

**Excerpt from "Paying The Piper" by Gail Ranstrom**

Chloe Faraday clutched her brother's sleeve and looked up into green eyes so exactly like hers that it was like looking in a mirror. "I tell you, Georgie, I am desperate. Our stepfather turns a deaf ear and refuses to discuss it. Last night he . . . he punished me. And if a girl cannot trust her own brother, who can she trust? You *must* help me."

Georgie patted her hand on his arm and smiled reassuringly. "Dear Chloe, you are merely having wedding vapors. Is that not *de rigueur* for blushing brides?"

"I am not being fashionable or coy, Georgie. I am truly desperate. I cannot imagine how I ignored the forthcoming nuptials for so long. I assure you, it is one thing to be promised to a stranger years in advance, and quite another to be scarcely a week from those very nuptials. I simply cannot go through with it, and that is an end to it."

"There, there, puss," Georgie soothed. "You will calm as the day draws near. There is nothing to concern yourself about. I went to school with Anthony Chandler. I know him to be a reasonable man, not given to sudden angers or passions. Indeed, he has always been a most serious sort."

Georgie was such a wag and a jester that she had to doubt him. She clasped her hands together and went to look out the parlor window.

Spring was in her giddy stages. Trees wore unfurling green leaves and the buds of flowers, tightly packed now, would soon be bursting to the warmth of sunny spring afternoons. By the time those same trees and flowers were in full bloom, she would be walking down an aisle to join her life to a stranger's. It was untenable!

She turned back to her brother. "Georgie, platitudes will not serve me now. If I do not have your help, I shall have to do something I'm likely to regret. Run away, or--"

"Come now. You've been betrothed to Chandler for two years. Why come down all missish now?"

"Because two years ago, there was always the chance that he . . ."  
*Oh, dear! She was going to have to say it aloud and look horrid!* "That he wouldn't come back from the war," she admitted in a rush. "And if he didn't, I could plead a broken heart and stall another match until I was considered quite unmarriageable. And I enjoyed being able to go to London for the seasons and not be troubled by earnest swains or matrons clucking their tongues over why I was not wed yet."

Heavens! When she said the words aloud, shame filled her to overflowing. Was she truly as shallow and self-centered as she sounded? She tried again. "Just two weeks ago, I was happily going my own way, and then, with the arrival of that dreadful letter to Papa

Hubbard from Captain Chandler--that he had returned to England and was posting banns at his parish church and told Papa Hubbard to do the same, and that he wanted to marry as soon as possible--well, everything has changed now. The past three Sundays I've cringed as I've listened to the banns being read. The servants are polishing every square inch of the house in preparation for Captain Chandler's arrival. And I never actually intended to marry. Anyone."

"You've had your fun, Chloe--two years of it--and now it is time for you to pay the piper."

"The piper? Or the devil? You told me he has horns and smells of sulfur."

Georgie grinned. "Ah, Chloe. It is a brother's prerogative to tease."

"If it is just teasing, Georgie, why hasn't Captain--excuse me--*Sir* Anthony Chandler presented himself ere now?"

Her brother shrugged. "He had to go home, post the banns in his parish and ready his house to bring home his bride. Besides, chit, it is not like you've never met the man. *Pleasantly presentable*, I believe were your words."

Her cheeks burned. If only she had known her polite social lie would

grow legs and run away with her! *Captain Chandler?* Yes, I remember him, Papa Charles. He was quite pleasantly presentable. "Oh, Georgie. That was my first season. I danced and chatted with so many young men that they blurred together until I could not tell one from another. When you and Papa Hubbard said that Captain Chandler was being touted as the hero of Cuidad Rodrigo and asked if I recalled him, I lied. You see, there were so many men in uniform that spring. I've absolutely no recollection of him at all. Had I known he'd made an offer for me, I'd not have fibbed about remembering him. But then Papa Hubbard arranged the details and signed the settlements and it was too late to cry off."

"Gads!" Her brother quirked an eyebrow. "S'truth? How could you have made such an impression on him when he made no impression on you whatsoever?"

