

THE
TROUBLE
WITH
ANNA

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a novel

RACHEL GRIFFITHS



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*For my Bloom Boys,
Robbie, Dominick, and Heath*

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CHAPTER 1

LADY ANNA RESTON STOOD AT THE BOTTOM OF A WIDE STONE STAIR-
case, wearing a borrowed dress and a grim expression.

The great house at Mayne was lit up and glowing in the cold, with lanterns splashing light over the mellow limestone walls to bounce between the building's crown of fanciful spires, and thousands of candles winking in clusters along the drive. Music, lively and quick, skipped down the steps toward her, and underneath it, Anna could hear the chatter of hundreds of thoroughly overexcited guests. Even the stars seemed to twinkle their brightest in the ink-black sky, as if they wanted to join the party.

Tonight's ball was already a smashing success, destined to be talked about for years to come. Which was why, Anna thought bitterly, there was absolutely no reason for *her* to attend.

Two rows of footmen resplendent in navy and silver stood at the top of the stairs, blinking down at her as if wondering at her hesitation.

"Are you sure this isn't too much for you?" she asked her grandfather, the Viscount Barton, standing ramrod straight beside her.

"I don't plan to die just yet, girl! But for god's sake, must we dawdle out in the cold? It's bad enough that you dragged me here."

Anna shot him a look. Only someone with the intelligence of

a squirrel could think *she* wanted to be here, swaddled in a ridiculous confection of silk.

"We'd best get it over with," she said, and took her grandfather's arm.

The Viscount patted her hand. "Now you're talking sense."

Anna squared her shoulders and marched resolutely forward.

Gifford, the butler at Mayne, stood still as a statue at the entrance to the ballroom. He puffed out his chest, heavy with silver braid, and bellowed, "The Right Honorable Viscount Barton! Lady Anna Reston!"

As Anna passed through the door, Gifford whispered, "Lady Charlotte will be delighted to see you."

"Thank you, Gifford," Anna whispered back. "May I say how *splendid* you look tonight?"

The Viscount jostled his way into the crowd and Anna pushed after him, staring around the room. Charlotte had crammed it full of real orange trees, which Anna had to admit looked spectacular and smelled even better. Candles hung from the trees and lined the gallery where the musicians played, and the enormous chandelier overhead sparkled bright enough to blind her. Four long refreshment tables seemed to quiver under the weight of the food laid out on them, and in pride of place was an enormous iced copper bowl from which footmen scooped pale mounds of sorbet into what looked like—good lord, could those be hollowed-out lemons?

Still, Anna's shoulders crawled up toward her ears, as if she were a turtle in need of a shell.

"Ah! At least there's *someone* here worth talking to," the Viscount cried, well within earshot of most of his neighbors. "Ramsay! Lord Ramsay! I must tell you about my horse."

Anna turned hot, then cold.

Oh no. Not him! Not now!

Julian Aveton, the Earl Ramsay, turned around and Anna's chest cracked open. She dropped her eyes to the gleaming floor, but it didn't help—the sheer force of him still hit her like a slap. He was tall, with shoulders that were almost alarmingly wide, and thick chestnut hair cut a little long, a little unruly. He was handsome, almost insultingly so, as if the stark planes and angles of his face were designed expressly to muddle her senses. But it was his air of command that undid her completely—the sweeping intelligence of dark eyes that saw so much and were impressed with so little. Anna might have found him cold, or a little remote, except every once in a while something caught his attention and he sparked with laughter.

Lord Ramsay bowed. “Good evening, Lord Barton.”

“Ramsay! I have a horse I particularly wanted to—”

“Good evening to you as well, Lady Anna.”

Anna's cheeks stained themselves red, her tongue tied itself into knots, and any scrap of brain that hadn't already melted gathered itself up and scuttled away. *He's Lord Ramsay!* she reminded herself firmly. He was miles above her. Miles above everyone, in fact. A man swooned over by society's daughters, and mamas, and a shockingly large number of young society matrons. Swooned over by a good number of the men as well, from what she could see.

“Good evening,” she managed, though she fixed her gaze firmly on her slippers. She could feel him searching her face and squirmed, knowing he must wonder—if he thought of her at all—why his sister Charlotte had ever bothered to befriend her. Anna knew she was plain to look at and prickly to deal with, but she never felt it more sharply than when *he* was around.

