



*The* JADED  
GENTLEMEN  
*series*

THOMAS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

GRACE  
BURROWES

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*The* JADED  
GENTLEMEN  
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Dedication: To those who feel as if they've loved in vain. No love is ever in vain.

# Table of Contents

<a href="#">Chapter One</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Two</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Three</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Four</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Five</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Six</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Seven</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Eight</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Nine</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Ten</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Eleven</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Twelve</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Thirteen</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Fourteen</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Fifteen</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Sixteen</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Seventeen</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Eighteen</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Nineteen</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Twenty</a>
<a href="#">Acknowledgement</a>

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## Chapter One

What did it portend, when a man arrived to his newly acquired estate and found an execution in progress?

“The damned beast is done for,” a squat, pot-bellied fellow declared from halfway down the barn aisle.

Thomas Jennings, Baron Sutcliffe, had an advantage of height over the crowd gathered in the stable. Nonetheless, he apparently hadn’t been spotted as he’d ridden up the lane, and he didn’t draw attention watching from the shadows near the door.

“The *damned beast* was rallying until some idiot fed him oats at midday, Mr. Chesterton,” a woman retorted.

She stood at the front of the group, slightly above average height, a neat dark braid hanging down a ramrod-straight back. Her dress was muddy about the hem and so far from fashionable Thomas could not have accurately named the color.

“Horses in work get grain at midday,” the Chesterton fellow retorted. “If you wanted special treatment for your personal mount, you should have come to me.” He uncoiled a bullwhip from around his middle, an ugly length of braided leather lashed to a heavy wooden stock. “I say the horse needs to be put down and I’m the stable master here, missy.”

This woman would not take kindly to being called *missy*. A blind man could have discerned that from the command in her tone.

Thomas was far from blind.

The lady stood in profile to him, her nose a trifle bold, her mouth wide and full. Not precisely a pretty woman, though her looks were memorable. She blocked the door to a stall that housed a raw-boned bay gelding. The beast stood with his head down, flanks matted with sweat. A back hoof lifted in a desultory attempt to kick at the horse’s own belly.

“The horse wants walking,” she said. “A few minutes on grass every hour, clean, tepid water, and no more damned oats.”

Chesterton let the coils of his whip fall, the tip of the lash landing on the toes of the lady’s dusty boots.

“You are prolonging that animal’s suffering, Miss Tanner,” Chesterton said. “What will the new owner think of your cruelty? The beast turns up colicky after you ride him to exhaustion in this heat, and you won’t even give your own horse the mercy

of a quick death.”

“We’ve had two other cases of colic in your stable in the last month, Mr. Chesterton. Any fool knows a horse recovering from colic ought not to be given oats.”

Thomas had certainly known that.

“If a horse can’t handle his regular rations without coming down with a bellyache, then he’s not recovering, is he?” Chesterton retorted.

Chesterton flicked his wrist, so the whip uncoiled behind him. With one more jerk of his wrist, and he could wrap that whip around the woman’s boots, wrench her off her feet, and get to the horse.

A stable lad sidled closer to the lady, though she gave no indication she’d noticed the advance of Chesterton’s infantry.

“Chesterton, think,” Miss Tanner said, more exasperation than pleading in her tone. “Baron Sutcliffe has only recently purchased Linden, and he will now receive my reports on the crops and livestock. When he learns of three dead horses in one month, every one of them a valuable adult animal in otherwise good health, what conclusion will he draw about his stable master? Give me another twelve hours with the gelding, and then you can shoot him if he’s not coming around.”

The offer was reasonable to the point of shrewdness.

“No baron worth a title will listen to a woman’s opinion regarding his land or livestock. You’d best be packing your things, Miss Tanner, or I’ll be the one *reporting* to the nancy baron what goes on at Linden.”

*Time to end this.*

“As it happens,” Thomas said, sauntering forward, “the nancy baron is here, and willing to listen to any knowledgeable opinion on most topics. Perhaps somebody might begin by explaining why a half dozen men to whom I pay regular wages are loitering about in the middle of the afternoon?”

The lady did not give up her place in front of the stall, but Chesterton coiled his whip and puffed out his chest.

