

AN INSPIRATIONAL REGENCY ROMANCE

THE EARL'S ULTIMATUM

Judy Hutt



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Dedication

To John, who reminds me why friends-to-lovers will
always be my favorite trope.

CHAPTER 1

Reading, England
1813

"Marianne is with child."

Lord Charles Beaumont glared at Andrew over his spectacles. "There is no guarantee the child is William's."

Andrew returned his father's glare with equal intensity. "I have no doubt it is."

The Earl of Highclere rose from his desk with measured deliberation, his hand steady as it reached for his cane. Though his hair was now streaked with gray, his features kept the handsomeness of his youth. A relentless hardness defined him, a trait Andrew knew all too well.

"The proper course of action is for you to propose to Miss Atwater," Charles said, his tone as indifferent as if he were discussing the weather. "You would raise your nephew as your own, and the child would be the Beaumont heir."

"I already proposed, Father." Andrew retorted. "And she refused."

Charles's brows arched, the faint flicker of surprise replaced by irritation. "Ungrateful girl." He grumbled

the words.

He pivoted and strode toward the window, the steady tap of his cane against the polished wood floor punctuating the silence in the room.

Andrew's gaze drifted to the study's mirror, where his reflection stared back, disheveled and travel worn. Dark hair swept in unruly waves across his forehead and a faint sheen of perspiration clung to his brow. He despised the sharp resemblance to the man standing across the room. No matter how far he traveled, he could not escape the legacy of his father etched into his features.

Andrew cleared his throat. "Marianne Atwater is a woman of integrity. You know her parents, they are loyal tenants."

"Integrity?" Charles nearly spat the word. "Spare me your romantic notions, son. A respectable woman does not end up with a child before marriage."

"Do you even care to understand her circumstances?" He demanded, anger rising in his chest. "She is living with her aunt and uncle in Hambleton, holding onto the only shred of dignity she has left. They are telling everyone she and William married before his death, and that she is a widow expecting his child."

"And you believe this nonsense?" Charles scoffed. "No matter the circumstances, I will tell you this. That child will never carry the Beaumont name, nor inherit a single penny."

Andrew's fists clenched at his sides as he took a step forward, his voice steady but laced with a

desperation he loathed. "This is your grandchild we're speaking of, Father. William's child. This is what he would have wanted."

Charles advanced as well, the deliberate tap of his cane echoing against the floor like a judge's gavel. "You presume to know what your brother wanted?" He hissed the words. "You hadn't seen your brother in over a year. Instead, you were gallivanting across the globe while neglecting the responsibilities you were to uphold as my firstborn son." He straightened, his tone sharp and cutting. "By now, you ought to have a family of your own and secured the rightful Beaumont heir."

Andrew flinched at the accusations but refused to back down. "I implore you," he said. "Give William's inheritance to your grandchild. The baby deserves a future, whether or not he carries the Beaumont name."

For a long moment, Charles said nothing. He turned toward the window, his back to Andrew as he stared into the black night. The silence stretched taut, broken only by the faint whisper of wind rustling trees outside.

Andrew shifted, the tension tightening in his chest with every passing second.

When Charles turned, a peculiar smile tugged at the corners of his lips, one that sent a chill down Andrew's spine. "I have a proposal of my own. Marry before the child is born, and I will ensure William's inheritance goes to the baby."

The words struck Andrew like a physical blow, the room seeming to tilt as he processed them. The very

arrangement he'd offered Marianne—a desperate attempt to protect her and the child—now twisted into his father's ultimatum.

Charles didn't wait for Andrew to respond. "When is the child due?"

"In a month or two," Andrew answered hoarsely.

The look on Charles's face betrayed his enjoyment of the situation. "How fortunate. The London courting season begins soon. Finding a bride should be no trouble, unless your heart remains entangled with some foreign fancy."

For a fleeting moment, he considered defiance, walking away, refusing to play his father's game. But then William's face rose in his mind, sharp and clear. This wasn't about his father. It was about protecting the child his brother would never know.

