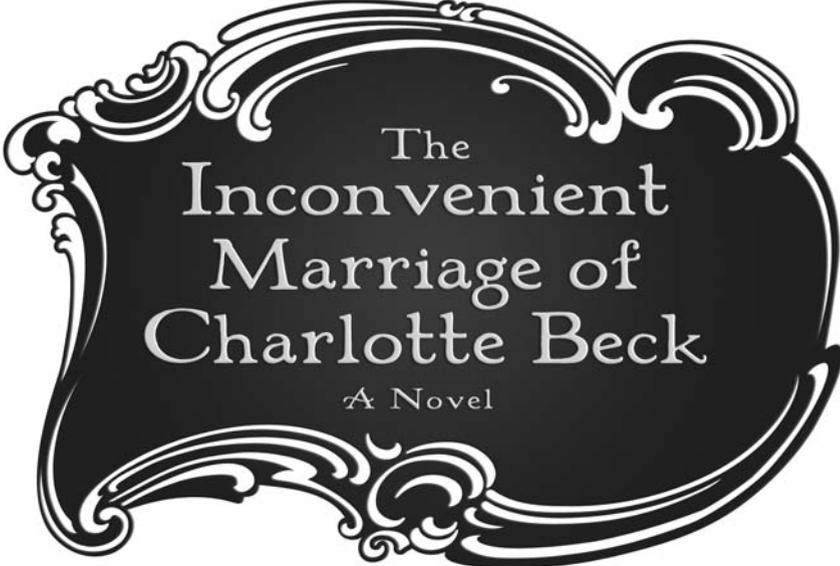




The
Inconvenient
Marriage of
Charlotte Beck

A Novel

KATHLEEN Y'BARBO

An ornate, black and white decorative frame with intricate scrollwork and flourishes. The frame is roughly rectangular with rounded corners and a slightly irregular shape, resembling a scroll or a piece of parchment. It contains the title and author information.

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WATERBROOK
PRESS



A lady carries herself with great poise and the sense
that an egg sits atop her head.

—MISS PENCE

June 9, 1887
London

What Charlotte Beck wanted, Charlotte Beck generally got.

Thus Charlotte stood on the doorstep of Fensworth House, poised to make her unofficial debut into proper society despite the fact that she'd not yet reached the age of introduction nor been presented to the queen.

Won't Gussie be surprised when I write her about the evening? The thought of her best friend, Augusta "Gussie" Miller, bolstered Charlotte's courage and reminded her why she'd insisted on being included tonight. After much pleading, Charlotte had convinced Gennie, her stepmother, that she needed to practice her social graces before her first official events of the New York and London seasons.

As the door opened, Charlotte swallowed a flutter of nerves. A uniformed servant nodded at her, and she worried she would forget the litany of instructions on proper decorum that Gennie had again gone over with her on the carriage ride here.

Charlotte slid a glance that she hoped conveyed thanks to the man whose duty it had been to escort the Beck ladies tonight. The same man

who'd successfully lobbied on her behalf. Colonel William F. Cody, who was not only her father's business partner but also practically family, responded with a wink, then adjusted his lapels.

Her gaze swept past the colonel to the room a level below them, which glittered as much from the chandeliers above as from the jewels the nobility wore. The light was perfect for painting. She closed her eyes to memorize the scene then opened them quickly when Gennie touched her arm.

Had she any breath left, Charlotte might have sighed at the loveliness of it all. But under Gennie's instructions, the maid had pulled her corset strings so tight that even mild exertion would likely send Charlotte plummeting to the floor.

Perhaps rushing her debut was not such a wise move after all. The combined effect of nibbling at almost nothing all day and then squeezing into the lace-covered instrument of torture was not Charlotte's idea of a grand time.

Colonel Cody shifted positions to move beside her, and she glanced up to see him giving one last swipe to his well-tended mustache. A fellow clad in the livery of the Fensworth household stepped in front of them and cleared his throat. "The distinguished Colonel William F. Cody, Lady Eugenia Cooper Beck, and Miss Charlotte Beck."

A hush fell over the room as Gennie allowed Colonel Cody to take her arm. "Show time," he whispered to Charlotte before linking arms with her as well.

