Silent on the Moor

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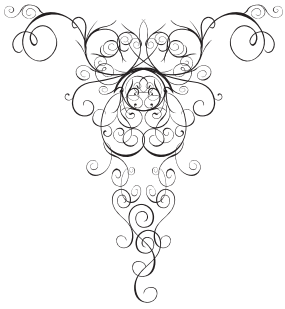
Extract

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THE FIRST CHAPTER

London, 1888



For now sits expectation in the air.
—William Shakespeare
Henry V

"Julia Grey, I would rather see you hanged than watch any sister of mine go haring off after a man who will not have her," my brother Bellmont raged. "And Portia, I am thoroughly appalled that you would not only condone such behaviour, but abet it by accompanying Julia. You are her elder sister. You ought to set an example."

I sighed and stared longingly at the whisky decanter. Portia and I had known that the summons to our father's London townhouse was a thinly-veiled ambush, but I do not think either of us had expected the attack to be so quick, nor so brutal. We had scarcely taken our seats in Father's comfortable library before our eldest brother launched into a tirade against our proposed visit to Yorkshire. Father, ensconced

behind his vast mahogany desk, said nothing. His expression was inscrutable behind his half-moon spectacles.

Catching my wistful glance, Portia rose and poured us both glasses of whisky. "Take this, dearest," she urged. "Bellmont is in rare form. He will surely rail at us until supper unless he has an apoplexy first," she finished cheerfully.

Bellmont's already high colour deepened alarmingly. "You may well jest about this, but it is unacceptable for Julia to accept an invitation to stay with Brisbane at his country house. He is an unmarried man, and she is a widow of thirty. Even if you are there to chaperone, Portia, you must admit, it would be a complete violation of propriety."

"Oh, Julia hasn't been invited," Portia responded helpfully. "I was. Julia rather invited herself."

Bellmont clicked his teeth together and drew in a deep breath, his nostrils going white at the edges. "If that is supposed to offer me comfort, it is a cold one, I assure you."

Portia shrugged and sipped at her whisky. Bellmont turned to me, deliberately softening his tone. At more than forty years of age and heir to our father's earldom, he had long since grown accustomed to having his own way. It was only with his eccentric family that his success was mixed. With a cunning blend of sternness, cajolery, and logic, he was sometimes able to bend us to his will, but just as often he found himself not speaking to more than one of his nine siblings. Now he attempted an appeal to my reason.

"Julia, I understand you were quite bereft when Edward died. You were very young to be a widow, and I am sympathetic to the fact that you felt compelled to search out your husband's murderer." I raised my brows. He had not been

so sympathetic at the time. When I had unmasked my husband's killer in a dramatic scene during which my townhouse was burned down and I nearly lost my life, Bellmont had actually stopped speaking to me for two months. Apparently, murder is a failing of the middle classes only. Aristocrats are supposed to be above such unpleasantness.

He went on. "I realise your connection with Mr. Brisbane was a necessary evil at the time. He has proved himself a thoroughly capable inquiry agent and, mercifully, a discreet one. But your association with this man cannot continue. I do not know what Father was thinking to invite him to Bellmont Abbey at Christmas, but it was badly done, and it has given you ideas."

"And God knows women mustn't have *ideas,*" Portia murmured into her glass. Bellmont did not even bother to look at her. We were well-accustomed to Portia's pointed asides.

I looked helplessly at Father, who merely shrugged and poured himself a glass of whisky. If Bellmont continued on we should become a family of inebriates.

"Monty," I began, deliberately sweetening my tone, "I do appreciate your concern. But Father has already explained to you Brisbane was there to pursue an investigation. He left before the family arrived for Christmas. You did not even see him. I have never invited him to accompany me to your home, nor have I ever foisted him upon you in any social situation, although he would not be entirely out of place. His great-uncle *is* the Duke of Aberdour, you know."

