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The Officer and the Gentleman

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

THE OFFICER AND THE GENTLEMAN

J.P. Bowie

Dedication

For Phil, Always

Chapter One

London: August 1854

Robert Alexander MacDonald peered through the window of his hansom cab at the dreary drizzle that had enveloped the city for the past hour or so. The occasional wispy cloud of mist hovered over the street lamps, adding to the overall picture of gloom. Robert sincerely hoped that his destination, Lady Haddon's townhouse, would present a more pleasant atmosphere than that which surrounded him at the moment. It seemed to him that summertime in London was not much better than in Scotland.

Robert had recently come down from the North, and although he had been welcomed by Lady Haddon and her niece Emily Wentworth, he still felt the lack of familiar surroundings afforded him at home. Still, he had always wanted to see London, the seething metropolis he'd heard so much about, and following his grandfather's demise, it had seemed as good a time as any to spend some time away from the estate he had inherited in Elgin. He had secured himself some comfortable rooms in Mayfair and had presented his letter of introduction to Lady Haddon, who had immediately invited him down to her country estate in Sussex. Robert had spent several pleasurable days there, enjoying the company of Emily and her companions. He and Emily had become fast friends, going for long walks down country lanes, riding their horses across the moors and picnicking on the cliffs overlooking the ocean.

There was just that one important ingredient missing.

His reverie was interrupted as he felt the hansom come to an abrupt halt with a clattering of the horse's hooves on the cobbled street. Climbing out of the carriage, he gazed up at the brightly lit windows of the townhouse where the party was being held. Lady Haddon had rather proudly informed Robert that her family had been the first of their acquaintances to have new gas chandeliers installed throughout the house. Lady Haddon had been quite insistent he should attend her first soiree of the season, and Robert had been only too happy to accept her invitation.

His heart quickened with anticipation of the evening ahead.

The townhouse door swung open, and a liveried servant descended the steps carrying an umbrella with which he sheltered Robert until they reached the door. He then smiled politely as he accepted Robert's hat and gloves. Lady Haddon, who happened to be standing in the hall chatting with some guests, noticed his arrival and swept forward in a rustle of expensive, pale blue silk to greet him.

"Robert, how marvellous that you could come," she gushed. "Emily will be delighted, as of course, I am. So good of you to brave this disagreeable weather."

Robert bowed over the hand Lady Haddon extended to him, brushing the lavender-scented skin with his lips. "I wouldn't have missed seeing you and Emily for the world, Lady Haddon," he murmured, smiling at the older woman.

"How handsome you look, Robert," she whispered. "The cut of that fine coat suits you immensely."

"Thank you. And may I say, Lady Haddon, I have never seen you look lovelier."

She laughed gaily. "Oh, dear boy, save your flattery for the young ladies who deserve it. And," she leaned in with a conspiratorial aside, "there certainly are some lovelies here tonight."

Robert heaved a mental sigh. Of course, there would be—all lined up to meet the newly wealthy young Scotsman, all with an eye to snaring him and helping spend the immense fortune left to him by his grandfather—no matter that the money had been amassed by less than pristine means. It was the amount that mattered. As Lady Haddon placed a hand on his arm to guide him into the living room where the guests were assembled, he took a quick glance in the hall mirror. He passed his hand over his red-gold, curly hair then ran a finger inside his too-tight collar.

"Please be at ease, Robert." His hostess patted his forearm gently. "I will make only the proper introductions for you."

Proper introductions. By that, of course, she meant only eligible ladies, regardless of looks or age. But how could he possibly inform the lady at his side that, if she introduced him to the Queen of Sheba herself, it would hardly raise a flicker of interest within him?

He smiled as Emily, Lady Haddon's niece ran to meet him. He was pleased to see Emily. She was not beautiful in the classical sense but pretty, and she possessed a sparkling

smile and a lively sense of humour. Robert had spent several very enjoyable afternoons in her company. Unlike some of the other young ladies he had passed the time of day with since coming to England, Emily never made him feel as though she were regarding him as a potential suitor or husband.

"Robert," she exclaimed, kissing his cheek lightly. "How handsome you look in your fine new clothes. However," her blue eyes danced with mischief, "I had rather hoped you'd wear your kilt for the occasion."

Robert returned her smile then chuckled. "So you could laugh at my bony knees, no doubt, Mistress Emily."

He was suddenly aware of another's presence at Emily's side, and he had to physically stop himself from gaping at the young army officer, who now regarded him with an amused expression on his exceedingly handsome face. The man wore a dazzling uniform of dark blue accented with gold braid.

"Robert, this is my brother, Captain Charles Wentworth," Emily said, still smiling. "He's just back from France and is staying in town for a week or two."

"Your servant, sir," Robert murmured, holding out his hand. The warm grip that enclosed it and the open admiration in Charles' eyes as they met his—eyes even bluer than his sister's—sent a sensual shiver through Robert's body.

"*Your* servant, sir." Charles inclined his head.

Lady Haddon beamed at them. "Well, Robert, now that you have met my nephew, you might want to arrange a ride in the countryside. You are both such splendid horsemen."

She looked across the room to where several young ladies were obviously waiting to be introduced to Robert and Charles. Emily, sensing Lady Haddon's next move, took her aunt by the arm and steered her away on a pretext of pouring her a glass of punch.

"You must try to enjoy the evening, Aunt," Emily said as she whisked her away from the men's company. "You worry too much about everyone else." Over her shoulder, she gave the men a smile—and a wink.

Left alone together, Robert and Charles exchanged small smiles. Robert felt a little tongue-tied as he stared at the handsome officer. He was perhaps a shade taller than Robert, with dark chestnut brown hair that fell over his forehead almost to his thick, dark brows. His

azure blue eyes gazed back at Robert with an intensity that made the young Scot shiver again with an unbidden sense of anticipation.

"So," Robert ventured finally. "I'm guessing you are a cavalry man, Captain Wentworth."

"Yes." Charles touched Robert's arm, indicating they should move out of the young ladies' line of vision. "With Lord Cardigan's Light Brigade—the Eleventh Hussars, actually. But, please, Robert, call me Charles."

Robert smiled and nodded. "What were you doing in France?"

"Before I bore you with army business..." Charles put a hand under Robert's elbow. "May I get you a glass of punch?"

"Yes, but I'll come with you." Robert chuckled as he glanced over at the group of young ladies still waiting hopefully for an introduction. "I feel if I am left alone, I will be surrounded by giggling lassies in no time at all."

"You are tonight's prize, I hear," Charles said, smiling.

"What about you—a handsome devil-may-care cavalry officer?"

Charles turned down the corners of his mouth in mock despair. "No money, I'm afraid. Try as my Aunt Abigail may, Emily and I are not considered 'a catch'."

Robert swallowed the retort that had almost sprung unbidden to his lips. It wouldn't do to scare Charles away by telling him, after knowing him only a few minutes that he considered him a marvellous catch indeed!

"But Lady Haddon, your aunt, is wealthy," he remarked, following Charles across the room.

"And very generous. But her fortune was Lord Haddon's, her deceased husband, and is held in trust and paid to her annually." He paused to accept two glasses of punch from another liveried servant and handed one to Robert. "Your health, sir."

They raised their glasses to one another, their eyes meeting over the rims as they each took a sip. Robert paused, entranced as he fixated on Charles' lower lip pressing against the glass. He shivered as he imagined that lip pressed to his—

He gulped at the punch and grimaced as the honeyed brew passed over his tongue.

"Not to your liking?"

"It's a wee bit too sweet for me."

"Of course, you are more used to Highland whisky."

"Aye...now *that's* a drink." He tore his eyes away from Charles' blue gaze as Lady Haddon descended upon them, two young ladies in tow.

"Mr. MacDonald, may I present Miss Agatha Withers and Miss Margaret Fitzsimmons? They have both been anxious to make your acquaintance. And of course, ladies, you know my nephew, Charles."

Robert and Charles bowed politely. "Would you care for a glass of punch, ladies?" Robert asked, hoping his irritation at the interruption wasn't too obvious.

"Oh no, thank you, Mr. MacDonald," Miss Withers replied, with an attempt at coquetry. "Margaret and I have already had a glass, and I fear it has quite gone to our heads."

"Really, Aunt Abigail," Charles chided Lady Haddon. "Did you overdo the alcohol?"

"Certainly not," Lady Haddon huffed. "The young ladies are, of course, not used to alcoholic beverages."

"You do both look a mite flushed," Charles told them. "Perhaps you should sit for a spell."

"Oh dear..." Miss Withers took her friend's arm. "I do feel a trifle faint."

Robert sighed with relief as Emily dashed over. "Oh, my dear Margaret and Agatha, how flushed you both look. Come sit with me awhile and regain your strength." She led the two startled young ladies away while Lady Haddon looked on in disbelief.

"What nonsense," she muttered. "There's only a *trace* of alcohol in the punch!"

"Perhaps one of the guests dropped in his own private supply whilst no one was looking," Charles suggested.

"The idea!" Lady Haddon swept off to inspect the punch.

"Come on," Charles said, gripping Robert's arm. "I think the rain has finally stopped. Shall we take a turn in the garden?"

"That would be grand."

Robert glanced over to where Emily sat with the ladies, who were now vigorously fanning themselves. She winked at him. He wanted to rush over and kiss her, but instead, he followed Charles through the French doors and onto the wide terrace that lay beyond.

The rain had indeed ceased, and the night had taken on a balmy feel. A gentle breeze ruffled Robert's curls as he and Charles stood together looking down across the verdant sweep of the lawn, only just visible beneath the lightening sky.

For a while, neither man spoke then Charles turned and smiled at Robert. "May I say, sir, that you are a very pleasant addition to my aunt's usually rather boring soirees?"

"Thank you." Robert felt his cheeks glow at the compliment. "And may I say that I did not expect to meet a dashing cavalry officer this evening?"

Charles chuckled. "Emily been keeping me a secret, has she?"

"She mentioned in passing that she had a brother..."

"Only in passing?" Charles affected mock displeasure. "I shall have to have words with my dear sister."

"She did say I would like you. And in that," Robert added shyly, "she is correct."

"Then I have forgiven her already." Charles met Robert's eyes, and Robert had to fight the urge that threatened to overwhelm him. The urge to forget all propriety and fling his arms about Charles, hold him pressed to his own eager body and taste the sweetness of his full lips. He trembled from the need building inside him. His cock throbbed and pushed against the front of his trousers, and he flushed with embarrassment at the sight he must now present.

"Shall we stroll a little?" Charles suggested.

Robert could not find his voice to reply but simply nodded once, so sharply he almost did his neck an injury.

They walked down the steps that led to the garden path and were soon swallowed by the darkness, the moon having scudded behind some clouds that loomed overhead. They paused to look back at the brightly lit house, from which emanated the sound of voices and laughter. Robert jumped slightly as he felt Charles slip an arm around his waist, then he leaned against the strong body and let himself be steered towards a large oak tree.

"No one can see us here," Charles said, his voice low and strangely husky. He pulled Robert into his arms and held him, his lips a mere inch from Robert's, his breath sweet and warm on Robert's skin.

"Dear God," Robert heard himself whisper as Charles kissed him. His lips were taken by a moist warmth that caused his head to thrum. For a moment, he thought he might swoon

then he was kissing Charles back, his lips parting to let the other man's tongue slip inside his mouth. Charles moaned, and his erection ground against Robert's. Both men shuddered as their desire swept through them. Their arms tightened about one another, their kiss deepened, tongues meshing, tussling, caressing...

All too soon, Charles broke away, slightly out of breath. "Not here, Robert. Not here amongst this mud and wet grass."

Robert thought he might fall over without Charles to support him. He reached out and gripped Charles by the shoulders.

"You...you're right," he stammered. "It wouldn't do for our first time. I have rooms in Mayfair, if you would do me the honour of accompanying me there."

"I am the one who would be honoured, Robert."

"How can we make our excuses?"

"I'm staying at the officer's club in Marylebone while I'm in town. I will tell my aunt that I'm taking you there to introduce you around to the chaps, that kind of thing."

"Excellent. Let's away then."

Charles chuckled. "Patience, Robert. Though I am flattered at your eagerness, we must not just rush away. We'll go in and chat for little while then —"

"Every second we tarry will seem like an hour."

"And every hour we spend together will seem like a second," Charles murmured, kissing Robert's lips gently. "Come now, let us go in."

Just before they entered, Charles turned to study Robert in the light thrown onto the terrace from the salon. Gently, he brushed down the lapels of Robert's coat and straightened his collar.

"There," he said his voice once again strangely husky. "You are quite presentable, sir."

Emily shot Charles a knowing smile as he and Robert walked into the salon together. Making her excuses, she joined them at the punch bowl.

"Has it stopped raining?" she asked, her lips lifting at the corners.

"It has, dear sister." Charles took her hand and kissed it. "It was really quite beautiful out there."

"I'm sure," Emily said, smiling at Robert's rosily glowing cheeks.

"I thought I might take Robert to the officer's club. What d'you think?"

"I think that is an excellent idea, Charles. Robert needs some excitement while he's in London, don't you, Robert?"

"What does Robert need?" Lady Haddon asked, joining them and looking slightly put out. "Miss Withers and Miss Fitzsimmons have taken their leave," she said with some irritation. "I don't know what they thought was in the punch. I tried to reassure them..."

"Charles is taking Robert to the officer's club, Aunt Abigail," Emily interrupted.

"Oh...well, that is nice of you, Charles. Robert needs to meet fellows his own age."

"Exactly what I thought," Charles said, smiling. "Thank you for a lovely evening, Aunt. As always, your soirees are hard to forget."

"My thanks also, Lady Haddon," Robert murmured as he bowed over the lady's hand. "I trust I shall be allowed to visit again soon?"

"Of course, dear boy, of course you may." Lady Haddon beamed at him. "You are welcome here any time. Emily so enjoys your company."

Chapter Two

"Very nice." Charles looked around the large expanse of Robert's drawing room with admiration. "You were fortunate to find such a charming place, Robert."

Robert smiled nervously. He suddenly felt apprehensive about what he was doing. There had been such a rush of emotion and desire between them in Lady Haddon's garden, but now...what if Charles became disenchanted with him?

"Would...would you care for a wee dram?" he asked for something to say. He knew *he* needed some fortification. His stomach was doing some very strange things, and he felt strangely dizzy.

