

“My lord.”

Nicholas looked up in surprise. The footman must have stepped into the drawing room and moved across it so unobtrusively that Nicholas hadn't even realized he'd entered until the servant stopped beside the couch to lean down and murmur near his ear. Not that Nicholas minded. His mother and the marquess had been lecturing him for over an hour.

He turned his head slightly. “What is it, James?”

“There is a woman crying in the stable.”

Nicholas raised a brow

“Thirty is a very good age to marry,” his brother the marquess was saying. “I married at nine and twenty, only a few days shy of thirty.”

“Who is she?” Nicholas asked the footman.

“I am not certain, my lord. The groom came to tell us.”

“Did the groom say what was the matter?”

“No, my lord.”

“Why doesn't the groom ask her to leave?”

“Nicholas,” the dowager said loudly, her voice echoing off the walls of the drawing room. “Are you attending? Your brother makes a very good point.”

“I am listening, Mama,” Nicholas said, smiling at her. He'd been listening for almost an hour now, but he didn't mention that. He'd known what this afternoon was about as soon as his sister and the marchioness went off together for a walk, leaving him alone with his brother and his mother for a friendly chat.

But this chat was more reminiscent of his time in the army and a general giving him his marching orders. He had been listening, even as the footman relayed his message, even as the pain in his leg grew from uncomfortable to unbearable. Both of his legs had been crushed when his horse fell on him during the war. The right leg had healed for the most part, though it still hurt and was terribly stiff in the morning or when the weather was damp. His left leg was mostly unusable. He could put a little weight on it and had some range of motion, enough that he could walk if he leaned heavily on a cane. His left knee, in particular, had suffered the worst of the damage and it pained him any time he had to bend it for very long. He'd now been sitting with it bent for almost an hour and he'd been in agony for approximately forty-five minutes of that

hour. He desperately wanted to prop it up on the couch and stretch it out, but if he did so in front of his mother, she would look at him with that awful pity in her blue eyes, and his brother Henry would look away as though embarrassed.

“Henry, do go on. You were saying thirty is a good age to wed.” Nicholas inclined his head toward the footman. “Does she refuse to leave?”

“No one can get close enough to her, my lord. She has a pig guarding her.”

Nicholas almost laughed at this, but the footman’s expression was deadly serious. “I see,” Nicholas said, forcing his expression to remain somber. “Assure the groom I will be there as soon as I can to deal with the situation.”

“Yes, my lord.” The footman bowed and made his exit.

“As I was saying,” his mother continued, “I think a house party is just the thing. We will invite a half dozen or so of the most eligible young ladies to come to Battle’s Peak for a week of games and riding and the lovely summer weather. At the end of the week, you will choose one to marry.” She produced a sheet of vellum. “I have made a list of the ladies I think we should invite. Your dear sister-in-law was kind enough to add her own suggestions.” She held the vellum out to him. “Would you like to peruse it?”

Nicholas liked anything that would allow him to move from his present position. He stood awkwardly, grasped his walking stick, and made his way across the room to his mother. Though it was only a few steps, it seemed to take hours. His mother looked away as he moved toward her, pretending to take in the newly remodeled drawing room. His sister Florentia had done it in the Greek style, with columns in white and white plaster and moldings on the walls and ceilings. Groupings of chairs and couches, all upholstered in pale cream and gold, were placed throughout the long, rectangular room.

Nicholas took the paper and stood in front of his mother, forcing her to look at him.

“Are all of the ladies from London?” the marquess asked. “None are local?”

Undoubtedly, he was thinking of the daughters of Mr. Kentworth, whose land bordered Battle’s Peak on the south.

“Your dear Mary made inquiries there, but the eldest girl is only eight,” his mother said. “There is the Blackstock family,” she said. “Mr. Blackstock was a gentleman, but he passed away a few months ago, and I’m afraid Miss Blackstock has been allowed quite shocking freedoms since then.”

Nicholas could only wish he'd be allowed the freedom of escaping from this room. He finally looked down at the list. He recognized the family names but none of the ladies. Even without knowing them, he knew they would be gently bred girls who were accomplished in all of the feminine arts—drawing, singing, playing pianoforte, and embroidery. They would speak French and wear the latest fashions and they would pretend they didn't mind that he was a cripple, but inside they would be completely disgusted. No lady of Society would consider marrying him unless her parents were desperate for a good match or in need of money. Without thinking, Nicholas crumpled the list into a ball and tossed it in the hearth. His mother gasped and his brother sputtered, "What's this now?"

"I'm not marrying," Nicholas said.

"But we just discussed—" his brother began.

"You talked, and I listened," Nicholas interrupted. "I *did* listen," he added before they could protest. "Not once did either of you mention the most important consideration. I am a cripple."

"Nicholas, do not speak that way," his mother chided him.

