

HER SECRET FANTASY

GAELEN FOLEY



BALLANTINE BOOKS

GAELEN
FOLEY


HER SECRET
FANTASY A Novel



BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

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CHAPTER



ONE



England, 1818

“**T**he poor ladies! They’re doomed, aren’t they? Whatever shall they do now?”

“Sell the old manor, I suppose, though God knows it is a ruin.”

“But it is their home—they’ve nowhere else to go!”

“Tsk, tsk, the ills of cards and drink, my dear.”

“Yes, well, that is not the ladies’ fault. Oh, it is so sad to see a once-great family slip into decline...”

The whispers were coming from a pew two or three rows behind her. Slowly the hushed exchange penetrated Lily Balfour’s grief, drawing her attention away from the empty feeling in her heart, and the lulling patter of the rain against the tall, clear windows of their little parish church, and the droning eulogy from Grandfather’s middle-aged heir, the new Lord Balfour—a stranger to her side of the family.

Behind the half-veil of black netting that gracefully draped her small hat, her dazed look of loss turned to shock and then pure indignation as the whispers continued.

What’s this? she thought, listening in outrage. Someone was gossiping about her family, right here in the middle of Grandfather’s funeral?

What a pair of busybodies!

She tried to recall which of her neighbors from among the local Quality had filed into the nearest pews behind her, but her mind was a blank. Indeed, she had spent the past two days in a fog, numb with sorrow and exhausted after months of caring for her dying hero.

For so many years, her grandfather, Viscount Balfour, had seemed larger than life. Being forced to watch him shrink day by day into a sick old man—being forced to watch him die—had been almost more than she could bear.

But he was gone now—at peace, she trusted—and as his heir’s eulogy dragged on,

her neighbors resumed their speculation on her family's fate. This time, Lily cocked her head slightly and listened with irked curiosity.

"Perhaps the new Lord Balfour will assist them. He seems a good-hearted fellow," one of the matrons suggested sympathetically, but the other snorted under her breath.

"Lady Clarissa would never accept it. The two branches of the family haven't spoken a civil word to each other in years. I thought this was common knowledge!"

"Yes, well, he can't leave them to starve. Oh, it's all so sad," her companion lamented softly. "First Master Langdon dead in India, and then the nephew in that horrid duel. Perhaps there *is* something to the old Balfour curse!"

"Nonsense. It's their own fault for being too proud. The answer is right before them if they would not turn their noses up at it."

"What answer? What ever do you mean?"

Yes, indeed? Lily frowned, wondering the same thing.

"One of the girls could still make an admirable match," the first lady explained in a brisk and reasonable whisper. "Well, not the elder cousin, perhaps," she admitted. "Miss Pamela is nearly forty, and very odd. But the younger one, Lily. Impeccable breeding, and she's got her mother's looks. I daresay an infusion of gold by way of the marriage mart could remedy their situation in a trice."

At these words, Lily felt the blood drain from her face; her entire body tensed, or rather recoiled, at the suggestion, and her fist closed hard around her crumpled handkerchief. *No.*

"But, dear, they could never afford a Season for her now. How they shall afford this funeral, I scarcely know."

"Well, it's now or never, if you ask me. The girl is nearly five and twenty. By the time she's out of mourning for her grandsire, she'll be on the shelf. Honestly, why she hasn't married yet is quite beyond all reckoning. She cannot lack for offers."

None of your blasted business, Lily thought, her jaw clenched.

"Perhaps Lady Clarissa did not deem any of her daughter's suitors fine enough for the old Balfour blood."

"No doubt. All the same, she is past the age of needing her mother's consent, is she not? I cannot speak for you, dear, but I should regard myself as derelict in my duty if I were in her shoes."

"Oh, come."

“No, really. What is she waiting for, a prince? A knight in shining armor? I had three children by the time I was her age.”

Lily winced at their all-too-true reproach and ventured a tentative sideways glance at her mother.

Aged forty-four, Lady Clarissa Balfour was not yet ready to give up her reign as one of the most beautiful women in the south of England. Many also considered her one of the fiercest.

