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The Reluctant Bride

Written by Beverley Eikli

Published by Choc Lit

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The Reluctant Bride

Beverley Eikli

Extract

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Published 2013 by Choc Lit Limited
Penrose House, Crawley Drive, Camberley, Surrey GU15 2AB, UK
www.choc-lit.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-781890-86-8

Chapter One
Spring 1813

'It's not a sin, unless you get caught.'

The gentle breeze seemed to whisper Jack's teasing challenge, its soft, silken fingers tugging at Emily's ingrained obedience. She put down her basket and stared with longing at the waters below, sweat prickling her scalp beneath her poke bonnet as desire warred with fear of the consequences.

'Where's your sense of adventure, Em?'

Still resisting, Emily closed her eyes, but the wind's wicked suggestiveness was like the caress of Jack's breath against her heated cheek; daring Emily to shrug aside a lifetime of dutiful subservience – again – and peel off her clothes, this time to plunge into the inviting stream beneath the willows.

She imagined Jack's warm brown eyes glinting with wickedness. Taunting her like the burr that had worked its way into the heel of her woollen stockings during her walk.

Exhaling on a sigh, Emily opened her eyes and admitted defeat as she succumbed to the pull of the reed-fringed waters.

Desire had won, justified by practicality.

If she had to remove one stocking to dislodge the burr she might as well remove both.

Scrambling down the embankment, she lowered herself onto a rock by the water's edge.

Her father would never know.

If he glanced from his study in the tower room, where he was doubtless gloating over his balance sheet, he'd assume she was a village lass making her way along the track. Emily had never seen him interest himself in the poor except …

Like most unpleasant memories, she tried to cast this one out with a toss of her head, still glad her father had never discovered what she'd witnessed from her bedroom window one evening five years ago: the curious sight of Bartholomew Micklen

ushering the beggar girl who'd arrived on his doorstep into his carriage.

Then climbing in after her before it rumbled down the driveway and out of sight.

Now was just another of those moments when Emily was glad her father remained in ignorance. Her insurance, should she need it, was that she knew a few of her father's secrets the excise men might just want to know.

By the time the first stocking had followed Emily's boots onto the grassy bank she was bursting with anticipation for her swim.

What did one more sin matter when she'd be Mrs Jack Noble in less than a week?

The second woollen stocking came next. Fine enough quality but ugly and serviceable, like most of her clothes. Jack had promised her scarlet silk stockings spun with salutary Bible story scenes on his return from his covert mission to the Continent. This, he'd suggested as he'd debunked her father's theory that all women's flesh was vile and corrupt, would enable her to feel as dutiful a daughter as a wife: sensuous silk for sinning with her husband-to-be, saintly stories for her sanctimonious father.

Jack liked to shock her.

With water up to her shoulders, Emily raised her arms above her head in a swift arc, splashing for the pure pleasure of it and glorying in her sinful nakedness. Who would ever know?

Finally she acknowledged she was living on borrowed time. She dried herself with her chemise, which made it thoroughly damp by the time she pulled it over her head, then sat down on the rock again and stretched out her bare right leg, pointing her toe as she pretended to ease on a scarlet stocking emblazoned with winged chariots. Exhaling on another sigh of pleasure once she'd pulled on her dress, she raised her face to the sun. When she was Jack's wife, she'd contravene every sin she could think of. He would buy her gowns that stretched the limits of decency. She'd dance naked with him on the lawn.

Grunting with irritation when she was unable to ease her boot over her damp foot, Emily hurled the ugly lump of leather over her shoulder. Though she'd have to climb to the top of the embankment and put it on later, it was catharsis not to be called to account for giving vent to just one of life's daily frustrations.

'Good God, what was that?'

The outraged expletive, followed by a peevish whinny, confirmed she was no longer alone. Feeling foolish, Emily scrambled up the river bank.

'I presume this is what you're looking for?' A tall, straight-backed soldier regarded her from the saddle, her boot dangling from one gloved hand. He was dressed in the green jacket of one of the two Rifle battalions and Emily's heart fluttered with excitement as she looked past him.

But Jack was not there and her disappointment was quickly replaced by embarrassment at the soldier's unsmiling scrutiny. The unsettling effect of his dark gaze was intensified by a thin ridge of scar tissue which slashed his left cheek in a graceful arc from eye to ear.

Lowering her head so the brim of her bonnet kept her face in shadow, Emily accepted the boot. 'I had no idea anyone was on the path,' she mumbled, hoping he'd put her lack of grace down to the poor manners of a country rustic. Not that it mattered. His restless gaze, caught in the glare of the sun, had barely registered her face.