The name of the famous American showman had caught the crowd's attention, and several dozen men and women moved toward them. The famed "Buffalo Bill" released Charlotte and escorted Gennie down the stairs to greet their hosts.

Left alone at the top of what seemed an impossibly high vantage point, Charlotte reached for the banister then thought better of it. *A*

lady carries herself with great poise and the sense that an egg sits atop her head, said Miss Pence, the tutor who'd spent the last few weeks whipping Charlotte into some manner of good form.

Find a focal point and walk toward it, looking neither up nor down. Easily done in her grandfather's drawing room, but not here with half of London watching her performance. Charlotte took a shallow breath and focused on a lovely Adams mantel across the room. Leaning against the mantel was a much more interesting focal point: an impossibly handsome, dark-haired gent who appeared quite amused at her plight. He had the audacity to lift one corner of his mouth in a taunting grin.

A child might have stuck her tongue out at him, but a lady did no such thing. Shifting her focus back to the fireplace and, above it, a rather lovely Watteau painting of an idyllic countryside setting, Charlotte took her first successful, if halting, step. And then another, and another, keeping in mind the wobbling imaginary egg, until she'd reached Gennie's side. Only then did she brave a look at her one-man audience, who applauded.

"Darling," Gennie said, drawing her attention, "say hello to our hosts." To the fellow in noble regalia and his strikingly beautiful wife, she said, "I'm so happy to present our daughter, Charlotte."

Our daughter. Charlotte squeezed Gennie's hand, and her stepmother returned the gesture. That the Lord had given her Gennie to fill the gaping void of living without a mother was still a blessing that brought tears to Charlotte's eyes.

She shifted to balance the imaginary egg then offered her host a smile. Slowly her attention turned to the earl's wife. Again, Charlotte smiled in greeting as Miss Pence had instructed her. *Speak when spoken to and do not assume nobility cares one whit for your ramblings* had been a favorite saying of the sour old tutor.

Lady Fensworth, resplendent in a gown of deepest blue, leaned forward, and her appraising gaze swept Charlotte's length. "You're quite lovely. Perhaps I should introduce you to my Martin. After he's finished speaking with Colonel Cody, of course."

"Martin?"

The question was met with instant disapproval on the face of their hostess while their host seemed to be off in a world of his own. Charlotte looked to Gennie for guidance on how to repair what was obviously some sort of damage.

"The future earl," Gennie whispered.

"Oh, yes, thank you. I would very much like an introduction," Charlotte managed. The woman's cool stare kept Charlotte off balance as she turned to find the man in question. She spied the colonel's silver hair and then, by leaning just a bit to the right, found a partial view of his companion. "Is that Martin?" she quietly asked Gennie.

At Gennie's nod, Charlotte studied the dark-haired man. When he turned his head her direction, their gazes collided. It was the same awful fellow who'd taken great delight in mocking her as she made her entrance into the ballroom.

This was Martin Hambly?

As Charlotte contemplated this fact, the man in question winked.

Of all the nerve.

"Come dear," Gennie said.

But she was too stunned to move. Rather, Charlotte's eyes narrowed. Whatever sort Martin Hambly was, he certainly was not a gentleman.

"Charlotte, do join me." Gennie's insistent tone caught her attention.

"Yes, of course." Charlotte offered a hastened version of a bow then scurried off a step behind her stepmother.

As she made her way across the room, she kept the dark-haired man in sight. She saw him duck behind a group of party goers, and though she searched for him, Martin Hambly was nowhere to be seen.

Gennie joined several society matrons engrossed in a conversation regarding the queen's upcoming Golden Jubilee, and Charlotte found her tolerance for this event, as well as her ability to take a decent breath, waning. The room began to spin, and she searched for a remedy. Colonel Cody stood against the far wall, a crowd of men surrounding him. He gestured animatedly with his arms, no doubt telling an exciting story about his time as an army scout. She longed to join the conversation, but Miss Pence would find it most improper.

She took another shallow breath, and her vision shimmered at the edges. To sit was unthinkable, especially given the limitations of the contraption that held her not only captive but upright. Escaping back up the stairs to freedom and the carriage that delivered her was also an impossible dream.

