



The Paradise Will

Extract

Alyssa and Sir Giles are dining together for the first time. During the conversation, Sir Giles enquires about Charles Brook, the man Alyssa is about to become betrothed to.

Alyssa, after studying the portrait of her uncle which hangs above the fireplace, looks back across the table to find Sir Giles regarding her steadily...

“How strange,” she observed, “when I looked a moment ago, I could have sworn Uncle Tom was watching us. He would be pleased we have met his wishes - thus far at least.”

“Amused too, I’d venture,” he said. “I admired his sense of humour as well as his spirit.” He glanced at the portrait and then back to her face. “I detect aspects of his features in you, Miss Paradise.”

“Not his side whiskers and grey flowing locks, I hope!”

“No,” he replied, smiling, “perhaps a certain sweep to your cheekbones. More particularly, you have the same glint of amusement in your eyes that Tom possessed - there the resemblance is uncanny.”

“Our personalities are also similar.”

“So I am discovering. When we first met, however, you were not at all what I expected.”

Alyssa watched his long fingers curl around the stem of his glass, noting the soft, dark hair dusted across the back of his hand and wrist. “Oh?” she said, quickly. “Well, *you* were not what *I* anticipated so there we are equal. What did you expect to find?”

“A demure miss, and instead, there was a self-possessed young woman who gave her opinion decidedly. You reminded me of someone but the answer did not occur for several days.”

“May I ask who?”

“My sister, Marianne – she states her views candidly.”

“Do you dislike your sister?” asked Alyssa, arching her brows.

He stared, puzzled. “Why do you ask that?”

“Because I sensed your antipathy to me that morning, Sir Giles.”

He smiled and shook his head. “On the contrary, Marianne is a much loved sibling. My hostility was because I had no control over the situation.” He hesitated, then added ruefully, “To feel powerless is not an everyday occurrence for me, I confess. However, I am prepared to make the best of things now and should apologize - it was wrong to suggest you knew about Tom’s will. My manner is sometimes blunt, Miss Paradise. I cannot change it but hope you find me open and straightforward, nonetheless.”

“I admit I thought you brusque, and self-important.”

“Do you still think so?”

“I don’t have enough evidence to make a further judgement.”

He laughed. “At least you are honest!”

“I cannot help it. And if this is the time for confessions, I should say I deliberately provoked you.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” she answered, incurably truthful. “I’m not proud of it, but the opportunity was too irresistible to ignore.”

There was a gleam of appreciative humour in his eyes. “Your uncle would have approved.”

“I expect he would,” she admitted. “I am not a naive girl, easily browbeaten by a fierce look.”

“Mr. Brook is concerned for you,” observed Sir Giles gently.

“He shouldn’t be: I am quite capable of looking after my interests.”

“Surely it is natural for him to be unhappy about the arrangements?”

“Perhaps, but he should know if he tries to dictate terms, I’ll go my own way.”

“It seems Mr. Brook does not know the best way of dealing with his future wife,” he murmured, half under his breath.

“Indeed? And what would you suggest, Sir Giles?” This was an entirely improper question and by voicing it, Alyssa knew she was straying into dangerous territory, but once again, some spark prompted her.

He did not answer immediately, giving her a lingering, contemplative look. He leaned back in his chair and, with quick dexterity, broke the bread on his side plate into small pieces with one hand. Eventually, his response came. “A hypothetical situation of course but, if we were betrothed, I would know how to deal with you.”

“Oh? I am interested to hear your view – hypothetically speaking, of course.”

“Very well...since you ask, I would employ a simple but effective punishment – one that ensured you lost interest in obstinacy.”

“Now I *am* intrigued!” she said, laughing. “What method you would use?”

“Ah, I shall not be specific, but it would be pleasant enough to take your breath away.”

She stared, but his bland expression gave no clue to his meaning. Alyssa suspected he meant kissing her thoroughly and her skin started to burn at the surprisingly pleasant thought. He deserved a set-down, but then Alyssa remembered she was to blame for asking the question in the first place. Unbidden, her gaze slowly traced the line of his jaw and firm mouth. Warmth coursed through her veins and, for a moment, the breath seemed to be driven from her body. As his eyes met hers, a deep blush rose to her cheeks.

He returned her scrutiny without a word until he said softly, “But ...we are only speaking hypothetically.”

“Of course,” she whispered.