Her ramrod posture as she sat in the wooden pew assured her daughter that she, too, had heard the impudent whispers. But unlike the meeker and far more obedient Lily, Lady Clarissa slowly turned her blond head and leveled a withering glare at their gossiping neighbors. Her look must have struck them like an icy blast of Nordic wind.

How...dare...you?

Lily heard small mortified gasps behind her and was not at all surprised. She knew that look.

She sank down in her seat a bit, quite familiar with being on the receiving end of one of her mother’s bone-chilling stares. She was only glad that this time it was not directed at her.

Her mother was the daughter of an earl—a fact that no one in her presence was permitted to forget—and was too well bred, thank you very much, ever to raise her voice. Of course, there was no need, when she could fling daggers from her eyes.

When Lady Clarissa Balfour turned forward again oh-so-serenely, her flawless face was a marble mask, hard and white against the black lace of her high-necked mourning gown. Having handled the insubordination from the locals, she slipped Lily a small sideward glance of cold satisfaction.

That’s Mother for you, Lily thought.

She responded with a tiny, rather hapless nod. Then she tried to return her attention to the eulogy, but in truth, it was very difficult to listen to the new Lord Balfour’s empty platitudes about a man he barely knew, a man whom Lily and everyone for miles around had loved.

Well, except maybe her mother. Lady Clarissa had been a dutiful daughter-in-law to the old viscount, but even as a child, Lily had sensed how they had blamed each other for her father’s death. She had always felt caught in the middle between them. Indeed, sitting here, lost in her thoughts before her neighbors had so rudely interrupted, she had been woefully trying to decide which funeral was worse, this one or her father’s.

In truth, it was no contest. Today her heart was broken, but it still could not match

the loss that she had suffered fifteen years ago as a child of nine. Though she had loved her grandfather dearly and had tended him in his frailty day by day, she had been even closer to her father—two peas in a pod, her nurse used to say.

Besides, her grandfather had been old and ill, and Lily had known his death was coming. Years ago, she had been but a little girl, unaware of death, and had believed her marvelous Papa was off having a grand adventure in India, riding elephants and meeting glittering maharajahs. That was what he had told her.

He had promised to come back with a sack full of rubies for Mother and one full of diamonds for her. *“My little princess. Princess Lily! One day you’ll be the grandest girl in all the land...”* Handsome, charming, and a thoroughgoing dreamer, Langdon Balfour had always tended toward hyperbole, but at nine, Lily had taken her father at his word.

About a year later, news of his death as a result of monsoon fever had brought her young world crashing down.

Perhaps that was why it was so difficult to listen to the new Lord Balfour’s speech. It should have been Papa standing up there, telling everyone about his father, Lily thought resentfully. It should have been Papa inheriting the title and taking up his rightful role as male head of the family. They might still have been bankrupt, and mutually embarrassed of their family’s decline, but at least they would have been together.

Instead, all she had left of him were fading memories of the fairy tales he used to tell her, and a garden folly that he hadn’t quite managed to complete before he ran out of money...and time.

Now they were a household of women with precious little income to sustain them.

God help us, Lily thought as her gaze slowly fell.

Their anonymous neighbor was probably right. They were doomed.

That quickly, guilt set in. Familiar guilt. Maybe her gossiping neighbors had a point. *You could fix all this if only you weren’t so selfish*, her conscience reproached her. *Why shouldn’t you marry when it could solve everything? Just look at poor Mother. Hasn’t she suffered enough? Look at her pride. She wasn’t born to be poor.*

You can do this, it persisted, trying to rally her. *You can save them. You know you can, if only you’d forget about the past and stop being afraid.*

But she was afraid. Experience had shown that a healthy mistrust of people and the world was necessary for survival. Indeed, if her father had owned a measure of sensible fear, perhaps he’d be alive today. Fear was good.

Before long, the funeral service had ended. The gossiping matrons had fled by the time the grief-stricken congregation turned to watch the pall-bearers march out, somberly carrying their beloved lord's casket.