The young soldier waved a dismissive hand, then shaded his eyes, straining to see into the distance as if uncertain of his present course. 'I'm looking for Micklen Hall.'

Emily's foreboding increased. What business had this man with her father? Worse, what if he should recognise her if her father called her to attend to him to pour tea? Unlikely, but not impossible.

She briefly considered confessing her truancy, begging him to refrain from mentioning their meeting, but the soldier's erect

bearing and forbidding expression suggested he'd condone her behaviour no more readily than her father would. Her next thought, that perhaps he was a friend of Jack's, was quickly dismissed. He might be roughly the same age but all similarities ended there. While his regular features and strong chin combined to create an effect of rugged handsomeness, enhanced, surprisingly, by his scar, his frosty demeanour was as different as possible from her easy-humoured, roguish betrothed.

She pointed behind him, over the hill. 'You took the wrong turn when you came out of the beech wood, sir.' Bobbing a quick curtsy, her manner was deferential. She was not dressed according to her rank. He'd forget her the moment he left. He'd barely looked at her and the sun was in his eyes. 'It's only a few minutes on horseback.'

He thanked her, and she watched him wheel his horse around, urging it into a gallop until he was a speck in the distance.

Emily waited until he'd crested the hill before she set her reluctant footsteps in the same direction. She'd be half an hour behind him, but if the stranger were not gone by the time she arrived she'd slip in through the servants' entrance and keep to her room until dinner.

If she were as lucky as last week, no one would even know she'd left the house.

If she were as lucky as last week, her latest sin would have no repercussions.

Major Angus McCartney was out of his depth.

He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. Only five minutes in this gloomy, oppressive parlour after the women had arrived and he was questioning his ability to complete his mission, a feeling he'd not experienced before Corunna four years before.

He'd been unprepared for the assault on his senses unleashed by the beautiful Miss Micklen. He shifted position once more, fingering the letters that belonged to her. For two years he'd

carried the memory of the young woman before him as a confident, radiant creature in a white muslin ball gown with a powder-blue sash. Now her tragic, disbelieving gaze unleashed a flood of memory, for in her distress she bore no resemblance to the paragon of beauty at the Regimental Ball, a bright memory in an otherwise tormented year after he'd been invalided out of Spain. Clearly Miss Micklen did not remember him.

She'd remember him forever now: as the harbinger of doom, for as surely as if he'd pulled the trigger he'd just consigned her hopes and dreams to cinders.

She turned suddenly, catching him by surprise, and the painful, searing memory of the last time he'd confronted such grief tore through him.

Corunna again. As if presented on a platter, the image of the soldier's woman he'd assisted flashed before his eyes, forcing him to draw a sustaining breath as he battled with the familiar self-reproach which threatened to unman him.

He reminded himself he was here to do good.

'A skirmish near the barracks?' the young woman whispered, resting her hands upon her crippled mother's shoulders. 'Last Wednesday?'

'That is correct, ma'am.'

Mrs Micklen muttered some incoherent words, presumably of sympathy. Angus pitied them both: Miss Micklen digesting her sudden bereavement, and the mother for her affliction. The older woman sat hunched in her chair by the fire, unable to turn her head, her claw-like hands trembling in her lap.

He cleared his throat, wishing he'd taken more account of his acknowledged clumsiness with the fairer sex. He was not up to the task. He'd dismissed the cautions of his fellow officers, arrogantly thinking he'd be shirking his duty were he not the one to deliver the news. It was condolences he should be offering, and he had not the first idea how to appeal to a frail feminine heart.

Nor was he accustomed to the lies tripping off his tongue as he added, ‘A tragic mishap, ma’am, but Captain Noble acquitted himself with honour to the end.’

Miss Micklen’s gaze lanced him with its intensity. Tears glistened, held in check by her dark lashes. ‘I can’t believe it,’ she whispered, moving to draw aside the heavy green velvet curtain and stare at the dipping sun. ‘Jack told me he was on the Continent.’

Choosing not to refute Jack’s lie, he said carefully, ‘An altercation occurred between a group of infantry in which I was unwittingly involved. When Captain Noble came to my assistance he was struck a mortal blow to the head. I’m sorry, Miss Micklen.’

