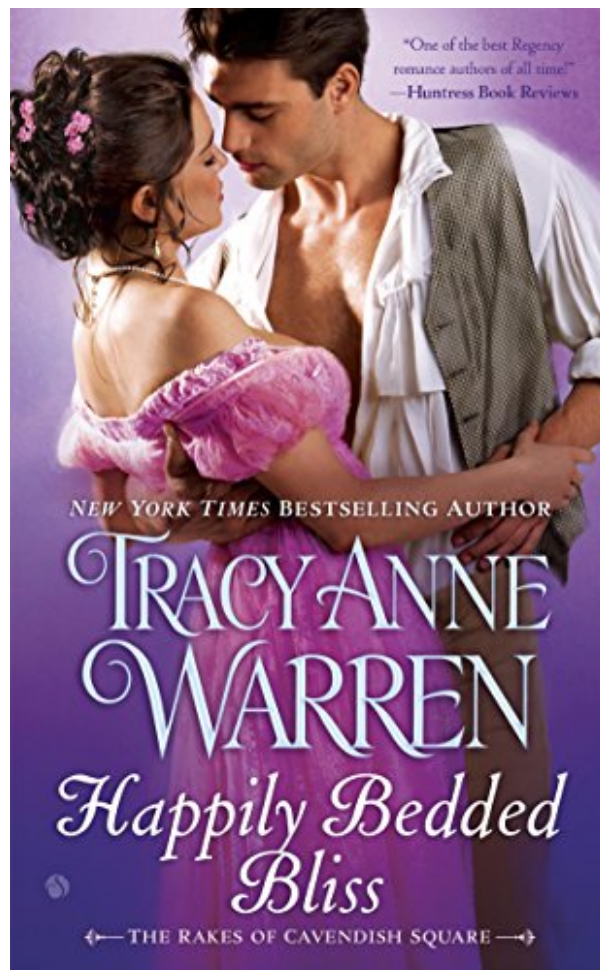
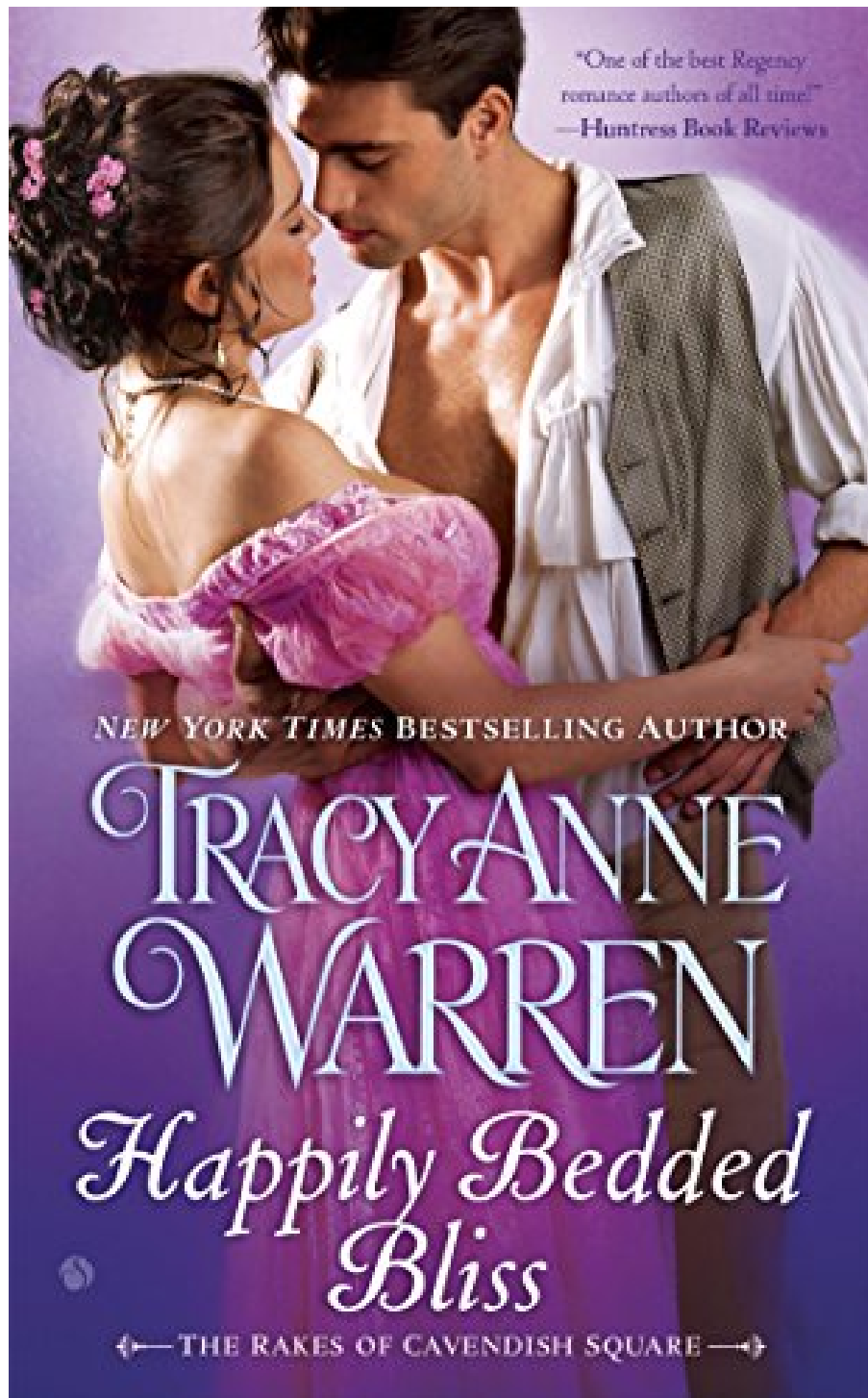


HAPPILY BEDDED BLISS (THE RAKES OF CAVENDISH SQUARE) BY TRACY ANNE WARREN



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Review

Praise for Happily Bedded Bliss

“Warren’s ability to craft a perfect classic Regency is what makes her a fan favorite. There is an added sweetness created by her endearing characters, and there’s enough humor and sensuality to satisfy everyone.”—RT Book Reviews

“Warren pairs up strongly defined characters, adds in plenty of sizzling sexual heat, and then seasons everything with just the right dash of scintillating wit to create another irresistible treat for fans of sexy Regency-set historical-romance novels.”—Booklist

Praise for the novels of Tracy Anne Warren

“Awe-inspiring genius.”—The Romance Readers Connection

“Exceptionally entertaining.”—Chicago Tribune

“Truly satisfying romance.”—The New York Times Book Review

About the Author

Tracy Anne Warren is a New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of more than a dozen romance novels, including *The Bedding Proposal*, *The Trouble with Princesses*, and *Her Highness and the Highlander*. After working in the corporate world for a number of years, she quit her day job to pursue her first love: writing. She has won numerous industry awards, including Romance Writers of America’s RITA Award, the National Readers’ Choice Award, and the HOLT Medallion.

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CHAPTER ONE

Gloucestershire, England

September 1818

Lady Esme Byron hiked her sky blue muslin skirts up past her stocking-clad calves and climbed onto the wooden stile that divided the vast Braebourne estate from land owned to the east by her family's nearest neighbor, Mr. Cray.

Cray, a widower near her eldest brother Edward's age of forty, was rarely in residence and never complained about her trespassing on his land; since her childhood, he'd let her traipse across it almost as if it were her own. Not that Braebourne didn't provide plenty of beautiful vistas to explore—it did, especially considering that her brother owned nearly half the county and more besides—it was just that Cray's land possessed a lovely natural freshwater lake that sat at a perfect walking distance from the house. The lake attracted a rich variety of wildlife, so there was always something fascinating to sketch. Plus, no one ever bothered her there; it was quite her favorite secret place when she was looking for an escape.

She jumped down onto the other side of the stile, taking far more care of the satchel of drawing supplies slung over her shoulder than she did of her fine leather half boots. She wobbled slightly as they sank ankle-deep into the mud, then stared at her ruined boots for a few seconds, knowing her maid would give her a scold for sure. But as she was always able to talk dear Grumbly around, she shrugged away any concern.

Grabbing hold of the fence, she unstuck herself one boot at a time, then scraped the worst of the mess off into the nearby grass. Turning with a swirl of her skirts, she continued on to her destination.

As she walked, she angled her face up to the sun and sighed blissfully.

How good it was to be home again after weeks in London.

How wonderful to be out in the open once more, free to roam wherever she liked, whenever she liked.

A tiny frown of guilt wrinkled her dark brows, since technically she was supposed to be back at the estate helping entertain the houseguests visiting Braebourne. But all seven of her siblings and their families were in residence, even Leo and his new bride Thalia, who had just returned with celebratory fanfare from their honeymoon trip to Italy. With so many Byrons available to make merry, she would hardly be missed.

Besides, they were used to her penchant for disappearing by herself for hours at a time as she roamed the nearby woods and hills and fields. She would be back in time for dinner; that would have to be enough.

An exuberant bark sounded behind her and she glanced around to see her dog Burr leap the stile and race toward her. She bent down and gave his shaggy golden head a scratch. "So, you're back, are you? Done chasing rabbits?"

He waved his bright flag of a tail in a wide arc, his pink tongue lolling out in a happy grin. Clearly, he was unapologetic for having deserted her a short while ago so he could hunt game in the bushes.

“Well, come along,” she told him before continuing toward a stand of trees in the distance.

Burr trotted enthusiastically at her side.

Nearly ten minutes later, they reached the copse of trees that led to the lake. She was just about to step out of their protective green shelter when she heard a splash.

She stopped and motioned for Burr to do the same.

Someone, she realized, was swimming in the lake. Was it Mr. Cray? Had he returned home unexpectedly?

Soundlessly, she peered through the leaves and watched a man emerge from the water—a man who most definitely was not Mr. Cray.

But who was most definitely naked.

Her eyes widened as she drank in the sight of his long, powerfully graceful form, his pale skin glistening wetly in the sunlight.

A quiet sigh of wonder slid from between her parted lips, her senses awash with the same kind of reverence she felt whenever she beheld something of pure, unadorned beauty.

Not that his face was the handsomest she had ever glimpsed—his features were far too strong and angular for ordinary attractiveness. Yet there was something majestic about him, as if a dark angel had fallen to earth. His tall body was exquisitely proportioned: wide shoulders, sculpted chest, long arms, narrow hips and sinewy legs, even the unmentionable male part of him that hung impressively between his heavily muscled thighs.