Charlotte sighed. She now knew without any doubt how a horse felt when it had been hobbled. Surely the New York parties would be much more fun.

As for the Pence egg, she'd been amusing herself for the last half-hour by imagining it as a ruined mess on the lovely ballroom floor, one that certain guests found too slippery to avoid. It was an evil way to pass the time, but any amusement was better than fainting dead away.

"Are you unwell?" one of the matrons asked her.

Charlotte once again looked to Gennie for the proper response.

"Perhaps a bit of fresh air might help," Gennie whispered. She nodded toward a large bank of windows overlooking what appeared to be a lovely garden. Heavy curtains lifted slightly at the edges, indicating the promise of a breeze. Gennie caught Charlotte's wrist. "Mind your

manners.” She pressed her lips to Charlotte’s cheek. “And don’t get caught,” she whispered in Charlotte’s ear.

Charlotte gave her stepmother an incredulous look. Had she just been instructed to climb out a window? When Gennie winked before returning to her conversation with the ladies, Charlotte had her answer.

“Excuse me, please,” Charlotte said to the wagging tongues. She set the Pence egg back in its imaginary place and moved toward the makeshift exit as if she owned the place.

As few knew her, no one impeded Charlotte’s progress. She spent only a few moments standing at the edge of the room to assure she’d gone unnoticed before turning to slip behind the curtains. Then it was a simple matter for Charlotte, who had been sneaking out of her second-floor bedroom since she was eight years old, to disappear under the open sash and out into the fresh night air.

Or it should have been simple. But her slippered foot caught on the sill, and the stupid corset kept her from bending. She hit her head on the sash, tipped over, and plummeted off the edge of what turned out to be a balcony with an extremely low and unsteady railing.

The stars above tilted and whirled as she grasped blindly for something to stop her fall. Only when she ceased tumbling did Charlotte realize that she’d not landed on the ground. Rather, she’d been caught by a man.

Worse, a second look confirmed it was Martin Hambly, the awful mocker who’d previously been posed beside the Adams mantel.

Charlotte’s mouth opened to order the awful man, who stared at her with that insolent grin, to release her at once, but instead she gave in to her strangling corset and fainted dead away.

Even when Viscount Alexander Hambly didn't go seeking trouble, it found him. This time trouble had come in the form of a girl playing dress-up. Or that had been Alex's opinion from afar as he watched the would-be Cinderella descend the staircase to join the ball.

Up close, however, Miss Charlotte Beck gave a different impression. While he determined her to be of an age at which some men preferred their companions, Alex didn't find the woman-child type to his liking. Worse, she was American, and not one of those interesting Yanks like Colonel Cody. No, from head to toe, it was apparent this was a female of the pampered variety.

He considered disposing of his duties by offering the vapid Miss Beck up to the frontiersman. Surely one man to another, Alex's explanation that he'd been minding his own business, watching for the appearance of Jacob's Comet on the western horizon, when a flying guest landed in his arms would be taken seriously. But then he remembered that the girl had arrived with Colonel Cody, making him a close acquaintance at least and possibly a dear family friend, and that Colonel Cody tended to shoot things for a living.

Indeed it was a predicament.

Voices on the balcony above sent Alex toward the hedge. Unfortunately, he'd not considered the limp bundle in his arms when he slid into his hiding place. A slight whack on the head from a tree branch was all it took to awaken the sleeping beauty.

And she didn't appear the least bit happy about her predicament. "Release me this—"

Out of necessity and self-preservation, he pressed his palm to her still-moving lips with his free hand. "Shhh," he hissed with as much authority as he could muster. The ploy seemed to work. "All right, then," Alex whispered. "What do you think you were doing?"

The woman in his arms merely glared at him.

“Well then,” he said slowly as he stared down into the loveliest pair of green eyes he’d seen in some time, “while I can say with all honesty that I was watching for Jacob’s Comet to appear, my guess is you have no such excuse.”

Her eyes widened and then slowly narrowed. A moment later, her teeth clamped down on his hand and he let out a yelp. Taking her advantage, the woman slid from his grasp and bolted from the hedge.

“Why, Charlotte Beck, is that you?” a man called.

Alex froze. Following at this point would only invite scandal. While he cared not a whit about the wagging tongues of London’s elite, his parents were much more sensitive to such matters.