"I do not know," she confessed. Tears stung the backs of her eyes. She really *was* all those awful things--shallow, fickle and rash! "I tried desperately to recall Captain Chandler after Papa Hubbard told me we were betrothed, but nothing would come. All the young men in uniform were presentable. Some were very amusing and some were quiet. All were excited to be going to the peninsula. I could never sort them out with their names."

George shook his head in disbelief. "Well, Anthony was always a man

who knew exactly what he wanted and went after it. He'd got orders to report back to Spain the very day he met you. Looks like he was right to tie you up before he returned to the peninsula. Some other chap would have spoken for you by now."

"Some other chap? But, Georgie, I do not want to marry. Ever. And, were Captain Chandler truly taken with me, would he not have written at least one letter?"

"Not one? Hmm. That is a little laconic, even for Tony. And you, puss? How many letters have you written him?"

Chloe pressed her lips together to stem the flow of vitriolic words and went back to the window to watch a sparrow soar heavenward. Blessed freedom. The very thing she yearned for. Within one week, she would belong to a man she had no recollection of, lying--horrors!--*naked* in his bed, and expected to behave as if all this were natural--allowing liberties and feigning pleasure. Oh, yes! She knew all about what husbands and wives did. Her friend, Marianne, had tearfully hinted at it when she'd come back from her honeymoon.

And that was not the worst of it! No, the worst was that Marianne--and all her friends who were now married--were at the mercy of their husbands. Men whose true character was not known to them until after the wedding. Men who now treated them indifferently at best,

and cruelly at worst. Why, she could even recall when their stepfather first came calling on her mother. In order to win her consent, he'd indulged her and Georgie, and even brought them sweetmeats and played games with them every time he came. They had thought he was wonderful. But after the wedding, when her mother was subject to his control, there were no more sweetmeats and games, and her mother spent much of her time in her room crying.

Chloe swallowed the lump in her throat and spoke without turning. "It is not Captain Sir Anthony Chandler, Georgie. It is marriage altogether. I do not want to wed anyone. And, if you do not help me, I shall do something drastic."

"Define 'drastic,' puss. What sort of thing are you plotting?"

"I shall join a convent or run away or. . . or ruin my reputation."

George sobered. "First, puss, you cannot join a convent since we are not Catholic. Second, if you run away, you will just be found and dragged back to the altar. As for ruining, what would you do to accomplish that?"

"If I were kidnapped, that would not make me a social pariah since it could not be my fault, but it would certainly call my . . . virtue into question. Since Captain Chandler has political aspirations, he needs a

wife with a spotless reputation if he is to rise in government and thus would not want me then." She lifted her chin with determination--a gesture she knew her brother would recognize as her signal that she would go through with any scheme that would liberate her from marriage.

Georgie sighed and she knew by his frown that he was thinking of their stepfather and what he might do to force the marriage. "Very well, Chloe. You'd better tell me what plot you're hatching and I'll see what I can do."

Sir Anthony Chandler, so recently knighted for valor in the Battle of Toulouse that he had not accustomed himself to the honor of 'Sir' attached to his name, stretched his stiff leg out toward the fire. The last thing he'd expected to invade his library on a stormy night was his future brother-in-law. He sipped his sherry and stared into the flames while he digested the startling news.

"Abhorrent, eh?" he asked at length. "That's the word she used?"

George Faraday sighed deeply and sat forward in his chair. "A simple case of wedding vapors. It will pass."

"So she has sent you to beg off?"

"Our stepfather has forbidden that. She has concocted some harebrained scheme to queer the nuptials. Believe me, if I thought I could talk her out of it, I would. But Chloe is determined, and when she has set her mind on something, consider it a *fait accompli*."

Anthony ignored the sharp edge of disappointment that sliced through him. He was not the same man Miss Faraday remembered. The intervening years had changed him, physically and emotionally. And since he was decidedly changed, well, it was only fair to give the girl a chance to change her mind.

"Is it my injuries? Has someone told her--"

"No, Tony. She knows nothing of that."

He sighed. At least she hadn't rejected him because he was in some way diminished in her eyes. "I will grant her freedom readily enough."

