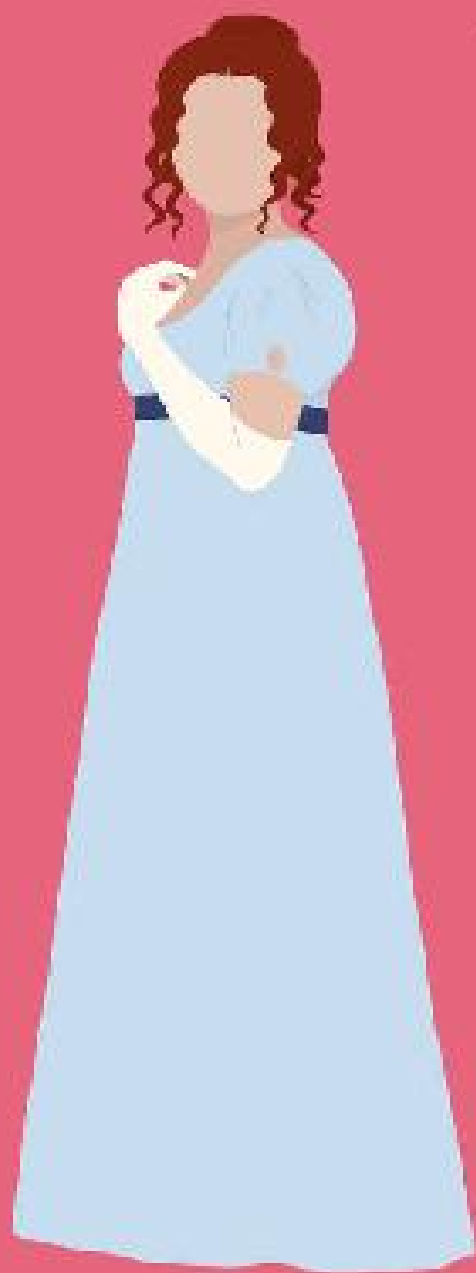


How Not to Entrap a Duke



STACEY NORTH

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Stacey North

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Chapter One

London, December 1815

“Let us go over the plan one more time.” Propped up in bed on a heap of cushions, cheeks flushed and eyes fever-bright, Diana clasped her hands together and waited like an expectant theatre-goer just before curtain-up. Though it was only mid-afternoon, the candles had already been lit to chase away the dull gloom of a wet winter’s day, and the pink velvet hangings of Diana’s four-poster cast a rosy glow over the scene.

“I am to wear your new gown and attend the masquerade dance at Almack’s,” Sophy recited. “With a mask on, no one will be able to tell who I am, and your voucher will enable me to enter.” She held up the gilt-edged invitation, addressed in flourishing script to the Marquess and Marchioness of Tarley and their two eldest daughters, the Ladies Diana and Arabella Frampton.

“I will be with her the whole time,” piped up Arabella, who was sitting on the other side of Diana’s bed, “to ensure she doesn’t make any mistakes or reveal her true identity. We will scout the room for a secluded alcove and I will point out the Duke of Seale.”

“Then I simply have to manoeuvre the Duke into the alcove and get him to kiss me,” Sophy said, although she still wasn’t sure exactly how she was going to manage this.

“No, you must kiss *him*,” Diana said sternly. “He is a true gentleman, and would not *dream* of laying his lips on a lady’s – at least in public. It is up to you to be bold and make the first move, Sophy.”

Sophy swallowed and nodded. “I can do that. But, Diana... what if I can’t get the Duke to come with me?”

Diana waved her hand impatiently, as if this crucial detail was of no importance. “Just say you have something urgent to impart to him, and draw him aside. He will be intrigued.”

“I rather liked my suggestion,” Arabella cut in hopefully. “Could you not –”

“No,” Sophy and Diana said firmly in unison, and then Diana broke out in a coughing fit, her face turning scarlet as she struggled for breath. Sophy rubbed her back, and Arabella refilled a cup with honey and lemon, pressing it into Diana’s hand once her coughing had subsided.

“Blast this putrid throat,” Diana rasped, taking a sip of the drink, which was now lukewarm rather than hot. She made a face, then downed the rest of it in one pained swallow.

“But if you were well, then Sophy would not be able to attend the masquerade!”

“I don’t mind that,” Diana said truthfully. Sophy knew her friend didn’t harbour the slightest trace of resentment that she was stepping into her dancing slippers for the night. Diana was invited to so many glittering balls that she was quite nonchalant about passing up an opportunity to visit Almack’s. She flopped back against the cushions with a sigh, and grumbled, “It’s only that being ill is so miserable.”

“But merely *pretending* to be ill –” Arabella began, unwilling to let her idea drop.

“I am not going to *swoon*,” Sophy said, and Arabella pouted in disappointment.

“I think it would be far more dramatic! He would have to catch you, and then, when he was laying you down on a couch in the retiring room, your eyes would flutter open and he would lean in and –” Arabella clasped her hands to her heart in ecstasy.

“There’s absolutely no call for dramatics. I just need to kiss him in such a way that compromises my reputation, so he will have no choice but to marry me.” Sophy looked at Diana anxiously. “He *will* marry me then, won’t he?”

Diana patted her hand reassuringly. “Of course he will, my dear. I have met the Duke – back when his father was alive and he was still only a lord – and I assure you, he behaved with the utmost honour the entire time. He is well known for

his upstanding moral code – and his broken heart, of course, but that does not signify.”

As a wealthy Marquess’s daughter, Diana was blasé about rank and fortune, but Sophy would never get used to her describing a titled aristocrat as *only* a lord.

“It’s just... after what happened with Sir Philip the other month...”

“Sir Philip is a cad,” Diana said promptly, “and I am glad you nearly poked his eye out with your fan. I hope it taught him a lesson he will not soon forget! His behaviour was deplorable and I am sorry you suffered it under our roof. Rest assured, my dear, Sir Philip is the exception and not the rule.”

Sophy remained silent. She didn’t know how to explain to her friend that Sir Philip had not, in fact, been the exception. In her experience, the noble lords of the *ton* were all the same – entitled and presumptuous. “When he finds out I am not a lady...”

Diana leaned forward, her face scrunched up in concern. “The Duke of Seale is a gentleman, Sophy. He will do the right thing by you, no matter your parentage.”

“Perhaps you will be the woman to finally mend his broken heart!” Arabella exclaimed, her eyes lighting up at the thought.

This is simply a business arrangement,” Sophy protested, uncomfortable at the idea of bringing feelings into it. She didn’t need the Duke to fall in love with her, for after all, she had no intention of falling in love with the Duke.

Diana was nodding in approval. “As your matchmaker, I have picked the perfect husband for you. The Duke is unattached, despite the machinations of many a scheming society mama, *and* he is exceedingly wealthy. Marrying him would solve all your problems.”

Sophy grasped onto that promise and used it to bolster her nerve, which was threatening to fail her at the eleventh hour. “And are you *quite* sure there is not another rich

gentleman who would do just as well? Only, a duke is so very grand...”

“If you’re going to do this, you may as well do it properly,” Diana said in a tone that brooked no argument. “If you marry a landed gentleman you will forever be known as his common wife whose parents had to work to earn a living. But as the wife of a duke, you will be untouchable.”

Untouchable. Sophy squared her shoulders and summoned her courage.

“Then by the end of the night I shall be engaged to the Duke of Seale.”

Chapter Two

“Must I attend this damned ball?”

“Language, Jack,” his mother said sharply, rapping him on the wrist with her fan. For such a decorative object, it stung more than he was expecting, but he did not let on other than by a slight narrowing of his eyes. His mother, the Dowager Duchess, was a formidable woman, and he did not want to incur her displeasure any more than he was already doing.

She reached up to adjust his cravat and then, stepping back, gave a nod of approval. “You will do nicely. And yes, Jack, I insist upon your attending this ball with me. It will be the first time I have stepped out in society since the passing of your beloved papa, and...”

“Say no more, Mama,” he said hastily, before she could whip out her lace-edged handkerchief. “It would be my pleasure to accompany you to the masquerade.”

“You are a good son,” she told him, stretching up on her tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek. Her violet crepe dress rustled, and he hoped her fragrance had not transferred to him. The last thing he needed was to spend all night smelling like lavender. “Come, we should leave now, or else we shall not arrive before midnight.”

As the Dowager Duchess had predicted, the streets leading to Almack’s were thronged with carriages, inching slowly along as their occupants were gradually disgorged. She seemed impatient and jittery, twitching the curtain aside to peek out into the street, which was covered in a muddy slush of melted ice and snow.

From the outside, the assembly rooms were surprisingly unpretentious, but Jack knew that inside they would be seething with the most influential members of the *ton*. Suppressing a shudder, he drew out a black domino mask and settled it over his eyes, tying it behind his head with the attached silk ribbons.

“How handsome you are,” his mother told him as they entered Almack’s and presented their vouchers, but she was not even looking at him, her eyes skimming the crowd instead. Despite the exclusivity of the invitations, the hall was packed. Ladies dressed in all hues and colours milled about like exotic birds with their feathered headdresses, their jewellery sparkling in the light from the two-tiered crystal chandelier overhead.

“Are you meeting someone here?” Jack asked.

“Well –” she prevaricated, her fan coming up to flutter agitatedly around her décolletage. “I – oh! There you are, my darling!”

She bustled past Jack, and with a sinking feeling he turned around, knowing whom his mother had just embraced. There was only one other man she called *my darling* these days.

“Richard,” he ground out.

“Jonathan!” His elder brother’s eyebrows raised in surprise, visible above the line of his own black domino – damn it, why did they have to look so similar? They were even dressed alike, in identical long-tailed coats of dark blue superfine over ivory silk breeches. Jack made a mental note to change his tailor. He was reminded of too many social occasions when he and his brother had deliberately worn complementary outfits, standing together like a couple of dandies, knowing they set each other off to full advantage with their height, fine figures, and thick dark hair.

“I did not expect to see you here,” Jack said, glaring daggers at his mother. The Dowager Duchess looked utterly unrepentant.

“It is high time you two got over this ridiculous feud you have going on between you,” she said crisply, jabbing her fan at them for emphasis. “I had thought that you might make amends at your papa’s funeral, but...”

Jack remembered the funeral all too clearly, and from the way he was squirming, so too did Richard. It had not been

their finest hour.

“I want both of my boys home for Christmas,” the Dowager said, fixing each of them with a gimlet eye. Richard mumbled something, while Jack redirected his glare down at his shoes. How could he make up with Richard, when his brother wouldn’t even call him by the nickname he had had since childhood?

“Allow me to fetch you some refreshments, Mama,” Richard said, turning and pushing his way through the press of people, his shoulders stiff. Jack watched him depart with a feeling of relief.

“I’ll just –”

“Go after him, and tell him I don’t want the weak lemonade they serve here!” his mother instructed, giving him a poke with her fan. Lord, she was a menace with that thing.

Grumbling to himself, Jack began to thread his way through the crowd, with no intention of actually finding his brother. It would be all too easy to lose himself among the masked revellers, and maybe even steal a dance or two with a pretty girl. Just as this thought occurred to him, a hand touched his elbow, and he glanced around to see a girl tentatively holding onto his arm, almost as though he had conjured her from his imagination.

The next words she spoke threw cold water over his fantasy.

“Your Grace? A word, if you please?” She bit her lip, and his gaze was drawn to her mouth. Then she seemed to summon some inner reserve of courage, and blurted out, “I must speak with you as a matter of great urgency!”

Bitterly, Jack was just about to inform her that she had the wrong brother, but at the last moment he hesitated. Richard had not been linked to another woman since Miss Cecily Lamington, so who exactly was this girl, and what did she have to say that was so pressing? Surely his unimpeachable older brother had not taken on a mistress?

Intrigued, Jack took hold of her hand and began to lead her away from the dance floor. “Let us go somewhere more private, so that we may more easily talk,” he said, looking forward to this chit spilling his brother’s secrets. He didn’t normally go in for blackmail, but it might just give him the upper hand if the Dowager was going to insist on them all spending Christmas together.

They reached the hallway, where it was quieter. A brief burst of laughter echoed from behind the door to the card room and the girl looked from side to side, no doubt checking to see if they could be overheard.

Jack leaned in closer. The girl was tall, so he did not have to bend down far. “Speak,” he murmured, trying to deepen his voice and sound more like his brother. “Do not be afraid of whatever it is you have to say.”

His words seemed to spur her into action. “I am not afraid,” she breathed, sounding as though she were trying to convince herself, and then she reached up and grabbed his face and pressed a clumsy but firm kiss on his mouth, her teeth banging against his.

Jack disengaged himself. Good Lord, had his brother not taught this wench how to kiss? She looked mortified by his rejection, her wide hazel eyes suddenly brimming with tears. Inwardly sighing, Jack put his arms around her and pulled her in tightly, pressing her body against his. She gave a squeak of alarm.

“Allow me to show you how it is done,” he murmured, nipping playfully at her lower lip and feeling her shudder against him. Her mouth was soft and warm, and opened in invitation as he darted his tongue out against her lips. She was a fast learner.

Enjoying himself now, Jack deepened the kiss, his hands caressing the length of her body, quite forgetting where they were – until a piercing shriek startled them apart.

“Unhand my friend, you rake!”

Jack raised his hands in lazy surrender. “I did not do anything the lady did not wish me to.”

The avenging angel he faced down was all but quivering in fury, one dramatic finger pointing right at his chest, which was about as high as she could reach. “You have compromised her reputation, sir! In front of all to see!” And indeed, the louder she shouted, the more people had begun to gather, drawn in by the excitement of the spectacle. Jack could have told her she was only making things worse, but he was somewhat bemused by the whole affair.

“Are you even old enough to be out?”

“I am seventeen, sir! But that is beside the point! Do not think you can distract me from your sinful behaviour with your honeyed words. The only honourable thing to do...” The girl paused, ringlets trembling in righteous indignation. “The only honourable thing to do, *Your Grace*, is to marry her!”

Jack couldn't help it: he laughed out loud. And then he reached up to undo the ribbons tied behind his head, and slid his domino off. “But I am not the Duke.”

Chapter Three

Not the Duke? Sophy felt as though she were falling from a very great height. Her mouth – which this unknown man had been kissing only moments ago, and which was still tingling from the experience – hung slightly open. “But...” she whispered, terror seizing her in its grip. “But who...”

She looked at Arabella, who had also removed her mask and was looking stricken. “The Duke’s brother,” she mouthed, not quite silently, at Sophy.

