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Wild Lord



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To Susan Williams, who's always been there for me.

Thank you for all the wonderful years!

And to my beloved brother, Craig Martin, the adrenaline junkie of the family, who inspired Gabe's character.

Stay safe!

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helpful information. What would I do without you?

Dear Readers,

I am at my wits' end with my grandson, Gabriel. It is because of him I demanded that all my grandchildren marry within a year or be disinherited. His best friend died racing Gabe, yet nearly seven years later, the reckless lad broke his arm racing another fool on the same treacherous course! That is what set me off. And no wonder—people call Gabe the Angel of Death precisely because he courts it at every turn.

Now, his best friend's sister, Virginia Waverly, has some notion about seeking vengeance by beating him in a race on that same course, and instead of ignoring the girl's mad challenge, Gabe wishes to court her! I believe he may have lost his mind. Granted, she is a spirited, pretty little thing, but her grandfather, General Waverly, will never approve the marriage. The man is too stubborn and willful for words. Why, the cavalier general had the audacity to call me a "she-devil"! No man gets away with that, no matter how handsome and spry he may be for his age.

But I digress (General Waverly distracts me unduly). I cannot decide what I think about Gabe's interest in the pert Miss Waverly. I do want him to marry, but he is still grappling with his guilt over what happened to her brother—how can I be sure that she won't make that situation worse? My only consolation is that she seems as fascinated by my grandson as he is by her. Only today General Waverly and I stumbled upon them after what may very well have been an intimate encounter! Her lips were decidedly red, and Gabe looked as if someone had just jerked his horse out from under him. The man is clearly unused to dealing with respectable women.

Meanwhile, I am getting too old for this. If this courtship does not turn out well, I may just have to tie Gabe up in the barn until he sees sense. Wish me luck, dear friends!

Sincerely,

Hetty Plumtree

Ealing, April 1806

People were yelling again.

Seven-year-old Gabriel Sharpe, third son of the Marquess of Stoneville, tried covering his ears to block out the sound. He hated the yelling—it made his stomach knot up, especially when Mother yelled at Father.

Only this time Mother was yelling at his oldest brother. Gabe could hear it plain as day, because Oliver's bedroom was right below the schoolroom. Gabe couldn't make out the words; they just sounded angry. It was strange for Oliver to be yelled at—he was Mother's pet. Well, most of the time. She did call Gabe "her darling boy," and she never called his brothers that.

Was that because they were almost grown? Gabe scowled. He should tell Mother he didn't like being called "her darling boy" . . . except that he did. She always said it right before she gave him lemon tarts, his favorite.

A door slammed. The yelling stopped. He let out a breath, and something loosened up inside him. Perhaps everything would be all right now.

He gazed down at his primer. He was supposed to be reading a story, but it was stupid, about a robin who got killed:

Here lies Cock Robin,
Dead and cold.
His end this book
Will soon unfold.

It told about all these creatures who did things for the dead Cock Robin—the owl who buried him, and the bull who tolled the bell. But though it said how Cock Robin died—the sparrow shot him with an arrow—it never said why. Why would a sparrow shoot a robin? It made no sense.

And there were no horses, either. He'd flipped ahead through the pictures, so he knew that for sure. Lots of birds and a fish and a fly and a beetle. No horses. He'd much rather read a story about a horse running a race, but there were never any children's stories about that.

Bored, he glanced out the window and saw his mother head for the stables with long, strong strides. Was she going to the picnic to tell Father on Oliver?

Gabe would love to see that. Oliver never got into trouble. Meanwhile, Gabe *always* did. That's why he was sitting in this stupid schoolroom with this stupid book, instead of having fun at the picnic—because he had done something bad and Father had ordered him to stay home.

But Father might forgive him if he had Oliver to be mad at. If Mother was going to the picnic, Gabe might even convince her to take him, too.

He glanced across the room; his tutor, Mr. Virgil, was dozing in the chair. Gabe could easily sneak out and ask Mother. But only if he hurried.

Keeping an eye on his tutor, he slipped off his chair and edged toward the door. As soon as he reached

the hall, he broke into a run. He ran down the stairs, then half-slid and half-ran along the tiled hall at the bottom before vaulting out into the Crimson Courtyard.

