

THE BRIDES OF BATH

A woman with dark hair styled in an updo, wearing a vibrant red long-sleeved dress with a white lace-trimmed apron and a pearl necklace, is smiling and looking down at a quill pen she is holding. She stands in a richly decorated Victorian parlor. To her left is a large, ornate wooden bookshelf filled with books and decorated with a garland of red and white flowers. In the background, a plush yellow tufted chair is visible near a fireplace mantel adorned with a colorful floral arrangement. The room features dark wood paneling and a patterned rug.

THE
WALLFLOWER'S
CHRISTMAS
WISH

NY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CHERYL
BOLEN

At the age of four and twenty, Miss Diana Furness is a confirmed spinster. Not only is she possessed of a nondescript appearance, but a stepmother with two daughters of her own to launch has convinced Diana she's inconsequential. Only one thing has ever given her joy: her artistic talents.

The marriages, one by one, of his circle of friends and siblings has left Sir Elvin Steffington feeling most bereft. Perhaps it's time for him to join their ranks. Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be a single beauty in Bath for him to woo. Added to that dilemma, his sister, who's married and moved off to Yorkshire, has begged for his portrait as her Christmas present. He bloody well does not want to pose for a portrait, but his love for his sister wins.

A chance encounter convinces him the exceedingly plain Miss Furness is the only person in Bath capable of painting his portrait, but he must first convince this talented amateur. After bribing the stepmother, Elvin and Diana are together on a daily basis while he poses for the portrait. This closeness reveals there's much more to the plain spinster than being a wallflower. Could he fall in love with a woman so vastly different from any woman to whom he's ever been attracted? Could an intelligent woman like her even be attracted to a sport-mad man such as he?

The Wallflower's Christmas Wish

A Brides of Bath Novella
(*The Brides of Bath*, Book 8)

Cheryl Bolen

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DEDICATION

To Tamara Kaupp, who has brought to the editing of my books the same expertise and care she brought to her profession as a college English teacher. We have all been fortunate to be associated with her.

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The Brides of Bath Series

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Chapter 1

“I’m going to get married.” Sir Elvin Steffington had never in his nine-and-twenty years uttered such a statement.

His twin looked up from the desk where he’d been surveying a stack of papers, his eyes wide. “I didn’t even know you had formed an attachment to a lady.”

“Oh, I haven’t.”

Melvin looked perplexed. “I’ve always deferred to your superior experience where women are concerned, but does one not wish to marry *after* one has found a prospective mate one cannot live without?”

“I may have a great deal of experience with those of the opposite gender, but I have no experience with women whom I cannot live without.” Elvin frowned. “Fact is, my latest mistress has rejected me.”

“Have you not always been the one doing the rejecting?”

Elvin nodded. “Must be losing my touch. Mrs. Pratt left me for a green grocer who offered marriage. It seems everybody wants to be married.”

“Everyone except you. Until now.” Melvin set down the pen he’d been using and gave his brother his full attention. “You should have no difficulty finding a mate. Catherine says you’re unquestionably the most eligible bachelor in Bath.”

“Very good of your wife to say that.” Catherine, indeed, was a very good wife. She adored Melvin, made him happy, and had presented him with a son who was indisputably the finest little lad in the kingdom—if being nearly two qualified as a lad. “However, there is the fact that I’m the last remaining bachelor of our crowd. Sedgewick, Blanks, his brother, you, and even Appleton have all wed now and abandoned me.”

“Ah! So that’s why you wish to marry. You’ve lost your mistress as well as all your friends to matrimony.”

Elvin rose and moved to stand in front of the roaring fire in his brother’s cozy library. He still had not thawed from riding

over here on this raw, blustery December day. “That’s one of the reasons.”

“And the others?”

“You know I’m not good at words like you.”

“How can you say that when you know what a poor conversationalist I am?”

“Because you express yourself uncommonly well with a pen and paper.” Elvin’s gaze went to the papers and pen on his twin’s desk. “It’s hard for me to explain what’s swimming around in my head. I only know that it’s like the joy’s been stripped from my life. No one needs me anymore.”

“That’s understandable. You’re missing our sisters.”

“I don’t know why Annie couldn’t have remained in Bath once she married. You wouldn’t believe how dull your old family home is now that Annie’s gone—and taken Lizzy away.”

“Oh, but I would. You must own, a bachelor under the age of thirty who’s known to be a rake is not the right person to be responsible for a young maiden.”

“Be that as it may, I still miss Lizzy—and Annie, too.” But he did not miss either or both of his sisters as acutely as he missed his twin brother. Melvin’s marriage had been a crushing blow. Elvin had hoped the two would always live together. It mattered not that they were as different as the sun to the moon, Melvin was the person Elvin had always loved first and most.

In spite of his own aching loss upon Melvin’s marriage, Elvin was genuinely happy for his brother. It had taken Catherine Bexley to bring fulfillment to Melvin’s life. Because of her, all of Melvin’s hopes to publish those boring books on classical philosophers had come to fruition, and the lovely Catherine and their much-beloved little Geoffrey brought Elvin’s twin great happiness.

“Any more reasons contributing to your new-found desire to wed?” Melvin asked.

“Geoffrey.”

Melvin’s brows elevated. “What the devil does my son have to do with such a decision?”

My son. Those words encompassed so much more than the physical being. Having a son brought a man incalculable pride and a certainty that all those ancestors who had come before him would continue to live on. “While I cannot believe any lad could be more ... well, more precious than Geoffrey, being with the little fellow makes me long to have a lad of my own.”

Elvin detected the sadness in Melvin’s eyes as their gazes met, and his twin nodded. “There’s no greater pride. I do wish that for you.”

Smoke from the fire must be making Elvin’s eyes water. “Speaking of your son, what can I get him for Christmas?”

Melvin shrugged. “I haven’t a clue. He’s not really old enough for a lot of things lads play.”

“It might help if he could talk.”

“Speaking of tots talking, do you recall how late you were in talking?”

“I have no recollection of being a tot.”

“Nurse teased for years about your inability to express yourself to anyone—except me—until you were five or six.”

“Oh, I do recall. Nurse claimed you and I had our own language and communicated quite well in that silly tongue.”

“I have no memory of that special language, but I’m pleased to say that since the age of six, you’ve had no difficulty talking.”

“Then we need not worry about Geoffrey.”

“I was worried about Geoffrey not talking, but Catherine talked to Felicity Moreland, who has three sons, and she assured Catherine that boys speak much later than girls. She said her firstborn did not speak in sentences until after his second birthday.”

“Does that mean our little fellow will start speaking in

sentences this month when he turns two?”

“That’s exactly what I asked Catherine. She said *after* was the key word.”

“Perhaps Felicity Moreland will have some suggestions for a Christmas present.”

“You really don’t have to get Geoffrey a gift. He doesn’t understand things like Christmas and birthdays yet.”

“I couldn’t *not* get him something. It’s both his birthday as well as Christmas, and I’ll not have him denied by his favorite uncle.”

“Do you not think it’s awfully smart of him to know you’re not his father, given that we look exactly alike?”

“Of course, he’s brilliant. He’s your son.” Everyone agreed about Melvin’s brilliance—in book learning.

“He is excessively fond of his uncle, though, even though he knows you’re not his father.”

“Another reason why I must get him a wonderful gift. And you won’t believe what Annie’s demanded of me for a Christmas gift.”

“What?”

“The silly woman wants me to have my portrait painted for her.”

Melvin grimaced. “Can’t imagine anything duller than sitting there for an artist.”

“I don’t even know how to go about finding an artist.”

“You’ll figure something out, old boy. But back to this business about you getting married... how do you propose to meet this future bride of yours? It’s not as if you’ll find one at Mrs. Starr’s gaming establishment—or at Mrs. Baddele’s’... well, you know.”

House of prostitution. “Of course I know that. I believe I’ll start at the Upper Assembly Rooms.”

A quizzing look clouded Melvin’s face. “But I thought you

didn't like going to the assembly rooms."

"I don't, but I'm prepared to make the sacrifice for my future happiness." He hadn't been to the assembly rooms since before Jonathan Blankenship had married, and that was around Christmas two years ago. Around the same time Geoffrey was born.

It had been easier to go to the assemblies when bolstered by his bachelor companions—all of whom had now wed. It would certainly feel strange to enter those chambers alone. He couldn't ask Melvin and Catherine to come with him. Melvin had spent most of his adult years avoiding social gatherings in favor of pouring over ancient Greek and Latin manuscripts.

"Have you decided what qualities you're going to seek in a wife?" Melvin asked.

Actually, he hadn't. He pursed his lips in thought. "Breasts. She'll need to be well endowed in that respect. You know I've always fancied buxom women."

"I may be wrong, and I generally am where women are concerned, but it seems to me such a qualification should signify very little. There are more important attributes a woman—a lifetime companion—should bring to a marriage."

"Of course, you're right. Always are." Elvin began to pace in front of the blazing fire. "I am trying to determine if she should be possessed of blonde hair or black. I tend to like them both."

Melvin cleared his throat. "Again, old fellow, the color of one's hair has no bearing upon one's suitability." He shrugged. "As one ages, that hair color is subject to change, you know."

"There is that." Sir Elvin Steffington commenced to his pacing in front of the fire again. "I've got it!"

"What, pray tell, is *it*?"

"You and I have always been exceedingly compatible. I attribute it to the fact we're vastly different."

"Go on."

"So I shall require a wife to embody many qualities you

possess. She should be better read than me.”

“Everyone’s better read than you.”

“There is that. But I believe she should be, well, smarter than me.”

“Yes, I can see that would be a valuable trait.”

“You’re not going to say everyone is smarter than me?”

“Of course not! You’re highly intelligent—perhaps not in many of the subjects found in books, but I daresay there’s no one in England better than you at evaluating horseflesh, and look at how extraordinarily talented you are at games of chance. Your mind has an uncommon grasp of the theories of probability.”

Sir Elvin blew out a breath. “I don’t even know what a theory of probability is, but my mind does seem to understand the workings of numbers, even though I can no more explain it than I can understand Geoffrey’s jabberings.”

“I believe now your compass is pointing in the right direction, as far as the selection of a wife goes. Compatibility is far more important than the color of one’s hair.”

“While that’s true enough, I must be attracted to the woman.”

“Oh, that goes without saying.”

Elvin stopped pacing. “Wish me luck. I go to the assembly rooms tonight.”

“You always have my best wishes.”

* * *

“I don’t see why Diana has to come with us to the assembly rooms tonight,” Frances said to her mother. “It’s not as if anyone ever asks her to dance.”

“It’s all about how things look,” Mrs. Marian Furness replied. “Never let it be said that I ever slighted my stepdaughter. I have always tried to treat Diana the very same as I would my own two daughters.”

It mattered not to the two that Diana sat within hearing range, madly drawing at the sketchbook that was as much her constant fixture as her nondescript brown hair. She was accustomed to being treated as one who was invisible. Not since her Papa had died when she was ten had anyone ever deferred to her.

She dared not even contradict Marian's statement that she was treated the same as her stepsisters. The modiste knew Diana was never the recipient of new dresses, for it was the modiste who altered Frances's and Alice's discarded dresses to fit Diana.

Were Diana to point out such a difference, she would be accused of ingratitude and sent to her bedchamber without dinner, and Diana did not wish to be denied tonight's roast beef. It was her favorite meal.

Were she asked—which was a non-existent occurrence—she would have begged not to go to the assembly rooms that night. Any money that had been spent on dancing lessons had been wasted on Diana. She could count on the fingers of a single hand how many times a man had asked her to stand up with him since she had come out six years previously.

Attending assemblies ranked highest on her list of dreaded activities. What young woman would wish to subject herself to such persistent humiliation? It was little consolation that neither stepsister fared much better. And they were older!

Marian was not to be deterred from her grandiose dreams that at least one of her daughters would marry well.

"It's most important, my dear Frances, that you spend extra time on your toilette tonight," Marian said to her eldest daughter.

"Why?" Frances asked.

Indeed, Diana, too, wished to know. She looked up from her sketching. Marian's green eyes sparkled, and her mouth was screwed up with the unmistakable look of smugness. "I have it on the best authority that Bath's most eligible bachelor will be in attendance tonight, and I've always thought a

baronet would do very well for you, my dear. After all, we are connected to a baronet ourselves.”

Frances’s eyes flashed, and a smile tweaked her lips. “Indeed. Sir William Grimley. But tell me, Mama, do you mean Sir Elvin’s to attend tonight’s assembly?”

“I do.”

“How did you learn this? The man hasn’t stepped one foot inside the Upper Assembly Rooms in at least two years.”

“Cook told me. She found out from Sir Elvin’s cook while at the butcher’s this morning. She said her master wasn’t dining in tonight because he was committed to going to the Upper Assembly Rooms.”

Were Diana at liberty to ask, which she was never permitted to do, she would have asked how Marian could possibly have pried such an intelligence from their cook. As she pondered this, though, Diana realized that Marian’s quest to find husbands for her daughters must have prompted her to alert her servants to forward any promising leads.

Marian cast her gaze at Diana. “You must fashion Frances’s hair tonight. You artistic types seem most capable in that respect.”

Had her stepmother just complimented her? Was this not the same woman who always found fault with Diana’s art? It had pained her stepmother when the former drawing master she hired for the girls effusively praised Diana’s work while being incapable of finding a single thing to admire in her stepsisters’ creations.

Upon further consideration, Diana understood why she’d merited this begrudging praise from Marian. Though Marian could spend money lavishly on finery for her daughters and for prestigious lodgings in this watering city, she tightened the purse strings in other areas.