Clearly unaware that he was being observed, he casually slicked the water from his dark hair, then walked deeper into the surrounding area of short grass, which she knew was periodically trimmed by the groundskeepers.

She caught her lower lip between her teeth, her heart pounding wildly as she watched him stretch out on his back across the soft green carpet of grass. With a hand, she motioned again for Burr to remain quiet. She did the same, knowing that if she moved now, the mystery man would surely hear her.

One minute melted into two, then three.

Quite unexpectedly, she heard the soft yet unmistakable sound of a snore.

Is he asleep?

She smiled, realizing that was exactly what he must be.

Of course she knew she ought to leave. But even as she began to ease away, he shifted, his face turning toward her. One of his hands lay on his flat stomach, one ankle tucked under the other at an elegant angle.

And suddenly she couldn't leave.

Not when she was in the presence of such splendor and grace; it was as if the universe had decided to give her a gift.

I simply have to draw him.

Without considering her decision any further, she sank quietly onto a fallen log nearby that provided her with a sheltered, yet excellent view of her subject. Burr settled down at her side, laying his chin on his paws as she extracted her pencil and sketchbook from her bag and set to work.

Gabriel Landsdowne came abruptly awake, the late-afternoon sun strong in his eyes. He blinked and sat up, giving his head a slight shake to clear out the last of the drowsy cobwebs.

He'd fallen asleep without even realizing. Apparently, he was more tired than he'd thought. Then again, that was why he'd come here to Cray's, so he could spend a little time alone, doing nothing more strenuous than taking a leisurely swim and lazing away the day. He could have done the same at his own estate, of course, but visiting Ten Elms always put him in a foul humor.

Too many bad memories.

Too many unwanted responsibilities on behalf of a place that had never brought him anything but pain. For the most part, he left Ten Elms' management to his steward, since he rarely set foot over the threshold, but invariably there was some matter or other that would crop up, requiring his attention. There was also his house in Cornwall, and his town house in London, both of which put claims on his time and attention, but he never minded seeing to those properties. They were his and his alone, with none of the taint of the past to sour his habitation.

Yet he'd grown tired of his usual haunts of late—and his usual companions and their seemingly insatiable craving for debauchery.

Even the devil needed a holiday every once in a while.

When his old, and far more respectable, friend Cray mentioned that he was going hunting in Scotland—an activity Gabriel did not enjoy—Cray offered Gabriel the use of his house in his absence. Knowing that Cray House was a place none of his regular crowd would ever think to find him, Gabriel had accepted. He'd actually left London without so much as a word to anyone, instructing his butler to take the knocker off the door and say only that the master was away at present and not receiving.

Wouldn't his ribald set of cronies laugh now to see him doing something as prosaic as taking a solitary afternoon nap? Then again, he was out of doors, stark naked, so they would most certainly approve of that.

Smirking, he stood up, brushing an errant blade of grass from his bare buttocks. He was about to cross to the stand of bushes where he'd left his clothes when he heard a faint rustling sound behind him. He turned and stared into the foliage.

"Who is it? Is someone there?" he demanded.

The only answer was silence.

He looked again, scanning the area, but nothing moved; no one spoke.

Maybe it had been the wind? Or an animal foraging in the woods?

Suddenly a dog burst from the concealment of the trees, its shaggy wheaten coat gleaming warmly in the sun. He was a medium-sized mix of no particular breed, part hound, possibly, or maybe retriever. He seemed well fed, so it was doubtful that he was a stray. Then again, mayhap he was skilled at poaching birds and

rabbits from the bountiful reserves of game in the area.

The dog stopped and looked at him, eyes bright and inquiring but not unfriendly.

“Who might you be, fellow?” Gabriel asked.

The animal wagged his tail and barked twice. Then, just as suddenly as he had appeared, he spun and disappeared into the trees once more.

In that instant, Gabriel thought he spied a flash of blue in the woods.

A bird?

The dog must have sensed it and gone off to chase.

Gabriel stared for one last long moment, then shrugged and turned to gather his clothes.

CHAPTER TWO

“’Tis high time you got home, my lady,” Esme’s maid scolded as Esme hurried into her bedroom nearly fifteen minutes after the dressing gong had been rung. “I was on the verge of sending one of the footmen out to fetch you. Och, and look at those boots. What new mischief have you been about this afternoon? Tromping in the mud again, I see.”

The older woman’s face creased into a scowl that put Esme in mind of a wizened prune.

“Oh, don’t carry on so, Grumbly,” Esme said with a coaxing smile, using the old nickname she’d given Mrs. Grumblethorpe when Esme had still been in leading strings. “I went for a walk, then stopped at the stables afterward to check on Aeolus. His wing is still healing and he needs food and exercise twice a day.”

Aeolus was a hawk Esme had found in the woods a couple of months earlier, shot with an arrow. She’d nursed him through the worst and hoped the bird might be able to fly again with enough time and care.

Grumblethorpe tsked and turned Esme around, her fingers moving quickly to unfasten the buttons on Esme’s mud-stained dress. “You and your animals. Always worrying over some poor, misbegotten creature. Rabbits and birds, hedgehogs and box turtles. You’re forever dragging something back, to say nothing of all the cats and dogs you’ve brought with you into the house.”

Esme let her maid’s words roll harmlessly away. Despite Grumblethorpe’s noises of disapproval, Esme knew she liked the family pets. She just didn’t approve of having so many of them in her mistress’s bedroom at once. Still, it was an old battle and one the lady’s maid had given up waging long ago.

Good thing too, since four of Esme’s six cats—who had all started life in either the Braebourne stables or as strays she’d rescued—were snoozing in various locations around her room. They included a big orange male, Tobias, who was curled up in a cozy spot in the middle of her bed; Queen Elizabeth—a sweet-natured tabby, who was lounging in her usual window seat; Mozart—a luxuriously coated white longhair who luckily loved being brushed; and Naiad, a one-eyed black female, whom Esme had rescued from drowning as a kitten. Her other two cats, Persephone and Ruff, were out and about, seeing to their own cat business.

As for the dogs, Burr lay stretched out on the hearthrug in front of the fireplace. He snored gently, clearly tired after their recent adventures. And joining him in the land of dreams was dear old Henry, a brindle spaniel who was curled up inside a nearby dog bed lined with plush pillows that helped cushion his aging joints. Handel and Haydn, a pair of impish Scottish terriers, were absent. She suspected they were on the third floor playing with her increasingly large brood of nieces and nephews. The dogs loved the children.

Still making a few noises that were true to her name, Grumblethorpe stripped Esme down to her shift and bare feet. She carried away the soiled garments, leaving Esme to wash up with the fresh water and towels that had been laid out.

As Esme dipped her hands into the basin of water, her thoughts turned again to the mysterious naked man at the lake and the drawing of him that now resided in her sketchbook.

A warm flush rose on her skin, together with a tiny secret smile. He truly had been . . . magnificent. Better than any of the Greek statues she'd ever seen.

But her interest in him had been strictly artistic, she assured herself. She was an artist and he had been her chosen subject. If he happened to be pleasingly shaped, and if she happened to have taken extra care in her rendering of certain intriguing body parts, well, she had only been doing justice to the artwork, nothing more.

Even so, she was grateful he hadn't realized that she'd drawn him. Some people didn't like having their likenesses sketched—although considering that he'd been swimming naked, he didn't strike her as the bashful type.

Thank heavens, though, for Burr. For a few seconds, when she'd been turning to leave, she'd feared that her accidental Adonis had spotted her. But Burr had dashed out and diverted his attention so that he hadn't known she was there.

Picking up the bar of honey-scented soap, she lathered her hands and began to wash. As she did, she speculated again on who he might be. Certainly no one who lived in the neighborhood; she would have remembered a man like him. So why did she have the strangest feeling she'd seen him somewhere before? For the life of her, she couldn't place him.

Oh well, it would come to her eventually—or not. She wasn't going to concern herself. After all, it wasn't as if their paths were likely ever to cross again.

Just then, Grumblethorpe came back into the room with Esme's evening gown and silk slippers in hand. Realizing she had no further time to ruminate, Esme began to bathe in earnest.

In far less time than one might have imagined, Esme stood clean, elegantly coiffed and attired in an evening gown of demure white silk—presentable for company once again.

She'd hoped with the Season over, she might be able to put all the entertaining behind her for the year. But then Claire had decided to host one of her autumn country parties, inviting the usual gathering of friends and family, in addition to a few new acquaintances from London.

Esme sighed inwardly, wishing she could spend a quiet evening with just the family, then retire early with a good book.

Instead, she straightened her shoulders, fixed a smile on her lips and headed downstairs.

“Might I have the pleasure of procuring a beverage for you, Lady Esme?”

Esme glanced up from where she sat on the end of the long drawing room sofa and into the eager gray eyes of Lord Eversley.

Only minutes before, the gentlemen had rejoined the ladies after dinner, strolling in on a wave of companionable talk and the faint lingering aromas of cigar smoke and port wine.

Esme had been half listening to the other women's discussion of the latest fashions when Lord Eversley approached and made her a very elegant bow.

He'd been seated next to her at dinner; she'd found his conversation both pleasant and interesting. He was an attractive man, personable, well-mannered and intelligent. He was also heir to an earldom and a fortune that was impressive even by her own family's standards.

In short, he was everything any sane young woman could want in a husband.

So why wasn't she falling under his spell?

She couldn't even claim the excuse of disliking him; she liked him quite well. He was nice. He had a good sense of humor, and as a friend, she had no quarrel with his company.

But marriage?

Instinctively she knew there should be something more—a spark, a flicker of passion, to say nothing of love. And that, above all else, was the problem. Perfect as he was, he simply wasn't the man for her.

Yet out of all her suitors during this year's London Season, Eversley had been the most attentive. She'd done her best not to encourage him. She had even tried a time or two to actively discourage him. But if he had one fault, it was his bone-deep streak of stubbornness. Which, she supposed, accounted for his decision to accept Claire's invitation to come to Braebourne for a fortnight of shooting and entertainment.

As for her sister-in-law Claire and her sister, Mallory, and their rather badly disguised attempt to further a relationship between her and Eversley . . .

She ought to be cross with them; really she should.