"If that means would I care for some whisky, the answer is a resounding yes." Charles peered at him from under his dark brows. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, yes...yes...I'm fine...just grand." Robert picked up a crystal decanter from a tray on the sideboard and sloshed generous amounts into the glasses on the tray. "Sorry," he mumbled. "Is that too much?"

"That's just right," Charles said quietly, accepting the glass.

"*Slainte mohr*," Robert whispered, clinking his glass against Charles'.

"If that means 'cheers', I agree," Charles said, smiling into Robert's eyes.

"It means much more than that, just as any words I might mumble to you could never convey what I truly mean." Robert brought his glass to his lips and swallowed the whisky in one gulp. He grimaced then smiled as the fiery liquid coursed through his blood. "I needed that – a wee bit of Dutch courage."

"Are you nervous of me, Robert?"

"Not of you...more of what you might think after...um...after..."

Charles put down his glass and pulled Robert into his arms. "What I will think of you *after*, my dear Robert, is that you are probably the most desirable man I have ever met. From the moment I saw that beautiful burnished hair and those dark green eyes, I have been bewitched, Robert. I cannot wait to make love to you – and *after*, to hold you and love you all through the night."

Completely entranced, Robert pressed his body against Charles, seeking his lips. Their kiss was once again a thing of wonder for them both. Charles moved his lips slowly over Robert's as if savouring the moist plumpness of his lower lip, nibbling on it then passing his tongue over the soft skin before slipping it into Robert's mouth. With eager hands, they began pulling at each other's clothes. Robert couldn't quite bring himself to throw Charles' fine uniform on the floor. As impatient as he was to see Charles in all his naked glory, he also revered what the uniform represented, and so, when he had removed the jacket from Charles' body, he carefully folded it and placed it on a nearby chair.

Their shirts gone, their hands roamed over each other's bodies, touching, exploring, caressing, while they whispered words of endearment and admiration. Robert bent to kiss Charles' chest, the tip of his tongue following the swirl of dark hair around each nipple before gently closing over each of them in turn, bringing them to small, hard nubs. He lowered himself onto his knees, his mouth travelling over Charles' hard torso, pausing over his navel, probing there gently with his tongue. He tugged at the belt buckle, then slowly, with an almost reverential hesitancy, he pulled down Charles' trousers and under drawers to reveal that part of him he had imagined, had felt but until that moment had not seen.

Robert sat back a little as he lifted Charles' cock free of his clothing. He held it at the base, a murmur of admiration vibrating on his lips as he gazed at the hard shaft pulsing in his hand. He cupped Charles' balls in his free hand, squeezing them gently, then leaned forward to lap at them, tantalising each one with the tip of his tongue. He ran his lips up and down the length of Charles' erection, delighting in the soft sounds of pleasure that escaped from the officer's throat.

Charles gasped, and his torso arched in ecstasy as Robert took him into his mouth. A long, low moan escaped his throat as Robert's lips slid down the length of his hard and throbbing cock. Robert's hands cupped Charles' buttocks, pulling him in deeper, and Charles began to move his hips to match Robert's slow and deliberate rhythm. His fingers tangled in Robert's red-gold curls. His head fell back as he gave himself up to the pleasure brought to him. He groaned as Robert's finger probed his anus, pushing past his resistance, touching the special place that caused his body to buck and his breathing to quicken.

"Robert," he whispered on a shuddering breath, and Robert, knowing that Charles was about to climax, held him fast, savouring the first hot spurt of semen that coated the roof of

his mouth. He pulled Charles in deeper, sucking greedily as the young man cried out and his seed flooded Robert's mouth. Robert grasped Charles' cock at the base and licked the head, taking the last vestiges of his essence as it trickled onto his tongue. Charles pulled out of Robert's mouth and sank to his knees, wrapping Robert in a fierce embrace and kissing him with all the fervour he possessed.

"There is a bed in the other room," Robert whispered when they paused to breathe.

"Is there now?" Charles kissed Robert's nose then stood, pulling him to his feet. "Look at me," he said with a chuckle. "My trousers down around my ankles and my boots still on, a fine sight I must present before you."

"The finest I have ever seen." Robert held Charles steady as he bent to pull up his trousers. "Should you not be taking them off and not putting them on?"

Charles winked at him. "Perhaps I'll let you do that."

Robert grasped his hand and led him into the bedroom, taking a lighted candle with them. Charles sat on the edge of the bed, and Robert knelt before him, easing off first one and then both of Charles' boots. He stood, and Charles gazed up at him, a smile of happiness on his face as he drank in the sight of the pale, slim athletic body before him. He ran his hands up the sides of Robert's torso, letting his fingertips linger on the small rosy nipples, squeezing them gently, eliciting a gasp of pleasure from Robert.

"I think in Scotland, they must call you a bonnie lad," Charles murmured, leaning forward to kiss Robert's smooth chest.

"Not so bonnie as you," Robert said, caressing Charles' face.

"That is a matter of opinion." Charles stood up and began to unfasten Robert's trouser buttons. His own slid down to his ankles again, and he stepped out of them as Robert threw his to one side. For a long moment, they were content to gaze at one another, holding each other's arms lightly while small smiles lifted the corners of their mouths. Then with a moan, Robert threw himself upon Charles, and they fell upon the bed, arms and legs locked around one another, mouths seeking, searching and kissing every part of their bare skin. Their bodies writhed together, the sensations that enveloped them filling them both with a joyous desire. Their parted lips met in a kiss so rapturous Robert felt every part of him was contained in it.

Robert's eyes, dark green now with wonder and lust, stared into Charles' gaze, and he felt as if he had been transported, filled with an elation he could not define. Charles moved over him, kissing each and every part of him, his lips grazing the head of Robert's cock, his tongue licking at the essence that spilled from it.

Moving lower, he lapped at Robert's balls, teasing each one gently by lifting it into his mouth and sucking it, rolling the soft skin between his lips. Robert's moans were as music to Charles' ears, encouraging him to explore further. He lifted Robert's legs and burrowed into the cleft of his buttocks, probing at the moist hole with the tip of his tongue. Robert writhed beneath him, soft whimpers of delight escaping his lips. Charles probed deeper, inserting his tongue beyond the tight ring of muscle that yielded to his touch. The scent and taste of Robert's musk intoxicated Charles, hardening his cock to the point of pain. He inserted a finger into Robert's hole using his tongue's saliva to ease the way.

Robert writhed under him, and Charles pushed forward with both his finger and his tongue making Robert cry out with the sheer pleasure being brought to him. Charles grasped Robert's erection and pumped it with long, measured strokes. He raised his head, his eyes locked on Robert's.

"Yes," Robert whispered in answer to the unasked question. "Fuck me, please."

Charles knelt between Robert's thighs, his cock pushing forward into the soft flesh surrounding Robert's opening. Robert raised his legs and wrapped them around Charles' waist, lifting his hips to help Charles gain more access. Charles leaned over him, his lips claiming Robert's as he pushed his way into his lover's sweet depths. A long, breathy sigh escaped from Robert, filling Charles' mouth. His arms found their home around Charles' neck, and as their bodies moved together in a rhythm born of desire and rapture, the kiss they bestowed upon one another so tenderly at first, grew to a heated passion, claiming their senses, propelling them into ecstatic bliss.

Charles moved over Robert, his face buried in Robert's neck while he fucked him with long, smooth strokes. Charles thought he'd never enjoyed the act of sex more in his entire life. This Robert, this young Scot was like a wild man under him, clinging to him, laving his neck and shoulders with lips and tongue, hips thrusting upward to meet every downward plunge Charles made into his warm moist core. They were both moaning now, their breath rasping in their chests as their orgasms churned deep inside them.

"Oh...Charles..."

Robert's body stiffened in Charles' arms then with a cry of joy, he came. A torrent of semen coated their stomachs and chests with its hot creaminess. Charles felt his own climax surge through him, and he tightened his arms about Robert as he erupted deep inside him. Robert's legs gripped him, locking their bodies together as waves of ecstasy rolled over them. Charles growled, a long low sound of pure gratification that came from the depths of his being.

"Robert," he whispered when, at last, he could again speak. "Robert, my bonnie lad, you have given me more pleasure in this short time we've had together than I have known in my entire life."

Robert blushed at the compliment, but at the same time, his heart swelled with pride. "And you, my handsome Captain, you have captured my heart."

The other words he kept inside, for it would not do to reveal his feelings too quickly. Love at first sight was surely only for poets and young lassies. But oh, he now knew it to be true for Robert Alexander MacDonald, also!

* * * *

After they had risen to wash themselves in the small bathroom, Robert suggested they have another 'wee dram' then go back to bed.

"It occurs to me that some time ago, I asked why you were in France," Robert remarked, as they sat side by side in bed, enjoying their whisky.

"Manoeuvres with the French cavalry," Charles replied, stroking Robert's curls. "There's some trouble brewing between the Turks and the Russians. Seems we're to be allied with the French if it comes to conflict."

Robert leaned his head on Charles' shoulder. "You mean you might go to war?" he asked, his brow creased with the concern that had suddenly gripped him.

"It's possible. I understand there are lots of talks and meetings going on to try to avert a head on confrontation. But those Russkies are pig-headed at the best of times."

"And the French? Can they be trusted? It's not so long since England was at war with them."

"Well, they want to be our allies now, so I suppose it's a case of better the devil you know."

"Not much of a choice," Robert muttered. He lifted his head and stared into Charles' eyes. "I suppose you must go?"

Charles chuckled. "Of course, I must go. It's what I became commissioned for, Robert."

"But we've just met, and – Och! I'm sounding like a selfish child."

Charles kissed Robert's forehead. "Stop frowning. I have two whole weeks in London, and we shall see each other every day, if you wish it."

"I do wish it."

"When do you go back to Scotland?"

"When I am tired of London," Robert replied.

"Then you shall be here for a very long time, my dear Robert. Very few souls ever tire of London." Charles threw back the last of his whisky. "Now, I propose that we take a trip tomorrow down the river to Kew and stroll in the gardens – weather permitting of course. And my aunt said you were a splendid horseman. We can go riding in Richmond Park..."

"That all sounds wonderful," Robert said wistfully. "But just to see you every day will suffice."

He reached up and kissed Charles on the mouth, gently nibbling on his lower lip. Charles drew him into his arms and soon both men felt the stir and heat of returning desire.

"You will stay tonight, won't you?" Robert asked, his lips brushing Charles' throat.

Charles smiled. "Wild horses couldn't drag me from your bed. I'm afraid you're quite stuck with me, Robert."

Robert reached between Charles' legs and grasped his burgeoning erection. "As long as I'm stuck with this..."

"You're a wonderful lover, Robert." Charles caressed the young Scot's face. "I had thought you might be a virgin still. You have that look of unsullied innocence..."

Robert chuckled. "A deft disguise I've perfected to lure unsuspecting cavalry officers to my bed."

"And it worked wonderfully well." Charles kissed Robert's chin. "How old are you?"

"Five and twenty. I know. I look younger. Everyone tells me so. And you?"

"Almost thirty."

"A grand age," Robert murmured, pressing himself to Charles' warm body. "How have you managed to escape matrimony?"

"By being away most of the time. Then, as I told you, there's the small matter of my being poor. No respectable young lady will attach herself to a man of no means. You, on the other hand, will be besieged night and day by prospective brides-to-be."

"The devil..."

"Were there no young ladies a-chasing you through the glens at home?"

Robert laughed. "One or two, but I'm afraid my lack of interest wore thin with them very quickly. I had a friend—a man who showed me the pleasure two men may have with one another."

"And where is he?"

"He left Scotland for the Americas two years ago. I have not heard from him since."

Charles frowned. "Do you miss him?"

"I did, for a long time. But when I realised he was not coming back, I moved on."

"To yet another lucky young man?"

"No!" Robert punched Charles lightly on the arm. "You are only the second man I have lain with."

"Then I am honoured," Charles murmured, tightening his arms around Robert.

"And what of your amours, Captain Wentworth?" Robert teased. "I'm sure you have many stories to tell of the lovers you have left behind."

"Not really. You know it is not an easy life we lead. In the army, just as in civilian life, one must be very discreet. I have seen careers ruined and men's reputations forever destroyed by malicious gossip and treachery. What we find to be a natural urge is looked on as something quite vile by most people."

Robert sighed. "That's what I heard from my grandfather's lips on many an occasion. He had no tolerance for anything or anyone who did not conform to his idea of what was morally right. An irony really, as his morals were—well, I don't want to talk of him and ruin a perfect evening."

"He sounds like an interesting character."

“No...not interesting.” Robert’s expression was one of intense dislike. “Merely a smuggler and a blackguard. But as I said, I don’t want to ruin our time together with talk of him.”

“I understand.” Charles hugged Robert to him. “To answer your question of before, yes, there have been dalliances, but none of earth-shattering proportions.”

Robert buried his face in Charles’ neck. “Well,” he mumbled, his lips pressed to Charles’ warm skin. “Prepare yourself to feel the earth shatter around you.”

Charles sighed happily. “I should, of course, have added – until you.”

Chapter Three

For Robert, the following days passed far too quickly. Even though he looked forward to every one spent with Charles with an excitement he had never before known, at the end of each perfect day came the sad realisation that its passing brought Charles' departure that much more imminent.

As Charles had promised, they had taken to the river and enjoyed a sun-filled day in Kew Gardens, roaming the grounds and the impressive new Palm House made of wrought iron and glass. They had gone riding in Richmond and had even found a hideaway where they had lain together and enjoyed each other's bodies beneath the rustling leaves of the tall oak trees. With each passing day, Robert fell more in love with Charles, resenting the hours they had to spend in the company of friends or even – and Robert was ashamed to admit this even to himself – in Emily's company.

In the company of others, of course, they had to be discreet. Only when alone could they give in to the always present need to hold one another and to kiss and caress. Towards the end of their first week together, Charles mentioned that he would like to show Robert his favourite part of England.

"It's quite a carriage ride there and back," he told Robert. "It would take up most of our week, but I think you would like it as much as I do."

If Charles liked it, Robert was sure he would too, and so he quickly agreed they should make the trip, however long it might be. As far as he was concerned, it merely meant more time spent alone with Charles.

"We'd have to hire a carriage, and I'm afraid my army pay won't stretch that far," Charles said, looking embarrassed.

"And of course you think, because I'm a Scot, I wouldn't be prepared to foot the bill," Robert remarked, hoping Charles realised he was jesting.

