

Dispatch from the Battle Front, March 1813

I am about to lay siege to the barbarians. Yes, I am embarking on my first Season, and my prize will not be a conquered land or the spoils of war, but something much less valuable: a husband!

I have come to the battlefield fitted out for war: armed to the teeth in sarcenet, velvet and silk, and a vast supply of simpering looks. I have already had my feet trod on three times in the course of dancing the quadrille, been told I look like an angel twice, and watched a young Buck split his breeches. It should prove to be an enjoyable time.

A Singular Lady

Chapter 1

London, 1813

Titania slammed the door with a fierce display of energy. She squinted her eyes against the burst of sunlight, blinding in comparison to the dimly-lit office from which she had just emerged.

“You would think,” she fumed, “a person’s demise would require they stop wreaking havoc with other people’s lives.”

A lump rose to her throat. “But not my father. His excesses live on, even if he does not.” Titania dug blindly in her reticule for her handkerchief, careful not to let the papers, the wretched proof of her father’s perfidy, slip from under her arm. She wiped her eyes, blaming her tears on the sun.

She looked around the London street where she stood, marking the subtle changes since she had been inside. The shadows were lengthening and the warmth of the spring day was beginning to ebb into evening, but that was as it should be. The world showed no signs of distress for her situation.

A rank of hackney coaches stood awaiting hire to her left and she turned toward them, her immediate instinct to head home and bury her head under the covers. Preferably for the next ten years. But London was not Ravensthorpe, and she had not taken three steps before she knew that she could not bear to return to her aunt's house in Russell Square straight away. Her heart was at full gallop, her thoughts were in a jumble, and she had no wish to see her overbearing Aunt Bestley or her own talkative maid Sarah just yet.

What she needed was a long ride. Galloping until both she and her horse were breathless had helped her solve many problems in the country. But as a long ride was impossible – first of all, she smiled to herself, she had no horse – then she could most certainly walk a long while instead. She would return to her aunt's house on foot. An unaccompanied lady was certainly no more shocking than a father who had left all his money to his mistress.

Titania spun around abruptly, smashing her nose into a wall. She dropped her reticule, one of her gloves, and the papers as well, which scattered on the ground about her. As she regained her balance, she saw that it was not a wall she had struck, but a man, a broad-chested man, who was already stooping

down to gather up her belongings.

"I beg your pardon, miss," he said in an amused voice. "I seem to have been masquerading as a door."

"Where did you come from, anyway?" Titania muttered as she crouched down to gather her belongings from the dusty street. The man bent down to help her, holding her papers with a patient air as she crammed them into her reticule. A scent of musk and leather wafted towards her as he placed the last of the papers in her hand.

"America. Boston, where the ships leave from, to be specific," he replied, a hint of laughter edging into his voice. "Why, have we met?"

"Certainly not," she bristled. "You don't have an accent," she said in an accusing voice as she drew her now bedraggled glove onto her hand.

The man chuckled again. A soft, throaty laugh. She looked up at him, a commanding set-down on the tip of her tongue, of the sort that always worked when she was employing her Managing Ways, but when she looked into his eyes she felt dizzy and even more flustered.

His green eyes were tinged with gold, like a forest being lit by the sun. Tiny laugh-lines branched from the corners. His lashes were long and full, their delicate beauty in contrast with his manly, rather stern, features. His dark

complexion suggested he spent a lot of time in the wind and sun, and his tawny hair, cut shorter than fashionable, gave him an autocratic look.

Titania rose, ignoring the stranger as he offered his arm for support. "If you are done discomposing me, I must be on my way."

"And where might that be, Miss?" said the tall man, his eyes still alight.

"I am sure it is of no concern of yours," she said with a sniff, and set off down the road. As she marched off, she was acutely aware of the man behind her, sure he was still watching her, still laughing with those extraordinary eyes.

Edwin Worthington, Earl Oakley, was still smiling in the afterglow of his encounter with the flustered, rude, and impossibly striking young woman he had run into outside as he made his way into Mr. Hawthorne's offices. He lowered his long frame into a chair, still warm from its previous occupant, and studied his solicitor.

"Good evening, sir," said Edwin. "It is nice to finally meet the correspondent of my good news. May I first inquire if you know the identity of the distressed young woman – black hair, white skin, blue eyes — I bumped into on the street outside your office just now?"

