

Alexandra had earned a reputation among Philadelphia society as an accomplished horsewoman. She could hold her own alongside the elite foxhunters of the city, exhibiting vigorous grace in the sidesaddle when challenged by rugged terrain. Once, on a dare, she had raced her dappled gray mare against Andrew Allen on his prized filly. A founder of the Light Horse of the City of Philadelphia, a volunteer cavalry troop, Allen had pronounced himself the superior of any woman on horseback. He defied Alexandra to prove him wrong. To his embarrassment, she beat him soundly in a half-mile sprint on the Centre Square racecourse, her proud husband John cheering her on. Afterward, a much-humbled Allen had dubbed her “The spunkiest little lady I ever did meet.”

That was three years earlier, before John fell gravely ill and passed away. Since then Alexandra had ridden for pleasure only occasionally, out of the public eye. And so, when Charles Villard invited her on a ride around Lionsgate to inspect a racecourse roughly oval in shape, laid out with newly erected posts, she accepted with delight. The mount Villard selected for her from his stable was a docile gelding hardly worthy of her skill. Nevertheless, the excursion beneath the warm October sun proved enjoyable, mainly because of the company.

Riding through a wooded defile blazing with the colors of fall, she observed, “This stretch is rather narrow for two horses running abreast.”

“Tis plenty wide enough. Anyway, by this point in the race, I expect North Wind will be well out in front.”

“Aren’t you the optimist?”

Villard’s face lit with the engaging smile that had inspired her to come out of mourning. “I watched him gallop the course this morning. He was full of himself, grabbing at the bit. He’ll earn his feed today, mark my words.” He kept quiet a moment, pensive beside her. “I’m almost afraid to ask. Did you decide to act on your whim?”

“If by that you mean did I bet on Jameson’s stallion, the answer is ‘yes.’”

Villard sighed. “You are ever a delight.”

“Oh, don’t be so touchy. I merely indulged in a bit of sport.”

“What unscrupulous schemer took advantage of you?”

“George.” Although unable to attend the match race, her brother-in-law had been tickled to accept her side wager.

Villard sighed. “Victory served with your defeat will taste sour indeed.”

“I wouldn’t worry, Charles. All you shall be eating is your own words.”

He choked back a guffaw. “My, but you can be pert.” Then leaning toward her, he ventured in a sensual way, “In the interest of sportsmanship, allow me to wish you luck.”

After halting her horse, Alexandra sought to satisfy his inclination as much as hers, tilting her head as his mouth drifted down, down. Slowly he pressed his lips to hers in a kiss warm and gentle, the simple contact exciting her blood.

He drew back with his eyes a gleam. “I look forward to consoling you after the race.”

“Slim chance of that,” she said. With a tap of her crop, she urged her mount ahead, forcing Villard to give chase.

As they topped a grassy knoll, the manor house became visible, its hewn stone walls awash in sunlight. On the front lawn facing the Schuylkill River, Lionsgate’s servants had erected an enormous canopy to accommodate dozens of guests, Tory friends of Villard invited to watch the match race. The group made a colorful splash in their layered finery. Pampered by attendants, they made small talk while sampling choice

wines, sweetened rum punch, and a sumptuous buffet arranged on linen-covered tables.

Alexandra winced as a burst of shrill laughter beat against her ears. She eyed a short, plump man in a bright yellow suit cavorting among the guests. Encouraged by his audience, he tossed an empty wineglass high above his head, pirouetted on wobbly legs, and then, to the amazement of all, caught the glass behind his back. He bowed to enthusiastic applause, teetering on pointed black shoes with gold buckles.

“Stephen is in rare form today,” Alexandra remarked, “in more ways than one.”

Villard studied his friend Stephen Lindsay, owner of a cooperage and a dry goods business in the city. Even at a distance, Lindsay stood out from the crowd. “He does catch the eye in that suit.”

“Like a glaring canary.”

He smiled. “Other than that what’s wrong with him?”

“He’s ill-mannered and always drunk.”

“Everyone here is drunk. He fits in nicely. Consider him part of the entertainment.”