"I have heard the Scots feel a need to be frugal," Charles said, smiling.

"Not this Scot." He kissed Charles tenderly. "This Scot would buy you the world if he could."

"And one day," Charles said, returning Robert's kiss, "this impoverished Englishman will repay you tenfold."

"You already have, in so many ways I canna' count them." Robert grinned suddenly. "I know. For every kiss I beg from you, you can charge me a sovereign."

"When have you ever had to *beg* for a kiss, sir? Sometimes, I fear you will implore me to stop laying claim to your lips."

"I can assure you, Captain Wentworth, that will never happen. Now, stop all this hawing and kiss me!"

* * * *

Travelling with anyone else, Robert would have found the two-day carriage ride into the southwest of England tedious indeed. He had not realised quite how far away from London Cornwall lay, and even though the countryside they passed through was exceedingly pretty, to Robert's eyes it lacked the majestic sweep of the hills and glens of the Scottish Highlands. His opinion changed somewhat though, as they neared the coast. The view from the carriage window of tall, rocky cliffs and the bluest of seas made Robert sit up and gape at the beauty before him.

"Heavenly, is it not?" Charles murmured, and Robert nodded in reply, his eyes fixed on the far horizon.

"You know Cornwall well?"

"Emily and I lived here when we were children. I hated to leave when our mother died."

"And your father?"

"He had left us long before..."

"I'm sorry." Robert felt ashamed, realising he had not once asked after Charles and Emily's family, just as he had not discussed his own wretched family life.

"Of course, we had to leave," Charles told him. "Aunt Abigail was our only living relative, and she was good enough to take us in, completely disregarding her husband's loud complaints." He smiled wryly. "I used to come down here every chance I had, but since joining the Hussars, it's been impossible."

"Then I'm very glad you are sharing this with me." Robert leaned forward to squeeze Charles' thigh and kiss his cheek.

Charles put his hand behind Robert's head and held him, their faces pressed together for a moment of fleeting affection. He wanted to tell Robert that he would be willing to share much more than a tiny part of Cornwall with him. He would gladly offer him his life. But it was too soon, and in a few days, he would be returning to France to await orders. He had not discussed this with Robert, but he had received news that Britain was about to declare war on Russia, all negotiations between the various factions having failed. God alone knew how long he would be gone. And then there was always the risk that he would never return.

"What are you thinking about?" Robert whispered. The touch of his lips on Charles' ear caused Charles to shiver with an almost uncontrollable yearning.

"Of how much I love your company," he replied. He smiled and tapped Robert lightly on the chin. "Now return to your seat, young man, before the driver reports us for unsuitable behaviour."

Robert giggled as he sat back into his own seat. "What would he have made of your behaviour last night, d'you suppose?"

"My behaviour? If I remember correctly, I was not alone at that inn. There was most definitely a young Scotsman in my bed, who would not let me be for a second."

"Nor will he let you be this night either," the Scotsman in question teased with a lascivious gleam in his eye. "Or any of the few we have left," he added wistfully. The mischief faded from his smile as he looked away out through the carriage window.

"Robert," Charles said quietly, "I know this parting will be hard on us, and it will be difficult to communicate with one another whilst I'm gone, but it is not forever. I will come back to you, if you wish it."

"If I wish it? Oh, Charles, how could you ever doubt it?"

"Because I may be gone for some time. You are a very handsome and desirable young man—"

"Oh, wheesht, Charles," Robert cried, his brogue becoming stronger. "Surely you canna' think for one moment that I will be gadding about looking for someone else while you're away!"

"There will be those who would tempt you."

"Aye, and we'll see how far they get with their *tempting*!"

Charles laughed. "My goodness, such ferocity. You've become a veritable lion."

"Just wait till we get oot o' this dratted carriage," Robert muttered. "Then I'll show you ferocity, Captain Charles Wentworth!"

* * * *

Two hours later, they drew up outside a small whitewashed cottage that stood alone on a bluff overlooking the ocean. They unloaded their bags then the driver took his leave with a promise to have a carriage there in two days to transport them back to London.

"So, Robert..." Charles gestured towards the ocean over which the sun had begun to set, its golden glow reflected across the water. "Is this grand enough for you?"

"It is beautiful," Robert murmured. He turned to smile at Charles and gasped as he gazed at the face of the man he loved, now illuminated by that same golden glow, his skin taking on a polished, burnished sheen. *He looks like a god come down from Olympus*, Robert thought, his breath catching in his throat. "But nothing," he managed to whisper, "nothing compares to your beauty."

"Nor yours, my bonnie Robert." Charles drew him into a close embrace. "But come, we must go in and find candles before the darkness falls." Their arms about each other's waists, they walked towards the cottage.

"This is where you lived as a child?"

"Where I was born. Both Emily and I were birthed right here."

"No wonder you hold such fondness for it."

Charles pushed open the door. "I hope it doesn't disappoint you."

Robert stepped inside and immediately smiled. The plainness of the room reminded him of his first home before he had moved into his grandfather's mansion.

"How do you keep it so clean and tidy?" he asked.

"Bridget from the village comes over once a week to sweep and dust. She's done so for years, and I'm sure the new tenant will continue to use her services."

"New tenant?"

Charles nodded his expression gloomy. "Aunt Abigail has been paying the rent on the cottage for years, even before my mother died. But now that Emily is living with her, and I'm gone from the country so much, she could see no point in it. And I had to agree. She's been more than generous to my sister and me." He took Robert in his arms. "So you see, this will be the last time I come here—and what better companion to share it with than you, my beloved Robert."

"Thank you," Robert whispered his lips on Charles'. "But I am sad that you must lose your home..."

"It is for the best. My time spent here has become increasingly rare, and when I'm in London, I can stay at the officer's club." He kissed Robert tenderly. "But enough of that talk. I want this to be the most perfect two days of our lives."

He released Robert and began rummaging in drawers. "Ah, here we are," he cried, holding up two impressively sized candles. "And we'll light the fire. Did you bring some of that lethal Scottish brew with you?"

Robert looked appropriately offended. "I'll have ye know, *sir*, that what I have in this satchel is the finest whisky obtainable anywhere."

"Then pour us both a wee dram while I tend to the fire—and be quick *about* it! There are some glasses in that cupboard there."

Chuckling, Robert hurried to do as he was bid. He thought he'd never been happier. Here, at what seemed like the edge of the world, with the one man he revered more than any other he'd ever known. What could be more heavenly? As he poured the whisky, he gazed with loving eyes at the man who knelt in front of the fireplace, using a tinderbox to light the kindling, and blowing upon it, coaxing the small flame to greatness.

"Ah, that's it." Charles leaned back to admire his work, watching the flames and smoke curl around the wood. Robert handed him his glass of whisky then knelt beside him.

"*Slainte mhor*, my love," he whispered.

"Slangsh..." Charles grimaced then laughed. "Oh, I cannot pronounce it. You'll have to teach me. Cheers..."

They threw back their dram then Robert drew Charles close. "You purse your lips like this...and your tongue comes forward..."

Charles groaned at the sight of Robert's full lips pouting an inch from his own. "The hell with it. Just kiss me, Robert."

"Willingly," Robert breathed, taking his lover's lips in one long, languorous kiss.

Charles fell back onto the fireside rug, pulling Robert down on top of him, marvelling not for the first time at how well their bodies seemed to fit together. There had been few, if any, awkward moves even from the first time they had made love. They were so good together, he thought, so right for one another. If only this damned war wasn't looming over everything he wanted with Robert. But Robert was kissing him, and that made everything all right. Now Robert stripped him, removing every bit of clothing and kissing every part he laid bare—and that made everything even better. With Robert, he could forget what horrors the future might hold. All he wanted was right here, right now.

Charles felt his cock grow and thicken under the onslaught of Robert's lips and hands. He moaned as the sensation of Robert's tongue licking the head of his cock sent a shock wave through his body. He raised his hips to meet Robert's mouth and shuddered as warm moist lips slid down the length of his throbbing shaft.

"Oh, dear God, Robert," he moaned, tangling his fingers in Robert's russet curls. "I do love you so."

Robert skimmed Charles' skin with his lips until he reached Charles' mouth where he lingered, flicking over the smooth moist flesh with the tip of his tongue. "

And I love you, my beautiful Charles," Robert whispered. "And I always will."

He sat astride Charles' hips and pulled his shirt over his head, tossing it to one side. Charles ran his hands over the slim hard torso before him, his thumbs circling Robert's nipples, bringing little cries of ecstasy from his lover. Feverishly, he pulled at the waistband of Robert's trousers.

"Blasted buttons," he muttered, and Robert chuckled, raising himself up sufficiently to divest himself of the last of his clothes.

"Better," Charles murmured, closing his arms about Robert's warm and willing body now stretched out over his. Their cocks ground together, the juices of their excitement spreading a slick path over each other's torsos.

"Let me taste you," Charles whispered, pulling Robert up so that he straddled his chest. Robert's throbbing cock lay within easy reach of Charles' mouth. Robert leaned forward, and

Charles captured the hard flesh, licking the glistening head before taking it, in one long swallow, down to the golden pubic hair that curled around the root. He heard Robert gasp, felt his body shudder over him. His tongue laved the pulsing shaft he held between his lips, his hands cupping Robert's buttocks, pulling him deeper into the heat of his mouth. He sucked slowly and with an insistence that had Robert moaning and thrusting his cock forward with long hard strokes. Then with a strangled cry, he exploded into Charles' mouth, drenching the back of his lover's throat with his semen. Charles encircled Robert's waist with his arms, holding Robert and himself locked together until the last spasm had been wrung from Robert's body. Completely exhilarated by the intensity of Robert's climax, Charles felt his own orgasm gather in his balls. He cried out as a wave of ecstasy overtook him and he came, spraying Robert's back with his seed.

"See what you do to me?" he panted, as Robert eased himself back down into Charles' arms. "I needed nothing more than the feel and taste of you."

Robert rubbed his face over the light covering of dark hair on Charles' chest then kissed each nipple gently. His hand grasped Charles' cock and held it to his own, smoothing the spent semen over both of them.

"I love you," he said, his voice no more than a whisper.

Charles caressed the nape of Robert's neck. "I love you, too."

They lay in each other's arms, dozing on and off in front of the fire, until a long and deep rumble emanated from Robert's stomach. Charles chuckled and pinched Robert's left nipple.

"Ouch! Do you plan on starving me after taking your pleasure?" Robert asked in a plaintive tone.

"Indeed not." Charles squirmed out from under Robert and stood up. "Come on." He held out his hand and pulled Robert to his feet. "I brought some bread, cheese and ham, and a bottle of claret for our supper. Tomorrow, we can walk into town and get more provisions."

"There's a town nearby?" Robert leaned in and nibbled Charles' earlobe.

"Mm-hmm." Charles slipped his arms around Robert. "Penzance is but two miles from here." He chuckled as Robert feasted on his neck. "Robert, my love, a moment ago I offered you cheese and wine..."

"I'd rather eat *you* all up."

"And so you shall—after we've washed and had some sustenance. I have to keep you strong for what's to come."

"I like the sound of that."

They washed at the kitchen sink, drawing water from the pump and rubbing one another's body with a wet rag and some soap Charles had brought with him.

"That smells nice," Robert remarked, inhaling the fragrance passing over his body.

"It has a touch of decadence, I was told," Charles said, smiling. "I bought it in Paris, and the other chaps teased me unmercifully the first time I used it. So I went out and bought them all a tablet of the stuff. The washrooms smelled a damned sight better for it, I can tell you!"

They stood by the fire, drying each other, pausing to share the occasional kiss and caress.

"Now I am truly ravenous," Robert said, his lips on Charles'.

"Then sit at the table, and I shall serve you, milord. Did you bring a robe?"

"Yes. I'll fetch it, seeing as how you are insisting I dress for dinner."

"Well, you never know who might drop in to say hello."

Robert looked at him in alarm. "Someone might?"

Charles chuckled. "Unlikely, as no one knows we're here. Of course, they might see the smoke from the chimney."

"I'll dress immediately," Robert said, hastening to the bedroom.

"Bring mine, too," Charles called out. "It's on the top of everything else in my valise."

Robert found his robe and slipped it on then opened Charles' valise. For a moment, he let his hands sink into Charles' clothing, relishing the softness of the linen and cotton shirts, and the silkiness of the red robe. He pulled it out and held it up to his face, inhaling the scent that was Charles. *Must have bought this in Paris also*, he thought, smiling. It was so fine—and slightly decadent.

When he returned, Charles was pouring the claret into two crystal glasses. "I think I prefer you naked," Robert said, handing him his robe.

"And I you," Charles agreed, tying his robe about him. "And without a doubt, we'll be out of these in no time after we eat. Now...have a sip of this delightful claret—all the way

from France." He handed Robert his glass. "Let's drink a loving cup." As Robert looked at him, slightly puzzled, he linked his arm through Robert's. "Now, raise your glass to your lips, and sip just as I do."

Robert did so, his eyes locked on Charles' as he drank the richly flavoured wine. "Delicious," he murmured, then leaned in to kiss Charles on the lips, his tongue sliding into his lover's moistness, the taste of the wine mingling in their mouths. "Can we do that every time we have wine?" he asked, his green eyes twinkling with mischief.

Charles chuckled. "Yes, let's. I can't wait to see the surprised look on everyone's faces when we do that at our next soiree! It would give them fodder for gossip for at least a month or two." His hand slipped down to cup Robert's bottom then he gave it a playful pinch. "Now, for pity's sake, let us eat!"

* * * *

"You asked me about my family, but you have said nothing of yours, Robert." The bread, cheese and ham devoured, Charles sat back in his dining chair, twiddling with the stem of his wine glass. "Did you have a happy home life?"

"For a time, yes I did," Robert replied. He smiled wryly. "When folk meet me they see the well-heeled gentleman I have become because of my grandfather's wealth. Truth is though, I was raised in a house much like this. My mother and I lived and under circumstances much like yours, except I had no sister like your beloved Emily. My faither, sorry, my *father*, died of consumption at an early age, only a year after I was born. His father, my grandfather, kept us in food and clothing and me in school, which are things I should be grateful for I suppose. But he was a wicked old bastard, Charles."

"In what way do you mean?"

"In a way that defies credence." Robert looked away from Charles' intense gaze as he continued. "He made my mother *pay* for his generosity. Nothing he did was done out of love for his son's wife."

