

Betrayal at Brighton

Chapter One

Belsever Magna, Somerset
August 1810

“But where are we going to find you black gloves to wear *now*?” Mama almost wailed.
“You leave tomorrow!

Annabel, her mother Lady Shellingham, and her maid Winters were gathered in Annabel’s old room (fortunately, not the one in the old nursery which somehow still smelled like the woolen stockings Annabel’s nurse used to dry by the fire.) Dresses, shawls, petticoats, and chemises billowed on every surface as Winters carefully wrapped everything in tissue paper and packed it in a trunk, for Annabel was indeed leaving on the morrow for Brighton, the seaside town the Prince of Wales had turned into the most fashionable resort in England, where the beau monde flocked to after the London season waned.

If only she didn’t have to.

“My lady could, er, borrow a few pairs from her grandmother,” Winters suggested. “If we sneak into Lady Agnes’s room while she’s in the garden, she will never miss them.”

Annabel caught the humorous gleam in her eyes and winked at her behind her mother’s back. “That’s an excellent suggestion! What time is it? She usually goes outside after her nap.”

“Winters! You know she keeps a list of her gloves, stockings, and handkerchiefs and checks it weekly to make sure they’ve been put away in the correct order, and woe betide her dresser and the laundry maid if there’s one out of place. A missing one might involve capital punish—” She turned, caught a glimpse of Annabel’s grin, and sighed. “Oh, you two.”

Annabel patted her mother’s shoulder. “Mama, I don’t need to bring black gloves. I’m not in mourning.”

“But your host and hostess are. Why are they even going to Brighton, if they’re in mourning? There’s probably a town statute against wearing mourning in public there. I wouldn’t put it past his royal highness.”

It had been several weeks since Sally Jersey had asked Annabel to accept an invitation to go to Brighton with her fellow Lady Patroness, Frances Dalrymple. Frances had behaved very strangely during their investigation into a blackmail attempt on the king’s youngest daughter, Princess Amelia—in fact, she had lied to include herself in the search for some highly personal letters in the blackmailer’s rooms and tried to take them herself. Only Mr. Almack’s fortuitous witnessing of her action had stopped her from getting away with it.

Annabel understood the necessity of finding out what Frances was doing and why. She understood why she was the logical choice to lead the investigation; Frances had been begging her to stay with her in Brighton for weeks. But understanding all of that couldn't make her like the idea any better.

At first, she'd thought she wouldn't have to go after all. The Monday morning after the conclusion of the Princess Amelia investigation she'd arrived in King Street for the usual Lady Patroness's meeting, nervously wondering how Frances would comport herself after being confronted in Windsor...only to find that Frances wasn't there. A hastily scrawled note explained that she had received word the day before that her father, the Duke of Carrick, had unexpectedly died, and that she and her brother Lord Glenrick—now Duke—had left for Scotland.

Sally had been disappointed; sorry for their loss, of course, but sorry too that their stay in Brighton would undoubtedly be cancelled and Annabel's chance lost. Annabel could not share that disappointment. Spending a fortnight or more in Brighton to spy on a friend she no longer trusted and a man whose advances repelled her was not her idea of a delightful seaside holiday.

But just ten days after sending a condolence letter, Annabel received a letter in return from Frances.

My dearest Annabel,

Alec and I were so touched by your dear, kind letter—you don't mind that I let him read it, do you? Of course, when he understood that it was from you, it was all I could do to keep him from snatching it from my hands and covering it with kisses!

Yes, it was a shock to lose poor Papa, even if it was not entirely unexpected; he had been ill for some time, as you know, and I suppose it might even be considered a happy release. My brother is doing all that is required, and doing it well, though it does seem funny to hear him addressed as 'your grace' by everyone and not as my lord Glenrick. But do not fear; he is still the same darling Alec, even if he is now the ninth Duke of Carrick.

And that brings me to the important part of this letter: his grace wishes me to inform you that the honor—and pleasure!—of your company will still be required in Brighton a few weeks hence. We don't intend to give up our holiday, though it will of necessity be a quiet one. Poor Papa's funeral is tomorrow, and Alec expects he will have taken care of enough of the boring but necessary consultations with lawyers and bankers and stewards to permit us to go there and enjoy ourselves as planned. Not that I will feel up to indulging in the usual social whirl of the town; I will be very content to have you and Alec, and dearest Quin will be there as well, though of

course not in our house! Will you mind a quiet stay with us?

Yes, she would mind—but she would go, because it was her duty as a Lady Patroness. But she'd not thought about Quin being there, which was foolish of her; Frances would obviously demand that he come to Brighton as well.

Which meant that she would have to find a way to keep from glowing with the knowledge that he still loved her, a way to keep from looking at him with that love reflected in her eyes. He had asked her to forget him that night in Chesterfield Street while he battled some nameless enemy but she would not, *could* not. How could she, when that enemy had been somehow responsible for Freddy's death? She owed it to Freddy's sons to find his murderer—and find out *why*.

Truly, going to Brighton would be anything but a delightful seaside holiday, but go she would. However, there was still a matter literally at hand...

"Mama, I don't care if Frances will be wearing mourning," she said firmly. "I'm not related to her, so it would not be appropriate for me to wear black gloves." She hesitated, then added, "The last thing I want to do is give anyone the idea that I am connected to their family...or that I want to be, for that matter."