While the gentlemen swarmed into the adjoining churchyard to bury the viscount, the ladies climbed up into their carriages for the short drive over to Balfour Manor, where Lily's family would offer a modest reception.

Her mother marched ahead in regal fashion, lifting the hem of her black skirts above the mud puddles while one of their loyal family footmen—who had not been paid in several months, alas—hurried after her, holding an umbrella over her black-bonneted and sleekly coiffed head.

"Come, Lily," Lady Clarissa summoned her. "We must be ready for our guests."

She made no move to follow. "I'd rather walk, actually. I need..." Her words trailed off at her mother's exasperated glance.

"Lily, it's raining. Don't be absurd."

"I have my umbrella. I'd really like to take a few minutes alone, i-if you don't mind, Mother."

Lady Clarissa swept about-face and stared at her. "Of course I mind! I need you to receive our guests as they arrive. I shall be in the drawing room pouring the tea. You will stand in the entrance hall!"

"Aunt Daisy said she'd take my place. I'll only be a moment."

Lady Clarissa glanced dubiously at her stout and usually helpless but kind-hearted sister-in-law.

"Y-yes, I will mind the door," Aunt Daisy piped up.

Lady Clarissa rolled her eyes.

"Oh, let her be, Clarissa," Aunt Daisy pleaded. "The poor girl wants to say good-bye."

Lady Clarissa flicked a haughty glance toward the graveyard, then shrugged. "Don't dawdle about it," she ordered. "In twenty minutes, we'll have a house full of guests, and I need you there."

"Yes, ma'am." Lily nodded, casting Aunt Daisy a grateful look as her mother turned away. Then Lady Clarissa and the two remaining members of her entourage—bustling and prattling Aunt Daisy and bookish Cousin Pamela, wrinkling her nose and drying her rain-flecked spectacles—all climbed into their weathered black coach and set off for Balfour Manor.

The grand brick house was only a stone's throw up the country road. The gabled roof was visible from here beyond the trees.

It's not a ruin, Lily thought defensively. So the roof had a hole or two. So what?

As she watched the line of carriages moving slowly toward it, she reflected in lingering amazement on the revelation in Grandfather's will. He had skipped her mother and left Balfour Manor, his one unentailed property, to Lily.

Of course she knew why he had done it. Not because she had taken care of him, nor even because she shared his blood, while her mother was only his daughter-in-law. It was because he had wanted to make sure that if indeed Lily stood by her vow never to marry, as well she might after what had happened to her, then at least she would always have a place to live, a home to call her own.

Not even Mother would be able to throw her out, as she had once threatened to do. Memories of her mother's cold reproach still made Lily tremble, though it had happened nearly ten years ago, when she was but a frightened fifteen-year-old. She still suffered keenly over the private shame she had brought upon her proud family; but under her grandfather's strict orders, they had closed ranks and kept her secret all these years, protecting her from any taint of scandal for the sake of family honor.

All of them had done their best to sweep it under the carpet. Not even her mother had mentioned it in at least eight years. But the knowledge of her sin was always there, beneath the surface in the polite and genteel war zone of her home. Life had gone on as it was wont to do, but Lily was left wondering if there was any way that she could *ever* be redeemed for her mistake.

This, in truth, was what she had lingered behind to ponder—not the loss of her grandsire, but the nagging guilt that still chafed after her neighbors' words.

"An infusion of gold by way of the marriage mart would fix their situation in a trice..."

Once more, the Balfour family honor was in jeopardy, not by scandal this time but by financial ruin. Years ago, it was she who had endangered the family's good name, but her kin had protected her. Now that they stood once more on the brink of disgrace, didn't she owe it to her family to save them if she could? Didn't she owe it to Grandfather?

As the line of carriages pulled ahead, she glanced over her shoulder at the men gathered in the churchyard.

Tears filled her eyes as she watched them lowering his casket into the earth. Lifting her fingertips to her lips, she looked ahead again while the rain softly drummed her black umbrella.

At length she continued walking homeward, setting each foot carefully in the precarious metal patens that barely kept her shoes above the mud.

What am I to do? I don't wish to be selfish...

