

The Heart That Waits

by Kaye Dacus

Prologue

Brightwell Estates
Santiago del Estero, Argentina
June 3, 1851

"Not bad news, I hope, my lord."

Stephen Brightwell looked up from the letter his steward had delivered to him moments ago. Even after more than thirty years working at the Brightwell cotton plantation, the man, a former sailor, did not sit a horse easily.

Stephen folded the letter and tucked it into the deep pocket of his heavy, plain, canvas jacket. "It seems that I will not be bringing my wife back with me in the spring

after all."

The steward's face clouded. "I do believe that constitutes bad news, my lord."

Stephen rolled his shoulders, the movement setting his own horse to dancing beneath him. A quick movement of reins and pressure from heels and knees calmed the animal almost immediately.

"She has decided to marry someone else." He shielded his eyes against the bright winter sun, surveying the new fields that would be sown with corn and oats come August. While it had taken him several years to grow accustomed to the inverted seasons in Argentina—winter from June through August, summer starting before Christmas and lasting through what were the coldest months back in England—after over ten years living here, it would be difficult to remember that it would be summer, not winter, when he returned to Oxford in July.

After discovering Kate, his fiancée, had been in love with another man, and knowing that she had accepted

Stephen's proposal only because of his offer to pay her father's debts. Stephen was not completely surprised at her change of mind. Even though he liked her as a person and they got on quite well together, he'd been in no danger of falling in love with her. Which was exactly why he'd proposed. He'd fallen in love once; and when that woman broken his heart, he'd vowed never to love again.

He tried to feel pride at not allowing himself to lose his heart to Kate. Instead, he only felt a sense of loss and anger.

Even after a public embarrassment—when her cousin announced at a dinner party she'd seen Kate kissing the landscape gardener, ensuring the news spread throughout London high society—he'd still planned to marry Kate. Certainly, he'd set conditions—the main one being that she was not to create any additional scandal nor have anything to do with the landscape gardener until Stephen returned from Argentina.

He sighed and reined his horse into a 180-degree

turn, heading back toward the cotton fields and, beyond them, the low-slung, sprawling house he'd had built shortly after his arrival here in 1840. When he'd boarded the steamer bringing him back to South America several weeks ago, he'd done so with an instinct deep inside telling him he would not be returning to plan a wedding but, instead, returning to an empty house and facing a future of bachelorhood.

At least his younger brother had a son. It wasn't as if there was no heir for the title of Viscount Thynne in the immediate family.

Stephen kicked his horse into a canter—having to urge the animal a bit more than what he was accustomed to with his regular mount, Azgar. But he'd taken Azgar to England, wanting to have some small part of Argentina with him in what felt like a forced exile from the place he'd come to love so dearly.

Dust rose in a cloud behind the substitute mount as the horse's heavy hooves pounded the dirt road between fields. Cool, dry air caressed Stephen's face, and he pushed

his hat off his head to let it hang by its strings around his neck. Winters here stayed almost as warm as the late spring or early summer in England, though much, much drier.

He knew all the time he spent in the sun had done his complexion no favors—his mother had been quick to point that out when she had first seen him upon his initial return to England not so long ago.

The combination of sun and wind, excellent horseflesh, and wide-open vistas created a balm for his soul and raised his spirits. So Kate was to marry the landscape gardener.

He had no doubt she would be happier as a poor man's wife than she ever would have been as Lady Thynne married to a man she would never love. She deserved to marry a man she loved. He was too fond of her to begrudge her that.

At the stables, he slid to the ground with a bounce returned to his step. Letters needed writing, and he'd have a hard time soothing his mother over this newest slight of the Brightwell family, as she would see it. He knew what she would tell him: At forty-one years old, he needed to

find a wife, and soon. He wasn't getting any younger, after all.

This experience had reminded him of his own personal mandate to be patient, to weigh his options, to take time before making decisions—a mandate he'd adopted after his first hasty decision to wed had ended badly. He'd allowed himself to believe it would be different with Katherine Dearing.

While he wasn't getting any younger, he also did not want to risk his happiness again on another relationship that could end up broken—or worse. He'd already done it twice. He would not make the same mistake a third time.

Although duty required him to return to London sooner rather than later, and Society would insist he take up his place immediately in the marriage mart, he would be patient and not do anything until he knew, deep down, he was making the right decision.

Yes, he would wait.