“I wonder if he ever entertains a serious thought. His only concern seems to be when and where the next party will commence.”

“And what do you think he should be concerned about?”

She turned her troubled gaze upon him. “The rebel army besieging Boston perhaps? That vindictive Committee of Safety bent on persecuting Loyalists? Little by little, those demagogues are tightening a noose around our necks.”

“Sweetheart, their audacity will amount to nothing.”

“How can you say that when militiamen all over the colonies are preparing for war? The flags decorating our city read ‘Liberty or Death.’ Those aren’t just words, Charles. The rebels believe in them. Their calls for independence grow louder and stronger and more dangerous every day. They glorify Mr. Washington as if he were some kind of savior called for divine service.” She brushed a fallen curl from her eyes. “Perhaps that man doesn’t frighten you, but he does me. He might deliberately sabotage any chance for a peaceful end to this crisis.”

“I once thought a peaceful end was possible, but now I say England should get busy with her muskets rather than her pens.”

“Suppose Mr. Washington wins a battle?”

He chuckled. “Absurd.”

“Just suppose he does,” she insisted, for she did not share his conviction that Washington and his rebellious horde were toothless. “Everything would change. The horrors of war could very well come here, right to our doorstep.”

“Then I’ll fight,” he said with quiet dignity, “to defend my home and my king against rabble. It’s as simple as that.”

She recoiled from the thought of him facing loaded muskets and drawn swords. Never mind that misguided farmers and tradesmen would be wielding those weapons. Bullets were bullets. Dead was dead.

“Let’s speak no more of war,” he said gently. “I want you to enjoy yourself today.”

“I can’t help worrying.”

“And I sympathize, sweetheart. After all, you did bet on Jameson. I would be worried too.”

She laughed despite herself. “Charles, tell me the truth. Aren’t you, in fact, the nervous one?”

“Nervous doesn’t quite nail it,” he confessed. “I can’t bear the thought of him handing me another loss. Then again, such things are of little consequence compared with my heart’s priority.”

When he reached out his gloved hand, she clasped it with passionate strength. Their glances met and

held. At that moment, she felt closer to him than ever before, happy to be riding beside this considerate man who lavished his attention upon her at every turn.

Arriving at the canopy, they turned their horses over to a waiting groom. A wine steward materialized before them as if by magic, proffering a tray holding two glasses of Villard's favorite French claret. Before they could relax and enjoy a sip, a grating voice hailed them.

"Heigh-ho!" Stephen Lindsay tottered over to welcome them back, his jowly visage ruddy from drink, his yellow satin suit aglow in the midday sun. Bestowing a smile, he sketched a salutation in the air. "I was beginning to think you two lovebirds would never return. Alexandra, you look positively ravished. From whence comes that blush on your cheeks? Stolen moments of lust in the woods?"

Alexandra bristled.

"Stephen, mind your tongue," Villard warned him.

"Now Charlie, I meant no offense. After all, what eligible man wouldn't choose to dally with this exquisite creature?" Lindsay bowed to Alexandra. "With all due respect, milady."

She drew a calming breath. Lindsay could not seem to open his mouth without leering or attempting to cause someone, anyone, discomfort. "Good afternoon, Stephen," was all she said.

"Delicious frolic, Charlie," Lindsay praised his host. "Once again, you've put the joy in enjoyment."

"How kind of you to say. I'm glad you could attend."

Alexandra's gaze flickered from one to the other. For the life of her, she could not comprehend why Charles went out of his way to include Lindsay in his circle of friends, most of whom seemed the intelligent sort. On the other hand, his willingness to accept this socially inept being indicated a charitable nature.

When a quartet of musicians hired for the occasion struck up a merry drinking song, Lindsay folded his hands over his breast, eyes fluttering. "Ah, 'With Women and Wine I Defy Every Care,'" he sighed. "Listen to that sweet flute. How refreshing! Those churlish fifes and drums are all one hears anymore." He signaled a steward for more wine. Plucking a lace-trimmed kerchief from his cuff, he blotted perspiration from his rouged face. "So tell me, Charlie, is North Wind ready for the race?"

