

Chapter One

“What is so bloody urgent that you had me summoned like some imp in need of a good scolding?”

Richard Bolton, the Earl of Belcrave sat behind his heavy Jacobean kneehole desk and looked at his oldest son and heir, Thomas, Viscount Bolton, who stood in a temper admonishing him for disturbing his evening. Thomas was dressed in formal attire wearing a black tailcoat and pantaloons, a white pristine shirt, crisp cravat, and waistcoat embroidered with silver thread. His black cape was thrown over one shoulder to reveal its red satin lining and his tall black beaver hat stood at a slight angle on his head. Even vexed, he was the epitome of a tall, dashing and handsome lord, and was certainly no man’s fool.

The earl sighed wishing his younger son, Harry, had an iota of Thomas’ sense, and typically blamed his wife for Harry’s caring and trusting nature. Regardless of all manner of instruction, Harry still remained too kind a fellow as evidenced by his recent folly. Belcrave returned

Thomas' scowl and waved him to the chair he had failed to take when he entered.

Thomas rolled his eyes, frustrated he would not be taking his leave soon. He looked down at the rectangular oak chair, a remnant from the reign of James the First with its high and stiff back and resigned to having his patience tested. With a flair most bucks coveted, he removed his tall beaver hat and cape with a swing of his arm, dropped his cape over the back of his chair, and placed his hat on his lap as he sat. He immediately tapped a tattoo on the top of his tall hat as he waited for his father to explain the reason behind his summons. The beat of his dancing fingers echoed within the silence of his father's study until his impatience compelled him to ask, "Well, what the deuce is so important?"

The earl sighed again, leaned back in his chair and interlaced his fingers to place his hands on his thickened waist. Streaks of grey marked his black hair and lines creased at his eyes, most likely from all the squinting he did when his temper rose, as it did now. Years of indulgences had turned his once fit body soft and while he was still thought to be handsome, his physique was kindly referred to as robust.

Thomas mirrored his father's manner and reclined back, not an easy feat with a chair designed for a person to sit erect, but he was damned if he would sit like he was about to be reprimanded. He slid down on his seat and stretched out his legs, crossing them at his ankles, while begrudgingly accepting he would not be returning to the

opera as he had hoped, or to the activities assured to him by the ever accommodating Lady Selby. The widowed lady had blatantly flirted with him and made an overture he was about to accept when his father's missive inconveniently summoned him. He conceded it was most likely for the best. Widowed ladies who were open to an indiscretion often became troublesome when they expected more for their one night of amusement.

"I need you to fetch your brother and his wife," the earl stated soberly, his features marked with disappointment.

Astonished by his father's announcement, Thomas pulled himself up in his chair. He leaned forward and asked to confirm what he heard, "Married? Harry? My coxcomb of a little brother is married? To whom, and why might I ask was I not invited to the wedding? For my own curiosity, pray, tell me, when and where the happy event took place?"

"I have no bloody idea," retorted the earl angrily. Over the years, the earl had shrugged off his younger son's follies, believing his antics were part of him growing into the man he was expected to be, but marriage to a woman of little consequence, was something the earl never anticipated.

"Are you to tell me your spare eloped and you had no idea?" asked Thomas. "Who is she?"

The earl sat up in his chair and looked down at the letter that lay on his desk. After a quick perusal, he informed, "Rebecca Barrington."

“Barrington, you say?” asked Thomas. “By Jove, he did not marry the daughter of the man who called out Damburten, causing his own and Damburten’s death and subsequent scandal?”

“It would have been a tragedy if Barrington’s son had not shot Damburten dead,” stated the earl soberly.

“Well, Damburten showed no honor in shooting early. His dishonor would have forced him to live abroad. The law forbids dueling and sees it as murder now if there is a death. How in heaven’s name did Harry get involved and married to Barrington’s daughter?”

“I have no idea,” said the earl again. “Last I saw Harry, I sent him to the country to rusticate until he was in funds to pay off his gambling debts. I did not want him to get any ideas of approaching a moneylender. That incident he was in nearly killed him. The boy has the worst luck at cards, mostly because he does not play to win, but to participate without thought to what has been played. Whoever heard of such nonsense?”

“Harry likes people. Always has and loathes to be left out of any kind of play,” explained Thomas.

“Well, he has done it now and as usual, I must do what I can to intercede before the news of Harry’s nuptials becomes the latest parlour on dit.”

“What do you plan to do? The lad is married. Seems to me it is done.”

“I plan on ensuring this Rebecca does not make our family a laughing stock by taking her in hand; then, I plan on finding you a wife. It is high time you did your

duty and secure the future earldom of Belcrave before the line is tainted by Barrington blood.”

“I suggest you worry about Harry, father. I need no assistance in finding a wife, nor do I wish to at this time.”

“I don’t care what you wish,” the lines at the earl’s eyes deepened as he steeled them at his impertinent son. In a voice that would brook no rebuttal, he commanded, “I want you married and your wife increasing, but first, I want you to bring Harry and his new wife to me.”