“Ramsay, it's about my Archer,” said the Viscount. “You'd be a fool not to put your mare—”

Lord Ramsay turned his attention to Anna's grandfather and she took the opportunity to walk briskly in the other direction. It

wasn't convenient, it wasn't sensible, and it certainly wasn't pleasant to feel this way, yet Anna's heart did giddy flips in her chest.

Stop it! Anna ordered her heart, but it thumped back at her rudely.

You barely even know the man! she argued, but her heart thrummed a ridiculous song about the lick of impatience in his eyes.

Oh, go stuff—

A ball of blush pink and bouncing black curls crashed into her.

"There you are!" cried Lady Charlotte. "I thought you'd never arrive. How do you like my party?"

"It's glorious. I love it," Anna lied loyally.

Charlotte beamed. "Let's have a look at you. How does the gown I sent over fit?"

Oh dear. Not even a lie could save Anna now. The fit of the gown wasn't too tragic, but somehow the apricot silk made her look paler and more pinched than ever, and it felt so odd against her skin that Anna kept twitching. All the other young women whirled around looking proud and glorious in their finery, but she yearned to be back in the sensible wool of her riding habits. There was nothing to do but shake her head and laugh. "I look a wreck, Charlotte. Even you have to admit it."

Charlotte frowned. "Where's the sash?"

Anna glanced down at herself. "Oh! I must have lost it in the carriage."

"Anna, really! There's no shape to the gown without the—never mind! You should have told me earlier that you had nothing to wear."

"How was I to know my gown had a whacking great stain on it?"

"Yes, your *one* gown. And how many million riding habits do you have? If you would give me just a few hours at the village seamstress, I could—"

“Enough, Charlotte!” cried Anna. “I’m here, aren’t I? Surely that counts?”

Charlotte sighed. “I know how you feel about parties, but—”

A footman coughed discreetly at Charlotte’s elbow. “My lady, Gifford would like a word. There’s a troupe of fire-eaters on the doorstep, and—”

“Oh, have they arrived? Anna, I won’t be a moment. I promise you’ll have fun tonight, even if we have to sneak up to the gallery and drop ice chips on the dowagers.”

Charlotte skipped away into the crowd, leaving Anna alone. Only fifteen minutes in, and already the night felt endless.

At least it can't get much worse.



Julian Aveton, the Earl Ramsay, stood in the center of his Suffolk ballroom and brooded. Being an earl, he reflected, was not just counting gold and banishing peasants, as the average Englishman seemed to think. In fact, in the fifteen years since the coronet had first landed on his head, Julian hadn’t banished so much as a single farmer and wouldn’t enjoy the task if it fell to him. Rather, most of his days were busy with drainage, dry rot, and seeping damp in places damp ought not to be. Come to think of it, the average Englishman might be quite sympathetic, if only he remembered the average English weather.

Certainly, very few Englishmen would envy him Charlotte. Was this really her idea of a simple country dance?

Ten years younger and the product of his father’s second marriage, Charlotte was generally one of Julian’s favorite problems, but this time she’d gone wildly past the limit. She’d crammed his ballroom full of people, all in their finest gowns and jewels, all fanning themselves against the heat of the crush and their own

excitement. Revelers spilled out down the terraces, laughing too loud under peach and apricot lanterns that splashed light against the lawn below. Champagne flowed into great towers of crystal coupes, and some of the younger guests already sported the glassy eyes and hectic smiles to prove it.

He always noticed who drank too much.

So how should he respond to Charlotte? Should it be chains? The dungeon? Should he sever her head, or worse, her allowance? Or—since she had been out four Seasons now and was much too old for any of that—should he congratulate her instead?

A burst of flame erupted from across the ballroom and the guests gasped and applauded as a troupe of fire-eaters began twirling their torches. Julian took a long sip of champagne, a particularly excellent vintage smuggled up from his own private cellar, he noted. *Definitely* the dungeon, then.

Julian turned his attention to another grievance, the sweetest and yet the most vexing.

Petit fours.

Two whole tables full, taunting him.

