

The Arrangement

By Carol Kennedy

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Cover: *The Pride of Dijon*, 1879, by William J. Hennessy (Irish, 1839-1917.) Public domain.

Dedications

To all my wonderful friends and family who helped me along the way in writing my novels. This book is dedicated to: Don Knight, Billy Miller, Jean Gess, Carol Silvis. Also, special thanks to Mary Burdick for proofreading.

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CHAPTER ONE

England, 1844

It was all quite clear and uncluttered. All Mr John Louis Wolcott had to do today was attend his friend's gala lawn party, have a few toasts and be done with it. After all, he had more important business in London that very afternoon, a money-making scheme to add hundreds of thousands more to his coffers.

He did not know that the day would change his life—forever.

His carriage ambled along the ancient Roman road toward Kensington Park Estate, Northeast of London. The noon sun lit a brilliant blue sky and washed bright hues over ambrosial green meadows. Birds twittered and trilled in the oaks. A delightful air wafted about the August heat. Staring out, Wolcott dabbed his sweaty brow. He did not feel the cooling breeze, nor did he hear the birds as he fumbled with his hat. His mind was on making money, not idling his time away at some silly lawn gala.

Sir Humphrey Hogg's estate was just ahead. The lathered team clopped up its drive.

The carriage had barely stopped when Wolcott stepped out shaking his head. There was a long line of carriages gathered at the carriage-porch and he was in no mood to wait. Plopping his hat back on, he grumbled to his footman, "I shall walk from here, Peterson."

Wolcott decided to take the tree lined path, avoiding the receiving line, and casually slip into the party through the side entrance, unannounced. If he had attracted anyone's attention, he had such a commanding presence that no one would dare challenge him.

Running his fingers through his thick black hair, he caught an admiring glance from Lord Wimbley's wife, Helen. He was the type of man many a lady wished was

lying next to her at night: over six feet tall, light green eyes, tanned skin, thick black beard and moustache, long eyelashes curled upward, soft well-kept hands.

But alas, making money was more challenging than making a woman.

His thoughts floated back to when he was a wee cockscomb of fifteen. Twenty and five years at least had passed since then. A vision of his first wild passion, Charmaine, stirred something yet unsettled in him. Bright red hair, fresh from Ireland she was, dancing the gangplank forward, smiling and singing. She crushed his heart. Wolcott thought for a moment about the silver ring, and how he had given it to Charmaine as a wedding promise. But she vanished. *Indeed, no woman shall ever do that to me again.*

He learned early on what a woman could do to his heart, and he knew if he was going to succeed in life he had to control himself. This discipline played out for him in all aspects of his life. Wolcott appeared to be made of steel. Indeed, he hid his emotions well.

Among his circle of friends and business associates, it was no secret why Wolcott had remained a bachelor for so many years. Women played no important role in his life. While entertaining aboard his luxurious yacht, he would often comment to the envious eye of his married colleagues, "I equate the arm of a woman to that of an anchor."

He never spoke of Charmaine.

It was a particularly warm London summer afternoon, and he thought well of his decision to stroll beneath the cool shade of the ancient oaks. On reaching the side entrance, he stepped out into the sun and into a clamour of controlled confusion at the food preparation tents. Servants rushed about with trays of roasted meat, fish, and fowl. Maids in black dresses with white pinafores arranged Hors d'oeuvres. Ornate silver filigree tri-trays were readied for the iced cakes. The clatter of serving trays kept the hounds at bay. Feral cats knew just where to crouch.

Ah, the champagne table. Wolcott helped himself to a glass and held it aloft, "I have arrived."

"Indeed, you have, Mr Wolcott," said Mr Birdwood, the butler, a well-mannered, older servant; one who knew his place; one with whom Wolcott could jest.

He turned at hearing the familiar voice. "Ah, Mr Birdwood, what brings you?"

"Precisely what you have in your glass, sir."