“Yes, I am the Duke of Seale’s brother,” the man at her side said in clipped tones. “Lord Jonathan Clayton, at your service. But perhaps you ought to call me Jack, given our... recent intimacy.”

Sophy winced. The murmurs among the crowd were growing in volume, and she was pinned to the spot, unable to move. How had this all gone so terribly wrong? She and Arabella had entered Almack’s without trouble, and it had not been long before Arabella had given her a sharp nudge and said, “Look! There he is, the Duke of Seale! Talking to his mother!” They had moved to follow him when he abruptly broke away, and for a moment Sophy thought they had lost him in the crowd, but then she had caught sight of that beautifully tailored coat and the dark swoop of hair, and Arabella had nodded enthusiastically and given Sophy a little push and said, “Go!”

It had all happened so quickly. She thought she had ruined everything when her kiss had landed so badly, but to her astonishment the Duke – no, not the Duke, *Jack* – had kissed her back. Except *kiss* didn’t really do it justice. Sophy was still reeling from the sensations he had ignited in her, her skin fizzing with a delicious heat she had never before experienced.

“What is going on?” called an imperious voice over the thrilled chatter of their audience. Beside her, Lord Clayton tensed. It appeared to have been a rhetorical question,

however, because the magnificent woman sailing towards them now said, “Is it true? Have you compromised this young lady’s reputation, Jack?”

“I suppose that would depend on whether the *lady* had a reputation to compromise in the first place,” he said churlishly, and Sophy – who had not thought she could feel any more embarrassed than she already did – cringed away from him.

“Jack,” the woman said sharply, and even without Arabella hissing under her breath, “*It’s the Dowager Duchess!*” Sophy would have guessed at her identity, for who else but a mother would scold a grown man as though he were still a child?

“She’s Richard’s mistress,” said Lord Clayton dismissively. The absurdity of this statement jolted Sophy right out of her stupor.

“I am not!” she said heatedly. “How dare you! I’ve never even met the Duke of Seale!”

“That is true,” said another deep male voice, and a man bearing a striking resemblance to Lord Clayton pushed through to the front of the crowd, mask dangling from his hand as he took in Sophy with a frown. Arabella emitted a little groan.

“Follow me,” the Dowager Duchess said briskly, and within moments she had ushered them all into the retiring room, shooing out a couple of young ladies and their chaperones so that they had the room to themselves. Sophy supposed that when you were a duchess, people just did what you told them to. “Now then,” the Duchess said, eyeing Sophy in a way that made her supremely uncomfortable, “just who *are* you? I know you, of course,” she said to Arabella, who was loyally clutching Sophy’s arm. “You’re one of Tarley’s girls.”

“Lady Arabella Frampton,” Arabella introduced herself, curtsying and almost pulling Sophy over as she did so. “And this is my very dear friend, Miss Sophy Draper.”

“Sophia?” the Dowager queried in her cut-glass accent.

“Everyone calls me Sophy, Your Grace” she whispered, overawed by this imposing lady. Although the Dowager was not tall, she still somehow managed to look down her nose at Sophy, her statuesque features giving her a commanding air.

“Well then, take off your mask, so that I may see your face.”

Sophy froze in shock. She was still wearing her mask! The whole plan hinged on her reputation being compromised, but how could she claim that if she’d been anonymous the whole time?

The Dowager clicked her fingers impatiently, and Sophy fumbled to remove the mask that had been meant for Diana. Underneath it, she was sure her powder had rubbed off. It was hot in the assembly rooms, and the terror of putting Diana’s mad scheme into motion had only made her perspire more. She stood, trembling a little, as the Dowager inspected her. Much to Sophy’s surprise, the Dowager said, “She has a good complexion, and fine bright eyes. Her hair is especially lovely – would you call this auburn?”

Sophy had no idea whom the Dowager was addressing, but said awkwardly, “I would call it chestnut, Your Grace.”

“No, it is definitely auburn,” the Dowager said decisively.

“Why does it matter what the colour of her hair is?” Jack demanded. He and his brother were standing as far apart as was possible without being on opposite sides of the room, and both of them seemed angry. Good heavens, this was the family Diana wanted her to marry into? Sophy felt an overwhelming urge to simply run away, but Arabella held her firmly anchored in place.

“I was only thinking of how handsome my grandchildren would be,” the Dowager said serenely, and there was a moment of shocked silence before Jack erupted in spluttering protestations. Richard, too, seemed taken aback.

“Mama, you cannot be serious. We do not even know who this girl *is*, and you would marry her off to Jonathan?”

“I didn’t know you cared,” Jack said bitterly.

“Perhaps I was thinking to save *her* from the awful fate of being married to you,” Richard spat back.

“Enough!” cried the Dowager Duchess, snapping her fan shut and smacking it into the palm of her hand so hard that Sophy flinched. “Lady Arabella, can you confirm that Miss Draper is a lady of good character and impeccable moral standing?”

Arabella nodded enthusiastically. “She is!”

“Then it is clear that my son’s actions have compromised her reputation, as you so keenly pointed out, and he must marry her to salvage her good name.”

But he’s not the Duke, Sophy thought, then chided herself for being petty. While this was not the outcome she or Diana had predicted, perhaps it was not quite the disaster she feared either. A duke’s brother was still held in high regard, and surely he would have a fortune of his own...? Besides, it would become clear all too quickly that she was nobody, and did not have a good name to salvage. Sophy dipped her head modestly, accepting the Dowager’s pronouncement, and glanced up at Lord Clayton to see he had a face like thunder.

“Very well, Mama,” Jack said, narrowing his eyes. “I will propose to Miss Draper. But she is free at any time to break off our engagement, if she so desires.”

There was a distinct challenge in his voice, and the look he levelled at Sophy told her in no uncertain terms that he saw her for what she was. Sophy was sure he did not intend to accept this engagement quietly, and a feeling of dread crept over her.

“Wonderful!” cried the Duchess, and Sophy could have sworn the grand lady gave her a flicker of a wink.

For some reason, this unsettled her even more.

Chapter Four

Richard and Jack faced off across the breakfast table like two dogs in a fighting pit, hackles raised. Such blatant hostility crackled between them that Jack was sure in the next moment they would be baring their teeth at each other and snarling. The Dowager Duchess, however, merely poured herself another cup of tea and said, “Richard, would you pass me the preserves?”

She had not let either of her sons retreat to their respective clubs that night, but insisted they both accompany her home and stay overnight at her splendid Mayfair townhouse like they were all still a happy family.

From the look on Richard’s face, it seemed the only thing that would make him happy was to never see Jack again.

“Now then, I have sent my carriage to collect Miss Draper and Lady Tarley so that we may discuss arrangements for the wedding. It is perhaps a little early for a morning call, but no matter.”

“As this does not concern me, I will take my leave,” Richard said, beginning to rise from his chair, but the Dowager stopped him with her next words.

“Your brother is getting married! This most certainly *does* concern you. I do not believe you were properly introduced to Miss Draper last night, so at the very least you need to make her acquaintance.”

“This is absurd. Everyone knows Jonathan is a rake – forcing him into marriage will not change that, Mama.”

Jack leant back in his chair with a lazy smile. “Of course not. I’m just doing this to save Miss Draper’s good name. My mistresses won’t care whether I have a wife waiting at home.”

“You utter –”

“Boys!” The Dowager Duchess’s chest was heaving. “That is *enough*.”

There was a frosty silence around the table. Jack was sorry to have caused his mother distress, but remained unrepentant towards Richard. His older brother had always been too quick to judge, believing himself to be morally superior in every way.

After that, no one seemed interested in eating anything else, their appetites vanishing in the face of such tension. Jack was heartily glad when the butler came to announce the arrival of Miss Draper and Lady Arabella.

“Lady Arabella!” the Dowager exclaimed, standing up. “My invitation was addressed to Lady Tarley.”

“Mama is suffering from the putrid sore throat and is unable to leave her bed,” Arabella said cheerfully. “Papa and Diana are similarly afflicted, and as there was no one else suitable, I thought I should accompany Miss Draper.”

“Very well then,” the Dowager said, frowning at the impertinence of a young lady making decisions for herself, but having no choice but to accept it. They moved through into the saloon, which adjoined the drawing room, and Arabella fussed over Sophy, making sure she was seated closest to the fire. Sophy looked unnaturally pale and she shivered as Arabella tucked a cashmere shawl closer around her. The long-sleeved pink dress she wore was an unfortunate choice, for it only served to accentuate her pallor.

“Last night you told me you were staying with Lord and Lady Tarley,” the Dowager said to Sophy. “Pray tell me, what is your situation?”

“My mother and younger siblings live in London. My father died earlier this year.”

The Dowager’s gaze darted over Sophy’s gown, which was not in mourning colours, and Jack could follow his mother’s line of thought as clearly as if she had spoken aloud. Sophy’s father had passed away over six months ago, which meant there would be no reason to delay getting married. “My

own dear husband passed away last winter,” the Dowager said gently. “I have not long been out of full mourning.”

Sophy inclined her head. “I am sorry to hear that.”

“Forgive me for being impertinent, but you are not yet twenty-one?”

“That is correct.”

“So then we must get your mother’s permission for you to be married, unless you are Lord Tarley’s ward?”

“No, Lord and Lady Tarley have been very kind to me, but they are not... That is to say...” Sophy looked to Arabella for help.

“Miss Draper is our very dear friend,” Arabella said staunchly. “Her mother, Mrs Draper, is Mama’s modiste.”

“Her modiste!” The Dowager could not cover up her horror, and for the first time this morning, Jack felt a flicker of amusement. Women were all the same: they played games, and did not say what they truly meant, but this was a twist even he had not seen coming.

“She has an establishment on Conduit Street,” Sophy replied calmly, “and a team of twelve seamstresses who work for her.” She folded her hands in her lap, seeming quite unashamed of this revelation, although the look she darted at Arabella suggested she had not expected her to reveal this information quite so soon.

“Are you also a mantua maker, Miss Draper?” Jack drawled, leaning forward.

Sophy raised her chin. Her cheeks had suddenly become very flushed, and her pupils were large and dark, reflecting the flicker of firelight. “I have been trained in dressmaking, yes,” she said.

Oh, this was excellent. Jack darted a glance at his mother, who for once in her life seemed utterly speechless. She had no doubt assumed Miss Draper to be a gentlewoman, and instead she turned out to be from trade! Jack had to acknowledge that he was more than a little impressed by Miss

Draper's social climbing. To have somehow inveigled her way into Almack's, of all places, and attempted to ensnare a duke!

Richard, who had remained silent and glowering throughout the whole conversation, stood up abruptly. "This is absurd! Mama, you cannot permit Jonathan to marry this – this *woman*."

That did it. Richard did not get to dictate his actions.

Goaded into action – and suppressing a laugh – Jack went and knelt at Sophy's feet.

"Dearest Miss Draper, last night I told you I would propose, but I did not actually do so. Allow me to rectify that grievous oversight here and now." He took her hands in his, and heard suppressed gasps from both his mother and Lady Arabella. "You must forgive my lack of romance, for I was not given any time to plan a more thoughtful proposal, but please believe the genuine sentiment behind these words. Sophy Draper, will you do me the very great honour of marrying me?"

Her eyes were wide, startled; they put him in mind of a doe. For a moment she did not move, only blinked rather rapidly, and then she whispered, "Yes."

In the next instant, her eyes fluttered shut and she slumped forward in a dead faint.

Chapter Five

Sophy surfaced from a very deep dream in which she had been floating down the River Thames and out to sea. For a moment the floating sensation persisted, then gradually it ebbed away to be replaced by a deep ache in all her muscles. The pale yellow canopy above her bed was unfamiliar – it was not where she slept when she stayed with Lord and Lady Tarley. She turned her head to one side and saw Diana looking down at her with tears in her eyes.

“Oh, you’re awake! I’m so glad!”

“You sound surprised,” Sophy rasped, her throat uncommonly dry. “Was there any doubt?” Diana nodded, the tears spilling over and down her cheeks.

“You have been most grievously ill, my dear. The doctor was not sure you would recover.”

Those words, spoken so simply, shocked Sophy to her core. “Where... where am I?”

“This is the Duchess of Seale’s house! The Dowager Duchess, I suppose I should say, for that is how she has chosen to style herself, even though the Duke of Seale has not yet taken a wife. You fell ill during your visit a week ago.”

“A week!”

“Indeed, you nearly missed Christmas,” Diana said with a smile.

“Do not tease me so.” Sophy’s head felt woolly enough; she could not cope with her friend making jokes. Immediately Diana was repentant.

“I have sent down to the kitchens for some broth. You will feel better once you have eaten a little, but it will be a while before you regain your full strength. Her Grace has insisted you recuperate here, as it is not safe to move you – it is so cold outside, even the short carriage ride back to Orchard Street might bring on pneumonia.” Diana shuddered and

patted Sophy's shoulder. "No, my dear, you will stay here, and I will visit every day and keep you entertained with all the latest gossip." Slyly, she waved a society paper in Sophy's face. "Are you well enough to hear what they are saying about *you*?"

"About me?" Sophy echoed in astonishment, but to her great frustration a knock sounded at the door of the bedchamber, and a maid appeared with a tray. Diana refused to say anything more until Sophy had drunk the broth and nibbled a corner of the soft buttered bread that came with it. "Now will you tell me?" Sophy begged, reaching feebly for the scandal sheet, but Diana held it aloft, and Sophy did not have the strength to argue.

"I will not permit you to strain your eyes reading it," her friend said solicitously and, clearing her throat, began to quote from the column. "*Gentle reader, we had given up hope of Lord C ever mending his sinful ways, but it appears he has been tamed by a mysterious miss who appeared at the masquerade held at Almack's last night. Rumours abound as to the identity of this paragon, but she has captured Lord C's heart so completely there is already talk of marriage...*"

Diana tossed the society paper aside and straightened out another one with a flick of her wrist. "Ahem. *The scurrilous Lord C will have to watch his step, for the first banns have been read announcing his engagement to the cryptic Miss D, who has not been seen in society since the fateful masquerade. We all know Lord C's taste runs to women who are already attached – oh, you don't need to hear that.*" Diana folded the scandal sheet in half and slid it back into her reticule, giving Sophy a moment to take this information in.

"The first banns have been read," she repeated. "Does that mean my mother knows? She gave her consent?"

Diana snorted. "Of course she gave her consent. You're marrying the brother of a duke!"

"Hush, I beg you! What if someone overhears?" It was one thing to scheme about their plan in private, and quite another to shout it to the rafters.