“Alvinus Chesterton, your lordship. I’m Linden’s stable master. Yon beast is suffering badly, and Miss Tanner is too soft-hearted to allow the horse a merciful end.”

Miss Tanner’s soft heart was nowhere in evidence that Thomas could divine.

He assayed a bow in the lady’s direction, though manners would likely impress her not one bit.

The point was to impress the louts surrounding her. “Miss Tanner, Thomas, Baron Sutcliffe, at your service. Chesterton, if you’d see to my horse. He’s endured a long,

hot journey down from London and needs a thorough cooling out.”

Chesterton clearly didn't like that suggestion. In any stable, the lowliest lad was usually stuck with the job of walking a sweaty horse until the animal could be safely given water and put in its stall. The stable master stomped off, bellowing for somebody named Anderson to tend to the baron's horse.

*Now for the greater challenge.*

“Your horse is ailing?” Thomas asked the lady.

“I own him,” she said, chin tipping up a half inch. A good chin, determined without being stubborn. In contrast, her eyes were a soft, misty gray—also guarded and weary.

“Chesterton tried to tell you what to do with your own livestock?”

“He tried to shoot my horse, and would have done so except I came by to make sure Seamus was continuing to recover.”

Amid the pungent, dusty, horsy scents of the stable Thomas picked up a whiff of roses coming from—her?

“Let's have a look, shall we, Miss Tanner?”

Oh, she did not want to allow a stranger into her horse's stall, but the realm's only female steward—and possibly its most stubborn of either gender—defied her new employer at her peril.

“Miss Tanner, I will not shoot the animal without your permission. You could have me charged before the king's man for such behavior, baron or not.”

Thomas would have preferred “or not,” though that choice had been taken from him.

Still, he refrained from physically moving the lady aside, reaching past her to open the door, or otherwise publicly disrespecting her authority as owner of the horse and de facto steward at Linden.

Standing this close to Miss Tanner, Thomas could see she was worried for her horse, though Chesterton had been about to use his bullwhip on the lady.

“The gums tell the tale,” Thomas said, quietly. “Your gelding is not trying to get down and roll, and that's a good sign.”

Outside the stable, Rupert's hoof beats went clip-clopping by on the lane.

“Tell the fools to walk your horse out in the shade,” the lady said. “They should get his saddle off too.”

Miss Tanner was trying to distract Thomas, trying to wave him off for however long it took her to inspect her sorry beast. Thomas was not willing to be distracted, not

as long as Chesterton and a half dozen of his dimwitted minions lurked about.

“Rupert walked the last two miles from the village,” Thomas said. “He’s barely sweating and will manage well enough. I wanted to make a point to my stable master, and you, my dear, are stalling.”

That chin dipped. “Chesterton could be right. I don’t want to put Seamus down.”

A spine of steel, nerves of iron, and a heart of honest sentiment. Interesting combination.

“Miss Tanner, the last time I saw a horse shot, I cried shamelessly. It’s a sad business all around.” Thomas had been twelve years old, and Grandfather’s afternoon hunter had broken a foreleg in a damned rabbit hole. The twins had sworn off foxhunting, and Theresa had cried loudest of all.

Grandpapa, for the only time in Thomas’s memory, had got thoroughly inebriated.

Miss Tanner pushed the stall door open, and the horse lifted his head to inspect the visitors. A horse approaching death would have ignored them or turned away.

“Seamus, this is Baron Sutcliffe,” Miss Tanner informed her gelding. “His lordship says he won’t shoot you.”

“A ringing endorsement.” Thomas let the horse sniff his glove. “Also the truth. When did you first notice a problem?”

“Last night. I came down in the evening, and Wee Nick alerted me. He and Beckman took turns with me walking Seamus for most of the night, offering him water and periodic nibbles of grass. By morning, Seamus seemed to be functioning normally, and I thought we were through the worst.”

Functioning normally was doubtless a euphemism for passing manure.

“Somebody gave him oats at noon?”

“Some imbecile.”

A horse who’d done without much fodder the previous night and skipped his morning ration of oats would have been ravenous for grain by noon, and bolting grain never boded well for an equine’s digestion.