She barely knew where to begin, thinking about how to pay for Balfour Manor's upkeep, a colossal expense even when its inhabitants dwelled meagerly. It was all hers now. Selling it was absolutely out of the question, but how she was going to pay the taxes, let alone fix the leaky old roof, she had no idea.

Maybe I *should* start looking for a husband, she thought uneasily. Whatever happened, she could not bear to lose her home on top of everything else. Her moldering house and this sleepy village were the only places on earth where she felt truly safe.

Besides, the whimsical folly that Papa had left half-built still stood at the back of the overgrown garden. If she had to sell the house, the new owners would probably demolish it, and that would be like losing her father all over again, along with most of her childhood memories, the innocent part of her youth.

On the other hand, if she didn't do something fast, she would lose the house for certain.

"One of the girls could still make an admirable match..."

At that moment, Lily heard a carriage clattering up the road and turned to look as she moved out of the way.

Through the gloom came a quartet of prancing white horses drawing a distinctive pink barouche with squat, rounded lines. When Lily saw the bright vehicle rushing toward her, she smiled for the first time that day. Her godmother, Mrs. Clearwell, had come all the way from Mayfair.

She knew her mother's faithful childhood friend had been invited to stay with them for a few days; eccentric as she was, Mrs. Clearwell always came in times of crisis.

Somehow the rain paused magically as the coachman, Gerald, drew the high-stepping team to a halt beside her. He tipped his hat with a cheerful, "Good day, Miss Lily!"

As she nodded to him, her godmother suddenly stuck her gray head out the window. "Oh, Zeus, I'm late! Lily, dearest, how perfectly awful of me! Have I missed the entire service? Get in, get in, my girl! You silly goose, what are you doing, walking in the rain?"

"I find the rain enjoyable, ma'am, and yes, I'm afraid you missed the service. But no matter." She could not suppress a wry grin. "You're just in time for tea and cakes

up at the house.”

“Well, thank goodness for that!” Mrs. Clearwell hopped out of the carriage and ducked under Lily’s umbrella.

The short, plump, bejeweled lady held Lily by her shoulders for a moment, searching her face with a gaze that poured out the most heartfelt sympathy, and then, in a spontaneous rush of emotion, she captured her in an effusive hug. “My dear, dear girl. Poor creature! You bore the brunt of his illness, didn’t you? Of course you did,” she said with a snuffle. “You were there when he went?”

“Yes.” Tears filled Lily’s eyes at her warm-hearted godmother’s kindness. “He would not take his medicine. He said he would meet death with his wits intact.”

“Oh...a hero to the end.”

Lily nodded. “He was in so much pain.”

“Well, he’s in Heaven now with your papa. There, there, sweet child. Are you all right?”

Lily managed a nod and wiped away a tear.

“Brave girl.” Mrs. Clearwell patted her cheek.

She was Mother’s cousin and was the only person that Lily had ever seen who truly knew how to manage Lady Clarissa. Their friendship had always rather puzzled Lily. The two women could not have been more different.

Her mother, for instance, would never have worn the star-shaped pins that twinkled in Mrs. Clearwell’s hair. Especially not to a funeral.

“Oh!” the portly widow exclaimed with sudden vehemence. “Lily, child, you must let me get you away from this gloomy place! I know you are a thoroughgoing homebody, but come to London with me. I insist!”

She offered a wan smile. “I believe I have six months of mourning to fulfill, according to the dictates of propriety.”

“Propriety, my foot!” her godmother protested with flashing eyes. “You’ve been in mourning since you were nine years old! No more, I tell you! Lord Balfour would not have wanted you to be unhappy, nor do I.”

“Ah, you’ve always been so kind to me.”

“That’s because I see great things in you, Lily.”

Lily shook her head at her godmother’s nonsense, wiping a trace of moisture off her

cheek and telling herself it was only a raindrop.

“Good, then,” Mrs. Clearwell concluded out of the blue. “It’s all settled. You will come to Town with me and we’ll have a grand time! There are concerts and dinners and balls and soirees—”

“Honestly, I have nothing to wear,” Lily interrupted wearily, a bit scandalized at her godmother’s talk of her going into Society so soon after a death in the family.