Diana leaned in closer and said, “Your mama was so shocked I had to whip out my smelling salts lest she collapse at my feet. It was she who insisted on the banns, you know – I believe the Dowager Duchess considers banns to be terribly common, and would rather have applied for a special licence. She is friends with the Archbishop of Canterbury, you know. But your mama said that would look as though the marriage needed to be conducted in haste because – well, *you* know why.” Diana widened her eyes significantly.

“Stop,” Sophy pleaded. “I cannot follow this. Does my mother know I am not – in that way?”

“Oh yes, she was confident that she had raised you better than that. At first she thought Lord Clayton had mistaken you for someone else, since you were wearing a mask. She even suggested the whole affair could be swept aside and forgotten about since nobody knew your identity, though the society papers had a great deal of fun in speculating. But I told your mama that your heart was set on marrying Lord Clayton and so she agreed to it, although she was mightily confused. And so the first banns were read and now everybody knows.” Diana beamed. “Our plan was a triumph, my dear! Admittedly, if I had been there instead of Arabella, you would now be engaged to the Duke rather than his brother, but...” She shrugged daintily. “I will leave you now, for you must rest, but I will call in every day to see you.” Kissing Sophy affectionately on the cheek, she skipped away, leaving her dazed friend to digest everything she had learnt.

* * *

The next day, however, brought a different visitor. “Lady Tarley!” Sophy gasped, struggling to sit upright, fighting the absurd urge to try and curtsy while lying in bed.

“How are you, my dear?” the Marchioness asked, her kind and wise eyes sweeping over Sophy. “We were sorely afraid you would not recover.”

“I still feel terribly weak,” Sophy admitted, “but I am pleased to see that you and Diana are up and about and looking so hale.”

“It would take more than a putrid sore throat to keep Diana down for long,” Lady Tarley remarked dryly. “When I heard what had occurred at the ball, I knew it at once for Diana’s handiwork. Ever since she was in leading strings she has come up with harebrained ideas and mad schemes. I thought *you* were more sensible, however.”

The accusation stung, but Sophy could not deny it. However noble her reasons, she had still gone to the ball with the deliberate intention of entrapping a man into marrying her.

“I did not take you for a social climber,” the Marchioness sighed, “but perhaps I was wrong. People change, after all. Or did Diana convince you that this was the only way you could continue to be friends, now you are both women grown? The rules of society are so strict, and not everyone is as permissive as I.”

“Very few people, I would have thought, my lady,” Sophy ventured, and the Marchioness flashed her a faint smile.

“Well, it is done, although I wonder how happy you will be as Lord Clayton’s wife.”

“You think I will be shunned for rising above my station,” said Sophy flatly.

“No! Well, perhaps, yes.” Lady Tarley looked uncomfortable. “But I was referring to... How to put this delicately? Lord Clayton has a reputation, my dear.”

“He is a notorious rake,” Sophy guessed, based on the gossip Diana had read out to her yesterday.

“Indeed. And you are... so innocent.” Lady Tarley gazed worriedly at her. Sophy squared her shoulders. She had gone into this with one purpose only: to provide for her family. As long as they were taken care of, she could bear all the rest. She had expected a loveless marriage. If Lord Clayton took mistresses, it was of no concern to her.

“As you say, Lady Tarley, it is done.”

Chapter Six

“Lady Diana, Miss Draper, would you care to join us downstairs for a game of cards?”

Jack leant against the doorway to the guest bedchamber where Sophy had been sleeping. He was pleased to note that she looked much improved, and the pale blue muslin gown she wore today suited her colouring much better. Sophy glanced at her friend, communicating silently in the way that women did, then said, “Yes, that would be a pleasant diversion.”

She seemed somewhat shaky on her legs when she stood up, clutching at Diana’s arm for support. “Are you able to make it downstairs, or do you need me to carry you?” Jack enquired.

“You cannot carry me!” she said, sounding shocked. “It would not be appropriate.”

“We are engaged,” Jack pointed out, amused, “and I carried you upstairs after you fainted.”

“You did?”

“Indeed, but perhaps I should not offer again, since the last time I picked you up left me recovering in bed for three days.”

Sophy spluttered indignantly.

“That was because you fell ill with the putrid throat,” Diana cut in sharply. “Do not tease my friend, sir.”

“I did not know you had also been ill,” Sophy said, her features softening slightly. “No one thought to mention it to me.”

“Most likely because it is not noteworthy. Now – will you walk, or not?”

“I will walk,” she said, nose in the air.

“You have a lot of airs and graces for someone who comes from trade,” Jack remarked.

“I have *manners*, and propriety. It is not at all the same thing.”

“Anyone may choose to behave with decorum, no matter their parentage,” Diana agreed.

“I didn’t see much decorum when she flung herself into my arms at Almack’s,” said Jack, and had the great pleasure of seeing Sophy blush crimson. She and Diana swept on ahead of him, arm in arm, and made their way down to the drawing room where the Dowager was shuffling a pack of cards.

“Whist?” his mother asked. “You will partner Miss Draper, of course,” she said to him, and Jack sat down opposite Sophy. She seemed to be assessing him, and Jack was acutely aware he did not look his best, with dark circles under his eyes that matched the ones on Sophy. Then he wondered why he even cared what she thought. Was his vanity really so great?

To Jack’s great surprise – and his mother’s, for the Dowager was a keen gambler and often unmatched at cards – he and Sophy won the first three rounds they played.

“It appears we are well suited,” he told her.

“I am working very hard to make up for your lack of skill,” she said archly, “but I suppose it is said that opposites attract.”

His mouth twitched. For a common-born girl, she was quite unafraid of squaring up to a lord, and he admired that about her. He was still determined to force her into breaking off their engagement, but he no longer wanted to do it by cruel means. He had no wish to hurt her – although he would not hesitate to humiliate her a little more. “True enough, and I know you are attracted to me from the way your desire overcame your decorum at the ball.”

“Jack,” his mother said sharply.

“You must forgive my rough manners,” he said insincerely.

Sophy, rather pink, said, “Indeed, you cut a fine figure, but imagine my disappointment when you removed your mask.”

Jack could not help it – he let out a snort of laughter.

“Another round?” Diana asked, gathering up the cards to shuffle them. Once again, she seemed to be communicating silently with Sophy via her eyebrows, but Jack wasn’t sure what she was trying to convey. For his part, this was the most fun he had had during a game of cards in a long while. He took another long look at Sophy, who did not modestly lower her eyes but met his gaze. Though she still looked tired and wan, those clear hazel eyes were bright and direct. He could not have said whether her hair was chestnut or auburn, but Jack noticed for the first time how prettily it was arranged, with braids at the side and a simple ribbon bandeau.

For the first time, Jack considered how much fun it might be to seduce her.

Perhaps something of his intention showed in his face, for she finally looked down, picking up her hand of cards and sorting through them. Jack’s mind, however, was no longer on the game.

Ever since the disastrous incident with Miss Cecily Lamington, Jack had gone out of his way to establish his reputation as a rake, making sure he had a different woman on his arm at every social occasion he attended. Opera singers, dancers, even wealthy widows – but never a dressmaker’s daughter. Jack was all too aware that his position in life afforded him a privilege over the middle and lower classes, and he would not abuse that by taking advantage of a woman who felt she had little choice in the matter.

Sophy, however... She had taken matters into her own hands. She had kissed him first, with the sole intention of securing herself an advantageous marriage. No doubt she considered him a poor second choice, compared to his

upstanding older brother, but perhaps he could change her mind.

Yes, Jack reflected, seducing Miss Sophy Draper would definitely be a pleasure rather than a chore – and it would be interesting to see how she reacted.

Either her propriety, which she claimed to possess in spades, would leave her horrified by his advances, perhaps to the point that she would call off their engagement – for surely a decent woman would not wish to marry a rake.

On the other hand, he might see another glimpse of the woman he had held in his arms at the masquerade, the one who had so willingly melted against his body as he kissed her senseless.

At that moment, Jack could not have said which outcome he desired most.

Chapter Seven

Sophy regarded the ribbons that Diana had set out before her. Even to Sophy's trained eye, some of them looked almost identical in shade and hue. "They're all very nice," she said.

Diana puffed out her cheeks in exasperation. "I know *that*. I wouldn't have brought you any ribbons that weren't nice. Don't you have *any* faith in me?" She tutted, and held one up against Sophy's face. "This one suits your complexion very well, my dear, but do *you* have a favourite?"

Sophy looked at the spread before her. "Perhaps... the duck-egg?"

"Really?" Diana made a moue. "It would not have been *my* first choice."

"Diana!" Sophy threw a pillow at her. "You just said –"

"I know, I know, but I am merely saying it is not my *favourite*."

"I think," Sophy said, with a great deal of patience, "it might be quicker if you simply tell me which one I should choose."

"Oh no," said Diana immediately. "It is *your* wedding dress."

It was, in fact, Diana's dress. The brand new one she'd had made for the ball at Almack's, in fact, and never worn herself, but she didn't seem to begrudge its loss in the slightest. Diana seemed to have an endless supply of gowns in her clothes press, a fact Sophy had always tried her hardest not to be jealous of. She was skilled at altering her own clothes, swapping out a bodice here or adding a different trim there, but they did look undeniably shabby next to Diana's pristine outfits. Diana had gifted her this gown, saying earnestly that it looked far better on Sophy anyway.

Sophy trailed her hand over the ribbons, watching Diana's face closely. "This one?" she hazarded, and was

rewarded by a radiant smile.

“That is *exactly* the one I would have chosen!”

Sophy hid her smile. “I have a little lace at home that I have been saving. I thought, perhaps, on the neckline...”

“You shall have reams of lace, if you wish it,” Diana said at once. “I will tell Mama – or perhaps Lord Clayton would buy it for you, as a gift for his new bride. Gentlemen need a lot of hints, though, so sometimes it is just easier to tell them outright what you fancy. Papa can be particularly dense.”

Sophy worried her lower lip with her teeth. “Do you think I should ask Lord Clayton for anything yet? Given why I’m marrying him, I fear it would be unwise to make frivolous demands before we are even wed.”

Diana looked so startled that Sophy was sure she had, in the excitement of discussing wedding dresses, forgotten about The Plan. “Oh! Of course, my dear, you are quite right. Get a ring on your finger before you start asking Lord Clayton to buy you gifts.”

“Like a house,” Sophy murmured dryly.

Diana nodded emphatically. “Once he falls in love with you, he will not deny you anything.”

“Falls in love with me?” Sophy’s eyebrows rose in consternation. “I do not recall *that* being part of the plan.”

“It is an essential element,” Diana scolded. “Getting engaged was only the first step! There is nothing to say he *has* to help your family, once you are married. But if he loves you, then he will do it willingly. Honey catches more flies than vinegar, after all.”

“I see,” Sophy said dubiously. “And... does your plan go into detail about... honey?”

Diana’s delicate features pulled together in a frown. “Perhaps we ought to ask Arabella for advice. She reads plenty of novels, and claims they are quite instructive when it comes to romance.”

“She would only tell me to swoon,” Sophy said dismissively.

“You already did that,” Diana pointed out, and Sophy was mortified to realise she was right. “What comes after swooning, I wonder? You should definitely compliment him. Gentlemen like to be told how well they ride, and fence, and so on. And his clothes! Although you are a dressmaker, not a tailor, you can still compliment him on the fine cut of his coat or the embroidery on his waistcoat. It will sound all the more sincere, coming from you.”

Sophy doubted she would sound all that sincere, given that she was being coached on this.

“I am sure he will be amenable to your wiles,” Diana continued. “You saw how he offered to carry you downstairs.”

“I don’t have wiles,” Sophy protested. Diana ignored her.

“Perhaps next time you ought to let him? He looked keen to assist you.”

“A little too keen,” Sophy said tartly.

“No, I suppose you are right. His hands would have been touching – well, places they should not.”

“Diana,” Sophy said slowly, wanting to talk about something that had been bothering her, “your mother said that Lord Clayton has a reputation.”

“As a rake, you mean?” Diana was frank.

“Well, yes.”

“He is mentioned in the society papers a lot,” she admitted. “Honestly, I was surprised when I heard he’d proposed to you. His brother the Duke would have been a gentleman, of that I have no doubt. But Lord Clayton is a different matter.”

Sophy felt a twist of apprehension in her gut. “Why do you think he did propose, then?”

“Because you are beautiful!” Diana declared at once. “Not to mention charming, and witty, and highly skilled with a needle.”

“Oh yes, I’m sure that’s exactly what he was looking for in a wife – someone who can mend her own clothing.”

“Well, why not? It shows you are practical and talented.” Diana was staunchly defensive.

“But... he keeps a mistress...” Sophy pressed.

“Several, if the scandal sheets are to be believed.”

Sophy’s heart sank.

“But,” Diana insisted, “he is marrying *you*. Lots of men have mistresses! Pray, do not look so distressed.”

Sophy shook her head. “No, I’m not upset about that. I only needed to find a wealthy husband, remember? I would have settled for anyone.” She wondered, for a moment, if that were true. If she hadn’t had Diana’s help, would she have had the courage to marry a cruel man, or a much older one, or someone she truly despised in order to save her family? And was it any better that she was marrying a complete stranger instead? “It’s just... Diana, if Lord Clayton is such a rake, then he will be used to women...” She trailed off, circling her hand vaguely as she searched for the right word.

For a moment, the two girls stared at each other helplessly, then Diana gasped so loudly it made Sophy jump. “That’s it! Sophy, you’ve solved it!”

“I have?”

“Lord Clayton is used to getting his way when it comes to women,” Diana repeated, “so he is *unused* to them rejecting his advances. You must intrigue him by not acting like a lightskirt.”

“As if I would!”

“You have kissed him once, and so he will probably expect similar wanton behaviour from you. By doing the opposite, you will show him you are a lady of quality!”

“Diana,” Sophy said gently, “I am not a lady.”

“Pshaw! It makes no difference. Sophy, I know you are concerned about Lord Clayton’s reputation, and doubtless you are right to worry, for a man does not acquire several mistresses unless he is wildly good at seducing women. But I believe you are strong enough to resist temptation, and by doing so, you will show him the virtue of a pure woman. He cannot help but fall in love with you.”

Diana sat back, beaming in satisfaction.

She made it sound so easy.

Chapter Eight

“Miss Draper, would you care to go for a ride in my phaeton?”

Before Sophy could respond, the Dowager let out an exclamation of horror from the other side of the room. “Jack, no! It is bitterly cold outside, and Miss Draper has still not fully recovered from her recent ailment.”