But she knew they only meant well. She could hear them now, whispering as coconspirators. But she so clearly likes him. We all like him; even Ned approves. The only thing those two need is a gentle nudge, a bit of time on their own, and the wedding bells will be ringing.

And that was the trouble.

Claire and Mallory were happily married—as were all her siblings now except her brother Lawrence, who just laughed and shook his head whenever anyone brought up the subject of matrimony. All any of them wanted was for her to be happily married too.

Which was sweet in one way and exasperating in another. If only the lot of them would believe her when she said that she wasn't interested in a husband.

Not right now at least, and not for a good long while, if she had any say in the matter.

Luckily, her oldest brother, Edward—despite his approval of Eversley—was in no hurry to get her off his hands. He'd assured her before the Season had even begun that she was to take her time and marry only

when, and if, she wished. He was quite content to let her remain at home for as many years as she liked.

Someday, she knew, the time would come when she would need to marry. Until then, she would have to find ways to avoid the overtures of interested young men, especially the thoroughly eligible and clearly determined Lord Eversley.

She smiled and nodded toward her nearly empty teacup. “Thank you, Lord Eversley, for your kind offer, but I am very well refreshed at present.”

“Ah,” he said, linking his hands behind his back while he took a moment to regroup. Suddenly his eyes brightened. “A walk, then, perhaps? The gardens here at Braebourne are quite splendid, even by lantern light.”

There it was, alone in the gardens. She wasn’t falling for that trick.

“Indeed the gardens are lovely. But again, I must refuse. Another time perhaps? I have walked a great deal today, you understand, and my feet are far too weary for another outing tonight.”

Her feet were never weary—everyone in the family knew she could beat paths through the fields like a seasoned foot soldier—but Lord Eversley didn’t need to be apprised of that fact. Hopefully none of her family was listening and would decide to give her away.

Yet apparently someone else was listening.

Lettice Waxhaven—another of the London guests, who happened to have made her debut along with Esme this past spring—leaned forward, a fierce gleam in her pale blue eyes. “Yes, where were you this afternoon, Lady Esme? We were all of us wondering what could be so fascinating that you would vanish for the entirety of the afternoon.”

Esme hid her dislike for the other young woman behind a tight smile. Why her mother and Lettice’s mother had to be old childhood friends who had been unexpectedly reacquainted this Season, she didn’t for the life of her know. But owing to the renewal of that friendship, Esme found herself far too often in Lettice’s company.

“I was just out,” Esme said. “Walking and sketching.”

“Really? Pray tell, what is it you sketch?” Lettice asked as if she were actually interested—which Esme knew she was not.

But quite without warning, she was caught up in unbidden memories of the lake and the drawings she had done of the naked sleeping man. She blinked, grateful for the room’s warmth, since it disguised the flush stealing over her neck and cheeks.

“Nature,” she answered with a seemingly careless shrug. “Plants and animals. Anything that takes my fancy at the time.”

And, oh my, had the glorious stranger taken her fancy.

“Lady Esme is quite the accomplished artist,” Lord Eversley said with enthusiasm. “I had the great good fortune to view a few of her watercolors when we were last in Town.” He smiled at her with clear admiration. “She is a marvel.”

Lettice's mouth tightened, her eyes narrowing. It was no secret—at least not to Esme—that Lettice had long ago set her cap at Lord Eversley and that so far he had failed to take notice of her. Esme would have felt sorry for her were she a nicer person.

After a moment, Lettice rearranged her features into a sweet smile, as if realizing she'd let a glimpse of her real personality show instead of the usual falsely pleasant mask she wore. "Oh, I should so like to see your sketches. Perhaps you might show them to us?"

"Yes, Lady Esme," Eversley agreed. "I too would greatly enjoy a chance to view your newest work."

"That is most kind," Esme said, hedging. "But I suspect you would find my efforts disappointing."

"Impossible," Eversley disagreed. "You are too good an artist to ever draw anything that could be termed disappointing."

"You give me far too much credit, Lord Eversley. What I drew today amounts to nothing of importance. Just a few random studies; that's all."

Nude studies of an unforgettable male.

Sleek limbs corded with muscle.

A powerful, hair-roughened chest.

Narrow hips.

Taut buttocks.

And his face . . .

Planes and angles that begged for an artist's attention, rugged yet refined, bold and brilliant.

Captivating.

"Truly, they're mostly rubbish, and I have no wish to offend anyone's eyes with the viewing," she said, hoping Eversley would take the hint and let that be the end of it.

Instead, he persisted. "You are far too modest, Lady Esme. Why do you not let me be the judge?"

"Who is modest?" her brother Lawrence said, turning his head to join the conversation. A few of the others looked around as well.

"Lady Esme," Eversley explained. "Miss Waxhaven and I are trying to persuade her to show off the sketches she did today, but she is too shy."

Leo, Lawrence's twin, laughed from where he sat next to his wife, Thalia. "Our Esme? Shy about her art? That doesn't sound likely."

"Yes, she's usually raring to share," Lord Drake Byron agreed.

"That's because even her bad drawings are better than anything the rest of us can do," Mallory said before she shot a glance over at Grace. "Except for Grace, of course. No offense, Grace, since you are a brilliant

artist too.”

Her sister-in-law smiled. “None taken.” Grace looked at Esme. “Do let us see, dear. I know we would all enjoy a glimpse or two of your latest efforts. I particularly love the landscapes you do.”

Cheers of agreement and encouragement rose from those gathered in the room.

Esme’s chest tightened. “No, I couldn’t. Not tonight. Besides, my sketchbook is upstairs. It’s far too much bother to retrieve it right now.”

“It’s no bother,” Edward said. “We’ll have one of the servants fetch it.” He glanced over at the butler. “Croft, please ask one of the maids to collect Lady Esme’s sketchbook and have it brought here to the drawing room.”

“Right away, Your Grace.” The butler bowed and exited the room.

No! Esme wanted to shout and wave her arms to call Croft back.

But it was too late. Any further protestations on her part would look odd, drawing speculation about why she was so adamant that no one see her sketches. When her siblings said that she had never before shown a great deal of modesty concerning her work, they were right.

Still, this could all turn out fine, so long as she didn’t panic. In the main, her sketchbook contained renderings of birds and animals, field flowers, trees in leaf, and the landscapes for which Grace had shown a partiality. The sketches of the man were at the back of the book. So long as she was careful, she could show only the innocent drawings in the front.

All too soon one of the footmen walked in, her blue clothbound sketchbook in hand. She leapt to her feet and hurried across to take it before anyone else could. “Thank you, Joseph.”

Quickly, she clutched the sketchbook against her chest, collecting herself. Then she turned to face the waiting company.

“Here we are,” she said brightly as she crossed to resume her seat. “Since you all wish to see, why don’t I just hold up the drawings rather than passing the book around?”

Slowly she cracked open the binding, careful to go nowhere near the back pages. She thumbed through, looking quickly for something she hadn’t already shown her family.

“Ah, here we are,” she said, relieved to have found a new sketch. “I drew this of the hills toward the village earlier today.”

Actually, she’d drawn it the previous week.

She held up the book, fingers tight on the pages.

Murmurs of appreciation went around the room.

“Lovely,” Lady Waxhaven said.

“Astounding,” Lord Eversley pronounced. “As I said before, you are a marvel, Lady Esme. Show us another.”

“All right.”

Bending over the book again, she found another new sketch, this one of her dog Burr lying under a tree.

She held it up, eliciting more positive remarks and smiles. From everyone except Lettice Waxhaven, that is. Lettice’s innocent mask had slipped again, her eyes filled with a bitterness that made her look as if she wished she’d never started this.

Well, that makes two of us, Esme thought.

Esme showed them one last sketch of farmers working in the fields, then closed the book, holding it on her lap. “There, you have all had your art exhibition for the evening. Now, enough about me. Please go back to whatever you were doing before, talking and drinking and enjoying the evening.”

“Thank you, dear, for sharing your beautiful drawings with everyone. But Esme is right,” Claire said with a broad smile. “Let us make merry. Perhaps a game of cards or some dancing? I should dearly love to hear a tune.”

“That sounds wonderful, Duchess,” Lettice declared, openly enthusiastic. Her gaze went to Eversley. “Do you enjoy music, my lord?”

“Indeed,” he said. “Mayhap you could play for us, Miss Waxhaven? You’re quite accomplished on the pianoforte as I recall.” Then he turned to Esme. “Lady Esme, what about you? Would you care to take to the floor?”

Lettice Waxhaven’s face drained of color.

Esme actually did feel sorry for her—and rather cross with Lord Eversley for being so obtuse. She stood, intending to refuse him. But before she could, Lettice stalked forward and deliberately bumped into her shoulder, though Lettice did a good job making it look unintentional.

The sketchbook flew out of Esme’s grasp, pages fluttering wide before the book spun and skidded to a halt on the floor.

She bent quickly to retrieve it, but Lettice Waxhaven’s loud gasp let her know it was already too late. Everyone else was turning and looking too.

Breath froze in her chest, her thoughts tumbling wildly one over the other as she tried to think exactly how to explain the page with the gloriously bare, unforgettably gorgeous male specimen lying open for all to see.

“What in the nine circles of Hell is that?” Lawrence said, his voice so loud she jumped.

“I believe we can all see what it is,” Leo answered, his face wearing the identical look of shock and dawning outrage as his twin’s. “The only thing I want to know is how we’re going to kill him.”

“Kill who?” Esme squeaked, suddenly finding her voice.

Leo and Lawrence’s gazes swung her way, while the rest of their family and friends looked on.

“Northcote.” Leo said the name like it was a curse.

“Our neighbor from Cavendish Square,” Lawrence finished.

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HAPPILY BEDDED BLISS (THE RAKES OF CAVENDISH SQUARE) BY TRACY ANNE WARREN PDF

From the New York Times bestselling author of *The Bedding Proposal* comes a seductive new novel about the most devilishly dangerous men in London...

When Lady Esme Byron happens upon a gorgeous naked man sleeping beside a secluded country lake, she can't resist the impulse to sketch him. But when her highly improper drawing is mistakenly revealed at a party, she finds her once-pristine reputation in tatters.

Gabriel, Lord Northcote, may be a notorious rakehell, but he is still stunned to find himself accused of despoiling a duke's sister—especially since he's never set eyes on her. When Esme's six irate brothers demand a hurried trip down the aisle, he has no choice but to comply. He thinks he can forget about his inconvenient bride but Esme Byron is no ordinary woman and Gabriel is about to learn just how unforgettable she can be.