“I’m sorry,” the Beck woman said. “Do I know you?”

Alex couldn’t hear all of the man’s response, but it appeared he was explaining just how they’d come to be introduced. At a tea, perhaps? Or was he saying at sea?

“I see,” Miss Beck said quite clearly to the unknown man. “I was just taking the air and hoping to catch a glimpse of Jacob’s Comet.”

Jacob’s Comet? Had the Beck woman just stolen his alibi?

The rest of her conversation was lost on the breeze as the two moved back inside, though her laughter floated through the hedge to settle somewhere between his heart and that place where irritation arose.

And rise it did, especially when he took a step and found the American’s fan beneath his foot. Alex picked up the crumpled piece of finery, ruffled and covered in the same pale fabric as Miss Beck’s dress. Shaking off the leaves but not bothering to remove the smears of mud, Alex went off in search of Charlotte Beck.

For the first time that night, Charlotte was thankful for the awful corset. Without the instrument of torture, her spine might have turned to jelly somewhere between the stairs leading from the back garden to the ballroom and the spot on the edge of the dance floor where she almost literally ran into Uncle Edwin. At least this way her back remained straight and her shoulders square. Only the best posture for a woman properly dressed.

“Do take me home,” she said as she linked arms with her uncle, then offered her cheek for his kiss. The orchestra struck up a waltz.

“Home?” His laughter reminded her of Papa, as did the way he made her feel that anything she said was of great importance. “After all the fuss you made to be allowed to attend? I’ll do no such thing. Genie would have my head. Now perhaps a dance?”

He gave her a look that told Charlotte her ruse had not worked. He knew her too well. She needed a stronger excuse for leaving Fensworth’s home post haste. Or at least before the fellow she’d landed on could catch up and tell on her.

“All right then,” she said. “Escort me back across the room to Genie so no more of these awful men accost me.”

“Accost you?” He halted and lifted a brow. “Explain yourself.”

Charlotte took a breath, or what passed for one whilst imprisoned in the corset, and offered a downcast look. “Promise you won’t tell Genie this, but...” She paused for effect then slowly swung her gaze up to meet her uncle’s stare. “Suffice it to say one fellow has received an injury for his trouble.”

As she spoke, Charlotte slid a peek around the edge of the crowd in case the fellow from the garden had appeared. Her conscience prickled at her uncle’s change in expression.

“What happened?”

“I, well, that is, the room was warm and the garden lovely, so...” She looked down at the mud on her slippers then back up at Uncle Edwin. “I was merely trying to catch a glimpse of a comet.” At her uncle’s confused expression, she paused. “I admit I bit him, but he deserved it. Thus, there truly is no further cause for action.”

“Where is the scoundrel? I’ll have his—”

“Forgive the intrusion, Miss Beck,” a decidedly familiar male voice called.

Charlotte looked past her fuming uncle to see the man from the garden moving toward them. In his hand he carried the mangled remains of her fan.

“Hambly,” Uncle Edwin said in an ugly hiss. He touched her arm. “Is that the man who accosted you?”

“Well, actually...” She grappled with an answer as her conscience began to sting.

“Just a moment of your time,” the man said.

“Charlotte?” When she couldn’t find any words, Uncle Edwin turned to face the dark-haired man head-on. “You’ll speak to me and not her, Hambly.”

Martin Hambly held up his hands, the fan still dangling from his fingers. “I mean no harm.”

“Uncle Edwin, please don’t make a scene.” Charlotte moved between her uncle and Hambly. “I must confess that I might have instigated the situation by—”

“Move,” her uncle said as he pressed past her. “This family’s been asking for...”

And then Uncle Edwin punched him.



Speak when spoken to and do not assume nobility
cares one whit for your ramblings.

—MISS PENCE

“I don’t care if he was Fensworth’s prize pony,” Uncle Edwin said as he helped Gennie into the carriage, then climbed in beside her. “Hambly’s son walked through the ballroom with your ruined fan out for all to see.” He paused and seemed to be considering what to say next. “A gentleman would have considered Charlotte’s reputation.”

“The same could be said for Charlotte. Still, Edwin,” Gennie said as she settled her skirts, “your behavior was simply barbaric.”