"That's the problem, you see. As I've already said, our stepfather has forbidden it," George admitted. "And our mother falls into vapors when it is mentioned. She fears Chloe will be branded a jilt and no one will offer for her again. Our stepfather swears he will not come up with another dowry." George held up a hand to stop the protest Anthony was about to make. "He said he will not break the contract. He's left



Chloe no choice. But the lack of future suitors or dowry does not daunt her. She vows that she never intends to marry at all."

Deep in thought, Anthony cupped his crystal glass in his left hand, running his right finger in lazy circles around the rim until the glass sang. Miss Chloe Faraday--a flurry of ebon curls, sparkling green eyes, full sensuous lips and a lithe supple form swathed in virginal white--the bright and pure image he had carried with him through untold horror and hardship. His touchstone. His reason to survive against seemingly insurmountable odds. The last thing left in his life he could hold untainted and untouchable. What a great waste if she never married at all.

On the strength of one dance the night before returning to the war, and scarcely daring to hope, he'd written her stepfather and offered marriage. He could still recall opening his letter of acceptance. He'd been awash in stunned disbelief and incredible pleasure. With Chloe Faraday waiting for him, he had a reason to go on.

Society considered him a good catch because of his good looks, family connections and future prospects. But he was, in any maid's eyes, a ruined man--oh, not in the social sense. His reputation had improved, if anything. But his injuries at Toulouse had left him a parody of what he'd once been. He had hoped this would not matter to Miss Faraday, but he'd been a fool to think so.

"I will call it off, George. She will not need a harebrained scheme. She has reason enough to regret her choice. I am hardly the man she knew."

George cleared his throat. "That, it would seem, is part of the problem. You see, she confessed that she has no memory at all of you."

Anthony stared at George in stunned disbelief. "Ah, the final insult. How flattering." Damnation! It had been one thing to be rejected because of his injuries, but quite another to be rejected because he'd been too inconsequential to even remember! Anger, fueled by hurt, made him want to hold her to her bargain.

He placed his glass on the side table and stood. If he sat too long, his wounded leg would stiffen and refuse to cooperate. There'd be very little dancing with pretty girls in his future. And Chloe Faraday would be sitting out her share of dances if he had anything to say about it.

Lightning struck in the orchard outside his window and thunder rumbled over Chandler Hall, rattling windows and bringing a chill wind. As he turned back to his friend, he caught his reflection in the darkened window. The scar that ran from his left jaw to his cheekbone was evident even in that murky reflection. He traced the ridge of angry red

tissue. Yes, he was enough to terrify any gently bred woman.

George, to his credit, did not try to dismiss his bruised pride. He went to the decanter and poured another sherry for them both. "May I ask why you never wrote to Chloe?"

"Pen and paper were deuced difficult to come by in the trenches, George. On the rare occasions when I might have been able to send her communication of any kind, I could not think what to say. I had acted on impulse when I asked her hand. Since she is your sister I knew she would be of good character, and that was recommendation enough for me. Her appearance . . . well, you know the effect such beauty has on a healthy man. But I had no idea what we might have in common, or how to engage her interest. I felt . . . inadequate."

His friend nodded as if he understood. "And Chloe said she did not know what to write to a man she couldn't remember." He sighed and sat again. "I could not convince her to come talk to you. She says nothing good can come from such an ill-conceived courtship, and that it is marriage she scorns, not you."

"I should not have put faith in our ability to find common ground and make a go of it. Put a rifle or sword in my hands and I am more than competent. But that slip of a girl had me tied in knots."

“She has that effect on her entire family. Chloe is an unstoppable force. Quite the little manager. That is why I despair of talking sense into her. She has been willful most of her life, but she actually means well and has a very good heart. And no, before you ask it, she has not been unfaithful nor does she have another beau in mind.”

Anthony shrugged. “The wedding is less than a fortnight away. Calling it off now would make us all look foolish. Sorry to say, George, but I’m inclined to think she’ll have to go through with it.”

George smiled, lifting his glass. “Let me tell you Chloe’s little scheme. And then my own ideas. You will have to decide if the reward is worth the risk.”

Lightning struck outside the window again and Anthony wondered if that was an omen of things to come.