

A TOUCH OF LOVE

By Regina Jeffers

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Prologue

Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect and touch and greet each other.

- Rainer Maria Rilke

“I will come for you when this is over.” Every time Carter Lowery closed his eyes, he heard the deafening rattle of the explosions, which had raged about him. It had been three months since Waterloo—three months since he had taken a bullet in his thigh—three months since he had promised the boy he would return for him—three months since he had tasted failure.

Carter lazily turned his head to take stock of the situation. This was his first assignment since Belgium, and he meant to prove himself worthy of being one of “Shepherd’s flock,” which was what the others fondly called their band of the Realm, a secret covert operation of the British government.

Resting upon a low-slung chaise, Carter hoped to portray the appearance of indifference. In reality, his heart pounded loudly in his ears. He had always felt quite invincible, but Waterloo had taught him the fallibility of too much pride and the physical pain of facing his own mortality.

A shuffling of feet off to the left told him something had changed. As casually as possible, he stretched his neck and back in a manner, which would permit him to determine what was amiss. Marcus Wellston and John Swenton exchanged hurried whispers, and Carter followed Wellston’s gaze with anxious anticipation.

He swung his legs over the chaise’s edge to sit. With another covert stretch Carter palmed a double-edged knife hidden in a pocket of his boot. He could not see clearly what it was that interested Wellston and Swenton so intently, but he knew from the alert slant of their shoulders, it was something of import. Looking to the others, he discovered Gabriel Crowden, the future Marquis of Godown, had slipped into the shadows, while Aidan Kimbolt impatiently palmed a deck of cards.

Carter swallowed his growing fear. Until Waterloo, he had easily engaged in confrontations with the ignorance of youth. He was only a few months older chronologically, but emotionally he felt ancient.

He heard Brantley Fowler say, “I believe I will take a walk. Stretch my legs,” and Carter had instantly understood the apprehension found on James Kerrington’s countenance. Kerrington “captained” their group and possessed the most experience in the ways of the outlaw bands they sought. Through his service, Carter had found admiration for a man, who still grieved for his late wife. He often thought, *It must be difficult to love so deeply.*

Fowler, on the other hand, irritated Carter. The future Duke of Thornhill was too impetuous—too self-centered, and too anxious to prove himself a hero, which explained what Fowler now intended.

Their Realm band were “guests” of Shaheed Mir, a shady Baloch warlord. Their mission was to secure Mir’s cooperation in protecting British outposts along the Indian border with Persia. They had been in the Baloch camp for three days, and for two of those days, they had witnessed Mir’s men repeatedly abusing a young girl, likely no more than fifteen years.

The woman's screams had torn at Carter's heart, but he had refused to risk his friends' lives to save her. *Concomitant damage. Just as the boy.* A cold shiver ran down Carter's spine. Was the boy really expendable? If not, was also the girl? The unknown brought bile rushing to his throat.

Before he could wallow further in his misery, chaos erupted. One of Mir's men warned Fowler's steps aside when the duke set a course for the girl's tent. In the blink of an eye, Fowler struck the man with the heel of his hand to the nose, sending the Baloch sprawling upon his backside, while Marcus Wellston shot one of the charging Balochs in the knee, and Crowden knocked another across the width of the tent.

Carter scrambled to his feet, only to be flipped over a Baloch's brawny back. He rolled to the left as his attacker pulled a curved sword from a sheath tied about the man's waist to hack away at Carter.

The blade hissed closed to his nose, missing Carter's face by mere inches, before he reversed his path, rolling to the right. The scene would have been quite comical if part of a theatrical farce, but this was not low comedy: This was life and death. The man jabbed at him before Carter took cover beneath a low table. Despite his many attempts to escape, he remained ineffective, his knife useless against the Baloch's swords.

Then, miraculously, Mir's henchman sprawled beside him on the dirt floor, knocked unconscious. Carter looked up to see Aidan Kimbolt reaching a hand down to him. "No time to rest, Lowery," Kimbolt declared over the din.

Carter angrily shoved the badly damaged table aside before accepting his friend's assistance. "You're a prat, Kimbolt."

