

Beautiful Faces

A Novella

Prequel to Broken Faces

by

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Dedication

To my aunt Geraldine.

Chapter One
Shropshire – Early June 1914
Lexi

‘Bloody women’s suffrage,’ shouted Lord Baldwyn slamming down his newspaper onto the highly polished breakfast table.

Lexi gasped and glanced at her mother. She wasn’t sure if she was more shocked by his language or by his condemnation of something she secretly supported.

‘I apologise for my outburst, dear, but there’s a limit to what we should have to bear.’

She watched her mother take a calming breath before asking what it was that had caused such outrage so early in the morning.

‘The church we visited early last year, the one at Breadsall in Derby, where,’ he frowned as he tried to recall something that alluded him. ‘It was the one where they held the funeral of that second cousin of yours, I can’t recall her name...’

‘What about it?’

‘It was severely damaged by fire yesterday. Damn near gutted apparently, leaving only the tower and the spire, which I doubt are going to last too long by all accounts. The glass is completely destroyed.’

Lexi and her mother exchanged glances before her mother asked, ‘And they’re saying that the suffragettes had a hand in this incident?’

He nodded. ‘They are.’ He turned his attentions to Lexi causing her to groan inwardly. She knew what was coming and did her best to prepare to take what he said without argument. ‘You, my girl, will not be getting any ideas about involving yourself with these, with these...’ He looked at his wife and sighed. ‘Women. As much as I’m fond of Charles’s Meredith, I do wish she wasn’t so determined to support this ridiculous cause. When that woman damaged that Velázquez painting in the National Gallery in London a couple of months ago with a meat cleaver I thought that appalling, but it seems to be escalating and I don’t want you caught up with vile behaviour such as this, Alexandra.’

Lexi knew better than to argue with him when he used her full name. She even had to admit to herself that he might have a point in this regard. What the women were expecting to achieve by antagonising the public with senseless acts of vandalism, she couldn’t imagine? She wondered how aware her father could possibly be about the restrictions these women had to deal with in their daily lives. Lexi thought about her own sheltered life and realised that she had little understanding of how others fared outside of her own home. What she did know though was that suffragists were increasing in number and she doubted that these attacks would be stopping any time soon.

‘Well?’ he asked glaring at her.

‘No, of course not, Papa. When would I be able to involve myself with anything? I rarely leave the estate and never alone.’ Sensing her chance, she added. ‘Which reminds me, Mama. Do you mind if I go on a picnic later today with Charles, Meri and Freddie?’

‘A picnic? Does Charles have nothing better to do with his days now?’ Her father frowned and shook his head before lifting his cup to his mouth and finishing his tea. ‘I have work to do. I’ll be in my study if you need me, dear.’ He stood up and bending to kiss Lexi’s mother on the top of her head, looked briefly at Lexi. ‘I really don’t know what has become of the youth today. Too much freedom, if you ask me.’

Lexi bit her tongue to stop from asking what freedom he assumed she might have. If she did have any, she wasn’t sure when she enjoyed it.

As soon as the door closed behind him, her mother reached out and took her hand. ‘Darling, I’m not so sure you should be going on this picnic.’

‘Whyever not? Charles will be there to chaperone me and whatever Father insinuates, Meri is

very decent and I love her company.'

'And young Freddie Chevalier?'

Lexi felt her face reddening. She couldn't lie to her mother but even if she had wanted to her rosy cheeks had already given her feelings away. 'You're very fond of Freddie, Mama, you said so yourself many times.'

'I am, and he's a calming influence on your brother,' she agreed. 'However, you're a very different matter as far as I'm concerned.'

'What do you mean?' Lexi asked, frustrated.

'You're protected here, darling. As sweet as Freddie is, he's also an extremely dashing young man. I wouldn't want you to fall in love with him and be disappointed.'

Mortified, Lexi covered her face with her hands. At least her mother was sharing her thoughts only to her. There were times when her mother was open with her in front of Charles and he never failed to pick up on Lexi's unease and use the information to tease her mercilessly.

Recovering her senses Lexi thought about her mother's words, intrigued by the notion that she had only expressed her concern for Lexi and not banned the thought of her falling in love with Freddie simply because of his background. It gave her a little hope.

'Do you not think he'd see me in that way then?' she asked intrigued to hear her mother's thoughts on the matter.

Lady Baldwin considered her words before answering. 'I think he could love you very much. You're a beautiful, kind, and clever girl, but a man with looks as beautiful as his must surely one day discover his hold on women and maybe, how shall I put it, not be as loyal a husband as I'd wish for you.'

The door crashed open and Charles marched in, immediately walking around to his mother and kissing her on her cheek. 'Good morning Mama, Lex.' He glanced at the sideboard. 'Good, I'm not too late. I'm famished.'

Lexi looked down at her plate of cold scrambled eggs and willed the colour in her burning cheeks to subside. Charles knew her too well to miss that she'd been having a private discussion with their mother about something awkward. She heard the cutlery as he served himself from several of the platters. He hadn't noticed, she realised, relieved.

'I was just telling Mama about our planned picnic,' Lexi said wanting to change the subject away from Freddie before her mother said anything referring to him.

'Our picnic?' He asked popping a cooked mushroom into his mouth.

'Yes,' she continued. 'The one with Meri and Freddie that we planned yesterday.'

Charles sat down in his seat and stared at her for a moment. Then his face softening into a smile he turned his attention to their mother. 'You don't mind if Lexi joins us, Mama? We're only going to the outskirts of the estate.' He began cutting some bacon before continuing. 'I thought it would be pleasant sitting down by the river bank past Laundry Cottage, near the woods.'

'I know where it is, thank you Charles.' Lady Baldwin looked thoughtfully from Charles to Lexi and then out of the window at the glorious sunny morning. 'Oh, why not? It's a shame not to make the most of this weather. How many summers do we enjoy that are this glorious?'

'That's what we thought,' Lexi beamed. 'Thank you, Mama.'

Charles winked at her. 'You can go down to the kitchen and arrange a hamper for us with Mrs Jordan.' As he passed behind Lexi he lowered his voice and whispered. 'We'll cycle there and you can give that new Hazlewood bicycle Papa bought you for your last birthday along to the picnic.'

Lexi nodded. She'd been delighted with the gift on her birthday. Papa had even arranged for a large red satin bow to be tied across its handlebars, warning her to 'take the utmost care with your skirts, you don't want a tumble.' Mama had been less impressed by this gift believing that well brought up girls shouldn't ride such a machine. She made her thoughts clear, but soon cheered up when Lord Baldwin insisted that apparently they were becoming more acceptable by

the day.

Lexi finished her breakfast and took a sip of her tea, glancing at her mother out of the corner of her eye.

Lady Baldwyn studied her children and sighed. 'I may be in my dotage,' she said amusing Lexi who decided that being in her mid-forties wasn't as old as her mother liked to believe. 'I will not tolerate silly behaviour, Charles. I expect you to look after your sister and not act the fool, especially if you're going out on those contraptions.' She turned her attention to Lexi. 'If you've finished your breakfast, you may leave the room. Don't ask Mrs Jordan for too much in your hamper, I don't want your appetite being ruined for tonight's meal.'

Lexi dabbed at the corners of her mouth with her napkin and placing it back on the table in front of her stood up. Arranging the picnic was the least she could do, she decided, barely able to contain her excitement at the thought of spending the day in Freddie's company. It also meant that she could request all the food she liked as well as a few favourite things for Freddie to enjoy.

As soon as she was out of the dining room, Lexi raced down to the kitchen to see the cook wondering how she was going to spend the rest of the morning so that the time didn't drag.

She was lying on her bed a while later when she heard a commotion outside. Lexi was certain she could hear Freddie's voice. Her heart raced. He was early. She hadn't expected him to arrive for another hour or so. She dropped her worn copy of Persuasion and ran over to the large window to peer outside. Aware her mother would probably still be down in the morning room close to the front door, Lexi waited patiently for Charles to escort Freddie inside before checking her hair was neat and smoothing down her skirts. She walked calmly as she could manage downstairs to greet him.

She reached the door of the morning room just as Freddie stepped out to the hallway and collided into her. The weight of him crashing into her made Lexi lose her balance and she began falling backwards. Reaching behind her in an effort to protect her bottom from landing on the hard marble floor tiles, Lexi braced herself for the inevitable pain but just before her hand connected with the floor Freddie grabbed her.

Pulling her up into his arms, he held her tightly for an all too brief moment before releasing her. He held her away from him and studied her. 'Gosh, Lexi, are you all right?' he asked frowning. 'I'm such an oaf sometimes. My mother's always telling me to slow down and watch where I'm going.'

Unable to collect her thoughts enough to reply, Lexi could only relish how it had felt to be held by him.

'Lex, you are alright, aren't you?' He asked bending his head down to check he wasn't mistaken.

Realising her hesitation had given him the impression that she'd been hurt, Lexi gave him a reassuring smile. 'I'm fine, truly,' she said.

'Are you certain?'

'I just had a bit of a shock, but that's all.'

He tilted his head to one side, unsure.

Lexi pushed his arm. 'Really, you caught me before I could hurt myself at all.'

Freddie nodded. 'Good. I'd have hated to have damaged you in anyway.'

Lexi was about to confirm that he hadn't when Charles called to them from inside the morning room.

'What's going on out there?'

Freddie stood back to let her walk ahead and as she entered the room she saw Charles and her mother weren't the only ones there.

'Meri,' she cried, delighted to see her beautiful dark-haired American friend. She really liked Charles's girlfriend who was smiling at her as she sat next to Lady Baldwyn. 'You're here, too. I didn't hear you arrive.'

Lexi sat down on the other two-seater opposite them, her heart dropping when Freddie chose

to sit in a nearby armchair to Meri.

‘Freddie and I were on the same train together,’ Meri smiled. ‘Isn’t that divine?’

Lexi pushed away the pang of jealousy. Meri was the sister she’d always wanted. She was in love with Charles, that much was obvious to them all. Why then did the thought of Meri and Freddie alone together for hours and hours on a train, hurt her so much. She looked at Freddie and felt like someone had gripped her heart tightly. The expression on his face, she thought as a terrible awareness dawned on her. Freddie was secretly in love with Meri. Lexi cleared her throat trying to eradicate the lump constricting the back of her throat.

‘What’s the matter, Lexi?’ her mother asked. ‘I don’t think a picnic is a good idea if you’re coming down with a sore throat.’

Horrified at the prospect of not joining the other three, Lexi shook her head. She had no intention of missing out on the picnic, especially now that she had worked out how Freddie felt about Meri. As painful as it felt to see the lovelorn expression he was attempting to hide each time he looked at her friend, Lexi knew it would be even worse to stay at home and let her imagination run away with her. She needed to see for herself whether Meri knew how Freddie felt.

‘My throat is perfectly fine, thank you,’ she said trying her best to sound light and happy.

Her mother didn’t look convinced. ‘That’s as maybe but if you don’t feel well at any time, I want your brother to bring you straight home. Do I make myself clear?’

Mortified to be treated as a child in front of Freddie, Lexi had force herself not to show how embarrassed her mother’s molycoddling made her feel.

‘Perfectly clear, Mama.’

Chapter Two Shropshire – Early June 1914

Relieved to be out of the house and cycling in the fresh air alongside Meri, Lexi determined that she would make the most of every moment she spent in Freddie's company. She could hear him and Charles chatting and laughing behind them. As much as she didn't like to think of Freddie being in love with Meri, she comforted herself with the notion that it was probably a passing phase.

She spotted Meri shoot an adoring smile at Charles over her shoulder and Lexi decided that Freddie's feelings towards her friend could never matter while her brother and Meri were so much in love. One thing she was sure about that that was Freddie might have feelings for Meri but he adored Charles. The two had been best friends for years and Freddie was a loyal man. He would never do anything to damage their friendship, she was certain of it.

Charles and Meri's growing closeness had even been the subject of recent family conversations over dinner, Lexi mused feeling a little better with every moment. Their father had taken to teasing Charles mercilessly and only a few mornings before over supper had asked Charles if he had been planning a forthcoming proposal of marriage?

She was lost in her thoughts and when Charles bellowed to turn to the left Lexi ended up moving her handlebars a little too late and caused Meri's front wheel to nick her own. Both girls tumbled in an ungainly tangle over their handlebars and on to the ground. Meri shrieked as she landed on the grass verge by the river bank, but Lexi wasn't so lucky and landed heavily on the stony track.

The impact momentarily took her breath away and it was a second before the pain in her hands and side of her right leg began to take hold. Furious with herself for being so clumsy, Lexi blinked away tears. She took a deep breath to steady herself.

Freddie immediately braked and lowering his bike carefully, rushed over to her, his navy-blue eyes wide with shock and concern.

'Lexi, you're hurt,' he yelled as he reached her. He looked her up and down and she could see he was anxious about any injuries. He peered down and went to touch her exposed knee. 'Sorry, I, um,' he said, his face reddening as he stood back.

Lexi shook her head. 'It's fine, the grazes sting a little, that's all.' She covered her bloodied legs with her skirt. 'If you'd help me up, we can get going again,' she said reaching her hands out for him to take hold.

'I'll ask Meri to come and check if you need some, um, attention.'

Lexi smoothed down her skirts and blew on her palms trying to soothe the tingling pain while he went to check that Meri wasn't badly hurt. Lexi watched her friend shake her head and smile at him before Freddie picked up both bikes and wheeled them over to the lawn. 'Maybe we should set up our picnic here under this oak tree,' he suggested.

Lexi went to walk, wincing when her ankle gave way slightly. She must have twisted it when she fell she thought irritated with herself.

'Here, let me help you,' Freddie said, taking her by the elbows and leading her over to where they were to eat. 'Hopefully you'll be fine after a rest.'

She smiled at him, enjoying being half carried by him. 'Thank you.' She spotted Meri and Charles taking the opportunity to whisper something to each other.

