

MEMORABLE PROPOSALS

A
Regrettable
PROPOSAL

Clean
Romance

JENNIE GOUTET

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Regrettable
PROPOSAL



JENNIE GOUTET

SWEETWATER
BOOKS

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Chapter One



MARCH 1812

Stratford Tunstall, former major of the 94th Regiment of Foot and newly appointed Fifth Earl of Worthing, trudged down Oxford Street in a uniform stiff with dirt. One glance down New Bond revealed a street already thinned of the bustling crowds. All the better. It would not do to appear in such attire in fashionable London, but he had no choice if he was going to reach the counting house before it closed. Picking up his pace, he headed toward the stone building housing the bank, its spring flowers poking through the wrought iron gate.

He passed three women at a storefront, inspecting a purchase of embroidered silk, when one broke away from the group with a startled cry. To his dismay, it was Miss Broadmore, the woman who had jilted him before he left for Spain and the last person he wished to see upon his return.

“Stratford! You’ve come home. When did you arrive in England?” She seemed to check herself upon observing his appearance more closely, but in the end she extended a slender hand encased in calfskin. Her touch was infinitesimal as he bowed over it.

“Only just.” Stratford’s voice was gruff, and he cleared it. “I’ve left my effects at the King’s Arms and set out immediately. I must transact some business before the counting house is closed.”

“The King’s Arms?” Miss Broadmore’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “I don’t know it. Why are you not staying in your house on Upper Seymour Street? Of course, as Lord Worthing, you will have a new house now—”

He gave a curt nod. “Our house has been rented for the upcoming Season, and I did not wish to impose upon the staff at Cavendish Square without having presented myself at the estate first. I leave tomorrow at first light.”

“Of course.” Miss Broadmore seemed at a loss for words but made no move to end the conversation.

He caught a whiff of her jasmine soap. It had been too long since he’d smelled a woman of gentle breeding, rather than the blowsy laundresses who followed the troops and reeked of lye soap. It had been too long since he’d been near *this* woman.

She peered at him from under her poke bonnet, bringing to mind another day when those same eyes held his as she released him from their engagement. Pain closed about him like a vice, and, as if in sympathy, the tentative late-afternoon sun hid once again behind the clouds.

“I hear congratulations are in order.” Stratford forced the words out of his constricted throat. “You are engaged to be wed.” *Again*, he thought. This time it was a viscount, and she must regret her haste all those years ago. Had Judith gone on to wed *him*, she would have been a countess. She’d made her mercenary views abundantly clear on the day she jilted him.

Miss Broadmore looked at her feet. “I fear you are under a misapprehension. Lord Garrett sent the announcement after speaking with my father. But he did not address himself to me, and I’m afraid I do not return his regard.” Stratford considered her silently, and she continued in a resigned tone. “These weeks have been uncomfortable for me. In public, I’m labeled a jilt by all but my closest friends.” Miss Broadmore glanced at her two companions, who had by now examined every inch of the silk in their attempt to appear disinterested. “At home, I must face my father’s wrath.” Her eyes pooled with tears. “I suppose I deserve it.”

Stratford could not remain impervious to this pitiable declaration, though he privately felt she did. “We must be glad our understanding was never made public.” It cost him to say as much, but it would be churlish to continue to punish her.

A silence ensued, and Stratford was unable to bring the conversation to a close. He wanted to pull out his pocket watch to see if there was time, but his arms hung heavy at his sides, and the words remained stuck in his chest. Finally, Miss Broadmore broke the silence. “Please accept my condolences for the loss of your father. I had thought you might, perhaps, have had leave to attend his funeral.”

“I had it. But we were laying siege to Ciudad Rodrigo in Spain, and officers were in short supply. My father would have preferred me to see the thing

through.” His throat worked while he chose his next words. “My uncle was not reconciled to my choice to remain, but I felt I must follow where honor led.”

“Your father was always proud of you,” she assured him. “I’m told he was following every movement in the Peninsula. And then, to miss acceding to the title by only five days . . .”

There was another silence as Stratford clenched his teeth. *The title! Who cares about the title?* He shifted as if to leave, and Miss Broadmore caught the subtle movement. “Will you be in London this Season?”

The street had grown unnaturally quiet, and he noticed that not only were there no other ladies visible, apart from Miss Broadmore and her friends, but also not even the usual bustle of gentlemen gave the street any life. Stratford managed a tight smile. “As little as I can help it. I’ve a great deal to do at Worthing and must learn where affairs stand.”

“I believe your sisters will have their second Season?” she inquired. Her friend signaled to a waiting footman to open the door to the carriage, and Miss Broadmore took a step toward it.

“My aunt is arranging that, yes.” Stratford stood, rooted to the spot with the realization that he must indeed return to London and would likely meet her everywhere. He must do what he could to avoid that. “Good day, Miss Broadmore.”

