

Slightly Married

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Extract

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CHAPTER I



England ~ 1814

THERE WAS A SHADY DELL SLICING THROUGH THE woods on the western side of the park at Ringwood Manor in Oxfordshire. The water of the brook gurgling over its rocky bed joined up eventually with a larger river that formed the boundary of the park and flowed through the nearby village of Heybridge. The dell was always secluded and lovely. However, on this particular morning in May it was breathtakingly beautiful. The bluebells, which did not usually bloom until June, had been seduced by a mild spring into making an early appearance. The azaleas were in flower too, so that the sloping banks were carpeted in blue and pink. Bright sunbeams slanted through the dark-leaved branches of tall cypress trees and dappled the ground with brightness and shadow while sparkling off the bubbling water of the brook.

Eve Morris was knee-deep in bluebells. She had decided

that it was too glorious a morning to be spent in any of the usual activities about the house and farm or in the village. The bluebells were in bloom for such a short time, and picking them for the house had always been one of her favorite springtime activities. She was not alone. She had persuaded Thelma Rice, the governess, to cancel classes for a few hours and bring her two pupils and her infant son out flower picking. Even Aunt Mari had come despite her arthritic knees and frequent shortness of breath. Indeed, it had been her idea to turn the occasion into an impromptu picnic. She was sitting now on the sturdy chair Charlie had carried down for her, her knitting needles clicking steadily, a large basket of food and drink at her side.

Eve straightened up to stretch her back. A pile of long-stemmed flowers lay along the basket over her arm. With her free hand she pressed her ancient, floppy straw hat more firmly onto her head, even though the wide gray ribbon attached to its crown and brim was securely fastened beneath her chin. The ribbon matched her dress, a simply styled, high-waisted, short-sleeved cotton garment ideal for a morning in the country when no company was expected. She savored a conscious feeling of well-being. All of the summer stretched ahead, a summer unmarred by anxiety for the first time in many years. Well, *almost* unmarred. There was, of course, the continuing question of what was keeping John away. He had expected to be home by March, or April at the latest. But he would come as soon as he was able. Of that she was certain. In the meantime, she viewed her surroundings and her companions with placid contentment.

Aunt Mari was not watching her busy hands. Instead she watched the children, an affectionate smile on her lined and wrinkled face. Eve felt a rush of tenderness for her. She had spent forty years hauling carts of coal along passageways

deep in a coal mine until Papa had granted her a small pension after the death of her husband, Papa's uncle. Eve had persuaded her to come to Ringwood to live a little over a year ago, when Papa was very ill.

Seven-year-old Davy was picking earnestly, a frown on his thin face, as if he had been set a task of grave importance. Close behind him, as usual, five-year-old Becky, his sister, picked with more obvious enjoyment and less concentration, humming tunelessly as she did so. She looked like a child who felt secure in her surroundings. If only Davy could learn to relax like that, to lose the strained, serious look that made him appear too old for his years. But it would come, Eve told herself, if she would just be patient. Neither child was her own, though they had lived with her for the past seven months. They had no one else.

Muffin was down by the brook, three of his paws braced precariously on three different rocks, the fourth tucked under his belly, his nose half an inch above the shallow water. He was not drinking. He fancied himself as a prize fisher-dog though he had never caught even as much as a tadpole. Silly dog!

Young Benjamin Rice toddled up to his mother, a cluster of azalea and bluebell heads clutched tightly in one outstretched fist. Thelma bent to take them in her cupped hands as if they were some rare and precious treasure—as of course they were.

Eve felt a moment's envy of that mother love, but she shook it off as unworthy of her. She was one of the most fortunate of mortals. She lived in this idyllic place, and she was surrounded by people with whom she shared a reciprocal love, the loneliness of her girlhood a thing of the distant past. In a week's time she would be able to leave off her half-mourning on the first anniversary of Papa's death and wear *colors* again. She could scarcely wait. Soon—any day now—

John would be back, and she could admit to the world at long last that she was in love, love, love. She could have twirled about at the thought, like an exuberant girl, but she contented herself with a smile instead.

And then there was the other prospect to complete her happiness. Percy would be coming home. He had written in his last letter that he would take leave as soon as he was able, and now surely he must be able. A little over a week ago she had heard the glorious news that Napoléon Bonaparte had surrendered to the Allied forces in France and that the long wars were over at last. James Robson, Eve's neighbor, had come in person to Ringwood as soon as he heard himself, knowing what the news would mean to her—the end to years of anxiety for Percy's safety.

Eve stooped to pick more bluebells. She wanted to be able to set a filled vase in every room of the house. They would all celebrate springtime and victory and security and an end to mourning with color and fragrance. If *only* John would come.

"Who's ready for something to eat, then?" Aunt Mari called a few minutes later in her thick Welsh accent. "I'm exhausted just watching all of you."

