his head and availing himself of her offer with lingering thoroughness. He tossed her a half sovereign along with a wink from his good eye when he was finished, and assured her that she was indeed a good girl.

There were more whistles as she made her unhurried departure, all dimples and saucily swaying hips.

"Scandalous!" the marquess said one more time. "In broad daylight too! But what can one expect of Ravensberg?"

The viscount heard him and turned to sketch him an ironic bow. "I perform a public service, sir," he said. "I provide topics for drawing-room conversation that are somewhat more lively than the weather and the state of the nation's health."

"I believe," Mr. Rush said with a chuckle as the marquess rode on, his back ramrod straight and almost visibly bristling with disapproval, "you are barely whispered about by the more genteel Ravensberg. You had better come to White's and get a beefsteak on that eye. That rascal gave you one deuce of a shiner."

"Hurts like a thousand devils," the viscount admitted cheerfully. "Egad, life should always be so exhilarating. My shirt, if you please, Farrington."

He looked about him after taking it from the hand of Lord Farrington, to whom his clothes had been entrusted at the start of the fight. The crowd was dispersing. He raised his eyebrows.

"Frightened all the ladies away, did I?" He squinted off in the direction of Rotten Row as if searching for one in particular.

"It is an alarmingly public place, Ravensberg," Lord Farrington said, laughing with him. "And your *trousers* were bare to the waist."

"Ah," the viscount said carelessly, taking his coat from his friend and shrugging into it, "but I have a reputation for wild living to live up to, you see—though I believe I must have done my duty by it for one morning." He frowned suddenly. "What the devil are we to do with these two slumbering bodies, do you suppose?"

"Leave them to sleep it off?" Lord Arthur suggested. "I am late for my breakfast, Ravensberg, and that eye is crying out for attention. The mere sight of it is enough to threaten one's appetite."

"You, fellow." The viscount raised his voice as he drew another coin out of his pocket and tossed it onto the grass beside the only one of his opponents who was conscious. "Revive your friends and take them to the nearest alehouse before a constable arrives to convey them elsewhere. I daresay a tankard or two of ale each will help restore you all to a semblance of good health. And bear in mind for the future that when milkmaids say no they probably mean no. It is a simple fact of language. Yes means yes, no means no."

"Bloody 'ell," the man mumbled, still holding his jaw with one hand while setting the other over the coin. "I'll never so much as *look* at another wench, guv."

The viscount laughed and swung himself up into the saddle of his horse, whose bridle Mr. Rush had been holding.

"Breakfast," he announced gaily, "and a juicy beefsteak for my eye. Lead the way, Rush."

A few minutes later Hyde Park in the vicinity of Rotten Row was its usual elegant, *tonnish* self, and traces of the scandalous brawl vanished. But it was one more incident to add to the lengthy list of wit's indiscretions for which Christopher "Kit" Butler, Viscount Ravensberg, had become sadly notorious.

“I cannot tell you,” the Duchess of Portfrey had been saying to her niece a few minutes earlier, “with a delight it is to have your company, Lauren. My marriage is proving more of a joy than I ever expected, and Lyndon is remarkably attentive, even now that I am in expectation of an interesting event. But he cannot live in my pocket all the time, the poor dear. We were both pleased beyond words when you accepted our invitation to stay with us until after my confinement.”

The Honorable Miss Lauren Edgeworth smiled. “We both know,” she said, “that you are doing me a far greater favor than I can possibly be doing you, Elizabeth. Newbury Abbey had become intolerable to me.”

She had been in London for two weeks, but neither she nor the duchess had touched upon the underlying reason for her being here until now. Elizabeth’s supposed need for Lauren’s company while she awaited the birth of her first child two months hence had been merely a convenient excuse. Of course it had.

“Life does go on, Lauren,” Elizabeth said at last. “But I will not belittle your grief by enlarging upon that theme. It would be insensitive of me, especially when I have never experienced anything to compare with what you have suffered—and when I have finally found my own happiness. Though the fact in itself may be of some reassurance to you. I was all of six and thirty when I married Lyndon last autumn.”

The Duke of Portfrey was indeed attentive to his wife, with whom he was clearly deeply in love. Lauren smiled her acknowledgment of the words of intended comfort. They strolled onward through Hyde Park, as they had done each morning since Lauren’s arrival, except for the three days when it had rained. The broad, grassy expanses on either side of the path looked enticingly and deceptively rural despite the frequent glimpses they afforded of other pedestrians and riders. It was as if a piece of the countryside had been tossed down into the middle of one of the largest, busiest cities in the world and had survived there, untainted by commerce.

They were approaching Rotten Row, from which Lauren had shrunk in some alarm the first time Elizabeth had suggested they walk there two weeks before. The morning gathering was nothing like the crush of the fashionable afternoon promenade in the park, it was true, but even so there were too many people to see and—more significant—to be seen by. She had thought she would never find the courage to face the *beau monde* after the fiasco of last year.

Last year half the *ton* had been gathered at Newbury Abbey in Dorsetshire to celebrate the wedding of Lauren Edgeworth to Neville Wyatt, Earl of Kilbourne. There had been a grand wedding eve ball, which Lauren had thought it was impossible to feel any happier—and how horrifyingly prophetic that thought had proved to be! And then there had been the wedding itself at the village church, which had been packed to the doors with the *crème de la crème* of the *beau monde*—a wedding that had been interrupted just as Lauren was about to step into the nave, on her grandfather’s arm, by the sudden appearance of the wife Neville had thought long dead and of whose very existence Lauren and her

whole family had been totally unaware.