“Barbaric, was it?” He turned his attention to Charlotte. “Tell her what you told me.”

What had she told her uncle? “I, that is...” She paused to think, an impossible task with two sets of eyes staring at her and the awful corset biting her ribs. “I believe I might have mentioned that—”

“That he accosted you,” Uncle Edwin supplied. “You were simply out looking at a comet.”

At that statement, Gennie’s brows rose. “When did you develop an interest in astronomy, Charlotte? Other than the painting you made for your grandfather, I’ve seen no indication of any affinity for stargazing.”

Several answers came to mind. “I’ll send a note of apology to our hosts,” Charlotte said instead. She lowered her eyes. “Please don’t tell Papa.”

“You’ll do no such thing, and I’ll make no promises as to your father.” Gennie paused. “Of all the noblemen in London, you two had to offend the earl and his son. Do you have any idea how difficult it has been for Lady Hambly and me to arrange even the most tenuous of truces between our families?” She crossed her arms and looked out the carriage window.

“But, I—”

“Driver, please turn the carriage around,” Gennie said sharply. “We’re going back to the Fensworth home.”

Charlotte shook her head. “We can’t go back there.”

Uncle Edwin joined the protest until Gennie held up her hand to silence both of them. “*We* aren’t going back. Charlotte is.”

“I am?”

Gennie nodded. “You are.” She swiveled to face her husband’s brother. “Edwin, you have amends of your own to make, but as this entire incident began with Charlotte, it shall end with her. You may either wait with me or find another means of transport.”

“You can wait alone.” He called to the driver. “Stop here and let me out.” Charlotte watched as her uncle bounded from the carriage without looking back.

“Stubborn man, that one,” Gennie said as she settled back against the seat. “Now, as to *your* Beck stubbornness, shall we discuss it now or once you’ve completed your errand?”

“I’d rather hear it now, if you please,” Charlotte said, “though I doubt it will be news to either of us that what some see as self-assured, others might call stubborn.”

“Self-assured, is it?” Gennie chuckled. “I supposed I might have been accused of that a time or two in my youth.” Her expression sobered. “However, you’ve a decision to make, and you’ll make it right now before you leave the carriage.”

“Goodness, Gennie, you sound—”

“Irritated? Annoyed? Completely exhausted with your antics?” Gennie’s eyes narrowed. “Yes, yes, and yes!”

The starch went out of Charlotte’s argument as she took in her stepmother’s reaction. “Well,” she said softly, “I had no idea you felt so strongly about this.”

“Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein: and he that rolleth a stone, it will return upon him.” Gennie paused. “From the twenty-sixth Proverb.”

Charlotte swallowed hard and studied the battered and stained fan dangling from her wrist. For once, no witty comment or smart retort came to mind.

“Your fan isn’t the only thing you’ve ruined tonight.” Gennie leaned forward to cover Charlotte’s hand with her own. “A lady’s fan is easily replaced. A man’s reputation, however, is precious and fragile. As to your reputation...” She paused and looked away. “Perhaps you’ll be excused as just another American. However, I’m sure your grandfather would wish a remedy of some sort.”

“A remedy,” Charlotte echoed as Gennie once again met her gaze. “Yes, of course, but how?”

Gennie leaned back against the cushions and contemplated the question. “I don’t suppose we can depend on stargazing to become all the rage. That would certainly excuse your behavior.” She shrugged. “We shall simply have to pray nothing further happens to raise eyebrows.”

Gennie spoke as if she had little hope of seeing this happen.

“I promise I’ll behave,” Charlotte said. And she meant it.

The carriage slowed to a halt, but Charlotte’s heart did quite the opposite. Crossing the street before them was the very man she’d wronged. *Thank you, Lord, for not making me go back inside.*

“Go on,” Gennie said as the liveried servant opened the carriage door. “I’ll wait here.”

“But that isn’t proper,” Charlotte argued, recalling Miss Pence’s admonition against unsupervised walks with unmarried gentlemen. “And I’ve just promised to behave.”

“Very well then.” Gennie looked at the servant. “Follow her, please. Keep your distance but see that propriety is maintained.”

“Yes’m,” he said with a nod.