"Now!" Kerrington's voice boomed above the melee, and they each broke for the tent's open flap.

"I have it," Carter yelled as he shoved Kimbolt through the opening. He turned to slit the arm of one of their pursuers before flipping the knife over to stab another. Wellston and Swenton rushed past him, while Carter guarded the exit.

"Go!" Kerrington ordered as he and Crowden cut several more of Mir's men low.

Carter turned to race toward the waiting horses. Up ahead he saw Fowler swing into the saddle, while Wellston assisted the girl to the future duke's arms. Lowery caught his stallion's saddle and pulled himself to the seat. Capturing the reins, he turned the animal in a tight circle.

He heard Crowden's call of "Lowery!" Instinctively, he kicked the animals' flanks. He and Crowden would draw Mir's men away so Fowler and the girl could escape. Their band would meet again at the safe house in Bombay in three days.

"Were you injured?" Crowden called over the sound of gunfire.

Carter squeezed his horse's sides with his knees. It would be a torturous death if the Balochs managed to unseat him. "I'm well!" he yelled.

The future marquis grinned as he set his horse to a gallop. "Good. Wouldn't want to have to return to rescue you."

Carter knew Crowden meant the flippant remark as a means to break the tension, but his heart stuttered to a halt. How long had the youth waited for Carter's return before the boy had given up hope? *Dear God*, he silently summoned forth the now familiar prayer, *in your eternal goodness, I beg you to protect the boy I have failed.* He had said the prayer when he awoke in the military hospital and every day since, and Carter would repeat it daily until he knew the boy's fate or until he met the youth in Heaven.

Chapter One

“Harumph!” Carter woke with a jerk. He wiped the sweat from along his upper lip and worked hard to steady his breathing. How long had it been since he had slept a full night? How long since the nightmares had not revisited him with a vengeance? *Forever*, he thought. A set of eyes belonging to a boy, likely not yet in his teens, clung to each of his nightmares. He gulped hard to drive the fear and the regret from his chest.

Tossing the counterpane aside, Carter swung his long legs over the edge of the mattress and reached for the water pitcher. Slowly pouring himself a glass, he inhaled deeply, pushing the images away. Allowing the tepid water to flow across his lips, he swallowed the fears, which had gripped him only moments earlier. The haze lifted, and his eyes focused on the dimly lit room: his chambers at Huntingborne Abbey. Reluctantly, he had returned to the Kent estate he had unexpectedly inherited when Prince George had bestowed a newly minted baronetcy upon him.

The reluctance had nothing to do with his dislike for his hard earned estate. Not at all. Carter held great plans to make it a showplace where he might entertain important political guests and build upon his career. No, the reluctance came from the knowledge his parents would arrive at Huntingborne by mid afternoon. Having his father’s company for several days while his parents awaited the ship, which would take the Baron and Baroness Blakehell upon an extended tour of the Continent, was not what Carter would term a “pleasure.” Reluctance would arrive with his mother’s need to organize his house, a place far from being in pristine condition after the former owner’s, Sir Louis Levering, life of debauchery, along with his father’s expected lecture regarding Carter’s determined interference in bringing his older brother Lawrence together with the lovely American heiress, Arabella Tilney. And finally, reluctance at having to leave his fellow Realm members in Paris, to finish the investigation he had begun into a threat on certain members of the Royal family. An investigation, which had grown colder, despite Carter’s best efforts.

“Suppose I should ring for Merriweather,” he grumbled, but Carter made no move to summon his valet. Instead, he leaned into the loosely stacked pillows to stare upward into the intricate design of the bed drape. He wondered who had chosen the pattern. Certainly, not he. Likely, one of his sisters. When the news of his fortunate rise to the baronetcy had reached Derbyshire, his father and two of his sisters had rushed to Kent to view the property.

“House is sound,” Baron Blakehell had declared after a careful inspection of the manor. “The rooms will require repairs, but you can bide your time and complete one room at a time.”

His mother, his three married sisters, and even several of his associates had ferried select pieces of furniture to his door, and Carter had held hopes of pleasing his father with the intricate plans he had developed for the property, but as with every other moment of triumph in Carter’s life, Baron Niall Blakehell had quickly lost interest.