"I do, sir," the man replied with a sigh. "She is the Honourable Titania Stanhope, daughter of the late Baron Ravensthorpe. She is to make her come-out this Season; it has been twice delayed on account of the deaths of her parents, her father's coming just last year. I fear the report I was compelled to give her was most unsettling.

"But," he said, drawing some papers towards the center of his desk, "now to your affairs, my lord, and a more welcome report, I am pleased to say."

Edwin nodded in assent, but his thoughts still lingered on the woman who had so briefly and tantalizingly placed her ungloved hand on his chest, whose deep blue eyes had stormed like an angry sea when she looked at him. So that was the daughter of the infamous Baron Ravensthorpe, he with the mind of a scholar but the heart of a rake.

"Do you know how she broke her nose?" he asked as Mr. Hawthorne assembled his papers on his vast desk.

"Pardon?" The older man looked puzzled.

"Miss Stanhope, that lady I just ran into...the one with the black hair. And the crooked nose. Do you know how she broke it? Obviously it did not happen recently, but it is unusual to occur to someone who has not spent time in the boxing ring."

Why she would have mentioned such an accident to her solicitor in the first place was another excellent question, but Edwin ignored that irritatingly inquisitive voice in his head.

Mr. Hawthorne gave him as much of a glare as his courtliness would allow. "Really, my lord, I could not say. But if you will just turn your attention here . . ."

Edwin settled back in his chair, stretched his legs in front of him, and waved a hand towards the older gentleman.

"I beg your pardon, sir. Please proceed."

Mr. Hawthorne leaned forward in his eagerness to impart the news. "In sum, my lord, you have a handsome fortune. It is unfortunate you were not apprised of your inheritance for so long, but the boon is that the capital has accrued handsomely, even since your relative's demise. The house in Belgrave Square is awaiting your arrival, as is the manor house in Hampshire. Of course, there are a considerable amount of decisions to be made, but you can dispose of them within a few months," he concluded.

Mr. Hawthorne regarded Edwin with an expectant air, clearly waiting for a reaction. At last, Edwin spoke. He held Mr. Hawthorne's eyes so the solicitor would know he was required to comprehend every syllable.

"Thank you, Hawthorne. You have done well by me, sir, and by my unexpected good fortune. I trust you will continue to serve me as well now, for I shall ask you to hold this matter in total confidence. I do not wish it to be known in Society that I have inherited anything more than a few sheep and some dilapidated houses."

Edwin addressed the man's unspoken question, feeling his jaw clench as he spoke. "I have had some experience of what it is like to be viewed as nothing more than a fortune-per-annum, Hawthorne. I prefer to meet Society again on my own terms. I do not wish to be looked upon as if I lined my hat with thousand-pound notes. Do I make myself clear?"

Mr. Hawthorne nodded vigorously, his startled eyes peering at Edwin from behind his spectacles. Edwin could not fault his surprise; they both knew it was not at all customary for gentlemen of the ton to be reticent about good fortune. And the message Mr. Hawthorne had given his client was extraordinary good fortune.

"You may rely upon me, Lord Worthington," said Mr. Hawthorne.

Edwin nodded and stood to take his leave. The solicitor rose also, and Edwin stretched his hand out across the desk. The shorter, slighter man extended his own; Edwin clasped it, careful not to squeeze too hard. He knew his grip was that of a boxer, not a gentleman of leisure.

"I am depending on you, Hawthorne," he said, moving to the door. "You are charged to remain silent on all aspects of my inheritance. If I should hear that someone has been talking, I shall come here first ..." He smiled, but his meaning was clear.

"You have my word on it, my lord," Hawthorne replied.

"Damn him." Titania spoke softly at first, then repeated her words more loudly. Not that her father could hear her where he was now. She found a particular satisfaction in uttering the shocking phrase. And she was in no hurry to return home, even though a lady would never be caught outdoors without an escort. She swung her head up and slowed her stride to a deliberate pace.

Damn it, she was going to take her time. Always doing the right thing had certainly not gotten her anywhere: twenty-three, penniless, and unwed. Wonderful. If she just rushed, she could fling herself into the Thames and would not be missed until dinner.