He wished he knew how to offer comfort. The beautiful Miss Micklen of the Christmas Regimental Ball had seemed all-powerful in her cocoon of happy confidence. Unobtainable as the stars in heaven, he’d thought as he’d watched her skirt the dance floor in the arms of the unworthy Jack Noble. For so long he’d carried Miss Micklen’s image close to his heart and this was the first time he’d been reminded of Jessamine.

God, how weary he was of war.

Two women, torn apart by grief at the loss of their soldier protector.

This interview was part of his atonement.

Angus dug into his pocket and held out a bundle, tied with red ribbon. ‘Captain Noble’s letters, ma’am.’

She took them with one graceful hand. The other fingered the brooch fastened to the collar of her high-necked gown. Angus was surprised by its modesty. Jack Noble’s taste in women ran to the ostentatious, though perhaps it was not surprising he would choose a wife as different as possible from his doxies.

‘Bear your sorrow with dignity, Emily.’ The old woman spoke in French. ‘You come from noble Normandy stock.’

Angus studied Miss Micklen’s shapely back as she gazed silently at the letters before raising her head to stare into the

gathering darkness. The calm before the storm? His mother's propensity for the vapours had taught him that females were wont to give vent to their wounded passions with no thought to present company.

Miss Micklen was stronger than that.

She turned. 'What was Jack doing with *you*, Major McCartney, in Chester,' she challenged, 'when he told me he was travelling directly to the Continent?'

Angus wished he'd thought of some other excuse that did not involve himself in order to preserve the gilded image she held of her false fiancé. 'A confusion of dates, I'm sure, Miss Micklen. Captain Noble was with his regiment, *in Chester*.' At least that part was true.

Her lip trembled and she lowered her voice, suddenly contrite. 'I'm sorry, Major McCartney. Jack was your colleague. No doubt your friend, too.'

He felt his own heart respond and flower. She was no longer the careless beauty whose gaze had failed to register him during the spate of balls they'd both attended that memorable season. In her most painful hour she was capable of compassion.

She extended her hand. 'It's a painful cross you bear, Major McCartney. Jack was denied the glory of giving his life in battle for his country, but you saw your comrade struck down'—her voice broke—'to save your life.'

She pulled on the bell rope then turned to the thin, weary-looking parlour maid who appeared. 'Show Major McCartney out, please, Lucy.'

'If there is any assistance you require …'

'No, but thank you, sir'—she sounded as if she might break down at any moment—'for giving me the comfort of knowing Jack died a hero.'

With a heavy heart, he bowed himself out.

The comfort of lies. They sat ill with him.

But then, lying was the least of his sins. He'd lost his soul the

day he laid eyes on Jessamine.

Gathering her cloak and bonnet the moment the dust had settled upon the major's departure, Emily slipped out of the kitchen door and fled across the meadow. There'd been no hint that Major McCartney recognised her as the lass on the road, preoccupied as he clearly was by his impending mission. Not that it would have mattered if he'd unwittingly implicated Emily in this afternoon's truancy. Her father had looked as if he were about to punish Emily, regardless, the way the tendons of his neck had swollen about his bitter face, red with suffused anger, when he'd heard the news.

As if Emily were to blame for Jack's death.

At the top of the hill she glanced down at the church in which she and Jack would have married the following week. She didn't stop. Only when she reached the old, disused woodcutter's cottage, deep amongst the elms, did she feel safe. Throwing open the door, she hurled herself onto the pile of hessian sacks in the corner, the setting for the delights she'd shared so recently with Jack.

Her heart had been ripped in two. Without Jack she had no buffer against the harshness of her world.

When her passion subsided, Emily dragged herself into a sitting position and rested her head on her updrawn knees.

Jack, the man who had wooed her with such tenacity despite her initial reluctance, the man who had breached her defences with his teasing humour and whose twinkling eyes and boyish grin never failed to make her pulse beat faster, was gone.

Wiping away her tears, she bent to pick up a half-smoked cheroot lying nearly obscured beneath an old log. Jack had smoked it just over a week ago. Clenching it in her fist, she closed her eyes and pictured the scene: Jack's smooth, muscled chest upon which she'd rested her head. With loving reassurances he

had coaxed her out of her fear. Tenderly he had massaged her temples with his long, sensitive fingers; fingers which had taught her that not only lips could show what joy and delight there was in loving. Her body burned at the memory, but not with shame, for she was proud to have loved a hero.

An image of grim-faced Major McCartney intruded, pushing aside her recollections of smiling, tousle-haired Jack. The scar puckering the soldier's cheek and his stiff, military bearing only reinforced her aversion to men with no sense of humour. Men who did not know how to wring the joy from life. Unlike Jack. But Jack was dead and her world had fallen apart. There would be no more joy for her now.

