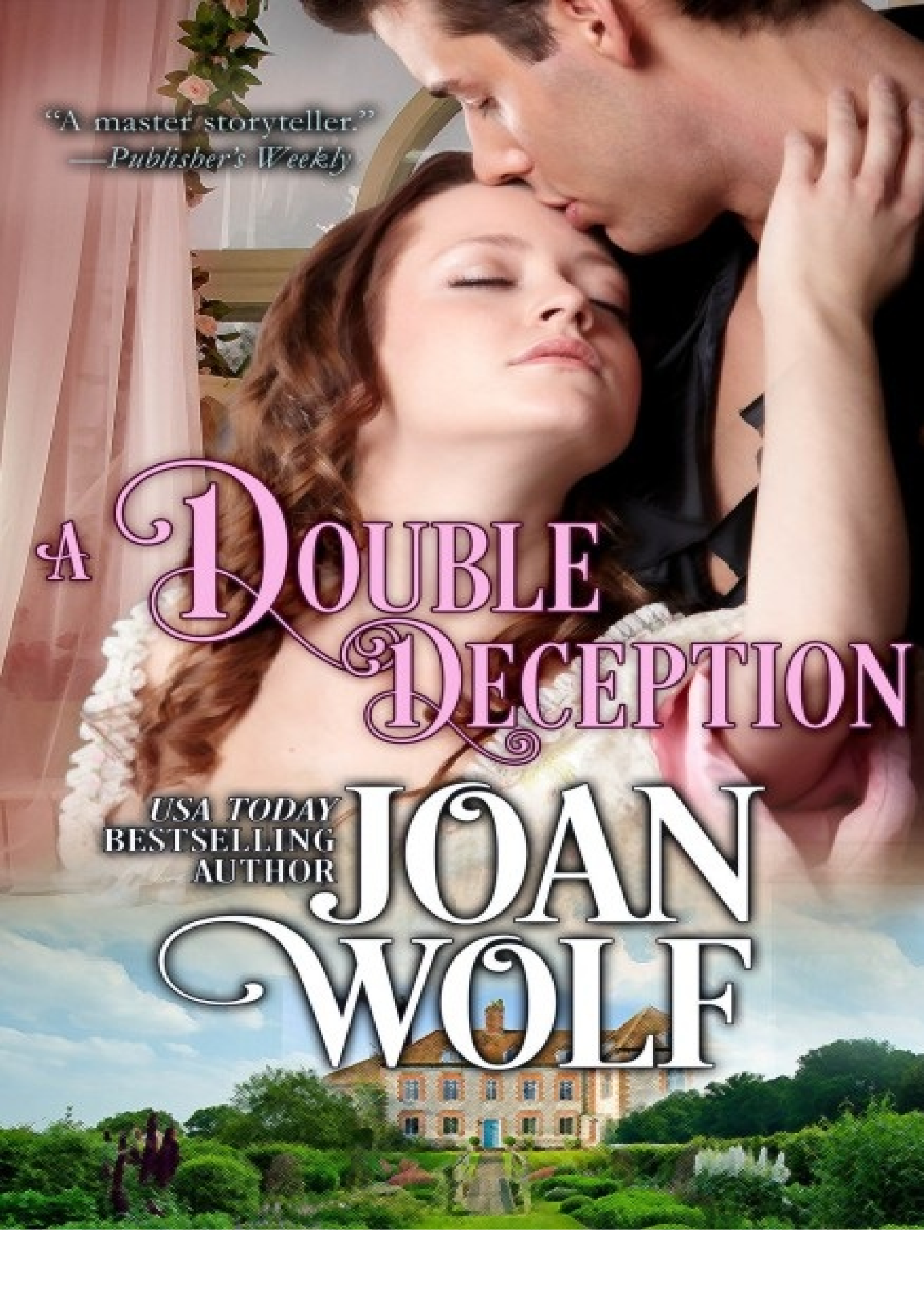


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A **DOUBLE
DECEPTION**

USA TODAY
BESTSELLING
AUTHOR

**JOAN
WOLF**



Parents require in the man fortune and honour, which are requisite to make the married state comfortable and honourable. The young lady may require personal accomplishments and complaisance, which are requisite to render a union agreeable.
—*The Lady's Magazine*, 1774

Chapter One

In the autumn of 1814 Lady Maria Cheney attended the wedding of her nephew Commander the Hon. Mark Anthony Peter George Cheney. It was an affair of much pomp and circumstance, as befitted the alliance of two of the oldest and most influential families in the county. The history of the Cheney family stretched far back into the days of the early Plantagenets, and the present Earl of Dartmouth, Mark's father, had been for forty years the most important man in Devon. The bride was Caroline Gregory, and the Gregory family, while not so illustrious or wealthy as the Cheney family, was quite as old.

The marriage was celebrated in St. Peter's Church, the parish church for Dartmouth Castle. Surrounding the assembled congregation of Cheney family members were the memorials of their past: the Dartmouth arms were on the pillars, Dartmouth names adorned the windows, past earls were buried behind the altar, and the churchyard outside was filled with the graves of dead Cheney family members.

The present heir to the earldom moved now from the sacristy to the front of the church to await his bride. Mark wore his naval uniform, and Lady Maria wiped away a surreptitious tear at the sight of his composed young face. She did not entirely approve of a boy of twenty assuming the responsibilities of marriage, but she was aware of the pressing need for him to do so. As the music began and the wedding procession started to move down the aisle, she glanced at her brother next to her on the front bench.