Wolcott glanced at his bubbly.

“To my dismay, sir, I discovered it was put out by mistake. Oh, imagine an 1836 Chabanneau sitting about.”

Wolcott gulped the rest and handed the empty glass to him. “You may inform Sir Humphrey to save me a sip.”

“Very well, sir.”

“By the way, Birdwood, is there anyone at this gala event I need to be aware of?”

“Yes, sir, Lady Primbrook.” He looked down his rather prominent nose and frowned. “She and his lordship are situated in the white tent, sir. Their daughter, Lady Penelope, recently out, is looking for a proper suitor.”

“The one with ...”

“Missing teeth, sir.”

Wolcott shuddered. “Thank you, Mr Birdwood.”

* * *

Wolcott meandered about the crowd studying who sat where and why. He avoided the white tent. Music flowed from the gazebo nearby. He could hear quiet conversations, but none in particular. *Just as well for I am in no mood for cordiality.*

From an open window, he heard the chime of a distant clock strike the quarter hour. Removing his pocket watch, he verified the exact time. “It’s almost one. I must soon be going if I am to make my appointment with Featherbone,” he uttered aloud.

Feeling the noon’s warmth, he stopped to shelter beneath the shade of a handsome arbour adorned with blooming lilac. Wolcott found it cool and peaceful; the crowd clatter now faded and indistinct. Close behind him he heard the sound of a trickling fountain. He moved a few branches to view its rippling splendour then caught sight of a young woman. She sat alone on a white wicker chair, wearing a low cut, white gossamer frock, with a delicate, feathered hat.

She leaned forward, slowly twirling her fingers through the water. He caught his breath and watched as she dipped her pink-laced handkerchief in the fountain. Smiling she turned her face toward the sun and dabbed the wet scarf behind each ear. Her long, tapering fingers stroked her bare neck, allowing the cool water to ease between her breasts. He watched, fascinated by her beauty.

Appearing to sense someone’s watchful presence, she froze. Feeling her embarrassment Wolcott dropped his hand from the thick leafed bush and stepped

inside the secluded rose garden. He did not want to alarm her, but he could not help but stare. His body tightened, his breathing quickened, but he knew how to control himself.

“Good afternoon, madam.”

She looked down, fumbling with her scarf. “Sir.” was all she could manage as she rose.

There was only one way out of the garden and he stood between her and it.

Her face flushed. She moved closer meeting his gaze with a brief nod, on her lips the slightest hint of a smile as she slowly walked around him and out of the garden.

Wolcott’s heart pounded as he read her: perfect chiselled face, pert nose, full lips, that most alluring blush when she caught him watching her, her smile and the way she deliberately came so near to him, meeting his eyes, then moving away. He placed his hand on his chest. Captivated, he could only watch her as she left the rose garden, disappearing as suddenly as she had appeared.

God Almighty, who was that? He walked to the fountain, dipped his fingers into the water and brought them to his lips. *Umm, I do not remember ever seeing her before.* He admonished himself for speaking to her first. *She must think me an impertinent, ill-mannered sort of fellow.* But he dismissed his minor breach of etiquette as trivial.

He stood near the white marble cherub in the fountain listening as the cool water trickled from its prayerful carved hands. A slight northerly breeze fanned his face with its fine mist. The sound calmed his heart. He vowed to find her again.

As he turned to go, he caught sight of his good friend Sir Humphrey Hogg entering the garden.

“Wolcott, so you found my hideaway, have you?” He raised his glass. “Lemonade, wine?”

“No, no, Hogie ... I was, ah, just escaping the beastly afternoon heat.” He loosened the cravat around his neck.

“Indeed.” Humphrey set his glass on the fountain’s balustrade. He removed the white, lace-trimmed handkerchief tucked inside the frilly cuff of his sleeve. “Beastly hot, you are right.” Lightly, he dabbed his brow.