Thomas stroked a hand down the gelding’s sweaty neck. “Part of Seamus’s problem is simply the heat. Why wasn’t a bucket hung in his stall?”

“I don’t know. We usually water them at the trough. Nick hung a bucket last night, but in summer, the buckets need to be scrubbed regularly.”

Seamus craned his neck in the lady’s direction.

“Shameless old man,” she murmured, scratching one hairy ear.

Uncomfortable the gelding might be, but he was not at death's door if he could flirt with his owner. Thomas lifted the horse's lip and pressed gently on healthy pink gums. A horse in the later stages of colic would have dark or even purple gums.

"He's uncomfortable," Thomas said, "but not in immediate danger. He should be on limited rations—hay and grass, not grain—and no work for several days, exactly as you intended. Was this Nick person among those watching Chesterton threaten your horse?"

Had Thomas not come along, the men might have started exchanging bets, *or worse*.

Miss Tanner scratched the horse's other ear. "Nick, Beck, and Jamie have gone into the village to get the last of the provisions for the house in preparation for your arrival. Chesterton timed this confrontation for their absence. None of those three would have allowed Seamus to be fed oats."

The lady did not want to leave her horse undefended, and Thomas couldn't blame her, but she would have to learn to trust her employer's authority.

"Come, Miss Tanner. I've yet to see my new house, and as the closest thing I have to a land steward, you are the first among the staff with whom I must become better acquainted."

"You'll want to eat," she said, tousling the horse's dark forelock. "To change, and Mrs. Kitts is doubtless in a taking that you've tarried in the stable this long."

Thomas did want to eat, also to drink a large quantity of something cold, and to bathe—God above, did he want to bathe.

"You there!" Thomas called to a skinny older fellow pushing a barrow of straw and muck down the barn aisle. "Your name?"

"Hammersmith, my lord."

"Hammersmith, if Miss Tanner's horse shows any signs of renewed distress, or is taken from his stall for any reason by anybody save Miss Tanner, you are to alert me immediately. Not Chesterton, not the local magistrate, not Wellington himself is to handle that animal without Miss Tanner's permission."

"Aye, milord."

"And when you've dumped that barrow, please see to it Seamus has half a bucket of clean water."

"Aye, milord. At once, sir."

"Now will you accompany me to the manor house, Miss Tanner?"

She gave the horse's chin a deliberate, final scratching. "Yes, my lord."

\* \* \*

Baron Sutcliffe, was entirely too big to stalk about a busy stable as quietly as a hungry tom cat. He spoke softly too, in the cultured tones of a gentleman, but Chesterton had paled at the sight of his new employer—and put away his whip.

For that alone, the baron had Loris's loyalty.

She'd been so focused on her horse she'd not noticed the addition to the crowd until Sutcliffe had strolled through the grooms like Moses parting a Red Sea of malevolence and mischief. The baron had been a human storm front rolling toward her, heedless of anything in his path.

No, not heedless—indifferent. Sutcliffe had known Chesterton and his lackeys were milling about, and he'd seen Chesterton fondling that infernal whip.

Sutcliffe simply hadn't cared.

The baron's exquisitely tailored riding attire and public school diction sat in contrast to Loris's conviction that his lordship would have relished a display of violence. One man against a half dozen and he'd been *amused* by the odds.

"So tell me about the enmity between you and Chesterton," the baron said, lacing his arm with Loris's. He'd matched his steps to hers—not all men would.

"He's your stable master, my lord, and we loathe each other."

"Why?"

*Because I have breasts and a womb and am smarter than he or any of his near relations. Because the stable is not my domain and I could run it better than he'll ever be able to. Because he's mean, and male, and no stable lad who wants his wages will gainsay such a master.*

"Chesterton loathes me because I am an unnatural female," Loris said. "I loathe him because he is needlessly cruel to the beasts who depend on him. Besides which, he is bigoted, backward, and incapable of hiring competent stable help."

As soon as the words were out of Loris's mouth, she wished them back. Not fifteen minutes after meeting her new employer, she was whining. Loris didn't like that the baron held her livelihood in his titled hands, she didn't like explaining herself, and she didn't like—oh, she most sincerely *hated*—that he'd been on hand for that scene in the stable.