The Earl of Dartmouth looked older than his sixty years. The death of his other son, Mark's older brother, Robert, had aged him badly. As she listened to the magnificent strains of the organ, Lady Maria reflected on that tragic event of just under a year ago. It had been such a freakish accident! Robert was a very good boxer. The blow to the head he had sustained had not seemed so serious at first. Concussion, the doctor had said. And then, two days later, he was dead.

She looked at Mark's clear-cut profile, and, sensing her regard, he glanced at her for a minute and winked. Then Caroline was at the front of the church and he moved to join her. The two young people ascended the altar steps, knelt, and the service began.

Robert's death had changed Mark's life more than anyone else's, thought Lady Maria, as she automatically followed the prayers. As a second son, he had chosen the traditional Cheney profession of the navy. Not for Mark the landowner's education at Eton and Oxford. He had gone to sea as a child and his schoolroom had been the cramped and turbulent cockpits and gunrooms of frigates. He had been a midshipman at eleven, a lieutenant at seventeen, and at nineteen he had been promoted to the rank of commander.

Lady Maria was much afraid that Mark's naval days were ended. Which was a pity because he had loved it so. Lady Maria treasured and still reread the letters he had written to her over the years. She was the closest female relative he had; his mother had died when he was seven.

Mark's job in future, she reflected, was to run the affairs of his family, his property, his county, and his country. His immediate job was to produce a son. Her brother had

been quite clear on that score. The fragility of human life had been brought home to him most forcefully with the untimely death of the twenty-five-year-old Robert. Ever since Mark had arrived home six months ago, he had heard little else from his father but this one refrain: marry and get sons. The Dartmouth line, unbroken in six hundred years, must not be allowed to die.

Mark, however, had not needed much urging to marry Caroline Gregory. One looked at her delicate beauty, her big blue eyes and shining golden curls, and he had been smitten. She looked entrancingly lovely today in her white dress and pearl-encrusted veil. You would have to travel very far, Lady Maria thought, as the music started up again and the wedding party prepared to depart, to find a handsomer couple or one more probably destined for happiness. Everything about them matched: birth, fortune, beauty. And they were in love. Lady Maria sighed, wiped her eyes once again, and allowed her brother to take her by the arm.

The wedding breakfast was held at Cadbury House, the Gregory home on the outskirts of Dartmouth. It belonged now to Sir Giles Gregory, Caroline's older brother. He was twenty-six, the same age Robert would have been. The two of them had been at school together, Lady Maria remembered.

Lady Gregory, Caroline's mother, lived with her son, and she was the hostess for the reception. The church had been very crowded and a large number of the congregation arrived back at Cadbury House for some post-ceremony refreshment. As one would expect in Devon, there were a great number of naval men in attendance.

Lady Gregory, a dimmer, older version of Caroline, was a happy, not to say triumphant, mother of the bride. As well she might be, Lady Maria thought, her eyes on her nephew. That tall, slim young man with his splendid shoulders, his litheness, his carriage, his long-lashed golden-brown eyes—what mother would not rejoice to have him for her daughter? Not to mention the fact that he would be the Earl of Dartmouth one day.

Sir Giles was a courteous and conscientious host. He came in for a good deal of teasing from his own relations, and from the Cheney's, most of which followed the lines of "your turn next." He took it in good-enough humor. Lady Maria thought there was occasionally a frosty look in his blue eyes, but to his credit, his smile never faltered. He had the reputation of being a very kind brother and a devoted son.

All in all, the day was a decided success. A highly desirable union had been forged, and all present had had a reasonably pleasant time.

Lady Maria accompanied her brother and assorted relatives back to Castle Dartmouth for the night. The family had given up living in the huge fortress of Dartmouth Castle almost a hundred years ago. The tenth earl, Mark's grandfather, had commissioned Nicholas Hawksmoor to build him a country house which would afford more comfort and convenience than the imposing fortification that had first been built in Norman times to guard the River Dart. The result had been Castle Dartmouth, so named to underline the fact that while it was a new location and a new house, the family had not changed. The house was generally held to be Hawksmoor's masterpiece.

The Earl of Dartmouth, his cousin Admiral Sir William Cheney, and his sister Lady Maria were the last to go to bed that evening. They sat together in the large

comfortable library, and the talk turned to Mark. The Admiral, evidently, had a point he was determined to make.

“I don’t want to see that boy resign from the navy,” said Sir William.

“Nonsense,” replied the Earl gruffly. “He will have more than enough to occupy himself here at home. I’m getting old: Can’t do what I once did.”

“You don’t need to,” put in Lady Maria. “You have a very well-trained and responsible estate agent. The estate practically runs itself anyway, and what else is necessary, Mr. Farnsworth is perfectly able to see to.”

Her brother glared at her, and Sir William took advantage of his opening. “Maria is right. There is no reason why Mark can’t keep his naval commission.”

“Why should he?” grunted the Earl, staring at his cousin from under his formidable white eyebrows.

“Because Mark has shown exceptional talent as a scientific investigator. He is widely recognized by the Naval Lords as being the best hydrographer we’ve seen in years.”

“Really?” said Lady Maria.