Why did he do it? Did she and her younger brother disappoint him somehow? And how did she not realize what had happened? He had always left everything to her, and she had just assumed the will was the same as the one she had seen a few years earlier. Titania shook her head at her own carelessness. She should have guessed he might do something like this.

She paid no attention to the lengthening shadows as dusk fell or the curious looks she received. The streets were rapidly thinning of pedestrians, but Titania remained oblivious, immersed in her own world. Her suddenly quite destitute world.

Titania had no real choice now. Not if she wanted Thibault, already giving indication of following his father's feckless nature, to be able to raise his children on Ravensthorpe, and not in a debtors' prison. Thibault's future and her servants' livelihoods were in her hands.

She and Thibault had enough to live "very modestly," according to Mr. Hawthorne. To be sure, she had no doubt she could live very modestly until she gradually lowered herself into her grave.

Or she could beat fortune at its own game. She could prove herself truly her father's daughter and gamble it all. She would have the Season her mother had always desired for her, and capture the rich husband she must have because of her father's rashness.

Reducing the problem to an equation – one Titania plus one eligible and insanely wealthy bachelor equaled survival – made it a lot easier for her to stomach. Titania had always considered herself clever at problem solving, though she had to admit Euclid's geometry paled at this difficulty. If she could not find a way out of her dilemma by the end of the Season, all would

be lost with Ravensthorpe and Thibault. Not to mention her own future.

She must choose the bold course, and she must succeed.

Having come to this resolve, Titania found she had also come near to the end of Southampton Row, where it emptied into Russell Square. The various mansions loomed with careless magnificence, and she forgot, for the moment at least, her own troubles as she drank in the patent largesse of London's elite. Her mouth gaped open at the sight of an obviously newly completed house. It was massive, with more windows than Titania could count, and she got dizzy peering up to where the building met the sky. Her eyes wandered to the other houses, marveling at their sumptuous facades.

Thus absorbed, she was doubly startled to hear a gruff voice almost in her ear. "See here, Miss, it's not a go to stare, now innit?" said the voice. "Looks so you're needin' some manners – should I throw you over my knee or is there summat else you'd like me to do more?"

Titania whirled to look at the man who was addressing her in such a vulgar manner. He was apparently a common laborer, a muscular man who had obviously hauled a lot of bricks in his lifetime. He smelled as if he had more recently lifted a great many tankards of ale. He was so close to her she could see the individual coarse black hairs protruding from his nose. One of his beefy hands reached to snake about her waist, the other rested on his hip.

“I would like you, sir, to leave me alone,” Titania said in what she hoped was her most commanding tone, although she was quaking inside. “What I am regarding is none of your concern, and I would be much obliged if you would let me pass.”

“Oh no. You don’t flit away like a pretty bird,” the man said with a leer, the intent of which was clear even to a sheltered country miss such as Titania.

“See here,” he continued, “you and me has a bargain to discuss, the same being what I could do to you and how many times.”

Titania froze. A lot of use her self-assurance and ability to balance a ledger were. Her common sense would have been more useful now. Why did she have to decide just now, in London, a thriving metropolis with which she was utterly unfamiliar, to be so reckless? She was an idiot. She drew a deep breath to quell the onrushing panic and opened her mouth to speak when she was startled by another male voice.

“Sir,” the deep voice spoke behind her, “do you have business with this lady? Because if not, I believe she asked you to let her by. Now.”

Turning, Titania saw a man who was not as enormous as the brute who had accosted her, but one whose muscular build had been fed on fewer beefs, ales and suet puddings. She felt . . . was it safe? as the new arrival drew off his gloves with the air of a man who knew just what he was about. Then, just

as methodically, he undid his cravat, tossing it to the ground in a negligently confident manner.

The ugly customer, who by now had his paw grasping her waist, barked a laugh. Titania felt his anger as he gripped her tighter, pinching her skin in a painful grasp. How would her rescuer prevail? That he would was not in doubt, even though she could not fathom how.

“It’s none of yours, but I do have business with this wench,” the man spat, “and if a gentry-cove knew what was good for him, he’d be the one what was passing by so I could take care of it.”

