

## Turmoil on the Thames

### Chapter One

*Chesterfield Street, London*  
*Early June 1810*

Annabel knew she was being shameless. Indeed, she was quite certain her behavior verged on decadence. And she was enjoying every minute of it.

She lifted the spoonful of sliced strawberries dripping with sugared cream to her lips. Ah, heaven. Now a sip of chocolate, accompanied by a blissful wriggling of her toes under the counterpane. Lying abed till half-past ten whilst drinking chocolate and eating strawberries and cream was abandoned behavior indeed for a Shellingham. Thank goodness the portrait hanging over the chimneypiece of Grandmama—given last year as a special mark of her approval of Annabel’s continued chaste widowhood—was just canvas and paint. Poor Grandmama would be scandalized if she truly were present

But really, didn’t she deserve a half-hour or so of regret-free dissipation? Last week’s investigation of the mysterious alterations to the pictures at the Royal Academy’s Summer Exhibition had been especially tiring, both physically and emotionally. She’d *earned* a little relaxation this morning. And this afternoon—she smiled in anticipation.

Today was the Fourth of June and the birthday of the dear old king. While few people outside court circles would pay much attention to the date, in one place it would be celebrated as a high holiday.

Because of its proximity to Windsor Castle, the king’s favorite residence, Eton College and its students had always enjoyed a firm friendship with his majesty. The king took a deep personal interest in the school and was a frequent visitor, and Eton’s boys responded by turning his birthday into an unofficially official day of celebration. The “unofficial” part was because the headmaster and staff of Eton did not sanction or participate (at least openly) in the day’s events, turning an indulgently blind eye to the annual boat race—ahem, procession—upon the Thames, followed by a picnic and evening fireworks.

Their presence wasn’t missed. The event had become part of the social season, and the *ton* turned out in force for it even if Eton’s masters didn’t. Dukes and earls and even the king’s own sons came to be taken as guests on the boys’ boats and to drink champagne in the field across from Surly Hall, a well-known riverside pub, where the race ended.

Today Annabel would be among their number, for Will and Martin had demanded that she come—bringing a suitably magnificent picnic, of course—to join them for their first Fourth of June. Annabel had agreed at once; in another year or two her presence might not be so welcome. She and her cook had conferred over the contents of the picnic box last week after Martin sent another note entreating her to bring *lots* of sandwiches and cakes—especially his favorite iced cakes that only Mrs. Dailey could bake.

Annabel smiled at the memory of her son's earnest note. In a little while she would rise and dress and pay a visit to the kitchen to see how Mrs. Dailey was getting on. Or... or perhaps she'd just pour herself another cup of chocolate and—

An urgent scratch at her dressing room door made her sit up. Before she could respond, her maid Winters had thrown open the door, her pale face even paler than usual. "Madam!" she gasped. "Lord and Lady Shellingham are here!"

"What?" Annabel stared at her. Mama and Papa here in London, at this time of year? "Right now? Where are they?"

"Hanscomb put them in the salon and is bringing them coffee." Winters hurried to remove the tray from Annabel's lap. "Lady Shellingham says she will come up to see you in a few minutes. I have your water for washing."

"Oh, heavens!" Annabel jumped out of bed. So much for her peaceful morning in bed! What could have brought her parents to London? Papa hated being away from Belsever Magna in spring and only came to town when there was a question being discussed in Parliament that he cared about. Perhaps that was it—but why hadn't they told her they were coming?

With Winters' help she was washed and hastily arrayed in a dressing gown when a firm knock sounded on her door and Mama's voice called, "Annabel?"

"Mama!" Annabel rose from her dressing table as Winters opened the door. "What a lovely surprise!"

Sarah, Lady Shellingham was a small, plump woman with dreamy blue eyes whose vague manner was completely spurious—except when it wasn't. "Is it?" she said. "Didn't the boys tell you we'd be coming with you to Eton today? We got the sweetest letter from Will begging us to come."

"No, they didn't—not that I'm not delighted to see you." Annabel bent to kiss her mother's soft cheek.