“Yes. The charts he’s made of the River Plate in Argentina and of parts of the South Atlantic and Indian Ocean are the most accurate we have ever had. In fact, for the last few years he’s been supplied with *three* chronometers—an extraordinary compliment, I assure you, that is usually accorded to only discoverers and navigators.”

“He almost drowned in the River Plate,” Lady Maria put in conversationally. “He was fourteen and had been sent out with the expedition to Buenos Aires. His ship was wrecked and quite a few men drowned—all for the want of an accurate chart. I think that’s where his obsession for surveying began. But I did not realize his work was so well-thought-of.”

“It is,” said the Admiral.

“Well, this is all very interesting.” The Earl rose to his feet. “Mark’s duty just at present, however, is not to produce a chart, but a son. Good night, Maria. William.” And he stumped out of the room.

Chapter Two

In the spring of 1815 Lady Maria Cheney attended the wedding of her goddaughter Miss Laura Dalwood. It was not as grand an affair as her nephew's wedding had been but it was quite the most important thing that had happened to the Dalwood family in a very long time.

Lady Maria's childhood friend, Louisa Vincent, had married Sir Charles Dalwood thirty years ago. The owner of Dalwood Manor had at that time been a considerable man, if not in his county at any rate in his part of the county. The income from his estate had allowed him to live plentifully and hospitably, if not lavishly. However, as the years had gone by and the war had come and gone, the income from the Dalwood property became insufficient for the Dalwood family and house. With three sons to provide for, as well as a daughter, Sir Charles had been forced to cut back considerably on his standard of living, which was very unpleasant for everyone concerned.

Laura's marriage to Edward Templeton was the sort of solution to his problem that Sir Charles had occasionally dreamed of. Mr. Templeton had money—a great deal of money. He had moved to Devon eight years ago and had built Templeton Hall in the neighborhood of Sydenham Damerel. He had thus taken his place in the group of neighboring gentry whose homes were superior to that of Dalwood Manor. However, none of the surrounding houses— Templeton Hall in particular—had that thorough established look of old county position which belonged to Dalwood.

Sir Charles, poor though he may be, was still the most important man in his world. He belonged, belonged in a way that Edward Templeton never would. The Dalwoods had been true to their acres through the perils of civil wars, Reformation, Commonwealth, and Revolution, and the head Dalwood of his day had always owned and had always lived at Dalwood Manor. In his part of the county, the owner of Dalwood reigned supreme.

The marriage of Laura Dalwood to Edward Templeton was a not unusual marriage of ancient name and position to present day money. However, Lady Dalwood hastened to reassure her old friend, Maria Cheney, that she must not suppose that Laura was only marrying to please her family. "Edward is a charming man," she told Lady Maria. "Laura likes him very much indeed."

Lady Maria was exceedingly fond of her goddaughter. There was a serenity about Laura that she found extraordinarily attractive. Laura had a gift for graceful stillness and repose that her godmother thought contrasted most pleasantly with the extreme shyness or noisy animation found most often in young girls her age. In fact, Lady Maria had quite made up her mind to offer to sponsor Laura for a Season in London when she turned eighteen. However, that would not be necessary now. Her parents appeared to have managed her affairs very well themselves. *If*, that is, the man really was acceptable.

It certainly did appear as if Laura was happy with her choice. Lady Maria arrived at Dalwood Manor the day before the wedding and was sitting in the drawing room having tea with Lady Dalwood when Laura came in to greet her godmother. She had just returned from a ride and her skin was still a little flushed with exercise. Her dan-

blue-gray eyes were warm with pleasure as she bent to kiss Lady Maria's cheek.

"Godmama! How good to see you. And how good of you to come for my great daughter tomorrow. You're looking very smart, as usual."

Lady Maria smiled affectionately at the smiling young face bent above her. In her old gray riding habit and well-worn boots, Laura most certainly did not look smart. But then, she did not have to, reflected Lady Maria wryly. Laura's hair was parted in the middle and drawn back smoothly against her head, a style becoming to very few women. Lady Maria looked for a minute at that smooth dark head and long graceful neck, and then she said softly, "Come and sit down and tell me all about your young man."

Laura complied. "Well, he is not precisely *young*, Godmama. Edward is thirty-three." Briefly Lady Maria's eyes met those of Lady Dalwood, and both ladies repressed a smile. After all, thirty-three does not seem young to seventeen, no matter how it might appear to two middle-aged ladies of fifty. "But he is very nice," Laura was going on. A gleam of laughter lighted her eyes. "And terribly handsome."

"Well, of course, that is most important," Lady Maria said imperturbably, and Laura laughed.

"It shouldn't be, I know," she replied. "But somehow ... it is."

* * * *

When Lady Maria saw Mr. Templeton at the church the following day, she realized that Laura had been speaking the simple truth about his looks. He was not a beautiful man, but Laura herself was small, so that hardly mattered. And he was handsome-beautiful, almost, thought Lady Maria, regarding his fair-skinned, delicately chiseled face and his cap of shining golden hair.

The organ began to play, and along with the rest of the congregation, Lady Maria turned to look down the aisle to see the bride advancing on her father's arm. Sir Charles looked splendid and dignified next to the small figure of his daughter. And Laura—she is so young, thought Lady Maria suddenly. All that gravity, that grace—and so young. She blinked away a tear. Good heavens, she scolded herself, I must be entering my dotage!