“Indeed,” Sophy said, half smiling, “your mother insists I am not yet well enough to be sent back home inside a closed carriage, so it is hard to see how I could survive an open air ride.”

“Oh.” Jack frowned. He enjoyed driving his high-flyer around Hyde Park, and was sure he could have left Sophy breathless with his skilful handling of the gig... not to mention the other uses he had planned to put his hands to once they had driven somewhere quiet. “I had thought, with plenty of blankets... But no matter. Would you, ah, care to see the portrait of my father on the first floor? It was painted by Sir Thomas Lawrence.”

“I have already seen it. Your mother showed it to me several days ago.”

There was an awkward silence. “Then perhaps a turn about the room...?”

Sophy smiled and shook her head. “I thank you, but no. I am quite comfortable here beside the fire.”

“A game of piquet, then,” he declared, deliberately choosing a card game for only two players so his mother would not be tempted to join them. Sophy perked up, and Jack sent up a silent prayer of thanks that at least one of his suggestions had met with her approval, albeit one with far less opportunity for seduction.

“Are you intending to call on anyone this afternoon, Mama?” he enquired as he dealt out the cards.

His mother didn't look up from the letter she was writing. "Not today," she said serenely.

"It would be inappropriate for her to leave us unchaperoned," said Sophy with a reasonableness that Jack found extremely frustrating.

"I suppose you are right. If left alone together, you might throw yourself at me again."

"Whyever should I do such a thing? You have already proposed." She sounded prim, but her eyes were dancing as she selected a card to discard.

"Curiosity, perhaps? You strike me as a very intelligent young woman, and it is well known that intelligent people are naturally curious."

She tilted her head to one side. "I cannot tell if you are complimenting my mind or questioning my self-control."

He gave her a feral grin. "Can I not do both?"

Lowering her voice, she murmured, "You have a high opinion of yourself, sir."

He spoke equally quietly, hoping their conversation was covered by the sound of the fire crackling beside them and did not carry over to the Dowager. "It is not a baseless opinion, as I hope to show you."

Sophy raised one eyebrow but merely said, "Point of six," and Jack reluctantly forced himself to look down at his cards. However, it did not take long before a mischievous idea struck him, and under the table he quietly eased off his shoe before running his stockinged foot up Sophy's shin.

She jumped, nearly dropping her cards, despite the layers of flannel petticoats between her leg and his foot. "You forget yourself, sir," she breathed.

Jack relaxed back in his chair, knowing that his actions under the table were hidden by the angle they were sitting at. "Am I making you uncomfortable?"

She gave a slightly strained laugh, shifting in her seat. Unexpectedly, Jack felt his body tighten, a sudden hunger

igniting in him that he longed to sate.

“I believe you are trying to distract me,” she said. “Are you so insecure that you would cheat to win?”

“When a prize is worth winning...” he murmured, his foot stroking down her calf with tantalising slowness.

She shivered, her eyes briefly dipping closed, but said boldly, “You shall not win this game, sir.”

* * *

Two hours later, Jack sat back with a laugh. Despite his best (or worst) intentions, Sophy had been entirely right. On this occasion, her skill at cards had trumped his talent for seduction. “It’s a good thing we weren’t playing for money. How did you do that, Miss Draper? You thoroughly trounced me.”

“Oh,” she said modestly with a little shrug, although a smug smile played around the corners of her mouth. “I have a good memory for which cards have been played.”

“Good? Faultless, more like. Did you come by it naturally, or was it learnt?”

She hesitated a moment before replying, “My father taught me.”

Jack was impressed. “What a unique legacy he left you. He must have been a devil at the gaming clubs.”

The light in her eyes seemed to dim. “He was, but not in the way you think. He overestimated his abilities and did not know when to walk away. After his death, my mother and I discovered he was deeply in debt.”

“How much?” Jack asked quietly.

She shook her head, reluctant to name the figure. “I would not shame his memory by telling you that. Suffice to say, we have lost everything, including our house. We have until the end of the year before we must move out.” Her gaze was candid, without any trace of self-pity. “I have four younger siblings. So you see, now, why it was imperative I

found a rich husband without delay, and secured my family's future in the only way I could."

The confession, so simply made, touched him in a way he did not understand.

"And so you find yourself shackled to a rake," he said, meaning to provoke her, but feeling unaccountably guilty as he spoke the words.

She shrugged. "Women have put up with worse in pursuit of financial stability. I know you keep a mistress – or mistresses... There is no need for you to change your ways after we are married."

"What if," Jack said slowly, "I did not wish to keep a mistress any longer?"

He watched the emotions play out over her face – surprise, confusion, uncertainty. "You may do as you please, of course," she replied, "but I do not –"

She broke off as the butler entered the room to announce the arrival of the Marchioness of Tarley and Lady Diana. In the flurry of kisses and greetings between the women, Jack sat in quiet contemplation, wondering what Sophy had been about to say. That she did not feel any affection for him? That she did not want to fulfil the duties of a wife? The woman he had just been teasing so shamelessly had not seemed unwilling. If anything, his advances had been met with a self-conscious kind of excitement, if he was any judge. He thought of how her breath had occasionally hitched, and the way her teeth pressed into the fullness of her bottom lip – and hoped that if anyone noticed his flushed face right now, they would blame it on the heat of the fire.

"It is decided, then," Lady Tarley was saying, and Jack felt a sinking sensation as she declared, "Miss Draper is well enough to travel home with us today!"

Chapter Nine

“Tell me everything,” Diana declared, when at last she and Sophy were alone in Diana’s bedchamber.

“You visited me nearly every day,” Sophy demurred. “What is there to say?”

“La, I saw the way Lord Clayton looked at you when you left! He has fallen in love with you already!”

“I highly doubt it.”

The door cracked open and both girls started guiltily. “Aha! I knew you were discussing scandalous secrets,” Arabella cried, slipping inside the room. She climbed onto the bed and bounced up and down in anticipation. “What have I missed? Tell me everything. And do not even *think* of sending me out, for I was *instrumental* in helping Sophy to secure her engagement to Lord Clayton, and I have every right to hear what she has to say.”

“She’s right, Diana,” sighed Sophy, when her friend showed signs of wanting to forcibly hustle her little sister out of the room.

“Besides, if you did send me out then I would only listen at the keyhole,” said Arabella with a sniff.

“You are utterly shameless,” her sister told her sternly.

“We had not spoken of much before you arrived,” Sophy soothed, before they could start squabbling in earnest.

“I think Lord Clayton has fallen in love with her,” said Diana.

“Well, who would not?” said Arabella loyally. “Sophy is uncommonly handsome.”

“Perhaps you should say I am *commonly* handsome,” Sophy said wryly.

Arabella made a dismissive noise. “You know that has never mattered to us, nor to Mama and Papa. Indeed, it was

Mama who suggested you should be a friend and companion to Diana and me, when she learnt that her modiste had a daughter of a similar age.”

“I notice you do not refute the statement,” Diana said slyly. “You have grown in confidence since your engagement. Perhaps Lord Clayton has been complimenting your appearance. Look, Arabella, she is blushing! I am right!”

Sophy flopped back on the bed next to Arabella and covered her face with her hands. She felt Diana come and sit on her other side, and one of the girls stroked her hair.

“I am sorry, Diana, but your plan will not work,” Sophy said through her hands, her voice muffled. “I... do not have the fortitude to bear it out. I thought it would be easy to resist temptation, but...” She peeked through her fingers. “It is a lot harder than I thought it would be.”

Diana was regarding her solemnly. “Are you in love with Lord Clayton, Sophy?”

She was quiet for a long while. Then: “I do not know,” she said honestly. “I enjoy being in his company more than I thought I would, given that my first impressions were not overly favourable. Things have changed between us. But I am not sure I know what love feels like.”

“A fluttering in your breast,” Arabella said immediately, “and a tingling sensation in your loins whenever you are near him.”

“Arabella!” said Diana, scandalised.

“Did you get that out of a novel?” Sophy asked.

“Yes, I did, but I am sure it is accurate! Well, perhaps it describes lust rather than love, but the two are not unrelated. Is that how *you* feel, Sophy?”

Sophy didn’t want to talk about her loins.

“I think I ought to confiscate this novel off you,” Diana interrupted, saving Sophy from having to answer. “But Sophy, this is better than I could ever have planned! I only hoped to

secure your future, my dear. But for you to have fallen in love! I am a better matchmaker than I thought.”

“You didn’t even intend to match me with Lord Clayton!” Sophy protested. Diana waved her hand airily. Facts had never troubled her overly much.

“The second banns have been read, and it will not be long before you two are wed!”

“Are you excited?” Arabella wanted to know.

Sophy’s stomach twisted. “I’m only doing this to save my family, you know that.”

“I know, but you’re still allowed to feel excited,” Arabella said. Her words, spoken without judgement, caused Sophy to feel a rush of affection for the Frampton sisters. They had only ever tried to help her, and wanted what was best for her. The least she could do was be honest with them.

“Yes,” she admitted. “I think... I am a little excited.”

* * *

The Dowager had invited the Marquess and his family, including Sophy, to dinner on Christmas Eve, so it was not long before Sophy saw Jack again. To her surprise, Jack’s elder brother Richard was also present.

“Your Grace!” said Sophy, greatly flustered, curtsying deeply to him.

He gave her a cold nod in return.

“I am so glad to see you again!” Diana said, beaming widely, seemingly unconcerned by Richard’s contempt. “You never seemed to be around when I visited Sophy.”

“I wasn’t here,” he told her. “When she brought infection into the house, I retreated to my club.”

Sophy flinched.

“Oh, who can say how these things spread?” Diana said dismissively. “Still, I am glad you were not struck down, for I can tell you personally that having a putrid sore throat is a rotten experience indeed. I found it *most* incommodious.”

“I am sorry you were unwell,” he said stiffly.

“Do not trouble yourself, Your Grace. As you can see, I am in fine fettle now.”

“Would you care to warm yourself by the fire?” Richard asked, and Sophy suppressed a sigh as he led her friend away, leaving her standing awkwardly alone. Diana’s charm worked magic on men and beasts alike, it seemed.

“Do not take his attitude to heart,” Jack said, appearing at her side, “for it is me he detests, not you.”

“I confess I do not understand why,” Sophy said, as Richard stood by the fire with his back pointedly turned on Jack. “I cannot imagine what could cause such enmity between brothers.”

He stared at her in amazement. “Do you truly not know?”

“No? How could I?”

“Do you not read the society papers?”

She made a face. “What would be the point? Even if they were to use full names instead of initials, I still would not know the people of whom they speak. Besides, it only ever seems to be unpleasant gossip, designed to cause harm. I confess I do not find that entertaining.”

His face had softened. “I assumed everyone knew.”

Sophy realised then that Diana and Arabella probably knew the story. In fact, Diana had mentioned a few things that now stood out to her – Richard’s broken heart, and that line in the scandal sheet about “Lord C” preferring women who were already claimed... “You do not have to tell me,” she said quietly. “A husband may keep secrets from his wife, and I am not even your wife yet. You do not owe me an explanation.”

He drew her aside, into a quiet corner. “I will tell you, so that you understand, but I will keep it brief. Two years ago, Richard was engaged to a young lady by the name of Miss Cecily Lamington.” His mouth twisted around the name. “I

seduced her, and she broke off her engagement with my brother. Richard has never forgiven me.”

Sophy’s mouth had fallen open; hastily, she closed it. “But – but –”

“Are you surprised?”

“Yes,” she said frankly. “Everyone said you were a rake, but I find it difficult to believe you could betray your own brother in such a way.”

“Believe it,” he said harshly.

“What happened to Miss Lamington?” she asked after a moment.

“She married a Scottish laird and lives up in the Highlands.”

“So far away! At least you do not see her around London,” Sophy said, darting a glance over at Richard, who still stood talking to Diana. “I imagine that would be exceedingly awkward – not to mention painful – for everyone involved.”

“In my opinion, no distance would be too great,” Jack said bitterly. “I would have cheerfully put her on a ship to New South Wales myself.” He ran his hands through his hair, and then shook off his dark mood. “I apologise if I have made you uncomfortable. But now you know the truth, and you understand why my brother loathes me. Come, it is nearly time for us to be seated.”

“Could you not apologise?” she whispered, as everyone present began to line up in order of seniority.

“No. Do not try to redeem me, Miss Draper,” Jack muttered in reply, before they were separated.

Sophy mulled this over all throughout dinner. She did not wish to excuse Jack’s behaviour, for surely what he had done was beyond the pale. But would it not be more harmonious if he and Richard could put the past behind them? The Dowager Duchess must wish for her sons to be reconciled if she kept bringing them together despite their mutual

antipathy. Sophy did not see how Jack could begin to atone for what he had done, but an apology would be a good place to start. Frowning to herself, she did not participate much in the conversation taking place around the table, and was surprised to find that several courses had passed and the plum pudding was being brought out.

The candles were dimmed. “Richard, would you do the honours?” the Dowager said. Richard stood up and slopped a liberal amount of warm brandy onto the pudding. Sophy leaned in, thrilled, as Richard held a lighted taper to the pudding and blue flames immediately engulfed it. They flickered and danced, and held her mesmerised, until one of the ringlets framing her face swayed into the flames and went up like touchpaper.

Chapter Ten

Jack had not known he could move so quickly until the moment he saw Sophy's hair catch fire. In an instant he was on his feet, his chair toppling over backwards, wrenching his tail-coat off as he sprang towards Sophy. He wrapped his coat around her head in one swift motion, smothering and beating the flames. Distantly, he was aware of Arabella shrieking at the top of her lungs and the Marquess bellowing for a jug of water, but it was all background noise to him. The smell of burnt hair engulfed him, flooding him with terror.

With shaking hands, Jack unwrapped his tail-coat, dreading what he would see.

To his enormous relief, two wide hazel eyes peeped out at him, blinking in shock. Jack caught hold of Sophy's chin and turned her head from side to side, unable to believe that she had escaped unscathed – well, almost. The ringlet that had caught on fire was beyond saving, just a charred frizzle that no longer even looked like hair, but her skin was unblemished.

Jack let out a breath he didn't realise he'd been holding. "Thank God."

"You didn't have to hit me quite so hard," Sophy said, sounding hurt. She reached up to touch the frazzled ringlet and it fell away in her hand. "Oh."

"You're lucky it wasn't far worse," he said, his heart still racing at the near miss. He couldn't bring himself to let go of her face, and if they hadn't been surrounded by people he would have crushed her into his arms.