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Review

Praise for *Happily Bedded Bliss*

“Warren’s ability to craft a perfect classic Regency is what makes her a fan favorite. There is an added sweetness created by her endearing characters, and there’s enough humor and sensuality to satisfy everyone.”—RT Book Reviews

“Warren pairs up strongly defined characters, adds in plenty of sizzling sexual heat, and then seasons everything with just the right dash of scintillating wit to create another irresistible treat for fans of sexy Regency-set historical-romance novels.”—Booklist

Praise for the novels of Tracy Anne Warren

“Awe-inspiring genius.”—The Romance Readers Connection

“Exceptionally entertaining.”—Chicago Tribune

“Truly satisfying romance.”—The New York Times Book Review

About the Author

Tracy Anne Warren is a New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of more than a dozen romance

novels, including *The Bedding Proposal*, *The Trouble with Princesses*, and *Her Highness and the Highlander*. After working in the corporate world for a number of years, she quit her day job to pursue her first love: writing. She has won numerous industry awards, including Romance Writers of America's RITA Award, the National Readers' Choice Award, and the HOLT Medallion.

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CHAPTER ONE

Gloucestershire, England

September 1818

Lady Esme Byron hiked her sky blue muslin skirts up past her stocking-clad calves and climbed onto the wooden stile that divided the vast Braebourne estate from land owned to the east by her family's nearest neighbor, Mr. Cray.

Cray, a widower near her eldest brother Edward's age of forty, was rarely in residence and never complained about her trespassing on his land; since her childhood, he'd let her traipse across it almost as if it were her own. Not that Braebourne didn't provide plenty of beautiful vistas to explore—it did, especially considering that her brother owned nearly half the county and more besides—it was just that Cray's land possessed a lovely natural freshwater lake that sat at a perfect walking distance from the house. The lake attracted a rich variety of wildlife, so there was always something fascinating to sketch. Plus, no one ever bothered her there; it was quite her favorite secret place when she was looking for an escape.

She jumped down onto the other side of the stile, taking far more care of the satchel of drawing supplies slung over her shoulder than she did of her fine leather half boots. She wobbled slightly as they sank ankle-deep into the mud, then stared at her ruined boots for a few seconds, knowing her maid would give her a scold for sure. But as she was always able to talk dear Grumbly around, she shrugged away any concern.

Grabbing hold of the fence, she unstuck herself one boot at a time, then scraped the worst of the mess off into the nearby grass. Turning with a swirl of her skirts, she continued on to her destination.

As she walked, she angled her face up to the sun and sighed blissfully.

How good it was to be home again after weeks in London.

How wonderful to be out in the open once more, free to roam wherever she liked, whenever she liked.

A tiny frown of guilt wrinkled her dark brows, since technically she was supposed to be back at the estate helping entertain the houseguests visiting Braebourne. But all seven of her siblings and their families were in residence, even Leo and his new bride Thalia, who had just returned with celebratory fanfare from their honeymoon trip to Italy. With so many Byrons available to make merry, she would hardly be missed.

Besides, they were used to her penchant for disappearing by herself for hours at a time as she roamed the

nearby woods and hills and fields. She would be back in time for dinner; that would have to be enough.

An exuberant bark sounded behind her and she glanced around to see her dog Burr leap the stile and race toward her. She bent down and gave his shaggy golden head a scratch. “So, you’re back, are you? Done chasing rabbits?”

He waved his bright flag of a tail in a wide arc, his pink tongue lolling out in a happy grin. Clearly, he was unapologetic for having deserted her a short while ago so he could hunt game in the bushes.

“Well, come along,” she told him before continuing toward a stand of trees in the distance.

Burr trotted enthusiastically at her side.

Nearly ten minutes later, they reached the copse of trees that led to the lake. She was just about to step out of their protective green shelter when she heard a splash.

She stopped and motioned for Burr to do the same.

Someone, she realized, was swimming in the lake. Was it Mr. Cray? Had he returned home unexpectedly?

Soundlessly, she peered through the leaves and watched a man emerge from the water—a man who most definitely was not Mr. Cray.

But who was most definitely naked.

Her eyes widened as she drank in the sight of his long, powerfully graceful form, his pale skin glistening wetly in the sunlight.

A quiet sigh of wonder slid from between her parted lips, her senses awash with the same kind of reverence she felt whenever she beheld something of pure, unadorned beauty.

Not that his face was the handsomest she had ever glimpsed—his features were far too strong and angular for ordinary attractiveness. Yet there was something majestic about him, as if a dark angel had fallen to earth. His tall body was exquisitely proportioned: wide shoulders, sculpted chest, long arms, narrow hips and sinewy legs, even the unmentionable male part of him that hung impressively between his heavily muscled thighs.

Clearly unaware that he was being observed, he casually slicked the water from his dark hair, then walked deeper into the surrounding area of short grass, which she knew was periodically trimmed by the groundskeepers.

She caught her lower lip between her teeth, her heart pounding wildly as she watched him stretch out on his back across the soft green carpet of grass. With a hand, she motioned again for Burr to remain quiet. She did the same, knowing that if she moved now, the mystery man would surely hear her.

One minute melted into two, then three.

Quite unexpectedly, she heard the soft yet unmistakable sound of a snore.

Is he asleep?

She smiled, realizing that was exactly what he must be.

Of course she knew she ought to leave. But even as she began to ease away, he shifted, his face turning toward her. One of his hands lay on his flat stomach, one ankle tucked under the other at an elegant angle.

And suddenly she couldn't leave.

Not when she was in the presence of such splendor and grace; it was as if the universe had decided to give her a gift.

I simply have to draw him.

Without considering her decision any further, she sank quietly onto a fallen log nearby that provided her with a sheltered, yet excellent view of her subject. Burr settled down at her side, laying his chin on his paws as she extracted her pencil and sketchbook from her bag and set to work.

Gabriel Landsdowne came abruptly awake, the late-afternoon sun strong in his eyes. He blinked and sat up, giving his head a slight shake to clear out the last of the drowsy cobwebs.

He'd fallen asleep without even realizing. Apparently, he was more tired than he'd thought. Then again, that was why he'd come here to Cray's, so he could spend a little time alone, doing nothing more strenuous than taking a leisurely swim and lazing away the day. He could have done the same at his own estate, of course, but visiting Ten Elms always put him in a foul humor.

Too many bad memories.

Too many unwanted responsibilities on behalf of a place that had never brought him anything but pain. For the most part, he left Ten Elms' management to his steward, since he rarely set foot over the threshold, but invariably there was some matter or other that would crop up, requiring his attention. There was also his house in Cornwall, and his town house in London, both of which put claims on his time and attention, but he never minded seeing to those properties. They were his and his alone, with none of the taint of the past to sour his habitation.

Yet he'd grown tired of his usual haunts of late—and his usual companions and their seemingly insatiable craving for debauchery.

Even the devil needed a holiday every once in a while.

When his old, and far more respectable, friend Cray mentioned that he was going hunting in Scotland—an activity Gabriel did not enjoy—Cray offered Gabriel the use of his house in his absence. Knowing that Cray House was a place none of his regular crowd would ever think to find him, Gabriel had accepted. He'd actually left London without so much as a word to anyone, instructing his butler to take the knocker off the door and say only that the master was away at present and not receiving.

Wouldn't his ribald set of cronies laugh now to see him doing something as prosaic as taking a solitary afternoon nap? Then again, he was out of doors, stark naked, so they would most certainly approve of that.

Smirking, he stood up, brushing an errant blade of grass from his bare buttocks. He was about to cross to the stand of bushes where he'd left his clothes when he heard a faint rustling sound behind him. He turned and stared into the foliage.

"Who is it? Is someone there?" he demanded.

The only answer was silence.

He looked again, scanning the area, but nothing moved; no one spoke.

Maybe it had been the wind? Or an animal foraging in the woods?

Suddenly a dog burst from the concealment of the trees, its shaggy wheaten coat gleaming warmly in the sun. He was a medium-sized mix of no particular breed, part hound, possibly, or maybe retriever. He seemed well fed, so it was doubtful that he was a stray. Then again, mayhap he was skilled at poaching birds and rabbits from the bountiful reserves of game in the area.

The dog stopped and looked at him, eyes bright and inquiring but not unfriendly.

“Who might you be, fellow?” Gabriel asked.

The animal wagged his tail and barked twice. Then, just as suddenly as he had appeared, he spun and disappeared into the trees once more.

In that instant, Gabriel thought he spied a flash of blue in the woods.

A bird?

The dog must have sensed it and gone off to chase.

Gabriel stared for one last long moment, then shrugged and turned to gather his clothes.

CHAPTER TWO

“’Tis high time you got home, my lady,” Esme’s maid scolded as Esme hurried into her bedroom nearly fifteen minutes after the dressing gong had been rung. “I was on the verge of sending one of the footmen out to fetch you. Och, and look at those boots. What new mischief have you been about this afternoon? Tromping in the mud again, I see.”

The older woman’s face creased into a scowl that put Esme in mind of a wizened prune.

“Oh, don’t carry on so, Grumbly,” Esme said with a coaxing smile, using the old nickname she’d given Mrs. Grumblethorpe when Esme had still been in leading strings. “I went for a walk, then stopped at the stables afterward to check on Aeolus. His wing is still healing and he needs food and exercise twice a day.”

Aeolus was a hawk Esme had found in the woods a couple of months earlier, shot with an arrow. She’d nursed him through the worst and hoped the bird might be able to fly again with enough time and care.

Grumblethorpe tsked and turned Esme around, her fingers moving quickly to unfasten the buttons on Esme’s mud-stained dress. “You and your animals. Always worrying over some poor, misbegotten creature. Rabbits and birds, hedgehogs and box turtles. You’re forever dragging something back, to say nothing of all the cats and dogs you’ve brought with you into the house.”

Esme let her maid’s words roll harmlessly away. Despite Grumblethorpe’s noises of disapproval, Esme knew she liked the family pets. She just didn’t approve of having so many of them in her mistress’s bedroom at once. Still, it was an old battle and one the lady’s maid had given up waging long ago.