Turning her attention back to Freddie she watched silently as he untied the hamper from the back of his bike and carried it over to the shade next to her. Shaking out the plaid rug he then helped her sit down on it and make herself comfortable. Taking off his jacket, he placed it on the grass next to the gnarled tree trunk.

'There you go,' he said looking, she thought rather embarrassed by her brother's attentions to Meri. 'I'll unload the picnic, if you're sure you don't wish to go home and have your knees

properly attended to by your mother?’

‘No,’ she snapped horrified at the thought. ‘I’m not going home until we’ve made the most of this beautiful sunshine and the food.’

He laughed. The tanned skin either side of his beautiful eyes crinkled making Lexi’s stomach flip over. ‘Good.’ Freddie undid the leather ties holding the lid of the hamper closed and looked across to where Charles was now kissing Meri, rather indecently, Lexi thought.

She wished her brother would save his amorous attentions for when he and Meri were somewhere more private, or at least where she and Freddie didn’t have to witness them.

She glanced at Freddie and saw him shoot a glance over at them before turning his attention back to unpacking the picnic.

Checking that no one else was around to see them kissing, Lexi relaxed slightly. Why was her brother always so uncaring about how he made others feel? She opened her mouth to ask Freddie something, but the words vanished when she noticed the expression on his face as he stared at the kissing couple. At Meri.

She blinked rapidly to banish the tears threatening to come. He really was very much in love with her friend. Why hadn’t she noticed this before today? His sun-kissed eyebrows knitted together in anguish and Lexi wondered if there would ever be a time when he might look at her in that way. She looked across at Meri, oblivious to Freddie’s adoration of her.

Pushing aside her own heartache, Lexi decided to make the most of having Freddie alone with her and decided to try and distract him. ‘Do you want me to set everything out?’ she asked.

Freddie forced a smile. ‘Sorry Lex,’ he said, his face reddening when she glanced from him to Charles and Meri kissing. ‘Maybe we should go ahead and start without them?’

She nodded lifting two glasses for him to fill. ‘Why not?’

Freddie lifted a bottle of champagne from the hamper and opened it with a gentle pop of the cork. Taking one of the glasses from her, he half-filled it before passing it back. His hand grazed hers and Lexi wished she could stay exactly where she was with the warmth of his hand against her skin. Seeing his gaze move once again towards her brother and Meri, she couldn’t help but say something.

‘She’s very beautiful, isn’t she?’ she said, her voice almost a whisper as it quavered slightly.

He looked hurt at her question but didn’t take his eyes from Meri straight away. Lexi wasn’t sure if it was because she’d stated the obvious or if he was ashamed at being caught out staring at someone they both knew he couldn’t have.

‘You’re very pretty too, Lex,’ he said turning his attention back to her and pouring a glass of champagne for himself. He sat on the rug next to her and leant his back against the tree. ‘I remember the first I met you on that first school holiday after Charles started at Victoria College and he invited me to stay here at Somerton. You were so little but always wanting to join us when we went for a hack in the woods or rowing on the river. Do you remember?’

Of course she did. Lexi lowered her head, so he couldn’t see her expression. ‘I must have been very annoying,’ she said quietly.

‘Not at all. You were funny and sweet.’

She could tell he was trying to reassure her, but it wasn’t what she hoped to hear. She wanted him to tell her how grown up she now was, or how beautiful and how much he loved her. She took a sip of her drink trying to force down the lump forming in her throat as she swallowed the bubbly liquid. Freddie didn’t feel that way about her, so would have no reason to say such things and crying about his lack of attraction to her was definitely not the impression she wanted to give him. She picked a daisy poking up its white face near the edge of the rug.

She had missed her brother terribly when he had been sent to Jersey to study at the impressive college where he and Freddie had been classmates. ‘I was so disappointed that you both didn’t come to Somerton for every holiday,’ Lexi admitted. ‘I used to be envious of Charles when our parents allowed him to stay with your family for shorter breaks from school.’

A lock of her blonde hair fell in front of her face and unexpectedly Freddie pushed it back,

tucking it untidily behind her left ear.

Lexi's stomach clenched at his light touch on the side of her face.

'It all seems so long ago now,' Freddie said wistfully. 'Even though it's only a few years ago really.' He gave a slow, deep sigh. 'I wonder what's to become of us all, Lexi?'

Struck by the intimate gesture he'd just made, she had to resist from reaching up to kiss him. Not that she had any experience of kissing anyone, least of all Freddie. Maybe her dreams of him one day loving her might come to fruition. She certainly hoped so.

Meri's laughter interrupted them sending envy coursing through Lexi. Without thinking she said, 'She is though, isn't she? Beautiful, I mean.' Before he could answer, Lexi added. 'And she's glamorous, American and confident and such fun. Everything I'm not, nor can ever hope to be.'

Freddie frowned obviously taken aback by this change in her usually cheerful manner. He sat back on his feet. 'Now listen here, Lexi. I don't know what's troubling you today, but it's not like you to be in such low spirits. You can confide in me if ever you need to,' he said patting the back of her right hand. 'I know I don't have a sister, or any siblings, so maybe I sometimes don't know how best to approach something like this, but I believe I've known you long enough for you to feel you can confide in me.' He hesitated. 'You're charming and have so much to look forward to. Hopefully we all have.'

Lexi looked up at him and nibbling the side of her left thumb considered his words. 'Thank you, Freddie. You're terribly kind.'

'Whatever is the matter?'

'It's nothing really,' she lied aware that she couldn't possibly tell him the truth. 'I'm probably over-tired, at least that's what Mama would insist.' She tilted her face up to the sun, closing her eyes and relishing the warmth on her face. 'Truly.'

His eyes narrowed. She could see he wanted to believe her, but wasn't sure if she was being honest with him. 'If you're sure,' he said.

'I am.'

Seemingly satisfied by her reassurances, Freddie lay on his back resting his head on his free hand.

Irritated by the sounds of her brother and Meri's kisses, Lexi wished she could tune out the sound. If she could hear them then so could Freddie. 'I do wish those two would stop it,' she grumbled, her gentle voice sounding louder than she'd intended. 'Charles can be so annoying. The four of us are supposed to be enjoying a picnic together.'

Freddie opened one eye and peered at her. 'I've had enough of waiting for them, let's start eating before all this food is ruined. It'll serve them right if we finish everything and they miss out.' He tilted his head towards the hamper and grinned. 'Shall we?'

Lexi giggled, happy that she and Freddie were back on their usual footing together.

'I wonder what has Cook packed for us today?' he said waiting for her to sit up.

Lexi made a dramatic display of lifting a slightly damp cloth to inspect neatly cut, crustless sandwiches made with Mrs Jordan's typical neatness.

'I like the look of those,' he said. 'What else do we have to tempt us?'

Placing the plate of sandwiches down on the blanket. 'How about this chicken and ham pie?' she said taking the lid off a tin and opening parchment wrapped around the mouth-wateringly perfect pastry. 'Or, we have boiled eggs and some tomatoes.' She placed various little dishes with condiments neatly onto the blanket with four plates, napkins and knives. 'There's a Victoria sponge in the hamper too,' she added satisfied with her findings and the suggestions she'd made to Mrs Jordan.

Freddie glanced briefly over his shoulder just as Meri threw back her head and laughed at something Charles had whispered to her.

'Do you wonder what might have happened if you'd met her first,' Lexi asked before she could think to stop herself.

‘It probably wouldn’t have mattered,’ he replied quietly. ‘I don’t have the same courage as Charles when it comes to women, beautiful or otherwise.’

‘You’re relaxed with me though,’ she asked aware she was pushing him to answer honestly despite not wishing to hear the truth she knew was coming.

His lips drew back in an affectionate smile. ‘Yes, but we’re friends, Lexi. Like I was saying before, I’ve known you for several years now and if I can’t be relaxed with someone who’s almost like family to me then I really am a dolt.’

There it was. He’d been honest and now she really did have to force herself to look cheerful.

‘Well then,’ was all she could think of to say. She picked up a plate and handed it to Freddie. ‘Let’s eat.’

He nodded. Waiting for her to take several sandwiches he followed suit. ‘Delicious, my favourite,’ he said, having picked up a salmon sandwich and taken a bite.’

Eventually, she could hear Charles and Meri walking over to join them.

‘We thought we’d better come and eat something before you two finished everything,’ Charles joked.

Lexi glared at her brother for his bad manners. ‘It would have served you right if we had eaten everything.’

Charles pulled a face at her and sat down next to Meri who batted away a persistent wasp before carefully inspecting her drink to be sure she it wasn’t going to sting her.

Lexi knelt over the hamper to take her mind off her brother’s wittering. She lifted out the Victoria sponge.

Charles picked up the open bottle of champagne and poured a glass for him and Meri and refilled Lexi and Freddie’s glasses.

Lexi spotted Meri taking hold of Charles’s free hand and giving it a squeeze. Her brother nodded, the movement so slight Lexi was unsure she had actually seen it. Then he cleared his throat.

‘You alright?’ Freddie asked. ‘You look as if you’re about to tell us something dreadful.’

Meri laughed. ‘I hope you don’t think it’s that when he does eventually tell you.’ She gazed up at Charles, and at that moment Lexi knew what she was about to hear.

‘Meri agreed to become my wife today,’ Charles announced, lifting Meri’s hand, turning it over and kissing the palm. It was such an intimate action, Lexi’s heart ached wondering if she would ever experience something similar from a man who loved her. She hoped so.

Meri giggled, beaming at each one of them in turn. Her eyes sparkled and her wide smile showed the joy she was feeling at being asked.

‘We’re engaged. Can you believe it?’ She turned her attention back to Charles, taking his face in her hands and kissing him.

Sensing Freddie’s heartbreak, Lexi immediately looked at him. He looked as if he had been punched. There was no happiness in his eyes, she noted. For a split second he seemed stunned. Then, sensing her looking at him, he appeared to force a smile but Lexi noticed that it didn’t reach his eyes.

‘Did you hear that Lexi?’ he said. ‘Charles is to marry his Meri.’

Lexi nodded. ‘Yes.’ She wasn’t sure if he was devastated because Charles was marrying their beautiful friend, or because he was losing his best friend to marriage. Unsure how to react for the best, Lexi picked up the Victoria sponge from the hamper and placed it down on the rug, not able to cope with the sadness in Freddie’s blue eyes. She picked up a knife and cut four slices, handing them out to each of their plates.

‘Shall we celebrate with a slice of this?’

‘Good idea,’ Freddie answered giving her a grateful smile. ‘Charles? Your sister is offering you cake.’

Charles looked at her, then down at the cake. ‘Perfect,’ he said taking a plate and handing it to Meri before then taking one for himself. ‘Mrs Jordan’s cake is a slice of heaven.’

Lexi sat back and speared a corner of the light sponge with her cake fork popping it into her mouth. For once the sweetness she always enjoyed seemed tasteless. Poor Freddie, she thought miserably. As much as she was happy for her brother and Meri, it pained her to see someone she loved trying so hard to appear happy, when she could tell he was anything but that.

She rested her hand on his for a moment. Recalling how her mother always gave Lexi something to distract her when she was upset, she decided to attempt to do the same with Freddie.

‘Try it,’ she said indicating the cake with a nod. ‘It’s delicious.’

‘I’m sure it is,’ he said giving her a smile and taking a mouthful of his champagne before eating the slice of sponge on his place. ‘Thanks, Lexi,’ he whispered. ‘You’re a sweet girl.’

Lexi had to concentrate on not letting her disappointment at his reaction show. Would he ever see her as anything other than Charles’s little sister?

Chapter Three
Jersey - Late June 1914
Freddie

Freddie sat on the newly cut lawn resting his back against the warm pink granite at the front of his parent's farmhouse drinking lukewarm tea. As much as he loved spending time at the Baldwyn's estate, Somerton wasn't home. He couldn't relax as completely as he could riding out on these lush fields with the salty air in his face. In Jersey he didn't have the constant reminder that the woman he loved was never going to be his. He was free to focus his attention on the work needing to be done on his father's farm and he had discovered that the best way to keep his heartache at bay was to keep busy with manual work.

For now though, he was taking a break and yet again his thoughts had turned to Meri. He closed his eyes relishing the warmth on his face and tried to force his brain to focus on the fact that Meri was in love with his best friend. Being away from Meri helped clear his head. Freddie had never envied Charles anything, not his magnificent home, his confidence or his lust for making the most out of every situation, but he couldn't help envying him Meri's adoration. What he wouldn't give for time alone with her, he mused. Imagine, days, or even months with Meri, with no Charles. It was a fantasy and one he must forget. He finished his drink and willed his body to relax and make the most of sitting still.

'Freddie?'

He opened his eyes at the sound of his mother's tight voice and quickly stood up, tipping the small amount of tea cooling in his teacup onto the grass. His heart pounding at the urgency in her voice, Freddie ran following the direction of her voice.

'What is it, Mother?' he asked as he rushed in to the living room through the open French doors, his bare feet skidding on the polished wooden flooring. Surprised to note that his mother wasn't alone, Freddie stared at the pretty brunette standing near one of the chairs next to an older woman who he assumed must be the girl's mother.

'Sorry, I wasn't aware you had guests.'

His mother gazed in horror at his messy hair and creased clothes. 'I think that is abundantly clear, Freddie,' she said her eyes wide with fury. 'Don't you recall me mentioning earlier that I'd invited Mrs Davies and her daughter Beatrice to join us for luncheon today?' She held her hand up before he could reply. 'No, don't say anything, I think we can all see that you didn't.'

The last thing he wanted to do today was spend time inside making polite chit chat with strangers. 'I won't be long,' he said leaving the room, but not before he noticed the coy way Beatrice looked at him from under her long eyelashes.