The baron had arrived with Carter’s sisters in tow and had spent a week, meticulously instructing Carter on what to have repaired immediately and what could wait until later, how to organize the estate ledgers, and what livestock to purchase. His father had even invested heavily in the estate to bring it solvency.

“Thought I had finally discovered the door,” he murmured in regret. But Law had sent word of trouble with two of the baron’s cottagers, and Baron Blakehell had rushed home to Blake’s Run, never to rekindle an interest in his youngest child’s progress.

Carter had not held his older brother Lawrence to blame: In fact, the baron had crippled Law nearly as effectively as he had Carter. It was only of late the two brothers had banded together to foil Blakehell’s manipulations regarding a pledge to marry off Law to Miss Annalee Dryburgh and her connections to Lord Graham, when Lawrence had obviously affected Miss Dryburgh’s cousin, Miss Arabella Tilney. “At least, we placed a chink in the baron’s armor,” Carter told the empty room.

“Perhaps if Law and I were closer in age,” he mused. But his brother had been away at his early years of school before Carter had made his familial appearance. Three rambunctious sisters separated them. Three sisters he adored. A brother Carter admired, but he and Lawrence had traveled separate roads to reach their current understanding.

Lawrence Lowery, Blakehell’s heir, had been schooled in all facets of the barony. His brother’s every waking moment had known the responsibility of his future title. “Never wanted to be Lawrence,” Carter declared honestly as he pushed his exhausted frame from the mattress. “Just wanted to be something more than the spare.” Carter reached for the bell cord. “Just wished for my share of the recognition,” he admitted to the shadows.

“You rang, Sir?” Merriweather breezed into the room. Carter sometimes thought Darek Merriweather slept less than he.

Despite his earlier maudlin, Carter smiled. “Time to face the day.”

Merriweather nodded his understanding before reaching for a towel. “I brought up hot water for your morning ablutions, Sir.”

When Carter had withdrawn from his official military service to join the Realm, he had left behind his trusted batman, Francis Sanders, and for some time, he had done without the services of a gentleman’s gentleman. With the Realm, he was often in dire straits, and Carter had refused to place another in jeopardy; however, at Waterloo, Merriweather had earned his position, along with Carter’s gratitude. From that day forward, Merriweather had served him faithfully. Ironically, it was his friend Gabriel Crowden, the Marquis of Godown, who had claimed Sanders as his man of service, and Carter had been glad of the marquis’s kindness.

Lazily, he straddled a chair while Merriweather dutifully applied soap to Carter’s cheeks to soften his beard. “I will require a second shave before supper,” Carter said distractedly. “His Grace has invited my parents to dine at Thorn Hall.”

The lack of a smile upon Merriweather’s lips was not apparent in his tone. “As you say, Sir.”

Carter rolled his eyes good-naturedly. “As if I had a need to instruct you in your duties.”

“As you say, Sir.” This time the corner of the valet’s mouth tugged upward.

Carter ignored Merriweather’s jib. He rarely termed the valet as insolent. They had spent the previous two years together. “I wish to confirm the accommodations for the baron and baroness have been prepared to my specifications. How go the preparations below stairs?” Carter had permitted Merriweather a say in the new hires for the estate.

“Cook has seen to hearty meals, which should please the baron and baroness, and the new maids have spent an inordinate amount of time with cleaning and polishing. You will be pleased.”

When his man finished, Carter used the small towel to wipe away the remaining soap. “I am easier to please than is the baron,” Carter warned.

His man retrieved the mirror. “It will be enough, Sir,” Merriweather assured.

Carter said dejectedly, “It is never enough.”

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“It is most generous, Your Grace, to see to our pleasure this evening,” his mother said honestly.

Brantley Fowler set his wine glass to the side. “We are gladdened to serve as your hosts, Baroness. Sir Carter and his family hold a standing invitation at Thorn Hall. It is the least I could do to recognize my venerable allegiance with Sir Carter, as well as the service your eldest, Lord Hellsman, provided me in the pursuit of my duchess.” Carter had always admired the way Fowler could easily talk his way through any situation; perhaps, if he could do likewise, he could persuade the committee overseeing replacing Aristotle Pennington as the Realm’s leader to choose him. He and Fowler were the two youngest of their “merry band,” although they held little in common except their like shortcoming: the desire to please an impossible father.

