



A Momentary Marriage

By Candace Camp



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James de Vere has always insisted on being perfectly pragmatic and rational in all things. It seemed the only way to deal with his overdramatic, greedy family. When he falls ill and no doctor in London can diagnose him, he returns home to Grace Hill in search of a physician who can—or to set his affairs in order.

Arriving at the doctor’s home, he’s surprised to encounter the doctor's daughter Laura, a young woman he last saw when he was warning her off an attachment with his cousin Graeme. Alas, the doctor is recently deceased and Laura is closing up the estate, which must be sold off, leaving her penniless. At this, James has an inspiration: why not marry the damsel in distress? If his last hope for a cure is gone, at least he’ll have some companionship in his final days, and she’ll inherit his fortune instead of his grasping relatives, leaving her a wealthy widow with plenty of prospects.

Laura is far from swept off her feet, but she’s as pragmatic as James, so she accepts his unusual proposal. But as the two of them brave the onslaught of shocked and suspicious family members, they find themselves growing closer. They vowed, “until death do us part”...but now both are longing for their marriage to be more than momentary in this evocative romance, perfect for fans of Sabrina Jeffries and Mary Balogh.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Candace Camp is a *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author of more than sixty novels of contemporary and historical romance, including the bestselling Regency romances *Enraptured*, *Treasured*, and *The Marrying Season*. She grew up in Texas in a newspaper family, which explains her love of writing, but she earned a law degree and practiced law before making the decision to write full time. She has received several writing awards, including the *RT Book Reviews* Career Achievement Award. Visit her at CandaceCamp.com.

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A Momentary Marriage

chapter 1

1882

Sir James de Vere was going home to die.

He would end his life as he had lived it, alone in the midst of his family. It was a bleak prospect, but even so, not as bad as spending his last days here in the gray and grimy city. At least at Grace Hill, he would have the beauty of his gardens. And Dem would enjoy the freedom of the country.

He glanced over at the huge dog, stretched out in the sunlight coming through the window. As if he had heard his master's thoughts, the brindle mastiff raised his head and looked at James, then, apparently satisfied that all was in order, lay back down again.

"Sir?" the man on the other side of his desk said uneasily.

James turned back to his man of business. Obviously he had missed whatever the fellow had said. He found it more and more difficult to maintain his focus—indeed, to think of anything but the stab of pain behind his eye. "I beg your pardon. I didn't hear you."

"I was asking if there was anything else, sir." The man's tone was deferential, but James knew he was itching to leave. James was never sure if Johnson was more uneasy about incurring James's displeasure or that of his dog. He had kept sneaking glances over at the mastiff throughout their conversation. In fact, Dem had a pleasant, even sweet nature, but James had never seen a reason to ease anyone's mind about it.

"No. I think that's everything." He had wrapped up every detail; there should be no confusion or encumbrances or dangling ends in his estate. Even though he wouldn't be here to see it, James disliked a lack of order. If he left it to his family, they would muck it up and eventually toss it all in Graeme's lap to untangle. There was no point in subjecting his cousin to that.

"Um . . ." The agent shifted on his feet. "Mrs. Hobart?"

“Ah, yes. Mrs. Hobart . . .” James had forgotten about her—and wouldn’t that have sent that brown-eyed beauty into a snit if she had known?

“Yes, sir. She, ah, came by the office last week.”

“Did she now? How enterprising of her.”

“She’d heard you were in the city. I said you were not; I assumed you would not, um, that you, ah . . .”

“You assumed correctly.”

Dem let out a deep bark, which made Mr. Johnson jump. The animal surged to his feet, facing the doorway, on alert. There were footsteps in the hall, and James’s cousin appeared in the doorway. The mastiff gave a wag of his tail and padded over to regally offer his head for a pat.

James’s visitor obliged, saying, “Hallo, Dem, I believe you’ve grown even more enormous since I saw you last.”

“Hello, Graeme.”

“James.” Graeme’s blue gaze went to James’s agent, and he hesitated.

“Johnson, sir,” the man supplied.

“Yes, of course. How are you? I believe last time I saw you, you were awaiting a happy event.”

“Were you?” James glanced at his agent. Trust Graeme to remember such niceties.

“Yes, sir.” Johnson beamed. “Thank you for asking. We have a bouncing baby boy, healthy as an ox, I’m happy to say. And you, my lord, I believe you and Lady Montclair have been blessed as well.”

“Indeed.”

James watched as an equally fatuous smile spread across his cousin’s face. He resigned himself to a discussion of the wonders of infants. It did little to distract him from the knife of pain behind his right eye. His fingers twitched, and he curled them into his palm.