A quick dart across and he was in his favorite place in the whole world—the stable. He loved the sweet smell of the horses, the crunch of hay underfoot in the loft, the way the grooms talked. The stable was a magical place, where people spoke in quiet, even voices. No yelling, because it bothered the horses.

He looked around, then sighed. The stall holding Mother's favorite mare was empty. She was gone. But he didn't want to go back to the schoolroom and that stupid book about Cock Robin.

"Good day, young master," said the head groom, Benny May, who was shoeing a horse. He used to be a jockey for Gabe's grandfather, back when the Sharpes put lots of horses in races. "Lookin' for someone?"

Gabe wasn't about to admit he'd wanted Mother. Instead, he puffed out his chest and tucked his thumb in the waistband of his breeches like the grooms did. "Just wondering if you need help. Looks like the grooms are gone off."

"Aye, to the picnic. I imagine a lot of folks will be tramping in and out this afternoon. The fine ladies and gentlemen will tire of the outdoors before long." Benny kept his gaze on the horse's foot. "Why aren't you at the picnic?"

"Father wouldn't let me go on account of my putting a spider in Minerva's hair and refusing to apologize."

Benny made a choking sound that turned into a cough. "So he said you could come to the stable instead?"

Gabe stared down at his shoes.

"Ah. Gave Mr. Virgil the slip again, did you?"

"Sort of," he mumbled.

"You ought to be nicer to your sister, y'know. She's a sweet girl."

Gabe snorted. "She tattles. Anyway, I came to check on Jacky Boy." That was Gabe's pony. Father had given it to him on his birthday last summer. "He gets cranky sometimes."

Benny's hard stare softened into a smile. "Aye, that he does, lad. And he always settles right down for you, don't he?"

Trying not to show his pride at the compliment, Gabe shrugged. "I know how to curry him the way he likes. Does he . . . um . . . need grooming?"

"Well, now, it's funny you should ask, because I do believe he could use a little care." He jerked his head toward the tack room. "You know where we keep the combs."

Gabe sauntered off to the tack room. He quickly found what he needed, then let himself into the stable. Jacky Boy sniffed him, hoping for a lump of sugar.

"Sorry, old chum," Gabe murmured. "Came out here in a hurry. I didn't bring you anything." He began to curry the pony, and Jacky Boy relaxed.

There was nothing better in the whole world than grooming Jacky Boy—the soothing motion of the comb, the pony's breathing quieting to a soft rhythm, the feel of Jacky Boy's silky coat beneath his fingers. . . . Gabe never tired of it.

Out in the stable, people came and went, but in the stall it was just Gabe and Jacky Boy. Occasionally something would disturb his reverie—a haughty gentleman demanding a change of mounts, a groom apologizing to some rude lady for not getting her mount as quick as she liked—but for the most part, it was silent except for the sound of Benny's hammer tapping another shoe into place.

Even that sound ended when Benny was called away to help with an approaching carriage. For a few minutes Gabe was in a state of pure bliss, alone with his pony. Then he heard boots tramp down the aisle.

"Anyone here?" a man's voice called out. "I need a mount."

Gabe shrank onto the floor in the front corner of the stall, hoping not to be noticed.

The man must have heard him, for he cried, "You there, boy. I need a mount."

He'd been discovered. When the man came closer, he called out, "Sorry, sir, I'm not a groom. I'm just looking after my horse."

The man stopped outside the stall. Since Gabe sat on the floor with his back to the stall door, he couldn't see the man. He hoped the man couldn't see him, either.

"Ah," the man said. "One of the Sharpe children, are you?"

His stomach got queasy. "H-How did you know?"

"The only children who would own horses stabled here are the Sharpe children."

"Oh." He hadn't thought of that.

"You're Gabriel, aren't you?"

Gabe froze, frightened of the clever man. He was in for it, if his father heard of this. "I-I . . ."

"Lord Jarret is out at the picnic, and Lord Oliver chose not to go. That leaves only Lord Gabriel. You."

The man's voice was soft, even kind. He didn't say things in that lofty tone grown-ups usually used with children. And he didn't *sound* as if he wanted to get Gabe into trouble.

"Do you know where the grooms are?" the man asked, his voice moving away.

Gabe relaxed now that the subject was off him. "They went to meet a carriage."

"Then they probably won't mind if I saddle my own mount."

"I guess not."

Oliver saddled his own mount all the time. So did Jarret. Gabe couldn't wait until he was big enough to saddle a mount. Then he wouldn't have to ask Father's permission to ride Jacky Boy.