“Is that so?” her rescuer queried, drawing nearer. Titania recognized him as the man to whom she had been so snappish just a few minutes before outside Mr. Hawthorne’s office. He wore sober, old-fashioned garb proclaiming a lack of acquaintance with a crack tailor, or even with current fashion. And his wardrobe was not just old-fashioned, but old: his coat was shiny at the elbows, as if he had spent long hours leaning on them. His boots were worn and dusty, the leather faded to a matte black.

He must be a clerk or tradesman of some sort, she thought, although she had never seen a tradesman with such an air of command. The man’s face had lost all of the good cheer and humor it held when he was helping her to collect her papers, and the laughter that was in his voice then was now replaced with a steely edge.

“Let go of the lady,” he repeated. A vile oath issued from the mouth of Titania’s captor.

“Is that so?” the man replied, his tone hardening.

His green eyes suddenly glinted, the gold speckles in them lighting up with a fiery anger. With a movement so quick Titania had no time to flinch, he shot out a fist and landed a blow square in the ruffian’s chin. The man let go of Titania and fell as if struck with a pole axe.

The green-eyed man looked down at his prey – it hardly seemed right to call him an opponent – and seeing him insensate, drew closer to Titania. “You are not harmed, are you, miss?” he asked with a tone of concern.

“No, no, no,” Titania jabbered. She drew a shallow breath and took a step backward, stumbling a little as she felt her legs tremble. He tucked her arm into his and moved her a few more feet away from the lummoX lying prone on the ground. She concentrated on breathing normally, then tried to speak in her usual calm tone.

“I am not harmed. I apologize for putting you in such a scrape as this ... although you did plant him quite a facer, did you not?” she said, lapsing into her brother’s boxing cant as relief at her rescue turned her nearly giddy. She looked up at him as she finished her sentence, and saw first that he had not

been shocked at her impropriety, but saw next that looking up at him was a different blunder.

His face loomed above hers, his green eyes focusing on her with an intensity that made her shiver. She lowered her eyes to his chest, but found that too was a mistake. The man's shirt was unbuttoned where he had loosed his cravat, exposing an expanse of smooth, muscled skin that made Titania desperate to lean against him and be enfolded in the arms she now knew were solid and strong.

Her pulse thudded in her chest. She had never felt so weak-kneed, so helpless, so ... girlish in the presence of a man.

She forced her eyes back up to his, trying to regain control.

“Thank you, sir, for your assistance once again. I am quite all right. I must be on my way home. It is just there, so I will not encounter any more mishaps.” She pointed with a shaky finger to a tall townhouse across the street. The man just continued looking at her, his green eyes beginning to warm.

Titania wished the ground would open up and swallow her. This man was merely being gentlemanly, but she did not deserve his kindness. Given the disastrous happenings of the day, all she wanted, all she deserved, was to be alone to stew in her own misery.

“As you wish, miss,” said the stranger, inclining his head with a mocking air. “I have discomposed you once already today, and I should not wish to tempt you again . . . But first, before you go,” he said, bringing his hand up to her face to push an escaped tendril of hair back into her bonnet, “first let me put you to rights.” He tucked the stray tress into her bonnet, and then let his hand rest briefly on her cheek as if he could not stop himself from caressing her.

If merely looking into his eyes made her feel like a giddy girl, a state Titania couldn't recall ever experiencing, then she couldn't even name the feelings brought on by his touch. She quickly brushed his hand away from her face and tried hard to look anywhere but in his eyes. She felt as if all the breath had been knocked out of her, a slow, prickling sensation began creeping up the back of her legs toward the bottom of her spine, and she clutched her possessions tightly so she would not be tempted to reach out and touch him back.

“If you please, sir,” she said with as much of her Managing Ways as she could muster, “I would not have you presume. I thank you once again.”

Collecting what little pride she had left, she turned again toward her aunt's house, her back as straight as her wobbly legs would allow.

She closed her eyes briefly as she realized her day's ordeals were not over.

She had to look her father's sister in the eye and tell her the Stanhope name had been disgraced yet again. She shuddered at the prospect, and little more relished the vicious scold Sarah would give her, which she fully deserved, for going out about the town all alone.

Her Aunt Bestley was as comforting as ice down the back upon hearing the news. "No money at all, you say?" she queried Titania, disdain vying with disbelief for control of her tone.

"None." The syllable resonated in the sudden quiet of her aunt's sitting room. Titania stood facing her aunt. She refused to sit, as much because she might not be able to get up again as to show herself equal to her haughty relative.