Lauren had come to London this spring because she could no longer bear to be living at the dowager house with the dowager countess and Gwendoline, Neville's sister, while Neville and his Lily lived at the abbey a mere two miles distant. Unfortunately, there had been few avenues of escape. She had grown up at Newbury Abbey with Neville and Gwen after her mother married the late earl's brother and went off with him on a wedding journey from which they had never returned. She had read Elizabeth's letter of invitation, then, with enormous gratitude. But she had come on the assumption that since Elizabeth was increasing, they would not be taking part in any of the social activities of the Season. She was right about that, but Elizabeth did like to take the air.

"Oh, goodness," the duchess said suddenly as they topped a slight rise in the path and came within sight of Rotten Row, "I wonder what the reason is for that crowd. I do hope no one has been taken ill. Or been thrown from a horse."

There was indeed a large gathering of horses and people on the grass beside the path, directly on their route to the Row. They were mostly gentlemen, it appeared to Lauren. But if someone had indeed been hurt, the presence of ladies might be welcome. Ladies could be far more practical in emergencies than gentlemen. They both increased their pace.

"How absurd of me," the duchess said, "to be remembering that Lyndon went out riding this morning. Do you suppose . . ."

"Indeed I do not," Lauren said firmly. "And I do not even believe there has been any accident. The people are *cheering*."

"Oh, dear." The duchess touched Lauren's arm to slow her down again and sounded suddenly on the verge of laughter. "I do believe we have stumbled upon a fight, Lauren. I think we must walk on past as if we had noticed nothing untoward."

"A fight?" Lauren's eyes widened. "In such a public place? In broad daylight? Surely not."

But indeed Elizabeth was quite right. When they drew closer Lauren confirmed it with her own eyes before she could avert them and hurry decently by. Although the crowd of men and horses was really quite dense, one of those inexplicable gaps appeared for a moment, allowing her a view of what was happening in the hollow center of the square. A shockingly clear view.

There were three men there, although she thought there might have been a fourth too, stretched out on the grass. Two of them were dressed decently, if shabbily, in the clothing of laboring men. But it was upon the third that Lauren's eyes riveted themselves for a few startled moments. He was crouched ready for action and was apparently taunting the other two by beckoning with both hands. But it was not his actions that startled her as much as his state of dress—or rather, his state of undress. His supple top boots and his form-fitting buff riding breeches proclaimed him to be a gentleman. But above the waist he was quite, quite naked. And very splendidly and alarmingly male.

Before she looked sharply away in blushing confusion, Lauren became aware of two other details, one visual and one aural. He was fair-haired and handsome and laughing. And the words he spoke

accompany the beckoning hands fell unmistakably upon her ears despite the hubbub of voices proceeding from the many spectators.

“Come on, you buggers,” he said without any apparent shame at all.

She hoped fervently, even as she felt the uncomfortable heat of a blush spread up her neck and blossom brightly in both cheeks, that Elizabeth had not heard the words—or seen the half-naked man who had uttered them. Rarely had she felt such embarrassment.

But Elizabeth was laughing with what sounded like genuine amusement. “Poor Lord Burleigh,” she said. “He looks as if he might have an apoplexy at any moment. I wonder why he does not simply run on by and leave the children to their play. Men can be such foolish creatures, Lauren. Even the slightest disagreement must be settled with fists.”

“Elizabeth,” Lauren said, truly scandalized, “did you see . . . ? And did you hear . . . ?”

“How could I not?” Elizabeth was still chuckling.

But before either of them could say more, they were distracted by the appearance of a tall, dark, handsome young gentleman, who stepped onto the path before them, bowed with hasty elegance, and offered an arm to each of them.

“Elizabeth,” he said, “Lauren. Good morning. And what a lovely morning it is too. It bids fair to be being unseasonably warm later today. Allow me to escort you to Rotten Row and earn the envy of every other gentleman there.”

Joseph Fawcitt, Marquess of Attingsborough, was a cousin, nephew of the Dowager Countess of Kilbourne. He had been one of the spectators of the fight, Lauren realized, but had seen them and had come to hurry them away. She took his arm gratefully. Actually, she thought, hearing the echo of his words, it was probable that there *was* no other gentleman on Rotten Row. Surely they were all clustered about the brawling men.

“How provoking it is sometimes to be a lady, Joseph,” Elizabeth said, taking his other arm. “I suppose if I were to ask you who that gentleman is who is fighting and why he is doing so, you would not answer me?”

He grinned down at her. “*What* fight?” he asked.

Elizabeth sighed. “As I thought,” she said.

“For my part,” Lauren assured him fervently, “I have no wish to know.” She was still flushed at the memory of the gentleman fighter, naked from the waist up. And of his words—*come on, you buggers*.

Joseph turned his head to look down at her, a twinkle in his eyes. “Mother intends to call Grosvenor Square this afternoon,” he said. “She has *plans* for you, Lauren. Be warned.”

Some rout or concert or ball, doubtless. It was proving extremely difficult to convince Aunt Sadi

the Duchess of Anburey, Joseph's mother, that she simply did not *wish* to join in any of the activities of the Season. Having seen her daughter, Lady Wilma Fawcitt, eligibly betrothed to the Earl of Sutto before the Season even began in earnest, Aunt Sadie had turned her well-meaning matchmaking eye upon Lauren.