"Why?" He leaned heavily on his stick to make a point and also because he needed to take some of the pressure off his left leg. "Because if we pretend I do not have an injury it will go away? I have unfortunate news, Mother. I am will not be miraculously healed, and you know as well as I that every lady on that list will pity me and pray to God her parents don't force her to marry me."

His mother opened her mouth but didn't seem to know what to say. Henry stepped in. "They're young and foolish. Mary and I didn't wed for love. That's something that comes in time."

"Mary also didn't feel pity and disgust for you."

"What are you saying, Nicholas?" the dowager demanded. "You have been back from the war for over three years. I have been patient. I have been understanding. You wanted to come here and recover, we allowed it. You did not want to travel to London for the Season, we allowed it. But if you will not come to London, then I must bring the eligible ladies here."

"No," he said.

She waved a hand. "You cannot possibly mean that you will never marry."

"Plenty of men don't marry—"

“But you are the son of a marquess. You *must* marry.”

“Third son and, as Henry pointed out, I am thirty years old. I don’t *have* to do anything.”

Now would have been the time for a dramatic exit. And if he could have walked faster than a snail, he would have made one. As it was, he hobbled across the floor and was able to hear all of his mother’s muttered insults, including how he was spoiled, willful, and stubborn.

He was stubborn. Nicholas could admit to that. But so was his mother.

He’d told her a dozen times, probably more, that he wanted to be left alone. What had she done? Sent his sister Florentia. Nicholas liked her well enough, and she stayed out of his way, but now his mother had come with the marquess in tow, seemingly for the sole purpose of prodding him into marriage.

Nicholas made his way toward the door that opened to the back of the house. He was closer to the stables that way. He nodded at the footmen he passed. Years ago, he would have strode quickly past them and not even noticed. Now he had plenty of time to take in their appearances and note whether they looked happy or irritable, weary or well-rested. At this moment the servants looked strained, as though they too were feeling the stress of his mother’s visit.

He finally reached the exit and stepped into the warm afternoon. The sunlight poked out from a blue sky filled with puffy clouds. It was a perfect day for riding, except he didn’t ride any longer. If he had, he would have saddled a horse and escaped his family that way. He would have come back in a much better temper as riding always restored his good mood. Now his escape options were far more limited. He wondered if it was time to seriously consider the ultimate escape—Canada. He had been contemplating booking passage on a ship and starting over where no one cared if he was Lord Nicholas St. Clare. He could just be Nicholas St. Clare, a cripple. And no one would pity his mother or his family or whisper behind their fans about what a shame it was because he had been such a handsome, athletic young man.

He’d reached the stable and a groom ran to meet him. The lad doffed his cap. He was sixteen at most and looked relieved to see him. “My lord, I don’t know what to do. The lady refuses to leave.”

“Why has she taken refuge in my stable?”

“I don’t know. I can’t get close enough because of the pig. I tried to talk to her, but I had to shout, and she was crying so hard I don’t know if she heard me.”

Nicholas looked about. “Where is John Coachman and the other grooms?”

“Lady Florentia and Lady Mary asked the coachman to drive them about.”

Nicholas nodded. “I see. Well, leave her to me then.”

“Yes, my lord.” The groom doffed his cap again. “Be careful, my lord.”

Nicholas smiled and hobbled toward the open door of the stable. During the war he’d been known as a horse whisperer—all of his life, really. He’d always had a way with horses. He seemed to understand their fears and their needs and how best to respond. The ability to connect to his horse made him a good rider, and it also served him and his troop well during the war when he was frequently called upon to steal horses. He never had a problem convincing a horse to go with him. It just took some soft words and a bit of coaxing—maybe a little treat—and he won the horse over easily.

Pigs were another matter, he thought as he stepped into the stable and was met with a large white covered with bristly white hair and several large, black spots. The pig had round, floppy ears that pricked up at his arrival, and she or he pawed at the ground and snuffled. There was no sign of a lady, but he’d heard the horses snorting as he approached. With one glance down the row of the stable, he saw several horses snorting with their heads high—a clear sign they were uncomfortable or detected danger.

The pig snorted as well, but Nicholas was not well-versed in pig vocalizations and wasn’t sure if the pig was friend or foe. He stopped just inside the stable, deciding not to test his luck with the pig. “Hullo!” he called. “Is anyone here?”

No answer except more snorting and head tossing from his horses. He moved inside, another slow step, and the pig watched him warily. “Hullo? Miss?”

Still no answer, but he thought he heard a telltale snuffle.

“If you are inside, might you call off your pig? I’d like to talk to you,” he said, beginning to feel rather like an idiot. “Nice pig,” he told the animal, who was grunting loudly now. “Is this a Hampshire pig?”

“A Gloucestershire Old Spots. Now go away,” said a feminine voice.

Nicholas took the words as a good sign. He was making progress. They’d come from the right rear of the stable. There were a couple of empty stalls there and she was probably hiding in one.