Little pink petit fours wrapped up like presents and filled with strawberry cream. Tempting white domes, each finished with a twist of sugared lemon. And of course the chocolate ones, each topped by a single pouting raspberry, calling to him like a dark addiction.

His sister was a fiend.

Also a master tactician who knew all his weaknesses.

A peal of laughter caught his attention. There she was, by the terrace doors, in charge of an army of lovestruck young men.

Julian inclined his head and she came dashing over. “This is a small country dance?”

“Well, you know I like to do things properly,” said Charlotte. “Besides, you so rarely come up to Mayne. We owe our neighbors a little entertainment.”

“Yes, a *little* entertainment. Suffolk hasn’t seen a ball like this in half a century.”

Charlotte went pink. “Oh, Julian, how kind of you to say so!”

His mouth quirked. “That was a complaint, brat, not a compliment. I should take the costs out of your allowance.”

“That would be less kind. Besides, my allowance wouldn’t begin to cover it.” The music changed and Charlotte brightened. “It’s the waltz! I must run, but I need to ask a particular favor. Dance with Lady Anna tonight?”

“The one who scowls mightily but will never say a word?”

Charlotte showed him a mighty scowl of her own. “No, I mean my dear *friend* Lady Anna, who is actually quite a firebrand if you get to know her. Did I tell you she’s running Chatham’s racing stud practically all by herself now?”

“Ah, she’s horse mad. In that case, I’m all impatience.”

“Don’t be beastly!” Charlotte said, but she was already rushing off. “Just one dance! You’ll adore her, if only you get to know her!”

Julian shrugged. He was quite sure he wouldn’t adore Charlotte’s little friend, but he’d do his duty and dance with her.

It wasn’t as if he had high expectations for the night anyway.



Was sneaking away allowed at a ball?

Anna crossed the ballroom, heading for the far corner and the little stairs the servants used, which led to Charlotte’s room, where she planned to toss off her slippers and flop on the bed until it was time to go home. She’d promised to *attend* the ball, but surely she could attend from a nest of cozy coverlets, perhaps with a good book in hand? Charlotte was certain to have something naughty tucked under the mattress.

You're a coward! her conscience muttered darkly.

I'm a genius! she shot back, looking over her shoulder as the door to the staircase swung closed behind her. *Charlotte doesn't need me and—*

Anna smacked hard into what seemed to be a solid wall of white linen. Impossibly well-muscled white linen that sent the oddest thrill shivering over her skin and carried the irresistible scent of—

Strong hands clamped down on her upper arms. “Lady Anna?”

Anna’s gaze swept up, way up. Over a warm, wide chest, up a strong column of neck and over the sharp curve of a jaw, up again past the dip of a rather stern mouth until she finally encountered a pair of bronze eyes, remarkably keen and clear.

Lord Ramsay.

Oh god.

Her mouth opened and closed like a dying trout.

Ramsay frowned. “Where are you going?”

“I—I—I . . .”

But as hard as Anna tried, she couldn’t form a proper sentence. Just one small word, over and over again.

“I see.” His mouth quirked. “Off to steal the silver, are you?”

Anna’s brain froze and her tongue doubled in size. Silence stretched out between them, long enough to strangle her.

“Shall I help?” he prompted. “When someone asks a question, it’s customary to answer.”

Heat seared across her cheeks. “Charlotte’s room,” she gasped. “I wanted a moment of peace.”

For a moment, his expression softened. “I see. It’s Bedlam out there, isn’t it?”

Anna wanted to answer. She wanted, one time, to say something easy like, *God, yes! There are so many people and they're all talking such nonsense!* Perhaps he’d respond; perhaps they’d strike

up a conversation and talk glorious nonsense together. But she could barely look at him, let alone speak.

Anna watched the faint hint of empathy on Lord Ramsay's face flicker out, replaced by boredom. "I'm afraid I must insist you return to—"

He was interrupted by a woman's voice, low and urgent, coming from just beyond the door.

"I won't ask him again, Freddy! I can't, when he's already given you so much. I'll sort out something from my allowance, of course, but—"

"You expect me to be satisfied by my sister's pin money?"

"No," the woman said softly. "I don't expect you to be satisfied by anything."

There was an ugly laugh. "That brooch of yours will satisfy me, at least for tonight."