"Well, since the new barouche he ordered was ready and his roses were still a week from their full display, your father thought we could manage a few days in London. We came down Friday. We're staying at Grillon's—it didn't make sense to open the house just for a few days—"

“You could have stayed with me,” Annabel interrupted reproachfully.

“No, we couldn’t. Papa was afraid you’d try to make him go to Almack’s.”

“But Almack’s is only on Wednesdays.”

“I know, dear, but he doesn’t always listen. I don’t know what we’ll do next year when little Sarah is ready to make her curtsy to the queen. Your sister will want us here in town, of course, but tearing Papa from his roses will be next to impossible.” Mama sighed and took off her hat, then seated herself at Annabel’s dressing table to pat her hair smooth. “You aren’t still wearing that disgraceful thing, are you?” she added, glancing at Annabel through the mirror.

Annabel flushed. Her dressing gown was old—and looked it. “It’s not as if anyone ever sees me in it but Winters.”

“I’m seeing it, right now...and you never know who else might at some point.”

“Mama!” Annabel could not decide whether to be scandalized or amused.

Mama turned away from the mirror and peered more closely at her. “You do look tired, darling. Perhaps you need to cut down on your social commitments? I shall have a word with Sally Jersey before we go home. If Almack’s is wearing you down this much—”

“Mama, I’m not twelve! And anyway, it’s not that—” Annabel began, then stopped. Mama of course had no idea about her extra duties with the Lady Patronesses. “This was just a—an especially busy week.”

“Hmm.” Mama turned back to the mirror, this time carefully *not* looking at her. “Are there, ah, any specific persons keeping you busy of late?”

Annabel restrained a sigh. For the last year and a half Mama had been dropping delicate and not-so-delicate hints about her marital status, or lack thereof. Unlike Grandmama Shellingham, she thought it long past time for Annabel to remarry.

She opened her mouth to reply in the negative to Mama’s question, then stopped. Someone *had* been occupying a great deal of her attention—two someones, in fact. But she winced at the idea of telling her mother about Lord Glenrick’s kissing her. And Lord Quinceton of course did not even belong in this conversation, no matter how much time she had recently spent in his company. “If anyone begins to keep me busy in that fashion, Mama, you shall know at once,” she said with a bright smile.

“Oh, darling.” Mama shook her head. “You are still the worst liar in all England, aren’t you? Who is he?”

How did Mama always know? She hesitated, then said, “Um—Lord Glenrick. He’s been, ah, most attentive.”

Mama gave up any pretense of primping at the mirror and turned in her seat to face her. “Glenrick? Good heavens!”

Annabel looked away. “He seems to think me attractive.”

Mama waved her hand. "Of course he does. You're a very attractive girl. But haven't you paid any attention—no, I don't suppose you have over the last few years. Everyone knows that the Carricks are practically at a standstill and that Glenrick would be a fool if he married anyone but an heiress to shore up the family fortunes. Regrettably, you are *not* an heiress. So why is he dangling after you, unless—" She frowned. "Has he tried to kiss you?"

"Er, yes."

Mama's frown deepened. "In that case, I expect he wants to make you his mistress. There's nothing wrong with that if it is agreeable to you, so long as you're discreet about it. However, considering how quickly you were breeding after you married Freddy, I would worry about unintended consequences—"

"Goodness, Mama!" Being a Shellingham for forty years had not repressed her mother's straightforwardness.

"—still, I could wish better for you." She sighed. "Papa and I *would* be pleased to see you married again." She rose and wandered over to the window. "I had hoped Freddy was going to be a better husband than he turned out to be. He seemed to quite dote upon you when he asked us for your hand, which was why Papa agreed to overlook the fact that his finances weren't as solid as we would have preferred."

Annabel looked sadly at her back. "It—it all turned out well enough, Mama. I have Will and Martin, after all."

"True." Mama's shoulders relaxed—but not entirely. "Speaking of whom, isn't it time you were dressed? We have an enormous picnic waiting in the carriage for two hungry little boys."

Annabel paused on her way to ring for Winters. "What? Did they ask you for food as well?"

Mama laughed and turned from the window. "The way Will phrased it, they're positively wasting away. I expect they'll grow six inches over the summer. Your brothers were the same way—two months of insatiable appetite, and then I had to order all new clothes for them because they'd outgrown everything in their wardrobes."