Joseph turned to address a remark to Elizabeth, and Lauren, despite herself, looked back over her shoulder. She had heard a loud cheer a moment before. The fight was over. The crowd had parted along her line of vision, and she could see that the gentleman with the naked torso was still on his feet. But if she had been shocked before, she was doubly horrified now. He had a *woman* in his arms—his arms were right about her waist and hers were wrapped about his neck—and he was *kissing* her. In full view of a few dozen spectators.

He lifted his head just as Lauren looked, and in the fraction of a second before she could whip her head about to face front again, his laughing eyes met hers.

Her cheeks were on fire again.

"You are looking thoroughly blue-deviled, Ravensberg," Lord Farrington commented late the following night, crossing the room to the sideboard and replenishing the contents of his glass before resuming his seat. "Foxed, are you? Or is it the eye? It has turned marvelous shades of black, purple and yellow. Not to mention the bright scarlet slit through which you are peering out at the world."

"I tell you, Ravensberg," Lord Arthur added, "I could scarce swallow the kidneys on my plate this morning for looking at that eye—or do I mean yesterday morning?"

"If I could just be sure," Charles Rush said, "that this mantel would stay upright when I push away from it, I would pour myself another drink. What the devil time is it?"

"Half past four." Lord Farrington glanced at the clock six inches from his friend's head.

"The devil!" Mr. Rush exclaimed. "Where has the night gone?"

"Where all nights go." Lord Arthur yawned. "Let's see—I believe I started the evening at m' aunt's rout—a deuced flat affair, but family duty and all that. I did not stay long. She looked over m'shoulder to see if Ravensberg was with me and then, even though he wasn't there, read me a lecture on the company I keep and the nasty tendency rakish reputations have of rubbing off on a fellow's companions. It seems I ought to stay away from you, Ravensberg, if I know what is good for me."

His friends shared the joke by roaring with hearty mirth. All except Kit, that was, who was sprawled with casual elegance in a deep chair beside the fireplace in his bachelor rooms on St. James's, gazing vacantly with his one healthy eye into the unlit coals.

"You won't have to put up with my wicked influence for much longer," he said. "I've been

summoned to Alvesley.”

Lord Farrington sipped his drink. “By your father? Redfield himself?” he asked. “A summons to Ravensberg?”

“A summons.” Kit nodded slowly. “There is to be a grand house party this summer in honor of the seventy-fifth birthday of the dowager, my grandmother.”

“An old dragon, is she, Ravensberg?” Mr. Rush asked sympathetically. “Do you suppose the mantel would collapse if I stopped holding it up?”

“You are three sheets to the wind, old chap,” Lord Arthur informed him. “It’s your legs, not the mantel.”

“I have always had a soft spot for the old girl, you see,” Kit said, “and my father knows it. Oh, for God’s sake, Rush, just look down into your glass, will you? It is still half full.”

Mr. Rush looked with pleased astonishment at the glass in his hand and drained off its contents. “What I really need,” he said, “is my bed. If my legs would just carry me there.”

“Egad,” Kit said, his gloomy stare back on the unlit fire. “What I really need is a bride.”

“Go to bed,” Lord Arthur advised him hastily, “and sleep it off. The feeling will go away by morning—guaranteed.”

“My father’s birthday gift to my grandmother is to be the betrothal of his heir,” Kit said.

“Oh, I say! *You* are the heir.”

“Jolly rotten luck, old chap.”

Lord Arthur and Mr. Rush spoke simultaneously.

“A pox on all fathers!” Lord Farrington exclaimed indignantly. “Does he have someone picked out for you, Ravensberg?”

Kit laughed and draped his hands over the arms of his chair. “Oh, yes, indeed,” he said. “Along with everything else, I am to inherit my late elder brother’s betrothed.”

“Who the devil is she?” Mr. Rush forgot his inebriated state sufficiently to straighten up and stand unassisted.

“Bewcastle’s sister,” Kit said.

“Bewcastle? The *Duke* of?” Lord Arthur asked.

“I have obliged my father by withdrawing from the Peninsula and selling my commission,” Kit said. “I’ll oblige him further by going back to Alvesley after almost three years even though I would

banished for life the last time I was there. I'll even oblige him on the matter of the birthday gift. ~~But I'll do it all on my terms, by Jove. I'll take with me a bride of my own choosing, and I'll be married to her before I go so that there will be nothing Redfield can do about it.~~ I have been sorely tempted to pick some vulgar creature, but that would not do. It is just the sort of thing Redfield would expect of me. I'll choose someone above reproach instead. That will gall him more than anything else because he won't be able to complain about her. She is going to be dull, respectable, prim, and perfect." He spoke with grim satisfaction.

For a moment his friends regarded him in fascinated silence. Then Lord Farrington threw back his head and laughed. "You are going to marry a dull, respectable woman, Ravensberg?" he asked. "Just to spite your father?"

"Not wise, old chap," Mr. Rush said, treading a determinedly straight path toward the sideboard. "You would be the one married to the woman for life, not your father. You would find such a wife insupportable, take my word on it. The vulgar wench might afford you more amusement."