“Pish-posh, Miss, life is for the living! As for your clothes, do not trouble your head a bit, we’ll fetch a few dresses for you in a trice. Not a word about expense—I promise you, it is a trifling matter. I am your godmother and I can spoil you if I want! And you know my Norbert died extremely rich.”

Lily gazed at her uncertainly. “It is hard to take your charity.”

“La, girl! Chaperoning a young beauty in London, why, it would be the most excitement I’ve had in years! Now, don’t be proud like your mama, or stiff-necked like His Lordship always was. Come, Lily, *I* know you are a practical young woman—and you know that I have always been on your side.”

Lily’s eyes filled with tears, but she turned away, making an effort to blink them back. “Very well...I will consider it. Just promise me one thing.” She slid her wily godmother a sideways look.

“What’s that?”

“You wouldn’t be planning on playing matchmaker, would you?”

Mrs. Clearwell beamed. “Well, actually...now that you mention it, dear, there may be two or three *agreeable* young gentlemen I’ve happened across in London, who I think might just be *perfect* for you.”

Lily groaned, then reconsidered, and abruptly blurted out a cheeky question: “Are they rich?”

“Lily, darling,” Mrs. Clearwell chided with a merry wink, “rich as princes. Otherwise, I wouldn’t waste your time.”

“Hmm,” she murmured, glancing over her shoulder at the big, cold, and gloomy Balfour Manor. The roof was probably leaking even now.

When Mrs. Clearwell gestured invitingly toward her carriage, Lily looked at her intently, then closed her umbrella and stepped up inside.

By the end of that very trying day, Lily's mind was settled on the matter. After all their visitors had left, save Mrs. Clearwell, who was upstairs in the guest bedroom at the moment, she called her kinswomen together in the drawing room.

She stood before the fire and faced them with her hands clasped behind her back. "There is something I wish to say to you all together. Something private."

"Yes, daughter?" Her mother lifted her chin.

Lily squared her shoulders and took a deep breath. "I have decided to accept Mrs. Clearwell's invitation to London. It's no use protesting," she informed them. "We all know something must be done."

Aunt Daisy frowned and cast an anxious glance at Lady Clarissa, then at Lily again. "But what about your mourning, dear?"

"I think in this case, Grandfather would understand," she said softly. She hesitated. "As the new owner of this house, I must take action if I am to keep a roof over our heads. So, you see, I shall go to London and find a man of means to be my husband—then none of us shall have to worry long," she finished hastily over the sound of their gasps.

The three ladies stared at her in shock.

"You're...going to marry?" her spinster cousin breathed.

"Oh, bless you, Lily, my dear, brave girl!" Aunt Daisy whispered, dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief. "I feared we were headed for the almshouse!"

Lily glanced at her mother to read her reaction. She waited on tenterhooks, searching her face.

Lady Clarissa was silent for a long moment. Then she lowered her embroidery needle and frame. "You are certain you can carry it off?"

Steeling herself to her task, Lily swallowed hard. "I can."

Her mother's sapphire eyes narrowed shrewdly. "All of it? A husband will have... certain expectations."

"Yes. I am aware of that, ma'am. I shall be prepared."

"But—Mother! Aunt Clarissa! Surely you can't let her do this!" Cousin Pamela burst out in alarm.

Nobody answered.

"I know we are poor, but you can't let Lily sell herself like—like an unmentionable

female! It's perfectly macabre!"

"Macabre?" Aunt Daisy echoed, frowning her brow.

"There must be some other way!" Cousin Pamela insisted. "I know!" She suddenly brightened. "I could sell one of my novels!"

"No!" both of their mothers said in unison.

"My God, you and your Gothic horrors, you will ruin any shred of respectability this family has left," Lady Clarissa muttered with a dismissive shudder. "I will hear no more of such talk. Ladies *don't* write novels."

"But I could publish it under a pseudonym—"

"We would still know it was you, Pamela," Lady Clarissa said with great long-suffering. "Honor is honor. Marriage at least is a respectable occupation for a woman. You might have tried it if you hadn't wasted your youth on all your pointless scribbling," she added under her breath.