The entire Dalwood family had assembled beneath the roof of the Manor for Laura's wedding, and they were all in great spirits. As well they might be, Lady Maria reflected, as she watched the oldest son, James, talking to his wife after dinner in the drawing room. She had had a very frank talk with Lady Dalwood the previous evening, and it appeared that Laura's marriage was nothing short of a godsend to the family. James, his wife, and their one child lived at Dalwood with his mother and father. Edmund, the second son, had taken orders and would take over the Dalwood living as soon as it became vacant—which would not be for another year or two at least. In the meanwhile, he was acting as curate for a neighboring parish. And Henry, the youngest son, had a commission in the Guards. All of the boys depended, in one way or another, on Dalwood for their finances. And Dalwood was mortgaged. Mortgaged to put three sons through Eton, two sons through Oxford, and to buy one son an army commission.

There had been nothing left for the daughter. But Edward Templeton had not wanted money with Laura, Lady Dalwood told Lady Maria. In fact, not to put too fine

a point on it, he had paid heavily to get her. The mortgage on Dalwood had been redeemed and Mr. Templeton had given Sir Charles some excellent advice about investments. All in all, the financial future of the family seemed assured.

“He wanted a wife to give him consequence, I gather,” said Lady Maria bluntly.

Lady Dalwood smiled a little. “Templeton Hall is a much finer place than the Manor. But it wants that graceful beauty of age that Dalwood possesses. Mr. Templeton is a fine young man as well. And a gentleman. But he wants that security of position, which only old families possess. Laura will give him that. She does like him, you know. We would never force her choice.”

“Who is he, Louisa?”

“His father was in the City. Edward was sent to Eton and Cambridge, and when his father died he sold the business to a partner, came to Devon, and built Templeton Hall. I assure you, Maria, his manners are as gentlemanly as anyone we know. He himself never had any connection with the City. He is, like us, a landowner—only, unlike us, he is very wealthy. I have no fears for Laura.”

Lady Maria wondered. It seemed to her that in their eagerness to acquire the Templeton money, the Dalwoods had not inquired too carefully into the man's background. If he were interested in setting up as a rich landowner, why on earth had he chosen Sydenham Damerel—an obscure section of Devon that looked over the river Tamar into Cornwall? Lady Maria considered herself a great deal more worldly than her friend, who had spent the last thirty years buried in Sydenham Damerel. To Lady Dalwood, Sydenham Damerel was the center of the world. To Lady Maria it was rather an outpost of civilization. She was a little concerned about Laura, but at this point there was really nothing she could do.

Chapter Three

Lady Maria had a house of her own in Bath, where she spent the greater part of the year, going up to London for a month or so every Season. When in London, she always stayed at Cheney House in Berkeley Square, which her brother the Earl was kind enough to staff for her visits. He himself rarely visited London anymore.

She was staying in Berkeley Square during May of 1815 when Mark also came up to town for a few days. Lady Maria had not seen him since his wedding; it was a Christmastime last year that Robert had died, and the Earl had had no heart for festivities this year. Consequently, she was delighted to hear from Robertson, the butler, that her nephew had arrived while she was out at a reception.

“Commander Cheney said you were not to wait up for him, my lady. He went to Watier’s for the evening and said he would see you in the morning.”

Lady Maria went to bed in a happy frame of mind, looking forward to a reunion with the boy she had always loved as well as if he had been her own son. She had been disappointed not to see him at Christmas, and had tried to tell herself that her new duties and responsibilities made his coming up to Bath to see her an impossibility. Her brother was not well. And Caroline—happy, happy news—Caroline was expecting a baby. Mark was needed at home.

He was not at Cheney House when she arose in the morning, either. He had gone off to the Admiralty, Robertson informed her. It was not until almost noon that he returned, looking in on her as she sat in the morning parlor answering her mail.

“Good morning, Aunt,” he said from the door, and came across the room to kiss her, tossing his hat on a sofa as he passed it.

“Mark!” Her strongly featured face was alight with pleasure. “How lovely to see you, my dear. And how splendid you look. William is right—you ought not to resign your commission. It would be a pity to give up that marvelous uniform.”

He smiled a little. “As it happens, I am not resigning, Aunt Maria. I am on leave at the moment.”

She took his hand and drew him over to a pair of chairs positioned near a sunny window. “Sit down and tell me about yourself. How is Caroline? My congratulations. I hear you are to be a father.”

There was not a flicker of expression on his face. “Yes,” he said coolly. “Papa sits beside himself with delight.”

“And you?” she asked, disturbed by the look of him.

“Of course.”

There was a brief pause, and then she said, “What were you doing at the Admiralty this morning?”

“I went up to see Lord Melville, the First Lord, and Mr. Dalrymple from the Hydrography Office. They wanted to know if I would undertake a survey of the coast of Ireland.”

“And will you?”

The sun from the window gleamed on his thick light brown hair, flecking it with gold. He shook his head, and the lights in his hair danced. “No. What is needed first, I told them, is a land survey of Ireland. And I cannot leave Castle Dartmouth at the

moment. Papa is not well. I do not think he has long to live.”

~~“Robert’s death took the heart out of him.”~~

“I know.” Mark had always known that Robert was his father’s favorite, just as he himself had been his aunt’s golden boy. He smiled at her now. “It is good to see you, Aunt Maria. You at least never change.”