“Lawrence has spoken to us of the difficulty you encountered with Viscount Averette,” the baron confessed. “It was providential Hellsman was in Derbyshire to provide his assistance.”

The duke quickly added, “It was also providential Sir Carter reacted to the urgency of recovering my daughter Sonali so I might concentrate on the duchess’s rescue. Knowing Sonali would be in your younger son’s most capable hands released me to save my wife.”

Carter appreciated his friend’s efforts, but he knew his father’s nature: Much to the detriment of the other four, the baron thought only of Lawrence Lowery’s accomplishments. Niall Lowery was not an abusive father; the baron had never raised a hand to any of his children; yet, each of the siblings had instinctively known his or her role in the family unit.

Ignoring the duke’s protests, the baron stated, “Carter is built for impossible quests; his accolades are commonplace. It is when a man, who does not know danger every day, takes on the heroic role that a person’s character is truly defined.”

Carter’s ire rose quickly. It was true; Lawrence had thoroughly distracted Viscount Averette, but his brother’s actions could never be compared to what Carter, James Kerrington, and Thomas Whittington had faced in their rescue of Sonali Fowler. They had eliminated a dozen hired assailants to save the child. What irritated him more was the baron gave Carter no credit for the good he performed daily in England’s name. The whole situation was incogitant. He opened his mouth to express his discontent, but as she had always done, his mother intervened. She effectively squashed the argument before it began. “All my children possess amiable talents,” she declared.

The duchess readily agreed, before adding, “You are fortunate, Baroness, to have your daughters so well placed and for both of your sons to hold a title.” Carter grumbled under his breath of how Prince George had termed Carter’s efforts worth the notice. His mother squeezed his hand in sympathy. Velvet Fowler continued to direct the

conversation. "Tell me of your expected journey. I have often wished to travel, but the duke claims he has seen enough of the Continent for one lifetime."

And so the evening had taken on the mundane topics of politics, fashion, and, of course, every Englishman's least favorite subject: the weather. All three played into the Lowerys' travel itinerary. Carter swallowed his growing need to confront the baron. He had held hopes of finally knowing his father's approval when Carter had orchestrated an elaborate plan to save Law's future thoroughbred line, but any goodwill the baron had shared had quickly dissipated when Carter had moved Heaven and Earth to bring Lawrence to Arabella Tilney's door. His brother and Lady Hellsman had retreated to the family's Scottish estate to celebrate their joining. Their withdrawal had occurred nearly a month prior.

As part of his mother's "punishment" for the baron's interference in Lawrence's life, the baroness had declared she and Niall Lowery would make an extended tour of the European continent. Therefore, their current residence under Carter's roof. He knew his father held no desire to travel, but the baron would not thwart his wife's desires; and, likewise, Fernalia Lowery would never relent. The baroness meant for each of her children to know the solace of their father's absence, and for that simple gesture, Carter thanked her.

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A cold January wind barreled between the closely packed buildings to send the rotted twigs and leaves skipping along the street. Hundreds of feet smashed everything upon which they trod, as the people rushed to work and errands. Lucinda Warren stepped from the boarding house's front door. Despite the chill, she kept her head high. Her father's voice reminded Lucinda how people never accosted a person who appeared in charge. Glancing about the street, she certainly hoped the colonel had known of what he spoke. Her new quarters had been a major step down from what she had left behind, but she had possessed no choice. She must know economy if she were to survive.

She caught the child's hand and started forward. In the week the boy had remained with her, she could count on one hand the number of conversations they had exchanged. It was not as if the child was disrespectful or even withdrawn. Simon said "thank you," "please," "you are welcome," and "pardon me" on a regular basis; yet, Lucinda knew very little of the boy's early years or of his home. It was as if the person who had deposited the child upon Lucinda's doorstep had instructed the boy not to disclose any information.