"Freddy, you can't—no!" cried the woman.

There was a ripping sound and anger surged through Anna, so clean and glorious that it swept all her hesitation away. Ramsay's whole body went tense behind her, like a fist clenching for a fight, but she couldn't pay attention to that, not when she could hear the man on the other side of the door walking away. He took one heavy footstep, and then another, and Anna knew she had only seconds to act.

She gave a battle cry and slammed her shoulder into the swinging door. The solid oak hit the man with a satisfying whack, and he went down with an odd broken yelp and a wall-shaking crash. Triumph howled through her, and then horror, because she couldn't control her momentum. The floor rushed toward her with dizzying speed and—

"Oof!" Anna's abdomen connected with the warm muscle of Ramsay's arm as he hooked her and pulled her against him, knocking the breath out of her. Once again she was flooded with

the scent of clean linen and . . . was that peat? Her shoulder and stomach both smarted like hell, but all she could think was that the damned man smelled impossibly good, as if he slept each night in a freshly made four-poster bed at the top of some faraway Scottish mountain. *Stop it!* she scolded herself, aware that this line of thought wasn't helping her breathe.

Lord Ramsay turned her in his arms. She could feel him searching her face, as if he'd never looked at her properly before. "Are you all right?"

Anna gulped down some air. "Perfectly!"

"You're not injured?"

Anna ignored her shoulder. "Of course not!"

"No, of course not," he said gravely, even as his mouth twitched.

Ramsay set her gently aside, scooped up a little diamond wreath, and stepped over the man still writhing on the floor. "Mrs. de Lacy, I believe? You seem to have dropped your brooch, and, oh dear—you've torn your lovely gown. Lady Anna will escort you to the retiring room."

The tiny, dark-haired woman looked near to tears, but she nodded. "Thank you, my lord."

"Don't thank me, thank Lady Anna. I'll remain here and deal with the mess on the floor."

Mrs. de Lacy's brother groaned and she flinched, looking down at him with doubt and fear. "I really should—"

"You should come with me. Shall we?" Anna offered her arm.

Mrs. de Lacy, with a worried glance over her shoulder, allowed Anna to lead her away. As Anna passed by Ramsay, he dropped his voice into a whisper.

"Nicely done, firebrand."



After Anna brought Mrs. de Lacy to the retiring room and found her mother for her, and then found her dear friend Lucretia who was handy with a needle, she circled back to the ballroom for what she considered a well-deserved lemon sorbet. The night hadn't been too tragic, had it? She dipped her spoon into the tart ice and considered. No one had asked her to dance, but that was more relief than tragedy. Her shoulder felt like a big, aching bruise, probably because it was. But somehow she'd survived the ball with her spirits intact, buoyant even, and that seemed a minor miracle.

Oh, don't lie! You're merry as a cricket and it's all because Lord Ramsay noticed you.

Anna ignored that thought, shoveling another big bite of sorbet into her mouth.

Just then came a muffled thump from the far corner of the room. Gasps went up and a low rumbling of voices, and then the urgent call of "Doctor! We need a doctor!" The music screeched to a stop.

Oh dear, Anna thought, licking her spoon, what now?

She craned her neck but couldn't see over the tight knot of people gathered in the corner. One by one, their faces turned, strangely solemn, searching for someone. The crowd gave an odd, shuffling ripple and parted to form a path from Anna to the person lying on the floor, unnaturally still.

Anna's spoon clattered on the parquet as the room receded and a footman made his solemn way over.

"Lady Anna, it's your grandfather." The footman's voice echoed in her bones. "Come quickly."

CHAPTER 2

ONE WEEK LATER ANNA SAT IN HER GRANDFATHER'S STUDY, waiting still as stone for the terms of his will to be read. She didn't betray her anger by so much as the flick of an eyelash, although she was livid and getting more so as the minutes ticked by and Mr. Beadle, of the firm Beadle, Bartlett & Grey, made no move toward the thick sheaf of papers lying on her grandfather's desk.

Beadle had placed himself in her grandfather's chair, behind her grandfather's desk, with Anna sitting like a truant child before him. It stabbed her to see anyone in the heavy mahogany chair, so recently empty, and she almost expected her grandfather to roar into the room and eject Mr. Beadle from it. She felt herself wanting to scowl at the lawyer and forced herself to breathe calmly, just to spite him.