Good thing too, since four of Esme's six cats—who had all started life in either the Braebourne stables or as strays she'd rescued—were snoozing in various locations around her room. They included a big orange male, Tobias, who was curled up in a cozy spot in the middle of her bed; Queen Elizabeth—a sweet-natured tabby, who was lounging in her usual window seat; Mozart—a luxuriously coated white longhair who luckily loved being brushed; and Naiad, a one-eyed black female, whom Esme had rescued from drowning as a kitten. Her other two cats, Persephone and Ruff, were out and about, seeing to their own cat business.

As for the dogs, Burr lay stretched out on the hearthrug in front of the fireplace. He snored gently, clearly tired after their recent adventures. And joining him in the land of dreams was dear old Henry, a brindle spaniel who was curled up inside a nearby dog bed lined with plush pillows that helped cushion his aging joints. Handel and Haydn, a pair of impish Scottish terriers, were absent. She suspected they were on the third floor playing with her increasingly large brood of nieces and nephews. The dogs loved the children.

Still making a few noises that were true to her name, Grumblethorpe stripped Esme down to her shift and bare feet. She carried away the soiled garments, leaving Esme to wash up with the fresh water and towels that had been laid out.

As Esme dipped her hands into the basin of water, her thoughts turned again to the mysterious naked man at the lake and the drawing of him that now resided in her sketchbook.

A warm flush rose on her skin, together with a tiny secret smile. He truly had been . . . magnificent. Better than any of the Greek statues she'd ever seen.

But her interest in him had been strictly artistic, she assured herself. She was an artist and he had been her chosen subject. If he happened to be pleasingly shaped, and if she happened to have taken extra care in her rendering of certain intriguing body parts, well, she had only been doing justice to the artwork, nothing more.

Even so, she was grateful he hadn't realized that she'd drawn him. Some people didn't like having their likenesses sketched—although considering that he'd been swimming naked, he didn't strike her as the bashful type.

Thank heavens, though, for Burr. For a few seconds, when she'd been turning to leave, she'd feared that her accidental Adonis had spotted her. But Burr had dashed out and diverted his attention so that he hadn't known she was there.

Picking up the bar of honey-scented soap, she lathered her hands and began to wash. As she did, she speculated again on who he might be. Certainly no one who lived in the neighborhood; she would have remembered a man like him. So why did she have the strangest feeling she'd seen him somewhere before? For the life of her, she couldn't place him.

Oh well, it would come to her eventually—or not. She wasn't going to concern herself. After all, it wasn't as if their paths were likely ever to cross again.

Just then, Grumblethorpe came back into the room with Esme's evening gown and silk slippers in hand. Realizing she had no further time to ruminate, Esme began to bathe in earnest.

In far less time than one might have imagined, Esme stood clean, elegantly coiffed and attired in an evening gown of demure white silk—presentable for company once again.

She'd hoped with the Season over, she might be able to put all the entertaining behind her for the year. But then Claire had decided to host one of her autumn country parties, inviting the usual gathering of friends and

family, in addition to a few new acquaintances from London.

Esme sighed inwardly, wishing she could spend a quiet evening with just the family, then retire early with a good book.

Instead, she straightened her shoulders, fixed a smile on her lips and headed downstairs.

“Might I have the pleasure of procuring a beverage for you, Lady Esme?”

Esme glanced up from where she sat on the end of the long drawing room sofa and into the eager gray eyes of Lord Eversley.

Only minutes before, the gentlemen had rejoined the ladies after dinner, strolling in on a wave of companionable talk and the faint lingering aromas of cigar smoke and port wine.

Esme had been half listening to the other women’s discussion of the latest fashions when Lord Eversley approached and made her a very elegant bow.

He’d been seated next to her at dinner; she’d found his conversation both pleasant and interesting. He was an attractive man, personable, well-mannered and intelligent. He was also heir to an earldom and a fortune that was impressive even by her own family’s standards.

In short, he was everything any sane young woman could want in a husband.

So why wasn’t she falling under his spell?

She couldn’t even claim the excuse of disliking him; she liked him quite well. He was nice. He had a good sense of humor, and as a friend, she had no quarrel with his company.

But marriage?

Instinctively she knew there should be something more—a spark, a flicker of passion, to say nothing of love. And that, above all else, was the problem. Perfect as he was, he simply wasn’t the man for her.

Yet out of all her suitors during this year’s London Season, Eversley had been the most attentive. She’d done her best not to encourage him. She had even tried a time or two to actively discourage him. But if he had one fault, it was his bone-deep streak of stubbornness. Which, she supposed, accounted for his decision to accept Claire’s invitation to come to Braebourne for a fortnight of shooting and entertainment.

As for her sister-in-law Claire and her sister, Mallory, and their rather badly disguised attempt to further a relationship between her and Eversley . . .

She ought to be cross with them; really she should.

But she knew they only meant well. She could hear them now, whispering as coconspirators. But she so clearly likes him. We all like him; even Ned approves. The only thing those two need is a gentle nudge, a bit of time on their own, and the wedding bells will be ringing.

And that was the trouble.

Claire and Mallory were happily married—as were all her siblings now except her brother Lawrence, who just laughed and shook his head whenever anyone brought up the subject of matrimony. All any of them

wanted was for her to be happily married too.

Which was sweet in one way and exasperating in another. If only the lot of them would believe her when she said that she wasn't interested in a husband.

Not right now at least, and not for a good long while, if she had any say in the matter.

Luckily, her oldest brother, Edward—despite his approval of Eversley—was in no hurry to get her off his hands. He'd assured her before the Season had even begun that she was to take her time and marry only when, and if, she wished. He was quite content to let her remain at home for as many years as she liked.

Someday, she knew, the time would come when she would need to marry. Until then, she would have to find ways to avoid the overtures of interested young men, especially the thoroughly eligible and clearly determined Lord Eversley.

She smiled and nodded toward her nearly empty teacup. "Thank you, Lord Eversley, for your kind offer, but I am very well refreshed at present."

"Ah," he said, linking his hands behind his back while he took a moment to regroup. Suddenly his eyes brightened. "A walk, then, perhaps? The gardens here at Braebourne are quite splendid, even by lantern light."

There it was, alone in the gardens. She wasn't falling for that trick.

"Indeed the gardens are lovely. But again, I must refuse. Another time perhaps? I have walked a great deal today, you understand, and my feet are far too weary for another outing tonight."

Her feet were never weary—everyone in the family knew she could beat paths through the fields like a seasoned foot soldier—but Lord Eversley didn't need to be apprised of that fact. Hopefully none of her family was listening and would decide to give her away.

Yet apparently someone else was listening.

Lettice Waxhaven—another of the London guests, who happened to have made her debut along with Esme this past spring—leaned forward, a fierce gleam in her pale blue eyes. "Yes, where were you this afternoon, Lady Esme? We were all of us wondering what could be so fascinating that you would vanish for the entirety of the afternoon."

Esme hid her dislike for the other young woman behind a tight smile. Why her mother and Lettice's mother had to be old childhood friends who had been unexpectedly reacquainted this Season, she didn't for the life of her know. But owing to the renewal of that friendship, Esme found herself far too often in Lettice's company.

"I was just out," Esme said. "Walking and sketching."

"Really? Pray tell, what is it you sketch?" Lettice asked as if she were actually interested—which Esme knew she was not.

But quite without warning, she was caught up in unbidden memories of the lake and the drawings she had done of the naked sleeping man. She blinked, grateful for the room's warmth, since it disguised the flush stealing over her neck and cheeks.

“Nature,” she answered with a seemingly careless shrug. “Plants and animals. Anything that takes my fancy at the time.”

And, oh my, had the glorious stranger taken her fancy.

“Lady Esme is quite the accomplished artist,” Lord Eversley said with enthusiasm. “I had the great good fortune to view a few of her watercolors when we were last in Town.” He smiled at her with clear admiration. “She is a marvel.”

Lettice’s mouth tightened, her eyes narrowing. It was no secret—at least not to Esme—that Lettice had long ago set her cap at Lord Eversley and that so far he had failed to take notice of her. Esme would have felt sorry for her were she a nicer person.

After a moment, Lettice rearranged her features into a sweet smile, as if realizing she’d let a glimpse of her real personality show instead of the usual falsely pleasant mask she wore. “Oh, I should so like to see your sketches. Perhaps you might show them to us?”

“Yes, Lady Esme,” Eversley agreed. “I too would greatly enjoy a chance to view your newest work.”

“That is most kind,” Esme said, hedging. “But I suspect you would find my efforts disappointing.”

“Impossible,” Eversley disagreed. “You are too good an artist to ever draw anything that could be termed disappointing.”

“You give me far too much credit, Lord Eversley. What I drew today amounts to nothing of importance. Just a few random studies; that’s all.”

Nude studies of an unforgettable male.

Sleek limbs corded with muscle.

A powerful, hair-roughened chest.

Narrow hips.

Taut buttocks.

And his face . . .

Planes and angles that begged for an artist’s attention, rugged yet refined, bold and brilliant.

Captivating.

“Truly, they’re mostly rubbish, and I have no wish to offend anyone’s eyes with the viewing,” she said, hoping Eversley would take the hint and let that be the end of it.

Instead, he persisted. “You are far too modest, Lady Esme. Why do you not let me be the judge?”

“Who is modest?” her brother Lawrence said, turning his head to join the conversation. A few of the others looked around as well.

“Lady Esme,” Eversley explained. “Miss Waxhaven and I are trying to persuade her to show off the sketches

she did today, but she is too shy.”

Leo, Lawrence’s twin, laughed from where he sat next to his wife, Thalia. “Our Esme? Shy about her art? That doesn’t sound likely.”

“Yes, she’s usually raring to share,” Lord Drake Byron agreed.

“That’s because even her bad drawings are better than anything the rest of us can do,” Mallory said before she shot a glance over at Grace. “Except for Grace, of course. No offense, Grace, since you are a brilliant artist too.”

Her sister-in-law smiled. “None taken.” Grace looked at Esme. “Do let us see, dear. I know we would all enjoy a glimpse or two of your latest efforts. I particularly love the landscapes you do.”

Cheers of agreement and encouragement rose from those gathered in the room.

Esme’s chest tightened. “No, I couldn’t. Not tonight. Besides, my sketchbook is upstairs. It’s far too much bother to retrieve it right now.”