She kept a plentiful supply of lead coins to drop into the Poor Box at church. Cheap tallows for the servants’ chambers were rationed as if they were gold coins, and while the best cuts of meat were served to the family, Marian insisted the

butcher's scraps were adequate for those in her employ.

Diana had often thought that were the Admiralty to put Marian in charge of procurement for the Royal Navy, she could save enough to pay for a new man-of-war.

It was to be expected that this parsimonious woman would deem the expense for hairdressers unnecessary when Diana could be enlisted for such a commission.

"If that's agreeable to Frances," Diana said.

"Where's the *Ackermann's*?" Frances raced to the table where their favorite periodicals were kept. "I must find a hairstyle I wish to emulate." She paused to glare at Diana. "If only you'll be up to the task. I must attract Sir Elvin's attention tonight."

Chapter 2

Diana lamented that she had not been permitted to bring her sketch book to the assembly rooms that night. Being occupied would have kept her mind off her humiliation. It was really the most irrational thing that she should even suffer humiliation. It wasn't as if she'd fallen from a state of great admiration. She could not recall a time when she'd ever been admired—except by her drawing master, and that lady's regard had not been for her but for her creations.

As Diana had always done at these affairs, she took her chair on the back wall and prayed no one would notice her. Marian could not countenance her daughters being against the wall. She moved their chairs in front of Diana.

Though nature had not favored her stepsisters with beauty, they both dressed beautifully this night. Frances's white gown succeeded in accentuating the white of her teeth in contrast to her raven hair and dark eyes. If her teeth, nose, and height weren't so large, she might have been pretty.

Alice, too, was dressed to perfection in a pale blue frock that complemented her azure eyes. Diana was pleased with how she had styled the younger of the stepsisters' thick, ginger hair in the Grecian fashion, with tendrils spiraling around her freckled face.

Of the two stepsisters, Diana thought Alice's prospects of finding a husband better than her elder sister's. Alice had the advantage of normal height. It had been Diana's observation that men typically did not admire a woman who was taller than they.

Marian was blind to Frances's shortcomings and could never abandon the dream of her firstborn marrying well.

Diana was thankful her own faded lavender muslin frock was obscured by the stepsisters who sat in front of her.

The first set was finishing, and not one man had even cast a glance their way, much to Marian's consternation. Of course, none of those inconsequential men mattered. Only Sir Elvin

did, and he had not yet arrived.

Even though the baronet rarely attended such gatherings, everyone in Bath seemed to know who the Steffington twins were. It was no common occurrence to see two tall, dark men of means who looked exactly alike.

If Diana was not mistaken, no one in her family had ever spoken to the baronet or been introduced to him. She was anxious to see how Marian would contrive to attract his attention.

While Diana was normally incredibly bored at these assemblies, tonight she amused herself by attempting to discern which of the ladies in attendance would attract Sir Elvin. She had studied the women on the longway facing their dancing partners. By virtue of having been asked to dance, those women must be the most sought-after in the chamber.

Diana would guess the youngest of the ladies no more than seventeen. Too young, she thought, for Sir Elvin, who must be thirty. The eldest of the dancers were married matrons, some likely nearing forty. She did not believe any of the unmarried ladies could be as old as Frances, who was six-and-twenty—two years older than Diana.

As she surveyed the dancers, it occurred to her not one of them could be considered a diamond of the first water. She still recalled how highly sought-after Glee Blankenship—then Glee Pembroke—had been when she'd come out. And many thought her sister, Felicity Moreland, even more beautiful, though Mrs. Moreland—then Mrs. Harrison—had been a widow who eschewed dancing when she'd come to Bath several years ago. The city had yet to see any women as lovely as the former Pembroke sisters.

Marian stabbed her firstborn with an elbow. "There he is."

Diana's gaze leapt across the crowded dancefloor to behold the baronet, dressed impeccably all in black, save for a starched white shirt and cravat. Only a man possessed of great confidence could enter a chamber such as this all alone without a single friend to bolster him. Everything about him spoke of power and prestige and overwhelming confidence.

Were Diana given to admiring potential suitors—which she most assuredly had never done—she would have thought Sir Elvin exceedingly admirable. He was not handsome in the classic sense, but his tall, lithely muscled body definitely stood out from the average man in several ways. There was nothing offensive in his pensive face. His coloring of very dark hair and very dark eyes resembled that of Frances, except that her skin was chalk white and his, even in winter, was bronzed by the sun.

It did not escape Diana's notice that half the young women in the chamber also turned to gawk at the baronet. How many of them, she wondered, would have aspirations of capturing his heart?

Capturing men's hearts was not something Diana had ever allowed herself to contemplate. Her attention returned to the dancers.

* * *

Elvin could not recall ever having attended one of these assemblies alone. This might be the first time he'd ever come without Appleton. What a pity that Appleton had gone and married Miss Pankhurst.

He stood frozen in one of the lofty chamber's doorways to survey the attendees, hoping to see a familiar face. Failing that, his eye went to the row of ladies dancing in the longway. He mustn't forget the purpose of this unpleasant experience was to find a mate. His first glance confirmed that not one of the ladies there was possessed of any great beauty.

He must remember what Melvin had cautioned. One should not select one's life partner based on superficial traits that could vanish with time. Easy for Melvin to say. His Catherine happened to be exceedingly pretty.

The longer one waited for matrimony, the smaller the pool of potential candidates. All the beauties had already been snatched up.

From here, it was difficult to see those ladies who were sitting out this first set. Not that it was particularly crowded

here this night. It was, after all, December. Not the busy season in Bath. He began to stroll the perimeter of the chamber, his gaze drawn to the musicians perched high above the dance floor.

He came close to toppling a buxom matron who had practically flung herself into his path. She stopped right in front of him like an aggressive flower seller at London's Covent Garden. This woman would be the same age as his mother, were that dear woman still alive. Any other similarities ended there. This woman was possessed of hair that had once been the color of marmalade but was now threaded with gray. A hearty meal could have been served on her enormous bosom. He was quite certain he'd never met her before, but the blasted woman knew his name!

"Oh, Sir Elvin, it's such a sad occasion to see you without your dear sister, Annie. How you must miss her." Her gaze darted to the dark-haired, large young woman who stood next to her. "My daughter, Frances, here, had the good fortune to be acquainted with Annie Steffington, did you not, my dear?"

"Indeed, I did. We once helped each other decorate the cathedral with lilies for Easter service."

"My daughter is always given to charitable acts, much like your dear sister."

It occurred to him as he stood there at a loss for what to say to this woman that the mother was attempting to foist her horse-faced daughter upon him. He could have tolerated a lady, like this daughter, who was considerably taller than average. A tall man like him did not have to exclude any potential bride because of excessive height. Perhaps he could even have overlooked those horsey teeth of the young woman's. But the one thing he could never countenance was an aggressive, match-making mama.

His own mother had always impressed on her children that when one married, one took on not only a spouse but also a new family, and adding one domineering matriarch into his own family was not something he would ever permit.

"Very commendable," he mumbled, his eye wandering to

the well-dressed ginger-haired young lady who stood half hidden by Horse Face, then to one of the most forlorn-looking young women he'd ever seen. That young woman, whose age he calculated to be a bit over one-and-twenty, was rather shabbily dressed and was so timid, her gaze riveted to her lap.

If one overlooked her faded dress and compared her to the two exceedingly well-dressed young women who stood in front of her, the petrified-looking young woman was perhaps the best looking of the three, though there was certainly nothing above the ordinary about her. She was possessed of hair in an ordinary shade of medium brown. Her eyes were a pedestrian shade of green. Her only feature out of the ordinary was her figure—and this was not something to be desired. She was downright skinny.

All of these observations were made as quickly as the eye skims an aged portrait one casually walks past on a daily basis. Without staring at any of the young ladies, he would have to say there was something about The Waif's face that bordered on being pretty. Her pale complexion was actually quite lovely, with a tinge of rose in her cheeks. By contrast, neither of the two well-dressed ladies could ever be considered attractive.

So what was expected of him now? While he owed nothing to the overbearing mother, he was a gentleman. As a gentleman, he was expected to behave in courtly manner. "If you would be so kind, Mrs... .?"

"Mrs. Furness."

"I beg that you introduce me to these young ladies."

Had he just presented her the Crown Jewels, she could not have looked more pleased. She turned first to Horse Face. "Sir Elvin, I should like to present you to my eldest daughter, Frances Hubbard."

That lady curtsied.

He forced a smile and nodded. Her last name was different than her mother's. His first thought was that she was married, but she wore no rings.

Then the mother turned to the lady in blue, the one with coppery hair. “And this is my daughter Alice Hubbard.”

Ah! Both sisters were unwed. It was the mother who had remarried.

The copper-haired sister also curtsied, and his head inclined in silent recognition.

He turned his attention to The Waif. “Is this lady with you?”

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Furness said. “That is my stepdaughter, Diana Furness.”

He turned to that young woman. Her lashes lifted as she rose to her feet and dipped into a curtsy, her lashes lowering again. She reminded him of a cowering hound who’d been grossly mistreated. He bowed. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Furness.”

Her only response was the eking of a half-smile.

A great dog lover, Elvin could never abide the mistreatment of any animal. And mistreatment—either physically or mentally—of a human was even more unforgivable. It took no strong powers of observation to understand that Diana Furness was a nonentity in her own home.

This plain young Diana Furness did not physically appeal to him on any level. Needless to say, he’d always been especially partial to well-padded women. Nevertheless, he felt compelled to offer her kindness, something he would wager she’d lacked for some time.

“Would you, Miss Furness,” he said to The Waif, “do me the goodness of standing up with me for the next set?”

Her frightened gaze darted to the stepmother, and then she looked downward and slowly nodded. The orchestra was just starting to tune up for the next set. This was the time to take their places on the dance floor. He held out his hand. She hesitated before placing hers in his. Good lord, did the lady even know how to dance?

As if to reassure her, he placed his other hand on top of hers

and patted it. Elvin may not have had much experience with reputable young ladies, but small children and all creatures loved him. Miss Furness reminded him of the latter.

The next set proved to be a country set that had them changing partners and clomping about merrily. When a full smile lifted her lips, it was to him like a rainbow after a wretched storm. He was even pleased to note her teeth were very fine.

After the set, he proffered his arm, and she timidly set her dainty hand upon it. “Thank you, Miss Furness, for suffering me for your dance partner.”

“Thank you, Sir Elvin.”

After he restored Miss Furness to her stepfamily, he was determined *not* to ask the stepsisters to stand up with him. He expressed his pleasure at having met Mrs. Furness and her daughters and then exited the ballroom.

There was nothing there that interested him, no woman to whom he would ever be compelled to pledge his troth.

Admittedly, Bath was thin in December. He could either wait until spring, or he might have to travel to London. Surely in the world’s largest city he would be able to find a bride.

Chapter 3

It took nothing more than the sun showing its face on this frigid December day for Elvin to flee the confines of his lonely house. Hang the cold! Midnight needed a good exercise at Sydney Park. And Elvin most determinedly needed to see other faces, even if they belonged to strangers.

While he deplored winter for the way it restricted the activities he most enjoyed, Elvin's hardy constitution made him not averse to cold weather. He actually found it invigorating, as did his filly.

As far as December days went, this wasn't bad. Sun could easily compensate for near-freezing temperatures, and there was nary a bit of wind. Elvin wasn't the only one enjoying this day. Sadly, many of those making their way to the baths in invalid chairs and heavily leaning on canes had no choice. They'd come to Bath for the treatment of their ills.

Most of the pedestrians crossing the River Avon on the Pulteney Bridge were headed toward the baths. He was one of only a few who sought the vast expanse of Sydney Gardens east of the bridge. Hopefully, it was early enough in the day for him to give Midnight a good romp. Speed is what exhilarated him, and if the bridle paths were clear—which he most ardently wished for—he and Midnight would indulge that wish.

In spite of the sun's rare December showing, few people were enjoying the gardens' offerings this day. It was early yet. Perhaps afternoon would bring out those who'd been forced inside by the recently gloomy weather.

With a gleeful spurt, he and Midnight launched ahead on the vacant path that wound through the park's perimeter. They rode like the wind for half an hour, when Elvin dismounted and led his beast to the lake for a good slurping.

Near the lake a lone young woman sat on a hefty wooden bench. It appeared that she was sketching. Something about her looked familiar, though it was difficult to tell, given the

abundance of clothing that wrapped about her. Many layers of dress were covered with a thick, red woolen cape, and a wool muffler coiled about her neck. The cape's hood capped her head, and her slender fingers were sheathed in leather gloves. Sturdy black boots kept her feet warm.

It took a moment for him to recall where he might have seen her before. Then he remembered. It was The Waif. Miss ... Miss Furness. Taking Midnight's lead, Elvin strolled to the bench where she sat. "Miss Furness, is it not?"

Instead of looking at her, he found himself staring at her sketch. If he was not mistaken, the woman had drawn Midnight. Not many in his experience—and he was madly interested in anything pertaining to horses—could render a satisfactory drawing or painting of a horse. But this woman did more than an admirable job. She was extraordinarily talented.

Her lashes lifted, and a tentative smile brightened her delicate face. She nodded.

Was The Waif too timid to speak? Was she stunned that he had remembered her as well as her name? Had the poor lady been conditioned to feeling so inconsequential that no one would ever remember her?

He would turn the tables. Let her believe he felt so inconsequential that he did not think she would remember him. "I'll wager you don't remember my name."

She set down her pencil and actually looked him in the eye. "You would lose your wager, Sir Elvin." Somehow, her voice did not match the girl. He'd expected a mere whimper but had gotten a rather authoritarian statement delivered in a pleasing, melodic voice.

"I am flattered that you remember me." He eyed the bench. "Will you permit me to sit here?"

"I do not own the bench. Of course, you must feel free to sit wherever you like."