Far too quickly, Charlotte found herself at the curb with the Fensworth heir moving away at a fast clip. As he had not seen her, Charlotte had not only to catch his attention but, failing that, catch him.

And in the ridiculous corset, no less.

Forgetting Miss Pence’s egg, she lifted her skirts and darted as best she could across the traffic on Grosvenor Square. At the opposite curb, she turned back to see Gennie watching.

Now what?

Gennie shook her head and pointed to the retreating Englishman.

With a groan, Charlotte turned back to her pursuit. “You there,” she called to the broad back of the Hambly fellow. “Please slow down.”

He kept walking, oblivious to her situation. Or perhaps reveling in it. Stepping in and out of deep shadows and brilliant streetlights, the nobleman appeared fully aware he’d been summoned and fully resistant to respond.

Charlotte picked up her pace, breathing as deeply as she could so as not to faint from lack of oxygen or the stench that permeated the city. The man’s stride was long, his agility quite good, for they had reached a section of sidewalk crowded with people. She too wove in and out of strolling Londoners, keeping the back of the Hambly heir in view. When

she glanced behind her, Grandfather's servant was nowhere to be seen. He had either blended into the crowd or abandoned his post.

And yet she could not turn back. Gennie would require her to complete her mission, be it now or tomorrow. And *now* was Charlotte's time of choice. She never had learned the gentle art of patience. Nor did she relish the thought of offering her apology in front of others—chief among them the earl and his wife.

"You, sir!" She darted around a trio of lads. "Slow down! I wish to speak with you."

"Hey, there," one of the young men called. "You're a pretty thing."

Ignoring the bawdy laughter, Charlotte pressed on. If only she could remove the corset. Then she could catch this man without once again making a fool of herself by passing out.

"Mr. Hambly," she gasped. "Truly, you *must* stop."

"Ooh, she's a *lay-dee*," one of the street toughs singsonged.

"A fine American *lay-dee*," the other added.

"Looks like she's *a-feared* of us," the third said. "See how she runs after that bloke. Or maybe she's not a *lay-dee* at all."

Well, that did it. Charlotte halted. She palmed the ruined fan that still dangled from her wrist and pointed it at the trio.

"Come one step closer and I shall be forced to show you exactly what happens when a man goes too far," she said. One of the three jerked his hand to his pocket, and Charlotte swatted at it with the fan. "Don't," she said through clenched jaw.

"I recommend you listen to the lady," came a deep voice from behind her. "Look what she did to me."

Charlotte glanced over her shoulder to see Hambly had returned, sporting the beginnings of a nasty black eye. A clamoring of boot heels

on the sidewalk told Charlotte the men had chosen to retreat. Unfortunately, so did the earl's son—in the opposite direction.

This time she easily caught him. “Look, if you’ll just stop a moment,” she said with what little breath she could manage, “then it won’t be so hard to say what I need to say.”

He halted so quickly that Charlotte slammed into him. A fortuitous accident, given her childhood talents.

“Go home, little girl.” He took off again at a faster pace. “I’m trying to find my—” He swiped at his forehead. “Just go home. I’ll hold no grudge, nor do I hope to recall your face. How’s that?”

“That is not acceptable,” Charlotte said. “Not acceptable at all.”

The earl's son kept walking, but Charlotte smiled. He wouldn't get far now.

“I advise you to return and hear me out,” she called. “I’ve quite a heartfelt apology planned, but I cannot give it to a moving target.”

“Not necessary,” he said curtly.

“I assure you it is,” she protested. “And besides, you’ll need your pocket watch eventually.” The Hambly fellow turned to face her, his hands moving to his pockets, and Charlotte dangled the gold time-piece at arm's length. “Fair trade, sir. One lovely watch for one heartfelt apology.”

Shaking his head, he moved toward her. “How did you do that?”

Charlotte waited until he reached her then dangled the watch over his outstretched hand. “A lady never divulges her secrets. Now, about that apology.”

The Englishman met her stare with his good eye, the bruising under the other eye continuing to darken. “Go on.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” she said. “My uncle, well, he has a temper.”

He snatched the watch from her hand. “As do I.”

“Look, Martin.” She paused to look up at him. “I can call you Martin, can’t I?”