"Are you warm enough?" Lucinda glanced toward the child beside her. He half hid in her skirt tails as he scrambled to keep up with her pace. Regretting her haste, Lucinda slowed her step.

Dutifully, the boy said, "Yes, Ma'am." The child had carried a small satchel when she had discovered him outside her door. It contained only two shirts, but Lucinda had taken one of her older gowns and made the boy several serviceable shirts of a dark green color. With each, she had created a lining of a sleeveless shirt for Simon to wear beneath his new ones for an extra layer of warmth. London could be quite brutally cold during the winter months, especially for someone unaccustomed to its dampness, and from the way Simon sat close to the hearth for its warmth, she suspected the boy had known kinder weather in his former home.

She tightened her grip on the boy's hand as they reached the cross street. "Today shall be a short jaunt into our new environs," Lucinda said as she leaned down to assure the child. Flat wagons and horses rushed past in a whirlwind of drab colors. With the boy by her side, Lucinda would require a larger opening to cross through the workday traffic. The child's shorter gait would cause her to adjust her step. "Stay close," she said softly to the child's ear, "and be aware of all the moving carts." The boy nodded his understanding as his eyes grew in size. "After the next wagon," Lucinda announced.

As she stepped from the curb—in anticipation of the their sprint, Lucinda tugged gently to nudge the boy into action. When the wagon cleared their position, she set a quick pace. Thankfully, the boy followed her example. Within seconds, they reached the opposing side, and Lucinda released the breath she held. Pausing briefly, she straightened her shoulders before entering the side street sporting several makeshift stalls, which displayed less than fresh vegetables. She sighed with resignation as she inspected the offerings. The life she had known as a child, one of the country gentry, often felt as if she had been another person completely. When Matthew Warren had announced his intention to buy a commission in the British military, Lucinda had not blinked a lash. Instead, she had accepted her duty, first to finish her years in the schoolroom, and then to follow her husband's unit; after all, she was the daughter of Colonel and Mrs. Roderick Rightnour. Her mother, the fourth daughter of Viscount Ross, had taught Lucinda well.

"Four years of playing the fool," she grumbled. Lucinda pinched her upper thigh through the folds of her cloak and skirt to push away the tears, which pricked her lashes. She leaned down to speak to the boy. "We shall purchase a few potatoes and maybe some cabbage. If you see anything else you may desire, tell me." Again, the child nodded obediently.

Lucinda perused each stall before making her choices. When Simon paused to admire a basket of apples, she purchased one as a treat for after their evening meal. No one who ever observed her and Simon together would think the boy hers. The child's hair, dark, nearly black, while hers a golden blonde, with light brown strands. His eyes were dark and his skin the color of those who spent time in the sun. Her pale skin held gold tones: the contrast often shocked her when she touched the child.

Over the previous week, she had often searched for a bit of her late husband in the Simon, but Lucinda was sore to recognize any of Matthew in the boy. In those weak moments, she would convince herself the rolled and beribboned letter delivered within the child's grasp had been some sort of hoax, but immediately, Lucinda would recognize the truth of the letter's assertions. She knew exactly when Matthew practiced his betrayal. When young Simon had likely been conceived. When her husband had lain with another. The knowledge Captain Warren had preferred a woman, so unlike her, ate away at Lucinda's usual genial composure. It was as if one of the French volleys had landed squarely in her chest, burning its way to her heart.

She had added a bit of flour and sugar and salt to her purchases, as well as bacon and a few eggs. Placing everything carefully in the cloth bag she had brought with her, Lucinda caught Simon's hand again. The boy's fingers were cold. She made a mental note to knit the child a pair of mittens; he would require them if they were to remain together during the winter days, and it was her intention to see to the boy's physical growth. There was a small park nearly a mile's walk, but she would find a ball and permit the child to run freely several times per week. Her father had believed in physical

activity, as part of a child's education, for both boys and girls. "No child of mine will be cosseted away behind closed doors," the colonel had often asserted.

"Let us find a bit of warmth," she said encouragingly.

The boy fell in step beside her as Lucinda adjusted her reticule and her packages. "Could we borrow another book?" Simon asked as he tugged gently on her cloak.