"Ah." Mama sighed. "The gossips will have it that you're dangling after a duke, won't they? I'm afraid the color of your gloves won't matter there, my dear—just the fact that you're staying with the Dalrymples is enough. A pity that someone whom I thought took a particular interest in you hasn't yet done something to halt that rumor in its tracks." She looked at Annabel sideways.

Annabel was aware that Winters had moved closer to her, standing almost protectively by her. After the Fourth of June, Mama knew that Quin "took a particular interest" in her; Winters knew that something devastating had occurred to disrupt it. "Er, well—" she began...and had never been so relieved by an unexpected knock on her door. "Winters, would you?"

"Yes, my lady." Winters went to open it, but the identity—or identities—of the knocker was revealed before she had even reached the door by the syncopated chime of stifled giggles. "May I help you, gentlemen?" she asked, after opening the door with a flourish which set two of the trio waiting in the doorway into fresh giggles.

The third member, however was not giggling. He stared wide-eyed up at Winters, his round face pale.

"Go on, Gus!" Martin Chalfont urged him. "Don't be such a great pudding!"

"Yes, do," Will, the small Earl of Fellbridge, added kindly. "It's perfectly proper to enter a lady's chamber if you're invited. I heard Papa say so, once."

Mama made a peculiar snorting sound. Will looked up at her in concern. "Are you well,

Grandmama?"

She whisked a handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed at her nose. "Just a sneeze, dearest. To what do we owe the pleasure of this call?"

Will came in, drawing Gus Blackburn with him while Martin followed closely behind, possibly to keep him from attempting to flee. They'd met at Eton and become fast friends, and Annabel had grown very fond of little Gus, whose small, round frame (though not so small as it once had been—the boy was growing) seemed hardly large enough to contain his ardent soul.

"Gus has a favor to ask of Mama," Will explained. "He's been afraid to ask her, but I told him he'd better because she's leaving and won't be back till it's almost time for us to go back to school. Go *on*," he added in an undertone to his friend. Martin helpfully shoved him forward.

Gus's soft brown eyes never left Annabel's face. "L-lady Fellbridge, do you think you could help me?"

"I expect that I can," she said at once. Winters hurried over to remove a pile of dresses from the settee at the foot of her bed, and Annabel led Gus to sit next to her on it. "What do you need?"

"It's this." He held up a small, paper-wrapped parcel that he'd evidently been holding behind his back.

"Yes?"

"I need to—it's for—for Lord Quinceton. I need to get it to him, but I don't know how. He never told me. And I don't know how to post it, even if I had his direction." His eyes filled with tears. "It's very important. I—I owe it to him. But you know him—he was there with you at the Fourth of June. Can—can you tell me what to do?"

Annabel had barely in time kept herself from stiffening at the mention of Quin's name. "For Lord Quinceton?"

"What is it, dear?" Mama swept forward and put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

He smiled up at her gratefully; since arriving at Belsever Magna with the boys, he'd come to regard her with almost the same degree of worship as Annabel. "It's a—" He glanced sideways at Annabel then said in a whisper, "He asked me to paint it. It's because he's paying my school fees. I wanted to repay him somehow, and he said this would do very well." He unwrapped the paper and held something out to her.

Mama took the small, flattish silver object from him—a box, perhaps? She fumbled with it, found a tiny clasp on one side—and gasped as the top of the box flew up. "My dear boy—it's exquisite!"

His smile widened to a grin. "Do you think so? Is it—is it like?"

"Judge for yourself." She moved around to stand by Annabel and held up the box.

Annabel turned to see it—and gasped too. The dainty silver box, decorated with a chaste

Greek key pattern, held a miniature—of her, from shoulders up, in a bronze-colored dress, her head bare. After a moment's regard she realized it was very like the dress she'd worn on the Fourth of June. Whether it was truly like her she couldn't say—but the assured brushstrokes and use of color were indeed exquisite.

"He sent me the box and asked if I could make a picture of you to fit it, and if I could remember what you wore that day at Eton," Gus explained. "I—I think I remembered it correctly, ma'am—did I?"

"You did it *perfectly*," Mama said, when it became clear that Annabel was incapable of speech just then. "I am sure that Lord Quinceton will be delighted with it."

Gus hunched his shoulders and gazed down at his feet for a moment, overcome. Then he looked up. "But how do I get it to him?"

Annabel cleared her throat. "I'll see that he gets it, Gus. He will be in Brighton as well—I am sure," she added hastily at her mother's slight movement.

"Oh, thank you, ma'am." He received the miniature back from Mama and rewrapped it tenderly in its paper. "Lord Quinceton had that case specially made, he said, at Rundell and Bridge. He said a beautiful jewel should always be properly set."

"Hmm," Mama said.

"Well, *that's* taken care of," Martin said. "Come on, Gus. I want to go down to the river. It's too hot here."

But Gus had to take a proper farewell of them, so it was a moment before the boys clattered out of the room—long enough for Annabel to regain her composure once more. She looked up to find Mama gazing at her meditatively. "Yes?" she asked, a little defensively.

But Mama only said, "Hmm" once more, then turned to Winters. "You're absolutely right. I don't think she'll be needing black gloves. Now, have you packed her dressing gown?"

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