

ONE  
(July 1834)

ON THE DAY he turned twenty-one, Nicholas Price decided he would marry Lord Byron's daughter. The fact that she was unaware of his existence did nothing to daunt his enthusiasm.

In his room at Hedland Manor in Devonshire, Nicholas tried on ten different waistcoats, accepting each one from his father's valet before discarding it onto a pile on the floor. Fielding stood patiently: waistcoats, cravats and shirts draped over his extended arms as if he were a dressmaker's dummy. Nicholas slipped into the silk burgundy waistcoat for the third time and regarded his reflection in the mirror.

"What do you think, Fielding?"

"Well, the burgundy does compliment your complexion, sir."

"But?"

"But...burgundy with a black frockcoat? You may look a bit, well, sinister."

"Sinister!"

"Dark, brooding."

Nicholas smiled. "All the better for Lord Byron's daughter, yes?"

"If I may say so, sir..."

"Spit it out, Fielding."

"More like the villain in one of those dreadful gothic romances you were so fond of as a boy. *The Monk*, perhaps?"

Nicholas stared at Fielding's reflection behind his in the mirror. "Good God, Fielding. I sincerely doubt I shall evoke fears of chaining the lady up in my secret dungeon. I merely wish to create a certain atmosphere..." Nicholas's smile faded as he lost his train of thought. "Anyway, help me tie on this lace cravat, will you?"

"Certainly, sir. Only may I say one thing more? Perhaps you have the wrong idea regarding Miss Byron's preference of atmosphere."

"My dear Fielding. Ada Byron is the daughter of Lord Byron, who epitomizes Romanticism. He defines the picturesque."

"Sir, yes, I am aware –"

"The man who was 'mad, bad, and dangerous to know.'"

"Yes."

"What would you have me wear for the daughter of such a man? Is Ada to be wooed in lavender?" Nicholas wheezed when Fielding tied the knot of the cravat with a flourish. He hooked a finger in and yanked it loose, glaring at his father's valet. "You may suggest I am mistaken; you needn't choke me, for the love of God. I don't want that one anyway. Fetch the silk one."

"Then may I suggest you are mistaken, sir?"

"Certainly not."

The mirror revealed the thin line of Fielding's lips and his arched eyebrow in the all-too-familiar expression of vexation he used on Nicholas's father when the man in question had his back turned. Their gazes met; Fielding's wet, rheumy eyes blinked, and Nicholas took in the valet's nose that had grown more bulbous in Nicholas's absence, covered in broken web-like capillaries that converged into a reddened tip. Nicholas was a man today, and one day would be master of this estate, perhaps even of this man. He straightened, yanking down his waistcoat which sounded like the smart slap of a riding crop.

“You’d do well to take care, Fielding. Frequent nips of the whisky flask tend to announce themselves in obvious ways.”

Fielding’s hands flew to his nose; before he spun around Nicholas caught sight of the wretchedness of his eyes. Nicholas caught his shoulder, stricken.

“I say, old man –”

“No, no, Lord Nicholas, you are quite right.” Nicholas, who had trouble hearing Fielding’s soft voice even in the best of times, had to lean forward to understand. “No excuse for it. You are quite right sir. Quite right.”

“That was inexcusable. I beg you to –”

“The boy gets a degree, turns twenty-one. Now he is Lord of the Manor.” Fielding whipped out a handkerchief and dabbed at his forehead. “Certainly takes after his father, no doubt about it. Good heavens. Now there will be two of them ordering me about. Making my life miserable.”

Nicholas’s grin was difficult to contain. He refrained from pumping the valet’s hand in gratitude, and instead turned back to the mirror, giving his waistcoat unnecessary attention. “That is correct, Fielding. You would do well not to forget it. Now where is that silk cravat?”

There was a curse from downstairs followed by the thundering of what sounded like a herd of horses galloping up the stairs.

“Oh, no,” Fielding said. “They’ve escaped.” He turned his back on the door and covered his head as if the roof were caving in, while Nicholas’s face erupted into a grin. His giant Newfoundland hounds, Harold and Manfred, came barreling into the room, toppling their master into the pile of discarded waistcoats. Nicholas laughed and wrestled with them, deftly avoiding the spray of slobber, while Fielding cleared his throat several times to get his attention.

A flummoxed steward appeared to wrangle the dogs; Nicholas, who was no help at all, laughed when the steward fell and was dragged by Manfred, clinging to the dog’s haunches. Meanwhile Fielding was on his knees, still trying to fasten the silk cravat around Nicholas’s neck.