"But the thing is that one has to marry sometime," Kit explained, cupping one hand over his aching eye for a moment. "Especially when the death of one's elder brother has made one the reluctant heir to an earldom and vast estates and a fortune to boot. One has to do one's duty and set up one's nursery and all that. Who better to do it with than a quiet, dull, worthy woman who will run one's household competently and without fuss and will dutifully present one with an heir and a few spares?"

"But there is a very real obstacle to such a scheme, Ravensberg." Lord Farrington was frowning when he spoke the words, but he grinned and then chuckled outright before continuing. "Who is the respectable woman would have you? You are a handsome enough devil, it is true, or so I understand from the way females look at you. And of course you have your present title and your future prospects. But you *have* established an impressively notorious reputation as a rakehell since you sold out."

"And that would be stating it mildly," Lord Arthur muttered into his glass.

"As bad as that, is it? What a devilish stuffy world we live in," Kit commented. "But egad, I am serious about this. And I *am* Redfield's heir. That fact alone will outweigh all else when it is perceived that I am shopping in earnest for a wife."

"True enough," Mr. Rush admitted, seating himself on an upright chair after refilling his glass. "But not necessarily the sort of wife you are looking for, old chap. Parents with lofty principles and daughters to match steer clear of gentlemen who mill with foul-smelling laborers within sight of Rotten Row and then kiss milkmaids without their shirts on for all the world to witness. And men who on a wager drive along St. James's in their curricles past all the gentlemen's clubs, a painted doxy squeezed onto the seat on either side of them. And men whose names appear in all the betting books in connection with every disreputable and outrageous dare anyone cares to wager on."

"Who are the possibilities?" Kit asked, ignoring this dire prediction and returning his attention to the coals in the fireplace. "There must be hordes of new arrivals in town now that the Season has begun in earnest. Hordes of hopeful misses come shopping for husbands. Who is the dullest, most prudish, most straitlaced, most respectable of them all? You fellows will know better than I. You all

attend *tonnish* events.”

His companions gave the matter serious thought. Each threw out a few names, all of which were rejected out of hand by the others for a variety of reasons.

“There *is* Miss Edgeworth,” Lord Arthur said at last, when they appeared to have run out of suggestions. “But she is too long in the tooth.”

“Miss Edgeworth?” Lord Farrington repeated. “Of Newbury Abbey? The Earl of Kilbourne’s abandoned bride? Lord, my sister was at that wedding. It was the sensation of last year. The bridegroom waiting at the front of the church, the bride in the porch ready to make her grand entrance. And then the arrival of a ragged woman claiming to be Kilbourne’s long-lost wife—and telling nothing short of the truth, by gad. The Edgeworth chit fled from the church as if the hounds of hell were at her heels, according to Maggie, who is not normally prone to exaggeration. Is she in town this year, Kellard?”

“Staying with Portfrey,” Lord Arthur said. “The duchess is Kilbourne’s aunt, y’know. And Miss Edgeworth is connected to her too in some way.”

“I had heard she was in town,” Mr. Rush admitted. “But she doesn’t go about much, does she? Hedged around by the Portfreys and dozens of other relatives, I daresay, all trying to get her married off quietly—and *respectably*.” He snickered. “She is doubtless dull enough to set one to yawning at the mere thought of her. You don’t want *her*, Ravensberg.”

“Besides,” Lord Arthur added with what proved to be the fatal challenge, “you would not get her even if you did want her, Ravensberg. Portfrey, Anburey, Attingsborough—*none* of her relatives would allow someone of your reputation within hailing distance of her. And even if you did slip past their guard, she would give you the cut direct. Turn you into an icicle on the spot, I daresay. You are *just* the sort none of them would want for her, least of all the lady herself. We will have to think of someone else for you. Though why you would want—”

But Kit was laughing gaily as he turned his face from the fire again. “Was that a challenge, by any chance?” he asked, cutting his friend off midsentence. “If it was, you could scarce have made it more irresistible if you had tried. I will not be allowed within hailing distance of Miss Edgeworth, you say, because I am the sort of rake and rogue from whom such a delicate and aging bloom must be protected at all costs? And she would freeze me with a single glance from her severe, maidenly eye, would she? Because she is incorruptible and I am corruption incarnate? By Jove, I’ll have her.” He slapped the arm of his chair with one open palm.

Lord Farrington flung back his head and shouted with laughter. “I smell a wager,” he said. “A hundred guineas on it that you cannot do it, Ravensberg.”

“And a hundred more of mine,” Lord Arthur added. “She is very high in the instep, Ravensberg. Someone just last week, though I can’t for the life of me remember who, likened her to a marble statue, except that she came out the colder of the two.”

“I might as well throw in my hundred too,” Mr. Rush said, “though I should know better where

Ravensberg is concerned. It was Brinkley, Kellard, who is forever scouting out prospective new mothers for his orphaned brood. That's how I knew she was in town—I remember now. She told Brinkley right straight out as soon as he broached the subject of wedlock with her—when he was strolling with her on Rotten Row one morning, if you can imagine it—that she has no intention of marrying anyone ever. He believed her. Apparently she is not the sort of lady whose word one doubts. That was when he made the remark about marble statues. Brinkley is eminently respectable Ravensberg.”

“And I am not.” Kit laughed again. “Well, for three hundred guineas and to annoy my father into the bargain I'll have to change her mind, won't I? Shall we say by the end of June, when I have to leave for Alvesley? A *marriage* before the end of June, that is. Between Miss Edgeworth and yours truly, of course.”