There was nothing like the calm of a woman to infuriate a certain type of man.

When the heavy clock above the mantel struck half past one, a full thirty minutes after the appointment was meant to begin, Anna's patience ran out. She leaned forward. "Sir, I believe you've had enough of my time. This portion of the will concerns me alone, and my grandfather told me many years ago that I would inherit Chatham and the stables. Must we have the theatrics?"

Mr. Beadle, a rosy man at the best of times, went scarlet. “Perhaps your ladyship is not quite as informed as you fancy. There has been a recent change to your grandfather’s will. We are awaiting the arrival of another beneficiary.”

Anna’s eyebrows knit together, but before she could say anything else the study door swung open.

In his deepest, most resonant voice, Hutchins, the late Viscount’s butler, intoned, “The Earl Ramsay.”

The effect was spoiled somewhat by the worried look he sneaked at Anna.

Oh, not now! It was Anna’s last rational thought before Lord Ramsay walked into the room and her stomach flipped over.

He bowed deeply, and Anna’s heart bobbed. “Lady Anna, my deepest condolences. I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Oh, go away! Anna thought, but she nodded, gazing fixedly at the floor. The day was overwhelming enough without *him* here.

“My lord!” Mr. Beadle leaped up and bowed so low his head nearly touched his knees, his broad face contorting as he tried to look at once both solemn and welcoming. “How good of you to come. Please be seated and let’s begin. I wouldn’t want to waste your time.”

Lord Ramsay flicked the man the slightest glance before turning his attention back to Anna. “Lady Anna?”

She twisted her eyebrows in a tortured way meant to seem inquiring. In truth, she had many questions. What was he *doing* here?

“You are not without friends. Charlotte has requested that I provide any service you require, large or small.”

Anna swallowed. “I’d simply like to get on with it.”

“Yes, of course.” Lord Ramsay turned to Mr. Beadle, and if Anna hadn’t been drunk with misery she might have laughed at how the other man snapped to attention.

“Surely this is a family matter?” Ramsay said, taking the seat

beside her. Of course, *he* looked nothing like a truant child in the small chair. Instead, it was as if the room knew its true center and rearranged itself accordingly.

Mr. Beadle flicked a strange smile at Anna before turning to Ramsay to bow deeply again. "It's good of you to come, Lord Ramsay. I assure you, the late Viscount was most emphatic that you attend."

Mr. Beadle bowed yet again—really, the man might as well just lie down on the floor. But at last the lawyer sat down and got to it, making quick work of the preamble, all the stilted words that said once again to Anna that her grandfather was dead and not returning. She looked out the window at the brown grass and the cold, iron sky, trying to blink back her tears.

Oh, just cry already! You'll drive them both off faster.

"Lady Anna?" Beadle called sharply. "Pay attention! This next part will be of particular interest."

Lord Ramsay, who had been only half listening, gave the slightest frown. "It is in your *particular interest* not to use that tone with Lady Anna."

Beadle's eyes bulged and he launched himself to his feet. "My lord! My sincerest apologies—"

"Your apologies are misdirected. They are due to Lady Anna." He looked over at her and his expression warmed. "Besides, she's quite formidable. I advise you to use caution."

The lawyer's sideburns quivered. "Lady Anna, of course! A thousand apol—"

"It's quite all right!" Anna blushed madly, nearly as mortified as Beadle. "Shall we just get on with it? Please."

Beadle quickly sat back down and snatched up the papers once again. "The estate of Chatham, to include the stables, the stud farm, the horses, and the sum of ten thousand pounds, will go to my granddaughter, Lady Anna Isabel Reston . . ."

Beadle stopped, cleared his throat, and shot Lord Ramsay the oddest glance.

Anna's skin prickled with foreboding.

"My lord!" Beadle burst out. "I would have you know I argued most strenuously against this ridiculous—"

"Continue, Mr. Beadle."

"My lord, perhaps I could just explain—"

"Continue."

The lawyer, choking with distress, put his head down and dove back into it: "The estate of Chatham, to include the stables, the stud farm, the horses, and the sum of ten thousand pounds, will go to my granddaughter, Lady Anna Isabel Reston . . ."