“I suppose that was meant as a compliment,” she said with dry humor. But she was not feeling at all amused. She was, in fact, alarmed. Something was the matter with Mark. He was almost unnervingly composed. And his smile did not reach his eyes.

“It *was* a compliment,” he said decisively. “I have a few days to spare in London. Do you want an escort for any of your parties?”

Her sharp brown eyes were soft with affection as they rested on his beloved face. The planes of his cheekbones looked harder than she remembered. He had almost completely lost his boyish look. “You don’t want to spend your evenings with an old woman,” she said.

“Not with an old woman. With my favorite woman.” And this time the smile reached his eyes.

She was deeply touched. She was also, upon reflection, deeply apprehensive. If she were his favorite woman, where did that leave Caroline?

* * * *

After a week Mark went back to Devon, and in mid-June Lady Maria returned to Bath. Two weeks after her arrival home, the news from Castle Dartmouth arrived. Caroline had borne a son.

They called him Robert, at the Earl’s request, and he was baptized with great ceremony at St. Peter’s Church, where his parents had been married almost exactly nine months earlier. Lady Maria had not seen her brother so happy since before the other Robert’s death. He had presented Caroline with a magnificent set of matched pearls and she wore them around her slender neck on the day of the christening.

Lady Maria thought that Caroline looked as if childbirth had taken a great deal out of her. She was too thin, too delicate-looking. Her great blue eyes dominated her narrow, pointed little face. She had not been able to nurse the baby, the Earl informed his sister. She was under orders from the doctor to stay in bed and to rest.

Mark was pleasant, courteous, attentive to his father, his wife, his guests. He did not appear to be overly interested in his son. Lady Maria found something slightly disturbing about his extreme self-possession.

* * * *

The Earl of Dartmouth died in August. It was an occasion of sorrow for his family, but it had not been unexpected. Everyone drew consolation from the fact that he had lived to see his grandson.

It was the death of Caroline Cheney in October, almost exactly one year after her marriage, that shocked the family and the county. Lady Maria posted down to Devon from Bath immediately. It was Mark who gave her the dreadful news. “She killed herself, Aunt Maria.”

“What!”

“Yes.” The impression of formidable reserve he had given her on their last meeting

was stronger now than ever. His face was absolutely shuttered. "She cut her wrist. I found her lying on her bed. She had been dead for several hours."

"Dear God, Mark!"

"Yes," he said again. "Quite." They were sitting in the library of Castle Dartmouth and now he got up from his chair and went over to look out the window. "I have told the magistrates that it was an accident, that she was opening a letter and the knife slipped. No one believes it, of course, but they didn't dare ask too many questions. She will be given Christian burial from St. Peter's. I'll need you to stand by me, Aunt."

Lady Maria stared for a moment at his back. His broad shoulders looked absolutely invulnerable. "Of course I will stand by you, my dear. I am so terribly sorry."

He turned back to her. "One can always count on you," he said quietly. "Thank you."

Meeting his steady, unreadable eyes, Lady Maria understood why the magistrates hadn't been able to ask him questions. His air of remoteness daunted even her.

They buried Caroline the following day. Her mother and her brother sat with Mark and his aunt in the front of the church, and the grief that never appeared on his husband's face was all too evident on theirs. Sir Giles, in particular, looked shattered. He and Mark scarcely spoke, except for a few minutes at the graveside. At that time Lady Maria caught something in Giles's blue eyes that frightened her. Good God, she thought involuntarily, surely he can't blame Mark for this tragedy!

She stayed at Castle Dartmouth for several months after Caroline's death, running the house and helping to look after the baby. During that time it was made perfectly clear to her by a few of the upper servants, whom she had known for years, that Mark and Caroline had not been happy together. Why that was, no one knew. Lady Maria disliked gossiping with the servants, but the issue at hand was hardly one she could ignore. And she simply could not talk to Mark. On the subject of Caroline he was unapproachable.

They had not been happy. Mark, apparently, had always been scrupulously polite to his wife. But he had been distant. "He stayed away from her, my lady," Mrs. Irons, the housekeeper, told her bluntly. "He kept up a show in front of others—especially his father. But once the old Earl died, it seemed as if he even ceased to make the effort."

"But what could have happened?" Lady Maria asked in great bewilderment. "He was so in love with her."

"I don't know, my lady. But I do know that talk is circulating that it was his coldness that drove her to her death, poor lass."

"Oh, no!" cried Lady Maria on a note of pain.

"I don't like to repeat gossip, my lady," said Mrs. Irons a trifle grimly, "but I thought you should know."

Chapter Four

Lady Maria stayed at Castle Dartmouth until the following April. She stayed mainly because she felt her presence helped in a small way to diminish the gossip about Mark. She had been alarmed and horrified by the extent and the malignity that gossip.

Where it came from or how it had started, she did not know. But people blamed him for the death of his young wife. It was there in their eyes whenever he entered drawing room, a local meeting, the church. She felt that her presence was a demonstration of good faith on the part of his family and as such was necessary. She was not necessary to either the house, which was run most efficiently by Mrs. Irons, or to Robin, who was in the very competent charge of his nurse. She was needed, she thought, by Mark.

It was in April that she received a second shocking communication containing tragic news. It came this time from Sydenham Damerel. She was sitting staring at her letter in obvious distress when Mark came into the morning parlor. "What has happened?" he asked instantly.