Titania and her aunt had already come to an agreement about how much it would cost to sponsor her for the Season. Lady Bestley had seemed none too sanguine about her own daughter's chances for making a beneficial match, which would almost certainly lengthen with Titania on the scene. Her aunt had demanded a large sum for her trouble, which would assuage the pain if her daughter did not take.

"Well then, my girl," Lady Bestley said with a brisk air, "I see nothing for it but for you to return home at once. You will not be able to settle the bargain we made, and without a substantial dowry, there is little chance you would

be able to attract anybody of note to marry you. Especially with that unfortunate nose.

"If you are lucky," she continued, as if it mattered not a whit to her whether Titania were lucky, "if you are very lucky, you can persuade one of the local gentry to marry you, although I do not know who would, given my brother's many disgraces. Who could have thought he would behave so reprehensibly, even from beyond the grave? I certainly can not afford to have my daughter exposed to such a scandal as you."

"But, Aunt, going back to Ravensthorpe is precisely what I must not do. I must have my Season, in the present circumstance even more than before."

"Be that as it may," said her aunt. "I will not be a party to your behavior. If you are to cause a scandal, as your parents did with their marriage, than you will have to do it on your own. I will not stoop to help such a thing." She clamped her lips together as she finished, and Titania knew that was her aunt's last word on the subject.

"Very well, Aunt. If you really refuse to assist me, than may I remind you of our bargain?" Her aunt waved her hand in dismissal, but Titania held up her own hand in an authoritative gesture.

"Hear me out. I pledge you will have the money I promised you, and I will double that sum if I do succeed in getting married by the end of the Season. I

still have my mother's jewelry, and I will sell the pieces to pay my debt to you, if necessary, so you can be assured you will get what is owed you, no matter what the outcome may be for me. Your only obligation is not to reveal the details of my father's will."

Lady Bestley's face revealed her unwilling interest at the proposal, and Titania continued. "I will handle my come-out myself, and just watch me snare the wealthiest man in England." Even if he's as bald as an egg with only one leg to hop about on, she finished to herself.

Her Aunt Bestley saw a bargain, but knew she could turn the screw a little tighter. The mole on her face quivered as she spoke. "You will not reside here."

It was not a question. "I doubt you will succeed in finding a husband – but I will not have it said that I dishonored an obligation to family."

Titania nodded her head in agreement. Without speaking another word, she climbed up the stairs to the room she had barely known as her own, telling a surprised Sarah to pack again. They were going to look for a suitable house for the Season.

"At this time, Mrs. Baldwin," Titania said airily to her prospective landlady as she surveyed the cheerful, if slightly threadbare, house, "I do not have the

authority to transfer funds from the family's account. But that is only a formality; you may be assured I will not live on tick forever."

Mrs. Baldwin seemed too engrossed in eyeing the elegant rose-colored gown in which Titania had arrived to pay overmuch attention to the detail of payment. After choking down the dry scones and watery tea her new landlady offered, the lease was signed. Titania and Sarah spent the rest of the day coughing on crumbs, unpacking the trunks, and figuring out how to survive until more staff could be brought down from Ravensthorpe to the modest house in Little Chiswick Street.

When Sarah could be heard snoring in her room one flight above, Titania allowed herself a full five minutes of heartfelt sobbing in her bedroom. Then, wiping the tears from her eyes, she pulled on her dressing-gown, lit a candlestick, and found her way to the escritoire in the drawing room. She drew a deep breath and dashed off a letter to her governess, Miss Tynte, whom she hoped had not settled too firmly into her retirement. The room was silent, except for the scritch of her pen upon the paper.

My dear Elizabeth,

Please return to London at once. Don't be distressed, I am well. I am not hurt nor in danger. But my future hangs in the balance and it is vital that you come.

I send you my love,

Titania

P.S.: Bring your best gowns.

She drew forth another sheet of paper and wrote a brief note to Sanders at Ravensthorpe, commanding he bring himself immediately to London, together with whoever among the servants he thought would be essential to manage a young lady's house in town. She made no explanation; the servants had certainly been through enough havey-cavey business with her father to countenance whatever she might present to them.

She laid down her pen, still unsure of the feasibility of her plan. Would Miss Tynte take on the charade Titania had fabricated?