"Are we in agreement?" Charles demanded.

Andrew held his father's gaze, his own brown eyes unwavering. The weight of the moment pressed upon him, yet his expression betrayed no submission, only a quiet resolve forged from a sense of duty. Finally, Andrew drew a slow breath. "Yes," he said, the single word sealing his decision. "I will marry before the child is born. But you will draft a contract stipulating that William's inheritance goes to the child, with the Atwater family overseeing its management."

Charles's smirk deepened. "I am writing it now."

Andrew turned, the door snapping shut behind him. The chill of the corridor hit him like a slap, but he pressed forward. Each step was more burdensome than the last, but his resolve remained strong. This was

for William, for the child, and for a promise he would not break.

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Nestled among the prestigious residences of Mayfair stood the home of Mr. Miles and Mrs. Phoebe Huxley. At the Earl's insistence, Miles—Andrew's cousin on his mother's side—had agreed to host him for the London season.

As his carriage rolled to a stop outside the Huxleys' Mayfair townhouse, Andrew felt out of place. His outdated coat, unkempt hair, and sunburned cheeks marked him as a man far removed from London's polished elegance. Yet it wasn't his appearance that troubled him most. Beneath the civility he projected, Andrew was a fraud, a man pretending to be what he was not: a proper gentleman who wanted a wife.

The butler greeted him at the door and escorted him to the drawing room. Andrew noted the room's tasteful decor, rich blue upholstery and artwork depicting rugged landscapes. Above the fireplace hung a striking painting of mist-shrouded moors, so vivid it stirred a familiar longing to be somewhere—anywhere—else.

The sound of approaching footsteps broke his reverie. Andrew turned as Miles entered, his smile warm and genuine. "Andrew, it's truly a pleasure to see you again," Miles said, extending a hand.

Stepping forward, Andrew took it with a firm

shake. "It's been far too long."

Miles grinned, his enthusiasm reaching his eyes. "Your letters always delight Phoebe and me. It's like traveling alongside you."

The cousins stood face-to-face, equal in height but strikingly different in presence. Miles's polished charm and impeccable style exuded confidence, his thinning chestnut hair lending him a distinguished air. Andrew, by contrast, carried a rugged intensity. His solid frame—shaped by outdoor excursions and foreign cuisine—gave him a size that bordered on intimidating.

Yet, those differences mattered little. Once seated across from one another, the cousins slipped into effortless conversation, as though no time had passed. Miles shared news of his family's estate and his siblings' exploits while Andrew recounted his travels abroad. Together, they reminisced about their childhood adventures, the connection between them as strong as ever.

After some time, Miles excused himself to find Phoebe for dinner. Left alone in the drawing room, Andrew leaned back in his chair. The conversation had stirred memories of youth—climbing trees, racing horses, and plotting harmless mischief with Miles.

But one memory refused to be silenced, creeping into his thoughts like an intruder. The moment that destroyed his illusions of his family. He had been twelve, visiting the Huxley Estate, when he overheard a conversation in the study. His uncle's voice, low but laced with contempt, carried through the cracked open

door.

"Charles treats infidelity like a game, another town, another mistress. And yet he carries himself as though he's beyond reproach. Mark my words, the man's arrogance will be the ruin of his family."

The words hit Andrew like a thunderclap, shattering his perception of his father in an instant. He had once viewed the earl with honor and integrity, but he was nothing more than a liar and a cheat.

Summoning the courage to confront him days later, Andrew had met only cold indifference. Father dismissed his son's anguish as if it were an inconvenience, a fleeting irritation unworthy of his time. The rejection cut deeper than any argument could have.

A month later, his father sent Andrew to Eton, his clear attempt to shield himself from any potential fallout of his indiscretions. Charles's decision left Andrew with years of isolation, severing what little bond remained between them and cementing the irreparable damage to their relationship.

The memories pressed against Andrew now, filling his chest with a familiar ache. He was only brought back to the present when he heard the door open.

"You appear lost in thought," Miles said, stepping back into the room with a faint smile.