Graeme, glancing over at James, broke off his effusions. “But I have interrupted you. I apologize. I shall return later.”

“No.” James straightened. “Stay. We are finished here.” He turned to Johnson. “Buy Mrs. Hobart some jewelry, a necklace and earrings.” He paused. He had been with her for some time; it tended to raise expectations. “Maybe a bracelet as well. You’ll know what to get better than I.”

“Certainly, sir.” Johnson paused, then went on delicately, “You’ll wish to add a note?”

“Oh. Yes.” That was the last thing he wanted to do with his head in this vise. But of course he must. It was expected. Seizing a piece of paper from a drawer in his desk, James frowned for a moment over the page, then scribbled a few words and signed it. Hastily, he blew on the ink to dry it, folded the note, and handed it

to Johnson.

Graeme watched the procedure, his face a study in astonishment, and when the agent had exited the room, he swung back to James, saying, “You are, I take it, breaking it off with your mistress?”

“Obviously.” James lifted a brow. “I don’t know why you’re surprised. It’s been months.”

“Yes, but I would have thought—it’s just—you’re not going to tell her good-bye?”

“I just did.”

“With a note.”

“And some very nice diamonds. Believe me, she’ll appreciate those far more than a few words from me.” He gave Graeme a half smile. “Don’t worry about bruising Ellie Hobart’s heart, coz. She doesn’t have one. That’s why I choose not to indulge in romantic encounters. There’s no emotion involved, only cash. No fuss and no tears.”

“No affection.”

James shrugged. “I don’t keep a mistress for affection. Come. Sit down. Would you care for a drink? Whiskey?” Graeme agreed, taking a seat in one of the armchairs before the fireplace as James crossed to the decanters. “What are you doing in London? I would have thought you couldn’t tear yourself away from domestic bliss.”

“It wasn’t easy.” Graeme took the glass James held out to him, his concerned gaze on James’s face. “I had to come to the city for business. I already miss Abby and Anna like the devil.”

“Of course.” James knew Graeme was speaking only the truth, astonishing as it was to James that anyone would prefer to live with a squalling infant.

“You should see her, James.” Graeme’s eyes lit up. “A full head of hair, jet black, just like Abby’s. She looks like her.”

James had seen the baby in question and as he remembered, she had not looked like much of anyone, only a tiny red wailing thing with a madly wobbling chin. He did recall, however, a burst of black hair spiking out all over her head like the raised hackles of a dog.

“It’s been only three months since you’ve seen her, but you cannot imagine how much she’s grown.” Graeme went on to enthusiastically detail the many changes.

Fortunately, Graeme did not require much response from his listener, for James heard only half of what he said through the pain that gripped him. The headaches came more and more frequently now, until at times he wanted to bash his head against the wall in search of blissful unconsciousness.

Graeme, watching him, stopped his flow of words. “James. What’s the matter? You look terrible.”

“Why, thank you, cousin. I am glad to know you don’t feel the need to flatter me.”

“You know what I mean. You look as if you haven’t slept in a week.”

“I probably haven’t.” He gave Graeme a thin smile. “I’ve had a little trouble sleeping lately.”

“I’d wager it’s more than that. You’ve lost weight as well. Are you ill? What is it?”

“Apparently, the doctors can’t agree on that. I’ve discovered recently the true depth of medical ignorance.”

Graeme frowned. “How many doctors have you seen? How long has this been going on? Does Aunt Tessa know about it?”

“God, Graeme, what in the world do you think my mother could do?”

“Point taken. But, really, James, you can’t just sit here and suffer.”

“Sadly, I have discovered that I can.”

“You should go see Dr. Hinsdale.”

“Who? You mean your Miss Hinsdale’s father?”

“She’s not my Miss Hinsdale. But yes. His family views him as a bit of a disgrace since he chose to actually do something useful with his life, but he’s one of the brightest men I know. Always up on the latest thing.”

“Thank you, but I suspect I’d be lucky to survive passing through his door, if the lovely Laura is there.”

“Don’t be absurd. Laura may, um . . .”

“Despise me?”

“Don’t be daft. Laura isn’t the sort to hold grudges. She knew you were only speaking the truth.”

“Mm. But truth is not something many people relish hearing.”

“Trust me. However she may feel about you, she would never turn you away. She is much too fair, not to mention kind.”

“Doesn’t your wife object to your blatant admiration for Miss Hinsdale?”

“Abby is much too fair, as well.”

James had to chuckle, despite the pounding in his head. “All your women are paragons.”

Graeme grinned. “Yes, I know. I’m a lucky man. But Laura is not mine. And Abby knows that I feel about Laura as one would about a sister.”

“Of course . . . if one had wanted to marry one’s sister.”