"You mean...?"

"Yes, that is what I mean. She had to succumb to his gross advances for years...for years, Charles, so I would have a roof over my head and warm broth in my belly!"

"Oh, my dear Robert!" Charles jumped to his feet and came to kneel before his lover, putting his arms around him and pressing his face to Robert's. Robert's sob almost broke Charles' heart.

"Even now...even now I cannot bear to think o' it, Charles. Seeing her face, so drawn and full of misery when she thought I couldna' see. And when I realised just what it was he was doing, if the old bastard hadna' died, I would've killed him! The irony of it is, he left no will, and so everything passed to me." Robert snorted out a cold chuckle. "When he was informed of that in his place in Hell, I wish I could have been there to laugh in his face!"

Charles tightened his arms about Robert. "And your mother?"

"She died before he did. Highland winters can be wicked cold." He slid his arms about Charles' neck and held him close. "You are the one wonderful presence in my life, Charles. I only wish my mother could have met you. She would have loved you, too."

Charles held Robert for a long time in silence then he lifted him into his arms and carried him through to the bedroom. Gently, he laid him on the bed, removed his robe, covered him with the sheet then lay beside him, holding him until he slept.

Chapter Four

The following day dawned bright and sunny. The balmy sea air filled Robert's lungs as he and Charles strode together along the narrow country road that led to Penzance. When he had wakened, he had been assailed with the knowledge that he had confessed his less than happy past to Charles. He felt shame at burdening his friend with the details of his grandfather's disgusting demands for the charity he had bestowed on his daughter-in-law and his grandson. Kindness, that in Robert's opinion, the old man should have given without compromising his daughter-in-law's virtue.

But Charles had assuaged his fears that he might have said too much, by being so warm and compassionate, showing Robert that he loved him unconditionally. Their lovemaking that morning, although still filled with passion and a sensuousness that had lifted Robert to the heavens, had also brought him the deep understanding that what he and Charles shared, went far beyond the merely physical. What he had found with Charles surely could only happen to a fortunate few.

"We'll stop at Bridget's house on the way into town," Charles said, bringing Robert back from his reverie. "She'll be a mite surprised to see me."

"She's the woman who cleans your cottage?"

"More than that. She helped my mother raise Emily and me. When times were hard, Bridget was always there to lend a helping hand."

"How wonderful," Robert said, immediately wishing his mother could have had a friend like that, someone to care for her when times were unbearable and she'd had no one, *no one*, to turn to for understanding. Robert shook himself. He would not think of that again today.

"All right?" Charles asked, putting his arm around Robert's shoulder.

"Yes, fine." He smiled as he gazed at Charles' handsome face. "How can I not be all right with you at my side?"

Charles pulled him in a little closer. "Words like that could be dangerous, young sir," he teased. There's many a hedgerow between here and Bridget's house where a young man could be taken advantage of, if he's not careful –"

"You mean, if he's fortunate!"

* * * *

Bridget's house was one of many in a row of tiny cottages fronted by masses of blooming flowers in myriad colours. The woman herself was outside, her ample figure bent over, pruning back the rose bushes that threatened to overwhelm the pathway to her front door.

"Master Charles!" she cried with delight on seeing him open the gate at the foot of the pathway.

"Bridget, my darling." He held his arms wide, and Bridget fairly fell into them, covering his face with smacking kisses.

"Bridget..." Charles winked at Robert as he disengaged himself from Bridget's arms. "I want you to meet a gentleman friend of mine from Scotland...Robert MacDonald."

"From Scotland?" Bridget afforded Robert a small curtsy. "Oh, but that's so far away. What brings you here, Master MacDonald?"

"Curiosity," Robert replied, straight faced. "I wanted to see if the English women were as beautiful as I'd been told they were. And now, I am convinced."

"Oh!" Bridget's plump cheeks turned every shade of red. "And how many Scotsmen have your gift of the gab, I wonder?"

"Not many," Charles said, rolling his eyes. "Bridget, can you be persuaded to make us some tea?"

"In a trice! Come inside. I must have known you were coming. I've made some scones."

After their tea, several delicious scones and some lively gossip of the 'goings-on' in Penzance, Robert and Charles made their way into town, pausing here and there to say a few words of greeting to those who recognised Charles.

"You're a popular fellow," Robert remarked after being introduced for the umpteenth time to friendly passers-by.

"They still consider me a local, even after all this time away. They remember my mother and Emily well." He pointed to a shop window. "Look Robert, homemade jams. We must have some of that for our breakfast tomorrow morning."

Robert put his nose to the glass. "I dinna' see any marmalade."

"Thank goodness. I can't stand the stuff."

Robert looked at him as though he were mad. "Not like marmalade? It's the grandest of all preserves, Charles."

"Well, you can eat all you want of it. Nasty, horrible stuff!"

"It's made in Scotland, Charles!"

"That doesn't make it good, Robert."

"Och well, a typical Englishman's response," Robert huffed, his face flushing. "You Sassenachs think nothing good comes from north of the border."

Charles opened his mouth to voice a stinging retort, but instead, he started to laugh.

"What's so damned funny?" Robert snapped.

Charles clapped him on the shoulder. "You and I, Robert. We're having our first argument over bloody jam and marmalade. Hah...I think I shall remember this moment forever!"

Robert's annoyed expression changed to one of embarrassment. "Aye, and it's a damn silly thing to argue about. Fancy, two grown men bickering o'er the pros and cons of preserves."

"And just so you know," Charles murmured close to Robert's ear. "*This* Sassenach knows very well that some wonderful things come from north of the border."

* * * *

They returned to the cottage some hours later armed with enough provisions to last them through the following day.

"Fancy a swim?" Charles asked after stowing away the food and wine.

"That sounds grand," Robert replied with enthusiasm.

"Grab a towel then. I'll show you a little cove where Emily and I used to play when we were children. Nice and private. No need to cover up."

"Even grander," Robert said happily.

The pathway from the cliff top to the cove below was steep, but afforded a breathtaking view of the sweeping coastline and of the breakers crashing onto the rocks below.

"Mind your footing, Robert," Charles cautioned. "There are lots of loose stones. Put your hand on my shoulder to steady yourself."

Robert smiled as he did so. He didn't mention the fact that he was used to rough ground underfoot in the glens and braes that surrounded the home he'd shared with his mother. Then, he had scampered like a mountain goat over craggy rocks and steep hillsides with hardly a scrape or scratch. But if Charles wanted him to hold onto his shoulder, who was he to argue? It was a very nice shoulder, wide and hard with muscles that rippled under Robert's fingers. They ran the last few yards down onto the sand, and Charles started stripping off his shirt and trousers immediately.

"Come on, Robert," he yelled as he dashed towards the ocean. Laughing aloud, Robert shucked off his clothes and followed, lasciviously admiring Charles' sleekly muscled body as he sprinted into the water.

"Whoa!" he heard Charles yell. "It's freezing in here!"

Robert dove headfirst through the first wave. It was cold, but nothing like the nippiness of the North Sea where he had frolicked in as a lad.

"It's not so bad," he said, as he surfaced, shaking the water from his hair.

"Spoken like a true child of the North," Charles said, shivering. "Come over here and warm me up."

"Gladly!" Robert dove upon Charles, wrapping his arms and legs around him, the end result being that they both went under as a giant wave crashed over them.

"Are you trying to drown me?" Charles spluttered on surfacing, Robert's arms still around his neck.

"Not yet," Robert assured him, laughing and kissing his face. "Now, come on, let's swim together. See that big rock yonder? I'll race you to it." And with that, he slipped from Charles's arms and swam steadily away, with sure, strong strokes.

"The blighter's a sea-baby," Charles muttered, admiring Robert's athleticism. "Not a chance of me catching up." He kicked off from the sandy sea bottom, following in Robert's

wake. When he reached the rock, Robert had climbed onto it and was lying on his back, a smile of sheer pleasure on his face.

"What took you so long?" he asked, leering at Charles' naked body.

"Quite the smug one, aren't you, young fellow?" Charles lay beside him and proceeded to lick the sea water from Robert's skin. His warm tongue gliding over Robert's cool body, swirling around his nipples and plunging into his navel, had Robert squirming with pleasure. His cock hardened in Charles' hand. Charles raised his head and grinned at him. "You might best me at swimming, dear Robert, but I think I take a slight lead in the art of giving delight."

Robert pulled Charles into his arms. "Och, you must teach me all that you can," he murmured, his lips on Charles'. "I will be a most dedicated student," he added, his green eyes twinkling impishly.

Charles rubbed his nose on Robert's. "It will be a very long lesson."

Robert's eyes gleamed with desire. "The very best kind, I'm told."

"And must it be done on a hard unyielding rock in the middle of the ocean?" Charles said, chuckling. "I'll let you show off your swimming prowess again then when I have you safely inside and in my arms, I will take you to Heaven and back."

"But I'm in your arms now," Robert protested. "And where better to make love than between the ocean and the heaven you'll take me to."

And so, surrounded by the swirling waves that thundered against the rock they lay on, they made love, aroused not only by their need for one another, but also by nature's surging momentum around them. Robert knew that he would always remember this time as one of the happiest of his life. As Charles took dominion over him, he cried out with a fierce passion, declaring himself forever bound to the man he loved.

Chapter Five

On their return to London, both still suffused with the joy of their time together, Charles suggested he stop by the officer's club on the way to Robert's rooms.

"I need another clean change of clothes, and I'd better find out if our orders have come in yet."

Robert's heart lurched at the thought of Charles leaving England to join their French allies in a war against the Russians, but he kept quiet, knowing it would not do to argue this point. Charles was an officer in the British army and had a duty to perform, whether Robert liked it or not.

He fidgeted in the carriage, waiting for Charles to return, and when he did, Robert's worst fears were realised. Charles' grim expression said it all.

"I'm afraid we ship out tomorrow morning," he said as he climbed back into the carriage. "This will be our last night together for some time, I fear." He gripped Robert's hand. "Of course, it could have been worse. They might've made me stay at the club, but they just made me promise I'd be back at first light."

Robert managed a smile as he fought to put aside the feeling of dejection that had swept over him at Charles' news. He would not let his emotions ruin their last evening together. He would send off Charles knowing he was loved, and that when this dratted war was over, he would be welcomed back into the haven of Robert's arms.

Once inside Robert's rooms, they wasted no time in idle talk. Conversation would come later. A trail of discarded clothing stretched from the vestibule through the drawing room to Robert's bedroom as both men hurried to the big bed and each other's arms.

Robert shuddered with desire as Charles' warm, hard body slid over him. Every nerve ending, every part of him tingled and ached from the need Charles created within him. He shivered with delight as Charles kissed the soft skin under his ear then nibbled on his earlobe. He moaned as soft lips left a tingling trail over his throat, down over his chest, lingering over each nipple. Charles' warm tongue laved each small nub of flesh, already made hard with desire, before continuing southward, following the thin trail of red-gold hair

that led to Robert's aching erection. He gasped, and his body bucked as he felt his cock head being taken into the moist depths of Charles' mouth.

"Oh, God," he murmured, writhing beneath Charles, his breath hissing between his teeth as Charles took him all in, down to the root. Feeling his lover's teeth nibble gently at the base of his cock, Robert's hips jerked upward in a reflexive movement, and his fingers entwined in Charles hair, holding him there as he devoured Robert's cock. His long slow rhythmic movements drove Robert mad with desire.

"Charles..." He pulled back and Charles looked up at him, a puzzled smile on his lips. "I want to fuck you, Charles. I want to be inside you, to be joined to you—to have that memory to cling to even after you have gone."

"Oh, my love." Charles kissed his way up to Robert's mouth. "Then you shall," he whispered, his lips on Robert's. "I give myself to you willingly."

Robert's hands caressed the smooth skin of Charles' back then, slipping from under him, he mounted him and ground his erection into the cleft between his buttocks. Charles raised his hips invitingly. Robert spat into his hand, smoothing the saliva over and into Charles' tight opening. Eagerly, Robert pressed forward, groaning with an ecstatic joy as his cock was enveloped by the silken heat inside Charles. He saw the muscles in Charles' back tense.

"Am I hurting you?" he asked gently.

"Yes...no...it's been some time since...but you feel wonderful inside me, Robert." He raised himself up onto his knees, leaning back against Robert's chest. Robert wrapped his arms around him, his lips on Charles' shoulder, and slowly they moved together to an insistent rhythm, Charles bearing down on Robert's throbbing flesh, arching his neck to seek Robert's kiss. Robert eased himself even deeper inside Charles, pushing upward as Charles bore down. Keeping one arm wrapped around Charles to hold him pressed to his body, Robert slid one hand down over Charles' torso, caressing the smooth hard flesh. He stroked the throbbing erection that jutted proudly from between Charles' thighs. Charles' breath came in long shuddering sighs as he neared his orgasm. His head fell back onto Robert's shoulder, and Robert laved the arched throat with his lips and tongue.

"Oh, Robert...oh my God..."

Charles' body suddenly lurched in Robert's arms, his spine curved backward and he cried out as he came, great gouts of his hot seed spilling over Robert's hand and spattering across the sheets. Charles fell forward onto his hands and knees, and Robert plunged deeper, sliding his cock all the way into Charles' heat. It took only a few more thrusts, and Robert felt his balls tighten as his orgasm overwhelmed him. He clung to Charles' hips as he exploded inside him with dizzying force. Robert collapsed on top of Charles' broad back, and the two of them slid face down onto the cool linen sheets where they lay prone and silent as waves of ecstasy and elation washed over them.

Charles smiled as Robert kissed his shoulder. He moved under Robert, turning over and holding Robert in his arms. He smoothed the curls on the head that now rested on his chest

"I love you," he said softly. "I will think of you every moment of every day we are apart."

Robert could not bring himself to speak. He was afraid that if he tried to put into words all that he felt for Charles and how their parting would affect him, the floodgates would open, and he would make quite a spectacle of himself. He brushed away the lone tear that trickled down his cheek.

"Cat got your tongue?" Charles asked, chuckling quietly. "Or have I rendered you speechless with my wanton display of how much I enjoyed having you fuck me?"

"I'm sorry," Robert said at last. "I just canna' bear to think that tomorrow you'll be gone—and to somewhere I canna' follow." He kissed Charles' chest and rubbed his chin on the light covering of hair.

"Look at me, Robert."

"I canna'. I'm crying like a wee lassie."