He first tied Midnight to the bench, then sat a few feet away from the lady and overtly glanced at the sketch pad she was

attempting to close.

“Please, Miss Furness, I beg you not close your book. I should be honored to look at what you’ve drawn.”

“I don’t draw for others.”

“You should. From what I’ve glimpsed, you are blessed with a talent that demands to be seen.”

Unlike most young ladies, Miss Furness did not attempt to deny her talent—a trait he found refreshingly honest. “Drawing is something from which I derive great pleasure.”

He would vow few things in her life had given her pleasure, not when she had to suffer that overbearing stepmother. “If I’m not mistaken, you’ve rendered a very fine likeness of my horse.”

Her cheeks, already pink from the cold, grew redder.

Not only was she unaccustomed to praise, but she was also embarrassed that her stealthy depiction of Midnight had been discovered.

“Please, might I see it?” he asked.

It took her a moment to respond. Finally, she handed him her sketch book. She had drawn Midnight riderless and in full gallop, her hind haunches taut, her mane flowing majestically. Somehow, this woman had even managed to convey the horse’s sleek, glossy coal color with nothing more than her pencil.

“This is wonderful.”

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“Would you permit me to look at your other drawings?”

She shrugged.

That was all the encouragement he needed. He began to flip through the pages. He instantly recognized the red-headed stepsister with her curly tresses and faint freckling. “You do people, too.”

“Drawing is an obsession of mine.”

“It’s good that you’ve cultivated such an uncommon talent.”

“Thank you.”

With what appeared to be no effort, she had perfectly captured the other stepsister and the mother. There was even an extraordinary self-portrait. He had never seen such accurate portraits done by an amateur.

“Do you paint as well?” he asked.

“I like to very much, but paints don’t come cheap.”

He would wager that the stepmother was loathe to encourage Miss Furness. What a pity. “Someone with your talent need not worry about the price of paint. You could command large sums for doing portraiture.”

She gave him an are-you-out-of-your-mind gawk. “Women of my class do not work.”

“I’m not suggesting you become someone’s housekeeper or nurse to a child. I refer to the God-given gift you possess, a gift that should be shared. And, if my memory serves me correctly, my late mother had a portrait done by an enormously talented woman who was every bit as good as Gainsborough or Romney, and I recall Mama saying the artist was received at the highest levels of the aristocracy as well as among the Royal Family.”

Miss Furness nodded. “Angelica Kauffman. You’re right about her work being as good as Gainsborough’s or Romney’s. She was one of the founders of the Royal Academy. I should love to see her portrait of your mother.”

He swallowed. His mother’s youthful beauty had been perfectly captured in the painting which hung prominently over the mantel in his dining room and had always been greatly admired. “It is probably the thing I value most. Of course, I would be happy to show it to you.”

Her gaze returned to her lap.

“As it happens,” he said, “I’m in need of an artist to do my portrait. Mind you, I can think of few things more unappealing

than sitting for a portrait, and I am not even remotely interested in seeing a likeness of myself. It seems an arrogant thing to want. But my sister who's married and moved off to Yorkshire has asked it of me for Christmas, and I've never been able to deny my sisters anything."

"Because as the firstborn, you feel responsible for your siblings."

How clever she was to so correctly understand his feelings. "Exactly."

"You refer to Annie?"

"You know her?"

"Not intimately but well enough to find her delightful. You must miss her."

"I do." He found himself wondering if Miss Furness had actual Furness siblings or just the two stepsisters. One night was not sufficient to judge familial relationships, but he would wager the stepsisters were as exclusionary as their mother to Miss Furness. "Do you have siblings?"

She hesitated a moment before answering. "Just the two stepsisters. Regrettably, they're much closer to each other than they are to me."

He was getting on far too intimate ground here and needed to revert to the previous discussion. "If I cannot persuade you to do my portrait, perhaps you can recommend someone who can."

"The only one in Bath whom I would endorse is Anthony Martino, but it may be hard to secure him. He's quite popular. You can find his studio upstairs on Milsom Street."

"An Italian?"

"Yes. One wonders why it is most of the finest artists in the world are Italian."

"Indeed." He handed back her sketchbook. "Are you certain I cannot persuade you to paint my picture? I would happily pay a handsome fee."

She appeared to hesitate, then shook her head. “My stepmother would not approve.”

He wondered if Mrs. Furness objected most to her stepdaughter entering a profession or to her stepdaughter’s talents being admired. He stood and took his leave of the lady.

* * *

Long after he had gone, Diana sat on the bench staring at the lake. The interchange between her and Sir Elvin was the first time in her life she’d ever been alone with a gentleman. It seemed such an innocuous occurrence she could not understand why it was so alien an experience. A man and a woman could converse in much the same manner as two women could. Why, then, was it supposed that such an action could possibly stir one’s lust? Lust—as well as romantic notions—were the farthest thing from her mind as she’d spoken with Sir Elvin.

Of course, a highly sought-after gentleman like him would never, ever be attracted to so plain or inconsequential a woman as Diana. Therefore, it took no effort on her part to exclude thoughts of an amorous tryst with the baronet.

Her thoughts kept returning to his question. Had she ever considered becoming a professional artist of portraiture? Truthfully, she had never considered it until he brought it up. It was such a pity that she was prohibited from doing something that would give her a great deal of pleasure.

The very idea of painting people appealed to her in so many ways. First, she thought she would love to paint portraits more than anything. As much as she enjoyed sketching, the idea of fully capturing a real-life likeness with appropriately colored eyes and hair and flesh exhilarated her.

Secondly, being a professional painter would give her financial independence. She could not imagine how wonderful her life would be if she were not at the mercy of her uncaring stepmother. She might even be able to live independently, away from Marian and her daughters. Such an incentive was even stronger than her desire to paint on a daily basis.

And, lastly, she admitted, she would enjoy making a name for herself because of her own accomplishments.

Since the age of ten, she had been treated no differently than the floor beneath one's feet: something that was there, that was useful, and that no one gave a thought to.

* * *

That very afternoon, the streets filled with warmly bundled people enjoying the sunshine. Elvin walked to Milsom and found Martino's studio. The painter, a graying man of about fifty, was madly at work painting the matron sitting before him. She was dressed in sheer finery with strings of costly pearls dangling beneath her three fleshy chins.

Elvin's eye went from the unattractive woman to the portrait that was propped on the artist's easel. The man Elvin assumed to be Martino captured the woman's essence, but his portrait was exceedingly flattering. It made sense that the artist would wish to please the woman who was paying him.

Once the artist colored in the woman's pale brown locks, he set down his brush, eyed Elvin, and spoke with a heavy Italian accent. "How may I help-a you?"

"I wish you to paint my portrait."

The artist nodded pensively. "I can get to you in May."

Almost half a year away. Far too long. He frowned. "I was hoping to have it painted for a Christmas gift."

The woman with the chins began to laugh. "One must be incredibly patient to procure the services of Mister Martino. He is undisputedly Bath's finest portraitist."

"So I have been told." Elvin addressed the woman. "Who would be the second best?"

"I could never recommend anyone except Mr. Martino," she said.

Elvin decided to play his trump. He did not like to allude to his minor aristocratic title, but it had proven to be helpful on any number of occasions. He moved toward the artist. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Sir Elvin Steffington." He went

to shake hands but noticed the artist's hands were smudged with paint. "Can I implore you to paint me? I'm willing to pay handsomely."

Mr. Martino shook his head. "It is not possible."

As disappointed as Elvin was, he admired a man who could not be bought. "I understand. Could you do me the goodness to tell me what range of fees an artist of your exemplary credentials could command for a portrait?"

"Full length or head and chest?"

He hadn't actually considered the matter though he had to own most of the portraits of gentlemen he'd seen depicted the man standing. Those military types had a penchant for posing with brightly colored uniforms and gleaming swords at their side. A pity Elvin possessed nothing as impressive. Still, there was something manly about a fellow standing rather than sitting. "Full length, I should say."

"My fee starts at one hundred pounds."

Such a huge fee could certainly supply Mr. Martino with a most comfortable living. Elvin nodded. "And how long would it take for one of your obviously vast experience to paint such a portrait?"

"I typically allow-a a month."

"And the fastest you've ever done a painting of someone?"

"I painted my-a daughter in five days, but she, she was-a not so critical. Family, you know."

"I understand. Thank you for explaining these things to me. Next time, I will get in your queue in ample time."

As Elvin strolled back to Green Park Road, he got an idea.

Chapter 4

The Furness butler's demeanor was as haughty as one in a royal household, even if the slight fraying on his graphite-colored jacket indicated his employer's lack of affluence.

Exactly what Elvin was hoping for.

The middle-aged butler's entire countenance changed from one of indifference to respect when he casually peered at the card Elvin handed him. The butler reverently stood aside and indicated for Elvin to enter the home on highly respectable Monmouth Street. "Allow me to show you to the drawing room, Sir Elvin, while I present your card to Mrs. Furness."

The home's drawing room was much like the Furness butler. It bespoke a faded grandiosity with its sturdily elegant French furnishings that had been upholstered in velvet that had once been crimson but now resembled watered-down wine.

Elvin's eye was drawn to the portrait over the mantelpiece. Was that the late Mr. Furness? The painting was of a distinguished-looking man whose dark hair was tinted silver around the ears. From the style of dress, Elvin would guess the painting had been commissioned at least twenty years previously. And, of course, the man was standing in a most masculine-looking stance.

That clinched Elvin's decision to stand for his portrait. If he ever got the opportunity. He had not given up on granting Annie's Christmas wish. That is why he'd come here today.

He had expected Mrs. Furness to rush to greet her caller. After all, on that night they'd met at the assembly rooms, she had acted as if entering the sphere of a baronet was vitally important to her life and to that of her unattractive daughters.

Yet the time slowly ticked away without yielding his hostess. Had the butler failed to tell Elvin his mistress was not actually at home this afternoon? He waited for so long, he became convinced the butler had neglected to tell Mrs. Furness of his visit. Elvin was just about to try to locate the male servant when Mrs. Furness burst into the chamber, all smiles

and enthusiastic greetings. He instantly realized what had taken the woman so long. She was dressed as exquisitely as one readying for presentation to the queen. Her hair had been dressed in an elaborate fashion. What a vain woman she must be.

It wasn't as if he were courting her. He was aware that she would heartily approve if he were to be interested in courting one of her daughters.

“What an honor it is, Sir Elvin, to have you call upon us. My daughters will be down shortly.”

Now standing, he brushed his lips across the air over the gloved hand she proffered. “Oh, but it's you, Mrs. Furness, whom I wished to see. I hope you still feel welcoming when I tell you the purpose of my call.”

Her brows lowered as she eyed him. “Pray, sir, I beg that you inform me of that purpose.” She indicated for him to sit back down, and she lowered herself onto the sofa opposite him.

“That night we met at the Upper Assembly Rooms,” he began, “you were kind enough to mention my sister. I hope to prey on your good feelings for her.”

“I harbor only the fondest feelings toward your sister. Go on, sir. You've piqued my interest.”

“I am confronted by a sad dilemma, and it is in your power to resolve it.”

“If it is within my power to do so, it will be my pleasure. Pray, what is your dilemma?”

“Now that Annie has moved so far away, she has taken it into her head to beg me to have my portrait made for her Christmas present. With my portrait, she would effectively have a likeness of both her brothers.”

“Indeed. You and your twin” Her voice was tentative, as if she were waiting for further clarification to explain how any of this could possibly pertain to her.

“It is far too late for me to procure the services of any

artist.”

“I’m terribly sorry.”

“Knowing how tender hearted you—as a mother—are and selfishly claiming your family’s connection to Annie, I have come to implore you to permit me to engage the services of your stepdaughter to paint my portrait.” He held up a hand as if to prevent any possible objection until he had fully explained his proposition. “I know she is a lady and does not even have a studio, but I would insist on paying you for the use of your home for a temporary studio. I could hardly ask your stepdaughter to come to my home, seeing that she’s a maiden, and I’m a bachelor.”

“I cannot have my stepdaughter perform such an undignified task.”

“I understand your feelings, and I sympathize with your desire to be mindful of her respectability—and that of your lovely daughters.” It fairly rankled him to refer to her daughters as lovely, but if he meant to have that portrait for Annie, he had to play into this woman’s ambition to have her daughters admired. “But Miss Furness is my last hope for procuring the portrait in time for Christmas. And you must be aware of the outstanding work of Angelica Kauffman, who painted my mother when my mother resided in London. Miss Kauffman was accepted everywhere—even by the Royal Family.”

“I have heard of Angelica Kauffman’s work. I even saw one of her paintings at the Royal Academy. We should love to see the portrait of your mother.”

“It will be my privilege to show it to you and your daughters.”

That comment perked her up considerably. “We have much in common, after all.”

He raised a brow.

“There’s a baronet in my family—Sir William Grimley—who married my cousin’s sister-in-law,” she said, beaming. “We shall adore seeing that Angelica Kauffman portrait at

your home. My daughter, Frances, is quite the connoisseur of art.”

Frances was *not* The Waif. “You speak of your tall daughter?”

“Yes. Tall girls, I have been assured are all the rage at present—especially with tall gentlemen.” Her gaze skimmed the length of his body. A moment later, she eyed him from beneath lowered brows. “How is it you know of Diana’s artistic ability?”

At least she had not disparaged the ability. “I happened upon her at Sydney Gardens and took the liberty of looking at her sketches. She draws very well.” He sensed that praising Miss Furness too strongly might not go down well with this woman. She obviously wished him to strongly praise her own daughters. “I have been turned down by Bath’s finest portrait artist, so I would have to insist on paying you a hundred pounds for the use of a temporary studio here at your lovely house.”