“It’s no bother,” Edward said. “We’ll have one of the servants fetch it.” He glanced over at the butler. “Croft, please ask one of the maids to collect Lady Esme’s sketchbook and have it brought here to the drawing room.”

“Right away, Your Grace.” The butler bowed and exited the room.

No! Esme wanted to shout and wave her arms to call Croft back.

But it was too late. Any further protestations on her part would look odd, drawing speculation about why she was so adamant that no one see her sketches. When her siblings said that she had never before shown a great deal of modesty concerning her work, they were right.

Still, this could all turn out fine, so long as she didn’t panic. In the main, her sketchbook contained renderings of birds and animals, field flowers, trees in leaf, and the landscapes for which Grace had shown a partiality. The sketches of the man were at the back of the book. So long as she was careful, she could show only the innocent drawings in the front.

All too soon one of the footmen walked in, her blue clothbound sketchbook in hand. She leapt to her feet and hurried across to take it before anyone else could. “Thank you, Joseph.”

Quickly, she clutched the sketchbook against her chest, collecting herself. Then she turned to face the waiting company.

“Here we are,” she said brightly as she crossed to resume her seat. “Since you all wish to see, why don’t I just hold up the drawings rather than passing the book around?”

Slowly she cracked open the binding, careful to go nowhere near the back pages. She thumbed through, looking quickly for something she hadn’t already shown her family.

“Ah, here we are,” she said, relieved to have found a new sketch. “I drew this of the hills toward the village earlier today.”

Actually, she’d drawn it the previous week.

She held up the book, fingers tight on the pages.

Murmurs of appreciation went around the room.

“Lovely,” Lady Waxhaven said.

“Astounding,” Lord Eversley pronounced. “As I said before, you are a marvel, Lady Esme. Show us another.”

“All right.”

Bending over the book again, she found another new sketch, this one of her dog Burr lying under a tree.

She held it up, eliciting more positive remarks and smiles. From everyone except Lettice Waxhaven, that is. Lettice’s innocent mask had slipped again, her eyes filled with a bitterness that made her look as if she wished she’d never started this.

Well, that makes two of us, Esme thought.

Esme showed them one last sketch of farmers working in the fields, then closed the book, holding it on her lap. “There, you have all had your art exhibition for the evening. Now, enough about me. Please go back to whatever you were doing before, talking and drinking and enjoying the evening.”

“Thank you, dear, for sharing your beautiful drawings with everyone. But Esme is right,” Claire said with a broad smile. “Let us make merry. Perhaps a game of cards or some dancing? I should dearly love to hear a tune.”

“That sounds wonderful, Duchess,” Lettice declared, openly enthusiastic. Her gaze went to Eversley. “Do you enjoy music, my lord?”

“Indeed,” he said. “Mayhap you could play for us, Miss Waxhaven? You’re quite accomplished on the pianoforte as I recall.” Then he turned to Esme. “Lady Esme, what about you? Would you care to take to the floor?”

Lettice Waxhaven’s face drained of color.

Esme actually did feel sorry for her—and rather cross with Lord Eversley for being so obtuse. She stood, intending to refuse him. But before she could, Lettice stalked forward and deliberately bumped into her shoulder, though Lettice did a good job making it look unintentional.

The sketchbook flew out of Esme’s grasp, pages fluttering wide before the book spun and skidded to a halt on the floor.

She bent quickly to retrieve it, but Lettice Waxhaven’s loud gasp let her know it was already too late. Everyone else was turning and looking too.

Breath froze in her chest, her thoughts tumbling wildly one over the other as she tried to think exactly how to explain the page with the gloriously bare, unforgettably gorgeous male specimen lying open for all to see.

“What in the nine circles of Hell is that?” Lawrence said, his voice so loud she jumped.

“I believe we can all see what it is,” Leo answered, his face wearing the identical look of shock and dawning

outrage as his twin's. "The only thing I want to know is how we're going to kill him."

"Kill who?" Esme squeaked, suddenly finding her voice.

Leo and Lawrence's gazes swung her way, while the rest of their family and friends looked on.

"Northcote." Leo said the name like it was a curse.

"Our neighbor from Cavendish Square," Lawrence finished.

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Captivating!

By Anna's herding cats

Happily Bedded Bliss. Something Lady Esme and her reluctant husband Lord Northcote must fight for...fiercely. Theirs isn't an easy romance or one that's particularly sweet or romantic but it was touching, hard won and in the end had me sighing in relief that these two had figured things out. And oh the things they had to figure out...whew!

The quick of it is that Lady Esme can't always help herself. Some things are just too damn tempting and stumbling on a sleeping--and naked--Gabriel one afternoon as she walked along the lake so brings that out in the naughtiest of ways and before she realizes it she's sketching the nude stranger and sealing both of their fates. The only way to avoid a scandalous and tattered reputation after they're made public? According to her many brothers...marriage to said stranger, of course!

I had a push and pull with both Esme and Gabriel. In the end I felt for them both and was glad they were together but during their long journey together (the book spans many months) they both proved to be both a trial and a lovely discovery. Esme is very young and so full of life. She cares for animals and is a vegetarian (yay! I love seeing that) and is rather impetuous. She's always had so much freedom in her life and been protected by her very large family and suddenly her life is turned upside down. She's having to leave home and be someone's wife. Having to do what they say and adjust to a new life. I so felt for her and her frustrations along the way. She made the best of the life she was dealt, though, and stood her ground when need be and proved to be a very strong soul.

And Gabriel. I felt for him too. He had a hard childhood and knew very few moments of kindness in his life and then was pulled into a marriage he didn't want by no fault of his own. He had nothing to do with ruining Esme yet he did the right thing and married her to save her reputation despite being a rake with the blackest of reputations. I wanted to bite him. Sometimes in a fun way and sometimes not so much. lol

Theirs was an interesting romance. It's not polished and prettied up but is a pretty realistic look into a reluctant marriage between two virtual strangers. Two people who are bound because of societies rules and obligation. It could be awkward and heart breaking and in some moments sweet and funny, too.

I really can't imagine life like that. Having to marry someone I didn't know or want to marry but otherwise facing being ostracized by society. Being expected to have sex with a stranger and really having no choice if they pushed the issue because I belonged to them. That was an issue in this one for me. It really pushed that edge of the issue for me and at times almost tipped into being unacceptable. It didn't quite but it got close which was difficult to read because I understood Esme and her fears of being intimate with someone she

didn't really know even if he was her husband.

I did like these two together when they weren't battling one another or their fears and insecurities and could just get along. They had sweet moments and were really lovely people. Esme was such a force and way more forgiving than I would have been with Gabriel and his mercurial moods--and oh he had his moments. Historical homeboy has a total freak out moment and it comes complete with some douchey moves. I mean. Whew! But he gets his s*** together and won me over in the end :)

All in all, Happily Bedded Bliss was a captivating read. Warren has a way of pulling you in completely and taking you for an incredible ride that may be a little bumpy but totally worth each and every growly moment endured. Definitely looking forward to more from the series.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Awesome

By Sk

Absolutely loved it. Tracey Anne Warren has been a favorite author of mine for a very long time. The story was interesting from start to end. Great character development and detail descriptions. Definitely recommend reading this book. And if you like this book then you will fall in love with her other book, The Husband Trap and its series.

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Review

Praise for **Happily Bedded Bliss**

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Praise for the novels of Tracy Anne Warren

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“Exceptionally entertaining.”—Chicago Tribune

“Truly satisfying romance.”—The New York Times Book Review

About the Author

Tracy Anne Warren is a New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of more than a dozen romance novels, including *The Bedding Proposal*, *The Trouble with Princesses*, and *Her Highness and the Highlander*. After working in the corporate world for a number of years, she quit her day job to pursue her first love: writing. She has won numerous industry awards, including Romance Writers of America’s RITA Award, the National Readers’ Choice Award, and the HOLT Medallion.

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CHAPTER ONE

Gloucestershire, England

September 1818

Lady Esme Byron hiked her sky blue muslin skirts up past her stocking-clad calves and climbed onto the wooden stile that divided the vast Braebourne estate from land owned to the east by her family's nearest neighbor, Mr. Cray.

Cray, a widower near her eldest brother Edward's age of forty, was rarely in residence and never complained about her trespassing on his land; since her childhood, he'd let her traipse across it almost as if it were her own. Not that Braebourne didn't provide plenty of beautiful vistas to explore—it did, especially considering that her brother owned nearly half the county and more besides—it was just that Cray's land possessed a lovely natural freshwater lake that sat at a perfect walking distance from the house. The lake attracted a rich variety of wildlife, so there was always something fascinating to sketch. Plus, no one ever bothered her there; it was quite her favorite secret place when she was looking for an escape.

She jumped down onto the other side of the stile, taking far more care of the satchel of drawing supplies slung over her shoulder than she did of her fine leather half boots. She wobbled slightly as they sank ankle-deep into the mud, then stared at her ruined boots for a few seconds, knowing her maid would give her a scold for sure. But as she was always able to talk dear Grumbly around, she shrugged away any concern.

Grabbing hold of the fence, she unstuck herself one boot at a time, then scraped the worst of the mess off into the nearby grass. Turning with a swirl of her skirts, she continued on to her destination.

As she walked, she angled her face up to the sun and sighed blissfully.

How good it was to be home again after weeks in London.

How wonderful to be out in the open once more, free to roam wherever she liked, whenever she liked.

A tiny frown of guilt wrinkled her dark brows, since technically she was supposed to be back at the estate helping entertain the houseguests visiting Braebourne. But all seven of her siblings and their families were in residence, even Leo and his new bride Thalia, who had just returned with celebratory fanfare from their honeymoon trip to Italy. With so many Byrons available to make merry, she would hardly be missed.

Besides, they were used to her penchant for disappearing by herself for hours at a time as she roamed the nearby woods and hills and fields. She would be back in time for dinner; that would have to be enough.

An exuberant bark sounded behind her and she glanced around to see her dog Burr leap the stile and race toward her. She bent down and gave his shaggy golden head a scratch. "So, you're back, are you? Done chasing rabbits?"

He waved his bright flag of a tail in a wide arc, his pink tongue lolling out in a happy grin. Clearly, he was unapologetic for having deserted her a short while ago so he could hunt game in the bushes.

"Well, come along," she told him before continuing toward a stand of trees in the distance.

Burr trotted enthusiastically at her side.

Nearly ten minutes later, they reached the copse of trees that led to the lake. She was just about to step out of

their protective green shelter when she heard a splash.