She would have hated more what would have happened if the baron hadn't come prowling along.

"Chesterton will not trouble you further," Sutcliffe said as they reached the steps of the manor house. "Of this, I am certain."

“You expect him to leave?”

The baron regarded her with eyes of such dark blue they might have been a portraitist’s artistic exaggeration. He had a baronial nose that on another man could have shaded toward unfortunate, but on him looked proud in the best sense. Loris did not like Sutcliffe—she didn’t *know* him—but she approved of that nose.

“I do not expect Chesterton to spontaneously quit my employ,” the baron said. “I can’t abide incompetence in any employee. Either Chesterton did not know how to care for your horse, or he deliberately jeopardized the gelding’s health.”

Sutcliffe held the door for her. Of course, he would not knock on the door to his own home.

And, of course—barons probably set great store by their manners—he was politely warning Loris that *her* time at Linden Hall could be drawing to a close as well.

Then what would she do? Papa had run off to God knew where, she had no useful skills to fall back on other than stewarding, no family to turn to, and not even a true friend to her name.

Rather than take issue with his lordship’s fussing, Loris preceded him through the door.

Unfortunately for her, all of her fear, fatigue, and uncertainty came trundling right along with her.

\* \* \*

No footman, butler, or porter attended the main entrance to the Linden manor house. Thomas began a list of Linden’s shortcomings: an empty stable yard, an incompetent stable master, and an unattended front door.

He gestured to the right. “Let’s have our discussion in the library, Miss Tanner.”

As best Thomas recalled the description of the house, a library lay off that direction. Perhaps an appearance of the Eighty-Second Regiment of Foot would have resulted in one of his staff coming at last to investigate.

Thomas had asked Miss Tanner to join him, mostly to separate the combatants in the stable and test the loyalty of the lads. If harm came to Miss Tanner’s horse despite Thomas’s orders, then the stable master would not be the only one sent packing.

Miss Tanner preceded Thomas to the library, at home in the Linden manor house and not the least bit self-conscious about it. The tip of her long braid kicked up with each impact of her boot heels on the carpeted corridor.

She could not know where that tempted a man to focus his gaze.

The house was exactly as its previous owner had described: lovely with an emphasis on light, and an airy graciousness created by soft colors, ample windows, high ceilings, and elegant appointments.

The help might be lacking, but the fields were in fine shape, the buildings in excellent repair, and the house itself immaculate and welcoming.

The room Miss Tanner lead him to, while not large, yet qualified as a library. A wide fieldstone hearth lined half of the outer wall, French doors graced the other half. A fine oak desk sat near the doors, positioned to take advantage of the natural light. The long, heavily cushioned couch faced the hearth, bookshelves extended behind the couch, and a sideboard stood along the inside wall.

Upon that sideboard sat a full decanter and four sparkling crystal glasses. Thomas lifted the stopper and sniffed the contents, congratulating himself on his purchase again.

Lord Greymoor had sold the place as is, where is, including fixtures and furnishings. Fortunately for Thomas, the estate was kept ready to receive its master—or his guests.

“May I offer you a drink, Miss Tanner?”

She stalked around the room, though her first instinct was likely to sit at Thomas’s desk, where she’d no doubt ensconced her tidy bottom many times before.

She left off pretending to inspect book titles and peered at him.

“A drink. Of?”

“Excellent brandy.” Thomas poured himself a hefty tot. “I intend to sample it myself, but it wasn’t my horse who was just given a reprieve from a firing squad.”

“Perhaps a small portion,” Miss Tanner said, taking a position at the French doors. She’d turned her back to her employer, which was rude, but probably no more rude than referring to an equine firing squad.

Miss Tanner was a conundrum, part lady, part employee, part something else Thomas couldn’t easily label. He was helpless to resist conundrums, because a man who’d made his fortune in commerce craved sense and order in all things.

“A restorative,” Thomas said, crossing the room to pass her what even a high stickler would allow was a tonic to nerves under a severe trial. He stepped back and half-leaned, half-sat on the desk.