"Yes, ma'am," Cousin Pamela said faintly. She dropped her gaze, timid and crestfallen once more behind her spectacles.

A flicker of a frown passed over Lily's face. That was Mother for you. Always correct and straight to the point.

Carelessly cruel.

"You needn't worry, Pam," she spoke up, trying to hearten her plain, rather pitiful cousin with a wan smile. "It might seem a little, er, macabre, but I don't mind it," she lied, "and besides, our mothers are right. It is merely the way of the world."

"Well, I, for one, never cared for the world very much." Regrouping after this slight encouragement, Pamela rose, putting the book she had been studying aside.

Marching over to Lily, Pamela stared into her face, her brown eyes piercing and intense behind her round, rimless glasses. Her breath stank of coffee—she never drank tea. "So, you're really going to do it, then?" she inquired in a fascinated murmur. "Even after...what happened? You're going to save us all from destruction by marrying a rich man?"

Lily lifted her chin a notch. "Very rich."

"Well, then, you'd better pick a stupid one," Pamela advised. "Easier to fool."

Lady Clarissa gave an idle laugh. "They're all rather stupid when you come down to it, dear."

The dry remark reminded all present that Lady Clarissa had never forgiven her husband for his ill-made scheme of running off to India to save the family fortunes. Not because she had been a particularly devoted wife, but because his death meant that she would never ascend to the title that she had married him for.

If he had lived, she'd have risen to the rank of viscountess. Instead, she was left with the mere courtesy title granted to her on account of her father's earldom.

"Yes, Lily, you listen to your cousin," she continued wryly. "Rich and stupid. Exactly the sort of man every girl needs."

"Right," Lily forced out softly, masking her dismay. She was determined to emulate her mother's unsentimental cool as she faced whatever fate held in store for her in London. She knew full well this was her one chance to redeem herself in her family's eyes.

Rich and stupid it was.

After all, what smart man would ever want her?

CHAPTER



TWO



London, Two Months Later

He was not what the committee had expected.

The nine Distinguished Gentlemen of the Appropriations Sub-Committee for Eastern Expansion took their seats at the long, elevated table at the front of the moldy medieval chamber and readied themselves for the parliamentary hearing they were about to conduct. Each secretly relished the prospect of an afternoon spent at their favorite game of the old slice-and-dice. Ah, yes, it was ever so pleasant to while away the hours grilling, insulting, browbeating, and badgering whatever unfortunate career officer had been dispatched from the front lines to report back to them, the civilian authorities—answering their questions, providing explanations, in short, scrambling to dance to their tune.

After all, it was *they* who held the purse strings for the army. Besides, such occasions presented ample opportunity for all the speechifying that no politician could resist.

Having done this many times before, the gentlemen knew what sort of spineless young weasel the commanders in the field always sent: some obsequious fop, no doubt, an aristocratic younger son who would rather have been at the gaming tables at White's. The sort of unctuous, dandified aide-de-camp who was careful to hang back in the shade of the generals' tent when the bullets started flying.

But that was not what Colonel Montrose had sent them this time from the front lines of the latest nasty little war in India—the one they largely preferred to forget.

No, indeed.

The chairman nodded to the armed bailiff, signaling their readiness to let the games begin. This worthy, in turn, hauled open the ancient creaking door as if to drag some poor, cowering Christian in to face the lions.

But then, the strong, ringing rhythm of polished boot heels striking the ancient flagstones just outside the door gave the committee their first inkling that their expectations may have been a bit...off.

Then *he* appeared in the doorway—and half the committee drew back in alarm. A few actually gasped. All of them stared, their gazes traveling over him in awed confusion. They took one look at the bona-fide warrior who had been sent to deal with them and knew that this sun-baked, towering savage was not going away until he got exactly what he came for.

A magnificent specimen in full-dress cavalry uniform, Major Derek Knight stalked into the chamber, and when he passed the long table where the committee members were arrayed, they were forced to note his impressive height, for although their table sat on a raised dais, he was still on eye level with them. He stared forward as he marched in, but was not too humble to look the canny old chairman, Lord Sinclair, straight in the eyes when he passed him.