Hurrying up to his room, he quickly stripped off and washed himself with water still in the bowl at his washstand. His mood dropped as it dawned on him that this was his mother's way of introducing him to a suitable young woman for him to consider as a future bride. 'Well, it's not going to happen,' he groaned as he roughly dried his face.

Moments later, having brushed his hair and dressed appropriately for the meal, Freddie walked down the stairs and stood briefly in the hallway wishing he didn't have to wear this suit and the shirt with its tight collar on such a blissfully warm day. He opened the door to walk in aware that if it was Meri on the other side waiting for him, he would be only too delighted to be spending the next couple of hours in her company.

'Mrs Davies,' he said taking the woman's hands and giving her his most gracious smile. 'I must apologise for my tardiness. I've been helping father on the farm and I'm afraid I've somewhat become used to working rather than mixing in polite society.'

He turned to Beatrice and took her delicate, pale hand. It was a hand that hadn't ever done any hard work. 'Beatrice,' he said aware her cheeks were reddening. She was pretty and seemed very sweet. He didn't want to appear rude. 'It's a pleasure to meet you.'

Beatrice was well-mannered and hung on his every word, but as beautiful as she might be he felt no attraction to her, or indeed any interest. Beatrice's mother worked with his own to draw the pair of them into conversations but Freddie could tell that the young woman was as embarrassed as he to be shown off in this fashion. Now though that he was aware of his mother's intentions, Freddie planned to be more careful in future not to be caught out in such a way again.

He politely accompanied Beatrice on a walk around his parent's landscaped garden with their mother's following a short distance behind them. Freddie struggled to find anything entertaining to say and wondered at Charles's ability to simply open his mouth and automatically be funny or flirtatious without seemingly having to think about it, or agonize about it first.

'Do you enjoy working on the farm with your father?' Beatrice asked eventually as they passed a border with various shades of pink roses emanating their heady scents.

Freddie said that he did and meant it. He loved it here, with the beautiful scenery, the mostly warm weather and especially the hot summer days when the mist lay low over the fields surrounding the farmhouse giving it an other-worldly feeling.

'Do you ever imagine you'd want to run your own farm?' she asked looking at her feet.

So, this is what it feels like to be interviewed, he thought. I'm a prospective husband and I need to fit the criteria for her and her family. It wasn't what he wanted from life, but he supposed it what was in store for him.

'Yes, I do,' he replied honestly. 'I'm an only child so I'll take over from my father at this farm when he retires. Before then I'll probably move to one of the smaller farms my family owns and live and work there.'

'Oh,' she said looking a little taken aback.

He wasn't sure if her reaction was because she didn't like the idea that he might live on a smaller farm, or that she liked the idea of his father owning more than the one she was visiting today.

'Which is your favourite?' she pulled the straw rim of her sunhat down a little further to shield her eyes from the bright sunlight.

'Farm?'

'Yes.'

'This one, because it's always been my home and I love the surrounding countryside. But I also love a small farm we have overlooking Gréve de Lecq. It has tenants living there now, so it's not somewhere I could move to for a time yet.' He hoped that by mentioning delays, any ambitions Beatrice might have to pursue him as a husband might be dampened.

They walked on in silence for a bit until Beatrice broke the silence by asking, 'You went to Victoria College, didn't you? With Charles Baldwyn.'

Freddie was so taken aback by her unexpected question that he stopped walking. 'I did.' He tried to recall meeting her before, but failed. 'I'm sorry, have we met prior to today?'

She stopped next to him and shook her head. 'No, but I met your friend, Charles once when I was out with my aunt.'

'Your aunt?' he said, a sense of uneasiness at the look in her eyes.

'Yes. My aunt, Louise.' She narrowed her eyes and stared defiantly into his. 'She's married to one of the masters at Victoria College. Do you remember her?'

Freddie stared at her, aghast. He couldn't imagine Beatrice knew anything of Charles's secret relationship with the attractive woman, whom most of the boys seemed to lust after. Louise was voluptuous with an effervescent personality and Charles had been having an affair with her on and off since he and Freddie were sixth formers.

Freddie realized that Beatrice was still waiting for him to answer and feigned ignorance. 'Yes, I know who your aunt is, in that I've seen her in the college grounds on occasion.'

'I thought you might have done,' Beatrice replied, a cheeky smile on her face.

Still unsure why she was bringing up the subject of Louise, Freddie glanced over his shoulder

at their mothers happily lost in their own conversation.

‘Is your aunt well?’ Even to his ears the question sounded inane, but he felt uncomfortable asking anything else.

Beatrice checked they weren’t being watched before grabbing him by his sleeve. As she tugged gently on the material, Freddie felt himself change the direction of their walk and accompanied her down a narrow pathway leading into a larger lawned area.

He was intrigued. Today was becoming far more interesting than he’d expected it to and he had to admit that maybe for once Charles’s dalliances might lighten his own day.

He followed Beatrice as she hurried down the pathway, checking briefly to see if their mothers were still behind them and noticing that they weren’t took Beatrice’s hand and pulled her in yet another direction towards the summerhouse where his mother often liked to spend time during warm afternoons reading novels.

Opening the door, he pulled Beatrice in with him closing the door quietly behind them. Moving away from the front windows so that they were out of sight and to give them as much time as possible to talk, he leant against the wooden wall and crossed his arms.

‘No one can overhear us now, so carry on. What is all this really about, Beatrice? You’re not here to see me really, are you?’

She seemed pleased with her antics and Freddie struggled not to be irritated with her. He waited silently until she was ready to speak.

‘You’re correct,’ Beatrice said. ‘I didn’t come here to see you.’ She smoothed down her skirt. ‘Although I have to admit that I’m having more fun today than I’d expected.’

‘As am I,’ he admitted. ‘I doubt we’ll be here alone for long. This is somewhere my mother will check when looking for us, so you had better hurry and tell me what’s going on. I presume as you mentioned your aunt Louise that this is about her.’

She nodded. ‘It is.’ Hesitating, she frowned and studied his face briefly. ‘It’s not that I didn’t want to come today, you understand. It’s just that I have a beau my Mother doesn’t approve of. She’s been insistent about speaking to your mother in the hope of arranging for us to meet and when I complained about it to my aunt, she confided in me.’

Her mother seemed rather formidable to him and he doubted Beatrice would have much chance to do as she wished, despite her feisty character.

‘Your aunt confided in you?’ he asked surprised. Surely Louise wouldn’t speak of intimate meetings between her and Charles? ‘What exactly did she speak to you about?’

‘She mentioned that she was, er, close with your friend, Charles and encouraged me to agree with mother’s plan that I meet you so that I could pass on a message to you for Charlie, I mean Mr Baldwin.’

She pushed her hand deep into her skirt pocket and withdrew a small envelope. It couldn’t be a long letter, he mused, more of a note. Then again, knowing Louise and Charles, he doubted either of them wasted words. They always seemed to get straight to the point of whatever they wanted to say. She handed it to Freddie. He took it and turned the envelope over.

‘You’ll send it to him?’ she asked, eyes wide. ‘I need to let my aunt know how you reacted to this request. She’ll be waiting to hear from me this evening.’

It was a bit brazen, but Freddie couldn’t help admiring Louise’s nerve to go after what she wanted, it was the sort of thing Charles did all the time. They were well suited in many ways, Freddie had to admit furious to think that Charles was carrying on his relationship behind Meri’s back when he had assured Freddie weeks before that wasn’t the case.

He heard his mother calling for him. ‘I thought Charles had broken things off with Louise,’ He asked needing to know.

‘I believe so. However I gather from what my aunt told me that she has something she wishes to tell Charles.’

Stunned, he took a deep breath. ‘What?’

Beatrice shrugged innocently. ‘She didn’t say, but I think it’s important that he receives the

note, don't you?

Freddie wasn't sure. He didn't trust Louise and even though Charles had insisted that their love affair was well and truly over, Freddie suspected that it wouldn't take much persuasion for his friend to continue with Louise where they'd left off. Where would that leave Meri?

'I'm not sure, I think this is the right thing to do.' He frowned. No. He wasn't going to betray Meri. He might not be able to have her for himself but he wasn't going to let his friend abuse her trust. He held out the letter for Beatrice to take back.

She stared at it and opened her mouth to speak. 'Please Freddie, she'll be furious with me if I don't persuade you to post this to him.'

'No, Beatrice. I . . .' His sentence was cut off by the door opening and his mother's horrified gasp before she marched in closely followed by Beatrice's mother, confused looks on their startled faces.

'Freddie, what on earth are you doing in here alone with Beatrice?'

Did he spot a look of hope on Beatrice's mother's face? He narrowed his eyes. 'I think he was probably showing my daughter this delightful summer house, weren't you Freddie?'

He nodded, not enjoying having to accept Mrs Davies offered excuse. 'Um, yes.'

Aware he was still holding the letter from Louise, he shoved it into his pocket and turned to hold open the door waiting for the three women to leave. 'Shall we have some of your delicious lemonade now Mother?' he suggested when she didn't immediately follow Beatrice's mother out to the garden.

'That would be perfect,' Beatrice said, giving Freddie a triumphant look as she stepped in front of him and walked out of the summer house. 'I love lemonade, don't you?'

As he expected, Freddie didn't have another moment alone with Beatrice for the rest of their visit.

As Freddie stood next to his mother watching Mrs Davies and her daughter leaving down their driveway in their pony and trap, he struggled not to give in to his frustration to have been left with the mysterious letter from Louise. How stupid of him to be caught up in another of Charles's messes.

'I thought she was a pleasant girl, didn't you?' his mother asked turning to walk back into the house. 'Although I must say I was a little taken aback to discover you both alone in the summerhouse earlier.'

'It was nothing, Mother, I promise you. She spotted your pretty summer house and asked if I might show it to her. We then discovered during our conversation that her aunt is a wife of one of the masters from Victoria College, that's all. We were reminiscing about school life.'

His mother didn't look convinced. 'One of the master's wives, you say?'

'Yes. It was all perfectly innocent, I can assure you. Now let's go inside and you can tell me if you've arranged any other meetings for me with your friends' daughters.'

'I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you're asking me that question.' They went into the living room and sat down. 'I can tell you weren't pleased about today.'

'No, I wasn't,' he admitted. 'I understand your hopes that I find someone with whom I might settle down so that one day I can take over the farm, but I'm not ready for marriage yet. I'd also like to find my own wife, Mother.'

She sighed. 'I understand. Your father said as much, which is why he's kept away this afternoon. I did think that Beatrice is a lovely young woman and rather suitable for you. Don't you think? Her mother and I had to agree that we would both be happy for the pair of you to pursue your friendship and hope that it might lead to something more.' She tilted her head slightly. 'I won't do this again though, not if you don't want me to. I promise.'

He moved forward and knelt on the floor in front of his beloved mother. Freddie knew that she only wanted what she believed to be what was best for him and loved her for taking the trouble to at least try to find happiness for him.

Taking her hands in his and kissing the back of them, he smiled at her. 'Thank you, Mother. I

promise that when I do choose a wife she will be one that I'm sure you like.'

'Your father said that, too,' she sighed. 'No more meddling from me.'

Freddie only hoped she managed to keep to her word. He loved his mother but being an only child understood only too clearly that his life would be much easier if his mother had other children to focus some of her adoring attention.

Later, Freddie sat on the side of his bed Louise's letter in his hand as he stared blankly out of the window at the bright moon lighting his room. What to do with this? he wondered. If he posted it to Charles, would he be betraying Meri? Probably. If he didn't, he'd surely be making choices for Charles that he had no right to make.

Freddie groaned and placed the letter into his bedside drawer. He decided to sleep on it and hoped the right answer came to him by morning.

Chapter Four

Jersey – Early July

Freddie watched Charles making his way over to him from the docked ferry. He was delighted that Charles had come to the island for an unexpected visit. Then again, Freddie mused, he should have known that Charles would make a plan to come over to the island after receiving Louise's letter. Freddie hoped his friend had kept his promise to stay away from Louise and that Charles wasn't here to start things up again with her.

'Good to see you,' Charles bellowed reaching Freddie and giving him a hard pat on the shoulder. He breathed in the salty air and sighed. 'My, it's good to be back on this blissful island again. I miss it when I'm not here. I have to admit that I find that I don't sleep nearly as well when I'm away from the sea at the estate in deepest Shropshire.'

Freddie picked up one end of Charles's portmanteau as his friend took the other. 'Yes, my parents are looking forward to you staying with us Manor Farm again. Mother said it has been far too long since you came to stay with us.'

'And she's right. I've been looking forward to it.'

'Do you have much planned?' Freddie asked still a little taken aback by Charles suddenly deciding to travel over.

'Not much,' Charles said looking a little sheepish.

'As long as you have no intention of picking up with your . . .?' Freddie lowered his voice and checked no one was within earshot of them. 'Louise.'

Charles laughed. 'Now, why would I do that?'

Freddie almost dropped the trunk in irritation. 'Because you've done it several times before. I mean it, Charles, I'm very fond of Meri, as well you know and I won't stand by and watch you take up with another woman. Not now the two of you are engaged.'

Charles walked on in silence.

'Truly, Charles. You can't treat your fiancé in that way, however much you might wish to meet up with Louise again.'

'I know,' Charles snapped. 'You don't have to tell me about my relationship with Meri.' He glanced at Freddie out of the corner of his eyes and Freddie didn't like that accusatory look he gave him. 'But I do have to see Louise. She has something to tell me and the least I can do is meet her for afternoon tea.' He closed his eyes and puffed out his cheeks. 'Somewhere public to please you so that I may hear what she has to say.'

Freddie considered Charles's words. He supposed he did have some sort of obligation to the woman after all that they'd shared and surely to meet up for an innocent tea couldn't hurt Meri in any way.

'That makes sense,' he said feeling a little less guilty about his part in bringing the two of them together again. 'I can accompany you if you'd rather?'