She stopped and motioned for Burr to do the same.

Someone, she realized, was swimming in the lake. Was it Mr. Cray? Had he returned home unexpectedly?

Soundlessly, she peered through the leaves and watched a man emerge from the water—a man who most definitely was not Mr. Cray.

But who was most definitely naked.

Her eyes widened as she drank in the sight of his long, powerfully graceful form, his pale skin glistening wetly in the sunlight.

A quiet sigh of wonder slid from between her parted lips, her senses awash with the same kind of reverence she felt whenever she beheld something of pure, unadorned beauty.

Not that his face was the handsomest she had ever glimpsed—his features were far too strong and angular for ordinary attractiveness. Yet there was something majestic about him, as if a dark angel had fallen to earth. His tall body was exquisitely proportioned: wide shoulders, sculpted chest, long arms, narrow hips and sinewy legs, even the unmentionable male part of him that hung impressively between his heavily muscled thighs.

Clearly unaware that he was being observed, he casually slicked the water from his dark hair, then walked deeper into the surrounding area of short grass, which she knew was periodically trimmed by the groundskeepers.

She caught her lower lip between her teeth, her heart pounding wildly as she watched him stretch out on his back across the soft green carpet of grass. With a hand, she motioned again for Burr to remain quiet. She did the same, knowing that if she moved now, the mystery man would surely hear her.

One minute melted into two, then three.

Quite unexpectedly, she heard the soft yet unmistakable sound of a snore.

Is he asleep?

She smiled, realizing that was exactly what he must be.

Of course she knew she ought to leave. But even as she began to ease away, he shifted, his face turning toward her. One of his hands lay on his flat stomach, one ankle tucked under the other at an elegant angle.

And suddenly she couldn't leave.

Not when she was in the presence of such splendor and grace; it was as if the universe had decided to give her a gift.

I simply have to draw him.

Without considering her decision any further, she sank quietly onto a fallen log nearby that provided her with a sheltered, yet excellent view of her subject. Burr settled down at her side, laying his chin on his paws as she extracted her pencil and sketchbook from her bag and set to work.

Gabriel Landsdowne came abruptly awake, the late-afternoon sun strong in his eyes. He blinked and sat up, giving his head a slight shake to clear out the last of the drowsy cobwebs.

He'd fallen asleep without even realizing. Apparently, he was more tired than he'd thought. Then again, that was why he'd come here to Cray's, so he could spend a little time alone, doing nothing more strenuous than taking a leisurely swim and lazing away the day. He could have done the same at his own estate, of course, but visiting Ten Elms always put him in a foul humor.

Too many bad memories.

Too many unwanted responsibilities on behalf of a place that had never brought him anything but pain. For the most part, he left Ten Elms' management to his steward, since he rarely set foot over the threshold, but invariably there was some matter or other that would crop up, requiring his attention. There was also his house in Cornwall, and his town house in London, both of which put claims on his time and attention, but he never minded seeing to those properties. They were his and his alone, with none of the taint of the past to sour his habitation.

Yet he'd grown tired of his usual haunts of late—and his usual companions and their seemingly insatiable craving for debauchery.

Even the devil needed a holiday every once in a while.

When his old, and far more respectable, friend Cray mentioned that he was going hunting in Scotland—an activity Gabriel did not enjoy—Cray offered Gabriel the use of his house in his absence. Knowing that Cray House was a place none of his regular crowd would ever think to find him, Gabriel had accepted. He'd actually left London without so much as a word to anyone, instructing his butler to take the knocker off the door and say only that the master was away at present and not receiving.

Wouldn't his ribald set of cronies laugh now to see him doing something as prosaic as taking a solitary afternoon nap? Then again, he was out of doors, stark naked, so they would most certainly approve of that.

Smirking, he stood up, brushing an errant blade of grass from his bare buttocks. He was about to cross to the stand of bushes where he'd left his clothes when he heard a faint rustling sound behind him. He turned and stared into the foliage.

"Who is it? Is someone there?" he demanded.

The only answer was silence.

He looked again, scanning the area, but nothing moved; no one spoke.

Maybe it had been the wind? Or an animal foraging in the woods?

Suddenly a dog burst from the concealment of the trees, its shaggy wheaten coat gleaming warmly in the sun. He was a medium-sized mix of no particular breed, part hound, possibly, or maybe retriever. He seemed well fed, so it was doubtful that he was a stray. Then again, mayhap he was skilled at poaching birds and rabbits from the bountiful reserves of game in the area.

The dog stopped and looked at him, eyes bright and inquiring but not unfriendly.

"Who might you be, fellow?" Gabriel asked.

The animal wagged his tail and barked twice. Then, just as suddenly as he had appeared, he spun and disappeared into the trees once more.

In that instant, Gabriel thought he spied a flash of blue in the woods.

A bird?

The dog must have sensed it and gone off to chase.

Gabriel stared for one last long moment, then shrugged and turned to gather his clothes.

CHAPTER TWO

“’Tis high time you got home, my lady,” Esme’s maid scolded as Esme hurried into her bedroom nearly fifteen minutes after the dressing gong had been rung. “I was on the verge of sending one of the footmen out to fetch you. Och, and look at those boots. What new mischief have you been about this afternoon? Tromping in the mud again, I see.”

The older woman’s face creased into a scowl that put Esme in mind of a wizened prune.

“Oh, don’t carry on so, Grumbly,” Esme said with a coaxing smile, using the old nickname she’d given Mrs. Grumblethorpe when Esme had still been in leading strings. “I went for a walk, then stopped at the stables afterward to check on Aeolus. His wing is still healing and he needs food and exercise twice a day.”

Aeolus was a hawk Esme had found in the woods a couple of months earlier, shot with an arrow. She’d nursed him through the worst and hoped the bird might be able to fly again with enough time and care.

Grumblethorpe tsked and turned Esme around, her fingers moving quickly to unfasten the buttons on Esme’s mud-stained dress. “You and your animals. Always worrying over some poor, misbegotten creature. Rabbits and birds, hedgehogs and box turtles. You’re forever dragging something back, to say nothing of all the cats and dogs you’ve brought with you into the house.”

Esme let her maid’s words roll harmlessly away. Despite Grumblethorpe’s noises of disapproval, Esme knew she liked the family pets. She just didn’t approve of having so many of them in her mistress’s bedroom at once. Still, it was an old battle and one the lady’s maid had given up waging long ago.

Good thing too, since four of Esme’s six cats—who had all started life in either the Braebourne stables or as strays she’d rescued—were snoozing in various locations around her room. They included a big orange male, Tobias, who was curled up in a cozy spot in the middle of her bed; Queen Elizabeth—a sweet-natured tabby, who was lounging in her usual window seat; Mozart—a luxuriously coated white longhair who luckily loved being brushed; and Naiad, a one-eyed black female, whom Esme had rescued from drowning as a kitten. Her other two cats, Persephone and Ruff, were out and about, seeing to their own cat business.

As for the dogs, Burr lay stretched out on the hearthrug in front of the fireplace. He snored gently, clearly tired after their recent adventures. And joining him in the land of dreams was dear old Henry, a brindle spaniel who was curled up inside a nearby dog bed lined with plush pillows that helped cushion his aging joints. Handel and Haydn, a pair of impish Scottish terriers, were absent. She suspected they were on the third floor playing with her increasingly large brood of nieces and nephews. The dogs loved the children.

Still making a few noises that were true to her name, Grumblethorpe stripped Esme down to her shift and bare feet. She carried away the soiled garments, leaving Esme to wash up with the fresh water and towels that had been laid out.

As Esme dipped her hands into the basin of water, her thoughts turned again to the mysterious naked man at the lake and the drawing of him that now resided in her sketchbook.

A warm flush rose on her skin, together with a tiny secret smile. He truly had been . . . magnificent. Better than any of the Greek statues she'd ever seen.

But her interest in him had been strictly artistic, she assured herself. She was an artist and he had been her chosen subject. If he happened to be pleasingly shaped, and if she happened to have taken extra care in her rendering of certain intriguing body parts, well, she had only been doing justice to the artwork, nothing more.

Even so, she was grateful he hadn't realized that she'd drawn him. Some people didn't like having their likenesses sketched—although considering that he'd been swimming naked, he didn't strike her as the bashful type.

Thank heavens, though, for Burr. For a few seconds, when she'd been turning to leave, she'd feared that her accidental Adonis had spotted her. But Burr had dashed out and diverted his attention so that he hadn't known she was there.

Picking up the bar of honey-scented soap, she lathered her hands and began to wash. As she did, she speculated again on who he might be. Certainly no one who lived in the neighborhood; she would have remembered a man like him. So why did she have the strangest feeling she'd seen him somewhere before? For the life of her, she couldn't place him.

Oh well, it would come to her eventually—or not. She wasn't going to concern herself. After all, it wasn't as if their paths were likely ever to cross again.

Just then, Grumblethorpe came back into the room with Esme's evening gown and silk slippers in hand. Realizing she had no further time to ruminate, Esme began to bathe in earnest.

In far less time than one might have imagined, Esme stood clean, elegantly coiffed and attired in an evening gown of demure white silk—presentable for company once again.

She'd hoped with the Season over, she might be able to put all the entertaining behind her for the year. But then Claire had decided to host one of her autumn country parties, inviting the usual gathering of friends and family, in addition to a few new acquaintances from London.

Esme sighed inwardly, wishing she could spend a quiet evening with just the family, then retire early with a good book.

Instead, she straightened her shoulders, fixed a smile on her lips and headed downstairs.

"Might I have the pleasure of procuring a beverage for you, Lady Esme?"

Esme glanced up from where she sat on the end of the long drawing room sofa and into the eager gray eyes of Lord Eversley.

Only minutes before, the gentlemen had rejoined the ladies after dinner, strolling in on a wave of companionable talk and the faint lingering aromas of cigar smoke and port wine.

Esme had been half listening to the other women's discussion of the latest fashions when Lord Eversley approached and made her a very elegant bow.

He'd been seated next to her at dinner; she'd found his conversation both pleasant and interesting. He was an attractive man, personable, well-mannered and intelligent. He was also heir to an earldom and a fortune that was impressive even by her own family's standards.

In short, he was everything any sane young woman could want in a husband.

So why wasn't she falling under his spell?