As the man chose the horse from the next stall, all Gabe could see was his beaver hat showing above. After he rode off, Gabe started to wonder if he should have found out the man's name, or at least tried to get a better look at him. Sudden panic gripped him. What if the man was a horse thief, and Gabe had just let him ride right off?

No, the man had known Gabe's name and all about the rest of them. He *had* to be a guest. Right?

Benny came back in the stable and, before Gabe could say anything, called out, "The guests are returning from the picnic, lad. You'd best run up to the house if you don't want your father catching you here."

Gabe's panic returned. If Father learned he'd snuck out of the schoolroom again, he'd get his hide tanned. Father was strict about their studies.

He ran for the house. When he reached the schoolroom, his tutor was still snoring. With a sigh of relief, Gabe settled into the chair and took up the boring book again.

But he couldn't think about the dead Cock Robin. He kept wondering about the unknown man. Should he have said something to Benny? What if there was a hue and cry about a stolen horse? What if he got in trouble?

He was still fretting over it after dinner in the nursery with Minerva. Celia, who'd been sick with a cough, was already asleep when a footman, Nurse, and Mr. Virgil came to fetch them. Grandmother

Plumtree wanted to talk to him and Minerva downstairs, the footman said solemnly.

Gabe's pulse leaped into a gallop. The man in the stable *must* have stolen a horse, and somehow Gran had found out that Gabe had let him do it. But then, why bring Minerva into it?

The footman brought them into the library, leaving Celia with Nurse and Mr. Virgil. When Gabe saw Oliver standing there with his hair wet and his eyes red, wearing different clothes than he'd worn earlier, he didn't know what to think.

Then Jarret appeared, summoned by another servant. "Where's Mother and Father?"

Oliver's face hardened to granite, and his eyes turned scary looking.

"I have something to tell you, children." Gran spoke more softly than usual. "There's been an accident. Something caught in her voice, and she cleared her throat.

Was she crying? Gran never cried. Father said she had a heart of steel.

"Your parents . . ."

She broke off and Oliver flinched, as if struck. "Mother and Father are dead," he finished for her in a voice that didn't even sound like his.

The words didn't register at first. Dead? Like Cock Robin? Gabe stared at them, waiting for someone to take it back.

No one took it back.

Gran wiped her eyes, then straightened her shoulders. "Your mother mistook your father for an intruder at the hunting lodge, and she shot him. When she realized her error, she . . . she shot herself, too."

Beside him, Minerva began to cry. Jarret kept shaking his head and saying, "No, no, it can't be. How can that be?" Oliver went to stand by the window, his shoulders quivering.

Gabe couldn't stop thinking about that stupid poem:

Then all the Birds fell
To sighing and sobbing,
When they heard the bell toll
For poor Cock Robin.

It was just like the poem, except without the bell. Gabe didn't know what to do. Gran was saying that they weren't to speak of it to anyone, because there would be scandal enough without that, but her words made no sense. Why would he want to speak of it? He couldn't even believe it happened.

Perhaps this was a nightmare. He would wake up, and Father would be here.

"Are you sure it was them?" he asked in a wavering voice. "Perhaps it was somebody else who got shot."

Gran looked stricken. "I'm sure. Oliver and I saw the—" With a grimace, Gran stepped over to put her arms around him and Minerva. "I'm sorry, my darlings. Try to be strong. I know it's hard."

Minerva just kept weeping. Gran held her close.

Gabe thought of the last time he saw Father, riding out to the picnic, and Mother, hurrying to the stable. How could that have been the last time? Now he could never tell Father he was sorry for putting the spider in Minerva's hair. Father had died thinking he was a bad boy who wouldn't apologize.

That's when tears welled in his eyes. He couldn't let Jarret and Oliver see—they would think him a stupid girl. So he darted from the room, ignoring Gran's startled cry, and dashed toward the stable.

It was quiet; the grooms were at their supper. As soon as he reached Jacky Boy's stall, he collapsed on the floor and began to cry. It wasn't right! How could they be dead?

He wasn't sure how long he lay there sobbing, but next thing he knew, Jarret had entered the stall and bent down to lay his hand on Gabe's shoulder. "Come now, lad. Buck up."

Gabe shoved Jarret's hand away. "I can't! Th-They're gone, and they're n-never coming back!"