He would also see to it that Miss Furness got a similar amount, but he need not share that intelligence with the stepmother. “I only hope my presence here each day would not be too much of an imposition.” He reasoned that his presence and consequential exposure to her spinster daughters might be the final consideration in swaying her.

He could see her calculating the two prospects—the handsome amount of money coupled with the prospect of daily exposing her daughters to what was considered an eligible bachelor. The features on her face softened. “I am persuaded that I must accept your offer in order to ensure that your poor sister has a happy Christmas so far away from those she loves. How kind you are to so strongly wish to please her. Tell me, does Diana know about this proposal of yours?”

“No.”

Mrs. Furness sighed. “I suppose the inconvenience of turning over the drawing room to a studio will only have to be for a few weeks, though it will be a hardship.”

“Exactly why you must be compensated. My man of business will be contacting you within the day.” He looked around the chamber. “The light here is excellent. How clever of you to determine this is where Miss Furness’s studio should be.”

“When should you like to begin?” she asked.

“As soon as Miss Furness can procure the supplies.”

“Oh, yes, I’d quite forgotten about that. We’ll send around a note to your house when she’s ready. You live on Green Park Road, do you not?”

“Yes.” He stood. “I am most indebted to you.”

* * *

Diana had been curious to know why Sir Elvin had called upon her stepmother. The occasion had necessitated enlisting Diana to style the woman’s hair. Surely Sir Elvin was not coming to ask permission to court Frances. Diana would have sworn the baronet had not shown even a modicum of interest in her elder stepsister, even though Marian had so desperately tried to foist her firstborn upon him.

As Diana sat sketching in her bedchamber, listening for Marian’s footfall in the corridor and expecting the jubilant mother to rush to Frances’ room, Diana was surprised that her stepmother’s footfall terminated at her own chamber door. Marian flung it open. “You must make yourself presentable. You’ll have to go and procure canvas and oils. I’ve given my permission to allow you to paint Sir Elvin’s portrait.”

Without even asking me? Even though the baronet had asked Diana first, she was stunned that he’d managed to manipulate the situation to his advantage. How had he contrived it? Diana had to own, the fellow was cleverer than she’d credited him.

Two explanations came to mind. First, Marian would wish to expose the baronet to her daughters in the hopes of one of them capturing his affections. Or Sir Elvin may have come up with a way to financially compensate Marian for securing her permission.

“How could you agree to this without asking me?” Diana asked.

“But, my dear girl, I thought I was doing you a favor. I know how much you adore your art. Is it not rewarding to have your work so admired that someone is willing to pay for it?”

Ah ha! “So Sir Elvin’s to pay me for his portrait?” As much as the notion of having her own money appealed to Diana, she was embarrassed that she would essentially be *in trade*. Her Papa, a fine gentleman, would have been horrified.

“Not exactly. He’s paying for the use of our drawing room as your studio. It will be a very great inconvenience for the rest of us.”

The light in the drawing room was excellent. Being able to purchase a set of oil paints and easel exhilarated her. She would actually enjoy painting the man’s portrait and had full confidence in her ability to do a credible job. She nodded solemnly. “I’ll just brush my hair and don warm clothing.” She could barely contain her excitement. Never before had she owned a full set of oil paints. They would undoubtedly be her most cherished possession.

* * *

The following morning Sir Elvin came. Marian had contrived to ensure that her daughters were dressed exquisitely while just happening to be standing about the well-lighted foyer when Thompson admitted him. And the mother, of course, was there. “You remember my daughters, Frances Hubbard and Alice Hubbard?”

“Yes, of course,” he said with a slight bow. “A pleasure to see you both again.” He handed off his coat, hat, and muffler to the butler as he looked up the stairway and saw Diana. “Good day to you, Miss Furness.”

Diana knew her shabby clothing looked out of place on so grand a curving staircase beneath a multi-tiered, glittering chandelier. “Good day to you, Sir Elvin.” He’d not dressed in the riding clothes he’d worn the previous day but now wore a

beautifully tailored black jacket with matching breeches. The clothing looked suitable for one of Bath's finest assemblies. That was how he wished to be immortalized in his portrait.

"Are you ready to begin?" he asked.

"Indeed. Won't you come upstairs to the drawing room? Marian's been kind enough to allow us to use it as a studio."

He turned to Marian. "I am very much in your debt, my dear lady. As my sister will also be."

"Pray," Frances said as she stepped forward, "do tell your sister I was asking after her." "That's very kind of you, Miss Hubbard."

Upstairs, when she reached her easel, Diana pivoted to face him. "I think you should sit by that window where the light's best." She indicated a chair some ten feet away from where she'd set up her paints and canvas.

He did not budge. "First, I must apologize to you, Miss Furness. It was underhanded of me to go directly to your stepmother before securing your permission. For that I am sorry, but I shall never be sorry that you are the artist I most wanted to do this portrait, and I know I will never regret my choice."

"I understand. Thank you for your confidence. I pray I'm worthy of it."

"You are." He moved to the chair she'd pointed out. "If it's all the same to you, I believe I'll stand for the portrait."

"I fear it will become too tedious for you. Why do we not compromise? Stand while I sketch you, then you may be seated for the rest of the portrait."

"That sounds agreeable. Please feel free to tell me how to stand."

"I must own I have no experience with men..." She paused, realizing her words could have a dual meaning. She felt the heat creeping into her cheeks. "With painting men."

He looked at the near life-sized portrait that hung over the mantel. "Is that a painting of your father?"

Her gaze followed his. “Yes, it is.”

“A very distinguished-looking man.”

“Thank you.”

“I should be pleased if you’d paint me in the same stance as your father is posed.”

“That would certainly make my task easier.”

“I hope you don’t think of this as a task. I recall you saying it’s your obsession. That’s why I felt no remorse for approaching Mrs. Furness about you doing this.”

She smiled. “Oh, it is my obsession. Or it will be.”

“And I see you’ve managed to procure paints.”

Once more, she could not suppress a smile. “I have, and I have you to thank for it, though it embarrasses me that my stepmother has accepted money from you.”

“I wasn’t sure if she would tell you about that. I was willing to do whatever it takes to secure your talents.” He shrugged. “She didn’t have to actually deal directly with me about the hundred pounds. My man of business presented it to her—as he has been instructed to give you the same amount.”

She almost dropped her paint brush. Never would she have imagined she could command such an exorbitant sum for a week of doing what she loved most. “I fear that accepting that would diminish my dignity.”

“You think Angelica Kauffman lacked dignity?”

“Angelica Kauffman was celebrated for her talents and for her connections to the Royal Family and some of the country’s finest aristocratic families.”

“The money she commanded for her portraits also made her wealthier than many of the aristocrats who were her patrons. You could be the same.”

It had never occurred to Diana that she could be wealthy. It wasn’t even something for which she had ever wished. However, the idea of having her own money and of being able to live independently held enormous appeal. One hundred

pounds would go a long way toward helping her achieve such independence.

“If you are satisfied with your portrait, would you consider recommending me to your friends?” Sir Elvin and his circle of friends were among the wealthiest people in all of Bath. A few one-hundred-pound commissions a year would enable her to have her own lodgings, to be her own mistress.

“I know I will be satisfied, and I will be happy to sing your praises.”

“You are too kind.” While it would have embarrassed her to accept money from him, she thought his use of his man of business as an intermediary was quite clever. She would have no qualms accepting the handsome fee from another person who toiled.

The prospect of earning money from her own talent gave her an unaccustomed feeling of wellbeing.

As she sketched him, the physical differences between him and her father became apparent. Her father’s painting had been done in his later years. He lacked the vibrancy of Sir Elvin, who was in the prime of his life. Also, her father had been of medium height—like her. Sir Elvin was considerably taller than average. The longer she looked at him, the more she admired his appearance. In many ways, it was going to be a pleasure to paint him.

“A pity it’s not sunny today like it was yesterday,” he said.

“Yes. Even though it was cold, it was a lovely day to go to Sydney Gardens.” How fortuitous that trip had been for her. That simple foray to a park had the potential of changing the trajectory of her life.

In spite of only a faint sun today, the light glancing off his hair gave it a blue-black tint. She was anxious to see how well she could match the color when she mixed her paints. Even though she possessed confidence in her drawing abilities, she worried that her lack of experience in mixing paints would mar her project.

Her only consolation was the quality of her former drawing

master. She'd been taught well. During the time she had studied art, no expense had been spared. Diana and her stepsisters were well supplied with all they could need for their creations: easels, canvases, shared oil paints in every color, water colors, and high-quality sketch pads.

“By the way, Sir Elvin, once I have sketched you in these clothes, you'll not have to wear them each day you come here.” She had been drawing him on the canvas, starting with his head and was working on getting the proportions correct.

“I am very happy to know that.”

“I perceive that you prefer the less formal attire like you wore yesterday.”

“Yes. I'm most comfortable in riding boots—in riding attire, actually.”

“Would I be wrong in thinking you're happiest when riding?”

He gave her a startled look. “It's as if you're clairvoyant, Miss Furness. That is, indeed, when I'm happiest. How could you possibly know that?”

“I saw the way you rode yesterday morning. You looked as if you were one with the horse. I don't believe I've ever before observed anyone who was a more skilled rider. To embrace anything with such perfection, I believe one must be passionate about it.”

He nodded. “Like you and your art.”

“Yes, I suppose so. I have my art, and you have your horses. Speaking of horses, what is the name of that magnificent beast you rode yesterday?”

“Midnight.”

“Ah, it suits him well.”

“He's a she.”

She giggled. “I'm revealing my ignorance. A large, black horse did not seem feminine to me.”

“Then you don't ride?”

She shook her head. “Not since I was a child. We used to live at Blandings in Buckinghamshire, and I had a pony at that time. But when Papa married Marian, she deplored the country and craved living in Bath.”

“So you’ve lived here ever since?”

“Yes.”

“Do you never return to Blandings?”

“No. Not only does Marian not like the country, she’s also a very poor traveler. She suffers from motion sickness on long carriage rides.” She shrugged. “I can think of no place where I’d rather be than back at Blandings.”

What was she doing? She’d never told anyone how she felt about Blandings. And this wasn’t just anyone. It was Sir Elvin Steffington, the most eligible bachelor in Bath. She must be boring him unmercifully. “What of you? Do you have a country seat?”

He shook his head morosely. “To my great consternation. My grandfather was like Mrs. Furness in preferring city life over country life.”

“Bath certainly has much to offer in the way of entertainments while still being a walkable city, unlike London.”

“I would have thought Mrs. Furness’s travel sickness would have kept you from visiting London.”

She laughed. “Oh, it has! I’ve never been to London, but, of course, I’ve read a great deal about it and have many friends who’ve been there. I suppose you’ve been there?”

“I go at least once a year. My father always preferred the tailors in London, and then there’s Tattersall’s.”

She favored him with a smile. “Why is it I’m not surprised someone as horse mad as you goes to Tattersall’s?”

“I am surprised a young woman who’s never been to London even knows about Tattersall’s.”

At least he didn’t say *a young woman who has no associations with men*. He had to know that not only had she

never a suitor, but also she'd never been admired by anyone of the opposing gender. She shrugged. "I read every London periodical I can—no matter how outdated they are."

"How is it one who would rather be at Blandings even has an interest in our country's capital?"

"Good question. I suppose every Englishman feels a bit possessive about London. Throughout the world, it's recognized as the greatest city. It's certainly the wealthiest. It has historical connections with every era going back to the Romans." She sighed. "And from what I've read and from the maps I've pored over, it's quite vast."

"It is."

A period of silence followed. She could not believe how much she had opened up to this man, a virtual stranger. She ought to be embarrassed, but she was not. For some unexplainable reason, this man—even though he was from a higher class than she—put her at ease. It was easy to talk to him.

By now she had sketched him from head to toe and was pleased with the result. "Do you have any questions about the portrait?" she asked.

"Yes. How many days should you like me to pose?"

"First, you may sit now, Sir Elvin. I've finished the sketch of you standing." She blew out a breath. "As to how long this is going to take, I must be truthful. I'm not sure how much time this process will be. You will be my first oil portrait. I should think I'd be finished by the end of the week. It does take a bit for the oil to dry, but I'm confident you can have it to your sister by Christmas."

"I am so indebted to you. Mind you, I don't care if I ever see my own bloody portrait, but I have a profound desire to do whatever it takes to please my sisters."

She was finding much more to admire in this man than a pair of long, nicely muscled legs. He lacked vanity. He was most generous. And he was in possession of a tender heart.

How fortunate was the woman who would captivate the

heart of Sir Elvin Steffington.

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Chapter 5

Dressing in his normal daytime attire was much more to Elvin's liking on this, his second day of portrait sitting. Miss Furness has asked him to arrive at noon because she thought the light better when the sun was high in the sky. Though he'd only spoken to her three times now, he'd discovered Miss Furness not only to be intelligent but also to be confident in her intelligence—an attribute that seemed oddly incongruous with one who was obviously treated as a nonentity in her own household.

He had expected her to be so timid she would refrain from sharing her thoughts, but as their short acquaintance had progressed, her natural abilities emerged. Those included that confidence her stepmother had been unable to suppress.

Surprisingly, the stepmother had not been hovering about the front door when he arrived, and he hadn't seen any sign of her two well-dressed daughters, either.

Saffron-colored draperies parted to reveal murky skies and only a hint of sun. Miss Furness studied him as he situated himself in front of the window. He took that opportunity to study her. The fabric of her dress was as faded as its style was outdated. Thinning muslin of her simple morning dress featured pale blue flowers. Because it came to her throat, he was unable to observe much of her bosom, other than to confirm his opinion that she was sadly lacking in that asset.

