

WICKED by Cheryl Holt

Excerpt

James had observed plenty when he'd barged into Rose's bedchamber, but he was hesitant to share his views with Stanley.

When Stanley had lured him home from the army, when he'd made the hilarious announcement that he was marrying again, James had been greatly humored. Now that he'd met Miss Ralston, he was simply confused.

With that wild auburn hair and those expressive green eyes, she was stunning. He felt she deserved much more than a cold, unhappy union with Stanley, but James didn't know her at all. How could he judge what she truly sought from the match?

No matter what her situation, though, he hardly thought Stanley should be the cure. Then again, if she could deliver the desperately needed heir, she'd be set at Summerfield forever. Wasn't such a boon worth it? Any female in the world would likely leap at the chance.

James didn't think Miss Ralston should sacrifice herself, but then, he loathed the estate.

He'd been brought to Summerfield, rescued from an orphanage in London, by Stanley's first wife, Edwina. Supposedly, she'd been lonely and had yearned for a child to keep her company. But why James? Of all the orphans in the kingdom, why had he been chosen?

Stanley had been maddening in his refusal to explain, so James occupied a strange position at Summerfield. He wasn't acknowledged as kin, but everyone assumed him to be.

Rumors abounded that he was Stanley's by-blow from a secret affair, but Stanley had never affirmed or dispelled the gossip, and James couldn't figure out what to believe. He and Stanley didn't look anything alike, not in facial features or stature, so there was no physical resemblance to provide any clues. And there was certainly no similarity of personality.

Stanley had welcomed James into his life, had paid for James's education, had bought his commission in the army. James viewed Summerfield as his home, but what did that mean?

He had no genuine bond with Stanley. Not one that Stanley would admit anyway. He constantly teased James with sly innuendo about James's past, about his parents' identities, about how Stanley knew precisely what James was dying to know.

As a boy, James had been frantic to learn who he was, so Stanley had manipulated him in a thousand small ways, but as the years had sped by, Stanley's power and influence had waned. Especially with James having been in the army for so long.

His ties to Summerfield and to Stanley had worn thin to the point of snapping. The least little incident could sever them. That's what James liked to tell himself. The reality was more complicated than that.

"She's very bright," James ultimately said of Miss Ralston, remembering her refined speech and gracious manners. "You'll never be able to trick her."

“Leave it to me.”

“I wish you’d reconsider.”

“Well, I’m not going to. What is your answer? Will you help me or not?”

“There has to be some other way.”

“You think I haven’t reflected? You think I haven’t dithered and debated and torn out my hair?”

“Is that where it all went? You tore it out?”

“Don’t be smart,” Stanley said again as he had to Lucas.

James sighed. “It would be so much easier if she was stupid.”

“Stupid! If she was, she’d pass on her insipid traits to my child, and I’d wind up with a dunce for a son. Why would I want that?”

“Why would you want any of this? It can’t be worth it to deceive her as you’re planning.”

“I can’t let Oscar inherit.”

Oscar was Stanley’s only brother, a pious, cruel, and sanctimonious vicar whom Stanley couldn’t abide and whom James detested. There were hundreds of people who relied on Summerfield for their income and employment, and Oscar was pompous and unbending. If he eventually became the owner of Summerfield, it would be a tragedy for all.

“It’s too bad you couldn’t have been a tad more fertile,” James said.

“And it’s too bad I’ve lowered myself to have you as an ally.”

James shrugged. “You have to pick your partners where you find them.”

“I certainly do.” Stanley sipped his drink, watching James with those shrewd, cutting eyes of his. James could barely resist squirming. Finally, Stanley asked, “What is your reply? Are you in or out?”

“Must I decide now?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know what’s best.”

“I told you: If you assist me, I’ll give you a thousand pounds. More importantly, I’ll give you all the information I have about your parents.”

“You liar. You never would. If you came clean, your hold over me would be broken.”

“Yes, it would, but you’d have what you crave: your past, your history, your kin. You’ve always claimed you’d jump any hurdle to discover the details. Will you?”

James stared and stared, eager to get up and walk out, eager to tell Stanley to use some other sap for his dirty work. But the sad fact was that he needed the money, and he was anxious to unravel the secrets only Stanley could provide. Those secrets were the only thing Stanley possessed that could force James to acquiesce. And there was Miss Ralston to consider.

She was remarkable, but naïve and trusting, and she’d journeyed to Summerfield with good intentions. She was extremely brave, traveling so far merely to wed an elderly ingrate. James was amazed by her courage. He wouldn’t have dared, but she was ready and willing to proceed.

Stanley was cruel and manipulative and driven to have his own way. If James refused to help, Stanley would bribe someone else. Who might it be?

The notion of what might happen to Miss Ralston, of what Stanley might *let* happen to her, was too disconcerting.

Wasn't it best if James agreed? If he participated, he'd know the outcome. If he didn't, the possibility of a catastrophic conclusion was enormous, and the damage to Miss Ralston would be incalculable.

"All right," he muttered. "I'll do it."

"I knew I could convince you."

"I'll do it for *her*, though. Not for you. For her."

"Aren't you a bloody knight in shining armor?" Stanley snorted. "Persuade yourself in any fashion you wish. We'll start tomorrow."

"I can't wait."

"Neither can I."

Stanley stood and strutted out. He was smug, cocksure, positive that he controlled the whole world and could render any ending that suited his purposes.

"Poor Miss Ralston," James murmured to himself. "The poor, poor woman."

Suddenly, he felt as if he was choking. On Stanley's spite. On Stanley's malice. On his own idiotic complicity.

He leapt up and headed for the stables to saddle a horse. Hopefully, Lucas was in the tavern in the village, and they could drink themselves silly until dawn. Perhaps by then, James would forget the entire sordid, disgusting arrangement.