"I know," Jarret said, his voice unsteady.

"It's n-not fair." Gabe gazed up at Jarret. "Other children's p-parents don't die. Wh-why should ours?"

Jarret bit his lip. "Sometimes things happen."

"It's j-just like that s-stupid book about Cock Robin. M-Makes no sense."

"*Life* doesn't make sense," Jarret said softly. "You mustn't expect it to. Fate has a hand in everything, and nobody can explain why Fate acts as it does."

Jarret still didn't cry, though his eyes were hollow and his face was screwed up in an odd way, as if somebody had stepped hard on his foot.

Gabe had always liked Jarret the best of everyone, but right now he hated how calm Jarret was. Why wasn't his brother angry?

"We have to be strong," Jarret went on.

"Why?" Gabe shot back. "What does it matter? They're still d-dead. And we're still all a-alone."

"Yes, but if you let Fate have the upper hand, it will drag you down. You must refuse to be cowed. Laugh at it, tell it to go to hell. It's the only way to beat it."

It wasn't Life that made no sense. It was Death. It took people away for no reason. Mother oughtn't have shot Father, and sparrows oughtn't shoot cock robins. Yet they were all still dead.

Death could take him away, too, any time it wanted. Fear gripped him by the throat. He could die *a minute*. For no reason.

How was he to stop it? Death seemed to be a sneaky bastard, coming up from behind to deal low blows. If it came after *him* . . .

Perhaps Jarret was right. There was nothing to do but stand up to Death. Or even try to ignore it. Gabe had played with plenty of sneaky bastards, and the only way to deal with them was not to cower, not to show that they hurt you. Then they went off to torment other chaps and left you alone.

He thought of Mother and Father lying somewhere dead, and tears stung his eyes again. Wiping them ruthlessly away, he stuck out his lower lip. Perhaps Death could get him the way it had grabbed Mother and Father, but not without a fight.

If it wanted him, it would have to drag him kicking and screaming. Because he would not go easy.

Eastcote, August 1825

Virginia Waverly could hardly contain her excitement as the carriage hurtled toward Marsbury House. A ball! She was going to a ball at last. She would finally get to use those waltz steps her second cousin, Pierce Waverly, the Earl of Devonmont, had taught her.

For a moment, she let her mind wander through a lovely fantasy of being danced about the room by a handsome cavalry officer. Or perhaps by their host himself, the Duke of Lyons! Wouldn't that be grand? She knew what people said about his father, whom they called "the Mad Duke," but she never paid attention to such gossip.

She did wish she had a more fashionable gown—like the one of pink *gros de Naples* she'd seen in *The Ladies Magazine*. But fashionable gowns were expensive, which is why she had to make do with her old tartan silk one, bought when Scottish garb was all the rage. How she wished she'd picked something less . . . distinctive to make over. Everybody would take one look at her and know how poor she was.

"I can see that you're worried," Pierce said.

Virginia stared at him, surprised by his insight. "Only a little. I tried to make this gown more fashionable by adding a net overlay, but the sleeves are still short, so now it just looks like an outdated gown with strange sleeves."

"No, I meant—"

"Surely people won't fault me too much for that." She thrust out her chin. "Though I don't care if they do. I'm the only woman of twenty I know who's never been to a ball. Even the farmer's daughter next door went to one in Bath, and she's only eighteen!"

"What I was talking about—"

"So I'm not going to let my gown or my inexperience on the dance floor keep me from enjoying myself," she said stoutly. "I shall eat caviar and drink champagne, and for one night pretend that I'm rich. And I shall finally dance with a *man*."

Pierce looked affronted. "Now see here, *I'm* a man."

"Well, of course, but you're my cousin. It's not the same."

"Besides," he said, "I wasn't talking about your gown. I meant, aren't you worried about running into Lord Gabriel Sharpe?"

She blinked. "Why would *he* be there? He wasn't at the race today."

A few years ago, the Duke of Lyons had started an annual race—the Marsbury Stakes—run on a course on his property. This year her grandfather, Pierce's greatuncle, General Isaac Waverly, had entered a Thoroughbred stallion from their stud farm. Lamentably, Ghost Rider had lost the race and the Marsbury Cup.

That's why Pierce was accompanying her to the race ball tonight, instead of her grandfather—Ghost Rider's poor performance had keenly disappointed Poppy. It had disappointed her, too, but not enough to keep her from attending the ball.

