

Lady Annabelle's Abduction
a Regency Rakes & Rebels Novella

Charisse Howard



*A kidnapped bride, a ruthless earl,
a ransom that must be paid by sunset,
and a persistent spaniel.*

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Chapter One

“Lie still, shut your eyes, and think of England.”

Lady Annabelle Chatfield wanted to clap her hands over her ears, but she could not move.

“And whatever you do, don’t scream.”

“Scream?” Panic rising in her voice. “Why would I want to scream?”

“One does, sometimes,” her mother continued in the same serene tone. “Perhaps you won’t. I did, but then Lord Brackenbury is a good deal older and, one hopes, less energetic than your father was on our wedding night.”

A shiver ran from Lady Annabelle’s satin-slipped toes to her tiara-crowned curls. Merciful heavens! Lack of energy—was that the only advantage to marrying a man more than twice her age?

“Signora Chatfield, prego!” called the portrait-painter from twenty feet away. “What you speak, it make bad look on face of la signorina.”

Lady Chatfield acknowledged him with a placid nod.

“Mama, surely we oughtn’t to talk of such things in front of . . . you know . . .”

“Him? Oh, he can’t understand a word. But we needn’t talk of such things at all! Cast it from your mind!” Lady Chatfield waved a graceful diamond-encrusted hand. “Think of sunshine and blue skies! Think of the grass drying so that everyone can enjoy their champagne out-of-doors, and not track mud on your papa’s carpets, and Brackenbury will be

utterly charmed by Signor Paolo's portrait of his lovely bride in the wedding gown worn by her mother and grandmother."

Lady Annabelle obediently rearranged her face. "But, Mama, why am I to think of England when my husband . . .?"

"Your duty to the nation, my dear! At the time, what Brackenbury is doing may not strike you as the act of a gentleman. That is when you must recall that his purpose is noble: to beget heirs. A son to carry on his title and estate, and a daughter to wear this gown one day."

It struck Annabelle that her mother had picked her moment. While the bride-to-be was immobilized by an acre of white satin embroidered with gold thread and seed pearls, every limb and eyelash fixed in place by Signor Paolo, how could she ask questions about this alarming initiation which awaited her on her wedding night?

Why had no one told her sooner that heirs were begotten in a fashion liable to shock the bride? Any time she had seen a baby, it had come from a nursery in someone's arms, a pink-faced bundle of white ruffles. How could something so charming be the product of violence?

"Mama," Annabelle whispered without turning, "will you not tell me what exactly Brackenbury will do?"

"No, dear," said her mother. "You will find out soon enough."

Lady Chatfield feigned a sudden interest in a tree outside the window. Every afternoon she found some reason to stroll toward the easel, in hopes of peeking at the wedding gift her husband had commissioned for his new son-in-law. Every

time, Signor Paolo lifted an eyebrow and covered the painting.

Really, such impertinence! Could he not see what a bore these sittings were for her? Was he not grateful for her *noblesse oblige* in playing chaperone? As for Lord Chatfield's promise not to spy on the painter's progress, that was his affair, not his wife's.

Temperament. Her friend Lady Glossup's one warning when she recommended Signor Paolo. *He is a Florentine, my dear, with the soul of an artist, and also the temperament.* Lady Chatfield had braced for an occasional noisy explosion, a flinging up of hands and stomping of feet and gabbling in Italian, as in the operas of Donizetti. Instead the painter had kept utterly mute behind his easel. That foolish beret hid half his face. And he refused to let her see her the portrait.

Still, hadn't he trimmed half a stone from the chin and midsection of Lady Glossup's daughter, and transformed the poor girl's oatmeal complexion to peaches-and-cream?

Temperament one need only tolerate for a week. The vision of elegance which now represented Alexandrina née Glossup in her husband's Great Hall would be admired for generations.

Lady Annabelle Chatfield, of course, needed no such improvements. She was a classic English beauty: dazzling blue eyes like a summer sky, sunny blonde curls, skin as soft and pink as a new rose petal. Her waist was slender, her bosom discreetly generous. If such outward sweetness was betrayed from time to time by a burst of fierce independence, at least her rebellious streak was not visible to the eye.

Yes, it would take an exceptional artist to do justice to

Annabelle's loveliness. Did not that give Annabelle's mother the right—nay, the duty—to see if Signor Paolo was up to the challenge?

She sidled toward the easel. Down went the painter's brush. Up went his eyebrow.

Lady Chatfield sighed and returned to her seat.

Thank God, she reflected, for the beauty of my daughter, which will shortly undo the havoc wrought by my fatally charming son.

Poor dear Stephen! No woman and few men ever could say no to him. Least of all his mother. His father's heart had hardened over a decade of extravagant revelry, weeping repentances, and broken vows.

Had Stephen not fallen victim to his own bad habits, and broken his neck in a drunken hunting accident, Chatfield Hall might now be heading for the auctioneer's hammer instead of the extensive repairs Lord Brackenbury had agreed to fund.

Thank God for Annabelle!

Seven years ago, following his wife's death, the Earl of Brackenbury's attentiveness to her daughter had made Lady Chatfield faintly uneasy. An old friend of her husband's, infatuated with her little girl? Perhaps it was embarrassment that moved Brackenbury to secretly pay round after round of Stephen's debts. Or perhaps even then he foresaw the young man's tragic end, which turned into such a nightmare for Stephen's family.