Andrew turned, released a slow breath as he flexed his fingers, and eased the tension that had gripped them. "I find myself preoccupied." He admitted.

Miles's expression softened. "I must confess, your father's letter surprised me. I had assumed you had embraced bachelorhood in your thirties."

"As did I."

"The news of William's death devastated my family," Miles said gently.

Hearing his brother's name gave Andrew the sensation of a weight smashing into his rib cage. His throat tightened as he tried to respond.

Miles, seeming to sense Andrew's struggle, refrained from speaking. Instead, he moved to the bar and poured a drink from the decanter, the soft clink of glass against glass breaking the silence.

"I suppose losing William makes finding a wife necessary," Miles said after some time. "The pressure to sire the Beaumont heir rests on you."

"It appears so," Andrew said in a sardonic tone. He turned the attention back to his cousin. "You are the fortunate one, Miles. How many nephews do you have now? Seven? Eight? There is no pressure for you to continue the family line."

Miles's posture tensed, and without looking Andrew in the eye, he raised his glass and took a sip. "We are in very different situations, cousin. You need an heir, and I desperately want one."

Feeling his face grow hot, the sunburn on Andrew's cheeks seemed to radiate in pain. He had known Miles and Phoebe were childless, but he had never given it much thought. Two years of marriage was plenty of time to have sired an heir, wasn't it?

An uneasiness gripped Andrew's heart as he

caught the flicker of pain in Miles's eyes. The casual indifference with which Andrew had regarded the idea of fatherhood felt callous. For Miles, it surpassed obligation, a deep yearning, far outweighing anything Andrew imagined.

He struggled to speak, searching for words of apology.

"Don't wear that sour expression, or you might scare away a potential bride." Miles grinned.

Andrew was grateful his insensitive comments appeared to be forgiven.

"Come, let us escape this melancholy and join Phoebe for dinner. I hear the cook has prepared roasted turkey."

At dinner, Andrew and the Huxleys enjoyed comfortable conversation over a delicious meal. The fragrant aromas of meat and vegetables filled the air. Andrew savored every bite, from the white soup to the Yorkshire pudding. As he indulged in the culinary delights, he reflected on how much he had missed the simple pleasures of a proper English meal.

Phoebe was a lovely woman, petite in stature, with hair the color of burnt embers. Her wide blue eyes and round features gave her an innocent aura, but it didn't take long to see her fiery personality matched her red hair.

Andrew watched the couple with a mix of admiration and jealousy. Their banter, while lighthearted and affectionate, often veered into playful arguments. Yet, underlying it all, they appeared to have profound mutual respect. It was clear in how they

looked at each other; the gentle touches exchanged between them, and the shared laughter that filled the room. If anyone could tempt him into matrimony, it would surely be Phoebe and Miles.

After drinks with Miles, Phoebe joined the cousins in the drawing room, announcing they would attend the Weatherby ball in a few days.

Andrew hadn't expected to be thrust into the ton so soon, but he forced an enthusiastic smile, ignoring the dread that settled over him.

For the next hour, Phoebe reviewed the eligible ladies of the ton.

"Is this necessary?" groaned Miles, echoing Andrew's unspoken thoughts. Yet both men endured her spirited assessment of potential matches.

"Tell me ," Phoebe asked. "What type of lady do you find appealing?"

The question caught Andrew off guard. He'd never given it much thought. His travels had introduced him to women from all walks of life, each as unique as the cultures they embodied. More than once, he had found himself entangled with a captivating stranger, drawn in by beauty, but wit, strength, or passion lingered. A Parisian challenged his views, an Austrian pianist's music revealed her soul, and a Greek merchant's daughter possessed an unshakable conviction. These were the qualities that lasted long after their parting, haunting his thoughts far more than their fleeting encounters.

Yet here, in the rigid confines of the ton, he doubted he would find such qualities or a woman who

embodied them all. And now was not the time to be picky. He was resigned to whatever happened. "Whomever you think best, Phoebe. I trust your judgment."