“Sharpe is Lyons’s close friend,” Pierce said. “In fact, he was at the race in Turnham Green with Roger. Her stomach sank. “That can’t be! The only people there were Lord Gabriel and some fellow named Kinloch—”

“The Marquess of Kinloch, yes. That was Lyons’s title before his father died and he ascended to the dukedom.”

She scowled. “No wonder Poppy refused to attend tonight. Why didn’t he tell me? I wouldn’t have come.”

“That’s why. Uncle Isaac wanted you to enjoy yourself for once. And he assumed that Sharpe wouldn’t be there since he wasn’t at the race.”

“Still, I’ll have to face the duke, who let Roger run that awful course in Turnham Green despite knowing the risks. Why did he invite us? Doesn’t he realize who we are?”

“Perhaps he’s holding out the olive branch to you and Uncle Isaac for his own part in Roger’s death, small as it was.”

She snorted. “Rather late, if you ask me.”

“Come now, you can’t blame Lyons for what happened. Or Sharpe either, for that matter.”

She glared at Pierce. They’d had this argument many a time in the seven years since her brother had died in a dangerous carriage race against Lord Gabriel. “His lordship and Kinloch—Lyons—took advantage of Roger’s being drunk—”

“You don’t know that.”

“Well, no one knows for sure, since Lord Gabriel refuses to speak of it. But Poppy says that’s what happened, and I believe him. Roger would never have agreed to threading the needle with Lord Gabriel when sober.”

The course was called “threading the needle” because it ran between two boulders with room enough for only one carriage to pass. The racer coming behind had to rein in to allow the other to drive through. Roger hadn’t pulled back in time and had been thrown into a boulder. He’d been killed instantly.

She’d hated Lord Gabriel ever since.

“Men do stupid things when they’re drunk,” Pierce said. “Especially when they’re with other men.”

“Why do you always make excuses for Lord Gabriel?”

Pierce cast her a shuttered look from eyes the exact shade of brown as Ghost Rider’s. “Because although he may be a reckless madman who risks his neck every chance he gets, he’s not the devil Uncle Isaac makes him out to be.”

“We’ll never agree on this,” she said, tugging at her drooping gloves.

“Only because you’re stubborn and intractable.”

“A family trait, I believe.”

He laughed. “Indeed it is.”

Virginia gazed out the window and tried to regain her buoyant mood, but it was no use. The ball was doomed to be ruined if Lord Gabriel showed up.

“Still,” Pierce went on, “if Sharpe does come, I hope you’ll refrain from mentioning the challenge you gave him a month and a half ago.”

“And why should I?”

“Because it’s madness!” His eyes narrowed on her. “It’s not like you to do something so irresponsible.”

know you didn't mean to issue that challenge—you were just angry—but to continue would be foolish, and you aren't that.”

She glanced away. Sometimes Pierce had no clue what went on inside her. He and Poppy insisted upon seeing her as some pillar of domestic virtue who kept the farm running and wanted the same things as women her age wanted—a stable home and a family, even if it was just with Poppy.

It wasn't that she didn't want those things. She just . . . didn't want them at the sacrifice to her soul. To the part of her that felt boxed in sometimes by constant work and responsibility. The part of her that wanted to dance at a ball.

And race Lord Gabriel Sharpe.

Pierce went on lecturing. “Besides, if Uncle Isaac ever hears that you challenged Sharpe to a race on the same course that killed Roger, he'll put a stop to it at once.”

True. Poppy was a mite overprotective. She'd been only three years old when he'd left the cavalry to take care of her and Roger after their parents, his son and daughter-in-law, had died in a boating accident.

“How will he hear of it?” Virginia batted her eyelashes at Pierce. “Surely you wouldn't be so cruel as to tell him.”

“Oho, don't try your tricks on *me*, dear girl. They may work on Uncle Isaac, but I'm immune to such things.”

She stiffened. “I'm not a girl anymore, in case you haven't noticed.”

“Actually, I have. Which is why you must stop tormenting Lord Gabriel. This ball is your chance to find a husband. And chaps don't like it when women go about challenging men to foolish races.”

“I'm in no hurry to marry,” she said, giving him the same lie she always gave her grandfather. “I prefer to stay with Poppy as long as possible.”