Lucinda looked left and right before exiting the side street between two families. "We must wait until tomorrow." She looked harriedly about. The street traffic had increased dramatically since they had entered the small market. "We shall set our rooms to right, but tomorrow, we shall walk to the park and stop at the lending library on our return." Distractedly, she tightened her grip on his hand. "Did you finish the book I brought with us?"

"Yes, Ma'am." The child read beyond his young years. Evidently, the child had had a tutor, something she would never be in a place to provide for him. Just as she had promised to see to the child's physical well being, Lucinda was determined to aid in Simon's studies.

"We must cross again." Lucinda rose on her toes for a better view. "After the coal cart," she announced. Keeping her eyes on the cart, she stepped from the curb, and, as before, she tugged on the child's hand.

"I wish for a book on the war," the child declared boldly. "I wish to know more of my father."

The boy's words caught Lucinda by surprise, and her steps faltered just long enough for the horse traffic to change. A mule brayed loudly as a local vendor used a banded stick to slap its hindquarters. Meanwhile, a small pony bucked at its harness and added to the clatter. Lucinda glanced down at the boy and accelerated her pace, but it was too late. She looked up again as several barrels of beer bumped along the uneven stones before and behind her. She caught the boy into her arms and tossed him into the back of a vegetable cart, just as one of the small barrels slammed hard against her legs. Lucinda fought for her balance: finally, one of those rushing to her aid caught her arm.

"Ye be well?" the snagged-tooth man implored.

Lucinda flushed with embarrassment as a crowd gathered. The street grew eerily quiet. Righting her stance, she nodded her gratitude to the man, but her eyes searched for the child. "Simon! Simon!" she called out, attempting to see beyond the onlookers. "Simon?"

"Here, Ma'am." The boy elbowed his way through the crowd to bury his tearful face in her skirts.

Lucinda instinctively knelt before the child and wrapped the boy in her embrace. "Are you injured?" she whispered.

A loud snort announced young Simon meant to be strong. "My fault," he hiccupped.

Lucinda caressed the boy's cheek. "It is no one's fault." Her ankle throbbed, and she suspected it would be a bright shade of purple tomorrow. "May we go home?" she whispered, and the child nodded.

Straightening, she acknowledged the crowd. "I am gladdened by your concern for the boy and me. I shall likely experience a tender ankle tomorrow, but the child and I shall recover." She wished desperately to remove her boot to examine her injury. With that, Lucinda took a tentative step forward. She kept a brave face and did not wince.

A plump woman handed Simon his lost hat, and Lucinda made a point of extending her gratitude. Mrs. Peterman, her landlady, met them at their door. "I thought I might require a new letter," the woman announced as she hustled them into the dark hallway. "I sees it all from the window," which likely meant the landlady had spied on her comings and goings.

"We are only a bit roughed," Lucinda assured. "Simon and I shall be right as nails in a few days. Shall we not, Simon?"

The boy kept his eyes downcast, but he answered, "Yes, Ma'am."

Lucinda had permitted Mrs. Peterman to believe the boy was hers. The landlady had asked few questions, and Lucinda had gladly kept her own counsel. "If'n ye require anything ye send the boy down to me," Mrs. Peterman called as Lucinda gingerly climbed the stairs.

"I shall, Ma'am." Lucinda leaned heavily against the rail. "Come along, Simon. I shall require your assistance."

* * *

Three days. Carter smiled through the personal pain. For three days his father had turned every conversation to Lawrence Lowery's endeavors. *It is a good thing I love and admire my brother,* he thought ironically. *Or else I might wish to strangle Law.*

"I shall attempt to keep your father occupied," the baroness said softly as they strolled along the wharf. Carter enjoyed the comforting feel of her fingers on his arm, an acknowledgement of her love. When he had served in the East, he had actually missed his mother's good sense and her company. Of course, he had never mentioned such longings to the others. They would have teased him as being a "babe in the womb" and it had been difficult enough to prove him worthy of the honor of being chosen to such an elite group. As his unit's youngest, Carter required not another reason for his mates to label him. "Although I spoke of being away for a year, I suspect six months may be more to the baron's limits."