Wind rattled the shutters. Distracted, Emily noticed the rain had begun to breach the meagre defences of the crudely constructed hut. She let out another sob. She didn't care if the water rushed under the door and drowned her.

After a few minutes, rational thought returned. How could Jack have been in Chester when he had intended crossing the channel on another secret assignment the day after his visit to Emily?

If only she'd quizzed the major more thoroughly. He'd said he was putting up at The Four Swans and to call on him if he could be of assistance.

Emily shuddered. She never again wanted to lay eyes on the tense, awkward soldier whose life had been saved through Jack's sacrifice.

Chapter Two

Autumn had set in and the surrounding patchwork of fields looked barren.

Angus shivered, despite his army greatcoat, as he and his brother navigated the narrow cliffside path on horseback. He glanced at the base of the froth-fringed sheer drop far below him to his left and wondered when the bridle path would be swallowed up by erosion. This was smuggler's territory. No doubt the excise men would have a field day if they only knew which caves and caverns harboured the contraband he had no doubt sustained the local community.

'How was mama?' Jonathan, older by a couple of years, twisted his head. His ready smile was amiable, differentiating him from the sibling he had once most closely resembled. That, and the now generous coating of flesh, a legacy of his comfortable seven-year marriage.

'Same,' Angus replied shortly, drawing level once they'd reached more hospitable terrain. Then, as if remembering he addressed his brother who really was interested, and not some cavalry man who expected only a monosyllabic answer, added, 'In delicate health, of course. Apparently only a visit from her dear boys stood between her and her eternity box.'

Jonathan chuckled. 'Forever susceptible to the damsel in distress, aren't you, little brother? Incidentally, I hear you were in these parts not so long ago.' He indicated the emerald turf on the chalk downs with a sweep of his arm then directed Angus a candid look through a pair of myopic blue eyes. 'Rather an out-of-the-way place to find yourself?'

Angus shrugged, not feeling it necessary to give any reasons. 'Not really.'

'Business? Military? By the way, how are you faring on half pay? I understand you want to assess your future after fighting so

long for king and country, but you'll have to make up your mind what you're going to do before much longer.'

Angus gave another non-committal shrug. 'I'm a half step ahead of the creditors. Tedium's the worst of it, though without Johnson it's the very devil taking off my own boots.' Angus had not yet replaced his loyal batman who'd been pensioned off to a small cottage in Norfolk since Angus had given up soldiering as his main livelihood. 'Thought I might go to Africa and be a mercenary.' He gave a wry smile. 'You advise me, Jonathan.'

'Find yourself a wife.' Jonathan put a hand to his expanded girth. 'A rich one. You look half-starved.'

'Don't pity me.' Angus glanced towards the beech wood. He hated it when his brother broached this topic.

Jonathan gave a snort. 'I wouldn't dare.' Reflectively, he added, 'Can't pretend to know all the answers either, though I *do* know you never chose the army willingly and wonder why you don't pack it in altogether.'

'It doesn't suit me as ill as I'd once supposed.' The truth was, Angus didn't know what to do with his life. War held no appeal. Hostilities with France had been a fact of life for as long as he could remember and men of his calibre were always needed to repulse the Corsican invader. 'I was hardly cut out for London revels, and as a military man I have some purpose.'

'Unlike the rest of your ramshackle family?' A grumble of laughter escaped his brother as they forded a shallow stream. 'You haven't answered my question. What brought you here?'

Angus was uncomfortably conscious of their proximity to the honey-coloured pile of stone which housed the beautiful, bereaved Miss Micklen. She'd occupied so many of his waking thoughts these past months. He wondered how she did.

And wished he didn't care.

Unconsciously he fingered the scar that puckered his cheek, an old habit of his when thinking. The disfigurement did not trouble him. No point concerning himself with his physical appearance

when he could do so little about it. Jonathan had once remarked it was as well Angus did not aspire to be a Corinthian like the rest of their brothers.

'Military business,' Angus said shortly, shifting in the saddle.

'Distasteful, I would gather, by your reaction?'

'Oh no,' responded Angus with an uncharacteristic curve of the lips as he compared Miss Micklen with the wives of other officers. He turned his head away, irritated with his lack of discretion.

Obviously Angus was getting too comfortable. Jonathan had been his only champion during a lonely childhood, but now he was an adult Angus had learned the folly of letting down his guard, even with Jonathan. Especially with Jonathan.