“Virginia,” Pierce said softly, “don't be naïve. He's sixty-nine. The likelihood of him living much longer —”

“Don't say it.” The very thought of Poppy dying made her stomach roil. “He's in good health. He could live to be a hundred. Surely one of our horses will win a good prize in the coming years, enough to increase my pathetic dowry.”

“You could always marry *me*.” Pierce waggled his dark brown brows. “You wouldn't even have to leave home.”

She gaped at him. Because of Roger's death, Pierce would inherit Waverly Farm, but he'd never before suggested marriage. “And who would be sleeping in the room adjoining yours—me or your mistress?”

He scowled at her. “Now see here, I'd give up my mistress.”

“For me? The devil you would.” She smirked at him. “I know you better than that.”

“Well,” he said sullenly, “I wouldn't keep her in the same house, at least.”

She laughed. “Now *that* is the Pierce Waverly I know. Which is precisely why I could never marry you.”

Unmistakable relief crossed his face. “Thank God. I'm too young to be leg-shackled.”

“Thirty isn't young. If you were a horse, Poppy would put you out to pasture.”

“Good thing I'm not a horse,” he quipped, flashing her the lopsided grin that had every silly girl on the marriage mart swooning over him.

She straightened. “Look, we're almost there! I think I see the house!” She smoothed her skirts as she faced him. “Do I look *too* much a country mouse?”

“Not at all. A *city* mouse perhaps—”

“Pierce!”

He laughed. “I’m joking, you little widgeon. You look perfect—eyes sparkling and cheeks blushing. That’s why I offered to marry you,” he teased.

“You didn’t offer marriage. You offered a convenient arrangement wherein you got to have your cake and eat it, too.”

He grinned. “Isn’t that always my plan?”

She shook her head at him. He was hopeless. “I should hope I’m not yet so desperate that I need to marry for convenience.”

“The trouble with you is you have your head in the clouds. You want some damned union of souls, with cooing doves flying overhead to bless the conjugal bed.”

Surprised that he’d even noticed that about her, she said, “I just think two people should be in love when they marry, that’s all.”

“What a disgusting thought,” he muttered.

That was why they could never wed. Pierce had a distinct aversion to marriage. Besides, he preferred women with big bosoms and blond hair, neither of which she had. And he liked them wild, too. Pierce’s reputation was less than stellar—though she suspected that half of it was whipped up into a froth of scandal, outrage, and intrigue by the gossip of worried mamas whose daughters were enamored of his dark good looks and devil-may-care manner.

Then there was the fact that he was practically her brother. He spent as much time at Waverly Farm as he did at his estate in Hertfordshire. She could no more picture him as her husband than his coachman.

The carriage stopped and Pierce climbed out, then helped her down. She stared open-mouthed at the famous Marsbury House—three long expanses of flint dressed with stone and anchored by four copper-domed stone towers.

The inside was even grander—marble columns and statues everywhere. As servants escorted them to the ballroom, she glimpsed rich tapestries, huge paintings in gilded frames, and silk draperies.

Oh, Lord. She didn’t belong here.

Could Pierce be right? Could the duke have invited her because he felt bad about Roger’s death? No, that made no sense. He hadn’t even attended the funeral.

Still, what other reason could there be for the invitation? The race ball at Marsbury was an exclusive affair, and although Poppy *was* the third son of an earl, he’d spent more of his life riding over battlefields than at fine parties like this. Having never had a formal debut, she wasn’t exactly high society, either.

When they entered the ballroom, Pierce guided her to a secluded corner so they could catch the bearings. Done all in gold and cream with gaslit chandeliers, the ballroom held a warm glow that made her heart race with anticipation. What if she *did* meet someone here tonight? Wouldn’t that be lovely?

After all, she wouldn’t *mind* finding a husband, though she feared that her requirements were unreasonable. The man would have to be willing to live at Waverly Farm until Poppy died, he’d need his own fortune, and he’d have to overlook the fact that she meant to race Lord Gabriel. All of which was a tall order.

Suddenly Pierce’s face tightened, and he bent to murmur, “Don’t look now, but Sharpe himself is leaning against that pillar over there.”

She looked at once, of course, then wished she hadn’t. Because Lord Gabriel Sharpe’s appearance had

materially altered since the last time she'd seen him.