"It wasn't luck, it was damned quick reactions. Pardon my language, ladies." The Marquess clapped Jack on the shoulder.

"I think I might swoon," Diana said faintly, and Richard immediately wrapped his arm around her waist. "I only said I *might*," she said sternly, and he let go with what seemed to Jack like more than a little reluctance.

“I think perhaps a nip of brandy, for the shock?” the Marchioness suggested, with a glance at the Dowager, who immediately nodded her agreement and signalled to a footman to pour Sophy a glass.

Jack took it from the footman and pressed it into Sophy’s hands. “Here, drink this,” he said, noting how she was beginning to shake as the shock set in. “You’ve had a bad scare.”

“I feel terribly foolish,” she mumbled.

“Nonsense,” the Dowager said crisply, and Jack felt a surge of gratitude towards his mother. “Now then, how does everyone feel about demolishing this plum pudding so that it can cause no further catastrophes?”

Reluctantly, Jack returned to his seat, but could not keep his eyes off Sophy, barely tasting his plum pudding, with the result that he nearly choked on the sixpence nestled in his portion.

“That’s good luck!” Diana cried, clapping her hands together. “It is a sign your marriage will be blessed with good fortune.”

Sophy, who had been looking down at her dish the whole time, glanced up and met Jack’s eyes when Diana made this comment. He wished he knew what she was thinking.

The meal finished, the party moved from the dining room to the drawing room. After Sophy’s ordeal, nobody felt like playing snapdragon, so the men drank port and the ladies talked in low voices. From the way Sophy kept reaching up to touch the singed wisps at her forehead, Jack guessed they were reassuring her about her hair.

“Wearing a veil with your bonnet would hide the worst of the damage,” he heard the Marchioness say, and before he knew what he was doing, Jack loudly interrupted their conversation.

“She looks as beautiful as she ever did. Even if all her hair had been burnt off I would still think her the loveliest creature in the room.”

His words received indulgent smiles from most present, although Richard scowled down into his glass of port. Arabella and Diana were whispering furiously behind their fans, but Sophy merely regarded Jack with a puzzled little frown, as though she were trying to work something out. Jack supposed she was still in shock.

“Come, let us take a turn about the room,” he said, holding out his arm.

“I don’t think –” the Marchioness began uncertainly, but Sophy was already standing up.

“It will do me good to move around a little,” she said, but her hand was still shaking as she took his arm. The double doors between the drawing room and the saloon had been opened, giving them a good length to walk, although they made slow progress since Sophy’s legs were so wobbly.

When they were a little distance away from the others, she murmured, “Thank you for saving me.”

“Any man would have done it,” he said.

“*You* did it,” she replied. He laid his hand over hers for an all too brief moment, and then she sighed and said, “Do you ever feel, sometimes, as though merely looking were not enough? To see something beautiful, and to want more than your eyes can give you?”

“Yes,” Jack said, and the intensity of his desire must have bled through into his voice, for she glanced up at him in surprise and then frowned.

“You are thinking of your mistresses,” she said censoriously. Jack couldn’t help glancing back at his mother, who was watching them shrewdly. He was glad their backs were to her, as sometimes he had the uncomfortable sensation that she could read lips.

“They are the farthest thing from my mind right now,” he said, and wondered if Sophy also felt the same growing attraction he did. He was acutely aware of the press of her hand against his arm, that small contact causing his skin to tingle even through the layers of clothing between them. He

felt a mad urge to kiss the singed tuft of hair that fell against her brow, and if it hadn't been for the presence of so many other people, he might have.

“Did you mean what you said before, about giving them up?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied without hesitation.

“Why?” They had reached the end of the room. The puzzled look was back in Sophy's eyes, but tinged with fear and hope, as though both emotions warred within her.

They have served their purpose, he could have said, but he knew she would misunderstand. Suddenly, Jack wanted her to know the truth – or at least a portion of it, since he could not share the whole – and so he considered his answer carefully before he spoke.

“The arrangement I had with my ladybirds was... mutually beneficial. I needed to reinforce my reputation, and they needed – oh, a great many things. Money, protection, company. Everyone feels lonely sometimes, and to know that there is always someone one can call on to attend the theatre, or the opera...”

“Or more,” she said bluntly.

“Yes,” Jack said, “or more. Loneliness comes in all shapes and forms.”

“Are you talking of your mistresses,” she said slowly, “or yourself?”

“I –”

“You have been standing under that kissing bough for an awfully long time!” Arabella called in a sing-song tone that carried from all the way down the other end of the room. Sophy jumped and looked up. There was indeed a ball of winter greenery dangling innocently above them, with mistletoe neatly woven through.

As the Marchioness scolded her youngest daughter for acting like a hoyden, Jack grinned and reached up to pick one

of the mistletoe berries, rolling it between his fingers. "I have always liked this tradition."

Sophy blushed and looked down, clearly uncomfortable with the impropriety of it. Jack did not blame her. He would also prefer they did not have an audience, but this was too good an opportunity to pass up. He bent his head and kissed her brow, right where her burnt-off ringlet had once sat.

* * *

Later, after the Marquess and his family had returned home, taking Sophy with them, Jack approached Richard. "I want to apologise," he said, thrusting his hand out awkwardly. Richard regarded his hand coldly but did not take it.

"If you want to apologise, do so."

Jack took a deep breath and let his hand drop. "I'm sorry. For what I did, and how it came between us. I wish things had gone differently."

"Are you sorry for robbing me of my chance at happiness? For stealing my bride, and humiliating me?"

With great effort, Jack unclenched his jaw. "Yes," he said tersely. "I am sorry for all of those things, and more."

"How noble of you to finally acknowledge the harm you caused," Richard said stiffly, "but it is too little, too late, Jonathan. Apologising doesn't mean you deserve to be forgiven."

"Is there anything I can do to regain your trust? I would like to put this behind us, and move on, even if you cannot yet bring yourself to forgive me."

Richard's eyes narrowed at the word *yet*. "You always get exactly what you want, don't you? You were the golden boy, mother's favourite, even though I was the heir. It is still ever thus. You suffered no lasting repercussions for your actions, and now here you are with a bride of your own."

"A dressmaker's daughter who entrapped me into marriage," Jack pointed out dryly. "It is not exactly romantic."

Richard scoffed. "I have seen the way she looks at you, and you her! You are both clearly infatuated, and who could blame you? She is beautiful. Even Mama approves of her." He gave a bleak laugh. "Once again, you have got everything you desire and, unlike me, *you* do not have to worry about history repeating itself. I would never go after another man's intended, even though it would be no less than you deserve."

Jack stared at his brother. "Is that why you have not even looked at another woman since Cecily? Richard, I thought you were still in love with her, and that was why... Did you really think I would behave the same way twice?"

"Why wouldn't you?"

The jab was as painful as any Jack had received in the boxing ring.

"I give you my word," he said unsteadily, "that I would never..."

Richard, however, was shaking his head. "I cannot trust a promise from you, Jonathan. Do you think your upcoming marriage will make you more respectable? There is one thing I know for certain, and it is this: rakes never change."

Chapter Eleven

As the following day was Christmas, Sophy returned home to spend it with her own family. Her younger siblings were overjoyed to see her, and clustered around her skirts begging for the gifts she had brought them. Sophy brought out almond comfits from her reticule, and showed them the toys and trinkets she and Diana had chosen while out shopping. Diana had insisted on paying for everything, saying cheerfully that Sophy could pay her back when she was a rich lord's wife. Although Diana thought little about money, and did not care one way or the other, she knew how much Sophy hated feeling beholden to her.

“This is for you, Mama,” said Sophy, handing over a fur-trimmed muff. “It is from Lady Tarley, and she wishes she could have given it to you directly, but...”

“She is very charitable,” her mama said stiffly. She and Sophy both knew it was one of Lady Tarley's cast-offs. Although this wouldn't have bothered her in the past, poverty had made her proud.

Sophy gazed sadly around the house that had once held so many happy memories. With most of the furniture already sold, the empty spaces echoed, but it was decorated with greenery for the season. Ivy trailed across the mantelpieces and windowsills, studded with sprigs of holly, the berries bright points of colour.

Dinner was a much more modest affair than the one she had enjoyed the previous night, although since she didn't set her hair on fire, Sophy considered it a great improvement. Her siblings demanded to know the story behind the shorn tuft of hair near her forehead, which she had unsuccessfully tried to hide behind more curls, and they hung open-mouthed on her dramatic tale. Her youngest sister Louisa was particularly enchanted by Sophy's description of how the dashing Lord Clayton had leapt to her rescue. Her mama, however, seemed less amused.

Afterwards, Sophy helped her mother clear up, since they could no longer afford the services of a housemaid. "I'm glad to see you're not too grand a lady to get your hands mucky," her mama said with a sniff.

"Don't be like that. I haven't changed."

"You're marrying a lord, Sophy. Whether you like it or not, you will change. You certainly won't be able to see your family on Christmas Day when you're His Lordship's wife. You're rising in life, and we're sinking. The tide of fortune will carry you away from us."

"Never," Sophy said stoutly.

"Who knows where we'll be next year?" her mama sighed, tucking a wisp of greying hair back under her lace cap. She pressed her hands into the small of her back and stretched. "I had a reply from my brother in Norwich. Do you remember your Uncle George? He's invited us – that is, me and the little ones – to go and live with him in the new year."

"But – you can't go," Sophy protested, her heart sinking. "Not now, not yet."

"I'll still come to your wedding," her mama said, reaching out to stroke her cheek. "I wouldn't miss that for the world, even if it's not exactly what I imagined for you. Oh, Sophy. I do wonder how happy you'll be after this... infatuation has passed."

Two weeks ago, Sophy wouldn't have cared about her own happiness. She'd accepted Jack's proposal to save her mother and siblings from destitution. Now, however, happiness didn't seem so far-fetched. Despite their different backgrounds, she and Jack were well-suited in temperament and humour... not to mention the physical desire that she was sure they both felt. "Why do you assume I'm infatuated?" she asked crossly. "Can't I be genuinely in love?"

"I was talking about Lord Clayton."

Sophy frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Even I have heard of his reputation," her mama said, folding her arms. "He's never seen with the same woman

twice, or so they say.”

“I think that’s a *slight* exaggeration.”

“Lady Tarley said he kissed you at some ball and then proposed to save your reputation,” her mama said, fixing her with a penetrating stare that Sophy did her best not to squirm under. “I keep asking myself, why would the son of a duke propose to a modiste’s daughter? His sort don’t marry girls like you – they use them and toss them aside like they mean nothing.”

Sophy knew all too well how gentlemen of the *ton* saw her. She had fended off enough advances from guests and visitors while staying with Diana and her family, after all. “And yet we are engaged,” she said stubbornly. Her mother’s gaze dropped to Sophy’s waistline, and she resisted the urge to wrap her arms around herself protectively. “I’m not ruined.”

“I’m not the only one wondering how you ensnared him,” her mama said with a shrug, and Sophy narrowed her eyes as a dark suspicion hit her.

“Have you been reading the society papers?”

Her mama had the decency to look slightly shamefaced.

Sophy scoffed. “It’s all rubbish, whatever they say. If you must know, the Dowager Duchess insisted that Lord Clayton behave like a gentleman and do the honourable thing.” It was not strictly true – the Dowager had been decidedly less keen once she learnt of Sophy’s parentage, but Sophy did not think it would help her case to confess that Jack had proposed simply to annoy his brother. Somehow she doubted her mother would be reassured by such flippancy. “Besides,” she said hastily, keen to move the conversation on, “what does it matter? We are to be wed, and once I am Lord Clayton’s wife I shall ask him to buy you a house.”

“I’ll not have you go begging for charity on your wedding night,” her mama said, appalled. “That’s not why you’re getting married.”

There was a terrible, chilling silence.

“I –” Sophy wet her lips nervously. “That *is* why I’m getting married, actually.” Her mama continued to stare at her in stunned disbelief, and Sophy rushed to reassure her. “I know this house has already been sold because Papa’s creditors needed paying immediately, and I’m sorry I couldn’t help you any sooner, but I am sure we could find another one just as nice.”

“I don’t care about the house! It’s not – Sophy, what were you *thinking*? I won’t take a penny of His Lordship’s money,” her mother said tightly. “Not now, not ever.”

“Why not? He is rich enough, and I don’t even think he would mind. Plenty of people marry for practical reasons.” Sophy was beginning to feel annoyed. “Mama, I did this *deliberately*. It was to save us! So you didn’t have to give up everything, because of what Papa did! I can’t believe your pride would stop you doing what is best for the children.”

It was the wrong thing to say. Her mother’s spine straightened, and Sophy saw in her the shrewd businesswoman who had managed to build her dressmaking business until she had a whole team of girls under her, making gowns for ladies of rank. “I’ll manage. I always do.”

They were proud words, boldly spoken, but Sophy knew her mama was no longer the young woman she had been when she first set up shop on her own, and her eyesight was failing from years of squinting over tiny stitches in dim light. If she wanted to rebuild her business, she would need help.

She would need Sophy.

And Sophy had known this when she’d gone to Diana for help. She’d seen the way her future would play out. If she moved to Norwich with her family, any dreams or plans or hopes she had for herself would be sacrificed. Her skill with a needle was too valuable to waste.

Entrapping an aristocrat into marriage – whilst terrifying and mad and improbable – hadn’t entirely been the selfless act she’d pretended it to be. It had been a selfish way of taking control into her own hands.

Anger flared in her breast, smothering the guilt. “You’re being ridiculous. Why shouldn’t I play the aristocracy at their own game?” Sophy said defiantly, hands on hips.

“Because you’ll only lose! They always come out on top, Sophy. *Always*. You may think you have the upper hand now, but you’re nothing more than a whore.”

The words hit her like a slap in the face. In the ringing silence they stared at each other, neither of them unable to let go of their pride and back down.

“Your papa thought he could go toe to toe with the fine gentlemen in their gambling hells, and look where that led him,” her mama said. The only colour in her face was two splotches of red in her cheeks. “They could afford to make the bets they did, and lose them too, but it didn’t stop them from coming after him – or us, after his death. The sums they played for were mere trifles for them, but a fortune for us. And we didn’t have it.

“Do you see,” her mama continued, softening, “why I am so afraid for you? This is a game you cannot win. You will only end up hurt – or worse.”