They had been on the road for more than two hours, returning from a visit to a prospective boarding school in Dover for Jonathan's eldest boy. The small town of Deal where Jonathan had business was just coming into view, after which they'd turn their mounts west and Angus could enjoy his sister-in-law Caroline's hospitality for one night of comfort. The thought of returning to his sparse soldier's lodgings in Maidstone brought Angus no joy.

Silence lengthened and when Jonathan continued to direct his enquiring gaze at him, Angus replied stiffly, 'It is always unpleasant reporting a casualty to loved ones.'

Staring ahead, he was conscious of the flush that stole up his neck as his brother remarked, 'Didn't know that fell within the line of duty. Thought correspondence was the usual. After we've taken a nuncheon at The Four Swans why don't we call on the young lady and see how she fares since she's in these parts?'

'I'd rather not. The nature of her betrothed's death was not …' Angus left the sentence unfinished. Trust Jonathan to have guessed it was a female. At his brother's raised eyebrows he sighed and continued. 'The man she was to have married, a fellow officer, died in a brawl over a camp follower. A woman.' The hard look he directed at Jonathan was meant to convey his

desire to end this line of questioning.

Jonathan continued to look enquiring.

Angus gave in, realising as he spoke a kind of catharsis in unburdening himself. 'The woman's protector came upon the pair *en flagrante.* He seized Captain Noble's sabre which was lying outside the tent, and I arrived at the scene in time to see the cut which ended Noble's life.'

The image was branded on his conscience. Noble was a deceitful, untrustworthy braggart but he hadn't deserved to die. Angus forced out the words. '*I* directed the man there. He was a foot soldier who regarded the female with whom I suspected Captain Noble was dallying as his wife. Righteously, I admit, I felt that Noble, affianced as he was, ought to be brought to task.' He cast a beseeching look at Jonathan. 'I therefore hold myself partly responsible, but of necessity have had to put another light on the incident … for the sake of Miss Micklen.'

'As your brother *and* as a man of the cloth, I grant you absolution.'

To his surprise Jonathan appeared not the slightest bit condemnatory. He went on, 'You might be *insufferably* righteous, as you put it, at times, but you are not vengeful. Therefore,' he added, patting his horse's neck, 'I strongly believe it will help your conscience to know how his lady fares while lightening her grief to be reassured her sacrifice is appreciated.'

It took a great deal of persuasion before Angus reluctantly agreed to the detour.

There was, however, no friendly welcome for them at Micklen Hall.

'You wish me to convey your respects to my daughter?' Mr Micklen, standing by the mantelpiece, was an intimidating character. Like his bristling eyebrows, his thick thatch of hair was pure white, his eyes an unsettling pale blue. Though slightly stooped, he'd clearly once been a handsome, commanding figure. Now any claim to handsomeness was obliterated by the ugly

twist to his mouth. Angus could imagine men quailing like girls when subjected to such sneering, belittling scorn. It was hard to know how to respond to a reception that all but painted him as Jack Noble's murderer, but the sooner he took his leave, the better.

He added sympathy to the other feelings he harboured for Miss Micklen. Noble must have offered a welcome escape from her father's house. In the uncomfortable silence, Angus went over what his investigations had revealed about the old man, though why he should have been interested was a moot point.

Bartholomew Micklen was not, by birth, a gentleman, but in just a few years he'd trebled the fortune brought him by the French bride he'd rescued from the guillotine and brought to England in the midst of the revolution in France twenty years before. Micklen's detractors hinted at nefarious dealings that went beyond the smuggling that contributed to the livelihoods of so many who lived along this part of the Kentish coast.

Shortly after Angus had returned from his condolence visit, a subaltern in his cups had eagerly informed him that a furious Micklen had withdrawn the generous dowry that was a condition of his daughter marrying the well-connected, rather elderly bridegroom he'd selected for her, and that White's Betting Book had Miss Micklen earmarked for a viscount at the very least, given her father's ambition. The impecunious, raffish Jack Noble was a surprising substitute.

Angus wondered how they'd met since he gathered Miss Micklen had spent a year in isolation following her rebelliousness.

His host kicked a burning log into the grate, then turned to glare at his visitors from beneath his shaggy white eyebrows. 'And your regrets? It's *my daughter* who has regrets!'

Mrs Micklen, who was staring into the fire, made a convulsive movement. Her hands trembled in her lap and her eyes were glazed. Clearly she was following the conversation but her

husband had not addressed her.

'Lucy! Show the gentlemen out.'