“Hogie, tell me, how many guests have you invited to your garden affair?”

“Ah, seventy, eighty. Why do you ask?” He took up his glass. “Let us take a look.”

They walked out of the garden. Humphrey scanned the guests, some sitting beneath vine-covered trellises, others meandering about the lawns and tents.

“Aye, easy that number, Wolcott.” Humphrey dabbed his brow again. “Easy that.” He squinted out again over his crowded lawn as strains of Mozart issued from the gazebo. Now and again a slight breeze floated about, stirring the many pink, red, and purple banners that hung from the terraces, tents, and trees. He turned to his friend. “So then, tell me, have I not invited enough or perhaps too many?”

“There is a certain woman wearing white.” Wolcott looked out over the terraces. “Blond curls, blue eyes, very blue. Her hat had a small feather to the side, not a long feather, but short. Long sleeves in the very same white material; her neckline was all white lace with frills ... exposed, but not overly exposed. She didn’t carry a bag, but only a long pink scarf.” He glanced down, catching a quick glimpse of a silver tailed fish gliding below water lilies. “She was just there, standing near the fountain.” His voiced trailed into an afterthought, “I must have frightened her off.”

“Well, most all the ladies are in white today. Feathered hats, of course, are in fashion. Blond curls, blue eyes. Ah, could be my wife.” They turned toward the Great House.

“There, there she is,” Wolcott whispered and turned his back, “over there, standing next to Peter Melbourne, near the red tent; the young lady in white.”

Humphrey squinted. “Ah, yes, that is Melbourne’s daughter, Mary. I suppose you would like to meet her?”

Wolcott cleared his throat. “Is ... is she married?”

Humphrey raised a brow and looked sideways at Wolcott. “Rarely have I seen you so anxious to meet a woman—any woman for that matter. Why, women come to you, never you to them. How many times, have I heard you say a woman is a nuisance?”

“Get on with it, Hogie,” he said becoming annoyed.

Humphrey shrugged. “Well, after all, you are the one who hates being tied, held accountable or beholden to anyone.” Pausing for a moment, he added, “Come then, I shall introduce you. I do believe she is married, but let us go and see for ourselves.”

Wolcott caught his smirk. “So, Hogie, I see you are enjoying, with great satisfaction, I may add, that such a devout bachelor as myself would fizzle in the noon heat—become less confident, less sure of myself. Very well then, let’s take a closer look.”

“A closer look?” a half-laugh escaped him. “Certainly then.”

Wolcott strolled alongside his friend lifting his hat with a pleasant nod to the guests he chose to acknowledge: Viscount Burton Lipscomb, Lady D’Amateo, Lady Snelling and her friend The Dowager Lady Alister.

“Odd, that,” Humphrey quipped, “for rarely do you smile, Wolcott.”

As the two approached Mr Melbourne, his wife and daughter were turned away. Wolcott felt ill at ease, thinking the nearby crowd might read his face. He positioned himself to his friend’s right, so that he would arrive by Melbourne’s daughter’s side without any undue awkwardness.

Mary Melbourne did not move away when Wolcott arrived at her side, but she did steal a glance his way and coloured. She graciously moved a little distance so that the gentlemen could move into the shade. Wolcott noted the gesture.

“Ah, Mr and Mrs Melbourne, and Miss Melbourne,” said Sir Humphrey removing his hat, “permit me to introduce you to my friend, Mr John Wolcott.”

Wolcott removed his hat. He took Mrs Melbourne’s outstretched hand and half bowed. “Pleased, madam, to meet you.”

Attention shifted to Melbourne’s daughter, Mary. She smiled.

Wolcott froze for a second, fear mixed with relief to find she was unmarried.

Miss Melbourne offered her hand. Though smiling, Wolcott struggled not to exhibit the slightest hint of romantic interest. He bowed over her hand. “Miss Melbourne.” Returning her hand to her side, he did not take his eyes from hers.

