

CHAPTER 1

January 1869

Lord Sebastian Griffiths was pacing around the office of his solicitor, Dennis Burrows. Burrows was the only person Sebastian could turn to at a time like this. Burrows and Sebastian had been good friends since their days at university together.

The problem was that Sebastian's mother was fatally ill and had announced that her dying wish was to see her only son—not to mention only living heir—married before she died.

Normally Sebastian wouldn't stop at anything to provide or do whatever his beloved mother asked. But this was the one thing Sebastian hadn't seen coming. He had no objections to marriage itself, but it just wasn't something he had ever desired for himself. In fact, it was the last thing Sebastian wanted.

He was happy with the life he had: he possessed more money than he could ever spend and did whatever and went wherever he pleased. The idea of answering to someone—and more importantly, a woman who whined and nagged—well, it simply sent him into a cold sweat.

Burrows had been so-called happily married for the last nine years but had gone grey over those years and become rounder around the middle and basically tired looking. Many men his age were. Sebastian was thirty-eight years old, with not a single grey hair in sight, and still in the same shape he'd been in as a youth. More importantly, he was free and answered to no one. There was no wife to embarrass him at social events, no little woman putting demands on his time.

What in God's name was his mother thinking? *Get married?*

"Don't you have a thing to drink in this office?" snapped Sebastian.

"No, and you know that. Now sit down; you're making me dizzy."

Sebastian reluctantly sat in one of the leather chairs in front of Burrows's desk. The office was a relatively large room, decorated in a dark, imposing green colour, with heavy, bulky furniture. The office was stuffed with shelves and cabinets. The solicitor's desk was always piled high with numerous papers and files.

But Sebastian liked the room; it was too messy and crowded for him to work in, but it had a very masculine feel.

Glancing around the room, Sebastian wondered if this was Burrows's retreat from his wife and home life. Susanna, Burrows's wife, wouldn't approve, but he doubted Burrows even allowed her into his office.

Their home was decorated in a very different style, much lighter, and it was spotless. The female touches were very dominant in Burrows's home.

Oh God, would this wife he was meant to produce out of thin air want to place her delicate little female touches

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around his homes? Would she redecorate and move his furniture around when they worked perfectly well where they were?

Oh, God! If he married, then *she* would be in charge of the running of his homes, right down to the very meals he ate. Groaning to himself, Sebastian leaned forward in his chair and cupped his face in his hands.

“Cheer up, old man! Married life isn’t that bad—it does have its perks.”

What? he wondered. Like a woman in your bed whenever you please? He already had that. At this point in time Sebastian had two mistresses, Mary and Delores, who were both widows in their mid forties. Both of them had already had children from their marriages and were living comfortably enough, particularly with his financial aid. Neither woman wanted anything else from him; he could take from their bodies and not have to even talk to them if he wasn’t in the mood. They both knew what he wanted when he visited and both gave gladly. He liked to think of it as almost a service he was providing to them, too—the sexual release of their bodies but no husband to put up with.

More importantly, he could walk back out of their doors without having to answer to anyone. He didn’t have to say sorry because he hadn’t had the time for them in weeks; he didn’t have to listen to their female chitchat about nonsense. And if he got bored with one of them, he could pay her off with a simple gift, which he didn’t even have to deliver himself. What in God’s name did he want a wife for?

“Sebastian . . . Sebastian?”

“Yes, sorry.” He gave himself a mental shake. “What was my mother thinking? I can’t get married! I don’t want a little woman in my life.”

Leaning forward, he put his head in his hands again. “Mother is asking too much this time.”

Burrows leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers together over his proud stomach, causing the chair to creak under his weight.

“Sebastian, there is always a solution to any problem. I believe you’re the one who always tells me that.”

“I can’t see how this time.” Sebastian rubbed his temples; he felt like a caged animal, trapped within the whole marriage problem. His life had been exactly as he wanted it before all this nonsense. God, he needed a drink.

Sebastian sat up straight again and glanced around the room, hoping to see the drink he desperately needed, but he knew full well he wouldn’t find it among Burrows’s books and files.

“Let’s look at it as a business transaction. What would you want in a wife?” asked Burrows.

“That’s the problem. I don’t.”

