



A Country Rivalry

SASHA
MORGAN

Can hate turn to love
in the Cotswolds . . .

Henry looked a little surprised, but nodded all the same. Megan smiled again. Obviously Tobias was making a point; he was a married man now, with separate rooms from the rest of the household, and she felt a sense of relief that he had set the boundaries.

Tobias put his arm round her and pulled her in to him. She felt further reassured. He kissed her cheek. 'We'll dine with Mother tonight. She'll want to see us. Is that all right?'

'Of course. I'm sure she's dying to see you.' Megan threaded her arm round him.

'Aunt Celia may still be here,' he gently warned, making her giggle.

'Even better.' Well, she was going to have to get used to all this sooner or later, wasn't she? She only hoped she'd manage to keep dinner down and her pregnancy a secret.

Together they walked along the tiled floors of the corridor, past the oak-panelled Great Hall and up the sweeping staircase to the south wing. The rooms had been aired and cleaned, but it was to be Megan's project to redecorate them. At the moment the walls were bare, all pale yellow and white with polished wooden floors. Nice enough, but she wanted to inject warmth and character into her home, to personalise the rooms with photographs, cosy it up with throws, rugs and gentler lighting. Tobias had had his great four-poster bed moved into their bedroom, and a matching dressing table with the same heavy style of carving had been placed there too. Beatrice, no doubt, thought Megan, appreciating her thoughtfulness. The two large sash windows in the drawing room overlooked the gardens, manicured to perfection, giving them splendid views. It was a vast contrast to the small cottage garden at her old home.

There was a knock at the door and a young girl wearing a white apron carried in a tea tray. Placing it on the coffee table she quickly smiled before leaving the room.

'Thanks!' Megan called after her.

Tobias was on his mobile, staring out of the window. Far in the distance the white railings of the training track could be seen. Beyond that was the old stable block, which he had converted for Dylan's business, and it was Dylan he was talking to, with an intense expression on his face. Clearly they were talking business. Megan understood how much her husband worried about keeping Treweham Hall afloat and out of the red. The training yard promised to have a huge positive impact on their finances, and both Tobias and Dylan were determined to grow the business as quickly as possible. Seeing the tea had arrived and Megan was waiting on the sofa for him to join her, however, he finished the conversation quickly.

'Everything all right?' Megan asked, pouring the tea.

'Fine. The yard's filling up; more horses are arriving this week.'

'That's great, isn't it?' she replied, passing him a cup.

'Certainly is.' He took his cup, put it down, and then turned to her. She got more beautiful as the days passed. Pregnancy certainly suited her, making her skin shine healthily and her brown eyes sparkle. Her body was starting to change shape slightly, with her full breasts and stomach beginning to swell. Megan saw her husband looking at her and it felt good that he still reacted this way. He leant forward to kiss her and she met his lips while her hands ran through his long, dark hair. He pulled her towards him, his arms enclosing her as he deepened the kiss. Her hands crept under his shirt and felt his toned

back. She heard him quietly groan as he ran his lips down her neck and began to reach for the zip at the back of her dress.

‘Tobias! Tobias, are you there?’ Suddenly they jumped apart. Beatrice bustled into the room, closely followed by Zac, Megan’s black Labrador. ‘There you are! How wonderful to see you both!’ Her petite frame was outstretched for Tobias to hug, which he dutifully did.

‘Mother, how lovely to see you,’ he answered.

Megan chewed her bottom lip to stop the laughter that threatened to escape, whilst hugging an excited Zac.

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Dinner that evening was a curious affair. Beatrice and Celia made rather humorous company, without any intention to be funny on their parts.

‘So, how did the honeymoon go?’ Celia asked directly whilst breaking into her bread roll.

‘France was divine, thank you, Celia,’ replied Tobias. Celia then turned to Megan.

‘All settled in then?’ Her eyebrow arched. Megan couldn’t decide if that was a genuine question, or a bit of a dig at them having their own private quarters.

‘Yes. How about you?’ replied Megan, referencing the fact Celia was still there since coming to stay for the wedding, instead of returning to her luxury retirement complex. *Touché*, thought Tobias grinning to himself. Celia chose to ignore the question and carried on.

‘You look a little pale, Megan. Are you feeling all right?’

Megan’s soup spoon hovered before her mouth. ‘Fine, thanks.’ Had the old bat guessed? With her hawk eyes she probably had.

‘Sebastian was just marvellous,’ gushed Beatrice, totally oblivious to the conversation going on around her.

‘I heard that too,’ Tobias smiled. ‘We’ll be seeing him soon. The reviews have been fantastic, haven’t they?’

‘Very talented boy,’ butted in Celia firmly.

‘He is,’ agreed Megan warmly. She thought fondly of her brother-in-law, who had given her so much support, especially when conducting the first guided tour of the Hall, dressed in sixteenth-century costume. Then an uneasy feeling started to stir inside her stomach. Oh, no, she thought, putting her spoon down. Tobias quickly turned to her.

‘Are you OK, Megan?’ His face was etched with concern.

Megan shook her head. ‘I think I’m... going to be...’ Then she quickly got up from the table and dashed to the nearest toilet.

Tobias rose from his chair. ‘Excuse us, ladies,’ he said over his shoulder and followed Megan.