It was a cool, metallic glance of warning—or a brief, disgusted glare. He ignored the earl's muttered, "I say!" and prowled on, moving with controlled power and grace, all menace and rippling muscle.

Upon reaching the smaller, lower table set up across from theirs, he stopped, pivoted with crisp precision, and did not salute them but stood at attention, his plumed cavalry helmet under his arm—rather like a Roman centurion, some thought.

For a long moment, none of the Gentlemen knew what to say, quite how to begin. Even the aged chairman was a bit stymied. They could only stare, marveling in spite of themselves to remember that such men existed out on those distant battlefronts.

The major's indigo coat fitted snugly across his broad chest as he waited. Gold epaulets gleamed on his shoulders. A black silk sash girded his lean waist, the long ends brushing the side of a solid thigh encased in cream-colored breeches. His ebony knee-boots were buffed to a spotless sheen, while his shining silver dress-sword caught the light. His smooth, black hair was bound back in a queue like a horse's silky tail. His sun-bronzed skin was tough and dark, but the small lines etched around the corners of his pale, wolflike eyes gave him the look of desert nomads used to peering out over long distances of bleak terrain. The proud angle of his chin, his unyielding stony stare, not to mention the startling girth of his biceps all proclaimed the warrior a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield.

Or off it.

"Ahem," he said, jarring the Gentlemen out of their daze.

The chairman coughed quietly while a few of the others shifted in their seats as they all began to recall with dawning uneasiness that they were accountable to men such as this, being, as they were, in charge of the money the army in India needed to function, and perhaps they had been a tad...remiss.

Watching them with infinite patience, Derek Knight sincerely hoped they felt uncomfortable.

These bloated slugs did not know the meaning of the word. “Uncomfortable” was going into battle knowing that you had so few bullets in your ammunition case that you’d have to load your gun with little rocks after a few shots and pray to God it worked. Or perhaps “uncomfortable” was better described as having the surgeon dig a ball out of your back without at least a swig of whisky to take the edge off the pain. *Ah, what is wrong, my dear gentlemen?* he thought, hiding his cynical amusement as he watched the subtle signs of a guilty conscience play across each haughty face.

He could almost hear the excuses running through their greedy little minds. To be sure, it was difficult for any man to think of parting with three million pounds sterling, and after all, they were only human. No doubt urgent requests for more funding were easily misplaced, what with all the business such important gentlemen had to conduct each day.

Now and then they received a tally of the casualties, but these were sloughed aside in favor of the mounds of treasure that British generals sent back from India, with new maps staking out the most recently conquered territories.

For all this, Their Lordships were swift to take credit. But in fact, the consistent success of the army in India must have led them to conclude that the task of subjugating the hostile maharajahs must not be all that hard! In which case there was no real rush to send the army the gold and supplies it kept whining for, now, was there?

At bottom, Derek supposed these chaps were all very sure that, come what may, the Indian army would do what it always had done—it would manage, with or without the gold that Parliament had so inconveniently promised.

And so it would. But that was not the point.

Unfortunately for the roomful of politicians that he faced, a promise actually *meant* something to men like Derek Knight. He had been sent by his crusty old commander, Colonel Montrose, to inform “them demmed cheeseparing bureaucrats” that an army marched on its stomach, not on its feet, and the men would want to be paid.

For his part, Derek was not happy. His boys had been promised this gold and it had not appeared.

Somebody had some explaining to do.

He raised his eyebrows politely. “My Lords. Sirs. Shall I begin?”

“Er, m’boy—right, yes. Please do.”

Apparently they would be skipping the niceties today. What a shame, he thought dryly. It seemed he had shocked the lovely Gentlemen. There was more uneasy throat-clearing as he set his helmet aside and rested his white-gloved fingers atop the files

from Horse Guards that he had brought as proof certifying his arguments.

He then proceeded to hand them their arses on a silver platter.