“What the devil is going on?” From the floor Nicholas turned to see his younger brother standing in the threshold of his bedchamber, staring at the mayhem. “You’ve been home all of what, seven minutes, and already the house is destroyed.”

“James, well met!” Nicholas said, scrambling to his feet and dusting himself off. He pulled his brother in for an embrace with Fielding and the steward tripping over the dogs behind him. At the same moment the steward had both dogs leashed, the valet finally caught Nicholas around the throat with the cravat as if he were roping a horse.

“And what is all the hullabaloo about?” James asked his brother.

“Haven’t you heard? Father is hosting a dinner party tonight, with none other than Ada Byron in attendance.”

“Is that the reason you’re deranged? For Ada Byron, bride of science?”

“Bite your blasphemous tongue!”

“Well, it’s true.”

The brothers stepped aside to allow the steward to drag the hounds out who were whining and contorting themselves to reach Nicholas. He gave Harold an absent pat on the head, his eyes locked on James.

“You cannot convince me that the daughter of the world’s greatest poet is devoted to science.”

James shrugged. “I won’t need to. You’ll see for yourself soon enough.”

Fielding held out the black velvet frockcoat that Nicholas selected; as Nicholas backed into it and slid his arms into the sleeves, the two brothers smiled at each other's reflection in the mirror. James, two years younger than Nicholas, wore his hair short, the pale blond a striking contrast to his brother's dark hair which fell in curls to the nape of his neck, naturally in a very Byronic style. Both young men had a pair of matching green eyes, broad noses and square chins, all on long, narrow faces they inherited from their mother. Tall and fair like James, their mother Sarah was dead only six months before their father remarried. Eliza, the new Lady Neville, was much shorter and darker than her predecessor. She was also only three years older than Nicholas.

"Burgundy with black," said James, frowning. "You look like what's-his-name, that sinister man in *The Mysteries of Udolfo*."

"I tried to tell him," Fielding said.

"And you both have been reading too many gothic novels!" Nicholas said. "I look very respectable."

"All right, all right, calm yourself. You do look very handsome. Just completely deranged." James straightened his brother's cravat. "Now all we need is for Father to come in and put your shoes on for you."

"Damned if I'll put his shoes on for him, home from Oxford on his birthday or not." All three men jumped at the sound of Lord Neville's voice. "I heard thundering up here and thought someone died. Now I see you kidnapped my valet and tried to feed him to your monstrous dogs."

Nicholas grabbed his father's arm. Lord Neville was trying to glower; Nicholas was amused to see that the best he could muster was pinching his lips together while his dancing eyes betrayed him.

"Father, please set straight my ignorant, misinformed brother, who is under the gross misconception that my future bride is devoted to science."

"By 'future bride,' I assume you mean Ada Byron."

Nicholas sighed. "Naturally."

"Well, for once your brother is right." There was a huff of indignation from James; Nicholas ignored him. "I heard from Sir George, my fellow MP who extended my invitation to Miss Byron and her mother, that Ada has a keen interest in science --"

"Lady Byron -- she's coming here as well?"

"Yes. Didn't I say? Damned if you ever listen."

Nicholas felt the blood drain from his face. "She positively *detested* Lord Byron. Whatever shall I say --"

"Yes, yes, and Sir George told me she has forbidden Ada to read any of her father's poetry, or see anything bearing his likeness. You would do well to keep your mouth shut regarding your precious poets, or the wedding you fabricated in your head will have to be cancelled."

"I don't believe it!"

"Believe it. And brush up on your theorems before dinner; I hear Ada is being well tutored in math and science. I hope you're not wearing that. And Mr. Fielding: my son has not yet inherited you. I hope my evening clothes are laid out."

Lord Neville left before Nicholas could summon a response. Fielding followed, brushing past the brothers. He paused at the threshold, the white wisps of his hair disarrayed from wrestling dogs and discarded waistcoats. Nicholas was careful to keep his gaze averted from the valet's nose.

"I am glad to see you home, sir, and I wish you many happy returns on your birthday. I must now attend to your father."

“Thank you, Fielding. Some day I’ll be grown up enough to have a valet of my own.”

Lord Neville’s voice echoed up the stairs. “Not on my allowance, you won’t!”

James and Nicholas exchanged a look, saying simultaneously, “*Your* father.”

They descended the stairs slowly, keeping gait with each other. The balustrade, newly polished, left a slimy film on Nicholas’s hand that he knew he would never rid himself of. He said to James, “I knew, of course, that Lady Byron kept that famous portrait by Thomas Phillips hidden from Ada, but I didn’t realize that she is still determined to keep Ada so ignorant. You know the portrait I mean? The one in Albanian dress?”