He did know a thing or two about fashion. Being fashionable was second only to his love of horses. Because his sisters were also in possession of the same fashion sense, he wasn't sure if he developed opinions on women's fashion by being exposed to Annie and Lizzy or if it came as naturally as his ability to evaluate horseflesh. He could not remember a time when he was not aware of what was stylish in feminine dress.

What a pity he'd inherited an eye for a well-tied cravat while his twin brother recited Latin as if it were his native tongue. Elvin still looked back on his school years as the

darkest time of his life (except for the cricket, at which he excelled). Without his brother's help, he'd have been a laughing stock because of his difficulties in learning to read. In turn, Elvin was useful to his twin by selecting his clothing. Melvin was the only member of the Steffington family who was ignorant of fashion.

As Elvin watched the artist, he thought it shameful her stepsisters should dress so well while it appeared that she wore their castoffs.

"At what point will you allow me to see your work?" he asked.

"When I'm finished."

"You do understand I'm only doing this for my sister? I'm not so vain I must have a likeness of myself for all to see." As soon as he spoke, he remembered the portrait of her father and felt wretched. "Though I suppose there comes a time in one's life when they wish to leave something for those who love them."

"You sound exactly like my Papa. He deplored posing for his portrait, but Marian insisted. She said that in the homes of the well-born, the current owner's portraits were always prominently displayed. My stepmother is highly influenced by the examples of the well-born."

So Mrs. Furness's motivation for her husband's portrait was not necessarily prompted by her love for the subject. As lonely as Elvin was since his siblings had left home, he knew he was loved. Annie would treasure having a likeness of her brothers.

He wistfully eyed the fire blazing in the hearth. A pity he needed to be positioned so close to the window where cold air seeped in like water through a hole in a Dutch dike.

"I'm now indebted to Marian," she continued. "There's something comforting about being able to still look upon my father, fourteen years after he departed this earth."

"Might I be so bold to ask how old you were when you lost your father?"

"I was ten."

Which would make her four-and-twenty. Long on the shelf. What a pity the poor lady would never have a home of her own, a home where she would be valued, where she would know love.

“And your mother?”

“The woman who gave me life?”

“Yes.”

“She died in childbed when I was six. So did the child.”

He effected a sympathetic look. “You have memories of your mother?”

“Oh, yes! I was much loved. By both parents. I was most fortunate to have had that.”

He supposed a cheerful countenance and a pragmatic nature kept Miss Furness from wallowing in self-pity. “But losing them must have been even more difficult for you than it was for someone like me.” Once again, he was revealing far too many personal things of himself.

“Because you have siblings to whom you’re obviously very close?”

“Exactly.”

Miss Furness was very perceptive. Lest he get too maudlin, he needed to change the topic. “Other than your art, what are your interests?”

She was silent for a moment. “I have no other interests.”

“Come now. Surely there’s something other than drawing that brings you joy.”

“I do enjoy reading.”

“Now that’s another thing we do *not* have in common!”

“You can’t possibly *not* enjoy reading.”

He wasn’t about to tell her how difficult learning to read had been for him. A man had his pride. Elvin preferred to project unfaltering confidence. “I am easily bored,” he said flippantly.

“Then you must try Mr. Scott’s novels of adventure. I should think they’d vastly appeal to one as masculine as you.”

He felt as if he’d grown a foot taller. She found him masculine. “I will own that when I was younger and Nurse would read to us—and even later when my brother would read to me—I did enjoy books. But I don’t fancy reading.” There he went again, blurting out too much of himself. He certainly did not want to elicit the woman’s sympathy. Nothing could be more emasculating, and Elvin prided himself on his masculinity.

“Perhaps when we finish the portrait, you will allow me to read you one of Mr. Scott’s books,” she offered.

“Here? In your drawing room?” he asked, laughing.

She laughed, too. “I shouldn’t like to be having Marian extort more money from you. Perhaps on fair days we could find a bench in Sydney Gardens.”

He was beginning to think that morning in Sydney Gardens had been a most fortuitous occurrence for him. “I would be very interested in doing that.” Now why had he gone and said that? For most of his adult life, books were as repellent to him as swimming was to a cat. But recalling those early days and how much he’d enjoyed it when Nurse or Melvin read stories to him rekindled a desire to hear stories again. His life had become much too mundane since all his friends had married.

“Do you know anything about lads?” he asked. The woman’s store of knowledge was vast. “Especially little boys of around two years of age?”

“I don’t. Why do you ask?”

“I thought, seeing as you’re so clever, you might have a suggestion for what I could give my little nephew for Christmas. It will also be his birthday on Christmas Eve. He’s quite the most special little fellow you’ve ever clapped eyes upon. Like his father, he’s exceedingly intelligent, too.”

“This is the child of your twin brother?”

“Yes. His name is Geoffrey.”

“How do they spell Geoffrey?”

He had to think about it for a moment. He pictured it, then slowly spelled out the letters G-E-O-F-F-R-E-Y.”

“Oh, just like Chaucer!”

He gazed admiringly at her. “Indeed. I do seem to recall my brother and his wife saying that Chaucer brought them together, and they would name their first son after him. Do you know this Chaucer fellow?”

“Well, he did die centuries ago, but I’ve read him.”

He was quite in awe of this woman’s intelligence. She would have made a perfect wife for Melvin—if his brother didn’t already have a perfect mate. “You, my dear Miss Furness, must read a great deal.”

“I suppose I do.” She set down her paint brush and eyed him wistfully. “I would wish that you could derive as much pleasure from books as I do.”

That was very kind of her. “With your help, perhaps I will.”

She had previously told him each of their sessions would last ninety minutes, and today’s time was almost up. “Tell me, Miss Furness, what is it you wish to receive for Christmas?”

Her hand stilled, brush skyward. She gave him a blank look. “I have no wish.”

She might as well have said *I have never been permitted to wish for something*. It made him melancholy to think of this fine woman’s deprivations, and he determined that he would have to find a way to fulfill her wish. She must have one.

The door to the drawing room opened, and in walked Mrs. Furness with her daughters, all three of them dressed to perfection in elaborate promenade wear that included fashionable headwear adorned with brightly colored feathers. He immediately stood and respectfully inclined his head.

The women curtsied. “How tedious this must be for you, Sir Elvin, having to sit or stand for such long stretches of time,” Mrs. Furness said.

“Conversing with Miss Furness makes it tolerable.”

Mrs. Furness eyed her stepdaughter. “I see the brush is no longer in your hand. You must be finished for the day.”

Miss Furness’s gaze darted to him, then back to her stepmother. “Yes, I am.”

“Splendid.” Mrs. Furness returned her gaze to him. “After this tediousness of sitting for the portrait, you will need to stretch your legs. Sir Elvin. I beg that you accompany us to the Pump Room.”

It would do Miss Furness good to move about after standing in the same position for an hour and a half. “It will be my pleasure,” he said.

The three ladies started for the door.

“Should we not wait for Miss Furness?” he asked.

“Oh, Diana can’t come today. Someone must stay here to care for Wee Willie. He’s doing poorly.”

His brows lowered. “I didn’t know you had a son. Or is he a stepson?”

“Wee Willie’s my lap dog,” Mrs. Furness said, barely able to suppress outrage from her voice. “Though our little fur ball’s as much a member of our family as my lovely daughters.”

* * *

Diana had never enjoyed going to the Pump Room, which was the most well-attended daytime activity among Bath’s most respectable inhabitants, whether they be permanent residents or visitors. She’d always disliked exhibiting the inferiority of her wardrobe in full daylight. Not that anyone ever noticed her anyway.

It had always seemed to her that women went to the Pump Room to be sized up much like a prized horse at Tattersall’s, and she would most certainly never display favorably.

She should have become inured to being invisible to others, but she still clung to enough pride to want to be noticeable in

some respect. She knew she was in want of a pretty appearance but would have liked to make her mark in something. Perhaps that's why painting Sir Elvin was so satisfying a prospect.

To her astonishment, today she had actually wanted to have the privilege of entering that august chamber beside a man who was as eligible as Sir Elvin. After he left with Marian and the girls, she tried to analyze her feelings of deprivation. She was shocked that she could possibly spare a thought to how others saw her. It was not in her nature to try to impress others. Most shocking of all was her desire to prolong the time she spent with Sir Elvin.

He was a far cry from the self-centered rake she had expected him to be. The more time she spent with him, the more she found to admire. Most of all, she valued his kindness. Not only was it clear to her that he was a loving brother, but he also cared about others. No friend had ever been more interested in her than this man appeared to be, and she believed his interest to be genuine. He wanted to know about her family, about her wants.

In a short time, a close friendship had developed between them. She was only too aware of her own shortcomings to ever think of their friendship in romantic terms.

Their friendship had revealed things about him that she believed he might not have told others. This paragon of masculinity, she believed, had his own feelings of inadequacy, particularly when it came to reading.

After he was gone, she felt very sorry for herself. She was treated no better than a servant in the house her father had bought. She regretted that she had not stood up to Marian and insisted that she be permitted to accompany them to the Pump Room, but she had never been able to summon the courage to stand up for herself with her intimidating stepmother.

She gazed at the portrait that was coming along nicely. Surprisingly, she found herself more interested in his half smile, in his long, sinewy legs, and in the perfection of his clothing than in her own execution of the portrait.

It suddenly occurred to her that she wanted her own copy of his likeness. After all, it was her first-ever commission. But it was more than that. This was the only man who'd ever been kind to her. She wanted something to remember him by when she no longer had the joy of seeing him daily.

That day when they no longer met would be most grievous, indeed. These past two days spent in his company had been the most enjoyable of her life.

She had even considered prolonging the portrait to extend her time with him, but she couldn't do that to him. Allowances must be made for the paint to dry and for sending it to his sister's home in Yorkshire. It had to reach her for Christmas, less than three weeks away.

Diana would begin her duplicate portrait right now, while the others were out. Her copy would have to be small. She would keep it in a drawer in her chamber so she would be the only one to look at it.

She thought of him strolling about the Pump Room with Frances and Alice, and for the first time in her life, Diana Furness experienced jealousy. What if one of them succeeded in capturing his affections? Inexplicably, she knew it would break her heart.

Chapter 6

“How much longer before the portrait will be finished?” Elvin asked her the following afternoon.

Her hand holding the brush stilled, and she smiled at him with a teasing expression on her face. It suddenly occurred to him that she was pretty. Not the kind of pretty that stopped a man in his tracks, but a soft prettiness rather like uncovering a pearl within an oyster.

He supposed he'd previously been unable to overlook her lack of bosom and shabby clothing to see her attributes. But now that he had come to admire her, he could clearly recognize the sweetness in her lightly freckled face, the beauty in the way soft greens feathered together in her eyes, and the glisten to her warm brown hair.

“Is sitting for your portrait so tedious?” she asked, her voice light.

“Surprisingly, it's not.” He shrugged. “Now that all my friends have married and gone on to more serious pursuits, my days have been mostly dull. I actually find myself looking forward to our daily sittings.”

“Me, too.” Not since that night at the assembly rooms when she'd been so timid had she spoken in so shy a voice. “And to answer your question, it grieves me to say that I should be finished in two days. I know you want Annie to have the portrait for Christmas.”

It grieves her? “Just because the portrait will be finished doesn't mean we won't be seeing each other frequently.”

Her eyes actually seemed to sparkle as she regarded him. “You haven't forgotten about me reading to you.”

“Of course I haven't. I'm greatly looking forward to it.”

He had no doubt that stepmother of hers would begrudge Miss Furness any friendship with him. It became clear to him the previous day that Mrs. Furness was determined to secure him for one of her unappealing daughters. He would have to

proceed carefully. If he alienated Mrs. Furness, she would prohibit her stepdaughter from meeting with him under any circumstances. He could not allow that to occur. In the short time he'd known Diana Furness, he'd come to treasure her friendship.

He turned to make sure the door to the drawing room was closed. Then he spoke in a low voice. "I foresee your stepmother may be an obstacle to our future friendship."

"You're much more perceptive than I had expected Bath's resident rake to be."

"If that was meant to be a compliment, I fear you've failed." He gave her a mock glare. "Being a rake is not something a gentleman should own. In fact, I've determined that being a rake is not something I want to pursue in the future."

What had he just told her? Melvin was the only one with whom he'd shared his plans of settling down. Now he had almost revealed that information to this woman. Why was it he was always so bloody honest with her? His former rakish self had never been honest with women. Quite the contrary.

"You're right, of course. About my stepmother."

"So what shall we do about it?"

"She is accustomed to me going to the park with my sketchbook—once I've finished making myself useful to her." "And in what other ways do you make yourself useful, other than caring for the aged Wee Willie?"

She sighed. "I am charged with dressing all of their hair. I used to walk Wee Willie before he got so infirm. I often write letters for Marian because her swollen hands stiffen."

"And you, as an artist, must be gifted with lovely handwriting, too."

"I don't know how lovely it is, but it is the most legible in this household. That is low praise, though, given the illegibility of the others."

He chuckled. Continuing with their meetings was

problematic. Were they to meet at Sydney Gardens, it would surely get back to Mrs. Furness, who would be angered. It occurred to him to have Miss Furness discreetly come to his house, but that could do irreparable damage to Miss Furness's reputation. Such a pity his sisters were no longer there to lend propriety to such an event.

It was a pity he could not be honest with Mrs. Furness and tell her outright he had no intentions of ever forming any alliances with either of her daughters. He was still mad at himself for not insisting the previous day that Miss Furness accompany them to the Pump Room. Never again would he allow her to be excluded from anything.

If he were to be honest with Mrs. Furness, he was almost certain she would do everything in her power to keep Diana from being his friend.

"I've got it!" he finally said.

"What?"