The Gentlemen would have dearly liked to find him an ill speaker. It would have been comforting, no doubt, to reduce the colonial-born barbarian in their minds to the mere killing machine he appeared to be, capable only of following orders. But he quickly dashed their hope when he launched into the explanation he had been preparing for some weeks leading up to this dismal assignment.

With the calm, strategic cunning of a seasoned chess enthusiast, he spent the next half hour explaining the nature of the enemy they faced; the Maratha Empire's considerable resources for repelling British attacks; what was at stake for the realm in all of this, the consequences of failure, and the benefits to be gained by success; and why the whole damned thing mattered, anyway.

"Gentlemen," he concluded at length, summing it up for those who had glazed over from too many facts. "The Maratha Empire is no trifling foe. It was founded by Hindu royalty of the warrior caste, and is currently ruled by a madman, Baji Rao. Baji Rao is known for his ferocity; he's killed several of his own family members in order to seize power and keep it. His own people live in fear of him, and now he seeks to unite all the forces he can muster to drive the British out of India. This is what we face. Our colonies are under threat. The army *must* have the resources we were promised so we can protect our people and our trade."

He took a long, slow, reproachful look around at them.

"I have been informed that Governor-General Lord Hastings issued his first request for the release of these funds nearly a year ago, but there's still no sign of the money in Calcutta yet. I implore the committee to understand there is no more time to lose. If we do not give this fight our all, we may lose our foothold in India entirely—and if that happens, our rivals in the region will be happy to take what we cannot hold."

"Major," the second-ranked member said complainingly, "Lord Wellington put the Maratha threat down years ago! If they were defeated then, how could they have been permitted to regroup?" The man waited, scowling at Derek as though the whole thing were his fault.

Derek looked at him for a long moment, certain that he had already answered this question several times, but, patient creature—no, saint—that he was, he resisted the urge to walk over and smack the man alongside his balding head to encourage the lot of them to listen.

It worked on the new recruits. Maybe he should try it.

But of course, this was not the Indian frontier. Civilization was ever so annoying. It would have been pleasant to bellow at them in full battlefield throat, but as a matter of

principle, Derek did not allow himself to be drawn into arguments with men whose heads he could have crushed with his bare hands under different circumstances.

That would not have been exactly fair.

After all, they were only *civilians*. Civilized civil servants, who could not understand why he did not grovel and placate. Why should he? He had little respect for their kind. In his world, respect had to be earned.

And besides, he prided himself on his ability to tell the flat-out truth to anyone, so in a way, he was perfect for this assignment. He had always preferred blunt honesty to sparing people's feelings and he had never once danced around anyone's rank.

Somehow, though, he refrained from bellowing and did not resort to banging heads this time. Instead, he merely summoned up his blandest, lordliest smile—for indeed he was of aristocratic descent—and answered the question patiently, one more time.

God knew he wished he were elsewhere, preferably with his men in the thick of the fight, but alas, this dismal mission to London was his penance, his punishment. Some months ago, he had managed to vex his commander, Colonel Montrose, and now, for his “impertinence,” the only way to get his old post back was to succeed in this horrid low mission of money-grubbing in London.

Damn it, he should have been sitting astride his horse right now at the head of his glorious cavalry squadron, *his* troops, whom he had personally drilled and trained to perfection. His elder brother, Major Gabriel Knight, had a matching squadron, and often they had used their might to squeeze the enemy between their forces, a classic cavalry wedge.

But now everything was changed.

Good God, to think of their boys out there without them, temporarily under the command of other officers who could not possibly possess the Knight brothers' own degree of expertise—well, it was best not to contemplate it too much, for such musings seriously darkened his amiable nature.

Just get the money, a silent, savage part of himself advised, the ferocious side that had grown strong through years of battle and helped him survive. *You'll be out of here soon. You'll get your chance to pay those Maratha bastards back.*

Aye, as if slaughtering some of his regimental fellows wasn't bad enough, in his last run-in with Baji Rao's henchmen they had nearly killed his brother, and this was a wrong that Derek could never forgive. Yes, serious wounds happened in warfare, but this had been different.

He wanted blood.