"I am," Becky cried, skipping happily toward the basket and setting her flowers down at Aunt Mari's side. "I am starved."

Davy straightened up but stood uncertainly where he was, as if he half suspected that the offer would be snatched away if he moved.

Muffin came bobbing up from the brook, his one and a half ears cocked, woofing as he came.

"You must be famished too, Davy." Eve strode toward him, set her free arm about his thin shoulders, and swept him along with her. "What an excellent worker you are. You have picked more than anyone else."

"Thank you, Aunt Eve," he said gravely. He still spoke her name awkwardly as if he thought it an impertinence to use so familiar a form of address. He and Becky were not related to her, except by a very tenuous link through marriage, but how could she have two young children growing up in her home and addressing her as *Miss Morris*? Or Aunt Mari as *Mrs. Pritchard*?

Thelma was laughing. Flowers along one arm, Benjamin on the other, she was unable to prevent him from pushing her bonnet backward off her head.

Aunt Mari had the basket open and was taking out freshly baked bread rolls, which had been carefully wrapped in a tea towel. The yeasty smell of them and of fried chicken made Eve realize how hungry she was. She knelt on the blanket Davy and Becky had spread on the grass and took charge of the large bottle of lemonade.

The ten minutes or so of near silence that followed were testament to both their hard work and the culinary skills of Mrs. Rowe, Eve's cook. Why did food always taste so much more appetizing out-of-doors? Eve wondered, wiping her greasy fingertips on a linen napkin after devouring a second piece of chicken.

"I suppose," Aunt Mari said, "we'd better pack up and take all these flowers back to the house before they wilt. If someone would just hand me my cane as soon as I have my wool and needles in this bag, I could haul these old bones upright."

"Oh, must we?" Eve asked with a sigh as Davy scrambled to offer the cane.

But at that moment someone called her name.

"Miss Morris," the voice called with breathless urgency. "Miss Morris."

"We are still here, Charlie." She swiveled around to watch a large, fresh-faced young man come lumbering over

the top of the bank from the direction of the house and crash downward toward them in his usual ungainly manner. "Take your time or you will slip and hurt yourself." She had hired him several months ago, even though Ringwood had not needed any more servants, to do odd jobs about the house and stable and park. No one else had wanted to offer Charlie employment after the death of his father, the village blacksmith, because he was generally described as a half-wit. Even his father had constantly berated him as a useless lump. Eve had never known anyone more eager to work and to please.

"Miss Morris." He was gasping and ruddy-cheeked by the time he came close enough to deliver his message. Whenever Charlie was sent on an errand, he behaved as if he had been sent to announce the end of the world or something of similarly dire import. "I am sent. By Mrs. Fuller. To fetch you back to the house." He fought for air between each short sentence.

"Did she say why, Charlie?" Eve got unhurriedly to her feet and shook out her skirt. "We are all on our way home anyway."

"Someone's come," Charlie said. He stood very still then, his large feet planted wide, his brow creased in deep furrows of concentration, and tried to bring something else to mind. "I can't remember his name."

Eve felt a lurching of excitement in the pit of her stomach. *John?* But she had been disappointed so many times in the last two months that it was best not to consider the possibility. Indeed, she was even beginning to wonder if he was coming at all, if he had ever intended to come. But she was not yet prepared to draw such a drastic conclusion—she pushed it firmly away.

"Well, never mind," she said cheerfully. "I daresay I will find it out soon enough. Thank you for bringing the message

so promptly, Charlie. Would you carry the chair back to the house for Mrs. Pritchard and then return for the basket?"

He beamed at the prospect of being able to make himself useful and stood poised to scoop up the chair the moment Aunt Mari got to her feet. Then he turned back to Eve with a beaming smile of triumph.

"He is a military feller," he said. "I seen him before Mrs. Fuller sent me to fetch you and he was wearing one of them red uniform things."

A military man.

"Oh, Eve, my love," Aunt Mari said, but Eve did not even hear her.

"Percy!" she cried in a burst of exuberance. Basket and flowers and companions were forgotten. She gathered up her skirts with both hands and began to run up the bank, leaving her aunt and Thelma and Charlie to gather up the children and the bluebells.

It was not a long way back to the house, but most of the distance was uphill. Eve scarcely noticed. Nor did she notice that Muffin ran panting at her heels every step of the way. She was up to the top of the dell in a few moments and then through the trees and around the lily pond and up over the sloping lawn to the stables, along in front of the buildings and across the cobbled terrace to the front doors of the house. By the time she burst into the entrance hall, she was flushed and panting and probably looking alarmingly disheveled, even grubby. She did not care one iota. Percy would not care.