Bellmont rubbed a hand over his face, smoothing the furrows that marked his handsome brow. "My dear, his antecedents are quite immaterial. He is in trade. He is a half-

Gypsy vagabond who makes his living by dealing in the sordid miseries of others. His exploits are fodder for the newspapers, and we have been dragged through those rather enough at present," he finished, shooting Father a look that was ripe with bitterness.

Father waved an indolent hand. "Do not blame me, boy. I did my best to sweep the entire matter under the carpet, as did Brisbane." That much was true. The newspapers, through Father's influence and Brisbane's connections, had taken little enough notice of the events at Bellmont Abbey, although a few rather distasteful morsels had found their way into print.

Bellmont swung round to face Father while Portia and I huddled closer to one another on the sofa and drank our whisky.

"I am not unaware of your efforts, Father. But the press have always been interested in our little peccadilloes, and you have simply not done enough to keep them at bay, particularly when you were so indiscreet as to entertain your mistress at the same Christmas party as your children and grandchildren."

"A hit, a palpable hit," Portia whispered. I stifled a giggle. Bellmont was being rather unfair to Father. He had exercised as much authority over the press in the matter as he could. Considering what had actually transpired at the Abbey, we were lucky it had not become the scandal of the century.

"Madame de Bellefleur is not my mistress," Father said, puffing his cheeks indignantly. "She is my friend, and I shall thank you to speak of her respectfully."

"It does not matter what she *is*," Bellmont pointed out

acidly. "It only matters what they *say* she is. Do you have any notion how damaging such stories could be to me, to my children? Orlando is considering a run for Parliament when he is established, and Virgilia is to be presented this season. Her chances for a good match could be completely overthrown by your conduct, and it will not improve matters for her aunts to be seen chasing off to Yorkshire to stay with a bachelor of questionable reputation."

Portia stirred. "I should think the fact that I live openly with a woman would be far more damaging to her chances for a society marriage," she remarked coolly.

Bellmont flinched. "Your relationship with Jane is something to which I have become reconciled over these past ten years. It is a credit to Jane that she lives quietly and does not care to move in society."

Portia's eyes glinted ominously, and I laid a warning hand on her wrist. "Jane is the love of my life, Bellmont, not a pet to be trained."

Father held up a hand. "Enough. I will not have you quarrelling like dogs over an old bone. I thought we buried that particular issue long ago. Bellmont, you forget yourself. I have permitted you to abuse your sisters and me quite long enough."

Bellmont opened his mouth to protest, but Father waved him off. "You have a care for your sisters' reputations, and that does you credit, but I must observe for a man so often hailed as one of the greatest brains of his generation, you are remarkably obtuse about women. You've been married going on twenty years, boy. Have you not yet learned that it is easier to pull a star down from the heavens than to bend a woman to your will? The most tractable of women will kick

over the traces if you insist upon obedience and, in case it has escaped your notice, your sisters are not the most tractable of women. No, if they are intent upon going to Yorkshire, go they will."

Portia flicked a triumphant gaze at Bellmont who had gone quite pale under the angry wash of red over his fair complexion. I took another sip of my whisky and wondered not for the first time why my parents had found it necessary to have so many children.

"Father," Bellmont began, but Father rose, straightening his poppy-coloured waistcoat and raising a hand.

"I know. You are worried for your children, as you should be, and I will see that their chances are not damaged by the actions of their aunts." He paused, for dramatic effect no doubt, then pronounced in ringing tones, "Your sisters will travel under the protection of their brother, Valerius."

Portia and I gaped at him, stunned to silence. Bellmont was quicker off the mark. Mollified, he nodded at Father. "Very well. Valerius is thoroughly incapable of controlling them, but at least his presence will lend the appearance of respectability. Thank you, Father." He turned to leave, giving us a piercing look. "I suppose it would be too much to ask that you conduct yourselves like ladies, but do try," he offered as a parting shot.

Portia was still sputtering when the footman shut the door behind him. "Honestly, Father, I do not see why you didn't have him drowned as a child. You've four other sons, what's one at the bottom of the pond?"