“Less than six weeks? Done.” Lord Farrington got resolutely to his feet. “Now I am for my bet while I can still find it and convey myself toward it unassisted. Come along, Rush, I'll steer you in the direction of yours at the same time. I would not begin the campaign for at least another week if I were you, Ravensberg. Any delicately nurtured female would swoon outright at the sight of that eye. That will give you approximately five weeks.” The thought amused him considerably.

“A marriage to Miss Edgeworth by the last day in June, then,” Lord Arthur said, summing up the wager as he joined his friends on their way out of the room. “It cannot be done, Ravensberg. Not even by you—*especially* not by you. This will be the easiest hundred guineas I have made this year. But of course you *will* try.”

“Of course.” Kit grinned at his friends. “And I will succeed. With what event shall I begin the campaign? What is happening a week or so from now?”

“Lady Mannering's ball,” Lord Farrington said after a moment of consideration. “It is always one of the grand squeezes of the Season. Everybody attends it. Miss Edgeworth may well not, though Ravensberg. I have not seen her at any balls—or any other entertainment for that matter. Not that I would recognize her if I saw her, of course, but someone would surely have pointed her out. She is still news.”

“Lady Mannering's ball,” Kit said, hoisting himself out of his chair in order to see his friends on their way. “I must find out if she will be there. Is she a beauty, by the way? Or is she an antidote?”

“Now that,” Lord Farrington said firmly, “you must discover for yourself, Ravensberg. It will serve you right if she resembles a gargoyle.”



Lauren arrived at Lady Mannering's ball the following week in company with the Duke and Duchess of Anburey and the Marquess of Attingsborough. After much initial resistance, she had agreed to attend even though she was fully aware that almost the whole of the *beau monde* would be present. Or perhaps it was *because* of that fact. She had made her decision to go for sheer pride's sake.

She was in London during the Season, and she was a member of the *ton*. If she maintained her decision to live a retired life as Elizabeth's companion, she might give the lasting impression that she was afraid to appear in public, that she was afraid of being laughed at, scorned, shunned as a poor, rejected bride. She was indeed afraid, mortally so, but above all else she had been raised to be a lady. And ladies did not allow fear to master them. Ladies did not abjure society merely because they were embarrassed and unhappy, merely because they felt unattractive and unwanted. Ladies did not give in to self-pity.

And so she had taken her courage in both hands and agreed to appear before the *ton* on one of the *ton*'s favorite playgrounds—a London ballroom during the Season. She would go and hold her head high and confront the demons that had shadowed her ever since that most dreadful of all mornings at the church at Newbury. She would remain in London until after Elizabeth's confinement—the duke had brought his duchess to town so that she would be close to the best physicians—and then she would do what she had decided she really wanted to do. She would take her modest fortune and set up her own establishment, perhaps in Bath, and she would live a quiet, retired life with a small circle of select friends. She would endure this ball, because when she did, no one was going to be able to call her a coward.

The Duke of Anburey's crested carriage took its place in the line of coaches depositing guests outside the Mannering mansion on Cavendish Square. Lauren could see that every window was ablaze with candlelight. Light spilled out from the double doors, which stood open, and illumined the red carpet that had been rolled down the steps and across the pavement. Even above the snorting of horses, the stamping of hooves, and the rumbling of wheels, she could hear the festive sound of voices raised in greeting and laughter.

It was a nerve-wracking moment and made her understand fully how much she had changed in the fourteen months since her wedding eve ball. Then she had felt very comfortably ensconced in her own milieu, perfectly at ease, perfectly assured of her own worth and her own place in the ranks of the *beau monde*. It was time she took that place again, not as Neville's prospective bride and countess, as was true, but as the Honorable Miss Lauren Edgeworth. She raised her chin, an unconsciously arrogant gesture that masked her desire to jump from the carriage and run and run until Cavendish Square and

Mayfair and London and her very self were far behind her.

And then it was their turn to alight. A footman opened the carriage door and set down the steps, the gentlemen descended, Uncle Webster handed Aunt Sadie down, and Joseph was reaching up a hand to assist Lauren. She took it and made her own descent to the red carpet, paying particular attention to her posture and facial expression as she did so. She knew she was looking her best. Her gown had been specially made for the occasion by Elizabeth's own modiste, and Elizabeth had helped her choose both the fabric and the design, as well as all the accessories to wear with it. The Duchess of Portfrey was well known for her exquisite taste. But then so was Lauren Edgeworth.

Lauren smiled as her aunt and uncle made their way indoors and she laid her hand on Joseph's offered sleeve.

"That's it, Lauren," he murmured approvingly, smiling at her and even winking. "You imitate a queen, my girl. Indeed you look lovelier than any queen I ever saw."

"And how many would that be, Joseph?" she asked, picking up the front of her skirt with her free hand and walking gracefully up the steps into the crowded, brightly lit hall. She quelled the sudden, panicked conviction that she must have forgotten something essential—like her gown.

"Hmm, let me see." He pretended to consider his answer. "One actually. Our own Queen Charlotte. You are a hundred times lovelier than she."

"Keep your voice down," she advised him. "You will have your head chopped off for treason if anyone should overhear you." But she slanted him a quick, grateful smile. He clearly understood something about the flock of butterflies dancing frantically in her stomach and was doing his best to distract her.

