A Historical Romance Novella

Book One of The Unexpected Love Series

by Meghan March

Chapter 1

England 1864

"And people say Russians are barbaric. This whole culture of marrying off young girls to old men … a tale as old as time, yet no less barbaric when done by the English." Prince Alexander Nicholas Karalovy shook his head in disgust as a man, whose waistcoat buttons were straining at his bulging belly, nearly drooled over the décolletage of a girl at least thirty years his junior.

"You know what they say about tradition," Hudson, his enemy turned friend, said with a laugh.

"What do they say about tradition?"

Before Hudson could answer, Alexander's attention was pulled to a voice coming from beyond the wall of greenery behind them.

"Remember, a man's title does not determine his character or his suitability as a husband. If one is lucky, one will meet a nobleman who is truly noble. If one does not, any man of character is a far superior choice for one's husband."

Hudson heard it too, Alexander deduced from the glimmer in his eye.

"What a unique chaperone. I can't say I've ever heard that before. Who was that?"

Alexander was already following the ball-gown-clad forms as they came around the wall of potted plants decorating the ballroom. His gaze barely registered the two young

girls, but he was riveted by the dark-haired woman in the high-necked navy dress who was still speaking to them.

"Now, have fun, but keep your wits about you." She carried herself with the bearing of a queen and spoke with the wisdom of King Solomon.

"I think those are the Templebourne twins. I heard about them at my club. Which would make her … Templebourne's niece, I believe. The one raised in India. Ahhh. Makes sense, doesn't it?"

"What makes sense?" Alexander asked.

"The wagers."

He finally tore his gaze from the petite woman, whose stunning beauty needed no ornamentation or daringly cut dress to stand out. "Wagers?"

"There are several contenders," Hudson added as he glanced at Alexander.

"For her hand?" Alexander could see it.

Even in dark navy, she shone like a jewel.

Hudson guffawed. "She's too old for that kind of offer. The wagers are on who will take her as a mistress."

Alexander's attention shifted back to the woman they were discussing, and this time, his field of vision included the entire ballroom. His were not the only male eyes following her, as opposed to her charges.

"Mistress?" Something about wagers being bandied about on such a subject with regard to this woman made him feel like reviving the barbarian he'd become on the battlefield.

"After the twins are married off, once the season winds down, there's a lot of money riding on whose bed she finds herself in. I know for certain the Duke of Carlton wants her. The most money is on him for sure. Baron Farley is definitely interested, but no sane woman would choose him over Carlton," Hudson whispered behind his glass.

Englishmen. Idiots.

As Hudson kept speaking, Alexander watched the woman whose beauty could not help but attract attention.

"She was raised in India. Her father was a Company man. She didn't come back until after she was too old to make her debut. I heard her parents died there. That's how she ended up living with Templebourne and his daughters. Her father was the younger brother, like me."

"How in the world does the niece of a nobleman end up as the subject of wagers of such a base nature?"

“Rumor has it, Templebourne is joining the hunt for a wife after his daughters are married off. I heard he wants his niece gone from the house before he weds again. And there are plenty of men who’d like to give her a place to land.”

“And none of them will marry her? Her uncle would just toss her to the wolves? How is that not barbaric?”

“I don’t know. There is speculation that she has other family who could take her in, but as Farley put it last night, what a waste for her to become a spinster in the country.”

“Hmm …” Alexander watched as she found a chair beside the other chaperones, having given permission for the twins to take their places on the dance floor with eager suitors.

She stood out like Cleopatra in a sea of gray-haired matrons.

“What a waste indeed.”

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