'Maybe,' Charles said. 'Maybe.'

They reached Freddie's pony and trap and the two lifted Charles's portmanteau onto the back. 'What have you packed in here?' Freddie laughed. 'It weighs a ton.'

'Chocolates for Louise,' Charles teased, punching Freddie's arm lightly.

Freddie shook his head. 'Get on to the trap before I leave you here and make you walk.'

As always, Freddie's mother was delighted to welcome Charles into their home. Freddie knew his mother adored his friend although she'd said often enough that she was relieved he wasn't her own son because Charles always managed to misbehave and get into trouble. He was a great entertainer though and dinner at the farm that night was fun as Charles and Freddie's father swapped anecdotes about Freddie.

The following afternoon after finishing work on one of the fields, Freddie arrived back at the

house expecting to wash and change in order to accompany Charles into St Helier to meet Louise for their pre-arranged tea only to discover that Charles had already left.

‘When?’ Freddie asked his mother irritated with Charles for his underhand behaviour.

‘He left about an hour and a half ago,’ his mother said after looking at the gilt clock on their mantelpiece.

Freddie hid his annoyance and hurried upstairs. He hoped Charles had the sense not to get himself entangled with Louise again. Freddie washed and changed, then left the house deciding to distract himself by going into town to visit his favourite book shop.

Freddie walked along Queen Street and saw an old school chum from Victoria College.

‘You’ll never guess who I saw a short while ago,’ Ernest called out as he walked up to Freddie. ‘Charles Baldwyn.’

‘Yes,’ Freddie said wondering whether to ask if Charles might have been alone, then deciding against it. ‘He’s come to the island for a visit.’

‘Staying with your family, is he?’

Freddie nodded. ‘He is.’

‘We had a brief chat, but he was on his way to meet someone and had to rush off.’

Freddie could see Ernest was waiting for him to elaborate but he had no intention of sharing Charles’s business with anyone else. ‘I see. Well,’ Freddie said, wanting to get on with his shopping. ‘It’s good to see you again. Must dash.’

‘Right, yes.’

Freddie walked away wondering where Charles might be meeting Louise. It could be in any one of the many tea shops dotted around St Helier. Freddie worried that Charles wouldn’t be able to resist Louise’s charms when they were together again. He wouldn’t be able to forgive himself if Charles failed to stand by his promise. After all it would be his fault for making the wrong decision in posting Louise’s letter to Charles. Why hadn’t he destroyed it? What calamities had his actions put in place for his dear Meri?

Freddie turned a corner and as he walked down Bath Street he spotted two women walking into a tea room with a prettily decorated bay window. He recalled being taken there a couple of times by his mother when he was younger. The memory made Freddie smile and as he walked past, he spotted movement at a table to the side of the window. Freddie realised it was Charles.

Unable to help himself, Freddie peered inside and saw Louise sitting across the table from Charles. Freddie could tell just by the angle of the couple’s arms that they were holding hands under the table. He would rather walk on by and pretend that he hadn’t seen them but his loyalty to Meri and Charles compelled him to go inside. There was nothing for it as their friend he had a duty to try and put a stop to whatever might be about to happen.

Freddie did not wish to confront his friend, but he knew he had no choice. Meri’s happiness was at stake and as fickle as Charles might be with his affections, Freddie believed that if his dalliances with Louise were ever discovered by Meri she would immediately end their engagement and Charles, for all his bravado, would be devastated.

He took a deep breath and opened the door. The little brass bell tinkled above the entrance alerting everybody inside of his arrival. Freddie noticed that Charles was too involved in his conversation with Louise to notice him. Clearly his friend was still infatuated with the woman, that much was abundantly clear.

Freddie watched them for a few seconds. Louise might be older than Charles, but she was very beautiful of that he could not deny. Her bright smile and pretty face framed with her curly blonde hair was something he knew a lot of men found attractive. But she was the antithesis of Meri’s own dark beauty with her pale skin and perfect complexion. What was wrong with Charles that he had the love of an exquisite woman such as Meri that he might still be compelled to want this woman? He didn’t understand it and doubted that he ever would.

Louise giggled, and unable to hold back another moment, Freddie stepped forward. Stopping by their table. He cleared his throat.

Charles distracted finally, looked up at Freddie, his eyes widening to see him standing there. Freddie felt a slight satisfaction when Louise's smile slipped.

'Freddie,' she said breathlessly. 'This isn't as it seems.'

Charles's eyes narrowed. 'You found us, I see,' he said defiantly. Charles let go of Louise's hand taking the back of the chair between them and pulled it out indicating for Freddie to sit and join them. 'I know you won't believe us, but nothing untoward has happened.' He glanced at Louise. 'Has it?'

Freddie followed Charles's pointed look at Louise in time to see her attempt to mask her confusion. Her expression told Freddie all he needed to know. Louise wasn't as an accomplished liar as his best friend, that much was clear.

'Charles, much as I would like to believe you,' Freddie said, his voice barely above a whisper so as not to cause a scene. 'It pains me to know that's untrue.'

Charles glanced around him before lowering his voice. 'You aren't to tell Meri of this.' He glared at Freddie angrily. 'She isn't to know. Promise me, you'll stay silent on the matter.'

Freddie knew that as strong as his feelings were for Meri, he would only be hurting her by telling her about this so close to her becoming engaged to Charles. He also knew that as much as Charles continually disappointed him where Louise was concerned, he was still his closest friend and despite his behaviour very much in love with Meri. He just had a very odd way of showing that devotion. If Freddie was going to protect Meri, then he needed to keep this from her.

'I have no intention of sharing what's happened between you to anyone else. Meri's happiness is important to me and I do not wish to have any part in her being upset.' He turned his attention to Charles. 'However, I will only promise to keep this from her if you make up your mind to stop this liaison once and for all. It's cruel to treat your fiancé this way and it's also unfair to Louise's husband.'

'Just because you have no love of your own,' Charles said. 'If you did you'd know how we feel about each other.'

'What are you saying, Charlie?' Louise asked in a flirtatious voice, hope clear on her face that Charles wanted more from her after all.

Charles shook his head. 'I'm sorry, Louise.' He gave her a gentle smile, then looked at Freddie. 'I know I'm wrong to continue with this infatuation but you're right. Meri has to be my priority now. I love her and we're to be married.' He sighed. 'I promise you I will stop behaving in this way.'

'I want to believe you,' Freddie said, tired from feeling torn between Charles and his chaotic relationships. 'Truly Charles, this has to stop right now. If you swear to me you'll finish this between you two today, then I'll leave you both and speak to you later when you return to the farm.'

Chapter Five Jersey

Freddie was sitting outside drinking a glass of wine by himself at the end of his parents' garden later that evening. He couldn't get the image out of his mind of Charles sitting at the table so brazenly Louise. Did he truly think that no one could see they were conducting a close intimate relationship? Surely it was obvious not only to him that this could not be explained away as merely an ex-pupil of her husband's catching up with the master's wife over a cup of tea? Or, was he seeing more into the situation than others might?

He was grateful that Louise lived in Jersey and that Charles's visits to see her happened on the island and far from where Meri might come across them both. He would hate the gossip to get back to her. The thought of Meri being humiliated by Charles's selfish actions enraged him until he reminded himself that Meri was not his to protect.

Hearing Charles's confident footsteps as he walked along the nearby path, Freddie braced himself to confront his friend.

'Come,' he said without turning to look at Charles. 'Join me.' He knew that Charles would already have a drink in his hand, aware that Freddie's father would have welcomed him with one.

'I can tell by your voice that you're still angry with me,' Charles said. 'I'm ashamed myself.'

'I want to believe you,' Freddie said, wishing that it might be that simple for Charles to change his ways.

'I promise you Freddie.' Charles pulled up a chair from near the table to sit closer to Freddie. 'I know, I've promised you this before. Several times. This time, however, I can assure you that Louise and I have finished our liaison. You no longer have any reason to concern yourself about me, my dear friend. I will be the man that Meri expects me to be. I love her, Freddie,' he said.

Freddie felt his friend's staring at him and turned to face him. 'I hope you mean it this time.'

'I promise you I do. I intend to be the best husband she could hope for. The one she deserves.'

Freddie hoped Charles was being honest with him and that he meant what he was promising this time. He was happy to hear his friend's assurances. 'You're my dearest friend, Charles. You have every chance to enjoy a wonderful future with Meri and for both your sakes I would hate for you to ruin that because you can't control your infatuation with Louise.'

'I know, Freddie.' Charles rested a hand on Freddie's arm briefly. 'I know you want the best for us and although I'm aware I wasn't very welcoming earlier in the tea room, I am grateful to you for your part in making me see what's right.'

He had known Charles long enough to believe when he was telling the truth. This time, Freddie sensed he could believe Charles. He hoped his intuition was right, and that he wasn't thinking this way simply because he desperately wanted to believe that Charles was finally going to do the right thing.

'I have an idea,' Freddie said satisfied that Charles was going to behave going forward. He smiled at his friend for the first time that day.

'Tell me.'

'I need to help my father here for the next two weeks. It's the Battle of Flowers parade on 12th and he's asked me to be available to assist where I can. This year the committee has introduced an evening fête.' He could see that Charles didn't understand what this had to do with him. 'If the fête is well attended by the islanders and visitors, then it should draw in a decent amount of money,' he explained.

'I'm not sure I follow.'

Freddie knew Charles wasn't going to be happy with his next suggestion. 'The thing is Charles, with all that's happened, I believe it would help you to keep your distance from Louise if you returned to Shropshire as soon as possible.'

'I beg your pardon?' Charles studied his face for a few seconds and Freddie could see he was trying to work out if he was being tested, or not. 'I can't say I'm not a little hurt at you wanting me to leave here earlier than planned,' Charles said taking a drink from his glass. 'However, I want you to build your faith in me once again and will agree to do as you suggest.'

'You will?' Freddie couldn't hide his surprise. He hadn't expected Charles to agree to his request so easily.

'Yes. I'll arrange passage tomorrow, or maybe the next day at the latest and will return to the estate.' Charles went to add something but seemed to think better of it. After a pause, he drank from his glass and swallowing, added, 'If I wasn't returning to the estate so soon I could stay here and help you and your father though.'

'Come to the evening event, you mean,' Freddie teased.

Charles gave him a light punch to his shoulder. 'Don't fret, I'll still be leaving.'

'Father is especially enthusiastic about this year,' Freddie went on. 'I gather the Committee has also arranged for Messrs Pathé Freres to film the parade. They will be distributing the film around the world and I believe it will be excellent promotion for the island's holiday industry.'

'I'm sure it will be. That's very forward thinking of them,' Charles said, impressed. He stared at Freddie thoughtfully for a few seconds. Freddie knew what was coming. 'Why don't I delay my return to Shropshire until, say, 13th or 14th of this month. It seems a shame to miss out on all the fun.' Freddie opened his mouth to speak, but Charles added, 'I can assure you I'll stick to my promise and not contact Louise.'

'You're a grown man,' Freddie said, aware that whatever he said his friend would find a way to persuade him to let him remain on the island. He enjoyed Charles's company when he wasn't going behind Meri's back, and was happy to let him stay. 'You do what you wish.'

They relaxed back into silent contemplation, each lost in their own thoughts as they drank their wine and stared out over a field of sunflowers waving gracefully in the gentle breeze.

'I read in the paper that Buckingham Palace were taking precautions to prevent an event from being disturbed by some 'wild women,' Charles said, laughing. 'It all sounds a little preposterous to me, but I suppose it could have some grounding behind it.'

Freddie had heard something similar on his way home that afternoon. 'I suppose it might have something to do with Emmeline Pankhurst, the Suffragette being released from prison. She seems a determined sort.'

'My father will drone on about it for days, if he hears about it,' Charles said groaning. 'He's very fond of Meri, but worries that her Suffrage leanings may turn more militant.'

Freddie couldn't imagine such a thing happening and said so.

Charles finished his glass. 'It's something that concerns me too, I have to admit. Let's face it, she's an independent woman of means since her parents perished on the Titanic two years ago. I think she's still grieving and sometimes she has ideas that simply aren't realistic where women are concerned.'

Freddie didn't disagree immediately. He had heard Meri many times extolling the virtues of independence for women and her beliefs that they should be given the vote. 'I don't think you have much to worry about with Meri though,' Freddie said thoughtfully. 'She's independent enough not to have to resort to militant tactics. It's not in her nature. I heard Meri speaking to a friend once and they were discussing how living their lives independently was a good way to show other women that it could be done. If you think about it though, Meri is in an advantageous position and it must be far easier for her to do as she wishes than most women.'

'In what way?'

Freddie laughed. 'I'm only saying that she doesn't have to conform to strict parents,' he winked at Charles. 'Or to act in a way her husband might expect, yet.' He wondered what kind of husband Charles intended to be. 'You won't be one of those strict husbands will you Charles? I mean, I know you like to be in control, but I can't see Meri putting up with any nonsense from you either now, or when you're married.'

Charles stared at the ground in front of them and Freddie could see he wasn't very happy with the question. He hadn't meant to cause offence. He nudged Charles in his arm with his elbow.

'I'm jesting. I only mean to defend Meri and quash any concerns you may have about her and her leanings towards women's suffrage.' He studied Charles's expression and hoped he hadn't inadvertently caused any issues for Meri. 'You do see what I'm trying to say, don't you?'

'Come,' Charles said not answering Freddie's question. He placed his empty glass onto the table. 'Let's walk. I need to speak to you about something. And this time it's not about Meri.'

Chapter Six

Intrigued, Freddie did as he asked. He put on his own glass and stood up watching Charles walk away his shoulders slightly hunched over. He could tell Charles had something serious on his mind and it worried him.

They walked together in silence a few moments until Freddie couldn't take the suspense a second longer.

'Come on then, out with it. I can tell by your expression and stance that it's something serious. What is it?'