“I can’t go away,” Nicholas said, edging closer. “I live here. I’m Nicholas St. Clare. Who are you?”

“I can’t go away either,” she said, her voice muffled with congestion. “I can’t go home.”

“Why is—” This was ridiculous. He did not want to yell down the length of the stable while a pig directed a menacing stare at him. “Miss, would you mind very much calling off your Gloucestershire Old Spots so we might speak face to face?”

For a long moment there was no answer, and then he thought he caught sight of a head peeking out from a right rear stall. A moment later, there was a shrill whistle. The pig’s ears twitched, and the creature turned her head. “Sweetie, come!” the woman called.

With a last look at Nicholas, the pig lumbered back toward the stall. Nicholas followed, lumbering himself as he made his way past the stalls of horses. He spent most of his days in the stable. He didn’t ride any longer. He would never ride again, but he enjoyed the company of the horses and grooming and caring for them took his mind off his shattered legs. Finally, he came to the stall and peered down at a woman sitting on a small stool and dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. She was pretty, even with red rimmed eyes and splotches of pink all over her face. She had hair the color of amber—not brown but not quite blond—and large brown eyes with long lashes. Her eyes reminded him of a fawn’s eyes. They were wary but curious. She was dressed simply in an earth colored under dress and brown over dress. Her hair fell in wild waves about her shoulders and was sprinkled liberally with hay. At one point it might have been pinned up, but Nicholas rather doubted it.

“You are Lord Nicholas,” she said.

He gave a slight bow and waited for her gaze to slide over his damaged legs and his walking stick and for the pity or horror to creep into her eyes. “I am,” he said. “I don’t think we’ve met.”

“We haven’t.” Her gaze didn’t waver from his face. “I don’t go out into Society. Until recently.” And with that, she started weeping again. She covered her face with her handkerchief and sobbed quietly, her shoulders shaking. Nicholas would have knelt beside her, but of course he couldn’t manage to do more than lean on his stick.

The pig, who had gone to the far end of the stall glared at Nicholas, and he would have sworn she wore a look of reproach. Nicholas gave the animal a pleading look, and perhaps it worked because the animal nudged the woman with her snout. The woman sniffed and rubbed

the pig's head. Finally, she sniffed again, and straightening her shoulders, dabbed at her nose and eyes. When she had composed herself, she took a breath. "I'm sorry to have disturbed you. I shouldn't have come here. I was out walking, and I began crying and—well, you see the state I am in."

Strange. Certainly, she must have noticed his walking stick or the way he stood awkwardly with all of his weight on it. Her gaze had dipped down, but she hadn't seemed repulsed.

"Has something happened?" Nicholas asked. "Are you ill or is anyone in your family—"

"No but thank you for asking. My problem is not that sort."

She was definitely educated. She spoke well and if she knew who he was, she must be local. "I've been told I am a good listener. If you want to talk," he added.

She shook her head. "No. Not about this."

"Then would you like to come inside? I could have the cook prepare some tea. We have several comfortable chairs where you could cry."

She gave him a watery smile. "Thank you. But I have almost wrung myself dry. I should probably go home."

He found that he didn't want her to leave quite yet. He hadn't had a conversation with anyone but a family member in some time. Not only that, but for once the conversation didn't involve his injury or marriage. This woman—whoever she was—hadn't seemed to care that he was a cripple. She couldn't have failed to note the stick and the way he favored his right leg, but she didn't immediately offer him a seat or behave as though he was an invalid.

"I would escort you home," he said, "but—" And he gestured to his leg.

She glanced at his leg impassively. "I don't live very far, but thank you. You have a lovely stable. I will recommend it to anyone else who needs a good cry."

"Please don't," he said. "The horses and grooms rather prefer tearful humans to go to the house. I believe I mentioned we have several comfortable chairs. Perfect for long or even short bouts of weeping."

"I shall keep that in mind." She rose and he noted she was of medium height, slender, with a hint of curves below the waist and more than a hint at her neckline. He might never plan to marry, but he was still a man, and he couldn't stop himself from looking. "And I am sorry to have troubled you."

“It was no trouble,” he assured her. She gave him a dubious look and then whistled as loudly and shrilly as any man might do. “Come, Sweetie!”

The pig trotted to her side. She gave a quick bob. “Good day, my lord.” Lifting the hem of her skirt, she started away, the pig at her side as though she were a dog. Nicholas noted the lady’s rear view was as pleasing at the front. If he was not mistaken, she had a nicely rounded bottom.

Right before she reached the door, Nicholas pulled his gaze from her backside. “Wait,” he called. “I didn’t ask your name.”

She glanced over her shoulder, all that amber hair whipping around. “Amelia Blackstock,” she said. “No doubt you’ve been warned about me.” And then she disappeared through the door, taking her Gloucestershire Old Spots with her.