The rogue! He had sent no word that he was coming. But that did not matter now. And surprises were wonderful things—at least *happy* surprises were. He was home!

"Where is he?" she asked Agnes Fuller, her housekeeper, who awaited her in the hall, large and solid and hatchet-faced. How like Percy to keep her in suspense, not simply to

rush out to meet her and sweep her off her feet and into a bear hug.

"In the parlor," Agnes said, jerking a thumb to her right. "Out you get, dog, until you have had your paws washed! You'd better go upstairs first, my lamb, and wash your—"

But Eve did not even hear her. She dashed across the checkered floor of the hall, flung open the door of the visitors' parlor, and hurried inside.

"You wretch!" she cried, pulling undone the ribbon of her hat. And then she stopped dead in her tracks, feeling intense mortification. He was not Percy. He was a stranger.

He was standing before the empty hearth, his back to it, facing the door. He seemed to half fill the room. He looked seven feet tall, dressed as he was in full regimentals, his scarlet coat and its gold facings immaculate, his white pantaloons spotless, his knee-high black cavalry boots polished to a high gloss, his sheathed sword gleaming at his side. He looked broad and solid and powerful and menacing. He had a harsh, weathered face, its darkness accentuated by black hair and eyebrows. It was a grim face, with hard, nearly black eyes, a great hooked nose, and thin, cruel-looking lips.

"Oh, I do beg your pardon," she said, suddenly, horribly aware of her bedraggled appearance. She pulled off her hat—her old, shapeless hat—and held it at her side. Her hair must be flattened and untidy. She surely had grass and flower bits all over her. She probably had streaks of dirt all over her face. *Why* had she not stopped to ask Agnes the identity of the military man who had come calling? And *why* was he here? "I thought you were someone else."

He stared at her for a long moment before bowing. "Miss Morris, I presume?" he said.

She inclined her head to him. "You have the advantage of me, I am afraid, sir," she said. "The servant who came for me had forgotten your name."

“Colonel Bedwyn at your service, ma’am,” he said.

She recognized the name instantly. She could even supply the rest of it. He was Colonel Lord Aidan Bedwyn and Percy’s commanding officer. If she had felt deep mortification before, now she wished a black hole would open beneath her feet and swallow her up.

But it did not take her longer than a moment to realize that embarrassment was the least of her concerns. He was *Percy’s commanding officer*. And he was standing in the visitors’ parlor at Ringwood in full, formal dress uniform. There was no need to ask why. In that instant she *knew*. Her head turned cold, as if all the blood had gushed downward out of it. Even the air in her nostrils felt icy. Unconsciously she let her hat fall to the floor and with both hands closed the door at her back, sought out the handle, and clung on tightly.

“What can I do for you, Colonel?” She heard her voice now as if it came from a long way off.

He looked hard at her, his face devoid of expression. “I am the bearer of unhappy tidings,” he said. “Is there someone you would wish to summon?”

“Percy?” His name came out as a whisper. She could well imagine this man wielding the cold, heavy steel at his side, a detached part of her mind thought. Killing with it. “But the wars are at an end. Napoléon Bonaparte has been defeated. He has surrendered.”

“Captain Percival Morris fell in action at Toulouse in the south of France on April the tenth,” he said. “He died a hero’s death, ma’am. I am deeply regretful of the pain it will cause you.”

Percy. Her only brother, her only sibling, whom she had worshipped during childhood, adored fiercely through her girlhood, when he had been restless and rebellious and constantly at odds with Papa, and loved unwaveringly during

the long years after he had gone away and then used the unexpected legacy left him by their maternal great-uncle to purchase a commission in a cavalry regiment. He had loved her cheerfully, generously, in return. She had received a letter from him—from France—just two weeks ago.

Captain Morris fell in action . . .

“Will you sit down?” The colonel had moved closer, though he did not touch her. He loomed over her, huge and dark and menacing. “You are very pale. May I have someone fetched to you, ma’am?”

“He is dead?” He had been dead for almost a month and she had not known. She had not even sensed it. He had been two weeks dead when she read his letter, more than two weeks dead when James brought the news of victory and she had felt such enormous relief. “Did he suffer?” Foolish question.

“I think not, ma’am,” the colonel said. He had not stepped back away from her and she felt suffocated, deprived of air and space. Seated on horseback, sword in hand, he must be truly terrifying. “There is often a merciful shock that keeps dying men from feeling the pain of their wounds. I believe Captain Morris was one of them. He did not look to be in pain and did not speak of it.”

“Speak?” She looked sharply up at him. “He spoke? To you?”

“His final thoughts and words were of you,” he said, inclining his head. “He begged me to bring you the news myself.”

“It was extremely kind of you to honor such a request,” she said, realizing suddenly how strange it was that Percy’s commanding officer should come in person all the way from the south of France to inform her of his death.