Carter patted the back of her hand. "I understand, Mother. You are placing your happiness on hold to permit Lawrence to redefine his role as Blakehell's heir."

His mother cackled, "Oh, my darling, Carter." She patted his cheek. "You think we all as altruistic as are you." Her gloved hand caressed his chin. "I would love to claim your goodness, but I must confess I have long wished to see part of the world beyond Derbyshire and London, but Niall has always claimed Blake's Run would suffer in our absence. I unapologetically used Lawrence's situation with Arabella to leverage my own desires. Your father experienced regret at your brother's learning of his manipulations. When I spoke on Law's behalf, the baron agreed to withdraw, and I seized the opportunity to advance my wishes. If I could, I would visit all the lands you have known. You have no idea how envious I have been of your youth and your freedom."

Carter thought of the slums and the palaces he had seen. Both held a country's most devious men. He chose to speak more candidly than usual, "Of course, Father would know remorse at losing control of Law's every thought. His remaining children have known no such care."

His mother's expression tightened with disapproval. "Your father cares deeply for each of his children, and Niall Lowery would walk through fire for you and your siblings." Her lips were taut with emotion. "I cannot deny the baron has been singular in his need to direct Lawrence's steps."

“The baron’s compulsion to control Lawrence...” he began.

The baroness stopped suddenly. Her eyes darkened in condemnation. “Carter Stephan Lowery,” she said in the way of all mothers when they call their children by their full names. “I shall not hear you speak poorly of your father. You hold no knowledge of why the baron acts upon his compunctions, and, therefore, have no right to criticize.”

Carter held her hand over his heart. “Then explain it to me,” he pleaded. “I am disposed to know the truth of your narrative.”

“It is not my tale to share,” the baroness said softly. She caressed his cheek. “Why can you not turn your head to the baron’s stubbornness? Your sisters have learned to accept your father’s ways. Niall’s singularity has caused no real harm.”

Carter said incredulously. “Father,” he hissed, “meant to make a match between Law and Miss Dryburgh! The baron would have *loved* Lawrence enough to see his eldest son miserable.”

His mother protested, “I would have put a stop to the baron’s maneuverings.”

“Possibly. That is if you had returned to Blake Run’s in time to know of Lawrence’s dilemma,” Carter corrected. “If you recall, you were in Staffordshire for Marie’s lying in. By the time you had heard of the match, Law would have been pledged to Miss Dryburgh, and Lawrence would not honorably call off the nuptials. Father would never have tolerated such shame on the family name.”

“Perhaps,” the baroness said enigmatically. “I would like to think Lawrence would have stood his ground.”

Carter held both his doubts and his words. “I am pleased Lawrence and Arabella have found each other. I pray my new sister gives Law many sons to secure the future baron’s peace.”

The baroness whispered, “And I pray the present baron sees those children and knows his efforts to assure the barony’s future has come to fruition.” Carter could not imagine Blake’s Run under anyone but Niall Lowery’s care; although he knew his father had not assumed his reign until Carter was well into leading strings; there had been great ceremony when Nigel Lowery passed on, and his only son became Baron Blakehell.

They looked up to observe the baron’s approach. His father had personally seen to the loading of their luggage aboard ship. “The ship is sound,” the baron announced. Carter wished to remind his father, he had already sent men on board to examine the ship’s reliability, but he bit back his protest. Despite their often-contentious nature, Carter would never permit his parents to know danger. His position as “Shepherd’s” assistant permitted Carter access to the ship and beyond.

“Captain Orson has an excellent record,” Carter assured. “Your journey to France will be a short one. I have sent word ahead. Several of my associates will greet you and escort you to the villa I have procured for your use. You will have access to a chaise and four, as well.”

His mother squeezed Carter’s arm. “Your diligence on our behalf is duly noted, is it not, Niall?”

The baron’s cheeks flushed with color. *From anger or embarrassment?* Carter wondered. “Of course, it is noted,” his father said brusquely. “Yet, it is no more than what should be expected from a dutiful son.”