Gently, Charles cupped Robert's face between his hands and smiled into his eyes. "This parting is not forever, Robert, my love. This war may be over in a flash. Many of these differences might yet be smoothed over by diplomacy. I may see no action at all."

"You're just trying to make me feel better, are you not?"

"Is it working?"

"No." Robert wound his arms around Charles' neck. "For no matter how long or short your time away from me, it's time we will never get back. Time wasted when we could be enjoying one another's company, knowing each other better."

"There will be time for that when I return." Charles kissed Robert's ear. "And I shall return, Robert, never fear." He ran his fingertips lightly up and down Robert's spine, causing the young man to shiver under his touch. Lightly, he stroked the curve of Robert's buttocks, letting his fingers stray into the warm cleft.

"But before I go," he whispered, "I want to see you smile for me. I want to feel your sweet lips on mine, and I want to make love to you again. Those are the memories I want to take with me when I leave. Will you give me all those things, Robert?"

"You know I will," Robert said, raising his head to look at Charles. "Do I look a sight?"

"Apart from the teary eyes and the red nose, you look as beautiful as ever."

Robert managed a smile. "Oh, Charles. I love you so much."

"And I love you, Robert. Hold fast to that while I'm gone, just as I will hold fast to the memory of what has been the most wonderful two weeks of my life."

No more words were necessary, for as they clung to one another, and the sounds of their ecstasy filled the stillness of the night around them. All that mattered to them was their love for one another, and the promises that would bind their lives together, no matter what might befall them.

Chapter Six

Balaclava, Russia: October 1854

Charles frowned as Major General, the Earl of Cardigan, addressed his officers in his usual snobbish and off-handed manner. He had gathered them in his tent to issue new orders.

"Lord Lucan's given us the job of taking out the Russians' first line of defence. Blighters have taken over our cannons left behind by those worthless Turks who ran at the first sign of Russian cavalry. Shouldn't be too much trouble. They're no more than rabble really. Totally unprepared for an attack such as we'll give 'em, eh lads?"

His smile was supercilious and marked him as a man very sure of his self-inflated sense of worth, one who listened to no one's advice. Cardigan was an unpopular commander and had proven himself to be foolhardy in the past, needlessly risking the lives of his men with his inability to use caution instead of reckless daring.

"Muster your men then, and let's get on with it," he rasped dismissively.

"Where exactly are we going, sir?" one of the officers asked.

Cardigan waved a hand in a vague gesture. "Wherever the Russians have decided to entrench, I expect." He muttered something under his breath then strode from the tent, the officers following. In a matter of minutes, the Dragoons, the Lancers and the Eleventh Hussars, the core of the Light Brigade were mustered and ready.

They had been at the front for several weeks, and Charles had already seen a considerable amount of action. The Turkish army the British were defending had proven itself to be unreliable and without strong leadership. Time and again, the Turkish troops had turned and fled before the Russians, and now this latest fiasco had cost the British army some of its valuable, and extremely scarce, armaments.

Often enough, Charles found himself reflecting on the words he'd spoken to Robert on their last night together. This was not to be the short war he'd predicted, mostly for Robert's

sake, to soothe his fears and make their parting easier. As his horse snorted and pawed the ground beneath him, Charles was suddenly filled with a feeling of unease and foreboding.

"Well, there they are, straight ahead of us," Cardigan now yelled. "Wentworth, bring your Hussars up behind me. And at my command. Cha-a-a-rge!" And like a shot from a gun, Cardigan spurred his horse forward, drawing his sabre and letting out a loud "Huzza!"

There was a moment of confusion as the startled officers watched Cardigan gallop off by himself then Charles raised himself up in his stirrups and signalled his men to follow.

"With me, Hussars! Charge!"

At that, the entire Light Brigade surged forward, each division anxious to keep up with the rest of the cavalry. Charles drew his sabre as his horse plunged forward. He felt the rush of the wind in his face and the thundering of his horse's hooves beneath him as he rode at breakneck speed towards the enemy lines.

All at once, a lone rider broke from the trees to his right. *Who the devil?*

Charles gasped as he recognised the horseman as Captain Louis Nolan, one of Lord Lucan's men. He was waving and gesticulating wildly. It looked like he was trying to change the direction of the charge. Was the man mad? A tremendous boom and crash almost deafened Charles, and he watched with horror as Nolan and his horse disappeared in an explosion of blood and shattered flesh.

Dear merciful God! What was happening? Suddenly the air was filled with the sound of cannons roaring, the ear-splitting scream of cannonballs whistling overhead and the crash and thump-thump of mortar fire that seemed to surround him from every direction. The line of 'rabble', as Cardigan had described them, had become a full-fledged and highly coordinated bombardment. The Light Brigade had charged into the midst of what would surely result in total carnage.

But there was no stopping now, no turning back. Charles waved his sabre over his head and urged his mount on, while behind him, the Brigade did not falter for one moment. Men and horses fell amidst a barrage of cannon fire and splintering shrapnel. The screams of mortally wounded men and animals almost drowned out the awful roar of the Russian weapons which kept up salvo after relentless salvo.

Charles was almost abreast with Cardigan now. Amazingly, both he and Cardigan were uninjured and, even more amazingly, were nearly upon the enemy line. Charles saw the look

of mystified surprise on a Russian gunner's face as he bore down on him, sabre slashing. He was followed by those of the Brigade who had survived the charge and who had now broken through the Russian ranks, laying about them with lance and sabre. The surprised and shocked Russians bombardiers, incredulous that the British cavalry had actually breached their line, fled in confusion. The Russian cavalry commanders, thinking earlier that they would not be needed in the conflict, finally galvanised their men into action, charging into the fray to stop the British from completely routing the Russian troops.

The sheer press of numbers on the Russian side began to wear down the British soldiers. The order to withdraw was given by someone, Charles could not discern who it was above the screams and gunfire and the clash of sabres. He wheeled his mount around to face a charging Russian who had levelled his lance directly at Charles' chest. Charles spurred his horse forward, slashing at the lance with his sabre. The lance was knocked aside, but the two horses collided with such force that both men and animals crashed to the ground. Charles rolled clear of his horse's body and leapt to his feet, reaching for his sabre. The Russian was not moving, obviously crushed under his horse as it struggled to rise. He grabbed his horse's reins and thrust one foot into the stirrup. He heard the shot before he felt the searing pain as the bullet passed through his scalp. He staggered back, blood spilling into his eyes then fell, unable to rise again, aware only that someone was standing over him, lance raised to thrust.

Then he knew no more.

* * * *

London, three weeks later

Lady Haddon and Emily were having afternoon tea in the parlour, when a loud rapping at the front door caused Lady Haddon to frown and purse her lips with displeasure.

"Who on earth can be knocking so rudely?"

"It sounds urgent," Emily said. A feeling of disquiet made her rise from her chair. "Oh, please let it not be about Charles..."

"Calm yourself, Emily." Lady Haddon turned as Dora, the maid, bustled in.

"Sir William Fenshaw, milady," Dora mumbled, admitting a large ruddy faced man sporting a striped waistcoat of red and black.

"Sir William...what a pleasant surprise."

"My dear Lady Haddon." Sir William waved the newspaper he carried. "Terrible news, terrible news. A disaster abroad for our fine fellows."

"A disaster?" Emily clutched at the lace around her throat. She suddenly felt faint.

"Of the worst kind, I'm afraid. The Light Brigade...almost entirely wiped out by those damnable Russkies."

"Oh, no!" Emily fell back into her chair. "Charles...oh my dear, darling Charles..."

"Sir William!" Lady Haddon turned on the startled peer. "Know you not that Captain Charles Wentworth, my nephew and Emily's most beloved brother, is a member of the Eleventh Hussars, and therefore was in the midst of this terrible tragedy? Could you not have couched your words a little more carefully knowing that your news would bring grief to this household?"

"Your pardon, dear, dear lady," Sir William bumbled. "Of course I know. That—that is why I came, post haste, with the news."

"Again, I say, the use of tact would not have come amiss." She picked up a bell to summon Dora. "Is there a list of the...of the casualties?"

"Not yet, Lady Haddon—" He broke off as Dora entered the parlour.

"Bring us a decanter of brandy, Dora," Lady Haddon said. "And *two* glasses. Well, Sir William, we won't detain you. Thank you for apprising us of this misfortune."

"Oh indeed, dear lady, indeed," Fenshaw muttered. "I am sorry to be the bearer of bad news."

Lady Haddon watched him take his leave, her eyes cold with dislike. "Silly old fool," she muttered. "No wonder the country's in such a state with nincompoops like that one sitting in the House of Lords."

She turned her attention to Emily. "Now, my dear, we don't have news yet of casualties, so we must not fear the worst. Charles may be perfectly all right, and with God's grace, be on his way home."

"Oh, Aunt Abigail, how long do you suppose it will be before we hear if he is safe or..."

Lady Haddon stroked Emily's hair gently. "Don't fret, my dear. Ah, Dora, pour Miss Emily some brandy, and I'll have a...a...what is it that charming young Scotsman, Robert, calls it?"

"A wee dram," Emily said weakly.

"That's it. Pour me a wee dram, Dora."

* * * *

Later, alone in her room, Emily wondered how she could get news to Robert of what had occurred. He had returned to his estate in Scotland, shortly after Charles had left for France. A letter would take several days to reach him. He would be devastated of course. Emily was fully aware of Robert's feelings for her brother and of her brother's for Robert. Life was difficult enough for them, having to keep their feelings hidden under a guise of mere friendship. If something terrible had happened to Charles, poor Robert would be unable to share his grief with anyone he knew in Scotland. What little he had told her of his life there had not included the name of a close friend or family member. *At least if he were here in London, she thought, we could console one another.*

Then another thought occurred to her. Of course, he would be keeping up with the news of the war in the Crimea. Perhaps not today, nor tomorrow, but surely within a few days, the Scottish newspapers would carry the news of the carnage at Balaclava. Sir William had left The Times behind, and she had read every gory detail, shuddering at the thought that her own dear brother had been a part of that heroic but misguided charge. According to the reports, the highest ranking officers had bungled the orders and had sent over six hundred men to certain death. She could only hope that the punishment for those who had acted so cavalierly, and with such total disregard for their men's lives, would suit the crime.

* * * *

Elgin, Scotland: November 1854

"Master Robert, sir, Master Robert!"

Robert heard the cry from his vantage point atop the hilly crag behind his grandfather's mansion. He still thought of the place as his grandfather's. Even though it was almost a year since the old smuggler had died, Robert still could not feel at home in that lavish pile of stone and timber. In truth, he did not know why he had returned after Charles had been ordered abroad. He could so easily have stayed in London and enjoyed Lady Haddon's hospitality. And Emily had looked a little crestfallen when he had told her of his plan to return home. But he had taken care of one small bit of business before he'd left. Charles would be so surprised and, Robert hoped, *pleased* at the news of what he'd done.

He stood and waved at Morag, his housekeeper who was calling him. She was waving a newspaper in her hand with great agitation.

Oh, no...

With a bound, he was racing down the hillside to the grounds that surrounded the mansion.

"Master Robert...terrible news..."

Robert snatched the paper from her hand and scanned the front page. He felt the blood drain from his face as he stared at the headline.

"No! Dear God, no!" His mind reeled as he read the account of the disastrous charge the Light Brigade had made against the Russian cannonade. "Almost all killed or wounded," he whispered, scarcely able to believe what he read.

"Your friend, Master Robert? Would he be among those poor laddies?"

Robert stared at Morag for a long moment without really seeing her, then he said, "I can only pray he was not, but it seems entirely possible he would have been in the midst of it."

"Oh, Master Robert, come away inside. I'll make you a nice cuppie of tea."

Nodding, Robert followed Morag through the back door and into the kitchen. He slumped down at the table, staring blankly at Morag as she bustled around making his tea.

How could this have happened? He buried his head in his hands, trying to control the sobs he felt sure would wrack his body at any moment. It just could not be! Charles could not be dead or horribly wounded.

"Morag..." He was barely able to speak. "I must go up to my room."

"Shall I bring you your tea?"

"Later," he muttered, practically running from the kitchen.

He took the stairs three at a time, ignoring the startled gaze of the maid dusting the hall furniture. He just had to be alone, had to be...

He burst through his bedroom door, slamming it shut behind him. He strode over to the window, staring out across the grounds to the green hills and beyond to the forest covered mountains. He palmed away the tears that welled in his eyes, seeing not the breathtaking scenery before him but a vision of Charles' face, the last time he had seen him, smiling sadly as they'd said their goodbyes. Robert choked back the sob that rose in his throat.

"Charles," he said out loud. "My dear, beautiful Charles. They canna' have taken you away from me. I will not believe you are gone. I will not believe it!"

But the printed report in the newspaper—'Almost all killed or wounded'—seemed to mock his brave words, and he felt his assurance falter. "Charles," he moaned, resting his forehead on the window glass. "Dear God, but I must know..."

A knocking sound made him jump and glare with anger at the door. "Not now," he snapped.

"I've brought your tea, Master Robert," came Morag's plaintive explanation.

"Leave it there, outside!" And then, hating himself for acting boorishly, he added, "No, wait, Morag. Come in."

He wiped his eyes with the palms of his hands then pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose noisily. Morag regarded him with knowing eyes. Small and birdlike, a woman whose every movement was spare and efficient, she could be seen as indifferent and somewhat intimidating. But her heart was big, and she had loved Master Robert since he was but a child, seeing past the air of self-assurance he had kept about him when dealing with his grandfather. She had always known that the boy tolerated the old man only for his mother's benefit. That was in the days before he discovered the truth behind his grandfather's 'charity'.

"I've put a wee dram of whisky in your tea," she said, handing him the cup and saucer. "It will soothe ye."

"Thank you, Morag." He looked at her, the vibrancy gone from his green eyes. "You should have brought one for yourself."

"I thought you'd be needing solitude. But see, Master Robert it willna' do to grieve until you know the truth of the matter. He might be just fine, this friend of yours. Wait a wee while—"

"No, Morag." Robert shook his head with vehemence. "I must go to London immediately. If anyone has news it will be Charles' sister, Emily. Oh, how she must be filled with sadness at the thought of Charles..." He could not say the words. "If anything, I might be of some solace to her."

Morag nodded, knowing there was nothing she could say that would change Robert's mind. "Aye...she could use a friend right now," she murmured. "But Robert, keep hope in your heart and make her a gift o' it when you see her next."