Charles took a moment but didn't stop walking as he pushed his hands deep into his trouser pockets. 'The thing is, Freddie old chap, I know I proposed to Meri at the picnic but I still haven't bought her an engagement ring.'

Freddie let out a deep sigh, relieved that this matter didn't involve Louise. 'And would you like me to help you find the right one? Or is it something else?'

Charles stopped and smiled, the relief on his face obvious. 'Would you mind? It's just that I've never done anything like this before and I wouldn't know where to begin.'

'And you think I might?' Freddie laughed. 'I'd love to help you. We have excellent jewellers here on the island and maybe you could have one designed and made up while you're here.'

'You see, I knew you'd have the answer.'

'I'm glad to help.'

Freddie looked at his friend, usually more confident than most and occasionally that confidence bordering on arrogance. It was unusual seeing Charles being unsure of himself. It reminded Freddie that his friend could be as susceptible to his own insecurities as anyone else. As he could be.

Something occurred to him. 'You're not doing this as insurance in case Meri doesn't like the ring, are you?'

Charles threw his head back and roared with laughter. 'You know me too well. I have to admit that the thought of being able to tell her that you influenced my choice of engagement rings, did calm me slightly.'

'You rotten devil,' Freddie laughed, amused at his friend's self-preservation in all things.

'Not at all. We both know that Meri adores you,' Charles argued.

If only, Freddie thought concentrating on not letting his smile slip. 'I'd be happy to help direct you to the most expensive ring then.'

'The most tasteful would be more to my liking,' Charles teased.

'I'm sure it would be.'

The thought of choosing a ring for someone else to slip on to Meri's finger stung, even if it was Charles. Freddie wondered if maybe he'd been too quick to agree. 'Maybe though this is something you need to do for yourself.' Seeing the disappointment in his friend's face, Freddie added. 'I'll follow you over to Somerton when you return though and we can meet up at the estate. I always enjoy staying at there and spending time with your parents and Lexi.'

'Watch yourself,' Charles teased. 'We both know my mother is fond of you and I'm certain she would be delirious if you were to marry my sister.'

'What rot,' Freddie laughed. 'Anyway, Lexi's only a baby.'

'She's not.' Charles frowned and shook his head. 'Don't let her hear you say anything of the sort. Even I can't quite believe it, but Lexi will be seventeen on her next birthday.'

Before Freddie had a chance to react, his mother called out to them from the living room window.

'We'd better go in, I think Father wants to discuss arrangements for the Battle of Flowers.'

Charles walked next to him. 'I wasn't trying to push my sister on to you. I think it would be horribly odd if you did take a fancy to her, but I thought I should warn you against my mother and any secret intentions she might have.'

Freddie shook his head and pushed Charles so hard he tripped sideways, almost falling over. 'Stop the matchmaking, will you? I love Lexi, she's like a sister to me. Nothing more.'

'That's good to know.'

They entered the living room to see his father stony faced resting his left elbow against the mantelpiece. 'Sit down, will you?' He glanced at the door. 'Close that, I've asked your mother to go and speak to Nell about some drinks. I don't want her listening to what I have to say.'

Freddie's heart pounded. He could tell his father was anxious about something and hoped nothing had gone wrong with his battle arrangements. 'What is it Father?'

'This damned assassination of that Duke. There'll be repercussions, you mark my words. They won't be allowed to get away with murdering an aristocrat. I think we need to prepare for war, boys.'

Freddie saw the delight in his friend's eyes at the prospect. 'Do you think it will come to that?'

'Unfortunately, I do.' He tapped the end of his cigar against the inside wall of the fireplace. Freddie watched as a glob of ash dropped from the end onto the clean logs displayed neatly should the weather take a turn for the worst. 'And I don't want you two lads playing heroics and joining up. You're fresh out of university and war isn't the glorious event that you two probably envisaged while in uniform in the Combined Cadet Force at Victoria College.'

'What was the point of us being in the CCF if we're not to use what we've learnt?' Charles asked. 'I'm sorry sir, but if there is a war then I intend enlisting. I feel it's my duty to do so.'

'Foolish boy.'

Freddie studied his father's complexion. He didn't want to antagonise the man and spark off a second heart attack when he was barely well from the one he'd suffered only weeks before. 'I will stay here for as long as you need me to, Father,' Freddie reassured him. 'When you're back to full strength and able to run the farm without me, then I'll have to rethink my decision, but for now I'll do as you ask.'

Chapter Seven

'I can't believe you volunteered for this,' Charles grumbled as he passed another pink flower to Freddie.

'Stop moaning, I didn't force you to come here, don't forget.' He took the flower from Charles and concentrated on attaching it to the frame of the float. 'You are free to leave here whenever you like. I promised my father I'd help him, and that's exactly what I'm doing.'

'How much longer do we have to do this for, do you think?'

Freddie was used to Charles being unable to keep up interest in things for very long. 'Only a few more hours.' Freddie turned his attentions back to what he was supposed to be doing. He had no intention of letting himself slack and hinder his neighbours' efforts.

Freddie glanced at Charles in time to catch him even a sly wink to one of the servant girls who had been brought in to the large shed on the neighbouring farm where they were decorating the float. He should have known not to let Charles come along. This really wasn't his thing at all. Unlike Charles, Freddie enjoyed the camaraderie each year as various friends came together to build and abundantly decorate floats with flowers.

Theirs was dress mostly in pink and pale blue hydrangeas and although it was only half done already looked splendid as far as Freddie was concerned. It was a matter of pride for his parishioners to present the best float possible and he knew it meant a lot his father. He had to admit it also meant a lot to him.

'It's not that I mind being here,' whispered Charles. 'It's just that I wasn't sure quite how long I might be expected to help this evening.'

Freddie took a deep breath, trying not to get frustrated by Charles's impatience. 'Why, what were you hoping to do instead?'

'Nothing.'

They exchanged glances. In that moment Freddie could see Charles was doing his best to behave. He couldn't help smiling. Behaving as expected came fairly naturally to Freddie, but he had known Charles long enough to be aware that Charles found it rather difficult most of the time. His friend might not behave as well as Freddie might like, but he couldn't help enjoying Charles's enthusiasm for life. He was fun to be around and rarely failed to raise Freddie's moods and the moods of those around him. He supposed it was what drew Meri to Charles too.

He scanned the shed where they have a working, smiling to himself to see the older members of the community working as busily as the younger ones, their gnarled fingers stiffer than they might once have been, but still deftly managing to decorate this float for the Battle of Flowers Parade.

He heard his father's voice and looked over towards the entrance. It saddened him to see the grey pallor on his father's face that until recently had always seemed so ruddy and healthy until his heart attack had shattered him and reduced his father to a shell of the man he had once been. He was getting better, Freddie thought with relief, but it was clear to anyone who knew his father that he still had a long way to go before he was back to full strength.

Freddie sensed his mother's concerns for her husband and part of him wanting to remain on the farm was to help reassure her. He didn't need her to become unwell due to the stress of worry about his father. He knew that if his mother had her way that his father would be resting at home but they both knew how much his father loved this time of year and preparing for the Battle of Flowers. If this was what made him happiest then surely neither of them had the right to take that away from him.

'Father,' Freddie called, waving his father over to inspect his work. 'What do you think of our efforts this evening?'

He stood back to let his father survey the float that to the untrained eye would look almost complete, but to Freddie and those who worked on these floats year after year they would know

that they still had many hours of hard work ahead of them to reach the desired effect before the parade the following day.

His father nodded sagely. 'You have a long way to go yet, my son, although I must say you're doing a good job even without me here to oversee you all most of the time.'

The gathered crowd laughed affectionately at his father's quip. 'Yes,' said one of their nearer neighbours. 'That's because we want to do you proud.'

'Well I'm you're certainly doing that,' he replied looking satisfied. 'Well done.'

Freddie saw his mother coming to join them and was surprised when his father allowed her to link arms with him. It worried Freddie to see that he wasn't as well as he had been earlier in the day when they had worked on one of the fields, but he hid his concern not wishing to alert anyone else of his father's discomfort.

'Come along,' Freddie said linking his father's other arm. 'I think you need to return home, to enable us to carry on without your beady gaze over the rest of us. 'I deserve a break.' Freddie turned to the rest of them wishing to make light of his father's unexpectedly early departure. 'Don't you agree everyone?'

'You certainly do young man,' agreed the neighbour who clearly understood what Freddie was trying to do. 'You can come and check on us tomorrow, Mr Chevalier. In fact why don't you trust us to finish this work? Maybe wait until the actual parade and let us surprise you with our concerted efforts?'

Freddie didn't expect his father to agree and rather hoped he hadn't realised quite what was going on. He could see his father's eyes dull slightly as it always did when he was displeased and hoped he would take their neighbour's comments in the vain they were intended.

'I shall do as you suggest,' his father said. He began walking away with Freddie halting after a couple of steps and turning his head to the group of workers they were leaving behind. Freddie watched his father smile gracefully to them. 'I might be leaving you to press on but I still don't expect anybody's efforts to slack while my back is turned. We all understand, I'm sure, that there is still much to do before the battle commences tomorrow.'

'We do,' various people agreed.

'Good. Then I shall leave you. I will be watching with interest and in case I don't manage to speak to any of you before the event begins, I'd like to say how proud of you all I am and look forward to seeing this colourful display winning the parade.'

Freddie led his father out of the shed to a round of applause. He could feel the sadness of those who knew what it must have taken for his father to step away from the float and not be there to help add the final flourish to the magnificent creation. He helped his father up onto the front of their trap his mother had brought to collect them and winced when she attempted to cover his father's lap with a blanket only to have it pushed aside.

'I'm still capable of covering my own legs should I need to,' his father growled. 'I would appreciate it if you would leave me be and stop your fussing.'

Freddie's heart pounded, upset to witness this disagreement between his parents. They were usually very happy in each other's company and rarely bickered. He hoped that their relationship would return to its usual stable footing once his father was fully recovered.

'I'll see you both in the morning,' Freddie said, spotting someone he recognised arriving at the shed. 'You don't need me to come with you.'

'Good lad. You go back and do my share in there. I hate to leave early, as well you know.'

'I will, Father. Enjoy your evening and please take it a little easy, tomorrow is going to be a long and probably hot day.'

'I'll make sure that he does,' his mother said grimacing when she saw the reaction her comment had instigated.

'I'd better go and find Charles,' Freddie said not wanting to wait a minute before returning to the shed. 'We'll both see you at breakfast in the morning. If either of you need me for anything, send for me.'

He watched as the mother tapped the horse's behind with the reins and it broke into a trot leaving small clouds of dust in the air. Freddie knew he had to find Charles immediately but needed to contain his emotions before returning to the shed. His father had always been a well-built, muscular man and seeing him reduced to this painfully thin person, with a gaunt expression and frustration at such a change being brought about in his health was hard to witness.

Freddie hoped that this was the worst of it. The doctor had assured them that if his father took things easy then he could possibly regain much of his strength and Freddie hoped he was right. He turned about to return to the shed when he spotted Charles marching out.

'You're leaving? If only you'd come out a moment's ago you could have returned to the farm with my parents. They've only just left.'

Charles looked down the driveway but the pony and trap had already gone. 'I hadn't realised they were going.'

He realised Charles was anxious about something. 'Is something the matter?'

'I'm sorry Freddie. Louise has just arrived with her husband. I think they've come to look at the float like I've seen other visitors doing. I heard someone say that Louise's aunt is one of the people helping in the shed tonight.'

Freddie remembered that he had also seen them arriving. He was surprised at Charles's reaction but also very relieved. Maybe Charles had meant what he had said about ending their affair. It wasn't like his friend to remove himself from the chance to spend a little time with his mistress. It could have been because neither of them were certain whether Louise's husband had an inkling about their relationship, in which case Charles was probably trying to avoid an embarrassing incident in the shed rather than avoid the woman he had been meeting in secret. Either way, Freddie was relieved Charles had acted as he had.

'You don't mind walking home?'

Charles shook his head. 'No, the walk will do me good. I have a lot to think about. And I think you're right, I need to return to Somerton and away from here. From Louise.' He sighed heavily. 'That woman is far too much of a temptation to me while I'm here.'

'I will see you back at the farm when I've helped the others finish work on the float. We'll have breakfast in the morning.' Freddie patted him on the shoulder. 'Then I'll take you to the docks in the morning. I believe you're making the right decision to go and if my father is well enough, I'll follow you in a few days.'

Early the following day, Freddie accompanied Charles to the docks to catch the ferry back to the English mainland. Freddie didn't have much time to spare seeing him off aware that he was needed back at the shed to help with the last-minute preparations to the float.

On the one hand, he was relieved Charles was returning to his family estate in Shropshire, but on the other he was sad to see him leave. Freddie enjoyed spending time with Charles and wished that he hadn't had to end his trip to the island so soon but knew it was the right thing for Charles to do.

Freddie spent the next few hours with the rest of the volunteers moving the float the three miles to the field next to the arena where the Battle of Flowers display was to take place several hours later. Once he was satisfied that his assistance was no longer needed, he went to find his parents and took his seat by his father and mother.

The excitement in the air was palpable. Everyone on the island looked forward to this annual event and many of the twelve parishes had groups of volunteers working hard for months to make the best float they possibly could. Quite a few families took part too, and for some it was a tradition. Freddie enjoyed watching the larger floats, but also enjoyed the smaller ones too.

The battle was declared open and the floats began moving along the road in front of where he and his parents sat with other locals and dignitaries. The bands marched and played adding to the excitement and soon cheers and people clapping filled the air as the afternoon drew on.

Freddie loved his Ireland of Jersey, especially at times like these when the locals got together to have fun. He was sad that Charles was going to miss the battle that would take place later after the parade had finished, when mostly youngsters grabbed flowers tearing them from where they had been stuck and woven onto frames to throw at others. Charles would have enjoyed that part the best, he imagined.