The silence stretched out until Anna, strained to the breaking point, thought she might scream. "Yes, Mr. Beadle?"

". . . on the occasion of her marriage to Julian Alaric William Aveton, the ninth Earl Ramsay."



For a moment nothing moved. Even Julian's blood stopped cold in his veins before rushing back so hot and furious that it launched him to his feet.

"What the devil?" he roared as a fresh wave of anger seared through him. He'd dealt with thieves and scoundrels before, but his sister never had. And now her damned friend—

Just the thought of it made his vision go black.

"Marriage, Lady Anna?" he said sharply. "I didn't know you cared."

She bowed her dark head in misery.

Julian turned on the lawyer. "Is this some sort of joke?"

"M-my lord, I-I-I assure you—" Mr. Beadle stammered painfully.

“And you, Lady Anna—nothing to say?”

But all the wretched girl ever did was stare at her shoes. And conspire with her grandfather, apparently.

He spun on the lawyer. “Before I go, are there any other charming last thoughts from the Viscount?”

Mr. Beadle’s broad face was full of dread. “Only that the late Viscount leaves Lady Anna’s guardianship to, er . . . you, my lord. And that if you should refuse her hand in marriage, or”—he glanced at Lady Anna—“she should refuse yours, she is to receive nothing from the estate save the portion held in trust from her father’s side. You both have six months to decide, at which time either you are married or Chatham is folded into the entail and—”

The girl made a show of surprise. “Chatham is folded into the entail? That can’t be right. My grandfather loathed Cousin Simon—he’d never let him have the horses.”

Julian shot her a look of derision. As if she hadn’t memorized every line of the blighted document. “Enough! My sister had the misjudgment to bestow upon you the great gifts of her friendship and loyalty, and this is how you repay her? With sorry schemes?” Lady Anna gawped up at him and Julian felt his eyes begin to burn as his wrath hardened into punishment. “Listen well, as this is my first and last act as your guardian. I forbid you Charlotte’s company. I’ll not have a viper like you anywhere near my sister.”

Lady Anna jerked back as if he had slapped her. “This is ridiculous! I had nothing to do with any of it!” she cried, jumping to her feet.

Julian smiled coldly. “You’ve gone from rich to poor, my lady, with only your greed to blame. May you choke on it.”

He turned on his heel and strode furiously from the room.

CHAPTER 3

THE TREES WHIPPED BY ON JULIAN'S LONG GALLOP BACK TO MAYNE. He stalked into the entry hall, calling to Gifford, "Where is Lady Charlotte? I need her at once."

"Oh, hullo, Julian!" Charlotte, a streak of buttercup yellow, raced down the staircase. "I can't stop now, Anna's expecting me."

Julian's eyes went flat. "I'm afraid it can't wait. In the drawing room, if you please."

Charlotte heaved a great sigh and clomped down the last few stairs. "Very well, but do be quick. And if it's about those trifling few bets I placed, I'll tell you right now that it's *my* allowance and I shall spend it as *I*—"

"It's not your allowance."

"Oh dear. More serious than Charlotte's allowance?" A soft voice wafted down the hall and Julian looked over to see his grandmother, thinner than ever but straight as a pin, making her way toward him.

"Gran!" He strode down the hall toward her, took up both her hands, and lifted them up for a kiss, inhaling the deeply familiar scent of sweetbrier and newly turned earth, as if she were fresh from the garden. "I wasn't expecting you for hours yet, and Charlotte didn't see fit to mention that you'd arrived."

He frowned over at his sister, who had the grace not to roll her eyes.

For once.

The Dowager smiled, as serene as ever. “That child is always highly *occupied*. Only at my age does one begin to understand that calm seas are infinitely better than turbulent ones. Now, may I join you, or is this a private matter?”

His mouth flattened.

“Ah. It’s dire indeed. In that case, you may need me.” The Dowager held out her arm to Julian, who tucked it into his elbow and escorted her into the drawing room, where he settled her into a well-cushioned chair.

Charlotte, in case her displeasure wasn’t clear already, heaved another loud sigh, tramped in after them, and propped herself moodily against the fireplace, her dark hair massing like storm clouds.