"He's not only ready; he's unbeatable. So says my jockey, Sammy, and he knows him better than anyone."

"Excellent! If Jameson had any backers, I would stake a frightful sum on your horse."

"By any chance, have you seen Mr. Jameson's stallion?" Alexandra wanted to know.

"No, I haven't."

"Then perhaps you shouldn't be counting your chickens." She could not say what inspired her next words, other than an intense dislike of Lindsay, but the challenge came forth unbidden. "I'll be happy to accept your wager."

Lindsay sputtered his surprise. "Oh my."

"One hundred pounds?" she asked sweetly. "Is that frightful enough for your fancy?"

Lindsay turned his rheumy gaze on Villard, who shrugged and kept quiet, his face impassive. Lindsay looked back at Alexandra. "How can I resist such reckless derring-do? Very well, then. One hundred pounds it is." He paused, suddenly distracted. "Charlie," he murmured, looking toward the line of carriages parked in the drive, "the bumpkin hath arrived. Alexandra, isn't that your coachman speaking with him?"

Turning, Alexandra saw Christopher Clue conversing with Dalton Jameson. From their animated gestures and easy smiles, she supposed this wasn't the first time they had met. "So it is."

"Perhaps we should leave him be," Lindsay suggested with an attitude of distaste. "He's clearly more at home with the help."

Villard shot him a glance. "Mr. Jameson is my guest. I'll thank you to remember that."

"Never fear; I shall bravely endure his want of distinction and breeding. It's sad to say, but I imagine his horse outranks him on both counts."

Alexandra handed Villard her wineglass. "I'll go and greet him."

"But—"

"I want to give him some advice about the course. You don't mind, do you? After all, I have a tidy sum riding on him." She left without waiting for his reply. Gazing around at the polished crowd, she knew they would frown on her rubbing shoulders with the lower sort. Her eyes danced as qualms about impropriety gave way to an impish urge to set them all on their ears, especially Charles for subjecting her to that annoying canary.

Approaching Dalton Jameson, she noticed two things about him: he was wearing the same clothes as when she first saw him, and they were not as clean as before. Preoccupied with untacking his stallion, Mercury, he glanced around on hearing her footsteps on the gravel drive.

She smiled a welcome. "Good afternoon, Mr. Jameson."

"Good afternoon, ma'am. I'm glad to see you again."

"And I, you." Now she was near enough to detect something else about him: he smelled of lye soap, but this did not mask the odor that came from working with livestock. She turned her attention to Mercury, noting his alert eye, his ears pricked forward in interest. "He knows something is afoot."

"That he does," Jameson agreed, "but he ain't worked up, just curious."

Mercury did indeed seem relaxed, which Alexandra attributed not only to his natural disposition but also to Jameson's handling of him over the past three weeks. She asked her coachman, "Christopher, have you ever seen a more superb specimen of a horse?"

"Never, ma'am. I was just telling Dalton, he has all the earmarks of a champion."

"Would you mind looking after him for a while? Mr. Jameson and I need to discuss the fine points of the race course."

Clue's quick, cheerful face lit up. "Mrs. Pennington," he ventured in a sly voice, "did you bet on this rascal?"

"Why, yes," she said, "because he's going to win." She met Jameson's look of surprise. "Isn't that so?"

"Count on it. I've never lost a horse race."

Hearing this, Alexandra amended an impression she had formed during their first meeting. He wasn't boastful, she decided, just that sure of himself. She asked him, "Will you walk with me in the garden?"

The casual invitation seemed to tongue-tie him for a moment. Then he smiled in that free and easygoing way she remembered. "I'd be honored, Mrs. Pennington." He handed Clue the stallion's lead rope. "If you wouldn't mind, give him a little water and rub him down, then walk him under the trees. Just don't let him graze." Satisfied that his horse was in skilled hands, Jameson gave himself over to Alexandra.