He felt his throat constrict and looked away. *I wonder what power she holds over me already. Oh, yes, that power to draw me in, take over my freedom, the power of domination—in that most intimate way.* He knew she possessed such power and he wanted her all the more.

Miss Melbourne fanned herself, perspiration beaded about her neck. She whispered to her mother that she wanted to move nearer the spraying fountain, but when she glanced at her father, hoping to get his attention, she was already put aside—to remain quiet.

“Wolcott Shipping?” inquired Mr Melbourne.

“Yes, sir,” said Wolcott as he caught the slightest scent of Melbourne’s daughter’s sweet breath. “And you, sir, are about Her Majesty’s work?”

Melbourne straightened. “Oh, yes, I am Her Majesty’s advisor, one of many.” Shielding his eyes from the sun’s glare, he teetered on his walking stick. “Sir

Humphrey, would you be so kind as to show me the way in? I must have a word with Lord Mayor Bramley.” He turned to Wolcott. “Mr Wolcott, excuse me. I shall not be long, I assure you.”

Wolcott nodded with a half-bow. “Indeed, sir.”

Melbourne nodded to his wife and daughter. “I shall return soon.”

“Very well.” With concern in her voice, Miss Melbourne called after him, “Do mind the steps, Papa.”

Her father nodded and mumbled something about his failing eyesight to Sir Humphrey as they moved away.

Searching for her fan, Miss Melbourne managed a slight smile and looked away.

Wolcott noticed. He was very much aware of the ways of female allurements. A man of few words and fewer words of endearment, he could dampen even the most ardent admirer at will. But this woman was different. Well, he would find a way to handle her like all the others, but first he had to hide his awkwardness. Dumbfounded at his sudden behaviour, his hands trembled again.

In silence, they watched Sir Humphrey escort the elder gentleman up three sets of steps, past the terraced esplanades, past servants carrying trays and guests chatting and laughing. Then the two disappeared into the Great House.

Wolcott recovered sufficiently and turned his attention to Melbourne’s wife. “Mrs Melbourne, the warmth is most unusual for this time of year.”

“Oh, indeed it is, Mr Wolcott. But I do enjoy it, immensely.”

Miss Melbourne chimed in, “Indeed it is, sir, very unusual.” She dabbed her brow, avoiding his eyes. “I have somehow misplaced my fan. That little bit of air at least helped.”

“Yes, one would think so.” He inhaled the sweet smell of fresh shaved grass. “How unfortunate, losing your fan.” Feeling a surge of confidence, he smiled again and glanced at her, but she was looking away. He followed her eyes to the fountain, irritated that she was not hanging on his every word.

“Mother, would you mind if we moved out of the sun?”

Wolcott hemmed. “Ladies, would you care to visit the fountain? Perhaps dip your scarf about the water?”

Remembering it was he who had watched her at the fountain, letting the water ease between her breasts, Miss Melbourne’s face coloured. “What a lovely idea, sir.”

“Why Mary, where is your fan?” asked her mother.

“I have no idea, Mama.” She glanced around. “I must have dropped it.”

Wolcott kept his trembling hands knotted behind his back. “Come then, I know of a cool place for us.”

The three walked along a path a few yards from the Great House. Wolcott slowed, noticing that Mrs Melbourne was infirm. Soon they came to a small pond surrounded by lush, ankle high grass. Clustered purple and white sweet-williams and cistus intermingled with the dark green shrubs surrounding the pond. Birds flitted atop the thick rushes of willows that grew wild along the banks. A huge canopy of leaves covered the couple from the sun’s harsh glare. An ancient, mossy smell hung heavy about still waters.

And as they walked a little way under the shade, Miss Melbourne breathed in its splendour. “It is quite beautiful here, Mr Wolcott.”

“I discovered it earlier while walking about Sir Humphrey’s grounds, miss.”

Miss Melbourne dabbed her brow, behind her ear and along her neck with the back of her hand.

