

Chapter One

May 1814

The blood-curdling female scream shook him out of his daze instantly. Jamie pulled up his horse and glanced frantically around to see if he could locate the source. All he saw was familiar meadow and trees, and for a moment he thought he might have imagined it. With the warm sun on his face and the leisurely motion of his mount ambling aimlessly beneath him, it was quite feasible he had nodded off. He was exhausted, after all.

Constantly exhausted from his brain's inability to stop whirring when darkness fell, conjuring up memories from his past which haunted him even though he knew both men responsible for the pain were undeniably dead and therefore no longer a threat. Yet the ghost of them lingered in his mind, forcing him to stay vigilant and preventing him from snatching more than a few hours here and there, usually as the sun began to banish the darkness away. Or perhaps it was simply the darkness which frightened him as it had as a child? After so many months, he was no longer sure. Just irritated with his own inability to move past it.

The second scream, no less curdling or high-pitched, raised all of his hackles, putting him on instant alert. With his soldier's instinct, Jamie raced his horse in the direction of the shriek, which happened to be towards the orchard near the huge wall which surrounded Markham Manor. The orderly trees were arranged in parallel lines with person-width paths of grass in between; aside from the gentle swish of leaves blowing in the summer breeze, silence reigned.

He cast his eyes methodically up and down the rows until he saw something—a dainty skewbald pony casually munching on the tiny, unripe apples that littered the ground around its hooves. As it was wearing both halter and a side-saddle, yet there was no sign of the rider, Jamie carefully lowered himself to the ground and wrapped his own reins loosely about a branch. At the best of times his temperamental black stallion was foul tempered; around other horses he was prone to be a brute. The pretty cream-and-dun pony, with her long fluffy mane and even longer eyelashes, would not stand a chance.

Jamie limped towards the abandoned animal slowly, conscious any sudden movement might spook the strange pony and send it galloping off to who knew where. 'Easy, girl...' At least he assumed it was a girl. If it were a boy the other horses would tease him mercilessly for that effeminate mane.

'Hello!' A slightly panicked woman's voice came from above. 'Is somebody there?'

'Hello?' He hadn't been expecting to address the sky. The sun pierced Jamie's eyes to such an extent he could not see a thing except blinding yellow light. The woman's exact location remained a mystery. Unless she was an angel sent to fetch him and drag him off to heaven, which he sincerely doubted. They had had their chance and failed miserably and if he was bound for anywhere it was probably hell. 'I can't see you!'

'I am in the tree... I wonder if you would be so good as to assist me, sir. I appear to be stuck.'

Surreal words, again unexpected. How did a woman come to be stuck in an apple tree? Jamie did his best to shield the worst of the glare with his hand and squinted through the tangled branches. Two wiggling feet dangled nearly six feet above his head. They were encased in half-boots and were attached to a very shapely pair of female legs, clad in fine silk stockings which were held up with rather saucy pink garters. His eyes widened at the garters. From this perspective they appeared to be completely festooned with flowers. Above them, about an inch or two of creamy thigh was also on display. The rest of the woman was hidden by leaves.

Thankfully, a passing cloud chose that exact moment to block out the worst of the sun, allowing Jamie to get a better look at the rest of the dangling woman. Her slate-coloured skirt, so incongruous in comparison to her choice of vibrant underthings, had inverted and appeared to be wrapped tightly around her upper body. One arm clung to a branch above, the other, and her head, were apparently trapped within the fabric. Her generous bottom was resting on a feeble branch which appeared likely to snap at any moment and, with nothing beneath her except the hard ground, his best assessment of her position was precarious.

‘Try to remain still. I’m coming up!’

He supposed it was the gentlemanly thing to do, although Jamie had no idea if he was still actually capable of climbing a tree. Thanks to Napoleon, he could hardly walk, certainly struggled to run and his dancing days were most definitely over. Quickly, he tried to work out the best way to tackle the challenge. The last time he had cause to climb a tree, he had been a scrawny, nimble boy and he recalled it had been a simple procedure by and large. Thanks to his burly Warriner ancestors, and over a decade of growing, he was now an ox of a man. An ox of a man with a useless left leg.