Father shrugged. "I would have drowned him myself had I known he would turn out Tory. I know you want to re-

monstrate with me over the suggestion of travelling with Valerius, but I want to talk to your sister. Leave us to chat a moment, will you, my dear?" he said to Portia.

She rose gracefully and turned, pulling a face at me as she went. I tried not to fidget, but I felt suddenly shy and uncertain. I smiled up at Father winsomely and attempted to divert the conversation.

"Valerius will be simply furious with you, Father. You know he hates to leave London, and he is devoted to his work with Dr. Bent. He's just bought a new microscope."

It might have been a good diversion under other circumstances. Father could rant easily for an hour on the subject of Valerius and his unsuitable interest in medicine. But he had other game afoot.

He turned to me, folding his arms across his chest. "Do not look to distract me," he said sternly. "What the devil do you mean by hunting Brisbane like a fox? Monty is right, though I would not give him the satisfaction of saying so in front of him. It is damned unseemly and shows a distinct lack of pride. I reared you for better."

I smoothed my skirts under nervous fingers. "I am not hunting Brisbane. He asked Portia to come and help him sort out the estate. Apparently the former owner left it in a frightful state and Brisbane hasn't any lady to act as chatelaine and put things in order." I opened my eyes very wide to show I was telling the truth.

"Nicholas Brisbane is entirely capable of ordering his own bedsheets and hiring his own cook," he commented, narrowing his gaze.

"There is nothing sinister afoot," I assured him. "Brisbane

wrote in January to accept Portia's offer to help arrange his household. He told her to wait until April when the weather would be more hospitable. That is the whole of it."

"And how did you become involved?" Father demanded.

"I saw the letter and thought springtime on the moors sounded very pleasant."

Father shook his head slowly. "Not likely. You mean to settle this thing between you, whatever it is."

I twisted a bit of silken cushion fringe in my fingers and looked away. "It is complicated," I began.

"Then let us have it simply," he cut in brutally. "Has he offered you marriage?"

"No." My voice was nearly inaudible, even to my own ears.

"Has he given you a betrothal ring?"

"No."

"Has he ever spoken of marrying you?"

"No."

"Has he written to you since he left for Yorkshire?"

"No."

My replies dropped like stones, heavy with importance. He waited a long moment and the only sounds were the soft rustling of the fire on the hearth and the quiet ticking of the mantel clock.

"He has offered you nothing, made no plans for the future, has not even written. And still you mean to go to him?" His voice was soft now, free of judgment or recrimination, and yet it stung like salt on a wound.

I raised my gaze to his. "I must. I will know when I see him again. If there is nothing there, I will return to London by the first train and never speak of him again, never wonder

what might have been. But if there is a chance that he feels for me—" I broke off. The rest of it need not be spoken aloud.

"And you are quite determined?"

"Quite," I said, biting off the word sharply. He said nothing for a moment, but searched my face, doubtless looking for any sign that I was less than resolute and might be persuaded to abandon my plans.

At length he sighed, then drained the last of his whisky. "Go then. Go under Valerius' protection, however feeble that may be, and find out if Brisbane loves you. But I tell you this," he said, folding me into his embrace and pressing a kiss into my hair, "I may be above seventy years of age, but I still fence every day and if the blackguard hurts you I will hunt him down and leave a stiletto in his heart."

"Thank you, Father. That is very comforting."

Dinner that evening was a peculiarly quiet affair. Portia was a charming hostess and kept an admirable table. She was renowned for the quality of her food and wines as well as the excellence of the company. She knew the most interesting people and often invited them to little suppers arranged to show them to perfection, like gems in a thoughtful setting. But that night there were only ourselves—Portia, her beloved Jane, and me. We were all of us occupied with our own thoughts and said little, our silences punctuated with phlegmy snorts from Portia's vile pet, Mr. Pugglesworth, asleep under the table.

After one particularly nasty interlude, I laid down my knife. "Portia, must you have that dog in the dining room? He is putting me quite off my food."

She waved a fork at me. "Do not be peevish just because Bellmont took you to task today."

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