* * * *

Robert left the following day, taking a carriage from Elgin to Aberdeen and, from there, a locomotive to London. It was a long and tiring trip, and that, combined with the sick feeling of apprehension that would not leave him, afforded him a vile headache by the time he reached his rooms in Mayfair. Despite that, he sent a message to Lady Haddon and Emily, asking if he could call upon them that evening. Lady Haddon's reply was prompt, saying that his company would give both she and Emily the utmost pleasure. After washing and changing out of his travelling clothes, he set off to Lady Haddon's townhouse. He could not help but reflect, as the hansom cab made its way to the Haddon residence, that it was there he had first met Charles, and this evening would be a sad reminder of that wonderful moment.

Emily stood in the hall when he was ushered indoors by Dora, the maid. Looking pale and sad, she rushed into his arms and clung to him as if she would never let him go.

"Oh, Robert, thank you for coming," she cried, trying to stifle a sob.

Robert kissed her cheek. "No more news?" he asked, stroking her long, dark-brown hair.

"Nothing." She leaned back to look at him as she spoke, anger replacing the sadness in her eyes. "They've bungled everything, Robert. Not content with sending all those brave young men to their deaths, they now cannot account for those still missing."

"Missing? You mean he may be a prisoner?"

"Or simply missing, Robert. Some of what we had been told is so appalling it is hard to speak of." She stepped back from his embrace. "But come in, please. Aunt Abigail has had a light supper prepared for us."

Lady Haddon, looking as regal as ever, greeted Robert warmly. "So good of you to come down, Robert. Emily will benefit greatly from your company."

"I'm only sorry my visit is under such sad circumstances," Robert said, bowing over her hand.

The older lady's smile was tense, yet brave. "I shall not give up hope until I see his name on the list of casualties. So far, the little that has been made known to us has not included his name. Emily and I pray every day for his safe return to us."

"As do I." Robert smiled at the two ladies. "Charles will return, I am sure of it." Of course, he was not sure of any such thing, but as Morag had counselled him before he left, he had to bring them hope.

"Would you care for a sherry before supper, Robert?" Lady Haddon asked, picking up her little bell to summon Dora.

"That would be very nice, thank you." He took a seat next to Emily as Lady Haddon sat in her usual chair. "You were saying, Emily, that there are still men unaccounted for?"

The young lady nodded and took a deep breath to steady herself. "Apparently, the bombardment was so heavy that some men and horses just...ceased to exist."

"Emily..." Lady Haddon fixed her niece with a stern but yet sympathetic look. "You must not dwell on these horrors. War is by necessity vile and merciless. Why we should be subjected to it, decade after decade, is beyond me and most sane people."

Robert took Emily's hand to comfort her. "Those men who have been recovered," he said carefully. "Where are they taking them?"

Emily shook her head. "We have received no news of that."

"Rumours are rife, of course," Lady Haddon said then looked up as Dora brought in their sherry. "Thank you, Dora. They have set up a field hospital to care for the wounded, and those able to get about are being shipped home." She sipped her sherry delicately. "The first men should be here at the end of the week."

"Then we'll really know what happened," Emily said bitterly. "The officers responsible, of course, have been covering up their own ineptitude. The men they betrayed will have very different tales to tell, I'm sure."

* * * *

Later, back in his rooms, Robert thought over what he'd been told. If only he knew where the wounded were being taken, he would go there and look for Charles himself. A mad scheme, perhaps, but better than sitting around fretting, waiting for news that might never come. He thought of what Emily had told him of men disappearing forever under the cannon shot. That fate surely could not have been reserved for Charles. He refused to believe that. He would not believe it!

And yet, it had been the fate of so many men. Robert felt the crushing weight of despair descend upon him again, just as it had when he'd first heard the news of the disaster. As he pulled off his clothes and got ready for bed, he was sure he would not sleep this night. His mind was too laden with morbid thoughts of what might have taken place on that battlefield. His most optimistic thought was that Charles might have been taken prisoner, and even that conjured up dire visions of filthy conditions and disease. Throwing himself into bed, he lay staring up at the ceiling, trying to clear his mind of these horrors and remember only the wonderful times he and Charles had spent together.

Those two golden days they'd spent at the cottage in Cornwall. That lovely time when they'd gone swimming. He smiled as he remembered how Charles had grumbled about how cold the water was then how he had given in to Robert's kisses and caresses and promises to bring him warmth he had never known before. Once again, Robert envisioned making love with Charles, gasping with joy as the heat they generated between them enveloped both their bodies, carrying them to an ecstasy they would never forget.

The memory of it was almost as sensual as it had been then, and Robert grasped his hardening cock in his fist bringing himself to a climax that made him cry out Charles' name. But when he was spent, his loneliness crashed in over him, and he turned his face to the pillow and wept.

Chapter Seven

The days that followed were harrowing for all who had loved ones in the Light Brigade. The news was excruciatingly vague, but at least, a few of the survivors, those who had suffered less serious wounds, had returned to England. Every day, Robert and Emily scanned the newspapers for a mention of Charles' name, and every day, they were both disappointed and, at the same time, given a vestige of hope that somehow he might have survived the disastrous charge.

Three weeks after Robert arrived in London, Emily made him a surprise visit at his rooms in Mayfair.

"Robert," she said breathlessly after the manservant he had recently employed had somewhat stiffly announced her, "I know my coming here alone is inappropriate, but I must show you this!"

"The devil take 'inappropriate', Emily." Robert embraced her warmly. "You are always welcome here."

"Look at this article in The Times." Emily handed him the paper and pointed to a small column at the bottom of the page.

"*Nurse returns from Scutari – says conditions appalling,*" Robert read out loud. "Where the devil is Scutari?"

"I looked on the globe," Emily told him. "It's in Turkey. The main British camp is billeted there and, according to another report in The Gazette, some British girls have gone over to tend to the wounded."

Robert nodded then continued to read. "Miss Sally Caruthers of Bridlington, Yorkshire had volunteered to nurse the British wounded after the Battle of Balaclava under the auspices of Miss Florence Nightingale. Unfortunately, Miss Caruthers contracted a fever and was forced to return home immediately. Miss Caruthers told this reporter that the conditions under which our soldiers are housed are appalling in the extreme. Death by infection is more common than by wounds suffered in battle, and hundreds of men are still unaccounted for by name..."

Robert stared at the last few words and knew what he had to do. "Emily, I must go to Scutari. I will make plans to leave on the first available ship."

Emily stared at him with eyes that slowly filled with tears. "Oh Robert...you would do this for him?"

"I would do anything for him, Emily. Only you know, apart from Charles and myself, just how much I love him. I will never rest until I know what has become of him."

Emily moved into Robert's arms and held him tightly. "But it will be so dangerous," she whispered

"If these brave nurses can face the danger, then so can I. I'd be a poor friend to Charles if I could not bear to be where he has fought for his country."

"Take me with you," Emily murmured.

"Your aunt would never allow it, my dear." Robert kissed her forehead. "And it might prove to be even more hellish than this report indicates. No, I shall go alone – and with God's grace, I will find your brother and bring him home."

* * * *

Scutari, Turkey, one month later

The tall, rail-thin but elegant woman regarded Robert with a degree of surprise. He had been directed to her when he had finally, after endless delays and miserable conditions aboard a Turkish freighter, found his way to the British camp at Scutari.

"Mistress Nightingale." Robert inclined his head respectfully. "I seek news of a wounded cavalry officer, Captain Charles Wentworth. Do you have a list of the army personnel housed in this hospital?"

"I do indeed, Mr. MacDonald." She looked upon Robert's weary appearance with sympathy. "Are you telling me that you have come all the way from England in the hope of finding a missing friend?"

Robert nodded. "I have made this journey so that I can bring news back to his sister and aunt, who suffer greatly as each day goes by without any word of his survival...or otherwise."

"You are a friend indeed." Florence Nightingale opened a folder and ran her forefinger down the list of names inside. She sighed as she looked up at Robert. "I'm afraid there is no mention of a Captain Wentworth."

Robert could not hide his disappointment. "He was with the Eleventh Hussars..."

Mistress Nightingale rose from her desk and gave Robert a smile of encouragement. "Let's make a tour of the beds, shall we? No one has boasted of this list being completely accurate." She placed a gentle hand on Robert's arm. "I'm afraid some of the men, even now, have not been able to tell us anything at all. Brace yourself, Mr. MacDonald. Some of what you will see should never be seen by anyone. With the war still raging, we have boys being brought to us daily."

She led Robert out of her office, down a hall and into what Robert would always remember as a vision of hell. Rows and rows of makeshift beds stretched out as far as he could see under a temporary roof of corrugated iron and canvas. The moans and groans of the sick and wounded seemed to burrow their way into Robert's head as he stood in horrified amazement at the sight before him.

"Believe it or not, it was even worse when my girls and I arrived here two months ago." Mistress Nightingale gestured vaguely at the room. "For the first week, we did nothing but clean the filth these poor boys were lying in. So many have died from infections they could have survived in ordinary conditions. We'll start over here. Look at each man carefully, Mr. MacDonald. Many have bandaged heads and faces."

Robert followed her as she moved down the narrow space between the rows of beds. He could not help but notice that she paused by each bed to smile and say some words of comfort, and that the occupant, no matter how badly injured, returned her smile before looking quizzically at Robert.

What in the world, he supposed, did they make of him? And what the devil was he doing parading in front of them, whole and healthy, while they lay there, missing limbs and pieces of their faces. He shuddered as he walked slowly behind the woman whom he now believed to be a veritable angel of mercy.

Charles...can you really be amongst all this dreadful carnage? And if you are, how will you ever survive the memory of it?

It took them the best part of an hour to tour the entire hospital, and Robert's heart was filled with despair as they neared the last row of wounded soldiers. Then he gasped, and his heart jumped in his chest.

"This man," he whispered. "What is his name?" He stared at the pale, drawn face, covered with many weeks growth of dark brown beard, his head swathed in bandages.

Mistress Nightingale glanced at the card by his bedside. "No name," she murmured. "All it says is Light Brigade."

"Charles," Robert said. "His name is Charles Wentworth—Captain Charles Wentworth of the Eleventh Hussars." He fell to his knees and grasped Charles' hand. It felt thin and brittle in his. "Charles, can you hear me? It's Robert. I've come to take you home."

"Mr. MacDonald." Mistress Nightingale sighed sadly. "I'm afraid this poor man has been catatonic since he was brought here. Nurse Bennett!" She summoned a young girl to her side. "My dear, this soldier has been identified as Captain Charles Wentworth. Perhaps you would be good enough to tell his friend, Mr. MacDonald, what you know of him."

Nurse Bennett bobbed a small curtsy to Robert. "I always thought he was a gentleman. Before the beard covered him, he had that refined look, you know."

"Yes, I know," Robert said quietly.

"He was in the Charge, shot in the head. He would have been killed outright if it weren't for some French soldier, who shot the bloody Russian who'd been about to stick him with his spear. The French cavalry had come in to relieve our boys, but this poor man was left behind. The French soldier said he thought he...uh, the captain was an officer, but—would you believe it?—some bloody Turk stole his uniform while he waited to be brought here. And those buggers are the ones we're helping!"

"So there was no way of identifying him," Mistress Nightingale added.

"Can he hear us?" Robert asked.

"I'm afraid not." She sighed. "There really is nothing more we can do for him here. We just don't have the equipment or the facilities—or the necessary medicine."

"Could he travel?" Robert persisted. "I mean, I can arrange for him to be taken home. I would look after him all the way. I can alert his sister of our arrival, and she will find him a proper hospital."

Mistress Nightingale smiled sadly at Robert's earnest expression. "Whether he stays here or goes with you, I fear he will never have a complete recovery, Mr. MacDonald."

Robert stifled the sob that rose to his throat. His eyes glistened as he stared at the woman who had sacrificed so much to bring comfort to the sick and dying.

"Then I will see that his days are spent with the ones who love him," he said. "Thank you for all that you have done for him."

Chapter Eight

London, three months later

"Good morning, Charles!" Robert smiled as he entered the hospital room. He had been waiting outside in the grounds, pacing restlessly until visiting hours commenced.

Charles stared back at him but did not smile. His eyes were open, but he seemed to not recognise the man who stood before him, holding a posy of flowers.

"Who...?"

"I am your friend Robert," Robert said, still smiling, although his heart quietly broke. Ever since Charles had at last opened his eyes and regained consciousness, he had asked the same question of Robert almost every day they were together.

"Who...?"

Robert was sure it was even harder for Emily. After Robert had brought Charles home, Emily had sat by his bedside every day, holding his hand and talking to him, reminding him of all the wonderful days they had spent together as children. When Charles had awakened, he had not known his own sister, and the doctors had given her no reason to hope that, one day, he might eventually remember her.

"How are you today, Charles?" Robert asked, brightly.

Charles stared back at him with uncomprehending eyes. His face, now devoid of the thick beard grown during his stay in the field hospital, was thin and drawn. Gone was the vibrancy in his eyes and the quick smile that once had enchanted Robert and all who knew Charles.

"Would you like a breath of fresh air?" Robert pointed to the wheelchair in the corner of the room. "It's a beautiful day for March. Not too chilly."

Charles' gaze moved away from Robert to the window through which could be seen a blue sky adorned with puffy white clouds.

"I thought you might. Come on then. I'll give you a hand."

Robert pulled back the bed covers and slipped his arm around Charles, feeling the bony thinness under his nightshirt. He paused, letting his face rest on Charles' neck, his lips kissing the warm skin. For a moment, Robert felt Charles respond, leaning into Robert's embrace, but then he groaned as if in irritation.

"Come on, Charles," Robert grunted, half lifting him out of the bed. "Swing your legs round, there's a good fellow." Robert finally managed to get Charles into the chair then he tucked a rug around him and set off down the hall to the door that led to the grounds.

As much as Robert hated seeing Charles in this condition, he could not imagine a day when he would not visit him. It was as if his life now only revolved around Charles' well-being. He had informed Morag in Scotland of what had transpired, and that he would be living in England for the foreseeable future. He had set up a payment schedule through a solicitor to cover the staff's wages and the upkeep of the mansion, although it was in the back of his mind to sell the place and have done with it. Only, what would happen to Morag and the other people who relied on him for their livelihood?