“Martin?” His laugh held no humor. “How did you learn my name?”

Charlotte toyed with the fan then shrugged. “Your mother thought we should be introduced.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed her grandfather’s carriage roll to a stop across the street. Gennie appeared to be watching but seemed in no hurry to join them. Beside the driver sat the servant, his head down.

“Of course.” The Englishman shook his head as the beginnings of a wry smile dawned on his face. “And Martin Hambly was called out right in the middle of Mother’s ballroom with Father watching.” Another chuckle, and this time Martin truly seemed amused. “Almost worth it, I’d say.”

Odd that he referred to himself in such a way. But then, nobles could be an odd bunch, including certain members of her own family.

“Again, I do apologize. And you’ll likely hear from my uncle as well.” She paused. “Or at least you should.”

“Miss Beck, you’ve accomplished what you came for.” He adjusted his hat then gave her a curt bow. “Apology accepted and duly noted. I’d be much obliged if you’d forget what happened tonight. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ll—”

“Forget?” She shook her head. “Unlikely. You see, I’m not in the habit of ruining reputations. I warrant I’ll never forget you, Martin Hambly.”

“A pity you didn’t get to meet my brother, Alex. He’s quite unforgettable as well. And definitely the more handsome of the two, current injuries notwithstanding.”

Charlotte squared her shoulders. “I would say perhaps another time, but I doubt the Hamblys and Becks will spend much time together now that I’ve caused such a fuss.”

He looked at her. “I must admit you’re not at all what I was expecting when I turned my attention to the sky tonight. Thank you for a most entertaining, albeit painful evening.” He gave Charlotte a wink. “Beginning with your performance on the staircase and ending just before my face was pummeled.”

“You’re a cad.”

The Englishman gave her a scathing look. “If you were fully grown, I’d kiss you and prove it so.”

She crossed her arms. “I’m not at all sure I like you, Martin.”

He shrugged. “There are times when I don’t much like Martin either, but what can I do? He’s my brother.” And with that, he left Charlotte standing on the sidewalk.

“What in the world did that mean?” she muttered as she made her way back across the street and into Grandfather’s carriage.

“Did things go well?” Gennie asked as the carriage lurched forward.

“I suppose so. He accepted my apology.”

Gennie patted her arm. “Of course he did, darling. He’s a gentleman.”

Charlotte didn’t have the heart to tell her that Martin Hambly—or possibly his brother, Alex—did not appear to be anything of the sort.



A lady should find a focal point on the opposite side of the room and walk toward it, head held high. If that focal point has a title and a hefty bank account, so much the better.

—*MISS PENCE*

The house was blessedly dark when Alex turned onto Grosvenor Square, a testament to just how long he'd paced the streets circling Hyde Park and the surrounding area, waiting for either his brother to appear or his anger to disappear. Of all the women who might have fallen into his arms, why had it been her?

Edwin Beck had been itching to punch a Hambly for years. At least since the day Martin won Edwin's favorite polo pony in a race Edwin claimed was fixed. It wasn't, of course, but the younger Beck brother had never been a good sport or a good loser. That Alex had been the one to offer an excuse for fisticuffs irked him almost as much as the slight to the Hambly name.

The only bright spot in the evening was the fact that Beck and everyone else thought Martin had been the one to land on his trousers. That alone would someday be worth at least a smile. Not that he wished his brother ill, for he did not. Martin had been through enough, while Alex had, somehow, returned from the war unscathed both physically and mentally.

When he allowed it, Alex wondered why, as twins, he had not shared equally in the suffering that plagued Martin. He paid his penance for returning whole by taking Martin's place at society functions, as the older Hambly twin no longer handled crowds or strangers well. And always, when playing his brother, Alex was a perfect gentleman.

Which begged the question of why tonight this slip of a girl had caused him to do what he'd never once done in public since returning from Africa: misbehave. He'd contemplate that question someday.

Someday but not tonight, for once again his twin had disappeared. And though Martin usually returned home on his own, he rarely reappeared without some sort of unexplained injury or loss of coin. Then there were the times when only the considerable donations made by Father kept Martin from landing in jail.

If Alex didn't love his brother dearly, he might hate him for the trouble he caused.