"I shall have my sister-in-law befriend you."

"You speak of Catherine Steffington, who used to be Mrs. Bexley?"

"The very one. If I ask her to invite you to her house, she will. You don't actually have to sip tea and munch on toad-in-the-hole with her. We'll just use her to give us a respectable yet private place to meet." He hadn't behaved in so stealthy a manner since his affair with Mrs. Gordon, the exceedingly amorous wife of an octogenarian.

"Are you sure she won't mind?"

"I am certain. There's nothing that Steffingtons won't do for Steffingtons. We're a close-knit bunch."

"You're very fortunate," she said in a forlorn voice.

He determined then and there he must find out what Christmas present Miss Furness would wish for.

* * *

Diana worked until the last vestiges of sunshine were gone

and was able to complete Sir Elvin's portrait that very day. As much as she would miss these sittings with the exceedingly amiable man, it was more important that his sister receive the painting by Christmas. Allowances must be made for the paint to dry properly before sending it off to Annie.

Looking at the portrait was much like looking at the actual man. She stood back to try to evaluate the painting. As critical as she was of her own work, she could find nothing in this portrait that did not please. She had even managed to have Midnight in the background. She fervently hoped he approved of her finished project.

The next morning she planned to complete her smaller, personal version of the portrait. In all honesty, she wasn't keeping it as a reminder of her first commission. She was keeping it to remind her of the man she had come to care for so deeply. She could not bear to contemplate the day when she'd no longer see him or the day when he would marry.

For in addition to acknowledging him as a friend, she knew what she felt for him was even stronger than friendship. She had fallen in love with him.

Her eyes lingered on the portrait. She looked at it without thinking as an artist. She looked at him as a woman looks at a desirable man. What woman wouldn't be in love with so appealing a man?

A man possessed of his tall, well-formed body had no need for fine tailoring to hide his faults. Even still, the expert cut and cloth of his fashionable clothing completed his air of masculine perfection.

His face, too, conveyed that sense of strength with its chiseled jaw and firmly set mouth. Her eye was drawn to the mouth. What would it feel like to have his lips pressed to hers? The very thought of it filled her with molten heat and a stirring in a place she'd not previously been aware of.

She went further still and allowed herself to imagine being gathered into his powerful embrace, feeling her body close to his, feeling protected. How wonderful it would have been to feel loved by him, but a fine man like him would never be

attracted to the likes of her.

Earning his friendship would have to be enough for her. She was heartily grateful for that.

Each day was presenting her with more evidence of Sir Elvin's thoughtfulness. Yesterday, his man of business had managed to meet her in private at the lending library where he pressed a sizable pouch of coins upon her in compensation for the portrait.

His employer must have known she wouldn't want Marian to have knowledge of her stepdaughter's new-found wealth; so, instead of coming to her home, the man had obviously been instructed to find her alone at a place Sir Elvin knew she would be visiting. That Sir Elvin knew her well enough to suggest the lending library as a place she'd visit demonstrated how well the baronet had come to understand Diana.

How was it a man from so privileged and so loving a background could so thoroughly understand the challenges her stepmother presented her? How could a man with so many attributes be possessed of such empathy? He'd not only always been well loved, but was also the firstborn, the title holder, the one admired by all. He was indisputably the most sought-after bachelor in Bath. Yet he had shown an unprecedented interest in all things pertaining to her.

He was indisputably the kindest man she'd ever known.

True to his word, his sister-in-law took the first step toward uniting them. The beautiful Catherine Steffington had sent around a letter that very afternoon requesting Diana to pay her a call the following day.

Sir Elvin must have advised against having Mrs. Steffington pay Diana a morning call. It was clear he wished to exclude Marian and her daughters from claiming the connection to the Steffington family.

* * *

When Sir Elvin arrived at noon the next day, she told him not to take his usual seat in front of the window. "I was able to finish your portrait yesterday. Would you care to take a look?"

He grinned. “Will I seem conceited if I do?”

“Not at all.” She eyed the full-length portrait. “Come and see.”

He came to stand next to her to survey the work. “Good lord, it’s like peering into a looking glass! You, my dear Miss Furness, are uncommonly talented. What a fine job you’ve done. And you’ve even included Midnight!”

“Thank you.”

“I am in awe. And extraordinarily pleased. How long before the paint dries?”

His satisfied reaction was what she had hoped for. She shrugged. “It’s hard to say. There are so many factors to consider. How much humidity is in the air? How close it is to the fire? How thickly has the paint been applied? Mindful of our deadline, I avoided using thick strokes.”

This was one of life’s moments that would forever be emblazoned in her memories. Standing beside ... Elvin. Basking in his approval. Swelling with satisfaction over a deed done well. What a pity such profound feelings must be tinged with melancholy. This was the last time he’d be in this room with her.

“Has anyone else seen it?” he asked.

“Yes. Marian and the girls. I mentioned at breakfast that this was your last day, and they wanted to see it.”

“Did they lavish you with the praise you deserve for so perfectly executing your commission?”

A little laugh erupted from her. “My dear sir, you know not my stepmother and stepsisters if you believe them capable of lavishing me with praise. They did, however, comment on what a good likeness it is of you. And all three agreed on what a fine-looking man you are.”

He turned to face her, stepped closer, clasped both her shoulders, and lowered his voice. “They are merely jealous of you, Diana.”

She could swoon. Her heartbeat roared. She trembled at his

touch, at the way those smoldering black eyes of his held her like chains. Even the timbre of his voice was smooth and gentle like her father's cognac. And he'd referred to her by her Christian name. Her name had never sounded lovelier.

At no moment in her life had she ever felt more connected to another person.

She did not know how to respond. She was unaccustomed to flattery. His words and actions had most certainly flattered. Her inclination to be honest, to tell him no one could possibly be jealous of one as insignificant as she, was quickly suppressed. She wanted this man to think her worthy of praise.

So she said nothing.

He finally dropped his hands and stepped back. "Shall we take the painting to my brother's house on the Royal Crescent? Catherine did invite you, did she not?"

Diana offered him a radiant smile. "Yes. I have seen her before, but this will be the first time I've had the honor of being able to speak with her."

"Oh, I told her she need not bother herself with hostess duties, that I wished to keep you to myself." He shrugged. "She, of course, insisted upon making you feel welcome before permitting me to hoard your companionship."

"I'm honored that you want to show the painting to your brother and his wife, but I suggest we wait a few more days for it to dry. Will you help me move it in front of the fire?"

"I believe I can manage without your help." He chuckled as he moved the painting and easel to stand in front of the hearth. "Will this be too close?"

"I think it's perfectly posed to dry quickly."

His face fell. "So I suppose you won't be permitted to walk alone with me to Melvin's house."

She shook her head. "Not without someone to chaperon, and I'd would rather not have my stepsisters accompany me." Diana wanted the story time to be just him and her. No one else. She was not going to let anything interfere with that plan.

“So you plan to come alone?”

“I do.”

“Then I shall take my leave, but I will see you at the Royal Crescent this afternoon.”

Feeling as foxed as if she'd imbibed champagne, she watched his back as his leanly muscled body strode from the chamber.

Diana knew she would eventually have to share with Marion her invitation from Catherine Steffington, but this first day she would allow her stepmother to believe that she was just taking one of her customary walks about the city. She gathered up her sketchbook and tucked the first volume of *Ivanhoe* into the same bag.

* * *

Elvin's own behavior perplexed him. He had first slipped and referred to Miss Furness by her Christian name. And now he'd arrived at Melvin's considerably earlier than he expected Miss Furness to arrive. He was acting like a lad from Eton experiencing his first flush of romance.

Romance? Now why in the devil would that word pop into his mind in connection with Miss Furness? They were friends. Nothing more. As much as he admired her, the woman simply was not his type.

He'd walked about Melvin and Catherine's house, muttering to himself, and little Geoffrey followed him, two steps to Elvin's one, also muttering in that senseless babble of his.

Melvin's cozy library was the natural place for Miss Furness to read to him. After all, it was crammed with books. It was cozy and warm. And it was intimate. There he went again! Why in the devil was he obsessed with intimacy when thinking of Miss Furness?

As much as he wanted the lady to read to him in Melvin's library, he knew prying his brother from his favorite place would not be possible.

Or would it? Elvin would never know if he didn't ask.

He gathered up Geoffrey and hoisted him on his shoulders. Geoffrey squealed in delight. His nephew loved to survey the world from such a great height. They burst into the library, and Melvin looked up from his writing and smiled. "I see you're spoiling my son again. The lad will be the devil to live with. Now, he'll demand that I walk about with him on my shoulders, the little scamp."

"You ought to spend less time on your bloody books and more time playing with your boy. He'll be off at Eton before you know it, and you'll wish you'd enjoyed him more."

Melvin looked quite offended. "I do enjoy him."

"If you play with him this afternoon, you'll be doing me a bang-up favor."

"How's that?"

"I should like the loan of your library. Miss Furness is ..."

Elvin paused. As close as he was to his brother, he felt awkward admitting that a man of nine-and-twenty was going to be read to by a maiden. But of all people, only Melvin would understand. "The lady is going to read one of Mr. Scott's adventure stories to me."

A slow smile lifted his twin's face. "So you've found The One!"

Elvin's palms flew up in the back-off gesture. "No, no! That's not it. We're merely friends. She ain't my type."

"But I thought you were conceding that appearances were not to be the prime consideration in the selection of your mate."

"I might have said something ..."

"Is she intelligent?"

"Oh, yes."

"Did you not own that intelligence might be a desirable quality in a potential mate?"

"Well ..."

“I thought you said it would even be a good thing if this potential wife of yours was smarter than you. Is Miss ... Furness?”

“She must be. She knows who that Chaucer chap was.”

Melvin nodded thoughtfully. “I will be happy to give up my library for you and your future wife.” He snatched his son from his twin’s shoulders.

“She’s not my future wife!”

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Chapter 7

If Marian knew Diana was visiting one of the elegant houses on the Royal Crescent—the finest address in all of Bath—she would have been apoplectic with jealousy. As soon as Diana was admitted by the Steffington butler, welcoming Steffingtons collapsed around her. She had the opportunity to observe Elvin and Melvin together and was surprised that she instinctively knew which one was Elvin.

Catherine Steffington could not have been more gracious. “We are so happy to make your acquaintance, Miss Furness. You must think of this as your own home.” She held in her arms an adorable little boy who was a miniature of her husband. Diana was struck by a pang of envy. How fortunate the woman was not only to have wed a man she obviously adored but also to be mother to that precious little fellow.

Diana’s gaze went from the beautiful blonde mother to the lad, and she quipped, “That cannot be a child to whom you gave birth!” The toddler’s hair and eyes were as dark as currants.

The mother nuzzled kisses into her child’s dark mop of hair. “Everyone says that, but you would not had you seen me two years ago when this lump in my belly prevented me from seeing my toes.”

They all chuckled.

Then Diana addressed Elvin. “You and your brother are not identical. You’re shorter!”

His dark eyes sparkled. “You can tell us apart! How uncanny.”

“I ought to. I’ve spent the past several days with you.”

Elvin’s admiring gaze warmed her on this chilly day. “Allow me to introduce you to my brother, Dr. Melvin Steffington, the smart twin,” he said.

Her gaze went to the brother, then back to Elvin. “Your brother may be a noted scholar, but I would vow you’re just as

smart in other ways.”

“Exactly what I’ve always told him,” Melvin said.

Diana directed her attention to Melvin Steffington. Though he did look almost exactly like the brother with whom she’d fallen love, there was an indefinable difference in their faces. Perhaps it was around the mouth. Perhaps she only noticed it because of her experience drawing faces. “I understand you’ve made significant contributions by translating some of Cicero’s works. I am in awe of your accomplishment.”

“I am in awe of your abilities—and the fact you’ve heard of Cicero,” Melvin Steffington said. “Not many women have. Not to disparage your gender, you understand.”

She felt Elvin’s eyes on her and looked up to meet his gaze.

“I never told you about Melvin’s books,” Elvin said. “Can’t ever remember that Cicero chap’s name. How did you know?”

“Your brother’s reputation is far reaching. I didn’t have to hear of his accomplishments from his twin.”

Diana’s attention returned to Mrs. Steffington when that lady addressed her. “Elvin’s told us about the portrait,” Mrs. Steffington said. “I cannot wait to see it. He says you’re as talented as Angelica Kauffman.” The beauty moved closer. “I must coax you to paint my family.”

“I should be happy to.” That would also give Diana a reason to come here and prolong her connection with Sir Elvin.

Catherine eyed her husband. “Keeping Geoffrey still won’t be nearly as challenging as persuading my husband to sit idly.”

“What do you think of painting your husband at his desk, with you and Geoffrey standing beside him, looking down at his writing?”

Catherine Steffington’s lovely mouth lifted into a smile. “That would be wonderful! It would most definitely capture our lives. You are brilliant!”

Melvin Steffington addressed his brother. “Your Miss Furness is most clever, El. Jolly good job finding her.”

“I shall show you to the library, Miss Furness,” Mrs. Steffington said. “My husband is dragging himself away from his work this afternoon to spend time with Geoffrey, and you and Elvin have a use for the library.”

“How very kind of you.”

Located on the ground floor, the library was perhaps the coziest room Diana had ever beheld. Its dark wood paneling and shelves lined with fine leather volumes looked exactly as one would expect in a home at Bath’s finest address, but the stacks of books of every style and piles of dog-eared papers on the floor and on every tabletop in the chamber bespoke the abode of a hard-working scholar. Which is exactly what Melvin Steffington was.

Diana’s eye was drawn to the blazing fire and the inviting sofa in front of it. This was an inviting refuge on a frigid winter day.

