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An Excerpt From: AT LOVE'S COMMAND

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Ian Witherspoon was rather amazed at how calm he was considering he had just left his lover to go meet his bride. For all that he'd been betrothed to her for nearly twelve years, he couldn't recall having seen her since that long-ago day. She'd been a mousy little thing of ten years then, thin and blandly brown—hair, eyes and clothes. He had been a very immature eighteen, reluctantly agreeing to the future marriage in order to stay in his father's good graces.

Then the war, and Derek, had come along and he'd forgotten about little brown Sophia Middleton. Ah yes, Derek. His lover was less than thrilled at Ian's upcoming nuptials. Ian had tried everything to make Derek understand why he was doing this. But Derek refused to listen, he refused to talk about the past or the future. Derek wanted to live in the present, with no thought to causes or consequences. Ian couldn't blame him, really. He'd seen too much of consequences in his short life. Hadn't they all? But his stubborn refusal to even discuss the situation had Ian tremendously frustrated.

As he walked up the stairs to the drawing room Ian thought about their friends Jason Randall, Tony Richards and their wife Kate, Lady Randall. Jason and Tony had fought beside Ian and Derek on the Peninsula, and they had suffered in the same way Ian and Derek had from the war. Yet they had found happiness with Kate. Why couldn't Derek see it was that elusive happiness that Ian sought for both of them with Miss Middleton?

Ian put Derek and their problems firmly from his mind. Right now the neglected Miss Middleton was awaiting him with her papa in the salon. Not only had she been kept waiting this morning, but she'd been cooling her heels here at his London townhouse for over a week, awaiting his return from the Lake District where he had gone to help a friend in need.

Ian stopped long enough to check his cravat in the hall mirror. Assured that his cravat, indeed his entire person, was suitably groomed to beg Miss Middleton's pardon, Ian stepped purposely down the hall to the drawing room. A footman opened the door for him, so he didn't even need to break his stride as he entered the room. The two occupants turned to the door expectantly and Ian stopped to bestow a polite smile on them.

"Good morning, Sir Middleton, Miss Middleton," he offered. He had decided not to be too contrite before them. A small amount of sheepishly apologetic behavior was required, of course, but for the most part he thought he ought to behave as he felt—sorry they'd been kept waiting but not sorry he'd gone to see his friend Jonathan Overton through a rough patch. As it was he worried that they'd left Jonathan too soon.

Ian saw that Sir Isaac Middleton was unabashedly sizing him up. Sir Middleton had been knighted for making an obscene amount of money in trade. Oh, they claimed it was for some terribly important service he'd done for the crown of course, but everyone knew it was the money. That's why Ian had been betrothed to his daughter. Ian's father was Lord Thomas

Witherspoon, the youngest son of the Earl of Wilchester. Granted, Ian did not have a title himself and was rather out of the running for Earl seeing as his cousins were amazingly prolific, but he was connected. Lord Thomas Witherspoon needed a large loan, and Sir Middleton wanted an entrée into society. Thus Sophia and Ian were matched and the two proud papas were happy.

Ian had been miserable about it at the time. He'd been picturing himself dazzling some diamond of the first water when and if he decided to settle down. He had arrogantly assumed his dashing good looks would overcome his complete lack of income. That lack of income had enabled his father to successfully threaten to cut off his meager allowance unless he betrothed himself to the girl. Little brown Sophia had done nothing to ameliorate Ian's displeasure. The only consolation was that he would not have to wed her for at least eight years. He'd made sure that provision was in the marriage contract, and in return Sophia received a very large marriage settlement. Everyone ignored the fact that the money would almost certainly come from her own dowry.

Over the years Ian had forgotten about her. When he asked his father to buy him a commission in the army, Ian had been surprised when the old man had asked him, "What about Miss Middleton?" He had nearly replied, "Miss Who?" In his own defense he hadn't thought he'd be at war longer than a year or two, and as Miss Middleton was only sixteen at the time he assumed it would work out well.

He'd been at war for four years. And when he came back he had Derek with him and a whole host of demons at his heels. Rushing to Sophia Middleton's side for a lavish wedding did not appeal. He didn't think she cared too much; he'd written to tell her of his commission and hadn't heard a thing from her, not in four years. She'd known where he was, she could have contacted him. And she hadn't sought him out in the two years he'd been back, either.

Ian thought back on why he'd finally decided to marry her. It had nothing to do with her charms—he honestly didn't know if she had any. What he wanted was a new beginning. He had love with Derek, but it hadn't made either one of them truly happy. They were too mired in the past, in a war they rarely talked about. Even more than Ian, Derek was haunted by the war. Ian wanted them to have a new start with someone not associated with the war and all that happened there. Sophia Middleton was the way to do that, he just knew it. Finally they could put the past behind them and live fully in the present, planning for a future. Ian wanted a family. He wanted children. And he wanted to give those things to Derek, too.

Since he'd decided he wished to marry, Ian logically concluded that the wife he'd had waiting in the wings for twelve years would do as well as any other. He thought after twelve years he at least owed her a wedding.

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