He spied Martin emerging from the fog up ahead. "Perfect."

Biting back a greeting lest he chase Martin away, Alex clenched his fists and walked on. With each step, his mirror image—minus the swollen eye—came closer. Apparently he'd been slumming, for Martin's usual gentleman's attire had been substituted for something the stable hands would have cast aside. And yet Alex could only feel relief that once again Martin Hambly had come home relatively unscathed from whatever nightmare precipitated tonight's excursion.

"Finally the good brother comes home looking like the bad." Martin Hambly's laughter and his footsteps bounded toward Alex across the cobblestones. "What's the matter? Can't bother to speak to me?"

How the Lord could create two such similar people who were so very different was one of life's unanswerable questions. Even before the war and their experiences in Africa separated them, Martin had never

been mistaken for Alex once one of them opened his mouth to speak. Where Martin had been friendly and outgoing, it had always been Alex's lot to hang back and allow his brother the spotlight. Not only did Martin prefer it, so did Alex. The arrangement worked for both of them.

Until the war.

"Hello, Martin," he said wearily. The gate swung open, and Alex offered a nod and a quick word of thanks to the smiling servant. "Coming in or just passing by?" he said when he noted Martin had paused just outside.

"Still deciding." He cast furtive glances, first to the right and then the left. "I'm not certain it's safe."

A weariness had settled all the way to his bones, and Alex had less patience for his twin than usual. "I doubt it is. Father's had more than his share of the Yorkshire pudding, and you know how that affects him. I'm sure Mother's beside herself, listening to him moan from the bellyache. Still, I recommend you come inside the gate. It's safer inside than out."

Martin inched forward enough for the servant to slam the gate shut and lock it tight. "Thank you," Alex told the fellow as he skittered away. He waited just a moment before giving his brother a curt nod. "Good night, then."

Alex had almost reached the stairs when something—or someone—hit him between the shoulders. He landed hard on the ground and then rolled away just as Martin pounced. Alex fought to stand, his brother's hand around his throat. Enraged by an enemy only he could see, Martin fought like a madman.

After a few glancing blows and one hard punch to the midsection, Alex had had enough. "Stop it, Martin," he demanded, but his words and, apparently, his identity went unheeded as the future earl kept

swinging. It was a pattern all too familiar and yet one Alex had little patience for that night.

Especially when his brother, who could come out of this odd rage at any moment, actually drew blood.

Finally Alex bested him with a blow that sent Martin staggering backward against the garden wall. His head hit first and then his body crumpled. Before Alex could reach his brother, he saw the elder twin struggle to a sitting position and swipe at a dark smear of blood on his forehead. Alex found a handkerchief in Martin's pocket and held it against the source of the bleeding.

"The soldiers," Martin said in a gasp of air. "They're coming for us. To kill us."

Not again.

"Be still," Alex told his brother. "Exertion will make things worse."

For possibly the first time in his adult life, Martin complied. He lay very still and appeared to study the sky while Alex continued to press on the wound.

"They're beautiful." His brother's eyes found Alex. "Never understood why you so fancied the stars. But look." He attempted to lift his hand.

Alex obliged by glancing up in the direction Martin pointed. Streaking across the eastern sky was what he'd been waiting to see all evening: Jacob's Comet.

"It has a tail," Martin whispered.

"That's because it's a comet."

"See, that's where we differ," Martin said in a long breath. "I wouldn't have known it was..."

"A comet." Alex pressed harder. "I warrant we differ in more than just the study of astronomy." He searched Martin's face, trying to ignore

the fact it was the same one he saw daily in the mirror. “You do understand there’s no one trying to kill us, don’t you, Martin?”

“Of course.” Martin’s laughter held no humor. “It isn’t you they’re after.” He met Alex’s stare, his eyes vacant and his expression blank. All familiar signs of the angst that plagued him. “They want me.”

Alex sighed as he handed the handkerchief to Martin then settled back on the ground beside him. Overhead a canopy of stars peered through wisps of clouds, which ringed a pale moon. He climbed to his feet and offered Martin help in standing, steadying him when he faltered. “Let me help you to bed.”

A statement Martin neither acknowledged nor likely heard as he stumbled inside. He rarely did.