‘Huh, just as I suspected,’ Celia said flatly. Beatrice looked quizzically at her sister. Oh for God’s sake, thought Celia in exasperation. Did she ever cotton on to anything? ‘The

girl's pregnant, Beatrice,' she stated with force.

'Oh... a honeymoon baby! How romantic!' Beatrice clasped her hands together with joy.
Honeymoon my foot, thought Celia.

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Finula took the thick, cream envelope and slid it open. Still unable to recognise the neat, bold writing on the front, her curiosity was building. Inside was a photograph. Pulling it out, she saw it was of her, as Megan's bridesmaid. Normally Finula didn't take a great picture, but even she had to admit this portrait was a good one. A very good one, in fact, capturing her coy smile and her glance cast slightly downwards, as if avoiding eye contact. The light had caught her dark red curls, and the long bronze dress, which hugged her slim build, baring one pale, freckled shoulder, complimented her figure beautifully.

Turning it round, she read the inscription: '*Best wishes, Marcus*'. Her heart stopped for a moment. Marcus. He'd contacted her. Then instantly getting cross with herself she tried to rationalise things logically. It was just a photo that he'd taken of her and he was being polite, sending her a copy. That's all. Even so, her heart had started to beat like a drum. Finula squinted her eyes to assess his writing closely. She once read that someone's handwriting could tell you a lot about the person. Marcus' handwriting was bold, solid, obviously written confidently; no hesitant, faint scribbles here. In any event, Finula thought, it was a kind gesture, which deserved to be thanked. Should she try to ring him? Then again, how? He'd left only his address, no landline number or mobile. Maybe she should send him a thank you card, then? But would that actually encourage him to contact her again? A friendly conversation would be more likely to result in their possibly meeting up, she was sure. Not quite knowing what the best course of action was, she decided to run it past Megan. She'd know what to do.

'Finula!' Her dad was calling from the bottom of the stairs.

'Coming!' she shouted back, shoving the photograph in her dressing-table drawer. Soon she was busy pulling pints, before later moving on to preparing the vegetables for that evening's dinner, and the whole while she had a spring in her step and a smile that refused to disappear. Her dad entered the kitchen, red faced and breathless.

'It's bedlam out there tonight,' he puffed. Finula shook her head; like she was ever going to be able to take that break he'd promised. 'Just to let you know, Fin, we've got full bookings next week.'

Finula looked up, surprised. 'All the rooms?'

'Yes, arranged this afternoon. A TV production team. Do you remember that chap who stayed here the other week? The producer?'

Did she ever.

'Er... Mark... no, Marcus?' She pretended vagueness.

'That's him. He rang, took all the rooms... well, what was available. Apparently they're filming a documentary here, in the village.'

Finula blinked. 'Here?'

'So he said. They'll be staying for some time,' he called, turning back to the busy bar.

Well, well, well. Marcus was coming back here, to The Templar. Finula's mouth stretched into a broad smile. She'd be able to thank him in person after all.

*

'You're retiring?' Connor spat down the phone.

Dylan braced himself, knowing full well how his fat, little agent would react. Although Dylan didn't particularly like Connor, finding him altogether too pushy and greedy, he had to concede that Connor had represented him very well over the years; gaining him exclusive contracts with various clothing and jewellery companies. Images of Dylan wearing the latest sports jacket or designer watch sent sales rocketing. His attending a particular gym had seen its membership soar, not to mention the aftershave commercial he had recently starred in, advertising the sexy fragrance Racer. Connor had made him money, there was no question about that, but in turn, Connor had also raked in the commissions and wasn't about to give them up lightly. On hearing Dylan's decision to retire from racing, Connor had broken out into a sweat. He couldn't let his star client slip through his podgy fingers.

'Dylan, I think you need to seriously reconsider. Think about it. Give yourself some time,' he urged, trying not to sound as desperate as he was, but Dylan saw straight through him.

'I don't need any time, Connor. My mind's made up. I need to concentrate on the racing yard.' He cast his gaze out of his office window to see his grooms scurrying about their duties. The horses were being tacked up for their early morning gallop. He longed to be out there with them, instead of catching up with all the paperwork. However, Dylan always made it a priority to oversee each horse, keen to observe any small change in performance. Each morning he assisted the yard staff with the first feeds and mucking out the stables. Each horse would be exercised for between one and one and a half hours, usually with the same groom, as Dylan wanted to make sure they got to know their horses and any habits or idiosyncrasies they may have. He was more often than not also there for evening stables too, when the horses were skipped out, groomed and checked for injuries or inflammation. The racehorses in Delany's Racing Yard lived in the equivalent of five-star hotel accommodation, always well fed, rugged up and receiving top-class care and attention. Sighing to himself, he turned his attention back to his phone call.

'But...' Connor sounded frantic to suggest a solution.

'It's that simple,' cut in Dylan with determination. 'Newmarket in November will be the last time I race.'

Connor obviously knew when he was beaten. Dylan's mind was clearly made up but, true to form, the agent's money-making brain came up with one last-ditch suggestion.

'What about a book? Your autobiography?' Connor's voice perked up, and Dylan imagined he was picturing the potential royalties stacking up. 'I could arrange it, put the