When she'd challenged him at Turnham Green, she'd been blinded by rage, and he'd been covered in dust from the race he'd just won against Lieutenant Chetwin. Tonight, however, he looked every inch the Angel of Death.

Oh, how she hated that nickname! People had given it to him after Roger's death, and he did everything to reinforce it. He dressed entirely in black, down to his shirt and cravat, which were said to be specially dyed for him. He'd even painted his phaeton black and fitted it out with a matched pair of coal-black horses.

Angel of Death, indeed. He was using the tragic race against Roger to enhance his reputation as a fearless driver. He ought to cower in shame in a remote corner of his family's estate—not take on every fool who demanded that he race him. How dared he strut about society without a care in the world? How dared he *look* so much like an Angel of Death?

Not just the death part, either. Grudgingly, she admitted that aside from his clothes, he was the very image of an angel. His gold-streaked brown hair looked as if the sun had run its fingers through its waves. And his face was like something sculpted by Michelangelo—a classic nose, a full Italian mouth, and a stubborn chin. Though she couldn't see his eyes just now, she'd observed their color before—a mossy green with brown flecks that reminded her of secret forest glades.

She snorted. She must be mad. His eyes were those of the man who'd killed her brother. She'd only noticed him because she hated him so thoroughly that it seemed an outrage for him to be that sinfully attractive. That was the only reason.

"You're staring," Pierce muttered under his breath.

Oh, Lord, she was. How *dared* Lord Gabriel get her to stare at him?

"Come, let's dance." Pierce offered her his arm.

She took it, grateful to be saved from herself. Then, as they joined a long line of dancers, she saw Lord Gabriel catch sight of her. His gaze widened, then slid down her figure with rude interest.

And the last thing she saw, as Pierce whirled her into the dance, was the curst Angel of Death looking straight into her eyes and smile.

LORD GABRIEL SHARPE watched as Miss Virginia Waverly danced down the length of the hall with the Earl of Devonmont. Thank God she had come. If he'd had to endure an entire blasted ball without accomplishing his purpose, he'd have blown his brains out.

Fortunately, he was well prepared for her appearance here. Jackson Pinter, the Bow Street runner helping his siblings look into the deaths of their parents, had discovered a great deal of sobering information about Miss Waverly. And Gabe meant to use it to his advantage.

"There goes your nemesis," said Maximilian Cale, the Duke of Lyons.

Lyons was a fellow Jockey Club member and Gabe's closest friend. He had a stable of Thoroughbreds that Gabe envied, one of which had won the Derby twice and another that had won the Royal Ascot. Gabe had bought the progeny of the latter horse last month, after he'd scraped together enough money from horse-wager winnings to afford it.

"Miss Waverly hardly qualifies as a nemesis," Gabe said dryly.

Lyons snorted. "Has she renewed her challenge to you yet?"

"She hasn't had the chance," Gabe said, feigning nonchalance. That damned challenge had been bandied about society ever since Turnham Green, and tonight he meant to put an end to it.

“Surely she won’t.” Lyons sipped his wine. “She can’t possibly be as hotheaded as her brother.”

Gabe stiffened. Seven years, and he still couldn’t forget the sight of Roger lying twisted in the grass, his neck broken. If only . . .

But “if only” was for priests and philosophers. Gabe was seeking neither absolution nor understanding; he couldn’t change what had happened.

But perhaps he could assuage the dire results, now that he knew about them. “I suspect that Miss Waverly is not only hotheaded, but stubborn.” Gabe followed her with his eyes as Devonmont led her down the narrow row. “She came here tonight, didn’t she? She had to guess I might be here.”

“If she mentions the challenge again, will you accept it?”

“No.” He was done with running that course in Turnham Green.

Lyons smirked at him. “Afraid that the chit will beat you?”

Gabe knew better than to rise to the bait. “More afraid that she’ll run her rig over my best team of horses.”

“They say she beat Letty Lade. That’s no small feat.”

He snorted. “Letty Lade was nearly seventy by then; it’s a miracle the woman didn’t fall off her perch. Leave Miss Waverly to me. After tonight, there will be no more talk of a race.”

“What do you mean to do?”

“I intend to marry her,” Gabe said.

What else could he do? Clearly her grandfather overindulged her, and that scoundrel Devonmont probably encouraged her for his own amusement. Miss Waverly needed a man to take her in hand. And since he was partly to blame for her present situation, he’d be the one to do it. In the process, he could solve his own problem.