“We’ll leave you two to get on with your book,” Catherine Steffington said.

Sir Elvin kissed the top of his nephew’s head.

It took no effort at all for Diana to picture Sir Elvin with his own lad. A pity she would not be the woman he selected to be mother to his child.

* * *

Elvin kept thinking of his brother’s words. *Your Miss Furness is most clever, El. Jolly good job finding her.* Why could his brother not understand he and Miss Furness were nothing more than friends? She was not *his* Miss Furness. Of course, Melvin had been correct about her cleverness.

Never before had anyone other than life-long friends been able to distinguish one of them from the other. When she’d entered Melvin’s home that day, there had been nothing to tip her to his identity. She had instinctively known which brother he was.

And how in the devil had she knowledge of this long-dead Cicero whom Melvin wrote about? The woman was uncommonly clever.

He looked at her. Her cheeks still red from the day's bitter cold, she brought to mind his youngest sister, Lizzy, with her youthful exuberance and lust for playing in the snow. How was it a woman of four-and-twenty could be so youthful in some respects? "Shall we sit on the sofa?" His gaze went to the bag she carried. "You've brought the book?"

"Yes." She sat in the middle of the sofa. It was a sign that he needed to sit close to her.

He sat on the sofa less than a foot from her.

"I confess this is the first time all day I haven't felt as if my bones rattled from the cold," she said. "Is this chamber not wonderfully warm?"

"It is rather." He cleared his throat. "How is it you could possibly think I'm as smart as Melvin?" Her flattering praise had made Elvin unaccustomedly swell with pride.

"Because you're one of the wisest men I know."

No one had ever said he was wise. His brows lowered. "How?"

"It's not just in the manly pursuits at which you excel, but it's in your uncommon perception. You have an extraordinary capacity for understanding your fellow man. You are possessed of the rare ability to empathize with ones less advantaged than you, and you're a shrewd judge of character. Those things elevate you, I believe, to being terribly clever."

Him? Terribly clever? "But those things have nothing to do with book learning."

"There are different kinds of intelligence. Melvin is clever about books, but you have the advantage. Can you deny that you're better at interacting with people than your brother?"

Actually, he could not deny it. As he sat there, basking in her praise, he no longer felt like the stupid twin. He *was* possessed of intelligence. This woman recognized it.

Miss Furness took out her book. "I've brought *Ivanhoe*. Have you heard of it?"

"Can't say that I have. Have you already read it?"

“I have, but I loved it so much, I’m eagerly looking forward to rereading it. I am told it’s a great favorite with men. It’s an adventure story set in the days of chivalry.”

“When men were real men.”

She looked at him. “Men are still real men. It was just easier in those days to demonstrate it.”

He had the distinct feeling she had just complimented him. This woman inadvertently stoked his faltering ego.

As she began to read, a contentment settled over him like a warm blanket. Her voice was clear and sweet, and she read very well. No stumbling like he would have done. They were close enough to the fire to be thoroughly comfortable but not too close to want to start shedding garments. Her faint rose scent was intoxicatingly feminine, even provocative.

It did not take long for his interest in the story to pique. Normally one who could not sit still for any length of time, today he wanted to continue here on this sofa and listen for hours to this tale of knighthood and bravery. He even found himself wishing he could have lived in those bygone days.

Occasionally his thoughts would center on the narrator, Miss Diana Furness. He would recall his brother’s words. And as they sat there so close that he could feel the whisper of her breath, he found himself feeling ever more possessive of this jewel of a woman.

As the day’s murky sun began to set, she closed the book. “I must be home before it gets dark.”

“I hate Decembers. Night’s in the afternoon.”

“I hate them, too. But you must own, this is a most cozy place to be on a winter day.”

“Will you come back tomorrow?”

“Yes. I didn’t tell Marian today, but tomorrow I’ll tell her about my acquaintance with your sister-in-law.”

“Before you leave, I have to ask you a question.”

“What?”

“I must give you a Christmas present for all you’ve done for me.” He’d become obsessed with doing something to brighten her dreary existence.

“I told you before. I can’t think of anything.”

His voice gentled. “Surely, Diana, there must be something that’s within my power to give you.” Good lord, he’d gone and called her by her Christian name again! What the devil had gotten into him? He’d never called any female, other than his sisters, by their Christian names before.

She did not respond for a moment. Her gaze dropped to her lap. She bit her lip. He could tell she wanted to ask for something, and by all that was holy, he would not permit her to leave until she disclosed it to him!

“Pray, please tell me,” he coaxed.

Her lashes lifted. “There is something. I should like to be kissed.”

Chapter 8

The moment she had said the word *kiss*, Elvin felt a kinship unlike anything he'd ever experienced. For he'd been thinking of kissing her for the past hour. The soft lilt of her voice as she read, her pleasant rose scent, the comforting warmth of the cozy chamber had all added to his already overflowing admiration of her and burgeoning desire for her.

His pulse accelerated as he drew closer to her. Why in the devil did a man as experienced with women as he feel so blasted buoyant at the thought of kissing a skinny spinster?

She flowed into his arms as if she'd been created for this purpose.

He'd meant to be gentle. He'd meant for this to be a chaste kiss. But when his lips pressed hers, a savage need overpowered him. He was nearly undone by her eager response to his parting of her lips, by the stroke of her velvety tongue, by the soft whimper seeping from her lungs.

How could he ever have thought this woman wasn't his type? He had come to crave everything about her. He even wished to cup the small nub of her breasts. Groaning as he filled a hand and feathered his thumb against her nipple, he cursed the vibrant life that sprang to his groin.

He wanted so much more. The very idea of lying with her, bare flesh to bare flesh, and widening her legs to bury himself within her increased the bittersweet pain of his throbbing need.

But Diana Furness wasn't one of his strumpets. She was a woman to treasure and honor. With one final sweet kiss on her cheek, he pulled away. "I must thank you for such a memorable kiss and beg your forgiveness for how profoundly it affected me."

Before she could respond, the library door flew open, and Geoffrey came running into the chamber on his short little legs, holding up his arms for his uncle to give him a shoulder ride.

His father raced behind him. "That son of ours is rotten.

I've just been toting him on my shoulders for the past hour—all because of you. And now he's pestering you again."

Elvin rose and lifted the lad, eyeing Diana. "I wish you'd permit me to see you home. It's almost dark."

She shook her head. "You know I cannot be traipsing about the city with you without a chaperon, even if I am quite the aged spinster."

Their gazes met. "You're a lovely young lady." He would have said *desirable* were Melvin not standing right there.

He walked her to the door. "Will you please return tomorrow and read some more? I'm enthralled by the story." *And by you.*

She looked to the brother. "Will it be all right if I come at noon?"

"You may come here whenever you like, Miss Furness," Melvin said.

After she left, Melvin turned to him. "You've outdone yourself, El. She's the perfect woman for you."

This time, Elvin made no effort to dispute his brother.

* * *

Blustery winds drilled Diana with an icy sting as she made her way home to Monmouth Street. Oblivious to the discomfort, she felt as if she were being carried on seraph's wings. Though she had no experience at kissing, she felt certain no man would kiss a woman as Elvin had kissed her were there not strong feelings on his part.

And he'd even said *You're a lovely young lady.*

She had no regrets about asking for that Christmas kiss. It had been her best present ever.

Throughout the evening, Elvin dominated her thoughts. If she were deprived of his companionship, she would always cling to the memory of today's intimacy with the only man she could ever love.

And she would always have her personal portrait of him.

The four women of her household sat about the drawing room after dinner. Alice played at the pianoforte, and Frances sang. Marian proudly watched. Diana, who possessed no musical talent at all, attempted to read, but she kept looking up at the portrait of Sir Elvin and longing to be with him.

“Diana, dear, could you find my spectacles?” Marian asked.

“Certainly. Do you remember where you last wore them?”

Her stepmother screwed up her plump lips. “Perhaps in my study.” She shrugged. “Then, maybe they’re in my bedchamber. I have full confidence you’ll find them.”

They were not in Marian’s study or in her bedchamber, but after looking for a considerable time, Diana located them on a shelf in the library and brought them to her stepmother. “I think I’ll turn in now.”

Diana wanted to be alone with her thoughts, to be able to contemplate what had occurred that afternoon between her and Elvin.

* * *

The following morning Diana made herself useful about the house. She dressed Marian’s hair as well as her daughters’. With considerable effort, she managed to coax an obnoxious elixir down Wee Willie’s canine throat. And she offered to sew a button on her stepmother’s cape.

When noon approached, she dressed in what she considered her prettiest frock, retrieved the letter she had received from Catherine Bexley, and showed it to Marian. “I’m off to the Steffingtons,” she announced breezily.

Marian gripped the parchment as if it were large bank note from which she refused to part, her brows scrunched together, a frown pulling down her heavily jowled face. “Why, pray tell, are our names not included on the invitation?”

“You will have to ask Mrs. Steffington that question.”

“I think you’ve gone behind our backs and tried to poison the baronet against us.”

It rankled Diana for anyone to accuse the kindest man she

knew of such blatant hostility. “Has Sir Elvin ever behaved less than courteously toward you?”

“We’ve had so little interaction with him, it’s difficult to say. You’ve done your best to steal him away from us.”

“How can you say that? The man was generous enough to overpay you a hundred guineas in order for me to paint his portrait as a gift to his sister, and you say *I* have stolen him!”

“Well, you’re not going to the Royal Crescent without us.”

Diana stomped her foot. “You can’t go barging into their house when you weren’t invited. You don’t even know the woman.”

“Neither do you!”

“But Sir Elvin wished for me to deepen the connection with his family. Me, not you, not Frances, not Alice. Plain, insignificant me.” Diana had never spoken to Marian with such vituperation.

Marian’s face twisted angrily. “Go. To. Your. Bedchamber. You’re not leaving this house today.”

For a moment Diana stood there, stunned. She had never felt love toward the cold woman who was her stepmother, but now she felt bitter hatred. Tears welled, but Diana would rather die than let Marian have the satisfaction of knowing she’d hurt Diana.

Anger surging through her, Diana pivoted and returned to her bedchamber. Trembling, she flung herself on the high tester bed and allowed the tears to flow.

After an hour or so, she came to her senses. She was four-and-twenty years of age. She had long passed the age of consent. She did not have to have Marian’s permission to do anything. Now that she had earned a hundred pounds and had the promise of earning more, she could live on her own.

She suddenly brightened. Moving away from Marian and her daughters would be a welcome, well-deserved, liberating experience. Because of her fortuitous acquaintance with Sir Elvin, she could finally live on her own as an independent

woman.

She sprang from her bed and packed a valise. She took some coins from her stash of a hundred pounds, put them in her reticule, and was determined to leave this house today and procure respectable lodgings.

But when she went to her bedchamber door, she discovered it was locked. She had become a prisoner in her own house.

* * *

Elvin began pacing his brother's library floor even before the hour Diana was expected. He was eager to see her again. He was anxious to hear more of the story of bygone days of chivalry. Most of all, he was hoping to steal another kiss.

He'd spent an unprecedented night of wakefulness, his thoughts on Miss Diana Furness. He'd recalled that first night he'd seen her at the Upper Assembly Rooms. Seeking a woman like her was the farthest thing from his mind that night, but now he knew that night had been his destiny. That timid woman doing her best to be inconspicuous had instead emblazoned herself in his memory as distinctly as his mother's smile.

The time for her to arrive had passed. Then an hour ticked away, and still no Diana. He began to worry. Had something happened to her? Had she become ill? Had she been struck by a runaway horse?

When two hours had passed and she'd still not arrived, he realized she was not coming. A deep melancholy etched a hole in him, an emptiness that could only be filled by her.

He was to blame for keeping her away. He'd gone too far yesterday. He'd scared her away with his greedy desire.

The rest of the day he refused to leave Melvin's. It was not like Miss Furness not to at least have sent around a note explaining her absence. She was possessed of exemplary good manners. Hearing nothing only contributed to his worries. Even if she despised him, it was unlike her to ignore the rules of society. Why, she would not even permit him to walk her home yesterday for fear of violating those strictures.

He must do something. He must see her. But how?

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Chapter 9

Marian was planning to starve her to death. Diana had overheard whispers about her father having left her something in his will. If she died, Marian would benefit. That must explain why no dinner had been brought to her room the previous night, no breakfast today. She listened as Marian instructed the parlor maid to skip cleaning Diana's room that morning. "Miss Furness is unwell."

Though Diana's first instinct was to scream and yell, she knew the parlor maid was beholden only to Marian. Screaming would do Diana no good. She must think of a way to escape. A pity her bedchamber had no windows, being in the middle of the town house. Marian's own chamber was lighted by a window at the front of the house; Frances had the bedchamber with the rear-facing window. As usual, Diana had gotten the least attractive room in the middle of the house.

She must be patient. At some point, Marian and her daughters would have to leave. Then Diana could bellow until one of the servants came.

Then she could flee.

Later that afternoon, she could hear a male voice some distance away. She would know that voice anywhere. It was Sir Elvin. He was so far away, she could not make out a single word. She knew, too, that no matter how loudly she attempted to scream, it was unlikely he could hear her, especially with Marian and the girls vying for his attention.

* * *

Where Diana was concerned, Elvin had lost his pride. He must see her even if she did not want to see him. He assumed that after two days facing the fire, his portrait must surely be dry. December fires were never permitted to die. He would use the portrait as a pretext for today's visit.

Besides, he really did need to send the painting to Annie. On this her first Christmas away from her brothers as well as Geoffrey—whom she adored—and from the only home she'd

ever known, she was bound to be blue-deviled. He would do anything to bring her cheer.

The Furness butler had led him into the drawing room where he awaited Diana. Elvin moved to the portrait and tentatively touched the paint. It had dried.