The colourful display and joy on all the smiling faces made Freddie's heart swell. He loved watching people cheering and clapping as their friends and relatives passed by with their bright, floral floats. . Freddie decided that the following year he would make a point of being on the island to help out much more than he had done this year in the lead up to the Battle of Flowers.

Chapter Eight

Shropshire – Late July 1914

Charles's car skidded to a halt just below the steps at Somerton's impressive entrance. Freddie couldn't help laughing. It was a joy to be back here again in this magnificent place where the rest of the world seemed not to exist. Even with everyone's current concerns since the assassination of Duke Ferdinand and his wife the previous month, it felt like they were in a safe bubble each time he returned to Charles's family estate.

Charles grinned at Freddie. 'I believe we are about to be joined by her now.'

Freddie didn't have a chance to ask who Charles might be referring to when he heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps hurrying towards them. He knew at once who was about to appear. His mouth drew back into wide smile as Lexi appeared at the double door to the hall. Her cheeks were rosy as she smiled firstly at her brother and then at Freddie.

'You're here, at last.' She ran down the front steps and reached the car pulling open the passenger door and waiting impatiently for Freddie to step out onto the driveway. As soon as both his feet had touched the gravel, she wrapped her arms around him in an enthusiastic hug.

'You promised to be back weeks and weeks ago, Charles,' she grumbled as she clung to Freddie. 'I want to know why I've had to wait so long.'

She looked up at Freddie, her beaming smile making him pull her into a tight hug.

'I spoke to Mama and she told me about your Battle of Flowers, Freddie. It sounds spectacular.'

'It is,' he agreed picturing the colourful display and music of the event that he doubted would take part if was to happen. Pushing the thought aside, he took her by her skinny shoulders and held her back from him to study her. 'Charles wasn't wrong when he said you were growing up into quite the young woman.' He shook his head and laughed.

Lexi scowled and pushed away from him and Freddie knew he had insulted her with his amusement.

'And what exactly is so amusing about that, may I ask?'

'Oh dear,' Charles grimaced, affirming Freddie's suspicion that his comment had been insensitive. 'Well done, Freddie. She's going to fall into a deep sulk now. Aren't you Lexi?'

'I am not,' she snapped. 'I don't sulk, I'm not a baby.'

It pained Freddie to be the cause of Lexi's sudden change of mood and he desperately tried to think how to rectify his stupidity. 'What I meant to say,' he said. 'Is that a few short years ago I would never have imagined that the tomboy you were then, and you must agree that you were a little hooligan, could change so much.'

'You thought I was a tomboy?'

'Freddie's not the only one to say it,' Charles said coming to his defence. 'Even Papa used to tease you about it.'

Lexi gave his question some thought. 'I suppose I have to agree with you,' she said giving a shrug before smiling. 'Papa was reminiscing yesterday and said almost the same thing.'

'Am I forgiven?' Freddie asked giving her an appealing smile to hopefully win her over.

Lexi nodded. 'Yes, you're forgiven.' She turned and began leading the way into the house. 'You are late though. Mama has been waiting to greet you and held back serving tea until your arrival. I think we need to hurry inside.'

Freddie went to take his leather case from Charles's car but before he could do so the butler appeared.

'I'll take that for you, Sir.'

Freddie thanked him as Lexi linked her arm through his and proceeded to lead him into the hall.

As soon as they were inside, Freddie heard Lord Baldwin's booming voice as he ranted about something inside the drawing room.

'Whatever you do,' Charles said quietly as he rested his hand on the door to the living room. 'Do not mention the assassination of the Archduke and his wife. My father still has to come to terms with what happened. Apparently, he met them both some years ago when he was travelling in Austria.' Charles shrugged. 'Skiing or some such activity, I gather. Although he said he didn't particularly like the man terribly much, he is pretty offended to think anybody would murder him. Which I suppose is understandable.' He took a deep breath and turned the handle pushing the door open 'Papa, Mama, I've brought a guest to see you both.' He stood back and waved for Freddie to enter.

Freddie waited for Lexi to pass in front of him before following her into the ornate room with its cream and pale blue furnishings. Lady Baldwin was waiting with a smile on her gentle, slightly lined face, which Freddie watched softened when she saw him. She seemed weary, Freddie thought. He could imagine that Lord Baldwin had probably been raving since news of the assassination had become public. Freddie knew Charles's father well enough to know that once the elder gentleman had been angered by something he found it difficult to let the matter rest.

'Lord Baldwin,' Freddie said giving the stern man a brief nod before he approached Lady Baldwin and took her hand in his own.

He raised it to his lips and kissed the soft skin surprised to see how much she seemed to have aged since his last visit to the estate.

'It's good to see you again, young Chevalier,' Lord Baldwin said.

'Thank you, your lordship. I'm delighted to be here once again.' Freddie liked the severe man and respected him enormously. The Baldwin family had always given him an effusive welcome and made him feel very much like one of the family. It was something that never ceased to surprise him especially he was the son of a farmer, albeit a rather wealthier one than most, but he was nonetheless not from aristocratic stock like his friend's family.

'Freddie, dearest boy,' Charles's mother said smiling. She indicated a seat opposite her. 'Please, take seat.' She gave Charles an admonishing look.

For the first time Freddie realised a maid was waiting patiently to serve them tea.

Lady Baldwin gave her a brief nod. 'You may serve now, Claire,' she said turning attention once again to Freddie. 'Charles tells me that your father is feeling slightly better.' She clasped her hands together for a moment. 'Please, do send him our best regards. It must have been a dreadful shock for you and your mother when he became ill.'

'He is. Thank you.' Freddie gave a warm smile aware that Charles would have kept his mother up to date with information about his family. 'His health seems to be improving each day, which is a relief to us all.'

Freddie was grateful to her for the bringing up the subject of his father. He couldn't shake off the guilt he felt at leaving him at such a time but knew his father was happy for him to take a break from Jersey to visit the Baldwins. The previous few months had been unsettling for them all since his father's heart attack. He suspected his father didn't mind Freddie leaving so that he had time without Freddie fretting and watching his every move.

'Yes, it is good to see you here again, my boy.' Lord Baldwin frowned as he stood with his back to the unlit fireplace. 'Charles informs me you're not here for very long though. Am I to suppose it's because you need to return home to help your father run the farm?'

Freddie noticed Lexi look from her mother to her father in appealing way. He couldn't understand why, but assumed she wished them to approach him about something.

'Is there anything wrong, Lexi?' he asked hoping he wasn't embarrassing her by doing so at that moment.

Lady Baldwin shook her head. 'Nothing is wrong, dear Freddie. I believe that my daughter is trying to remind me that we have an invitation for you. One which we hope you will be able to accept.'

‘An invitation?’ Freddie was intrigued.

‘That’s correct. However,’ Lady Baldwin tilted her head to one side sympathetically. ‘We will understand completely if you were unable to accept given the circumstances of your father’s present health.’

Lexi picked up invitation from the table next to her mother’s right hand. ‘Here it is,’ she said looking anxious.

‘You may open it immediately, if you wish.’ Lady Baldwin smiled up at him and waited.

Freddie noticed that the rest of the family were watching him intently and realised that the invitation must be for something special. He took the envelope from Lexi’s fingers feeling a little unnerved. Taking a deep breath, Freddie opened the envelope carefully and slowly withdrew the thick white card with embossed black lettering inviting him to the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary of Lord and Lady Baldwin being held the following month at Somerton.

He beamed at each one in turn. ‘I will be delighted to accept.’ He would find a way to persuade his father to allow him to return to Shropshire for such an inauspicious occasion. Surely he would understand how important the event would be for Lord and especially Lady Baldwin? It was certainly one he was loath to miss.

‘I’m honoured to have been invited.’

Lady Baldwin gave him a satisfied smile. ‘We are delighted that you wish to celebrate such an important family occasion with us, Freddie.’

He caught Lexi wiping a stray tear from her eye and realised she was crying because she, too, was happy. Lexi really was the dearest girl. Recalling Charles’s comment about Lexi’s age reminded himself that she was no longer a girl and that he must learn to see her as the young lady he could see she had become. Freddie studied her, then realised with embarrassment that everyone else in the room was staring at him, waiting for him to continue speaking.

Freddie cleared his throat. ‘I will have to ask my parents if they give me leave to travel over again so soon, but I’m sure they will be very happy once I explain the reason why. I very much doubt though that I’ll be to stay for very long. Maybe only a few days.’

‘A few days is better than nothing. We can have a lot of fun a few days.’ Charles raised an eyebrow at him before turning to address his parents. ‘Now Freddie’s accepted, I presume that’s approximately two hundred and fifty of your closest personal friends who will be here for the ball?’

‘Stop teasing, Charles,’ his father grumbled.

Freddie sat in silence while the maid poured the tea and handed out dainty cups to each of them. Once a platter of tiny sandwiches had been served, she left them to enjoy their afternoon tea together.

Freddie took a bite of a cucumber sandwich wondering how something as simple as white bread and slivers of cucumber could possibly taste so delicious. He always enjoyed afternoon tea at the hall. Mrs Jordan, the Baldwin’s cook made food that Freddie knew to be the tastiest he had ever enjoyed. He looked forward to their evening meal, aware now that he had finally eaten for the first time since leaving home that he was still very hungry.

Lord Baldwin finished his tea. He looked as if he had something troubling him, Freddie noticed. Knowing Charles’s father as he did, Freddie knew that Lord Baldwin would be unable to remain silent when he was impatient to speak about whatever it was on his mind. He heard the statuesque man make a sound like a growl somewhere deep in his throat and saw Lady Baldwin stiffen.

‘Did you see the Austro-Hungarian government have declared war on Serbia?’ He stared at Freddie clearly expecting an answer.

‘I did, Sir.’

‘I’m not sure if it’s a good thing or not.’ He seemed to think for a second before continuing, ‘I suspect this will mean Great Britain will need to become involved.’ He studied Charles and Freddie for a moment. ‘At least you two boys are still being educated and not in the military

should men be called to fight.'

'That is something to be thankful for,' Lady Baldwin said, sipping at her tea and peering at both of them over the decorated rim of her fine porcelain cup. 'I don't wish to partake with further talk of distasteful things dear. Let us enjoy this beautiful afternoon and make the most of the boys both being with us once again.'

'Yes, Papa, Mama is right,' Lexi said giving her father what Freddie assumed to be an appealing look. 'We should be thinking about happy things not frightening each other about events taking place on the other side of the world.'

Lord Baldwin placed his cup and plate on the occasional table nearest to him. He scowled at Lexi and his wife. 'Serbia is not the other side of the world, unfortunately. And, if necessary, we will have to do our part. It is, after all, why countries sign agreements as a way to protect each other and of course themselves. But when we do this it means that sometimes we are called to act upon that agreement. I fear that this is one of those times.'

Lady Baldwin's teacup clattered slightly in saucer as she put it down on the table next to her. 'That might be the case, my dear, but it only adds strength to my comment. While Charles and Freddie are here with us, I intend keeping the conversation to lighter matters.'

Freddie watched as Lord Baldwin took his wife's hand in his giving it a light squeeze. Shows of affection were rare between them. In fact, Freddie realised that this was the first time in all the years he had spent time staying at the hall that he had witnessed such an act. It only added to the gravitas of the world situation and Lord Baldwin's true concerns about all their futures.

Freddie's appetite vanished at the prospect of what this might mean for them.

'Would you boys wish care to accompany me for a walk on the lawn?' He let go of his wife's hand and without waiting for an answer strode over to the large doors leading outside.

Aware this was a demand rather than a request, Freddie smiled at his hostess aware that he needed to leave the room after Charles's father.

'Thank you for inviting me to stay once again in your beautiful home,' he said standing in front of her chair. 'It is wonderful to be back here again.'

After taking his leave of Lady Baldwin, Freddie followed Lord Baldwin and Charles to the garden. He assumed Charles's father wanted to speak openly with them about the future not wishing his wife to pick up any inuendo of possible danger.

Once outside, Freddie felt someone watching them and glanced over his shoulder to see Lexi looking out of the floor to ceiling window. Lord Baldwin stopped a way from the house and looked back, no doubt to check they were not within hearing distance of the drawing room.

'I resisted adding to my comments inside but I am almost certain there will be a war. Britain will be brought into this mess one way or another. I can't see how it's avoidable.' He looked at Freddie briefly before adding, 'And most possibly your Channel Islands, too. We may all be involved in what is about to happen.' He scowled into the distance and Freddie could see the older man was deeply concerned. 'I understand why my wife finds this distasteful. As do I, especially now I have a son old enough to enlist. I can see the chain reaction already unfolding and who knows where it will lead.'

They walked on in silence for a while and Freddie sensed Charles's excitement and knew, without doubt, that his friend would want to take part in whatever was about to happen. Hadn't Charles always favoured excitement over sense? Whereas he was always the one to take more care, thinking things through deeply before committing himself. He turned to watch Charles, aware that his friend would feel compelled to enlist should the need arise. Freddie knew without doubt that Charles had no intention of missing out on this one.

Chapter Nine

Lexi

Lexi was delighted to hear Freddie confirm his acceptance to the ball. It would be the first time her parents were allowing her to join in and she couldn't wait.

'I'm looking forward to returning again soon,' Freddie said when her mother gave her permission to travel with Charles and Meri to drop Freddie off at the railway station a few miles away when he was returning back to Jersey.

'I wish you didn't have to leave so soon,' Charles shouted from the front seat where he reached out and took Meri's hand in his. 'This visit has been far too short.'

Lexi's sentiments matched her brothers but she was glad she hadn't been the one to have to share them for once.

'It has,' Freddie sighed. 'But it couldn't be helped. I'm lucky I've had this time staying with you. Anyway, I'll soon be back for the ball. It's only a couple of months away.'