When at last the Chatfields emerged from mourning into near-poverty, they were able to see Brackenbury's obsession in

a different light. Lord Chatfield embraced it. Lady Chatfield conceded that really it would not be such a bad thing for their daughter to wed an earl. Annabelle pulled the covers up over her head and refused to come out, until her father threatened to shoot her pet spaniel, Lochinvar.

A long engagement was agreed upon, out of respect for the family's loss, and to give the bride-to-be time to come round. The wedding would take place a month after Annabelle's seventeenth birthday.

One week from tomorrow.

The dress promised to be as spectacular as on its previous outings. The garden would blaze in floral glory, whether the sun shone or not. The bridesmaids' gowns, the wedding feast, the champagne, the tents, the tables, everything was poised for a perfect day.

Except the portrait.

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What can't be cured must be endured, reflected Lady Annabelle. Still, it was too bad that out of all the gentlemen who had hung around her late brother, his chief creditor had to be the Earl of Brackenbury.

If she could turn back the clock, she would urge Stephen to borrow money from someone handsomer. Young Lord Darlington, for instance, with his dashing mustache. One of the square-shouldered sons of the Marquess of Phlough. A man near her own age. A man with strong arms and chiseled

features, whose eyes lit up with pleasure when he caught sight of her.

Brackenbury—a short, round-faced gentleman with a receding chin—had a habit of staring at her as if he were a chained dog and she were a squirrel.

Not that Lady Annabelle Chatfield minded being stared at. Her parents had doted on her since birth, although Stephen, as the son and heir, naturally took precedence. Brackenbury had adored her as long as she could remember: first from afar, then, as her debut neared, with shy invitations to walk, ride, dine, or dance.

The earl's attentions lit a spark among her brother's set. Suddenly everywhere she went, one young man or another was striking up a conversation, offering her his arm, proposing a stroll in some convenient garden or arcade.

And as fast as it began, it ended.

If only Stephen had chosen a different horse! If only he had not drunk so many stirrup-cups! If only—!

It seemed sadly possible to Lady Annabelle that the last man who would ever stare at her as if she were the most fascinating girl on earth was Signor Paolo.

Since he was an artist and a foreigner rather than an English gentleman, she felt free to stare back. She found the painter quite strange and a little disturbing. Enormous brown eyes, like St. Sebastian's in the stained-glass window at church. She could only see them clearly when he tipped back his head, owing to his floppy beret. The beret, along with a scarf at his throat, also hid his hair.

Most of the time she had nothing to watch but his hands, flicking his brush from palette to canvas as deftly as Phipps wielded a carving-knife. His fingers were long, with tapered tips and round knuckles. At the start of each sitting, when he gripped her shoulders to set her in place, she felt that he could crush her if he chose like a pecan in a nut-cracker.

What a pity, to waste these precious last hours of her youth watching the back of an easel and a few bits of a man!

If only he had accepted her offer of a footman's help, she could have lightened this tedious session by gazing at Hepton.

That was the marvel of servants. When a particularly presentable one joined the household—ideally a footman, since his job involved so much standing about—your whole day brightened. You took care with your morning toilette. You hurried down to breakfast, where you could admire him uninterrupted. If you managed it just right, his hand reaching for your plate would brush your bare arm and send a delicious shiver through your whole body.

Perhaps today's sitting would run late and Hepton would bring tea. Then Signor Paolo could not complain about the expression on Lady Annabelle's face!

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Chapter Two

He had slept in woods and fields for days before he chose this abandoned cottage. An old game-keeper's shack? It was one of the estate's remotest outbuildings, a good mile from the main house. Completely hidden by trees, it offered a brook where they could get water for themselves and their horses. On these long June nights they should need neither fire nor lamp, but if they did light a fire here, no one would notice.

The path was overgrown, the door so long unopened that it took him and Fox several minutes to wiggle it loose and get inside. Cobwebs and mouse droppings everywhere. Just as he'd hoped.

Only four men in England knew that he had come back. The Honourable Albert Fewnall was not one of them. After ten years of parading about in his stolen title, Uncle Albert evidently had concluded he was home free.

Fool! A clever man would not have let up his guard once the furor over his nephew's disappearance died down. He would not have shrugged off his henchmen's failure to find a body, only a bloodied shirt. A clever man would have realized that ten years gave a boy time to grow to manhood, and to gather money and friends.

Not that the returning exile was naive enough to expect a prodigal son's welcome. The four friends had proceeded with extreme caution. They called each other by nicknames: Hawk, Badger, Fox, Stoat. They had not traveled together, but had met up two days ago in London. Only now, supplied by Stoat

with horses, weapons, and food, could the other three launch their plan.

Ten years had given the usurper authenticity. People no longer thought of him as the late earl's younger brother. As for the late earl's son, only his three allies knew he was alive, much less recognized him as the true heir.

With authenticity had come stability. If the long-lost Lord of the Manor arrived openly, demanding reinstatement, how many of the neighboring land-owners would support him? Most, he suspected, would play it safe by closing ranks around the thief and would-be murderer they knew as the Earl of Brackenbury.

God, however, was on the side of justice.

God had arranged for the Honourable Albert Fewnall to marry Lady Annabelle Chatfield a week from tomorrow.