“I owe Captain Morris my life,” he explained. “He saved it in an act of extraordinary courage and at the risk of con-

siderable personal danger two years ago at the Battle of Salamanca.”

“Did he say anything else?”

“He asked that you not wear black for him,” the colonel told her. “I believe he added that you have had too much of that.”

His eyes swept downward over her gray dress, which she was so looking forward to discarding for something more colorful, more in tune with the season in a week’s time. But it no longer mattered.

Her brother was gone. Forever.

She was engulfed in pain, blinded, deafened by it, by the unbearable agony of loss.

“Ma’am?” The colonel took another half-step forward and reached out a hand as if to take her by the arm.

She recoiled. “Anything else?”

“He asked me to protect you,” he said.

“To *protect* me?” Her eyes flew to his face again. It was like granite, she thought. Without warmth, without expression, without sentiment. If there was a person behind the hard military facade, there was no sign of him. Though perhaps that was unfair. He had come close as if to aid her and had reached out a steadying hand. And he *had* come all the way from the south of France to repay a debt to Percy.

“I have taken a room at the Three Feathers Inn in Heybridge,” he said. “I will remain there until tomorrow, ma’am. The next time I call here you will inform me how I may be of service to you. But at the moment you need the assistance of people who are familiar to you. You are in shock.”

He stepped to one side and pulled on the bell rope beside the door. *Was* she in shock? She felt perfectly in command of herself. She even wondered if that bell still worked since she could not recall the last time it had been used. She also

realized that if it *did* work and if Agnes *did* answer it, she was going to have to move. She was still standing against the door, her hands clinging to the handle as if for very life. She did not believe she would be able to move if she tried. The universe would shatter into a billion fragments. Perhaps she really was not quite herself.

Percy was dead.

Agnes answered the summons almost immediately. The colonel grasped Eve firmly by the upper arm just in time to move her to one side as the door opened.

"Is there someone you can summon to Miss Morris's assistance?" he asked, though in truth his words sounded far more like a crisp command than a courteous request. "If so, do it immediately."

Agnes, in true Agnes fashion, merely turned her head and bellowed. "Charlie? Char-*lie*, do you hear me? Set down that chair and run back for Mrs. Pritchard. Tell her to hurry. Miss Morris needs her. *Now!*"

"You must sit before you faint," the colonel said. "Even your lips are colorless."

Eve sank obediently onto the closest chair and sat there, very upright, her spine not quite touching the back, her hands clasped tightly, painfully, in her lap. Poor Aunt Mari, she thought—*tell her to hurry*. Then she heard the echo of something the colonel had said a minute or two ago.

. . . you will inform me how I may be of service to you.

"There is nothing you can do for me, Colonel," she said. "There is little point in subjecting yourself to the discomforts of a country inn. But I do thank you for your offer. And for coming all this way. You are very kind."

How was it possible, she wondered, watching Agnes pick up her hat from the floor and hold it against her chest, frowning ferociously the while, to mouth mundane courte-

sies when *Percy was dead*? She felt the sharp pain of her fingernails digging into her palms.

"The amenities of even the humblest of country inns seem like the lap of luxury to a man newly returned from a military campaign, ma'am," he said. "You need not concern yourself about my comfort."

She had not offered him refreshments, she thought in the minute or two of silence that followed while Agnes stared at her and Colonel Bedwyn did not. He had taken up his stand before the hearth again, his back to it. She had not even offered him a seat.

Aunt Mari, still wearing her hat, came hobbling into the room before any conversation could resume, her cane tapping out an urgent tattoo on the floor, her eyes wide with dismay, as if she already understood what this was all about. Charlie must have outdone himself in conveying a sense of doom. Eve swayed to her feet.

"Miss Morris has need of you, ma'am," Colonel Bedwyn said without waiting for any introductions to be made. "I have been the bearer of sad tidings concerning Captain Percival Morris, her brother, I am afraid."

"Oh, my poor love." Aunt Mari came straight toward her and gathered her into her arms. Her cane clattered to the floor. Eve rested her forehead on her aunt's bony shoulder for a weary spell, drawing comfort from the human touch of someone familiar, someone who loved her, someone who would make all better if she possibly could. But no one could make this better. No one could bring Percy back. Wretchedness enveloped her like a dark cloud.

When she lifted her head again, her aunt's eyes were filled with tears and her lips were wobbling in an effort to control her emotions. Muffin was standing at her feet, wagging his bit of a tail, looking soulful. Agnes still hovered just inside the room, clutching Eve's hat and looking as if she

would gladly fight a dragon or two if someone would only point her in the right direction. Thelma, her eyes wide with dismay, was there too, though there was no sign of the children. Nanny Johnson must have taken them upstairs.

Colonel Lord Aidan Bedwyn had gone.