They could tally up their respective rudenesses later. “Has Chesterton threatened you previously?”

Miss Tanner tilted her glass and took a sniff of the contents. “Must we discuss

this?”

Thomas sipped his drink, studying a tallish, dark-haired woman with gray eyes and a Gypsy cast to her features. Now that he had the chance to examine her riding habit in decent light, he'd classify the color between mud and dust.

She moved, dressed, and spoke to hide the fact, but Loris Tanner was undeniably attractive.

Thomas liked women, generally. Liked their pragmatism and humor, their affection and resilience. He liked the women he took to bed, particularly the ones who found their way there, passed an enjoyable hour or three, then found their way back out of his bed—and his life—with a smile and a wave.

Loris Tanner had a kind of beauty women seldom valued and men never overlooked: earthy, dark, curvaceous, and strong.

If she were sweet and merry, he might have had a problem, but her surliness was helpful, because they'd likely be working in relatively close quarters—provided Miss Tanner was as competent as both Lord Greymoor and Greymoor's cousin, Guinevere, Lady Amery, had claimed.

“One usually imbibes a drink, Miss Tanner.”

She sampled her brandy, her expression transforming from a pensive scowl to open wonder.

“What a lovely, lovely, business this is.”

Thomas added an intriguing streak of hedonism to Miss Tanner's inventory of characteristics, because as she partook of the spirits, she closed her eyes and tipped her head back, as if to savor the heat sliding down her throat and warming her insides.

“You are a connoisseur?” Thomas asked, sipping his own drink. The blunt word was tippler, the vulgar word was drunk. Applied to a woman, those terms also implied a class of tragedy Thomas had observed all too often.

“My work requires I be out of doors in all kinds of weather,” Miss Tanner said. “The occasional medicinal indulgence does not go amiss.”

But in all the time Miss Tanner had assumed responsibility for running the estate, she hadn't sampled the owner's brandy even once.

The conundrum reared its head again. A lady decided whether a gentleman was to sit in her presence, but an employer was the one who made that offer to the employee.

Thomas's saddle-weary arse made the decision for him. “Shall we sit, Miss Tanner?”

She took the center of the sofa, back straight, hands quietly holding her drink in

her lap, as if she were enduring a social call and trying not to glance at the clock.

“You had questions, my lord?”

*Have Chesterton and his like kept their hands off you?* “How long have you lived on this property, Miss Tanner?”

“I have lived on this property since before Lord Greymoor purchased it almost ten years ago—he was Lord Andrew Alexander then. My father was steward here until about two years ago.”

Her grip on her drink had grown quite snug.

Best get the next part over with. “What happened to your father?”

“I do not know. He either left or met with foul play. Papa was ruinously fond of drink, but because his lapses were as infrequent as they were spectacular, Lord Greymoor tolerated him.”

*Ruinously fond.* Poetic of her.

This much, Thomas had already been told, but he suspected Mr. Tanner’s minor lapses had been covered up by his daughter, who’d apparently become her father’s right hand despite her gender.

“I cannot abide a drunk, Miss Tanner. Particularly not in a position of responsibility.”

Thomas’s guest raised her glass, as if examining the beauty of sunlight passing through brandy.

“I cannot abide a drunk in any capacity whatsoever, my lord.”

“We are in agreement then.” Thomas also could not bear to bully this woman regarding her father’s shortcomings when she’d tried so hard to atone for them. “How do you find Linden at present?”

Now she swirled her drink, a fortune teller divining her tea leaves.

“Improving,” she said at length. “Prospective buyers came down last autumn, and because they were astute, and members of Lord Greymoor’s family, they were able to inform him of certain changes needed to benefit the property.”

Again, she was being honest, if carefully so. Guinevere Hollister Allen, Lord Greymoor’s cousin, and a frighteningly competent woman, had come to look the property over with Douglas, Lord Amery, now her spouse. They had discovered Loris quietly performing the tasks of a steward in her father’s absence.

“Linden is improving, how?” Thomas asked.

“We’ve sold many of the sheep, which were grazing the place into oblivion. We’re looking at irrigation and drainage improvements, and have started on them in a

modest way. We'll ship the first loads of firewood this autumn, and the ledgers are certainly in better condition than they were."