He led her toward the staircase and the slow-moving queue of guests ascending it. She drew a few deep, steadying breaths and resisted the urge to look at things rather than people. How many of the guests on the stairs, and how many guests in the ballroom above, had been at her wedding and witnessed her humiliation?

The answer was, of course, a significant number of them. But a lifetime of training can be a marvelous thing, Lauren soon discovered. It took her up the stairs, along the receiving line, and into the ballroom, which was already crowded with people who for the moment had nothing better to do than watch and comment upon the arrival of fellow guests.

She tried to concentrate upon the magnificence of the ballroom, which was lit by hundreds of candles set in three great crystal chandeliers overhead and in numerous wall sconces, and upon the sumptuous floral arrangements that filled the room with their delicate pastel shades and their perfumed scents. And she tried—with some success—to look calmly about her, making eye contact with numerous other guests, inclining her head politely to those she recognized.

But it was her own family who killed any remote chance that she might enjoy the evening—killed it by kindness. Almost before Lauren was fully inside the ballroom, still on Joseph's arm, her uncle and aunt close by, Wilma and Lord Sutton came along, all gracious condescension, a thin, reedy young

man in tow, and made the introductions. Mr. Bartlett-Howe earnestly solicited the hand of Miss Edgeworth for the second set, it being understood that the Marquess of Attingsborough had already bespoken the first. And only a minute or so later Lord Sutton, who had wandered away, returned with yet another gentleman, who had apparently conceived a burning desire to reserve the third set with Miss Edgeworth.

It seemed that her family, concerned that she might be a wallflower at her first ball in over a year, had spent the few days since she had agreed to attend lining up prospective partners for her—and prospective suitors too?

Just a little over a year ago she had danced at her wedding eve ball, secure in her own attractiveness, the cynosure of all eyes, the admired and envied bride of the Earl of Kilbourne. Tonight she was an aging, faded beauty, unable to attract her own partners, in dire danger of declining into a permanent and irrevocable spinsterhood. Or so her family made her feel.

Lauren felt the depth of humiliation. Even Joseph's kindness in offering to escort her to the ball was—well, it was just *kindness*.

Lauren smiled her unconsciously arrogant smile and plied her fan with slow grace.

When Kit and Lord Farrington arrived in Cavendish Square, the ball had been in progress for some time. But it was a clear, moonlit evening, unseasonably warm for the middle of May, and the front doors were still open wide. The merry noises of conversation and laughter spilled outside from the hall and stairs. The sound of an orchestra playing a vigorous country dance wafted down from the ballroom above.

“A squeeze indeed,” Kit said, handing his opera cloak and silk hat to a liveried, bewigged footman and looking about the entrance hall with open interest. “Do you suppose the ballroom is as crowded as Farrington?”

“Sure to be. More so, in fact.” His friend relinquished his own cloak and hat and checked the immaculate folds of his neckcloth. “We had better go up and find out.”

Kit nodded affably to a few acquaintances, mostly male, as they ascended the staircase. This was the first ball he had attended since Lisbon. He could not even remember quite how long ago that had been. He had had invitations to several here in London, of course. His wilder exploits might have caused the highest sticklers to raise disapproving eyebrows and the most conscientious parents to gather them more protectively to the family bosom, but he was after all Viscount Ravensberg. More important, he was the son and heir of the Earl of Redfield. And this was the Season, the great marriage mart, when everyone of any consequence at all was invited almost everywhere.

“You are quite sure she is going to be here this evening?” he asked as they reached the top of the

stairs and turned in the direction of the ballroom. The crowd became denser and there was a noticeable swell in the noise level. Kit was aware of increased heat and the heavy scents of a thousand flowers mingled with the expensive perfumes worn by guests.

“As sure as I can be.” Lord Farrington paused in the doorway of the ballroom and gazed unhurried about the milling crowds. “Sutton said she was coming and he ought to know—betrothed to Lady Wilma Fawcitt, you know. Of course, she might have contracted some deadly disease or broken a limb or simply changed her mind. Ah.” He raised his quizzing glass to his eye.

“You have seen her?” Kit asked.

He might have been feeling self-conscious since this was his first appearance in years at a grand town entertainment, and there was no doubt that he was attracting considerable attention. A number of those not dancing were looking quite pointedly his way. Lorgnettes and quizzing glasses were raised and inquisitive eyes. Heads were moving closer to other heads as confidences were exchanged. More than a few young ladies were stealing covert glances his way, especially those who had been apprised of his identity—the shocking, forbidden Lord Ravensberg! But Kit had never been much concerned with what others thought or said of him and tonight was no different.

“The delectable Miss Merklinger,” Lord Farrington murmured, his quizzing glass trained upon one of the dancers. “All dimples and bouncing golden curls. Not to mention the bosom.”

Kit chuckled and favored the beauty in question with a long scrutiny through his own glass. “Are you not a day over eighteen,” he said. “Definitely not an object for your particular brand of gallantry, Lord Farrington.”

“Lord, no,” his friend agreed with a sigh. “More is the pity. That is the attraction, I suppose. Not her, then, Miss Edgeworth.”

He resumed his unhasty perusal of the room and its occupants even as the set came to an end and the dancers moved off the floor to further crowd the sidelines.

“Kellard pointed her out to me in the park just three or four mornings ago,” Lord Farrington said. “I am quite certain I will recognize her again.”