'My apologies for troubling you, sir.' Angus bowed as the parlour maid opened the drawing room door to usher them into the passage. Stiffly, he added in parting, 'I had wished merely to enquire after your daughter, sir, since it was I who broke the news of her bereavement.'

Micklen grunted.

The maid, whom he remembered from before, handed them their coats, then waited with frightened brown eyes as they donned hats and mufflers.

'Please, sirs,' she whispered with a furtive glance behind her. 'Miss Micklen is staying with the master's sister, Miss Gemma, in Sussex.' Her mouth trembled. 'Don't know as I'm doin' the right thing telling you, but me brother was a brave soldier what fought at Corunna – only Charlie never came home. Well, he were a hero too, what rescued a lass in sore need of a friend just before he left with his regiment … A lass just like my poor Miss Emily, so I feels it only right to beg you to do the same.'

'Seems as if poor Miss Micklen's fit of the dismals has sent both parents queer in the attic,' remarked Jonathan as he vaulted into the saddle. 'Sussex? To pay a social call? I don't think so.' Picking up the reins, he glanced at his brother with a droll look. His mouth dropped open. 'Good Lord, Angus,' he said, 'you have got it bad.'

Emily sat on the edge of her bed chewing her finger nails, cursing the fact her curiosity had got the better of her.

To be seen at the casement by Major McCartney of all people! Why he should wish to call on her, she had no idea. But it was beyond anything to be caught out in such a shameless snub which reflected more on her, yet would no doubt be taken personally by him. Not that she was in a mood to care greatly for anyone else's sensibilities. She had enough to worry about.

She put her forehead into the palm of her hand as she hunched over the bed and tried to think sensibly. Well, regardless of how far he had travelled to see her, or why, she was not going to receive him.

It was at that point she received the summons from her aunt. Interfering, controlling Aunt Gemma who was not one to be thwarted, as evidenced by her threat to fetch Emily down herself.

Emily crossed to the dressing table. What a sight she looked. Was there any point in taking pains with her appearance, to at least make herself a little more presentable? The major would leave, shocked, either way. But moments after Mary had withdrawn there was Grummidge, Aunt Gemma's personal dresser, upon the threshold.

What on earth was Aunt Gemma up to?

Emily made her appearance in the blue saloon ten minutes later, dispatched by the thin-lipped, stiff-backed retainer with the dubious reassurance that she looked as good as she ought, under the circumstances.

And those circumstances were not the most auspicious, anyone would agree.

'Major McCartney.' How she managed to retain an aura of calm dignity in the face of the almost instantaneous fiery blush that rushed up from his shirt points, Emily never knew.

And then, suddenly, Aunt Gemma had abandoned her and she was left alone with the tongue-tied soldier.

Almost defiantly she stood in the window embrasure with the light behind her, throwing her silhouette into relief. There really could be no hiding the swollen belly that proclaimed her spectacular fall from grace.

'Miss … Micklen,' he stammered, bowing, his eyes seemingly reluctant to travel upwards from the tops of his boots. So ludicrously apparent was his discomfiture that Emily actually laughed.

'You see how it is with me,' she said harshly, smoothing the

loose, unflattering garment over her stomach. ‘I don’t wonder you are struck dumb, Major. Nor do I know why my aunt, who has been at such pains to keep me hidden, should have me flaunt myself before you.’

‘When I told her I’d come from Kent she seemed to realise my interest was sincere. My—’

‘Commiserations? Condolences?’

The young soldier bit his lip. ‘Did Captain Noble know?’

‘That he was to be a father? No, Major McCartney. He was killed before even I knew.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Sorry that he never knew? Or sorry for my predicament?’ Crossing the room she lowered herself awkwardly into a chair, gesturing him to be seated while she poured the tea that Mary had just brought in.

‘Both.’ Frowning, he leaned forward to accept the dainty china cup she offered him. ‘What will you do …?’ Clearly too embarrassed to complete the sentence, he coloured once more.

Emily regarded him with wry amusement. ‘You have no sisters, do you, Major?’

‘No, ma’am,’ he confirmed.

‘But you ask me what I will do?’ She sipped her tea and said with the faintest shrug, ‘I am ruined, of course.’

‘You were to be married the week after I visited you, I recall.’ Quickly, the young major added, ‘I’m not judging you, Miss Micklen. It was ill’—he reddened further—‘luck.’

Angus’s embarrassment abated with the realisation Miss Micklen was using proud defiance to mask her fear. Jessamine had done the same.