*We have, we are, we shall.* Miss Tanner spoke like a true steward, one who viewed a patch of ground as creating a community of the people who cared for it and depended on it.

"What changes remain to be made?" Thomas crossed to the decanter to top off his glass and gestured with the bottle to inquire if his steward would like more.

"No, thank you." Her tone suggested drink mattered little when the land was under discussion. "What this property needs is time and people who care about it. For shearing and lambing and so forth, we're using itinerant crews, as we do for planting and harvest. The local people still work some of the staff positions, but we're short-handed, and those we do have aren't as knowledgeable as they should be."

Thomas suspected much of the "we" aspect of working Linden was in Miss Tanner's mind—or her heart.

"Is the lack of staff a criticism, Miss Tanner?" Thomas resumed his seat, scooting his chair closer to the sofa. He wanted desperately to prop his feet up on the low table, and might have if his steward were male.

But his steward, or the closest employee he had to a steward, was female, and Thomas would not discommode her unnecessarily.

"Whom would I be criticizing, your lordship?"

"Me."

"I don't know you well enough to criticize or praise you, sir. What would I criticize you for?"

Oh, how Thomas longed to pull off his boots and put up his aching feet. "You might criticize me for purchasing a property without even seeing it? For buying land in a part of the country I'm unfamiliar with? For firing my stable manager without having a replacement to hand?"

"Chesterton is an ignorant bully. The horses hate him, and with good reason. He never speaks when he can yell, and he never passes up an opportunity to snap that infernal whip."

Miss Tanner's comment reminded Thomas—inappropriately, of course—of when the ladies at the Pleasure House had taken a patron into dislike. Their judgment, sometimes despite all appearances to the contrary, had invariably been sound.

"Who hired Chesterton?"

"One of Lord Greymoor's factors," Miss Tanner said, finally taking another sip of

her damned drink. “If I were to criticize anybody, it would be my former employer, though he was ever a gentleman and never overtly negligent of his estate.”

“And yet, he fell short in your estimation. Honest of you to admit it,” Thomas remarked. The brandy spread a lassitude through him that revealed a pervasive fatigue. He was tired to the bone, and in need of a meal, a bath, and a clean bed, in that order.

“Lord Greymoor didn’t take this property seriously,” Miss Tanner said. “Oh, he liked to bring his Town cronies down for hunting in the autumn, or come around at planting to ride his horses over hill and dale, but he wasn’t—he did not love his own land. Papa said his lordship had nobody show him how to go on with the property, and his lordship was young.”

Though Miss Tanner was younger than Greymoor, she could apparently neither comprehend nor entirely forgive his lordship’s lack of attachment to the estate.

“You expect me to *love* Linden, Miss Tanner?”

She set her drink aside. “What I expect matters not one bit, does it?”

Her expectations had been all that had kept Linden together for nearly two years.

“A gentleman isn’t supposed to argue with a lady,” Thomas said, even though arguing with this lady would be a lively undertaking.

They lapsed into a silence Thomas felt stretching into a brood. All the while, his steward sat primly, six feet and a mysterious female universe away.

Thinking of the horse? Thomas rose and stretched a hand down to her. “Thank you for your time. We’ll talk more, I’m sure.”

Miss Tanner looked first at his hand, then up at his face, then down at his hand again before she seemed to grasp that he was offering to assist her to rise.

She stood, dropping his hand immediately. “Shall I fetch Mrs. Kitts to you?” she asked, moving toward the door. Miss Tanner loved the land, but she did not in the least love being interrogated by the landowner.

Lady or not, Thomas was her superior. “Miss Tanner, I haven’t yet excused you.”

She waved a hand. “A small oversight, your lordship. You mustn’t feel the need to stand on ceremony with me.”

Then she was gone, leaving Thomas to put his feet up in a bemused solitude that soothed after the peculiar developments of the day. To arrive to one’s own property—and he had sent notice ahead—and find nothing and no one to greet him, was a lowering comment on the state to which his life had arrived.

He appropriated a portion of his steward’s drink. What did he need with a welcoming committee, for pity’s sake?