Dutiful is crossing each "t," Carter considered. *I have known nothing but duty all my life, but never the much-desired praise for a minor son.* He dutifully said, "Then I am pleased to have been of service."

"Come along, Fernalia," his father said. "I would prefer to be one of the first aboard. Less riff raff in the small boats." The baron extended his hand to his wife.

She nodded her agreement before turning to Carter. "You will see to your sisters' cares. They have capable husbands, but I trust no one but you to know what is best for the family. You are my rock—my anchor," she said seriously.

It had always been so. He and the baroness had held a relationship different from all the others. "I will make a nuisance with each," he said with an easy grin. "And I will show Baby Harry a sketch of his grandmother so the boy does not forget his 'Nana' in your absence."

Tears misted the baroness's eyes. "Do not say as such, or I shall press the baron into returning to Field Hall to spend more time with Maria and Sheffield."

Carter placed his mother's hand into the baron's. She wrapped her fingers about her husband's arm. "Enjoy your journey, Mother. You have many years to spoil Baby Harry. It is important to hold no regrets. See part of the world beyond England's shores and know your family adores you." He extended his hand to his father. "Be safe, Sir."

The baron reached into his inside pocket. Removing a thick folded document, he handed it to Carter. "Give this to Lawrence, if, Heaven forbid, an accident occurs. My will addresses the estate and its holdings."

Carter placed the paper inside his jacket. "And this?" he asked curiously.

The baron shrugged away the question. "There is no need unless the unspeakable occurs. I trust you to keep the document in a safe place."

Carter nodded his agreement. "Inform me of your return. If it is available, I will send the yacht."

His mother kissed his cheek one last time before walking away with the baron. Carter was tempted to read his father's words. He possessed the skill to remove the sealing wax and later replace it without anyone knowing of his duplicity, but he could not be so callous as to break his father's trust.

He was nearing his waiting coach when he heard his name called. Carter turned to greet Symington Henderson, one of the Realm's post war recruits. "You sought me out?" he asked as the third son of Lord George Henderson, the Earl of Johnseine, approached.

The man bowed in respect. "Shepherd wished me to locate you. I called in at Kent, and the duke spoke of your escorting your family to Dover."

"What is Shepherd's pleasure?" Carter said sarcastically as he accepted the written instructions from Henderson.

"Something of a suspicious Chinese ship in Liverpool. I am to assist you. Monroe has ridden north to retrieve Baron Swenton," Henderson explained as Carter read Shepherd's missive.

He slid the note into his pocket. "Have you secured horses?"

"Aye, Sir."

"Permit me to give my coachman instructions, and then we will depart."

Henderson nodded his agreement before striding away in the direction of the public stables.

Carter secured his father's papers in a large case under the coach's seat. "Tell Merriweather to send clothing on to Liverpool and to secure these papers in my private safe," he told his trusted footman Bines. "I have no idea how long I will be in the port city. I will send word for you and Merriweather to follow when I know the details."

"Aye, Sir."

"Be of good speed," he instructed. "I prefer not to be long without Merriweather's care."

"Mr. Merriweather will not fail you, Sir."

Carter nodded his farewell and quickly followed in Henderson's footsteps. The man was waiting by the gate with two geldings. Carter accepted the reins of the gray and brown one. He hated to know a saddle so soon; in reality, he had another week of his holiday remaining. He had thought to hire a housekeeper for Huntingborne Abbey while time permitted and to set his small staff to several tasks before returning to his position in London. "So much for well placed plans," he grumbled as he adjusted the saddle's stirrups.

"Mr. Shepherd is quite thorough in his instructions," Henderson ventured.

"Shepherd demands no more of me than I do of myself." Carter declared as he set his foot into the stirrup. Catching the horn, Carter lifted his weight to sit upon the seat, but as he shoved off the unfamiliar horse pranced in place; and Carter released the horn as his foot pulled free. At that same moment, a bullet whizzed over his head.

He spun around to find cover behind a large rain barrel. Henderson was pressed close behind him. Carter scanned the area, but saw nothing unusual.

"My God, Sir!" Henderson said on a thready exhale. "If the horse had not pulled free of your grasp, the bullet would have hit you square in the heart."