'Do you have your gown ready, Lexi?' Meri asked changing the subject. Lexi had caught Meri watching her reactions to Freddie and wondered if her friend was trying to lighten the mood.

'I do,' Lexi said. 'Mama thought it too early to have one made up for me, but I persuaded her that I've been waiting a long time to attend a ball and that I knew exactly how I wanted my dress to look.'

'I still have to visit my dress-maker for my final fitting,' Meri said.

'You'll look magnificent in whatever you choose to wear.' Charles raised Meri's hand to his lips having to drop it when they reached a corner a little too fast.

Lexi wished her brother would concentrate on what he was supposed to be doing before he injured them all in a crash. 'I'm not certain Papa is too keen about the ball though,' Lexi confided.

'Why do you say that?' Charles shook his head.

'I overheard him this morning insist that he needed to travel to London the day before for a meeting of some sort. I don't think Mama took what he told her too well.'

'Father does tend to return later than promised to the hall more and more these days.'

'Poor Mama,' Lexi said anxious for their anniversary ball to go well. 'I hope he doesn't cause her to fret the day before. She's been looking forward to it very much and for him to do so would be cruel.'

Freddie patted Lexi's hand. 'I'm certain your father won't be late back to the estate.'

Lexi didn't want Freddie to withdraw his hand a moment sooner than was necessary and rested her free hand lightly on his, delighted to feel his hand between her two. 'Thanks, Freddie,' she whispered.

'I'll have a word with him,' Charles promised.

Freddie smiled at her as he slowly withdrew his hand from hers and shook his head. 'I can't imagine your father would be late for this occasion, it's important to him too, don't forget. Twenty-five years married is a special anniversary and it sounds like all their friends and everyone who's anyone in society is coming.'

'Including you,' Charles laughed from the front seat. 'The Jersey Boy.'

'You love it there too,' Freddie replied resting the hand that had moments before been held by Lexi onto his friend's shoulder.

'He certainly does,' Meri said. 'Charles is always making me jealous and going on about how fond of Jersey and its charms he is. He's constantly telling me about his many holidays he's spent with you scouring the beaches, sand dunes, valleys and woods whenever Lord Baldwin allowed him the freedom to remain in the island during school holidays.'

'Probably because it was the easiest option,' Charles laughed. 'It was certainly the most peaceful one for Papa. I always argued with him whenever he tried to force me to travel back to the estate for holidays. I love it here, of course I do, but I knew that as soon as I left school I

wouldn't be able to spend as much time on the island and wanted to make the most of being able to.'

'You'd love it there too, Meri,' Freddie said making Lexi tense. 'You, too Lexi.'

She relaxed slightly, relieved to have been included in his thoughts.

'You both would,' Charles said wistfully. 'I think that one day I might buy a holiday home there in which to spend summers. One by the sea, down in one of the bays, near St Catherine's maybe? What do you say to that, Freddie?'

Lexi watched for Freddie to react unsurprised when he smiled and nodded enthusiastically.

'What about me?' Lexi asked.

'You'll always be welcome at my villa,' Charles assured her.

'And you're more than welcome to come and stay at my family's manor farm, too,' Freddie said giving her a smile. 'I'd love to show you around the valleys, Lexi. The land bordering the reservoir my father built decades ago is now well established with trees and it's one of the most peaceful places. I'm sure you'll appreciate it.'

'And me?' Meri said.

Lexi couldn't miss seeing her brother's shoulders tensing and presumed it was because Meri had addressed the question to Freddie and not to him.

'I've never visited your island, Freddie. Come to think of it, you've never actually invited me.'

'We could go there on our honeymoon,' Charles said quickly.

Freddie winced. Lexi wasn't sure if it was the tone Charles had used to remind his friend exactly who was the one engaged to Meri, or the thought of their honeymoon. Freddie nodded. 'You could. It's a particular favourite haunt of honeymooners,' he said his smile seeming forced.

Lexi could tell her brother's comment had cut Freddie deeply.

'Stop teasing, Charles,' Meri laughed. 'I think we should all make a plan to go and visit Freddie's home later this summer, don't you? I've never met the rest of the Chevalier family and would love to be shown around the farm and all the places you've mentioned to us.'

'Then we will,' Freddie agreed. He looked happy at the prospect of being able to show Meri the places he loved, Lexi realised. 'You must come too, Lexi, if your parents allow it.'

'Charles can be my chaperone,' she said hugging herself delighted to have been invited by Freddie. 'Can't you, Charles?'

'I'm not so sure Mama would entrust her only daughter's safety to me,' he said. 'We'll have to ask them.'

Charles raised his hand in an imaginary toast. 'To Jersey,' he cheered. 'And to Freddie giving us all the holiday of a lifetime.'

Chapter Ten

Shropshire – Late August 1914

'I dare you, Freddie. Just one dance,' Charles said, taunting her and not caring that he was also setting up his best friend. 'After all, she's only been allowed to attend the ball because it's a private family occasion. She wasn't supposed to be coming out for months yet.'

'I'm sure your sister would far rather dance with someone her own age,' Freddie replied, catching her eye and winking at her.

She took a deep breath and praying she wouldn't blush, resisted the urge to glare at her brother. Dear Freddie, love of her life, if only he knew it, would there ever be a time when he'd see her as an attractive woman rather than simply Charles's little sister?

He waved her over to join them. 'Lexi, you look very beautiful tonight,' Freddie said, bending to kiss her lightly on her cheek.

'Scrubs up rather well, doesn't she?' Charles said over Freddie's shoulder. It was all she could do to resist stamping her newly acquired heels onto his foot.

'Take no notice of him.' Freddie turned his back on Charles and took her hand in his much larger one. 'Now, Lexi, tell me honestly, would you like to dance the next waltz with me? I gather from Charles that your mother has given you permission. Or, if you're not familiar with the steps, would you rather sit this one out?'

She wanted to wipe the smug look of her brother's mocking face and decline Freddie's offer, but knowing this could be the one chance she had to be in his arms, she dared not risk turning him down.

'I know how to waltz, Freddie and I'd love to dance with you,' she said, relishing being able to say those often dreamt of words. 'Especially as it'll give you an opportunity to talk to someone other than my boring brother for several minutes. He's monopolized you for far too long already this evening.'

She tilted her head slightly to one side and enjoyed the look of surprise on both men's faces as she stepped into Freddie's arms.

'I don't remember my parents having a Silver Wedding Anniversary celebration.' Freddie's warm breath tickled her ears, sending shivers through her. 'I hope you're enjoying yourself?'

Lexi breathed in his fresh scent and the heady mixture of lemons and sandalwood that she knew so well. She had watched him dance many times over the years, desperately wishing she could replace whatever woman he had in his arms. Freddie was not simply a brilliant dancer he was also the most beautiful man she had ever seen. She sighed.

Freddie, as usual, sublimely unaware of the effect he had on her, bent his head and studied her expression for a moment. 'Are you all right, Lex?'

'Yes, thank you, just concentrating,' she said accidentally standing on the tip of his left foot and causing them both to falter.

He held her tighter to stop her from falling. Clearing his throat as he loosened his grip on her, he said. 'I suppose your first ball must be terribly exciting for you?'

She wished he'd hold her more tightly again. However, he was showing his customary sensitivity, as always and never forgetting who she was. Why did he always feel the need to share responsibility for her? Taking care of his best friend's sister was something he'd never had a problem doing, but she wished he'd notice how much she had grown up now.

'You mustn't mind Charles,' Freddie said quietly into her ear. He smiled down at her and her stomach flipped as his dark green eyes bored into hers.

'That's easy for you to say.'

'I don't think it's personally directed at you. Charles is always teasing someone. He was either teasing or making trouble the whole time we were away at school,' Freddie laughed. 'Got him into some tight spots too, I can tell you.'

Lexi didn't doubt it. 'The army should put him straight once he finishes his officer training,' she said willing it to be the case. 'Although it's going to be hard for Charles to take orders from anyone.'

'I agree.' Freddie said looking shocked. 'I still can't believe he's joined up. I admit I'm going to miss his visits. Living in Jersey can be such a hindrance when your friends are on the mainland and a ferry ride away.'

The prospect of Freddie's regular trips to visit them at the estate now that Charles had enlisted frightened her. 'You'll have to come here to see us when he's on leave.'

'I'll probably have to if I wish to see him. He's a hopeless letter writer and I don't suppose he'll have enough time during leave from the army to visit Jersey for some time.'

Lexi concentrated on her footwork while attempting to take in every second of this special dance with Freddie. 'I really do look forward to seeing your home, Freddie. Charles has often spoken about the how pretty it is and how the valley the farm overlooks is the most beautiful he's ever seen.'

'Having ridden out on this estate, I'm certain there are equally beautiful views.'

Lexi followed his lead, desperately wishing she could move closer, but knew her mother was watching them from where she was listening to several of her guests talking. The Lexi thing she wanted to do was be humiliated by missing another step or make Freddie uncomfortable and give him cause to avoid asking her to dance again.

'I don't suppose our intended trip to Jersey will happen now that Charles is going away.'

'Maybe not,' Freddie said looking into her eyes and making her breath catch in her throat. 'But we will have the holiday at some point.'

'Not for a while though, I imagine.'

He held her closer. 'No, not for some time if things continue to escalate as they are now.'

The music was coming to an end. She quickly tried to think of something else to say to hold on to the moment.

'Do you have any photographs with you, of your home?' she faltered when she realized the inanity of her question.

'Not right now, but I may have one or two up in my room. I'll try to remember to bring them down to breakfast tomorrow and show them to you then.'

'I'd like that,' she said honestly. 'Charles talks about Jersey often. We used to think he'd rather live there than here.' She glanced up at Freddie delighted to find he was watching her, a warm expression in his green eyes. Despite her best efforts, Lexi blushed, and immediately looked away. 'I suppose you'd never have met at all if he hadn't been asked to leave Rugby.'

'Probably not. Victoria College was never the same after your brother's arrival,' he said, grinning and shaking his head slowly looking amused by a memory that she presumed he had recalled.

Lexi thought of the boarding school her brother had been sent to when her parents had tired of his bad behaviour. No one had expected a school-hating pupil to change as much as Charles had done and then settle down in Jersey and enjoy his time there as much as he had.

'It was extremely dull at school before he joined us,' Freddie continued. 'Charles is a bit of a legend with the younger students, I'm told.'

She remembered only to vividly her father's fury when he received the headmaster's letter telling him of Charles's latest escapade and his threat to expel him.

'Father feels Charles is doing something useful now, at last. He believes he's been wasting his time since leaving Cambridge with all the parties you and Meredith were attending.' Lexi wasn't sure, but Freddie seemed to stiffen slightly at the mention of Meredith's name.

The music ended and her mood dipped when he led her to the refreshments.

Lexi took the lemonade he held out for her. 'Since he met Meredith Charles spends even less time at the estate,' she said taking a sip and winced at the sharpness of the drink. She wished she could have tried some of the punch Freddie was drinking but knew he wouldn't defy her mother

by letting her have a glass.

‘He does enjoy spending his free time with her but that’s only to be expected.’

She supposed he was right. ‘Mama said she’s looking forward to helping Meri start making plans for their wedding.’

‘That’s kind of her, but then Lady Baldwin has always been a generous lady.’

‘Thank you. I think Mama feels it’s up to her to take charge since Meri’s parents perished when the Titanic went down,’ she whispered the last few words knowing Charles hated her referring to the tragic incident in case Meri overheard. ‘Although if there is a war and he’s sent away, I can’t imagine how they’ll settle on a date too easily.’

‘Typical Charles to pre-empt matters and join up before the rest of us have a chance to.’ Freddie said, drinking his punch. ‘I wish I could join the cavalry with him.’

Lexi froze. The thought of Freddie putting himself in danger horrified her. She loved Charles but was used to her brother being carefree with his ways. Freddie, on the other hand, tended to be more sensible and it worried her to think that he might do something dangerous simply to keep up with Charles.

‘Is something the matter?’

‘You can’t join up,’ Lexi said, with more force than she intended. To cover her outburst, she added, ‘At least while your father needs you at home?’

He shrugged, a crestfallen expression on his face. ‘I suppose I’m stuck there for the foreseeable future.’

Relief flooded through her. The vision of gentle Freddie joining up, especially now there was this constant talk of war, was too terrifying to bear. ‘I expect you miss Cambridge and freedom, but it can’t be that bad living in Jersey?’

‘The island is a great place to live. Usually I enjoy everything about it, but I can’t help feeling envious of Charles doing something worthwhile. It seems heroic, somehow, to join the Lancers; Death or Glory and all that.’

‘You can always write to each other.’

He gave her a sympathetic smile. ‘We both know your brother is hopeless at correspondence. I’d have no idea what’s going on and I dread missing out on all the excitement.’ He finished his drink.

Lexi saw his obvious frustration and suppressed a shiver. ‘Charles will no doubt look dashing in his regimentals, but I can’t imagine anything more awful than war.’ She looked up at him recalling some of the horror stories she’d overheard her father retelling to friends over drinks about the Boer War. ‘I’ve had an idea. I could write to you and let you know how Charles is getting along. Charles will be forced to write to Papa regularly if he wishes to keep receiving his allowance. I overheard Papa telling Charles that his weekly correspondence would at least prove he had an inkling of management and self-control.’

Freddie threw his head back and laughed. ‘I remember hearing your father telling him the same thing. Charles was furious with Lord Baldwin for insisting he write regularly. Charles loathes anything as dull as letter writing.’

‘There, you see?’ Lexi said happy to have found a way for her and Freddie to keep in touch. ‘I could pass on any news and that way at least you won’t feel you’re missing out on anything.’

Freddie stepped back from her, his eyes narrowing as he studied her. He frowned thoughtfully as he considered her offer for a moment. Lexi held her breath wondering what he was thinking.