A quiet tap on the door heralded the arrival of Mrs. Kitts, a round, graying little terrier of a woman who seemed to think if she smiled long and hard enough, Thomas might smile back.

“Shall I assemble your staff, Baron?”

*Baron?* Well, yes, Baron. Baron Sutcliffe.

“In twenty minutes, and I’ll take a tray in my rooms for supper, say around half eight.”

“*Very good, my lord.*” Mrs. Kitts bobbed with the enthusiasm of a female one-third her age. “*Very good.*”

She withdrew, apparently pleased with her assignment, with her new employer, with the state of life in general, while unease nagged at Thomas. Nobody could be that happy, not all the time, and if they were, they should have the decency not to show it.

He took the last of Miss Tanner’s drink to the French doors and gazed out over the fields and pastures lying between the manor and the home wood. Lord Greymoor and Lord Amery had both told him the home wood was far too large and poorly maintained. The benefit of this neglect was a quantity of deadfall, enough that Thomas would enjoy wood fires at his own hearth where and when he pleased, and he would also have income from selling the excess if he so chose in the short run.

Loris Tanner had pointed out the potential profit to be made, and Greymoor had given her leave to start harvesting the wood last winter. She’d also drafted the plans for the irrigation and drainage system, and she’d culled the flocks to manageable numbers.

All in all, she’d proven competent as an interim steward, but to Thomas’s expert eye, she was utterly inept as a woman.

Women did not interpose themselves between livestock and bullwhips. They did not march about in stifling heat as if on dispatch for Wellington. They did not accept offers of brandy in the afternoon, even on medicinal terms.

Women liked to dress up and be told they were pretty. They flirted, simpered, and manipulated, and were usually very charming with it. Women teared up prettily at the mention of distressing developments—their favorite hair ribbon going missing, for example—and they gazed at a fellow as if they might enjoy activities with him that weren’t mentioned in polite circles.

Loris Tanner had been raised by her father, a drunkard by her own account, who had dragged her from one rural estate to another. She’d never had the benefit of genteel associations, and that lack showed.

Thomas would have to do something about her. He wasn't quite sure what, but doing something about Loris Tanner went onto his list of matters to be addressed—right at the top.

## Chapter Two

Thomas had long ago resigned himself to a life full of petty ironies and minor frustrations. Here he was, bone weary and much in need of slumber, but unable to sleep. He'd summoned Chesterton and dismissed him with two months' wages and no character other than a letter verifying the period of employment and position held.

Chesterton's gaze had narrowed on the epistle, though Thomas doubted the man could read. Thereafter had come—bless Mrs. Kitts and her staff—a bath, a good meal, and bed.

All a weary fellow could want on such a day, but sleep, fickle lady, would not join Thomas in the bed.

He tossed, he turned, and he tossed the other way. He mentally recited some of Caesar's Gallic letters in the original Latin. He composed an epistle to his former employer, David Worthington, Viscount Fairly. Next, he made a stab at the Scottish royal succession from Kenneth MacAlpin down through the Jameses, none of which brought slumber closer.

So Thomas got out of bed, pulled on his breeches and shirt, and padded barefoot down to the library for another nip of the "lovely business."

A niggling cocklebur of a thought intruded on the way to the decanter: Thomas had let his stable master go. A man of business knew that loose ends were the stuff of avoidable disaster, and Chesterton's dismissal meant nobody was in charge of the stable.

Rupert was in the stable, as was Miss Tanner's gelding.

Thomas used the flame from the sconce in the corridor to light a carrying candle and left through the French doors. Moonlight gilded the path to the stable, and the night breeze made the air nearly cool, a blessed change from the sweltering day.

Heat lightning flickered to the north, but the horses were calm, some munching hay, some dozing.

Seamus had curled up in the straw of his loose box, his gaze clear, the remains of a pile of hay near a hanging bucket. Somebody had brushed out the gelding's coat so no trace of his earlier ordeal remained.

Beside the bucket, nestled on a horse blanket, Thomas's steward lay curled into the corner.

A woman—a tired, badly dressed, inconveniently pretty woman—defended the Linden stable.