“Yes. I heard that as well, that when Ada was a child there was a curtain drawn over it to prevent her spying her father’s face.”

“But now that Ada is more mature, surely it is a crime to deprive a lady of her father’s countenance, not to mention hiding from the world such an esteemed work of art?”

“Apparently Lady Byron fears that even a glimpse of Lord Byron will influence her daughter away from science and toward poetry, which she equates with debauchery, lewdness, and all other evils real or imagined that she conceived of her husband.”

“Someone must rescue her from such a fate!”

James rolled his eyes. “You are *such* a romantic.”

They took afternoon tea in the drawing-room, where heavy burgundy drapes were pulled back to let in the sunlight which illuminated mahogany furniture and Indian rugs resting on the dark wooden floor. The beige-colored walls were decorated with an eclectic mixture of archaic and modern decoration; on one wall, for instance, was a medieval tapestry, and on the other was the latest in Italian paintings. The wall closest to the entryway was dedicated to Nicholas’s own paintings; here one could track the development of his talent, from his first rudimentary watercolors to his more recent Impressionisms.

James spooned another lump of sugar into his tea. “May I ask you something? What do you hope to accomplish by making Ada Byron your wife? Is it just to have possession of Lord Byron’s closest relation?”

“It is much more than that,” said Nicholas. “I want in my future wife that very fiery passion of Byron’s that her mother seeks to squelch. I want the brilliant poetic mind with which to compose poetry and hold intellectual and stimulating conversation. And yes, I want the name Byron associated with me, I want to use the connection in hopes of finding a publisher and audience for my own poetry, and, in my wildest fancies, I want the very rare chance to be named the next Lord Byron.”

“Lofty ambitions indeed. The lordship of Neville is not enough for you.”

“If I could, I would give the title to you. I would be more than happy simply being Lord Byron.”

“ ‘Simply being.’ ”

“If she marries me, or even allows me to woo her, I will free her mind from scientific oppression so that there will be no going back.”

“Heaven help Lady Byron, then.”

“Nicholas!” Lady Neville, dressed in black and burgundy brocade, hurried toward them, her hair pulled back with a flamboyant assortment of feathers. Having made Eliza’s acquaintance only once before, on the day of her marriage to his father during the Christmas holiday, Nicholas stood and bowed, smiling nervously. Under his breath he said to James, “You see? She is wearing burgundy and black.”

“Yes,” James whispered back, his smile frozen in place, “and you see how well it accentuates her sinister nature.”

Nicholas straightened. “Lady Neville, I am honored to see you again.”

Eliza squeezed his hand. “Please, Nicholas, if you will not consent to call me Mother, or even Stepmother, do me the courtesy of calling me Eliza.”

“Eliza, then.”

“Well, how handsome you are,” she said, holding a sherry glass; Nicholas could smell its contents with great clarity on her breath. “Indeed, I did not see much of you during your stay with us last Christmas, with the wedding so busy and frantic and the honeymoon closely following, and I really had no idea...”

Behind him, James was quietly reciting, “ ‘The funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage table.’ ”

Nicholas wished he were within range to twist his younger brother’s ear. Meanwhile Eliza’s eyes glazed over with a look Nicholas could not interpret. His gaze dropped to the floor; some sort of jewel on Eliza’s shoe caught the light and blinded him.

James coughed and Eliza turned, releasing Nicholas to look up again. His father was entering and Nicholas exhaled with relief. “Well, Ambrosio,” Lord Neville said, “the guests are arriving. Help me greet them.”

“For the last time, I do *not* resemble a character in *The Monk*.”

“I hope Fielding remembered to polish the chains in the dungeon.”

“Oh, Father, really.”

He took his place at his father’s side at the entrance of the drawing-room, but found it increasingly difficult to look Lord Neville in the eye after enduring Eliza’s odd expression. To compensate, he greeted each guest with more gusto than usual.

“Lady Byron and Miss Ada Byron,” the butler said after several guests were announced, and Nicholas felt faint.

“Dear God,” he said to himself, “let me make a favorable impression, and I shall never shirk from church on Sundays again.”

The words no sooner left his lips than his eyes caught sight of them. He would always regret the line that came out of nowhere in his mind in that moment, wondering for years to come if he had only conjured something from a sonnet or even a comedy instead of *Macbeth*, that the disaster that followed might have been averted. But no, it was Lady Macbeth with her damned, bloody ambition who appeared.

*I can feel the future now in an instant.*