“Work with me here,” said Burrows. He leaned forward in his own chair, which made an alarmingly loud noise. He rested his elbow on his large, cluttered desk. “Well man, what do you want in a wife?”

Sebastian sighed to himself and looked towards one of Burrows’s many bookshelves piled high. “All right . . . I would want a pretty face, a body to enjoy, someone who acts like a lady, makes no demands on my time, knows what to say and do at any given time, can host any banquet or party I throw at her—”

Sebastian stopped short upon hearing an odd sound coming from Burrows. Looking at him, Sebastian found Burrows still sitting in the same position but with both his eyebrows raised and an odd smile on his face.

“You have thought a lot about this, I see,” said Burrows.

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“What? *No!* I don’t want a wife.”

“No!” Burrows raised his hand and counted down each finger: “What you want is a whore in your bed, a housekeeper to run your manors, and—what was the other thing—oh yes, a perfect partner to sit daintily at your arm.” The man burst into loud laughter. “Sebastian, old friend, no wonder you have never married!”

“And what does that mean?” Sebastian said, feeling his blood start to boil and his back stiffen.

“You are after quite a woman, that’s all! Take it easy,” Burrows replied, holding up his hands in surrender. “I’m on your side, remember? There has to be a woman out there who would be simply grateful to marry you and who has a gentle lady’s upbringing.”

“And you know such a woman, do you?” he asked, with a bark in his voice. “I’m not marrying any of your wife’s sisters.”

“God forbid! I wouldn’t send any of them to my worst enemy,” said Burrows, laughing. “I wouldn’t send my own wife, sometimes.”

“My point exactly. If you wouldn’t send your charming Susanna to your worst enemy, then why should I even consider marriage? Marriage is not something I have ever wanted, and you know that better than anyone. I like being a confirmed, rich bachelor.”

“Yes, I know. But you’re not getting any younger, and you need an heir at some point. This could work in your favour.”

“How? By demanding my time and attention and embarrassing me? Need I say more?”

“Well, if that’s what you think marriage is all about, then I can see your point,” said Burrows.

Sebastian really needed that drink now. He got up and started to pace again. He didn't want to deny his mother her one dying wish—but how could he make this work?

“What I need is someone who would be grateful in marrying me and then, once mother is dead, just fade away into the background again.”

“It's a good job I know you,” exclaimed Burrows.

Swinging around, Sebastian snapped, “And what is that supposed to mean?”

Burrows threw his hands up again. “Easy! I just meant you're not painting a very pleasant picture of yourself right now, that's all. Look, surely you're not thinking of divorcing the woman once your mother's dead, are you?”

“Good God, no! I would set her up and leave her to it.” Sebastian waved his hand in Burrows's general direction.

Sebastian watched Burrows stop and then pause in mid thought. Sebastian could see an idea forming in the man's brain. This was what he liked about him: he was clever and good at problem solving. Sebastian could almost hear the cogs ticking away in his old friend's head.

What had he said to spark off this mental activity? Sebastian started running through everything he'd just said, but he found himself becoming more and more frustrated with the position he was stuck in.

Burrows got up, still without saying a word, and started rummaging through his filing drawers. After a short while, Burrows must have found what he was looking for, because he sat down again, still without a word, but with a bright smile on his face.

“What?” demanded Sebastian.

“I think I might have found a solution to your problem.” Then he just stopped, and he started to read his file.

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“Well, spit it out, man!” Sebastian demanded, sitting back down in the chair he had vacated earlier.

“I have a Mr Bennett on my books, an old client. In fact, a very old client, but right now he’s sitting in a debtors’ prison. He has a daughter—a very beautiful daughter, by all accounts.”

“And how does that help me?” barked Sebastian again. It occurred to him that maybe his old friend wasn’t as good as he’d thought he was.

“She is—or was, I’m not sure any more—living with her father in the debtors’ prison. She was only eighteen at the time. Poor girl had just had her first season, and then her father lost everything gambling. Her mother died when she was still very young, so her father is all she has.”

“Burrows, I feel sorry for the girl, really I do, but how is this going to help me out of the problem I have?”

“Oh, Sebastian, use your head, man!” Burrows barked back. Waving the file in front of Sebastian, he continued. “She is basically alone in the world, with no money, but brought up like a lady, and beautiful as well. If you”, he said, pointing at Sebastian, “could help out her father, she would be more than grateful for any situation you could help her into and be the good, loyal wife you need. Then, when the time is right, she can just fade into the background.”