She couldn't even claim the excuse of disliking him; she liked him quite well. He was nice. He had a good sense of humor, and as a friend, she had no quarrel with his company.

But marriage?

Instinctively she knew there should be something more—a spark, a flicker of passion, to say nothing of love. And that, above all else, was the problem. Perfect as he was, he simply wasn't the man for her.

Yet out of all her suitors during this year's London Season, Eversley had been the most attentive. She'd done her best not to encourage him. She had even tried a time or two to actively discourage him. But if he had one fault, it was his bone-deep streak of stubbornness. Which, she supposed, accounted for his decision to accept Claire's invitation to come to Braebourne for a fortnight of shooting and entertainment.

As for her sister-in-law Claire and her sister, Mallory, and their rather badly disguised attempt to further a relationship between her and Eversley . . .

She ought to be cross with them; really she should.

But she knew they only meant well. She could hear them now, whispering as coconspirators. But she so clearly likes him. We all like him; even Ned approves. The only thing those two need is a gentle nudge, a bit of time on their own, and the wedding bells will be ringing.

And that was the trouble.

Claire and Mallory were happily married—as were all her siblings now except her brother Lawrence, who just laughed and shook his head whenever anyone brought up the subject of matrimony. All any of them wanted was for her to be happily married too.

Which was sweet in one way and exasperating in another. If only the lot of them would believe her when she said that she wasn't interested in a husband.

Not right now at least, and not for a good long while, if she had any say in the matter.

Luckily, her oldest brother, Edward—despite his approval of Eversley—was in no hurry to get her off his hands. He'd assured her before the Season had even begun that she was to take her time and marry only when, and if, she wished. He was quite content to let her remain at home for as many years as she liked.

Someday, she knew, the time would come when she would need to marry. Until then, she would have to find ways to avoid the overtures of interested young men, especially the thoroughly eligible and clearly determined Lord Eversley.

She smiled and nodded toward her nearly empty teacup. “Thank you, Lord Eversley, for your kind offer, but I am very well refreshed at present.”

“Ah,” he said, linking his hands behind his back while he took a moment to regroup. Suddenly his eyes brightened. “A walk, then, perhaps? The gardens here at Braebourne are quite splendid, even by lantern light.”

There it was, alone in the gardens. She wasn’t falling for that trick.

“Indeed the gardens are lovely. But again, I must refuse. Another time perhaps? I have walked a great deal today, you understand, and my feet are far too weary for another outing tonight.”

Her feet were never weary—everyone in the family knew she could beat paths through the fields like a seasoned foot soldier—but Lord Eversley didn’t need to be apprised of that fact. Hopefully none of her family was listening and would decide to give her away.

Yet apparently someone else was listening.

Lettice Waxhaven—another of the London guests, who happened to have made her debut along with Esme this past spring—leaned forward, a fierce gleam in her pale blue eyes. “Yes, where were you this afternoon, Lady Esme? We were all of us wondering what could be so fascinating that you would vanish for the entirety of the afternoon.”

Esme hid her dislike for the other young woman behind a tight smile. Why her mother and Lettice’s mother had to be old childhood friends who had been unexpectedly reacquainted this Season, she didn’t for the life of her know. But owing to the renewal of that friendship, Esme found herself far too often in Lettice’s company.

“I was just out,” Esme said. “Walking and sketching.”

“Really? Pray tell, what is it you sketch?” Lettice asked as if she were actually interested—which Esme knew she was not.

But quite without warning, she was caught up in unbidden memories of the lake and the drawings she had done of the naked sleeping man. She blinked, grateful for the room’s warmth, since it disguised the flush stealing over her neck and cheeks.

“Nature,” she answered with a seemingly careless shrug. “Plants and animals. Anything that takes my fancy at the time.”

And, oh my, had the glorious stranger taken her fancy.

“Lady Esme is quite the accomplished artist,” Lord Eversley said with enthusiasm. “I had the great good fortune to view a few of her watercolors when we were last in Town.” He smiled at her with clear admiration. “She is a marvel.”

Lettice’s mouth tightened, her eyes narrowing. It was no secret—at least not to Esme—that Lettice had long ago set her cap at Lord Eversley and that so far he had failed to take notice of her. Esme would have felt sorry for her were she a nicer person.

After a moment, Lettice rearranged her features into a sweet smile, as if realizing she’d let a glimpse of her real personality show instead of the usual falsely pleasant mask she wore. “Oh, I should so like to see your

sketches. Perhaps you might show them to us?"

"Yes, Lady Esme," Eversley agreed. "I too would greatly enjoy a chance to view your newest work."

"That is most kind," Esme said, hedging. "But I suspect you would find my efforts disappointing."

"Impossible," Eversley disagreed. "You are too good an artist to ever draw anything that could be termed disappointing."

"You give me far too much credit, Lord Eversley. What I drew today amounts to nothing of importance. Just a few random studies; that's all."

Nude studies of an unforgettable male.

Sleek limbs corded with muscle.

A powerful, hair-roughened chest.

Narrow hips.

Taut buttocks.

And his face . . .

Planes and angles that begged for an artist's attention, rugged yet refined, bold and brilliant.

Captivating.

"Truly, they're mostly rubbish, and I have no wish to offend anyone's eyes with the viewing," she said, hoping Eversley would take the hint and let that be the end of it.

Instead, he persisted. "You are far too modest, Lady Esme. Why do you not let me be the judge?"

"Who is modest?" her brother Lawrence said, turning his head to join the conversation. A few of the others looked around as well.

"Lady Esme," Eversley explained. "Miss Waxhaven and I are trying to persuade her to show off the sketches she did today, but she is too shy."

Leo, Lawrence's twin, laughed from where he sat next to his wife, Thalia. "Our Esme? Shy about her art? That doesn't sound likely."

"Yes, she's usually raring to share," Lord Drake Byron agreed.

"That's because even her bad drawings are better than anything the rest of us can do," Mallory said before she shot a glance over at Grace. "Except for Grace, of course. No offense, Grace, since you are a brilliant artist too."

Her sister-in-law smiled. "None taken." Grace looked at Esme. "Do let us see, dear. I know we would all enjoy a glimpse or two of your latest efforts. I particularly love the landscapes you do."

Cheers of agreement and encouragement rose from those gathered in the room.

Esme's chest tightened. "No, I couldn't. Not tonight. Besides, my sketchbook is upstairs. It's far too much bother to retrieve it right now."

"It's no bother," Edward said. "We'll have one of the servants fetch it." He glanced over at the butler. "Croft, please ask one of the maids to collect Lady Esme's sketchbook and have it brought here to the drawing room."

"Right away, Your Grace." The butler bowed and exited the room.

No! Esme wanted to shout and wave her arms to call Croft back.

But it was too late. Any further protestations on her part would look odd, drawing speculation about why she was so adamant that no one see her sketches. When her siblings said that she had never before shown a great deal of modesty concerning her work, they were right.

Still, this could all turn out fine, so long as she didn't panic. In the main, her sketchbook contained renderings of birds and animals, field flowers, trees in leaf, and the landscapes for which Grace had shown a partiality. The sketches of the man were at the back of the book. So long as she was careful, she could show only the innocent drawings in the front.

All too soon one of the footmen walked in, her blue clothbound sketchbook in hand. She leapt to her feet and hurried across to take it before anyone else could. "Thank you, Joseph."

Quickly, she clutched the sketchbook against her chest, collecting herself. Then she turned to face the waiting company.

"Here we are," she said brightly as she crossed to resume her seat. "Since you all wish to see, why don't I just hold up the drawings rather than passing the book around?"

Slowly she cracked open the binding, careful to go nowhere near the back pages. She thumbed through, looking quickly for something she hadn't already shown her family.

"Ah, here we are," she said, relieved to have found a new sketch. "I drew this of the hills toward the village earlier today."

Actually, she'd drawn it the previous week.

She held up the book, fingers tight on the pages.

Murmurs of appreciation went around the room.

"Lovely," Lady Waxhaven said.

"Astounding," Lord Eversley pronounced. "As I said before, you are a marvel, Lady Esme. Show us another."

"All right."

Bending over the book again, she found another new sketch, this one of her dog Burr lying under a tree.

She held it up, eliciting more positive remarks and smiles. From everyone except Lettice Waxhaven, that is. Lettice's innocent mask had slipped again, her eyes filled with a bitterness that made her look as if she

wished she'd never started this.

Well, that makes two of us, Esme thought.

Esme showed them one last sketch of farmers working in the fields, then closed the book, holding it on her lap. "There, you have all had your art exhibition for the evening. Now, enough about me. Please go back to whatever you were doing before, talking and drinking and enjoying the evening."

"Thank you, dear, for sharing your beautiful drawings with everyone. But Esme is right," Claire said with a broad smile. "Let us make merry. Perhaps a game of cards or some dancing? I should dearly love to hear a tune."

"That sounds wonderful, Duchess," Lettice declared, openly enthusiastic. Her gaze went to Eversley. "Do you enjoy music, my lord?"

"Indeed," he said. "Mayhap you could play for us, Miss Waxhaven? You're quite accomplished on the pianoforte as I recall." Then he turned to Esme. "Lady Esme, what about you? Would you care to take to the floor?"

Lettice Waxhaven's face drained of color.

Esme actually did feel sorry for her—and rather cross with Lord Eversley for being so obtuse. She stood, intending to refuse him. But before she could, Lettice stalked forward and deliberately bumped into her shoulder, though Lettice did a good job making it look unintentional.

The sketchbook flew out of Esme's grasp, pages fluttering wide before the book spun and skidded to a halt on the floor.

She bent quickly to retrieve it, but Lettice Waxhaven's loud gasp let her know it was already too late. Everyone else was turning and looking too.

Breath froze in her chest, her thoughts tumbling wildly one over the other as she tried to think exactly how to explain the page with the gloriously bare, unforgettably gorgeous male specimen lying open for all to see.

"What in the nine circles of Hell is that?" Lawrence said, his voice so loud she jumped.

"I believe we can all see what it is," Leo answered, his face wearing the identical look of shock and dawning outrage as his twin's. "The only thing I want to know is how we're going to kill him."

"Kill who?" Esme squeaked, suddenly finding her voice.

Leo and Lawrence's gazes swung her way, while the rest of their family and friends looked on.

"Northcote." Leo said the name like it was a curse.

"Our neighbor from Cavendish Square," Lawrence finished.

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