However, that damned leg was not going to define him. If he wanted to climb a tree, he would climb a blasted tree! Putting all of his weight on his right foot, and using the strength of his arms, he managed to hoist himself laboriously upwards. It might have raised him less than a foot off the ground, but he had left the ground. He rearranged his good foot and heaved again. Two foot from the ground! What was that if it was not progress? Slow, laboured, feeble progress. Painful, humiliating, soul-destroying progress.

Oblivious to his grunts of exertion, or the supreme effort it took him to actually climb, the grey faceless bundle above his head decided this was the appropriate time for a conversation.

‘I suppose you are wondering how I came to be stuck up this tree in the first place...’ At this stage in the proceedings, how she came to be there was neither here nor there. All Jamie could concentrate on was putting one foot painfully above the other. ‘It’s a funny story really. My pony, Orange Blossom, has a fondness for red apples.’ As she spoke, her legs and bottom jiggled, causing the fragile branch to quiver with indignation. ‘And rather stupidly, I assumed... *Oooh!*’

The flimsy branch suddenly bent downwards as it split from the main trunk of the tree. Fortunately, she had the good sense to hook her legs around an adjacent branch and managed to halt her descent. Unfortunately, in doing so her dress had now ridden further up her thighs, displaying all of her legs quite thoroughly. As legs went, they were rather nice although now was really not the time he should be admiring them. As he had suspected, those saucy garters were festooned with pink-silk flowers. Her shapely derriere now hung between the two branches and directly over Jamie’s head. In her panic, she was wiggling in earnest now in an attempt to free her head from its dull, muslin prison, her visible hand still clinging desperately on to a straining branch above.

Jamie began to inch closer to her struggling form. ‘Madam, it is imperative that you remain still!’ Because if she fell, it was his cranium which would bear the brunt and the closer he got, the less confident he was he was strong enough to catch her. If her bottom was anything to go by, she was not exactly petite. He pulled himself on to a sound-looking branch and locked one arm around it.

‘Take my hand!’ Perhaps he could swing her down to the ground? Unless, of course, she wrenched his shoulder out of its socket. Then he would have a crippled arm to go with his ruined leg.

He watched her wrestle within her tangled skirts until her other hand burrowed its way out and her arm made a frantic bid for freedom, but instead of grabbing his outreached hand as he had quite plainly instructed, she used it to attempt to cover her exposed legs with her inverted clothing. Tiny, hard, barely formed apples began to tumble out of the fabric and rained down around him. Two of the lead-lined fruits bounced off his head like miniature cannonballs and made him yelp.

‘What in God’s name are you doing, woman! Grab my blasted hand now!’ For good measure, he prodded her arm to help her locate him.

More wood splintered somewhere close by and the faceless wench squealed again, her bottom lolling further between the branches and coming level with his face. At last, she swung her free arm around and grabbed his hand, but it was a moment too late. Thanks to weak, young wood and gravity, her advancing bottom had begun to gain some momentum and continued to

slide on its journey downwards. Acting on impulse rather than gentlemanly manners, Jamie looped his good leg over another branch and tried to halt her descent in the only way now left open to him. Grabbing a handful of a rather pert, round cheek, he unceremoniously braced himself against it to stop her falling.

The headless woman squeaked in outrage and vehemently attempted to remove her posterior from his clenched hand by grasping at anything wildly to haul herself back up again. This frantic new movement proved to be problematic for both the tree and Jamie's tenuous grasp of it. The branch supporting his good leg snapped with a loud crack, sending them both careening helplessly downwards.

He landed flat on his back, with a resounding thud. A split second later the woman landed on top of him. Jamie was hard pressed to decide which event caused him more pain. If he'd had any breath left in his lungs, he probably would have screamed in agony. All that came out instead was a weird hiss, almost as if his entire body was slowly deflating. By some miracle, his eyes still worked. He knew this because he was currently drowning in a sea of hair.

He felt her brace herself on to her hands and lift her head up. Two brown eyes stared, blinking directly into his, far too close to allow him to see anything else. 'Are you all right?'

Hiss.