Sophy blinked back tears, her throat tight. With a sigh, her mother opened her arms, and Sophy let herself be enfolded in the hug. “I think I’ve fallen in love with Lord Clayton,” she confessed, and then she really was crying, her face buried in her mother’s fichu.

“Oh, Sophy.” Her mama stroked her back. “Gentlemen do not fall in love with girls like you.”

Chapter Twelve

There was nothing quite like an invigorating ride to get the blood racing, especially when you ran into an old school friend who was happy to race you. It had snowed during the night, and the inhospitable weather meant that Hyde Park was much quieter than usual, giving them the opportunity to have a little fun. Jack's grey stallion had just taken the edge, and he'd left with the promise of returning in a few days' time for a rematch.

Flushed with the thrill of victory, he returned home, wondering if he might invite Richard along next time. His older brother had been spending a lot of time at the family home in recent days, which had made their mother very happy. Jack suspected that this had more to do with the presence of a certain Lady Diana Frampton, rather than any desire on Richard's part to mend broken fences, but he was not going to be the one to dash his mother's hopes.

Jack was not naive enough to believe that Richard was thawing towards him – indeed, he was as curt to Jack as ever – but perhaps it would not be a bad thing to extend another olive branch. He had barely seen Richard over the last two years, and the distance had made it easier to bear his brother's anger towards him. Being in such close proximity this month had brought it home to Jack how much he missed being on friendly terms with his brother.

“Have you seen Richard?” he asked his mother upon entering the drawing room, and predictably she lit up at his question.

“I believe he is in the book room. Have you asked him to be your groomsman yet?”

“Not yet,” Jack answered awkwardly. It was one thing asking Richard to go riding with him – an invitation which he suspected his brother would turn down anyway – but quite another thing entirely to ask him to be groomsman at his wedding.

“Well, you ought to,” his mother said, fixing him with one of the stares she was so famous for. Jack squirmed under her scrutiny.

“Very well, but he might not agree.”

“Hm,” she said, in a tone that implied she would make sure he did. “Had you any thoughts about your honeymoon? Winter is not an ideal time of year to travel, since the roads will be in a shocking state, but perhaps Brighton? Or you could go later in the year to the Lakes...”

“It might be nice to travel on the continent,” Jack said thoughtfully. “The Treaty of Paris was signed last month,” he added, correctly interpreting the Dowager’s dubious expression. “I have heard the Italian Lakes are charming in spring.”

He imagined Sophy in Italy. How would she react? She was so fearless, he could well see her trying every new food and activity on offer. Did she enjoy walking? Boating? Jack realised he knew so very little about her, but he wanted to learn more – of her interests, her fears, her passions.

“Jack?”

“Mm? Sorry, Mama, I was...”

“Daydreaming,” she supplied with a smile. “I said, I think I shall offer to lend my diamonds to Miss Draper, for the wedding. Or do you think the pearls?”

“I think that’s something you should ask her, Mama.”

“Indeed, and so I shall. Lady Tarley and I have already been in discussion about the wedding breakfast and the guests. I would much rather have had the wedding here, but Mrs Draper was insistent it should be held in their church.”

Jack wondered how much input he and Sophy would have. Considering it was their wedding, the planning seemed to be taking place without them.

“Have you chosen which waistcoat you will wear? I fear it is a little late in the day to have a new one made.”

“I thought the red silk, with the embroidery,” Jack suggested, making it sound like he had already decided, and not just selected one on a whim right that instant. He supposed he should be grateful his mother was so good at taking charge – no doubt if it had been down to him, he would have forgotten to make any arrangements at all. If he’d thought about the wedding at all, it had been to wonder how Sophy would look, and what she would wear... and how they would spend their wedding night.

“Very good, the red will suit the season. Perhaps I should lend Miss Draper my rubies, instead, to match...”

Jack let his mother’s chatter wash over him. Despite her initial reluctance at finding herself saddled with a dressmaker for a daughter-in-law, the Dowager had rallied to the task of organising a wedding within a few weeks, and seemed to be enjoying the whole process immensely. Jack often had the thought that the Dowager would have made a good general, and that the war might not have lasted as long as it did if she had been marshalling the troops.

“Will you live here, after the wedding?” the Dowager enquired, and Jack sat forward slightly, frowning in thought.

“I thought perhaps our own little house, somewhere nearby... I am sure Miss Draper would want to be within visiting distance of Lady Diana, and of course we would not want to be too far from you either, Mama. But her family may need to move in with us, until their situation is settled.”

The Dowager froze. “Situation?”

Jack shifted uncomfortably. “I believe they are in the process of finding somewhere new to live.”

“Why?”

He did not want to reveal Sophy’s secrets, but he equally did not want to lie to his mother. “Miss Draper’s father died earlier this year, as you know. I assume that the loss of his income means they will have to make economies...” There, that was plausible.

“Perhaps you could provide the funds for a new house,” Richard said coldly from where he stood in the doorway, arms crossed. Despite the mustard-coloured banyan he wore, he looked forbidding. Jack wondered how much he had heard, and tried not to let his face betray the accuracy of Richard’s statement.

“I do not think that would be appropriate,” said their mother with a tone of finality.

“But that is why Miss Draper is marrying Jonathan, is it not?”

Jack gritted his teeth. “*I* am marrying *her* because I compromised her reputation, and I am a gentleman.”

“I thought she did a good job of compromising it herself,” Richard remarked, his eyes like two chips of ice. “Do not forget, it was me she was after. Money *and* a title.”

“How lucky she must feel to have made that mistake,” Jack retorted hotly. “I cannot imagine her shackled to an unfeeling, pompous blunderbuss like you.”

“Maybe you had better rethink the loan of your jewellery, Mama. Miss Draper might abscond with it.”

“*Enough!*” the Dowager cried, rising to her feet. Though she was not tall, she seemed to tower over both her sons in her sudden anger. “Richard, I have spent time with Miss Draper since her illness, and I find her to be a lively yet well-mannered young woman who plays an excellent game of cards. Jack, do not insult your brother, for I am sure he only speaks out of concern for your future. Now then, I do not want to hear any more on the matter. Do you understand me? Not another word!”

Richard and Jack glared at each other, then both mumbled something that might have been an apology, but not one that was meant with any feeling.

The Dowager gave a nod, and swept out grandly, leaving Richard to skulk off back to the book room. Jack snorted at the thought of Richard being his groomsman. He would have to ask a friend instead.

In high dudgeon, Jack poured himself a generous glass of brandy, and slumped down into one of the wingback chairs to stare moodily into the fire. He already knew that Sophy was marrying him for his money, so why did it make him feel so discomfited? She would not *really* run off with the Dowager's diamonds around her neck on the eve of their wedding... Would she?

Jack gave a snarl of frustration and downed the rest of his drink in one. Women were manipulative, he knew that better than most, but Sophy had been honest with him. Well, if you didn't count her dishonest way of securing him as a husband. But surely now there was genuine affection between them, wasn't there? Or was it all one-sided on his part? Jack crossed and uncrossed his legs restlessly. Damn Richard! He had a way of getting inside Jack's head and planting seeds of doubt.

Chapter Thirteen

“Hurry up, my darlings, or we shall all be late.” The Marchioness looked resplendent in a gown of flowing yellow silk with a matching turban. Pearls and topazes adorned her throat, ears, and wrists.

“You look beautiful, Mama.”

“Thank you, Arabella. Diana, we are leaving *imminently*.”

As soon as she had left, Diana threw up her hands in exasperation and said, “This isn’t the right one either. Alice, please could you fetch the periwinkle gown instead? Sophy, help me, my dear.”

Sophy stepped forward to help Diana out of the white muslin before she tore it in her impatience. The fabric was as soft as gossamer, and so sheer it needed to be worn with two petticoats. Sophy tried very hard not to compare it to the gown she was wearing.

“What’s wrong with that one?” Arabella demanded to know.

“It doesn’t flatter me.”

“We both know why she wants to look her best,” Arabella whispered to Sophy with a giggle.

“We do?” Sophy replied uncertainly. She had been much in her own head of late, troubled by her recent conversation with her mother.

“A certain Duke of S, as the society papers would call him, is going to be at this ball – or so I hear.”

“Hush,” said Diana, as the maid brought over the new gown and began to help Diana dress, but Sophy noted how her eyes sparkled.

“Personally I think him to be rather high in the instep,” Arabella said loftily, “but then I do not know him as well as

Diana. Why, he put his arm around her on Christmas Eve!”

“I was about to faint!” Diana protested.

“You looked hale enough to me,” Arabella teased, and ducked as Diana threw a hairbrush at her.

“My lady, please sit still so that I can fix your hair,” her maid begged.

Was it true, Sophy wondered? Diana did not deny her sister’s accusations – indeed, there was a becoming flush to her cheeks, and she bit her lip in undisguised pleasure as she looked at herself in the glass.

“Yes,” Diana said softly, “this will do.”

* * *

They *were* late to the ball. The dancing had already started by the time they arrived. Lord and Lady Tarley greeted the hosts, who were the Earl and Countess of Mallingham, and introduced Sophy as “our dear Miss Draper, who is a very close friend of our eldest daughter Diana, and engaged to Lord Clayton.” Sophy knew it was only those last four words that permitted her entry to this grand occasion, otherwise she would not be welcome.

Trying to suppress the resentment and hurt she felt over that, she wandered over to the edge of the dance floor, tugging awkwardly at the dance card tied to her wrist. There was only one man she wanted to dance with tonight.

And he was already dancing with another woman.

Sophy stared, then caught the sleeve of the nearest person, a girl about her own age. “Excuse me, but who is that lady dancing with Lord Clayton?”

The girl giggled. “It’s so hard to keep track of all his mistresses, isn’t it? I believe that one is Mrs Rossi. She’s an opera singer, and she’s very good. I heard her sing in *Fidelio* last week. Have you seen it? You really must, I was *transported*.”

Sophy mumbled something vague, and made the excuse of needing a drink. As she made her way along the

edge of the dance floor, she watched Jack. He was gazing very intently into Mrs Rossi's eyes. Sophy felt her stomach twist. She thought he only looked at *her* that way.

How stupid could she be? Of course he didn't look at her like she was the only woman in the world. He looked at her like she was just the latest in a long line of admiring females – and she had fallen for his charm.

Everyone had told her Jack was a rake. When had she stopped believing it?

Sophy looked around for Diana, then saw her standing very close to Richard, her face tilted up towards his. Sophy's heart fell. Even from this distance, she could see how her friend glowed under his attention, and Sophy was forced to admit that Arabella's sisterly intuition had been right. Diana had fallen in love with the Duke of Seale.

Sophy briefly thought about finding Arabella, but she wasn't that desperate. If she confided in Arabella, there was no telling what she might do – probably march onto the dance floor and loudly denounce Jack's infidelity for all to hear.

She found the retiring room that had been set aside for ladies' use and slipped inside. Luckily, it was empty, for she was close to tears. Sniffing, she pulled her handkerchief out of her reticule in anticipation.

“Sophy?”

She whirled around. Jack was standing in the doorway, looking at her in concern. “Are you unwell?”

She hesitated, then nodded, accepting the ready-made excuse he handed her.

“Let me take you home,” he said gently.

“I cannot be alone in a carriage with you, sir.”

He shook his head, smiling in a way that sent a shiver down her spine. “Of course, how could I forget? You do not trust your self-control.”

Sophy was trembling, her breathing coming quick and shallow, and she wasn't sure why. Rage? Grief? Desire?

No, she refused to countenance the last.

“You are one to speak of self-control.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We have been engaged for a little over three weeks now. I wonder, have you spent every one of those nights in the arms of one of your mistresses?”

Jack’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline, and then he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. As this was the ladies’ retiring room, Sophy supposed she ought to berate him for that, but clearly he did not want an audience for what he was about to say. Sophy wasn’t sure she wanted to hear it either.

“I have not,” he told her, low and intense, and an unhappy laugh escaped her.

“I saw you dancing with Mrs Rossi. She is very beautiful.”

“She does not compare to you,” he began, but she cut him off.

“Why do you insist on flattering me? So that I will fall willingly into your arms – and your bed? Is this just a game to you? I entrapped you into marriage, so now you are having your fun seducing me, because you know I only see you as a means to an end.”

“Is that still how you see me?” he asked quietly.

“I would be a fool to feel affection for a man who dances with his mistress in public while his fiancée is present,” she said bitterly.

“Mrs Rossi is a good friend of mine – and that is all we have ever been to each other. I was dancing with her tonight as a favour, to make her lover jealous.”

Sophy made a noise of disbelief.

“It is true, and you may ask her if you like. She would be honest with you.” Jack moved closer, and she took half a step back. “Sophy,” he said urgently, “you must believe me

when I tell you that I have not so much as looked at another woman since I proposed to you. Yes, I will admit that at first I was angered by your scheme and my mother's insistence that we wed. You were so stubborn and aloof that I enjoyed trying to seduce you into having feelings for me. I did not expect to develop feelings of my own."

Her heart was beating very fast. She thought of Jack gazing down into Mrs Rossi's face, both of them smiling like they shared a secret. She thought of his confession to her on Christmas Eve, that he had lured away his brother's fiancée. She thought of her mother telling her that lords did not, *could* not love someone who was so far beneath them.

"Am I wrong to believe that you also enjoyed the kisses we shared?" he asked.

"No," she replied honestly, "I did enjoy those, and I daresay if there were a kissing bough above us right now then I would be hard pressed to resist."

A relieved smile broke across his face, one that quickly turned beguiling. "We do not need a kissing bough, Sophy..."

"But," she interrupted, holding up her hand between them, "you did not succeed in creating genuine feeling on my side."

He frowned. "What are you saying?"

"That I do not love you."

Jack seemed completely taken aback. Sophy wagered that a woman had never spoken those words to him before. Clearly he was more used to women falling at his feet.

She held her features in cool composure and said, "I release you from your promise."

"What?"

"I am breaking off our engagement," she explained. "You need no longer marry me."

"The deuce if I'll let you!" He grabbed her arm as she tried to move past him. "What if I still want to marry you?"

She gave a hollow laugh. “Would you force me, sir?”

She felt the tension in his fingers ease before he finally let go of her arm with what seemed like a supreme effort. “No, but – what about your family?”

“They are not your concern.”

He stared at her, utterly bewildered. “Sophy, I don’t understand. I thought –”

His words hung in the air between them. Sophy hardened her heart. “It was preposterous to think we were suited in any way when we are so unequal in rank and station. You know I only wanted to wed you for your money. A marriage between us would never have worked.”

“I disagree,” he said angrily, “and I must say, I did not take you for a coward.”