She looked up at him. "What is it that Claudius says to Gertrude, something about sorrows coming not in single spies but in battalions? I've just received a letter from my old friend Louisa Dalwood. Her daughter, Laura, who is also my goddaughter, was married last year, shortly after you were. Her husband is dead of typhus. He was only thirty-four."

"I'm sorry," said Mark. He came and sat down across from her on a rose-colored sofa. "It does not appear to have been a lucky year for marriages." There was a note of audible bitterness in his voice.

"No," she replied quietly. "Not, at least, for you or for Laura."

There was a pause, and then he said, in quite a different voice, "I had a rather important letter myself, Aunt Maria. From the Admiralty."

"Yes?" She looked at him inquiringly.

"They have offered me command of the frigate *Glasgow*. They want me to undertake a survey of the southern coast of Turkey."

"Turkey?"

"Yes." His golden-brown eyes, fringed by lashes many shades darker than his hair, were more alive than she had seen them in months.

"The Turkish coast should be able to provide us with valuable naval ports. England has a steadily growing commercial interest in that part of the world, you know. We have no accurate charts of the south Turkish coast—almost four hundred miles of it! Lord Melville writes that this expedition is being launched to remedy a serious chasm in geography."

"And they want you to command it?"

"Yes. I will be posted to the rank of captain." He grinned at her. "God, Aunt Maria, this is like the answer to a prayer!"

"But, Mark, for how long will you be gone?"

"Several years, I expect."

"Several years! But what about your son? What about Robin?"

His face darkened. "He has his nurse. He is only a baby. He doesn't need me."

~~Lady Maria was silent. After a minute he went on, his voice a little strained.~~ think it will be better for everyone—Robin included—if I go away for a while. It will give old wounds a chance to heal. When I come back, perhaps I will be able to be a better father. But right now, I can't. I just can't."

It was the first crack she had seen in his composure. He was very pale. "If you want," she said gently, "I will stay at Castle Dartmouth."

"No." His eyes were brilliant with feeling. "No. You have done enough, Aunt Maria. More than enough. You have your own home, your own life. I appreciate more than you can ever say what you have done for me this last year. But I won't take advantage of you any longer. If you feel you can make an occasional visit to check up on Robin's welfare, I would be very grateful. But you have neglected your own life for my sake for too long. You must return to Bath."

In the end, that was what she had done. Mark sailed for Turkey, and life for Lady Maria resumed its accustomed round. The situation at Castle Dartmouth remained stable for almost a year. Then Robin's nurse sent notice to Lady Maria that she was leaving her position. Lady Maria posted down to Devon at once. Someone else would have to be found to look after Robin, who was now a sturdy toddler of almost two. And, as she had received a disturbing letter from her goddaughter, Laura Templeton, in the same post as the nurse's resignation, Lady Maria dashed off an invitation to Laura to come to stay with her at Castle Dartmouth for a visit.

* * * *

Laura thought she had never seen anything as magnificent as Castle Dartmouth. It was rather as if one had stumbled upon an Italian Renaissance palace in the middle of a mellow English landscape. The great baroque dome of the central hall dominated the building, which stretched out in graceful elegance over an indecent amount of space. To the west of the house were avenues of cedars leading to the stables and the hothouses. To the east was a glorious deer park studded with fine old oaks and graceful ponds. A fountain, which looked as if it might have been designed by Bernini, was the focal point on the south front lawn.

Lady Maria gave her goddaughter a house tour. "My father and my brother bought most of the furniture, pictures, statuary, and china that you see," she told the wide-eyed Laura. "We have some very fine pieces, I understand."

"Yes," breathed Laura, awestruck by the magnificence in evidence everywhere. "I should rather think you must!"

Laura was also introduced to Mr. Robert Cheney, age twenty-two months, and she immediately fell in love. Robin was an extraordinarily beautiful child, with bright golden curls and huge, angelic blue eyes. "However can she bear to leave him?" she asked Lady Maria after his nurse had taken him back upstairs for his supper. The two ladies were having tea in the family drawing room.

"Mrs. Stebbins' brother has retired from the navy and needs her to keep house for him. She has been kind enough to say she will stay until I can find a replacement, however." Lady Maria stirred her tea. "And now, my dear Laura, tell me about yourself. Are you sorry you sold Templeton Hall after your husband died?"

"No. I could not live there, Godmama. I'm not sorry I sold it." She sighed. "But

can't live at home either, it seems."

"Why not?"

"Oh, Papa and Mama are forever after me to 'do something with myself.' They want me to go to Bath. They want me to go to London. They want me to get married again. That is what it all comes down to."

"And you don't want that?"

"No!"

Lady Maria looked with concern at the lovely, unchildlike face of her goddaughter. "You are only eighteen, my dear. You will marry again one day."

"I don't see why," said Laura calmly. "I have money—more than enough to support myself." She looked up from her lap to Lady Maria's face. "You never married, Godmama."

"That is true."

"You have a good life. You are allowed to have your own house, to go your own way."

"Is that what you want, Laura? To set up your own establishment?"

"Yes, I do. But Papa and Mama won't hear of it. They would not have complained if I had stayed at Templeton Hall, but when I talk of buying another house, they act as if they are horrified."