‘Thank you, Lexi. That’s very thoughtful of you.’ He took her hand and raised it to his lips, kissing it lightly. The sensation of his lips on her skin sent tingles through her body. ‘I’ll appreciate your letters very much.’

‘Then that’s what I’ll do,’ she said breathlessly.

Chapter Eleven

'You danced with him at last then, little Lexi,' Charles teased as he spooned mushrooms onto his breakfast plate the following morning. Replacing the silver lid onto the platter, he returned to his seat opposite her at the dining room table. 'Stop scowling. I know you told Meri when she was last over that you thought Freddie was. . . What was it now? Ah, yes.' He put the back of his hand against his forehead as if in a faint. 'Freddie is the most handsome man in the entire world.' Luckily Meredith prefers my more rugged physique.'

Lexi threw her napkin at him. *What was Meri doing sharing her confidences with Charles?*

'You're no gentleman. If you tell Freddie, I swear I'll make you regret it. Anyway, you're jealous because Meri couldn't get here for the ball.'

'Don't be such a baby.' Charles returned to the sideboard to add another spoonful of kedgeree to his heaped plate.

'I'm not,' she argued. Lexi glanced briefly towards the door checking it was still closed. 'You know Freddie will be here any moment. Don't you dare say anything in front of him.'

'In front of whom, dear?' her father asked, as he pushed his gold rimmed glasses up his roman nose. It was a nose Lexi was relieved not to have inherited, although it seemed to suit her father and Charles quite well.

'No one, Papa. Charles was teasing me, that's all.'

'For pity's sake, Charles, do leave your sister alone.' He took his seat at the head of the long, oak table and waited. 'How many times do you have to be told not to tease Alexandra at the table?'

Their mother swept to the room. 'What has Charles done now?' Then noticing the amount of food Charles had heaped onto his plate she shook her head. 'Really dear, how do you manage to eat so much this early in the day? Do sit down and finish your breakfast and stop vexing your sister.'

'Yes, Mother,' Charles said and bent to kiss her pale cheek. 'I was only having a little fun.'

'Well stop it now, darling for all our sakes.' She raised an arched eyebrow and smiled at her husband.

'Yes, Mother. Sorry.' Charles winked at Lexi no doubt, she thought, to let her know he had not yet finished teasing her.

She was about to poke her tongue out when Freddie came in. Her stomach did its usual somersault and her breath caught in her throat. He was magnificent, she mused, just like one of those Italian sculptures crafted out of alabaster her mother shown her in Florence a couple of years before. Lexi pictured him half-naked like the exquisite figures her mother adored so much then closed her eyes briefly to try and banish the image in her mind. When she opened them she saw Freddie smiling at her, more handsome than usual with his face tanned from weeks helping his father working outside on the farm.

'Good morning,' he said. His velvety, deep melodious voice made her wish she had a way to listen to him speaking more often.

Charles cleared his throat. Daring her brother to say anything embarrassing, Lexi narrowed her eyes at him daring him to continue his teasing in front of Freddie.

'Freddie, old chap,' he said, ignoring her. 'Sleep well after all your dancing last evening?'

'Very well, thank you. Good morning Lady Baldwin, Lord Baldwin.' Freddie walked up to the sideboard and taking a plate served himself a fried egg.

'Young Chevalier,' her father said with mock sternness. 'I gather you took a few turns about the dance floor with my little girl. Not sure about all this waltzing business.'

Freddie shifted from one foot to the other and hesitated before continuing with choosing his breakfast.

'Yes, little Lexi,' Charles mocked, his eyes glinting in amusement.

Would they never allow her to grow up? 'Father, I'm not little a little girl anymore.'

'No, darling, we know you're not.' Her mother patted Lexi's clenched hand under cover of passing the marmalade. 'I'm afraid to your father you'll always be his little girl, however old you become.'

Lexi watched Freddie, as he deftly added a couple of rashers to the eggs on his plate, but quickly looked away as he turned to go and sit next to Charles.

'I had a splendid time last night.' Freddie smiled at her before addressing her parents. 'Thank you again for inviting me to such a special occasion.'

'Naturally you were included,' Lady Baldwin said. 'You're part of our family now, Freddie. I think I've spent nearly as much time with you over the past few years as I have done with my own son. Don't you agree, Charles?'

Charles shook his head. 'Now, now, mother, you know if that were true it's only because I know how much you enjoy seeing Freddie and invite him here as often as I can. Anyway, we all know you think Freddie is a good influence on me.'

'I can't argue with that sentiment.' Her voice was gentle and light as always but Lexi could sense a sadness in her mother and presumed it was the thought of Charles leaving soon. 'I would love to see more of you darling boys, but with you leaving soon and Freddie returning to Jersey, opportunities are few. I suppose now you and Meredith are engaged you'll be spending some of your leaves in London visiting her as well?'

'Fine girl, Meredith,' her father said. 'Mind you, I can't see why women need to go to Cambridge. It's a good thing you've enlisted Charles. This latest business at Sarajevo looks bad to me.'

'I'll have a few days in London on my way back and Meri and I have plans to meet then.' He gave his mother an apologetic look. 'I agree with you, I think war is in the air. Give my regiment a chance and we'll show them a thing or two though.'

'Bertie.'

Lexi could hear the tinge of anguish in her mother's voice as she looked at the two young men. 'Enough of this unpleasant talk over breakfast.'

Her father looked perplexed. 'What have I said now?'

'It's this talk of war, Papa,' Lexi told him. 'It's upsetting for everyone.'

'Poppycock, nobody fretted when I went to India, or even South Africa for that matter.' He scowled. 'It's about time this generation stopped all their partying and wild ways. They need to stand up for what's right and defend our country. You,' he pointed an accusatory finger at Charles. 'When was the last time, or indeed the first, that you did anything useful? Anything at all for that matter? The only time I see you, is when you're leaving for parties or returning from them, and, more often than not, in a frightful state too. No improvement since you got into that unspeakable mess at Rugby, as far as I can see.'

Lexi groaned inwardly. Her father was on one of his rants and she suspected he was in a bad mood because he had over-indulged with his drinking the night before.

'I'm doing it now, or at least I will be, Pa,' Charles rolled his eyes at Freddie who looked like he was trying not to smile. 'At least I soon will be. My passing out parade is in a couple of months then I'll be leading my men to death or glory as you did before me.'

'Humph.'

'Stop it, Bertie!'

Lexi saw her mother was battling with her emotions.

'I'll have no further talk of war or fighting at the breakfast table.'

'There's no reason to take on so,' Lord Baldwin replied. 'I don't mean to upset you, dearest one.'

Her mother's hand was shaking slightly as she dabbed the sides of her mouth with her napkin. 'Tell me, Freddie, how long do we have the pleasure of your company this time? Surely you can stay a little longer.'

'I'm afraid I must leave this afternoon.'

‘Today?’ Lexi asked louder than she’d intended. ‘So soon?’

He smiled at her. ‘Afraid so, my father needs me to attend a meeting with his tenants. With the situation being as it is, we need to make provisions for . . .’ He stopped himself from further mention of the dreaded war rumours. ‘Well, suffice to say, I’ve got to help him make certain arrangements and can’t really refuse to be there at such an important time. More’s the pity.’

‘Lexi?’ Her brother leant forward slightly, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

‘Charles, that will do,’ her mother said, quickly, her tone defying argument, much to Lexi’s relief.

Chapter Twelve

Two hours later, Lexi was trying hard not to show how upset she was that Freddie was packed and ready to leave.

‘Hurry up, Freddie,’ Charles bellowed from the Rover

Lexi saw her brother squeezed the brass trumpet horn several times impatiently as she waited by the front door for Freddie to finish bidding her parents farewell. She knew her the thought of him not visiting as often was a source of sadness to her mother as well as to herself. Freddie’s footsteps neared and she turned to greet him as he reached the door.

‘Lexi, it was splendid seeing you again.’ He took her hand. ‘You have my address?’ he asked, lowering his voice.

Lexi steadied her breathing. ‘I do and I promise to keep you up to date with Charles and his antics as soon as we learn about them.’ She forced a smile.

Freddie studied her for a moment. ‘Dear Lexi, you really are growing up so quickly.’ He leant forward and kissed her cheek almost overwhelming her with the fresh scent of his skin against hers. ‘I hope it won't be too long until we meet up and then you'll have to promise to dance with me again.’

Lexi pretended to think about his request. ‘I suppose I could, if I really must.’ They walked down the steps together.

‘Despite your mother not wishing to discuss it,’ he said his voice quieter than before. ‘I'm sure there is to be a war. I don't see how it can be avoided now.’

‘Don't say that,’ she pleaded. She didn’t want her last words with him to be about war, especially when she knew that it might be the cause of keeping him from visiting her home for longer than either of them expected. ‘How can you think of war on such a perfect summer’s day?’

‘I only mention it because I suspect your mother will need all the support you can give her when Charles goes overseas with his regiment. It's going to be terribly upsetting for her.’

Realising she was being selfish, Lexi softened her tone. Freddie meant well and she was grateful to him for his thoughtfulness. ‘I know.’

Charles squeezed the horn impatiently. ‘Bloody hell, Freddie, what are you waiting for? You'll miss your ruddy boat-train if we don't get a move on.’

‘I'm coming,’ he shouted over his shoulder before smiling at her. ‘It's hard to imagine anything spoiling all this, but you mark my words, little Lexi, there will be a war. I only hope it lasts long enough for me to be able to take part.’

‘I don't understand you men.’ She swallowed the lump in her throat and tried not to let her annoyance and fear show. ‘Why are you always so eager to volunteer for scrapes?’

‘It's going to be more than that.’ He shook his head and ruffled her hair like he had done for so many years. ‘I'll see you sometime soon.’ He ran down the last two steps to the car.

Lexi concentrated on remaining composed. The last thing she needed was Freddie seeing her cry.

‘Lex,’ Freddie shouted, stopping and pulling something out of his jacket pocket before running back up the steps towards her. ‘I almost forgot to give you these.’

Delighted that he had a present for her, Lexi gasped. ‘What are they?’ She bit her lower lip to try and stop a silly smile spreading across her face.

Freddie tapped his left temple. ‘My mind is always elsewhere. These are all I had on me.’ He handed her two photographs. ‘This one is the manor farm by the outbuildings,’ he pointed at a group of granite buildings in the picture, then shrugged. ‘I'm afraid, I'm in this one, but it shows the front of the house and some of the garden and will give you a better idea of how the place looks.’

Lexi took them from his hand, her fingers grazing against his, delighting her. ‘Thank you,’ she whispered glancing at them again briefly, aware he had no idea how much he had thrilled her.

Now she had her very own picture of Freddie.

‘Thank you,’ she said again, her voice catching. ‘They’re perfect.’

Freddie nodded. ‘Good. I’m happy you’re pleased with them.’

‘Come along.’ Charles squeezed the horn once more. ‘I thought you were in a rush to catch that bloody train?’

Freddie pulled a face at Lexi. ‘Must dash, or he won’t give me a lift to the station.’ He squeezed her shoulder lightly. ‘Take care of yourself, little Lexi, and mind you don’t forget me.’

Lexi couldn’t speak, so nodded and raised her hand to wave.

She watched as Freddie was taken from her down the driveway, dust and stones flung into the air behind the Rover as Charles’ left in his inimitable style.

For some reason, she couldn’t push away the uneasy sensation of foreboding that came over her as the car turned the corner and Freddie disappeared from view.

‘I promise I’ll never forget you, Freddie,’ she whispered raising the photo of Freddie to her lips and kissing his handsome face.

Author Note

Dear Reader,

I hope you've enjoyed meeting Freddie, Charles, Lexi and Meri. This book is the introduction to the characters in *Broken Faces* and how they lived in the months preceding The Great War when each of their lives were forever altered.

If you would like to stay with these characters for another 460 pages and discover how they coped when one received life-changing injuries during the war, then you can buy your copy of *Broken Faces* here.

In this novella I mention the Battle of Flowers. This is an annual parade that takes place on the island of Jersey each August. Every year we invite a celebrity taking part in the parade and in 1912 that celebrity was Charlie Chaplin. There were also times when the battle couldn't take place including during the Great War until 1922, or the Occupation of the island from 1940 to 1945. It eventually started again in 1951.

I always like to be as exact in my historical novels as possible, but in this novella I've used a little bit of artistic licence on two occasions. The Battle of Flowers was in fact cancelled in 1914 due to the looming war and British Pathé actually came to the island to record the event in 1910, however, to be able to include these events in my novella I've chosen to change those dates.

In 2011 I stayed with my aunt in Paris for a research trip. I was lucky enough to track down the studio where the masks mentioned in *Broken Faces* were made. When we arrived at the property my aunt explained to a lady living there why we had sought out the property. She was amazed to discover what had happened in one of the apartments above her home and was happy to show us down a long passageway behind high gates to the road.

Making my way along the ivy-clad passageway from the main road with my aunt towards the building, where I was able to walk up the same stairs to the studio that the men with damaged faces who inspired some of my characters had walked almost one hundred years before was a day I'll never forget.

It's therefore to my aunt that I dedicate this novella.

Thank you for reading *Beautiful Faces* and if you do go on to read *Broken Faces*, I hope you enjoy it enough to give it a quick review on Amazon.

All the very best,

Deborah

Just a thought!

If you liked this book, you will enjoy the sequel, [Broken Faces](#). I've also written the following books, two of which are USA TODAY bestsellers as this book is prepared for publication.

Standalones:

The Poppy Field
An Island at War
The Beekeeper's War

Mrs Boots series:

Mrs Boots
Mrs Boots of Pelham Street
Mrs Boots Goes to War

To discover more books written by me as soon as they become available, as well as behind the scene snippets on my research and any exciting news, why not join my mailing list at:

www.DeborahCarr.org

Thank you.