Charles muttered something, bringing him back sharply from his musings. He stopped pushing the chair and went to kneel in front of Charles.

"What is it, my love?" he whispered, gazing up at the man he adored with all his heart and soul. If only he would come back from wherever his mind now lived.

Charles locked eyes with him, and his lips formed the word Robert had come to hate. But instead of saying the anticipated "Who...?" Charles touched Robert's face, and said, "Cottage."

Robert blinked. *Cottage?* Did he mean the cottage in Cornwall? Oh, he hoped that was indeed what he meant—the cottage on the cliffs where they had spent two wonderful, never to be forgotten days.

"Yes, Charles. The cottage in Cornwall. Did you want to go there?"

"Gone." There were tears in Charles' eyes as he repeated, "Gone."

"No, Charles," Robert cried, realising what Charles meant. "It's not gone. Oh, my dearest Charles, I bought the cottage for you. It's yours now...your home."

Charles looked away then slowly back at Robert. "Who...?"

Robert bowed his head and wept.

* * * *

"Are you quite sure, Robert?" Emily stared out the window at the lush lawns, made even greener by the recent rain.

"I think I must try—as a last resort," Robert replied, shifting uncomfortably beside her. "The doctors give us no hope of his recovering his mind and memory, and yet, sometimes I feel he is on the brink of remembering *something*."

"This is so hard on you, Robert."

"It's hard on everyone who loves him, Emily. On those who remember his vibrancy, his zest for living—his wonderful laugh. I want him back, Emily, the way he was. I thought perhaps the cottage in Cornwall would help jolt a memory for him. A sound, a scent, the ocean...*something*."

Emily turned to him and kissed his cheek. "If anyone can help Charles, it's you. I will pray for you both. It's all I can do now, it seems."

Robert held her in his arms, wondering for the millionth time, how such a terrible thing could have happened, but knowing also, that in time of war, and long after, many people were afflicted with the pain of seeing a loved one slip away from them despite all their attempts to keep them safe.

"You must come down to visit with him, and stay a while," Robert said. "If we can surround him with all he finds familiar and holds dear, it may just be enough to restore his memory."

* * * *

The carriage ride to Cornwall seemed to last forever. Charles sat opposite Robert, his head lolling loosely on his shoulders as if he were asleep, yet Robert could see his eyes were open, staring at the carriage floor, ignoring the wondrous scenery they passed. Several times, Robert tried to engage Charles in an exchange of words, but there was no connection, no flicker of recognition in Charles' blank stare.

Not for the first time, Robert wondered if he was doing the right thing. The doctors had warned against it, remonstrated with him over his lack of wisdom of taking a man away from the care he needed night and day.

"But I can give him that care," Robert had argued.

One of the doctors had glared at him imperiously. "And are you aware that he will need you for *everything*, Mr. MacDonald?" he'd rasped. "From feeding him as you would a child, to ensuring that his bodily functions are satisfactory, and to the cleansing of him afterward? Need I stress the importance of all those daily routines?"

One of the other doctors was more supportive. "Just make sure he gets exercise," he said. "Encourage him to walk a little each day. Confinement to a bed or wheelchair will render his leg muscles useless in time."

When they arrived at the cottage, Robert managed to get Charles out of the carriage with the driver's help. Robert had sent a message ahead to Bridget, and she was there, anxiously awaiting their arrival. Her pleasant face wreathed in sorrow when she saw the sorry state of her one-time charge. Robert had entertained a slight hope that Bridget herself might stir a memory for Charles. After all, she had been there with him through all his childhood. But that hope was dashed when Charles did not respond to Bridget's embrace, and Robert began to wonder if perhaps he'd been wrong involving the old lady in his plan. Her look of total misery when Charles did not recognise her was painful for Robert to witness.

After they had Charles settled in a chair by the fireplace, Bridget and Robert retreated to the kitchen, talking in low voices of what would be needed during the course of the men's stay.

"I want him to see everything that was precious to him about this place," Robert said, keeping an eye on Charles as he appeared to doze by the fireside. "The ocean, the beaches, the town itself, and the people he used to know. Something may jar his memory quite by chance."

"You are a saint to do this for him," Bridget remarked, patting Robert's arm. "You are more like brothers than friends. I noticed a special bond between you both when I first met you, Master Robert."

"I love him, Bridget," Robert said quietly. "His happiness and well-being mean more to me than my own. I long for the day when his eyes will clear, and he will know us all again."

"And the doctors...?"

"The doctors gave us little hope. The wonderful woman who nursed him in the barrack's hospital told me that a bullet had scored his brain. Fortunately, it had passed through his scalp and did not lodge in the skull, but the bleeding that had gone unchecked for too long caused the damage. It's a miracle he's alive at all, Bridget."

"Then I'll pray for another miracle," she said. "One that will soon restore him to full health—and to us."

Robert nodded and kissed her cheek. "Perhaps you can recommend a good doctor who can look in on Charles now and then. The doctors in London were not optimistic of Charles' full recovery, but I worry about his general health also."

"Doctor Henderson...I'll have a word with him and see that he pays a visit now and then," Bridget assured him.

After Bridget left, taking a list of provisions to bring back with her on the morrow, Robert unpacked the suitcases he had brought, hanging up his and Charles' clothes and filling the chest of drawers with their shirts and underwear. He hoped he had packed enough, but of course, there were the shops in Penzance, and Bridget would launder for them when the time came. She had left a stew simmering in a pot on the stove. That, along with chunks of bread, would make a fine dinner later.

He was suddenly aware that Charles watched him as he moved about the cottage. *Is he wondering who I am and what I'm doing here? Does he even know where he is?*

Robert turned and smiled. "Fancy some fresh air, Charles? We can watch the sunset from the cliffs."

Charles, of course, made no reply, but Robert busied himself getting the wheelchair ready, finding a warm blanket to wrap around Charles' legs. At least, he hadn't uttered that dreaded word, "Who?"

"Emily will be down to see you in a few days, Charles. That'll be nice, won't it?" He kept a stream of steady conversation as he always did. Ruefully, he had thought that perhaps his constant chattering would force Charles to yell at him to be quiet. He had never dreamed that his fondest hope would be that Charles would shout, "Oh for pity's sake, Robert, shut up!"

Tears stinging his eyes, he helped Charles into the wheelchair. "There," he murmured, tucking in the blanket. He was startled when Charles again touched his face, trailing a finger

through the moisture on Robert's cheek. He looked at Robert slightly puzzled, the way a child would on seeing something he did not understand.

"It's nothing, old chap," Robert murmured, taking Charles' hand and kissing it lightly. He gazed into his lover's eyes, seeking some glimmer of recognition, but none came. Robert stood up, sighing. "Come on then, let's watch nature's splendours, shall we?"

He pushed the wheelchair to a good vantage point on the cliffs then settled down on the grass, leaning his head on Charles' knee. There had been a time when Charles would flinch away from any intimate contact with Robert, but over time, he had allowed the occasional touch or kiss. Robert had hoped it meant some sense of what they were to one another was returning to Charles, but lately he had resigned himself to the idea that Charles was now just used to Robert being there.

"Beautiful isn't it, Charles?" He raised his head to look at Charles, his face bathed in the golden rays of the setting sun. Robert's heart quickened as he remembered that very first day at the cottage when they had watched the sun set together, and he had seen Charles almost as he was now, his skin burnished under the sun's golden glow. He had thought him god-like then, and even now, his face thin and sad, in Robert's eyes there was still something of the god about him.

Robert reached out and took Charles' hand, pressing it to his face and lips. "Oh Charles, I do love you so." He tried not to let despondency take him over when Charles pulled his hand away without even looking at Robert.

* * * *

Over the next couple of days, when Robert tried to rationalise matters, he had to admit to himself that he was a very small part of Charles' life. They had known one another for only two weeks before Charles had left for France. Two weeks of an extremely intimate nature to be sure, but in the span of Charles' thirty years of life, there might be other memories perhaps more pressing than the time he'd spent with Robert. They had communicated as much as had been possible before Charles had gone to the front. Letters filled with sweet longing, and by necessity, signed discreetly only with an initial. Robert had

kept each and every one, but where now were those he had sent to Charles? Perhaps scattered over a battlefield or buried in the debris of an abandoned encampment.

On their third night in the cottage, Robert prepared a dinner from the provisions Bridget had brought and, much to his surprise and pleasure, Charles really seemed to enjoy it, even accepting seconds. Later, Robert sat him by the fire and read to him from a book of poems Emily had presented him with before they left. It was as he read the first few lines of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem that Robert felt Charles' eyes upon him.

"How do I love thee?" Robert recited, "Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breadth and height. My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight. For the ends of being and ideal grace. I love thee to the level of every day's. Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight. I love thee freely as men strive for right. I love thee purely as men turn from praise. I love thee with the passion put to use. In my old grief's—"

Robert broke off as a strangled sob broke from Charles' throat. "Charles, oh my love..." He rose from his chair and sank to his knees in front of Charles who gazed at him through tear-brimmed eyes. Robert grasped his hands tightly in his. "Oh Charles, I do love thee more than life itself, freely and purely and with a passion that threatens to overwhelm me when I look at your dear face. Come back to me, Charles. Please, come back."

Charles' lips moved soundlessly as though he was trying to form a reply, but in the end, a long sigh escaped his lips, and the tears streamed from his eyes. Robert bowed his head over their tightly clasped hands and gave in to his sorrow.

Chapter Nine

Robert awoke with a start from a dream he couldn't quite recall, but he knew he had been in a dark and lonely place and was sure he'd cried out in his sleep. He lay on his back, turning his head to look out the window at the moonlit sky visible through the thin curtains. Beside him, Charles slept on, his breathing deep and steady. It was the first time they had slept in the same bed since Charles had left to join his cavalry unit in France. Their overnight stay at the inn on the way to Cornwall had afforded two beds in the room, each large enough to accommodate both of them, but Robert had decided to leave Charles in peace on their first night alone together.

Since then, he had lain on the divan in the parlour, but Charles had not shown surprise this evening when Robert had climbed in beside him and had even allowed Robert to hold him before he fell asleep. Robert could not stop wondering just what was happening in Charles' mind. Had he understood the poem Robert had recited to him earlier in the evening? Had the words actually meant something to him? It certainly had seemed so to Robert, seeing the emotion on Charles' face. Or had that merely been a sadness of not being able to escape the boundaries his affliction had set upon him?

When he looks at me, Robert wondered, who does he see? When I speak to him, does he understand anything of what I say?

He moved closer to Charles and slipped his hand into the opening of his nightshirt, lightly stroking the hard, warm chest that rose and fell gently under his hand. Robert's heart almost stopped when Charles rolled slightly towards him, his face only an inch away from Robert's. He could not resist the temptation. Easing closer, he brushed Charles' lips with the lightest of kisses, and experienced a surge of relief, mixed with desire, as he felt Charles return his kiss.

"Charles," he whispered. "I love you."

Of course, he knew Charles would not reply. He was still asleep, but Robert prayed that somewhere, in those impenetrable regions of his mind, Charles was dreaming of that kiss, and of Robert's words spoken from the heart.

* * * *

Bridget was at the cottage only minutes after Robert had risen and coaxed Charles into a warm robe before taking him to the outside lavatory to relieve himself. As he eased Charles onto the lavatory seat, he wondered how difficult it would be to have an inside toilet installed in the cottage. It would be expensive, but he had the money, and it would be so much easier for Charles. Perhaps Bridget could recommend someone.

When he wheeled Charles back to the cottage, he found the woman herself busily making them breakfast.

"Good morning, Master Robert," she sang out then bent to kiss Charles' cheek. "How's my pet?" she crooned in his ear.

"He slept tolerably well last night," Robert told her. "I read to him – a poem by Mistress Browning – and I think he understood some of it."

Charles looked up at both of them his eyes distant to the point of blankness, and Bridget had to stifle a sob. She turned away to occupy herself with their breakfast.

"You brought enough for yourself, I hope?" Robert asked.

"Oh no, Master Robert. I have already partaken of an egg comfit. While you and Master Charles eat, I shall dust and sweep a little."

"Well, in the future, please join us at the table, Bridget. Your company is as important as mine to him, I feel." Robert helped Charles out of the wheelchair and into his place at the kitchen table. "I don't want you feeling you are simply our servant, Bridget. You are a part of Charles' family. He told me so himself."

"Thank you, Master Robert," Bridget sniffled. Then clearing her throat, she asked. "Will you be bringing him into town?"

"Not yet. I think I'd like to see if he can walk a little. My ambition is to have him walk on the sand at the bottom of the cliffs, but of course, that may take a wee while yet." He smiled at the apple-cheeked woman. "But tell his friends he is here, and that they will see him soon enough."

Bridget turned away, muttering something under her breath about a saint.

When they were alone again, Robert filled the hip bath from the pump, then added some scalding hot water he'd boiled over the fire. He smiled at Charles who, once again, seemed to watch every move Robert made.

"Looks inviting, eh, Charles? Come on then, my lovely fellow." He stooped to help Charles out of his chair, steadying him as he leaned heavily on Robert's shoulders. "That's it, Charles. One step forward...I have you...you won't fall. Now another...wonderful, Charles...wonderful...one more. There, now hold on to me. I'm going to lift your leg over into the tub...that's it...lean on me now...here we go with the other leg...lovely. Now hold my hands and I'm going to lower you in...grand, Charles, just grand!"

Robert had no idea if Charles understood one word of what he said, but he was heartened by the fact that Charles seemed to respond a little better. Or was it just because he had no option but to give in to Robert's ministrations? Robert gazed down upon Charles' naked body, thinner but still amazingly hard. He threw off his robe then knelt by the side of the tub. He picked up the soap and rubbed it over Charles' chest, working up a lather and trying to ignore the erection he felt building between his thighs.

How can I help it if the sight and feel of him fills me with desire? I love him – every part of him – and even if he never fully recovers from this, it will not quell my love or desire for him.

Tentatively, he brought his hand lower over Charles' abdomen and gasped as through the soapy water he saw Charles was aroused. He ran his hand over the hard flesh, gripping it lightly, revelling in the feel of it throbbing in his hand. He pressed his face to Charles' neck and kissed the damp skin. Charles groaned and raised his hips, driving his cock through Robert's fist. Robert quickened his strokes, slipping his arm around Charles, holding him close as he brought him to orgasm. Charles' breathing became harsh and laboured, and he reached out a hand for Robert, clutching at his shoulder as he would a life-line. He came in great gasping spasms, his semen arcing from the water and splattering both his and Robert's chests. Robert shuddered in the grip of his own orgasm, and as he came, he tilted Charles' head back and kissed him with an unbridled passion.