‘Miss Micklen, whatever happens, let me assure you of my discretion.’ He wanted to believe she had hope, but his brief interview with her father was not reassuring. Angus knew it was easier for a parent to cast off an erring daughter than a husband a

wayward wife. His own parents' troubled union had made that clear enough.

'Thank you, Major. You are, of course, a gentleman and'—her voice trembled—'have shown uncommon kindness in visiting me so as to reassure yourself as to my welfare …' The bravado slipped. She looked close to tears as she whispered, 'I am sorry if I have embarrassed you.'

Suddenly she was no longer the proud, unobtainable beauty whose confident gaze about the ballroom did not even register his presence.

Ruined. Her grim assessment was true enough. She would be forever barred from respectable society for a transgression no unmarried woman was ever forgiven. Without a timely marriage to legitimise Jack Noble's child she would lose everything that constituted a life even bearable.

Miss Micklen regarded him silently. Proudly. Despite her swollen belly she held herself like a queen. Her porcelain skin glowed and her inky black hair shone.

It was her regal hauteur which decided him.

A graceless soldier such as himself could never hope to win a wife of Miss Micklen's calibre.

Unless she were desperate.

Reason banished the uncharacteristic and impulsive madness.

Become father to another man's child? What's more, a man he despised? No, Angus did not act rashly.

He returned his gaze to her lovely face. It glowed with energy and serenity, tinged with defiance. Yet he sensed she wished for his approbation.

She had it, and surprisingly, without disgust. Miss Micklen could only be considered a blameless victim of her betrothed's selfish coercion. Jack Noble would be better remembered for his shameless want of conduct with regard to the fairer sex than his heroism.

He opened his mouth to speak. Like the uncharacteristic

impetuosity that had driven him to ride two days to get here, he was again driven by impulses beyond his control, to speak words he had never imagined he was capable. Words that would, he now hoped, change his life forever.

He turned as the door opened.

'My apologies, Major McCartney. Emily, a quick word if I may.'

With the ghost of a smile upon her thin lips, Miss Micklen's aunt beckoned from the doorway. 'Cook is in a pet over some disturbance in the kitchen. You are so much better at restoring domestic calm. I'd appreciate it if you went to her.'

As the door closed behind her niece, the venerable Miss Gemma Micklen waved Angus back into his seat while she folded her lanky frame into the chair opposite.

'So Major McCartney … You see how it is with Emily,' she said bluntly. 'Captain Noble is dead, but she might just as well be, too. Her father has cast her off without a penny. He will not forgive her. Emily came here in a dog cart with one trunk, and no more. The workhouse was her only alternative, and that's the truth.'

Angus's thought that perhaps France might offer a safe haven was nipped in the bud by her next words.

'Madame Guillotine disposed of the French side of the family twenty years ago – except for an aunt rumoured to have bestowed her favours upon Napoleon, or some enemy of that nature.'

Miss Micklen fixed him with a steely look. 'Now, Major McCartney, what I have to say might sound somewhat peremptory. You have met Emily but twice. No doubt she expects that after today's morning call she will never see you again. I, however, have other hopes.'

Angus had never lost his nerve in battle, but facing the lovely Miss Emily Micklen in the same grim parlour the next day tested his mettle like nothing ever had.

It was not that he had expected to be thanked. He had not,

however, expected to be scorched by such a fulminating look, and subjected to what amounted to a violent diatribe.

Immediately after his interview with her aunt the previous day he had coldly taken his leave, sickened by the woman's cold-blooded determination and handsome inducements. She had implied that the honour of her family was beyond price and that he, an impecunious soldier, who clearly had a personal interest in her niece, would be well rewarded for salvaging it.

Miss Gemma, as frightening in her own way as the brother she obviously despised, had said farewell with flint in her hardened eyes. The satisfaction that flickered in their cold grey depths when he had been announced just now was equally sickening. But Miss Gemma could not be helped. It was Miss Micklen he had come to see, Miss Micklen for whom he had a proposition. One that came from his curiously affected heart.

Now that it had been delivered in the most artful terms of which a man of his self-acknowledged romantic clumsiness was capable, he was receiving a dressing down of almost hysteric proportions.

'She can only have lined your pockets with gold to induce you to saddle yourself with … well, with soiled goods!' Flinging herself round from the window embrasure to which she had marched, chest heaving, her beautiful eyes luminous, Miss Micklen presented a terrifying manifestation of feminine outrage.

