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An Excerpt From: LOVE'S FORTRESS

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## Chapter One

“You did what?” Gideon was very much afraid that he had not misunderstood her at all.

“She will make you a fine wife, North,” Anne, Duchess of Ashland, said crisply as she poured a cup of tea.

They were sitting in the gazebo at Blakeley House, Gideon's estate, watching the grooms try to catch the horses in the adjoining pasture. Gideon would have turned his look of horror on the duchess, but he didn't want to take his eyes off the horses. They were his livelihood, after all.

“It isn't as if you didn't advertise for a wife, North,” she said with exasperation.

They'd been friends for nearly a year, ever since Gideon had proposed to her. She'd turned him down, of course. She'd been madly in love with Ashland and Brett Haversham, and told him so. He gave her credit for her honesty. Unfortunately she felt his declined proposal gave her the right to interfere in his life.

“You had no right and you know it. I will find myself a wife, thank you.” Gideon didn't try to hide his annoyance. She was a very managing female. “I'm going to have to talk to Ashland about keeping you in check,” he told her, quite disgruntled by the whole conversation.

The duchess's laughter was hearty and genuinely amused. “Yes, you do that, North. I'm sure that shall curtail my endeavors. Truly. I am chastised.”

“Are you sowing the seeds of Gideon's discontent, Anne?”

Gideon's back straightened and he gripped the arm of his chair with his good hand as his estate manager Charles Borden took the seat next to Anne at the small table containing the tea service. Gideon didn't look—he didn't have to. He could see the expression of amusement and exasperation on Charles' face in his mind. He'd seen it a thousand times before and surely would see it a thousand times more.

“I suppose you were part of this?” Gideon asked tightly.

“I was not. I heard Her Grace as I was walking up,” Charles said, sounding far too superior for Gideon's liking. Charles was worse than the duchess when it came to trying to manage Gideon's life. Charles had been his sergeant in the war. After Gideon's injury Charles had come home with him, nursed him back to health and somehow become Gideon's left hand, replacing the almost useless one he'd brought home from the war. Now he refused to leave. Gideon had dismissed him so many times he'd lost count, and yet every morning to his consternation he found Charles smiling at him over his morning fare. It was damned irritating.

“If I had known it would annoy you so much, however, I would have gladly helped the duchess in any way I could.” Charles sounded so happy about the situation it made Gideon grit his teeth and he felt his cheek twitch.

“Splendid,” Gideon bit out. “It is my greatest joy in life to amuse you both with my annoyance.”

“Well, it pleases us to give you joy, North,” the duchess said, “whether you like it or not.”

Charles laughed and the sound sent a shiver down Gideon’s back. He closed his eyes and took a moment to calm down.

“I will see her,” Gideon announced. “But I will make you no promises, Anne. You know my requirements in a wife.”

Anne sighed in that long-suffering way of hers. “Yes, Gideon. I have heard it enough to commit it to memory each time you have rejected an applicant.” She ticked the items off on her fingers as she began to recite. “She must be practical and hardworking. No ladies with soft hands who’ve never known a day of work. She must be of a hearty constitution. You do not wish to be met with a case of the vapors every morning over tea. She must not be a talkative woman. You have no use for endless prattle about dresses and such. She must be able to handle the servants and know all about the running of a farm. And she must be self-sufficient, as you need a wife to make your life easier and not to become another burden on your shoulders.”

“Like Charles,” Gideon added drily.

“Ha,” Charles said without rancor. “The burden is mine.”

Anne stopped her recitation to nod. “I must agree with Mr. Borden, North. You are a trial.”

“I am the very soul of generosity,” he argued, reaching for a biscuit. “After all, I put up with you two.” He pretended not to see the look that passed between them.

“I have assured her father that this is a splendid opportunity for her.” Anne’s voice was stern.

“Do not make a liar of me. From what Mr. Matthews says, she is a sweet-natured lady who wishes to marry and establish her own home. I cannot say if she meets all your requirements, not having met her myself. But in my experience a man’s requirements in a wife rarely coincide with his choices.”

Charles snorted beside him.

“She will be here with her father in two weeks’ time,” Anne continued. “I have agreed to sponsor her introduction and they will stay at Ashton Park. I only ask that you keep an open mind and remember that she is here at your request.” Gideon raised a brow. “You did advertise for a wife, North. I merely wrote to the Reverend Whitley and brought your advertisement to his attention.”

Gideon sighed in irritation. “I have said I will see her, Anne. That is all I can do.”

“Hardly,” Anne retorted. “That is all you are willing to do.”

Gideon blinked innocently at her. “I fail to see the difference.”

“You would.” Charles spoke drily as he rose from his seat. He tapped his thigh impatiently, as if sitting with them had cost him dearly. Gideon tried to ignore the sight of his tanned hand with its strong, thick fingers patting his perfectly formed, heavily muscled thigh. Charles was the son of a well-to-do farmer, had grown up knowing hard work and enjoyed it still. It showed in his physique. Part of Gideon’s discomfort over his obsession with Charles’ physical attributes was the jealousy that struck him each time he admired Charles’ perfection. He refused to examine the other emotions causing his discomfort.

“As long as you agree to see her, Gideon,” Charles told him with a little too much tone of command for Gideon’s liking, “and you don’t act like an idiot while she is here, I shall be happy.”

“Once again,” Gideon responded with a bland expression, “your happiness is of the utmost importance to me in this matter.”

Charles’ grin brought out the fresh-faced boyish charm he hadn’t lost, though he was nearing thirty. “I wouldn’t have it any other way,” he said with a wink in Anne’s direction.

Anne’s laughter filled the silence as Gideon watched Charles walk away and tried not to think about how important Charles’ happiness truly was to him.

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