“That was eleven years ago. I was too green to understand what I felt. What I’m saying is, Abby knows I

love only her. And stop trying to get me off the subject. We're talking about you seeing Dr. Hinsdale."

"Must we?"

"Yes. If anyone can find what's wrong with you and fix it, Dr. Hinsdale can."

"I'm tired of chasing a magical cure. I think I shall go home soon. Things are in order here."

"In order? What are you talking about?" Graeme's voice rose in alarm. "You sound as if—James, you're frightening me." He paused, then added, "It's not like you to give up."

James huffed out an exasperated laugh. "You're bringing out the heavy artillery now. Next you'll be telling me it's for queen and country."

"Don't be a buffoon. You know very well it's for me. For all of us who love you. I don't want to lose you, James. Go see Dr. Hinsdale."

"You're bloody persistent." James sighed. He was tired of hope; he was tired of fighting. And he was most excessively tired of keeping a stiff upper lip. "Where is this medical miracle worker?"

"You know where. You went there to talk Laura into breaking our engagement."

"Ah. Yes. Close to Canterbury. Rather out of the way."

"It's not the ends of the earth. An easy day's trip from here. I'll take you."

"No! No." James saw the faint hurt on the other man's face, but he couldn't explain why he'd rather be alone. It was simply easier not to have to maintain the façade of stoicism. He tried to soften his abrupt words. "You have business to do, and you must get back to your wife and daughter. I'll go to Canterbury before I return home."

"Promise?"

"Yes, yes. I'll take a bloody oath on it. Now can we talk about something else?"

Satisfied, Graeme left the tender subject and returned to more raptures on the bliss of fatherhood, relieving James of the burden of conversation or, indeed, of even really listening. James leaned back, letting the familiar tones of his cousin's voice wash over him.



James came to with a start, his heart pounding, his breath jerking in a gasp that set off a paroxysm of coughing. Graeme was gone. Thank God. At least he had not witnessed the wracking cough. It was embarrassing enough that James had fallen asleep in front of his cousin, like some decrepit ancient. The rest of the time he could not sleep, yearning to slip into oblivion, yet today, with someone there, he could not keep his eyes open.

With a snort of disgust, James pushed up from his chair. The butler would appear soon, no doubt, to pester him with afternoon tea, laying out an array of delicacies with his ever-hopeful expression. James thought of

escaping, but there was nowhere else to go, nothing to be done. He had just spoken to the only person whom he would regret never seeing again.

Dem heaved to his feet and padded after James as he left the study and walked down the hall. He stopped at a door that was smaller, plainer than most in the house, for the small room inside had been refashioned from what had once been the butler's pantry.

Dem sat down, letting out an almost human sigh. James smiled faintly and brushed a hand over the top of the dog's blocky head. "That's right. It's the place you cannot enter." He rubbed his thumb across the wrinkles that gave the dog his perpetually grave look. "I apologize."

James stepped inside, closing the door behind him, and turned on the low gaslight. It was a small space, filled with several glass-fronted cabinets, too cramped, really, for his tastes. But it was imperative that the room be windowless and unventilated, sheltered from the touch of sunlight, air, and dampness that would ruin the ancient pages.

Not long ago, he had spent hours at a time here, carefully preserving his collection of medieval writings. Now he merely strolled past the cabinets, drinking in the beauty of the illuminated manuscripts, the gilt and jewel-like colors of the ornate letters, the cunning drawings hidden among the curlicues. Studying these painstaking works of countless monks never failed to soothe him.

Was it faith or art that fueled their efforts?

Cynically he had always assumed that it was a love of beauty that inspired the monks, the same joy and yearning that swelled in his chest as he gazed at them. But perhaps, in the good brothers, at least, that sweet ache had been faith. James was not well enough acquainted with such things to know.

He leaned his forehead against the cool glass of a display case, the vicious pain in his head increasing. His heart began its now-familiar pounding, stuttering in that way that shot a spear of panic through him. It would pass, he knew, but deep down he could not quite suppress the fear that this time it would not.

This was the last time he would see the manuscripts. He hated to leave them, but they were too delicate to pack and cart about the countryside. And his longing for the verdant gardens and spacious rooms of Grace Hill was stronger than his love of any art. It was time to go there.

But first he had to go to bloody, benighted Canterbury. Why had he been so weak as to agree to Graeme's urgings? But he knew the answer to that—deep down inside him there still grew a tender green shoot of hope. Futile though it would doubtless turn out to be, James was unable to ignore it.

He would seek out Laura Hinsdale's father. And some irrepressible sense of mischief, some spark of humor that refused to leave him, made him smile, thinking of the look on Miss Hinsdale's face when he crossed her threshold again.

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