"Charles...oh, Charles my love," he whispered, their lips still joined. He pulled back as Charles moaned in protest, turning his face away from Robert's kiss. Robert tried not to find the rejection hurtful, but it wounded him nevertheless. He used the bath water to clean himself off then turned his attention to finishing Charles' ablutions. Once again, Charles

fixed Robert with a blank look as he helped him out of the water and began to pat him dry with a towel. Robert helped him into his robe then settled him back in the wheelchair.

"We'll go for a little walk once I'm dressed," Robert said. "The doctors think it will be good for you – keep the strength in your legs. We won't go far," he chattered on as he fetched Charles' clothes. "Perhaps to the cliff edge and back for today then a little farther tomorrow. How does that sound?"

* * * *

They made a slow and painful progress towards where the cliffs dropped away to the rocks and sand below. Charles seemed uncomfortable, clinging to Robert's shoulders as Robert guided him slowly to the cliff edge.

"Come on, Charles," Robert panted, weighed down by the snail's pace and the pressure on his shoulders. "Just a little farther." He wanted Charles to experience the view, the expanse of ocean that stretched for miles in every direction – the view that had been such a huge part of Charles' life since childhood. Robert felt the familiar tug of disappointment when they finally stood together at the cliff edge, and Charles' expression contained no trace of recognition.

"Never mind," he murmured, almost to himself. "Miracles don't just fall from the sky because you want them to. Sometimes, you have to work at making them happen." He smiled wryly as he uttered the words his mother had spoken when he was a lad. "That's right, Charles." He squeezed his lover's arm. "And we'll work at them every day until they happen."

* * * *

That night, a thunderstorm raged overhead. It woke Robert from a deep sleep, and he was startled to see Charles sitting bolt upright in bed, his hands over his ears, his eyes wide and staring, his body trembling.

"Charles..." Robert sat up and put his hand on Charles' arm. "It's all right, my love. Just a thunderstorm." He had no sooner said those words when an ear splitting boom reverberated overhead.

"Nooooo!"

Robert was knocked flat on his back as Charles launched himself upon him, pinning him to the mattress and covering his body with his own.

"Charles!" Robert struggled to ease himself from under his lover's weight. "It's all right...just a storm. It'll be over soon."

"No! Cannons...cannons. Keep you safe..."

Robert gasped as Charles uttered those words. He stopped struggling and lay quietly under Charles, feeling the pounding of his heart against his own. *Dear God*. Intuitively, he knew that Charles was reliving the day of the charge, those moments when he and his Hussars had been surrounded by cannon fire. He was *remembering*...

Robert wrapped his arms around Charles and held him close.

"Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you for keeping me safe."

"Cannons," Charles muttered then fell asleep in Robert's arms.

* * * *

Robert remembered that night vividly in the days that followed. It had been his hope that there had been a breakthrough, but when they had awakened in the morning, Charles seemed to have no recollection of the storm or his impression that the thunderclaps had been cannon fire. Nevertheless, Robert regarded it as a positive sign that somewhere in Charles' mind there still remained memories of the past. Every day, he took Charles walking, and every day they walked a little farther. If Charles showed no sign of actually enjoying their walks, at least, he did not lean quite so heavily on Robert for support.

"And that, my dear Bridget," Robert told the old woman as they sat at the breakfast table together several days later, "that is the start of the miracle." He smiled and leaned back in his chair. "I'm going to take him down to the cove today. Let him walk barefoot on the sand."

"Oh, but how will you get him down there? The path...it's so steep!"

"I shall carry him, Bridget, on my back."

And so, with Bridget watching anxiously from the cliff top, Robert cautiously inched his way down the steep and curving pathway cut into the side of the cliff. A passive Charles sat,

piggy-back style, on Robert's back, his legs supported by Robert's hands, one under each thigh.

Robert sang as he descended towards the beach far below. *"By yon bonnie banks and by yon bonnie braes, where the sun shines bright on Loch Lomond!"* Well, Charles," he turned his head slightly as he spoke. "If my constant yammering doesn't drive you mad, my singing surely will. *'But me and my true are ever want to gae, on the bonnie, bonnie banks of Loch Lomond!'"*

He was laughing and panting by the time he reached the sand at the bottom of the path. Gently, he lowered Charles from his back.

"There now, that wasn't so bad, was it, old chap?" He took Charles' hand and walked him slowly to the water's edge. "See, over there..." He pointed out to where a large rock jutted from the surface of the sea. "That's the rock we raced to the last time we were here." He grinned at Charles. "I beat you, and then you...well, you made some rather pleasant advances upon my person. It was so pleasant, in fact, that we had to rush back to the cottage and—" He broke off as Charles released his hand and started to walk away, following the shoreline. "And we made love all afternoon and all evening," Robert murmured to himself. "Oh, Charles, why can't you remember?"

He watched as Charles wandered in a seemingly aimless fashion along the beach. Robert breathed out a long sigh of sadness. How much longer could he stand this? If only there could be another moment as when Charles had thought the thunder had been cannon shot. Then, he had sought to protect Robert—or had he actually known it was Robert he protected? Perhaps, he'd imagined the man he'd lain over had been another soldier...

Robert looked upward into the cloudless sky and wiped at the tears that welled behind his eyelids. Perhaps all this was simply impossible. Perhaps the miracle he sought was just that much out of reach no matter how hard he worked at it.

Chapter Ten

Bridget, washing the breakfast dishes at the sink, glanced at Robert's gloomy expression and felt her heart twist with sadness. *The lad has tried so hard*, she thought, scrubbing at some congealed egg yolk on a plate. *But I think he's about to give up*. She knew he'd placed high hopes on a visit from Master Charles' sister, Emily, but that visit had come and gone a week since, and no progress had been made.

In fact, Robert had become frustrated with Emily as she seemed incapable of spending time with Charles without weeping. Not that Charles had noticed. And Doctor Henderson had been of little help. The good man had been unable to add anything to the prognosis already handed down by the doctors in London. He had told Bridget privately that he thought Robert's ministrations were futile indeed. Kindly and well-intentioned but futile.

And yet, sometimes it seemed to Bridget as though something was going on behind Charles' passive expression. A vague flickering smile, a look of anger... Master Robert had noticed it also and had quickly seized any opportunity he could to encourage Master Charles, coaxing him with smiles and chatter. The lad was resilient.

"Bridget..."

She started as Robert's voice broke into her thoughts.

"When you go back to town today, would you please have a carriage stop by the cottage?"

"Oh, Master Robert..." Bridget's eyes filled with tears. "Are you taking him back to London?"

Robert chuckled. "Indeed not, Bridget. I'm taking him into town, but it's a fair distance to walk, so a carriage seems like a good idea."

"Oh, forgive my foolishness. Of course, I'll have one sent immediately."

"Thank you, Bridget." Robert rose from the table and embraced the old woman. "You have been a godsend to Charles and me, and I thank you for all the help and support you have given us."

Bridget pressed her face to Robert's chest. "If only I could see him as he was again. For your sake, I pray for that every day. You are the most wonderful friend any man could have."

After Bridget left, Robert bathed and dressed Charles, determined that the people of Penzance, who remembered him, would regard him with admiration and not pity. When he was finished, Robert stood back to view his handiwork. He had dressed Charles in fawn-coloured breeches tucked into dark-brown riding boots. A burgundy coat over a white shirt and cravat completed the ensemble. Robert was immensely pleased with the result. If it were not for the slightly vacant expression, Charles' demeanour could pass as that of a man about town without a care in the world. Dressing himself took Robert only a fraction of the time he'd spent on Charles' appearance, and just as well, for no sooner had he finished than the carriage arrived outside.

As they rolled along through the country lanes leading to Penzance, Robert found himself wishing that Charles, after glancing at the beautiful scenery they passed, would smile at him and say, "Lovely day, Robert. Aren't we the lucky ones to be out enjoying it?"

Instead, Charles stared out of the carriage window with only a passing interest in Cornwall's lush greenery.

Once in town, Robert asked the driver to stop, telling him they would walk a short distance, have some tea then return to the cottage. If he would just wait an hour or so...?

"I'll be right here, sir," the cabbie assured him as they set off.

The High Street was far from busy, most people being either at home or at work, but one or two people, recognising Charles, stopped to give their good wishes for his speedy recovery before passing quickly on their way. It was a far cry from the last time Robert had accompanied Charles on this very same walk. But then, Charles had been the dashing cavalry officer, not this blankly staring, silent man from whom they could not wrest even the smallest smile.

"Well, Charles," Robert began his usual stream of chatter, pointing out the places he remembered from his first visit—the churches, the pubs, the tea shops—until he was brought to an abrupt silence as Charles stopped dead in his tracks in front of a small shop window.

"Jam," Charles said, loudly and clearly. "Homemade jam..."

"Aye," Robert said, remembering. "But I canna' see any marmalade."

"Robert..."

Robert's head whipped around, away from the shop's window. Charles gazed at him, and for the very first time since he had regained consciousness, he was actually looking into Robert's eyes. Then he smiled.

"I hate that horrible stuff," he said.

Robert did not know whether to laugh or cry, so he did both. "Charles!" He flung himself into his lover's arms. "Oh, my Charles."

* * * *

"Can you ever forgive me for the hell I've put you through?"

Robert smiled and ran his fingertips over Charles' smooth jaw. "I would gladly do it all again if I knew I would have you here with me at the end of it. You are the one who has been through hell."

They were sitting in front of the fire, holding one another, their clothes scattered on the rug around them. After Robert had rushed Charles to Bridget's house to give her the wonderful news of his recovery, he had then bundled him into the carriage with orders to return home as speedily as possible. Once alone together, their reunion of mind and body had been tumultuous. Words of love and endearment had poured from both their mouths, while hands and lips had worked feverishly to bring each other longed-for pleasures. Their lovemaking had been wild, frenzied even, and achingly sweet.

Now, Robert nuzzled Charles' throat with his lips, still wonderstruck by what he had hoped and prayed for finally being realised. Who could have predicted that a simple thing like a jar of homemade marmalade—the object that had sparked their one and only argument—would be the catalyst to restore Charles' memory?

"So many times," Charles said, caressing the nape of Robert's neck, "I struggled within myself to try to make you aware that I knew you and what we meant to one another. But there was always some insurmountable barrier I could not breach."

"Sometimes you looked angry."

"I think those were the times when I was frustrated by my failure to communicate with you—coming close then finding it all slipping away again."

"One night, there was a thunderstorm," Robert said, carefully. "And it seemed to take you back to the battlefield."

Charles nodded, his eyes clouding with the memory. "Yes, I remember. In my mind, I heard the roar of cannon shots and saw the devastating effect it had on the men. It was a vision from hell, Robert."

"And yet you sought to keep me safe," Robert murmured. "You threw yourself over me to protect me."

"Because, my dear, I love you more than life itself." He leaned into Robert and took his lips in a kiss infused with a sweet rapture and yearning desire.

"I can still scarcely believe that I have you back," Robert said, his senses blurred from the sensation of Charles' lips on his. "I dread that this might be a dream, and when I awaken—"

"Hush..." Charles stilled Robert's words with another kiss. "You are not dreaming. I am here with you, and I will never leave you again."

"And the Hussars?"

"I'll resign my commission, if they haven't already discharged me as being unfit for duty." Charles smiled into Robert's eyes. "I want to make all of this up to you, Robert, my love. Spend every moment of every day showing how much I love and adore you."

"We'll go to my home in Scotland," Robert exclaimed happily. "Oh, Morag will love you. I've told her so much about you. And then there's France and Italy, perhaps even the Americas. The world is our oyster, Charles—ours to explore and enjoy."

"All I want to explore and enjoy at this moment is you," Charles said, lowering his head to run his lips over Robert's bare shoulder. "To explore and enjoy every glorious inch of you."

Gently, he pushed Robert back onto the rug and lay over him. "Just lie there and let me love you." His lips teased Robert's nipples, the tip of his tongue scouring the already hard points of flesh.

Robert moaned and wrapped his arms around Charles. As his body responded to the sensual heat Charles created within him, Robert's mind exulted with the realisation that all he had ever longed for was finally here. Charles was safe again, was his again, and now nothing would ever part them. Whatever the future held for them, wherever it took them,

they would face their destinies together. But for now, the future, wonderful as it would be, could wait. What was truly wonderful was this moment in time, when he and Charles were locked in each other's arms, loving one another again.

The feel and the scent of Charles filled Robert's senses so completely that everything, except his need to melt into his lover's embrace, fell away. Robert shuddered as Charles' hands and lips roamed over his body, suffusing his heated skin with such intensely sensual sensations, they threatened to overwhelm him. He writhed with delight as the heat of Charles' mouth enveloped his aching erection, Charles' tongue scouring the shaft from head to base with long, exquisitely pleasurable strokes. Robert groaned from the onslaught of emotions and sensations that enveloped his mind and body. His fingers tangled in his lover's dark curls, and he rocked his hips, matching the pace of Charles' talented mouth.

Charles raised himself over Robert, sitting astride his thighs and easing Robert's hard cock, now made slick with Charles' saliva into the cleft between his buttocks. Slowly, he sank down upon the length of Robert's erection, a beatific smile of satisfaction lifting the corners of his lips.

"Ah, Robert, my love..."

Charles gazed down upon the man he loved, at the slim hard torso, the tiny nipples hard with desire, at the startlingly handsome face crowned by red-gold curls. He thought that perhaps he had never seen anything quite as beautiful in his entire life. His hands caressed Robert's chest with loving tenderness. Their eyes locked on one another, they began a deeply sensual rhythm, one that carried them both to the ultimate heights of ecstasy. As their breathing became laboured and the impending thrill of orgasm overtook them, Charles leaned forward and claimed Robert's lips with his own.

Their kiss was passionately sweet, unhurried, as if they both realised that now for them to love one another, there was all the time in the world.

About the Author

J.P. Bowie was born in Scotland and toured British theatres in numerous musical shows including Stephen Sondheim's Company.

Emigrated to the States and worked in Las Vegas, Nevada for the magicians Siegfried and Roy as their Head of Wardrobe at the Mirage Hotel. Currently living in Henderson, Nevada.

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