"I hope they're getting enough to eat," Annabel said. Was Mrs. Poltre, who ran their lodging, feeding them properly? They had looked well enough when they were home at Easter, but perhaps this was a more recent problem. She would have to question them this afternoon. She went to the bell and rang for Winters.

"Annabel." Mama had followed her; now she touched her arm. "About Glenrick. Do you return his regard?"

Annabel paused, still holding the bell pull. Did she? She had been so wrapped up in being flattered by his obvious preference and by Frances's marital hints that she hadn't truly considered that question. She thought of his kiss on that quiet wooded path at Hampton Court and what she'd felt—or not felt.

“I don’t know,” she said, looking down at the toes of her slippers. “I can’t help feeling a little...well, he’s the next Duke of Carrick, after all. And I’ve never felt *desired* before. I hadn’t realized what a heady sensation that could be. But now, thinking about it without him before me—I don’t know.”

“Oh, my poor dear.” Mama folded her in an embrace. “I could just *smite* your lout of a husband.”

Annabel had been inclined to teariness, but Mama’s indignation made her laugh instead. “That’s already happened if you recall—the poor old dear. And I’m quite well. Just...confused.”

“Men. The world would be a much simpler place without them, wouldn’t it, Winters?” Annabel’s maid had appeared, bearing a bronze muslin walking dress trimmed with bands of brown silk.

“That it would, your ladyship.” Winters had been a maid at Belsever Magna before becoming Annabel’s maid. “Perhaps not as amusing, however.”

“I’ll take simple over amusing any day,” Mama said firmly. “Is that a new dress?”

“No, an old one we remade. Don’t you care for it? I think it’s one of Winters’ best efforts.” Annabel smiled at her maid. “One does not dress up too much for this event, so I understand.”

“Hmm.” Mama eyed the dress as Winters laced Annabel’s stays and helped her on with a petticoat. “Very pretty, but—” She pressed her lips together and said, more firmly, “Very pretty.”

Mama herself was, as always, beautifully turned out, today in cream-colored muslin with a high-necked lilac sarsenet mantle. Annabel knew that her straitened circumstances and limited dress allowance troubled her fashionable parent, but Mama had sufficient delicacy to not make too great a fuss about it.

While Winters dressed her hair in a simple style, Mama wandered around the room, examining her treasures: miniatures of the boys when they were three by Richard Cosway, a pair of Limoges vases Freddy had given her when the boys were born, the small but exquisite watercolor of an orchid that the boys’ friend Augustus Blackburn—Gus—had painted for her.

“That’s a pretty thing,” Mama commented, peering at it closely.

“Isn’t it? You’ll probably have the opportunity to meet the artist later today.” Gus would almost certainly be there with the boys this afternoon—or at least with Martin, while Will rowed.

“I’ll look forward to it—good heavens, darling!” Mama said, pausing before the portrait of Grandmother Shellingham. “Do you really want a picture of Grandmama in your *bedchamber*?”

“Why? What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s so—unconducive!”

Winters gave a strangled sort of cough but heroically maintained her countenance; upper servants never betrayed that they’d heard a word uttered by their superiors unless directly

addressed. Annabel, however, had no such constraints. “Mama!”

Mama shrugged. “All I can say, dear, is that if I’d allowed your grandmother’s portrait in *my* bedchamber, you and your brothers and sister might not be here today. Poor Papa!” She surveyed it a moment longer, then shook her head.

“How is Grandmama, anyway?”

“Oh, very well. There are still fifteen chairs in the dining room that need new covers. I think she’s signed a pact with the devil to stay alive until she’s done embroidering them.”

Annabel grinned. Why didn’t that surprise her? Grandmama sometimes seemed to forget that her eldest son was himself a grandfather now.

“You’re ready, milady,” Winters said, setting down her comb and handing Annabel her earrings.

“Thank you, Winters.” Annabel slipped them on. “Speaking of Papa, shall we go down and join him for coffee before he thinks we’ve forgotten him?” She stood up, took Mama’s arm, and led her from the room. As the door closed behind her, she heard poor Winters giving way to her pent-up mirth and smiled in sympathy.

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