Instead of Diana, her stepmother waddled into the chamber, her own daughters following like trained pups, all of them bestowing radiant smiles upon him.

He did not feel like smiling. "Where is Miss Furness?"

"She's out," her stepmother said.

Disappointment coursed through him like a corrosive acid. His heart had been set upon seeing Diana. He blew out a sigh. "I beg that you tell her I collected the portrait." He eyed it. "Is she not extraordinarily talented?"

"It is a perfect likeness," Mrs. Furness said.

The woman was incapable of praising her stepdaughter. Angry, he strode to the painting and lifted it. "Perhaps your butler could give me a hand taking it down stairs and putting it in my coach. I don't want to damage anything."

"Yes, of course, but won't you stay for a while?"

"I cannot."

The following day, he tossed his pride to the winds that brought snow flurries and sent a note to her, begging her forgiveness and begging for her to allow him to speak to her.

Another day came and went, and he had heard nothing from her. Enough time had passed since he'd last seen her for him to relive every moment spent in his brother's library that day. *She* had been the one who asked for the kiss. And even though he'd not been able to control his heated response to her delectable kiss, he was fairly certain she had enjoyed it. A woman did not make throaty little noises of satisfaction who did not enjoy what elicited those throaty little noises.

Perhaps she was not angry at him, after all. Perhaps she was angry with her own eager response. After all, she was a proper lady.

Once more, he would push aside his pride and go to her.

When the butler at Furness House told Elvin Miss Furness was not in, something in the servant's manner alarmed him. Elvin stuck his foot into the door opening. "I will wait for her, then."

The butler looked flustered. Mrs. Furness came hurrying down the stairs (as much as one of her girth could). "So good of you to call, Sir Elvin."

"I've come to see Miss Furness, and I've told your servant I'm not leaving until I see her." He hadn't realized how loudly he spoke.

From far above, he heard Diana's voice. He couldn't make out what she was saying, but she sounded distressed. Something was wrong! He pushed aside the butler and raced up the stairs. "Diana? Diana?"

Her voice was distant, but he was certain she said, "I'm here, Elvin." He moved toward the sound of his angel's voice. Her loathsome stepmother followed, blurting out denials.

When he reached the chamber where Diana was, he tried the door, but it was locked. With hatred in his eyes, he looked at Mrs. Furness. "Open this door right now."

She looked at the butler and nodded. He removed keys from his fob and opened the door.

Tears streaming down her cheeks, nothing had ever looked more beautiful to Elvin than Diana did at that moment. Now everything became clear to him. She was not mad at him. She was being prohibited from meeting with him by a jealous stepmother. He moved to the woman he'd fallen in love with and drew her into his arms. "I've come for the woman I mean to marry."

Chapter 10

Her valise was already packed. Chaperone or no chaperone, they silently left the house where she'd lived for nearly two decades. He refused to call it her home. Together, if she consented, they would make a real home for her, a place where she would be cherished as she deserved.

Despite the blistering cold, he could not have been happier as they walked along the pavement that was dusted with snow. She had not protested when he'd said he was going to marry her. Did that mean she was agreeable to the union? Or would she have done anything to leave the place where she'd been so repressed? There was only one way to find out.

When they reached the white blanket that was now Crescent Fields, he left her side and strode out into its vast emptiness and fell to one knee. "Will you, my dearest Diana, honor me by becoming my wife?"

He would never forget how she looked standing there, her hooded cape sprinkled with snow, as she silently regarded him, tears glistening in her eyes. "You really want me for your wife?"

"I've never wanted anyone else. You are the one woman who can make me whole. You see, I have ..." He drew a deep breath. "Forgive me if I don't express myself well. I've never said this before. Allow me to begin again. You see, I love you, Diana."

She launched herself into his arms. He fell backward, pulling her with him, kissing her hungrily. "Does this mean you accept my proposal?"

"Oh, yes. You see, I am deeply in love with you."

He held her as if she were a precious piece of Dresden porcelain and sighed with contentment. "How does a Christmas wedding sound?"

"It sounds wonderful."

He helped her up, and with her hand resting possessively on

his arm, they made their way to Melvin's house.

"I've thought of the perfect gift for Geoffrey," she said.

"What?"

"A kitten. They make such cuddly pets for little ones. I always had one until we moved to Bath. Marian abhorred cats in favor of dogs."

"Then you must help me select a cuddly kitten for Geoffrey."

She sighed. "I must own, I was most jealous of Catherine when I saw her holding her son. How wonderful it must be to have a son, especially a little one so much like the man one's fallen in love with."

"Does that mean ... you'd like for you ... and I to have a little fellow?"

She looked up at him wistfully. "Oh, could anything be more wonderful?"

His thoughts exactly. He decided he had done very well by selecting this woman.

EPILOGUE

It was a Christmas Eve wedding. It was unquestionably the happiest day of his life. He'd just said his vows in front of all those who mattered the most to him. Making it an even happier day, Annie and Lizzy, upon hearing of his nuptials, came all the way from Yorkshire to be there.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, he turned to Diana. She'd never looked more beautiful. "I love you, Lady Steffington."

She gripped his hands. "I adore *you*, my dearest Elvin," she whispered.

Later, at their wedding breakfast, Annie asked how they had found each other. "Actually," he answered, "Midnight brought us together."

Annie's brows lowered. "Your horse?"

His eyes flashing with mirth, he looked at his bride, and she nodded. He proceeded to tell his sister about that morning at Sydney Gardens.

"Your brother was magnificent on that beast," Diana said.

"He is rather gifted with horses, and now it appears he has just as much sense about women."

He looked around the table. His friend Jonathan Blankenship was there, fussing over his wife, who was increasing heavily with their first child. His newly married friend Appleton was smiling across the table at the wife he appeared to adore. Even his long-married friends Blanks with his Glee and Viscount Sedgewick with his slender wife displayed an uncommon contentment.

But he would vow none of them could possibly be as happy as he was on this his wedding day.

After the others left, his coach was brought around. He looked quizzingly at his bride.

"I have a Christmas surprise for you," she said.

“We’re going on a wedding trip?” That would please him very much. He could think of nothing more pleasurable than lying in bed with his wife all day and all night, making love to her for days and days with no intrusions.

She nodded.

“Where are we going?”

“To your new country home, Sir Elvin.”

He *had* always wanted a place in the country, but his poor wife was not capable of bringing that about. He raised a brow.

“Blandings. I’ve only just found out that Papa left it to me upon my marriage. As my husband, it’s now yours. Happy Christmas, my darling.”

His life could not be any more perfect.

The End

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Cheryl Bolen's Books

Regency Historical Romance:

The Brides of Bath Series

The Bride Wore Blue

With His Ring

The Bride's Secret

To Take This Lord

Love In The Library

A Christmas in Bath

Once Upon A Time In Bath

The Wallflower's Christmas Wish

The Deceived Series

A Duke Deceived

His Lady Deceived

The Lords of Eton Series

The Portrait of Lady Wycliff

The Earl, the Vow, and the Plain Jane

Last Duke Standing

House of Haverstock Series

Lady by Chance

Duchess by Mistake

Countess by Coincidence
Ex-Spinster by Christmas

Brazen Brides Series

Counterfeit Countess
The Wedding Bargain
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Texas Heroines in Peril Series

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Murder at Veranda House

A Cry In The Night

Capitol Offense

World War II Romance:

It Had to Be You

American Historical Romance:

A Summer To Remember (3 American Romances)

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The Brides of Bath Series

If you enjoyed reading *The Wallflower's Christmas Wish*, you may also enjoy the other seven installments of *The Brides of Bath* series.

The Bride Wore Blue ***(The Brides of Bath, Book 1)***

Cheryl Bolen's writing draws you into her fast-paced story.
4 Stars – *Romantic Times*

Cheryl Bolen returns to the Regency England she knows so well...If you love a steamy Regency with a fast pace, be sure to pick up *The Bride Wore Blue*. – *Happily Ever After*

* * *

For six long years Thomas Moreland has dreamed of the beautiful young noblewoman who rescued him from death. While amassing his fortune in India, not a day passed he did not recall Felicity's fair loveliness, did not recall the silken tones of her sweet voice, did not desire to possess her.

Now a widow, Felicity Harrison does not recognize the handsome nabob as the young man left for dead by highwayman years earlier. Though she wants nothing more than to snub the arrogant man who promises to rescue her family from financial ruin in exchange for presenting his sister

to Society, she cannot snub him. She must force herself to bear his company. But the longer she is with him, the more she has to force herself to remain true to her dead husband's memory. Why is it the humbly born Thomas Moreland possesses more nobility than any man of her class? And why is it she finds it harder and harder to mourn a dead man when Thomas's virility awakens her deepest desires?

With His Ring
(The Brides of Bath, Book 2)

Texas Gold's Runner-up for Best Historical Romance 2002

Highly recommended. – *Under the Covers*

Cheryl Bolen does it again! There is laughter, and the interaction of the characters pulls you right into the book. I look forward to the next in this series. 4 Stars – *Romantic Times*

With His Ring is a good book. Once you start reading you will not want to put it down...The secondary characters are a blast. They will have you laughing right along with Glee's stunts. – *The Romance Readers Connection*

If you liked Cheryl Bolen's first installment in her Brides of Bath series set in Regency England, you'll like this one. *With His Ring* has plenty of sensuality. – *Happily Ever After*

* * *

Glee Pembroke has turned down countless offers of marriage because she has secretly been in love with her brother's best friend, Gregory Blankenship, all her life. When she learns Gregory will lose his considerable fortune if he's

not wed by his twenty-fifth birthday, she persuades him to enter into a sham marriage with her. What he doesn't know is that she plans to win his heart. She will do everything in her power to make him happy—including mimicking the ways of a “fast” woman since he's noted for alliances with women of that sort.

Why did he ever allow himself to marry the maddening Glee? He'd thought they would have great fun, but at every turn, she exasperates him. Why does she persist in wearing the bodice of her dresses so blasted low? Why do other men persist in flirting with her, his wife? And why in the blazes has his heretofore complacent life been turned upside down by this sham marriage? He finds himself longing for a real marriage, but for reasons he cannot divulge, that can never happen.

The Bride's Secret
(The Brides of Bath, Book 3)

A story of healing, forgiveness and change that will make readers cheer. – *Romantic Times*

* * *

Since his commanding officer in the Peninsula took a bullet meant for him, James Moore, now the Earl of Rutledge, feels responsible for the dead man's young son and the boy's exquisite mother, Carlotta Ennis—so responsible that he offers to marry the lavender-eyed beauty. Though their marriage was not to be a love match, Carlotta's torturing presence has James yearning to make her his true wife.

Though she did not love his lordship, her desperate situation forced her to accept his proposal. Little did she know she would come to crave being with him, would hunger for his every touch. If only she could be worthy of the fine man she's

married, if only she can keep him from learning her dark secret
...

To Take This Lord
(The Brides of Bath, Book 4)

“Wonderfully Crafted... Highly recommended... 5 stars.” –
Huntress Book Reviews

“Bolen’s writing... creates the perfect atmosphere for her
enchanting romances.” –

Romantic Times

“Bolen does a wonderful job building simmering sexual
tension.” – *Booklist*

* * *

Even though it’s been two years since his cherished wife
died on childbed, George Pembroke, the Viscount Sedgewick,
continues to rely on liquor to blunt his grief.

Worried about him and his children, George’s sisters urge
him to ask spinster Sally Spenser—a longtime family friend—
to help care for his daughter and son. Sally’s the perfect
person. She’s of high birth (but has no money) and she adores
Lord Sedgewick’s children. It’s her deep love of the
motherless children and fear that their father might marry an
unfeeling stepmother that prompt Sally to consider George’s
proposal. Even though it will be unbearable living under the
roof of the man she loves and knowing she can never have
him.

Love In The Library
(The Brides of Bath, Book 5)

The Beauty and the Scholar...

Certain the “smart” Steffington twin is the person who can help her recover her late husband’s nearly priceless stolen Chaucer manuscript, Catherine Bexley tearfully persuades the scholar to assist her. A deal is struck. She’s particularly pleased that the Doctor of Letters is not interested in seducing her because she’s finished with men (owing to her late husband’s multitude of unfortunate alliances with...doxies). Regaining the manuscript and its subsequent sale will give her independence to ensure she never has to marry again.

Once he learns the poor, delicate widow is in danger of losing her heavily mortgaged home if they cannot find the valuable hologram, Dr. Melvin Steffington vows to do everything in his power to restore the rare Canterbury Tales to her. It’s obvious the pretty little thing needs a man to help her. Not normally the twin to take note of pretty little things, Melvin can’t help but to observe that Mrs. Bexley’s physical appearance is much like the beauties so admired by his twin brother.

He hadn’t counted on the fact he would have to pose as her husband as they race against the banker’s ticking clock. He hadn’t counted on the mysterious thief attempting to kill him. Most of all, he hadn’t counted on how close he would become to the lovely widow or how the kissing of said widow would become the most pleasant experience in his entire seven and twenty years...

A Christmas in Bath ***(The Brides of Bath, Book 6)***

All the characters from the first five Brides of Bath books

will be serving up some Christmas cheer, while Glee Blankenship sharpens Cupid's arrow.

Unbeknownst to scholarly Jonathan Blankenship, his sister-in-law Glee has decided this Christmas he needs a little push to make him see that his dear friend of four years, Miss Arbuckle, will make his perfect mate.

Once Upon a Time in Bath
(The Brides of Bath, Book 7)

To save his family from ruin, Lord Appleton's prepared to sacrifice his happiness to marry a peculiar heiress, but more than his happiness is at risk when sinister forces try to come between him and his cat-loving fiancée.

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