“Then it seems you do not know me as well as you thought,” she said, and slipped out of the room.

Chapter Fourteen

Jack stumbled back into the ballroom in a daze.

I do not love you.

Cecily had said those exact same words to him, just as Sophy had.

Had he learnt nothing? Women were all the same, you could not trust them. They had their own agendas, and thought nothing of toying with men's hearts the way cats toyed with mice, dangling them, giving them hope before brutally snatching it away.

Cecily had been so beautiful, so charming. She was a natural coquette. She had flirted with Jack and he had been flattered, but she was his brother's fiancée. He would never have taken things further, until the night of that fateful house party.

They had all been so drunk. When Cecily had slipped inside his bedchamber, Jack had slurred, "Wrong brother," but to his surprise she had smiled and said, "I am exactly where I want to be," before climbing into bed with him. Clumsily, he'd tried to push her hands aside, but she was persistent, until in his wriggling Jack had toppled right out of bed with a thud.

A moment later, Richard was there, laughing, still awake. They had been in adjoining bedchambers, and he had heard the noise and come to see if Jack was all right.

He stopped dead at the sight of Cecily in Jack's bed.

The worst part had been how he didn't even shout, didn't even argue. That came later. He just said stiffly, "I am sorry to have disturbed you both," and stumbled out. But he could not disguise the hurt that radiated from every line of his body, from the tenseness in his shoulders to the way he turned his face away so that they could not see his expression in the light of the single candle.

The next morning, Jack had tried to talk to Cecily alone. He had still been so naive, so *stupid*. He thought she genuinely cared for him, that she regretted choosing Richard over him, even though Richard was the heir. Cecily had laughed pityingly and said, “I do not love you.”

She could have gone ahead and married Richard, who was too much of a gentleman to even think of jilting her. Thank God she’d had some common decency, and quietly called it off herself before disappearing – no doubt to make more mischief elsewhere. As long as she was out of their lives, Jack did not care.

He wished he could feel the same way about Sophy but his emotions were roiling within him, refusing to be suppressed, bringing back memories that he had no wish to relive. A sudden burst of clapping startled him out of his daze. A dance had finished, the couples bowing to each other, moving off the dance floor for refreshment.

Refreshment. That was a good idea. Jack needed punch – several glasses of it. He needed to drown his sorrows and then lose himself in the intricacies of a game of faro in the men’s card room – or in the arms of a lady.

His head came up, searching, wondering if there was anyone here he knew who would indulge him in this, but his eyes met Richard’s instead.

In an instant, his brother was moving across the room towards him, and Jack’s feet felt too slow and clumsy to even attempt an escape.

“I know that look,” Richard said grimly. “You’re thinking of doing something self-destructive.”

“No –”

“Are you foxed already? Come with me.”

Jack let Richard steer him out of the ballroom, and out of the house altogether. The moon was full, and the lit windows of the Mayfair townhouses threw out golden squares of light. “Where are we going?”

“For a walk. You look like you need to clear your head.”

Jack shivered in the cold winter air. “It’s freezing.”

“So walk quickly.”

Jack glanced at his older brother, but in the darkness could not read his expression. “Why are you being so...” He trailed off. Richard smiled grimly.

“’Tis the season.”

A Christmas miracle? Jack would have laughed if his teeth weren’t chattering. “I wouldn’t be surprised if this was a trap and you had arranged for footpads to set upon us and beat me up.”

Richard gave a snort of laughter. “Alas, I do not possess your cunning.” After a few moments’ silence he said abruptly, “Diana said something to me whilst we were dancing.”

“*Diana*, is she?” Jack nudged Richard in the side. His brother’s eyebrows came down in a fearsome scowl.

“*Lady Diana* had some most illuminating observations to make.”

“Which were...?” Jack was too cold and befuddled to drag this out of Richard.

His brother gave a gusty sigh, his breath coming out in a cloud. “Namely, that it is difficult to seduce a woman of Cecily’s standing if she does not want to be seduced. Diana was most insistent that women have their own minds and independent spirits, and that it is insulting to believe they cannot make decisions of their own free will. It was quite the lecture.” But Richard did not look harangued. If anything, he looked slightly admiring. “And... it made me think about how I found Cecily in *your* bed, not the other way round.”

Jack avoided his brother’s gaze. “No, it is entirely my fault. I... flirted with her, and led her to believe...”

“Stop. Why would you say that?” Richard grabbed Jack’s shoulders and turned him round so that they were facing

each other on the street corner, Jack still shivering in the wintry night. “Were you trying to save her reputation? Or protect *my* feelings?”

Jack flinched. This close, Richard could not help but see it.

“Jonathan. *Jack*. I thought we had always been honest with each other.” Richard sounded hurt, and Jack could not bear it.

“You loved her!” he burst out. “You loved her, and she – we –” He thrust his hands into his hair. “Wasn’t it better to believe she hadn’t betrayed you?”

Richard, who was still gripping Jack’s shoulders tightly, gave him a little shake. “It hurt *more*, you damned fool! Thinking my *own brother* –” He gave a wild laugh. “Do you honestly think I would have preferred to live in ignorance, rather than know the truth? Damn it, for a long time I still *wanted* to marry Cecily, because I thought she was blameless...” He gave a little shudder. “Thank God she broke it off.”

“Thank God,” Jack echoed dully, thinking of Sophy.

“Come, let us return, it is far too cold to linger,” Richard said bracingly. “Now tell me, what has you so out of sorts? Too much of the punch? It’s damned strong.”

“Miss Draper and I are no longer engaged,” Jack told him.

“What?” his brother cried indignantly. “She has jilted you?”

“I suppose you could say that.”

“But... why?” Richard sounded utterly bewildered. “I do not claim to know what is in a person’s heart, but watching you two together... You seemed well suited. You seemed *happy*.”

“I was happy.” Jack’s eyes stung, and he pretended it was from the cold. “I do not know why she called it off. Who can tell why women play the games they do?”

“Well, it’s a bad show indeed! I cannot imagine what she must be thinking. She a dressmaker’s daughter and you the brother of a duke! I will ask Lady Diana to find out.”

“Lady Diana is Miss Draper’s closest friend. I doubt she will share such confidences with us.”

“We shall see.” Richard gripped his arm in a show of solidarity, and Jack wondered at the irony of losing a fiancée and regaining a brother all on the same night, as though his world had tipped and then rebalanced. Two weeks ago, he would have rejoiced in this outcome.

Now he felt only bereft.

Chapter Fifteen

Diana was not a morning person. Even Arabella climbing on top of her while clutching a breakfast tray was not enough to rouse her. She groaned and buried her head under the bedcovers, refusing to come out, until Arabella said with an air of great sufferance, “Well then, I suppose Sophy and I shall have to eat these cakes all by ourselves.” Diana poked her head out cautiously.

“What kind of cakes?”

“Well, plum cake, naturally, but also brioche and honey cakes, and there’s some rather wonderful apricot jam – oh, and chocolate, naturally.”

The chocolate was nearly upset, so quickly did Diana sit up. “Very well, I will have a little,” she said, reaching for the tray. Sophy sat on the end of the bed, sipping her own chocolate and watching the sisters get jam and crumbs all over the counterpane. She did not have much of an appetite.

When Arabella judged that Diana had enough sugar in her to make her sweet, she said coyly, “You seemed to enjoy talking to the Duke of Seale last night. How many times did you dance with him, again?”

Diana narrowed her eyes. “You know perfectly well, since apparently you were counting them all.”

“Three!” Arabella declared triumphantly. “She danced *three times* with the Duke, Sophy, when everyone knows that it is only respectable to dance twice with a man in the same evening – unless, of course, you happen to be engaged...”

“We are not engaged.”

“As good as, then!”

“Well... maybe.” For the first time, Diana allowed herself to smile, and Sophy saw then how much her friend had been fighting back her joy. “Neither of us wish to rush into anything in haste.”

“A bit of haste would not go amiss,” Arabella assured her. “You have been out for three Seasons, you are practically a spinster.”

Diana pinched her sister.

“Ow! I am only saying.” Arabella rubbed her arm. “You will be in the society papers next, mark my words. *The delectable Lady D could not keep her hands off the Duke of S* – ow! Stop pinching me!”

“Stop being insufferable and I will,” said Diana. “But enough about me. Sophy, I want to know where you were skulking all night. I barely saw you after we arrived!”

“I did not feel much like dancing,” she said truthfully.

“Oh no, were you unwell again? Or did Lord Clayton lure you under another kissing bough?” Diana asked, waggling her eyebrows suggestively and sending Arabella into a fit of giggles. She reached for another cake and accidentally knocked a cushion off the bed, revealing a cloth-bound book which had been tucked beneath it.

“Is that my novel?” Arabella asked indignantly, her laughter abruptly ceasing.

Diana snatched it up. “I confiscated it from you since it was *highly* inappropriate reading!”

Arabella tweaked a bookmark out of the middle of the novel. It had the name DIANA beautifully stitched down the centre.

“I have just realised,” Diana said hastily, “that if I marry the Duke, we will truly be sisters, Sophy!”

“In the market for a new one, are you?” Arabella said tartly.

“I am not getting married,” Sophy said, setting down her empty cup. She had barely tasted it.

Both Diana and Arabella turned to her with identical expressions of horror, their squabble instantly forgotten. “Not getting married? Did he jilt you?” Diana exclaimed.

“I knew he was a dishonourable rogue!” Arabella declared at once. “I will take one of Papa’s pistols, and –”

“You cannot *challenge him to a duel* –”

“I will see that he answers for his actions! He compromised Sophy! Her reputation is in tatters! He *must* marry her!” Arabella was becoming more hysterical by the minute.

“Hush,” said Sophy, her head aching. “I am touched by your loyalty, but there is no need. I called it off.”

There was a shocked silence. Then: “*Why?*” asked Diana, who looked almost in tears. “Sophy, you could have had it all! Money, a position in society... We would have been sisters! And what about your family?”

“My family and I will be fine,” Sophy said, forcing the words out past the lump of resentment in her throat. “My mother built her business up from nothing, and she can do it again, with my help.” They would need to take out a loan, of course, which would be near impossible given the state of their finances, but Sophy did not mention this out loud, because she knew Diana would immediately offer her the money, and she did not wish to be indebted to her.

“Were you worried about what Lord Clayton would think when he found out?” Arabella asked.

“He already knows.”

Arabella frowned. “Did he refuse to help? Did he make you feel ashamed?”

“No. In fact, he was... sympathetic.” Sophy squirmed under the sisters’ scrutiny. “Do not look at me like that. I appreciate all you have done for me, and truly, Diana, it was a magnificent plan, but...”

“But?” Diana prompted.

Sophy shrugged helplessly. How could she tell Diana the truth? Diana had never wanted for anything in her life; she would not understand what it felt like to go through life

knowing your life was not worth as much as the next person's. "I cannot go through with it. It would not have worked."

"Lord Clayton *loves* you," Arabella declared. "I *know* he does! And you admitted you felt something for him!"

"I was wrong," Sophy snapped. "There cannot be love between a lord and a common-born girl. It simply does not happen."

Arabella was shaking her head, and Diana looked most troubled, her own happiness forgotten in the face of Sophy's news. Sophy felt a pang of guilt for ruining what should have been a blissful morning for her dearest friend.

"Thank you for trying," she said softly. "I intend to return to my family today. I have imposed on your hospitality long enough."

"No," Diana said at once, "you cannot leave until after our New Year's Eve ball. It is only two days away."

Sophy bit her lip. "Well..."

"I doubt Lord Clayton will attend, if that is what you are worried about. You will have hurt his pride, and he will not want to see you again so soon."

Unsurprisingly, this did not make Sophy feel any better, and her friend's brisk words cut deeper than she expected. Diana was not normally so brutal.

"We must see in the new year together," Arabella agreed solemnly, "for it seems it will bring many changes."

"Very well," Sophy agreed, her throat tight. "I will stay for the ball."

Chapter Sixteen

Jack squared his shoulders and knocked on the door of the narrow townhouse. This was not an area of London he usually frequented, but he was surprised to find it was not as rough nor as poor as he had been expecting. Goswell Street was a respectable part of town, and the inhabitants could not be too badly off if the maid scrubbing the doorstep of the adjoining house was anything to go by.

The woman who answered the door seemed wary as she took him in. Though Jack had dressed casually, with a greatcoat to keep out the cold, he knew she would notice the quality of his buckskins and Hessians.

“Mrs Draper?”

“Yes?” she answered, still cautious.

“There is a matter I would like to discuss – in private, if you will?”

Her face hardened. “You’ve had everything I can give you, and the rest is coming in the next week when we move out.”

Dismayed, Jack realised she had taken him for one of her late husband’s creditors, and hastened to reassure her. “No, I’m not – that is, I’ve come about a different matter entirely. If you may, I would like to talk to you about your eldest daughter – about Sophy?”

“Sophy!” she exclaimed, and then her eyes narrowed. “You’re him, I take it. Her fancy lord.”

“Lord Jack Clayton,” he said, bowing cordially.

“I don’t know what you could have to say to me, sir.”

He fidgeted. “Could we not do this on the doorstep...?” For a moment he thought she would slam the door in his face, but then with a grudging sigh she opened it wider.

“Tea?” she asked, taking him into the front parlour. It was a well-proportioned room, with tall sash windows that let in as much of the weak December light as possible, and elegant blue wallpaper with a repeating pattern of white fleur-de-lys, but there was only a minimal amount of furniture. No rugs on the floor, no ornaments on the mantelpiece. A small fire burned in the grate but did not throw off much heat. Jack did not sit down, not wishing to impose further on her hospitality.

“Thank you, no, I shall not stay long. I only wished to enquire if you knew...” He steeled himself and took a deep breath before his next words, since they pained him to speak aloud. “...If you knew why your daughter had broken off our engagement?”

She was astonished. “Well,” Mrs Draper said, “this is news to me, but I am glad to hear she has been sensible and taken my advice.”

“Your advice?”

“I grudgingly gave my consent, when Lady Tarley and her daughters apprised me of the situation, and told me how you were doing the honourable thing to save Sophy’s reputation.” She shot him a dark look. “But when I found out *why* she was doing it...”

“To provide for you,” Jack said, somewhat curtly. Mrs Draper didn’t sound particularly grateful.

She gave a bitter laugh. “And the rest!”

“What do you mean?”

“She wanted to play you at your own game.”