Before he had a chance to call on his experience with his quick-to-take-offence mama, she'd turned on her heel once more, grating out, 'Let's not tiptoe around the truth. I am what I am! Yet, sir, let me tell you I'd rather be on the streets than suffer the humiliation of—' Interrupting Angus's stammered protests, Miss Micklen was checked by a rasping sob. 'Oh, the indignity! How could Aunt Gemma?'

'Miss Micklen, your aunt had nothing to do with this—'

'I didn't cut my wisdoms yesterday, Major. Only bribery could have induced you to make an offer for me.'

Her vulnerability, which she dressed up as anger, was so stark he had to stop himself from bridging the space between them to comfort her. His nerve endings tingled with a sensation he could not identify and again he found himself stepping forward to take her hands in his and declare he was motivated by feelings of love and admiration, but he stopped himself in time.

Shaken by his momentary lack of control, Angus drew in his breath and fixed his gaze upon Miss Micklen's fierce loveliness. With businesslike calm, so at odds with what he felt, he said, 'Since yesterday's interview I've been unable to rid my mind of the conviction that making you an offer of marriage would not only solve your immediate problems, it would salve my conscience.'

The words sounded wooden but the conviction that welled up in his breast was almost overwhelming. He had the power to save Miss Micklen from ruin. From an inauspicious start he could foster love. He didn't want gratitude. Jessamine's gratitude had been a poisoned chalice. He wanted salvation through atonement and Miss Micklen offered him a chance to be better than he was.

The force of his longing powered through him though he stripped the emotion from his voice. 'Quite frankly, I am in need of a wife.' It was easier to stare through the window than at her.

The myriad of extraordinary sensations Miss Micklen unleashed in him when he'd first met her at the Regimental Ball two years ago had him once more in thrall. If anyone had told him then she might one day become his wife he'd have scoffed at a notion that surpassed his wildest dreams. Quietly, he added, 'I am not a glittering match, but I have prospects.'

The fact she did not interrupt gave him courage. 'My lodgings in Maidstone are small, but I plan to sell my commission. We might then find a bigger house.' He paused, meaningfully. 'A home for both you and your child.'

Her eyes resembled her aunt's with their flinty coldness. 'My child and I can do very well without you *or* my aunt's

interference.'

He had not reckoned on her intransigence. It only served to heighten his desire. *Desire*. His upbringing had taught him desire wrought disappointment and destruction. He had thought himself well trained in not desiring what he could not have, did not deserve. He swallowed, the need for her acceptance like fire in his veins. He would be raising a cuckoo in his nest, a bastard, but what of it? Hadn't he, too, been a cuckoo? His mother's revenge on a husband who nevertheless treated Angus no differently from his blood-born sons? Though Emily Micklen's child was Jack's and would have inherited Jack's faults had Jack lived to rear it, it was Angus who would rear and mould it. Give it love and a promising future.

He longed to give the proud, hurt, beautiful woman before him love and a promising future.

As a soldier, Angus had enough experience of intransigent prisoners to know when to press the advantage. Gaining confidence from her silence he said, smoothly, 'You realise, Miss Micklen, that unmarried you will be in no position to keep your child?'

Of course she'd know it.

She took a shuddering breath. 'Aunt Gemma—' she began. Then obviously perceiving that if she threw away the only opportunity she was likely to receive to legitimise her child Aunt Gemma may prove less dependable than hitherto, she covered her face with her hands and slumped against the window.

'I know nothing about you, Major McCartney.'

'I am a soldier and a gentleman. I need a wife. You need a husband. I am offering you my name and a home, Miss Micklen. It's intolerable you might be stripped of your child,' Angus called on reserves of creative logic he'd not thought existed to further his cause, 'when I am the indirect cause of your hopeless situation.'

She raised her strained, weary face to his. 'Your actions defy

logic unless you are to be handsomely recompensed.'

'Your acceptance is recompense enough.'

Sighing, she looked at him steadily. 'I am not a fool, Major McCartney, and I would be one were I to reject your offer out of hand.' Her eyes were glazed with misery as she turned to stare through the window.

In a dull, flat voice she added, 'Allow me a day in which to consider it. I will see you tomorrow – providing you, yourself, are not struck by just how outrageous your proposal is.'

Exultant, he took a step forward. He wanted to take her hands, press them to his lips and reassure her he would be a kind and loving husband.

He could not. Her despair was too overwhelming. His smile died before she turned. 'Then I shall call again tomorrow, Miss Micklen,' he said stiffly.

Bowing, he took his leave.

To be continued …

Available as an ebook in August and in paperback from 15th September 2013.