Her head dipped at his formal use of her name, but she replied in kind. “Good day, my lord. Our paths will undoubtedly cross when you return to London.”

Miss Broadmore’s red-haired companion called out, “Judith, my mother will be most unhappy if I’m late to dress for dinner. As it is, we won’t have time for Hyde Park.”

Miss Broadmore nodded, then faced Stratford. “Be sure to give my regards to your sisters.” She curtsied and turned toward the waiting footman, leaving Stratford alone on the street. The driver snapped the reins, and the carriage clattered over the cobblestone pavement.

Now Stratford did pull out his pocket watch as he marched toward his destination, afraid he might be too late. *So, she jilted someone else, did she?* But this time the man had a title, and she refused his hand in marriage, even against her father’s will. Why? Had she learned that happiness does not belong to the highest peer in the realm? *Does she regret refusing me?* He remembered her downcast eyes and was tempted to think she missed him.

No. She only regretted his recent acquisition of the title and her precipitous retreat before obtaining the prize. *Now she'll have to jockey with the other eligible damsels who'll be after my coronet.* He'd have to choose one of them in the end, he reminded himself, but on this matter he would remain firm. *It won't be Judith. She must cut her losses and look elsewhere.*

At the broad, wooden door of the bank, young Mr. Brooks had his back to the street as he wrestled with a skeleton key in the unyielding lock.

Stratford called out as he rounded the path from the gate. "Hold there."

"The bank is closed. *Oh—!*" Stratford knew from experience that Mr. Brooks did not like to be caught by surprise, be it an unexplained downturn on the 'Change or a client rushing at him like an unbridled colt. However, one glance at the visitor removed the peevishness from his tone.

"My lord. I had despaired of seeing you today." Mr. Brooks turned the key in the lock—a simple matter, it seemed, now that he was not trying to escape to a warm meal. "Won't you come in, my lord? I've readied the papers, and it's just a matter of pulling them out of the safe." He ushered Stratford into the building and closed the door behind them.

"I apologize for keeping you. I've only just arrived in London and leave for the estate first thing in the morning." Stratford followed Mr. Brooks through the narrow corridors into his small, dark office.

"Kindly have a seat while I fetch all that is necessary." Mr. Brooks went into a side-room where he was heard to turn a key in a lock and rummage through papers and objects. He returned carrying a stack of papers, a little velvet box, and a leather envelope. The velvet box he held out. "Here is your signet ring, as requested. I must say it went against the grain with me to hold on to this for you when you might have needed it at any instant. A peer should not be separated from his ring."

"I had no use for it on the Peninsula. It was in much safer hands with you." Stratford slipped the ring on his finger and felt its unfamiliar weight. *My cousin, John, or even Nicholas, should be wearing this—not me. They had been brought up to the role.* "Thank you for sizing it up."

"Not at all. Here is the sum you asked for in notes and coins. Of course, you can draw on the bank at any time, and we await your instructions on the other transactions you wrote about regarding your father's holdings." Mr. Brooks folded his hands on the desk. "Where are you staying? Upper Seymour has been let."

“The King’s Arms,” Stratford returned with a sheepish grin.

“The King’s Arms . . .” Mr. Brooks sat back, stunned. “But why not Cavendish? My lord, may I remind you we have men who will take care of these details for you. You may entrust them to me.”

Stratford gave a weak smile and shook his head. “I am much too accustomed to handling my own affairs.”

“You must think of your position,” the banker pleaded.

“I can hardly avoid it,” Stratford murmured. Here he had completed one taxing journey that had not purged his thoughts from the horrors of that last battle. Tomorrow he would embark on a shorter one, but one which would end in no repose. Family members who had not cared to know him before now would descend upon him at Worthing, and his uncle’s ward would arrive the day before the reading of the will. *She must be eager to learn of her expectations*, Stratford thought bitterly. This was followed by another reflection: *I am in no mood for entertaining strangers*.

Stratford took a deep breath. “I expect to proceed with joining the two estates once I ascertain where affairs stand at Worthing. The reading of the testament will occur in a week’s time. Meanwhile,” Stratford stood, bumping the sconce at his right shoulder, “I thank you for your attention to these matters.”

Mr. Brooks gestured forward, allowing the earl to precede him. “May I express, on behalf of Brooks and Sons, our pleasure at having you back on English soil.”

Stratford nodded and exited through the front door, pulling his cloak about him as he descended the stairs into the evening shadows. Another three steps and he had turned out the gate and down the near-deserted street. A mid-March gale clanged the wooden shutters on the building next door, and he thought of the hot bath and meal awaiting him at the inn. If only this were the end of his journey and nothing further were required of him.

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