They entered a terraced garden flourishing with hardy autumn blooms. After plucking a flower head of pink phlox, she twirled the stem between her fingers, acutely aware of the tall, earthy man walking beside her. Like his stallion, he seemed at ease yet watchful, patiently awaiting her lead. Enveloped in his musky scent, she began, "I hope you won't think me impertinent, as I'm sure you know racing much better than me, but I observed some things about the course that might prove useful to you."

"I'm all ears, ma'am."

"To begin with, the ground past the stable is spongy from yesterday's rain. You should keep to the outside, as near to the posts as possible. The footing there is much firmer."

He nodded, thoughtful as he gazed straight ahead. “What else?”

“Just past the second turn, on the right is a small pond where some geese landed this morning. I believe they’re still about. I don’t know how Mercury responds to noises, but those birds began to trumpet when I rode past.”

Another nod accompanied by a lingering glance at her. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

She had worried that he might not take her seriously, but he seemed absorbed in weighing her advice. “Oh, and one other thing,” she said. “The wooded stretch of the course is tight. Be mindful of that once you come off the third turn, as the way narrows quickly.”

“You really know your stuff.”

She blushed with pride. When she looked him full in the face, the glare of sunshine revealed a quality of his aspect she couldn’t help noticing: the stronger the light, the better he stood it. “I’ve ridden a time or two.”

“And you know a prime bit of blood when you see one. I, myself, never laid eyes on Mercury’s equal. He’s a rare gem for sure, light in hand, willing to work, and good around people to boot. That reminds me, I noticed him catching your scent earlier. He seems to like the smell of your perfume. Being this close, I have to agree with him. You’re wearing rosewater,” he inhaled deeply, “with a bit of vanilla, am I right?”

She might have been put off by his boldness were his manner not so ingenuous. “Exactly right,” she said, amazed at how seamlessly he had turned the conversation from the safe ground of horse racing to the very personal matter of her fragrance.

His tone changed too, quieter and earnest when he asked, “Did you really bet on me?”

The wonder in his eyes made her smile. “I most certainly did.”

“Knock me down with a feather. What did your Mr. Villard have to say about that?”

“What could he say? It’s my money. More to the point, I happen to think Mercury is the better horse.”

“He is that, ma’am. He’s the fastest horse around, and no mistake. His speed plain takes my breath away.”

The thought struck her that the upcoming contest would be as much a tonic for him as a chance to line his pockets. From the buoyancy of his step to his adventurous air to the eagerness animating his countenance, he exhibited a competitive spirit. If he harbored any fear of losing, she saw no indication of it.

“I won’t repeat that to Charles,” she said. “He’s anxious enough about the match. But don’t worry”—her blue eyes sparkled with mirth—“he’s sure to be gracious in defeat.”

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Anxious didn’t quite define the extremity of Villard’s condition. With feigned composure, he watched from a distance as the woman he adored and a man he abhorred strolled side by side through Lionsgate’s garden, discussing God only knew what. Now more than ever he burned to take Jameson down a peg.

To that end, he excused himself from the gathering to visit his stable, where his jockey had just brought North Wind into the paddock in preparation for the race. Before entering the enclosure, Villard paused to admire the faultless conformation of his black stallion—the good bone structure, four very correct limbs, a regal bearing. Standing at around sixteen hands high, North Wind was an enormous creature without being heavy or overly muscular. He had never lost a match race with Sammy Drayden aboard.

When Sammy caught sight of his employer, he tipped his cap in greeting and then stepped aside as Lionsgate's master approached the horse.

Villard patted the black's powerful shoulder. "How is he, Sammy?"

"Tip-top, Mr. Villard."

"Did you get a look at Jameson's mount?"

"Yes, sir."

"And?"

Sammy hesitated. "He's a good-looking animal, sir," he conceded, "but Blackie and I are about to shame that pair."

This was precisely what Villard wanted to hear. Smiling his approval, he clapped Sammy on the shoulder much as he had North Wind, and then his smile ebbed as something cold and ominous darkened his stare. "Beat him," he ordered. "I don't care how you manage it, just beat him."

Sammy gave a quick nod. "We'll take care of it, sir," he said and knew he better had.