Jack frowned. “You will have to make your meaning plainer, ma’am.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Do you know how many times my daughter has had to fend off the advances of *gentlemen* while staying with Lord and Lady Tarley? Men who have grabbed her, and tried to kiss her, and behaved indecently towards her, all because she is not a lady born? Or the ones who spoke charming words to her until they found out she was

only the daughter of Lady Tarley's modiste, and then decided she was fair game for their base desires? Fit only to be their ladybird – or worse.”

Listening to this, Jack felt a surge of protectiveness, which swiftly ignited into searing anger. He wanted to horsewhip anyone who had dared lay a hand on Sophy. He wanted to wrap her in furs and diamonds and defy anyone to say she did not deserve it. He wanted to bundle her into a carriage and take her far away from the whispers and gossip of London, to live on one of his father's country estates, just the two of them. He wanted to tell her he was not like those other men, that he had never once seen her as prey –

But then his thoughts jarred to a halt. For hadn't he behaved exactly thus, stealing touches and kisses like he was owed them, because she was his fiancée? Because she had done it first, to him, so he had considered it a fair turnabout?

Mrs Draper hadn't finished. “I should have known it was a bad idea letting her play with Lady Diana and Lady Arabella when they were children. Lady Tarley was so tolerant, with her Bohemian ways, and said it would benefit them all. But I do not see the benefit when my daughter comes to me in tears over the way she has been treated. I tried to teach her that life is not fair, but she has the heart of a warrior and has always longed to reclaim what she feels the world owes her.”

“I admire that greatly about her,” Jack said roughly. “She has never been afraid to speak her mind, or take me down a peg or two when she thought I needed it. I swear to you, ma'am, I would do right by her.”

She sniffed, unimpressed with his heartfelt words. “My late husband was a silk merchant who did very well for himself. Sophy was raised to be genteel, but she cannot change her birth or family. A substantial dowry might have made her more acceptable to the *ton*, but she has nothing now. If you marry her, she will be seen as a greedy social climber and she will be shunned. What will you do then? Would you find yourself ashamed of her roots and embarrassed to take her out in company?”

Jack exhaled and dragged his hands down his face. “You paint a bleak picture, madam. I cannot say what lies ahead, but I can tell you how I will act. I greatly admire Sophy, and would face anything if she stood at my side. It is true that she may never be granted a voucher to Almack’s, but in truth I have never cared overly much for that establishment. Besides, Sophy has already charmed my mother into accepting her, and I should think that the greatest battle of any daughter-in-law.”

Mrs Draper gave a soft chuckle. “You are not at all how I imagined you to be. Sophy chided me for believing the rumours in the society papers, but in my experience there is rarely smoke without fire.” She spoke lightly, but her eyes were keen as she appraised him.

“It suited my purpose to gain a reputation as a rake,” Jack said. “Would that all my endeavours met with as much success.”

“I sense there is more to this story,” she said thoughtfully.

“Indeed there is,” he acknowledged, “but you will forgive me for being discreet and keeping the particulars to myself.”

She gave a hum of approval.

“Mrs Draper,” said Jack, “I love your daughter, and would be honoured if she would accept me as her husband. Do you still give your consent for her to be married?”

She gave him a long assessing look, and then said, “If she will have you.”

Bowing, Jack took his leave, feeling so much lighter that he practically skipped down the steps – and almost collided with Diana, who was just alighting from her carriage. He reached out to steady her.

“Lady Diana! What are you doing here?”

“I came looking for you,” she said breathlessly, clutching at his arm. “I called at your mother’s house, but she said you were not in, and then Richard told me where you

were headed. He wanted to know if I knew why Sophy had jilted you, and I told him it was not my secret to share, but –” She broke off and looked up at him beseechingly. “Please say you will come to our ball on New Year’s Eve. I know circumstances have changed since last we spoke, but I beg you, do not stay away.”

“I had not intended to.”

“No?” she said hopefully. “I was afraid, after what happened between you and Sophy – well, I thought you might not want to see her again.”

“I didn’t, at first,” he admitted. “Richard will tell you I sulked like a bear with a sore head for an entire day. But then I wanted to know *why*.”

She nodded earnestly. “Sophy is proud. And I think –” Diana glanced up and down the street, then leaned in. “I think her feelings for you scare her. I will not say too much, for a good matchmaker knows the value of confidentiality, but I am convinced all may yet come right, if you will but try.”

“I will try,” Jack assured her, optimism singing in his veins. “The rest is up to Sophy.”

Chapter Seventeen

“What do you think, miss?”

The maid addressed her words to Sophy, but it was Diana who answered. “She looks marvellous, Alice. You’ve outdone yourself this time.” The maid bobbed a curtsy, murmuring her thanks.

Sophy regarded herself in the looking glass. She supposed she did look especially lovely tonight, thanks in equal parts to Alice’s skills and Diana’s clothes press. Diana had insisted on lending Sophy yet another dazzling ballgown, this time in pomona green. It was more vibrant a colour than Sophy was used to wearing, but she had to admit that it suited her colouring nicely. It was perhaps a little lower cut than she was comfortable with, but the puffed sleeves were charming, and she knew how much work would have gone into creating the intricate beaded hemline. Her hair was piled on top of her head in a mass of ringlets that cascaded down at the back. She looked, in short, like a lady.

“Thank you,” Sophy said to both Diana and Alice.

“The finishing touch,” Diana said, holding out a jewelled comb for Alice to slip into Sophy’s hair.

“Oh no,” Sophy protested, “it is too fine.”

Just then, Arabella – who had slipped out earlier – reappeared, clutching a handful of Christmas roses. “Sophy is quite right,” she announced. “These are much more fitting.” At Diana’s nod, Alice tucked three into the side of Sophy’s hairdo, and Sophy tilted her head to one side to judge the effect. The simple white flowers stood out against the rich colour of her hair, and set off the green of the gown without being showy.

“It’s perfect,” Sophy said, a lump in her throat. She could not believe this was probably the last night she would ever spend with Diana and Arabella. She was glad she had let Diana talk her into dressing so elegantly. Sophy had protested

at first, saying she was not in the mood for attention and compliments, but then Diana had pointed out that Richard was coming, and he was sure to report back to Jack.

“Lord Clayton doesn’t care what I wear,” Sophy had insisted, ignoring the traitorous flutter of her heart.

“Be that as it may, you do not want Richard to report that you were dressed in something plain and dull and looked miserable. It will surely be more satisfying for you if Lord Clayton hears that you looked exquisite and danced all night long.”

Sophy had to admit the logic of this.

And so here she was, dressed in the most beautiful outfit she would never own. Diana handed her a dance card, and together they descended the stairs for an evening of revelry.

Sophy danced twice and then pleaded fatigue, sitting out the cotillion that followed. As she stood on the sidelines, watching Diana dance with Richard (both of them unable to break eye contact, wide smiles on their faces) she heard someone behind her say, “I’d recognise those chestnut curls anywhere.”

For a moment she froze, then she dug deep and summoned every last drop of her courage before turning to face Jack. “I believe this shade is *auburn*. I heard the Dowager Duchess of Seale describe it so, and I would not dare to disagree with such an august lady.”

Jack’s smile was tender. “I can personally attest that those who do dare to disagree with her are like to be struck by her fan. She wields it as a hussar wields his sword, and does far more damage.”

Sophy’s mouth twitched. “Spoken like one who has been impaled.”

“Many a time.” He gestured to her wrist. “May I steal a dance?”

“I do not think that would be wise.”

“It would give me the greatest pleasure.”

“Unfortunately for you, I do not exist merely for your pleasure, sir,” she said sharply.

He winced. “No, you do not. I apologise. Only five minutes into this conversation and I’ve already made a damned fool of myself. No wonder you cannot stand me.”

She frowned but did not correct him.

“What I should have said was, dancing with you would give me the greatest pleasure, but only if it is also what you want. For if you danced with me out of obligation, then I should not enjoy it at all. I only want you to be happy, and to do as you choose.”

“Who have you been talking to?” Sophy asked suspiciously. “Diana?”

He smiled faintly. “Your mother.”

“I am amazed she was willing to speak to you.”

“Oh, she had a lot to say. I see now where her daughter gets it from.” When Sophy grimaced, Jack added, “That is a compliment.”

“Be still my heart! Such honeyed words, sir.” She twirled her fan, curiosity getting the better of her. “What did you discuss?”

“You, of course. It was a most illuminating conversation.”

A flare of alarm went through her. “I am not sure I like the sound of that.”

“It was something I should have done much sooner,” Jack admitted. “Despite my rather unorthodox proposal, I still should have spoken to her directly to gain her consent once I had recovered from the putrid sore throat.”

Sophy was squirming in embarrassment. “What did you say? What did *she* say?”

“She explained a great many things of which I was woefully ignorant, and she also reaffirmed her consent for our

marriage... should it come to that.”

Sophy did not think her eyebrows would ever descend to their normal resting position, so high had they climbed.

“Now,” said Jack, “you may either strike me over the head with your fan, and I will leave at once and never bother you again, or... you may permit me the very great honour of having the next dance with you.”

Wordlessly, not even sure why she was doing it, Sophy held up her wrist. Jack took hold of the dance card that dangled there, and a smile crept across his face. “The next dance appears to be a waltz. God bless Lady Tarley for being so permissive.”

A waltz! Of all the dances. Of course it would be a damned *waltz*.

The cotillion was over, the flushed and breathless couples who had just finished dancing moving off to the side, Diana and Richard among them. Richard looked over at them and nodded at Jack, who tipped his head in return.

“It is not too late to change your mind,” Jack said gently. Sophy shook her head mutely and let him lead her onto the dance floor, where he placed one arm around her waist and took her hand. Suddenly Sophy’s heart was beating very fast.

“I notice you and your brother seem to be on better terms,” she said as the music struck up and they began to lightly step in time to the beat. “Your mother must be glad.”

“She is.”

“His Grace has forgiven you?”

“He has forgiven me for not being honest with him,” Jack said carefully.

“Hm. It is as I suspected, then. Miss Lamington was not the paragon of virtue you made her out to be.”

He looked at her, startled. “You knew?”

“I guessed. It did not feel right to me, that you would do such a thing...” His grip tightened on her waist and she

inhaled sharply. This close to him, she could smell his scent, and she longed to brush her nose against his jaw and inhale more deeply. What was the matter with her? Just because he had done this one noble thing did not mean he was not exactly like the rest of the *ton*. “Poor Jack, women forever throwing themselves at you and accosting your virtue. You must have been reminded of Miss Lamington when I grabbed you at Almack’s.”

“It was not at all the same thing,” he said.

The pace of the music increased and he whirled her across the dance floor with ease. Sophy’s hand tightened around his and he squeezed back reassuringly, which somehow only made her more breathless.

“It is nice to be able to look a partner in the eye, instead of over her head,” Jack commented.

“You have had many partners,” she stated baldly.

“I only want one, now.” His fingers were warm through the fabric of her gown. “Yes, I have had mistresses in the past. I’ve never hidden this from you, Sophy. But I have cut all ties with them now.” The music swirled around them as they danced, but to Sophy it was merely background noise, so intently was she focused on Jack’s words.

“How did they take the news?”

He raised his eyebrows. “They took it very well. I was never interested in passionate, jealous types, Sophy. There is something refreshing about being able to speak openly about what you want, rather than playing games. I value honesty. I appreciate it in my friends, and it is a trait I would look for in a wife.”

“I believe I was always honest with you,” she whispered. “Except maybe once.”

Jack pulled her closer than was decorous. She did not care.

“When you told me you did not love me,” Jack said, his eyes fixed on hers, “did you mean it?”

The music had swelled to a crescendo, and suddenly ceased. Sophy stumbled to a halt, Jack's grip keeping her upright. The sound of clapping seemed to press in on her from all sides, but the roaring in her ears was louder. She began to walk as fast as she could in her gown without tripping, Jack keeping pace beside her.

"Sophy," he said urgently, but she would not stop. They passed through the entrance hall, where people milled about at the foot of the grand staircase, cooling off from the heat of the ballroom. "Sophy," he said again, catching hold of her arm, and at last she came to a halt. They were in a quiet hallway, away from the noise of the ball, and entirely alone. "I love you," Jack said in a rush. "You're outspoken, entirely too bold, and infuriatingly stubborn. In short, you are perfect. I cannot lay claim to such a thing myself, but I promise you this: I will never stop trying to be better."

"I'm not perfect," she whispered, "and I didn't expect you to be either. I never asked..." She shook her head, and he caught her fingers.

"Yes?"

"I never asked for love."

"Yet here we are." As he said it, he couldn't help glancing up, and laughed when he saw where they were standing. "Under a kissing bough. Again. How convenient."

She trembled in his arms and tilted her face up, filled with yearning, but he did not move. Then she understood what he was waiting for. "Kiss me," she begged, and he bent his head and obliged, setting her body alight with desire. She clutched at the lapels of his claret tail-coat, pressing her body wantonly against his, not caring who saw. She was filled with heat, and something else, something deeper that warmed her all the way down to her toes. "I'm sorry," she gasped, when he at last broke their kiss.

"Come now, it wasn't that terrible," he teased, though there was a worried crease between his brows. "You are becoming quite an accomplished kisser."

She pushed at him while still clinging to his jacket, unwilling to let him go even for a moment. “I’m sorry for entrapping you, and jilting you, and judging you before I knew you, and pretending my reasons were noble even though they were selfish, and thinking that justified my actions.”

“That’s quite a list. Is there anything you’d like to add?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner that I love you, even though you are a scurrilous member of the *ton*.”

His chuckle reverberated through her. “Spoken like the saucy chit you are. I hope you never lose that sharp tongue.”

“Your ego will serve as a whetstone. I daresay it is large enough to last my whole life.”

He stilled, and looked down into her face, brushing gently at her forehead where the trimmed tuft of hair had been hidden under another ringlet. “Are you saying what I think you are?”

“Yes. Lord Clayton, I have compromised your reputation by luring you under this kissing bough and seducing you for all to see –” She looked around and was amazed to find they were still entirely alone. “Where is Arabella when you need her? No matter, I do not want you to think my hand was forced. Jack Clayton... will you marry me?”

He laughed, and Sophy knew he was startled by the audacity of her proposal. A woman asking a man? It was not done. But she had done it anyway.

From somewhere in the house, the chimes of midnight began to ring out. Sophy was filled with a wild and joyful hope stronger than anything she had ever felt before. Looking in Jack’s eyes, she saw a similar conviction that together they would overcome any odds.

“I will,” he promised, and tugged her in tighter to claim another kiss.

Author's Note

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