“Allow me.” He removed his handkerchief from his side pocket and released its crisp white folds with a flick of his wrist, then dipped it in the pond. “Perhaps this will cool you.”

Wolcott felt bewitched by her, unsure whether he read her correctly. Was she like the water? Cool, mysterious, and running deep?

Watching as she patted the softest curve of her neck, he knew beyond a doubt that he had to have her—all to himself. His reasoning was never clearer than on that day, on that spot of soft green grass, with this captivating creature. *Indeed, I cannot have such a woman running willy-nilly about England—she is much too powerful.*

A sparrow flit through the air, snatched a morsel off the pond, and left only a light ripple in its place. Miss Melbourne marvelled at the little creature. “Dear me,” she said, “if only I could fly.”

“Miss Melbourne,” Wolcott’s hands were still clenched behind his back, “where would you go?”

At that moment she caught sight of her father and her face lit up. “Oh,” she motioned with her hand, “to my dearest Papa.” He stood at the entrance to the pathway, smiling; he was a kind and devoted husband and father.

“Indeed, so you would.” Wolcott nervously cleared his throat. “Ah, Miss Melbourne, I would like to call on you next week.”

“Indeed, Mr Wolcott, sir. I would like that.”

She smiled up into his face for a very long time. He coloured a little and looked away. She watched the commanding Mr John Wolcott struggle. She felt that certain power a woman has over a man. “So, you are falling in love with me?”

“I beg your pardon, miss?”

“It was nothing, sir.” Her gait increased as her father took a seat under the arbour. “Papa is waiting.”

Wolcott offered his arm, and escorted her along the narrow path. Both appeared to be reeling with inexplicable giddiness, perhaps the euphoria of falling in love.

Mr Melbourne slowly stood. “Thank you, Mr Wolcott.” He leaned heavily on his stick, and took his daughter’s arm. “I am a little weary. We really must be going. Do come for a visit, sir.”

“Indeed, sir. I shall.” Nodding his adieus, he held Miss Melbourne’s gaze.

She slid her arm into her father’s. “Good day, Mr Wolcott.” She glanced at him, then flushed and smiled.

Wolcott stood at the edge of the clearing and watched them depart. He inhaled deeply and smiled. Rocking back and forth on the very ground Mary Melbourne had walked on only moments ago he realized she had already claimed him for her own. *God Almighty*, he sighed as he wiped his brow and turned to look out over the pond again, *God Almighty*.

* * *

After many months of courtship, Wolcott was pleased and relieved to see that the beautiful Miss Mary Melbourne now hung on his every word, rarely distracted when they were together. He felt as though he had become a stronger man since meeting her. Each successive visit with her left him feeling more self-assured, more in control. His hands stopped shaking. His nervous cough disappeared. Indeed, he was satisfied that he had caged this lovely creature.

Although he had already amassed a respectable fortune, he felt he was still far from achieving the greatest wealth in England. He realized that he lacked the social polish and acceptance of the old money. He thought about the lovely Miss Melbourne and how marriage into the Melbourne family could elevate him to the position he so wanted in life, to be accepted into the heart of the financial elite where he could

become an integral part of the economic wizardry that ran England's financial empires.

For their part, the Melbournes were indeed within the Queen's circle, but with failing health and waning estate, they welcomed the financial strength and young blood that Wolcott could give them as a son-in-law.

* * *

It was a crisp, frosty January day in Portsmouth as Wolcott and Miss Melbourne rode toward her home. Their words wafted about the carriage in puffs of misty vapours. Slush muffled the sound of the ambling wheels. The crack and whistle of driver's whip rang hard against the snowy thin blanket of solitude. Beneath a muffling wrap, she wore a soft lavender satin day frock, Wolcott's favourite. Her bonnet, of the same material, framed shiny blond ringlets curled about her face. When she removed her hand from the muff to adjust her bonnet, he gently took it and brought it to his lips.