Phoebe's cheeks flushed as her face lit up with delight. "You won't be sorry." She declared, beaming as if someone had given her the queen's crown jewels. "I will be your matchmaker, and I promise you are in very capable hands."

As she chattered about debutantes and dowries, Andrew leaned back and exhaled, his gaze drifting to the window, now swallowed by the pitch-dark. Somewhere out there, a wife awaited, not chosen by desire, but by necessity. Phoebe's optimism couldn't quell the gnawing certainty in his chest. This journey would end in disappointment for them both.

CHAPTER 2

Every woman in London's high society adored an afternoon at Madame Louise's modiste. Her impeccable taste and unparalleled service made it the premiere location to prepare for the London season. Gowns spun from the finest silks, whispers of upcoming balls, and dreams of eligible suitors—it all started here, within these elegant walls.

Lucy Grant, however, was not one of those eager debutantes. She stood rigid on a small platform at the heart of the shop, a bundle of nerves wrapped in silk.

Madame Louise worked with practiced precision, pinning the fabric of Lucy's ballgown as her gaze swept over Lucy like an artist appraising her canvas. "Stand tall, dear," she said. "With your curvaceous figure, slouching does you no favors. A gown like this demands confidence to match its elegance."

Lucy straightened her shoulders, a practiced smile touching her lips. Confidence was a tall order, but she could fake it well enough for now.

Nearby, her cousin Phoebe stood before another mirror, her striking red hair gleaming against the soft lavender of her gown. She moved with the ease of someone who had long mastered the art of society. After two years on the marriage mart and another two

as a married woman, she was at home in the modiste's shop. "A bit higher in the front." She instructed an assistant, inspecting the lace trim with a practiced eye. "This will do."

Eliza, Lucy's younger cousin, twirled a few steps away in her shimmering blue gown, the intricate trim of bluebells fluttering with each movement. At just sixteen, Eliza was the picture of a fresh-faced debutante. Her auburn hair framed her youthful features and her eyes lit up with excitement. Lucy couldn't help but admire her beauty and energy.

Aunt Caroline's voice floated through the room, cutting through the quiet hum of activity. "Eliza, that gown is stunning. It will be perfect for the Weatherby ball."

"Yes, this is perfect for my debut." Turning her head, Eliza called out, "Aren't you excited, Lucy?"

"Oh, yes," Lucy said, though the words rang hollow.

The Weatherby ball. The highly anticipated launch of the London season. Lucy wished she had her cousin's enthusiasm, but all she felt was doubt and trepidation. If only she could summon Phoebe's poise or Eliza's effortless charm.

Madame Louise adjusted the cap sleeve of Lucy's gown and slipped a silver pin into the fabric. "You've waited longer than most for this moment, Miss Lucy," she said. "I remember your first fitting here. Such a lovely young lady. It's been a long wait, hasn't it? Does it feel as you imagined it would?"

Lucy's smile faltered, then shifted into the polite

mask she'd perfected. Madame Louise's words transported her back to that first fitting five years ago, when she had stood on this very platform. Her mother had been at her side, their shared enthusiasm filling the room as they'd planned her debut together. At sixteen, that milestone had seemed like a grand adventure, bursting with promise and possibility.

But fate cruelly snatched that dream from her. A month before her debut in court, her mother passed. Mourning dresses of black and grey replaced vibrant gowns, and grief eclipsed the bright future she'd envisioned.

Her father, Lord Bertram Grant, saw no urgency in pushing Lucy into society. His wealth and standing made an advantageous match unnecessary. A reclusive man by nature, Bertram valued their quiet life over the scrutiny of the ton. While others might have insisted she conform to societal expectations, Bertram prioritized his daughter's healing over her prospects. "You'll debut when you're ready." He often reassured her.

The years slipped by—one, then two, then five. Despite his sister Caroline's persistent urgings, Bertram had allowed Lucy to remain at home, a decision she embraced. Yet as he grew older, the reality that Lucy would one day face the world without him became harder to ignore. The thought that his only child might have to navigate life alone stirred him to action. One afternoon, he took her aside and declared, "It is time, Lucy."