"I see." Lady Maria ran her finger gently over the decoration on her teacup and looked reflectively into Laura's smoky blue eyes. "I was not eighteen when I left home, my dear. I was twenty-nine." Laura opened her mouth to say something, and Lady Maria continued serenely. "Nor was I beautiful. You, on the other hand, are both eighteen and beautiful. Of course your parents are concerned about your setting up on your own."

"I am not a child," said Laura firmly.

"No, I don't believe you are." Lady Maria smiled at her reassuringly. "I think I may have an idea that would suit you. Let me think about it for a little."

"Oh, Godmama, I should be so grateful!" Laura sighed wearily.

* * * *

In the end, Lady Maria made her suggestion and Laura fell in with it eagerly. She was to live at Castle Dartmouth for a time and help look after Robin. "I don't mean to suggest this as a permanent arrangement, my dear," Lady Maria had said. "I don't wish to turn you into a governess. But as a temporary solution to both our problems, it may serve."

The temporary solution served so well that it stretched from months into years. And the more time that passed, the more impossible it appeared that Laura would return to Sydenham Damerel. After the first year her parents protested that it was time she came home. After the second year they seemed resigned to their daughter's continued absence. Laura simply would not leave Robin.

She and the little boy had formed an almost instant bond, and it was a tie that grew stronger with every passing day. Robin's nurse had been a competent and conscientious woman, but she had not had a warm personality. The child was starved for affection, starved for a mother. And Laura desperately needed someone she could love. It was not long before she was fiercely devoted to her small charge. She felt, i

fact, like his mother.

Lady Maria came periodically to visit Castle Dartmouth, and with her came the only news they ever had of Robin's father. The Turkish survey was going very well, Lady Maria reported. "Besides his marine surveying, Mark seems to have become a determined antiquarian," Lady Maria told Laura on one of her visits. "The last letter I received from him was full of lamentations about his lack of Greek and Latin. Evidently the Turkish coast is studded with the remains of ancient cities. When he is not out in a boat, Mark appears to be an obsessive prowler of ruins."

"I thought all boys studied Greek and Latin," Laura observed.

"Mark did not go to school like your brothers, Laura. He joined the navy at age eleven, and while there was a schoolmaster on board to instruct the midshipmen, Greek and Latin was not part of his curriculum. He did manage on his own to acquire a much more liberal education than was offered. I've sent him literally hundreds of books myself. He reads French and Spanish. But not the classical languages—a gap over which he is apparently now beating his breast."

Lady Maria shared some of her nephew's letters with Laura, who was unabashedly curious about the father of her darling. Some of the things she had heard about Lady Maria's nephew had been decidedly sinister—very different from the picture that her godmother always painted of her nephew.

He certainly appeared to be a good naval officer and scientist, whatever else might be true of his character. He inquired periodically about the welfare of his son, but through Laura's alert sensitivity, the inquiries were definitely perfunctory. Quite clearly he did not care about Robin, a situation that only made Laura love the little boy even more.

The only person who seemed to care about Robin beside herself and Lady Maria was his uncle, Sir Giles Gregory. He lived at Cadbury House, a few miles from Castle Dartmouth, and came over at least once a week to visit his nephew. He was very fond of Robin, who was his only family since his mother had died.

Sir Giles was a handsome, eligible, well-off young man, and clearly he liked Laura. The neighborhood kept expecting to hear an announcement concerning the two of them, but somehow nothing more than friendship ever developed out of their relationship. Laura herself didn't quite know why Giles kindled no sparks in her breast. His blond, blue-eyed good looks, so like his nephew's, were certainly very attractive. He had given her clear indication on more than one occasion that if she gave him any encouragement he would declare himself. But that encouragement had not been forthcoming, and soon they settled into an easy comradeship that suited them both. Certainly it suited Robin, who was always delighted to see Uncle Giles. He was the closest thing to a father Robin knew.

On the subject of Robin's real father, Giles was reticent. He was willing to concede Mark's scientific and technical brilliance. But he always gave Laura the impression that it was an effort for him to speak well of his brother-in-law. In fact, Laura rather got the feeling that Mark's early years at sea had painfully hardened his character. "One sees so much cruelty in the navy," Giles said to her once. "The floggings, the impressments, the battles. Mark went into the navy when he was eleven, you know. I am not myself in favor of sending such young boys to sea. It cannot be good for their characters to be exposed at so young an age to the brutality of life on a ship of war."

Laura was inclined to agree with Giles about the folly of sending children to sea so early. From all she had heard about him, it seemed that the Earl of Dartmouth was a tough character with little concern for the feelings of others. His marriage had not been a success, and the blame for that was generally laid at his door. There was a very pretty girl in Dartmouth, now respectably married, whom Giles had pointed out to her once grimly as "my poor sister's rival." Mark evidently had not been faithful to his marriage vows for very long.

It worried Laura. She did not like to think ill of Robin's father. And she was afraid of what would happen when he returned. She had come to regard Castle Dartmouth as her home. Certainly the servants all acted as if she were the mistress of the house. She had made a number of friends in the neighborhood. And—surpassing all else in importance—she had her boy. What would happen when the Earl returned? It was an uncertainty that she tried to think of as seldom as possible.