Sebastian jumped up from his chair, ran his hand down his face, and just stood there watching Burrows. Either the man had gone completely mad or he really was on to something. At this point in time, Sebastian was still willing to consider every option open to him. But the daughter of someone hauled up in a debtors’ prison?

Sebastian ran his hand down his face again, and in a low voice he asked, “What do you know about this Mr Bennett?”

“He was a good man; he owned the estate in Shere that came up for sale nearly ten years ago.”

“He owned that place? It’s huge.” Sebastian remembered it well and had even considered buying it himself, but it had cost a lot of money and he hadn’t really needed another home. He had gone to take a look around the place, nonetheless. It was huge, with not a scrap of furniture or a painting left. He was told the lot had been sold to raise money, but that still hadn’t been enough to clear the owner’s debts.

Could he really be considering marrying the daughter of a gambler who’d lost that much money? Sebastian sighed. It wasn’t the daughter’s fault, he supposed; it was, after all, her father who had lost everything . . . but still.

“That’s the one,” continued Burrows. “He married a woman much younger than himself, who was basically weak bodied. Well, after giving birth to Isabel—yes, I think that was the daughter’s name—Mrs Bennett became even weaker. I believe she died from a common cold in the end, too weak to fight it. Mr Bennett started to go downhill after that. He doted on his daughter but had a nasty habit of gambling. Until, in the end, he lost everything.”

Everything and more from the sounds of it!

“And you think this . . .”, he waved his hand in front of him, “Miss Bennett would play her part in my problem?”

“Yes, I think she would. She would be so overwhelmed with joy, with you, for taking her out of the situation she’s currently in, and for helping out her old father. I personally believe she would play her part out perfectly.” He leaned back in his chair again, smiling like the cat that got the cream, lacing his fingers over his stomach once more, and feeling the job well done.

But Sebastian wasn’t so sure; he had a bad feeling about this idea.

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“Is she healthy? I don’t want some weak-bodied woman on my hands.”

“From what I remember, she was as healthy as a horse.”

Maybe this wasn’t such a mad idea after all, but he just couldn’t get rid of the feeling that something wasn’t quite right.

On paper, she would be the perfect candidate: she had a lady’s upbringing, she was desperately in need of help and rescuing, and she was pretty, if he could go by what Burrows had said. It would be easy to pay her off and have her step into the background when the time was right.

After all, what sort of marriage could she hope for, with her father in debtors’ prison and her having no dowry? This Miss Bennett would be so overwhelmed by his help she would become the perfect wife. He might even get to enjoy her body from time to time.

No! That would just complicate things; he didn’t want her falling in love with him just because he could make wonderful things happen to her body. Then he would be stuck with a clingy wife he couldn’t get rid of. He’d heard all about women like that, who fell for the beastliest of men just because they were good at the bedroom sport.

But could he really marry her . . . ?

Yes—after all, he was powerful enough to marry whomever he chose; he had no need for status or financial gain. But would his reputation withstand the taking of a debtor’s daughter?

Yes, he thought again, running his hand through his hair. He could always buy a new background for her if need be; after all, money could buy anything. She had been brought up as a lady, and it was her father who had lost

everything; the daughter couldn't be held responsible for her father's gambling debts.

Sebastian himself had a friend who had married a notorious whore. At the time, people had thought it was because she was with child, but over a year later, she still had no child.

Sebastian thought the man had just simply lost his head with the wonders she could do to his body. Having tasted the woman himself in the days of his early manhood, Sebastian could almost see the appeal—but never of marriage.

But Lord Winterford's reputation and status had held strong, so why shouldn't Sebastian's? Sebastian was wealthier and had a bluer bloodline than Winterford's. And, after all, Sebastian would be marrying a well-brought-up lady, not a whore.

Sebastian looked back at Burrows, still sitting there letting Sebastian process the information. Burrows had never been known to make a rash decision before; he would always think things through thoroughly before acting on them.

But was Sebastian's own future wife and happiness really to be found in a debtor's prison?

"I want you to look into them—and I mean dig deep—before I make any decisions," he told Burrows.