“But you were not presented,” Kit said, “so cannot now introduce me to her.”

“I would not make matters that easy for you anyway,” his friend assured him. “I have a wager I will win, if you will remember. Ah, there she is. Just being escorted to Attingsborough’s side by Stennson. Oh, hard lines, old chap. Anburey and his duchess are hovering over her too. She is quite hedged about with formidable gaolers.” He grinned.

“Stennson? *That* dry old stick?” Kit followed the direction of his friend’s gaze. He knew both the Marquess of Attingsborough and George Stennson and soon picked them out in the crowd some distance away. The older couple with them must be the duke and duchess. And the lady standing between the two gentlemen had to be the one he had come to meet. His future bride. Kit raised his quizzing glass to his eye again.

She was on the tall side and slender, he could see, but not without pleasing feminine curves. He would wager that beneath the flowing skirt and train of her high-waisted gown her legs were long and slim. She had a graceful bearing, with the sort of arch to her spine that invited a guiding male hand to nestle against the back of her waist. Her dark hair was glossy in the light of the candles. It was dressed high on her head, held there with jeweled combs, and fell about her neck and temples in soft curls. Her face was oval with high cheekbones and straight nose and large eyes—he could not see their color from where he stood. She was elegantly and fashionably dressed in a shimmering satin gown of deep violet, which she wore with silver gloves and slippers and a pale violet fan.

She was nothing short of a beauty. Kit's lips pursed in a silent whistle.

She was conversing with her companions, but she was fanning herself and looking about at the same time. For a few moments Kit was pleasantly surprised by the smile on her face. It gave the lie, seemingly, to the notion that she was as cold as a marble statue. But the expression, he noticed as he kept watching, did not once change as she continued to converse and look about. Then it struck him that perhaps it was not so much a smile as a haughty, condescending look of contempt for all the lesser mortals within her orbit.

"A diamond of the first water," he murmured, lowering his glass.

"Indeed," Lord Farrington agreed. "And an impregnable fortress if ever I saw one, Ravensberg. She looks as if she considers anything short of royalty quite unworthy of her notice." He obviously found the thought amusing.

"But then," Kit said, looking about for their hostess, who by happy chance was making her way toward them, a smile of welcome on her face, "I always did have a weakness for impregnable fortresses, Farrington. And for other assorted impossible challenges."

"Lord Farrington, Lord Ravensberg." Lady Mannering was all gracious charm as she presented each of them with a gloved hand to bow over. "How delightful that you have seen fit to attend my ball. And how provoking that you have arrived so late. You cannot know what a headache it is to a hostess to have to provide all the young ladies with partners for the opening set when all the young gentlemen persist in being fashionably late."

"But it is not with the *very* young ladies that I came to dance, ma'am," Lord Farrington said with his most disarming smile. "I knew the partner of my choice would be busy for the first few sets finding partners for her guests. It was my hope that by now you might be free to honor me with your hand for a set."

Lady Mannering laughed as she tapped his arm sharply with her closed fan. "You are a rogue, Farrington," she said. "It would serve you right if I clung to your arm for the rest of the evening. Now how did you succeed in luring Lord Ravensberg here? It was my understanding that he is always too busy racing his curricule to Brighton and engaging in other such fascinating manly activities to attend dull events like balls. However, his notorious presence will guarantee the unqualified success of mine." She tapped Kit in his turn on the arm with her folded fan.

He inclined his head. "How could I resist, ma'am," he said, "when I saw that the invitation came from one of my mother's dearest friends?"

"I have not set eyes on your mama in years," Lady Mannering said bluntly. "She stays in the country. Now, permit me to find partners for you both. Though if all the fond mamas do not grab the daughters and run with them the moment they see the infamous Viscount Ravensberg in my ballroom, I will be agreeably surprised."

"Perhaps, ma'am," Kit said, favoring her with his most engaging smile, "you would present me to Miss Edgeworth of Newbury?"

Lady Mannering's eyebrows rose. "I believe there are younger ladies who are far more desirous of handsome, roguish partners than Miss Edgeworth," she said. "And it is her family, rather than I, who have been choosing her partners this evening. However, if it is your wish."

"It is, ma'am." Kit bowed again.

"And is it also your wish?" Lady Mannering asked Lord Farrington.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, "but I see some acquaintances across the room to whom I must make myself agreeable—since you are to be otherwise engaged."

Kit followed his hostess across the ballroom while the crowds parted to let them through. His appearance had definitely caused a buzz, he noticed with rueful amusement, though whether it was a buzz of indignation or one of speculation he neither knew nor cared. He was noticing that by a stroll of good fortune the Duke and Duchess of Anburey were engaged in conversation with a couple behind them, Stennson had disappeared, and Attingsborough was directing his attention and his gallantry toward a blushing, giggling young lady who had just stepped off the dance floor. Miss Edgeworth stood virtually unattended for the moment, still looking about her, still wearing that fixed half smile.

"Miss Edgeworth." When Lady Mannering addressed her by name, she turned her gaze toward the newcomers, and her eyebrows arched above her eyes even as the motion of her fan was suddenly arrested. "Viscount Ravensberg has asked for the honor of an introduction."

She regarded him with large, dark-lashed violet eyes, the exact shade of her gown—surely the most beautiful feature in an extraordinarily beautiful face. Quite a perfect knockout, in fact.