The Dowager arranged one of her shawls across her lap and nodded to her grandson. “Now then. You may begin.”

Julian summoned his patience. He adored his half sister and grandmother, but his life would be considerably easier if he could manage to adore simpler creatures. Like chickens. Or a herd of well-mannered cattle.

“Charlotte, my news concerns your friend. Lady Anna has been involved in something unsavory—”

“Oh, how *wonderful!*” Charlotte pushed away from the fireplace and clapped her hands. “A scandal is just the thing to cheer her up.”

The Dowager threw back her head and laughed, until she caught Julian’s look and made a weak attempt at a coughing fit.

“It is *not* wonderful. Lady Anna is to inherit Chatham—”

Charlotte lifted her chin. “What’s wrong with a woman owning a little property?”

"Damn it!" Julian shouted. "She'll only inherit if I marry her!"

Charlotte paled. "*What?*"

"You heard me."

"Oh dear," said the Dowager.

Charlotte shook her head. "I don't understand. Anna's not to inherit Chatham until you marry her?"

"There is no until about it," Julian snapped. "I won't be tricked into marriage nor led with so paltry a bribe. Lady Anna is not to inherit Chatham *at all*."

Charlotte sank down onto a settee. "Oh, that old *wart* of a man! Oh, my poor Anna! What has he done?"

The anger banked low in Julian's gullet sent up a howling flame. "What they've both done, you mean."

Charlotte jumped to her feet. "I mean nothing of the sort! Anna would never agree to something so freakish."

He forced himself to speak gently. "I'm afraid you have no experience with how far people will lower themselves for money."

Charlotte paced the room, her skirts swinging wildly. All at once she whirled on him. "Tell me you didn't get all lordly and terrifying with Anna, right after she received a great shock?" The answer must have been marked on his face, because her eyes narrowed to slits. "Oh dear. I'm afraid you and I are about to have a great many words, and not one of them pleasant."

The Dowager Countess shook her head. "That's no way to solve things, my darling. Now, Charlotte, you seem to believe the girl is a saint, and, Julian, you believe she's a sinner. Which is it? Because the answer will determine a great many things."

"Anna's a saint!" Charlotte declared, although she looked instantly uneasy. "Well, I must admit that her tongue is sharp and her temper is uncertain. I wouldn't place myself in pushing distance of a pond, for instance, if I had recently wronged her. But I can *promise* she didn't do this!"

“And Julian—why do you believe the girl is guilty?”

Julian thought back to the Viscount’s study, to Lady Anna’s dark head bowed in misery. Lady Anna was guilty because of course she was, because he’d seen enough of the world to know that people always were. “Ramsay is a great prize—”

“Aha!” cried Charlotte. “It’s your amazing self-regard! You can’t imagine a single female who *wouldn’t* want to marry you.”

“Damn it, Charlotte! You said yourself that she’s a firebrand!”

“Yes, a firebrand! Not a thief!”

Doubt crept in on Julian, cold and insidious. He couldn’t erase the memory of Lady Anna’s cheeks when she’d raised her face, the red slap of shock against her pale skin. If he was wrong, he’d behaved abominably. To a young woman, all alone in the world, who had some claim to his protection.

Christ.

Charlotte saw her opening and pounced. “Lady Anna is my *closest friend*. Do you think me such a lackwit as to so misread her character?”

Julian’s jaw worked. A rare uneasy feeling that felt uncomfortably like guilt rumbled through his stomach. His sister was many things, most of them trouble, but she was nobody’s fool. “Let me be clear—are you telling me you believe Lord Barton acted without Lady Anna’s knowledge? You vouch for her?”

Charlotte looked him straight in the eye. “I’d trust Anna with my life.”

Damn it.

Charlotte had once asked Julian waspishly if he had to be right all the time. The answer was yes, because he had 1,524 dependents counting on him, 1,524 livelihoods held carefully in his hands. But it seemed his judgment was badly off when it came to one small, silent, and deeply vexing young woman.

Julian gave his sister a cool nod. "In that case, I won't detain you any longer."

Charlotte gave a tilt of her head, magnanimous in victory. She rose to her feet, pressed a kiss on her grandmother's cheek, and swept out of the room like a young queen.