Lucy's reaction was a mix of laughter,

protestation, and tears. "Why do I require a husband?"

"You do not," Bertram replied with a knowing smile. "But there may come a time when you desire one."

Lucy presented a long list of why a husband was neither wanted nor necessary.

After she'd exhausted her arguments, her father had smiled. "My darling Lucy. I would prefer you revel in the joys of independence than wed a foolish man, but I want you to have the freedom to choose, regardless of where your heart leads—and that choice won't be made if you stay here at home with me." He paused, and then added with conviction, "I cannot keep you to myself any longer. Go, Lucy, enjoy the season, and see where it takes you."

Now, as Lucy stood in the same place where her younger self had once imagined a glittering future, the moment felt different, less like fulfilling a dream and more like an uncertain step into an unfamiliar world. A purposeful tug at her shoulder startled her from her reverie.

"You've gone quiet, Miss Lucy," Madame Louise said, snapping Lucy back to the present. The modiste stepped back, pinning Lucy with an assessing gaze. "Are you lost in thought?"

Lucy let out a nervous laugh. "My apologies," she murmured. "I was daydreaming, I suppose."

Madame Louise smiled, her tone softening. "No need for apologies, dear. Such occasions are bound to inspire reflection." She continued her handiwork on the sleeve of the gown. After a few moments, she said,

"There now, perfection! Take a look, my dear."

Lucy turned to the mirror, her breath catching. The gown, reminiscent of early spring, draped her figure with elegant ease. The soft sage hue complemented the mix of blue and green in her eyes, making them appear even more striking. It also harmonized with the rich brown of her hair, swept into a simple chignon for the fitting. She could already picture how Fanny would style it into soft, cascading curls to frame her face for the Weatherby ball.

From her seat, Aunt Caroline leaned forward, her expression alight with emotion. "Lucy, you are exquisite," she said, waving her fingers near her eyes as if to hold back tears. "I never thought this day would come."

Lucy dipped her head, her hands smoothing the skirt of her gown. "Thank you, Aunt Caroline."

"Madame Louise has outdone herself." Phoebe exclaimed.

Eliza chimed in with an enthusiastic agreement.

The modiste smiled with approval. "The latest fashions highlight the beauty of well-endowed women," she said with a satisfied smile.

Cheeks warm at the compliment, Lucy glanced at her reflection again. "It is lovely." She admitted. "This style suits me well."

As Madame Louise moved to adjust the hem, her assistant brought over a delicate bandeau adorned with tiny pearls. "This will complement your gown," the assistant said, holding it up for inspection.

The soft sheen of the pearls caught the light, and

Lucy's breath hitched. Her mother had often worn a similar bandeau, a favorite piece she paired with her evening gowns. Lucy reached out, her fingers brushing over the smooth pearls. The cool texture sent a pang through her chest as an image of her mother formed in her mind. The ache that followed was sharp and sudden, settling deep within her heart.

Her aunt's words interrupted the moment. "Oh, it's lovely, is it not? Your mother would have adored it."

The remark hit Lucy like a wave, the ache swelling into an overwhelming sense of longing. Her hand fell away from the bandeau, and she dropped her gaze to the floor, blinking hard against the tears welling in her eyes.

Aunt Caroline's smile faded, her expression softening with concern. Rising from her seat, she crossed the room with deliberate steps. She leaned toward the modiste and asked, "Might we have a moment of privacy, Madame Louise?"

The modiste, ever discreet, offered a small nod and gestured for her assistants to leave. The soft rustle of skirts and the faint click of the door closing signaled their privacy.

Aunt Caroline turned back to Lucy, her gaze tender and steady. "I'm sorry, darling." She whispered the words. "I know how much you miss her."

Lucy shook her head, her composure slipping as tears fell. She caught her breath. "I just ... I wish she were here."

Aunt Caroline rested her hands on Lucy's