"Of course you will marry me, my dear."

Turning, she felt his hand strong and firm and amazingly warm. His lips touching her fingers felt soft, his beard coarse. He avoided her eyes. She had dreamed of a proposal, but not like this. She did not feel the ecstasy that she had anticipated, that Bronte had so aptly described with Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester. Instead of giddiness and happiness, she felt sadness. *This is not the way I am supposed to feel.*

Forcing an emotion she had distilled and left dormant since the moment she met him, Mary brought his hand to her lips. *Oh, that he should take me in his arms and kiss me.* She encouraged him by pressing her lips to his trembling hand. Closing her eyes, she took in the scent lingering there and yearned for him to repeat the proposal with more ... more love, more passion.

"Sir, I do not know what to say. You have quite taken me off guard."

There was a long silence. Wolcott stared out into the glaring starkness of the city. The carriage wheels spun off clods of brown mud-caked slush.

"I should think a spring wedding, an early spring wedding, would be nice, Mary."

Uncharacteristically he let her fondle his hand, but he would not allow himself to meet the enveloping blue of her eyes.

"I have, of course, spoken to your father."

Her heart beat faster. She had an inclination to refuse him. Then perhaps he would propose properly.

“Indeed, sir.” She studied his profile silhouetted against the snow’s white glare. His long eyelashes curled upward. His thick black beard and moustache emphasized the smallness of his features. “I do love you,” she whispered.

“I know, Mary. I knew the first day we met.”

“But, John, you have never said as much to me.” Leaning toward him, she tried to catch his eye. “I know you are a private person and would not want to kiss me now, in so public a place. Though,” she squeezed his hand, “there is no one out on such a day.”

He removed his hand from hers.

Feeling his rebuke, she realized she had been too forward.

“Forgive me, sir. It is only that I am so very happy.” She could feel her face turn hot.

Wolcott sat back, retaking her hand. He had known this day would come. She was an affectionate woman. He was frightened of her, frightened of her power. And still there was the matter of sharing his bed with her. Would he succumb to her the way he did with Charmaine? Indeed, he cannot let that happen. He cannot let another woman ever control his biggest weakness ... his heart.

“Indeed, Mary, I am a private man.” He glanced at her. “April is as good as any month, my dear.” Their carriage slowed as it approached the Melbourne House. “We shall marry on the fourteenth day.”

She took his hand as he helped her from the carriage. “As you wish, John.”

A sudden gust of wind sprayed them with an icy, snowy mist. Wolcott sheltered her with his body. With his arm firmly around her waist, he moved her under the alcove of the Melbourne House.

She remained motionless, wanting all the more to kiss him, but fearful of rejection should she make another advance. She tried to move away, but he would not release her. Impulsively, she kissed his mouth.

Wolcott, for an instant, dropped his guard and returned her kiss. He pulled her closer, parted her lips with his tongue and moaned. With a jolt, he regained his composure and shook his head. “Mary—I, I, we must not do this.”

She felt his hot breath on her face. Her own breathing had quickened. She was confused by all the wild feelings permeating the intimacy of her body. What is happening to me? She whispered, "Oh, John. After all, we are to be married."

"Yes, Mary." Cupping her chin, he looked down into her face.

She felt heat radiate from his body, felt the hardness of his grasp, her sweet naiveté shown pure and simple on her face. A half-laugh escaped him.

"Sir," she said breathlessly as she pulled away, "what is there to laugh about?"

The front door opened and Wolcott released her. The Melbourne housekeeper curtsied. "Oh," she stammered at finding them so intimate, "Oh, good day, Miss Mary. Good day, Mr Wolcott."

"Good day, Mrs Fennigan." Mary's face coloured. "Well, sir, until tomorrow." She studied her future husband with scepticism. When he did not say anything more, she walked past the housekeeper and ascended the steps to her room.