But it was a face he had surely seen before, Kit thought—and recently too. For a moment the exact occasion eluded him. But then he remembered last week's fight in Hyde Park and the embrace with the milkmaid. When he had looked up after kissing her, he had found himself locking eyes with a shocked beauty—clearly *not* of the milkmaid class—some distance away and wishing fleetingly and naughtily that it was she who was caught within his embrace. But before he had been able either to grin or to wink at her, she had whipped her head about to present the back of an elegant bonnet to his gaze. When he had looked for her a short while later, she had disappeared among the crowds strolling on Rotten Row.

He had not thought of her since—until now.

Kit executed his most elegant bow.

Lauren felt a shock of recognition the moment she set eyes on him, even though he looked very different tonight—he was *clothed* from the neck down. He was dressed with impeccable elegance, in fact, in a black, form-fitting evening coat, cream silk knee breeches and embroidered waistcoat, and pristine white linen and lace.

He was not outstandingly handsome. And he was no more than two or three inches taller than she was surprised to discover. Yet there was an aura of confident vitality about him that gave the illusion of extraordinarily attractive good looks. His face was tanned and good-humored, and his gray eyes smiled with some inner light.

He was the sort of man whose acquaintance she should avoid at all costs, Lauren thought in the few seconds that elapsed after Lady Mannering's introduction, while Lord Ravensberg bowed and she curtsied. Even if she had not been a witness to his unseemly behavior in the park, she surely would have sensed the indefinable air of raw masculinity that he somehow exuded. There was something very different indeed about him from the eminently respectable parade of gentlemen Wilma and Lord Sutton had been presenting to her thus far this evening. She felt an unexpected wave of amusement as she realized that her aunt and uncle and Joseph were bringing their attention back to her and looking concerned—as if she were a green girl who was quite incapable of taking care of herself. And Lord Sutton was approaching purposefully from a short distance away with a portly, earnest-looking young man—as if she were a dull, aging creature quite without the charms to attract any gentleman who would not be coerced.

Viscount Ravensberg had not been coerced.

“My lord,” she murmured.

“Miss Edgeworth? Charmed.” The smile lurking in his eyes spread to the rest of his face to reveal very white teeth and laugh lines at the outer corners of his eyes. Lauren revised her first impression that he was not particularly handsome. “I begged for the introduction since I simply had to get close enough to discover if your gown really does match the color of your eyes. It does.”

Lauren fanned her cheeks slowly—the ballroom was surely overwarm even though both sets of French windows leading out onto the balcony on the other side of the ballroom were wide open. Did she expect her to blush and simper at such blatant gallantry—when she had heard very different words from his lips last week? *Come on, you buggers.*

Joseph was purposefully clearing his throat.

“May I hope you are free to dance the next set with me, Miss Edgeworth?” Viscount Ravensberg asked while Lady Mannering smiled benevolently at his side.

“I was about to escort my cousin to the refreshment room,” Joseph said smoothly but with a firm edge of dismissal in his tone. He offered his arm for her hand. “Miss Edgeworth is thirsty and needs rest from dancing. Lauren?”

But Lord Ravensberg did not look away from her. He raised his eyebrows inquiringly while laughter danced in his eyes. He awaited an answer from her own lips. No true gentleman would have done so. And there was no necessity for her to reply when Joseph had done so for her. She had merely to place her hand on his arm, smile disdainfully, and walk off. It was a quite unexceptionable way in which to deal with unmannerly pretension. But she did none of those things.

Lord Ravensberg had not been coerced. He had complimented her eyes, however foolish the flattery. And he was undeniably attractive.

“Thank you, Joseph,” she heard herself saying, “but perhaps I have the energy to dance one more set before taking refreshments.”

She stepped forward, set her hand on the viscount’s sleeve, and allowed him to lead her onto the open space of the dance floor. Would she have done so if Joseph had not spoken up to protect her? Or if Lord Sutton had not been bringing her another partner? She did not know. But she did realize suddenly, now that it was too late to change her mind, that the next set was to be a waltz—the intimate dance, still considered slightly scandalous by the highest sticklers, that she had once considered wondrously romantic. But that had been when she had danced it with Neville at her wedding eve ball. And never before or since.

“Such a grave look,” the viscount murmured as she turned to face him. “Are you tired? Would you prefer after all that I escort you to the refreshment room?”

“No. Thank you.” It was strange how such a small rebellion had lifted her spirits. And she was actually glad that the dance was to be a waltz. Perhaps she could lay to rest more than a few ghosts tonight.

The orchestra began playing the opening bars. Lauren raised her left hand to his shoulder and set her other hand in his. She could feel his right hand come firmly to rest against the arch of her back. His height made their positioning seem more intimate than it had felt with the taller Neville. She could not easily avoid gazing into his face. She could not avoid feeling his intense physical presence. She could feel the warm strength of both his hands. She could smell the subtle musk of his cologne. She drew a slow breath and looked into his eyes.

They smiled warmly, knowingly back into her own—as if he felt her discomfort and was amused by it. A dangerous man indeed, she thought. She had never been comfortable with such men. She had avoided them all her life.

He led her into the waltz.

For a while the bitter memories of her wedding eve ball and the day that had followed it threatened to overwhelm her. She calmed herself by deliberately counting her steps and concentrating on the rhythm of the music and the movement of her feet. But it did not take long to realize that she was

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