The intent of matrimony is not for man and wife to be always taken up with each other, but jointly to discharge the duties of civil society, to govern their families with prudence, and educate their children with discretion. —*The Lady's Magazine*, 1774

Chapter Five

The first week of November brought some unusually fine weather to Devon, and Laura and Robin took full advantage of it. Robin had been given a pony for his fifth birthday in June and the two of them went out riding for hours every morning. On Tuesday they returned to the stables at one o'clock and were met by news that sent Laura's heart plummeting into her stomach. "His lordship arrived about an hour ago, madam," John, the head groom, informed her gravely.

Laura felt herself go white. 'His lordship,' said in that tone of voice, could mean only one person. "Thank you, John," she said a little tremulously. Then, taking a steadying breath, she turned to the child by her side. "Did you hear that, Robin? Your father has come home."

They walked together up the avenue of cedars, and Robin was unusually quiet. Laura took his hand and he looked up at her out of troubled blue eyes. "Do you think he will like me, Laurie?"

"Of course he'll like you, darling. He always asks after you in his letters to Aunt Maria; you know that. You might feel a little ... awkward with him at first, but that will be only because you don't know each other," She reached over with her other hand to ruffle his sunny locks. "Don't worry about it."

Laura went in by the front door, something she rarely did, and Monk, the butler, greeted her with unusual solemnity. "His lordship has arrived, madam. He asked that you join him when you came in. He is in the library."

There was no mention of Robin, and Laura turned to him with a smile. "You go upstairs, darling, and wash up. I'll bring your father up to see you in a little while."

He nodded vigorously, gave her a little smile, turned, and raced up the stairs. Laura smoothed her own hair down and walked through the great domed central hall toward the library wing. She would bring Robin's father up to meet him, she vowed, she had to knock him unconscious to do it.

The library door was open and she said from the doorway, "You wished to see me, my lord? I am Laura Templeton."

He was standing by a window looking out at the sunlit fountain on the south lawn, but at her words he turned. "Yes, do come in Mrs. Templeton. I am pleased to be meeting you at last."

He was still in front of the window and the sun was in Laura's eyes, blurring her vision. The first thing she noticed was what a deep and beautiful voice he had. "We do not know you were back in England, my lord," she said.

He came around the desk and gestured her to a chair by the fire. "I landed in Deptford ten days ago and have since been paying courtesy calls on the Lords of the Admiralty. I suppose I should have sent you notice that I was coming." He shrugged slightly. "I didn't think of it. I'm sorry."

As he moved out of the glare of the sun and she was able to see him clearly, she was conscious of sharp surprise. He was different from what she had expected. He was very tall, all lean bone and muscle. His skin was deeply tanned from the sun, but she thought, from the color of his hair, that he was naturally fair-skinned. There was a little resemblance between his totally masculine good looks and the little-boy beauty

of Robin.

~~“There is no need to apologize,” she said, and essayed a smile. “This is your house.~~

He did not smile back. “I understand from my aunt, Lady Maria Cheney, that you have been looking after my son these last three years. I am most grateful.” There was a flicker of expression in his brown eyes. “I must admit I had not expected you to be so young, Mrs. Templeton.”

“I am twenty-two, my lord,” she said shortly. He looked very elegant in his well-cut coat of blue superfine and his pale yellow pantaloons. She was conscious suddenly that the skirt of her riding habit was flecked with mud. He had wanted to see her right away, she thought defiantly. He could scarcely complain if she looked young and untidy.

“I am quite old enough to be Robin’s mother and I assure you I have looked after him as if he were my own.” Her face softened. “He is a delightful child, my lord. So bright. So loving.” She leaned forward in her chair a little. “I told him you would come up to the nursery to see him. Will you?”

“Yes.” He looked utterly remote as he waited for her to rise and precede him out of the room. Please let him be kind to Robin, she prayed silently as they went up the two flights of stairs to the nursery.

Robin had taken her advice and scrubbed his face until it shone. As she came into his sunny blue-and-white room with the tall silent figure of his father at her back, he looked instinctively at her for reassurance. She smiled a little and said, “Here is your father, darling. Won’t you come and say hello?”

Slowly Robin crossed the room until he was standing before them. “Hello... Papa,” he said in an uncertain little voice.

“Hello, Robin,” the Earl of Dartmouth said gravely. He looked for a long silent minute into the child’s face. The big, candid blue eyes looked back, unafraid. Then the man smiled. “You’ve grown into quite a lad. The last time I saw you, you were still wearing nappies. But you’re not a baby anymore, are you?”

“No, sir,” said Robin, beaming proudly. “I have my own pony even.”

“Do you?” said his father with interest. “You must show him to me.”

Robin looked lit from within. “I will!”

The Earl stayed in the nursery for perhaps fifteen more minutes, looking at Robin’s toys, examining his schoolwork. Then he turned to Laura. “You must not let me disturb your routine, Mrs. Templeton. I know you and Robin must have things to do. Perhaps you will join me for dinner this evening?”

Laura was feeling immensely grateful to him for his handling of Robin. She had heard of his earlier indifference to his son. She had sensed a reluctance on his part to come upstairs with her. She had been terribly afraid that Robin was going to be hurt. So now she gave him her extraordinarily sweet smile and said, “Thank you, my lord. I should like that.”

* * * *

She dressed for dinner with special care, choosing an evening dress of deep blue silk that brought out the blue in her eyes. Her hair she wore a la Madonna, parted in the center of her head and coiled at the nape of her long slender neck.

She had no idea what they could possibly find to talk about and was relieved and

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