Lyons gaped at him. “Marry her? Why the hell would you do that?”

Gabe shrugged. “Gran is demanding that my siblings and I marry, and Miss Waverly needs a husband. Why shouldn’t it be me?”

“Because she blames you for Roger’s death?”

Gabe forced a smile. “Once she realizes that what happened with Roger was truly just an accident . . .”

He trailed off, bits of memory plaguing him. Roger rousing him out of bed for the race. Lyons looking green about the gills as they arrived at the course. Gabe’s blood running high as he approached the boulder . . .

An uncharacteristic anger boiled up in him, and he tamped it down with effort. He didn’t generally get angry. Long ago, he’d buried his emotions in a grave so deep that they could never be unearthed.

Or so he’d thought. Ever since Miss Waverly’s challenge, he’d been volatile, prone to irrational bouts of fury. It made no sense. How could one stupid challenge churn up the cold ground inside him? And yet he had. Everything seemed to tax his temper.

But tonight he must hold his anger in check, or he’d never succeed in his plans. So he fought his emotions back into the grave that felt shallower by the day.

“Why not find someone more compliant to marry?” Lyons asked.

Because her lack of compliance oddly attracted Gabe. Since he had to marry, he didn’t want someone placid, toadying society chit. He wanted a wife with spirit. Who had more spirit than a woman brave enough to publicly challenge a man to a race?

Besides, after everything he'd heard about Miss Waverly and the sad life she'd been leading, he couldn't let that situation continue. Not that he could tell Lyons that; the duke wouldn't understand that he was only doing what was right.

He put on his usual grin. "You know me. I always like a challenge."

Looking unconvinced, Lyons sipped his wine. "So it wasn't your grandmother's idea for you to marry Roger's sister?"

"Gran didn't specify whom we marry, just that we all do so—or none of us will inherit. And by the way, that's not common knowledge, so I'd appreciate it if you kept it to yourself."

"I suppose Miss Waverly wouldn't *like* hearing that she's the key to your gaining your inheritance. But do you need the money that badly? Oliver seems to have the estate well in hand, Jarret convinced your grandmother to give him the brewery anyway, and Minerva now has a husband who can afford to give her whatever she wants. Surely you can rely on them to lend you money if you run short."

"It's not that." Given more time, he hoped to support himself on his own anyway. "I'm worried about Celia."

"Ah, yes. I forgot about her."

Gabe glanced over to where his sister was dancing with some foreigner twice her age and looking decidedly annoyed. She'd told Gabe only last week that she had no intention of marrying as long as Gabe stayed unmarried. *We two should hold firm*, she'd said, *and Gran will have to give in. She's got three of us paired off—that should satisfy her.*

Gabe gritted his teeth. Gran wouldn't be satisfied until she had the entire family marching in step to her tune. And as long as he refused to marry, Celia could blame *him* for the fact that they were all disinherited.

But then she would be the one to suffer. While he was putting his plans for financial independence into place, she would be shuffled from relation to relation. She said she didn't need or want a man, but with no dowry to compensate for the weight of the family scandal on her marital prospects, she'd have no choice but to become a spinster.

He refused to be responsible for that. If Celia still wouldn't marry after Gabe got himself leg-shackled, at least she couldn't blame *him*.

"I don't suppose you're looking for a wife," Gabe said hopefully.

Lyons eyed him askance. "Your lovely sister? I'm not sure I *want* a wife who can shoot me dead in twenty paces."

Gabe smiled ruefully. "That seems to be the objection most men have to Celia."

And given Lyons's family background, he would have more of an objection than most.

Lyons returned his attention to Miss Waverly, who was sashaying into a turn. "I suppose she's pretty enough. A bit underendowed, though."

Underendowed? Hardly. But then, Gabe had never been attracted to women with bosoms like overstuffed chair cushions. Made them look unbalanced. He liked breasts he could take in his mouth without feeling smothered.

He'd wager Miss Waverly had fine little breasts beneath that martial gown . . . and a shapely little derrière to match. In fact, she was damned near close to perfect. Taller than the average female, with a trim figure that bespoke hours of walking and riding.

Then there was her beautiful hair, glossy black and swept up into some arrangement of feathers and plaits, ribbons and dangling ringlets that made a man itch to take it down. And her face, too—all pert and pretty.

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